

Countering Disinformation in Your Community

Disinformation is poison in the veins of our society. It undermines democracy, fosters division and hate, and blocks progress on the most pressing issues of our time.

What is disinformation? Lies and misleading information deliberately spread for financial or political gain, usually at the expense of the public good.

Coordinated groups of bad actors actively push disinformation in order to divide communities, delay action, and distract and demoralize those trying to build a healthy planet and safer world. While disinformation harms everybody, coordinated disinformation campaigns often disproportionately target and harm Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, and Middle Eastern communities.

Coordinated groups of bad actors actively push disinformation in order to divide communities, delay action, and demoralize those trying to build a healthy planet and safer world.

A broad and interconnected network enables the spread of disinformation; this includes a range of political organizations, elected officials, corporations and their lobbying groups, and other bad actors. Often, it's the same bad actors, like the Koch-affiliated American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and certain fossil fuel companies, that fund and disseminate disinformation across multiple issue areas: climate change, voting rights, pandemic response, and more.

Disinformation is a big problem, but the good news is that well-informed and well-intentioned people like you dramatically outnumber bad actors who intentionally spread disinformation.

All of you can and should play a role in countering this toxic and growing threat, and holding accountable those who are behind it. **Science and the scientific community have a crucial role to play in this fight.**

To inoculate yourself and your communities against disinformation, you will need to:

- share best practices and resources for recognizing and responding (or not) to disinformation;
- proactively and preemptively raise awareness of specific disinformation tactics; and
- establish and center key narratives and resources that are grounded in shared values.

You must consistently call out and expose the creators and purveyors of disinformation, reveal their true motivations, and push to hold accountable the platforms that enable and accelerate the spread of disinformation.

And you must act locally, lending your expertise, connections, and skills to state and local organizations leading the charge on the issues you care most about.

This guide provides the information, pathway, and tools you need to take meaningful, effective action to counter disinformation in your community.

Science and the scientific community have a crucial role to play in the fight against oppression and disinformation.

Understanding and Countering Disinformation

Bad actors who spread disinformation want to divide, distract, demoralize, and delay accountability—the Four D’s of Oppression. Instead of getting dragged into those kinds of behaviors, learn how to counter disinformation instead.

Targets of disinformation

Spreaders of disinformation target specific types of people in order to sow division, distraction, delays, and demoralization. Those top targets are:

- Media
- Scientists
- Public health officials
- Activists
- Public servants

Practice makes perfect in developing a disciplined response

- Be aware of how bad actors can weaponize your **good intentions**. They:
 - Exploit your attempts to warn people
 - Exploit your attempts at good-faith conversation (i.e., wasting your time explaining the truth to people who are deliberately lying)
 - Exploit your attempts to demonstrate your awareness

BOX 1.

Counteracting the Four D’s of Oppression

The intent of disinformation is to spread oppression. Be vigilant about the four D’s of oppression and respond strategically. When you encounter:

- **DIVISION**—respond with compassion and try conflict resolution
- **DISTRACTION**—focus on the truth
- **DELAYS**—react with organized action
- **DEMORALIZATION**—work on building community and moving beyond silos

The more visibility you give to disinformation, the more you help spread the disinformation, no matter your intentions.

- Twist your consent ethic (i.e., your discomfort with taking action before achieving consensus)
 - Be aware of how bad actors weaponize your **bad habits**. They:
 - Exploit your tendency to retain negative information more than positive information
 - Exploit your “Well, actually . . .” tendency, (i.e., responding rapidly to perceived threats or opposing messaging)
 - Exploit your false sense of superiority (e.g., shaming people who share false information)
 - Exploit your attempts to change others’ minds instead of changing your focus
 - The more visibility you give to disinformation, the more you help spread the disinformation due to the illusory truth effect: what you repeat, you reinforce—even if it is false. Therefore...
 - Avoid quoting disinformation, even to joke about it
 - Avoid sharing images of the disinformation
 - Lead with values
 - Intentionality is the foundation for well-being and message discipline. Decide at the start who and what you will engage with, for what purpose, and when/for how long. (i.e., allot 10 mins during your lunch break to look at your social media feeds).
 - Develop safety plans to protect yourself from bad actors if you choose to publicly call them out for spreading disinformation. Contact Sophia Marjanovic, bilingual senior organizer at the Union of Concerned Scientists, at smarjanovic@ucsusa.org if you have questions about safety plans.
- Prioritize building inclusive, focused, and motivated communities that are adept at expediting change**
- You are capable and deserving of building a stable, peaceful, and compassionate community

- How you communicate will affect how the disinformation can be countered
 - Keep a calm, nonjudgmental attitude
 - Prioritize empathy over expertise
 - Look for points of connection (e.g., shared faith, love of community, etc.)
 - Look for and acknowledge underlying concerns
 - Use your expertise to explain the truth in a way that speaks to their underlying concern
- Be aware that you may not always be the best messenger to counter disinformation in certain situations, especially if you belong to institutions that have historically participated in (or benefited from) oppressing members of the community

Strong networks depend on strong connections between people. Strong connections depend on clear, compassionate communication.”

— Sabrina Joy Stevens,
communications strategist

now targeted for disinformation. This is one of the key reasons it’s important to repair the harm and work to (re)build trust with trusted members of systematically oppressed communities. Here are some ways to begin that go beyond one-on-one interactions:

BOX 2.

The Dos and Don’ts of Refuting Lies and Attacks

- **DO** use individual stories to illuminate collective trends and statistics
- **DO** name what is true while emphasizing what is possible
- **DO** use news cycles and real-world incidents to advance your narrative
- **DO** meet people where they are, to lead them somewhere better
- **DO** name names, bad actors, and systemic dynamics
- **DO** speak from a position of power (i.e., the power of the people and of truth)
- **DO** develop plans and messaging that counter the opposition’s
- **DO** report the disinformation to people who can regulate the content:
 - [Report to the social media platforms](#)
 - [Report to trusted messengers in the voting rights space](#)
 - [Report hate](#)
- **DO** report the disinformation to people who can counter the message through trusted relationships, such as local community organizers or influencers
- **DON’T** repeat, **replace**: instead of repeating a misperception, replace it with factual information
- **DON’T** prioritize facts and statistics over storytelling
- **DON’T** prioritize myth-busting. “Dunk-and-debunk” posts may be (temporarily) satisfying, but your audience already knows the myths, so focus on the facts; as noted above, repeating myths only serves to reinforce them.
- **DON’T** create an air of doom and gloom: you can convey your seriousness and the seriousness of an issue without sending the message that the situation is hopeless (because it’s not!)
- **DON’T** be too focused on advancing your own agenda
- **DON’T** manipulate your audience through fear and anger
- **DON’T** use the passive voice (e.g., instead of “Someone was bitten by the dog,” say “The dog bit someone”)
- **DON’T** exaggerate opponents’ power or underestimate your power
- **DON’T** use shaming content—it makes people less receptive to anything you have to say, and the people you may think “deserve” shaming usually aren’t listening anyway, but prospective supporters are

- Offer meaningful resources (e.g., groceries, disaster kits) to people during outreach events and meetings
- Share resources and expertise with respected community organizations
- Showcase contributions to community improvement
- Visibly advocate for justice and accountability in your field

You have about six seconds to catch someone's attention online before they move on.

Building Values-Driven narratives

- You have about six seconds to catch someone's attention online before they start scrolling. How will you use it?
- Know what you value
 - Prioritize the most important information you want audiences to retain in your headlines, captions, and images so you expose them to your key messages even if they don't engage with every part of what you share
 - Know what you want people to think about
 - Amplify only what you want people to think and talk about
- Your message should be:
 - **ACCURATE:** It reflects truth as validated by experience and rigorous research
 - **ASPIRATIONAL:** It offers an attractive possible future that inspires audiences to answer your calls to action
 - **ACTIONABLE:** It offers clear, practical next steps that people can take to move you closer to your desired future
- Ask who is the best and most trusted messenger to deliver this message to the intended audience. It may not be you.
- Storytelling content to prioritize
 - Big-picture stories: narrate what's happening on your issue or what's at stake in your campaign, or what's going on in your community/society at large
 - First-person stories: share stories that help people understand what's at stake from a relatable perspective
 - Momentum stories: people want to join a winning team, so talk about your campaign from whatever angle showcases your power

FIGURE 1. Example of the Three A's at Work in a Values-Driven Narrative

THE ROOT

How to Save Our Voting Rights During the Pandemic

By Rashad Robinson | 5/22/20 11:00AM | Comments (7)

Accurate

On Wednesday, President Trump attacked states like Michigan and Nevada for protecting voters' from COVID-19 in upcoming elections by sending applications for absentee ballots. Voting by mail is a key way for states to protect voters' health and safety, which states have a moral and legal obligation to do. It was yet another example of how, after decades of using tactics like voter purges and closing polling sites to disenfranchise black voters, Trump and other extremist political operatives are trying to use the coronavirus pandemic to stop as many people from voting as they can. They've even admitted that this is their strategy, which is why it's so urgent that we all get serious about voter justice in our states and local communities.

Aspirational and Actionable

Everything we need to make voting safer and more convenient already exists in this country. We just have to get the resources to the right places and ensure they're spent on giving voters the accommodations outlined in our 2020 Voter Justice Agenda. To start, we must demand that Congress fully fund or increase the Election Resilience grants to states in the HEROES Act so that states have the funding they need to make these critical changes quickly. And voters must get registered and check their registration status, so we can get the latest election updates directly from local and state election officials.

Aspirational

We have everything we need to protect our health *and* our votes this year. If our elected officials start now, we can expand safe voting options and get significantly closer to making voter justice a reality in every state. After Wisconsin, millions of people are finally realizing that the voter suppression experienced by black communities could also be wielded against them—and they're also seeing that we as voters have the power to rebuke public officials who abuse their power in this way. Let's build on that momentum to protect voting rights for everyone. Let's take action today so we can elect leaders who won't play deadly political games with our lives.

This article exemplifies use of the three A's (accurate, aspirational, and actionable) to build a values-driven narrative. The author also took the opportunity to expose bad actors.

SOURCE: RASHAD ROBINSON. "HOW TO SAVE OUR VOTING RIGHTS DURING THE PANDEMIC." THE ROOT. MAY 22, 2020. ADAPTED BY SABRINA JOY STEVENS.

- Engaging explainers: use your narrative-building skills and awareness to explain what's happening in human-scale terms

Building the Movement to Counter Disinformation

Equipped with the tools above, you can now educate others about how to counter disinformation. The ultimate goal is building a strong network of people in your family, your community, and your state who will be empowered to neutralize the spread of disinformation. This is known as relational organizing.

To be effective in any campaign, organizers must build relationships that will persist despite the challenges of oppression. In societies where a small group of people hoard and use wealth

*"Everyone who cares is a communicator.
Everyone who cares is an organizer."*

— Sabrina Joy Stevens,
communications strategist

to wield power over everyone else, it takes large groups of people working together to disrupt oppression and restore a healthy balance of power. And building a network that has power in numbers starts with building strong relationships among as many people as possible who share the common goal of liberation.

One-on-one conversations are the most effective way to build trust, gather information, identify concerns, identify points of persuasion, share information, inoculate against challenges, and mobilize people into action. Our guide "[Effective One-on-One Meetings for Mobilizing People into Action for Voting Rights](#)" offers everything you need to know to be successful at relational organizing on any issue (not just voting rights).

Once you've familiarized yourself with that guide and this one, you'll be ready to defend your community from all types of harmful disinformation.

*This guide, produced by **Dr. Sophia Marjanovic** and **Lindsey Berger**, is adapted from the intellectual property of communications strategist **Sabrina Joy Stevens**, and **Jane McAlevey's** "Strike School," based on her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. Content can be shared freely as long as credit is given to Sabrina Joy Stevens and Jane McAlevey.*

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