

Discussion Guide for Navigating Misinformation In Our Communities



How can local communities and news outlets best address growing concerns about misinformation and disinformation?

Introduction to the document: This document provides a framework to spark discussion and deliberation about this important issue, focused on potential actions that local communities and journalists should consider. The document utilizes a National Issues Forum structure, which is designed to help participants have a productive, wide-ranging discussion about complex issues. It starts with a broad question focusing on an issue many agree is a concern that must be addressed. Then the document provides four potential approaches to address the issue. These approaches are not choices in the sense that we will vote or pick one at the end of the discussion. Rather, the approaches are framed to ensure a full conversation and to recognize that there are no simple solutions that will solve the issue. Each approach connects to some particular values and concerns, but each also inherently has tradeoffs that we must consider. The approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive -- communities could adopt ideas from across the four -- but they do represent separate areas of focus and strategy.

The idea is to explore what participants most support in each approach while considering the tradeoffs. There will be tensions within each approach, as well as tensions between the approaches. We encourage groups to engage and work through those tensions, rather than avoid them. Working through the tensions can help sharpen the ideas and surface the most effective ideas to move the needle on the issue.

Lastly, this document is a living document, as all deliberative discussion guides are. It was developed based on a combination of available research on misinformation, survey results, and insights gained from a two-part event in June 2022 focused on concerns around misinformation. This document is something to react to and work on as a group to improve.

We want to know what you like, what you want to push back on, what may need to be changed, and what should be added. Feel free to email us your comments at GoodInfo@colabnews.co.

Approach 1 - Equip people with the individual skills to recognize and avoid misinformation

This approach recognizes the difficulty of regulating information and stopping misinformation, and therefore focuses on the need to equip people -- starting with K-12 but continuing throughout their lives -- with the individual skills they need to better make distinctions between good information and bad information. Our best defense against misinformation, supporters of this approach argue, is to work to inoculate people against its impact, thus diminishing the long-term impact of misinformation.

Key Arguments

- This approach argues that a primary cause of the misinformation problem is simply the significant supply of people who fall victim to it. If people are better trained to resist misinformation, its impact would diminish.
- If successful, this approach would prevent the negative impacts of misinformation without relying on actions that would undermine freedom of speech or necessitate giving too much power to authorities.
- This approach seeks to strengthen societal norms of high expectations of individual responsibility for thinking critically and using media appropriately, avoiding the spread of misinformation, and developing a cultural intolerance for disinformation from an early age.

Potential Actions

1. Expand critical thinking and digital/media/information literacy requirements in K-12 and higher education.
2. Life-long learning and classes should be readily available at libraries, cultural, and educational institutions to help individuals continuously update their skills as new issues and technology evolve.
3. Information about cognitive biases and disinformation techniques should be a basic aspect of education at all levels.
4. Local news outlets should consider themselves key educators on these issues, providing readers with content and events focused on improving these skills.

Concerns/Tradeoffs

- A.** The K-12 system is already overburdened, asking them to increase focus on additional areas without significant support to build up that capacity will likely be problematic.
- B.** Optional educational solutions tend to suffer from the dilemma that those who most need the education are often the most resistant to it.
- C.** This approach expects too much out of human nature. We can't expect enough individuals to develop these skills and habits to counteract the growing problem.
- D.** This approach may work for future generations, but the situation is critical right now.
- E.** School curriculum issues are growing targets of political controversy and working to expand these areas will likely get entangled in partisan argument as well.

Approach 2 - Slow the spread by addressing the worst offenders and developing mechanisms to counteract misinformation

This approach argues for an aggressive yet careful response to develop and support measures that address the most significant causes of misinformation head-on, particularly bad faith actors and complex social media algorithms. It calls for creative solutions that challenge bad faith actors and increase accountability while still respecting freedom of speech and open inquiry.

Key Arguments

- This approach argues that a primary cause of the misinformation is bad faith actors that are profiting, political and/or monetarily, by manipulating people and sparking outrage.
- Bad faith actors have found ways to game the system to their benefit, so we must be more bold and aggressive against forces that are working against democracy and science. Some argue the real issue is power and its misuse.
- We must strengthen accountability measures, particularly against the superspreaders and those who are abusing power.
- Growing research shows when done well by trusted sources, fact-checking can be effective.

Potential Actions

1. Provide positive recognition to quality sources and expose and discredit those that consistently produce or share misinformation.
2. Strengthen our tools to help people make distinctions such as reputation ratings or warnings about sharing misinformation.
3. Continue to pressure social media companies to adapt their algorithms and be more transparent so that they work to stop the spread of misinformation and support higher-quality information.
4. Local news outlets should expand their fact-checking resources to be more equipped to call out misinformation and highlight problematic sources.

Concerns/Tradeoffs

- A.** Bad faith actors are a small part of the problem. People unknowingly sharing bad information is the primary issue.
- B.** Efforts to address what some consider bad faith actors will be seen as partisan, and only lead to more polarization and division, which in turn creates a more fertile environment for misinformation.
- C.** Similarly, calling out problematic sources could lead to a backlash and loss of trust for local news outlets.
- D.** Some of these actions would require government support to be strong enough to make a difference, but significant concerns exist regarding censorship and giving the government too much power to decide what is true or false.
- E.** Many of these actions are beyond the scope of local actors.

Approach 3 - Build and support local resources and organizations designed and equipped to provide quality trusted sources of information

This approach focuses more on ramping up ways to develop and provide local trusted, quality information -- primarily by creating new and reinvigorating existing institutions -- rather than focusing on addressing misinformation. This can be done by reimagining and supporting local news outlets, and sparking collaborations with public libraries, educational institutions, and civic organizations focused on improving the local information ecosystem and providing the local community with honest brokers of information to rely on.

Key Arguments

- Rather than reacting to misinformation, more focus should be placed on developing ways to proactively identify and share quality information.
- Local journalism should be seen as a public good and funded well, rather than be left to the whims of the market (particularly since due to human nature quality journalism will always struggle to compete).
- Due to information overload and the prevalence of misinformation, local communities need trusted gatekeepers and information curators to help residents make sense of the world. Such organizations do not develop naturally, so communities must be intentional to develop them.
- Civic society must adapt to the new reality brought on by the internet, the growth of misinformation, and partisan divides. Organizations that serve as trusted impartial resources must be actively protected and supported.

Potential Actions

1. Increase support to current institutions that contribute positively to the local information ecosystem.
2. Create new collaborative efforts between local journalists, educational institutions, libraries, and other civic organizations committed to this effort that can benefit from their varied strengths.
3. Reimagine the financial model for local journalism that sees it as a critical public good. With sufficient alternative support, local news can not only increase in capacity but can also be made available without subscription fees/paywalls in order to better compete against misinformation.
4. Local news outlets must work to build trust and be a resource to everyone in the community. That will require reaching out and authentically connecting to underserved audiences, diversifying the newsroom, and, depending on the community, exploring language translation options.

Concerns/Tradeoffs

- A.** Building trust and connecting with everyone in the community would require significant additional time and resources at a time when local news outlets are reducing staff.
- B.** This approach requires significant financial investment, which would likely need to come from either the government or philanthropic sources. Having the government fund journalism would raise a number of concerns about undue influence and the loss of independence.
- C.** Similarly, relying on philanthropic sources would also raise concerns about independence, and would be particularly difficult in rural communities, which could further worsen divides between media-rich cities and rural news deserts.
- D.** Collaboratives require significant time and effort to develop and manage well, and the organizations asked to be involved -- news outlets, educational institutions, libraries, and civic organizations -- are all addressing their own challenges currently.
- E.** These efforts may be seen as partisan and work to erode trust or divide people even more.

Approach 4 - Build strong relationships, connections, and engagement in the community in order to rebuild trust and combat the proliferation of misinformation

This approach sees the prevalence of misinformation as more of a symptom of growing division, partisanship, and distrust. When we are so divided, we are particularly susceptible to misinformation and attempts to spark outrage. This approach, therefore, seeks to focus more on the root of the problem, assuming that as we rebuild relationships and community, the power of misinformation will subside.

Key Arguments

- To protect our communities from the negative impacts of misinformation, we must focus on reducing polarization, building relationships, and building bridges across perspectives. Such efforts are very difficult at the national level -- where partisan identities dominate -- but local communities have real opportunities to develop connections between people in more positive ways.
- Communities need organizations that serve as impartial conveners and facilitators, dedicated to bringing people together across perspectives to address their shared problems more effectively. Such organizations must be proactively imagined and supported.
- Efforts to address misinformation without addressing these root causes will ultimately fall short or simply be seen as partisan or adversarial and backfire.
- Polarization is often exaggerated because the most polarized are often the most active and vocal. Creating local opportunities for people to come together in productive ways will help people realize the common ground that exists that partisan processes often undermine.

Potential Actions

1. Strengthen programs that bring people together across perspectives. Develop more capacity for public forums, focus groups, and meaningful engagement on critical issues impacted by misinformation supported by quality processes.
2. Encourage people to reach out and talk with people who think differently and try to respect and understand their perspectives.
3. Local news outlets should focus more on providing clear diversity of thought and helping groups understand each other.
4. Local news outlets and civic organizations should work together to build their skills in convening and facilitation, and expand both online and in-person opportunities for people to engage each other productively.

Concerns/Tradeoffs

- A.** In a partisan environment, efforts focused on civility and impartiality may work unintentionally to support false equivalence or “both sides-ism,” undermine necessary dissent, and support a problematic status quo. Navigating being “impartial,” “objective,” or “neutral” in the current hyper-partisan environment is exceedingly difficult.
- B.** Philanthropic efforts tend to focus on specific issues and causes, rather than capacity building. Finding the funding for these sorts of efforts will be difficult.
- C.** Similar to approach 3, this approach adds additional expectations to news outlets at a time when many are cutting back on staff, and thus would require a significant increase in funding.