

## A LETTER TO THE READER: WHY RESEARCHING DISINFORMATION IS IMPORTANT


In 2018, the Institute for Public Relations Board of Trustees decided to investigate the impact of disinformation based on the rise of fake news and deep fake videos. In 2019, IPR published our first report focused on disinformation. We are thrilled to now publish the second annual “IPR Disinformation in Society Report.”

First, it’s essential to understand how disinformation influences society. In 2019, [a study by Oxford University](#) found evidence that organized social media manipulation campaigns have taken place in 70 countries, a 150% increase from when they started collecting data in 2017. Studies have also investigated the influence of disinformation on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Based on an analysis of Twitter, a [2018 Knight Foundation report](#) determined many of the accounts active in the 2016 election disinformation campaigns continue to operate, despite clear evidence of automated activity.

The 2020 U.S. presidential election will be no exception to the threat of disinformation, perpetuated by “foreign malicious actors” who want to “undermine our democratic institutions,” according to the [U.S. Department of Justice](#). Disinformation will increase dramatically in intensity and frequency as the 2020 election in November draws near.

Research demonstrates that disinformation erodes trust in society and democratic institutions. Published in [Harvard’s Misinformation Review](#), researchers found that fake news exposure lowers trust in the media, but may also increase trust in government when one’s side is in power. However, trust in government is still low. The [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) found that none of the four societal institutions—government, business, NGOs, and media—are trusted. This erosion of trust compromises the ability of leaders to make decisions.

In 2018, the Rand Corporation published a report, [Truth Decay](#), identifying four interrelated trends that increasingly have had an impact on national political and civil discourse over the past 20 years. **These include:**

-  Increasing disagreement about facts and data
-  A blurring of the line between opinion and fact
-  The increasing relative volume and resulting influence of opinion over fact
-  Declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. The researchers then identified the four effects of truth decay at the personal, community, national, and international levels:
  -  Erosion of civil discourse
  -  Political paralysis
  -  Alienation and disengagement from political institutions
  -  Uncertainty over national policy

Increases in technological sophistication and the connectedness of networks have led to frequent blending of facts, opinions, and misinformation, according to [Dr. Michael Dimock, President of Pew Research Center](#).

Disinformation sows the seeds of doubt, creating what [Dr. Kevin Young](#) of The Schomburg Center refers to as the “colonization of doubt.” Dr. Young says disinformation creates mistrust in truths, which deteriorates trust overall in institutions to the detriment of society.

We anticipate this problem will grow as technology costs decrease, sophistication increases, and the successes of disinformation campaigns continue. IPR plans to continue studying the impact of disinformation on society as we believe it has critical implications not just for our profession but for society and our democratic processes as well. As communicators, we need to be more vigilant than ever to define what is, or is not, true.

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