



How Communicators Can Help Manage Election Disinformation in the Workplace

By

Olivia K. Fajardo, M.A.

Tina McCorkindale, Ph.D., APR

IPR Behavioral Insights Research Center



INSTITUTE FOR
PUBLIC RELATIONS

Table of Contents

Introduction & Purpose	3
<i>Why Do People Share Disinformation?</i>	4
<i>Impact of Disinformation on Elections and Businesses</i>	5
Theories and Models	6
<i>Cognitive Dissonance</i>	6
<i>Motivated Reasoning</i>	7
<i>Confirmation Bias and Selective Exposure</i>	8
<i>Availability Heuristic</i>	8
<i>Bandwagon Effect</i>	9
Prebunking	9
<i>Prebunking and Inoculation Theory</i>	9
<i>Potential Obstacles to Prebunking</i>	11
<i>How to Prebunk</i>	12
10 Ways Communicators Can Help	13
Guidelines for Sharing Election Information	19
Conclusion	20
References	21



Introduction & Purpose

Elections create environments for the spread of disinformation and misinformation, thanks to the ubiquitousness and networking abilities of social media or other technological applications or networks. Disinformation and misinformation should be regarded as two distinct terms where the difference lies in the intention of the sender. *Disinformation* is defined as **deliberately** misleading or false information as the intent of the sender is to deceive (Institute for Public Relations, 2020). *Misinformation*, or false or leading information without the intent of deception, is more often the result of ignorance, carelessness, or a mistake (Institute for Public Relations, 2020).

According to researcher Samantha Lai at The Brookings Institution (2022), social media is a breeding ground for disinformation thanks to the large amount of information available and its shareability. In past elections, bad actors have spread disinformation on social media about incorrect polling locations or voting dates, election fraud, stories of threats of law enforcement at polling locations, and have sowed doubts about the overall trustworthiness of the election process.

According to Campaign Legal Center Executive Director Adav Noti (interview, 2024), the public may not have high awareness about how elections work, which offers an opportunity for disinformation to be spread.

“Companies that benefit from the policies and programs that society and lawmakers have created have an obligation to help ensure they contribute to a healthy society through the election process.”
-Adav Noti, Campaign Legal Center

Election disinformation can have significant societal consequences by influencing election outcomes, making voting laws more restrictive, increasing partisan conflict, and lowering the levels of trust in the election process and institutions.

To help organizations better understand the science behind disinformation and to help them manage these challenges during elections, the Institute for Public Relations Behavioral Insights Research Center has compiled this research and insights-driven report. This brief provides examples of the biases that may be used by bad actors to inform disinformation campaigns, how employers can inoculate their employees and stakeholders against election disinformation, best practices for screening content for disinformation, and 10 tips for what organizations should do.

Why Do People Share Disinformation?

The Institute for Public Relations has [annually conducted studies](#) investigating disinformation and its impact on society in the U.S., Canada, and South America. Research has found users especially habitual ones, are incentivized and rewarded by sharing disinformation. Professors at the University of Southern California analyzed the habits of Facebook users and found that the most habitual news sharers were responsible for spreading about 30% to 40% of the fake news (Ceylan et al., 2023). Disinformation is designed to be visually compelling to users, and the content evokes emotion (e.g., anger, sadness) to increase its shareability.

“False news” on Twitter (now X) is 70% more likely to be shared than true news stories, concluding that disinformation may be more appealing than reality (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

One of the seminal studies in this area was a 2018 MIT study that found “false news” on Twitter (now X) is 70% more likely to be shared than true news stories concluding that disinformation may be more appealing than reality (Vosoughi et al, 2018). Even disregarding the effects of social media, the spread of mis- and disinformation is due in part to human behavior. A series of cognitive and socio-affective factors drive individuals to believe and spread disinformation. When users see information online, they automatically focus on comprehending the information and deciding how to respond, rather than assessing the credibility. While doing so, they suffer from a phenomenon called “knowledge neglect” where, even if they have knowledge that contradicts what they’re reading, they don’t retrieve it as long as the information they are processing is reasonable to them (van der Linden et al., 2023).

“We know that misinformation and disinformation preys on biases, and what started as state actor propaganda has been adopted by those seeking to gain financially or reputationally at the expense of organizations by targeting their stakeholders. This includes both competitors targeting each other, and individuals seeking to grow their following and influence jumping on a bandwagon.”

-Lisa Kaplan, Alethea

Impact of Disinformation on Elections and Businesses

A [recent study](#) by the Bipartisan Policy Center found that 72% of Americans are concerned about “inaccurate or misleading information” regarding the 2024 U.S. Presidential election. Additionally, the [2024 IPR-Leger Disinformation in Society report](#) found that 75% of Americans believe disinformation undermines the American election process, and 74% believe disinformation is a threat to American democracy. A [poll conducted](#) in 2023 by the Public Affairs Council also found that only 37% of Americans believe that the 2024 elections will be “both honest and open to rightful voters,” while 43% of respondents had doubts about honesty, openness, or both.



Businesses should not ignore this issue. A [KRC Research and Weber Shandwick study](#) found that 81% of employees and 80% of consumers thought “American businesses should encourage a free and fair election.” However, respondents did not want businesses to take sides. The study found that 72% of consumers and 71% of employees said, “the workplace should be kept politically neutral during this election year.” Only 25% of employees and 23% of consumers said American businesses should actually endorse candidates.

Also, employees are turning to businesses as a trusted source for information ahead of the election. A [2023 Public Affairs Council poll](#) found that 43% of respondents trusted businesses as a political news and information source, and a [2024 Edelman study](#) found that 63% of individuals across the globe have overall trust in businesses. Therefore, businesses may be an excellent resource for employees during elections.

Theories & Models

One of the best ways to defend against disinformation is to understand the psychological frameworks that make disinformation campaigns believable. There are several theories and models that may help explain or predict how people perceive and process information. These theories are not mutually exclusive, and oftentimes are unconsciously used in tandem.

Additionally, research has found certain biases can affect how people process information. Below are some theories and models that help explain how people process information and can be influenced by misinformation and disinformation. Most of these models could apply to the processing of both misinformation and disinformation; when referring to a specific study, we use the term that was in the original research.

Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger (1957) developed the concept of cognitive dissonance to describe the mental uneasiness people feel when their perceptions do not align with other information or beliefs in their environment. When this occurs, people will take steps to reduce their dissonance. For example, if people believe COVID is not real, but people around them are dying or there are news reports about the impact of COVID, they may try to reduce the dissonance in their minds by seeking additional evidence that agrees with their pre-existing belief or downplay the impact of COVID.

Three ways people will reduce dissonance:

(Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020)

1

Changing their current attitude

2

Adding cognitions that agree with their pre-existing belief (such as finding information that aligns with their belief) so the overall inconsistency decreases

3

Decreasing the importance or perceived validity of conflicting information

Cognitive Dissonance (Cont.)

Cognitive dissonance may play a role in how people perceive news that disagrees with their political views. One study found that consuming news that challenged participants' political viewpoints caused significantly more cognitive dissonance than consuming news that was neutral or consistent with their views (Metzger et al., 2015). The Cancino-Montecinos et al. study (2020) also supported the notion that if readers convince themselves that conflicting information is not credible, it reduces dissonance. Cognitive dissonance theory has been supported across multiple decision-making and information-processing theories and models.

Motivated Reasoning

Motivated reasoning involves selectively processing information that supports one's prior beliefs or preferences while ignoring or discounting contradictory evidence (Kunda, 1990). Motivated reasoning can influence social and political attitudes and behaviors, including polarization, confirmation bias, and voting choices (Ditto et al., 2019; Redlawsk et al., 2010).

Research has found that when presented with counterarguments, people are more likely to stick with their initial position on an issue, and in some cases, strengthen their preexisting position on an issue (Stanley et al., 2019). However, for the small number of individuals who may change their minds, exposure to counterarguments can be effective.

Researchers have found that one way people may be willing to change their position on an issue is to ensure their perspectives are not stated from the outset. Otherwise, they may be more likely to be defensive of their original position—this is referred to as the “prior-belief bias”—and create attitude change resistance. Other research has found those who have a high need for cognitive closure (in order to reduce cognitive dissonance) may reject new information because they believe they are already sufficiently knowledgeable about a topic (Kruglanski et al., 1993). Simply put, changing attitudes is difficult.

Research conducted on the 2020 U.S. Presidential election found that supporters of the winning candidate more strongly rejected concerns that the integrity of the election had been compromised, believing their candidate had won fairly (Vail et al., 2022). On the other hand, supporters of the losing candidate more strongly believed the election's integrity had been compromised by ballot fraud (Vail et al., 2022). These findings further demonstrate the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. The strength of one's position and perceived knowledge on that issue, as well as the outcome, can influence how people process information.

Confirmation Bias and Selective Exposure

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek or interpret evidence that aligns with one's existing beliefs and expectations (Nickerson, 1998). Similarly, selective exposure occurs when individuals only expose themselves to information that aligns with their own beliefs.

These biases can impact political beliefs and discourse. Research shows that when people only tune into news sources that bolster their views rather than challenge them, the result can be increasingly larger divisions in views and perceived social distance between political parties (Garrett et al., 2014).

“Echo chambers,” or situations where only certain ideas, information, and beliefs are shared are another aspect of selective exposure worth studying in the context of political polarization (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Dubois & Blank, 2018). Research has shown that echo chambers can lead to a “proliferation of biased narratives fomented by unsubstantiated rumors, mistrust, and paranoia” (Del Vicario et al., 2016, p. 558; Institute for Public Relations, 2020). Echo chambers are increasingly present on social media, where user engagement algorithms push content that they suspect individuals will agree and interact with. While traditional media sources often have stringent regulations on fact-checking, the rapid “peer-to-peer” sharing of social media makes it difficult to monitor and regulate the spread of mis- and disinformation (van der Linden et al., 2023). Research indicates that individuals who engage in politically motivated selective exposure also perceive mass media to be biased in general (Barnidge et al., 2017).

Availability Heuristic

Heuristics are “mental shortcuts,” typically based on past experiences that help increase the speed and decrease the mental energy used when making decisions or judgments. For example, if someone has an issue with their internet, they may first revert to what they have done in the past such as restarting their computer or resetting their router. In 1984, Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor introduced the term “cognitive miser” (also known as “cognitive laziness”) which has been used to describe how people will take shortcuts to avoid expending mental effort to avoid cognitive overload.

The availability heuristic is a pattern of thinking in which individuals assess the likelihood of something based on how readily relevant examples or information come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Availability can be influenced by the frequency with which an individual is presented with information on a topic, along with other factors. This “mental shortcut” creates potentially flawed correlations between subjects and can lead to bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

As for elections, this heuristic could support the argument that the increased availability of certain information leading up to an election can impact perceptions surrounding the election. For example, one study found that individuals who were asked to imagine Jimmy Carter winning the presidential election prior to the election were more likely to predict that he would win (Carroll, 1978). This becomes a concern in the case of election disinformation, as repetition of a false narrative can impact perceptions due to the availability heuristic.

Bandwagon Effect

The bandwagon effect is the “tendency for people in social and sometimes political situations to align themselves with the majority opinion and do or believe things because many other people appear to be doing or believing the same” (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1). When people perceive public opinion to favor one side of the issue (Marsh, 1985; Nadeau et, Cloutier & Guay, 1993; Schmitt-Beck, 2015), this may encourage people to avoid sharing their viewpoints if they are in the minority, as Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) outlined in her spiral of silence theory. One of the reasons why people may avoid sharing a contrary perspective is a fear of isolation, as people want to avoid “criticism, scorn, laughter, or other signs of disapproval” (Petersen, 2019, ¶ 7).

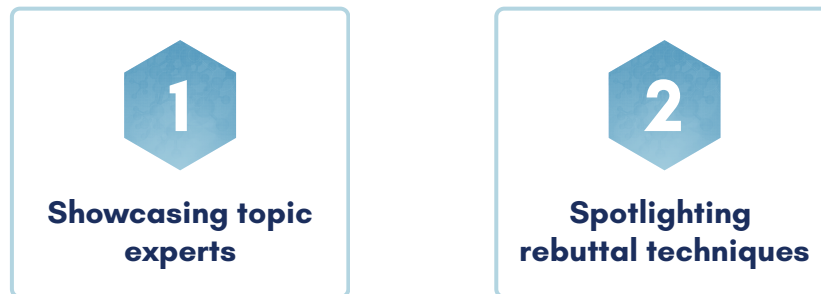
Research also spotlights the importance of mass media, including social media, as a channel where individuals primarily get their information on public opinion (Mutz, 1998; Schmitt-Beck, 2015). Although the bandwagon effect has been shown to have relatively weak effects overall, research suggests that its effects may be strong enough to influence elections in the time leading up closely to the election (Schmitt-Beck, 2015). These effects are also believed to occur typically “under conditions of weak political involvement on the part of voters, both with regard to partisanship and general political awareness” (Schmitt-Beck, 2015, p. 3).

Prebunking

Prebunking and Inoculation Theory

Inoculation theory (also referred to as “prebunking”) is a proactive strategy to prevent people from believing or spreading misinformation and/or disinformation. Inoculation theory posits that disinformation may be countered by exposing some of the logical fallacies or false information before people encounter it (Cook et al., 2017, p. 4; Institute for Public Relations, 2020). The theory operates from the same principle that inoculating people against disinformation helps them build resistance to false content, much like how a vaccine helps inoculate people against disease.

In an experiment applying inoculation theory to combatting vaccine disinformation, Schmid and Betsch (2019) found disinformation regarding vaccinations typically follows two predictable types of science denialism: discrediting experts and presenting information through manipulative techniques. Therefore, they recommend focusing on two strategies that are both equally helpful for mitigating and combatting disinformation:



Additionally, the researchers found science denialism (in this case, regarding vaccine efficacy) typically uses common techniques for rebuttals: information selectivity, impossible expectations[1], conspiracy theories, misrepresentation or false logics, and fake experts. Understanding the primary schemes of science deniers allows communicators to be better equipped with strategies for combatting disinformation. Communicators need to have a strong understanding of the topics and techniques used to create disinformation surrounding elections.

Roozenbeek and colleagues (2022) conducted a series of experiments with nearly 30,000 participants to determine whether people can be inoculated against various manipulation techniques found in disinformation on social media. They tested common techniques found in online disinformation: the use of excessively emotional language, incoherence, false dichotomies, scapegoating, and ad hominem attacks. Results indicate that watching even short inoculation videos spotlighting these manipulation techniques improved people's ability to identify disinformation, which in turn boosted their confidence, increased their ability to recognize untrustworthy content, and improved the quality of their social media sharing.

Dr. Courtney Boman at the University of Alabama (2021) conducted a seminal experiment in public relations to investigate the effectiveness of the strategies of prebunking, debunking (after the disinformation has been disseminated), and strategic silence (no response) when trying to minimize potential damage to reputation after the spread of disinformation. Across the board, prebunking statistically outperformed both debunking and strategic silence, especially when coupled with autonomy supportive messaging (non-pressuring message framing that allows readers to have a choice) and explicit details of the attack.

[1] An impossible expectation is an unrealistic standard that can never be met. For example, guaranteeing a 100% effectiveness for vaccines is an impossible expectation.

Potential Obstacles to Prebunking

Although inoculation or prebunking is a great tool to defend against disinformation, some potential challenges may arise when attempting to prebunk. One such challenge is the “backfire effect.”

When individuals already have a deeply held belief or they have already been exposed to misinformation or disinformation (and believe in the mis-/disinformation,) they might experience what is known as the “backfire effect.” According to scholars Nyhan and Reifler (2010), “individuals who receive unwelcome information may not simply resist challenges to their views. Instead, they may come to support their original opinion even more strongly” (p. 307). Research results have been mixed on the influence of the backfire effect.

A related concept is the “boomerang effect,” which also involves a message producing the opposite outcome of what was intended. However, in the case of the boomerang effect, the identity of the audience plays a significant role. According to the literature, boomerang effects are “produced when a threat to one’s freedom of choice is perceived and are accompanied by a heightened sense of emotional arousal” (Richter et al., p.9, 2023; Byrne and Hart, 2009; Brehm and Brehm, 2013).

Although some research has observed a backfire or boomerang effect, scientific support for these effects is inconsistent (Casas, Menchen-Trevino & Wojcieszak, 2023; Trevors et al., 2016). Thus, these challenges should not prevent attempts to inoculate against disinformation.

Communicators should also be careful not to repeat the disinformation when attempting to prebunk; instead, they should refer to disinformation generally. The “illusory truth effect” describes how repeated statements are more easily processed, and therefore are more likely to be believed as truth compared to new statements (Beauvais, 2022). Chris Graves, founder of the Ogilvy Center for Behavioral Science, reported that when you repeat disinformation, you are unintentionally sharing it with more audiences and as many as 40% of the audience members will believe it (Graves, 2015).



How to Prebunk

Below are some research-driven guidelines for how disinformation can be prebunked:

- Share clear and factual information before the election and continue throughout the election cycle.
- Understand the topics and techniques bad actors will use to spread disinformation about the election and prebunk them.
- Provide explicit details of the type of the attack and use non-pressuring language (e.g., autonomy supportive)
- Share the correct information using multiple expert sources instead of only one source. Having multiple expert sources tends to reduce belief in disinformation more effectively (Vraga & Bode, 2017).
- Some of the most trusted sources for election information are local officials, business leaders, and military members, according to The Brennan Center for Justice (2024).
- Train and equip your audience with the skills and tools to evaluate and verify election information critically.
- When disinformation is encountered, provide a clear warning that there is an attempt to mislead and provide facts that refute the disinformation (Betsch et al., 2015).
- Messages that refute disinformation should provide “scientific, factual, or other credible information relevant to the issue” (Institute for Public Relations, p. 21, 2020; Macnamara, 2020b).
- When refuting disinformation, create an emotional connection with your audience and work toward self-affirmation, which can prevent your audience from feeling ostracized.



10 Ways Communicators Can Help

In addition to prebunking disinformation, communicators have options for how to help combat disinformation as stakeholders increasingly expect business leaders to help ensure a free and fair election. Here are 10 ways business leaders can get involved in communicating about elections and related disinformation without overstepping boundaries:

1 Understand theories, biases, and the current state of research

One key strategic decision about disinformation is deciding how or whether to challenge and correct it (Macnamara, 2020b; Institute for Public Relations 2020). Academic research has studied the circumstances with which companies should respond and not respond. But there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Therefore, understanding behavioral science, such as the research provided by the [IPR Behavioral Insights Research Center](#) and this guide, helps uncover why people think and act the way they do. Having a strong understanding of theories and models that help explain or predict behavior is critically important for communicators.

2 Inoculate employees against disinformation

In line with inoculation theory, communicators should understand election-related topics that are used to discredit and cast doubt on the election process. According to The Brennan Center for Justice (2020), myths and false claims from the 2020 U.S. Presidential election included:

- Millions of noncitizens are voting
- Significant numbers of ineligible individuals are voting
- Machines are malfunctioning or are rigged
- Election results take too long
- The outcome is different than the polls or predictions
- Recounts and audits are ways to steal elections
- Poll workers are telling people how to vote (ballot tampering or harvesting)

Knowing this, communicators can be better equipped to prebunk misinformation and disinformation.

3 Serve as a trusted resource about elections and election processes

According to the [2024 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), 79% of respondents trusted their employer as a source of information overall. Additionally, [research](#) by the Bipartisan Policy Center shows that voters are more likely to look to sources they are more familiar with for election information. If organizations choose to communicate about the election, they have a responsibility to craft internal messages carefully.

Companies can provide their employees with nonpartisan voting information (e.g., polling locations, how elections work) or resources where they can go for more information to help them build confidence and participate in the election process. Other outreach methods include professional development programs, lunch-and-learns, or inviting nonpartisan experts to speak on election-related topics.

Below are a few nonpartisan, nonprofit sources where people can go for more information:

- **USA.gov:** The U.S. Government has a site dedicated to information about voting in elections across all levels (congressional, state, and local) as well as how to register to vote and when to vote. [Voting and elections | USAGov](#)
- **Vote.org:** Nonpartisan nonprofit that provides information about voting to help remove barriers to voting. [Everything You Need to Vote - Vote.org](#)
- **Ballot Ready:** Nonprofit that helps people research election ballots and find local polling places. [BallotReady](#)
- **Factcheck.org:** Hosted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, Factcheck.org monitors the factual accuracy of what politicians say in ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. [Our Mission - FactCheck.org](#)
- **Vote 411:** Formed by the League of Women Voters Education Fund, Vote411.org is a one-stop shop for election-related information with both general and state-specific information on the election process. [About Us | VOTE411](#)
- **The Brennan Center for Justice:** Part of the NYU Law School, this independent, nonpartisan law and policy organization conducts research and works to reform, revitalize, and defend the U.S. systems of democracy and justice. <https://www.brennancenter.org/>

Companies should also offer tips and tricks to help stop employees from sharing disinformation (see “Guidelines for sharing election information” in this document).

4 Equip employees with tools for identifying disinformation

There are several organizations and online tools to help identify or detect disinformation. Here are just a few examples from the [IPR Disinformation Resource Library](#), which contains over 30 different resources:

- **News Literacy Project:** Nonprofit that focuses on educating the U.S. public on news literacy and how to detect mis-/disinformation. [News Literacy Project](#)
- **Bad News:** Online game that teaches users about the techniques involved in the dissemination of disinformation. [Bad News](#)
- **Association for Psychological Science:** Published "[Countering Misinformation with Psychological Science](#)," a paper that features a "misinformation prevention kit" for policymakers, the scientific community, the media, and members of the public.

Types of Misinformation (Credit: News Literacy Project)

Types

Adapted from First Draft's [seven types of mis- and disinformation](#), created by Claire Wardle.

Misinformation can be categorized based on what makes it false or misleading. The following five types are commonly found online:



False context

An image, video, quote or other piece of content is presented in a new, false context that changes its meaning.



Fabricated content

Misinformation that is entirely made up, such as computer-generated imagery or entirely fictional reports presented as "news."



Stolen satire

A specific type of "false context" misinformation in which all or part of a piece of satire is presented as authentic.

Imposter content

Content — such as a fake tweet from a public figure, or a fake ad — that falsely uses a well-known name, brand or logo to fool people into believing that it is authentic.



Manipulated content

Photos, videos, graphics and other types of content that have been "doctored" in some way, such as having one or more elements artificially added or removed.



5 Avoid partisan politics

Endorsing a partisan viewpoint can lead to “reduced levels of psychological safety among workers who identify with a different political party, which in turn can adversely affect engagement, innovation, productivity, and retention” (American Psychological Association, 2022, ¶ 21). Keeping company communication about upcoming elections neutral will help employees with differing political viewpoints feel psychologically safe.

6 Understand the legal context

As many organizations host internal sites, communication apps, or intranets for employees to share their thoughts and feelings, communicators should be aware of what employees can say and not say from a legal standpoint when it comes to election-related content, as well as possible disinformation.

7 Encourage employee participation in the election process

Leaders should speak about the importance of voting and fair elections, according to The Brennan Center for Justice. Employers can also offer time off for employees to vote in elections. [Time to Vote](#), a nonpartisan movement led by the business community, advocates that workers should not have to choose between earning a paycheck or voting. They offer resources on their website for employers.

Companies can also give employees time off to volunteer in nonpartisan activities such as serving as an election worker, which can help individuals better understand the election process. Leadership can reinforce their nonpartisan support of a fair election by thanking employees who serve as election workers.





8

Find employee ambassadors and trusted sources

Identify and educate employee ambassadors on how to detect disinformation and effectively communicate with other employees regardless of any political leaning. Sharing guides such as the one created by the [News Literacy Project](#) can help civil conversations take place.

When employees are looking for information on the election that extends beyond the company's area of responsibility, companies should point them toward credible, trusted, expert sources. Some of the most trusted sources for election information in the U.S. are local officials, business leaders, and military officers, according to The Brennan Center for Justice (2024).

9

Provide media and information literacy (MIL) training to help stop the spread of disinformation

Media and information literacy (MIL) should be regarded as a core business competency. MIL helps build critical thinking skills and helps employees process and evaluate the authenticity of that information more effectively. MIL training, though, is not a one-size-fits-all solution as people have different requirements and levels of competency at different stages in their lives.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) survey of adult skills in 33 countries, nearly half of the adults studied had low proficiency in problem-solving techniques.

In fact, only 6% of adults scored at the highest level of skill for "managing challenging and complicated processes in unfamiliar media and digital technology environments" (Rasi, 2019, p. 8). Studies have found that MIL training decreases the likelihood of sharing disinformation (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Jones-Jang et al, 2019).

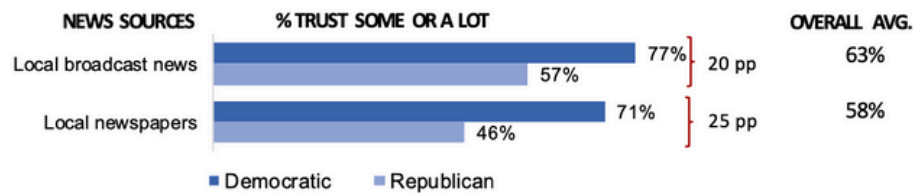
Digital literacy also plays a large factor in combatting disinformation. High digital literacy, or the ability to understand and communicate in an online setting, was found to mitigate the spread of disinformation, and those who underwent literacy training were more likely to use critical thinking while observing information on social media (Beauvais, 2022). MIL training can have significant long-term benefits to organizations outside of the election process.

10 Support local journalism

In the [IPR Disinformation in Society](#) annual studies, results find that while significant differences exist between Republicans and Democrats and information sources they trust, the smallest differential is with local news, both broadcast and print/online. However, according to the State of Local News Project at Northwestern University, the US has lost nearly 2,900 newspapers since 2005 and is on pace to lose one-third of all its newspapers by the end of next year. This creates news deserts where people do not have access to reliable news and information from a source they trust. Organizations can help better support local journalism, which serves as a trusted source across political parties.

Local news bridges the trustworthiness gap between Democrats and Republicans with a smaller differential than other sources

Many Democrats and Republicans say they have at least “some” trust in local newspapers and local broadcast news (especially Democrats).



Sources Ranked By Trust Among Total Population

Credit: IPR-Leger Disinformation in Society Report

Guidelines for Sharing Election Information

Below are some guidelines people should consider when sharing election-related information:

- Verify the information is from a reputable source.
- Check the date of the content to ensure it is not outdated.
- Determine if the information is consistent across other sources.
- Identify inconsistencies or discrepancies.
- Verify information through an online fact checker tool such as [Media Smarts](#) from Canada's Centre for Digital Media Literacy, Or, research the authors of the study—if there is no author, then it is probably not a reputable source.
- Consider the context and purpose of the information. Is this information shared in a way that elicits a strong emotional response? Does it contain facts, is it an opinion, or does it simply appeal to a certain preexisting belief system? If it elicits a strong emotional response, it may be disinformation.

Check out the IPR ["Think Before You Link"](#) checklist for more guidelines and a helpful visual.

10 WAYS TO THINK BEFORE YOU LINK

- Who is the Author or Source?
- How Current is the Source?
- Who Shared the Post?
- Does the Headline Match the Content?
- Does it Create Distrust or Sow Division?
- How Does It Make Me Feel?
- What is the Evidence?
- Could It Be a Joke?
- Have I Verified It?
- Do I Know Enough?

Conclusion

Every person in a communication role can help fight election disinformation. By understanding the biases and techniques that make disinformation campaigns successful, people can better protect themselves and others from harmful, false information. These simple guidelines for prebunking and election communication provide a reliable reference for communicators as elections take place around the world.

Special thanks to the following contributors for providing edits to the brief:

- Zifei Fay Chen, Ph.D. (University of San Francisco)
- Mathew Isaac, Ph.D. (Seattle University)
- Doug Pinkham (Public Affairs Council)
- Dave Scholz (Leger)
- Stacey Smith (Jackson Jackson & Wagner)

For more information on disinformation, prebunking, and more, visit these IPR resources:

- [IPR Disinformation Resource Library](#)
- [10 Ways to Identify Disinformation - A Guide and Checklist](#)
- [IPR Research Library - Mis/Disinformation Topic](#)
- [2023 IPR-Leger Disinformation in Society Report](#)
- [10 Ways to Combat Misinformation: A Behavioral Insights Approach](#)
- [A Communicator's Guide to COVID-19 Vaccination](#)



About The Institute for Public Relations

The Institute for Public Relations is an independent, nonprofit research foundation dedicated to fostering greater use of research and research-based knowledge in corporate communication and the public relations practice. IPR is dedicated to *the science beneath the art of public relations*.™ IPR provides timely insights and applied intelligence that professionals can put to immediate use. All research, including a weekly research letter, is available for free at instituteforpr.org.

References

- APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2008). Bandwagon effect. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.apa.org/bandwagon-effect>
- Association for Psychological Science. (2022). Countering misinformation with psychological science. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/redesign/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/APS-WhitePaper-Countering-Misinformation.pdf>
- Barnidge, M. (2016). Exposure to political disagreement in social media versus face-to-face and anonymous online settings. *Political Communication*, 34(2), 302-321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2016.1235639>
- Betsch, C., Böhm, R., & Chapman, G. B. (2015). Using behavioral insights to increase vaccination policy effectiveness. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2(1), 61-73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732215600716>
- Boman, C. D. (2021). Examining characteristics of prebunking strategies to overcome PR disinformation attacks. *Public Relations Review*, 47. [Examining characteristics of prebunking strategies to overcome PR disinformation attacks - ScienceDirect](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.101016)
- Brehm, S., & Brehm, J. (1981). *Psychological Reactance*. New York, NY: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/c2013-0-10423-0>
- Byrne, S., & Hart, P. S. (2009). The boomerang effect: A synthesis of findings and a preliminary theoretical framework. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 33(1), 3-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2009.11679083>
- Cancino-Montecinos et al. S, (Nov 11, 2020). A general model of dissonance reduction: Unifying past accounts via an emotion regulation perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, [A General Model of Dissonance Reduction: Unifying Past Accounts via an Emotion Regulation Perspective \(nih.gov\)](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584111)
- Carroll, J. S. (1978). The effect of imagining an event on expectations for the event: An interpretation in terms of the availability heuristic. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14(1), 88-96. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031\(78\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(78)90062-8)
- Casas, A., Menchen-Trevino, E., & Wojcieszak, M. (2022). Exposure to extremely partisan news from the other political side shows scarce boomerang effects. *Political Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09769-9>
- Ceylan et al. (January 17, 2023). Sharing of misinformation is habitual, not just lazy or biased. *PNAS*, 120(4), <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216614120>
- Cook, J., Lewandowsky, S., & Ecker, U. K. H. (2017). Neutralizing misinformation through inoculation: Exposing misleading argumentation techniques reduces their influence. *PLOS ONE*, 12(5). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175799>
- Dame Adjin-Tettey, T. (2022). Combating fake news, disinformation, and misinformation: Experimental evidence for media literacy education. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2037229>
- Del Vicario, M. (2016). The spreading of misinformation online. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(3), 554-559. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113>
- Ditto, P. H., Liu, B. S., Clark, C. J., Wojcik, S. P., Chen, E. E., Grady, R. H., Celniker, J. B., & Zinger, J. F. (2018). At least bias is bipartisan: A meta-analytic comparison of partisan bias in Liberals and Conservatives. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 14(2), 273-291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617746796>
- Dubois, E., & Blank, G. (2018). The echo chamber is overstated: The moderating effect of political interest and diverse media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21(5), 729-745.
- Edelman. (2020). 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer spring update: Trust and the Coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://www.edelman.com/research/trust-2020-spring-update>
- Edelman. (2023). 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer. Retrieved from <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>

Feldman, M. (2020). Dirty tricks: 9 falsehoods that could undermine the 2020 election. Brennan Center for Justice. [Dirty Tricks: 9 Falsehoods that Could Undermine the 2020 Election | Brennan Center for Justice](#)

Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson & Company.

Garrett, R. K., Gvirsman, S. D., Johnson, B. K., Tsfati, Y., Neo, R., & Dal, A. (2014). Implications of pro- and counterattitudinal information exposure for affective polarization. *Human Communication Research*, 40(3), 309-332. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12028>

Institute for Public Relations. (2020). A Communicator's Guide to COVID-19 Vaccination. Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/a-communicators-guide-to-vaccines/>

Institute for Public Relations. (2023). IPR-Leger Disinformation in Society Report. Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/2023-ipr-leger-disinformation/>

Institute for Public Relations. (2023). IPR Disinformation Resource Library. Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/behavioral-insights-research-center/disinformation-resource-library/>

Jamieson, K. H., & Cappella, J. N. (2008). *Echo chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the conservative media establishment*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Jones-Jang, S. M., Mortensen, T., & Liu, J. (2021). Does Media Literacy Help Identification of Fake News? Information Literacy Helps, but Other Literacies Don't. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 65(2), 371-388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219869406>

Kruglanski et al., A. W. (1993). Motivated resistance and openness to persuasion in the presence or absence of prior information. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(5), 861-876. [1994-29637-001.pdf \(apa.org\)](https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.5.861)

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480-498. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480>

Lai, Samantha. (June 21, 2022). Data misuse and disinformation: Technology and the 2022 elections. The Brookings Institution. [Data misuse and disinformation: Technology and the 2022 elections | Brookings](#)

Macnamara, J. (2020). *Beyond post-communication*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Marsh, H. W., & Hocevar, D. (1985). Application of confirmatory factor analysis to the study of self-concept: First- and higher order factor models and their invariance across groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 97(3), 562-582. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.97.3.562>

Metzger, M. J., Hartsell, E. H., & Flanagin, A. J. (2015). Cognitive dissonance or credibility? *Communication Research*, 47(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215613136>

Mutz, D. C. (1998). *Impersonal influence: How perceptions of mass collectives affect political attitudes*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139175074>

Nadeau, R., Cloutier, E., & Guay, J.H. (1993). New evidence about the existence of a bandwagon effect in the opinion formation process. *International Political Science Review*, 14(2), 203-213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251219301400204>

Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175-220. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175>

Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1974. "The Spiral of Silence A Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication* 24 (2): 43-51. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x

Noti, A. (2024, April 11). Empowering voices: The role of communicators in the election process [Conference presentation]. IPR Bridge Conference, Washington, D.C., USA. <https://web.cvent.com/event/50ffc489-4ba2-4c83-9678-1e45e376b763/websitePage:645d57e4-75eb-4769-b2c0-f201a0bfc6ce>

- Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, 32(2), 303-330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>
- Pappas, S. (2023). What employers can do to counter election misinformation in the workplace. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/workplace-fake-news>
- Petersen, T. (2019, January 2). Spiral of silence. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiral-of-silence>
- Pinkham, D., & Kresic, O. (2023). New poll shows how parties differ in views about business and Democratic values. Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/new-poll-shows-how-parties-differ-in-views-about-business-and-democratic-values/>
- Rasi, P., Vuojärvi, H., & Ruokamo, H. (2019). Media Literacy Education for All Ages. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 11(2), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2019-11-2-1>
- Redlawsk, D. P., Civettini, A. J. W., & Emmerson, K. M. (2010). The affective tipping point: Do motivated reasoners ever "get it"? *Political Psychology*, 31(4), 563-593. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00772.x>
- Richter, I., Thøgersen, J., & Klöckner, C. (2018). A social norms intervention going wrong: Boomerang effects from descriptive norms information. *Sustainability*, 10(8), 2848. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su10082848>
- Roozenbeek et al, J. (2022). Psychological inoculation improves resilience against misinformation on social media. *Science Advances*, 8 (34), DOI:[10.1126/sciadv.abo6254](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abo6254)
- Schmid, P. & Betsch, C. (Sept 2019). Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions. *Nature Human Behavior*, 3, 931-939
- Schmitt-Beck, R. (2015). Bandwagon effect. *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118541555.wbiepc015>
- Stanley, M.L., Henne, P., Yang, B.W. et al. Resistance to Position Change, Motivated Reasoning, and Polarization. *Polit Behav* 42, 891-913 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09526-z>
- Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2009). Conspiracy theories: Causes and cures. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2), 202-227. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x>
- Trevors, G., Muis, K., Pekrun, R., Sinatra, G., & Winne, P. (2016). Identity and epistemic emotions during knowledge revision: A potential account for the backfire effect. *Discourse Processes*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2015.1136507>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1973). Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability. *Cognitive Psychology*, 5(2), 207-232. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(73\)90033-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(73)90033-9)
- Vail, K. E., Harvell-Bowman, L., Lockett, M., Pyszczynski, T., & Gilmore, G. (2022). Motivated reasoning: Election integrity beliefs, outcome acceptance, and polarization before, during, and after the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. *Motivation and Emotion*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-022-09983-w>
- Vraga, E. K., & Bode, L. (2017). Using expert sources to correct health misinformation in social media. *Science Communication*, 39(5), 621-645. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547017731776>
- Weber Shandwick & KRC Research. (2024). Should businesses address politics in the workplace? Retrieved from <https://instituteforpr.org/should-businesses-address-politics-in-the-workplace/>
- Westerwick, A., Johnson, B. K., & Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2017). Confirmation biases in selective exposure to political online information: Source bias vs. content bias. *Communication Monographs*, 84(3), 343-364. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2016.1272761>