



Toolkit for **COUNTERING** **DISINFORMATION**

Empowering citizens
in the quest for truth



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01

Introduction



Imagine waking up to a viral story claiming that a well-known public figure has resigned in disgrace, only to discover hours later that the entire narrative was fabricated.



Or picture a widely shared image depicting a wildfire in your city - except the photo was taken in another country years ago.



In today's information ecosystem, it is not uncommon to encounter these scenarios.



False information, whether spread deliberately to mislead or simply shared without verification, has the power to **shape public opinion, distort reality, and undermine trust in institutions, the media, and even our own perceptions.**



Disinformation is a problem that affects everyone. Misleading content, from manipulated images and deep fake videos to coordinated campaigns pushing false narratives, influences social and political conversations worldwide. With the rise of digital platforms, information travels faster than ever, often outpacing efforts to verify and correct falsehoods. The consequences can be severe, making it increasingly difficult for people to distinguish fact from fiction.



Disinformation thrives in uncertainty, but equipping yourself with the right tools and strategies, you can collectively push back against falsehoods and reinforce the importance of truth.

02

The anatomy of disinformation

MYTH

Disinformation is just harmless gossip or random falsehoods circulating online.

TRUTH

Disinformation is a deliberate and strategic tool designed to manipulate public perception, influence decisions, and shape narratives to serve specific interests.

Disinformation does not emerge in isolation. It involves multiple actors, operates across various platforms, and is driven by political, economic, and ideological motivations. Every false narrative is carefully constructed, amplified, and embedded into public discourse, creating a distorted version of reality.

Once disinformation takes root, it becomes difficult to counter, as repetition reinforces belief, and public trust in credible information sources is systematically eroded. In the long run, this weakens informed decision-making, fuels social divisions, and undermines public discourse.

What is disinformation?



Disinformation is the deliberate creation and **dissemination of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive.** Unlike misinformation, which may be incorrect but not intentionally harmful, disinformation is crafted to manipulate, influence or disrupt public discourse. It preys on biases, exploits emotions, and is often designed to appear credible using the language of reputable sources, doctored images or videos, and relying on half-truths to make lies more convincing.

Key characteristics of disinformation



Intentional deception

Unlike simple errors, disinformation is produced and spread with the explicit aim of misleading an audience.



Manipulated content

This can range from outright fabrications to distorted truths, including altered images, misleading statistics and videos taken out of context.



Rapid amplification

Social media, messaging apps, and even mainstream news sources can unwittingly spread disinformation at unprecedented speed.



Psychological targeting

False narratives are crafted to trigger emotional responses, making people more likely to believe and share them.

03

The disinformation ecosystem

Disinformation operates within a system where multiple actors, platforms, and motivations interact to create, amplify and legitimise falsehoods. They include:

1 The Originators



At the heart of disinformation are those who **manufacture falsehoods for strategic gain**. These originators craft misleading content with deliberate intent, often blending partial truths with outright fabrications to make their claims more believable. Their goals can range from manipulating public perception to inciting distrust in institutions, destabilising societies, or influencing economic and political outcomes.

Originators may be:

- **Political operatives** who create false claims to discredit opponents or sway public sentiment.
- **Government agencies** engaging in state-sponsored propaganda or information suppression.
- **Foreign actors** who exploit societal divisions to weaken trust in democratic institutions.
- **Corporate entities** seeking to damage competitors or protect their own interests through manipulated information.
- **Pressure groups** who use misleading content to support ideological or advocacy goals.
- **Individual actors** who independently create and spread disinformation, often driven by personal beliefs, biases or financial incentives.

These individuals or groups often operate behind the scenes, relying on intermediaries to spread their narratives while maintaining plausible deniability.

2 The Amplifiers



Once a false narrative is created, it needs to be amplified to gain traction. Amplifiers are the intermediaries that spread disinformation widely, ensuring that it reaches as many people as possible.

These may include:

- **Social media influencers** who, knowingly or unknowingly, push misleading content to their followers.
- **Automated bots** programmed to rapidly share and engage with disinformation, creating the illusion of widespread support or concern.
- **Troll networks and coordinated online groups** that flood platforms with false narratives, sometimes using harassment tactics to silence opposing voices.
- **Paid content creators or disinformation contractors** who are hired to produce and distribute misleading or false content for political, ideological, or financial motives.
- **Shady PR firms or lobbying groups** that intentionally spread false or misleading narratives to promote certain corporate, political or social agendas.
- **Traditional media outlets** with weak editorial oversight that may unknowingly report unverified information, further legitimising falsehoods.

Amplification is particularly effective due to the widespread use of social media and messaging apps, where viral content spreads rapidly with minimal scrutiny.

3 The Distributors



Disinformation requires platforms and channels where it can circulate.

These distribution channels include:

- **Social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok)** where misleading content spreads rapidly through shares, retweets, and group messages.
- **Messaging apps like Telegram and WhatsApp**, which offer encrypted, private spaces for the unchecked circulation of falsehoods.
- **Online forums and blogs** that publish sensationalised or misleading stories, often mimicking the appearance of legitimate news sources.
- **Radio and television stations** that, in some cases, air unverified or biased reports that reinforce disinformation.

WhatsApp, in particular, is a dominant player in the global disinformation ecosystem. The closed nature of the platform makes fact-checking difficult, and forwarded messages often from anonymous sources carry a false sense of legitimacy among communities.

4 The Consumers



At the end of the chain are the consumers - the general public who interact with disinformation. Some individuals question, verify, and reject falsehoods, while others unknowingly or willingly spread them further.

Factors influencing consumer susceptibility include:

- **Limited media literacy**, making it difficult to differentiate between credible and manipulated content.
- **Pre-existing biases**, which make people more likely to accept disinformation that aligns with their beliefs.
- **Emotional triggers**, as disinformation is often crafted to provoke strong reactions such as fear, anger, or outrage.
- **The credibility of the source**, as people are more likely to believe falsehoods if they come from trusted friends, family, or influential figures.

Where word-of-mouth and community networks play a significant role in information-sharing, the way consumers interact with disinformation has a profound impact on its effectiveness and reach.

Motivations behind disinformation

Understanding the motivations behind disinformation is key to countering it effectively.



1 | Political motivations

Disinformation is frequently weaponised for political gain. False narratives are deployed to:

- Discredit opponents and undermine their credibility.
- Create confusion and doubt around key political issues.
- Manipulate public sentiment ahead of elections or policy decisions.
- Suppress dissent and opposition voices.



2 | Economic motivations

Disinformation is also a lucrative business. False content generates clicks, engagement, and advertising revenue for those who exploit it. Examples include:

- Clickbait websites that publish sensationalist headlines to drive traffic.
- Fake product endorsements and scams designed to deceive consumers.
- Corporate rivalries, where businesses push misleading information to damage competitors.
- The rise of pay-per-click advertising models has incentivised the creation of misleading but attention-grabbing content, as higher traffic translates into greater profits.



3 | Ideological motivations

Religious, cultural and social ideologies also fuel disinformation. Actors with ideological agendas use misleading content to:

- Reinforce existing beliefs and dismiss dissenting perspectives.
- Push conspiracy theories that align with their worldview.
- Promote divisive narratives around ethnicity, religion, gender or social issues.

For instance, false claims about vaccines, reproductive health, or minority communities often spread through ideologically driven networks, making them difficult to challenge.



4 | Personal motivations

Some disinformation campaigns are highly personal, designed to settle scores by damaging reputations, target individuals through smear campaigns, or exploit social divisions to stir tensions.

04

Spotting and analysing disinformation

Disinformation often masquerades as credible news. For journalists, media professionals, and the general public, recognising disinformation is the first step towards countering its harmful effects. This section provides a framework for identifying and analysing falsehoods, using real-world examples and practical tools.

The 5 Signs of disinformation:

1. Emotive language and sensationalism



Disinformation often employs strong emotional triggers like fear, outrage, shock or sympathy, to manipulate audiences into reacting impulsively rather than thinking critically.

Signs to watch for:

- Overuse of words like shocking, horrifying, unbelievable, breaking news.
- Language that incites anger or panic, such as “Bishop caught red-handed!”
- Dramatic personal testimonials with no verifiable details.

Example:

A viral WhatsApp message claiming “All school children in Uganda to be injected with an experimental vaccine tomorrow! Parents must resist this tyranny!” plays on fear, lacks official sources, and urges immediate action without verification.

2. Lack of credible sources or anonymity



Legitimate news reports cite trustworthy sources-experts, officials, academic studies. **Disinformation either fabricates sources, misquotes them, or omits them altogether.**

Signs to watch for:

- No named journalist, media house, or cited reports.
- A vague “experts say” or “sources confirm” without identifying who.
- Information based solely on social media screenshots or forwarded messages.

Example:

A viral Facebook post claimed that a “World Bank report confirms Uganda’s economy will collapse within months.” No such report existed. The claim was traced back to a blog with no author details.

3. Manipulated or misused visuals and audio



Images and videos carry persuasive power, **but they can be altered, taken out of context, or fabricated to mislead.**

Signs to watch for:

- Reverse image searches show that the photo comes from a different event.
- Cropped or edited pictures that remove crucial details.
- Videos without time stamps or locations.

Example:

A widely shared photo claims to show mass protests in Kaabong. A quick image search revealed it was from a town in Kenya in 2017.

4. Agenda-driven framing



Disinformation is crafted to fit a specific political, ideological, or economic agenda. It presents facts selectively, exaggerates certain aspects, or distorts events to push a narrative.

Signs to watch for:

- Only one side of the story is presented, with no opposing views.
- Loaded language that demonises or glorifies specific groups.
- Context manipulation, where genuine events are twisted to fit a false claim.

Example:

A Twitter thread in 2022 claimed that foreign NGOs were plotting to destabilise Uganda. The sources cited were real but taken out of context, omitting details that disproved the claim.

5. Too fast and too widespread



Disinformation spreads rapidly, often before verification occurs. Messages urging people to “share immediately” or claiming “this will be deleted soon” exploit urgency to bypass scrutiny.

Signs to watch for:

- Posts with thousands of shares but no credible news reports.
- Claims that “mainstream media won’t cover this” (a tactic to preempt debunking).
- Coordinated sharing by multiple accounts at once.

Example:

During a fuel price surge in Uganda, a hoax WhatsApp message claimed that a major petrol station chain would close within 24 hours. Panic-buying ensued despite no official confirmation.

05

Case study on how disinformation spreads

This case study presents a hypothetical scenario that mirrors real-life situations, illustrating the process of identifying and analysing disinformation.

The claim

A viral Facebook post alleged that a prominent opposition politician was spotted at a popular hangout receiving wads of cash from unknown individuals as part of a plot to undermine her own party. Another claim quickly followed, suggesting that the house she recently moved into had been bought for her by a high-ranking government official, implying she was secretly working with the ruling party.

How it spread

- A grainy photo circulated online, allegedly showing the politician receiving money, though the image was blurry and the faces were unclear.
- Political influencers on Twitter and Facebook amplified the claim, accusing her of betrayal.
- A WhatsApp voice note from an anonymous source insisted that “insiders” confirmed the house purchase.
- A local YouTube channel picked up the story, with some commentators presenting it as fact before any verification was done.

The reality

- Fact-checkers traced the viral photo back to an unrelated social event where the politician was greeting supporters. The claim about receiving cash was fabricated.
- Property records showed that the house in question was acquired through a legitimate mortgage, with no links to any government official.
- The voice note spreading on WhatsApp contained no verifiable details, and its sender could not be identified.

Impact

- The politician faced online harassment and credibility attacks, affecting her campaign efforts.
- Party members and supporters became divided, with some questioning her loyalty.
- Despite clarifications, distrust lingered, and rival politicians continued to reference the false claims in their public statements.

This case highlights how political disinformation can rapidly erode trust, manipulate public perception, and disrupt democratic processes.



Quick checklist for journalists on spotting and analysing disinformation in the case study

Step 1: Check the source

- Who first reported this claim? Is it a trusted media outlet or an anonymous social media account?
- Is there an identified witness or an official statement, or is it just speculation?

Step 2: Cross-check the claims

- Are multiple credible sources reporting the same story?
- Is there official documentation (e.g., property records) that can confirm or refute the house ownership claim?

Step 3: Verify images and videos

- Perform a reverse image search to see if the photo has been taken out of context.
- Look for signs of manipulation, such as blurred areas or edited elements.
- Does the photo show actual cash exchange, or is it a misleading caption?

Step 4: Analyse the language and framing

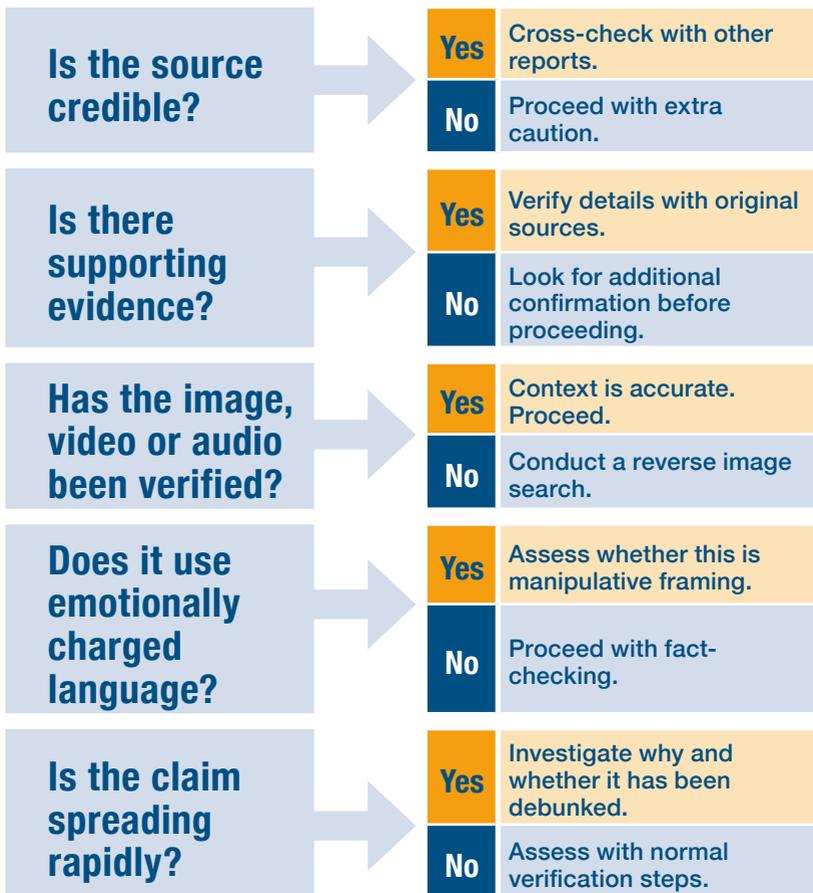
- Does the post use emotionally charged words like traitor, sell-out, bribed to provoke outrage?
- Is it presenting only one perspective without offering counterarguments?

Step 5: Be wary of viral content

- Is this information spreading rapidly without evidence?
- Does it encourage immediate sharing or suggest that mainstream media is “hiding the truth”?

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Disinformation decision tree for journalists and other professionals



If a claim fails any of the above tests, do not share until further verification is done.

07

Strategic reporting on disinformation

When addressing disinformation, it is essential not just for journalists, but also for media organisations, independent creators, and activists to expose falsehoods while exploring the deeper layers behind these narratives. Here are additional strategies to enhance the approach to disinformation.

Contextualise false narratives

It is not enough to merely “call out” a false claim. A successful strategy involves offering context and explanation about the origin and intent of misinformation. Independent creators and activists should also follow this approach, explaining who is behind the disinformation, their potential motives, and the impact on the audience. For example, a viral social media post making false claims about health should not just be debunked but should explore the underlying agenda - whether it is a marketing campaign, political manipulation or an attempt to create fear for personal gain.

Map the disinformation ecosystem

Media organisations and independent creators can deepen the narrative by mapping out the ecosystem in which disinformation thrives. By examining the channels (social media platforms, websites, apps) where disinformation is most commonly shared, the groups or communities that spread it, and the incentives behind these actions (financial profit, ideological agenda, etc.), they can highlight how disinformation functions at a systemic level.

Humanise the impact of disinformation

By focusing on the human cost of disinformation, from damaged reputations to public health risks, the reporting can make the issue more relatable. Activists can share real stories of how misinformation has harmed individuals or communities, creating empathy and a sense of urgency among the audience.

Build a case for accountability

It is important for media organisations and activists to not only call out false narratives but also highlight the need for accountability. Disinformation often has a deliberate strategic aim, whether it is political manipulation, economic exploitation or ideological warfare. By tracing the origins of misinformation

and pointing to those responsible, journalists and creators can advocate for policy change, platform accountability, and legal recourse.

Explore disinformation motives

Often, behind disinformation campaigns lie financial or political benefits. By uncovering these motives - for instance, exposing how fake news may boost sales of a product, drive traffic for ad revenue, or serve a political campaign - journalists, creators, and activists can help the public understand the broader implications. This helps audiences connect the dots and not just see disinformation as random, but as a calculated effort with real-world consequences.

Countering falsehoods without amplifying them

- I. While debunking is critical, it is equally important **to avoid spreading falsehoods unintentionally**. Media organisations should be careful in how they report on false claims, ensuring that their headlines do not amplify disinformation. Rather than repeating the claim, they can **focus on showing how the claim is false and why it matters**.
- II. **How a story is framed** is just as crucial as what is reported. Instead of focusing solely on the false claim, shine a light on the positive actions being taken to counter with it. This helps shift the narrative from negativity to actionable solutions.
- III. Instead of reporting only on the consequences of falsehoods, **explore the conditions that allow it to thrive**. Journalists can investigate the role of tech platforms, the lack of regulation, or the erosion of trust in traditional institutions that enable disinformation to flourish.
- IV. One of the most effective ways to combat disinformation is by encouraging **media literacy** among the public. Journalists, creators, and activists can partner to launch campaigns that teach people how to critically engage with information.
- V. Transparency in fact-checking is critical for building public trust. Journalists, media organisations, and independent creators should **openly share their fact-checking processes, including the sources used and the steps taken to verify claims**. By showing their audience how they arrive at conclusions, they can demonstrate the integrity of their work and encourage trust in the process. For example, through live fact-checking sessions on social media or behind-the-scenes videos, creators can walk their followers through the verification process.
- VI. Media organisations and activists can collaborate with tech companies to develop **automated tools that flag or filter misinformation** before it spreads. These could include browser extensions or apps that alert users when they encounter misleading claims. While not a replacement for human judgement and critical thinking, such tools can complement existing efforts and extend their reach.

08

Fact-checking tools and resources

Important considerations

- ☀ Always use multiple tools and sources to verify information.
- ☀ Tools are helpful, but human judgment and critical thinking are essential.
- ☀ The landscape of online disinformation is constantly evolving, so stay informed about new tools and techniques.

A | General fact-checking and claim verification

Website:	Purpose:
 <p>Google Fact Check Tools https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/explorer</p>	 <p>Search for fact-checks published by various organisations.</p>
 <p>Snopes https://www.snopes.com/</p>	 <p>Debunking rumours, urban legends, and viral claims.</p>
 <p>Africa Check https://www.africacheck.org/</p>	 <p>Fact-checking claims made by public figures in Africa.</p>

B | Image and video verification

Website:		Purpose:
 TinEye TinEye https://www.tineye.com/		Reverse image search to find the origin of images.
 Google Google Images (Reverse Image Search) https://images.google.com		Find other instances of an image online.
 Yandex Yandex Images (Reverse Image Search) https://yandex.com/images		Another strong reverse image search engine.
 InVID InVID https://www.invid-project.eu		Video verification tools, including reverse image search on video stills.
 FotoForensics Foto Forensics https://fotoforensics.com		Analysing image manipulation.
 ExifTool ExifTool https://exiftool.org		Command line tool to analyse photo metadata.

C | Website and domain analysis

Website:		Purpose:
 Wayback Machine Waybak Machine (Internet Archive) https://archive.org/web/		Viewing archived versions of websites.
 who.is Whois Lookup Tools (e.g., Whois.com, DomainTools) https://who.is		Finding information about website domain registration.
 VIRUSTOTAL VirusTotal https://www.virustotal.com/		Scans files and URLs for malware.

D | Metadata and geolocation

Website:

Purpose:



Google Earth Pro
<https://earth.google.com/>



Verifying locations in images and videos.

SunCalc

SunCalc
<https://www.suncalc.org>



Determining the sun's position for geolocation and time verification.

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