

Combatting Disinformation Fact Sheet

Insights from 2023 Disinformation Briefing

This document summarizes key findings and recommendations from the Black Race Class Narrative Disinformation Briefing,¹ which featured disinfo experts including Brandi Collins-Dexter, Damaso Reyes, and Kelsey Suter.²

This information can be used by organizers who are hearing disinformation from your audience or responding to disinformation targeting your audience. This document aims to empower organizers with the tools needed to better understand and effectively inoculate against disinformation.

What is disinformation?

There are three categories of information disorder:³

1

MISINFORMATION: False information that people may spread unintentionally (if they're honestly mistaken or have been misled) or intentionally.

2

DISINFORMATION: Deliberately false or misleading information that bad actors intentionally spread to manipulate or destabilize people.

Online Racialized Disinformation: False or intentionally misleading info/propaganda typically related to racial and social justice issues, targeting and harming individual members of minority groups.

3

MALINFORMATION: True info that bad actors weaponize by sharing it in inappropriate ways or contexts to mislead, harm, or manipulate (e.g. doxxing, [recontextualized media](#), revenge porn).

1. July 26, 2023.

2. In addition to our featured presenters, special thanks to Jaime Longoria with the Disinfo Defense League (DDL) for their thoughts and feedback.

3. "Information disorder" refers to the many ways our digital environment is polluted with misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM).

What are the main tactics used by people who spread disinformation?

WEAPONIZING CONFIRMATION BIAS: Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, and recall information in a way that supports what we already believe.

- Disinfo campaigns often latch onto real systemic disparities and/or existing beliefs.
- Confirmation bias is used by bad actors to push disinfo that aligns with or confirms what we already believe (e.g., using the Tuskegee experiments to sow distrust in the COVID vaccine).

Disinfo targets our confirmation bias and emotions to override our ability to think clearly. So, if you feel extremely angry, frightened, or sad immediately after seeing something online, that could be a sign of manipulation.

KEYWORD SQUATTING: The practice of co-opting and/or creating content around specific search engine optimized words/phrases (e.g., PragerU cranking out videos and content to co-opt the “social justice warrior/SJW” search term; right-wing co-opting “DEI,” “CRT,” and “woke”).

CONTENT COLLAPSE: The blurring of traditional distinctions between verified news and entertainment. This is particularly common on social media (e.g., AI images and videos on TikTok; the rise of “infotainment”—popular podcasts, radio shows, and content creators melding “news,” celebrity gossip, and entertainment).

TARGETING DIGITAL BARBERSHOPS:⁴ The practice of disrupting traditionally non-political or quasi-political spaces to inject them with false political discourse (e.g., the NextDoor app; lifestyle blogs and blog communities; Twitch livestreams).

Key tips for fighting disinformation:

Consider how to integrate trust-building into your work. **Trust is the ultimate form of inoculation against disinformation.**

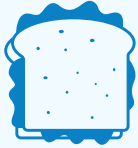
Countering disinformation is not about “forcing more truth” but building trust: We determine truth based on who we trust.

- **It is not about fact-checking or one-off fights:** Our world is noisy and information is everywhere. *“We can’t beat the disinformation monster with facts.”*

Format matters: You can’t fight a meme with a *New York Times* article. Meet people where they are.

- **Content must feel native to the space:** It needs to be emotionally engaging and feel authentic.
- **Situate facts in the context of stories/values** that help people understand concepts in human terms.

4. “Digital barber/beauty shop” is a frame coined by Catherine Knight Steele and usually refers specifically to quasi-political discourse in Black spaces that’s in line with offline oral traditions. Steele, Catherine. (2016). [The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community. Social Media and Society.](#)



CONSIDER A “TRUTH SANDWICH” FOR INOCULATION MESSAGING.⁵

Our brains remember what we hear first and most often!

- 1 POSITIVE:** Address the core fear/concern with a shared value.
- 2 NEGATIVE:** Offer “logic correction” by focusing on bad actors’ motives, tactics, or networks.
- 3 POSITIVE:** Pivot to your proactive message.

Encourage people to connect with loved ones offline to discuss mis/disinfo and de-escalate tensions happening online:

- Think about relationships and relational organizing: We can’t win going up against the bad actors or huge tech platforms. But who in our household, our families, and our circles can we speak to about disinfo?

Promote emotional skepticism: If something you see online makes you feel extremely happy or angry (or pressures you to act immediately or purchase something quickly), stop, re-evaluate how you’re feeling, and consider the source and context before reacting or sharing.



Key tips for fighting disinformation long-term:

In the long term, it’s important to build and reinforce trust through relatable content that feels authentic to the intended audience, uses repetition, and builds emotional connections with your audience. **Your audience is more likely to trust you when they feel listened to and seen.** Develop an authentic relationship and shared worldview with your audience.

Build narrative power through storytelling to help people understand and visualize the changes or the future they want to create. It’s important to use stories as part of a narrative strategy.

Other long-term strategies to combat disinformation include promoting media literacy (helping people understand which media sources they can trust and why), supporting and promoting local journalism, and civic education.

5. Inoculation messaging attempts to build resistance against mis/disinformation in general. The idea is that preemptively exposing people to a weakened persuasive argument builds people’s resistance against future manipulation. “Pre-bunking”—showing people the tactics and tropes of misleading information before they encounter it in the wild, so they’re better equipped to recognize and resist it—is an example of inoculation messaging. Learn more: [A New Way to Inoculate People Against Misinformation](#)

DO THIS...

- ✓ Use stories to explain issues, trends, & statistics.

- ✓ Name what is while emphasizing what's possible.
- ✓ Offer an attractive possible future that inspires your audience to answer your calls to action.

- ✓ Name actors and decision-makers, villains and their motives.
- ✓ Provide clear, practical next steps your audience can take to move us closer to our desired future.

- ✓ Communicate proactively & stay on narrative.

INSTEAD OF...

- ✗ Centering facts and statistics over storytelling.

- ✗ Exclusively telling "doom and gloom" stories.

- ✗ Using the passive voice.

- ✗ "Myth-busting" & communicating reactively.

BECAUSE...

- Research shows that stories help people understand and make sense of complex issues.
- Stories are also more likely to *move people to take action* than statistics or data.
- Audiences resonate more with content centered around stories and relatable experiences.
 - However, facts and accuracy are still important. Your content should reflect the truth as validated by experience and research.

- "Doom and gloom" stories are demotivating.
- People know that there are problems. They want to know what can be done to fix the problems, and what they can do to help.
- Showing your audience a possible future—a future we can create together—inspires people to take action with us.

- Using the passive voice obscures who is responsible for the action. Passive voice gives bad actors and villains cover.
- Passive voice can make the spread of disinformation seem inevitable or something we can't prevent.
- Passive sentences often sound wordy and indirect. They can make the reader work unnecessarily hard, which can demotivate the reader from taking action with us.

- Communicating reactively means spending time, energy, and resources moving from one crisis to another. This leads to slapdash communications and can distract from your narrative.
- Proactive communication reinforces your narrative and your larger goals. It prevents problems instead of just responding to them.

DO THIS...

- ✓ Speak in relatable, real-world terms.
- ✓ Repeat your values-based core narrative.
- ✓ Logic correction / logic-based correction (focusing on motives and techniques used to mislead) instead of fact-checking.
- ✓ Consider a “truth sandwich” for inoculation messaging.

INSTEAD OF...

- ✗ Overusing slogans and jargon.
- ✗ One-off “fact-checking”.

BECAUSE...

- Using relatable, accessible language helps people better understand issues.
- Speaking in simple, real-world language people can understand also brings more people along with us.
- Research shows that fact-checking isn’t an effective long-term strategy to stop the spread of disinformation.
- Our world is noisy and information is everywhere. It’s impossible to fact-check everything. As soon as you fact-check one piece of disinformation, new pieces of disinformation will pop up.
 - Reacting to disinformation can become a never ending game of whack-a-mole!
 - Before responding, consider [reach, impact, and response](#).
- Some kinds of fact-checking can actually amplify the disinformation you’re trying to debunk.
- Instead of fact-checking, focus on repeating your values-based narrative, explaining why disinformation is created and spread, and reinforcing truth. This will help your audiences identify disinformation the next time it appears, and reduce the likelihood they will engage with new disinformation.
- These are all examples of “pre-bunking”—showing people the tactics and tropes of misleading information before they encounter it in the wild, so they’re better equipped to recognize and resist it.

“I need to respond to some harmful content. What should I do?”

[READ THE GUIDE](#)