

The Foundations of Disinformation and Misinformation

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The term **Information disorder** was coined by researcher Dr. Claire Wardle to describe the broad societal challenges associated with misinformation and disinformation, generally on the digital landscape, that contribute to the pollution of our evolving information ecosystem. *Misinformation* is the unintentional spread of false or misleading information, shared by mistake, or under a presumption of truth. *Disinformation*—false or misleading information that is deliberately spread with an intent to cause harm or damage—is neither new nor unique to the modern day.

From Octavian's propaganda campaign against Antony in Ancient Rome to '[The Great Moon Hoax](#)' of 1835, disinformation has been a favored weapon of politicians, civic leaders and mischief makers around the world. Yet the rise of the internet and the exponential growth of social media use across cultures and communities has dramatically increased the speed and impact of false narratives. The tactics behind disinformation vary widely and further complicates our understanding around source motivation and intention. Knowing how it's done is just as important when trying to understand why.

Reading Resources:

[Information Disorder: Toward An Interdisciplinary Framework For Research And Policy Making](#)
(First Draft)

[A short guide to the history of 'fake news' and disinformation](#)
(International Center for Journalists)

Video: [A Brief History Of Disinformation, And What To Do About It](#)
(Matt Tait, University of Texas)

[The Long and Brutal History of Fake News](#)
(Jacob Soll, Politico)

Podcast: [Thomas Rid on active measures and digital disinformation](#)
(Brookings)

[The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online](#)
(Janna Anderson And Lee Rainie, Pew Research Center)

[The Misinformation Campaign Was Distinctly One-Sided](#)
(Renee DiResta, The Atlantic)

[The long fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 election](#)
(Election Integrity Partnership report)

[20/20 Vision: Lessons learned about the challenges of disrupting misinformation in 2020](#)
(First Draft article series)

[Combating Digital Disinformation An Evaluation Of The William And Flora Hewlett Foundation's Disinformation Strategy](#)
(Hewlett)

[Digital Democracy: Accelerating A New Field Of Knowledge](#)
(Knight Foundation)

[Facebook: From Election to Insurrection](#)
(Avaaz report)

[Tackling misinformation: What researchers could do with social media data](#) (HKS Misinformation Review)

[Addressing false information during the 2020 election and lessons for the future](#)
(American Press Institute)

Regulation Models from Other Parts of the World

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Efforts by various European countries to address distrust and disinformation vary across the continent. Regulating big technology companies and social media platforms is an approach the U.S. has yet to effectively take, presenting opportunities for the American government to learn, adapt and act.

Reading Resources:

[Social media: How do other
governments regulate it?](#)
(BBC)

[The United States
Needs a BBC](#)
(Foreign Policy, 2021)

[How the EU's new digital
services act can help
build trust and tackle
illegal content](#)
(Victoria De Posson,
Disruptive Competition
Project)

[Digital Services Act:
Ensuring a trustworthy and
safe online environment
while allowing freedom
of expression](#)
(Victoria De Posson,
Disruptive Competition
Project)

[Twitter, Trump, and Tough
Decisions: EU Freedom of
Expression and the Digital
Services Act](#)
(Christoph Schmon,
Electronic Frontier
Foundation)

[EU Code of Practice on
Disinformation: Briefing
Note for the New European
Commission](#)
(Carnegie Endowment)

[Law prohibiting election
misinformation struck down](#)
(CBC)

[Southeast Asia's
Disinformation Crisis: Where
the State is the Biggest Bad
Actor and Regulation is a
Bad Word](#)
(Jonathan Corpus Ong,
Insights from the Social
Sciences)

[Government Responses to
Disinformation on Social
Media Platforms: France](#)
(Library of Congress)

[Government Responses to
Disinformation on Social
Media Platforms](#)
(Library of Congress)

First Amendment and Section 230

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[Jeff Kosseff](#)

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Words That Created
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[Mike Masnick](#)

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Section 230 has become a political football in terms of platform accountability and responsibility regarding the spread of online mis and disinformation. "One highly influential piece of misinformation is that the [tech industry is biased](#) against conservative figures and conservative content," shared Dr. Mary Anne Franks, president of the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative as [part of a question](#) for Facebook, Twitter and Google CEOs. "Conservative figures and content actually [perform very well](#) on social media sites such as Facebook, even though they [disproportionately violate](#) companies' policies against misinformation and other abuse." With members of Congress introducing the SAFE TECH Act to address Section 230 concerns, questions are being raised about how this could affect rights protected by the First Amendment.

Reading Resources:

[The history of Section 230](#)

(60 Minutes, with Jeff
Kosseff)

[Speech on the internet:
The First Amendment and
Section 230 are different](#)
(Marketplace)

[Section 230: Everything You
Need to Know—Tweets,
Free Speech, Beyond](#)
(Mike Masnick, podcast)

[Hello! You've Been Referred
Here Because You're
Wrong About Section 230
Of The Communications
Decency Act](#)
(Mike Masnick, Techdirt
blog)

[How Section 230 Enhances
the First Amendment](#)
(Eric Goldman, American
Constitution Society)

[Six Constitutional Hurdles
For Platform Speech
Regulation](#)

(Daphne Keller, Center
for Internet and Society)

[Mapping Worldwide
Initiatives to Counter
Influence Operations](#)
(Carnegie Endowment for
International Peace)

Cognitive Science and Behavioral Economics

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[@Kendeou](#)

[Eric Saund](#)
Research scientist
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and AI

[Jason Stanley](#)
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Social media may have provided a space for mis and disinformation to spread, but questions around why people believe and share false content and how they became radicalized must be addressed as well. What roles do cognitive biases and mental shortcuts, as described by behavioral economics, and the development of algorithms affect or even degrade our information ecosystem?

Reading Resources:

[‘Exit Counselors’ Strain To Pull Americans Out Of A Web Of False Conspiracies](#)
(Tovia Smith, NPR)

[COVID lies, conspiracy theories build on boredom, beliefs](#) (Kathrin Wesolowski, Deutsche Welle)

[Political psychology in the digital \(mis\)information age: A model of news belief and sharing](#)
(Preprint)

[How Cybersecurity Experts Can Nudge Users To Make Safer Choices](#)
(Perry Carpenter, Forbes)

[How Facebook got addicted to spreading misinformation](#)
(Karen Hao, Tech Review)

[Fake News and Anthropology: A Conversation on Technology, Trust, and Publics in an Age of Mass Disinformation](#)
(Journal of the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology)

Platform Response and Accountability

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Social media platforms and Big Tech play a pivotal role in both the spread and response to online mis and disinformation. Questions regarding transparency, responsibility and accountability have risen as independent researchers and technologists work to understand how to approach studying platform impact when data and access are restricted. Platform-led efforts, policies and research have been developed internally and with nonprofit organizations, but questions still remain over their effectiveness.

Reading Resources:

[All Change No Fix: How Big Tech's "Self regulation" fails our democracy](#)

(Decode Democracy)

[A Dozen Experts with Questions Congress Should Ask the Tech CEOs — On Disinformation and Extremism](#)

(Just Security)

[Can an Oversight Board Created by Facebook Actually Fix the Company's Failings?](#)

(Mother Jones)

[Distraction Helps Misinformation Spread. Thinking About Accuracy Can Reduce it](#)

(Jigsaw)

[Can "Inoculation" Build Broad-Based Resistance to Misinformation?](#)

(Jigsaw)

[Why content moderation costs billions and is so tricky for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others](#)

(CNBC)

[Facebook's Oversight Board makes an imperfect case for private governance](#)

(Brookings)

[You and the Algorithm: It Takes Two to Tango](#)

(Nick Clegg, Medium)

[We need to know more about political ads. But can transparency be a trap?](#)

(Madelyn Webb, Bethan John, NiemanLab)

[Platform Interventions: How Social Media Counters Influence Operations](#)

(Partnership for Countering Influence Operations, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

[Bringing Truth to the Internet](#)

(Democracy Journal)

[Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform](#)

(Social Science Research Council)

[Improving Social Media: The People, Organizations and Ideas for a Better Tech Future](#)

(All Tech is Human)

Intersection of Disinformation and Marginalized Communities

Selected Experts on the Topic:

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Communities of color and other marginalized groups have consistently been disproportionately affected and targeted by mis and disinformation. According to a [report](#) by the Senate Intelligence Committee on Russian interference in 2016, “no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African Americans. By far, race and related issues were the preferred target of the information warfare campaign designed to divide the country.” In 2020, these tactics focused on suppressing [voter turn-out](#) and spreading medical distrust in minority communities, creating societal harm and individual risk. Understanding the history of targeted disinformation campaigns is critical when trying to develop whole-of-society solutions.

Reading Resources:

[Failure to understand Black and Latinx communities will result in a critical misunderstanding of the impact of disinformation](#)
(Jacquelyn Mason, First Draft)

[From vote to virus, misinformation campaign targets Latinos](#)
(Will Weissert, AP)

[Michael Tubbs on disinformation, racism, and news deserts](#)
(Akintunde Ahmad, Columbia Journalism Review)

[COVID-19 infodemic exacerbates existing religious and racial prejudices](#)
(Harrison Mantas, Poynter)

[‘An unquestionable truth’: Religious misinformation in the coronavirus pandemic](#)
(Jaime Longoria, Daniel Acosta Ramos and Madelyn Webb, First Draft)

[The challenge of combating fake news in Asian American communities](#)
(Terry Nguyen, Vox)

[How a racialized disinformation campaign ties itself to The 1619 Project](#)
(Joan Donovan, Brandi-Collins Dexter, Columbia Journalism Review)

Cults, Conspiracy Theories and Thwarting Online Radicalization

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[Daniel Koehler](#)

Research Fellow at the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at the "Center for University Excellence (CUE)" of American University

[Janja Lalich](#)

Ph.D., a researcher, author, and educator specializing in cults and extremist groups

[Sander van der Linden](#)

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[Dr. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens](#)

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[Peter Neumann](#)

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Mis- and disinformation has driven individuals to embrace fringe, radical views. Its roots go back decades as a cyclical relationship between public curiosity and the media and entertainment industry have led to the dramatization and amplification of cults and conspiracy theories. The advent of social media and tech platforms gave rise to algorithmic targeting and private online groups, driving people deeper into partisan camps and fabricated belief networks resulting in [dangerous](#), disinfo-fueled events [around the world](#).

Reading Resources:

[I Escaped the Cult. But I Couldn't Escape the Cult Mentality](#)

(Narratively, Daniella Young)

[What we can learn from conspiracy theories](#)

(BBC, Zaria Gorvett)

[How to talk to conspiracy theorists—and still be kind](#)

(Technology Review, Tanya Basu)

[Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs Are Bad Policy](#)

(The Brennan Center for Justice)

[Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies](#)

(International Journal of Conflict and Violence)

[Could One of Your Facebook Friends Be The Next QAnon Shaman?](#)

(John Semley, The Nation)

[Facebook's Militia Mess](#)

(Tech Transparency Project)

[7 Insights From Interviewing Conspiracy Theory Believers](#)

(Jigsaw)

Decline of Trust in Institutions

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Rebecca Stavick
CEO, Community
Information Trust
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Ethan Zuckerman
UMass Amherst; former
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Center for Civic Media.
Author of "How
do we Regain Trust
in Institutions?"
[@EthanZ](#)

A decline in trust in American institutions is both a contributing factor in and a victim of information disorder. In 2019, a [Pew Research study](#) showed that the public's trust in both the federal government, news media, and in their personal circles have decreased. Prior to the pandemic, a majority of the respondents said they trusted medical doctors, researchers and scientists, but trust in scientists and medical researchers [declined](#). In [an essay](#) published in 2020, Richard Edelman, CEO of the communications firm Edelman, said "every institution must play its part in restoring facts to their rightful place at the center of public discourse as the essential step to emerging from information bankruptcy."

Reading Resources:

[The elites have failed](#)
(Vox)

[How to Put Out
Democracy's Dumpster Fire](#)
(The Atlantic)

[Outgoing Washington
Post editor Marty Baron
reflects on the state of
American journalism](#)
(PBS Newshour)

['An Epidemic of
Misinformation.' New
Report Finds Trust in
Social Institutions
Diminished Further in 2020](#)
(Time)

[The ongoing fight against
racism in newsrooms](#)
(Jon Allsop, Columbia
Journalism Review)

[Americans have lost
faith in institutions.
That's not because of
Trump or 'fake news'](#)
(Bill Bishop,
Washington Post)

[Crisis in Democracy:
Renewing Trust in America](#)
(Knight Commission
on Trust, Media and
Democracy)

[2021 Edelman Trust
Barometer](#)
(Report)

[Most Americans—especially
Millennials—say libraries
can help them find reliable,
trustworthy information](#)
(Pew Research Center)

[The Global Trust Crisis](#)
(Foreign Policy)

Crisis in Local News and Media

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[Tracie Powell](#)
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Jim Steyer
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[@CommonSense](#)

Margaret Sullivan
Washington Post
[@Sulliview](#)

Steven Waldman
President & Co-founder,
[Report for America](#)
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Local news, in crisis before the pandemic, is now facing a cataclysm. Ad revenue has been decimated and consolidation has driven record job cuts. Access to critical trustworthy information for millions of Americans is declining at alarming rates across the country. Into that void has entered partisan information sources, often riddled with falsehoods. Local reporters were unprepared to address the onslaught of misleading and false content that spread on social media and via word-of-mouth accounts on testing, masks and vaccines, complicating the information ecosystem even more.

Reading Resources:

[Losing The News: The
Decimation of Local News
and the Search for Solutions](#)
(PEN America—[Full report](#))

[A New Tool To Measure
The Health Of Local News
Ecosystems](#)
(Knight Foundation)

[Give local journalism a
fighting chance by creating
a demand for it](#)
(Alan Miller, Poynter)

[It's Bigger than Fox News:
Time for Mainstream
Journalism to Reckon with
Monetizing Disinformation
and Eroding Truth](#)
(Farai Chideya, Medium)

[How the government can
help save local news without
endangering its editorial
independence](#)
(Poynter, Steven Waldman,
Report for America)

[Watch Author Margaret
Sullivan Explain How the
Decline of Local Journalism
Undermines American
Democracy](#)
(Margaret Sullivan, Time)

[News And America's Kids:
How Young People Perceive
And Are Impacted By
The News](#)
(Common Sense Media)

Political Polarization and Disinformation

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[Dave Rand](#)

Professor of
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[Craig Silverman](#)

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Social media has both evolved and complicated the information landscape. Algorithmic targeting and private groups have driven us further into partisan camps and deepened mistrust into alternative viewpoints. Many legacy and digital media are operating in seemingly different realities, dependent more so on either political influence or audience demands. Disinformation campaigns, reaching a crescendo in the last year, demonized officials at all levels of government and expanded into areas of public health. Americans were exposed to content that depicted elected leaders and candidates as active dangers to their livelihoods and values, with January 6 a consequential outcome. This level of polarization is a critical fracture in the democratic fundamental of political discourse.

Reading Resources:

[Social media is making a
bad political situation worse](#)
(Rani Molla, Vox)

[Fake News Gets
More Engagement on
Facebook—But Only If It's
Right-Wing](#)
(WIRED)

[Whose Anger Counts?](#)

(Whitney Phillips,
Boston Review)

[Disinformation Fuels Distrust
And Even Violence At All
Levels Of Government](#)
(Sarah McCammon, NPR)

[How shared partisanship
leads to social media
connections](#)

(Peter Dizikes, MIT News)

[Facebook Is a
Doomsday Machine](#)
(Adrienne LaFrance,
The Atlantic)

[Political sectarianism in
America](#) (Science)

Brands, the Commercial Sector and Disinformation

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Troll-Busters.com
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Chris Perry
Global Chief
Innovation Officer,
Weber Shandwick
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John Poulos
CEO, [Dominion
Voting Systems](#) (lived
experience expert)

Areas of concern regarding mis and disinformation are not limited to social media platforms and political discourse. Businesses, corporations and financial markets can be greatly affected by false or misleading information, intentional and otherwise. Whether it's to manipulate stock prices, damage brand reputations or target consumer confidence, disinformation has become a dangerous tactic that marketing and public relations firms may not be prepared to effectively counter. It's important to understand how brands, businesses and companies are currently being targeted and how they respond to attacks such as deepfakes on an organizational level.

Reading Resources:

[Trust, Misinformation And Why Brands Need To Be More Careful Than Ever](#)
(Marian Salzman, Forbes)

[Brands Face A New Online Threat: Disinformation Attacks](#)
(Robert Mcmillan, The Wall Street Journal)

[Business must combat fake news](#)
(Edelman, 2019)

[Fake news can cause 'irreversible damage' to companies—and sink their stock price](#)
(Claire Atkinson, NBC News)

[Disinformation: Companies in the crosshairs](#)
(James Blake, Security Magazine)

[Fake news threatens our businesses, not just our politics](#)
(Matthew F. Ferraro, Jason C. Chipman, Washington Post)

[Disinformation attacks are spreading. Here are 4 keys to protecting your company](#)
(Lisa Kaplan, Fortune)

[What Comes After The Coherence Crash?](#)
(Chris Perry, Medium)

[Mergers: Commission fines Facebook 110 million for providing misleading information about WhatsApp takeover](#)
(2017)

[Dominion vs. Fox News Defamation Filing](#)
(2020)

[Dominion Voting Systems CEO John Poulos talks elections, death threats and lawsuits](#)
(Axios, 2021)

Nation-State Threats

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[Ron Deibert](#)
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Camille Francois
chief innovation
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John Kelly
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[Alicia Wanless](#)
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Countering Influence
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Clint Watts
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Center for Cyber and
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Nation-state actors have carried out influence operations during elections in both Europe and the United States. Even though tactics such as network operations, provocations and the coordinated spreading of disinformation have been revealed, this has not deterred the activity from Russia and China. Disinformation efforts have increased during the pandemic and concerns about future threats and targets have increased.

Reading Resources:

[Tackling disinformation is national security issue says former NSA general counsel](#)
(CBS News, Michael Morell speaks with former NSA general counsel Glenn Gerstell)

[The Norwegian Intelligence Service's assessment of current security challenges](#)
(2021)

[Germany is main target of Russian disinformation, EU says](#)
(Reuters)

[Don't Wait for Them to Find You: What You Need to Know Today About Nation-State Threat Actors](#)
(Podcast, blog, Secure Works)

[The changing landscape of disinformation and cybersecurity threats: A recap from Verify 2019](#)
(Hewlett)

[The Fake News Machine: How Propagandists Abuse the Internet and Manipulate the Public](#)
(Trend Micro)

[Chinese hackers targeted Uyghurs living in US, Facebook security team finds](#)
(CNN)

[Mapping Worldwide Initiatives to Counter Influence Operations](#)
(Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

Emerging Disinformation Threats

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Giorgio Patrini
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Melissa Ryan
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The Capitol siege by white nationalists, Trump supporters and militia groups on January 6 that was grown out of a social media-led disinformation campaign has revealed new concerns from internet experts, threat researchers and more. How will tactics evolve, what sites will bad actors migrate to and what types of digital technology will be used to disrupt society in the weeks, months and years to come?

Reading Resources:

[What will misinformation look like in 2030 \(and will we be better at spotting it by then\)?](#)
(Laura Hazard Owen, NiemanLab)

[The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite](#)
(Renee DiResta, The Atlantic)

[How to deal with AI-enabled disinformation](#)
(John Villasenor, Brookings)

[Survey XII: Digital New Normal 2025—After the Outbreak—Hopes and worries for the evolution of humans and digital life in the wake of the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
(Report, Elon University)

[Assessing The Real Threat Posed By Deepfake Technology](#)
(International Banker)

[Deepfake master behind those viral Tom Cruise videos says the technology should be regulated](#)
(Fortune)

Civic Education and Media Literacy

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[Patrisse Cullors](#)
co-founder, Black Lives
Matter Movement
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[Dan Gillmor](#)
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Alan Miller
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[News Literacy Project](#)

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Increasing the public's media literacy and civic educational understanding has been viewed as a critical solution to the mis and disinformation problem American society is facing. Studies by research institutions and [programs by schools](#) and libraries have reflected an increasing demand for civic engagement and digital media literacy, and hopes that it can push back against political polarization and online radicalization.

Reading Resources:

[Media and Information
Literacy: Reinforcing
Human Rights,
Countering Radicalization
and Extremism](#)
(UNESCO report)

[Media Literacy &
Misinformation:
Getting Started](#)
(Monmouth
University resource)

[Massive investment in
social studies and civics
education proposed to
address eroding trust in
democratic institutions](#)
Joe Heim, Washington Post)

[Why Civic Education Is Key
to Protecting Democracy](#)
(Douglas F. Challenger, New
England Board of Higher
Education)

[Alan Miller says National
News Literacy Week
is about solving the
misinformation "pandemic"](#)
(Jan 2020, CNN's Reliable
Sources podcast)

[Want to Stop the Next
Crisis? Teaching Cyber
Citizenship Must Become a
National Priority](#)
(Time)

Appendix

Recommended readings and resources not shared as materials for commissioners but useful for all those interested in the work surrounding information disorder.

Digital Resources

[Disinformation Annotated Bibliography](#)
(The Citizen Lab)

[Untangle misinformation using predictive media intelligence](#)
(Newswhip)

[Media & Migration Lab](#)
(University of Central Florida)

[Misinformation, Disinformation and What Government Can Do About Them](#)
(Governing.com)

[@EUvsDisinfo](#)
(EU East Stratcom Task Force)

[Political Polarization](#)
(Pew Research Center)

[Exploring Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Mitigating Truth Decay](#)
(Rand.org)

[Media Literacy Education in Libraries for Adult Audiences](#)
(American Library Association)

[Exploring New Ways to Build Resilience to Misinformation](#)
(Jigsaw)

[European Digital Media Observatory](#)

[How Social Media Has Harmed the Growth of Democratic Culture by Design](#)
(Berkley Center)

[The Infodemic Cleanse: How to detoxify your information diet](#)
(Marc Ambinder)

Case Studies, Reports and Examples

[Shifting attention to accuracy can reduce misinformation online](#)
(Nature)

[Birtherism of a Nation](#)
(The Atlantic)

[Butterfly Attack: The Origins Of Fake Antifa Social Media Accounts](#)
(Media Manipulation)

[Fake news victims are using lawsuits to shut down the lies. Can courts cure this plague?](#)
(USA Today)

[Joan Donovan's Media Manipulation Case Study Database](#)

[What Americans Know and Don't Know about Facebook and Google](#)
(Center for Media Engagement, UT-Austin)

[How disinformation evolved in 2020](#)
(Brookings)

["This is Our House!" A Preliminary Assessment of the Capitol Hill Siege Participants](#)
(Program on Extremism, George Washington University)

[Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies](#)
(International Journal of Conflict and Violence)

[Do we need a Paris Agreement for tech? Here's what world leaders and tech chiefs say](#)
(World Economic Forum)

[Collaborative Models for Understanding Influence Operations: Lessons From Defense Research](#)
(Carnegie Endowment for International Development)

Information Disorder Academics

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