IN BRIEF

Misinformation

Misinformation thrives on social media where anyone can share almost anything they choose, and attention spans are short. Here’s a quick guide to help you understand what misinformation is and how to recognize it.

Why do people share misinformation?

Many people share misinformation unknowingly and sometimes with good or altruistic intentions — whether to articulate their perspectives, warn others away from danger or join others in trying to make sense of the world around them.

But some research suggests that some people also knowingly share things they suspect are false — whether to damage “the other side” in a political debate, get social media likes and shares, or conform to their ideological identities.

Bad actors — such as hyperpartisans, trolls and even foreign agents — create and share disinformation to cause division and confusion, to promote political interests and points of view or for financial gain.

Types

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.

Red flags

If you see these common misinformation themes and “rumor cues,” proceed with caution:

**Phrases**

- “Let that sink in”
- “The media won’t report this”
- “Make this go viral”
- “Do your own research”
- “There are no coincidences”

**Patterns**

- Manipulated text on signs or t-shirts
- Doctored “amazing” nature or space photos
- Photos of protests and crowds
- Screenshots of articles with no links

Key resources

- “Misinformation” lesson from NLP’s Checkology® virtual classroom
- NLP’s weekly email newsletters: The Sift® (for educators) and Get Smart About News (for non-educators)
- NLP’s Viral Rumor Rundown blog
- First Draft website
- The Media Manipulation Casebook

VERSUS

Misinformation:

Information that is misleading, erroneous or false. Misinformation is generally shared — and sometimes created — by people who are unaware that it’s inaccurate. This is the best term to use when the intent of the creator or sharer is unknown.

Disinformation:

A subset of misinformation that is deliberately created or shared with the intention to misinform and mislead others, usually to achieve a desired ideological, political or financial result.

Remember:

The intent behind the creation or amplification of false information is often impossible to determine.