A GUIDE FOR LIBRARIANS
USING MEDIA LITERACY TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

This guide provides key principles and topics that librarians may use to combat the spread of mis/disinformation and to promote healthy digital literacy habits in their communities.

PART I: **The History and Effect of Disinformation**

PART II: **Applying Media Literacy to Combat Disinformation**

PART III: **What Librarians Can Do In Their Communities**

In the wake of an unprecedented election and a post-election period rampant with disinformation, we hope you will consider ways to help keep your communities informed of critical resources on civic engagement, electoral processes, and credible news outlets.

What Librarians Can Do This Election Season and Beyond
A Non-Exhaustive List
(continued in Part III of this guide)
- Learn about the threat of disinformation on our democracy
- Identify trusted voices in your community
- Be a resource for others!
- Use this guide to embed messaging into your existing work
- Inspire trust in the electoral process by assuring your communities that while results will take time, our democratic institutions are strong and resilient

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PART I : **The History and Effect of Disinformation**

<u>**Why Media Literacy Matters: A Solution to Combating Disinformation**</u>
Disinformation poses a dangerous threat to all aspects of democractic engagement, but it is not a new phenomenon. It's helpful to ground this in history to help community members understand the urgency in addressing disinformation. It's also effective, as a leader, to admit that we all mayfall for misleading content. This can help instill a sense of togetherness in this fight.

Encourage members in your community to spend some time reflecting on the pivotal role that social media sites and tech giants play in the spread of disinformation online. Encourage them to question the level of transparency in companies like Twitter and Facebook.

Encourage people to take control of their news feeds and think critically about WHERE they get their news.

Start with making a distinction between disinformation and misinformation:

> *Disinformation* - demonstrably false information created with the intent to deceive the public
> *Misinformation* - false information that has been created and/or shared in error

Why We're Suscectible to Disinformation

Emotions	Emotions can be manipulated, particularly fear and anger. Think about your reactions to headlines or image captions -- capitalization and exclamation points suggest urgency. Our emotions often become HEIGHTENED and disinformation thrives when we play into those emotions without thinking carefully.
A 'patina' of credibility	This is the "look of authenticity." Perhaps a post or tweet or meme *kind of* looks real with names of fake organizations that appear familiar, real people's names are slightly misspelled, references to people and events are in credible news.
Fake or computer generated accounts	Bots are computer generated and designed to appear to be users on social media, particularly Twitter. Trolls can be potentially misleading identities aiming to provoke. Both kinds of accounts can help boost visibility as they engage with content to manipulate its reach.
Illusory Truth Effect	The more we encounter something, the more we believe it
Confirmation bias	Confirmation bias refers to our human tendency to seek out sources of information from sources which support our own beliefs

How Disinformation Works

It is used to **manipulate** public opinion

Disinformation threatens to derail our democracy this election

**Types of misleading content:**
- Fake news sites, these can be called "pink slime" sites that masquerade as credible and legitimate news outlets but are not
- Posts on social media: private groups or on your news feed
- "Coordinated inauthentic behavior" (Trolls, Bots, Fake Profiles, etc.)
- Highly partisan or biased sites

Examples of manipulated or misleading content

We highly encourage librarians to think about the credible content you can share in your communities, not giving too much oxygen to disinformation. When you do give oxygen to misleading narratives, that simply helps those narratives grow and take root.

However, we also understand that disinformation can feel like an abstract concept without any real-world examples. Here are two examples about COVID and election disinformation, which you may use in your storytelling and advocacy in your communities.

1) COVID examples: Images that are altered or misattributed to incorrect contexts. Take this example, of swans swimming in the Venice canals, which was thought to be unheard of before COVID-19. Fake stories proliferated online that this was a "silver lining" of humans being in quarantine and that animal life was thriving. The photo was not manipulated, but it was taken out of context and led people to believe something that was untrue:
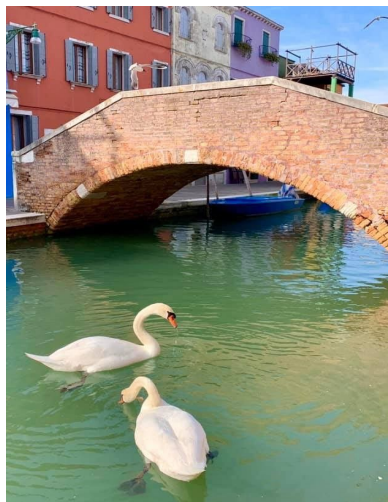
2) Election-related examples of photos/images taken out of context:
These images are ones that our colleagues at the News Literacy Project have debunked. They found: "**NO:** The envelopes in these photos do not contain ballots. **YES:** They are empty envelopes that once contained mail-in ballots from the 2018 midterm election, and were retained for 22 months under state law. **YES:** They were recently discovered in a landfill in Petaluma, California, near Sonoma. **NO:** They are not related to the 2020 U.S. presidential election. **NO:** Mail-in ballots will not be sent out in Sonoma County until early October."
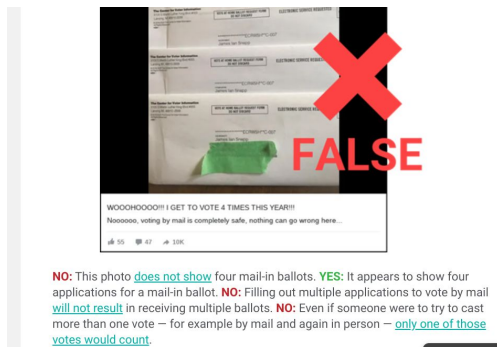

Images from The News Literacy Project
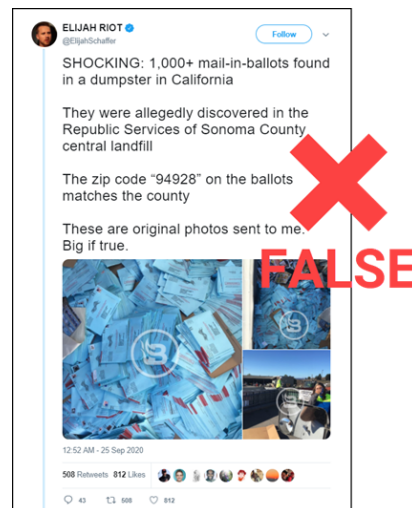
This is an opportune time to guide community members through the lifecycle of a fake news story, from the way it can be created (a headline, a fake image, even a mis-captioned video), to the way it spreads online. When we share content that we don't realize is disinformation, even if we have good intentions, we become creators and spreaders of misinformation.

You can encourage your patrons to think of themselves as ambassadors of truth: their hard work to verify content could be the difference between someone else seeing and believing misleading content...and not.

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PART II : Applying Media Literacy to Combat Disinformation

We must begin from the perspective of empowering communities with tools to assess information and discern truth can help minimize the spread of misleading content such as disinformation and misinformation.

A 2018 Gallup survey found that more than 60% of U.S. adults said they were less likely to share stories from sites labeled as unreliable. And in 2019, a study conducted by the University of California found that *labels are effective, at least in some capacity.* This means that when users get some flag that information might be false, this notification or label can help reduce the sharing of false news by diminishing the credibility of misleading information for users.
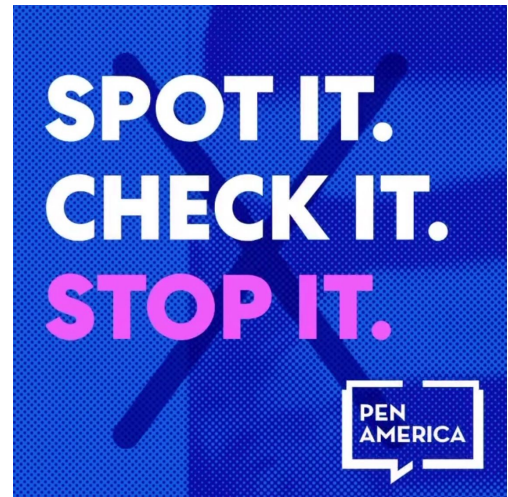
How the News Gets Made
A crucial element of media literacy is demystifying the journalism process, and restoring the public's trust in the media.

If there's an opportunity to engage with a local journalist in your community, we highly encourage this as part of the media literacy training experience. This can be a companion event, or it can be embedded within a workshop setting.

A crucial hallmark of responsible journalism is accuracy. As stewards of public trust, responsible journalists are in pursuit of truth based on evidence. Incumbent on this is thorough research, fact-checking statistics with accredited agencies, and making sure to quote and/or cite sources. Should mistakes occur, a professional news organization will acknowledge and correct them. Quickly. This stands in contrast to peddlers of disinformation who purposefully blur the lines between accuracy and falsehood.

Cynicism and discrediting of mainstream media has grown with charges of bias. A clever disinformation tactic is the creation of false local news outlets, usually websites that have a masthead and seem like a reputable local newspaper.

Maybe it's called "The Local Gazette" or "Chesapeake Bay Times" -- you might even fall prey to reading stories on these sites and frankly, they're not real. They're fake news outlets masquerading as purveyors of news.

Responsible journalism ideally pursues the truth. Purveyors of disinformation intentionally misquote or misattribute, elevate conspiracies, and follow up false stories with more disinformation instead of retracting and correcting.

Your Toolkit: Using Tech to Empower Communities

Much of this can rest in our hands to take control of our news feeds and more carefully think about our digital experiences so we become publishers in our own right, deciding what we read and what we share. To help with this, encourage your community to follow a few simple steps:

1. **Take a step back and take a scan of your digital experience.**
2. **Question your reactions: what are you feeling?**
3. **Is this news or opinion?**
4. **Check the source: news websites, image sources, the captions on videos, social media accounts.**
5. **Before you share → fact-check what you see.**

PEN America Guides & Tipsheets

We encourage you to share these guides with your patrons to learn about how disinformation can permeate our newsfeeds around topics such as COVID, protests, elections, and beyond!
- *What to Expect this Election Season*
- *How to Talk to Friends and Family Who Share Misinformation*
- *Disinfo Defense Toolkit for Organizers & Advocates*
- *PEN America's Guide on COVID-19 and Disinformation*
- *PEN America's Guide for Combating Protest Disinformation*

Fact-Checking Resources
- *Politifact.com* by The Poynter Institute or Washington Post's Factchecker both fact-check political content.
- *Fact Check*, through Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, in non-partisan and monitors for political accuracy.
- *All Sides* offers perspectives on topical news stories from the left, center, and from the right. They also offer a 'media bias rating.'
- *Snopes.com* began in 1994 and fact-checks internet content.
- *Reporterslab.org* is a database of both national and global fact-checking resources.
- *NewsGuard has a Coronavirus Misinformation Tracking Center. It's a great place to comb through if you want to see the breadth of misinformation about the pandemic.*

Share these resources with your constituents. You should take time to review the websites and resources yourselves, so you're confident and adept at using them.

Consider embedding a news literacy quiz into your workshop as well. It is fun, engaging, and informative for each of us!

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PART III : What Librarians Can Do In Their Communities

First: What to Expect This Election Season
1. Expect to **fact check** everything you hear--even from people you trust.
2. Expect the media's **reporting** on early results to look different from usual.
3. Expect and accept **delays**.
4. Expect the **unexpected**.

Second: The Effects of Disinformation On Democratic Discourse
Providing practical, current examples will drive your point home. Relate the threat to your community members' daily lives online. Use the latest, most contemporary examples you can find so you can provide timely and relevant context for why media literacy skills are important.

We also encourage you to share PEN America's reports examining the effect of

disinformation on our elections and beyond! These include our 2019 report, <u>Truth on the Ballot: Fraudulent News, the Midterm Elections, and Prospects for 2020</u>.

Some likely sources of disinformation in the context of the past couple U.S. elections, for example, include:
- Foreign actors' fake social media accounts/bots
- Hyper-partisan websites
- Domestic agents peddling conspiracy theories
- Misleading political advertisements
- Election Day misinformation

<u>Finally: Librarians have a powerful role to fight disinformation.</u>

Here are some strategies for becoming ambassadors of truth and to promote credible information:

- **Understand disinformation as it affects your community**. There are examples which abound in the post-election context, as well about the pandemic and protests and civil unrest. We recommend you familiarize yourself with these examples, from fact-checking websites that we've listed to other lateral reading. And librarians can be a powerful stopgap to educate their members and community about these ills.
  - **Use this guide to offer guidance on defending against the spread of false narratives and conspiracy theories targeting people across identities, and familiarize yourself with some common instances of microtargeting**. For example, pay special attention to misinformation narratives and campaigns designed to play to specific religious beliefs, and that most aggressively target Black, Latino, and other BIPOC voters. Some of these campaigns even aim to pit different communities of color against each other, and librarians can play an important role in fighting this kind of divisiveness.
- **Be a nonpartisan, trusted source for members of your community**: Given the unprecedented election season amid a pandemic, we are facing expected delays in results coming in. This isn't necessarily a sign of something bad, it means that election officials are doing their job and counting ballots! Help your members by serving as a nonpartisan resource. You can help educate them about what to expect this election season and about knowing where to turn for credible resources.

Remember to lead with the facts - that's about as nonpartisan as you can get.

- **Host a community conversation about disinformation or bias**! You can take our resources, including this packet and our disinformation tip sheets as a starting place to adapt curriculum for your community's needs.
  - Maybe it's just a 30 minute virtual session with community members about the history and examples of disinformation. Maybe it's a flyer with resources about your local news ecosystem. Be a resource for voters to help maximize voters understanding the content they see and engaging in our democratic process.
- **Meet your patrons where they are**, and consider where different members of your community get their news. For example, younger members may get their information from social media more often than older members do. Different communities may have access to cable and specialized news broadcasts, others only limited wifi. When you hear about mis/disinformation flowing through your followers and friends, as a leader, it will be imperative that you address it -- privately and empathetically with the spreader of the false information, and then publicly, without naming or shaming, and provide the facts. It can also be helpful to designate community point persons for members to report instances of mis/disinfo to anonymously. This is a healthy way to encourage members to hold each other accountable.
- **Inspire trust in the electoral process**. As educators and trusted sources, your communities not only look to you for accurate information, but emotional and spiritual guidance as well; as such, you are in a unique position to instill calm and trust in the system amidst a period rife with distrust and disinformation. Encourage your patrons to be proactive, take matters into their own hands, and invite them to join you in strengthening their digital literacy muscles. Moreover, make a plan for the weeks after the election during which the country will likely be in emotional turmoil. Having a plan for how to deal with patrons' emotional reactions to the news and parsing out truth from fiction, will be imperative.

For more information on and resources for combating disinformation around the post-election period, check out PEN America's election defense campaign, **What to Expect 2020**, which includes:

- Links to various **tipsheets** and **guides** to combat the erosive effects of mis/disinformation

- **Conversations** with voting, democracy, and election experts
- Video **recordings** of disinformation defense workshops, panel discussions, virtual town halls, and more
- For an in-depth report on the dangerous proliferation of false information, check out PEN America's landmark report Faking the News: Fraudulent News and the Fight for Truth

Please keep in touch! We'd love to hear how your media literacy sessions are going in your community. We are available to support you in tailoring this content, co-sponsoring or facilitating workshops with your communities, or building more materials.

Contact PEN America at medialiteracy@pen.org to learn more.