Tackling Misinformation

▶ **The Communications Industry Unites**

Pictured left to right: Errol Cookfield, Tara Carraro, AnnaMaria DeSalva, Rachel Catanach and Mike Paul.

AI AND HOW TO USE IT RESPONSIBLY TO GUARD AGAINST MISINFORMATION

PRSA

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Welcome to Tackling Disinformation: The Communications Industry Unites, an essential guide that helps public relations and communications professionals navigate the ever-changing landscape of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

In a time when over half the world's population is active on social media, obscuring the truth has quickly become commonplace.

This Playbook serves as a spotlight that illuminates the industry's path forward toward clarity and integrity.

Within the pages of this document, you'll explore the root causes of the spread of disinformation, how this topic is even more relevant during an election year in the United States, what we can collectively do to mitigate the potential risks of artificial intelligence, and much more.

As we continue to confront the challenges of the digital age, the need for reliable and trustworthy information has never been more critical.

By embracing the information shared in the Playbook, we can equip ourselves with the knowledge and tools to rebuild a future where transparency and accountability take precedence.

Thank you, PRSA, for encouraging others to join your efforts to uphold ethical communication practices today and in the future.

I hope you all find the information in this Playbook helpful in supporting and optimizing your future communications strategy.

Brian Balbirnie

Chief Executive Officer, Issuer Direct

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Part 1: Industry Influencers Agree To Work Together

Pictured left to right: Alexis Williams, Eleanor Hawkins and Michael Abrahams. | Photographs by Ronald A. Wyatt.

At a time of deep division within the United States and around the world, there are few areas that people agree on more than the devastating influence of misinformation and disinformation.

While surveys find differences about the issue along political and age categories, in the U.S., most people agree the lack of trust in content is a significant problem for the country's well-being, its civility, institutions and democratic form of government. It is this group's belief that misinformation has contributed significantly to the country's polarization and lack of civility.

In addition, with 2024 elections in the U.S. this year, Americans are concerned that the broken information regime could become much worse. Misinformation and disinformation are shaking democracy at its core.

Americans are not alone. More than 2 billion people are expected to vote this year in 50 countries. Accordingly, a survey of 1,500 global experts puts misinformation and disinformation as the most concerning issue for 2024.

In addition to political manipulation of content, there is concern that AI and generative AI will speed creation and distribution of inaccurate information, compounding an already difficult situation.

It is in this climate that PRSA, at the end of 2023, assembled a group of 25 senior communicators from a wide range of industries, in-house and firms, for an initial meeting. In addition, several follow-up meetings were conducted with subject matter experts. PRSA believes the profession must help preserve democracy by working against misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

This group's work, which we expect will continue indefinitely, is part of PRSA's standing commitment to fight misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. This commitment stems from PRSA's Code of Ethics and is a continuation of elements from its Voices4Everyone platform and AI guidance work.

This "Initial Playbook to Combat Misinformation in 2024" is the first result of those meetings and is being distributed to all PRSA members. It is intended as a dynamic document. It will be updated regularly with additional solutions, progress updates, research findings and data. The group's initial meetings were conducted under Chatham House Rule, so participants who are quoted in this Playbook will remain anonymous.

"This group's work, which we expect will continue indefinitely, is part of PRSA's standing commitment to fight misinformation, disinformation and malinformation."

► Part 2: Understanding the Problem and Suggesting Solutions

Pictured left to right: Ray Day, APR and Michael Marando.

► Root Causes

A Human Behavior Issue

History offers evidence that there will always be misinformation and disinformation. It is a human behavior issue, not a technology problem.

Certainly, in today's digital age and with the ascendance of AI and generative AI, the ability and speed to manufacture misinformation and disinformation and spread it have accelerated. Moreover, with so much news and information bombarding the American consumer via digital technology, many are ignoring dedicated news sources and/or reading only curated headlines on social media.

Yet at its root, misinformation and disinformation are not technology problems. If digital technology, social media platforms and AI were removed from the world tomorrow, misinformation and disinformation would still exist.

► Solutions

While we acknowledge misinformation and disinformation will not end, their scourge can be reduced using a three-part approach.

► Learn From Bad Actors and Out-communicate Them

We must study the bad actors. Fortunately, in some cases bad actors are relatively easy to follow. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a small group of people and organizations, some of whom were well funded, were spreading much of the disinformation about the disease.

We intend to study these bad actors, follow their money and anticipate their next moves.

In addition, we must out-communicate the bad

actors — and in many ways return to the basics of the PR business. Are our messages concise and consistent? Are they user-friendly? Can audience members without internet access find our messages?

Again, the COVID pandemic provides numerous examples of organizations issuing messages that confused the public; messages with conflicting advice; wording that often was inaccessible; messages that were not translated into languages other than English; and messages that required visiting multiple sites.

► Education of Society and Stakeholders

As misinformation and disinformation are human behavior issues, we plan to battle them with education. Our plan will model this effort on The Truth Initiative (TTI), which for decades has informed the public about the dangers of smoking. As we know, TTI has not ended smoking, but it has changed behaviors and the way the public thinks about smoking's health risks.

Similarly, our education activities, which we will make available to PRSA members, will not end misinformation and disinformation. However, we believe they will change at least some of the public's behavior when these people consume news and information and subsequently spread it. In short, we will concentrate on education, disseminating resources and sponsoring training, over regulation.

This education effort will supplement existing PRSA resources and activities in misinformation and disinformation, ethics and AI guidance. Much of the education activities will involve partnerships with groups and experts who are doing this work already (see below).

► **Partnerships**

Members of the group met with subject matter experts, including Dr. Claire Wardle, founder of First Draft, and Alan Miller, founder, News Literacy Project.

We are formulating plans to work with Miller and Wardle as well as groups they represent, which have been conducting education outreach and creating grassroots campaigns, respectively, for years.

In brief, Miller's work trains students and the public to pause and think deeper as they consume and spread information and news. Moreover, Miller, a former journalist, works with media, encouraging reporters to build relationships with consumers through outreach and transparency.

Wardle's work has her creating citizen groups, mainly from communities that are most vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. Citizens report about news and information they hear and Wardle's team examines the origins and objectives of the content.

It is our belief that there is no limit to what we can accomplish with these groups when we put the power, talent and diversity of PRSA behind them. Again, our plan is to develop a movement like The Truth Initiative.

"We must out-communicate the bad actors — and in many ways return to the basics of the PR business."

Part 3: Digging Deeper

Pictured left to right: Linda Thomas Brooks, Aaron Sherinian and Chad Latz.

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A Threat: Dimensionalizing the Issue – Misinformation and AI

By

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Chief Innovation Officer, BCW

and

Michael Cherenson, APR, Fellow PRSA

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► **Clarification of Definitions and Spectrum of Information Threats**

There is a predisposition to compound or confuse a collection of terms that individually describe what has become a significant problem for the information ecosystem: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation.

These issues, particularly against the backdrop of a highly polarized social and political landscape, compromise the integrity of news and social media, public understanding and the public relations profession. These issues have a dramatic impact on attitudes, decision making, policymaking, social well-being, democracy and the economy.

- **Misinformation** can be defined as the creation and distribution of false or inaccurate information by a poorly informed, or misinformed, party **without** the intent to cause damage.

- **Disinformation,** however, is the creation and spreading of purposefully inaccurate and false information **with the intention** to deceive and cause harm.

- **Malinformation,** which may stem originally from truthful statements or accurate events, is information that is often **recontextualized or exaggerated** to intentionally inflict harm.

These terms, in and of themselves, along with fake news, have become highly charged and polarizing, often as a result of how individuals with differing belief systems, political agendas or views categorize what they find as truthful.

The term **weaponized information** seems a more accurate and encompassing description since in each case of mis-, dis- and malinformation there is the capacity for communications to be used to produce inaccuracies and cause harm.

Documented scientific research shows people are 70% more likely to share falsehoods ahead of truth. This demonstrates, in part, why there is such a vast problem. The issue is not simply isolated to the role of nefarious or ill-informed actors, or technology and now generative AI as an accelerant.

Instead, we are dealing with a challenge associated with **human behavior.** In the age of weaponized information, the nearly subconscious and habitual actions of liking, sharing and commenting on content without a deeper level of investigation or verification, highlight the need for **public awareness and behavior**

change to help combat the issue.

Additionally, a facet of the issue is not only that some people produce misinformation, it's that some people want misinformation to support their agendas, or because it reinforces their belief system.

Weaponized information (disinformation) became more pressing and visible during the 2016 U.S. presidential election with threats attributed to foreign actors. Accordingly, governments are creating frameworks to help address this issue.

As we move headlong into another election year in the U.S. and more than 40 countries worldwide, officials are citing disinformation combined with the threat of AI as the most pressing issue for election integrity. This is against the backdrop of what is thought to be the most significant year of volatility in modern times. From economic instability with countries comprising 60% of global GDP (and population) heading to the polls, to socio-political polarization, the environment is rife with risk for all stakeholders where virtually every issue can be weaponized.

"Falsehoods are spread by humans at a faster rate than truths."

► **A Threat Beyond Elections**

Misinformation and other forms of weaponized information are not simply a threat to democracy. The WHO clearly states that we are experiencing an i**nfodemic,** where misinformation and disinformation are a public health threat. Financial markets have been sent reeling from AI-generated disinformation. From the clean energy transition and climate change to health care and banking, false or weaponized information has put clients and companies at considerable risk across industries, sectors and issues.

The news sector itself is under considerable threat with concerns about the integrity of the news and information environment, an issue generative AI has accelerated. Trust in news media has hit a record low of 32%. Polarized social and political beliefs are

contributing to mistrust of media. Weaponization of skepticism, or what some call the "liar's dividend," where bad actors can allege that scandalous or controversial stories about them are fake news or deepfakes, allowing them to maintain support in the face of damaging information, only further degrades the news and information ecosystem. The misinformation battle is a regular occurrence for journalists against fake news sites, which sometimes, in addition to the use of AI, steal the identities of western news sites to sow mis- and disinformation.

The issue is three-fold:

1. **Verification** of reported events with digital provenance.

2. **Growing competition** for attention and per-ceived veracity and lack of trust of news sources.

3. **The ease of proliferation** (using generative AI) of websites that use stories scraped from mainstream news sources, repackaging them (with malintent or not) and siphoning revenue and attention from legitimate outlets. In es-sence, news brands are stolen and can be used in a variety of ways including promoting deepfakes and other synthetic media.

► **Artificial Intelligence – A Considerable Information Threat**

In its latest Global Risks Report, the World Economic Forum cites AI-powered misinformation as the world's biggest short-term threat in 2024. The ability to easily create synthetic media and disinformation at scale using generative AI has escalated the threat. One account identifies the growth of websites hosting false, AI-created articles by more than 1,000 percent.

Human trust in generative AI further creates problems for the news and information environment. A 2023 CapGemini study showed that 73% of people are inclined to trust content that generative AI creates. Given the fact that as much as 90% of content produced on the internet in the next several years will be created at least in part by generative AI, and that falsehoods are spread by humans at a faster rate than truths, the concerns are vast.

Further, it has been well documented that generative

AI LLMs (large language models) are not infallible, from hallucinations to a decline in accuracy to model collapse. Regardless of who or which organization is using the technology, it's clear the burden of accuracy is on the human or the organization.

Concern for the news and information environment is far-reaching and being addressed by numerous organizations with a range of interests, from policymakers to news organizations to NGOs. Multisector coalitions, including Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (#C2PA) and Partnership on AI (PAI), are focused on taking an ecosystem approach from digital provenance at point of capture (truepic) all the way through the software used to modify imagery, up to point of distribution via news with multiple technology solutions being assessed.

As we assess possible solutions, it's also important to note that a recent study states that interventions to counter misinformation are often less effective for polarizing content.

► **AI: How To Use It Responsibility To Guard Against Misinformation**

The broad adoption of, and enthusiasm for, generative AI, along with the disruption it is poised to bring for the marketing and communications industry, has left practitioners eager to test and apply the technology. Whether for creative content or core media relations tasks such as press releases and targeted pitch development, many agencies are exploring solutions. However, this is posing as many challenges as it is opportunities, particularly as it relates to maintaining the integrity of our craft.

There is a responsibility for the PR and communications industry to reinforce the integrity of the information environment and do its part to help reduce risk to companies, brands, publics, news and our industry.

A few tactics:

► **Disclose generative AI use and validate generative AI outputs for accuracy.** In short, avoid contributing to the information problem. Inaccuracies in generative AI outputs are well documented and while perhaps unintentional, it's crucial that the information and content we create, with and without AI outputs, uphold the highest standards of fact and integrity.

► **Conduct quality research that drives accuracy and reinforces fact.** When undertaking deskside research, be certain to verify sources, particularly if using it to substantiate a position that you may go on to assert as fact. Conduct original, proprietary research to the highest level of quality and statistical significance with methodologies disclosed. Using generative AI to extract trends from data also should be validated.

► **Assess unusual patterns in the creation or distribution of content online.** This is particularly so on social channels. High-velocity posts on accounts with a small number of followers that are lacking credentials or identifying information on profiles are most certainly suspect relative to misinformation or malinformation. For news, verify reported events across multiple outlets and assess the consistency of reported facts.

► **Avoid activating the algorithm.** Digital content, whether via recommendation engines, trending topics on social platforms or otherwise, is optimized for engagement. The near subconscious activity of liking, sharing and commenting can otherwise contribute to accelerating the spread of mis-, dis- or malinformation. Think before you click.

► **Maintain the integrity of media relationships.** Despite the experimentation of AI and LLMs at news outlets, journalists and editorial teams are using AI detection and are already rejecting AI-generated pitches. Don't forsake media relationships in favor of automation.

► **Outreach to platforms and news outlets.** Many news organizations and social platforms provide fact-checking solutions and are actively working to debunk fake news. Advise teams to alert media outlets and social platforms of misinformation whether on behalf of your clients or relative to other issues.

► **Detection. Use advanced tools of the trade.** Broadly available generative AI detection tools can help spot AI-generated content, which can often be an indicator of misinformation, as the technology can help bad actors produce weaponized content at scale. There are utilities for reverse-image searches, and pixel cloning detection can help surface anomalies in visuals or images that have been taken out of context and used in weaponized narratives.

Deepfake video detectors are also available. Fake account detection technology exists and varies by social platform, but changes to APIs have impacted the ability to do this effectively and reliably.

► **Cognitive AI solutions** are emerging from our industry that can now predict the virality, believability and impact of weaponized information to track and quantify threats. Dedicate resources within your organization to evaluate emerging technologies.

► **Education and Media Literacy.** Multiple studies have found that misinformation can still influence decision making, even if it's corrected. While detection, debunking and defensive tactics are essential, organizations and institutions should consider prebunking strategies aimed at building resilience and cognitive muscles to guard against manipulation both online and off. Numerous studies have shown the efficacy of media literacy and inoculation interventions including messaging, games and videos, which help build mental immunity to persuasion and manipulation.

Addressing weaponized information requires a joined-up, whole-of-society approach to tackling what is arguably one of the most significant issues of our time and will determine the future in which we live.

"Organizations and institutions should consider prebunking strategies aimed at building resilience and cognitive muscles to guard against manipulation both online and off."

Michael Marando
Director, Content Policy, Meta

What Tech Is Doing To Combat Misinformation in the Global Election Year

By

Michael Marando
Director, Content Policy, Meta

This will be an historic year for elections. In 2024, more voters than ever will participate in elections worldwide. This will include some of the world's largest democracies such as the United States, India, Indonesia, Mexico and the European Union. At least sixty-four countries will hold elections this year, representing about 49% of the world's population.

This unprecedented number of elections means that tech companies will grapple with increases in misinformation on an array of issues. Misinformation and elections often go together. Fortunately, tech companies have learned a tremendous amount about

misinformation from prior elections. They also are preparing for new risks that will likely emerge this year.

► Generative AI: A Major New Risk

The major new risk comes from recent advances in artificial intelligence. Generative AI now allows people to create photorealistic-looking videos and images, and realistic-sounding audio with relative ease. Already we have seen AI-generated images and videos of major candidates and world leaders on social media. We will only see more of this content as generative AI becomes more readily accessible. What this means is that people will increasingly share content they believe depicts, for example, a world leader saying something they didn't say. It also means that bad actors have another tool to sow disinformation.

To prepare for this risk, tech companies, from the largest social media companies to companies that create AI content, are working together to align on common industry provenance and watermarking standards to embed in AI-generated content. Other companies can read these invisible marks and inform users when they are interacting with AI-generated content.

Major tech companies, including Meta, Google, OpenAI and Amazon, signed a pledge in July 2023 at the White House to engage in this important work. Ensuring that this work continues will be a critical step toward confronting AI-generated misinformation risk this year.

► Platform Protection

Companies must also invest in protecting their platforms. There is no one panacea to combat misinformation, and as a result, the investment must come in many forms. For instance, we employ thousands of people at Meta to work on safety and security issues and are continually adapting and retraining our workforce to stay on top of new challenges. Meta also employs roughly 100 fact-checkers worldwide who work in more than 60 languages.

There also needs to be continued investment in trusted partners and others on the ground globally who can relay real-time information and trends to the trust and safety professionals who protect platforms. For example, Meta partners with more than 400 nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian agencies, human rights defenders and researchers from 113 countries to understand local context, trends in speech and signals of imminent harm.

► Risk and Political Ads

With the influx in elections this year, it's also critical that tech companies focus their efforts on risks posed by political advertisements. Tech companies must require transparency for political advertisements on their platforms, for example by requiring advertisers to disclose who is paying for their ad. Companies also should consider blocking new political ads shortly before an election, as sometimes there is insufficient time to contest claims made in the ad. For instance, Meta blocked new ads close to elections in previous years and will do the same this election year in the United States.

While it is possible to counter some misinformation through the timely introduction of more, and better, information, platforms should remove some misinformation entirely, particularly during an election year. Most social media platforms, including Meta, Google and TikTok, have policies prohibiting misinformation that can directly contribute to imminent offline harm. These companies, however, also have policies that prohibit misinformation specifically related to elections. For example, Meta removes content on its platforms that misrepresents dates, times, locations, or eligibility requirements for elections. Similarly, YouTube prohibits such election-related misinformation.

Any discussion on misinformation — particularly about elections — would be incomplete if it did not address disinformation, or the intentional sharing of misinformation. Over the years, tech companies have learned the techniques of foreign interference and domestic influence operations and are experts at defeating large-scale operations. Ensuring continued investment in these defenses is critical.

Moreover, users should know when they are interacting with state-controlled media on social media platforms. Companies such as Meta and X label state-controlled media so users know when content is from a publication that may be wholly or partially under the editorial control of a government.

Protecting against misinformation, particularly during an election year, means employing a variety of tools. It requires multiple, overlapping measures and continued investment in identifying and mitigating new risks.

"To prepare for this risk, tech companies, from the largest social media companies to companies that create AI content, are working together to align on common industry provenance and watermarking standards to embed in AI-generated content."

Alan C. Miller

Founder, News Literacy Project

What the News Industry Is Doing/Should Do in 2024 To Protect Against Misinformation, Especially Leading Up to the Global Elections

By

Alan C. Miller

News Literacy Project

A high-profile commission at the Aspen Institute spent six months studying what it called "a crisis in truth and trust."

In its report, released in November 2021, the commission called on elected officials to create a national strategic plan to counter misinformation and disinformation and to dedicate long-term investment in local journalism. In addition, it urged newsrooms

and social media platforms to become more diverse and inclusive to increase public trust. It said that social media companies should become more transparent; that the government should reform laws that shield platforms like Facebook from being held legally liable for content that their algorithms amplify and monetize; and that there should be ways to hold bad actors accountable. It also mentioned the need for more media literacy education.

► **Rebuilding Trust in Journalism**

A major reason that the public is vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation is the loss of trust in journalism as well as all other major institutions that traditionally served as arbiters of credible information.

"The best way to protect against misinformation is to have a relationship built on trust," Joy Mayer, the executive director of Trusting News, says. "People are overwhelmed and not sure what to believe — and that's a reasonable response to today's information landscape. If journalists want to help people cut through the noise, they need to not just be another noisy voice. Journalists have an opportunity to be a guide for the people who trust them."

Journalists can do this by doubling down on verification and accuracy. They should promptly correct factual errors and explain why they occurred, and delete bad information, including on their social platforms. They should clearly distinguish between news reports and opinion, analysis and branded content — particularly online, where so much content is disaggregated.

Moreover, they should not assume trust but earn it by showing their work: how they know what they know. This includes being transparent about the processes behind their reporting, and sharing and annotating source documents such as court records, data sets and video and audio clips to verify assertions and provide context. Many news organizations now do this, especially online, but the opportunity remains to do more of it consistently and better.

► **Combating Misinformation**

News organizations must push back against misinformation and disinformation by calling it out and debunking it, including the destructive falsehoods and conspiratorial thinking some political leaders spread. They need to encourage healthy skepticism and give audiences tools to help them decipher good information from bad.

Amid the growing recognition that news organizations have this responsibility, many have taken steps to do so, particularly in the past decade. Various outlets have created fact-checking units to join the ranks of PolitiFact and FactCheck.org. This includes The Washington Post's Fact Checker and USA Today's Fact Check.

A more recent initiative is the News Literacy Project's RumorGuard, which debunks viral rumors, provides posts to push back against them and teaches people skills to do the debunking themselves. [For more fact-checking resources, see the Resources section of this guide.]

In addition, since 2016, major news organizations have assigned journalists or teams to cover and debunk misinformation. Craig Silverman, now at ProPublica, is an award-winning pioneer in debunking online rumors and misinformation, and analyzing media manipulation. The New York Times has a Visual Investigations team that "combines traditional reporting with digital sleuthing and the forensic analysis of visual evidence to find truth, hold the powerful to account and deconstruct important news events." TEGNA's VERIFY team, "with help from questions submitted by the audience, tracks the spread of stories or claims that need clarification or correction" for its 49 local television stations. Broadcast networks, including CNN and NBC News, have assigned reporters to misinformation beats.

At the same time, news organizations must do more. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey of nearly 12,000 working U.S.-based journalists found that 26% said they unknowingly reported on a story that was later found to contain false information. While

the journalists said they felt good about their ability to detect misinformation, only 35% said that news outlets are somewhat good at doing this, and only 8% said news organizations do a very good job at handling misinformation. Meanwhile, 60% of those surveyed said their organization does not have guidelines for handling false and made-up information.

This underscores that more news organizations need to train journalists on misinformation and best practices. Peter Adams, senior vice president of research and design for the News Literacy Project, said this includes: how to make frequent "use of a `truth sandwich' (clearly state the truth, then explain the falsehood, then restate the truth); never pose the falsehood as an open question ('Did this poll worker change votes on this ballot?') but rather make the truth clear at every turn; and don't give a voice/platform to people bent on disinforming the public." News organizations also can make greater use of the technique of "prebunking" by explaining and identifying pervasive disinformation patterns and tactics from prior elections.

► **The 2024 Election**

Amid the growing concerns and allegations around election interference, news organizations generally did a better job in 2020 of ensuring that their audiences understood the nature of elections. This includes the process itself; the checks and balances to prevent fraud (i.e., people voting twice, people voting by mail and in person, people mailing in ballots for recently deceased relatives, etc.); the proper role of election workers; and why vote totals often change significantly late on Election Day or even in the days after as all votes are tallied. News outlets need to do this again before, during and after Election Day this year.

They also need to continue to draw attention to coordinated efforts to undermine confidence in elections and to discourage certain groups (especially historically marginalized communities) from voting, and to underscore that these efforts are anti-democratic

or unpatriotic.

"Of course, the press must be just as tough on Democrats, should they adopt similar tactics or start lying all the time or trashing governmental norms," wrote Margaret Sullivan, the former public editor for The New York Times and media columnist for The Washington Post.

She continued: "The standards should be the same for all. But journalists shouldn't shy away from the unavoidable truth: Most of this is coming from Trump-style Republicans. Perhaps the most important thing journalists can do as they cover the campaign ahead is to provide thoughtful framing and context. They shouldn't just repeat what's being said but help explain what it means. This is especially important in headlines and news alerts, which are about as far as many news consumers get. When Trump rants about the supposed horrors of rigged elections and voting fraud, journalists must constantly provide the counterweight of truth. We have gotten better at this since 2016. Now we have to stick to it."

► **AI-Generated Content**

Generative AI represents a growing threat to the information ecosystem. It has the potential to create far more disinformation and rapidly scale it. Moreover, as the 2024 campaign unfolds, the public is likely to see more doctored photos, videos and audio of individuals, including candidates, purportedly saying and doing things they never said and did.

This also could lead to candidates dismissing actual footage of them as fake in an environment where people become ever more uncertain of what to trust. The news media needs to remind people as often as possible about the rise of AI-generated photos and videos and encourage them to be mindful of how they evaluate visuals. Marty Baron, the former executive editor of The Washington Post, recommends that news organizations form alliances with each other and academicians and other specialists to share tools that can help rapidly decipher fabricated content.

► **Personal Responsibility**

News organizations can publish and air content reminding people that media and consumers have roles in combating misinformation. Through stories on misinformation and media literacy, media can encourage audiences to approach all content, especially social media and online information, with skepticism, and ask themselves whether the source is credible, the information is designed to inform or to persuade, incite or misinform, and whether they should trust it, share it and act on it.

"News organizations can publish and air content reminding people that media and consumers have roles in combating misinformation."

Rachel Catanach

**Senior Vice President, Senior Partner and
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A Primary Misinformation Root Cause: Human Behavior

By

Rachel Catanach

**Senior Vice President, Senior Partner and
General Manager, FleishmanHillard, NY**

Spreading lies, misinformation has always been part of the human condition. It is done to create a positional advantage, weaken an opponent, or as a defensive mechanism to cover up wrongdoing. Sometimes it can simply be a case of inadequate fact-checking.

While organizations have always faced risk from mis-, dis- and mal-information, these risks are exponentially higher when AI is powering false information.

The Global Risk Report 24, released in January 2024 by the World Economic Forum, categorized misinformation and disinformation as the "most

severe global risk anticipated over the next 2 years." According to the report, "The nexus between falsified information and societal unrest will take center stage amid elections in several major economies that are set to take place in the next two years."

For clarity on the difference between mis-, dis- and malinformation:

- **Misinformation** is false, misleading or out-of-context information shared without an intent to deceive.

- **Disinformation,** on the other hand, is deliberately false and is spread with intent to deceive.

- **Malinformation** is true information that is distributed with the intent to cause harm, i.e., leaking classified or trade secrets, ransomware or revenge porn.

AI's accessibility and ease of use has already led to an explosion in falsified information and "synthetic content" such as voice cloning and counterfeit websites. AI can extend the reach of misinformation on a scale previously unimaginable.

Despite the scale and proliferation that AI makes possible, the most challenging elements for organizations are social dynamics that have changed the way humans receive and respond to information. **These social dynamics include:**

- **Social Influence:** People are influenced by their social networks. If misinformation is prevalent in one's social circle, it's more likely to be accepted and further disseminated.

- **Emotional Engagement:** Misinformation often contains emotionally charged content, which is more likely to be remembered and shared. Humans are more likely to engage with content that evokes strong emotions, whether positive or negative.

- **Overload of Information:** In the digital age, the vast amount of information available can be overwhelming. This makes it challenging to discern accurate information from misinformation. Information overload can lead to quick, less critical consumption of content.

- **Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles:** Online platforms often show users content that aligns with their interests and previous interactions. This can create echo chambers or filter bubbles, reinforcing existing beliefs and making users more receptive to misinformation that aligns with these beliefs.

- **Trust in Authority and Familiarity:** Misinformation often exploits trust in authority or familiar sources. People are more likely to believe and spread misinformation coming from a source they trust or perceive as credible.

- **Lack of Media Literacy:** A lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills makes it harder for individuals to identify and question the credibility of the information they consume.

- **Psychological Comfort:** Sometimes, misinformation provides psychological comfort by offering simple explanations for complex issues or reaffirming one's worldview, making it more appealing than the often more complex truth.

- **Political and Ideological Motivations:** Misinformation can be used as a tool for political or ideological manipulation, exploiting human tendencies to align with group identities and viewpoints.

- **Feedback Loops:** The spread of misinformation can create feedback loops. As more people come across and believe in misinformation, they are more likely to spread it further, creating a cycle that perpetuates and amplifies the misinformation.

These dynamics make false information, once it has been distributed at the scale of AI, exceedingly difficult to debunk. People believe what they want to

believe. The unpackaged truth often doesn't suffice. Other strategies need to be deployed to persuade people of another point of view.

This is also why false information powered by AI is particularly potent in the hands of bad actors. And why AI has the power to become a political weapon, creating further social unrest and additional fissures in an already fractured global economy.

Organizations will need to develop methodologies to counter misinformation based on a critical understanding of these human dynamics. These include scenario planning, message pre-emption and persuasive campaigns (as opposed to information-based ones) designed to appeal to the emotional needs and beliefs of critical stakeholders and consumers.

And the preparation needs to start now!

"Spreading lies, misinformation has always been part of the human condition. It is done to create a positional advantage, weaken an opponent, or as a defensive mechanism to cover up wrongdoing. Sometimes it can simply be a case of inadequate fact-checking."

Chris Perry
Chairman, Weber Shandwick Futures

Paul C. Hardart
**Director, Entertainment, Media and
Technology Program, Clinical Professor,
Leonard H. Stern School of Business,
New York University**

There's Value in Studying Bad Actors When Combating Misinformation

By
Chris Perry
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and

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Program, Clinical Professor, Leonard H. Stern School
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In "Meditations," Marcus Aurelius suggested that the best way to counteract the negativity and immorality we encounter in others is not by mirroring it, but by reinforcing our own commitment to good behavior.

In a similar way, studying bad actors in communications can be a valuable approach to discern what excellence could and should look like. By examining bad actors and analyzing how they engage in ineffective communication, we can gain insights into what not to do and identify the traits and behaviors that hinder effective communication.

As new technologies evolve and internet penetration increases, we will continue to move into the realm of the autonomous age. In this paradigm shift, bad actors will be able to effortlessly corrupt communication in several ways, often by undermining the truth or exploiting communication channels for harmful ends. **Here are a few specific examples:**

1. **Spread of Disinformation:** By creating and disseminating false information, bad actors can mislead public opinion, stir up confusion and erode trust in authentic sources of information. An example could be fabricating a story that is entirely untrue but seems plausible enough to be believed by the unsuspecting public.

2. **Propagation of Misinformation:** Sometimes, bad actors may unknowingly spread misinformation — a false narrative or data not created with deceptive intent, but which is nonetheless wrong. They can do this by sharing unverified rumors or hoaxes that can influence people's behavior or beliefs.

3. **Selective Sharing of Malinformation:** By sharing true information out of context or in a way meant to cause harm, bad actors can manipulate the narrative to serve their interests. For instance, they might leak genuine documents meant to embarrass or discredit individuals or groups, regardless of the potential damage to personal reputations or national security.

4. **Social Media Manipulation:** Creating fake accounts or bots to generate fake likes, shares or comments can create an illusion of consensus or popularity, which can sway public perception. This tactic can amplify divisive or extreme viewpoints, making them appear more widespread or accepted than they actually are.

5. **Phishing and Scams:** Communication channels can be corrupted by bad actors who engage in phishing — sending emails that appear to be from reputable sources to trick individuals into revealing personal information like passwords and credit card numbers.

6. **Deepfakes and Media Manipulation:** The use of AI to create realistic but entirely fabricated audiovisual content can put false words into the mouths of public figures or depict events that never happened, creating convincing lies.

7. **Hate Speech and Harassment:** Bad actors may engage in or incite hate speech, bullying or harassment, creating a toxic environment and often targeting individuals or groups to silence or marginalize them.

By understanding these tactics, individuals and organizations can better prepare to mitigate the impact of such bad actors on communication systems. This might involve employing fact-checking resources, promoting digital literacy or implementing stricter security measures where necessary.

Lastly, and importantly, we should be sure to consider the dynamic between incumbents and insurgents. Incumbents are those who are native to the communication ecosystem and are accustomed to broadcasting their messages. Insurgents can be considered both "good" and "bad," and are generally playing an asymmetric game and do not necessarily abide by the practices and standards of incumbents. Recognizing the fast-evolving nature of insurgents will be essential to the discussion going forward.

► Resources
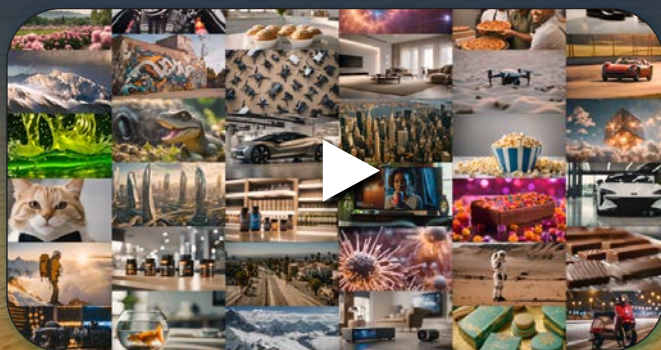
► Fact-checkers:

- **Factcheck.org (Annenberg Public Policy Center)**
- **Fact Checker (Washington Post)**
- **Hoaxy**
- **Opensecrets.org**
- **Politifact.com**
- **ProCon.org**
- **Snopes.com**

Five Steps for Vetting a News Source: An infographic from the News Literacy Project with simple tips for assessing legitimate news and information.

Harvard Kennedy School **Misinformation Review:** An updated collection of quickly peer-reviewed, short, accessible articles about how misinformation and disinformation spread, and approaches to combating it.

In Brief: Misinformation: An infographic from the News Literacy Project and an excellent primer, distinguishes between misinformation and disinformation and provides tactics for assessing content's veracity.

IPR Disinformation Resource Library: In concert with IPR's fourth annual "Disinformation in Society" report (November 2023), the IPR's Behavioral Insights Research Center built an online page that gathers resources in six areas of disinformation including combating disinformation.

Breaking News Checklist: An infographic from the News Literacy Project offers six tips for vetting breaking news including practicing patience, noting false, unconfirmed claims often surface from the time a story breaks until later, when details are confirmed.

MediaWise and Poynter Institute's **Misinformation Archive: MediaWise** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit initiative of The Poynter Institute that provides fact-checking training and online news literacy resources for students. The Misinformation Archive is an up-to-date collection of Poynter articles on the topic.

National Press Foundation: The journalism society based at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., offers free transcripts and video coverage of its

periodic lectures and programs on disinformation and fact-checking featuring professional journalists.

News Literacy Project: The nonpartisan nonprofit provides news literacy tools, programs and resources that educate students and adults about recognizing fact from fiction in news. Some of its tools include **RumorGuard,** a misinformation tool, and **Checkology,** a virtual classroom about misinformation.

Get Smart About News: The free, weekly newsletter from the News Literacy Project that includes breaking stories on news literacy and misinformation.

AI Insights: A comprehensive webpage from PRSA that includes strategies, tips and best practices for communicators to work ethically with AI and generative AI and **counter AI misinformation.** Also residing on the page is PRSA's AI ethical guidance, **"The Ethical Use of AI for Public Relations Practitioners."**

Trusting News: A nonprofit run by a foremost expert on trust in media, Joy Mayer. Its philosophy emphasizes media transparency and forging a dialogue between journalists and consumers en route to building a relationship with those they serve.

Trust Tips: The free weekly newsletter of the nonprofit Trusting News (see above). Each edition includes one useful tip for restoring trust in media.

Voices for Everyone, Disinformation Section: A PRSA initiative that includes a useful disinformation resources section. Users can download a **government report** on disinformation as well as a **PRSA roundtable** on the topic.

▶ **Books**

"Foolproof: Why Misinformation Infects Our Minds and How to Build Immunity," by Sander van der Linden (2023): A definitive book on misinformation from the University of Cambridge professor, an often-cited expert on the subject.

"Attack From Within: How Disinformation Is Sabotaging America," by Barb McQuade (publishing Feb. 27, 2024): The University of Michigan Law professor and MSNBC analyst discusses how disinformation is influencing democracy and proposes practical solutions to strengthen the public, media and politics.

▶ **Articles and Research**

The Problem

Why A 'Perfect Storm' of Misinformation May Loom in 2024
The Washington Post
Analysis by Cristiano Lima with research by David DiMolfetta
WaPo, September 5, 2023

Poll Shows Most US Adults Think AI Will Add to Election Misinformation in 2024
The AP
By Ali Swenson and Matt O'Brien
November 3, 2023

Misinformation Research Is Buckling Under GOP Legal Attacks
The Washington Post
By Naomi Nix, Cat Zakrzewski and Joseph Menn
September 23, 2023

Social Media Firms Scramble to Curb Wartime Misinformation
Axios
By Sara Fisher
October 17, 2023

Potential Solutions

What to Do About Disinformation
By Eliot Higgins
Financial Times
December 16, 2023

Misunderstanding Misinformation
Issues in Science and Technology
By Claire Wardle
Vol. XXXIX, No. 3, Spring 2023

How Might We Build Trust in An Untrusting World?
Medium
By Richard Gingras
October 21, 2023

How to Mitigate Misinformation
Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)
By M. Mitchell Waldrop
August 30, 2023

Pictured left to right: Ray Day, APR, Chad Latz, Linda Thomas Brooks, Errol Cockfield, Chris Kuechenmeister, Michelle Egan, APR, Fellow PRSA; John Gerzema, Mike Paul, Chris Kuechenmeister

Roundtable Partic

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Barby Siegel
CEO, Zeno

Alexis Williams
Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Stagwell

"This Initial Playbook to Combat Misinformation in 2024 is intended as a dynamic document."

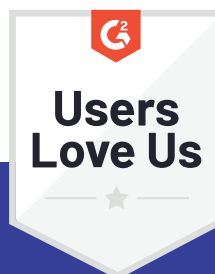# Tackling Misinformation ▶ The Communications Industry Unites

Pictured left to right: Tara Carraro, AnnaMaria DeSalva, Rachel Catanach, Michelle Egan, APR, Fellow PRSA; John Gerzema, Paul Hardart, Cheryl Krauss, Chris Perry, Aaron Sherinian, Michael Marando, Chris Perry, Paul Hardart, Michael Marando, Mike Paul and Ray Day, APR.

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