



DISINFORMATION HANDBOOK

Organized campaigns by domestic groups and foreign governments are flooding social media platforms with disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. They rely on a mix of fake accounts, “bots,” computer automation, and algorithms to take highly emotive, knowingly untrue information and make it artificially “go viral.” The intent of these bad actors is to create confusion, seed distrust in medicine, science, and public health institutions, or heighten existing divisions in our communities.

You can help keep yourselves, your loved ones, and our community safe by learning about disinformation, how to spot it, and what to do about it.

What is misinformation and disinformation?

Misinformation is inaccurate information, often unknowingly shared. Examples might include a newspaper article with an inaccurate headline or photo, or even a legitimate scientific finding that is later overturned. Misinformation is often self-correcting through discussion and debate.

Disinformation, on the other hand, is inaccurate information knowingly shared as part of a campaign with a specific goal or agenda. Because it often spreads through deceptive marketing and artificial amplification, it can be very difficult to detect or correct.

Disinformation campaigns depend on others to spread their message. They use disingenuous tactics to promote engagement (e.g., posing as members of a community or artificially inflating retweets or view counts with bots) and to sidestep critical analysis of their claims (e.g., using slick production values or emotionally compelling narratives). To avoid unwittingly spreading disinformation, consider the validity of a post’s claims and arguments on their own merits, based on the evidence presented. Keep an eye out for suspicious posts or accounts. If you come across any, **do not engage** with them—more engagement means they’ll get more views—and consider taking the actions below. Remember that **disinformation tactics are sophisticated**—good, clever people can and do fall for them!

What do I do if I spot disinformation?

DO NOT: Share, retweet, or engage online. Don’t accidentally help the campaigners’ goals by sharing posts and engaging in discussion based on disinformation, even if you are trying to debunk it. [Repetition of incorrect info can “stick”](#) in people’s minds. In fact, **research shows that when myths are debunked, people often remember the myth rather than the facts!** Any time you like a tweet or reply, it ends up on your timeline for others to see. Don’t share others’ bad information!

DO: Discuss it outside the echo chamber. Discuss the disinformation with friends and family offline or in private chat. Feel out whether the arguments make sense outside of their original context. Don’t be afraid to change your mind, and leave space for others to do the same.

DO: Report it. If you see disinformation in a forum or Facebook group, report it to the moderator or admin. If it's elsewhere on social media, report the content or account to the platform. For step-by-step instructions, see: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Youtube](#), [TikTok](#), [Pinterest](#), [Snapchat](#)

DO: Delete it. If disinformation pops up on your timeline or in a group you manage, remove it ASAP by deleting it or untagging yourself. #MEAction is deleting disinformation within our own groups. Facebook provides great information on [how to control what gets tagged](#) on your own page.

DO: Consider muting/blocking.

What if others say I am helping to spread disinformation? - If your own post is taken down, know that this is not a critique of you as a person, but the disinformation itself. Remember, disinformation is designed to be compelling.

What if someone I know is helping to spread disinformation? - Don't shame others if they accidentally post something inaccurate; everyone in our community is trying their best. Refer people to this handbook or to the resources we've added below; you can help teach others to spot disinformation.

How to identify disinformation

It's highly inflammatory

The goal of many disinformation campaigns is to **encourage disagreement and distrust** within a community in order to promote ideas or agendas that wouldn't otherwise gain support. Many post inflammatory statements on hot-button issues to start arguments and get lots of replies. Look out for "wedge posts" that seem designed to split one section of a community from another by exploiting existing areas of disagreement -- or by creating new ones. Also look out for posts that invoke particularly painful topics in our community (e.g., forced hospitalization of pwME) to promote unrelated ideas. These aim to manipulate our feelings in order to circumvent our logic.

It attacks institutions in bad faith

One goal of disinformation campaigns is to **destabilize governments and institutions**, often by promoting conspiracy theories. Beware of posts that aim to pit people with ME against their governments as a whole. Our community has specific and legitimate grievances with our governments and health institutions, grievances that require specific remedies. Content that pushes us to attack these and other institutions in general may have an ulterior motive in mind rather than our best interests. When evaluating claims involving elaborate schemes, ask yourself what the motivation or benefit would be for the alleged perpetrators, how many people would need to participate in full secrecy to pull it off, and whether the same result could have been achieved through simpler means. If the answers don't seem rational, it's unlikely to be true.

It uses story tropes & myths to circumvent rational thinking

We are primed to accept stories that feel familiar. Disinformation campaigns **often cast real people into traditional story roles** like hero and villain, whistleblower vs. corrupt power, crusader vs. criminal, David vs. Goliath. This frames complex and nuanced issues as battles between good and evil, encouraging an 'us versus them' mentality. People are complicated and reality is messy; an overly simple explanation for complex problems should be suspect. Promoters of disinformation may switch quickly among different stories if their previous ones don't gain ground. While every story won't work on everyone, each new attempt can gain more believers to spread the word.

It's promoted by bots

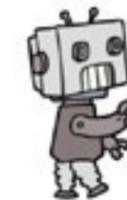
A bot is a social media account that appears to be a real individual engaging online, but is in fact a program that automatically finds and retweets or engages with certain content to suit a specific agenda. There are also fake accounts run by real people who are paid to post about a specific cause from hundreds of different accounts under false names. Disinformation campaigns may use both methods to garner tens of thousands of likes and shares so a message "goes viral" and appears to have broad support. (More info on bots below.)

It claims to give you access to special information

The feeling that we have been given **secret knowledge** can **impart a sense of power and control** in situations that are otherwise scary and unpredictable. Disinformation campaigns know how to take advantage of how special it can feel to be 'in the know'. When social media platforms find COVID-19 disinformation that could cause imminent harm to people's health and delete it, disinformation campaigns claim it as proof they have some secret truth the powers that be don't want you to find out.

It employs logical fallacies

Fallacies are **rhetorical tricks** that **exploit common glitches** in people's thinking to convince them of something. Someone using a fallacy isn't necessarily incorrect or lying; rather, the argument they're using doesn't support their claim. However, fallacies **are** often used to support arguments that are indefensible on their own merits, intentionally targeting our thinking where it is most likely to short-circuit. You can find out more about logical fallacies on the next page.



How to spot a "bot"

- 1. It may have a generic name and no picture.** JSmith12399748 may not be real.
- 2. It may have popped up yesterday.** A bot may have an account that only launched in the last few months. It may not have a lot of original posts, just retweets. It could also be several years old, but dormant until recently.
- 3. It may use the exact same wording as other bots.** Other than hashtags, be suspicious if the same phrasing is used by many seemingly-unrelated accounts.
- 4. It may struggle with language.** Posts by bots often don't read well -- they may have typos or odd wording. Automated bots also can't engage in back-and-forth conversations.
- 5. It may scoff at the idea that bots and coordinated attacks exist online.** A fake account may seed reflexive dismissal of this idea to ensure it can spread its message freely.
- 6. It may be more active than a single individual would be able to manage.** It may post a lot of complex original content, such as videos, in quick succession. Or the same message may be posted across multiple platforms at once by seemingly unique users.
- 7. Check who it follows, and who follows it.** Most people follow a variety of accounts; a bot may only follow accounts related to a single topic, and may not have many followers.
- 8. Use a bot checker.** Apps such as [Bot Sentinel](#) gauge the likelihood that an account belongs to an actual individual versus an algorithm or anonymous actor. You can also use their block list to automatically block over 112K bots.

Logical fallacies to watch for

Fallacies are **rhetorical tricks** that **exploit common glitches in people's thinking** to convince them of something. A good summary that can help you understand all fallacies is: consider what is said, and the evidence for it, rather than how or by whom it is said. And know when there is [not enough good information](#) to make a judgment.

- » **You should believe something because experts/lots of people agree.** Expertise can easily be attributed to or withheld from different people or groups in misleading ways. And [just because a person has an advanced degree doesn't mean they are an expert in the topic at hand](#). Finally, just because many people support an idea doesn't mean it's more likely to be correct.
- » **Something is good because it is natural, new, or traditional.** Whether something comes directly from nature is not directly linked to its worth. Neither is the novelty or age of an idea or thing. Beware of arguments that harken back to an earlier, simpler time or claim that something is bad because it is 'not natural'.
- » **Only certain evidence "counts".** Conspiracy theories often involve a "built-in safety mechanism" in that they claim that they are the only ones you can trust. By doing so, they cut readers off from good sources that might contradict their false assertions.
- » **Slippery slope.** This argues that if a certain thing happens, then surely increasingly worse things will follow, which can only lead to a terrible, disastrous outcome. To tell if it's a logical chain of events, consider whether the first premise truly automatically leads to the last.
- » **Correlation vs causation.** Human beings are primed to search for patterns. As a result, we are likely to believe that two things happening at once must be related, when this is seldom actually true. For example, if your cat scratched your arm and you ran a fever that evening, you might conclude that the scratch led to the fever, but this is far from certain. Consider the likelihood of other causes; in this case, there are many other potential causes for your fever.
- » **Circular argument / Begging the question.** This is when the argument or evidence presented for a claim is actually just a restatement of that claim, not independent proof. These may be challenging to spot, so [here are some examples](#).
- » **Hasty generalization / Proof by example.** Just because something is true in one case doesn't mean it is true in all cases.
- » **Genetic fallacy & ad hominem.** Even a broken clock is right twice a day! Just because an idea comes from a bad place or person doesn't mean it's a bad idea, and attacking someone as a person cannot disprove their point. It's the argument itself that must be countered.
- » **Appeal to consequences.** If an argument relies on whether it would benefit or harm people if it were true, this is a fallacy. Consider whether the premise is true, not what would happen if it were!
- » **Burden of proof.** If someone makes a claim, [they must be the one to provide proof](#) that something exists/something is correct. Anyone who tries to get you to make their argument instead, saying, "I don't have to prove I'm right, you have to prove I'm wrong!" is using this.

Additional resources

Books and Handbooks

[The Conspiracy Theory Handbook](#) and/or the more concise [The Debunking Handbook](#) by John Cook and Stephan Lewandowsky - Great overview of how/why conspiracy theories are created and amplified.

[Verification Handbook](#), edited by Craig Silverman - This book equips people in general and journalists in particular with the knowledge to investigate social media accounts, bots, private messaging apps, information operations, deep fakes, as well as other forms of disinformation and media manipulation. The entire content is online and in sections, making it very easy to read.

Articles on misinformation and disinformation

[Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories — and How to Change Their Minds](#) by Mark Lorch at The Conversation - Beginning with a personal story, this article shares the author's insights on the why and how of conspiracy theory belief and strategies in communication.

[Think Before You Share](#) -- by EUvsDISINFO, a disinformation monitoring, analysis, and education project of the European Union -- Guidelines on how to assess the trustworthiness of an online news source, complete with a short video and a practice quiz.

Articles on COVID-19 disinformation

[How to Talk about the Coronavirus](#) by Liz Neeley at The Atlantic — Four suggestions on how to communicate science effectively.

[Why Dangerous Conspiracy Theories about the Virus Spread So Fast — and How They Can Be Stopped](#) by Travis M. Andrews, Washington Post

[Why It's Important To Push Back On 'Plandemic' — And How To Do It](#) by Tara Haelle at Forbes -- Overview of video, problems with it, and what to do about it.

[The COVID-19 "Infodemic": A Preliminary Analysis of the Online Conversation Surrounding the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) by social media analytics firm, Graphika.

Videos

[Misinformation TED Talk Videos](#) — Various TED Talks regarding misinformation and what to do about it.

Logical Fallacies

[Logical Fallacies Handlist](#) by Dr. Kip Wheeler at Carson-Newman University; also has a [great pdf version](#) you can print out

[Logical Fallacies](#) by Purdue Writing Lab — Great resource on spotting logical fallacies in discourse

