Countering
DISINFORMATION:
A Guidebook for Public Servants

Countering disinformation: A guidebook for public servants.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Disinformation is a constantly evolving threat that affects all parts of society in different ways. Countering this disinformation is a global issue that affects all democracies and requires a response from all areas of society—governments, industry, civil society and citizens.

All departments, agencies and functional groups within the Government of Canada should make efforts to counter disinformation.

This guidebook is intended to provide an overview of disinformation, how its increasing threat is impacting our democratic institutions, and how to spot and respond to disinformation as it relates to government information, programs, policies and services.

This will provide public servants with information and resources about best practices and advice on navigating disinformation related to their work, and how to not only help counter disinformation, but also build the public's resilience and resistance to it.

While this guidance provided is for all public servants, organizations and groups will use this information in different ways, depending on their particular roles and responsibilities, as well as the structure of their organization. Please consult your Communications team before taking any public-facing action against disinformation.

Note that, as research, evidence and tools available to combat disinformation continue to evolve, guidance and procedures will need to be adapted. When applying this guidance, consider your organization's individual situation and mandate.

Note:

The guidance provided in this document is meant to complement the rules in place for the management of communications. As with all public-facing communications, any activities to counter disinformation in the public environment must be approved by the Departmental head of communications and must adhere to the direction set out by the policies and directives under the Communications and Federal Identity suite of products.

The content in this guidebook is inspired by a variety of government and other partner sources. At the end of the guidebook, you will find a list of those sources, as well as other resources that will help expand your knowledge and understanding of disinformation.

UNDERSTANDING DISINFORMATION

What is disinformation?

There are many definitions for the terms misinformation and disinformation. For the purpose of this guidebook, disinformation is defined as "deliberately false information that is disseminated to deceive or cause harm." Disinformation narratives can be spread through written text, images, sound recordings, or a combination of media and formats. Disinformation is often described informally as "fake news", but it can take many different forms.

Disinformation should not be confused with other types of potentially harmful information such as:

- Misinformation: False information that is often shared in good faith and not intended to deceive.
- Malinformation: When factual information, such as personal health status, is deliberately and maliciously used with the goal of causing harm.

It also shouldn't be confused with opinions, which are simply beliefs or attitudes that are subjective and not necessarily based on fact.

Individuals, organizations, foreign governments and other actors may create and spread disinformation for different reasons, including to:

- gain support for their policies and suppress criticism in their own countries and around the world,
- profit from creating false or misleading content,
- spread their own ideology or beliefs with the public, and
- spread conflict and interfere with other countries' domestic affairs.

Once a disinformation narrative is introduced into the information ecosystem (for example, via social media posts), the goal is for it to be spread virally and unwittingly by others.

Will countering disinformation limit free speech?

No. The guidance provided will not limit individuals' freedom of expression. The information in this guidebook is provided with the sole purpose of ensuring that public servants are aware of the threat that disinformation poses so they are equipped to counter it by making sure people have access to accurate and trustworthy information about government policies, services and mandates.

The Government of Canada defends and supports freedom of expression, which is fundamental to a free and democratic society and is guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Why are we concerned about disinformation?

A strong democracy requires access to diverse and reliable sources of information. Canadians rely on information from various sources, such as traditional news outlets, social media, and peers, to make important decisions—both personal and democratic. This empowers citizens to make decisions independently based on a free assessment of the best information available.

The aim of disinformation is to erode public trust in institutions, increase polarization, deepen existing social divisions, and negatively affect the government's ability to protect the public and deliver programs and services that support national interests. In cases of extreme content, disinformation or conspiracy theories can also lead to radicalization and violence.

This false or misleading information can cause doubt, confusion, and frustration, and its presence can make it harder for people to find and trust accurate information.

> ### Example:
>
> A report published in 2023, by the Council of Canadian Academies' Expert Panel on the Socioeconomic Impacts of Science and Health Misinformation, estimates that false COVID-19 information seriously affected Canada's healthcare response and led to at least 2,800 avoidable deaths and almost $300 million in additional hospital expenses.

It may cause people to delay making important and informed decisions that could affect their safety and well-being.

It is crucial that, as public servants, we are aware of disinformation, and ensure people have access to accurate and evidence-based information to make informed decisions and fully participate in crucial democratic activities.

How can you identify disinformation?

Some disinformation, when over the top or obvious, can be easy to spot. However, factual or partially factual information is often manipulated to make it appear credible, thereby making it harder to detect. This is done in a variety of ways, such as weaving kernels of truth into an otherwise false story, omitting important context, or combining text with unrelated or altered images.

Strong partnerships between subject matter experts, policy groups, communicators and decision makers can be key to sorting fact from fiction.

While disinformation can sometimes be hard to identify, there are common signs.

> ## Example:
>
> In 2019, a false headline about Canada's immigration program went viral online. While the false story used parts of an actual 2017 Government of Canada announcement, it left out key information.

Look for content that:

Aims to provoke a strong emotional response	**Uses small pieces of valid information that are exaggerated or distorted**	**Seems too good to be true**	**Makes a bold statement about a controversial issue**
Contains clickbait	**Has been shared widely on platforms with a track record of spreading disinformation**	**Makes an extraordinary claim**	

This is just the tip of the iceberg. The Communications Security Establishment provides resources and information on other ways to identify disinformation, including various of tools for fact-checking.

The Communications team in your department may also have access to media and social media monitoring tools, that would serve as a basis to help spot disinformation.

DEFENDING YOURSELF AND YOUR ORGANIZATION AGAINST DISINFORMATION

The best defence against disinformation is making sure Canadians are resilient—meaning they can identify and resist disinformation. Building this resilience involves making sure people have access to reliable and factual information, as well as the tools they need to become digitally savvy.

As a public servant, the best way you can help build resilience against disinformation is by ensuring your organization's information is easily accessible, clear and concise, as well as accurate and up to date.

While this section provides more detailed tips and advice, it's important to always consult with your Communications team before taking any public-facing action.

Preparing your organization

While there is no single solution to stop disinformation, you can help anticipate and prepare your organization against disinformation by:

1. Knowing where your organization may be vulnerable to disinformation
2. Understanding the public environment
3. Developing messages that counter disinformation before it spreads

Did you know?

In 2019, as part of Canada's plan to protect democracy, the Government of Canada launched the Digital Citizen Initiative, a program that aims to support democracy and social inclusion in Canada. It achieves this by building citizens' resilience against online disinformation and building partnerships to support a healthy information ecosystem.

1. KNOWING WHERE YOUR ORGANIZATION MAY BE VULNERABLE TO DISINFORMATION

Working with your subject matter experts, including Policy and Communications, it's important to determine the key business lines within your organization that could be affected by the spread of disinformation.

A good place to start is by assessing vulnerabilities. Consider factors such as the effect disinformation could have on your stakeholders, your operations and your organization's ability to deliver programs and services. Consider whether there have been past instances of disinformation on related topics and identify patterns or recurring themes.

By identifying where your organization may be more vulnerable to disinformation, you can focus your efforts on these areas to prepare clear, factual and easy-to-find information related to your mandate. You can also proactively prepare messages based on facts and evidence to counter false narratives that may arise.

The steps above will be part of an ongoing exercise, so think about how you can share this information more broadly within your organization. This may include updates at standing meetings, an evergreen planning document, or regular check-ins with subject matter experts, decision makers, program and policy analysts, and your department's communications branch.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE PUBLIC ENVIRONMENT

Being aware of what is being said is a vital to prepare your organization. The easiest way to do so is through a public environment analysis (PEA).

The PEA will provide a clear picture of the nature and scope of an issue or subject, at both the macro level (general) and micro level (audience segments) within a specific period of time.

Communications teams are typically able to assist with PEAs.

Understanding the public environment will help ensure you are aware of any false narratives or information about your area of work. It will also help assess vulnerabilities and help anticipate issues that may need to be addressed.

> **Did you know?**
>
> A PEA is a thorough gathering of information and research data from numerous sources (media and social media monitoring, Parliamentary debates, committee proceedings, public reports or research, third party websites and information, activity of special interest groups, etc.)

3. DEVELOPING MESSAGES TO PROACTIVELY COUNTERACT POTENTIAL DISINFORMATION

Once you have assessed your organization's vulnerabilities, and have a better picture of what's being discussed in the public space, you can begin to prepare content that addresses existing or potential disinformation.

When dealing with disinformation, time is of the essence. It can be challenging to correct false information on departmental files and issues once that information has spread widely. Planning ahead can save valuable time.

Studies show that people can be protected against disinformation if they first encounter information that "pre-bunks" —meaning providing accurate and factual information and context. Ensuring content is readily available will help address and reduce vulnerabilities by filling in any gaps that might emerge in public understanding.

Proactively communicating with the public in an engaging way about key files and issues requires an organization-wide partnership between subject matter experts, decision makers, program and policy analysts, and communicators.

The Communications team in your department would be able to help craft content that is tailored to your target audience. These messages should be clear, concise, and compelling, and provide accurate and up to date information.

This content can be communicated proactively or used responsively to disinformation campaigns. This could involve:

- developing a set of Q&As to share with spokespersons ahead of any public engagement opportunity;
- sharing messages with social media teams for reference when responding to conversations on official government channels; or
- posting information online that addresses false information and provides an accurate counterpoint.

Tactics for building resilience

Giving the public reliable and accurate information on key departmental files and issues can help build public trust and resilience against disinformation.

After helping to prepare your organization, there are some tactics you can use to help build that resilience including:

1. Share accurate information with your audience ahead of time (pre-bunking)
2. Support digital literacy
3. Being open and transparent
4. Engage your audience frequently
5. Acknowledge what you don't know

These tactics can either be used on their own, or in combination.

While these tactics can be useful, it's important to consult and obtain approval from your Communications team before proceeding with any action.
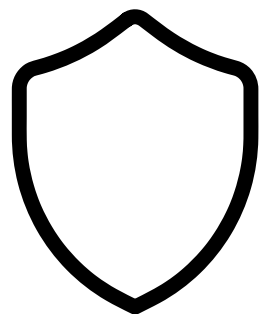
1. SHARE ACCURATE INFORMATION WITH YOUR AUDIENCE AHEAD OF TIME (PRE-BUNKING)

Pre-bunking means preparing your audience before they encounter disinformation by providing accurate information, evidence or context. It also involves making sure your information is available, easy to find, and easy to understand.

The aim of pre-bunking is to address potential misconceptions, false information and disinformation campaigns before they start. This ensures people see the correct information first and are better able to spot disinformation before they believe or inadvertently share it.

Research has shown pre-bunking to be one of the most effective strategies to combat the spread of disinformation.

Pre-bunking fills the information space with frequent, and accurate information. Work with your Communications team to ensure information about your program or service is available and updated regularly. Whether it be on digital platforms, provided to media, available through more traditional sources such as pamphlets and radio, or shared during in-person communications (e.g. townhalls, roundtables, stakeholder meetings, etc.), this information will provide helpful and accurate details to Canadians.

This information can also be used responsively, to provide additional background or contextual information through official Government channels when disinformation arises.

Example: Getting ahead of disinformation campaigns

Canada's response to Russian disinformation, led by Global Affairs Canada, involves a proactive public communications strategy to get ahead of Kremlin disinformation campaigns.

The ongoing social media campaign and web presence have helped readers understand how to navigate disinformation while clearly and concisely putting the information into context with some of the following activities:

- Weekly posts to @CanadaFP channels as well as the GAC LinkedIn and U.S. State Department Telegram accounts

- Amplification of content from 50 participating mission accounts, as well as updates to all missions for major campaign content

- Regular monitoring and amplification of key Government of Canada partners (namely, National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces and the Communications Security Establishment) as well as international partners (namely, EUvsDisinfo, the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the U.S. Department of State)

- Local-language versions of key campaign content (in nine languages to date) with weekly posts

2. SUPPORTING DIGITAL LITERACY

Research has shown the best defence against disinformation is building a resilient population who can recognize disinformation making them generally less susceptible to manipulation. Even subtle, brief interventions have been found to build resilience to disinformation.

As a public servant, you can contribute to building this resiliency by helping to raise awareness of disinformation and its impact, as well as provide resources on how to identify and verify reliable sources of information.

Working with your Communications team, ensuring the availability of practical resources, tools and tips that support media literacy and critical thinking will help audiences identify disinformation.

> ## Example:
>
> Including things like reminders to check the origin of information, or the domain name of internet sources. These types of interventions are designed to encourage users to think critically about whether information is accurate, before sharing it.

Tips like these, and others provided by the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, can be shared in social media posts, during news conferences or technical briefings, in media responses, and through links on your website.

3. BEING OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

Providing clear, accurate and timely information is crucial, but it can be especially important in an evolving information environment, where policies, procedures or positions may need to change and adapt. This approach can help build trust in the organization and the reliability of its information.

This can include communicating about a revised policy measure by highlighting what has changed as well as the circumstances that have led to the change. It can also include being open and upfront about events related to operations that could affect Canadians, such as planned maintenance or service interruptions.

By acknowledging the change and explaining why, in a public forum, you are giving the public a behind-the-scenes look into the decision-making process and ensuring full transparency and accountability.

Doing so can shrink space for misinterpretation and reduce the perception that the organization is trying to "trick" the public. Ensuring full transparency and accountability will help preventing the spread of disinformation on these types of issues.

In an evolving information environment, policies or positions will inevitably need to change and adapt. In these cases, acknowledging the change and explaining why, in a public forum, is important.

Communications about a new policy measure or initiative can include information about what has been changed in the policy, what circumstances have led to this change, and how decisions to update the policy were made. Your organization would have to carefully weigh the risks before deciding to use this communication strategy.

Example: Changes in Government Policy

Before cannabis was legalized in 2018, the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* classified it a Schedule II substance. As a result, public messaging emphasized the fact that cannabis use was illegal and that there were laws against and criminal penalties for cannabis possession and trafficking.

As part of the legalization process, messaging focused on the reasons for the changes—that the *Cannabis Act* was introduced because of evolving societal attitudes, public demand for change, evidence-based discussions, and consultations with experts.

After legalization, the messaging shifted toward acknowledging cannabis use among Canadians, especially young people, and keeping profits out of the hands of criminals. It also focused on an approach that aims to reduce public health harms associated with cannabis, particularly for youth.

Messaging throughout the process was open and transparent, helping reduce the potential space for disinformation.

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4. ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE FREQUENTLY

To help prevent the spread of disinformation, engage with your organization's audience by communicating with them regularly to build, and maintain, relationships.

It's important to show you understand your audiences' needs and to communicate in a way that emphasizes the two-way exchange of information.

Building trust with your audience increases the chances of your information being understood and retained. This, in turn, will help your audience be able to spot disinformation when it comes up.

The Communications team in your department would be able to assist with this.

Example: Engaging your audience through "Ask Me Anything" sessions

Statistics Canada has had success in reaching and interacting with their audiences by hosting Ask Me Anything sessions (AMAs) on Reddit. During sessions, they engage with an active online community on a topic of interest.

Typical AMAs involve a one-hour live event with two to five subject matter experts who answer questions and address concerns. They also help to expand data literacy as well as public knowledge of Statistics Canada programs and initiatives. Past topics have included the Consumer Price Index in the r/PersonalFinanceCanada subreddit (a topic and region with a very active user base).

The community response to these sessions has been very positive. Users have thanked the agency for being transparent, as well as for taking the time to discuss issues of importance to members.

In addition to fostering trust by participating in an approachable and informal setting, these sessions give the agency an opportunity to directly address misinformation and disinformation.

5. ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

In a crisis or when an issue emerges and the information landscape is evolving quickly, information is not always interpreted in the same way. Disinformation can take root when there is no official information.

In these cases, it's important to fill the information void through timely updates, even when you do not yet have all the details to address an issue. By explicitly, accurately and proactively acknowledging that there are aspects that aren't yet known or haven't been determined, we can help manage expectations and combat rumours.

Working with your subject matter experts, including Policy and Communications, an assessment of the risks on a case-by-case basis would need to be conducted before implementing this strategy.

Examples could include:
- a social media post to confirm that a situation is still ongoing and that no decision has been made, or
- a media response that states what is known, what has not been confirmed yet, as well as where to look for updates or when an update is expected.

TAKING ACTION AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Despite your best efforts, a disinformation narrative has taken root. Now what?

This section will explore approaches to countering disinformation campaigns that are already underway. The main concern is the **effect or influence** that disinformation may have, as it can lead to people taking or resisting actions in ways that may harm themselves or others.

Determining if action is needed

The question of whether to intervene in disinformation should be treated on a case-by-case basis and should be well thought out. To guide your decision-making process, it may be helpful to consult experts within your organization, including subject matter experts, decision makers, program and policy analysts and your department's communications branch.

Earlier in the guidebook, we talked about identifying areas where your organization can be vulnerable to disinformation. Those areas could help you determine if a response is needed and if so, the scale of the required response.

Not all disinformation requires a response, and, in many cases, public opinion will self-correct. In some cases, letting a disinformation narrative fade away on its own may be a better strategy than amplifying it with a response.

It's also important to only counter disinformation that consists of verifiably false claims. The following are not examples of disinformation:
- Opinions
- Interpretations of policy and government positions that do not align with your organization's key messages

Before acting, consider the following:

1	2	3	4
Determine whether the content is disinformation	Consider the reach and impact	Understand the context and public environment	Evaluate the potential for harm
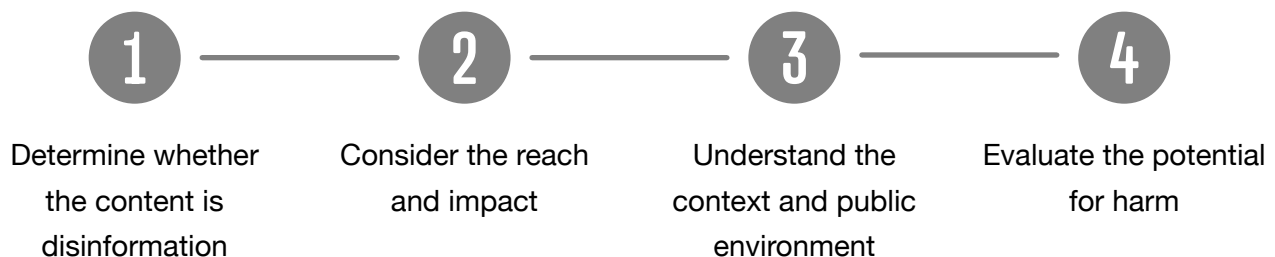
1. DETERMINE WHETHER THE CONTENT IS DISINFORMATION

Before choosing an approach to counter disinformation, make sure the information that you will be correcting is inaccurate and intended to deceive or harm. (Refer to the section above on "How to identify disinformation".) This is an important step to ensure you are not taking unnecessary action.

It's also important for subject matter experts, decision makers, program and policy analysts, as well as communications experts to work together to get facts to correct the disinformation.

Efforts should focus on countering false claims, not on responding to differing opinions or interpretations of policy and government positions or intent.

2. CONSIDER THE REACH AND IMPACT

By considering the reach and impact of disinformation, you can determine the potential for a false narrative to spread widely or go viral, and for it to have harmful effects. This information can inform the type of approach you take. For example, a proactive, timely, and high-profile response may be especially necessary in cases that could involve harm to a large audience.

Working with your Communications team, you can use several methods to determine the reach and whether a disinformation narrative is likely to go viral. For instance:
- Consulting social media or web analytics
- Monitoring trending topics and hashtags
- Ensuring awareness of public discourse online
- Monitoring traditional media to see how the issue is being reported

Definition:

Reach: Refers to the number of people or the size of the audience that has been exposed to the disinformation.

Impact: Refers to how quickly and widely the disinformation is being shared or circulated.

These types of information help you compare the volume of conversations about disinformation with that of typical discussions about topics related to your mandate. That data can help you identify concerning patterns or shifts in sentiments.

3. UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT AND PUBLIC ENVIRONMENT

Additional research into what is going on in the public environment can help you better understand what may have led to the emergence or circulation of the false narrative and can help you counter it more effectively.

For instance, with further research you might discover that the timing of disinformation aligns with a recent government announcement, or that an influential figure has made public remarks that have triggered interest in the topic.

Being aware of the landscape in which a disinformation narrative is circulating helps determine the urgency of the situation. Depending on the context, some disinformation may need a quick response to reduce its impact, and other instances may be less time sensitive and require a more subtle approach.

Understanding the broader context in which disinformation is spreading can shape the approach you choose. It can also help you determine if it is part of a broader disinformation campaign or if there are other departments or agencies that may be involved.

Any dates or timestamps associated with disinformation can help you trace the disinformation back to a specific time. Working with your Communications team, you can then analyse the broader information environment during that time period to identify any related narratives or themes that may have been circulating. It's important to work with partners and other involved organizations, and to share your findings.

4. EVALUATE THE POTENTIAL FOR HARM

The potential for harm refers to the potential negative impact that the disinformation may have on your organization, its operations, its reputation, or the safety and well-being of the public. Again, doubt, confusion, frustration, and polarization are just a few examples of the many harms caused by disinformation.

Understanding how much of a threat an instance of disinformation may pose to your organization or to the public can help you determine whether an immediate response is required or whether you should continue to monitor developments for the time being.

Determining the potential for harm is not a straightforward calculation. You may have to weigh multiple factors to decide on the most appropriate course of action.
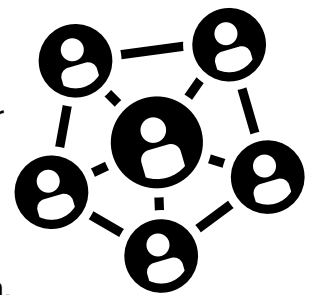
Developing strategies

Once you have considered the factors above and determined that a response is needed, you will need to work with partners in your organization to develop an appropriate response strategy.

Responding to disinformation requires a thoughtful and strategic approach that considers the specific context, target audience and channels of communication. A successful strategy for countering disinformation is one that is measured and well thought out. Every situation needs to be evaluated individually to determine the best response from your organization.

While each situation is unique, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to responding, the following guiding questions will help shape your approach:

- What is the objective of countering this disinformation?
- Who is the target audience and how will you reach them?
- How urgent is the situation? Is a response needed immediately?
- What are your communications options?
- Can you collaborate with partners?
- How will you monitor the effectiveness of your approach?
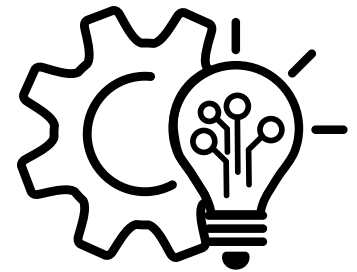
It's important to consult and seek approval from your Communications team when preparing any strategies or taking any action.

Tactics for countering disinformation

The principles that guide all Government of Canada communications activities are outlined in the [Policy on Communications and Federal Identity](#). To be effective, communications must be timely and relevant and must provide a clear and concise message that is accurate and objective.

These principles also apply to countering disinformation. Content should be tailored for specific audiences, information should be readily and publicly available, and proactive communications (as outlined above in the "Defending against disinformation" section) is the best approach.

Countering disinformation is an ongoing process that requires persistence, a multi-pronged approach, as well as input and action from multiple teams in your organization.

The following are examples of tactics that may be used as part of your strategy, coupled with broader efforts to promote media literacy, critical thinking and responsible sharing practices.

While the execution of most of these tactics falls under the responsibility of your Communications team, it's important to understand the options and your role in them.

1. MAKE ACCURATE INFORMATION AVAILABLE QUICKLY

Provide accurate information and clarifications as quickly as possible. This can help prevent the spread and limit its impact.

A quick response can help prevent disinformation from becoming deeply ingrained and can help prevent the spread of false narratives by ensuring accurate information is available.

Working with your subject matter experts, including Policy and Communications, you can help ensure information is already publicly available on your organization's official channels, such as websites and social media.

If a more direct strategy is needed, provide your Communications team with key information they can quickly disseminate via official social media accounts, news releases, discussions with media outlets, etc.

2. ENSURE CONSISTENCY AND REPETITION

Repetition can help combat false beliefs and increase the likelihood of accurate information being remembered. By consistently providing accurate information and repeating key facts through various means, organizations can create and maintain a narrative that helps drown out the false information.

Working with your Communications team, look for ways to weave key messages into ongoing proactive communications opportunities, such as:

- social media posts,
- news releases,
- media responses,
- parliamentary appearances,
- public speeches, and
- other communications with the public.

3. DEBUNKING

The goal of debunking is to make sure accurate information prevails by providing facts to counteract false information.

Debunking involves several steps:

1. Identify false narratives.
2. Check facts using credible sources.
3. Provide accurate evidence to prove the false narrative is wrong.
4. Back up your corrections with credible sources and evidence.
5. Provide links, references or citations for reputable sources that support your statements to build trust and confidence in your message.

> **Definition:**
>
> **Debunking:** To explicitly expose false information to make the facts clear.

Example: Debunking disinformation

Canada's response to Russian disinformation, which is led by Global Affairs Canada, involves an ongoing social media campaign and online content to counter false narratives put out by the Kremlin.

Launched in 2022, the webpages Canada's efforts to counter disinformation - Russian invasion of Ukraine and Countering disinformation with facts - Russian invasion of Ukraine, include content related to disinformation and provide a database on Kremlin disinformation that is regularly updated. They also provide facts from the Department of National Defence, Global Affairs, and the Communications Security Establishment.

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4. CREATE A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

A public awareness campaign is a coordinated effort to increase knowledge, understanding, and recognition of a particular issue or topic, either among a target audience or with the public.

The campaign can help people recognize and critically evaluate information by breaking down complex concepts or information into simpler, easier-to-understand formats.

This type of campaign can be a useful tactic to counter disinformation by flooding the public space with accurate, timely and clear information.

Your Communications team would be able to assist you in determining whether a public awareness campaign is required and help with its creation.

5. ENGAGE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Engaging with your audience is another tactic to respond directly to disinformation.

Opportunities to interact and have a dialogue with your audience will allow you to listen to their concerns, respond to questions, concerns, and doubts in a respectful and constructive manner, all while providing evidence-based explanations to counter disinformation effectively.

By being available and responsive, organizations can build trust and credibility with their audiences.

Active engagement with the public can involve your social media accounts, online forums, public town hall meetings, or stakeholder events.

> **Tip:**
>
> Read the Communications Community Office's Meeting people where they (already) are – online! for best practices for communicating and engaging in a digital world.

6. COLLABORATE WITH TRUSTED SOURCES AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Collaborative approaches using trusted sources and government communications are an effective way to amplify your message and reach a wider audience. Hard to reach or vulnerable groups in particular are more likely to trust organizations and leaders with established networks.

Collaborate with credible sources, experts and other stakeholders who have a trusted following to share your information and help counter disinformation.

Find reputable leaders to promote accurate information, critical thinking and evidence-based discussions.

Work with these leaders to create content and events that provide opportunities for you to address disinformation. This could include informative videos, articles, public town halls, or live Q&A sessions where opinion leaders can answer questions from their audience about specific topics or debunk misconceptions.

Example: Using trusted voices to engage with newcomer communities on digital messaging platforms

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government heard from racialized and minority communities that language and access to technology were the most significant barriers for them and those that serve them. To reach and provide communities with accurate information, the Public Health Agency of Canada/Health Canada partnered with [Refugee 613](), an organization with a trusted voice within the community, to distribute Government of Canada informational products. The information was translated into Arabic and shared through Telegram, the digital messaging platform the organization uses to host online groups for newcomer communities.

Partnering with Refugee 613 provided vulnerable audiences with official information using a trusted source. It also gave the government invaluable insights and best practices for creating and sharing content with newcomer audiences. It was also an opportunity to improve newcomers' trust in government information.

Key takeaways from the partnership that may be useful for other organizations that are thinking about partnering with a trusted source include:

- Communicators should identify credible and trusted voices within specific audiences and equip them with information and tools to communicate with their networks and communities.

- Reaching people where they are and through trusted voices requires multipronged approaches to engage with the public in conversations.

- Messengers matter, and people's individual networks are important.

- Top-down messaging does not reach everyone.

- Working with stakeholders has been key to getting credible third parties to share accurate information at the community level.

SUMMARY

Disinformation is a constantly evolving threat that affects all parts of society. As public servants, we need to be aware that disinformation risks eroding public trust in our institutions, increasing polarization, and negatively affecting the government's ability to protect the public and deliver programs and services that support national interests.

The research, evidence, and tools available to study and combat disinformation continues to evolve quickly. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to countering disinformation, hopefully the guidance provided here will provide a starting point for further discussions within your organization.

As new information becomes available, updated guidance and procedures will need to be developed and adapted.

If you'd like to continue learning about disinformation, explore the resources listed at the end of the document.

SOURCES

The content in this guidebook is inspired by a variety of sources, including:

- the UK's RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit (English only),
- research commissioned by the Protecting Democracy Unit,
- the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's Countering Information Influence Activities handbook (English only),
- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) DIS/MIS Resource Hub, and
- guidance provided by Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), the Canada School of Public Service, and the Government of Canada's communications community.

RESOURCES

Government of Canada

- Communications Security Establishment: Online disinformation
- Canadian Centre for Cyber Security: Cyber security guidance
- Canadian Security Intelligence Service publications
- Privy Council Office's Democratic Institutions video series: Think twice before sharing online content
- Public Safety: Foreign Interference
- Treasury Board Secretariat: Government of Canada Communications
- Privy Council Office: Plain language, accessibility, and inclusive communications

International and third-party
Note that some of the links below are only available in English, as they are not owned by the Government of Canada

- The UK RESIST 2 toolkit
- Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency: Countering information influence activities - A handbook for communicators (PDF)
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation
- EU DisinfoLab
- Disarming disinformation: Our shared responsibility (U.S. Department of State)
- Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond
- EU vs disinfo
- UN Pledge to Pause campaign
- Setting the record straight (NATO)
- DISARM Framework
- Media Smarts
- CTRL-F Find the Facts
- CIVIX Explains: Disinformation
- Digital Public Square
- Apathy Is Boring