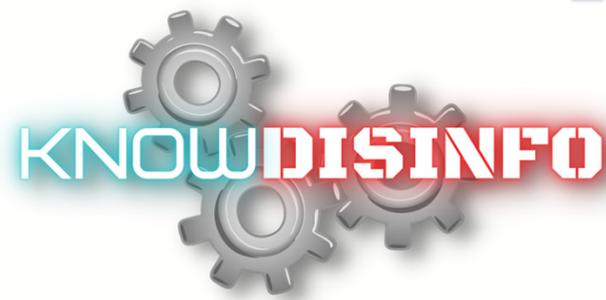


Seven Steps to Protect Yourself (and Your Loved Ones) Against Misinformation, Disinformation, and Manipulation



by Jennifer Slavik Lohman
KnowDisinfo.org • STLVPC.org





Overview

Why It Matters



Neil deGrasse Tyson 

@neiltyson

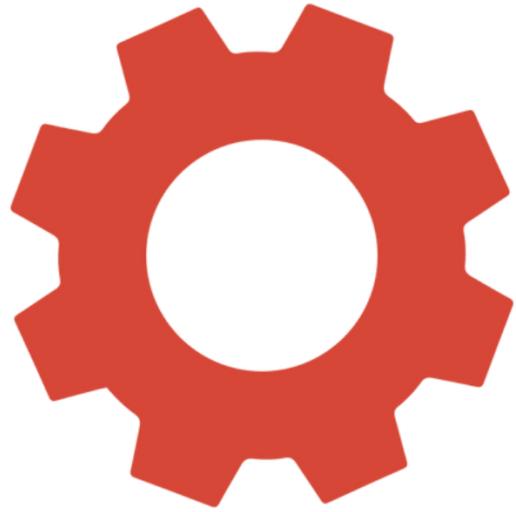


Seems to me, if you can get the citizens of a Democracy to no longer agree on what is objectively true in the world, then you have conquered them with all the strength of an invading army.

11:26 AM · Jan 14, 2021 · TweetDeck



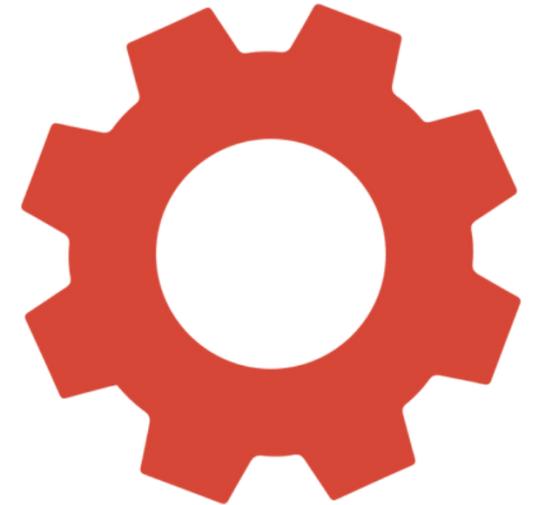
MISINFORMATION



Mistakenly erroneous information; not intentional. Misinformation is usually the result of an honest error/miscommunication or a mistaken belief that a concept is applicable to everyone. The latter is very common in the context of voting information, since voting laws and practices vary widely in all 50 states (remember the "use two stamps!" meme that actually applied only to a single past election in one California county?) Well-intentioned misinformation can be very harmful--maybe even more so because it usually comes from a place of genuine concern and a desire to help others, which makes it appear all too credible.

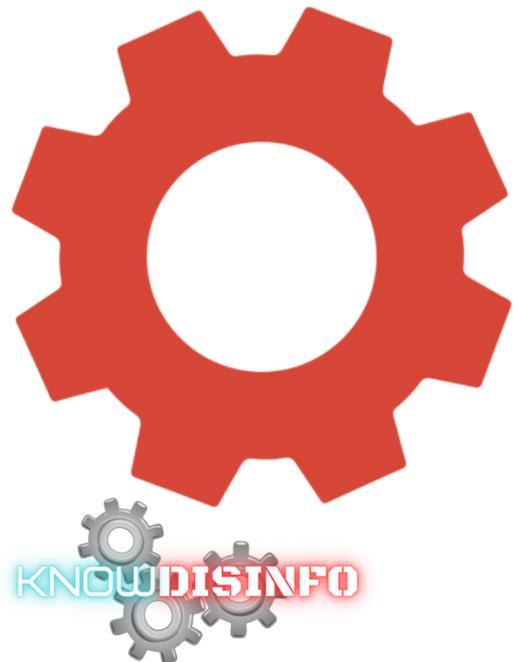
DISINFORMATION

A deliberate attempt to spread fake news, conspiracy theories, bad information, and outright lies about critical topics such as COVID-19 or elections. The source can be foreign or domestic. Politicians, celebrities, and even journalists can become witting or unwitting amplifiers (or even sources) of disinformation. Not to put too fine a point on it, but disinformation (especially "The Big Lie" about the election) is dividing this country to the brink of civil war, and COVID-related disinformation has led to tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of unnecessary deaths.



MANIPULATION (a form of MALINFORMATION)

Manipulation doesn't rely on disinformation, although some things like artificial amplification of a controversy straddle both definitions. Instead, manipulation uses genuine information, circumstances, or controversies to make emotional appeals that will influence a person's decision-making. This was used to great effect in 2016, especially among communities of color, where manipulation was a factor in people deciding not to vote. Manipulation is also meant to stoke division among groups in order to weaken them.



How do people fall prey to misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation?

We now know for sure that **social media companies employ algorithms** (programs that choose what users see on their social media feeds) to push controversial, extreme content so that users will become angry and afraid—and will spend more time online as a result, which maximizes the profits of the platforms.

There is **no regulatory framework** to prevent this from happening. Facebook might face consequences for withholding damaging studies from their shareholders, but they can continue to manipulate users with content for profit.

In addition to sociopolitical and health-related consequences, the **emotional toll** of the conflict, fear, anger, alienation, and anxiety stemming from polarization caused in part by misinfo, disinfo, and manipulation is staggering.



Watch
"The Social Dilemma"
on Netflix to learn
more!



Examples of Misinformation

or people who feel unsafe about voting in person but now fear the USPS will be unable to deliver a "mail-in" ballot in a timely fashion — here is a way around it:

1. Request a mail-in ballot.
2. Do not mail it.
3. Go to your supervisor for elections to see where you can drop off your mail-in ballot. It's usually NOT THE POLLING PLACE. All states allow this!

Here is what you're accomplishing by doing this:

1. Your ballot gets in on time no matter what happens to the USPS.
2. You don't have to worry about standing in line, getting sick, or contracting an infection.

3. You still voted! Hooray!
4. Also, when you drop it off, find out how to track it online to make sure it is verified. California, Oregon, Washington, and Colorado have systems that can track your ballot just like tracking a package from Amazon.

HOW TO FIGHT COVID

No one ever talks about with Covid in November.

103, a rapid heart beat, a with Covid. While I was dehydration and pneumonia.

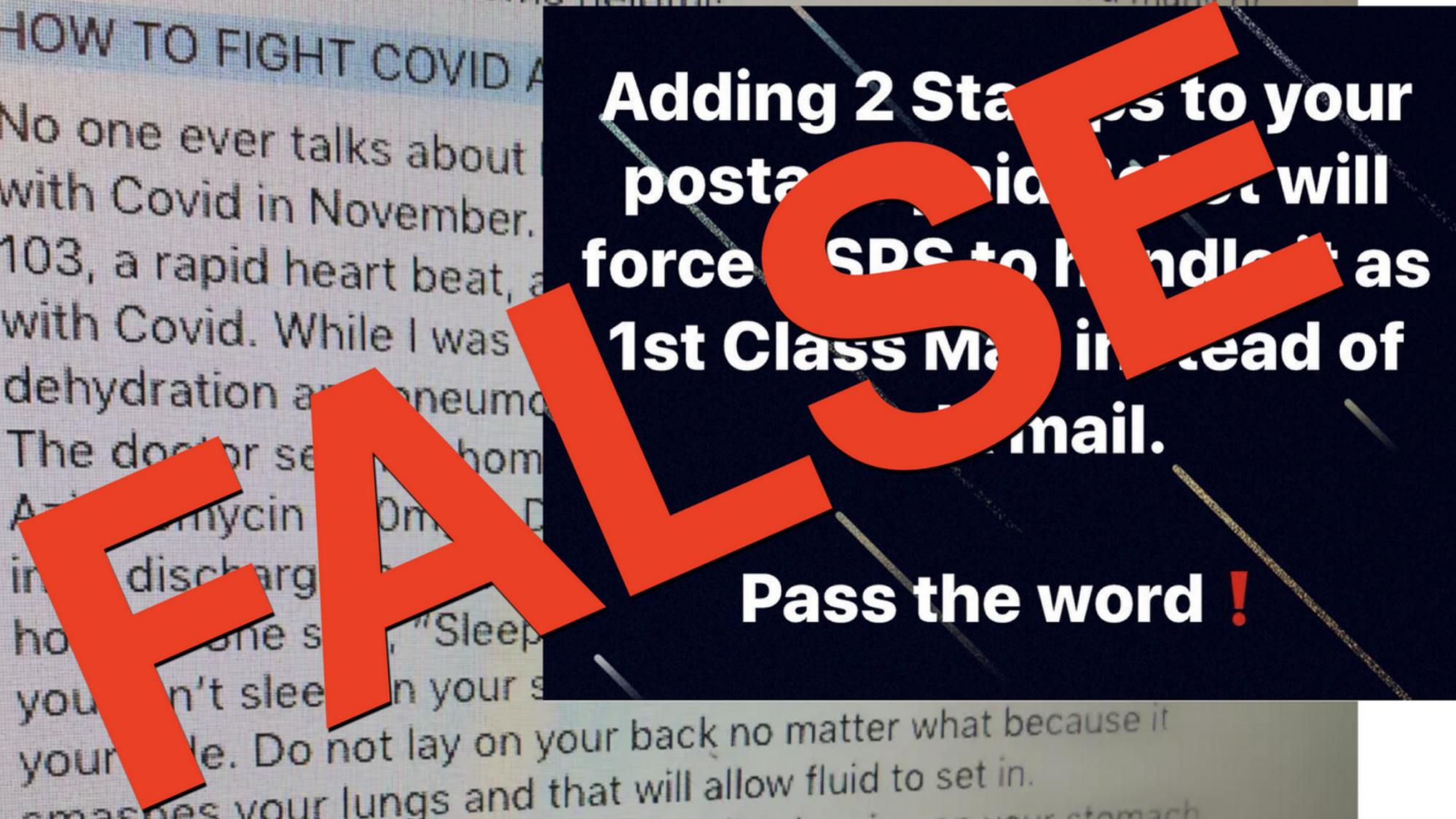
The doctor said I had pneumonia. I was discharged and I was home.

Do not lay on your back no matter what because it smashes your lungs and that will allow fluid to set in.

Wake up every two hours while sleeping on your stomach.

Adding 2 Stamps to your postal mail will force USPS to handle it as 1st Class Mail in lead of mail.

Pass the word !



Disinformation Warning Signs

BEWARE OF COPY & PASTE POSTS!
“Copy and paste this post and pass it on!” is a red flag. And if the post claims to include “expert/insider tips” or information “someone doesn’t want you to know,” it’s almost certainly false or misleading.



DON'T FALL FOR FALSE EQUIVALENCE



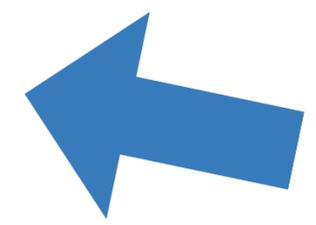
Sometimes even the pursuit of “fairness” can be unfair and deceptive. When a source “shows both sides” by treating those sides equally, regardless of the actual relative weight of the evidence, or when someone uses a “both sides do it” argument regardless of relative seriousness, those things can be highly misleading false equivalence.

DOES IT CREATE A STRONG REACTION?



Does the photo, video, article, or post make you react with concern, anger, fear, outrage, or some other strong emotion? Does it tug at your heartstrings or make you want to take immediate action? Disinformation can be designed to be emotionally manipulative. The stronger your reaction, the greater the need to verify.

Disinformation can be conflated with manipulation, because at its core it IS manipulative



Your Lying Eyes: Faked Images and Video

IS IT EVEN REAL?

Photos and videos can be edited, manipulated, misattributed, mislabeled or even faked outright. Learning to do a reverse image search on your browser can help you find the true origin of an image.



DON'T SPREAD DISINFORMATION

Faked images and videos are a cornerstone of disinformation. All photos and videos can be edited or altered ("**cheapfakes**"); misattributed or mislabeled; and even completely faked ("**deepfakes**")



Source: Pinterest



***Which one is real?
Or are they both
fakes?***

Source: Facebook



Disinformation-Driven Conspiracy Theories and Their Dangerous Consequences

“Truther” Movements: (9/11, Sandy Hook): Survivors stalked

“Birther” Movements: (Pres. Obama, Sen. Harris): Officials harassed

Pizzagate: Armed “rescue operation” at pizzeria full of customers

Q Anon:

Believers with violent reactions, suicidal ideation & other behaviors affecting their families and community as well as involvement with “Stop the Steal”

COVID Anti-Mask, Anti-Vaccine, Untested “Cures” Like Ivermectin:

Tens, if not hundreds of thousands of unnecessary illnesses and deaths; violence and harassment of frontline workers, health officials, local government officials, and school officials

And “The Big Lie” about the 2020 election . . .





Reuters / Wednesday, January 06, 2021

An explosion caused by a police munition at the Capitol Building, January 6. Thousands of Trump supporters stormed the seat of Congress last Wednesday, forcing lawmakers who were certifying Democratic President-elect Joe Biden's election victory into hiding in a harrowing assault on the heart of American democracy that left five dead. REUTERS/Leah Millis

Manipulation by Inspiration



Tyra Jackson
@IamTyraJackson

This is Warrick Dunn. His mom, a New Orleans police officer, was shot & killed while he was in high school. He raised his siblings while in college, graduated & went to the NFL. He built & paid for over 145 houses for single mothers, sacrificing millions of dollars! #BlackExcellence



10:40 AM · Aug 22, 2019 · Twitter Web App

58.8K Retweets 288.7K Likes

This **“inspirational”** post is actually an insidious effort by a **Russian troll account** to attract followers to what they think is a credible account—which then sprinkles disinformation and propaganda in between posts like this one.

Be vigilant & skeptical! Accounts featuring those heartwarming “cat with no back legs learns to walk” videos might be hiding a very dark side.

Source: Rolling Stone, “That Uplifting Tweet You Just Shared? A Russian Troll Sent It,” 11/25/2019



Manipulation by Artificial Amplification

STIRRED UP BY BOTS AND TROLLS



When something outrageous or controversial is trending, watch out! Bots and trolls seize upon emerging fringe rumors or outrage to amplify them and draw in others. You might think "everyone" is talking about something when bots and trolls are artificially driving the trend. Don't jump on that bandwagon!

CISA
CYBERSECURITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE SECURITY AGENCY
July 2019

THE WAR ON PINEAPPLE: Understanding Foreign Interference in 5 Steps

To date, we have no evidence of Russia (or any nation) actively carrying out information operations against pizza toppings. This infographic is an ILLUSTRATION of how information operations have been carried out in the past to exploit divisions in the United States.

1. TARGETING DIVISIVE ISSUES

Foreign influences are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to inflame hot button issues in the United States. They don't do this to win arguments; they want to see us divided.

American Opinion is Split: Does Pineapple Belong on Pizza?
An A-list celebrity announced their dislike of pineapples on pizza, prompting a new survey. No matter how you slice it, Americans disagree on the fruit topping.

2. MOVING ACCOUNTS INTO PLACE

Building social media accounts with a large following takes time and resources, so accounts are often renamed and reused. Multiple accounts in a conversation are often controlled by the same user.

Pro Tip: Look at an account's activity history. Genuine accounts usually have several interests and post content from a variety of sources.

Begin with Username: Berliner123 → Change to Username: PizzaPro → Change to Username: ProfPizzaUSA

3. AMPLIFYING AND DISTORTING THE CONVERSATION

Americans often engage in healthy debate on any number of topics. Foreign influences try to pollute those debates with bad information and make our positions more extreme by picking fights, or "trolling" people online.

Pro Tip: Trolls try to make people mad, that's it. If it seems like an account is only aiming to raise tensions, think about whether it's worth engaging.

Being anti-pineapple is Un-American!
Millennials are ruining pizal!
Keep your pineapple off my pizal!
What's wrong with plain old cheese?

4. MAKING THE MAINSTREAM

Foreign influences "fan the flames" by creating controversy, amplifying the most extreme version of arguments on both sides of an issue. These are shared online as legitimate information sources. Sometimes controversies make it into the mainstream and create division among Americans. This is a foreign influencer striking gold! Their meddling is legitimized and carried to larger audiences.

Being anti-pineapple is Un-American!

5. TAKING THE CONVERSATION INTO THE REAL WORLD

In the past, Kremlin agents have organized or funded protests to further stoke divisions among Americans. They create event pages and ask followers to come out. What started in cyberspace can turn very real, with the same down Americans because of

JOIN YOUR FELLOW PIZZA LOVERS AT THE TOWN CENTER TO MARCH FOR PINEAPPLE!
Yes I'll be there! | Maybe I currently work/school | No I'll not be there

Pizza is for Pepporonni | Pizza is for Pineapple!



CISA.GOV



Impacts on Communities of Color

- Disinformation and manipulation has been deployed to **suppress voter turnout in communities of color**
- Disinformation—either explicitly or implicitly about voters of color—is also often cloaked in terms of “election integrity” or “preventing voter fraud” and **used to justify suppressive anti-voter legislation**



Murphy Bannerman first noticed the posts this summer in a Facebook group Being Black in Arizona. Someone started posting memes full of false claims that seemed designed to discourage people from voting. The memes were "trying to push this narrative of, 'The system is a mess and there's statements such as, 'Obama didn't do anything in voting.' 'Obama didn't do anything around Democrats and Republicans' 'Obama didn't do anything around a Democrat this time



White Supremacist Recruitment of Teenage Boys

There are coordinated, deliberate efforts by white supremacists to recruit followers in places adolescent boys frequent: **online gaming** sites (in-game chat, DMs), meme/joke sites like **iFunny**, and media platforms like **YouTube**.

This process can start with something as simple as sharing "**humorous**" or "**edgy**" **memes** that go close to, but not quite over, the line, and then escalating from there, using the algorithms to their advantage and preying on the confusion and alienation many adolescent boys feel.



This Tik-Tok video illustrates how kids can be lured from Minecraft to the alt-right.

High Level Responses to Misinfo, Disinfo, Manipulation, & Their Consequences

- Deplatforming Bad Actors
- Political Accountability for Elected Officials
- Regulatory & Legal Accountability for Platforms & Bad Actors
- De-radicalization & Inoculation Messaging



On An Individual Level: How All Of This Affects Us Personally (And What We Can Do About It)



Social media companies get rich by making us angry & afraid so we will spend more time online, and in doing so, they're tearing us apart.



HOW THIS HURTS US

- 
- This spiral into extreme and polarized views makes it impossible for people to find common ground.
 - **Without a shared understanding of the truth, we cannot engage in good decision-making on any level (personally or societally)**
 - Polarization also leads to rifts between friends and family members.
 - The emotional toll of this anger, fear, and conflict can be significant.

The Good News:

We can protect ourselves by following seven (mostly) simple steps.

Step One: Know Your Own Vulnerability

We cannot assume that misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation is something that primarily affects other people with different sociopolitical views. **Every single one of us has fallen prey to this type of content whether we realize it or not**, and all of us are also affected by the stress and conflict it generates.



We all need to be as self-aware as we are judgmental when it comes to misinfo, disinfo, and manipulation.



Step Two: Change Your Social Media Habits

Consider leaving social media. (Seriously, you'll live--you can even save your past Facebook content if you are concerned about losing photos and memories).



If you simply can't do that, follow these rules instead:

1. Never click on recommended content or join suggested groups on any platform;
2. If a friend or relative posts a great deal of problematic content, block the accounts they are sharing from; that way *you can remain friends but not see that content*;
3. Disable notifications to reduce time spent online; and
4. If you are a parent, share these rules (and the reasons for them) with your kids in a straightforward, nonjudgmental way, bearing in mind that we are all vulnerable to this content, regardless of age.



Step Three: Avoid Stealth Manipulative Content

We all love words of wisdom and heartwarming stories, and many of us enjoy a good debate, but unfortunately these things are not always what they seem online.

We must be skeptical of **"inspirational"** or **"empowering"** social media accounts, and very skeptical of any online debate that **"everyone is talking about."**



Step Four: Seek Credible Sources of Information

Seek credible sources of information online and in the media, and think about how your choices affect you in terms of stress and anxiety.



Remember, a "verified" social media account just means the person is famous, not trustworthy, and repetition alone doesn't mean information is credible.

There are many "blue check" users online who are monetizing sociopolitical upheaval, fear, and anger by providing content that rallies their targeted audience. Look out for online personas that are "branded" and make appeals for engagement such as "If you agree that pineapple doesn't belong on pizza, share this post!"

More broadly, think about your offline media choices, and in addition to seeking credible media sources, **spend less time on commentary-heavy or ideologically-driven programming, especially on cable networks.**

These media choices can lead to greater stress and the urge to engage further on social media, thereby increasing the chances of engaging with disinformation or manipulative content.



Step Five: Beware What You Share Online

ALWAYS err on the side of not sharing content. Just don't share memes, "cool" photos or videos (the "shark on the highway" photo that gets brought out with every hurricane is still not real!), links, articles, forwarded or re-shared posts, copy & paste posts (these are a huge red flag!), or any other potentially problematic content.

This leads us to our most important rule...



Step Six: Never Repeat Misinfo, Disinfo, or Manipulative Content

DO NOT REPLY, SHARE, FORWARD, DM, RETWEET, QUOTE TWEET, COMMENT ON, OR OTHERWISE ENGAGE WITH THIS CONTENT...

... EVEN TO DISAGREE WITH IT OR FACT CHECK IT.



Any repetition of misinformation, disinformation, or manipulative content amplifies that content and can even lend credibility to it.

Just don't do it. It's HARD, but we should quell the urge to respond every time someone on the Internet is wrong or outrageous or even just plain lying, because the harm outweighs any benefit from engaging with that content.



What you **CAN** do instead:

- Report any problematic content to the platform as well as to **ReportDisinfo.org**.
- Concerned about a friend or relative posting bad info? **Handle it privately** via direct message, email, or in person.
- Post truthful information instead. You can learn more about **effective messaging** from MOVPC's partners; join MOVPC to find out more.
- Follow **Step Seven**



Step Seven: Engage in Proactive & Productive Activities

Expand your knowledge of misinformation, disinformation, and manipulative content (a form of malinformation) by visiting **KNOWDISINFO.ORG**.

Stay informed about voting rights issues--*and actions you can take to help*--in Missouri by joining the Missouri Voter Protection Coalition; simply text **MOVPC** to **66866** to join.



Follow up questions?
Email me: jennifer@stlvpc.org



Q & A

