THE FLOOD OF MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION

How can local communities and higher education best address growing concerns?



NC CAMPUS ENGAGEMENT

CENTER FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION
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National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement

DELIBERATIVE FORUM OVERVIEW

A deliberative forum is a model developed by the National Issues Forum (www.nifi.org) that convenes citizens to move toward a public decision by deliberating on a difficult issue. Another name for this approach is "choice work" as citizens together explore various options to address the issue.

In a deliberative dialogue we:

- understand the pros and cons of each option—its benefits, drawbacks, and trade-offs;
- know the strategic facts and how they affect the way the group thinks about each option;
- get beyond the initial positions people hold to their deeper motivations—the things they consider to be the most valuable in everyday life;
- weigh carefully the views of others and appreciate the impact various options would have on what others consider valuable; and
- work through the conflicting emotions that arise when various options pull and tug on what people consider valuable.

Below is a recommended framework to hold a deliberative forum.



Deliberate

From Latin deliberatus (to consider carefully), from delibrare, from de- + libra scale (to weigh, balance)

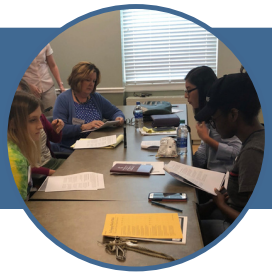
Weighing facts and arguments with a view to a choice or decision; carefully considering the probable consequences of a step.

FORUM FRAMEWORK

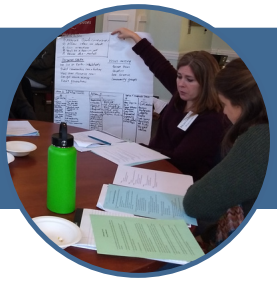
1. **Welcome and introduce the issue to be deliberated. Review & agree on the Ground Rules.**
2. **Invite people to describe how the issue affects them, their family, or their community.**
3. **Consider each option, spending equal time on each. What is attractive? What drawbacks do you see?**
4. **Reflect on the conversation individually and as a group. Review tensions, trade-offs, and areas of common ground.**

GROUND RULES

- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Focus on the options.**
- **All the major options should be considered fairly.**
- **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere for the discussion.**
- **Listen to each other.**



ABOUT THIS GUIDE



According to a 2021 study by the The Pearson Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, the overwhelming majority of Americans (95%) identified misinformation as a problem when they're trying to access important information. However, not as many are certain about who to blame and what to do. Is it the responsibility of the U.S. government, social media users, tech companies, educational institutions or something and someone else? The concerns that underlie this issue are not confined to party affiliation, nor are they captured by labels like "conservative" or "liberal."

This guide is designed to help people deliberate together about four possible approaches to this issue with an emphasis on local solutions that leverage local news outlets. These approaches are intended to spark reflection about different ways of understanding this issue, to explore what matters most to us, and to explore possible actions. All deliberative discussion guides are a living document, and this issue in particular is constantly evolving. For example, this guide does not explore the emerging ethical debates related to artificial intelligence and ChatGPT.

The issue raises a number of difficult questions, and there are no easy answers:

- Could local communities, local news organizations, and higher education effectively counter misinformation?
- Can we stem the growth of misinformation and disinformation in such a way that it doesn't undermine democratic principles like free speech and open inquiry?
- Do the actions of everyday citizens even matter when the primary cause of misinformation are the huge tech companies that have profited from platforms and algorithms that divide us and spread misinformation?
- Isn't misinformation and disinformation just a symptom of the underlying mistrust in institutions, pervasive polarization, and hyper-partisanship?
- How do we help Americans, and especially young people gain the research and critical thinking skills necessary to critically evaluate and consume media?

While there are no easy answers, we hope to spark the conversation and empower citizens to explore solutions to this difficult issue.

Development of this Issue Guide

These approaches were initially generated during a joint project by the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, the COLAB (Colorado News Collaborative), and the Institute for Science and Policy at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. They developed these approaches based on a combination of available research on misinformation, survey results regarding the issue, and the insights derived from concern gatherings involving diverse citizens. Leslie Garvin, a UC National Center for Free Speech & Civic Engagement Fellow and Executive Director of NC Campus Engagement, designed the guide, including the introductory and background information, updated the approaches, and tested the framework with diverse audiences throughout the state. Support was provided by the University of California National Center for Free Speech & Civic Engagement.

The Flood of Misinformation & Disinformation

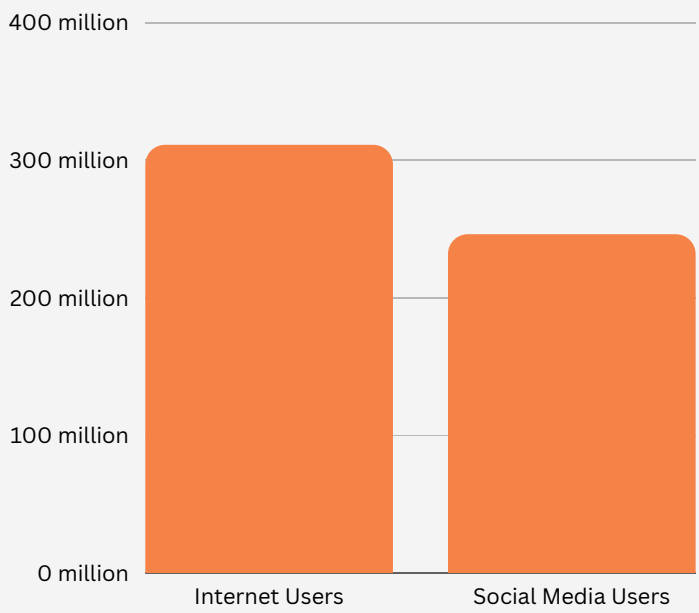
How can local communities and universities best address growing concerns ?



Since the 1990s, the world has experienced a technological revolution. The internet began in 1993 when the source code for the world's first web browser and editor was released and, as of January 2023, there were approximately 311 million internet users in the U.S. Perhaps the most profound growth has been in the emergence of social media. While the earliest platforms launched only two decades ago, today around 246 million Americans use social media. A 2021 survey from Common Sense Media found that teenagers spend an average of nearly two and a half hours a day scrolling their social networks.

There are many positive aspects to social media such as the ability to stay connected with friends and family, to establish connections and build community with people with similar interests and/or expose individuals to people who live and think differently, and to raise awareness about and garner support for important issues or causes. Social media also has the ability to elevate the voices and perspectives of people who may have previously been underrepresented in the public square. Social media can also facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and news. According to a 2021 Pew Research study, more than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet “often” or “sometimes.” While news websites and apps are the most common way Americans access their news (68%), over half (53%), say they get news from social media.

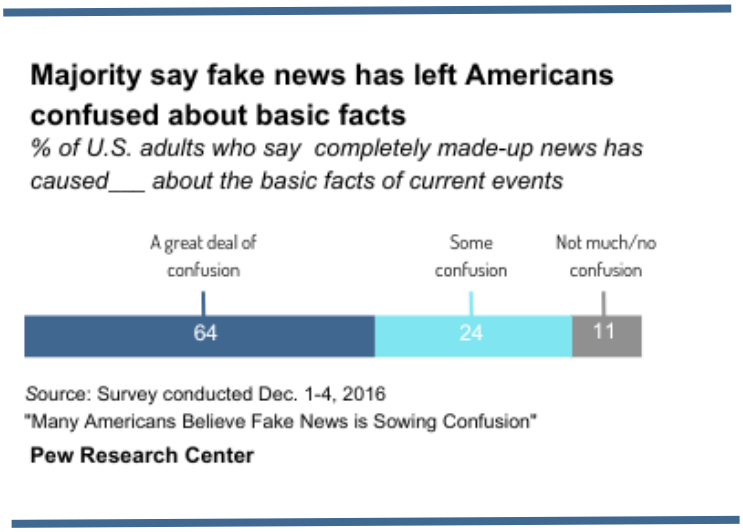
Number of internet and social media users in the U.S. as of January 2023 (U.S. population = 337mil)



Source: We are Social: DataReportal: GWI: Meltater, Statista "Internet Usage in the United States" 2023

Perhaps ironically, while Americans are turning more towards social media for news and information, they have significant distrust and fear about social media and online information and even view it as a threat to democracy. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey of 19 advanced economies found that, across the countries polled, a median of 57% say social media has been more of a good thing for their democracy, with the exception being the U.S. where just 34% of U.S. adults think social media has been good for democracy and while 64% say it has had a bad impact.

In the same survey 85%, of Americans believe the internet and social media has made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors and 79% believe it has made people more divided in their political opinions. In a 2016 Pew study, 50% of Americans, who consume news regularly, believed that fake news is a significant problem because the content often appears as though it's been produced by a reliable source or news outlet. Respondents felt strongly that the issue needs to be addressed.



Definitions

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong.

Disinformation is false information which is deliberately intended to mislead—intentionally misstating facts.

Source: The American Psychological Association

According to the American Psychological Association, **misinformation** is false or inaccurate information—getting the facts wrong. It is important to note that anyone may spread misinformation without intending to mislead. **Disinformation** is false information which is deliberately intended to mislead—intentionally misstating facts. While the motives and intent may be distinct between these two actions, both can cause confusion, division, hurt, or even tangible harm. For example, in 2020, during the global COVID 19 pandemic, the World Health Organization noted the existence of an "infodemic" or an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that made it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they needed it. We may never know what concrete harms resulted from the numerous hoaxes, scams, fake cures, and malware that proliferated. For example, the misinformation being spread that hydroxychloroquine was a proven treatment for the virus (although the clinical trials had just begun to test it's effectiveness), led to so much hoarding and panic buying that people suffering from lupus and other autoimmune disease struggled to fill their prescriptions. According to the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, at the peak of the pandemic, several states had to take steps to limit inappropriate prescriptions for hydroxychloroquine and preserve supplies for patients who take the medicine as approved.

At the same time that Americans are deeply concerned about misinformation and disinformation online and on social media, they are losing trust in major institutions and traditional media. Since 1993 Gallup has measured the confidence American's place in 16 major institutions, including newspapers and television news. In 2021 the average confidence across all institutions was just 27%, the lowest level since they began measuring it.

However, there is one clear exception to this trend - Americans continue to hold local news organizations in fairly high regard. A 2022 poll from Gallup and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation found that while trust in national news organizations continues to decline, trust in local news remains fairly steady, although there are slight difference across party lines, with Republicans trusting all news reporting less often. (Figure 1) Further, when accessing local news sources, people turn to mainstream or traditional media such as broadcast news, radio, and newspapers more often than social media (Figure 2).

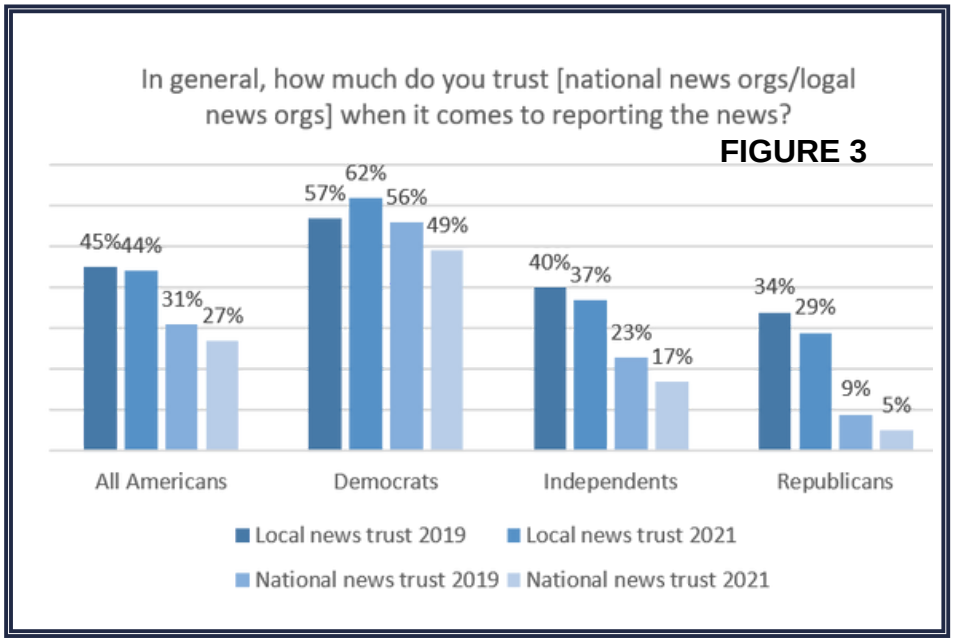
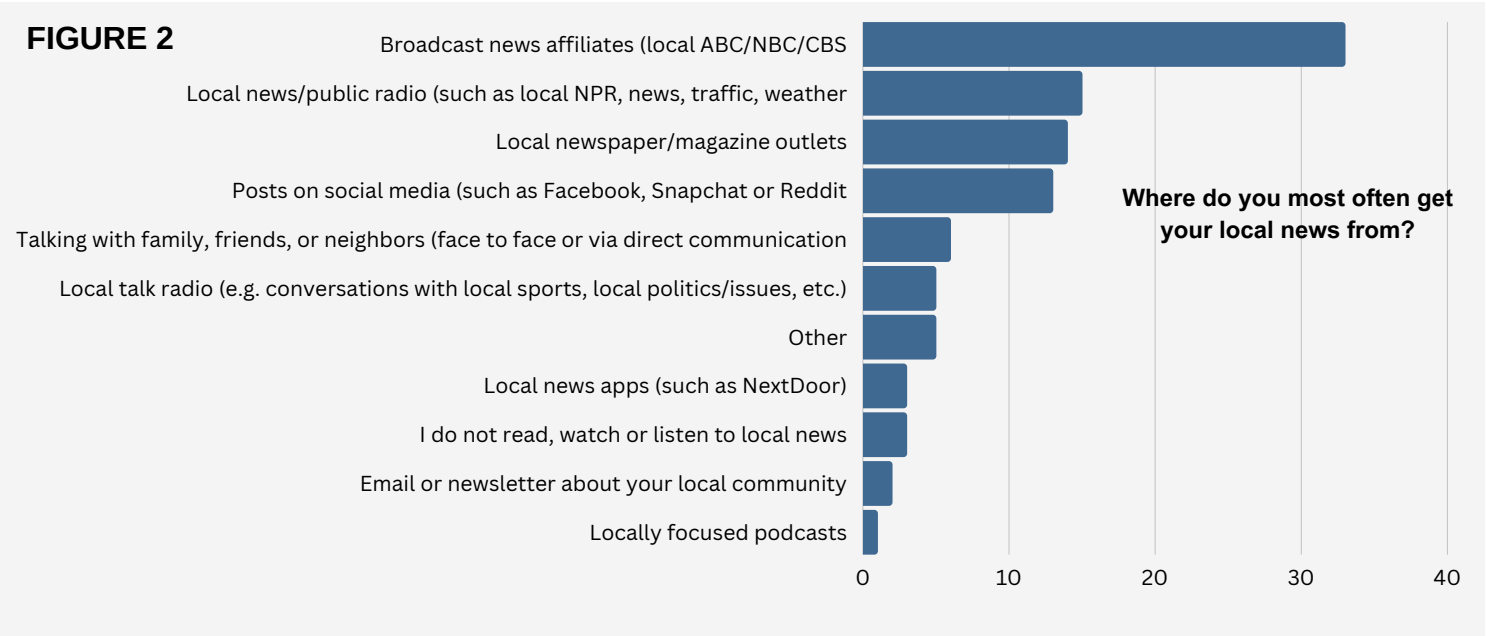


FIGURE 3

However, while Americans are still more likely to trust information from local and national news organizations than information on social media sites, this is no longer true for the youngest adults. Adults under 30 are now almost as likely to trust information from social media sites as they are to trust information from national news outlets according to an October 2022 Pew study.

FIGURE 2



While Americans largely trust their local news, a 2020 report from the UNC-Chapel Hill Hussman School of Journalism and Media "News Deserts and Ghost Newspaper: Will Local News Survive?" describes an “extinction level” threat to the country's local news ecosystem. At least 30 newspapers closed or merged in April and May 2020, dozens of newspapers switched to online-only delivery, and thousands of journalists at legacy and digital news operations have been furloughed or laid off. More than one-fourth of the country’s newspapers have disappeared, leaving residents in thousands of communities living in vast news deserts. The report attributes this crisis to technological and economic assaults which have destroyed the for-profit business model that sustained local journalism - all of which was exacerbated by the economic fallout from the COVID 19 pandemic.

Finally, while 95% of Americans identified misinformation as a problem when they’re trying to access important information, they are unsure who bears responsibility. About half put a great deal of blame on the U.S. government, and about three-quarters point to social media users and tech companies. (Pearson Institute and the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research study, 2022)



Higher Education = Anchor Institution

The concept of “anchor institutions” was first formally articulated during a 2001 Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiative. The idea was based on a study making the case that institutions who have a significant infrastructure investment in a specific community, and are therefore unlikely to move, are “anchor institutions.” Since the 2000s, initiatives, organizations, and an extensive body of scholarship has emerged helping place-based institutions, such as universities, understand their anchor role and the positive impact they can have on local communities and economies. Many institutions have embraced their anchor mission, working with local communities to bring the enormous resources of knowledge and human and economic capital of higher education to bear on addressing public problems.

As mentioned previously, Americans have lost confidence in most major institutions, according to the annual Gallup poll. However, while a June 2023 Gallup poll showed that confidence in higher education is waning, it still stands in the top four among the 17 major institutions included. Only small business, the military and the police are ranked higher. This means the opportunity exists for higher education to play a role in disrupting misinformation and disinformation. Colleges and universities have the opportunity to impact their local community through partnerships and interventions. Most importantly, the 4300 plus institutions of higher education in America, have the opportunity to directly impact the over 21.9 million students they serve directly (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2019).

> “Community colleges, colleges, and universities (public as well as private) all play crucial, multi-faceted roles in their communities and surrounding regions as anchor institutions in the areas of education, research, service, housing and real estate development, employment, job training, purchasing, hiring, business and technological incubation, and cultural development.”
>
> - Leadership and Governance in Higher Education, Volume No. 2, 2014

Considerations as we begin to deliberate

- Americans agree misinformation and disinformation is a serious problem, especially when trying to ascertain correct news and information about current events and issues.
- Americans continue to lose faith in major institutions, but confidence in local news sources and higher education remain comparatively high.
- The majority are also still more likely to get their news from local news outlets, rather than major news sources or social media.
- Is it possible for local communities, local news outlets, and higher education to work together to address misinformation?

Now we will deliberate on four approaches to address misinformation and disinformation. Each option offers advantages as well as drawbacks or downsides.

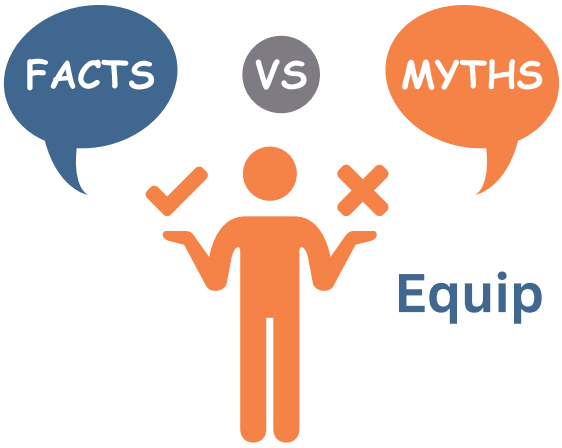


OPTION 1 **Equip individuals to distinguish information.**

OPTION 2 **Slow the spread by addressing the worst offenders and developing mechanisms to counteract misinformation.**

OPTION 3 **Build and support local resources and organizations designed and equipped to provide quality trusted sources of information.**

OPTION 4 **Build strong relationships, connections, and engagement in the community in order to rebuild trust and combat the proliferation of misinformation.**



Option 1:

Equip Individuals to Distinguish Information

This approach recognizes the difficulty of regulating information and stopping misinformation, and therefore focuses on the need to equip people with the individual skills they need to better make distinctions between good information and bad information. This approach should start in K-12 but continue across the lifespan. Our best defense against misinformation, supporters of this approach argue, is to work to inoculate people against its impact, thus diminishing the long term impact of misinformation.



Key Arguments

- This approach argues that a primary cause of the misinformation problem is simply the significant supply of people who fall victim to it. If people are better trained to resist misinformation, its impact would diminish.
- If successful, this approach would prevent the negative impacts of misinformation without relying on actions that would undermine freedom of speech or necessitate giving too much power to authorities.
- This approach seeks to strengthen societal norms of high expectations of individual responsibility for thinking critically and using media appropriately, avoiding the spread of misinformation, and developing a cultural intolerance for disinformation from an early age.

Option 1: Equip Individuals to Distinguish Information

WHAT WE SHOULD DO

Examples of What Could Be Done:	Some consequences or tradeoffs to consider:
Expand critical thinking and digital/media/information literacy requirements in K-12 and higher education.	The K-12 system is already overburdened, asking them to increase focus on additional areas without significant support to build up that capacity will likely be problematic. School curriculum issues are growing targets of political controversy and working to expand these areas will likely get entangled in partisan argument as well.
Life-long learning and classes should be readily available at libraries, cultural, and educational institutions to help individuals continuously update their skills as new issues and technology evolves.	Optional educational solutions tend to suffer from the dilemma that those who most need the education are often the most resistant to it.
Information about cognitive biases and disinformation techniques should be a basic aspect of education at all levels. Higher education should commit resources towards research and dissemination of best practices in media literacy.	This approach expects too much out of human nature. We can't expect enough individuals to develop these skills and habits to counteract the growing problem.
Local news outlets and higher education should consider themselves key educators on these issues, providing readers with content and events focused on improving these skills.	Over the past two decades, the US has experienced a significant reduction in the number of local news organizations like newspapers and locally focused news websites. Many remaining local outlets are struggling. Additionally, many higher education institutions may not see th

A Primary Drawback

This approach may work for future generations, but the situation is critical right now.

Option 2:

Slow the spread by addressing the worst offenders and developing mechanisms to counteract misinformation



This approach argues for an aggressive yet careful response to develop and support measures that address the most significant causes of misinformation head on, particularly bad faith actors and problematic social media algorithms. It calls for creative solutions that challenge bad faith actors and increase accountability while still respecting freedom of speech and open inquiry.



Key Arguments

- This approach argues that a primary cause of misinformation is bad faith actors that are profiting, political and/or monetarily, by manipulating people and sparking outrage.
- Bad faith actors have found ways to game the system to their benefit, so we must be more bold and aggressive against forces that are working against democracy and science. Some argue the real issue is power and its misuse.
- We must strengthen accountability measures, particularly against the superspreaders and those who are abusing power.
- Growing research shows when done well by trusted sources, fact checking can be effective.

Option 2: Slow the spread by addressing the worst offenders and developing mechanisms to counteract disinformationation

WHAT WE SHOULD DO

Examples of What Could Be Done:	Some consequences or tradeoffs to consider:
Provide positive recognition to quality sources and expose and discredit those that consistently produce or share misinformation. Higher education institutions could engage in research to determine the sources and key players in promoting disinformation.	Bad faith actors are a small part of the problem. People unknowingly sharing bad information is the primary issue. Efforts to address what some consider bad faith actors will be seen as partisan, and only lead to more polarization and division, which in turn creates a more fertile environment for misinformation.
Strengthen our tools to help people make distinctions such as reputation ratings or warnings about sharing disinformation.	Calling out problematic sources could lead to a backlash and loss of trust for local news outlets.
Continue to pressure social media companies to adapt their algorithms and be more transparent so that they work to stop the spread of misinformation and support higher quality information.	Some of these actions would require government support to be strong enough to make a difference, but significant concerns exist regarding censorship and giving government too much power to decide what is true or false.
Local news outlets should expand their fact checking resources to be more equipped to call out misinformation and highlight problematic sources.	Over the past two decades, the US has experienced a significant reduction in the number of local news organizations like newspapers and locally focused news websites. Many remaining local outlets are struggling.

A Primary Drawback

Many of these actions are beyond the scope of local communities.



Option 3:

Build and support local resources and organizations designed and equipped to provide quality trusted sources of information

This approach focuses more on ramping up ways to develop and provide local trusted, quality information -- primarily by creating new and reinvigorating existing institutions -- rather than focusing on addressing misinformation. This can be done by reimagining and supporting local news outlets, and sparking collaborations with public libraries, educational institutions, and civic organizations focused on improving the local information ecosystem and providing the local community with honest brokers of information to rely on.

Key Arguments

- Rather than reacting to misinformation, more focus should be placed on developing ways to proactively identify and share quality information.
- Local journalism should be seen as a public good and funded well, rather than be left to the whims of the market (particularly since due to human nature quality journalism will always struggle to compete).
- Due to information overload and the prevalence of misinformation, local communities need trusted gatekeepers and information curators, such as higher education institutions, to help residents make sense of the world. Such organizations do not develop naturally, so communities must be intentional to develop them.
- Civic society must adapt to the new reality brought on by the internet, the growth of misinformation, and partisan divides. Institutions, such as colleges and universities, that serve as trusted impartial resources, must be actively protected and supported.



Option 3: Build and support local resources and organizations designed and equipped to provide quality trusted sources of information

WHAT WE SHOULD DO

Examples of What Could Be Done:	Some consequences or tradeoffs to consider:
Increase support to current institutions - such as local news orgs and higher education institutions - that contribute positively to the local information ecosystem.	Building trust and connecting with everyone in the community would require significant additional time and resources at a time when local news outlets are reducing staff and some higher education institutions are struggling.
Create new collaborative efforts between local journalists, educational institutions, libraries, and other civic organizations committed to this effort that can benefit from their varied strengths. Higher education, in particular can devote resources to provide training, resources, and research to strengthen local journalism.	Collaboratives require significant time and effort to develop and manage well, and the organizations asked to be involved -- news outlets, educational institutions, libraries, and civic organizations -- are all addressing their own challenges currently.
Reimagine the financial model for local journalism that sees it as a critical public good. With sufficient alternative support, local news can not only increase in capacity, but can also be made available without subscriptions fees/paywalls in order to better compete against misinformation. Higher education could use their resources to support this effort by creating and promoting and/or expanding their own local journalistic efforts such as campus-based newspapers, and news & radio stations (through online and paper formats)	This approach requires significant financial investment, which would likely need to come from either the government or philanthropic sources. Having the government fund journalism would raise a number of concerns about undo influence and the loss of independence. Relying on philanthropic sources would also raise concerns about independence, and would be particularly difficult in rural communities, which could further worsen divides between media-rich cities and rural news deserts.
Local news outlets must work to build trust and be a resource to everyone. That will require reaching out and authentically connecting to underserved audiences, diversifying the newsroom, and exploring language translation options.	These efforts may be seen as partisan and work to erode trust or divide people even more.

A Primary Drawback

Many of these actions require resources while many communities and institutions are already struggling financially.

Option 4:

Build strong relationships, connections, and engagement in the community in order to rebuild trust and combat the proliferation of misinformation

This approach sees the prevalence of misinformation as more of a symptom of growing division, partisanship, and distrust. When we are so divided, we are particularly susceptible to misinformation and attempts to spark outrage. This approach, therefore, seeks to focus more on the root of the problem, assuming that as we rebuild relationships and community, the power of misinformation will subside.

Key Arguments



- To protect our communities from the negative impacts of misinformation, we must focus on reducing polarization, building relationships, and building bridges across perspectives. Such efforts are very difficult at the national level -- where partisan identities dominate -- but local communities have real opportunities to develop connections between people in more positive ways.
- Communities need institutions, such as colleges and universities, hat serve as impartial conveners and facilitators, dedicated to bringing people together across perspectives to address their shared problems more effectively. Such organizations must be proactively imagined and supported.
- Efforts to address misinformation without addressing these root causes will ultimately fall short or simply be seen as partisan or adversarial and backfire.
- Polarization is often exaggerated because the most polarized are often the most active and vocal. Creating local opportunities for people to come together in productive ways will help people realize the common ground that exists that partisan processes often undermine.

Option 4: Build strong relationships, connections, and engagement in the community in order to rebuild trust and combat the proliferation of misinformation.

WHAT WE SHOULD DO

Examples of What Could Be Done:	Some consequences or tradeoffs to consider:
Strengthen programs that bring people together across perspectives. Develop more capacity for public forums, focus groups, and meaningful engagement on critical issues impacted by misinformation supported by quality processes. Colleges and universities can provide venues/spaces for such gatherings. Higher education institutions can also provide trainings and facilitate dialogues and conversations that bring people together. Encourage people to reach out and talk with people who think differently and try to respect and understand their perspective.	In a partisan environment, efforts focused on civility and impartiality may work unintentionally to support false equivalence or "both sides-ism," undermine necessary dissent, and support a problematic status quo. Navigating being "impartial" or "objective" or "neutral" in the current hyper-partisan environment is exceedingly difficult.
Local news outlets should focus more on providing clear diversity of thought and help groups understand each other. Local news outlets and civic organizations should work together to build their skills in convening and facilitation, and expand both online and in-person opportunities for people to engage each other productively.	Similar to approach 3, this approach adds additional expectations to news outlets at a time when many are cutting back on staff, and thus would require a significant increase in funding.

A Primary Drawback

Polarization is growing and expanding so quickly, it is unclear if such efforts can outpace the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation fueled by mistrust.

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