Ten best practices to help journalists identify and tackle misinformation

**BACKGROUND**

This guide is intended as a resource for journalists covering climate to help better understand and respond to misinformation. Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), defines climate dis/misinformation as content which undermines the existence or impacts of climate change, the unequivocal human influence on climate change, and the need for corresponding urgent action.

Social media algorithms, fossil fuel industry spending on public relations and political lobbying, a changing media landscape and an increasingly volatile political climate have all fueled an explosion in the circulation of fabricated or misleading material on the Internet.

High-quality journalism remains crucial in addressing the threat of misinformation, but in an era of declining newsrooms and consolidated media, more help is needed. A body of research on misinformation has expanded vastly in recent years, informing this selection of best practice tips.

Further information can be found in the extended Journalist Field Guide.

**BEST PRACTICES FOR DEALING WITH MISINFORMATION**

1. **Assess whether to report or ignore misinformation.**
   Determining the impact and visibility of misinformation before covering it is key. The 2020 Debunking Handbook contains a detailed flowchart on this topic, while communications strategist Sabrina Joy Stevens has developed a response framework chart based on the spread and impact of misinformation, as published in the 2022 Union of Concerned Scientists video “How to Counter Disinformation.”

![Image: Wendy Cook, 2020 Debunking Handbook]
2 Assess if you are being manipulated into covering misinformation
The Data & Society Research Institute’s Source Hacking report examines tactics that are used to manipulate reporters into helping misinformation spread, along with brief recommendations for journalists.

3 Don’t include or directly negate misinformation in headlines
Research shows that most people on social media share news without reading beyond the headline. A headline that repeats or questions a falsehood without context risks doing more harm than good.

4 Use the ‘Truth Sandwich’ to debunk
When debunking is required, the authors of the Debunking Handbook specifically recommend a communication technique known as the “truth sandwich.” This involves leading and finishing your debunk with the correct information. In between, you should explain clearly exactly what was false about the misinformation, and how it differs from the facts.

5 Don’t exaggerate the threat of isolated instances of misinformation
A widespread, coordinated disinformation campaign is a very different thing from a few isolated instances of problematic content. Exaggerating or speculating on the significance of relatively low-profile content can help draw unnecessary momentum to a falsehood.
Don’t use the language of misinformers
Using the language and framing of bad actors risks reinforcing and mainstreaming dangerous and misleading ideas. Avoid repeating dishonest framing as much as possible.

Avoid partisan signaling, when possible
Readers may be biased by partisan cues, leading them to reject the content. Professor Brendan Nyhan recommends avoiding framing the discussion in response to specific statements from politicians.

Contextualize
Misinformation campaigns don’t occur in a vacuum; they are rooted in the history, culture and politics of those targeted and those spreading the content. When reporting on problematic content, it’s important to include this context.

Don’t Boost Bad Content
- Inserting rel=“nofollow” into the HTML code of any hyperlink to misinformation will prevent search engines from giving additional weight to that link in search results.
- Avoid sending users to monetized YouTube videos. Screenshots and transcripts can also be used to help illustrate.
- Use archive sites like the Wayback machine to provide context on misleading sources.

Encourage reader to help
Empowering readers to participate in neutralizing misinformation can only help, perhaps starting in the comments of your publication’s social media feeds. Readers can also be engaged to help circulate fact-checks and expert debunking when myths have already circulated.

Further information, as well as illustrations, detailed examples, an academic literature review and various other resources can be found in the extended ‘Journalist Field Guide’.