



HOW-TO DRAFT: DEALING WITH DISINFORMATION

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This is a work in progress that is meant to evolve over time with input from campaigners. At the moment, the tips and ideas here reflect the voices of the [contributors/reviewers listed below](#). We are always looking to add more voices of campaigners that have knowledge and experience on this topic. If this is you, please contact us here: blueprintsfc@gmail.com.

Summary

Disinformation (the intentional spread of false and misleading information) and misinformation (the unintentional spread of false information) are not new phenomena. What is new is the ability to rapidly create, disseminate, and consume false and misleading content on a global scale via an interconnected digital media landscape.

The hostile actors (e.g., the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency) who create disinformation campaigns rely on provocative, divisive, and/or disturbing content to get our attention in an immensely crowded digital media landscape. The goal is to evoke emotion. Emotions like anger, jealousy, and fear drive content resharing on social media platforms.

Case in point, during the 2016 presidential elections in the United States the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency (IRA) ran a polarizing disinformation campaign that used Facebook advertising to exploit existing racial tensions, biases, and divisions. More specifically, [USA Today's](#) analysis of the thousands of Facebook ads created by the IRA found that:

- Over half of the 3,500 ads referenced race. This accounted for 25 million ad impressions.
- Close to a quarter of the ads engaged policing and crime, commonly with a racial connotation.



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Blueprints for Change

- In the final months prior to the election there was an average of 400 divisive racial ad buys a month.

[The racist advertisement below](#), which targeted Facebook users interested in topics like Southern pride and the Confederate flag, received 40,000 clicks and 500,000 impressions (to see other Russian Facebook advertisements, check out this article in [New York Magazine](#)).



Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential elections was a wake-up call. Efforts to deal with disinformation since then offer valuable lessons. This guide deals with the issues faced by ordinary campaigners, activists and organizations challenged by disinformation in their day-to-day efforts to make progressive change. It also references the larger projects tackling the systemic causes of disinformation, such as government actors, media platforms, and broken internet infrastructure, but we primarily focus on what you can do right now. In other words, *this guide is mainly about steps to take if a*



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lie about your campaign is being spread on Facebook, for example, rather than how to campaign to change Facebook itself.

One of the most valuable lessons we learned from campaigners who successfully dealt with disinformation was that it was not always necessary to deal with it. So if you only read and act on one part of this guide, we would recommend the first of the ["Steps to take"](#) on risk assessment and mitigation. It may save you from losing time, emotional energy, and reputation in reacting (or overreacting) to disinformation, which unfortunately is becoming a challenge most campaigners will face at some point.

Who's doing it?

The Eighth Amendment Referendum campaign in Ireland is a useful case study that highlights the way [Together for Yes](#), [The Transparent Referendum Initiative](#), and [Repeal Shield](#) effectively addressed disinformation surrounding abortion. [Together for Yes](#) is a national grassroots movement and civil society campaign comprised of 70 different organizations fighting for access to abortions in Ireland. The [Transparent Referendum Initiative](#) (TRI) is a volunteer run organization committed to ensuring digital advertising transparency in Irish electoral campaigns. Like TRI, [Repeal Shield](#) is a volunteer-based service that formed in response to the Eighth Amendment Referendum campaign in Ireland. [Repeal Shield](#) uses [Block Together](#) to improve the Twitter experience for pro-choice users.

The Russian disinformation campaign against the Syrian Civil Defense, also referred to as the White Helmets, is another useful case study. The Syria Campaign produced the report ["Killing the Truth"](#), which exposed the mechanics and motivations of conspiracy theorists, Russian state media, and thousands of social media trolls and bots who amplified each other's disinformation about the White Helmets.

A final case example from the 2019 European Parliament Elections relied on crowdfunded fact-checking to take on disinformation. The Brussels based [AVAAZ](#) team of 30 people uncovered content missed by 30,000 Facebook monitors. They produced 700 pages of results that illustrated how fake accounts in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK were being used by the far-right. Their work led to Facebook shutting down this web of disinformation in Europe.



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In addition to case studies, it is useful to have a general awareness of some projects and institutions engaging the systematic causes of disinformation. The [EU Disinfo Lab](#) is an NGO that developed a methodology to map social media clusters of disinformation. They are committed to addressing the international scope of disinformation and identifying solutions to address the insufficiency of the current legal framework. [The Mozilla Foundation](#) is a nonprofit committed to building an open, accessible, and healthy internet. [Misinformation](#) is a specific aspect of internet health that Mozilla is working to address. In September 2018, Mozilla, the European Union, Google, Facebook, Twitter and various trade groups created the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#).

There are also organizations that solely focus on misinformation and disinformation. [First Draft](#) is a nonprofit that uses fieldwork, research, and educational resources to fight disinformation and misinformation. [Misinfocon](#) is a global movement to address misinformation that brings together experts from policy, advocacy, media literacy, cybersecurity, and social science. Finally, the [Credibility Coalition](#) is an interdisciplinary community that takes a holistic approach to misinformation focused on improving the media ecosystem and strengthening media literacy.

Impact/ Why do this?

Disinformation in its different forms has been blamed for various events and trends, from the 2016 US Presidential election and Brexit referendum, to the decline of trust in institutions, rise of support for reactionary populism, even acts of extremist violence. Aside from those global consequences, the campaigners we spoke to explained how it affects them specifically, and why we should all be aware of its dangers.

On the **individual** level, being lied about simply hurts. Campaigners and activists throw themselves into the causes they care about, so disinformation is especially painful when it deliberately targets individuals and their integrity, motivation, and personal lives. Anna Ridout from The Syria Campaign pointed out that they work with ordinary people who are risking and losing their lives to save others, and that when they are slandered, “you cannot underestimate the impact that has on the morale” of those volunteers, and the



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staff and supporters who know them. This human impact should not be minimised when calculating our response to disinformation.

On the **organisational** level, disinformation has in some cases led to funding being cut, public support dropping, and legal issues - even if the disinformation is not believed. However at an earlier stage, the more common impact on organisations is simply that resources are wasted because of the time spent monitoring and deciding how to respond to it, as well as the opportunity cost of not putting out your own message while figuring out whether to respond and how. Part of the advice within this guide is how to streamline that internal process so that we do not give the spreaders of disinformation that first victory of having wasted our time.

On the **strategic** level, the reason our opponents spread disinformation in the first place is because they think it will harm our causes, and that is true in different ways. As campaigners, we are often trying to mobilise people to act - we are in an asymmetrical contest where progressives need to break through apathy. When basic facts are in question, that makes our work harder. Disinformation does not have to be proved, or even believed, for it to prey on people's tendency to feel "no one has clean hands", which undermines trust and optimism in change. For example, The Syria Campaign's hope for justice and accountability in Syria's conflict relies upon the eyewitnesses to war crimes - the primary strategic goal of the disinformation they face is clearly to discredit those voices.

What this requires (people, resources, etc.)

Assessing the untraceable impact of disinformation

When the Eighth Amendment Referendum passed by an overwhelming 66%, the effort to reform abortion rights in Ireland was a success. Still, the challenge of dealing with disinformation should not be underestimated. [Together for Yes](#) volunteer Jean O'Brien, "the big anxiety was the money that the No side had" they were able to bring "in consultants and tactics from the successful Trump and Brexit campaigns" She added, "we didn't know our tactics had worked until polling day as there was very little visibility."

Well funded hostile actors with extensive resources pose a major threat due to the way they can control public discourse. The way they can bleed into the national conversation



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in untraceable ways. Maeve O'Reilly of the [London-Irish Abortion Rights Campaign](#) positioned this as a huge concern. Turing to O'Reilly, "people would talk about conversations with family members who were repeating false statements they'd obviously heard directly from the anti-choice campaign." Disinformation also influenced media framing. For example, "interview questions would be framed in a way that was clear it has been influenced by the disinformation," according to O'Reilly. The opposition also relied on tactics to misrepresent the level of support for abortion reform. Case in point, they set up copycat "4Life" accounts for any grassroots pro-choice social media account. The false accounts made it look like there was equal support on both sides.

Digital Transparency

Disinformation thrives in climates that lack transparency. The good news is there are creative ways to generate digital transparency. For example, [The Transparent Referendum Initiative](#) (TRI) is a volunteer run organization that was founded to ensure digital advertising transparency in Irish electoral campaigns. Over 500 TRI volunteers created a [crowdsourced database](#) of online political advertisements that were used to target Irish Facebook users during the 2018 Eighth Amendment Referendum campaign. The database, which includes 1,500 Facebook ads, was created by Irish voters who contributed by downloading the [WhoTargetsMe](#) plugin. The Eighth Amendment Referendum campaign also provides a useful lesson related to disinformation on Twitter. More specifically, [Repeal Shield](#) is an application that uses [Block Together](#) to improve the Twitter experience for pro-choice users. Like TRI, Repeal Shield is a volunteer run service.

Attention to Messaging

Messaging is an area of central importance when trying to deal with the impact of a disinformation campaign. Instead of engaging the inaccurate information, Jon Lloyd of the Mozilla Foundation emphasizes the power of really **clear and direct messaging of key points**. The value of this approach is you avoid being reactionary, while at the same time you are actively conveying a message that requires the other person respond to you. Another way to avoid being reactionary while still disseminating your message is **personal testimony and storytelling**. [Together for Yes](#) used [personal](#)



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[testimony](#) in the fight for abortion rights in Ireland. Storytelling is also a useful tool. If you are a campaigner looking for a webinar to use storytelling to deal with dis-information you can check out “[Trump vs. the Truth: Winning the Battle of Story](#).”

This Power Labs webinar provides a story-based strategy to fight disinformation.

Staying away from divisive rhetoric is a final messaging tool that can help you deal with disinformation. Again, [Together for Yes](#) is a useful example. The main slogan/name of the organization embodies a positive collaborative approach, as does their positioning of Ireland as a compassionate country and their appreciation for diverse view:

“The Together for Yes campaign respects the diverse views people hold on this issue. We understand that this is a complex and sensitive issue for many. We know that life is not black and white; that it is sometimes grey and complex. We believe that people in Ireland have the compassion to understand that the Constitution is not the place to decide the complexities of crisis pregnancies because it is too blunt (Together for Yes, [Who We Are](#)).”

Setup steps/stages

1. **Risk assessment and mitigation:**

A proactive assessment is an effective way to identify and mitigate specific risks tied to disinformation. Thoughtfully assessing potential opponents; planning for a potential disinformation campaign related to your organization/the issues you cover; and evaluating organizational transparency are specific ways to assess and mitigate risks. As Jon Lloyd of the Mozilla Foundation described it, “this is like installing a smoke alarm”. There are a number of steps that would strengthen your cause even if you do not currently face disinformation.

- a. **Preemptively building resilience:** Many of the steps that are necessary to build your resilience for dealing with disinformation are the same as those needed to build a resilient campaign strategy or a crisis communications plan (e.g., risk matrix, identifying potential third party



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allies and opponents, 'red teaming' potential defensive scenarios). Check out the guides below for additional information about crisis planning.

- i. ['Crisis Communications for Charities: a best practice guide' from Charity Comms](#)
- ii. ['Creating a Rapid Response System' from Mobilisation Lab](#)

b. **Radical organizational transparency:** Radical organizational transparency is a way to avoid attacks from hostile actors seeking to discredit your organization. Two nonprofits spoken to for this guide cited a common accusation about their sources of funding. Both nonprofits felt that if their funding had been transparent (or at least explained) on their websites it would have been easier to respond, or potentially prevented the suspicion that "there was something to hide" in the first place. Here are two resources to help with radical transparency.

- i. [Restless Development](#), who won the UK international development sector's 'Transparency Award' for measures including livestreaming annual meetings of directors, publishing all partners, their ethical fundraising guidelines, and the salary levels of all staff positions in all 10 countries. More best practice for this 'dynamic accountability' is at the website of [Accountable Now](#).
- ii. Engineers Without Borders published a 2011 'Failure Report' that was celebrated by the organisation [Fail Forward](#). Fail Forward aims to publicise, celebrate, and advise NGOs in how to be transparent about failures and lessons.

2. **Monitoring:**

Monitoring is a useful practice. Still, it can consume an extensive amount of time and emotional energy. The goal is to utilize efficient monitoring methods.

a. **Monitoring Posts:** You can use a combination of [Crowdtangle](#) (free), [Tweetdeck](#) (free), and search queries to monitor what is being said about your organization/issues and identify potential disinformation threats. [This](#)



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[article](#) from First Draft explains how to use these tools to monitor misinformation.

- b. **Monitoring Advertisements:** Facebook launched the [Ad Library](#) in March 2019 which intends to make it easier to search for all the ads (on both Facebook and Instagram) run by any page. This tool allowed a [Media Matters](#) researcher to identify that President Trump ran 2,200 Facebook advertisements with the word 'invasion' before the mass shooting in El Paso. Please be aware that [Mozilla documented](#) serious gaps and problems with Facebook Ad Library and API system as of July 2019. Google has its own [political transparency database](#) for ads on its search engine and YouTube. Currently, this database does not include issue ads (e.g. an advert about climate change, which does not mention political parties).
- c. **Using Volunteers to Monitor Advertisements:** Volunteers are an effective way to monitor dark advertisements. Ireland was one of the first countries to test Facebook ad visibility. This gave [Together for Yes](#) volunteers the opportunity to research disinformation on opposition pages. At the time, this functionality was still at an early stage. Nonetheless, the volunteers could see the metrics on engagement (they could not click through to profiles of those liking or sharing the post) and the kind of messaging opponents were testing. [Together for Yes](#) used a two step process for ad monitoring. First, they set up a google spreadsheet of pages they knew would run ads. Second, they assigned volunteers to check and take screen grabs on a daily basis. To speed the process up they created a basic tool to put iframes on an html page so you could check 20 at once. Later when their opponents dramatically ramped up spending they developed a tool which scraped the pages automatically.

3. **Reporting**

- a. Flagging content on [Facebook](#) as disinformation.
- b. Flagging content on Twitter as disinformation.



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4. Responding

- a. **Don't overreact:** [Analytics investigations](#) have shown the scale of the disinformation campaign against the White Helmets volunteers in Syria. Still, Anna Ridout of The Syria Campaign warned against reacting to the quantity of noise that can be generated on social media: "It's easy to get trapped in the bubble, you can focus on a tweet from someone with a reach of 1,000 or you can get on the front page of [Time Magazine](#) - they're not equal. That's the problem with disinformation, you can get sucked into defending yourself, worrying about one tweet, and a lot of it no one reads." This does not mean that you should always brush it off, sometimes the disinformation crosses a line that should be dealt with, and Anna gave the example of hate speech as a threat that should be flagged to the platform.
- b. **Respond efficiently:** If you choose to directly counter a disinformation campaign it is best to have a thoughtful and coordinated response. For example, the Syria Campaign produced the [Killing the Truth](#). This report exposed the mechanics and motivations of conspiracy theorists, Russian state media, and thousands of social media trolls and bots who amplified each other's disinformation about the White Helmets. The report was efficient due to the way it comprehensively dissected the most repeated lies in one document. The report also addressed a major vulnerability associated with disinformation by demonstrating how a series of supposedly linked independent sources tied back to a single lie. The benefit of this approach was that a single, authoritative piece of content - backed up with sources and mountains of data - was established, covered by mainstream media, and existed via a link that could be used over and over.



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Tricky parts/ fixes

Fact Checking:

Fact checking is a widely used tool that comes with some significant issues. Two specific issues noted by Jon Lloyd of the Mozilla Foundation are inaccurate statements that can't be fact checked and the unwillingness of people to believe fact checkers. Another issue, according to Lucas Graves (2018) is the vast differences in the way fact checkers operate (e.g., funding structures, institutional affiliations, methodologies, and ideologies) and in what they deem factual. Graves 2018 article "[Boundaries Not Drawn: Mapping the institutional roots of the global fact-checking movement](#)" is available for free until December 31, 2019.

Filter Bubbles:

Filter bubble, a term coined by Eli Pariser, is an information silo that confirms an individual personal views. People knowingly self-select into personalized information silos on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter and unknowingly are directed to news that confirms their worldview by new media gatekeepers (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Google) based upon algorithms that make use of their digital footprint.

Community Care:

False and misleading information causes frustration, anguish, and pain for the communities targeted by the disinformation/misinformation and the campaigners and volunteers monitoring/evaluating the content. While there has recently been more attention paid to creating [resources](#) to support the general mental wellbeing of campaigners, we would be grateful for anyone who can share specific resources or tips for tackling the impact of disinformation on individuals.



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Further resources

Guides

- **A Field Guide to Fake News and Other Information Disorders:** This [field guide](#) is a project from [First Draft](#) and the [Public Data Lab](#).
- **MediaReDesign:** [MediaReDesign](#) is a document that provides information and links to resources surrounding the media ecosystem, fake news, journalism, media literacy, and much, much more.

Organizations

- **FullFact.org:** [FullFact.org](#) is a UK based fact-checking organization.
- **News Nerdery:** [News Nerdery](#) is an international organization committed to knowledge sharing and news collaboration.
- **Open News:** [OpenNews](#) is a US based nonprofit working with communities to strengthen the media ecosystem.
- **The Tectonica Organising Network:** Tectonica is setting up an international fake news working group that pulls together campaigners and organisers to learn about their positive and negative experiences with fake news. [Contact them to join](#).
- **The International Fact Checking Network:** [The International Fact Checking Network](#) is a project within the Poynter Institute that was founded in 2015 to connect fact-checkers across the globe.

Articles and Case Studies

- Allcott, H. And Gentzkow. (2017). [Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election](#).



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