



The University of Texas at Austin  
Center for Media Engagement  
*Moody College of Communication*

# ELECTION MISINFORMATION SYMPOSIUM

As the 2022 U.S. midterm elections approach and the unsubstantiated claims of fraud in the 2020 election persist, newsrooms have an important role: warning audiences about misinformation. This role is especially critical for local newsrooms given that local ecosystems are arguably good targets for foreign and domestic parties looking to create division and chaos by planting disinformation. With this in mind, the Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin hosted an election misinformation symposium on September 8 and 9, 2022 to help newsrooms learn how to detect and deal with false information.

Twenty-four news leaders from battleground states attended the symposium, learned from experts in mis- and disinformation detection and prevention, and strategized on techniques they could implement in their newsrooms. Below, we explore the main themes of the event and provide takeaways for newsrooms looking to combat false and misleading election information.

## Tools for Newsrooms

Misinformation leaves a data trail in its wake – stopping it at the local level is an important first line of defense.



"What we're trying to do is identify [pieces of misinformation] at these points right when they're moving up the chain. We don't want them to get to a point where they're on a national news organization getting reported and reaching a much wider audience."

– Jo Lukito, Center for Media Engagement

Jo Lukito and Christian McDonald, both professors at The University of Texas at Austin, shared helpful tools newsrooms can use for tracking, detecting, and reporting misinformation:

### [Junkipedia](#)

Junkipedia is a free tool that deals specifically with social media misinformation. It's helpful for image and video analysis and will save a post, video, or tweet to a dashboard that can be referenced later. This centralizes the problematic information and can help newsrooms track a threat across users, geographies, and platforms.

### [SMAT](#)

SMAT is also a free tool that deals specifically with social media misinformation. It is designed to show misinformation hotspots and is useful when searching for a specific piece of misinformation across multiple social media platforms.

### [Twitter API](#)

The Twitter API is another great resource for tracking information and is free for anyone with an account. The tool provides data from the past week and offers the ability to collect tweets about any topic or keyword.

### *Additional Tools*

[DataMinr](#) and [Newswhip](#) cost money but are useful for tracking social media and the spread of news stories, respectively. They can both be used to get ahead of possible misinformation and to track emerging risks on public platforms.

## *Deepfake Detection*

Matt Groh from MIT Media Lab shared tactics and resources for identifying and debunking a deepfake. A deepfake is a synthetic image of a person that has been altered in some way and can be used maliciously to spread disinformation. This type of disinformation is less common, but the technology has improved. Machine learning technology to detect these sorts of images or videos also has improved, but people have the cognitive reasoning and real-world knowledge that a machine lacks.



“I’m optimistic about [the ability to identify deepfakes] because people can think critically. Especially professionals in the media think about this all the time and can think critically and so being able to convey this to a large audience, how to think about what can and can’t happen, is going to be super, super useful.”

—Matt Groh, MIT Media Lab

A key takeaway is to trust your instincts when you encounter a visual form of misinformation.

As far as tools that may prove useful in identifying deepfakes, [FotoForensics](#) and [Deepware](#) are free resources to help identify doctored images. [Tineye](#) is another free photodetection resource that allows for reverse image searches. The [Wayback Machine](#) is an internet archive resource that shows the history of a website, similar to [Trackly.io](#). These resources can be useful when sorting out potentially problematic content.

## Engagement with Marginalized Communities

Marginalized communities are disproportionately targeted with false information. Seeking to disenfranchise and to foster a general sense of disempowerment, a bad actor might exploit the fact that these groups have well-established reasons to be distrustful of the media. The stoking of division is something that newsrooms must take seriously and find ways to address in their own communities.



“We heard [from participants in PEN America research studies] about the legacies of trauma and distrust that immigrant communities may be carrying with them that may not be as obvious to U.S. institutions.”

— Summer Lopez, PEN America

Summer Lopez from PEN America, Kayo Mimizuka from the Center for Media Engagement, and Jacobo Licona from Equis Institute provided strategies for addressing these issues:

1. *Work with community leaders*

Find community leaders who are trusted by minority communities and work with them to gain insights and to disseminate information. This will not only increase community engagement but also mitigate misinformation.

2. *Pre-bunk misinformation*

Get ahead of the misinformation. Poll your community and ask them what topics they want to learn about. Publish stories that are largely informational and give people the tools they need to learn the facts.

3. *Meet people where they are*

Some communities are using encrypted messaging apps, which can be a source of not only information, but also misinformation. While it may be easier to direct attention to major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter when fact-checking, be sure to pay attention to other platforms like Whatsapp and Telegram.

4. *Bring empathy*

Meet any story with empathy and compassion. Be sensitive to the interpersonal conflict that misinformation can create within tight-knit communities. Use language that fosters a sense of unity instead of language that could increase divisiveness.

## 5. *Fill the language void*

When news is only published in English, non-English speakers often resort to getting news elsewhere. Platforms such as WhatsApp or YouTube can circulate problematic content and conspiracy theories targeting these communities. Making information available and accessible in several languages and on multiple platforms can help to bridge the gap.



“Building a robust and year-round digital media infrastructure for Latino voters, including in Spanish, is crucial. The media has an opportunity to engage the Latino community by investing in creating organic content and online distribution channels, building trust with Latinos, and using trusted messengers to deliver accurate information to the Latino community.”

– Jacobo Licona, Equis Institute

## **Strategies for Newsrooms**

### **Fact-checking and Pre-bunking**

Journalists are familiar with fact-checking, but staffing and deadline challenges can be an issue. D’Angelo Gore of Factcheck.org shared strategies to make the process easier:

#### 1. *Limit fact-checks to statements of fact*

Sticking to statements that have clear benchmarks (like statistics, quotes, or dates) will save time and energy and prevent wasting time investigating claims that cannot be proven right or wrong.

#### 2. *Reach out to the person who made the statement or post*

The burden of proof is on the individual who made the claim. Reaching out can be helpful because, more often than not, the person will be willing to show you where they got the information. Avoid making assumptions or being accusatory when reaching out.

#### 3. *Use your network and original sources*

Reach out to experts on the topic who might be able to verify the information with ease. Discuss with a colleague who might be able to point you to a new resource. Try consulting video footage or audio transcripts when fact-checking a quote.

#### 4. *Pick your battles*

Newsrooms must decide which claims to fact-check. In some instances, publishing a fact-check can amplify the disinformation, doing more harm than good. With another colleague, decide whether correcting the disinformation will set the record straight or will foster more misinformation. Consider, for instance, how widespread the misinformation is when making the decision.

#### 5. *Keep a record*

Sometimes disinformation repeats itself, so keep a database of claims you have fact-checked before. This way, you don't have to do the work twice, and you'll be able to track repetitive sources of false information.



“Be proactive instead of reactive. Produce content that provides accurate information about a subject that will act to counter misinformation that may come later.”

– D’Angelo Gore, Factcheck.org

In addition to fact-checking, pre-bunking can help newsrooms navigate the flood of disinformation. When big civic events, like elections, are coming up, newsrooms can proactively put out stories about topics likely to spark mis/disinformation before false claims get a chance to circulate. Explainer pieces and resource lists are great resources for local communities. In general, make a game plan for tackling future misinformation.

### **Integrating Findings Into Stories**

When integrating fact-checks into a story, Lukito suggests putting the piece of false information between two pieces of true information, known as a truth sandwich. For example, start with the context, follow with the false statement, and end with a correction.

Remember to also back up the original piece of misinformation by saving a copy to a computer or archiving it on Junkipedia or the Wayback Machine. Once you've stored the original, don't forget to report it as misinformation to prevent it from circulating any longer than it already has.

## Planning Coverage that Engages and Legitimizes

When covering the election, it's of the utmost importance to craft coverage that is transparent and instills trust. Caroline Murray and Gina M. Masullo from the Center for Media Engagement discussed their research on [why people believe in election fraud](#) and how news organizations can help [bridge the divide](#) between the media and American conservative and right-leaning audiences.



“The good news is that, even among the conservatives that we surveyed and interviewed, trust in local media is relatively high relative to national media.”

– Gina M. Masullo, Center for Media Engagement

The research findings offer several suggestions for newsrooms:

- Carefully consider what images, graphs, and diagrams are incorporated and ask yourself, “Can this be misleading?”
- Explain how early election returns work and why the results may change over time. Don't make the assumption that every viewer has the same background information.
- Be radically transparent. Offer explanations that show the audience the process of writing a story and how they might access those same resources. Let your audience in behind the scenes.
- Be sure to represent all sides, but don't oversample the more extreme cases just because they are more exciting. Extremist journalism often skews audience perception, so be sure to paint a clear picture of moderation when it is warranted.



“There were of course some people that were on the fringe-edge, but I think that most people were just struggling to understand the voting process and really wanted to.”

– Caroline Murray, Center for Media Engagement

## More Information

Fact-checking and fighting against misinformation can be time-consuming but is vital to our democracy and our daily lives and must continue to be a priority for journalists. The guidance from speakers at the symposium can help newsrooms in this work by providing ways to increase trust and to put a stop to locally circulating misinformation.

As a journalist, being on the front line of misinformation often means being exposed to hateful, violent, or racist discourse, so be sure to protect your personal information, take internet breaks, and find ways to disconnect.

- [Symposium slides](#)
- [Symposium videos](#)
- [Election Coverage Quick Tips](#)