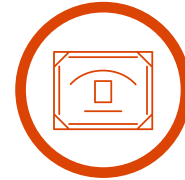# Combating Misinformation

Liz Schroeder

Oregon State University

Today's workshop
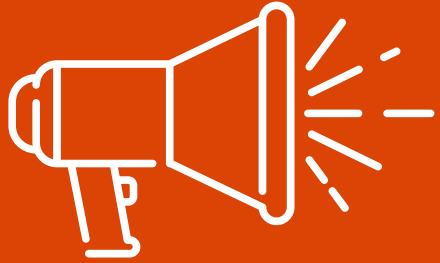
The threat of misinformation

What makes us susceptible to misinformation. What makes misinformation stick. How polarization, fragmented media and social media play a role in spreading misinformation.

Fighting misinformation

Based on this information, what are the best practices for fighting misinformation? How they can be applied locally.

THE THREAT OF MISINFORMATION
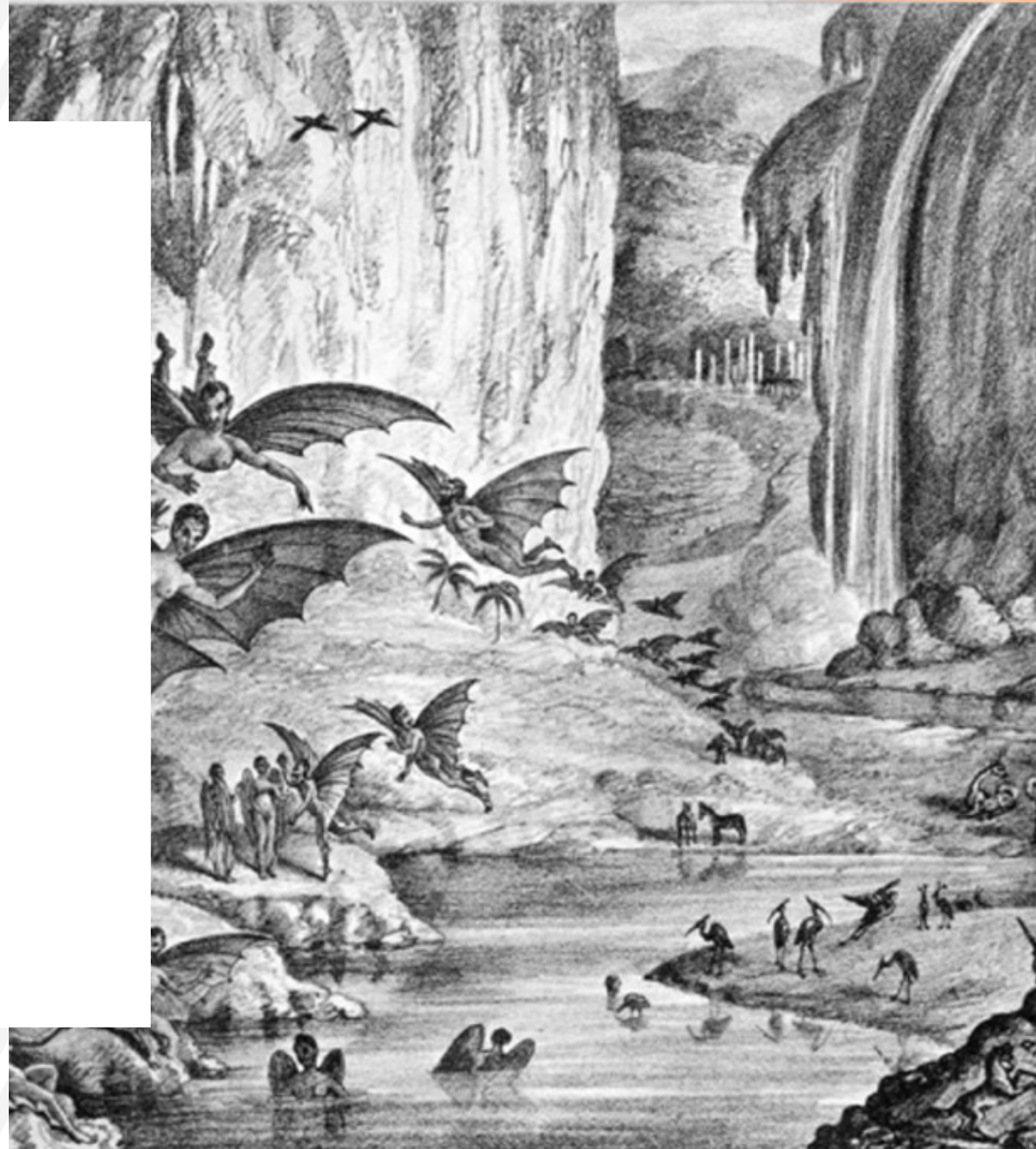
What is misinformation?

False or misleading information masquerading as legitimate news

1. Outdated news initially thought to be true and disseminated in good faith

2. Technically-true but misleading half-truths

3. Entirely fabricated **disinformation** spread intentionally to mislead or confuse the public

4. Misconceptions can even be acquired from obviously fictional materials

Misinformation is not new

- The *New York Sun's* 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835

- Claimed that there was an alien civilization on the moon

- Established the Sun as a leading, profitable newspaper

What is new: speed and magnitude

- Fragmented and polarized news landscape

- Social media effects

Traditional sources of info

o 79% of Americans trust local news more than national news sources to give them information they can use in daily life.

o Local news organizations are also trusted more to report the news without bias and to get the facts right.

Decline of local news

- 2,500 newspapers in the United States — ¼ of them — have closed since 2005.
    - Ad revenue fell by over 80% from 2005 to 2020

- "News deserts"

- Oregon
    - 2 counties have no newspaper, 20 have only a weekly newspaper
    - Circulation has decreased more than 40% since 2004 and cuts continue

- **Information vacuum**
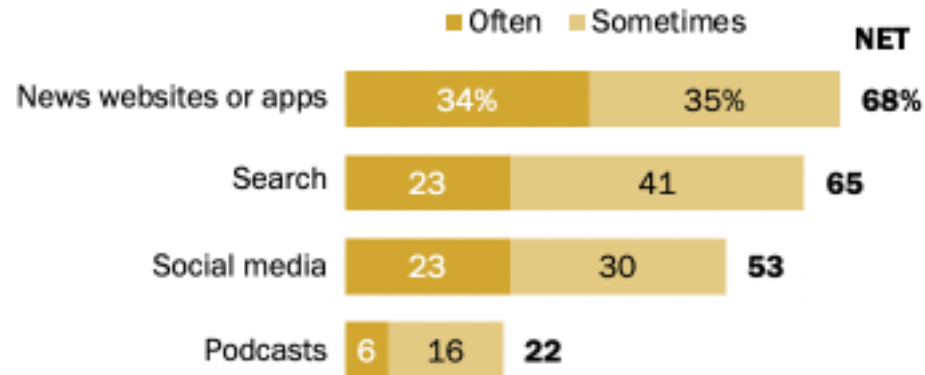   - Making it possible for misinformation to flourish online

Rise of online news

o 86% of U.S. adults get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet "often" or "sometimes"

Americans more likely to get news on digital devices from news websites, apps and search engines than from social media

% of U.S. adults who get news _____ from ...

	Often	Sometimes	NET
News websites or apps	34%	35%	68%
Search	23	41	65
Social media	23	30	53
Podcasts	6	16	22

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fragmentation of news sources

o Different people see and hear different content

o Selective exposure
  o People with different political identities place their loyalty and their trust in very different sources.

o Creates homogeneous, polarized clusters or echo chambers

o Challenging to parse through this information
  o Large share of Americans say made-up news creates confusion and is a big problem for society.

Why are we susceptible to misinformation?

Identity

Behavioral biases

Familiarity
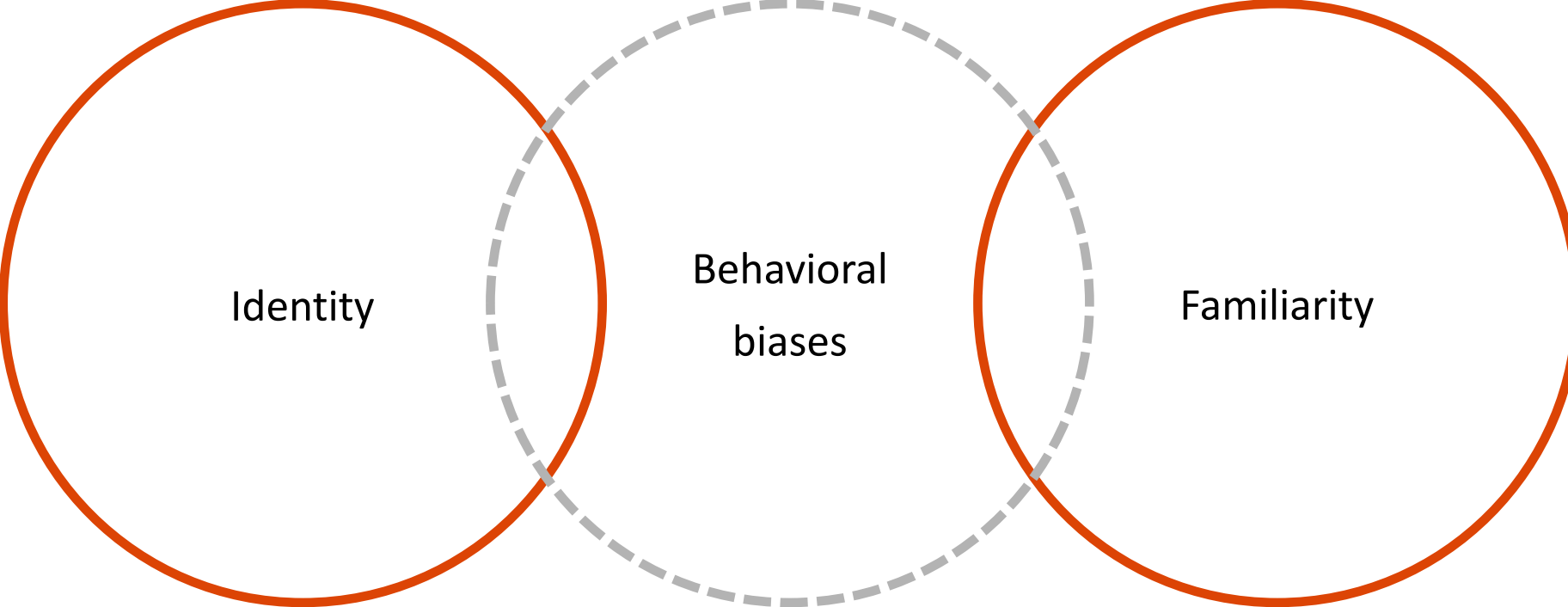
Group Polarization

- **Confirmation bias**: An automatic tendency to notice data that fit with our beliefs.

- **Motivated reasoning**: Tendency to scrutinize ideas more carefully if we don't like them than if we do.
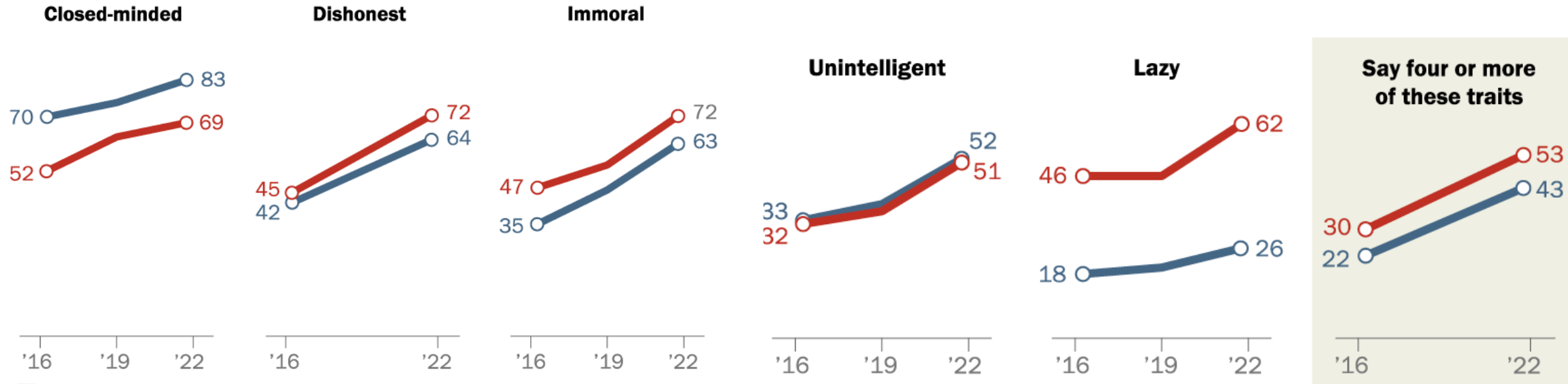
Rise of polarization

Growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats say members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, closed-minded than other Americans

*% who say members of the **other** party are a lot/somewhat more ____ compared to other Americans*

— Republicans say Democrats are more ...
— Democrats say Republicans are more ...

Closed-minded
70
52
83
69

Dishonest
45
42
72
64

Immoral
47
35
72
63

Unintelligent
33
32
52
51

Lazy
46
18
62
26

Say four or more of these traits
30
22
53
43

'16   '19   '22

Note: Partisans do not include those who lean to each party.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 27-July 4, 2022.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Examples: study on mask mandates

Study on mask mandates

o 9 months into the pandemic, Americans had no clear sense of which level of government was responsible for COVID policies in their local communities.

o The more opposed to the policies people were, the more likely they were to blame whichever level of government was controlled by the opposite political party.

Experiments about government services

o When individuals believe a program or service is low quality, they are likely to assume it is provided by government.

o When encountering a program or service that is perceived to be of higher quality, they are more likely to assume it is provided privately.
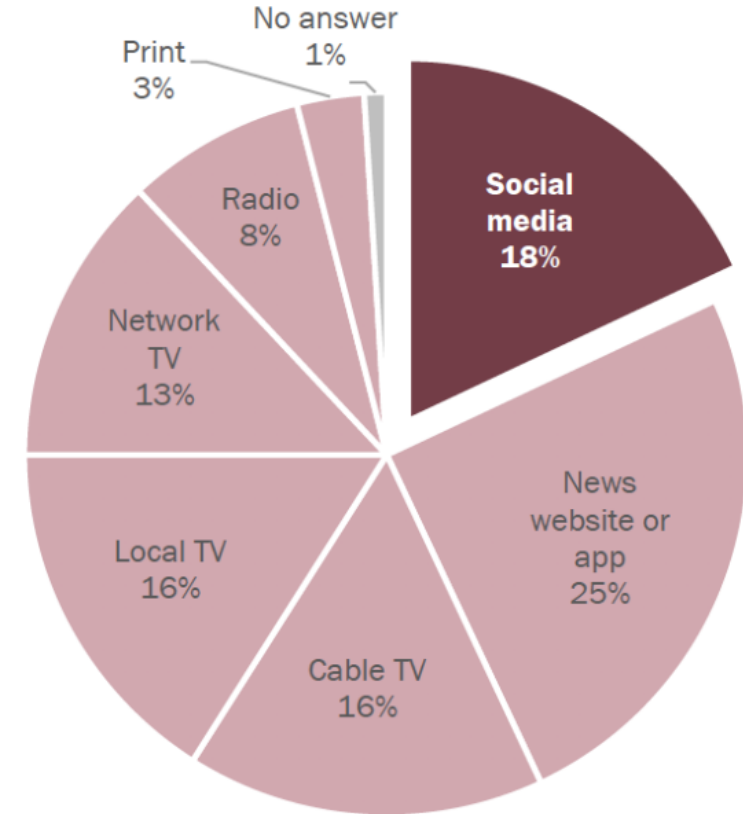
Social media

○ Democratized publishing of information

○ Gatekeepers are not traditional publishers and editors

About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news primarily through social media

% of U.S. adults who say the most common way they get political and election news is ...

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019. "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Social media and identity

o We tend to share information because it **connects us with others**, not necessarily because it is true.
   o "Interesting if true" or "just asking questions"
   o Share to mark identity

o We trust people when we feel like they're on our side
   o Cognitive trust vs. effective trust

o Replies between like-minded individuals strengthen group identity
   o Can strengthen tentative beliefs

Misinformation is sticky

o Repetition leads to "illusory truth" effect

    o We tend to believe falsehoods when they're repeated often enough

    o People more inclined to pass along a rumor after they'd heard it two or three times.

o Even if source is discredited, repeated exposure to info still tilts people toward believing its claims

o Corrective information doesn't get the same level of attention as the original misinformation

Social media and familiarity

- Posts that drive engagement are favored over everything else.
  - More time spent on platform leads to more revenue
  - Algorithms favor outrage, anger, lies, conspiracies because those drive engagement.

- Misinformation is shared much more often and travels more quickly
  - False news stories are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than true stories
  - The lifecycle of political misinformation on social media is longer than that of facts and tends to reemerge multiple times

Left post (Facebook):

▶ **Wisconsinites Against Excessive Quarantine**

17 hrs · 🌐

URGENT ACTION NEEDED if you know people who think like we do and live in Appleton, bad stuff is about to happen at the council meeting tonight. I copied this from someone else. They apparently really want to push this through. 😠

For those living in Appleton the city council is voting TONIGHT (Wednesday the 17th) whether or not to approve 1.2M in gov. funding for contact tracing, isolation measures for those with or suspected COVID, etc. All cities are being faced with this decision per Evers. There are now cameras set up all over for surveillance. Please call or email the 15 members of city council. See page 6 of 8 then open the pdf. Share the link and copy paste this post please

https://cityofappleton.legistar.com/View.ashx...

Also I'm hearing there's a county wide meeting in outagamie cty next week 22 or 23. If anyone has info please share it with all on here. And looking for brown county info as well. Thanks I'm advance

😠😮👍 386   231 Comments

Right post:

This is how voter fraud happens different colors for Different affiliates Don't need to open it up and see you voted for the color of the envelope States whether you are a Democrat republican or independent. If this is not voters fraud I don't know what is.do not mail it in hand deliver. And pray that ot is not thrown away.

OFFICIAL BALLOT ENCLOSED

OFFICIAL BALLOT ENCLOSED
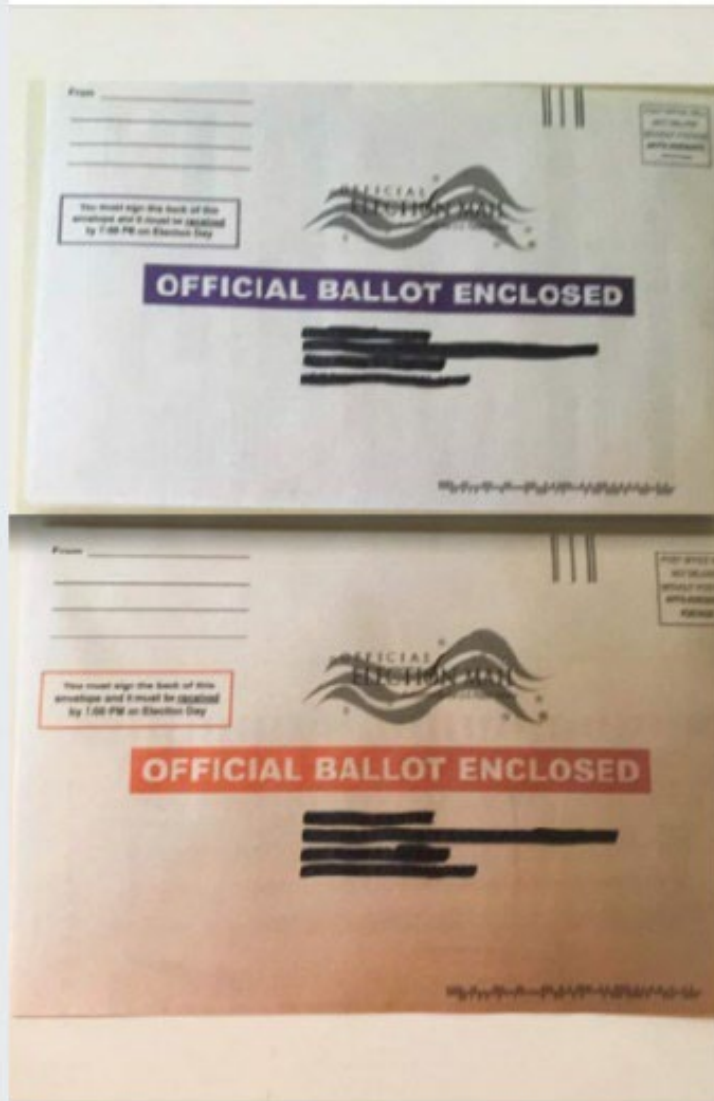
😠👍😮 15   41 Comments 84 Shares

City says misinformation rampant surrounding playground equipment for autistic children

Elliot Lake will continue to serve those children

Brent Sleightholm
Apr 1, 2022 3:12 PM

This week Elliot Lake City Council voted to move some playground equipment out of Westview Park.

The specially-designed equipment had been designed and installed in the park on the shores of Elliot Lake, to benefit autistic children.

The city was forced to take the step after vandals who abused the equipment wound up causing sleepless nights for people living across the water from the park.

Since last Monday's virtual council meeting, City of Elliot CAO Daniel Gagnon said there has been misinformation circulating about the fate of the park and specialized equipment for youngsters with autism.

He stated that remedies will be taken to make sure autistic children will continue to have their recreational needs met.

City of Dixon to Host a Town Hall Meeting in Regards to Recovery and Sober Homes to Clear Up Misinformation

By Tim Lee

Aug 1, 2022 | 6:29 PM

According to Dixon City Manager Dan Langloss there is a great deal of misinformation in the community in regards to Recovery and Sober Homes. At the Dixon City Council meeting Monday night, he also said the city has also heard legitimate concerns from the public.

HESPERIA STAR

Officials: Misinformation being spread

City website statement says spread could be intentional

Staff Reports

Published 11:19 a.m. PT May 5, 2015 | Updated 11:19 a.m. PT May 5, 2015

City officials last week released a statement clarifying a discussion regarding animal zoning at a recent City Council meeting.

Despite a lengthy discussion on animal zoning at the April 21 council meeting, officials said misinformation continues to be spread throughout the community. Officials say they believe this action may be intentional.

CORTEZ FIGHTING MISINFORMATION WAR OVER OVER REFUSE DEPARTMENT TROUBLES

2/22/2022

LOCAL NEWS NETWORK

Prince Edward Island

- Pop 156,947

- Story got 6 million interactions on Facebook

Drivers will now lose licence if they illegally pass a school bus

Fines already highest in Canada, and will be higher with more demerit points

Nicole Williams · CBC News · Posted: Nov 29, 2018 4:12 PM AT | Last Updated: November 30, 2018

As of Dec. 8, Island drivers will lose their licence if they illegally pass a school bus. (Brian Higgins/CBC)

208 comments

P.E.I. drivers will now lose their licence for a time if they illegally pass a school bus, Transportation Minister Paula Biggar said in the legislature Thursday.

Group discussion 1

o What examples of misinformation have come up in your communities?

o How were they spread? Social media, word of mouth, community groups?

o Did people ignore accurate information? Was there an information vacuum?

o Did group identity or repetition make fighting the misinformation more difficult?

o What are your concerns for the future?

Recap of discussion

o What common types of misinformation came up in your group?

o What common sources of misinformation came up in your group?

o What made misinformation the most difficult to fight?

o What are your concerns for the future?

FIGHTING MISINFORMATION

Identity and trust

- Information from sources that are perceived to be credible typically creates stronger beliefs and its more persuasive
    - Credibility can matter more than expertise for correction of misinformation

- Americans have higher levels of trust in local elected leaders than state or federal

- Tailor the message to the audience and use a messenger trusted by the target group

- Discredit disinformation sources that have vested interests

Stickiness of misinformation

- Fact-checking can reduce people's beliefs in false information

- But the misinformation often continues to influence people's thinking
  - "Continued influence effect"

- Backfire effect?
  - Headline: 'Bob Talbert is not linked with Mafia'

- Important to use the most effective debunking approaches

Two arms of fighting misinformation

○ Prebunking

  ○ Try to inoculate people from believing misinformation

○ Debunking

Prevent misinformation from sticking if you can

o "Prebunking" or "inoculation"

o Explaining misleading or manipulative argumentation strategies to people

  o Makes people resilient to subsequent attempts

o Encourage people to:

  o Think critically about all the information they read on social media

  o Consider the source of the information and the experts associated with those sources

  o Evaluate all claims by checking them against other sources

o Simple, consistent reminders to follow these steps help lead to a more discerning use of social media.
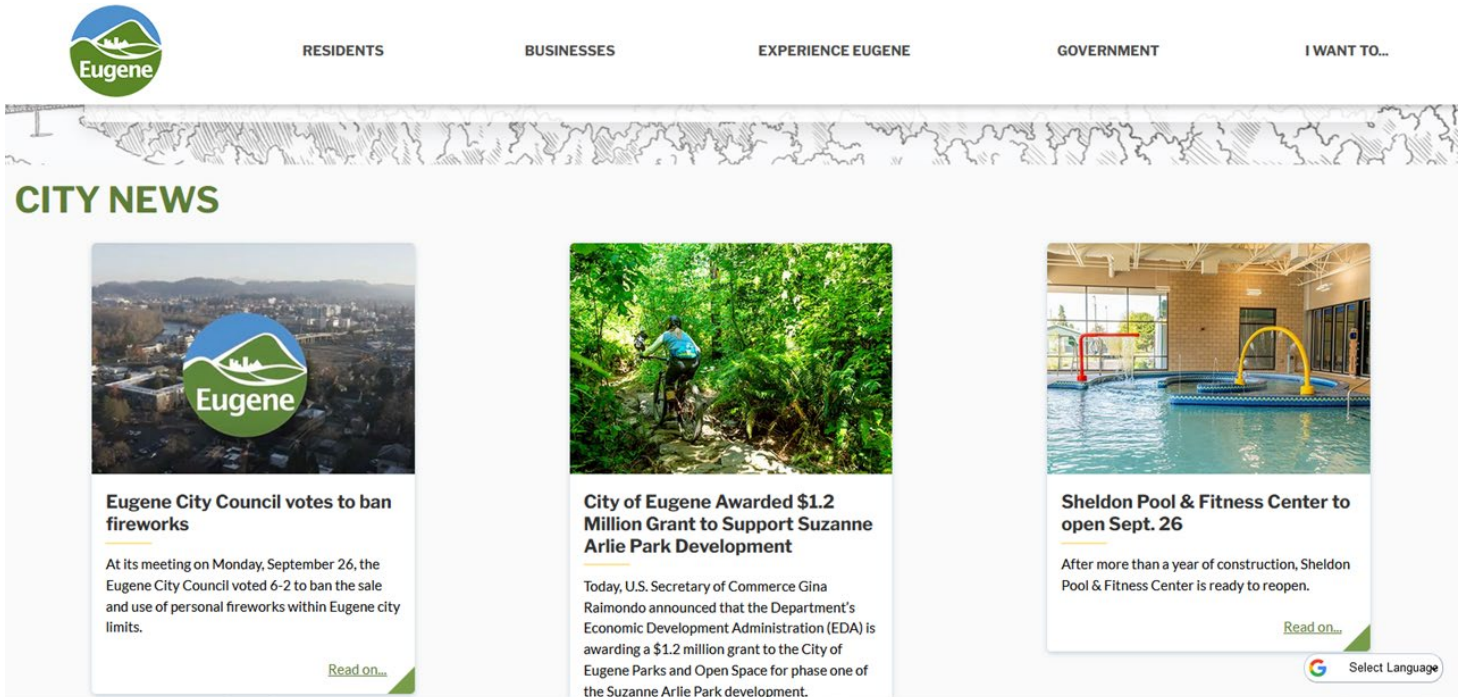
Be active communicators

o Present reliable, factually correct information before false information is spread

　　o The first information heard tends to be what sticks

　　o Should be issued quickly, repeatedly, and across multiple different platforms.

　　o Build a strong track record as a reliable source of information is key

o Effective methods

　　o Email

　　o Text

　　o Website

Amplify the message

o Every community has influential members who are trusted by the public

o Have a consistent and reliable voice

o Admit to mistakes when they are made

Systematically debunk

- If the misinformation is largely unknown, keep monitoring, withhold debunking, but be prepared
    - Avoid raising familiarity

- If myth is out there, but you can still set the agenda or frame the topic, provide accurate information.

- If myth has spread with fixed framing, debunk often and properly
    - Fact-checking and debunking doesn't necessarily backfire

How to debunk

FACT
Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible. It must "fit" with the story.

WARN ABOUT THE MYTH
Warn beforehand that a myth is coming... mention it once only.

EXPLAIN FALLACY
Explain how the myth misleads.

FACT
Finish by reinforcing the fact—multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative causal explanation.

Fact: State the truth first

o Make it sticky

    o Clear, concrete, say it in a few words

o Elevate trusted, local voices

o If possible, do not rely on simple retraction, i.e. "This claim is not true"

o Truth should not be more complicated than the original misinformation

Myth: Point to misinformation

o Repeat the misinformation, only once directly prior to the correction.

    o Avoid any potential backfire effects

o Corrections are most successful if people are suspicious of the source or intent of the misinformation

Fallacy: Explain why misinformation is wrong

- Clearly pair the misinformation with the rebuttal

- Explain
  - Why the mistaken information was thought to be correct in the first place

  - Why it is now clear it is wrong

  - Why the alternative is correct

- If possible, also point out the logical fallacy underlying the misinformation
  - e.g. cherry-picking data

Fact: State the truth again

o Restate the fact again, so the fact is the last thing people process

o Effects will wear off over time, so be prepared to debunk repeatedly

Remember role of worldview

o Efficacy of corrections depends in part on recipient's willingness to believe the statement.

o Activating group identities likely induces constraints on how people think about an issues

  o Could help or hurt misperceptions

  o May affect whom a person will believe

o Important to avoid stigmatizing groups for holding inaccurate beliefs

  o Likely to polarize more

  o **Debunk the idea, not the person.**

Debunking on social media

o Accuracy nudges and reminders increase the quality of people's sharing decisions on social media

  o "Most people want to receive accurate information"

o Mobilize social media users to respond quickly to misinformation by sharing facts

  o Individuals can make a difference online: "See something, say something:

o Seeing someone else on social media being corrected can lead to more accurate attitudes

City of Glendale Rumor Page

About

The City of Glendale's **Rumor Page** is dedicated to eliminating misconceptions,
and bringing residents the facts about varying issues and concerns within our community.

GWP Heat Wave Messaging

X During the last heatwave, GWP used its customer notification process ...

Rent Price in Glendale

X Rent.com Labels Glendale as Having the Highest Rent in Southern California

Americana at Brand Economic Impact

? The City of Glendale received numerous inquiries

HOME

FIRE

CONNECT

Economic Development &
Tourism Marketing　　▶

Grand Jury Reports &
Responses

Public Comment Guide

Correcting Misinformation

Correcting Misinformation

During public comment at board meetings and in other venues, we continue to hear misinformation about various aspects of the County's policies and operations. Below is a list of corrections to some of this misinformation, with the most recently added corrections provided at the top.

14. Myth: The County refuses to release video from the Board of Supervisors' January 2022 workshop.

The Board's workshop was not included in our contract with Nevada County Digital Media Center (NCDMC) as it is not normally live streamed. However, due to Covid protocols in place at the time, the County requested the additional service of live streaming the workshop which was available to the public and the media for viewing during the event. Unlike regular and special Board of Supervisors' meetings during which action is taken, the annual workshop is informational only; for this reason, written minutes (rather than a recorded video) are the official record of the event. These minutes can be found here. We recently learned that a saved recording of the livestream is accessible, and have uploaded it to that same link. *[Added 5/19/2022]*

13. Myth: Nevada County is tracking children through contact tracing.

Fact: Contact tracing does not involve tracking anyone. "Tracing" involves a voluntary interview with the COVID-positive individual to determine who they may have been in contact with during their infectious period so that close contacts can be notified and provided guidance and resources. We have no ability or desire to track anybody.

Additional Information:

- Contact Tracing: This is a long-standing practice to limit the spread of communicable disease. This involves contacting people who have tested positive (or their parents/guardians in the case of children) and connecting them with information and resources to help them manage their illness. This process also includes voluntarily interviewing them to determine if they have been in close contact with others during their infectious period who need to be notified of their possible exposure, and following up with those close contacts as needed.

Example of a refutation

FACT

Contact tracing does not involve tracking anyone. "Tracing" involves a voluntary interview with a COVID-positive adult to determine who they may have been in contact with during their infectious period so that close contacts can be notified and provided guidance and resources.

WARN ABOUT THE MYTH

A myth that is circulating claims we are tracking children.

EXPLAIN FALLACY

Without knowing the details of how contact tracing works, it might be understandable to think we are keeping the data. However, Rapid Trace staff have no ongoing access contact tracing data.

FACT

We therefore **cannot track people through contact tracing**. We have no ability or desire to track anybody.

Group discussion 2

o What tactics have you used to fight misinformation, and were they effective?

o What resources did you use?
  o Website, social media, newsletter, meeting, etc.

o What other resources could you use, and what are the constraints?
  o Staff time, budget, etc.

o Who are credible sources of information in your community you could enlist to help?

o Can you apply the "truth sandwich" to one of the instances of misinformation you talked about in discussion 1?

FACT

WARN ABOUT THE MYTH

EXPLAIN FALLACY

FACT

Recap of discussion

o Did your group have examples of techniques that worked?

o Did you get ideas for new ways to fight misinformation?

Key takeaways for fighting misinformation

o Fill the information vacuum at local levels
  o Prebunk if possible

o People share and believe misinformation due to group identity.
  o Be aware of this when debunking

o Information is sticky
  o Debunk using a "truth sandwich"
  o Debunk repeatedly

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THANK YOU

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University