

A Refresher: Considerations and Tactics for Reporting on Baseless Claims and Mis- and Disinformation

Prepared by Over Zero, January 2, 2021*

Narratives baselessly contesting democratic processes and procedures are often rooted in mis- and disinformation.

Correcting such misinformation can be tricky, particularly because the more we hear a piece of information (even if it is being disputed), the more likely we are to remember and believe it. Luckily, research and practice reveal effective ways to correct misinformation without reinforcing it. Below we outline both guiding considerations and specific tactics for effectively correcting misinformation.

Guiding considerations for correcting misinformation and reporting on baseless claims:

- ❑ **Familiarize yourself with the types of baseless narratives and mis- and dis-information currently circulating -- and with the correct information.** Be prepared with specific information refuting the false claims and with the accurate and factual information (for example [here](#) and [here](#)) and sources you can turn to for that specific information.
 - ❑ Current examples of debunked conspiracy theories and misinformation involve claims of voter fraud and voting irregularities, the procedures for Congress certifying the results, and the Vice President's discretion in rejecting certified results.

- ❑ **Consider the broader narratives and emotions that misinformation and conspiracy theories reinforce; couch explanations in similarly broad truths or worldviews.** Mis- and disinformation are often emotive, tapping into worldviews, identities grievances (real or perceived), and strong emotions like threat and fear. Consider how you can similarly couch any corrections in broader narratives, ideas, and belief systems. Think about how to couch any technical language or information in a broader truth or understanding- for example the history of elections in the U.S., the way we address disputes if they arise, the acceptance of results of a free and fair election by the loser, etc.

- ❑ **Examine the information ecosystem more broadly.** Familiarize yourself with the different speakers and channels spreading the misinformation. Think about their place in the information ecosystem (i.e. who finds them credible and why). Be prepared, if addressing specific mis- and disinformation, to question motives and discuss how and why it is spreading (e.g. fueled by algorithms, specific tactics) in addition to the content itself. Consider also your own credibility. Are there ways in your reporting to remind your audience of your credibility (for example by appealing to values your audience cares about)?

- ❑ **Consider whether addressing the misinformation will do more harm.** Think about how widespread the conspiracy theory or piece of misinformation currently is. For instance, if a piece of information is not being widely circulated, but rather, confined to a Reddit thread, addressing it may only serve to give in oxygen. Instead, you can consider how to keep playing “offense” with tactics such as positive framing (outlined further below) and providing consistent factual information about the issue at hand as the main story.

Effective misinformation correction tactics:

- 1. Correct misinformation as quickly as possible.** The more that people hear or see misinformation, the more they are likely to believe it.
- 2. Never ever repeat a false claim or misinformation in a headline.** Many people only read headlines, and headlines stick. For example, “[name] claims power to overturn election results” may result in more people believing the information by creating broader exposure, even if the rest of the article debunks this claim. Instead, frame the headline using the correct information, “election results are clear, though some baselessly reject them in a widely rejected bid to overturn the election.”
- 3. Beyond headlines, avoid repeating false claims or misinformation, particularly without first providing a warning or labeling the claim as misinformation or a conspiracy theory.**
- 4. Instead, use positive framing:** For example, if John has been accused of being a thief, the best correction will re-focus attention on what John is (e.g., “John is an honest person who is always sharing”) rather than what he is not (e.g., “John is NOT a thief.”) Why? Repeating the original accusation can strengthen the very association you are trying to undercut (John and thief).
- 5. If you must make reference to false claims or misinformation,** Carefully structure the corrective statement and provide a warning: Start by stating what is true. Then frame the misinformation – “there have been attempts to provide patently false rumors that [misinformation].” Next, reassert the correct information again. In other words, (1) truth + (2) warning + (3) misinformation or baseless claim + (4) reasserted truth. If you can, add (5) and include different messengers and experts who have credibility across a range of stakeholders asserting the correct information and rejecting baseless claims/following correct processes.
- 6. Always provide a simple, precise correction for the concerned misinformation, rather than merely disputing the false claim itself or framing it as something that’s debatable.** This is especially important for misinformation surrounding election procedures and other complicated or technical processes that the average person may not fully understand. Here, misinformation may gain steam simply because it’s easier to understand than the more complicated truth. To avoid this, distill any correction down to its core, essential parts and

avoid unnecessary detail. With election processes specifically, ensure your correction also addresses how these processes are clearly laid out in federal and state laws and the long history of following them. This will avoid false equivalencies between, on the one hand, what the law and precedent mandate and, on the other, any alternative processes proposed.

7. If possible, provide an alternative explanation for the evidence underlying the incorrect claim. Misinformation is more influential when people infer a causal relationship from the evidence and subsequent event (e.g., between the delays in counting mail-in ballots and Biden's victory). A correction that simply disputes that there was fraud will be less effective than one that explains the connections between mail-in voting being favored by Biden supporters, the state-mandated delays in counting mail-in ballots until election night, and the timing in announcing Biden's victory.
8. **Whenever you can, make sure your correction comes from a source (whether an individual, institution, or organization) that people find credible and that represents their interests and values.** If you're the one to make the correction, reference sources you think your audience will find credible (for example, referencing a trusted local leader and what they had to say about it).
9. **Show the norm of rejecting misinformation and baseless claims and instead following democratic processes and sharing correct information.** For example, where there are many people across political lines and from different sectors rejecting the misinformation or baseless claims or sharing the correct information, repeat them and quote them – show the broad norm of buying into correct information.

**Guidance drawn from Over Zero's September 2020 publication, "Building a Resiliency Network: A toolkit for building community resilience during a contentious election cycle."*