

INOCULATING YOUR AUDIENCE AGAINST FAKE NEWS

How Transparency Can Help Build Trust and Counter Disinformation

BY KALEIGH ROGERS, Freelance Journalist

Hotsheets

When the President of the United States tweets about “fake news” almost daily, you can expect your audience is going to be wondering about what they can believe.

One of the most insidious effects of the rise of disinformation online has been the erosion of trust in legitimate journalism. But this has also created an opportunity: a chance to build bridges with your readers and empower them to become more news literate. Here are some steps that you can take to help guide your readers through the increasingly murky waters of online media and enhance your audience’s trust in your publication’s work.

CREATE YOUR OWN TOOLKIT FOR READERS

One of the first priorities for inoculating your audience against disinformation is to build a toolkit for your readers. Creating a living document that you can refer to in your reporting will come in handy over and over again and will provide a resource that your audience can come back to while learning to better identify and avoid fake news.

You will want to cover the different kinds of disinformation and provide a basic introduction to DIY fact-checking. The former can include things like the difference between disinformation — false information being deliberately shared in an attempt to mislead — and misinformation, which is shared by mistake or not knowing any better. The latter can provide readers with simple tips for checking sources themselves, such as how to do a reverse image search or figure out if a URL matches the site they’re trying to reach.

In your toolkit, you may want to include common strategies used by those who spread disinformation. Understanding where disinformation comes from and the tactics used to manipulate readers can help your audience more easily spot fake news when it comes across their feed. For example, disinformation is often packaged in a way that is emotionally-provocative, with sensational headlines and images. Give your readers a list of questions to ask themselves when they come across stories like this, such as “This is giving me a strong emotional reaction, why might someone want me to feel this way?” or “Have I seen this story covered anywhere else besides this one source?”

You can easily customize your guide to be specific to the content of your publication, giving readers tips and tricks to navigate the kinds of disinformation that might crop up in your area of coverage. For example, a health publication could provide readers with an introduction to how the peer review process works, as well as tips for following up on the source study behind a headline.

Before building your toolkit, read up on research into disinformation to understand how it spreads and how it might be impacting your area of specialization. [This report, from the UK parliament](#), covers a great deal of research. You can also check out existing guides to get inspiration, like [this one](#) for CBC News, or [this one](#) from the University of Toronto libraries.

Being their own fact checkers empowers readers to feel confident in what they read and share online, and magazine media can provide different tools to give their audience that confidence.

MAKE DEBUNKING AND FACT-CHECKING A PART OF EVERY BEAT

We know that disinformation isn’t limited to politics. Everything from climate change to celebrity news is susceptible to misleading content that is designed to dupe readers. One way to help build your audience’s news literacy and their trust in your publication, is to make fact-checking a regular part of your publishing schedule.

While your instinct may be to ignore disinformation in order to avoid giving it more oxygen, sometimes the fake news can take on a life of its own and deserves a thoughtful take down — think of Snopes, but for your publication's focus. [Snopes](#) has made a name for itself online as a resource for double-checking dubious claims and the site tries to take a neutral approach to verifying rumours and popular stories going viral online. By regularly fact-checking the biggest pieces of disinformation in your space, you'll be establishing your magazine as a place where readers automatically turn whenever they come across something that seems suspicious. They'll know that they can trust you to be on top of what is being shared and providing neutral, fact-based reporting to verify or debunk the information.

Fact-checking articles are a cinch for most staff writers or freelancers who specialize in your publication's area of expertise. Keep an eye on social media for trending topics or memes that make false claims — these often have a long shelf life and are passed around for weeks or months at a time. Assign a writer to debunk the claims, with evidence to back up the facts. These are evergreen stories that audiences can share and refer to over and over, whenever the untrue nugget rears its ugly head. And, it will help build the credibility and authority your experienced writers deserve.

AVOID GETTING DUPED YOURSELF

Unfortunately, there are a growing number of examples of disinformation slingers targeting journalists in an attempt to deceive and discredit them. Even [the Washington Post revealed in 2017](#) that it had been the target of a malicious attempt to plant a fake story in its pages — luckily, the Post's high journalistic standards meant the ploy was exposed.

With tight budgets and the pressures of 24/7 publishing on digital media, it can be easy to let journalistic rigours slip through the cracks. But it's important to stay on alert for attempts to deceive. Videos and images are particularly likely to be deceptive, as they're easily manipulated or shared out of context, so make sure to triple check the source of the media before reporting on it.

The same goes for any story that seems too good to be true. Bad actors know that a good scoop increases up the pressure on magazines hoping to break the news first and will try to use it as bait in the hopes that publications will get sloppy in a rush to publish. The more urgent the story, the more you careful you want to be with your details.

The last thing any magazine wants is to become purveyors of fake news themselves. Staying on alert and leaning on well-worn standards of journalism will help protect your readers and your reputation.

BUILD TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENCY

We can actually use the scourge of disinformation as an opportunity to open the door to our audience. So much of how publishing happens is opaque to the average reader. At one time, this may have added an aura of exclusivity and authority to what appears in the pages of your magazine. But now, a lack of transparency only makes readers wonder, "Where'd they get this from anyway?"

There are lots of ways you can be more transparent about the process behind your work. Profiles of your writers and editors can highlight their experience, training and expertise. Or you can add this information to their byline: something as simple as listing the number of years they've been writing about a specific topic can speak volumes about their professional skills.

If you haven't already, you might also consider publishing and promoting your standards and practices online, including how you vet sources, check facts and what your publication's rules are on things like reviews and free products or travel. Having this available in black and white, and regularly referring to it, can also help readers understand that when your publication prints something, you can back it up.

LIFT THE CURTAIN TO REVEAL THE REPORTING PROCESS

Transparency ties in nicely with the last, but certainly not least, tip: give your readers an inside look at how your magazine "sausage" is made.

There are lots of ways to do this and you can look to what other publications are doing to find what best fits your magazine and audience. One strategy is to insert more of the reporting process into the story itself. If your writer called 14 different cancer survivors in order to get a broad range of experiences for a story, but only quotes three of them include that in the story. Or you

may choose to include editors' notes in your issues to further illuminate how much care and work goes into everything that you publish.

Social media can help, too. You can use Twitter threads to explain the reporting process behind a story and provide further details and context that didn't make the final cut or set up a Reddit "Ask Me Anything" session on a relevant subreddit. Even a video, chatting with a writer or following them as they do their job, can help further lift the veil.

What we take for granted as a normal part of the publishing process is often completely unknown to readers. Show your work and your audience will grow to appreciate — and trust — it even more.

--

This Hotsheet is presented as part of the Age of Disinformation project.



We acknowledge the support of the Government of Canada.

