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Countering Misinformation: Tips for Journalists

Avoid negations, use graphics, and get the story right the first time!

By Brendan Nyhan

This article was written by Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler. It is adapted from Misinformation and Fact-checking: Research Findings from Social Science (PDF), a New America Foundation Media Policy Initiative report they co-authored that was released Tuesday in Washington, DC.

With eight months to go before Election Day, the political misinformation cycle is already in full swing as misleading super PAC ads flood the airwaves.

Citizens and journalists alike are concerned that the prevalence of misinformation in our politics may pollute democratic discourse, make it more difficult for citizens to cast informed votes, and limit their ability to participate meaningfully in public debate. In particular, we know that many political myths are difficult to correct once they become established. So how can journalists most effectively counter the misleading claims that are made in the 2012 campaign?

Unfortunately, available research in this area paints a pessimistic picture: the most salient misperceptions are typically difficult to correct. This is because, in part, people's evaluations of new information are shaped by their beliefs. When we encounter news that challenges our views, our brains may produce a variety of responses to compensate for this unwelcome information. As a result, corrections are sometimes ineffective and can even backfire (PDF).

And even if people are not actively engaged in resisting unwelcome facts, the limitations of human cognition can hinder the correction of misperceptions. For example, once a piece of information is encoded in memory, it can be very difficult to undo its effects on subsequent attitudes and beliefs. Trying to correct a false claim with a negation (e.g., "John is not a criminal") can also lead people to more easily remember the claim you are trying to negate ("John is a criminal"). Finally, people may use the familiarity of a claim as a heuristic for its accuracy. If corrections make a claim seem more familiar, we may be more likely to see the

underlying—and incorrect—claim as true.

Nonetheless, there is reason for cautious optimism. In our report (PDF), we identify several strategies that show at least some promise in experimental studies. Based on these findings, we offer a series of practical recommendations for journalists and citizens about what to do and what *not* to do when trying to counter misperceptions:

1. Get the story right the first time. Once an error is communicated and stored in people's memories, it is difficult to undo. Even when people are exposed to a correction and acknowledge that the initial claim was false, the errant information may continue to influence their attitudes. In addition, people may misremember the false claim as true over time.

2. Early corrections are better. News organizations should strive to correct their errors as quickly as possible and to notify the media outlets that disseminated them further. It is difficult to undo the damage from an initial error, but rapid corrections of online articles or video can ensure that future readers and other journalists are not misled.

3. Beware making the problem worse. While prompt corrections are valuable, it's important to recognize the risk that corrections can *increase* the prevalence of misperceptions. First, news reports seeking to correct a misperception may expose more people to false information and thereby increase belief in the myth rather than reduce it. Corrections may also increase the prevalence of a misperception if people who hold it are provoked to defend their prior beliefs. Finally, even if people initially accept that a given claim is false, they may suffer from an "illusion of truth" over time and come to believe that the claim is accurate. A careful balance must be struck between the desire to correct misperceptions and the risks of popularizing them further.

4. Avoid negations. Stating a correction in the form of a negation may reinforce the misperception in question. Research and theory suggests that corrective affirmations ("John is exonerated") are likely to be more effective than trying to negate a misperception ("John is not a criminal").

5. Minimize repetition of false claims. The more times a false claim is repeated, the more likely people are to be exposed to it. The fewer people exposed to a false claim, the less likely it is to spread. It is also important not to repeat false claims because people are more likely to judge familiar claims as true. As false claims are repeated, they become more familiar and thus may come to seem more true to people.

6. Reduce partisan and ideological cues. The context in which misperceptions are addressed seems to play an important role in the effectiveness of corrections. When corrections are embedded in media coverage of partisan politics, they are frequently ineffective and may even make matters worse. People may rely on partisan cues within the story and ignore or reject the content of the correction. As a result, framing corrections around misleading statements by prominent political figures (as most news coverage and fact-checking sites do) may be an ineffective means of reducing misperceptions. There is an obvious tension

here with other journalistic imperatives: corrections that do not identify a source are not only less newsworthy but may be more difficult for individuals to interpret and apply when they are later exposed to a misleading claim. But at a minimum, presenting information in an authoritative manner with a minimum of partisan cues is likely to be more effective than the "Democrats say X, Republicans say Y" frames that are typically used.

7. Use credible sources; don't give credence to the fringe. Sources matter when people evaluate factual claims. Corrections that come from unexpected or credible sources are likely to be more effective than those from the media or partisan sources. Experts who speak out against a misperception held by their ideological or partisan allies can be especially persuasive. For instance, an ABCNews.com story on the "death panels" myth stated that "even [health care experts] who do not support the version of the health care reform bill now being discussed... note that these accusations are shocking, inflammatory and incorrect." On the other hand, including pseudo-expert dissenters in stories on topics about which there is a scientific consensus can misinform the public about the available evidence and the views of the scientific community.

8. Use graphics where appropriate. When quantitative information can be presented in graphical form, it should be. Graphics appear to be a more effective means of correcting misinformation (PDF), especially about trends that may be the subject of misperceptions (the state of the economy under a given president, the number of casualties in a war, etc.).

9. Beware selective exposure. In a media marketplace with many options, people can make choices about the content they consume. In the political realm, they may seek out news outlets that are consistent with their ideological or partisan views (PDF). This problem of selective exposure can limit the effectiveness of corrections because media outlets may be less likely to correct misperceptions that are disproportionately held by their viewers or readers. In addition, journalists should be aware of the ways in which selective exposure can hinder the effectiveness of a given outlet's efforts to correct misperceptions. People may tend to select the stories that reinforce their views and avoid those that make them uncomfortable. This is a daunting challenge. But news organizations that are committed to stemming the flow of misinformation can begin to meet it by investigating ways to encourage readers to be exposed to a more diverse stream of news.

Of course, while these steps could help improve reporting about disputed facts, there is no "solution" to the problem of misperceptions, which are the inevitable result of the limitations of human information processing and the demand for misinformation in a polarized society. It is therefore worth considering whether we can instead affect the *supply* of misinformation at the elite level—that is, among the politicians and pundits who seek personal and ideological gain by starting or spreading false memes.

For instance, it may be more effective (PDF) to "name and shame" dishonest politicians and pundits who promote misinformation. Doing so could increase the reputational costs of false claims and thereby help change future elite behavior. These effects will be compounded if corrections help to create an elite consensus rejecting a particularly notorious false claim,

which can shape public opinion and create pressure on individual political figures to not make false statements. Even if corrections are sometimes ineffective at the individual level, fact-checking efforts that change the balance of elite beliefs on an issue can have powerful effects.