Guide: Confronting Disinformation

Mis- and disinformation are significant challenges facing Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities today. These issues threaten community safety, undermine trust in election systems, and even cause familial divisions. With the widespread use of the internet, social media, 24-hour news, and radio, false and harmful narratives targeting AAPI communities are spreading more rapidly and extensively than ever before. These false narratives have played a key role in recent elections, and continue to distort contemporary issues such as immigration, election integrity, public safety, and more.

Deciphering mis- and disinformation from facts can be challenging, even for experts. To address this, APIAVote has created a guide to provide background on the issue of mis- and disinformation in AAPI communities and offer tips for combating these false narratives.

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Background

Key Definitions

Misinformation: Misleading, incorrect, or false information; could be caused by human error, faulty fact-checking. Not intended to deceive.

Malinformation: Genuine information that is shared to cause harm; often de-contextualized information used to promote an argument or perspective.

Disinformation: Misleading, incorrect, or false information presented with the intent to mislead an audience.

Propaganda: True or false information spread to persuade an audience, which is often politically connoted. May use accurate, but selectively presented, information and identified sources.

Where is Disinformation Coming From?

When discussing disinformation, bad actors from foreign sources often come to mind. **Russian-based entities** with ties to the Kremlin have promoted disinformation in American spaces with the goal of polarizing the United States and eroding faith in our democratic institutions and promoting a pro-Putin worldview. One primary tactic they use is posing as Americans and creating fake social media accounts and **fake news sites** to appeal to American voters.

There is also evidence that **Vietnamese** and **Chinese-based entities** have also been pushing disinformation campaigns directed towards the United States. They employ many of the same tactics that Russian entities use, including creating fake accounts to manipulate public opinion and harass those perceived to be in opposition to the governing party. These disinformation campaigns, sometimes referred to as **'Spamouflage,'** since the fake accounts often post a lot of non-political content to hide their true intent, specifically attempt to erode public trust in the American government, stoke violent division between both parties, and elevate extremist positions across the political spectrum. However, these campaigns have had significantly less success than Russian-based entities as a result of has **largely failed** due to a number of factors such as issues of cultural context, online partition from the outside world, a lack of interconnected thinking between state media and disinformation campaigns, and the use of tactics designed for both countries' own heavily censored online environment.

Another rising player in this world of transnational disinformation is the 'Hindutva' movement in India. This movement is spearheaded by Indian Prime Minister Modi,

which posits that **Hindus ought to be the first class citizens of India** at the detriment of Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and other minorities. These views have found companionship with other religious and ethnic supremacist views in the United States, and the proliferation of such ideas could result in major harm to AAPI and other communities.

However, disinformation from foreign sources is only a fraction of the story. The truth is a significant portion of mis- and disinformation in the United States has domestic origins, to the point where it is an entire industry.

One major source of domestic disinformation comes from hyperpartisan news outlets. Often, such outlets will masquerade as **unbiased local media** in an attempt to build credibility. However, there are a number of notable national news outlets that receive significant engagement, despite being recognized as untrustworthy news outlets. For instance, one far-right news outlet, The Gateway Pundit, is marked by the reputable media fact-checking outlet **MediaBiasFactCheck** as having 'very low factuality', but nevertheless it has 'high traffic." Often, these hyperpartisan news outlets may report mostly factual information in their articles, but then include small bits of disinformation. For example, this can be seen in **this article** by the far-left outlet, the World Socialist Web Site, which reported on the real story that the United States government engaged in an anti-vaxx campaign in the Philippines, but then ended the article by making the claim that the United States' espoused concerns of China's human rights violations are also another disinformation campaign despite there being overwhelming evidence of human rights violations being true.

In the last few years particularly, artificial intelligence (AI) has also emerged as a powerful tool to create and spread false narratives at higher rates than before. In May 2024, the FBI published a **report** where they mentioned that the threat level from AI-based disinformation coming from China and Russia would be very high this election cycle. Specifically, AI can be used to manage large amounts of **bot accounts**, quickly generate graphics, and perhaps more frighteningly, to create deepfakes or robocalls that can imitate the voices of politicians and make it seem like they said a statement that they never said in reality. And it's not just foreign actors who use AI, but **domestic bad actors** as well.

Lastly, elected officials, political commentators, celebrities, influencers, and others with name recognition are also often key disseminators of disinformation. For instance, **OPB** featured an interview where a researcher describes how the spreading of mis- and disinformation gave Instagram influencers more clicks and profit. Additionally, the **Financial Times** found that the most misleading information can often come from elected officials. It is also important to note that disinformation can also sometimes be ordinary individuals that see their post go viral. Such posts can easily sway many viewers, especially since individual stories can be very hard to fact-check.

How Does Disinformation Impact Asian and Pacific Islander American Communities?

AAPIs, like other Americans, may find disinformation in their daily lives as they scroll through social media. There are several key factors that differentiate how mis- and disinformation impacts our communities in comparison to other communities:

- AAPIs are spread out across more platforms, often in-language, in comparison to other demographics. For example, **54 percent** of AAPIs regularly use WhatsApp - in comparison to **29 percent** of Americans overall. Other popular platforms amongst AAPIs include Line, Kakao, WeChat, Weibo, and Viber – which many AAPIs use as a main source of news. Many of these platforms have little to no infrastructure to moderate harmful content.

- Even on mainstream social media platforms, including Facebook and X/Twitter, that have moderation policies are not consistent in enforcement. To make matters worse, they are less likely to flag disinformation in **non-English languages**. This means the AAPI community, which encompasses over 50 languages, is potentially being exposed to more false and misleading narratives than the average user.

- Many immigrants in the community move to the United States with different experiences and historical/cultural backgrounds that frame their understandings of "democracy" and "government," and what it means to be "American". Consequently, there may be a gap for some on certain concepts in an American context – a gap that bad actors exploit to promote their hyper-partisan agenda.

- There is an insufficient number of in-language outlets, resources, and other accessible information for AAPIs. With a notable portion of the AAPI population's first language not being English, a vacuum is created – allowing bad actors to take advantage of these gaps to push their own agenda.

- Due to many AAPI immigrants keeping in touch with family and friends in their home country, they often interact with content from their home countries as well. While this is typically harmless, it adds another layer of complexity to understanding the full scope of mis- and disinformation within AAPI spaces; exposure to false narratives and other problematic content relevant to other countries' politics increases and can shape one's views here in the United States. Conversely, harmful narratives and conspiracy theories originating in the United States can be spread to other countries.

Challenges and Gaps to Know

Language Comprehension and Cultural Understanding

The immense diversity of languages within AAPI communities presents significant challenges in monitoring problematic narratives and understanding cultural nuances. With AAPI communities encompassing over 50 languages and hundreds of cultures, language barriers hinder the ability to detect mis- and disinformation and impede efforts to engage with and support affected communities.

Moreover, cultural nuances and contextual factors inherent in each language further complicate the interpretation of messages and the formulation of effective responses. As a result, initiatives aimed at combating harmful narratives within AAPI communities must prioritize multilingual approaches, cultural sensitivity, and community-led interventions to address the diverse linguistic and cultural landscape effectively.

Insufficient Information on Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders

There is very little research on disinformation's impact on Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities, leaving a critical gap in understanding the unique vulnerabilities and the consequences faced by these groups. Despite being disproportionately affected by various socio-economic disparities, including limited access to resources and healthcare, NHPI communities have largely been overlooked in studies examining the spread and impact of disinformation. This lack of research fails to capture the nuanced ways in which disinformation campaigns may exploit cultural and historical contexts, exacerbating existing inequalities and threatening community well-being.

One recent example was the impact of disinformation on Native Hawaiian communities during the **2023 Hawaii wildfires**. Native Hawaiians have long had distrust towards American institutions due to their experience with colonialism and discrimination. Consequently, disinformation about receiving government help, the role of the government in the wildfires, and other conspiracies surrounding the wildfires such as being a terrorist attack proliferated throughout Hawaii. Bad actors in the traditional right-wing ecosystem helped amplify these claims.

This incident is a case study for how disinformation travels throughout NHPI communities, and the type of narratives that might target them. As disinformation continues to proliferate across digital platforms, urgent attention is needed to investigate the specific effects on NHPI populations.

Common Themes in AAPI Communities:

AAPIs come in contact with much of the same mis- and disinformation that other Americans do, including narratives related to election security, vaccines, and

immigration. However, there are some specific narratives that are either directly targeted towards AAPIs or resonate more strongly with AAPIs.

The following are a few examples:

- Misleading narratives of the impact of diversity initiatives on Asian Americans

- Blaming anti-Asian hate crimes solely on other minority groups

- Misleading claims around increasing Asian immigration into the United States

- Misleading anti-socialist or anti-democracy narratives that exploit historical traumas or knowledge gaps of AAPIs

- Exploiting historical distrust in American institutions and government at-large to push a hyperpartisan agenda

- False claims about the "loyalty" of an Asian American with the goal of undermining their character

- Scapegoating Asians for economic or public safety problems

Detecting Disinformation:

If information seems too good to be true, is inconsistent with other sources, lacks coverage by multiple sources, appears overblown or exaggerated, or lacks specific evidence, these are tell-tale signs that the information being presented may not be flawed or lacking in credibility.

Below are other tips to help identify problematic narratives:

- **Analyze grammar and sensationalism.** Unreliable and non-credible sources often utilize all caps, make spelling errors, and make other grammatical mistakes. They often also prioritize shock value, drama, or controversy to distort the true nature of events or issues, presenting them in a way that amplifies their impact or significance beyond what is warranted by the facts. The less neutral the language seems, the more caution should be taken.

- **Consider who the intended audience is.** To do this, analyze the language and tone used — whether it reflects terminology and viewpoints associated with a specific political ideology. Consider the central themes and issues discussed; these often align with topics of interest to particular partisan groups. Being able to determine the intended audience for a post helps in verifying the credibility of sources and identifying potential biases or perspectives that may affect the reliability of the information.

- **Ask yourself if the post makes you emotional.** Bad actors rely on emotional

responses for their fake or misleading stories to gain traction. If an article, post, or narrative provokes an emotional response – this may be the first hint multiple sources should be consulted regarding the story.

- **Check the source!** If it appears to be a news outlet or blog, use MediaBiasFactcheck.com or AllSides.com to determine if it is a trustworthy source. If it is an individual, do a background check. Investigate if the account has any real photos of the person; many hyperpartisan and spam accounts have no identifiable markers. Also check if the account was created recently; many bot accounts are created in response to recent news stories.

- **Check if other reputable sources are covering the narrative or assertion.** This is especially important if there is little to no information about the original source. This may include well-known national news outlets, trusted local news media, government websites, encyclopedias, and nonpartisan fact-checking websites.

- **Ask yourself if the information fits comfortably into your belief system.** Identifying disinformation can be challenging when it reinforces existing beliefs. When consuming information from unfamiliar sources, reflect on whether it fits too neatly into your pre-existing beliefs. This practice challenges assumptions and guards against believing false or misleading information.

Let's Debunk Disinformation Together:

Example 1

At first glance, this post from 2021 seems to be made by a verified account. Additionally, the account is listed as an official Chinese government official, a news

article is cited, and several graphics that list "facts" are posted. All of these points could potentially convince someone who is quickly looking through the post that it is saying something true. Additionally, the text of the post sets up opposing views as "far-right," thus taking advantage of people's negative view of the far-right in order to potentially make them agree with the content of the post more easily.

However, if we do some quick searches and examine this story more critically, we can find several issues with it.

Firstly, a search of Lijian Zhao will reveal that he has consistently posted disinformation that elevates the views of the Chinese government and supports other authoritarian governments while simultaneously attacking democratic nations. For instance, he has spread falsehoods that support Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and disinformation that claimed that the United States intentionally initiated the spread of COVID-19 in China.

Additionally, a quick search on **The Grayzone**, which is the source cited in the post, reveals that it is rated by multiple fact checking websites as a far-left source with low to mixed factuality. The Xinjiang Data Project, a research project based in Australia, has found that China **has consistently been amplifying** content from The Grayzone as they often make posts that hide China's humanitarian violations. The Xinjiang Project additionally has found that China has been seeking to intentionally spread disinformation throughout American outlets in order to indoctrinate people to be more positively disposed towards them. This is an example of the aforementioned campaigns of foreign disinformation that seek to erode trust in the United States government.

While, of course, there is a justifiable skepticism that many Americans have towards the United States's government's foreign policy, quick searches will reveal that the oppression happening in Xinjiang is very well reported by almost every other government in the world, not just the United States.

Thus, this post is a clear example of disinformation.

Example 2:
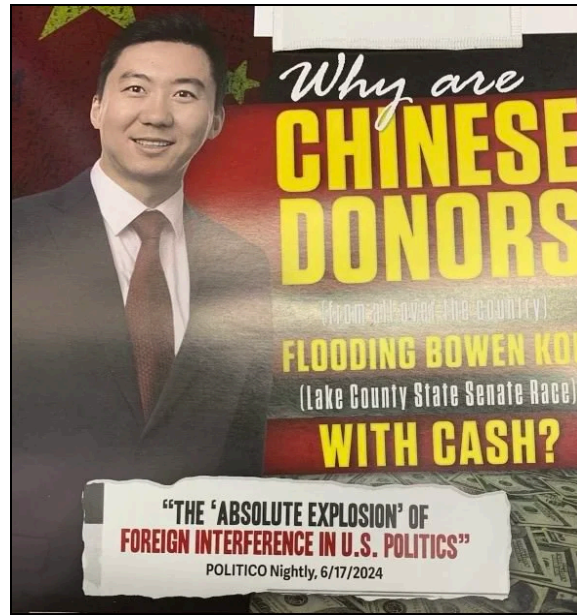
This mailer was sent out during the 2024 election cycle to voters in Florida's 13th State Senate District. The man featured on the mailer, **Bowen Kou**, is a Chinese American who immigrated to the United States almost 20 years ago for college, and who is now a businessman running for a seat for Florida's State Senate as a Republican. The ad pictured above was sent by the Florida Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, and was endorsed by Kou's main opponent in the primary, Keith Truenow.

This mailer associates Kou with the Chinese government, and claims that his campaign is a form of Chinese interference in American politics. The flip side of the mailer, which is not pictured, says that 80 percent of Kou's donors are from out-of-state, and it lists the names of these donors, which are publicly available, emphasizing that most of them have "Chinese names."

These words and images can easily create the impression that Kou is funded by the Chinese government, thus persuading voters to not vote for him. However, this can be debunked by looking closer. First, it is illegal for noncitizens to donate to campaigns – therefore, it would be impossible for the list of publicly available donors to include Chinese nationals. Additionally, the fact that Chinese people from out-of-state are donating money to Kou can easily be explained if you research what Kou's occupation is. He is a businessman who runs a nationwide chain of Asian American groceries. Thus, it makes sense that he has business partners and colleagues from around the nation who would be Asian American.

This mailer also cites a line from a Politico article as if the article was written about Kou, when in fact, reading the actual article, it was not written in reference to him at all. Nonetheless, the inclusion of a trusted news outlet, regardless of its irrelevance, gives a sense of credibility to the mailer.

Thus, while the mailer does not directly say any information that is false in and of itself, it leaves out critical context and shapes the factual information into a narrative that is ungrounded in fact, but rather Sinophobia. This incident is a perfect example of why mass education on what election laws exist as well as the long history of red-baiting tactics used against Asians in public life is crucial to inoculate voters from such efforts.

Combatting Disinformation as an Organization

There must be policy change to hold social media companies accountable, and to restructure the ways in which they handle disinformation and other problematic content. There must also be societal-level improvement in media literacy, and consequences for problematic entities who knowingly push out and profit from disinformation.

These changes will not happen overnight, however. In the meantime, there are important steps organizations can take to combat disinformation now:

- **Do not engage with problematic content.** Whether a user is responding positively or negatively to mis- or disinformation, engagement such as likes, reposts, or comments help it spread to a wider audience. Avoid doing this at all costs.

- **Repeatedly push out factual information and messaging.** Those who come across problematic information but were previously exposed to factual information are more likely to be skeptical of something that contradicts something they already know. This process is known as *inoculation*.

- **Enlist trusted messengers.** It is critical that the target audience of a message trusts the individuals sharing the information. These messengers may not always be from one's own organization, but may include local community members, influencers, doctors, professors, in-language journalists, and others who are respected within the community.

- **Undermine bad actors.** Focus on discrediting the messenger rather than engaging with specific claims. Highlight their lack of credentials in relevant fields, history of falsehoods, or associations with controversial individuals or organizations. This approach weakens the foundation upon which their messages stand.

- **In-language, in-language, in-language!** Efforts to confront disinformation in AAPI communities must be in the language or languages they understand. Inclusivity helps bridge the information gap, allowing individuals to make informed decisions and participate fully in society. Moreover, providing information in multiple languages mitigates the risk of media deserts, areas where reliable information is scarce, being exploited by bad actors who spread misinformation.

- **Report problematic online posts.** Getting others to report the same post increases the chances it will be taken down, or at least flagged, by social media companies. This is not a means to an end, however – reporting posts has historically been met with mixed results of success.

- **Utilize the [truth sandwich](#)!** George Lakoff, an esteemed cognitive linguist and philosopher, suggests using a "Truth Sandwich" as a messaging tactic to counter mis- and disinformation. A **[truth sandwich](#)** includes starting with the truth, as people remember the first and last things they hear. Then, identifying the lie without repeating its specific language but referring to it vaguely. Lastly, finish with the truth. This method makes an audience more likely to remember the truth rather than the lie, while still allowing for the debunking and discussion of problematic disinformation.

How to Converse with Loved Ones about Disinformation:

Learning how to talk to friends and family who are repeating flawed, false, or sometimes dangerous talking points can be tricky. The initial instinct may be to react strongly, but this is often unproductive.

Here are some tips on how to approach these types of situations effectively:

- **Consult authoritative sources on the topic before engaging in a conversation about it.** Confronting disinformation without the correct information is unproductive. If possible, read up on the issue at hand

- **Know who you are speaking to.** If it is someone who is receptive to new information, engage. If this person is set in their beliefs, attempting to engage with them may only reinforce their beliefs. In this case, rethink engaging.

- **Speak to the person in private.** If this interaction is online, send a message. If this interaction is in-person, pull them aside or wait until there is not a crowd around. Challenging a person's assertions in public is likely to lead to embarrassment, which may only reinforce their beliefs.

- **Open with empathy and try to understand where the person is coming from.** It is also important to respond in good faith, and truly *listen* to the person – making sure they feel heard and understood. Ask questions, lay common ground, and try to understand where the person is coming from. People are significantly more likely to be receptive with this type of response.