

Communications in the Age of Fake News

A Crisis Handbook for

Election Commissions



SMARTMATIC

Preface

Spreading disinformation breeds confusion and distrust and undermines our democratic process. Of course, propaganda is not new. The term “fake news” did not suddenly spring up during the 2015 US presidential campaign. Fake news is not a new idea; it’s been around for as long as human beings have used the spoken word to communicate. But the ease of use and the reach of social media put tremendous power and influence at the fingertips of anyone who chooses to use it – for good or bad.

There are many people, foreign and domestic, who exploit media to gain power, discredit ideas, weaken competition or destroy adversaries – all with the touch of a button. But the power of information doesn’t have to be controlled by those who would use it for nefarious purposes. Technology is also a formidable tool for disseminating truth. Media can be used to advance discourse that promotes fact over fiction, reason over fear. Right makes might.

Two arenas that are particularly vulnerable to disinformation are the election process and election systems. In recent years, bad actors have systematically disseminated lies in order to undermine elections by inciting fear, anxiety and distrust among voters. The responsibility of election officials has always been administering and protecting the integrity of the voting process. Now the threat to legitimate elections is compounded by the endless promotion of false information spread by those seeking to influence election outcomes. It is no longer enough for election officials to smartly and competently administer elections. They must also manage the information flow about elections. They must fight fake news.

With our extensive background assisting election officials around the world, we’ve acquired considerable experience in addressing the growing trend of disseminating disinformation that threatens to undermine the work of election officials – and delegitimize America’s government by the people. We’ve created this handbook as a planning tool and guide to aid election officials in countering false information and protecting the integrity of the election process in jurisdictions across the United States.

—The Smartmatic Team



4	Introduction
6	CHAPTER 1 How False Information Impacts the Work of Election Management Bodies
8	CHAPTER 2 A Five-step Crisis Communications Guide Step 1 – Audit the Context Step 2 – Develop a Crisis Communications Plan Step 3 – Prepare in Advance Step 4 – Taking Action In a Crisis Step 5 – Post-election Evaluation
18	CHAPTER 3 Final Recommendations
19	Glossary

Introduction

Elections are pressure-packed, time-limited events with high stakes. They are the bedrock of democracy. Reliable and actionable information from election authorities during an election is critical to voter confidence and voter turnout. Many factors can raise communications to a crisis level – long lines, voting machine breakdowns, accusations of fraud and more.

Election-related fake news - misleading or false information based on creating, promoting or sharing false facts and a false narrative - can ignite or aggravate a communications crisis during and immediately following an election. Such a communications crisis could significantly diminish the reputation and trust placed by individuals in an Election Management Body (EMB).¹

Having an easy-to-follow guide to combat fake news and prevent a communications crisis is a must for today's election officials. It saves time, strengthens leadership, offers a sense of readiness to act, helps build trust in election authorities and most of all, protects election integrity.

During the 2016 presidential elections in the United States, the fake news phenomenon became a pressing issue of global significance. The potential influence of election misinformation and disinformation² in the voting process presented EMBs with the need to be proactive, prepared and responsive. Therefore, the purpose of this handbook is to provide EMBs with a communications road map to avert and combat fake news while offering useful and reliable sources for information.

A crisis communications management approach recognizes the urgency of engaging quickly and forcefully in order to curtail the effects of false information, and to provide fact-based

Disinformation: false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.

Misinformation: information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who don't know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.²

clarity to individuals who have been the targets of disinformation. It brings together voters, candidates, and organizations during the crisis and provides them with supportable facts that they need to make informed decisions and to respond to falsehoods.

Communications experts agree that having a well-developed crisis communications plan is critical to managing a crisis if and when it happens. The exchange of information that occurs within and between authorities,

1 The Election Management Body (EMB) is the authority charged with administering the election process. Due to the complexity and extraordinary skills necessary for election management, a specific agency to be responsible for managing election activities is necessary. Such bodies have a variety of forms and sizes, with several titles which include Electoral Management Body (EMB), Electoral Commission, Electoral Council, Electoral Unit, Department of Elections, Electoral Board, etc.

2 Definitions according to ["Information Disorder: The Essential Glossary"](#) (By [Claire Wardle](#), with research support from Grace Greason, Joe Kerwin & Nic Dias, July 2018)

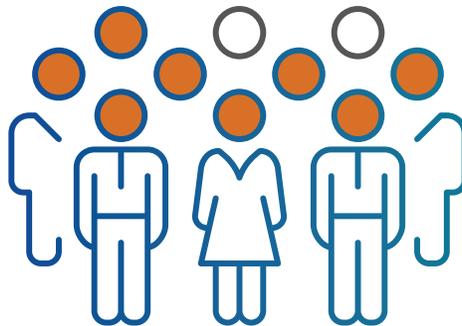
organizations, media, as well as interested individuals and groups, before, during and after an election should be regularly monitored, fact-checked and shared. This helps to counter disinformation and prevent a communications crisis, or may mitigate its impact if one does materialize.

This handbook includes best practices and guidelines to help EMBs coordinate their internal and external communications response to a potential crisis caused by misinformation or disinformation in the press and on social networks during an election cycle.

Chapter One offers a brief perspective on how fake news can negatively impact elections, the EMB's work and the importance of public trust. It provides the foundation for understanding the practical applications outlined in the following chapters.

Chapter Two offers a practical guide to creating a crisis communications plan to address false information that can compromise an election.

Chapter Three provides final recommendations on managing the flow of information and evaluating an election authority's performance during a crisis.



FACT: 8 in 10 Americans say that the news media are critical or very important to our democracy.

Source: 2018 American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy - Gallup/Knight Foundation

How Fake News Impacts the Work of Election Management Bodies

Disinformation is false information meant to cause harm, and misinformation is false information that might adversely affect individuals, organizations or movements, though not deliberately. The spread of both forms of false information in the digital political sphere, and more prominently before and during elections, can have a negative impact on election systems, management and the integrity of results as well as confidence in Election Management Bodies (EMBs).

The creation and dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and hoaxes has increased profusely in the last decade through the internet and social media. Digital platforms not only provide a medium for spreading fake news, but offer tools to actively promote dissemination, making false or misleading content go viral quickly.

Because of heightened interest in outcomes, election periods are a ripe environment for internet trolls or other bad actors to incubate, test and share false and polarizing stories intended to deceive or influence readers.

[Recent studies](#) (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018) suggest that fake news as a viral phenomenon during election time "...reflects the potential for people on the extremes to be trapped in echo chambers that aren't just reinforcing their opinions but providing them with false and misleading factual claims that seem to reinforce those opinions."

Correspondingly, "[The science of fake news](#)" report (Lazer et al., 2018) analyzes why "people prefer information that confirms their preexisting attitudes (selective exposure), view information consistent with their preexisting beliefs as more persuasive than dissonant information (confirmation bias) and are inclined to accept information that pleases them (desirability bias)." This explains why voters may be receptive to fake news and why individual biases might prevent acceptance of fact-checking of a given election-related fake news story.

The consequences of continuous exposure to, and consumption of, misinformation and disinformation from social media, political websites or news outlets during an election cycle directly impact voting integrity and public trust in candidates and results.



FACT: 88% of U.S. adults consider fake news a very serious or somewhat serious threat to our democracy.

Source: 2018 American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy - Gallup/Knight Foundation

Thus, the power and influence of misinformation makes it all the more important for EMBs to combat fake news and ensure that voters have correct, fact-based information readily available to them.

According to political scientist and elections expert, [Brendan Nyhan](#), “fake news and bots can mislead and polarize citizens, undermine trust in the media, and distort the content of public debate.” This view is also supported in a 2017 study by [Allcott and Gentzkow](#) that concluded, “...exposure to [fake news] or similarly dubious and inflammatory content can undermine the quality of public debate, promote misperceptions, foster greater hostility toward political opponents, and corrode trust in government and journalism.”

The consequences of continuous exposure to, and consumption of, misinformation and disinformation from social media, political websites or news outlets during an election cycle directly impact voting integrity and public trust in candidates and results. It also adversely affects the ability of EMBs to effectively manage an election, as well as commissions’ reputations.

EMBs are responsible for ensuring the integrity of elections, which can be undermined by false information. They should be prepared to address the impact election-related false information can have through a comprehensive crisis communications plan, just as they would prepare to manage other types of crises, such as natural disasters, cyber intrusions or election violence.

CHAPTER 2

A Five-step Crisis Communications Guide

Step 1 – Audit the Context

Start by gathering all the relevant information to build a strong foundation. Diagnose, classify and monitor potential vulnerabilities that can be impacted by false information. Promote an enquiring environment regarding relationships with your internal and external stakeholders, as well as your ongoing connection to the media.

Identify potential risks

- » Conduct a SWOT-type analysis (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat) to identify vulnerabilities and classify them according to risk level. Explore areas including how fake news can impact the management of an election; what sites or publications are promoting disinformation; which individuals are responsible.
- » How would fake news affect your environment and ability to execute your mission of conducting a secure, transparent and efficient election?
- » Evaluate to what degree the false information might affect the election process and all of its elements.
- » After identifying risks and potential vulnerabilities, prioritize the most damaging issues and assess the potential consequences.
- » Keep in mind that not all risks can be anticipated, so having an adaptable, flexible plan is critical to responding quickly and effectively.

Identify key audiences

To ensure that communication channels remain open and functional, it's important to maintain and nurture relationships with all election stakeholders before, during and after an election. Keep in mind that these relationships have to be kept current and should embrace a win-win spirit. Sharing information, in the form of infographics, videos or tables, is a good way to develop mutually beneficial relationships. Be mindful of the needs and requests of your stakeholders, including:

- » **Voters:** Communicate with your voters via social media, emails, regular mail and statements by public officials. Establish a single point of contact (customer service) to provide a reliable channel to engage with voters. It provides you with an opportunity to hear first-hand what is of interest or concern to voters, and it establishes a higher level of trust. When false information of any kind reaches voters, you will be able to quickly address it and monitor their reactions, thus providing some context in determining your next course of action.
- » **Journalists and editors:** Journalists and editors are important resources when dealing with misinformation, particularly fake news. They cannot only help with fact-checking and reporting your version,

but they are often the first to hear of fake news. Journalists play a critical role in shaping your office's reputation, good or bad. It is important that you actively maintain your relationships with journalists even in non-election periods.

- » **Influencers:** Certain individuals have a significant amount of influence through various channels, including the internet, social media or broadcast media, or as prominent voices in their communities. Being aware of election or political influencers means being able to measure and monitor the action and shared content among their followers.
- » **Political parties and campaigns:** Candidates and political parties are important stakeholders that have a vested interest in election systems. You will need to have a continuous and robust, but neutral, relationship before, during and after each election cycle. Mapping and monitoring political figures is imperative.
- » **Federal, state and local elections communications counterparts:** It is advantageous to have a comprehensive list of election organizations and associations with which to coordinate messaging and outreach to ensure best practices and accurate information sharing.
- » **Policymakers:** They provide support to EMBs and can help share your message.
- » **Law enforcement:** Sometimes fake news will activate the need for law enforcement, so keeping them informed is important to maintaining your ability to administer an election.
- » **Third-party interest groups:** These are groups that raise awareness and advocate certain positions, some that support your mission and some that don't. The more reliable ones do important work sharing fact-checked information.



FACT: 73% of Americans say the spread of inaccurate information on the internet is a major problem with news coverage today.

Source: 2018 American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy - Gallup/Knight Foundation



FACT: Leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, the 20 most popular fake news stories received more shares, reactions and comments (8.7 million engagements) than the most popular 20 real news stories (7.3 million engagements).

Source: BuzzFeed News

Assess the current media environment

- » **Assemble a rapid response team:** A rapid response team should be put in place to identify any form of false information beginning to circulate and address it as quickly as possible.
 - Some tools to monitor digital news outlets include Google Alerts, Talkwalker, Cision and Meltwater. These tools provide reports detailing the conversation in the digital world.
 - Some tools to monitor social media include Hootsuite and TweetDeck.
- » **Define success:** Use available information and analysis from previous election cycles to produce a strategy and plan that best meets your needs.
- » **Monitor disinformation:** Continuous monitoring and active engagement is critical to your ability to correct and neutralize false information before it goes viral. Useful tools include media monitoring, social media analysis and public opinion research.
- » **Use available resources:** Identify and utilize existing tools to monitor and address misinformation. Use Facebook or Google if the platform is being used to advance a negative meme or post. Facebook even has a program to allow people to flag fake news.
 - Consider possible alliances based on other elections case studies. For example, during the Brazil 2018 Elections and the 2018 US Midterm Elections, Facebook established a dedicated office or “Election War Room” to identify, monitor and fight fake news.
 - Another helpful resource is the Communications Plan template “In Case of an Election Cyber Incident” by The Belfer Center, which you could use for more insight, or “The Campaign Cybersecurity Playbook” for campaign professionals.

Dive in. The creation of an action plan, ready-to-use policies, materials and valuable information sources will be key to countering false information if a communications crisis arises. Additionally, developing the plan gives your team hands-on experience improving their ability to respond quickly and effectively.

Identify communications goals, messages and channels

- » **Explain the purpose of the plan and how to use it:** Emphasize that when addressing false information, team members must ensure accuracy and sourcing, and that the information is appropriately vetted and disseminated.
- » **Establish an internal communications protocol:** Create and share policies. Before an election, promote a crisis-ready culture. Make sure that communications staff and organizational officers are trained in crisis communications, with exercises specifically geared to elections communications. Remember to make all of your staff feel valued, and assure them that their work (even if not directly related to the crisis response) is critical to success and to building trust.
- » **Messages and channels should be timely:** Real-time response is critical to diffusing the impact of false information. These responses must be useful, informative, responsive and sincere.

Outline a clear crisis management workflow

When false information is detected, swift action is crucial.

- » **Communications process workflow:** Draw a clear chain of command in your manual. Outline who will manage the crisis response, who will serve as spokesperson, and who will manage day-to-day crisis communications during an incident.
- » **Rapid response:**
 - Determine the timeframe for communications from the incident response team.
 - Consider whether you need to establish a dedicated war room.
- » **Establish a decision-making protocol:**
 - Create an Incidence Response Team with designated individuals and backups. Delineate their roles and responsibilities to ensure speed and efficiency.
 - Dedicate individuals to identify and track false information and sources.
 - Ensure the Chief Election Officer, the Director of Elections and the Communications Director (or similar officers) are set as decisionmakers for consulting and activating the crisis plan and response.
- » **Identify spokespeople ahead of time:** Provide media training for all spokespeople. To select the team members, consider factors such as communications skills, prior experience, authority, empathy and relationship with stakeholders.

Create collateral materials

Have drafts and templates ready and previously approved, then finalize when the need arises. Ensure materials adequately address all the potential situations mapped in the audit (first step of this manual).

» Key messages:

- Create fact-based key messages and talking points.
- Create a list of terms with a common nomenclature for use by all stakeholders.
- Develop communications response guidelines (social media included).

» **Statements and press releases:** Have a prepared statement on hand that can be used to make an initial general response to audiences when the crisis first becomes known. Initial statements should include at a minimum the “who, what, when and where” of the situation, using only reliable sources and confirmed facts. As new information and facts become available, share the information as quickly as possible -- in real time if feasible.

- Prepare holding statements for various scenarios.
- For press releases and public statements, be mindful of the tone, timing and intended audience.
- Analyze disclosure terms with all departments and review applicable laws (legal implication, public opinion).
- Ensure review by legal department.

» Language guidance:

- Be concise and address the fake news directly. Be factual.
- Say “we” instead of mentioning the organization (candidate or party) name. When needed to express joint responsibility, say “We are working together with...” or “Working closely with...”

- Keep messaging positive and avoid confrontation.
- Be honest, sincere and transparent. Accept responsibility where appropriate and quickly focus on a remedy. Be careful not to give information subject to change. Provide context.
- Don't blame others in your statement, even when referring to false information or fake news. Stay focused on fact-based, accurate information.
- Present negatives in broader context, give additional relevant information and make good use of euphemisms.
- Stress that you are taking action, using phrases like “Taking immediate action,” or “Taking appropriate measures.” Be specific as to what you are doing, and do it.
 - Show empathy and concern.

» **FAQs:** Prepare an FAQ document to address key issues that are likely to generate questions. Use FAQs to address issues that may come up, but should not be included in initial messaging.

» **Emergency website plan:** Consider developing a crisis microsite – a landing page or microsite prepared in advance of an emergency, but not viewable until it is activated as part of the crisis communications response.

» Establish a secure portal as the only source for accurate, timely election information available from one week before an election commences to one week after votes are certified.

» Social media:

- Establish a social media manager (share their contact information and responsibilities with your key internal stakeholders). Also, establish backup personnel.
- Establish a team that will have access to login details, platforms, and key messages.

- Craft hashtags and social media campaigns (updates).
- » **Social media guidelines:**
 - Monitor and respond.
 - Be accurate and use approved messaging.
 - Stay factual and constructive.
 - Offer regular updates.
 - Coordinate with messages distributed through other channels (website, offline).
 - Negative comments/fake news-based comments: Don't delete negative comments or fake news-based comments. Respond with key messages. Be courteous and constructive when handling them. Know when to stop and take the discussion offline if necessary.

Prepare a media toolkit

Include EMBS' facts and figures, diagrams and infographics, case studies, testimonials, spokespeople's biographies and photos. These serve as references, guides and sources of information that will come in handy when addressing false information. When finalized, share with journalists and editors prior to the election.

Prepare and maintain lists of contacts

- » Incidence Response Team, including communications team, spokespeople and PR consultants.
- » Media list (names, titles, contact info.) and the internal contact for each journalist.
- » Experts and third parties (and their areas of expertise or interest).
 - Share talking points, FAQs, sample social media posts, etc., with them – anything that will help spread the truth to their followers/members.
- » Key executives and their roles.
- » Create a Contact Log: A log should be established to record all inquiries from the media or other audiences. This will help to ensure that the many responses required are not overlooked. It will also assist in the post-crisis analysis.

Plan offline events

- » Prepare a press conference contingency plan. Include potential locations, budgets, trustworthy providers, logistics, workflow and agenda.
- » Implement a dedicated phone line and train staff to respond in case of emergency.

FACT: 58% of Americans say the explosion of information sources makes it harder, rather than easier, to stay well informed.

Source: 2018 American Views: Trust, Media and Democracy - Gallup/Knight Foundation

Step 3 - Prepare in Advance

Election season is always a busy, pressure-packed occasion. So, it is wise to always have a crisis-ready culture. Before the election and before any crisis arises, prepare, train for, and test responses ahead of time. Consider skillsets, campaigns and ongoing preparedness programs for your organization.

Prepare election staff

- » All team members should be prepared to monitor news, identify red flags, escalate issues and determine next steps to undertake.
 - Establish a clear chain of command in advance. All EMB staff members should know (or be able to find easily) whom to notify and how to proceed in case he/she identifies issues of concern that could result in a crisis.
 - Establish key messages and have templates ready to be updated. Templates should include answers for anticipated questions from the media.
 - Media train your spokespeople – and practice. A crisis situation is always difficult when dealing with tough audiences. Rehearse prepared statements and answers to possible “tough” questions that may be asked by reporters. Familiarize spokespeople with the process and the issues, thus lessening the possibility for errors or embarrassment. If possible, similar preparation should be conducted prior to each media interview, briefing or news conference. It is also important to anticipate and address new questions or issues that arise as the story evolves. It is better to over-prepare than to be surprised by the questions. The Incidence Response

Team should prepare questions and answers for the practice sessions. These questions and answers should be for internal use only and not for distribution outside the organization.

Develop a media relations strategy

- » **Brief journalists (before, during and after elections):**
 - Conduct background briefings and hold public events on election procedures and the current work the EMB is doing to ensure a secure and efficient election.
 - Explain the technologies and systems to be used. Set expectations on the timing of each process.
 - Detail what the auditing mechanisms are in place, as well as all the election security measures and cyber analytics tools to be used. Draft FAQ documents for each audience (print media, digital outlets, social platforms).
 - Identify who will be responsible for each election cycle stage, including the EMBs’ hierarchy.
 - Share content (e.g., infographics) that can be published and socialized by media.

Be honest, sincere and transparent. Accept responsibility where appropriate and quickly focus on a remedy.

- » **Personalize/customize the interaction with journalists:**
 - Be a reliable source of information. Establish relationships before a crisis happens. A good practice is to organize briefings with journalists – explaining the whole election process, technologies used, etc.
 - Establish a private Twitter feed for media: Manage media’s desire for real-time info.
 - Have a media toolkit/documents ready to pitch (see Communications Plan).
- » **Understand and support collaborating journalism and crowdsourced news reports:**
 - Identify groups of journalists working on monitoring and verifying election (fake) news.
 - Establish an open communication channel with them.
- » **Fact-checking:**
 - Fact-checking has become the most effective journalistic response to fake news and other forms of misleading information. The US 2018 elections served to prove what fact-checking organizations bring to the election cycle. Some of them (e.g. in Brazil and US) became “go to sources” of reliable information to confirm election news.
 - Vet the publisher’s credibility – What is the outlet? Is it known? What’s the domain? Who’s the author? Who is paying for this?
 - Pay attention to quality and timeliness – Are there spelling errors? What’s the word usage like? Is everything in caps? Check the date.
 - Check the sources and citations – go upstream to the source. See who is quoted and make sure they are real people or organizations. Follow the links and see how reliable they are.

- Find out who (if anyone) fact-checked the piece or pass it to a fact-checking source.
- Support citizens’ collaborative platforms for fact-checking.

Educate voters, influencers and political stakeholders

- » **Know your citizen (customer/voter):**
 - Understand and document how voters interact with you, including their channels, frequency, motivations.
 - Educate your audiences. Teach courses, workshops, or digital webinars about rigorous methods for fact-checking and verification to unmask fabricated news, deceptive memes and manipulated videos that pop up on political websites and social networks.

Create content all year-around

- » **Engage in thought leadership:** Become the expert that provides reliable and timely information with a unique point of view.
- » **Counter false information:** Research the published information regarding elections before the voting cycle begins and join the election experts’ list.
- » **Keep key audiences up to date:** Establish continuous communications to grow your audience, build trust and maximize impact.

Step 4 - Taking Action In a Crisis

Your capacity to respond quickly and effectively during a crisis while keeping the spread of false information under control must be a priority. Additionally, avoiding panic and also having clear procedures in place will help you find opportunities that manifest within the crisis. Act promptly to protect your reliability and election integrity.

Let the plan guide you

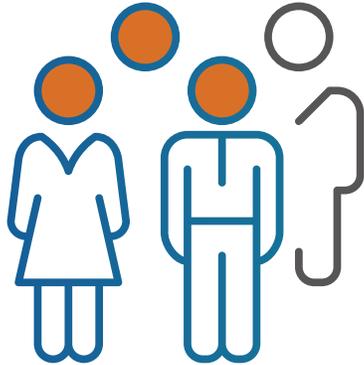
- » Activate the Incidence Response Team.
- » Implement the crisis management workflow.
- » Monitor the media coverage of all election information (including fake news, and note them as such).
- » Prepare to take action.

Ensure that your audiences are regularly informed

- » Give regular updates on the situation to the stakeholders mapped in Step 1. Be as open, transparent and cooperative as you can, but avoid giving unnecessary details. If you stay silent, speculation and false information could be perceived as truth.
- » Inform your entire organization of a developing crisis. Follow the procedures in Step 2 and 3.
- » Use all available channels and platforms. Be prepared to find false information in a variety of channels.

Be timely, honest and transparent

- » Take control of your organization's voice across all media (digital, print, etc.) before, during and after the crisis. Establish your organization as reliable experts.
- » Promote the truth.
 - Focus on actions you are taking to address the issue. Talk about what you are doing to address public needs or concerns.
 - Establish the facts and double-check them. Avoid mentioning or repeating misinformation in your messages. Focus on providing accurate facts and do not repeat the false messages.
- » **Manage Social Media:** Make your point, give the facts about a situation, rebut any false accusations, suppress speculation, calm nerves and provide useful information throughout all of your social media accounts.
 - **Facebook:** Create your own profile to share news about elections and create community through a group.
 - **Twitter:** Twitter is an essential platform to talk with people and respond to their questions. Twitter is a favorite place to share articles and expert opinion.
 - **Instagram:** Use to share stories. Highlight the people making the election possible, the team and the voters, their culture and their countries.
 - **Website:** Establish and publicize a dedicated, secure website for election information.



FACT: More than 77% of Americans believe that major traditional television and newspaper media outlets report fake news.

Source: 2017 testimony by Facebook's general counsel (via USA Today)

Identify opportunities resulting from the crisis

- » Remember best practices during crisis communications (online and offline).
- » Provide context. You are far more likely to protect a long-term reputation if you put the situation into context.
- » Remember: All crises come to an end. How you respond in a crisis will determine how you emerge.
- » Use the crisis to learn about opportunities and weaknesses.

Step 5 – Post-election Evaluation

The last step of the communications handbook, evaluation, is essential for closing a crisis event related to disinformation or misinformation successfully. Hopefully, your response was effective enough to avert a crisis. Whether or not a crisis materialized, the evaluation process is as important as the planning and implementation sections. You must determine what went right and what went wrong, and how to fix it before the next situation arises. Make sure to make the process comprehensive and collaborative.

Use checklists

Have an accessible archive of checklists with all the actions proposed in Steps 1 to 4 of the manual that apply to your election management procedures. Share the lists with all team members contributing to the crisis response and analysis.

Conduct post-election audits and reviews

- » Document the lessons learned for future communications planning and crisis readiness.
- » Use surveys or interviews and incorporate your stakeholders' feedback.
- » Review every aspect of your plan and revise accordingly.
- » Review and discuss findings with your team.
- » Revise your team, plan and process as needed for next time.

CHAPTER 3

Final Recommendations

Studies suggest that the growing fake news phenomenon does not alter news consumption. Thus, establishing and promoting EMBs as the trusted source of election information weakens the ability of fake news promoters to have an impact. It also gives voters confidence in the integrity of the election process.

The following are recommendations from election researchers and experts for EMBs when structuring their own communications protocol:

- » Update your Election Crisis Communication Plan at least once a year. This way, you will stay current with your messages, methods, materials and changing circumstances.
- » Provide consistent, transparent and secure experiences for citizens.
- » Support partnerships between social networks and fact-checkers during election periods. These platforms can help in addressing and countering the spread of false information.
- » Encourage communication and collaboration with other voting jurisdictions before and during an election. Good coordination facilitates the fight against false information.
- » When addressing fake news, draw attention to hard news and reliable facts. In the face of well-sourced material and facts, fake news tends to fade away.
- » Support efforts to improve the assessment of the quality of information sources, through education and training.

This guide is intended to provide Election Management Bodies an easy-to-follow, step-by-step guide to address a communication crisis driven by fake news. Providing fact-checked data and stories at the right time and through the right channel will go a long way in minimizing the negative impact of fake news. In doing so, authorities will increase trust in the election process and offer peace of mind to voters, candidates, observers and the media. However, this handbook is simply a collection of industry best practices and recommendations from experts, and should in no way be construed as legal council. Your organization should only seek and accept legal guidance from a lawyer who is licensed to practice in your state.

1. **Fake news** is “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the Internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke.” (Cambridge Dictionary)
2. **Influencers** are thought leaders in a specific topic area with a strong social follower base.
3. **Bots** are social media accounts that are operated entirely by computer programs and are designed to generate posts and/or engage with content on a particular platform. In disinformation campaigns, bots can be used to draw attention to misleading narratives, to hijack platforms’ trending lists and to create the illusion of public discussion and support. Researchers and technologists take different approaches to identifying bots, using algorithms or simpler rules based on number of posts per day.
4. **Botnet** is a collection or network of bots that acts in coordination and is typically operated by one person or group. Commercial botnets can include as many as tens of thousands of bots.
5. **Dark ads** are advertisements that are only visible to publishers and their target audiences. For example, Facebook allows advertisers to create posts that reach specific users based on their demographic profile, page ‘likes’ and their listed interests (but these ads are not publicly visible). These types of targeted posts cost money and are therefore considered a form of advertising. Because these posts are only seen by a segment of the audience, they are difficult to monitor or track.
6. **Deepfakes** are fabricated media produced using artificial intelligence. By synthesizing different elements of existing video or audio files, AI enables relatively easy methods for creating ‘new’ content, in which individuals appear to speak words and perform actions which are not based on reality. It is likely we will see examples of this type of synthetic media used more frequently in disinformation campaigns, as these techniques become more sophisticated.
7. **Disinformation** is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.
8. **Fact-checking** is the process of determining the truthfulness and accuracy of official, published information such as politicians’ statements and news reports. Fact-checking emerged in the U.S. in the 1990s, as a way of authenticating claims made in political ads airing on television. There are now approximately 150 fact-checking organizations in the world, and many now also debunk mis- and disinformation from unofficial sources circulating online.
9. **Fake followers** are anonymous, or imposter social media accounts created to portray false impressions of popularity about another account. Social media users can pay for fake followers as well as fake likes, views and shares to give the appearance of a larger audience.
10. **Malinformation** is genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation.
11. **Manufactured amplification** occurs when the reach or spread of information is boosted through artificial means. This includes human and automated manipulation of search engine results and trending lists, and the promotion of certain links or hashtags on social media. There are online price lists for different types of amplification, including prices for generating fake votes and signatures in online polls and petitions, and the cost of downranking specific content from search engine results.
12. **Meme**, coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976, is an idea or behavior that spreads person to person throughout a culture by propagating rapidly. The term is now used most frequently to describe captioned photos or GIFs that spread online, and the most effective are humorous or critical of society. They are increasingly being used as powerful vehicles of disinformation.
13. **Misinformation** is information that is false, but not deliberately intended to mislead or cause harm. For example, individuals who don’t know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.
14. **Propaganda** is generally biased or misleading information spread to persuade an audience, but often has a political connotation. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity, journalism and propaganda are often unclear or deliberately muddled.
15. **Sock puppet** is an online account that uses a false identity designed specifically to deceive. Sock puppets are used on social platforms to inflate another account’s follower numbers and to spread or amplify false information to a mass audience. The term is considered by some to be synonymous with the term “bot.”
16. **Spam** is unsolicited, impersonal online communication, generally used to promote, advertise or scam a user. Today, it is mostly distributed via email, and algorithms detect, filter and block spam from users’ inboxes. Similar technologies to those implemented in the fight against spam could potentially be used in the context of information disorder, once accepted criteria and indicators have been agreed.
17. **Trolling** is the act of deliberately posting offensive or inflammatory content to an online community with the intent of provoking readers or disrupting conversation. Today, the term “troll” is most often used to refer to any person harassing or insulting others online. However, it has also been used to describe human-controlled accounts performing bot-like activities.
18. **Troll farm** is a group of individuals engaging in trolling or bot-like promotion of narratives in a coordinated fashion. One prominent troll farm was the Russia-based Internet Research Agency that spread inflammatory content online in an attempt to interfere in the U.S. presidential election of 2016.
19. **Verification** is the process of determining the authenticity of information posted by unofficial sources online, particularly visual media. It emerged as a new skill set for journalists and human rights activists in the late 2000s, most notably in response to the need to verify visual imagery during the ‘Arab Spring.’

Sources: “Information Disorder: The Essential Glossary” ;
 “Journalist’s Resource: Information disorder: The essential glossary”

