

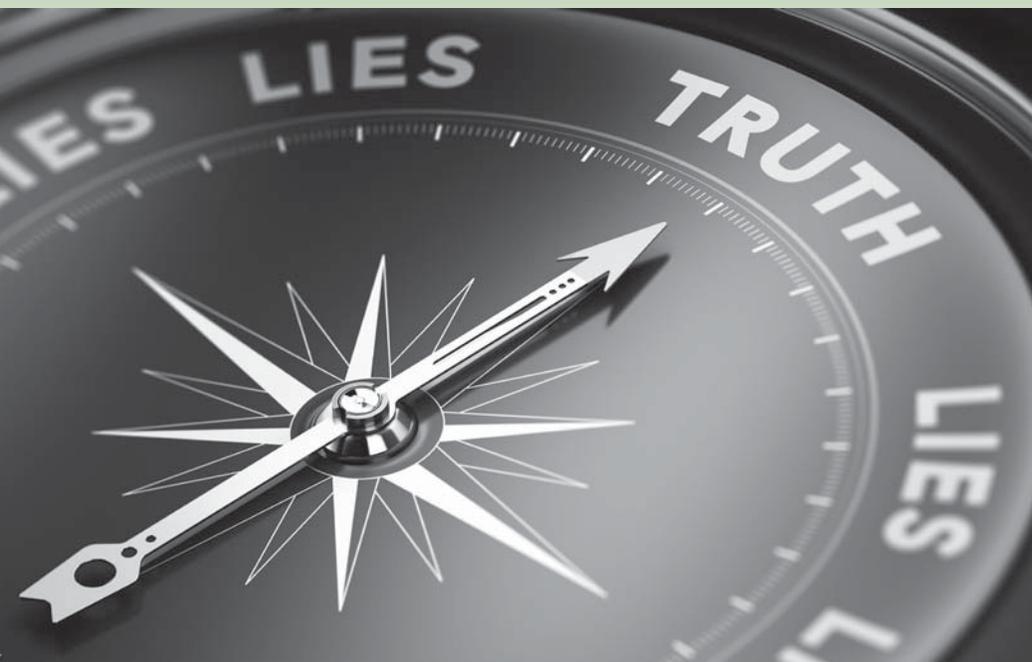
Responsive Philanthropy

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Can philanthropy help rebuild trust in news and the public square?

Today there is real concern about the spread of misinformation and issues of basic trust in our democratic institutions, including the press, our fourth estate. From viral hoaxes disguised to look like news to propaganda spread by automated bots online, we are witnessing a sustained attempt to spread misinformation, generate uncertainty

and undermine objective truth. When paired with the kinds of political attacks journalists have faced in recent months these trends raise troubling questions for a free and open society.

However, despite the new contours of our current political climate and technological developments, issues of trust in journalism extend far back into our nation's history. According to polls, trust in the media has been eroding since Watergate, but the impact of misinformation has been experienced unevenly for a long time. Communities of color in particular have been grappling with inaccurate reporting and outright false stories¹ that have had real and damaging consequences.

By Josh Stearns

As such, we have to understand that the challenges we face today are not just technological, but also economic, cultural and political. The scholar danah boyd has called this an information war that is being shaped² by "disconnects in values, relationships and social fabric." They are fundamentally human struggles and have as much to do with our relationships with each other as our relationship with the media.

Given this complex web of forces, it can be difficult to determine the best role for philanthropy. This is the kind of wicked problem that systems thinking is designed to help untangle. At Democracy Fund, we have invested in systems (continued on page 12)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Can philanthropy help rebuild trust in news and the public square?

(continued from page 1)

approaches³ because they help us develop multi-pronged strategies that reinforce one another in a complicated and dynamic world. Systems thinking helps us see the often hidden and tangled roots of the issues we care about. We are currently mapping systems that shape people's trust in the public square and will be able to share our analysis soon.

In response to these issues some foundations are organizing rapid response grants and programs designed to invest in new ideas and projects. Some donors are investing in investigative journalism and local news⁴ to expand the capacity of trustworthy newsrooms. Others are taking a measured approach, adjusting their current grantmaking or planning with their grantees for the ongoing engagement these challenges demand. The reality is that we need both long- and short-term strategies.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM WITHOUT ALL THE DATA

For all the concern about "fake news," there is still a remarkable amount we don't know about trust, truth and the spread of misinformation online or the impact it has had on politics and public debate. So much news consumption and distribution happens on private platforms whose proprietary data makes it hard for researchers to study.

And yet, organizations like the American Press Institute, Engaging News Project, The Trust Project and Trusting News Project as well as a number of academic researchers are testing real-world strategies for building trust and probing the reach and influence of mis- and disinformation.

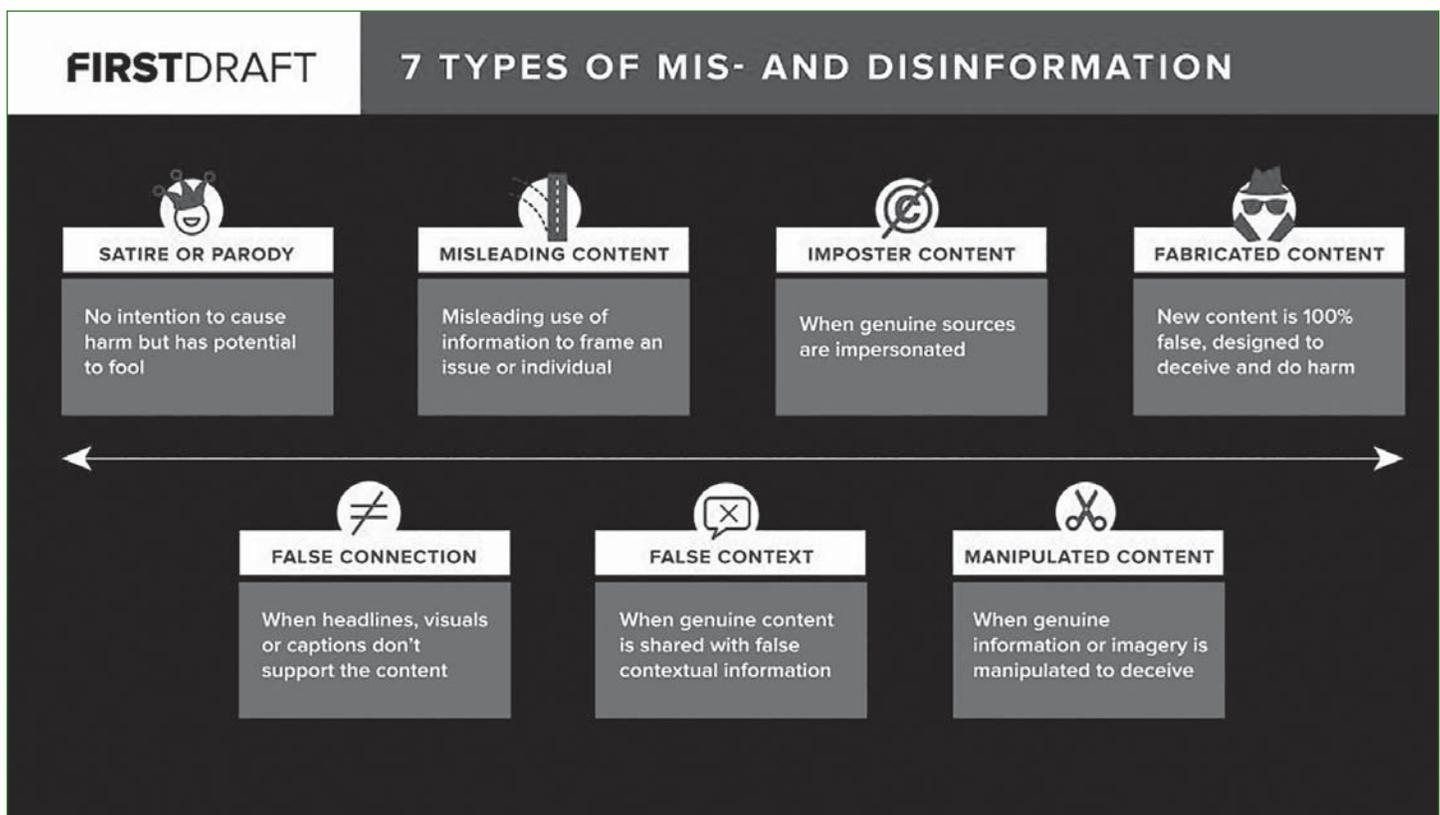
Foundations should expand their support for research in this area but should do so strategically and in coordination with other foundations to ensure that

lessons are being shared and translated into actionable intelligence for the field.

OPEN CALLS AS A CALL TO ACTION

At the start of this year, New Media Ventures launched an open call for media and technology projects from "companies and organizations working to resist fear, lies and hate as well as those focused on rebuilding and using this unprecedented moment of citizen mobilization to shape a better future."⁵ In about a month, they received more than 500 applications, an unprecedented number for them.

A few days later, the Knight Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation and Democracy Fund announced a prototype fund for "early-stage ideas to improve the flow of accurate information." That fund received 800 applications in a month.⁶ Finally, the International Center for Journalists just launched a "TruthBuzz" contest,⁷ funded by the Craig Newmark Foundation.



This typology of misinformation by Claire Wardle of First Draft News identifies the spectrum of fabricated stories and the motivations behind them.

These open calls are a way for foundations to catalyze energy and surface new ideas, bringing new people and sectors together to tackle the complex challenges related to misinformation.

NEGOTIATING NEW RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN JOURNALISTS AND THE PUBLIC

Trust is forged through relationships, and for many, the long-term work of rebuilding trust in journalism is rooted in fundamentally changing the relationship between the public and the press. For the last few years, foundations like Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation and others have been deepening their investments in newsroom community engagement efforts.

Organizations like Hearken, which reorients the reporting process around the curiosity of community members, and the Solutions Journalism Network, which encourages journalists to report on solutions, not just problems, help optimize newsrooms for building trust. The Center for Investigative Reporting, ProPublica and Chalkbeat have also pioneered exciting projects in this space.

Making journalism more responsive to and reflective of its community demands culture change in newsrooms and an emphasis on diversity and inclusion. If we want communities to trust journalism, they have to see themselves and their lived experiences reflected in the reporting. Too often that is still not the case, and foundations can play a vital role in sustaining the ongoing work to renegotiate these relationships.

WEAVING FACT-CHECKING INTO A PLATFORM WORLD

In December, Facebook announced that it was enlisting fact-checking organizations around the globe to help assess the veracity and accuracy of stories flagged by Facebook users on the platform.⁸ Google is working with Duke University's Reporter's Lab on how to

surface fact checks in their search results⁹ and is trying to give more weight to authoritative sources.¹⁰

The growth of the fact-checking field in recent years has been fueled by strategic investments from a number of foundations, including Democracy Fund. These investments have helped strengthen the practices and infrastructure for fact-checking making these platform partnerships possible. However, new challenges demand new kinds of fact checking.

Foundations should not wait until the next election to increase support for these efforts. Now is the time to invest in learning and experimentation to make fact-checking work even better, engage an often critical public, and adapt to the new realities we face.

CULTIVATING NEW SKILLS FOR COMBATING MISINFORMATION

While fact-checkers hone the science of debunking official statements from politicians and pundits, we need to develop new skills for combating the wide array of unofficial and hard-to-source falsehoods that spread online. The leading organization working on these issues is First Draft News, which combines rigorous research with practical hands-on training and technical assistance for newsrooms, universities and the public. (Disclosure: I was one of the founders of First Draft News.)

Other efforts include Storyful, Bell-ingcat, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab and On the Media's "Breaking News Consumer's Handbook" series.¹¹

Most of these efforts work not only with newsrooms, but also human rights organizations, first responders and community groups who are on the front lines of confronting misinformation. Foundations should help connect their grantees to these resources and support First Draft and others to scale up their work in this critical moment.

A NEW ERA FOR NEWS LITERACY

In April, five foundations and four technology companies launched the News Integrity Initiative at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. Designed to advance a new vision for news literacy, this global effort is rooted in a user-first approach to expanding trust in journalism. Today, we the people are the primary distributors of news. As such, it is critical that the public be adept at spotting fakes and debunking falsehoods, and that we cultivate the skills to track a story to its source and the motivation to hold each other accountable.

With support from MacArthur, Robert R. McCormick, Knight and other foundations, projects like The News Literacy Project, Center for News Literacy and The LAMP have been working with students for years to address these issues. Similarly, youth media groups like Generation Justice in New Mexico, Free Spirit Media in Chicago and the Transformative Culture Project in Boston, are working with diverse communities on becoming active creators, not just consumers of media. And libraries across the country are hosting workshops and trainings for people of all ages.

In the past, foundations funding health, climate change and racial justice have recognized the need to help people sort fact from fiction. Today, foundations can help expand the field by investing in engaging models of news literacy and supporting efforts to get news and civic literacy into state education standards.

PROLOGUE TO A FARCE OR A TRAGEDY

James Madison wrote in an 1822 letter that "A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both." We are increasingly facing an information ecosystem flooded by misinformation and disinformation being strategically deployed to spread uncertainty and dis-

trust. Those efforts are being amplified by the speed with which information is shared across social media, algorithms tuned for viral views and emotional impact and filter bubbles that increasingly divide us into silos.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to address the challenges of eroding trust and the spread of false and misleading information. The interventions discussed above are largely focused domestically but there is more that can and should be done to confront these issues on the global stage. Foundations and donors should invest in approaches that focus on making change across three interconnected areas: the press, in the public square and social platforms.

Given the diverse strategies foundations can pursue in their response to this moment, it is critical that we work together to share what we are learning, invest strategically in what is working and put the people most impacted by these issues at the center of our funding. ■

Josh Stearns is associate director for the Public Square program at Democracy Fund. Learn more at www.democracyfund.org.

Notes

1. L. Joy Williams, "Fake News Is Not New to Black Folks, But Here Are Some Tips to Avoid It," *NewsOne.com*, <https://newsonline.com/3671096/fake-news-is-not-new-to-black-folks-but-here-are-some-tips-to-avoid-it/>.
2. danah boyd, "Google and Facebook Can't Just Make Fake News Disappear," *Backchannel*, March 27, 2017, <https://backchannel.com/google-and-facebook-cant-just-make-fake-news-disappear-48f4b4e5f8e8>.
3. More at <http://www.democracyfund.org/systems>.
4. Democracy Fund, "Democracy Fund & First Look Media Announce \$12M+ in New Grants to Support Free Press" <http://www.democracyfund.org/newsroom/entry/democracyfund-first-look-media-announce-new-grants-to-support-free-press>
5. More at <http://www.newmediaventures.org/6th-innovation-fund-open-call/>.
6. More at <https://www.knightfoundation.org/articles/knight-prototype-fund-open-call-closes-with-more-than-800-ideas>.
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11. Brook Gladstone, "Breaking News Consumer's Handbook," *On the Media/WNYC*, Nov 18, 2016, <http://www.wnyc.org/story/breaking-news-consumer-handbook-fake-news-edition/>.

HEALTH EQUITY BRIEF

FOUNDATIONS, DONORS AND HEALTH POLICY: Why federal health debates matter to you and how you can respond



Learn more at www.ncrp.org/publication/health-equity-brief