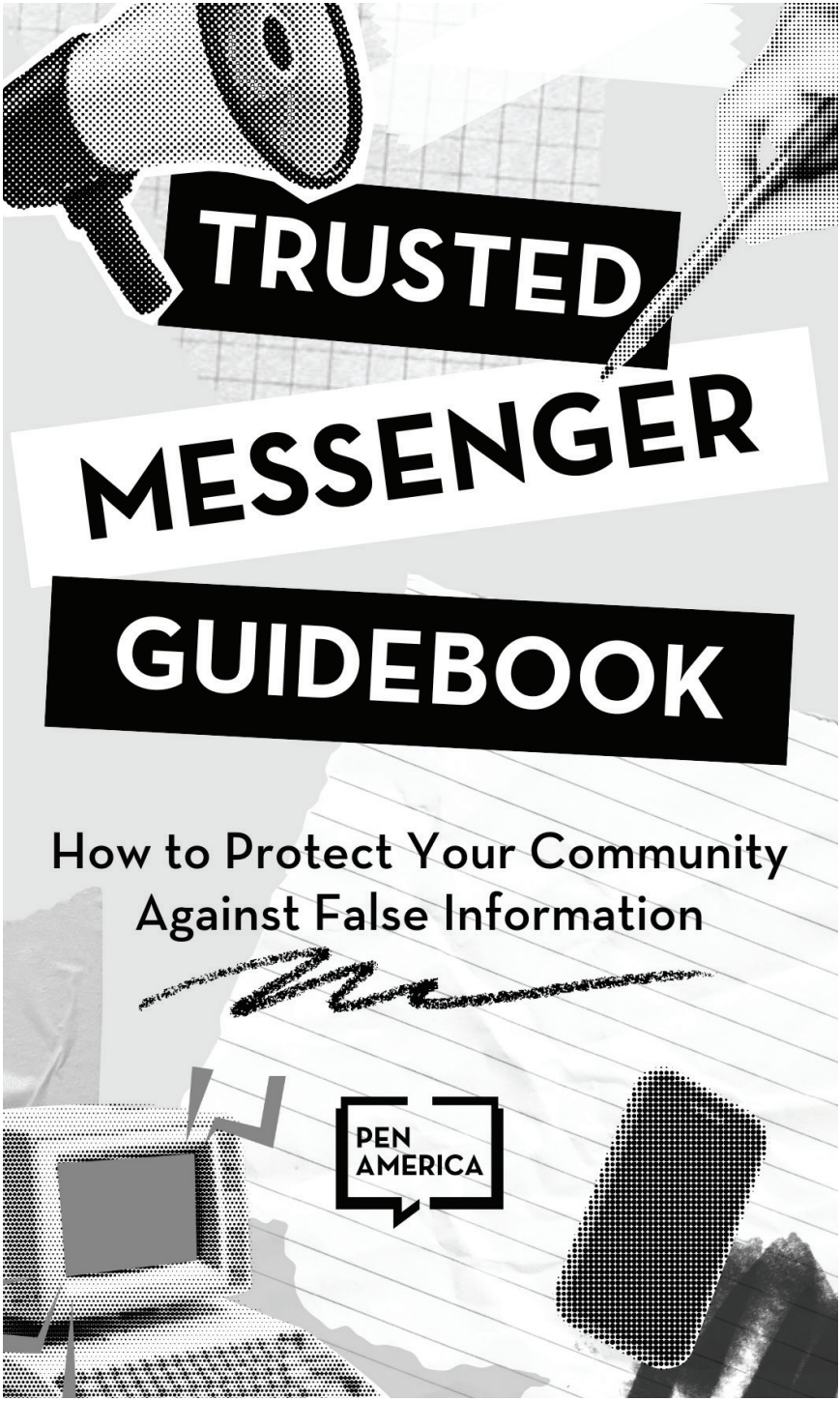
TRUSTED
MESSENGER
GUIDEBOOK
How to Protect Your Community
Against False Information
PEN
AMERICA

Published November 4, 2024

Everyone can help stop the spread of false information. Our conversation guide can show you how.

PEN America is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to defending free expression. We believe disinformation poses a threat to this principle. We have developed this guide to help anyone fight against it.

Disinformation, sometimes called information manipulation, is false information intended to deliberately deceive the public. It interferes with people's ability to make accurate and informed decisions, undermining a key pillar of democracy. It heightens conflict, turns us against each other, makes compromise more difficult, and draws our attention away from the most urgent challenges we face as a nation.

The proliferation of deceptive information can make us lose faith that anything can be trusted — not public figures, teachers, journalists, or doctors.

When everything might be false, nothing can seem true.

> **Disinformation is a problem nationwide, but in Arizona where we have electors being indicted and lots of people who mistrust our elections, it's a particularly hot topic, just like our weather.**
>
> *— Mina Hirsch, Phoenix, AZ*

Why is this resource for me?

The spread of false information is a very real threat to all of us, regardless of our political affiliation, undermining our ability to make informed judgments or to come together to meet big societal challenges. This is true, whether it is misleading "guidance" targeting immigrants to make it harder for them to renew their status, conspiracy theories spread to sow dislike — or even hatred — of people's identities, or malicious information designed to make it harder to vote. It can seem overwhelming, but we are not powerless in this fight.

Disinformation thrives on isolation — when folks have little community to draw on as a check, or when they get their news from the same types of sources, they have little to serve as a counter to false information. Community conversations can be a key part of protecting you and your loved ones from being manipulated. Consider your individual role as a trusted messenger in your community. **Your friends, colleagues, neighbors, family, and others, trust you.** In fact, data shows that they are likely to trust you ***more*** than they do information coming from a stranger, an article, ad, or from social media.

The longer a loved one is exposed to disinformation without a counter, the harder it becomes to change their mind. Think about your parents, best friends, kids, colleagues, and neighbors. **We need *you* to be that counter.** We're asking you to have conversations with your friends and family who may be falling prey to disinformation, whatever its topic. This guide is designed to empower you in this fight.

Who's susceptible to false information?

We all are, full stop.

You can't be too educated, too rich, or too media-literate to fall for inaccurate, misleading or harmful information. This isn't a political "right" or "left" thing. To be clear: there are certain traits that can make some of us more likely to believe and share disinformation. But recognizing that it's happened to all of us — whether we're outraged at an incendiary social media post or share a news article based on the headline alone — will help you foster a productive, empathetic conversation around disinformation.

So let's think beyond the stereotypes. Instead, the following behavioral and environmental risk factors may signal someone's susceptibility to disinformation:

- Nearly all their information comes from one source or group, so they rarely hear anything that brings a different view or challenges existing beliefs.

- They primarily get information from social media sites or channels that act like "echo chambers," versus sources with a history of checking facts.

- They spend more than three hours online daily, not counting working hours.
- When they share information, their goal seems to be to stimulate intense emotions like fear or outrage.
- They may be in emotional distress and/or feel alienated, anxious or powerless.
- They rely heavily on their intuition rather than analysis or reflection.
- They're overly confident in their knowledge.

What can I do to protect myself and my community?

There are a number of things that you can do, and that you can encourage members of your community to do to stop the spread of disinformation. This can include developing a habit of fact-checking or simply taking a beat before sharing information online or in-person until you've been able to verify.

For the purposes of this guidebook, however, we'll focus on encouraging your family, friends, coworkers, and others to adopt a diverse news diet. But what does a "diverse news diet" actually mean?

A healthy news diet involves relying on a variety of avenues for consuming information, meaning relying on several forms of media—and in particular, including some that challenge your thinking from time to time. Research shows that a diverse news diet builds up resilience to the spread of mis- and disinformation. There are a number of types of news sources that you could include:

- Standard reporting, meaning the facts of what's happening, is distinct from commentary, meaning news with an opinion or biased perspective attached to it. Some publications, cable channels, radio stations, etc. feature more commentary than others.
- User-generated versus professionally produced news. Social media is a great avenue for getting individual, on-the-ground perspectives, but one feature of social media platforms to be aware of is algorithms, which are designed to maximize whatever content keeps users most

engaged — oftentimes incendiary content — and that can create echo chambers.

- Right to Left. A news diet that includes a variety of political perspectives is likely one where you'll run into things that you disagree with, developing a habit of stopping to think or fact-check before sharing information.

- National news is very likely to cover issues differently than local news, and city-wide news is similarly likely to cover things differently than neighborhood-specific news.

Having a foundation to start with can remind you and the person you're speaking with that you're both safe having this conversation and that it doesn't have to end poorly. For instance, when talking about vaccine disinformation, say, 'I know this is important to both of us. We care about the health of children.'

— Kristen Calvert, Dallas, TX

- Media by and for particular communities, such as communities of color, the LGBTQ+ community, rural communities, or others can be good places to see the perspectives of those who are often disproportionately affected by false narratives.

What should I consider before entering a conversation?

Before talking with a community member who you feel has been impacted by, or is susceptible to, the spread of disinformation, ask yourself a few questions. You'll want to make sure that you get the most out of this conversation — and that begins with reflection:

What is my goal for this conversation? Be sure to go into a conversation with a specific purpose. In this guide, we'll refer to encouraging a broader, more diverse, news diet, even if only slightly broader. Keep in mind that you may not inspire a broad shift in behavior or news consumption after one conversation, but having a specific intention for what behavior you'd like to change is key.

What can I learn from this person's perspective? Consider this an opportunity for you to learn something new as well — particularly if it

will deepen the connection between you and the person with whom you're conversing. What about their personal experiences led them to the news sources they consume? If they're seeking information that consistently elicits strong emotional reactions, what is driving them? Asking questions and really listening to the answers is important.

What shared values or common concerns for my community do I share with this person? You're likely approaching this person because you see differences between you. They watch that one news channel or are immersed in an online messaging channel that you can't stand. They share content on social media that seems outlandish to you. They show up to Thanksgiving dinner with political claims that don't seem rooted in truth. These factors may annoy you but pause and consider what you do have in common. While still important, values are more likely to change hearts and minds than statistics or facts.

Is this the best moment to intervene with this person? Chances are, you know when your friend, colleague, or loved one will be more open to intervention. You know what kinds of conversations you are used to having with them, and when might be the easiest time to introduce them to new sources of information, or a new understanding of information manipulation. If you start the conversation at the wrong time, take a step back and try again later. Remember, you likely won't change this person's behavior after one conversation.

If engaging with a specific claim, ask yourself: am I sure this is disinformation? This is key — do your own fact-checking before you engage. Suspecting that content is misleading or false is different from having confirmed it. You can Google keywords and confirm that multiple credible outlets are reporting similarly. In that case, it's more likely to be true. Or, you can see if the story has been verified by using fact-checking websites such as FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com. If there's a visual component, try running a reverse image search in Google or using TinEye.com.

And lastly, ask yourself: **what are examples of moments when I might have fallen prey to information manipulation?** How would I have liked to be approached?

Strategies for empowerment in conversation

Often you will know the best language to use with the person you're talking to; you know what they respond well to and what might make them shut down. Use your own understanding in approaching

the conversation, but here are a few tips for encouraging folks in your community to protect themselves against disinformation:

- **Ask questions and avoid lecturing.** Importantly, ask to learn, not to respond. Seek why this person came to trust a claim or why they lean on particular, or very few, news sources.

- **Assume good intent.** None of us are likely to change our habits if we feel judged or disrespected by the person intervening. Chances are, this person likely determined their news sources using similar judgments that you used to determine yours. We're all driven by emotion, personal values, and concern for our communities — and none of us like to think that we believe things that aren't true.

We must remember intent vs. impact is real. Trauma is real and triggers are too. These hard conversations must happen and happen in safe spaces. It can be done through the lenses of understanding that it is okay to agree to disagree. Also remembering there are many ways to a solution.

— Cortés Marià Lewis, Miami, FL

- **Consider the role of trauma.** Remember, disinformation campaigns are designed to be effective — often latching onto a kernel of truth. Many disinformation narratives exploit real concerns and traumas in order to funnel people towards political objectives rooted in falsehood. Particularly in communities with large immigrant populations, rhetoric used in home countries may make people sensitive to particular trigger words in the United States.

- **Maintain trust and confidentiality.** These are difficult conversations — and the individual you are talking to may feel particularly vulnerable after speaking with you. They may have been introduced to the idea that they were manipulated by a false information campaign, or they may be reconsidering a deeply held belief. Keep that vulnerability in mind. No one likes feeling "duped," or like someone else believes they were.

- **Avoid black-and-white framing.** Try to avoid telling the person they're "wrong," or characterizing their news sources as "liars."

Emphasize that issues are often complex and that there are multiple perspectives on every topic.

Should I prepare for conflict?

If you're looking for a fight, you'll find one. By following the above steps, your conversation will hopefully be conflict-free — or at least as non-confrontational as possible. But if the discussion turns testy (and that could happen, no matter how well you prepare) here are strategies to keep in mind.

Set some conversation guidelines. Start with your own ground rules. What are you willing to talk about? What aren't you willing to talk about? Then, in the conversation, establish some common ground, like shared values and what constitutes a credible source. While it's not realistic to list out rules for your discussion, you can model positive behaviors by asking questions and not interrupting.

Decide when to end the conversation. If the discussion becomes too contentious, it's best to take a step back. It's OK to tell the person that you think it's needed. Reinforce how much you care about the person and redirect the conversation or move on completely, at least for now.

Recognize that this will take time. One "Well, actually..." conversation isn't going to break these deeply held beliefs — after all, they probably took years to cement! Repetition is key. Even if you don't deem this conversation a "success," you've primed this person for the next discussion. We're doing this work because we care about our friends and family and the information they're receiving, and that will likely mean more than one tough conversation.

Work to keep the momentum going! There are plenty of small action steps you can take to push someone toward better habits when it comes to information consumption. **Below, you'll find a few suggestions for small adjustments that may help you along the way:**

- Ask if you can share a news article with the person. They might be open to reading a single article on a topic they care about from a new source, even if they're not ready to begin consuming that source regularly. Introducing them to the idea of a broader news diet is a good first step.

- Encourage the person to try a fact-checking tool, unaffiliated with a

news source. Developing a habit of fact-checking, or even a habit of stopping to consider doing a fact check, can be helpful. If they share the articles with you, you could even process them together. Good resources include Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, or PolitiFact.com.

- Ask the person to reflect on a time when they changed their mind about something. How did that happen? Who was involved and how did it feel? Or, share a time when you changed your mind on a topic after considering new information.

Remember: You often will know the best language to use with the person you're talking to.

While data shows that Americans are increasingly losing trust in national leaders and public institutions, it also shows that they remain trustful of their friends and family — even if it doesn't feel like it all the time. It's important to remember that you know how to communicate with your loved ones better than anyone else. That said, here are a few phrases you could try to get the conversation started:

- "I don't want to influence your political leanings. I just want to make certain you're getting accurate information, just as I'm sure you want me to get accurate information too."

- "We care a lot about some of the same topics. Do you think we should talk about some of the information we've been hearing?"

- "I'd love to share some new sources with you. Do you think you could send me some of yours too?"

You can play a role in protecting your friends and loved ones against the spread of false information intended to manipulate them. **Take action in your role as a trusted messenger and encourage those around you to consider their sources of information.**

If this guide has been helpful, please share it with a friend! You can find more information about PEN America's disinformation and community engagement program — including upcoming trusted messenger conversation workshops in your community — at **pen.org/disinformation**.

pen.org