

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

"In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act," attribution unknown.

The pervasive impact of misinformation and disinformation on society poses a direct threat to the foundations of a healthy, functioning democracy and erodes collective life. Recognizing this urgent challenge, the members at the League of Women Voters of Lane County (LWVLC) annual meeting in May 2025 approved "Combating Misinformation/Disinformation in the Digital Age" as a study topic. The study's scope is to define misinformation and disinformation (mis/disinformation), discuss their impacts, and provide strategies to identify and counter them.

DEFINITIONS

Two similar terms, misinformation and disinformation, differ in the intent of the speaker. *Misinformation* is the unintentional spread of false information without an intent to cause harm. *Disinformation* is false information deliberately designed to mislead others and is spread with the intent to confuse fact and fiction. The omission of relevant information can contribute to both misinformation and disinformation. This occurs when an author either unintentionally or intentionally presents an incomplete version of facts, which creates a false context or misleading impression, distorts the truth, or manipulates the audience's understanding of the information.

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS POSITION

The League of Women Voters does not have positions at the national, Oregon, or Lane County level that explicitly addresses mis/disinformation. However, the national League does have an online publication, *Your Guide to Mis- and Disinformation*, which provides definitions of mis/disinformation, tips on spotting mis/disinformation, and suggestions on how to stop mis/disinformation. In addition, the League has two positions relevant to mis/disinformation. One position addresses the importance of local journalism in sustaining democracy and the other concerns a citizen's right to know. The relevant portions of those positions are the following:

- The League supports credible and ethical local journalism, in whatever format it is published, as essential to our democracy.
- The League of Women Voters of the United States believes that democratic government depends upon informed and active participation at all levels of government.

HOW MIS/DISINFORMATION SPREADS

Mis/disinformation spreads effectively through social media, often more so than through traditional print or TV media. This is due to several key factors inherent to social platforms.

Algorithm-Driven Echo Chambers: Social media algorithms prioritize content that users are likely to engage with. People have a tendency to seek out, interpret, and remember information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (confirmation bias). When a user interacts with content that aligns with their beliefs, the algorithm creates a feedback loop, presenting them with more of the same. This can make a false idea appear far more prevalent and credible than it is and traps users in an informational bubble where their views are constantly reinforced, preventing them from encountering diverse perspectives. The architecture of social platforms, with features like "Share" and "Retweet," allows content to go viral almost instantly. By the time fact-checkers and other authorities can issue corrections, the false information has already reached a large audience. In 2025, Meta (the parent company for Facebook,

Threads and Instagram) announced that it will soon drop third-party fact-checkers and instead rely on users to “correct inaccurate and false posts.”

Artificial Intelligence (AI): Advanced AI tools facilitate the rapid creation of highly convincing, but false, videos and recordings that realistically depict persons or events. This technology lowers the barrier for bad actors to produce misleading content on a large scale.

Emotional Triggers: Disinformation campaigns deliberately exploit feelings of outrage, fear, and surprise to provoke an immediate, viral reaction. Easily shareable formats, such as memes, provocative posts, and short-form videos on platforms like TikTok, leverage these emotions, making disinformation more compelling, especially for those without a strong knowledge of a subject.

Lack of Context and Deliberation: Social media's concise nature makes it difficult to provide nuanced, contextual information. This brevity often oversimplifies complex topics, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation. Furthermore, many users impulsively share content without verifying its accuracy, a major driver of mis/disinformation.

Targeting Younger Audiences: Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are popular with younger users, making them prime targets for mis/disinformation.

Disinformation Campaigns: While some false narratives spread organically, many are part of organized campaigns. These campaigns use *trolls*, people paid to spread disinformation, and automated accounts to intentionally spread false information and create the illusion of widespread support for specific narratives, a tactic known as *astroturfing*.

Influencers: Content creators on social media can sometimes wield more influence than genuine experts. A charismatic creator with a large following might present inaccurate information and be seen as a credible source by their followers, many of whom may lack the tools to fact-check. These influencers are often incentivized to post sensational content that drives high engagement, regardless of its truthfulness.

IMPACT AND EXAMPLES

History

Disinformation campaigns, both historical and contemporary, downplay the brutality of American slavery. The resulting knowledge gap contributes to a lack of understanding about slavery's foundational role in shaping today's societal inequalities. Education has become a focal point for disinformation about slavery. Critics point to efforts to revise history textbooks and curricula that sanitize American history by portraying slavery as a minor issue or by downplaying its brutality. Such revisions deprive students of an accurate understanding of history and obscure the long-term consequences of slavery—persistent disparities in wealth, education, and the justice system.

Texas offers a clear example of the debate among politicians, educators, and the public over curriculum. In 2022, the Texas State Board of Education discussed proposals to describe slavery using euphemistic terms such as "involuntary relocation." Critics—historians and civil rights advocates alike—argued that this sanitizes history and understates slavery's profound impact, while some educational officials defended the proposals as age-appropriate. State politicians in Texas have introduced bills to regulate classroom discussions about race and slavery, prompting debates over academic freedom and the integrity of history education in Texas. There have also been incidents of textbooks downplaying slavery. For instance, a high school text described enslaved people as "workers." Following public outcry, publishers faced pressure to revise their materials.

Subtle omissions, euphemisms, and reframed narratives can quietly reshape students' understanding more effectively than outright denial. Curriculum choices matter because they influence how students interpret the country's past and, by extension, its present. Other states (Florida, Oklahoma, Montana, New Hampshire) have adopted curricula with similar disinformation about the history of slavery and indigenous peoples.

In the Willamette Valley, government officials in the 19th century pursued a pattern of disinformation against the Kalapuya people. The Kalapuya Treaty of 1855 compelled the various Kalapuya bands to cede millions of acres of land to the United States, and they were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands in the Willamette Valley. For decades, the dominant narrative erased the Kalapuya's rich culture and resilience, portraying them as a "vanishing" people, effectively ignoring their resurgence as members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians.

Elections and Vote-by-Mail

Mis/disinformation about the security and integrity of early voting and mail-in ballots may not have originated with President Donald Trump, but he amplified falsehoods after losing the popular vote in 2016 and the election in 2020. Since his return to office, the president has threatened to impose an executive order outlawing mail-in ballots and early voting, contending as one justification that every other nation has done so because of "massive voter fraud." In fact, 32 countries, including most European nations, offer some form of mail-in voting. In a 2025 interview, Oregon Secretary of State Tobias Reed said the president has no constitutional authority, barring an act of Congress, to override states' voting systems.

Independent studies have found voting by mail (VBM) in the United States to be safe and secure. In the wake of the 2020 election, Associated Press reporters researched claims of voter fraud in six states where Trump's campaign filed election challenges and found fewer than 475 potential instances out of more than 25 million votes cast, which would not have changed the outcome in any of those states.

A 2020 review by Oregon's Legislative Fiscal Office of the 61 million ballots cast by mail from 2000 through 2019 found only 38 criminal convictions for voter fraud resulting from complaints filed with the Secretary of State. However, the state did uncover—and is working to correct—flaws in the implementation of its Motor Voter law, under which U.S. citizens are automatically registered to vote when they receive an Oregon driver's license. About 1,700 individuals who were not citizens were erroneously added to the voter rolls between 2010 and 2020; the Secretary of State's Office is investigating the fewer than 50 individuals who were found to have voted. It is illegal in Oregon to vote as a noncitizen, even if a person receives a ballot through no fault of their own.

Oregon was the first state to mail ballots to all registered voters following a 1998 referendum on VBM that garnered 69 percent support. Oregon and seven other states plus Washington, D.C. automatically mail ballots to registered voters, and 28 other states allow "no-excuse absentee voting," under which mailed ballots can be requested without justification. The COVID pandemic was a major factor behind the high mark to date for VBM across the United States, representing 43 percent of all ballots cast in the 2020 presidential election, though the 30.3 percent rate in the 2024 election remained well above pre-pandemic levels (U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2025).

Museums and National Parks

In March 2025 President Trump issued an executive order titled “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.” The order stated that the Smithsonian Institute had “come under the influence of a divisive, race-centered ideology” and promoted “narratives that portray American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive.”

Initially, the White House’s review will focus on eight Smithsonian museums: the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Air and Space Museum, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The wide-ranging review of current and planned exhibitions aims to scour wall text, websites, and social media “to assess tone, historical framing, and alignment with American ideals.” Museums will be required to adjust any content that the administration finds problematic within 120 days, “replacing divisive or ideologically driven language with unifying, historically accurate, and constructive descriptions.”

The official response from the Smithsonian said that its “work is grounded in a deep commitment to scholarly excellence, rigorous research, and the accurate, factual presentation of history.” The Smithsonian faces pressure to comply since 62 percent of its more than \$1 billion annual budget comes from congressional appropriation, federal grants, and government contracts.

Another executive order calls for the removal of information on slavery in national parks to scrub them of “corrosive ideology.” National Park Service officials are broadly interpreting that directive to apply to information on racism, sexism, slavery, gay rights, and persecution of Indigenous peoples.

Education

In May 2025, the Oklahoma State Board of Education enacted new academic standards requiring high school students to identify “discrepancies” in the 2020 election that question the integrity of mail-in ballots and ballot counting—even though those claims have been repeatedly debunked. The Oklahoma Supreme Court suspended the requirements four months later as it considers two civil lawsuits filed by parents and other interested parties challenging the standards’ validity. This case exemplifies how mis/disinformation can work its way into curricula.

Mis/disinformation in schools commonly concerns policy matters, budget issues, school safety including health information, curriculum, and educational practices. Schools are subject to hoaxes and sensational stories. A 2024 survey by the National School Public Relations Association reported that 96 percent of respondents said the spread of mis/disinformation was a problem in their districts, up from 81 percent in 2020. More than three-fourths said their district had faced a challenge related to the spread of false information in the past year. Forty-one percent of respondents said the false information was spread deliberately.

Students, parents, and teachers may have limited media literacy and struggle to evaluate online sources. Vested interests deliberately spread disinformation to provoke distrust, push agendas, and ultimately undermine confidence in public education. Mis/disinformation erodes trust among students, parents, teachers, and administrators, and constant exposure to conflicting information breeds cynicism. It can be difficult to distinguish credible from untrustworthy sources. The negative impact may also create anxiety or promote biases. At a systemic level, mis/disinformation can fuel the adoption of ineffective curricula or policies not based on researched data.

In February 2025, the Department of Education (DOE) published a “Dear Colleague Letter” to schools that interpreted a Supreme Court ruling (in *SFFA v. Harvard*) to prohibit race-based benefits and claim DEI programs involving racial preferences are unlawful. Eugene School District 4J joined the American Federation of Teachers as plaintiffs in a federal civil case that alleged the letter created First and Fifth Amendment injuries.

The court concluded that, by seeking to substantially alter the legal obligations of schools and educators without employing the procedures necessary to implement such a change, the government ran afoul of the Administrative Procedure Act’s procedural requirements. “The regulation of speech cannot be done casually.” The court determined that the Letter and Certification Requirement are unlawful.

In March 2025, the administration announced the DOE’s future closure.

Culture

Throughout his tenure, the president has engaged in a public dispute with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, using a combination of criticism, misinformation, and disinformation to reshape the institution. His claims have primarily focused on three areas: the center's finances, the physical condition of the building, and its artistic programming.

The president has alleged that the Kennedy Center is in "tremendous disrepair" and that its previous leadership mismanaged funds, leading to a significant deficit. These claims were used to justify the removal of the previous board of trustees and president. In response, the former Kennedy Center President, Deborah Rutter, has publicly refuted these allegations as "false" and made by people "without the context or expertise" to understand the institution's finances and the complexities involved in nonprofit and arts management. She explained that a backlog of maintenance was due to limited and decreased federal funding, not mismanagement.

President Trump has accused the Kennedy Center of hosting “woke” programming and “anti-American propaganda” to justify cancellation of shows with LGBTQ+ themes and a planned concert celebrating diversity.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival has faced similar mis/disinformation tactics, including the idea that the festival has abandoned its core mission of performing traditional Shakespeare plays. This narrative suggests that OSF's focus on social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion has alienated long-time audience members and donors. Former Artistic Director Nataki Garrett, the first Black woman to lead the festival, became a focal point for this criticism. She was publicly harassed, received death threats, and hired private security.

The primary causes of the festival's financial struggles were a combination of factors—including the COVID-19 pandemic, recurring wildfire smoke, and a shifting arts landscape. Mis/disinformation, particularly on social media and in online forums, has shifted blame to the festival's artistic direction. These narratives have contributed to a climate of distrust and have likely made fundraising and audience engagement more difficult. The ongoing public conversation has often featured highly charged and inaccurate information that has contributed to the festival's difficulties. This has had a real-world impact on the organization's finances and reputation.

Science, Medicine and Health

Scientific and health-related misinformation has a long history. Bloodletting as a medical treatment existed for thousands of years because people, including physicians of earlier eras, wrongly believed that illness

often resulted from an excessive amount of blood. Such misinformation was claimed as fact but, with our improved understanding of scientific evidence, is now recognized as false.

The use of tobacco products was widely promoted during much of the 20th century, with cigarettes touted as a cure for asthma and doctors featured in advertisements. In 1964, the U.S. Surgeon General released a report that concluded cigarette smoking was a cause of cancers and chronic bronchitis. Later research found that tobacco companies knew for decades that cigarette smoke contains cancer-causing particles but deliberately hid the information from the public, using obfuscating information to mislead—an example of scientific and health disinformation.

Evolving and confusing messages understandably hamper the public's ability to find accurate, trustworthy sources. The COVID-19 pandemic further heightened mistrust. As a new pathogen, COVID proved extremely challenging for scientific and medical institutions and personnel, resulting in mistakes and missteps. The COVID response became polarizing in the United States, with continuing implications for public health. The pandemic also led the World Health Organization to conceive the term, *infodemic*: "...too much information including false and misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak."

Roughly one million Oregonians have contracted COVID, with nearly 10,000 deaths attributed to the virus as of March 2023. Between August 1 and September 14, 2021, the Oregon Poison Center managed 25 cases of Oregonians using ivermectin, an anti-parasitic drug promoted by various individuals and organizations generally opposed to the COVID vaccine and/or related public health measures, such as masking and shutdowns. Testing in human trials has failed to show ivermectin effective in reducing symptoms or curing COVID, according to the Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) School of Medicine. Five of the Oregonians using ivermectin, which in large doses can be dangerous, landed in a hospital.

In the wake of problems stemming from contested information in recent years, the National Academies of the Sciences, Engineering and Medicine in December 2024 released a report on "Understanding and Addressing Misinformation about Science." Among the concerns laid out in the report:

- Misinformation about science poses a threat at individual, community, and societal levels.
- Scientific misinformation impairs our ability to make informed decisions.
- Misinformation can exacerbate disparities within marginalized communities, worsening health inequities and discrimination.
- Misinformation can distort public opinion and undermine trust in scientific institutions and authorities.

In Lane County, public health leaders in May 2025 spoke for factual scientific and health care information during a community forum hosted by the Eugene City Club. "We need to prioritize our hospital and medical groups to deliver evidence-based treatments, including prevention efforts at every opportunity," said PeaceHealth Chief Medical Officer Kim Ruscher.

Environment and Climate Change

Mis/disinformation about human-caused climate change—even in the face of its increasingly destructive impact and overwhelming scientific consensus—has persisted for more than 30 years. Fossil fuel producers have a dual strategy of simultaneously downplaying the extent to which burning oil, gas, and coal is heating up the planet and "greenwashing," or promoting their business practices and policies as more environmentally friendly than they are. The Trump administration published a report in July 2025 minimizing the dangers of climate change and claiming advantages in the increased production of

greenhouse gases. Though the report drew immediate criticism from more than 85 scientists, citing errors and misrepresentations, the Environmental Protection Agency is already using the analysis to justify repealing a 2009 scientific declaration that climate change poses a danger to human health and welfare.

A solid majority of Americans accepts the science of climate change. According to a December 2024 survey by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, “Americans who think global warming is happening outnumber those who think it is not happening by a ratio of more than 5 to 1.” Sixty percent of respondents agreed that climate change is mostly human-caused; 48 percent think Americans are being harmed by global warming “right now,” and 49 percent say they have personally experienced its effects. Majorities said climate change is worsening extreme heat, wildfires, droughts, flooding, rising sea levels, hurricanes and tornados, air and water pollution, water shortages, and agricultural pests and diseases.

Even amid widespread recognition of the dangers of wildfires in the Pacific Northwest, misinformation helped kill attempts to identify Oregon regions most at risk and implement measures to alleviate property damage and human casualties. After the most destructive fire season on record in 2020, the state legislature ordered a map estimating the wildfire risk for every property in the state, with the aim of identifying homes and businesses most in need of “a defensible space” against wind-spread fires. But the proposed map immediately drew the ire of homeowners and was blamed, without evidence, for rising insurance rates and canceled coverage; Insurance industry representatives confirmed they conducted their own risk assessments in making those determinations. The “Agenda 21” conspiracy theory, alleging that the United Nations seeks to force people into cities so they can be more easily controlled, surfaced in a Facebook group formed as a base of opposition to the wildfire risk map.

The initial map was withdrawn and recast, but the new map also was defeated. A ProPublica report quotes Dacia Grayber, the lone vote in the state House against its repeal: “We are walking away from a very clear decision to build safer, more resilient communities.” The tragedy, she added, is that the decision to drop the map “was 100% based in misinformation.”

Research

Mis/disinformation affects research in many ways, from design of a study to the conclusions. Even when corrected, it can still exert lingering influence, such as the flawed 1998 study linking the MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccine to autism. The study was retracted due to fabricated data and ethical violations, but it continues to influence peoples’ choices about whether and when to vaccinate their children.

Scholars can be attacked when trying to correct misinformation, and valuable research can end. Mis/disinformation can occur when citations are used that do not factually support the cited paper. Systemic pressures can encourage cherry picking by selectively using or misrepresenting accurate data to push a narrative. Research can be intentionally falsified to promote a specific agenda. Misinformation in the longer run can erode trust in institutions and delay funding.

As the federal administration cuts science and health grants, staff at Oregon’s universities are feeling the impacts. While such reductions could be branded as changing priorities, mis/disinformation also plays a role by misrepresenting specific research projects and denying scientific evidence. An estimated \$400 million in grants awarded to Oregon projects for climate resilience, including wind-energy research at Oregon State University, were among those terminated in early October 2025. In a social media post, the federal budget director said, “Nearly \$8 billion in Green New Scam funding to fuel

the Left's climate agenda is being cancelled." Among other cuts, a University of Oregon professor lost a federal grant investigating suicidal thoughts and behaviors among lesbian, gay, and bisexual rural residents. Informed her research was grounded in gender ideology, she noted her work did not address gender identity but suicidal risk among sexual minorities.

STRATEGIES TO IDENTIFY AND COUNTER MIS/DISINFORMATION

Scientific, medical, educational, environmental, and cultural institutions whose work and missions have been targeted by mis/disinformation are sounding alarms about those threats and developing strategies to set the record straight:

- Monitor traditional and social media to track the origins, spread, and impacts of mis/disinformation.
- Employ *prebunking*, the dissemination of accurate, clear, and consistent information as widely as possible to head off acceptance of fallacies.
- Know your audience, and develop culturally aligned messages and messengers.
- Use social media to correct mis/disinformation, and reach out through local and national journalism outlets to share fact-based messages and recommendations for public action.
- Support community initiatives to improve access to credible information.
- Foster media literacy to help citizens critically evaluate information.

That final point emphasizes the need for individuals to hone their abilities to identify and rely on credible information sources free from bias, supported by evidence, and written by trustworthy authors or organizations. Assessing credibility entails considering several factors: the author's identity and credentials; the identity, mission, and purpose of the information's publisher; source of funding for dissemination of information; citation of verifiable sources and evidence; the aim to inform or sway opinions; and reliance on unsupported, emotional, exaggerated, or sensational claims or language.

To evaluate whether information is credible, digital literacy expert Mike Caulfield has developed the SIFT (stop, investigate, find, trace) process for evaluating online sources:

1. **Stop.** Before reading or sharing an article or video or acting on a strong emotional response to its content, assess what you know about the expertise and reputation of the author, the website publisher, and the sources of information. Then dig deeper.
2. **Investigate the source.** Don't rely simply on what a website says about itself. Conduct a separate search of the organization and/or author to see what others say about them. Wikipedia may provide information on the author's personal, professional, and educational background and an organization's purpose and activities, history, and funding. This online encyclopedia is not guaranteed to be accurate and complete, but it may be a good starting point and provide citations you can follow to verify information. Online search engines are another option to gain a wider view of accuracy and credibility. For many media sources, you can research potential bias from sources such as Ad Fontes Media (adfontesmedia.com) or Media Bias Fact Check (mediabiasfactcheck.com). Keep in mind that biases range on a spectrum from extreme to moderate and that a biased presentation can still impart valid information; however, extra care should be taken to verify the accuracy and completeness of content from that source.
3. **Find better information.** When reading an article from an unfamiliar or questionable media source, search for other coverage on the same topic. If the subject has been covered by a news source you have determined is reliable, use the coverage from that dependable outlet. Also, check when the information you are evaluating was published; if it is dated, search for updated

news or studies. Finally, you can use a respected fact-checking service such as [Snopes.com](https://snopes.com), [FactCheck.org](https://factcheck.org), or [Politifact.com](https://politifact.com).

- 4. Trace claims, quotes, and media back to the original source.** If an article cites another media outlet as the source for its content, go to that source for the original information.

A series of short videos employing the SIFT method is available at <https://clark.libguides.com/evaluating-information/SIFT>.

CONCLUSION

“A society grounded in fiction rather than reality cannot function.” Heather Cox Richardson.

Mis/disinformation isn’t new. In our contemporary climate, our fractured, fast-paced, and anonymized methods of relaying opinions, news, and artificial images pose special risks. People often want to believe negative information about their perceived opponents. Many individuals and groups have financial incentives to spread lies. This makes tackling mis/disinformation a shared responsibility, requiring each of us to recognize, resist, and mitigate its harmful influences.

Mis/disinformation erodes trust, undermines public health, disrupts democratic processes, and can lead to physical harm and violence. False claims increase polarization and deter informed civic participation. Attacking scientific inquiry and evidence waylays effective responses to illness and disease, the ongoing climate disaster, and environmental challenges. False narratives and amplified mistrust distort learning materials and teaching methods, misrepresent history and culture, and skew our understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

As part of the League’s commitment to democracy, we must be discerning consumers of information and support others in developing their own antennae. We also must remain trustworthy and reliable in the information we provide—and insist that others, leaders and media included, do the same.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you recall an instance in which you shared or received mis/disinformation within your family or friendship circle? How did you determine the falsehood, and how did you follow up?
2. In September 2025, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced the agency would require a label on acetaminophen, citing a possible association between the drug’s use during pregnancy and autism spectrum disorder in children. Is this an appropriate caution or an example of mis/disinformation? What steps could you take to make an informed judgment on this matter?
3. How can the League more effectively counter misinformation and disinformation regarding elections and voting?

The complete list of sources will be provided in paper form at the unit meetings, and it is also included in the digital version of this paper and accessible on the League of Women Voters of Lane County website.

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