

Hazardous Misinformation: Key Policy Levers

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While misinformation has long been a [component](#) of traditional print and broadcast media, digital technology allows for the [frictionless](#) dissemination of false and manipulated content with, at times, acutely dangerous [consequences](#). Misinformation pertaining to [COVID-19](#), linked to worsened individual outcomes and community outbreaks, and to our [elections](#), tied to instances of voter [intimidation](#), suppression and [incitement](#), have been of particular concern recently.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations focus on promoting [transparency and accountability](#) to mitigate the spread of hazardous misinformation among the majority of Americans who now not only consume, but also create and propagate media. The proposals can be categorized into four threads: (1) **industry co-designed codes of practice**; (2) redress for digital practices to strengthen **legitimate news outlets**; (3) a safe harbor for **sharing data with misinformation researchers** to improve oversight; (4) broad implementation of interventions that boost **media literacy** and the capacity to discern misinformation.

Codes of Practice with Public and/or Third-Party Oversight

- As a point of departure for crafting policy on this topic, multiple scholars call for a new locus of specialized, expert-led federal oversight for digital platforms, such as a Digital Platform Agency.
- While legislation would be necessary to create a distinct new regulatory agency, the White House might immediately convene an [inter-agency task force](#) engaging expertise within the executive branch, Congress, industry, civil society and academia to clarify and update digital platform policy.
 - A digital platform task force could lead efforts to develop an industry-wide code of practice which promotes transparency and accountability through commitments including: **disclosing political funding in advertising**, **demonetizing purveyors** of disinformation, **closing fake and/or bot accounts**, and addressing **algorithmic biases** that reward extremist and/or low-credibility content (EU Commission's [Code of Practice on Disinformation could be used as a model.](#))
 - Such a code of practice can be held accountable through [independent, third-party oversight](#).

A Healthy Landscape for Legitimate Journalism

- Misinformation thrives when [legitimate journalism](#), particularly local journalism, is on economically shaky ground. Consumers increasingly rely on social media for news, with revenues for digital platforms flourishing and the journalistic sources struggling to survive.

- Scholars have called for comprehensive [re-evaluation](#) of anti-competitive practices that interfere with a vibrant, reality-based information landscape.
- Policymakers might consider leveraging [antitrust](#) actions to ensure news sites are reimbursed for journalism posted on their sites. Further, the creation of a temporary [safe harbor](#) in antitrust laws would allow news publishers to [collectively negotiate](#) with platforms regarding the terms on which their content may appear.
- Additional proposals have included (1) levying a [digital services tax](#) on major news-sharing platforms in the interest of creating a vibrant [public funding model](#) to support local and public interest journalism, and (2) the use of [tax incentives](#) to encourage struggling news outlets to transition to a not-for-profit status.

Supporting Research/Mapping Misinformation

- Just as academic researchers play a crucial independent role regarding other public health and safety issues, misinformation researchers need access to [data](#) that will bolster nuanced policies and best practices; yet researchers [warn](#) that digital platforms habitually restrict access to data that could inform oversight.
- Such [data](#) would allow researchers to better understand how misinformation spreads and [how disinformation campaigns operate](#).
- Scholars suggest policy provisions that allow for a [safe harbor](#) for sharing aggregated, anonymized data with academic misinformation experts studying such questions.

Civics Education/Media Literacy

- Research confirms that helping media consumers discern the types of dubious information they *will* encounter -- a practice called “[prebunking](#)” — is far more effective than efforts to “debunk” false (yet often legitimate-looking) news stories following exposure. Prebunking exercises can be incorporated into media literacy and civics education curricula as in [other countries](#).
- While in pockets of the country, [state and local policy makers](#) support media literacy as a critical component of civics education, federal policy makers have yet to ratify such efforts. The proposed federal *Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act* ([H.R. 4688](#) and [S.2240](#)) would create a Department of Education grant program to support K-12 digital citizenship and media literacy education.
- Critically, researchers note that [older adults](#) are particularly vulnerable to digital scams and misinformation. In order to address the [most vulnerable](#) media consumers, policy makers can leverage digital platform oversight to ensure that major media-sharing platforms implement validated prebunking exercises into their practices for both onboarding and ongoing users.



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