



MANAGING MISINFORMATION

A Guide to Separating Fact from Fake in the Digital Era

Introduction

In today's fast-moving digital landscape, **misinformation spreads quickly** across both traditional and social media, often undermining public trust and complicating crisis response. **For government agencies, combating misinformation is critical** to maintaining transparency, credibility, and public safety.

This guide provides **practical strategies** to help local governments:

- **Educate the public** on identifying misinformation
- **Determine when to respond** to false claims
- **Craft effective responses** to misinformation
- **Engage media and social platforms** to uphold accurate reporting

By implementing these best practices, county governments can serve as **trusted sources of information**, ensuring **that facts prevail over falsehoods**.

Understanding Misinformation

Misinformation refers to **false or misleading content**, whether spread intentionally or by mistake. **Recognizing misinformation** is the first step in countering it effectively.

Key Indicators of Misinformation

- Misinterpretations of real events
- Satire mistaken as fact
- Lack of credible sources

Did You Know? A study by MIT found that **false news spreads six times faster** than the truth on social media.





Educating the Public on Misinformation

The best defense against misinformation is an informed and critically thinking public. Government organizations can take the initiative to educate and empower communities.

How Government Agencies Can Help:

- **Organize Educational Campaigns**
 - Host **workshops and seminars** on media literacy, the ability to critically analyze stories presented in the mass media and to determine their accuracy or credibility.
 - Partner with **schools to integrate fact-checking skills** into curricula.
 - Share **public service announcements (PSAs)** via social media and government websites.
- **Promote Critical Thinking**
 - Encourage residents to **verify sources** before sharing information.
 - Provide **easy-to-understand guides** on spotting fake news.
- **Leveraging Digital Tools**
 - Use **infographics, explainer videos, and interactive content** to make learning about misinformation engaging.

Example: A county creates a **short video series** featuring local officials explaining how to fact-check news articles.

How to Identify and Correct Misinformation

Not every false claim requires a response. **Use a strategic approach** to determine when and how to correct misinformation.

When Should You Respond?

- If the **misinformation is spreading widely** and could cause harm, respond with facts.
- If the **claim is minor and not gaining traction**, responding might amplify it unnecessarily.
- If it's an **opinion rather than false information**, correcting it may not be effective.

How to Correct Misinformation Effectively:

- **Address the false claim**
 - Acknowledge that incorrect information is circulating.
 - Clearly state the **correct information** with supporting evidence.
- **Cite credible sources**
 - Use **official government data, academic research, and trusted media outlets**.

CORRECT MISINFORMATION



Use Clear and Simple Language

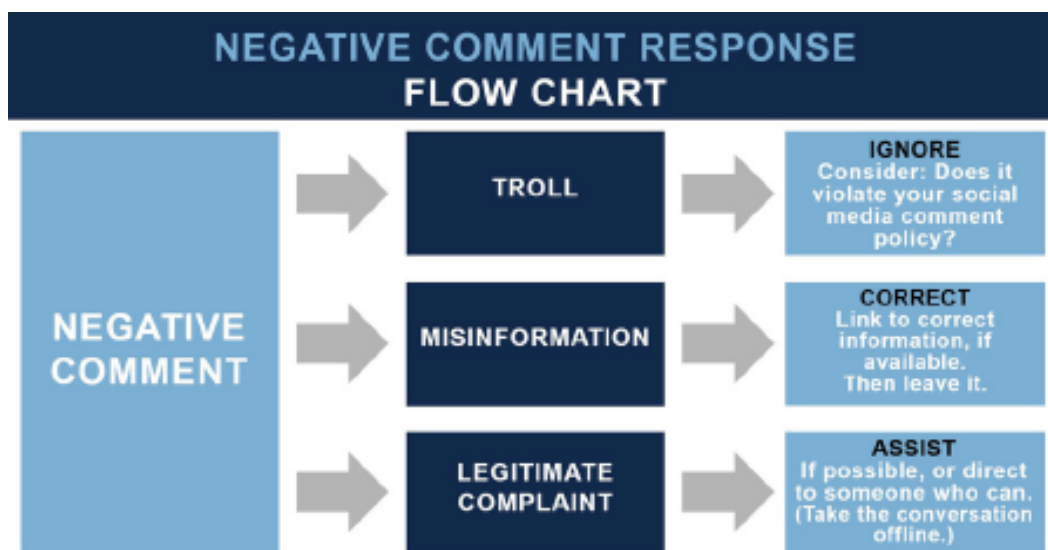
- Avoid overly technical or defensive language.
- Ensure the correction is **easy to understand and share**.

Leverage Visual Aids

- **Infographics, charts, and short videos** are highly shareable and help simplify complex topics.

Example Social Media Response Template Guidelines:

"Thank you for your comment. We want to provide some clarification. According to [credible source], the correct information is [fact]. For more details, visit [official link]."



Social Media Response Strategies

Social media plays a **major role in the spread of misinformation**. Government agencies must be proactive in monitoring and responding.

Best Practices for Responding to Misinformation Online:

- **Choose an appropriate graphic.** Clearly state the purpose of the post and follow your brand guidelines.
- **Use clear, fact-based captions** when posting corrections.
- **Monitor** responses.
- **Consult with the county attorney** before hiding/deleting harmful comments (e.g., you might be subjected to public records requirements).
- **Archive** any comment before removing it (make sure you aren't subjected to public records requirements before doing so).

Example: A county posts an infographic debunking a false claim about emergency relief funding, linking to an official FEMA update.

Combating Misinformation on Social Media

- Monitor platforms for **emerging misinformation trends**.
- Flag and **report false claims to platform moderators**.
- Use **hashtags strategically** to amplify accurate information.
- Engage **trusted surrogates** (e.g., community leaders) to help spread the truth.



DISSEMINATE CORRECTIONS VIA MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

Traditional Media:
Contact news outlets and request a correction to misinformation.

Social Media:
Post corrections on all social media platforms and tag the original post, if warranted.

Official Websites:
For clarity & permanence, post detailed corrections on websites.



Traditional Media: Partnering With News Outlets

Media coverage **shapes public perception**. Ensuring that journalists receive **accurate, timely information** helps prevent misinformation from spreading.

How to Work with Media to Address Misinformation:

- **Be the First and Most Reliable Source**
 - Issue timely press releases when misinformation arises.
 - Provide a single, clear message across all communication channels.
- **Establish Media Relationships**
 - Develop strong connections with **journalists and newsroom editors**.
 - Offer **expert interviews** to clarify misleading stories.
 - **Example:** Media interviews witnesses who suggest that the county is underreporting the number of fatalities during Hurricane Helene. **Call news stations and offer interviews with experts** such as the medical examiner, or representative from North Carolina Vital Records, if they are willing to provide an interview.
- **Know When to Escalate**
 - If a media outlet **publishes incorrect information**, request a correction.
 - If misinformation **continues unchecked**, escalate concerns to a **news director or managing editor**.

Tip: If a media outlet is **unresponsive to correction requests**, consider engaging an **alternative reputable outlet** to set the record straight.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

While **freedom of speech** protects most online discussions, **some misinformation can cause real harm** — especially in public safety or health crises.

Steps to Take for Harmful Misinformation:

- **Consult legal experts** if false claims damage reputations or incite panic.
- **Report serious misinformation** to relevant authorities or platform moderators.
- **Maintain ethical communication practices** to uphold public trust.
- **Example:** County leadership learns of information that is unfavorable regarding the county's response to a crisis. It's imperative that leadership avoids hiding information from the public or being untruthful. **Be forthcoming and transparent.**

Final Thoughts

Misinformation is a **persistent challenge**, but county **governments have the tools to combat it**. Local governments can **foster an informed, engaged, and resilient community** by:

- Educating the public on how to identify false information
- Responding strategically to misinformation when it arises
- Leveraging social and traditional media to share fact-based communication