

# *Crisis of Trust: How Can Democracies Protect Against Dangerous Lies?*

## **Discussion Guide**

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### **Before You Read:**

#### ***Discussion Questions:***

- How would you rate your trust in the U.S. government? If you'd give it a high ranking, why? If you would give it a low ranking, what do you view as its major pitfalls? How do you think it could be improved?
- Do you think the U.S. is the best country in the world? Why or why not? If not, what country or countries would you say is better, and why?
- How do you receive a majority of your news? Do you trust that the media you are exposed to reflect accurate information?
- Do you think that government regulation of distorted or "fake news" on social media goes against our First Amendment right to free speech? Can you think of any regulations that would allow Freedom of Speech and also prohibit the spread of harmful misinformation and disinformation?
- How can democracies committed to freedom of speech protect against dangerous lies and manipulation?

#### ***Survey:***

Please rate the following statements below.

1 = strongly disagree 2 = somewhat disagree 3 = neutral 4 = somewhat agree 5 = strongly agree

1. Unregulated social media platforms are harmful for democracies. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation are prevalent in American society.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. America is the greatest country in the world. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I can easily identify misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation. \_\_\_\_\_
5. Social media needs to be regulated more than it is today. \_\_\_\_\_

### **Introduction**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- "Americans widely agree that disinformation is a problem. The problem is, of course, that we're convinced it is the others' facts that are false." (p. 7)
- "The very topic of countering disinformation is so fraught — and trust in government so low — that in the spring of 2022, when our Department of Homeland Security formed a 'Disinformation Governance Board' to grapple with the challenge, pushback was swift and strident." (...) "and within a few weeks President Biden nixed the Board." (p. 8)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “Today, less than one-fifth of us live in countries deemed ‘fully free.’” (p. 6)
- “Since the mid-1960s, trust in government has plummeted—from over three-quarters to just one-fifth today.” (p. 6)
- “Despite deep divides, nearly all of us *do* ‘agree that the spread of misinformation is a problem,’ according to a 2021 Pearson Institute/AP-NORC poll.” (p. 6)
- “In 2022, half of Americans predict a civil war in the next ‘several years.’” (p. 7)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What are some key factors that have led to American’s sinking trust in the U.S government?
- Do you agree that American politics are increasingly polarized? If so, what are some of the prime examples or case scenarios of this trend that you’ve experienced?
- What are your thoughts on such conflicting statistics relating to the U.S government, disinformation, and our actions in combatting it?

### **Private, Monopoly Power, a Threat to Truth Telling**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “Guiding our brutal form of capitalism is one unspoken ‘rule’: *Do what brings the highest return to existing wealth.* What follows is extreme economic inequality and tightly held corporate power.” (p. 10)
- “We’ve generated wealth inequality more extreme than in 111 countries, putting us virtually on par with the Ivory Coast and Peru.” (p. 11)
- “Many of those at the lower rungs of the economic ladder assume, even if unconsciously, that they are responsible for their own poor standing. Feelings of shame can then arise. But shame is extremely uncomfortable, and relief is found in blame. Thus, disinformation that identifies enemies and encourages blaming has great appeal.” (p. 11-12)
- “If distrust and despair drive citizens to withdraw, democracy dies.” (p. 12)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “In the 1980s, around 50 media corporations competed for our attention, but today just six corporations own 90 percent of U.S. media.” (p. 9)
- “‘Hate-filled Tweets’ leapt nearly five-fold, potentially reaching over 3 million users, in the 12 hours following [Elon Musk’s] purchase [of Twitter].” (p. 9)
- “In 2021, as both political parties were considering legislation to reign in corporate power, seven big tech companies spent nearly \$70 million on lobbying to counter government action to increase competition in the media sphere. (...) Meta, spent over \$20 million on lobbying, ranking seventh in overall spending.” (p. 9)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- Do you believe that media platforms should be owned and regulated by private parties? What are some pros and cons of this method?

- Do you think there should be a limit placed on the amount of money that can be used for lobbying efforts? Why or why not?
- What are ways America could reduce the role of money in elections?

## **Risk — It's a Given**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “Failing to confront disinformation involves great risk, and today we are experiencing the negative consequences of our neglect. But tackling disinformation also involves risks, including mistakes in identifying disinformation as well as overreach diminishing freedom of speech, not only in the U.S., but across the world.” (p. 12)

### ***Statistics:***

- “Challenging Americans’ self-image, we fall behind 61 countries including all 27 E.U. nations except Bulgaria and Poland.” (p. 13)
- “..In the U.S., spending in our 2020 presidential and congressional elections totaled \$14.4 billion—more than double the record set in 2016, according to Open Secrets.” (p. 13)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What risks come from not confronting disinformation?
- Does the U.S.’ global Freedom House ranking surprise you? Why or why not?
- How have our elections distorted U.S spending?

## **Lessons, Not Models**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “Our Constitution’s First Amendment aimed not simply to protect the individual’s right to speak. It was also fashioned to serve a vital *public* function: ‘to assure unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people’, as clarified in a 1957 Supreme Court ruling.” (p. 14)
- “We fail, however, in this core public purpose if ‘freedom of speech’ gets reduced to the right to say whatever we please within a ‘marketplace of ideas’—a metaphor introduced more than a century ago by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.” (p. 14)
- “In the decades following the end of the fairness doctrine, audiences tended to sort themselves—consuming media offering a narrower range of opinion.” (p. 15)

### ***Statistics:***

- “As MIT Media Lab observed, ‘Falsehoods are 70 percent more likely to be retweeted than truth and reach their first 1,500 recipients six times faster.’” (p. 14)
- “By 2021, 86 percent of Americans reported getting their news from digital devices. (...) the rapid shift to digital content also created virtual ‘echo chambers,’ allowing misinformation and disinformation to spread quickly with little pushback from users.” (p. 15-16)
- “A 2019 sample of over 20,000 websites posing disinformation risks collectively brought in annual profits of \$235 million, reports the Global Disinformation Index,” (p. 16)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What defined our First Amendment and do you think there are times when it should be limited? If you had to create boundaries to the first amendment, where would they lie?
- Where do you get most of your news? What about your peers? What do these similarities/differences reflect?
- Is there a connection between monopoly power within social media companies and the spread of disinformation? Why or why not?

### **Defining Misinformation, Disinformation, and Manipulation**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “Merriam-Webster defines misinformation as ‘incorrect or misleading information,’ while disinformation is ‘false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by planting rumors) to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.’” (p. 17)
- “More difficult to define and confront is what we are calling ‘manipulation’: the intentional effort to influence by, for example, telling only one side of a story and carefully tailoring messages based on the target’s vulnerabilities.” (p. 18)
- “A helpful strategy: **SIFT**:
  - **Stop**
  - **Investigate the source**
  - **Find better coverage, and**
  - **Trace claims, quotes, and media to their original context.**” (p. 19)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “Subconsciously, we tend to trust those whose beliefs and values mirror our own—a psychological pattern called ‘confirmation bias.’” (p. 18)

#### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What are the key differences between misinformation and disinformation? Give a real-world example of each.
- In your opinion, are misinformation and disinformation both equal in their negative impacts on society, or is one more harmful than the other?
- Have you been exposed to mis-or-disinformation in your own life? Were you able to recognize it? Why or why not?

## **Warnings from the Experiences of Anti-Democratic Responses to Disinformation**

### **Brazil’s Controversial “Fake News” Law — A Cautionary Tale**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “Brazil’s online integrity has been further harmed by Bolsonaro’s and allies disinformation campaigns” (p. 23)

- “Less than a month after the [“Fake News Law’s”] introduction, Bolsonaro’s ban on removing social media posts was struck down by Brazil’s Senate and top court.” (p. 24)

***Statistics:***

- “In Brazil in 2020, the National Federation of Journalists recorded 428 cases of violence against journalists, including two murders.” (p. 23)
- “As we consider Brazil’s struggles, note the sobering truth that Freedom House ranks the U.S. only 10 points higher than Brazil.” (p. 24)

***Discussion Questions:***

- Do you see any similarities between Brazil and the U.S.?
- How has Brazil adjusted to this spread of disinformation? Is there anything they have done that we should implement? Is there anything we should avoid?

**Singapore: A “Partly Free” Democracy Grapples with Disinformation**

***Key Quotes:***

- “The Act [POFMA] empowers government agencies to assess whether internet posts are false and damaging to Singapore’s security, domestic and international interests, confidence in government, elections, or its citizens.” (p. 26)

***Statistics:***

- “Confirming the validity of such fears, the law has been applied primarily to opposition party members, especially in the run-up to the 2020 general elections. Four days after the election, Reuters reported that opposition party members had been served numerous correction orders, while the party in power (the People’s Action Party) had been served no such orders.” (p. 27)
- “[The effect of Singapore’s Law] on political speech caused the world press Freedom Index to lower the country’s 2021 ranking (...) Freedom House gives it a low score of 47 in political rights and civil liberties.” (p. 27)

***Discussion Questions***

- Based on the information in this report, do you think POFMA should be revised or completely abandoned?
- Why do you think that POFMA has causes Singapore’s Freedom Index to lower? Is there a way to maintain this law without lowering one’s freedom score?

**Steps Toward Democracy**

***Key Quotes:***

- “Chile and Colombia, for example, just elected progressive presidents in ‘historic shifts’ in leadership, signifying a democratic wave in both nations. Priorities of the new leaders include greater economic equity, environmental protection, and improved government-citizen relations.” (p. 28)
- “In fact, amid today’s discouraging realities, there are many advances from which we can take positive lessons. Note that in Germany it was in part the failure of the U.S. to

prevent damage from harmful lies in our recent elections that triggered their new, protective steps.” (p. 28)

### ***Discussion Questions***

- Can you think of any positive changes towards democracy in the U.S. that you have seen throughout your lifetime?
- How has Chile and Columbia changed our democratic views? What have their elections shown us?

## **Media and Democracy: Helpful Lessons from a Range of Nations**

### **New Zealand: A Standout in Upholding Public Standards, Transparency, and Citizen Participation in Solutions**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “[New Zealand] uses in-depth research, online-safety campaigns, and a publicly sponsored online, transparent system for reporting and correcting disinformation.” (p. 30)
- “It [BSA] will penalize broadcasters if they do one or more of the following:
  - ❖ Misinform the public about important matters.
  - ❖ Unfairly harm the dignity or reputation of the people they feature.
  - ❖ Leave out significant viewpoints on issues of public concern.” (p. 32)
- ““It is better, [David Shanks] believes, to have a transparent agent looking out for the public interest. ‘[I]f you don’t have any [public] authority that makes those calls,’ he argues, ‘you abdicate [the power] to the private sector and also to invisible kinds of bureaucrats and groups—all operating in a disorganized way that nobody can make any sense of.’” (p. 33)
- “The Media Council has 12 guiding principles. Among them are accuracy, fairness, balance, prevention of conflict of interest, and a responsibility to publish corrections as needed.” (p. 34)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “Freedom House gives the country [New Zealand] a score of 99, placing it fourth worldwide in ‘global freedom,’ a measure of political rights and civil liberties.” (p. 30)
- “Over 80 percent of New Zealanders polled believe that ‘exposure to misinformation is common, and concern is widespread’ and that ‘something should be done.’” (p. 33)
- “In New Zealand, cautious engagement by each of these initiatives and organizations helps to explain why Transparency International ranks the country as least corrupt (tied with Denmark and Finland) worldwide in its *Corruption Perceptions Index*, measuring how ‘corrupt public sectors are perceived to be. In stark contrast, the *Corruption Perceptions Index* places the U.S. behind 26 nations, between Chile and Barbados.” (p. 36)

### ***Discussion Questions***

- What strengths surround New Zealand’s tactic in combatting dis- and misinformation?
- What policies and tactics could we apply to the U.S? Why?
- What are your thoughts on the role of a “Chief Censor”? What are the benefits and risks involved with such a position?
- What are the Five Key tools New Zealand uses to protect honest exchange?

### **Australia Combines Laws and Voluntary Measures**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “The legislation states that anyone who ‘provides a content service [and] fails to cut such content [such as the video of the Christchurch massacre] in a timely fashion could face prison time, and companies could be fined up to 10 percent of their annual profit.’” (p. 37)
- “As of mid-2022, Adobe, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Redbubble, TikTok, and Twitter have adopted the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation.” (p. 38)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “Three-quarters of Australian respondents in a recent poll ‘thought online platforms should do more to cut the amount of false and misleading content online.’” (p. 38)
- “Australia’s efforts have much to teach the rest of us about fighting disinformation while protecting freedom and democracy. Note that Freedom House gives the country a score of 95 in ‘political rights and civil liberties,’ placing it 14th worldwide, just below Switzerland.” (p. 38)

#### ***Discussion Questions***

- How do New Zealand and Australia share similar tactics in combatting disinformation?
- Do you believe that voluntary codes are an effective measure for regulating digital platforms? Why or why not?
- What can we learn from Australia that is different from others? Are there any weaknesses to what they are doing?

### **Germany: Setting Higher Standards for Social Media**

#### ***Key Quotes:***

- “In part motivated by the destructive tenor and misinformation of the 2016 U.S. elections, in 2017 Germany passed the Network Enforcement Act, otherwise known as the ‘Facebook Act,’ aimed at combatting hate speech and fake news on social networks.” (p. 39)
- “To be considered defamation, the false information must be capable of negatively affecting public opinion of a person.” (p. 41)

#### ***Statistics:***

- “According to the study, ‘of the 992,039 messages on Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter that were notified as possibly unlawful, only 166,072 (amounting to 17 percent) were

taken down by the platform,’ and only one of more than a thousand lawsuits resulted in a fine to Facebook.” (p. 40)

- “The U.S., by contrast, has no federal law protecting against defamation. However, 23 states and two territories do have criminal defamation, libel, and/or slander laws.” (p. 42).

### ***Discussion Questions***

- What do the statistics surrounding the message takedowns of the Network Enforcement Act study show us? What does this reflect?
- Do you agree with the German laws of punishment for defamation? If yes, why? If not, how could they be amended to become suitable?
- Do you believe any of the anti-disinformation efforts used in Germany could be useful in the U.S. If so, which ones and why?

## **France Fights Information Manipulation on Several Fronts**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “That year, parliament passed the Law Against Information Manipulation, allowing candidates to sue for the removal of ‘contested news reports’ during election campaigns and requiring social-media platforms to disclose funding sources for sponsored content.” (p. 42)
- “Another bill in France related to fighting disinformation is the highly contested Laetitia Avia bill (...) the bill’s specific aim was to combat online hate speech, terrorist speech, and child pornography. (...) after considerable debate, a version of the Avia law did pass in May 2020.” (p. 44)

### ***Statistics:***

- “France created a new agency focused on combating ‘foreign fake news.’ First proposed in the spring of 2021 as part of the country’s preparation for 2022 presidential election, it is to be run by the Secretariat-General for National Defense and Security (SGNDS).” (p. 45)
- “Given France’s wide public awareness of the disinformation crisis and varied responses, we were surprised to find that Freedom House ranks it 45th worldwide in its Global Freedom Index. Note, it is still comes in seventeen points higher than the U.S.” (p. 45)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- How does France’s approach to combating “fake news” and disinformation differ from other countries discussed? What tactics do you admire/believe are most effective?
- What do you think makes France 17 points higher on the Freedom House Index than the U.S?

## **Sweden’s “Psychological Defense” Against Disinformation**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “In 1777, Sweden became the first country to write freedom of the press into its constitution.” (p. 45)



- “[Sweden] defines ‘hate speech’ as the expression of ‘contempt for a national or ethnic group or other such group of persons with allusion to race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, creed or sexual orientation.’ The country’s courts also regard signs with xenophobic symbols and racist paraphernalia as forms of hate speech.” (p. 45)
- “‘Ombudsman’ refers to an official with responsibility for receiving and acting on complaints by the public against government or businesses such as banks or insurance companies. (...) Today, the Office of Media Ombudsman is an independent ‘self-disciplinary’ body that investigates cases of possible violation of press ethics.” (p. 46)
- “Sweden focuses more on promoting factual content and educating users to effectively spot disinformation than on blocking what’s false.” (p. 47)

***Statistics:***

- “The fact that Freedom House gives Sweden a score of 100 in political rights and civil liberties respectively is worth noting here. It again signals that enforceable standards can contribute to freedom, rather than suppress it.” (p. 45)

***Discussion Questions:***

- What are your thoughts on writing freedom of the press into a constitution?
- Explain the roles and benefits of an ‘Ombudsman’. What do you see as its strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you think Freedom House gives Sweden a 100 in its Global Freedom Index. What tactics and efforts make this nation a leader in speech freedoms and honest exchange? Could these methods be applied elsewhere to help struggling democracies like the U.S.?

**Other National Responses to Disinformation**

***Key Quotes:***

- “In a global 2018-2019 report, the Poynter Institute found the most common steps for fighting misinformation and disinformation across the world are laws and their enforcement, media literacy campaigns, taskforce actions, factfinding reports, investigations, and court rulings.” (p. 48)
- “In 2020, the European Commission proposed parallel laws—the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act—designed to reduce exposure to illegal content, protect the rights of internet users, and establish a transparent “accountability framework” for online platforms, as well as break up big tech companies’ tight control of online communication.” (p. 49)

***Discussion Questions:***

- How do you feel about only seven percent of citizen complaints being upheld by the BSA? Do you think that number is too high/low or just right?
- What threats do monopoly “gatekeeper” media companies pose to the public good and truthful exchange?

## **Learning to Detect Disinformation, Even as Youngsters**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “A number of countries are adding ‘media literacy’ to their schools’ curricula. Finland and Estonia—both bordering Russia—have become recognized leaders in part because they include media literacy in primary school curricula.” (p. 52)
- “Media literacy is crucial in reducing the harm of misinformation and disinformation in part because it can shorten the critical time span between the posting of such content and its being reviewed and flagged.” (p. 53)
- “In our communities, McNeill encourages all of us ‘to talk with our local leaders what they are doing about media literacy.’ We can each ‘approach our representatives in the statehouse, ask our school committee members and school superintendent.’ She adds that ‘any member of the community can do this, not just parents of children in the system. It matters to all of us.’” (p. 54)

### ***Statistics:***

- “As of 2021, only one [U.S.] state, Illinois, explicitly requires schools to teach media literacy.” (p. 53)
- “...an alarming Stanford study that included this finding; Of 3,446 students questioned, eight in ten students incorrectly identified advertisement as a real news story, despite it being labeled as ‘sponsored content.’” (p. 53)
- “Studies have found that educational warning videos about the existence and spread of misinformation on platforms like YouTube can heighten the public’s ability to identify falsehoods online.” (p. 54)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What are some ways you can be more conscious of disinformation?
- What would media literacy look like in your school? Or in the school you went to growing up?
- How can you help enhance media literacy education in your homes and communities?

## **Strengthening Trust, Inspiring Democratic Action**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- “The tricky part is this: At least a modicum of trust is required to lay a solid foundation for trust. And in America today, trust in government is low.” (p. 56)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- Do you think public trust in our U.S. government is salvageable? What steps could be taken to increase it?
- Explain the two possible paths that our democracy could follow, as explained in this section.

## **Igniting a Sense of Possibility**

### ***Key Quotes:***

- "...We in the U.S. have allowed private interests propagating dangerous lies to corrupt public dialogue. In so doing, we place private rights above a founding purpose of our nation as defined in the Preamble to our Constitution: that is, to 'promote the general Welfare.' Arguably, allowing the spread of such harmful disinformation for private gain is therefore blatantly anti-constitutional." (p. 58)
- "Just imagine how much more discouraging it would be if America truly were 'the best democracy,' given all we know about the power of private wealth in political life and the many ways our voting system denies equal voice." (p. 59)
- "Burying the notion of American 'exceptionalism' can fire up our motivation as well as open our eyes to inspiration and practical tools from stronger democracies" (p. 59)

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- Were you brought up to believe in 'American Exceptionalism'? If so, what stories were you told? Do you still believe the U.S. is 'exceptional'?
- How do you interpret the guiding forces as outlined in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution? Do you believe our nation today reflects the promises of our founding fathers?

## **After you Read:**

### ***Discussion Questions:***

- What are the standout aspects of this report? What facts or techniques shocked you? What can we learn from them?
- Do you think the U.S. is the best country in the world? Why or why not? If not, what country or countries would you say is better, and why?
- How can democracies committed to freedom of speech protect against dangerous lies and manipulation?

### ***Survey:***

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5. Social media needs to be regulated more than it is today. \_\_\_\_\_