

# Improving Digital Literacy In An Era of Disinformation

Digital Discernment and Protecting  
Your Organization's Credibility

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# ABOUT ME

## **Founder and Principal, Zeal Communications**

Two decades leading purpose-driven communications

## **Former Executive, Goodwill Industries International and National Head Start Association**

National spokesperson; led crisis communications, misinformation response

PRSA Voices4Everyone — Combating Disinformation Task Force

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# TODAY'S SESSION

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**The New Misinformation Landscape**

*AI, algorithms and how falsehoods spread*

02

**A Case Study in Real-World Rumor Management**

*The Goodwill viral rumor playbook*

03

**Head Start Under Attack**

*Defending mission-driven programs from false narratives*

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**Digital Discernment as a Leadership Skill**

*Tools, frameworks and team culture*

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**Protecting Your Credibility**

*Proactive strategy for purpose-driven organizations*

# Part 1

# The New Misinformation Landscape

*AI, algorithms and the erosion of trust*

# MISINFORMATION vs. DISINFORMATION vs. MALINFORMATION

## Misinformation

False information spread without harmful intent. Often shared by people who believe it is true.

## Disinformation

Deliberately fabricated or manipulated content distributed to deceive, harm or manipulate.

## Malinformation

True information weaponized to harm such as private data shared publicly to damage reputation.

*The goal of adversaries is not to inform. It is to corrode trust and make truth feel exhausting to find.*

# THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

22×

more memorable  
stories are vs.  
facts alone.

1.9M

nonprofits in the  
U.S. Each is a  
potential target.

60%

of Americans have  
encountered  
online misinformation.

# MISINFORMATION SPREAD

- **Algorithmic Amplification:** Platforms reward engagement over accuracy. Outrage travels farther and faster than truth.
- **AI-Generated Content:** Deepfakes, synthetic voices and fabricated quotes can be indistinguishable from the real thing.
- **Prominent Amplifiers:** False claims gain instant credibility when shared by celebrities, politicians or influencers — even without verification.
- **Viral Momentum:** A rumor can circle the globe before the correction is written. Once a narrative takes hold, facts fight uphill.
- **Trusted Networks:** People are more likely to believe misinformation from family, friends and community leaders than from strangers.

# Part 2

# A Case Study in Viral Rumor Management

*Goodwill Industries International — Responding at Scale*

# GOODWILL: A MISSION BUILT ON TRANSFORMATION

150

Independent  
community-based  
Goodwill organizations

3,300

Stores in the U.S.  
and Canada

142K+

People connected  
with jobs each year

34M

People served  
virtually

Goodwill worked to build one of America's most iconic nonprofit brands — and then had to defend it from one of the most far-reaching viral rumors in nonprofit history.

# THE VIRAL RUMOR: 'THINK BEFORE YOU DONATE'

## The False Claim:

A viral email and social media chain alleged that 'Mark Curran,' the supposed 'owner' of Goodwill, personally profits \$2.3 million per year. The claim named a person who did not exist in that role and cited fabricated compensation figures.

## Why It Was High Stakes:

- Prominent public figures shared the rumor without verification
- Thousands of emails and social media posts demanded answers
- Media outlets picked up the story, amplifying it further
- Donor behavior and store traffic faced potential disruption
- 150 independent Goodwill organizations across North America needed consistent, accurate responses

# THINK BEFORE YOU DONATE

*SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS*

<p><b><u>The American Red Cross</u></b> President and CEO Marsha J. Evans' salary for the year was \$651,957 plus expenses</p>	<p><b><u>MARCH OF DIMES</u></b> It is called the March of Dimes because <b>only a dime for every 1 dollar is given to the needy.</b></p>	<p><b><u>The United Way</u></b> President Brian Gallagher receives a \$375,000 base salary along with numerous expense benefits.</p>	<p><b><u>UNICEF</u></b> CEO Caryl M. Stern receives \$1,200,000 per year (100k per month) plus all expenses including a ROLLS ROYCE. <b>Less than 5 cents of your donated dollar goes to the cause.</b></p>	<p><b><u>GOODWILL</u></b> CEO and owner Mark Curran profits \$2.3 million a year. Goodwill is a very catchy name for his business. You donate to his business and then he sells the items for PROFIT. He pays nothing for his products and pays his workers minimum wage! Nice Guy. <b>\$0.00 goes to help anyone! Stop giving to this man.</b></p>
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*Instead, give it to ANY OF THE FOLLOWING GO "GREEN" AND PUT YOUR MONEY WHERE IT WILL DO SOME GOOD*

<p><b><u>The Salvation Army</u></b> Commissioner, Todd Bassett receives a small salary of only \$13,000 per year (plus housing) for managing this \$2 billion dollar organization. <b>96 percent of donated dollars go to the cause.</b></p>	<p><b><u>The American Legion</u></b> National Commander receives a \$0.00 zero salary. Your donations go to help Veterans and their families and youth!</p>	<p><b><u>The Veterans of Foreign Wars</u></b> National Commander receives a \$0.00 zero salary. Your donations go to help Veterans and their families and youth!</p>	<p><b><u>The Disabled American Veterans</u></b> National Commander receives a \$0.00 zero salary. Your donations go to help Veterans and their families and youth!</p>	<p><b><u>The Military Order of Purple Hearts</u></b> National Commander receives a \$0.00 zero salary. Your donations go to help Veterans and their families and youth!</p>
<p><b><u>The Vietnam Veterans Association</u></b> National Commander receives a \$0.00 zero salary. Your donations go to help Veterans and their families and youth!</p>	<p><b><u>Make a Wish:</u></b> For children's last wishes. 100% goes to funding trips or special wishes for a dying child.</p>	<p><b><u>St. Jude Research Hospital</u></b> 100% goes towards funding and helping Children with Cancer who have no insurance and cannot afford to pay.</p>	<p><b><u>Ronald McDonald Houses</u></b> All monies go to running the houses for parents who have critical Children in the hospital. 100% goes to housing, and feeding the families.</p>	<p><b><u>Lions Club International</u></b> 100% OF DONATIONS GO TO HELP THE BLIND BUY HEARING AIDES, SUPPORT MEDICAL MISSIONS AROUND THE WORLD. THEIR LATEST UNDERTAKING IS MEASLES VACCINATIONS (ONLY \$1.00 PER SHOT).</p>



**Bethenny Frankel** ✓

@Bethenny

Follow

Administrative costs. My hand to GOD every single person in over 400 churches @ 35 communities says they have seen ZERO of publicized BS relief.

**Monica Mia** @MonicaMiaOnSite

Replying to @Bethenny

Wow so where is the money that's being raised????

12:59 PM - 29 Nov 2017

78 Retweets 308 Likes



34 78 308



**Donald J. Trump** ✓

@realDonaldTrump

Follow

.@unicef Caryl M. Stern CEO is driving around in a Rolls Royce...

Reply Retweet Favorite

620 RETWEETS

79 FAVORITES



**Donald J. Trump** ✓

@realDonaldTrump

Follow

...while her charity is getting less than 5 cents per donated dollar. She should be ashamed!

Reply Retweet Favorite

391 RETWEETS

65 FAVORITES



10:06 AM - 19 Nov 12 · Embed this Tweet



**Dave** @DashingDave314

19 Nov

@realDonaldTrump And what sir is YOUR salary? She does more to help this world than you. People like you are why nobody respects America.

Details

# RESPONSE STRATEGY

- **Addressed the rumor head-on:** Developed a dedicated 'Think Before You Donate' response page with fact-based content, community impact data and CEO compensation transparency.
- **Partnered with fact-checkers:** Wrote posts for Snopes and FactCheck.org. Coordinated with other nonprofits named in the rumor — Red Cross, Salvation Army, UNICEF.
- **Built a Social Media Messaging Toolkit:** Provided all 150 Goodwill organizations with guidelines, template social graphics, Facebook and Twitter posts, and LinkedIn Article templates.
- **Leveraged paid and organic media:** Facebook advertisements, letters to the editor, speaking event handouts, direct responses across email and social media channels.
- **Equipped frontline staff:** Talking points and key messages for store associates — the first people donors and customers encounter in person.
- **Pursued legal outreach:** Contacted social channels to address persistent, provably false content through formal channels.

# ONLINE VIRAL RUMOR: MANAGEMENT MEMBER ADVISORY GROUP



**MYTHBUSTING**

A Playbook for Combating Online Viral Rumors

# SUMMARY PRINCIPLES: WHAT THE GOODWILL PLAYBOOK TEACHES US

- Determine the appropriate messaging mix for your market and your audience segments
- Promote community impact proactively. Fill the information space with what is true before a rumor can fill it with what is false
- Proactively monitor media coverage, social media and search results year-round
- Include internal stakeholders — staff, board, affiliates — early and consistently
- Monitor social posts and respond quickly, courteously, and with accurate information
- Legal, media and communications outreach may all be warranted in the same situation



*Handling complaints via social networks carries the same weight as dealing with them face-to-face — only with higher stakes. Seventy percent of people will change their mind when you respond.*

— Jay Baer, *Hug Your Haters* — cited in Goodwill's rumor response training

# RESULTS

80.4%

of web traffic to  
the rumor response  
page came from search —  
people finding the truth

20

mentions of 'Think  
Before You Donate'  
in news since the  
materials launched



Positive sentiment  
increased as the  
organization flooded  
channels with facts

# KEY LESSONS FROM THE GOODWILL CASE STUDY

## What Worked

- Addressed concerns head-on with accurate, accessible information
- Built a consistent toolkit every affiliate could use immediately
- Prioritized SEO so truth surfaced first in searches
- Coordinated with peer organizations also named in the rumor
- Equipped staff at every level — not just communications
- Combined proactive and reactive outreach simultaneously

## What the Research Confirms

- Responding to complaints can recover stakeholders and deepen loyalty
- Facts alone are not enough — emotional resonance and trust matter
- The 'bypass' strategy: reinforce the truth, not just the refutation
- Speed matters — misinformation moves faster than corrections
- Audiences share what they find first; make truth easiest to find
- Community-driven responses (peers, advocates) outperform top-down comms

# Part 3

# Head Start Under Attack

*Combating false narratives about a 61-year legacy*

# HEAD START: MORE THAN 60 YEARS OF IMPACT

**40M+**

Children and families  
served since 1965

**\$12.36B**

Congressional  
appropriation, FY 2025

**17,000**

Head Start and Early  
Head Start centers  
nationwide

**Every  
District**

Head Start operates in  
every Congressional  
district in the U.S.

Head Start provides comprehensive early learning, health, nutrition, and family support services to children from birth to age 5 for eligible families. Decades of research confirm its positive impact on cognitive, social-emotional, academic and economic outcomes for children and families.

# THE FALSE NARRATIVES HEAD START HAS FACED

- **"Radical curriculum" claims:** The Trump administration's leaked 2025 budget proposal alleged Head Start used a 'radical' curriculum. This was a characterization rejected by early childhood researchers and program operators.
- **Immigration targeting:** A 2025 HHS directive falsely implied Head Start preferentially served undocumented immigrants, misrepresenting a 60+-year-old federal eligibility framework. Courts blocked the restriction.
- **Fraud allegations:** Broad claims of systemic fraud were used to justify funding freezes, despite no evidence of widespread misuse. This left programs scrambling and families in uncertainty.
- **Efficiency attacks:** Claims that the program 'costs more than it delivers,' which ignored decades of longitudinal research showing Head Start's long-term returns to children, families and taxpayers.

# HOW THE HEAD START COMMUNITY FOUGHT BACK

## Communications Tactics Used

- Personal stories from parents, educators and Head Start alumni shared widely across social media
- State and national associations published rapid-response fact sheets and myth-busting resources
- The 'Stand for Head Start' campaign mobilized advocates, alumni and family voices
- Coalitions coordinated messaging to ensure consistency across 1,600+ programs
- Hundreds of family advocates met with members and staff and some testified before Congress with real, human stories of program impact
- Media relations secured coverage that countered false budget narratives in major outlets

## Lessons for Your Organization

- Parents and families are your most credible messengers — prepare them with talking points
- Develop a rapid-response fact sheet BEFORE you need it
- Coalition messaging amplifies reach and credibility when peer voices align
- Stories move people; data supports them — use both, lead with people
- Monitor legislative and media environments year-round, not just in crisis
- Legislators respond to constituent stories — make it easy for families to tell theirs

# THE 'BYPASS' STRATEGY: REINFORCE TRUTH WITHOUT AMPLIFYING THE LIE

*Research from the Annenberg School for Communication proposes a powerful alternative to direct refutation:*

1

**Identify the conclusion you want people to hold**

*e.g., 'Head Start works' or 'Goodwill serves communities'*

2

**Find accurate information that BOLSTERS that conclusion**

*Without repeating or elevating the false claim*

3

**Lead with impact, not with the lie**

*Show the positive truth. Let it crowd out the falsehood*

4

**Use trusted messengers**

*Families, alumni, researchers and community leaders carry more weight than institutions defending themselves*

# Part 4

# Digital Discernment as a Leadership Skill

*Recognizing unreliable content and helping others do the same*

# ONLINE VIRAL RUMOR MANAGEMENT: A PEER NETWORK

An international community of communications leaders — from corporations, nonprofits, associations and agencies — focused on reputation management, media training and combating misinformation.

## What Effective Peer Networks Do:

- Share early intelligence on emerging rumors before they spread to your organization
- Coordinate messaging when multiple organizations are named in the same false claim
- Pool resources, including fact sheets, toolkits and social templates, so no one rebuilds from scratch
- Provide mutual support and real-time counsel during active crisis situations
- Develop sector-wide standards for responsible, fact-based communication

# HOW TO SPOT UNRELIABLE CONTENT: A LEADER'S CHECKLIST

- **Sensationalist headline:** If it's designed to provoke rather than inform — if it reads like outrage bait — treat it with suspicion before sharing.
- **No credible attribution:** Trustworthy journalism names its sources. If a claim lacks verifiable attribution, investigate before you amplify.
- **Cherry-picked data:** Selectively using data while ignoring contradictory evidence is one of the most common misinformation tactics.
- **Urgency and pressure:** 'Share this now before it's deleted' is a manipulation tactic. Credible information does not require panic.
- **Check the source's track record:** Is this outlet known for accuracy? Does the author have credible expertise? Does this appear on any fact-checking sites?
- **Reverse image search:** Photos are frequently used out of context. Before sharing, verify that an image actually depicts what it claims to show.

# AI-GENERATED CONTENT: THE NEW THREAT LANDSCAPE

- **Deepfakes and synthetic media:** AI can now generate realistic video, audio and images of people saying things they never said. Detection is becoming harder.
- **Bot-amplified content:** Coordinated bot networks can make fringe claims appear mainstream by artificially inflating engagement metrics.
- **Authentic-seeming fabrications:** In evaluations, AI-generated disinformation was indistinguishable from real journalism in more than half of instances.
- **Speed asymmetry:** AI can generate false content faster than human fact-checkers can debunk it. Organizations must be proactive, not reactive.
- **What communicators can do:** Establish verification protocols before sharing, invest in media literacy training, and build relationships with journalists who cover your sector.

# PRE-BUNKING: GET AHEAD OF THE NARRATIVE

*Pre-bunking means releasing forewarnings about likely false narratives BEFORE they spread — inoculating audiences against misinformation before exposure.*

## Anticipate

Identify the false narratives most likely to target your organization based on your mission, funding model or public profile. Build a rumor threat register.

## Prepare

Draft holding statements, social media responses and FAQ documents before you need them. Speed is everything in the first hour.

## Inoculate

Brief your board, staff and key stakeholders in advance. When audiences hear a false claim from a trusted source first, they are less susceptible to believing it later.

## Monitor

Establish real-time social listening for your organization's name, leadership and key programs. Set up Google or Talkwalker alerts. Know when something is spreading.

# Part 5

# Protecting Your Credibility

*Proactive strategy for purpose-driven organizations*



*“Loss of trust produces fertile ground for disinformation — which then erodes trust further. Organizations must communicate with clarity, confidence and consistency before the crisis arrives.”*

— UN Department of Global Communications, 2024

# THE PROACTIVE CREDIBILITY FRAMEWORK

**T**

**Transparency** — Publish your financials, leadership compensation and program outcomes proactively. When the truth is easy to find, rumors struggle to take hold.

**R**

**Relationships** — Build trust with journalists, community leaders and key stakeholders before you need them. A reputation management issue is not the time to introduce yourself.

**U**

**Unity** — Ensure your board, staff and affiliates speak with consistent key messages. Fragmented voices amplify confusion and invite speculation.

**S**

**Speed** — Acknowledge publicly when something is spreading even if you are still investigating. Silence reads as confirmation.

**T**

**Truth-first Culture** — Model responsible communication at every level of your organization. Leaders who fact-check before sharing set the standard for everyone else.

# YOUR BEST DEFENSE: A STORY BANK THAT TELLS THE TRUTH

- The most powerful antidote to a false narrative is a true one told with clarity, frequency, and human authenticity.
- **People you serve:** Real stories of transformation build emotional credibility no press release can match.
- **Staff and volunteers:** Inside voices humanize your brand and build trust with stakeholders who never visit your programs.
- **Program milestones:** Data with a human face demonstrates impact in ways that audiences remember and share.
- **Community partnerships:** Collaborative stories expand your credibility beyond your own walls and into networks that trust your peers.

*Organizations that tell their truth consistently are far harder to misrepresent. Your story bank is not just a content strategy. It is a credibility insurance policy.*

# YOUR TOP TAKEAWAYS

01

Digital discernment is a leadership skill. Verify before you amplify and model that standard for your team.

02

Pre-bunk before you debunk. Fill the information space with truth before a rumor can fill it with falsehood.

03

Speed, transparency and consistency are your most powerful tools in the first hour.

04

Coalitions and peer networks multiply your reach and credibility. No organization should fight alone.

05

Your story bank is your credibility infrastructure. Build it now, before you need it.

# RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

## Fact-Checking and Verification Tools

- Snopes.com — myth-busting and rumor verification
- FactCheck.org — nonpartisan political and organizational fact-checking
- PolitiFact — journalists checking accuracy of claims
- Reverse Image Search (Google/TinEye) — verify photo origins
- Google Alerts and Talkwalker — free monitoring for your organization's name and key terms
- Media Matters and National Consumers League — nonprofit sector resources

## Research and Further Reading

- Carnegie Endowment: Countering Disinformation Effectively (2024)
- Annenberg APCC: The Bypass Strategy for Misinformation
- PwC: Disinformation Attacks in the Corporate Sector
- UK RESIST 2 Counter-Disinformation Toolkit
- Center for American Progress: Debunking Myths About Head Start
- National Digital Roundtable: [digitalroundtable.org](https://digitalroundtable.org)

*“The organizations that protect their credibility are those that build trust before they need it, tell their story before someone else does, and respond to falsehood with facts — quickly, confidently and together.”*

*- Lauren Lawson-Zilai, Zeal Communications*

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Let's continue the conversation.

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