

# RUMOR CONTROL PAGE START-UP GUIDE

Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (MDM) can present risks to the election infrastructure community, its owners and operators, and the public. MDM can spread quickly, causing rumors to undermine facts.



The risks of MDM range from undermining confidence in institutions to activating and inspiring dangerous behaviors and violence.

This Rumor Control Page Start-Up Guide is for organizations seeking to dispel specific MDM narratives through transparent and authoritative information. Designed for use by state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) government officials and private sector partners, this guide cites the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) Rumor Control page as a model for debunking inaccurate narratives. The recommendations in this guide are not intended to be one-size-fits-all and should be adapted to the capabilities and resources available, as well as the MDM risks facing the community. Organizations should only set up a rumor control webpage related to issues for which they have access to information and expertise necessary to properly dispel MDM narratives and articulate facts. Each organization that plans to set up a rumor control page may want to consult with the appropriate organization legal counsel, if possible, prior to beginning operations.



## What is a rumor control page?

A [rumor control page](#) is a web page that offers the public accurate and authoritative sources of information which will help address common MDM narratives. It is provided by a trusted voice to either preempt or respond to developing narratives. Credible messengers are most effective at disproving falsehoods. A rumor control page should not be considered the sole source of truth, rather it should drive people to seek more information about a complex subject by directing them to other trustworthy sources.

With a rumor control page, election officials and stakeholders can dispel rumors about the systems and assets they manage and have unique insight into. Some election offices may already have public information websites, which commonly include a "Frequently Asked Questions" page and/or press releases that seek to clarify information. In this sense, a rumor control page can be viewed as an extension of existing efforts.

It is important to note that a rumor control page is only one element of a successful MDM response strategy. Improving the resilience of elections to MDM also requires reporting MDM narratives. The Center for Internet Security (CIS) was established to support the cybersecurity needs of the election subsector. The CIS can be leveraged to report real-time MDM via email at [misinformation@cisecurity.org](mailto:misinformation@cisecurity.org). Be sure to include links and screenshots, as well as details on the misinformation and your jurisdiction.



## How can a rumor control page reduce risk of MDM?

A rumor control page is a public resource for authoritative information. By providing people with accurate, timely information, the page can help slow the dissemination and amplification of MDM narratives and reduce your organization’s risk. It also provides an authoritative source for others to cite to amplify accurate information, including via internet searches.



## When should you use rumor control?

A rumor control page provides reasonable, authoritative information that refutes claims that develop via MDM narratives. MDM narratives often emerge where there is a lack of information or where not all information is known (as in a breaking news story). Effective narratives appeal to one’s sense of identity and community belonging (or the desire to belong), and shortcut rational processes through invoking an emotional response, like shock, fear, or excitement.

At this point of interest, consumers may seek more information to either confirm or refute what they have read, and a rumor control page fills the void by providing accurate information from a trusted local source. When presented with this information, consumers are less likely to amplify an MDM narrative.

Above all, use caution when deciding what rumors to include on your page. Before developing a response, consider whether any of the following factors are at play to determine the best path forward:





- **Is the content of the rumor within your sphere of influence to address?** Consider if you are best positioned to respond to the narrative, or if another entity would have more authority or expertise, such as your technical systems provider. In some instances, a joint response may also be appropriate.
- **How prevalent is the rumor?** To the extent you are allowed by law, determine the spread of the narrative across different social media platforms and/or whether it has been picked up by traditional media outlets. If the spread is minimal, consider whether responding to it will amplify the rumor instead of combating it.
- **Are you confident your response is accurate and contains appropriate caveats?** For example, rumors involving breaking news stories may need a caveat that updates will be made once more information is known. Where you do not have sufficient expertise, reference the trusted sources and experts you consulted in crafting your response.
- **Does the content of the rumor involve matters currently in litigation?** If so, consult with your office’s attorney before proceeding with a response.

Not all rumors and MDM narratives have to be addressed. Deciding which rumors should be addressed is an exercise of an organization’s judgement – and that judgement may change as MDM narratives evolve.

A sample checklist on page 5 outlines criteria that may help you determine if a rumor control entry is appropriate.




## How do you communicate effectively on a rumor control page?

<p>Pre-emptively debunk or “pre-bunk.”</p> 	<p>Lead with the truth, not the rumor.</p> 	<p>Keep it simple.</p> 	<p>Be consistent in the types of MDM narratives and activities you debunk.</p> 
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First, even when there are no specific narratives for you to counter, consider common questions those in your community have about elections and election-related processes and answer those on your rumor control page. You should also anticipate complex or difficult-to-understand characteristics of your operation may be targets for MDM narratives. Proactive communications and engagement will help build trust in your office as an authoritative source of information and make it more likely that consumers will return to your page when MDM narratives emerge.

When MDM narratives emerge, a standard format should be used to explain why each rumor is inaccurate or misleading. The rumor control page entry should provide a factual statement, summarize the rumor in one sentence, and provide a substantial explanation debunking the rumor.

- **Begin with the facts:** Debunking or mitigating MDM reduces belief in the narrative at hand, according to the [Virality Project](#). Presenting factual information first is the best strategy for combating MDM, as starting with the rumor can unintentionally amplify an MDM narrative and confuse or mislead your audience.
- **Use plain language:** It is critical the information used to debunk MDM narratives is easily understood by the average person. Content should be simple and straightforward, with links to further resources where appropriate. Where possible, include images and diagrams in social media posts (including ones developed by other sources if your resources are limited).
- **Provide other sources:** You should provide links to sources that are recognized as independent and reliable.



**Reality:** Malicious actors can use fake personas and impersonate real accounts.



**Rumor:** If a social media account claims an identity, the account must be run by that person or organization.

**Get the Facts:** Malicious actors often use fake personas and impersonate real accounts to trick the public into believing disinformation, including election-related disinformation.

Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and others provide an indication, such as a checkmark that is either blue or grey, to indicate that an account is verified by the platform. If an account claims to be a well-known person or official organization but is not verified, they may be an imposter.

There are multiple things to look for if you think an account is fake or spoofed. Is the account brand new? Do they create content or merely re-share? Do they have a coherent profile description, and does it match what they are sharing? Do they have a real profile photo? A best practice when looking for election-related information is to go to trusted sources, like your local election official.

If you find a suspicious social media post or account, consider reporting the activity to the platform so others don't get duped. Most platforms have a "report" function built into posts, so it's easy to report suspicious items, such as misinformation about election infrastructure. If an account is posting election disinformation, consider reporting to your state or local election official.



## How should you document the decision to include a rumor on your page?

Record your decision-making process for each rumor. This assessment will inform future decisions as your organization works to fight MDM.

- What considerations informed your decision to address or not address the rumor?
- What were the potential consequences of the spread of this MDM narrative?
- Was the rumor “ripe for intervention” based on the timeliness of the situation, the potential spread of the MDM narrative, and the consequences of its spread?



## How should you handle inflammatory or sensitive rumors?

Reporting MDM activity helps the election community combat emerging MDM narratives. MDM narratives that contain sensitive or leaked information, call for violence, or pose an imminent threat of physical harm should be directed to local law enforcement. These narratives may also be reported to federal law enforcement, like your Election Crimes Coordinators. A rumor control page is not intended to address these sorts of MDM narratives.



## Rumor Control Checklist

Consider the checklist on the next page before making your decision on which rumors should be addressed. Note that the decision of how, when, and where to respond will always be context- and content-specific and there is no firm threshold for response. Nonetheless, if you answer “Yes” to a majority of these criteria, then you should discuss moving forward with dispelling the rumor. Add your own criteria to the list as well. By creating a selection process for rumors to be featured on your page, your organization can quickly respond to and disrupt MDM narratives.

ASSESSMENT		
My organization has the expertise and mission set to distinguish the narrative from good faith discourse.	Yes	No
My organization has the expertise and responsibility to clearly and appropriately dispel the false narrative and articulate the facts.	Yes	No
The narrative is around a contentious or disputed topic, where information is changing or not widely known.	Yes	No
The narrative pertains to systems, information, processes, or expertise that is operated by or unique to my organization.	Yes	No
TRENDS		
The MDM narrative is trending on social media.	Yes	No
The narrative is spreading on multiple platforms.	Yes	No
Traditional media is reporting on the narrative/artifact. (Traditional media comprises broadcast and print media at the national, state, and/or local level. This may include the major networks, newspapers, journals, and online.)	Yes	No
Multiple narratives/artifacts are converging into a single narrative or conspiracy.	Yes	No
AMPLIFICATION		
Multiple organizations across the sector are reporting similar narratives/artifacts.	Yes	No
The allegation is paired with media (pictures, video, audio) that is unverified or misrepresented, in an effort to provide “legitimacy” to the narrative.	Yes	No
There is an opportunity to amplify corrections initiated by social media platforms and/or traditional media.	Yes	No
CONSEQUENCES		
The narrative includes a call to arms* or other directions for action, whether in person or virtual.	Yes	No
The narrative/artifact focuses on upcoming major milestones or events where early fact-checking could proactively disrupt the spread.	Yes	No
The rumor could cause physical or reputational damage to the organization, community, country, or global society.	Yes	No

*\*MDM Narratives that contain sensitive or leaked information, calls for violence, or poses an immediate threat of physical harm should be directed to local law enforcement, reported to your Election Crimes Coordinator, and reported to any other entity required under the law. This document is provided as guidance only. Organizations should consult with their election officials, legal counsel, and other required entities within their jurisdiction before starting a rumor control program. This guide does not provide your organization with the legal authority to operate a rumor control page if it's not allowed/authorized by your SLTT laws.*