

COMMUNICATING DURING CONTENTIOUS TIMES: DOS AND DON'TS TO RISE ABOVE THE NOISE

By **Over Zero** and **PEN America**

Community leaders can play a central role in reducing tensions, divisions, and the spread of **misinformation** that may accompany an election season. The below pointers highlight dos and don'ts for leaders to avoid inadvertently causing harm. Last, we provide simple steps for taking action to reduce likely harms before, during, and after voting occurs.

DOS

▶ **Model positive norms: Show that your community is overwhelmingly committed to ensuring free, fair, and peaceful elections.**

Highlight stories of community members taking actions consistent with these norms. Emphasize your community's unifying, local identity—which cuts across lines of division—and draw on local values and stories demonstrating cooperation. Define your community in terms of who it is, rather than who it is not, using its own words, narratives, and local sources.

▶ **Emphasize individuals' agency and the many actions underway to ensure a free, fair, peaceful election.**

Amid tensions and uncertainty, people can feel limited in whether and how to respond. Narratives may deliberately create a sense of chaos or cast violence as an inevitability. This can create pressure for people to remain silent or even go along with violence. Emphasizing the work underway to ensure a secure and peaceful election can counteract perceived powerlessness and a sense of chaos, and can offer concrete ways for people to get involved in ensuring a peaceful election. Highlighting this broader context—for instance, the many groups working to ensure communities can securely vote—can also prevent violence or intimidation from having a chilling effect on public engagement.

▶ **Where tensions, misinformation, and violence do emerge, consult with targeted communities to learn their needs and preferences for public statements before acting.**

Communities targeted with violence and false information often have experience responding in high-threat moments and know best what their community members need. When you do speak out, model empathy toward targeted communities.

▶ **Offer a concrete, non-violent path forward for grievances, including clear channels and processes for addressing things in real-time.**

▶ **Be specific in referring to tensions and/or violence.**

Political violence, including harassment, and misinformation are tools to intimidate communities from engaging in public life. Precise, accurate, and accessible language can help ensure violence does not appear more widespread than it is. For example, naming specific districts or stating “at one street corner” rather than referencing full cities or states. Also, be precise about who was involved. For example, saying “there was violence at a protest” could be misleading if the violence was actually from a group of armed counter-protesters and only one or two protesters were involved. Speaking with clarity and precision can limit the ability of violence to intimidate communities from showing up to vote. Importantly, it can also guard against signaling that violence is the norm or expected for those associated with any groups.

DON'TS

▶ **Don't signal negative norms, including through depicting violence as widespread.**

▶ **Don't speak about violence without condemning it and highlighting responses.**

Highlighting the many efforts underway to ensure all community members can safely vote or peacefully protest help prevent violence from being used as a tool to intimidate and chill civic engagement. Likewise, avoid repeating calls to violence—even if to report on them—lest you provide a platform to vigilante or extremist groups, who may use past violence to further their notoriety and recruitment efforts.

▶ **Don't use vague or speculative language** which can engender mischaracterizations and fear-based responses (particularly if the language misconstrues violence as more widespread than it is). Using specific language eliminates room for assumptions and speculation.

▶ **Don't use language that activates fear or anxiety**, such as war and natural disaster metaphors (e.g., “protestors flooded the streets,” or “violence erupted”). This also reduces individuals’ sense of agency (personal empowerment) in responding. Relatedly, avoid repeating language that describes people as animals or as less than human (“dehumanizing language”), such as pests, deadly or wild animals, or diseases. This language drives people to act towards those described with less care or concern than they typically would other humans.

▶ **Don't reference entire groups of people when discussing individual actions or viewpoints.**

When an incident is the result of one or a few individuals, don't attribute it to a general group, such as Republicans, Democrats, or protestors. This can engender an association between harmful actions with entire groups of people, furthering notions of collective blame and negative norm-signaling that all within a particular group or community should or do feel/act a particular way. However, when specific individuals or groups are acting in an explicitly unified way, such as illegal militias or institutions, naming them can highlight culpability.

▶ **Don't repeat misinformation or rumors.**

Anticipate the types of misinformation and dangerous rhetoric that might circulate throughout the election and arm yourself with clear, specific corrections. Follow best practices in responding to misinformation (see below).

ZOOMING IN: BEST PRACTICES IN REDUCING THE IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION

Misinformation is playing a central role in driving threats, intimidation, and even violence ahead of the 2022 midterm elections. As with all communications, addressing misinformation can either further amplify or defuse the false claims. Consider the below best practices for addressing misinformation.

► Consider the role of psychology.

Misinformation often taps into powerful emotions like fear and anxiety, as well as deeply rooted narratives, stereotypes and identities. Understanding what is driving someone to believe the misinformation—the identities, emotions, or experiences it's exploiting—can better position you to respond and address the broader narratives that may make misinformation appear more credible. Misleading narratives look different in every community, so take the time to customize your message to appeal and resonate with your target audience.

► Anticipate the issues ripe for misinformation and proactively equip yourself and your communities with corrective information.

As noted, misinformation may often simplify the complex. Preemptively arming yourself with corrective information can allow you to respond in real-time: it's critical to respond to misinformation as quickly as possible to prevent it from spreading unchecked. This will also allow you to proactively release clarifying information on issues or processes that you expect misinformation may exploit. Offering your community basic, corrective information ahead of time will better position them to spot and reject it.

► Express understanding while still modeling positive norms.

Addressing misinformation can be challenging and often involves confronting firmly held beliefs. Acknowledge your audience's confusion and reiterate your shared commitment to both the truth and ensuring a free and fair election. This can help neutralize any defensiveness. Along the way, emphasize community norms rejecting misinformation, for instance by underscoring influential local leaders rejecting false and dangerous claims and upholding the community's commitment to a free, fair, and peaceful election.

► Allow plenty of room for nuance while still using simple corrections.

Misinformation surrounding the election process may take advantage of complex, technical processes that the average person may not fully understand. In these instances, misinformation may gain steam simply because it's easier to understand than a more complicated truth. To avoid this, distill any corrections down to their core and avoid unnecessary details. With misinformation targeting election processes, ensure any corrections also address how these processes are clearly laid out in state and federal law. This will help avoid false equivalences between what the law mandates and any alternative processes that misinformation may be pushing.

▶ **Avoid repeating false claims, particularly without first providing a warning or labeling the claim as misinformation or a conspiracy theory.**

The more people hear or see misinformation, even if it is being disputed, the more likely they are to remember and believe it. If you must repeat a false claim, carefully structure your message using a “truth sandwich”: Start by stating what’s true. Then frame the misinformation—“there have been attempts to amplify false rumors that [misinformation]”). Next, reassert the correct information again.

▶ **Use positive framing throughout your corrections.**

Imagine that John has been accused of being a thief. The best corrections will re-focus attention on what John is (e.g., “John is an honest person who is always sharing”) rather than what he is not (e.g., “John is NOT a thief.”). Why? Repeating the original accusation can strengthen the very association you are trying to undercut (John and thief). Applied to 2020 election misinformation, this means emphasizing how audits, investigations, and dozens of lawsuits confirmed that it was a free and fair election in which a record-number of Americans turned out to vote.

▶ **If possible, provide an alternative explanation for the evidence underlying the incorrect claim.**

Misinformation is more influential when people can infer a causal relationship between the evidence and a subsequent event (e.g., between the delays in counting mail-in ballots and Biden’s victory in the 2020 election). A correction that simply disputes that there was fraud, for instance, is less effective than one that explains the connections between Biden voters’ preference for mail-in voting, state-mandated delays in counting mail-in ballots, and the timing of the results announcement in 2020.

▶ **Invite your community to consider the motivations of those spreading misinformation,**

whether deepening existing divisions and distrust, intimidating or discouraging certain communities, especially BIPOC communities, from voting or engaging in other democratic processes, or profiting from related fundraising initiatives.

▶ **Whenever you can, ensure your correction comes from a source that your community finds credible and that represents their interests and values—**

whether an individual, an institution, or an organization. Remember that individuals often find local news sources more trustworthy than national ones. If you are making the correction yourself, reference additional sources your audience finds credible (e.g., referencing a trusted local leader and their relevant statements).

TAKING ACTION: WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE TO BE PREPARED?

BEFORE ELECTION DAY

Engage other community leaders to collaboratively develop a monitoring and response plan should violence or tensions emerge during either voting or the ballot counting process. Prepare positive and proactive messaging that communicates faith in the system; reaffirms a commitment to free, fair, and peaceful elections; and addresses any polarizing or false narratives that have emerged. Consider sharing and gut-checking them with other community leaders for consistency. Remember that getting out ahead of false, misleading, and fear mongering messaging can go a long way.

ON ELECTION DAY

Continue elevating positive narratives and norms expressing a commitment to a free and fair election. Continue your monitoring plan to stay on top of any tensions or false narratives that might emerge. Share reputable sources of information, including credible news sources for election updates. Remember that local and community journalism is historically more trusted and less polarizing than their national counterparts, so try and lift up community voices whenever possible.

AFTER ELECTION DAY

Remember that misinformation, threats, and violence can continue past election day, while the ballots are being counted or even once results have been announced. For instance, violence might be used to dispute the results (consider January 6) or by the winners as a show of force to express dominance. After the voting has concluded, continue spreading positive narratives and norms expressing a commitment to a free and fair election and rejecting violence. Remind your community that results take time. The most empowering behavior can often look like some of the calmest.

▶ [How to Talk to Friends and Family Who Share Misinformation](#)

▶ [Reporting in Contentious Times: Insights for Journalists to Avoid Fanning the Flames](#)

▶ [Media Literacy Toolkit](#)

▶ [Building a Resiliency Network Toolkit](#)

For more information and resources on Over Zero's programs, check out their resource [pages](#), and for more information on combating disinformation, check out PEN America's Disinformation Issue [page](#).