

How to save people from drowning in a sea of misinformation. | Slate

By Suzanne Nossel

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Until a few years ago, disinformation was talked about mostly as a geopolitical tactic. Throughout the Cold War and up through the 2016 election, concerns over disinformation centered on foreign governments, in particular their motives and tactics. Now, disinformation seems to have metastasized and is blamed for bedeviling elections, impairing pandemic response, and fanning conflicts.

Most disinformation containment strategies focus on ferreting out and curtailing malign actors or curbing the viral spread of falsehoods on social media. But in a society that respects free speech, it will never be possible to eliminate disinformation at the source, nor to stanch its spread. The originators of disinformation—not just foreign governments but conspiracists, provocateurs, and paid propagandists—are too diffuse to be shut down; even trying to shut them down would unavoidably impinge on expressive rights. Experts cannot agree on whether the COVID lab leak theory is a hoax or not; trying to conclusively identify and eliminate all disinformation would unavoidably end up muzzling much legitimate—and even essential—debate.

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