

## Episode 259: Countering the Spread of Misinformation

**Lisa Hernandez:**

Misinformation seems to be everywhere, from falsehoods about Covid-19 and how to treat it, to lies being spread by political leaders and their followers. In recent years, it feels like it is getting harder and harder to discern fact from fiction, truth from opinion, and with social media and AI permeating our lives, new technologies only seem to be making the situation worse. So how did we get here? What does all of this misinformation mean for the future of our democracy, and what can be done to combat its spread?

To find out, for this month's episode, I spoke to Ray Block, the Brown-McCourtney Career Development Professor in the McCourtney Institute and Associate Professor of Political Science and African American Studies at Penn State. Block is also the inaugural Michael D. Rich Distinguished Chair for Countering Truth Decay at the RAND Corporation. Here's our conversation.

Hi Ray. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

**Ray Block:** Thanks for having me.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Of course. So about a year ago you joined the RAND Corporation as the inaugural Michael D. Rich Distinguished Chair for Countering Truth Decay. Can you explain to me what the focus on truth decay means, and also give me an example of how you've seen it play out?

**Ray Block:** The standard way of describing it is that we are really concerned at the RAND Corporation with the declining role of facts and analysis in public life. And I mean that not only in the United States, but also abroad. And when we think about this, we are talking about the causes and the consequences of the rampant spread of falsehoods, the growing distrust of experts that established information sources, a posture in general against research, and what I'm gonna call the elevation of opinion over fact, and I can give examples of each one.

So like the rapid spread of falsehoods is one of the things I'm especially interested in. I started doing this work before RAND, 'cause I was working on stuff related to the spread of Covid-19. And this is probably an interesting origin story, but I'm a political scientist and a

black study scholar. I had no business doing anything on public health, but I was in this world where I was watching family members get sick and I was watching family members die and I was very concerned about my own wellbeing and I was hunkered down in a home with my wife and child, just worried in general.

And my way of coping is that I did a lot of research related to Covid-19 looking at it the way a social scientist would look at it. So I was studying social inequality and all of the social inequalities that we know about that existed before Covid were made worse because of what happened with the pandemic and the social and political dynamics about it, right?

This information related to what to do to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 was something that I got a chance to see both intimately as a person who was living life at the time, but also as someone who studies race relations in the USA. And so falsehoods and half truths about what Covid is, where Covid comes from and what to do about it, were literally conversations that could have life and death consequences to people, and the concern that those consequences would be extra difficult to deal with because they were wrapped up in politics made this the kind of topic that somebody like me would be interested in.

So the rapid spread of falsehoods was something that I was thinking about before RAND gave me the fancy title of being their truth decay chair, and going along with that, the growing distrust of experts and information sources.

It's just something that people who study politics and people who just pay attention to society are noticing in real time. And so any person that you heard in your circle, or outside of your circle on social media discussing fake news, for example, and whether or not you can trust the people that provide information to give you the facts that you need to make the decisions you wanna make.

It's kind of part and parcel with the idea. The posture against research is the thing that as a faculty member at a university that I am particularly struggling with, and what I mean by that is there's this tendency these days. Experts to be questioned in a way that I didn't see as being the norm previously.

And I can't tell you exactly when that trend started, but I know that at least in the Covid-19 example, people that work in infectious diseases were being met with a lot of skepticism when making recommendations to the public about what to do to keep themselves safe and well. And the idea that experts would be in a position to be the ones to help out with

narratives about Covid were in this very interesting place where they were sitting in the political crossfire between what different candidates and politicians and the political parties they represent cared for suggested to me some of the things that ended up being part of my job here at RAND.

And the elevation of opinions over facts is a thing that I've grown to appreciate but really, really dislike. And it's this idea that you can have narratives in the media and casually out in society where the people that are leading the opinions may or may not be basing what they're concluding on information that had been researched and properly vetted, but the fact that they're very strong in their beliefs about those opinions gives them, at least in their mind the, I don't know, credence, the opportunity, the green light, so to speak, to express themselves in a way that suggests that they have authority to talk about those things and as a professor, that's just troublesome to me because as a professor, I'm in the knowledge business, I'm in the research business, I'm all about people coming to conclusions that are based on facts and analysis.

The idea that people can draw conclusions based on opinions and anecdotes and those conclusions are somehow and in some way put on the same shelf with those conclusions that are being grounded in facts and analysis and given similar treatment because of that is something that's just hard for me to stomach.

And so I say all that to say that before getting the job at RAND, I was concerned about this stuff. I came initially into this space because of the work that I was doing on race and ethnicity and public health. But now that I'm at RAND, I'm realizing that these problems are a lot bigger.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Absolutely. And you mentioned this truth decay phenomenon, essentially being something that is worsening, that truth, and facts are declining in the way that they're upheld as the actual truth. Why are we finding ourselves in this era? And, also is it that we put facts and opinions on the same platforms? Is social media playing a part in all of this?

**Ray Block:** Can you say all of the above? So there are a lot of reasons. There are a lot of reasons why we're here, right? There are risk factors to truth decay. If you could think about truth decay as being a disease, I don't think you should, right.

But to tell you a joke, when I first told people I got the job, some of my family members confused the topic with tooth decay. Where like, you know, like I'm a dentist or something like that. So in the analogy of truth decay being like tooth decay, if you want to indulge me a little bit, there are some things that contribute to it.

One of those things is just the information environment that we're in. You know what I mean? So like we have a 24 hour news cycle. We have a very robust social media landscape, which is changing in real time. So some of the places where people go to meet in this public sphere that happens to be virtual, there are different ones cropping up from time to time, and there's different audiences that are sort of moving in between them.

That doesn't help because what that means is we have a lot of opportunities to come together and to exchange information because of the technologies that we have in our information environment. There's also the fact that, I don't know, I'm a political psychologist by training and there are certain cognitive biases that we have, like the way we make sense of the world.

Actually allows us in some instances to either be more resistant to this information and sometimes less resistant to this information. And a really basic one of these is that we tend to not scrutinize well. We tend not to be skeptical of information that kind of fits with what we already believe. And we tend to be really skeptical of information that doesn't quite fit with what we believe.

And so people that are trying to be bad actors in a disinformation space. If they know that about people, then one of the challenges is trying to wrap information that isn't true around in a package that sort of fits with preconceived beliefs, or at least people's understandings of what their audience's preconceived beliefs are.

**Lisa Hernandez:** So you have an opinion or you believe something strongly, social media recognizes that and then feeds you back that information over and over again. Am I understanding that correctly?

**Ray Block:** Yeah. And so this is almost a decade ago, but there was a book by a man named Bill Bishop called "The Big Sort". And I remember reading and at the time being amazed because the author put in the word something that I had been thinking about for a while. And we live in a world where if we wanted to we could expose ourselves to the

information we like the most, and we can minimize being exposed to information we don't like.

In other words, we're sorted, you know what I mean? Like we can tailor what kind of news feeds that we get our information from. To a degree we can tailor the kind of interactions we have virtually, and to a degree because of how we are geographically spaced out and because of our residential patterns, like we can probably not go through.

Large sums of time where we're spending time around people that are extremely different from us. And that sorting makes it easier for the algorithms. I'm not saying the algorithms cause the sorting, but I'm saying that the algorithms can take advantage of it, and that sorting allows us to be in these positions where we might get curated information that kind of fits what we believe already.

And because of that, we give it an easier pass to the information that maybe doesn't fit our prior beliefs and doesn't quite give us the opportunity to scrutinize it the way that we might.

**Lisa Hernandez:** I wanna ask a little bit about a different aspect of social media, something that might contribute to information sharing or disinformation sharing. What about the role of artificial intelligence now or where people can create text, images, audio, and even video? That's all computer generated and maybe not necessarily truthful or accurate, how does that play into this truth decay pattern that we're seeing?

**Ray Block:** I think it's so I'll be the first to tell you that I love the fact that we make these technological advances, so I'm not scared of tech. But it doesn't make it easier to fight this stuff. And I think that's the thing that's been the biggest concern. So someone might ask for example, why should we care?

You know what I mean? We've had instances like this in our past and we have, you know what I mean? We could talk about yellow journalism in the history of what were the norms for how you report the news and how that came about. We've had instances in our society where we've had to deal with propaganda before, or we've had to deal with the flood of disinformation before.

I think what makes this different is that we're dealing with the flood of disinformation in a world where the technology is not only really good, but it's abundant. There are all of these

different ways that we can be led astray and artificial intelligence goes along with other things, right? So artificial intelligence combined with the 24 hour news cycle and the abundance of social media options for people just adds more fuel to the proverbial fire.

**Lisa Hernandez:** I wanna talk a little bit about an area that we of course see a lot of truth decay, a lot of disinformation playing out. And you mentioned it as being a point of contention for you to sort of look into, this truth decay problem that we're having.

So there's an election going on. How do you see these issues playing out in our current election right now?

**Ray Block:** Well, to me the first place to start with this is to think about polarization in the USA. And again, polarization isn't anything new. But polarization allows for truth decay to thrive in an environment where people are insulated from one another. And those groups become really ingrained in how they feel about themselves and how they feel about the people that are outside of those groups.

And in an environment like that. Information that sort of makes your group look good and the others look bad is the kind of information that doesn't get as much scrutiny as the information that, for example, makes your group look bad and the others look good. And so I just think that polarization is a topic that's really important for us to think about.

And I'm biased, obviously as a political scientist, PhD. I also think that part of the goal of all of this is that I want to think about what might be some of the endgame outcomes of truth decay. And one of the endgame outcomes of truth decay is that if we don't trust one another as citizens, then that's just not good for democracy overall.

And I know that I'm not talking about the election specifically, but I think that a conversation about what it means for our democracy to be struggling at the moment gets into a conversation about what happens in 2024, for example, during the election in November. It also looks past it. It thinks about what happens after that election because somebody's gonna win, obviously, and whoever wins is going to be in this position of struggling to think about what to do to unify a nation that is politically polarized and arguably will be more so by the time we get to the election day.

And disinformation about what the members of the out groups versus the in groups are is not gonna help this cause at all.

**Lisa Hernandez:** And the different groups that we're mentioning here, are there different ways that people are maybe more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation, or do you see it facing groups in similar patterns?

**Ray Block:** Definitely. And one of those risk factors I forgot to mention is that we have, I want to call it an overstressed education system where we have all of this technology. We have almost this constant feed of information. Some of it legit, some of it not. And we have people who are literally trying to figure out how to make sense of everything in real time.

And we outsource a lot of that skill building to our education system. And our education system is like us, we're one step behind in trying to figure out how to manage all of this stuff. And so the reason why our education systems need to be a part of this conversation is because, I'm gonna call it media literacy is something we're gonna need to be good at so that we can be good consumers ourselves of misinformation and being able to ferret that out from the stuff that's factual, we're gonna need to be able to do that ourselves.

So if I use that tooth decay analogy, we need something to strengthen our teeth, right? We need to be able to make sure that the information that does get past our filters, information that we can engage with and we can make decisions about. We have the tools to do that.

The people that don't have those tools, or at least don't have those tools as mastered as others are going to struggle in this case. And just like education isn't equal in our society, the things that people can learn that help them to be better consumers of information aren't being given out equally in our society too, and those groups of people who are economically vulnerable are also the people that are going to be vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation and propaganda and stuff like that.

And so the same things that already exist in our society in terms of how we are sorted based on our social class and our education level, and whether we live close to the city center or we live far away from the city center or we live far away, all of that stuff, how we get access to information and how we make sense of that information once we get access to it, and what kind of decisions we make about the truthiness of that information.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Now you mentioned, different classes of folks essentially based on their economic class, having access to different types of information when, we have tons of information readily available to us, whether by Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, X, etc,

and all the various different online platforms, information is allegedly more free and accessible to folks through that way.

So how does economics play into folks' accessibility to information?

**Ray Block:** Okay, so one of the ways that I like to think about this is where we get our news from. So most of us get our news from national sources because it's easier in some ways to do so, right? That's not a personal economics thing, more of a preference thing. But one of the economics things, and this is something that people at RAND, are very interested in, is that, remember I was talking about trust, like whether or not people trust the system.

One of the things that we know is that people tend to trust information sources that are closer to home. And what I mean by that is the local newspaper, the local television news show and things like that tend to get higher trust scores from people than say the syndicated news. The national stuff.

And if that's the case, then one of the issues/challenges that we're dealing with is that local news outlets are having a hard time competing with national news outlets. And you see that when you talk to people. For example, I live in a relatively small part of central Pennsylvania. Talking to neighbors and colleagues when I leave campus, what I'll notice is that some of the things that are dinner table topics for them are the kind of things that you hear are important topics in national news outlets, and some of those things aren't even directly important to central Pennsylvania, but because news outlets are discussing them, the idea is that these issues are everywhere and they're really important.

If there were, for example, another source of information, more at the local level, dinner table, conversations would be about things that are closer to home. They would be about things that are relevant to people that live in rural parts of central Pennsylvania, for example. And you don't see a lot of that because these places are like information about what's going on in rural Pennsylvania, those things are having to compete with the big news conglomerates and oftentimes they don't win.

And so one of the puzzles that RAND is thinking about is how can research and outreach done at RAND help out with the deeds of local media outlets so that local media outlets can do what they're trained to do? I'm thinking about this in terms of local versus national news, but I'm also thinking about this in terms of the information that people in urban areas get versus the information that people in rural areas get and the further away you



are from the center of the city, the more important some of these local sources are because of the access that these folks in these areas might have.

In other words, if there is national news to look at, what else do you have to use to get your information? Not everyone's a researcher like you where they go online and spend a lot of time trying to figure out what is and what isn't true. A lot of people want something quick that they can go on and they want to use that information and make decisions, and they're hopefully trusting the folks that are giving them that.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Absolutely. And you mentioned local news as a positive solution, something that people can turn to in order to either reestablish themselves within their own communities or essentially gather information that is more pertinent to their geographic landscape and where their communities are. I wanna talk a little bit about, well you have this title, Distinguished Chair for Countering Truth Decay, and we have discussed a lot of the challenges, but of course I want to talk about countering. So are there strategies that you and the folks at RAND are finding that can actually work to counter the issue of truth decay?

**Ray Block:** Yes. I think that one of the solutions is that we want to combine research with outreach, and that's what RAND does very well. RAND is really good at the research and the outreach part, and I think that we need to target that research and outreach across different parts of our society. And this is what I mean by that.

So truth decay and the stuff that comes along with it is what our concern is. One of the many things that we're concerned about. And RAND has produced tools and resources for people, and those tools and resources are publicly available and they're free. And one of the things that I've been doing lately is just talking to people to remind them of that or to introduce them to what RAND is up to if they're not familiar with it.

We have online tools for fighting disinformation. And it allows you to do keyword searches and it pairs you, it gives you options of apps and workshops and things that are helpful to the cause, right? In other words, I think that if we're going to fight truth decay or counter truth decay, what are the things that we need to do?

We need to arm people or give people the tools that allow them to be good consumers of information. So that's a priority. Another priority is that we want to think really hard about

how to create an environment that encourages good practices when it comes to how you spread information.

And that means thinking really hard about what the motivations for media outlets are and what incentives can be offered in a world where free speech is really important to protect so that media organizations can develop their own set of best practices. And so that conversations with members of Congress, for example, are the kind of conversations that point out how important these issues are so that hopefully policy changes can be implemented at some point in the future. And so it's important to, in fact, to equip individuals and it's also important to be in conversation with institutions. If I can use those two words, I'm trying not to be too jargony.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Absolutely. I think arming people with the power of media literacy sounds like a really important factor. And of course, we love to think about how to do things in a way that feels like we're impacted, not just making individual choices, but also informing a larger sphere such as an institution of policy makers, either nationally or locally. So I appreciate you bringing that up. And as people are listening to this podcast and living out their daily lives, likely doing their dishes or working, any advice for something that people can do today in order to counter this issue?

**Ray Block:** Stay connected. And I know that sounds cheesy, but the way I think about a lot of this, we are better off when we stay human to each other. And what I mean by that is like if you are sorted really hard and your information is highly curated and all you get are the kinds of things that you already agree with.

Then it's really difficult for you to come out of that if you're not connected to other people. And yes, we don't typically want to argue with others about our viewpoints, and I'm not recommending that people go out and seek arguments with other people. But I am recommending that you give yourself the opportunity to make yourself available to other perspectives, and that happens when you're connected with others in your network.

There's something about being isolated and going down rabbit holes on the internet and not getting an opportunity to vet that stuff with people in your family and people in your friend groups that produce these echo chambers that can be breeding grounds for the kind of disinformation that can be dangerous, and that can be counterproductive for people trying to maintain and strengthen their democracy.

And if you're the kind of person that likes being around people, then that means you can develop ways to have conversations about this stuff. Politics is not an easy thing to talk about. As a political scientist, I think it's important you talk about politics with the people you love and the people you care about, and with your acquaintances, whenever those opportunities arise, and from a very practical standpoint, the more information that you get, that doesn't necessarily make you a good consumer of it, but the more diverse the information that you give yourself an opportunity to kind of be exposed to.

The more likely you are going to be able to make decisions that reflect what that information truly should be. In other words, being connected with other human beings, I think is just important. I also think being connected with a bunch of different perspectives is a nice way to make sure that you're gonna be a good consumer of information because you're gonna be getting a lot of it and different types of it.

You're gonna be making decisions about the overall summary of that information, so you'll get just as many things on one political side as you do on another political side, and it'll be up to you to figure out which ones are the most compelling for.

**Lisa Hernandez:** Thank you for sharing that information and thank you for helping arm us today. I'm sure that we all appreciate as listeners helping us with our own media literacy journey, and thank you so much for coming on the show today.

**Ray Block:** It was a pleasure. Thank y'all for having me.

**Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich:** And thanks for listening. For more on Professor Block's work, check out our show notes at [scholars.org/nojargon](https://scholars.org/nojargon). No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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