

COMMUNITY

A community partnership to counter disinformation.

LEADERETHICS



What is COMMUNITY?

COMMUNITY is a nonpartisan, collaborative effort that engages local media and community organizations to work together to counter the effects of disinformation and misinformation (information disorder) within the community. The goal is to build trust in the information shared on key issues of local importance. By local media partnering with respected community organizations, the **COMMUNITY** model will help to overcome information silos and form a community culture that is more resilient to information disorder.

La Crosse COMMUNITY partners:

- Fox 25/48-TV
- Great Rivers United Way
- La Crosse Tribune
- LeaderEthics-Wisconsin
- WIZM News Radio
- WKBT-TV News 8000
- WXOW-TV News 19

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Background

The following article by Lee Rasch appeared in the January 2022 issue of *The Ethics Report*.

In October 2021, the [Commission on Information Disorder Final Report](#) was released. The high-profile Commission conducted a detailed analysis of the conditions facing the country due to the prolific expansion of disinformation and misinformation. The comprehensive report presented 15 recommended actions for government in order to improve transparency, to increase trust and to reduce harms. As quoted in the summary of the Final Report, “Information disorder makes any health crisis more deadly. It slows down our response time on climate change. It undermines democracy. It creates a culture in which racist, ethnic, and gender attacks are seen as solutions, not problems. Today, mis- and disinformation have become a force multiplier for exacerbating our worst problems as a society. Hundreds of millions of people pay the price, every single day, for a world disordered by lies.” This is strong language. As citizens, we should be taking these words very seriously. However, putting the recommendations into actions is a challenge. Since the report does not carry any legal authority, it remains to be seen how many of the recommendations ultimately gain legislative traction. Nonetheless, the report effectively lays out the complex challenges ahead. The report is worth reading.

It is important to point out that there are three areas that fall under the umbrella of the term information disorder: misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. Misinformation is when false information is shared, but no harm is intended. Disinformation is when false information is knowingly shared with the intent to cause harm. Mal-information is information based on reality that is knowingly shared with the intent to cause harm. Forms of information disorder have likely been around for as long as humankind, though the formats of today are much more sophisticated in

distribution. The Commission fully recognizes the complex challenges faced in tackling the issues of information disorder. In a statement from the final report, “In reality, merely elevating truthful content is not nearly enough to change our current course. There is an incentive system in place that manufactures information disorder, and we will not address the problem if we do not take on that system, nor will we improve if we fail to address the larger societal issues that continue to divide us.”

One significant area of concern raised in the Commission report involves the declining conditions with local media. Studies by Pew Research and Gallup indicate that local media is more trusted as an information source, when compared to national media or social media. Yet local media outlets face a combination of challenging dynamics. Resources are dwindling for local news outlets, most notably local newspapers. But local television and radio outlets are also under siege. Increasingly, local media organizations are being bought up by major media conglomerates. This often results in consolidation and a reduction in staff at the local level. This is followed by a significant reduction in coverage of local events, often replaced by increased state and national coverage. By a large margin, people have less trust in major media organizations when compared to local media sources. The Commission contends that in a climate of reduced trust in the media sources, information disorder thrives. In the void of trusted information, disinformation fuels the hyper partisan divide. And a divided nation, where many people are uncertain about the facts, is ripe for an assault by disinformation. It is a vicious cycle.

Background *(CONTINUED)*

Can local communities counter these divisive dynamics?

The current state of information disorder is a massive global issue. The data indicate that public trust in major institutions is in decline. As 2021 Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa noted, "It is going to be impossible to have integrity of elections if you don't have integrity of facts and right now that is the case, because by design the social media platforms, which deliver the news, are amplifying and delivering to your newsfeeds lies over facts." These conditions open the door to disinformation. The data provided by Pew Research (August 2021) shows a significant reduction in trust in national media and social media from 2016 (in blue) to 2021 (in green). There is a decline in trust in local media as well, but to a lesser degree. And the overall trust level in local media remains higher, as demonstrated in the following chart:

Yet if the data also indicate that people in the United States are more likely to trust local government and local media sources, is there an opportunity to counter the effects of information disorder through strategies that bolster local media? That may depend upon the local community and how well they work to build trust. The August 2021 Pew Research study also shows a growing gap in media trust among adults who identify themselves as Republicans or Democrats. Though Democratic supporters had a drop off in media trust, the drop off among Republicans was much greater, particularly in the trust toward national media. Though there were differences between the two groups in 2016, the differences are much greater today...just six years later.

Trust in Media 2016 to 2021

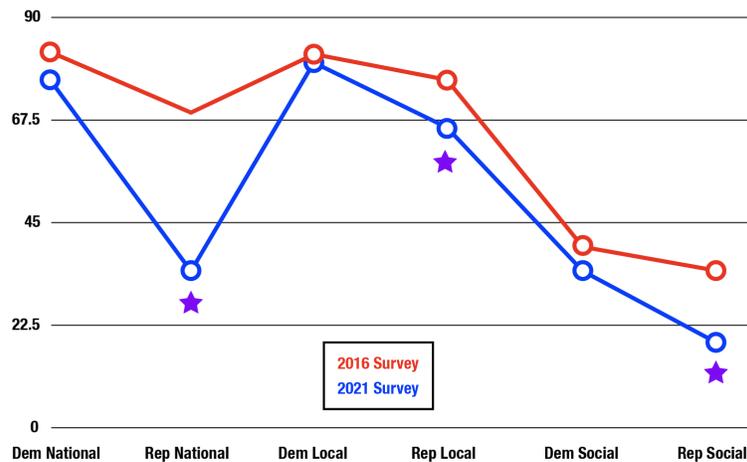
(percentage of adults with a lot or some trust in media)

(Pew Research August 2021)



Partisan Differences in Trust in Media

(Pew Research August 2021)



Background (CONTINUED)

If local communities seek to counter the gathering effects of disinformation, they have an advantage due to the inherent trust people have in local news sources. But to be effective in this effort, communities must find a way to engage the media that is consumed by both political parties. If local media can collaborate on major issues of importance, and the collaboration is representative of the political spectrum, they will likely be more successful in their efforts. An example of this collaborative approach is the Vote Safe Project conducted in September 2020, in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The project involved a “virtual town hall meeting” to address concerns people had about voting safely during the pandemic, as well as concerns about voting process integrity leading up to the November 2020 election. The community partners included the newspaper, broadcast television stations, the conservative talk radio station and the local United Way. Community endorsers (two Rotary clubs and the local chapter of the League of Women Voters) also publicly lended their organizational endorsement. The virtual event was provided live through the Facebook pages of the partners with more than 17,000 views reported. Each partner handled a portion of the program.

The key elements of the Vote Safe Project involved a) engaging diverse local media outlets that represent the political spectrum and b) public support from respected community organizations.

It is important to recognize that people tend to be loyal to their favorite media source(s). They tend to consume media from within their respective silos. Consequently, a local collaborative approach can break down the silos. It should also be stressed that a local collaborative approach may not work in every community, particularly if the local media outlets do not get along. And as national media conglomerates buy up media outlets, local collaboration may be viewed as running counter to the national business model. These are major hurdles to overcome. But a local collaborative approach can work in many communities, particularly if prominent local community leaders and respected organizations come forward. And it can also raise the level of community awareness about the very real threat posed by information disorder. Given the need for more trust in fact-based information, the effort to tackle this problem is clearly worth it.

Step One

Establish Community Awareness

Consider these issues:

Information Disorder is Complex.

There are many facets to the information disorder challenge. Disinformation and misinformation have been around as long as mankind. The expansion of internet technology, social media, the removal of the Fairness Doctrine and the growing political divide are among the factors that are effecting the expanded influence of information disorder on local communities.

Each community is unique.

Each community has a unique combination of size, political dynamics and socio-economic variables. The community model may be readily embraced in some communities and struggle in others.

The will of local leadership is key.

Local leaders can influence the direction of the community. If recognized local leaders believe that information disorder is having a detrimental effect on local issues, they will be far more likely to support the formation of a local effort to build resilience to disinformation and misinformation.

Consider these actions:

Share information about the COMMUNITY model.

The COMMUNITY packet can be shared with service clubs, business organizations and local media outlets. The testimonial video clip of the La Crosse experience is designed to introduce the COMMUNITY concept.

Invite a speaker to address your group.

A representative from LeaderEthics–Wisconsin or the La Crosse COMMUNITY organization will be glad to address your group. The first step is the recognition of local media and community leaders that there is a reason to be concerned about information disorder within the community; and that by working together, we can take steps to address it.

*“Without facts, we can’t have truth. Without truth, we can’t have trust.”
Maria Ressa, 2021 Nobel Peace Prize recipient.*

Step Two

Convene the Group of Potential Partners

The **COMMUNITY** model calls for the formation of a Partners Group. The Partners Group should be primarily comprised of representatives of local media, plus some respected community organizations (perhaps the local United Way). At the initial partners meeting, it is recommended that a representative of LeaderEthics-Wisconsin join the meeting to review the **COMMUNITY** model and essential components.

The model contains several essential components:

- Program partners, including media, should represent the political spectrum.
- Respected community endorsers (service clubs, business organizations...) should publicly lend support.
- Events and topics should focus on information accuracy and be inherently nonpartisan.
- Events may use traditional media but must involve elements of social media to better reach target audiences.
- Media literacy will be incorporated to increase awareness and resilience to online misinformation.
- Social media venues may include a broader reach in rural communities, areas most susceptible to being in news deserts.
- Sites embracing **COMMUNITY** should consider incorporating a local chapter of LeaderEthics-Wisconsin, in order to receive start-up technical support.

Step Three

Draft the Operating Assumptions for the COMMUNITY Partners Group.

Each community is unique, and the COMMUNITY model should reflect the dynamics of the local community. It is recommended that the Partners Group establish operating assumptions that can serve as a guide for the local COMMUNITY. The dynamics of information disorder are inherently complex and often divisive within the community. Furthermore, collaborative

partnerships sometimes face organization or interpersonal disagreements. In recognition of this, it is highly recommended that the local COMMUNITY Partners Group develop operating assumptions to serve as a guide. The following are EXAMPLES of operating assumptions. Through a roundtable approach, each COMMUNITY Partners Group should draft their own operating assumptions.

Memorandum of Understanding COMMUNITY Operating Assumptions (EXAMPLES)

The partners in each coalition should develop operating assumptions that serve as a guide for their operations. The following are intended to serve as examples for the purpose of this proposal. The list is certainly not all inclusive.

- The purpose of the local COMMUNITY is to promote accurate information and to build resiliency to information disorder within the local community.
- Events and topics should focus on information accuracy and be inherently nonpartisan.
- Event topics and speakers will be selected by unanimous consent.
- The local COMMUNITY will be up for renewal on a yearly basis.

“Many believe we are in an “infodemic”, as misinformation on social media becomes a greater influence”. Lee Rasch, published in the March 7, 2021 issue of the La Crosse Tribune.

Step Four

Develop the Local COMMUNITY Program

The local COMMUNITY Partners Group should establish a format and list of tentative topics for the upcoming year. The topics can include items such as media literacy, seeking common ground or election integrity, and they should reflect the priorities of the local community. The format can vary depending upon local preferences. For example, the format could involve quarterly virtual “town hall meetings” or a series of collaborative public service messages.*

Considerations include:

- Seek a format that attempts to reach people across the silos of information that typically exist for people.
- Approach news deserts that may exist within the service area.
- Recognize that information disorder is constantly evolving and new issues are emerging. Consequently, flexibility in the format is key.

*The La Crosse COMMUNITY held a virtual town hall meeting called the Vote Safe Project. The focus of the program to address concerns about voting safely during the pandemic as well as concerns about voting integrity. The panelists included the current State Attorney General (a Democrat), the former State Attorney General (a Republican), a representative from the Wisconsin Elections Commission and the La Crosse County Elections Clerk. The one-hour program was conducted on Zoom and broadcast via live-stream on the Facebook pages of the Partners Group (two local television stations, the local newspaper, the “talk radio” station, Great Rivers United Way and LeaderEthics-Wisconsin).