

# TIPS FOR TALKING TO JOURNALISTS ABOUT DISINFORMATION & THE 2020 CENSUS

Calling attention to disinformation -- even if the intent is to discredit it -- gives it [oxygen](#) and, thus, helps it flourish. This is known as the problem of amplification. Purveyors of disinformation want to reach the professional media to amplify the harmful content to the widest possible audience. Media coverage is further amplified by search engines and social media. To minimize the impact of disinformation on the 2020 Census, you might consider strategically engaging the media using the following tips:

## ❑ ENCOURAGE JOURNALISTS TO CONTACT NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS GROUPS

- ❑ **Don't** feel like you have to talk to every reporter who reaches out, or that you have to know all the answers to questions about disinformation. You always have the option of saying, "I'm not the best person to comment on that."
- ❑ **Do** urge journalists to contact national civil rights organizations, which can either engage the journalist directly or connect them to experts in the field of disinformation. If your organization doesn't have a national hub, feel free to direct journalists to Tamika Turner, national communications director for the Census Counts campaign, at: [turner@civilrights.org](mailto:turner@civilrights.org)

## ❑ UNDERSTAND REPORTING TERMS, BUT ELABORATE USING PLAIN ENGLISH

- ❑ **Don't** say, "I can talk *on background*," and leave it at that. This means something different to every journalist, as there are no universally agreed-upon definitions for the terms used to describe conversations with sources.
- ❑ **Do** spell out jargon-free conditions for your conversation if you do decide to talk to a journalist, e.g. "I can talk *on background*, meaning you can publish what I say, but it can only be attributed to a 'census advocate,'" or, "Everything I say is completely *off the record*, meaning you cannot publish it at all, even if you attribute it to an anonymous source." Expect pushback no matter what; journalists will always try to get you *on the record*. But remember: You are not required to talk to a journalist on the record, or at all, if you do not feel comfortable.

## ❑ DON'T GIVE EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

- ❑ **Don't** point journalists to specific instances of disinformation, even if you're talking off the record. If they can find it online, they can publish it because you are no longer considered the source.
- ❑ **Do** press journalists to tell you what evidence they have. It's their job to find the examples. If they don't have any, remind them that there's a big difference between what is possible and what is known.

## ❑ AVOID REPEATING DISINFORMATION

- ❑ **Don't** repeat or share the falsehood, e.g. "We're concerned about the rumors circulating online that the Census Bureau is leaking data to ICE." Studies have shown that when you verbalize a negative message, it sticks in people's heads —

- even if you're refuting it.
- **Do** provide accurate facts in the form of inoculation or balance messages, e.g. "We're working to remind folks that it's illegal for the Bureau to share information with other government agencies."
- **AVOID LANGUAGE THAT TRIGGERS A COUNTER-RESPONSE**
  - **Don't** use language that could trigger a counter-response among adversarial groups, such as "white decline," "constitutionalist," or "alt-right trolls."
  - **Do** describe the actions of adversarial groups and their impact on your communities in as accurate and euphemism-free terms as possible, e.g. "Individuals with anti-immigrant views are spreading disinformation to scare people out of participating in the census and securing funding and representation for their communities."
- **PIVOT TO OTHER TOPICS BESIDES DISINFORMATION**
  - **Don't** let the conversation solely be about the existence or impact of disinformation.
  - **Do** pivot to all your other census-related work, the benefits of census participation, and the evergreen reasons why your communities are hard to count, which predate the current political climate and the internet itself.
- **AVOID SPECULATION**
  - **Don't** offer up examples of potential disinformation campaigns, e.g. "If there were disinformation about foreign interference in the census, that would be really bad."
  - **Do** stick to the evidence. If there is nothing pointing to a disinformation campaign, remind the reporter of that.
- **AVOID FEAR MONGERING**
  - **Don't** talk about how scary the threat of disinformation is.
  - **Do** talk about your efforts to provide people with accurate information.
- **THINK ABOUT THE THREAT-LEVEL**
  - **Don't** talk to journalists on the record about problematic narratives if they pose a low threat (i.e. they're circulating on only one platform and have low online engagement). Media coverage of disinformation can do more harm than good if only a small number of people have seen the disinformation to begin with.
  - **Do** encourage trusted journalists to debunk if the threat of people seeing disinformation rises (i.e. a narrative has spread to two or three platforms or reached over 1,000 online interactions). For help assessing the threat-level a particular piece of content poses, reach out to national civil rights groups or to Tamika Turner at [turner@civilrights.org](mailto:turner@civilrights.org).