



Free markets. Real solutions.

## EVENT REPORT

# Misinformation and Disinformation Idea-thon Spawns Eight Real Solutions

By Brent M. Eastwood

**We could face even greater levels of political polarization in the upcoming months if we do not actively work to combat misinformation and disinformation in the media we consume.**



## INTRODUCTION

Misinformation (false information) and disinformation (intentionally misleading false information) are pervasive in our daily communication. From polarizing news to social media posts and conversations with friends and families, many individuals either knowingly or unknowingly spread false content.

The U.S. public is acutely aware of the problem. A March 2019 survey reported that [nearly seven out of every 10](#) respondents believed that fake news in the United States was causing “a great deal of confusion.” And [a more recent 2021 survey](#) found that half of respondents had more distrust in information from social media and the news than they did a year earlier.

Americans widely agree that something must change: [96 percent](#) of the 2021 survey respondents indicated that they wanted to limit the spread of false information. Yet taking practical steps to move that needle on a nationwide scale is complicated for a variety of reasons. First, it is difficult to recognize and curb: Only [23 percent](#) of those who wanted to limit the spread of false information felt “very confident” that they could identify it, and more than [one in three](#) reported accidentally sharing it. In addition, recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have given rise to more sophisticated constructs of false information (“[synthetic media](#)” like [deep fakes](#) and [speech synthesis](#)) that make it even more difficult to determine what information is accurate and what information is not. Furthermore, attempts to mitigate misinformation and disinformation have (so far) largely taken the form of top-down solutions, such as relying on social media platforms to police content themselves with extensive internal content moderation teams or novel solutions like X’s “community notes” feature.

# 96%

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These challenges are especially problematic as we head into the next election cycle, given that disagreement about what is or is not fake news tends to align with political beliefs and fuel divisiveness. For example, Americans were divided both on the necessity/efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines and on whether the 2020 presidential election was stolen, largely aligned with political affiliation. Thus, we could face even greater levels of political polarization in the upcoming months if we do not actively work to combat misinformation and disinformation in the media we consume.

# AN INNOVATIVE IDEA-THON



R Street is actively engaged in educating policymakers on issues and potential solutions around misinformation and disinformation. This year alone, [we have produced many analyses, appeared on radio, and hosted events](#) to discuss commonsense approaches to online content policy. As a nonpartisan think tank dedicated to free markets and limited, effective government, we believe that issues like these are often best addressed with practical, bottom-up solutions generated by the private sector and broader community. We also value First Amendment rights and support solutions that prevent government censorship.

Therefore, to complement our ongoing efforts, we took a unique angle and hosted an “idea-thon.” We conceptualized this event as a single day of group-based brainstorming, problem-solving, and presenting, designed to gather new insights and ideas from those outside typical policy and government conversations. Our ultimate goal was to share these new ideas with policymakers to inspire fresh business ideas and policies and show the value of seeking innovative solutions from stakeholders outside of normal government/policy circles.



We asked George Mason University (GMU) to partner with us for this event because the university is a leader in software “hackathons,” often having hundreds of attendees at such events. GMU’s [Institute for Digital Innovation](#) volunteered to sponsor and lead the idea-thon effort, as the institute has longstanding partnerships with industry representatives, professors, and students that would ensure the event’s success.

## EVENT RECRUITMENT

Our attendance goals were  
100 RSVPs and 50 attendees.

**We met both goals.**

To recruit student participants, our contacts at GMU sent out a broad mailer to hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students. We also reached out to the deans and communication staff of three schools at GMU—politics and policy, education, and computing. In addition, **we sent event details to more than 150 professors at GMU, Georgetown University, American University, and George Washington University.** To attract members of the wider community, we placed flyers across northern Virginia.

Our attendance goals were 100 RSVPs and 50 attendees, and we met both goals. Interestingly, we even attracted an employee from the Central Intelligence Agency who attended because he was interested in the national security aspects of misinformation and disinformation.



R Street Institute and  
George Mason University Present:

### Misinformation and Disinformation Idea-thon

Help Solve a Major Societal  
Problem—Bring Your Ideas  
to Fight Misinformation  
and Disinformation



#### COMPETE FOR PRIZES!



Select a track or category:  
Government, Business/Technology,  
Nonprofit, or Education

#### Form a team to come up with solutions and work products:



A business plan for a tech start-up,  
a mobile app, an academic course,  
a new nonprofit, or new legislation  
or regulations. **Be creative!**  
We welcome innovation.

Software developers are needed,  
but **no computer science skills  
are necessary to participate.**

Transportation services available  
from GMU Fairfax campus.  
Metro accessible.

Bring your best ideas to solve  
the problem of misinformation  
and disinformation!

Register At  
[www.rstreet.org/events](http://www.rstreet.org/events)



Saturday, April 20, 2024

9:00AM–6:30PM ET

George Mason University (GMU)  
Schar School of Policy and Government  
3351 Fairfax Drive, Arlington, Virginia



# 8 TEAMS 8 PROBLEMS 8 SOLUTIONS

Many of our 50 participants were undergraduate and graduate students, and

**~80%**

were representatives of minority or underserved communities.

## On April 20, 2024, we held our first annual Misinformation and Disinformation Idea-thon.

The event took place at the GMU Schar School of Government and Policy in Arlington, Virginia.



We divided participants into eight teams (one of which was organized beforehand) and tasked the teams with identifying a key problem related to misinformation and disinformation and devising a practical solution to overcome that issue. The teams competed in one of four categories: business and technology; nonprofit; education; and government.

The competitors worked all day on their projects and then gave a slide presentation to three judges. The judges evaluated the teams on the quality of their slides, their presentation, the originality of their idea, the potential impact and reach of their solution, and the probability that their solution would succeed. Individuals in the top three teams won Apple gift cards.

**The work products of each team are described below. These summaries represent the core ideas from their final presentations, and all participants granted R Street permission to describe their solutions in this report.**



## TEAM 1

### PROBLEM

Misinformation and disinformation are widespread and have affected our ability to improve public health, address climate change, maintain a stable democracy, and more. We must be aware that they exist and use tools to identify faulty content to protect ourselves from its ill effects.

### SOLUTION

**iFact, an AI-/human-assisted fact checker that would be available as both a mobile and web app**

It would use a ChatGPT application programming interface (API) that would be paired with human input/feedback to determine whether the entered URL or text is factual or not. iFact would use a novel procedure called “embedding,” which self-learns how to search, classify, and compare information to identify questionable content. The program would also use speech-to-text so that users could upload an audio or video social media post and receive feedback on that type of content as well. Humans would play a critical role in iFact, serving as editors (initially) and then writers (after achieving a certain amount of reputation) of notes that support or challenge the validity of the queried text.

## TEAM 2

### PROBLEM

When browsing social media platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook, users do not have time to fact-check every statement, despite there being many bad actors and state-sponsored disinformation campaigns presenting false information as fact. Because negativity tends to trend rapidly and false comments get pushed to the top of comment sections, misinformation and disinformation can be perceived as truth.

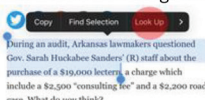
### SOLUTION

**Verity Info Inc., a free-to-use fact-checking website, browser plugin, and mobile app that could be easily accessed by individuals and integrated into businesses’ existing software**

The app would enhance user trust and promote critical thinking by providing a convenient and reliable way to verify online information. With seamless integration across various platforms, users could quickly fact-check information while browsing on their computers or smartphones.

### Easy access and easy integration solution

- Our solution **combats false information online**. It offers a free website, browser plugin, and mobile application, each providing easy access to fact-check information from credible sources.
- Goal: **Enhance user trust and promote critical thinking**
  - Provide a **convenient and reliable** way to verify online information.
  - With **seamless integration** across various platforms, users can quickly fact-check information while browsing online or on their smartphones.



### Arkansas Government Questioned About \$19,000 Lectern Purchase

Arkansas lawmakers questioned Gov. Sar...

This website is known for spreading false information!

Give me more credible sources

Give me some facts about this topic



## TEAM 3

### PROBLEM

Misinformation and disinformation can rapidly spread during elections, which undermines U.S. democracy.

### SOLUTION

**Create an election security consulting firm for government election offices, political campaigns, and nonprofits that would use advanced AI fact-checking algorithms and API integration services via a system called “Election Deception”**

This service would offer real-time analysis and strategic recommendations, education, and training via a web application. It would feature standard behavioral psychology analytics and integration, user risk reports, and threat intelligence reports, as well as custom reports—all designed to stave off misinformation and disinformation and bolster democracy.

## TEAM 4

### PROBLEM

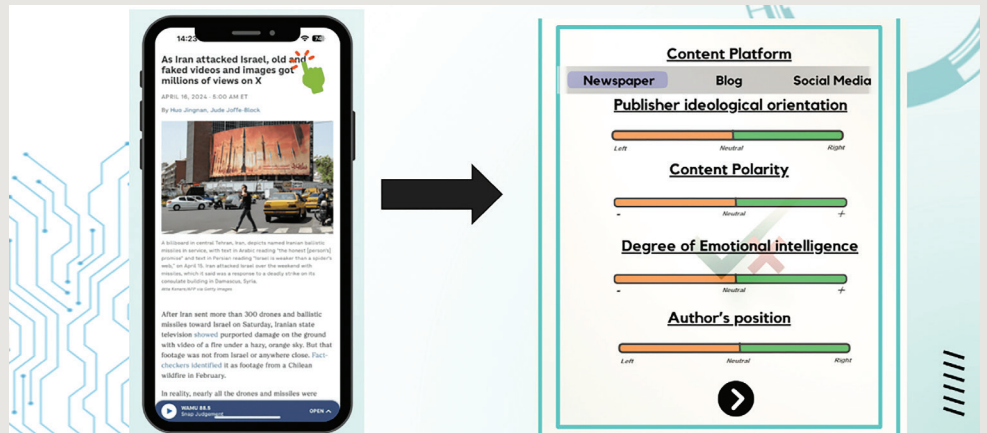
Powerful players use misinformation and disinformation to control the public, but if we authorize individuals or groups to censor bad information, it could create a First Amendment issue.

### SOLUTION

**TrustSphere—a technology that automatically labels misinformation and disinformation on the content we consume**

TrustSphere would scan content before viewers access it. The program would then rate each news article on the level of a publisher’s ideological orientation, its content polarity, its degree of emotional intelligence, and the author’s position and leanings. In the same way that nutritional labels are used to help us assess the food we consume, TrustSphere would provide a quick, at-a-glance assessment to help users determine the likelihood that the content is valid and unbiased.

Quick, at-a-glance assessment





## TEAM 5

### PROBLEM

Substance use disorder (SUD)-related deaths in the United States are increasing at an alarming rate. Misinformation and disinformation abound online, and content tends to become outdated quickly, making it difficult for individuals to know whether the resources they are consulting are accurate or not. Furthermore, individuals with SUD often face judgment in the health care system, which is fueled by stigma and biases underpinned by misinformation; this anticipated judgment can be a barrier to seeking lifesaving treatment.

### SOLUTION

#### **Develop SUD-specific resources for iConnect, a nonprofit enterprise to build human connections and combat misinformation**

iConnect is an existing suite of mobile apps that features real-time updates, secure authentication, community engagement (with crowd-sourcing), improved data management, and an engaging user experience. If SUD-specific resources were built into the app, it could help users find medication-assisted treatment, food assistance, and housing assistance. The app would use geolocation features and offer contact information for each option depending on where the user is located.



## TEAM 6

### PROBLEM

Individuals spread misinformation and disinformation both wittingly and unwittingly, and regulations and legal reforms alone are not enough to combat this issue. There is a need for an easy-to-implement, generalized class on this topic that could be taken by any student, regardless of their background.

### SOLUTION

#### **Create a new, 8-week college course using the latest educational techniques to train students to recognize, understand, and counter misinformation and disinformation**

In weeks one to three, students would acquire background knowledge and be able to answer questions like “What are misinformation and disinformation?,” “Who is spreading it and how?,” and “What regulations and programs currently exist to counter them?” Weeks four and five would be the application stage during which students would participate in group projects to identify and research real-world examples of misinformation and disinformation. Weeks six to eight would focus on future work and integrity. Students would study potential future developments in misinformation and disinformation with various tools and regulations, and they would answer the question, “How can we, as informed citizens, counter misinformation and disinformation with both top-down and bottom-up solutions?”

## TEAM 7

### PROBLEM

The contemporary information ecosystem is dynamic, changing, and highly contested, making the norms and interpretation of mass media difficult.

### SOLUTION

**Establish a nonprofit called the “Student Media and Technology Alliance” to equip students with the means to create norms and interpretive frameworks to navigate today’s challenging information environment**

The alliance would take a diverse group of high school journalism faculty and students and connect them to professionals in technology, media, and academia to develop a community of media-proficient high school students that would be equipped to tackle misinformation/disinformation and teach media literacy to their peers. The nonprofit would also provide students with resources to inform their own projects to address misinformation and disinformation.

## TEAM 8

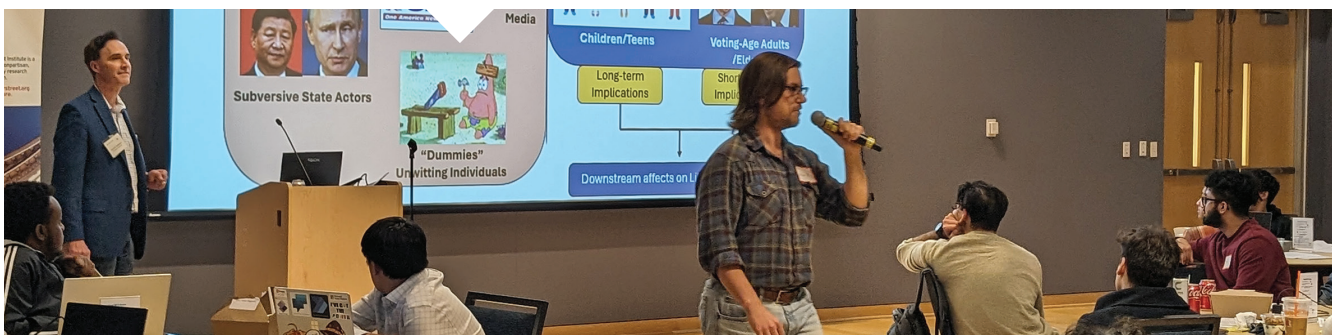
### PROBLEM

Misinformation/disinformation is not a problem that can be solved; it must instead be managed. Many solutions coming from Washington, D.C., such as existing legislation and potential executive orders, are heavy-handed and punitive and threaten individuals’ First Amendment rights.

### SOLUTION

**Take a “whole-of-society” approach to educating school-age individuals about media literacy and voting-age adults about misinformation and disinformation while creating counter-messaging and enhancing government transparency and policy coordination**

This would be accomplished by tasking the Department of Education with establishing national education standards for K-12 in media literacy and critical thinking, which would be implemented by state and local governments, as well as by tasking the Federal Election Commission to publicize electoral processes and vote-counting procedures. In addition: (1) the White House should issue an executive order to reduce intelligence and law-enforcement barriers to disclose foreign misinformation and disinformation to enable timely public awareness; (2) federal agencies should share intelligence and law-enforcement information with tech and social media companies to help identify bot farms, label or remove state-sponsored media, and remove fake accounts; and (3) Congress should award grants to companies that are promoting digital safety in innovative ways and publish quarterly reports on disinformation tactics and narratives.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

## THIS INAUGURAL EVENT WAS A MAJOR SUCCESS.

Participants expressed gratitude for the experience and competition, and we were grateful to the attendees, all of whom came engaged and ready to identify and tackle our idea-thon theme in a friendly, competitive way.

### COMMON THEMES



Half of the teams identified an issue related to false information in news articles and on social media, and many of their solutions suggested using AI as a content-screening tool, balanced with human input and oversight.



Another common theme was investment in education and informational resources to better equip individuals to discern false information from truth.

## EACH of the proposed solutions had merit and could be converted into a new private-sector product or company:

- In October, GMU will hold its annual hackathon, and the teams from this idea-thon that suggested software-based solutions will be invited to turn their ideas into minimum viable products in that 36-hour event. In addition, participants from one team asked if they could create a company and have it incubated at R Street. Although that is not something we are equipped to handle at this time, it shows the team's enthusiasm for working with us to grow their idea.
- The college course solution could easily be developed into a real academic offering, and two professors gave extra credit to their students who worked on this idea. It is possible that those instructors might consider incorporating parts of that proposal into their own syllabi.
- The idea that involved the creation of a nonprofit organized by high school journalists is quite intriguing. In reality, it could be difficult to implement this type of program because of strict state and local curriculum guidelines, but it nonetheless has merit as an idea that could continue to be developed and refined.
- Although we appreciated the legislative and regulatory idea from the team that focused on a government-based solution, our experience suggests that the passage of the full slate of recommended reforms would be difficult. Still, we were intrigued that the small-government/light-regulatory-ethos of the solution aligned with R Street's philosophy.

## These new, creative ideas are worth sharing with industry, academia, policymakers, and nonprofit leaders.

We believe participants left the event with not only a unique experience to add their resumes but also with a new spark of inspiration to continue working on their ideas and contributing to solutions to the misinformation/disinformation problem of today's content environment. In fact, members from the two first-place teams wrote detailed posts on LinkedIn about their positive experiences and solutions, which created many reposts, likes, and comments that extended the reach of our idea-thon well beyond the event participants.

## We plan to host the event again next year.

Although R Street is not a grassroots organization, we showed that solutions to misinformation that bubble up from the broader community can better inform policymakers, inspire free-market thought, create educational opportunities, and spawn new nonprofits. In so doing, the idea-thon exceeded our goals, objectives, and expectations and demonstrated that a think tank can go beyond the traditional offerings of policy institutes (like expert panels discussing current events) and successfully host this type of event. We also demonstrated that looking outside the typical sphere of government debate and discussion for fresh perspectives can be the lynchpin to finding an equitable, inventive solution to some of our most pressing challenges.