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# PSYCHOLOGY OF DISINFORMATION

Edition 2024



# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DISINFORMATION: HOW IT WORKS AND WHY IT MATTERS

Societal impact

Influence on critical  
decisions (e.g.,  
health, politics)



Polarised  
opinions

Eroded trust in  
institutions

Importance of awareness

Reduces the  
spread of harmful  
misinformation

Promotes critical  
thinking in a  
digital age



Helps identify  
false narratives

# WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

1

## Misinformation

False information shared without intent to harm (e.g., sharing outdated health advice).

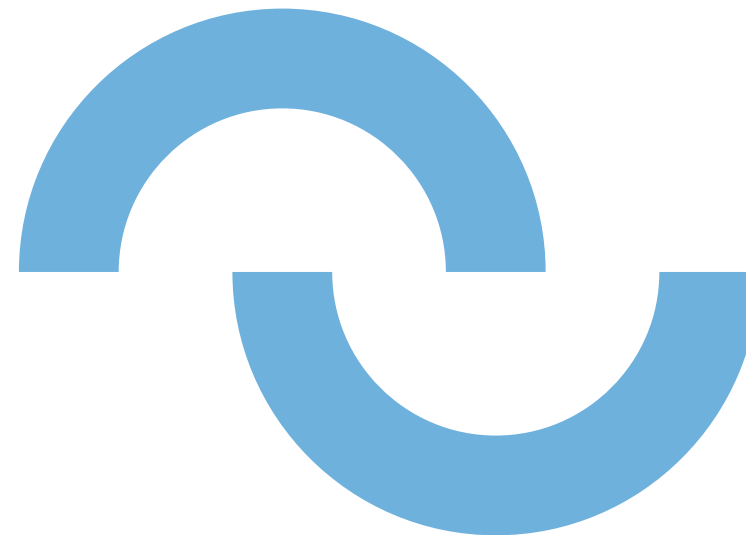


A celebrity death rumor spreads on social media.

2

## Disinformation

False information shared with the intent to deceive (e.g., fabricated election fraud stories).



Coordinated fake news campaigns during elections.

3

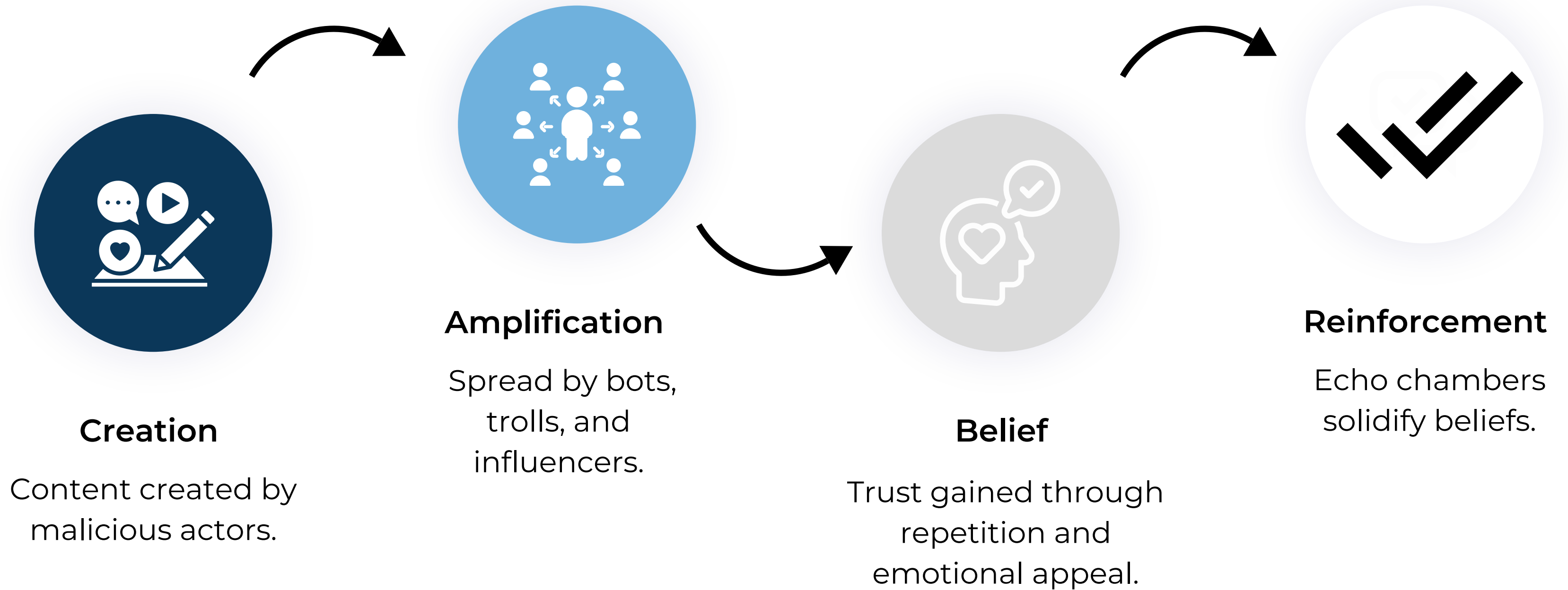
## Malinformation

Genuine information shared maliciously (e.g., leaking private data to harm reputations).



Personal emails leaked for character assassination.

# HOW DISINFORMATION SPREADS



# COGNITIVE BIASES AND VULNERABILITIES



## Illusory truth effect

Repeated exposure to false information makes it feel familiar, and familiarity is often mistaken for truth.



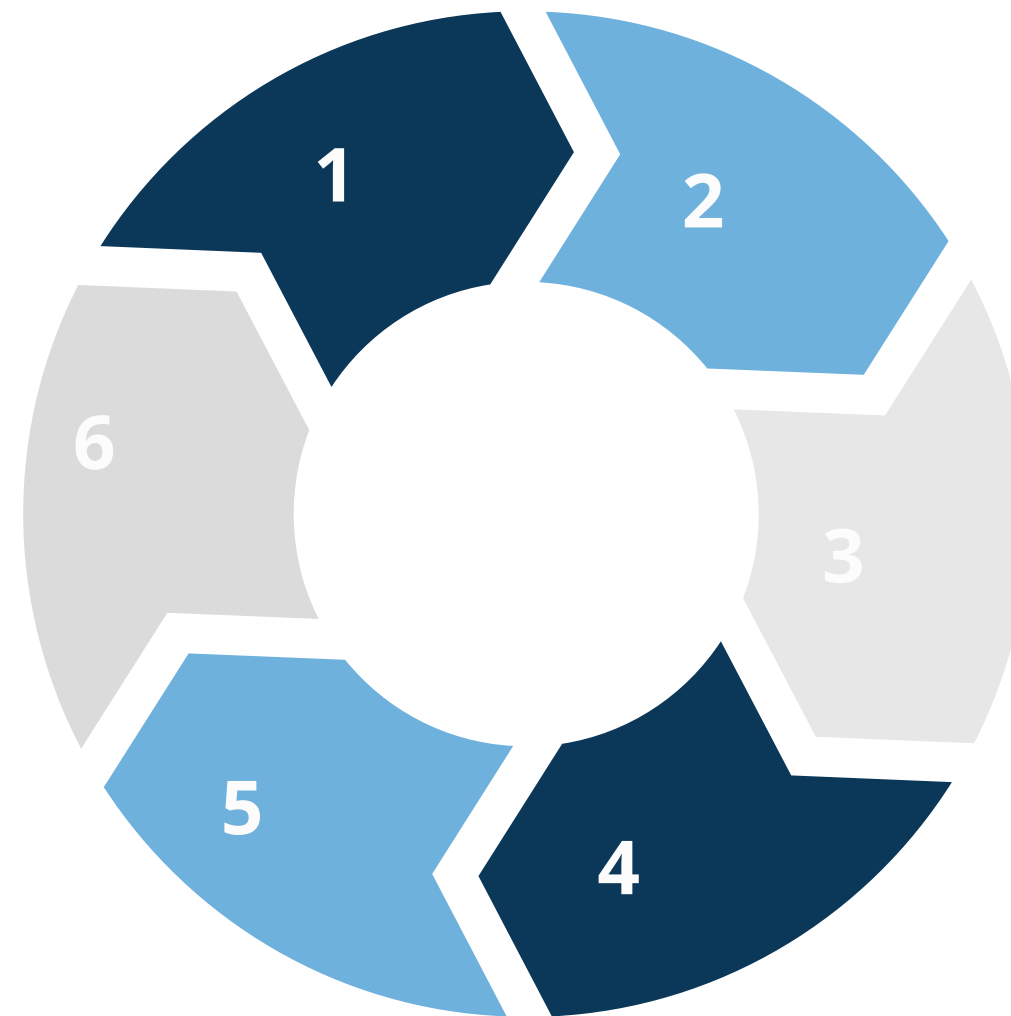
## Confirmation bias

People tend to seek and believe information that aligns with their existing beliefs, ignoring evidence to the contrary.



## Social proof

People trust and share information that appears popular or widely accepted.



## Emotional influence

Emotional content (e.g., fear, anger) grabs attention and triggers quick, impulsive reactions, bypassing critical thinking.



## Anchoring bias

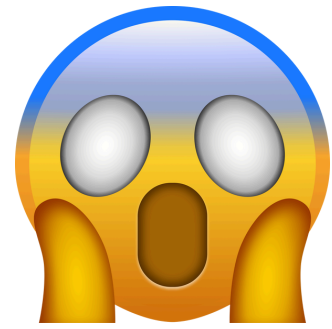
People rely heavily on the first piece of information they receive (the "anchor") when making decisions, even if it's false.



## Cognitive overload

Disinformation is simplified, making it easier for our brains to absorb.

# HOW DISINFORMATION PREYS ON EMOTIONS



**Fear: “Vaccines are unsafe and experimental!”**



**Anger: “They are lying to control you!”**



**Hope: “This miracle cure will save lives!”**

Emotional content is more likely to go viral.

During crises or political events, fear and anger drive fast reactions, making verification less likely.

Positive emotions like hope can also be manipulated to create false optimism.

Heartbreaking but false stories about tragedies go viral as they evoke strong emotional responses.

# HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AMPLIFY DISINFORMATION

## Role of social media

### Algorithms

Engagement-based algorithms prioritise polarising content.



### Virality

False content spreads faster than corrections due to emotional appeal.



### Echo chambers

Platforms group like-minded users, reinforcing shared beliefs.

## Platform-specific examples

### X

Trending hashtags used by bots for rapid spread.



### Facebook


Amplification through group recommendations.



### YouTube

Suggesting radicalising content via autoplay.


# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS



Prolonged exposure to disinformation erodes trust in institutions and media.



It increases polarisation, making societal consensus harder to achieve.



Psychological effects include stress, confusion, and decision fatigue.



### Skeptical persona

Distrust of all media, leading to isolation.



### Overwhelmed persona

Anxiety and confusion due to an overload of conflicting information.



# A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

## Case Study 1: COVID-19

Disinformation: COVID-19 was engineered in a lab as a bioweapon.

### Psychological mechanisms

#### **Fear and uncertainty:**

Heightened emotions during the pandemic made people more receptive to alarming claims.

**Confirmation bias:** Those distrusting governments or science embraced narratives aligning with these beliefs.

**Social proof:** Widespread sharing of lab-origin theories created the illusion of credibility.

### Consequences

#### **Vaccine hesitancy:**

Mistrust in vaccines contributed to slower uptake and prolonged the pandemic.

#### **Spread of unproven treatments:**

Disinformation promoted unverified cures like hydroxychloroquine.

**Polarisation:** Claims about virus origins deepened divisions between nations and within societies.

### Obstacles to changing beliefs

#### **Need for a causal explanation:**

A simple, dramatic origin story provided emotional closure.

#### **Familiarity through repetition:**

Constant repetition of the claim enhanced perceived truthfulness.

**Tribalism:** Partisan divisions tied belief in the theory to political identities.

# A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

## Case Study 2: War in Ukraine

Disinformation: Russia is liberating Ukraine from Nazis.

### Psychological mechanisms

**Tribalism:** Framing Russians as saviours and Ukrainians as enemies appeals to nationalist identities.

**Framing effect:** Using terms like “denazification” creates moral justification for war crimes.

**Emotional manipulation:** Fear of historical threats (Nazism) stirs outrage and support for the invasion.

### Consequences

**Justification of violence:** Disinformation helped justify killing civilians, torture, and other atrocities.

**Global division:** Some populations accepted the false narrative, weakening international solidarity.

**Dehumanisation:** Labelling Ukrainians as “Nazis” encouraged acts of cruelty by Russian forces.

### Obstacles to changing beliefs

**Echo chambers:** Russian state-controlled media reinforces the disinformation narrative.

**Distrust of western sources:** Anti-Western sentiment undermines trust in opposing accounts.

**National pride:** Accepting the truth would challenge the myth of Russia as a liberator.

# A REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

## Case Study 3: Climate Change Skepticism

Disinformation: Climate change is a hoax designed to control economies and restrict freedoms.

### Psychological mechanisms

**Cognitive dissonance:** Denying climate change reduces discomfort about unsustainable behaviours.

**Social proof:** Prominent individuals and viral posts lend legitimacy to climate change scepticism.

**Framing effect:** Framing climate policies as economic control creates resistance.

### Consequences

**Policy resistance:** Disinformation delayed support for renewable energy and conservation efforts.

**Public confusion:** Conflicting messages undermined trust in scientific consensus.

**Economic harm:** Delays in adopting green technologies slowed sustainable economic progress.

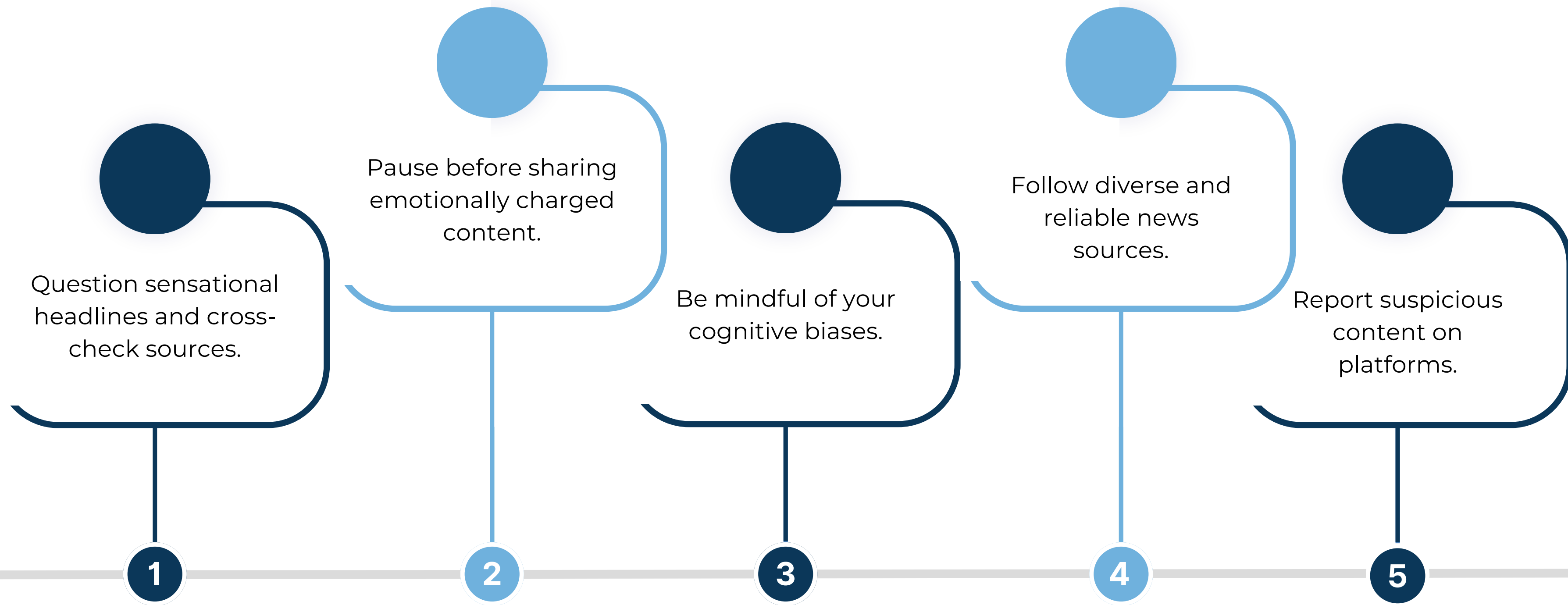
### Obstacles to changing beliefs

**Misinformation familiarity:** Repeated claims normalised scepticism.

**Identity ties:** Political ideologies made rejecting disinformation a challenge.

**Motivated reasoning:** Beliefs were rationalised to avoid confronting inconvenient truths.

# HOW TO COUNTERACT DISINFORMATION



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## Disclaimer

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