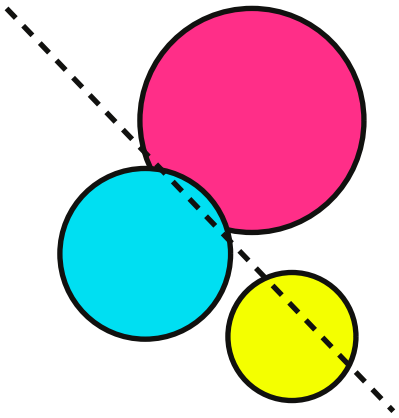
A SOCIAL TRANSMISSION FIELD GUIDE

RUMOUR ENGINE



How information changes as it travels - and how to preserve what matters.

A practical companion to the Rumour Mutation Network. Includes a print experiment, two case files, reflection prompts, a verification protocol, ethical limits and checked references.

This guide is educational. It does not determine truth, predict virality, diagnose people or infer why someone shared a claim.

00 / ORIENTATION

A MESSAGE IS A RELAY, NOT A PARCEL

Information does not move through a neutral pipe. People summarize it; memory rebuilds it; interfaces reward some expressions; groups supply context and identity; institutions confirm, delay or revise it. At each hand-off a message can become shorter, sharper, less sourced, more qualified, newly corrected or more useful.

This guide treats those transformations as social and technical processes. It avoids the easy story that misinformation exists only because some people are gullible. Sharing may reflect attention, novelty, uncertainty, care, humour, identity, urgency, distrust, interface design or a mistaken attempt to help. None of those possibilities can be diagnosed from a post alone.

INFORMATION

A claim, observation, instruction or account that can be true, false, mixed, uncertain or not yet settled.

MISINFORMATION

False or misleading information shared regardless of intent. Intentional deception is more specifically disinformation.

RUMOUR

Unverified information circulating because it seems relevant under ambiguity. It can later prove true, false or partly true.

EVIDENCE KEY: Established means supported in bounded studies, not universally guaranteed. Observational means a pattern was measured without controlling every cause. Contested means credible explanations compete. Hypothesis means plausible but unconfirmed here. Simulation means an authored illustration, not a research instrument.

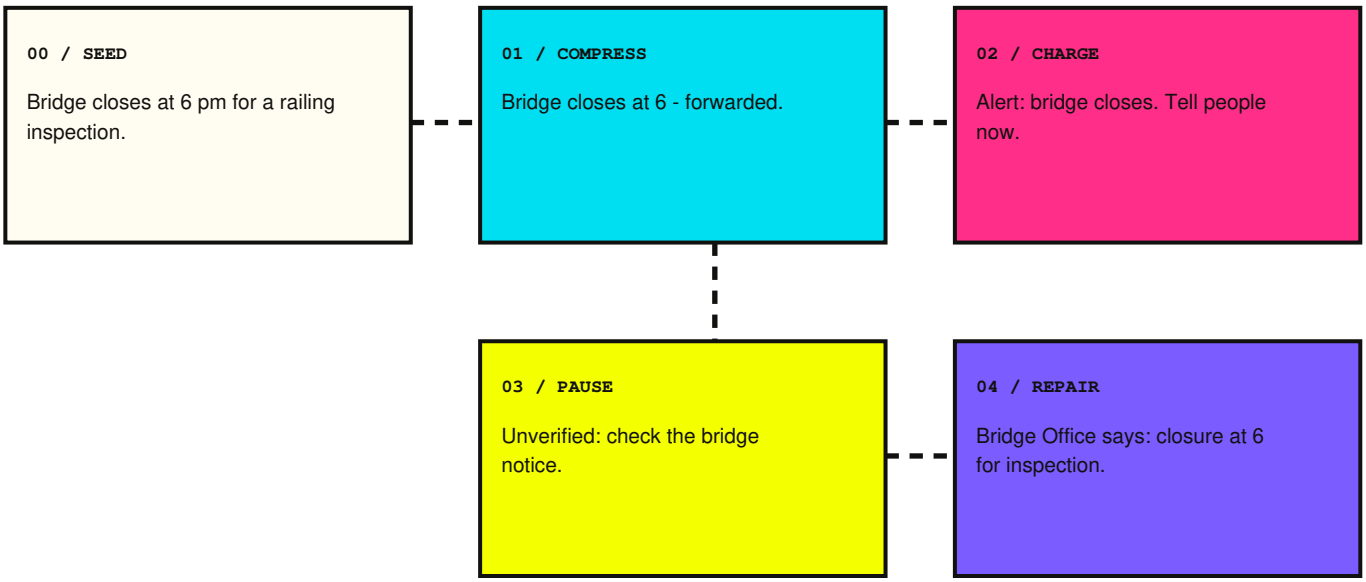
What to notice

Which details survive? Where does the source label go? What new certainty appears? What action does the message invite? Does the correction supply an alternative account, or merely reject the old one?

01 / PRINT EXPERIMENT

BUILD A RUMOUR MUTATION NETWORK ON PAPER

Use a fictional, non-personal report. The exercise makes transformations visible; it does not measure a participant's intelligence, honesty or susceptibility.



1 / SEED

Write one report with source, time, reason and an uncertainty marker.

2 / COMPRESS

Fit it into twelve words. Circle every detail that vanished.

3 / CHARGE

Make it urgent without inventing an event. Underline new certainty cues.

4 / BRANCH

One branch drops the source; one adds unverified and a check route.

5 / REPAIR

Reconnect the message to a dated record while preserving useful action.

COUNT: Seed words retained; source cues visible; urgency cues added; recipients shown. These are descriptive tallies, not credibility scores or probabilities of spread.

02 / MECHANISMS

FIVE PRESSURES THAT CHANGE A MESSAGE

Reconstruction, not photocopying

Human remembering is selective. Retelling rebuilds an account from remembered elements and prior knowledge. Serial-reproduction research observes omission, normalization, sharpening and reorganization. Context, expertise and the task matter.

Repetition and familiarity

Controlled experiments show that prior exposure can increase the perceived accuracy of plausible false headlines. This does not mean repetition guarantees belief or defeats strong evidence. Familiarity is one cue among many.

Emotion and attention

Moral-emotional language has been associated with wider diffusion in particular networks. A large Twitter study found false stories more novel, on average, than true stories in its dataset. Neither finding is a universal recipe for virality.

Social proof and identity

Visible shares can signal that a claim matters. Group cues can turn sharing into belonging. But inattention accounts also fit evidence: people sometimes fail to consider accuracy at the moment of sharing. The same person can respond differently across settings.

Correction and continued influence

A correction can reduce belief without erasing every downstream inference. Reviews recommend a clear warning, specific explanation, credible evidence and a coherent alternative. Lead with the accurate account; repeat the false one only as needed.

CAUSAL CAUTION: A feature can correlate with spread without causing it. A lab effect can be real without having the same size outside the lab. Ask what was manipulated, what was observed, who was sampled and what outcome was measured.

03 / COMPETING LENSES

WHY DOES QUESTIONABLE INFORMATION MOVE?

LENS 1 / ATTENTION AND REASONING

People may not prefer falsehood; attention may be pulled toward novelty, social reward or the next task. Accuracy prompts and pauses improve discernment in some experiments. This lens points toward friction, source cues and opportunities to reflect.

LENS 2 / MOTIVATION AND BELONGING

A claim can defend identity, express loyalty, sustain a worldview or participate in a group. Facts alone may not replace that function. This lens points toward trusted messengers, relationships, dignity and alternatives that do not require social exile.

A third lens: structure

Interfaces decide which actions are easy, metrics decide what becomes visible, and incentives decide what is produced at scale. Elite cues, recommender systems and weak local information shape exposure before an individual judgment.

Contested point: the backfire effect

Some influential studies reported corrections strengthening misperceptions. Later large experiments found such effects elusive rather than routine. Test corrections, avoid humiliation, make the accurate account memorable and do not treat backlash as inevitable.

USE ALL THREE: Ask whether a person had an opportunity to attend to accuracy, what social function the message served and how the surrounding system rewarded the action. An explanation at one level does not erase the others.

Reflection

Think of a claim you once shared and revised. Which explanation fits: limited attention, group belonging, source trust, urgency, platform design, incomplete evidence, or a mixture? What evidence would distinguish them?

04 / CASE FILE 01

1938: THE PANIC AND THE STORY ABOUT THE PANIC

On 30 October 1938, CBS aired Orson Welles's radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's The War of the Worlds, shaped in part like breaking-news bulletins. Archival letters and contemporary records show that some listeners were frightened and that institutions received anxious calls. But the later image of a nation in mass flight rests on weak audience estimates, a small selected interview sample and sensational newspaper coverage.

Hadley Cantril's 1940 study interviewed 135 people, including 100 known to have been upset. It asked why some listeners treated the drama as news. Accounts pointed to radio's authority, realistic interruption formats, familiar places and recent experience of genuine bulletins. Yet the design could not establish national prevalence.

Later work by Jefferson Pooley and Michael Socolow examined how Cantril's research, early audience measurement and press-radio competition helped stabilize an inflated mass-panic narrative. The case contains two transmissions: the fictional invasion and the durable story that a whole nation panicked.

SUPPORTED	Some listeners were confused or frightened; calls and letters are documented; bulletin form contributed to realism.
CONTESTED	The size and national character of the panic; estimates from selected interviews and uncertain audience totals.
LESSON	Do not replace an exaggerated claim with 'nothing happened.' State what the record supports and what the sample cannot show.

FIELD QUESTION: What evidence estimates scale rather than merely showing that at least one vivid incident happened? Look for representative sampling, denominators, contemporaneous records, independent sources and incentives behind retelling.

05 / CASE FILE 02

2013: COLLABORATIVE ATTENTION BECOMES MISIDENTIFICATION

After the Boston Marathon bombing on 15 April 2013, online participants examined photographs, assembled clues and circulated candidate identities while official information was scarce. Some activity helped surface evidence. Some produced false accusations and harmful attention toward innocent people.

In an 18 April briefing, the FBI released photographs of two suspects and stated that those images were the only ones the public should treat as credible for identification. Other circulated photos, it warned, could divert attention and create unnecessary work. Public attention can assist an investigation, while public naming without verified evidence can cause severe harm.

Maddock, Starbird and colleagues later analysed four Twitter rumours. Their mixed-method descriptive study found different temporal, lexical and source patterns rather than one universal rumour curve. Denial, speculation, conspiracy and misidentification may require different responses.

URGENCY + UNCERTAINTY	Time-stamp updates; state unknowns; provide the next check-in time.
PUBLIC IMAGE MATCHING	Do not publish private identities; route evidence privately.
SOURCE COLLAPSE	Keep the original record, date and contact attached.
CONFIDENCE CASCADE	Use calibrated language; seek evidence that could falsify the identification.

This case does not show that crowds are always wrong or officials infallible. It shows the asymmetric cost of publishing an unverified identification and the value of provenance, private evidence channels and visible uncertainty.

06 / FIELD PROTOCOL

TRACE: SIXTY USEFUL SECONDS BEFORE FORWARDING

T / TYPE THE CLAIM	Reduce the item to one checkable sentence. Separate fact, opinion, prediction and emotional framing.
R / RECOVER THE SOURCE	Open the original, not a screenshot. Check author, date, context and whether the source is in a position to know.
A / ASK WHAT IS MISSING	Look for scope, denominators, comparisons, uncertainty and what evidence would change the conclusion.
C / CHECK LATERALLY	Leave the page. See whether independent sources and primary records support the same specific claim.
E / EXPRESS PROPORTIONALLY	Share with calibrated language: known, reported, plausible, disputed or unknown. Do not publish a harmful unverified identification.

IN AN EMERGENCY: Do not let exhaustive checking delay an appropriate safety action. Separate 'act cautiously now' from 'this explanation is confirmed.' Use official emergency channels relevant to your location.

A compact correction

Fact first. Signal the specific error. Explain with decisive evidence or context. Replace it with a coherent alternative. Attach and time-stamp the correction beside the original.

07 / REFLECTION WORKSHEET

RECONSTRUCT ONE RECENT RELAY

Choose a non-sensitive message you recently received. Do not use private names, medical details or unverified allegations. Compare the earliest version you can locate with the version you remember.

1 / The checkable claim in one sentence

2 / The earliest source, date and context I can recover

3 / What was lost, added or made more certain in transit?

4 / What action did the message invite, and who could verify it?

5 / A safer rewrite that preserves urgency and uncertainty

08 / EVIDENCE + ETHICS

KEEP FINDING, INTERPRETATION AND MYTH APART

ESTABLISHED	Repetition can increase perceived truth; the effect varies and is not mind control.
OBSERVED	False news diffused differently in one Twitter dataset; one platform is not a timeless rate.
CONTESTED	Identity and attention accounts each explain parts of misinformation susceptibility.
MYTH	Only gullible people share misinformation. A share does not reveal one motive.
HYPOTHESIS	Friction helps in some contexts but can also delay accurate urgent information.
SIMULATION	Rumour Engine values come from authored rules and do not predict behaviour.

What the model does not prove

It cannot determine truth, predict spread, measure susceptibility, infer motive or estimate an intervention's effect. Real transmission depends on audience, culture, platform, incentives, timing, identity and evidence.

Ethical limit

Verification should reduce harm, not become surveillance. Correct the claim while preserving dignity. For rumours naming private people, pause publication, preserve evidence and use a private reporting route.

INSTITUTIONAL DUTY: Say what is unknown, time-stamp updates, keep corrections attached to the original record and explain why advice changed.

09 / CHECKED REFERENCES

FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE UPSTREAM

Metadata and URLs checked against publisher, index, archival or institutional pages on 28 October 2026. Read each method and limitation; inclusion is not endorsement of every inference.

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