

Module 3: Interview with Davey Alba

[00:00:10] **Maryn McKenna** Hello and welcome back to our MOOC, Covering the COVID-19 Vaccines: What Journalists Need to Know. I'm Maryn McKenna, your chief instructor. And in this segment, I'm talking to Davey Alba, the technology reporter at The New York Times who covers online disinformation. Davey, thanks for joining the MOOC.

[00:00:28] **Davey Alba** Yeah, thanks for having me.

[00:00:30] **Maryn McKenna** So let's start with, can you explain your beat?

[00:00:35] **Davey Alba** Sure. So the very basic way that I explain my beat is I cover the viral Internet. And unfortunately, a lot of what goes viral, because of the way the algorithms are programmed on the biggest platforms online, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, tend to be false information or sensationalized information. So, I write about myths and disinformation.

[00:01:05] **Davey Alba** And if it's helpful, we can talk about the differences between myths and disinformation. And that spans, mostly, the different topics that are in the news. So there's a lot of misinformation and disinformation currently swirling around the pandemic. Last year, there was a flood of myths and disinformation about the election, about the racial justice protests and really every big news item of the day.

[00:01:38] **Maryn McKenna** I would like to hear your definition of misinformation versus disinformation.

[00:01:45] **Davey Alba** Sure. So misinformation is, sort of, pieces of false information that are spread without the intention, without the intentionality and the knowledge that this is false information.

[00:02:03] **Davey Alba** So if people have been swindled, basically, and are spreading these lies online, that's misinformation. Disinformation is when you can ascribe intentionality to spreading pieces of information. So if you can, for instance, tie the disinformation campaign to a state actor, we've all heard about the Russian disinformation campaign during the 2016 election.

[00:02:35] **Davey Alba** That would be called disinformation, because we know now that Russia sort of intentionally put into the water of the information ecosystem in the United States false information about the election.

[00:02:55] **Maryn McKenna** So, my personal definition accords with the definition you just gave us, which gives me a great sense of relief.

[00:03:02] **Davey Alba** Good.

[00:03:07] **Maryn McKenna** So, can you describe for us when you are reporting on disinformation and misinformation, how do you do your research? How do you prove that things are true?

[00:03:18] **Davey Alba** Yeah, so we try our very best to adhere to the journalistic standards that we know of and go directly to the source of who the authority on whatever item it is that we're trying to debunk. So, for instance, to take the last election, there were a

lot of different rumors. For instance, like ballots appearing over night suddenly, vote counts changing overnight, that sort of thing. In those cases, it helps to go directly to the County Board of Elections and ask them why did this count change?

[00:04:09] **Davey Alba** And sometimes that would be something as mundane as a clerical error. Sometimes they just input the counts overnight. It's usually very anodyne explanations, and it's usually very far from the sort of sensational rumor online that spreads that there is widespread voter fraud. And indeed, when The New York Times went out and sort of surveyed every state, basically, on whether there was voter fraud, they found no voter fraud in every state.

[00:04:50] **Davey Alba** And so that's what the reporting bore out. Basically, you go directly to the source and do your best to sort of pull out the information you need, but also know that depending on the sources, oh, and context and collection of information, those things can change. For instance, an ongoing police investigation, the assumptions that are made at the beginning may change as the investigation proceeds.

[00:05:24] **Davey Alba** So it's important to, when you're talking to these sources, situate every piece of knowledge that you're reporting out to the public in the context of, this is what we know now, there might be some information that is still unknown. This could be a more authoritative statement a month from now. So all of that external context is very important and relevant to talking about misinformation. Hopefully that was helpful.

[00:05:59] **Maryn McKenna** So is there something you can say, given your experience on this beat, about the major types of misinformation or disinformation related to the pandemic?

[00:06:10] **Davey Alba** Yeah, so in the past year, we've seen a surge of misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic and, you know, it spans sort of a whole range of different things. So there are disinformation campaigns that we've reported on about the vaccines, for instance, where in Russia they are promoting their own vaccine and sort of downplaying and spreading misinformation, false information about the efficacy of other vaccines coming from other countries.

[00:06:50] **Davey Alba** There is viral pieces of misinformation, usually in the form of videos that we saw in the last year of people who purport to be authorities, but they don't have the scientific credentials that they say they do. So one example of that that you may have heard about was the enormously viral video called "plandemic". It was actually fronted by a scientist named Judy Mikovits who had been discredited.

[00:07:33] **Davey Alba** And a lot of that type of misinformation, I would say, dovetails with anti-vaccination and anti-vaccination movement. And so, some of these things have already taken root in various communities online, and when this pandemic came up, it fed into them being able to use the pandemic to reach even more people with this general message of anti-vaccination.

[00:08:04] **Davey Alba** So, yeah, and then there's the third category, which is more misinformation where it's, you know, sort of this thread of or this type of post that seems like good information where you may be trying to help your mom or your great aunt know more about the coronavirus and your copy, pasting certain things about sorts of treatments.

[00:08:41] **Davey Alba** There was something that went around early in the pandemic about, you know, the symptoms of coronavirus and how you should be drinking like hot water and like, all of these sort of like regimens that you don't know exactly where it came from, but it looks legitimate so you pass it along. But my rule of thumb for those kinds of things is usually that, you know, if you don't know it's true to yourself, just don't spread it. It's better to be safe than sorry.

[00:09:13] **Davey Alba** So, political disinformation around the coronavirus, there is sort of swindlers and these supposed health authorities that don't really have the credentials, but make themselves out to be experts. And then there's the strain of misinformation that is, you know, help and advice that it's not verified.

[00:09:45] **Maryn McKenna** So as you -- I'm sure you're extraordinarily busy and you probably don't have a ton of time to read the work of other journalists. But when you see misinformation and disinformation being promulgated, are there particular mistakes or repeatable mistakes that you see journalists making?

[00:10:02] **Davey Alba** Yeah, absolutely. There is a notion that when you cover misinformation, you actually give it oxygen. And so there's there's actually a really great paper called The Oxygen of Amplification, and it's by Whitney Phillips, who's a great source of mine. If you have time to look that up, that would actually be really helpful. But the idea is that when you cover misinformation, you actually give it -- you put the spotlight on it, basically.

[00:10:38] **Davey Alba** And so, you have to be careful about what you decide to cover and how you phrase certain things. So if you're actually repeating the misinformation right in the headline, instead of making it clear that this is, we often have these signal words like, "falsely said" or "this was an unfounded idea," that kind of thing, that helps give the reader immediate context just in that short sentence of the reading that that is something that you should absolutely be thinking about.

[00:11:14] **Davey Alba** And then yeah, so in terms of the amplification, the thing that I think about is, has this already gone viral? Because it's only really a good service if it's something that people have heard about already, potentially, and are wondering about. And so it's useful to debunk something like that, but if it's this very niche rumor that's just getting started, you writing about it could actually put a spotlight on it and cause people to think, well, maybe there's something to this and, you know, sort of like fall deeper into this rabbit hole of conspiracies that exist out there.

[00:11:57] **Maryn McKenna** So, a lot of the participants in our course are journalists, but they are relatively new to science or health writing, they were called into covering the pandemic last year. And so, I think a lot of them struggle with feeling like they don't have the background to debunk some of the things that they're seeing.

[00:12:21] **Maryn McKenna** So I'm wondering as my last question, do you have any advice for journalists who are covering COVID, covering vaccination, encountering the misinformation and disinformation around the vaccine campaign, that any single thing they should keep in mind?

[00:12:38] **Davey Alba** Hmm, I really like this question because I myself am not a health expert and my background is in covering technology and the platforms and how their

algorithms work, and then showing how that dynamic and system can produce viral misinformation.

[00:12:59] **Davey Alba** But again, yeah, I myself am not a health expert. So what I do is I often run things by my colleagues who are on the science desk who cover these things every day. So I would urge the journalists of this course to look into their communities, if there are people who are closer to the actual subject material that they can run things by and make sure that they have the good context that they're providing when writing pieces about the virus and the vaccines and just make sure that the facts that they have behind it are solid.

[00:13:44] **Davey Alba** And obviously, part of journalism is always interviewing experts. So lean on that as a resource, you know, and just do the best you can. Sometimes journalism can be very difficult and there mistakes that are made, but if you're honest and are sticking to the truth of the mission, which is just being accurate and giving people the good information that they desperately need in this in this time, I think you can't go too wrong.

[00:14:26] **Maryn McKenna** Thank you. Thanks for that answer and thanks for joining our MOOC. So, everyone, that's Davey Alba, technology reporter at The New York Times. I'm Maryn McKenna, your chief instructor. Thanks for watching this segment, and we'll see you online.