Prebunking: A proactive strategy to boost community resilience against mis- and dis-information in public health

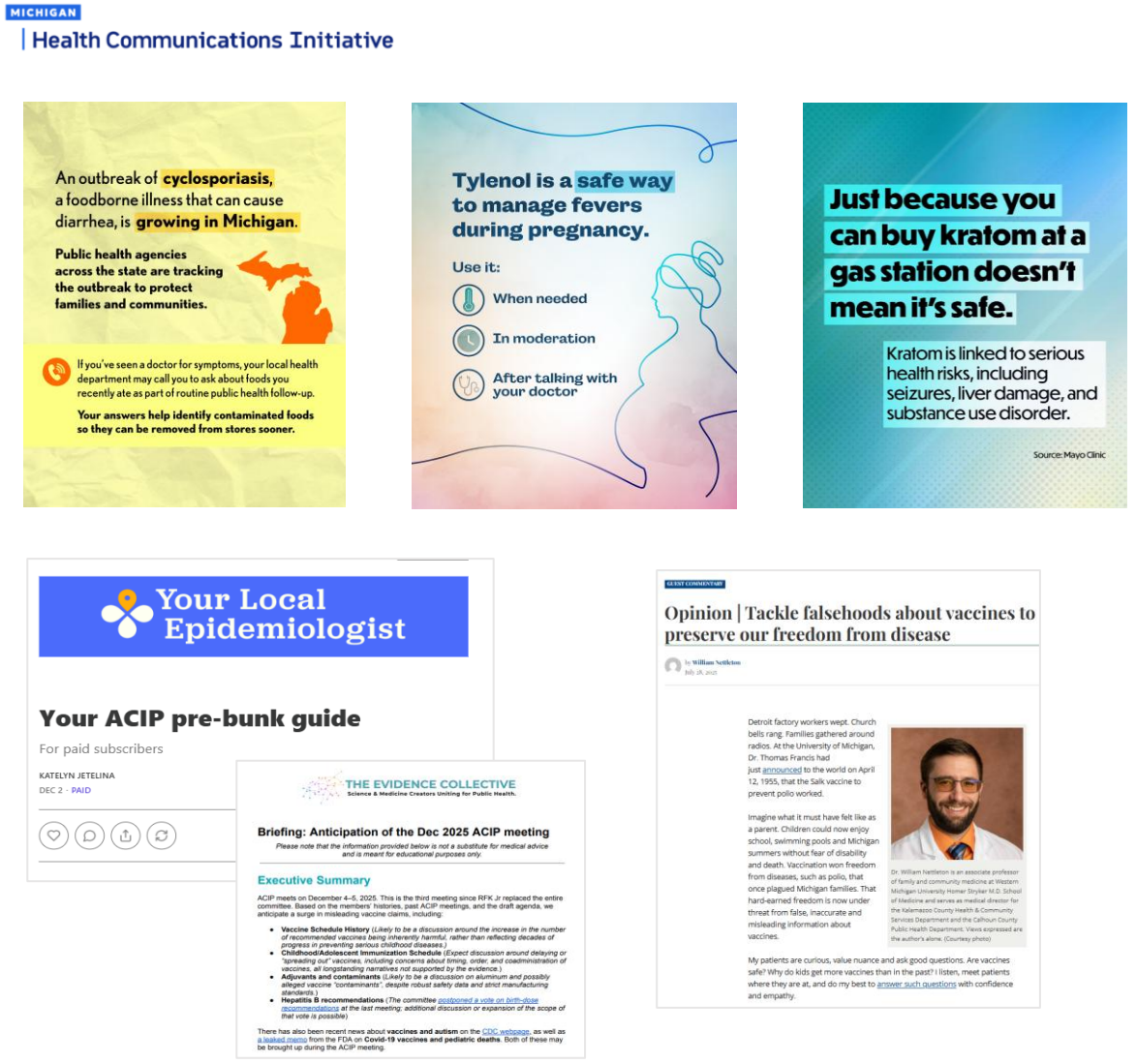
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How to prebunk (slide 1 of 2)

- **Three main ways prebunking is used:**
  1. To fill knowledge gaps.
  2. To get ahead of potentially trending narratives.
  3. To explain the tactics used to spread false claims.
- **When should you do it?**
  - When narratives or techniques can be anticipated.
  - Before audiences have been convinced.
- **Who should do it?**
  - Trusted messengers who have the expertise to speak authoritatively on the topic.



How to prebunk (slide 2 of 2)

- **How to apply this:**
  - Become your agency's prebunking expert.
  - Look at your calendar and flag events, occurrences or anticipated changes that you can prebunk.
- **Choose your tool(s).**
  - A PowerPoint like this one.
  - A pre-bunk guide.
  - An email campaign.
  - Social media content.
  - Talking points for local meetings.
  - All of the above? **Others?**
- **Execute.**
  - Remain in the conversation. Answer questions and promptly provide clarity when asked.



Common misinformation tactics

- Learn the common misinformation techniques/tactics used online in social media content, podcasts, videos, etc.

Emotional manipulation.	**False dichotomy.**	**Cherry- picking.**	**Ad hominem attacks (attacking the person).**	**Common sense fallacy.**
Polarization.	**Conspiratorial ideation.**	**False balance.**	**Scapegoating.**	**Appeal to nature fallacy.**

Emotional manipulation

- Using language, tone and imagery to spark strong emotional reactions, including **fear** or **outrage**.
- Examples of mis-and disinformation:
  - Birth control causes infertility.
  - **Emergency contraceptives being an "abortion" pill.**
  - **Being on/coming off hormonal birth control is harmful to the body.**
  - The misconception that all hormonal birth control makes you gain weight.
  - **Calling an event or accident "horrific" instead of "serious."**
  - Calling something a "heartbreaking twist of fate" rather than an "unfortunate coincidence."

False dichotomy and false balance

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False dichotomy

- This is a type of logical fallacy that makes it appear as if there are only two sides or choices in a debate or situation, when there are many more.
- Examples of false dichotomies as mis- and disinformation:
  - **"I got the flu shot, and I got sick. So, the flu shot must have given me the flu."**
  - Do children need vaccines or a healthy diet? (They need both).
  - All or nothing thinking regarding contraceptive side effects.
  - **Learning about sex and contraception encourages teens to become sexually active.**
  - **Drug prevention and harm reduction encourages people to use drugs.**

False balance

- Presenting a debate as having two relatively balanced viewpoints that oppose each other when, in fact, one argument has much more evidence to support it.
- Examples of false balance mis- and dis information:
  - **Experts debate the shape of the earth. While scientist Reece Chow has found the earth is spherical, expert Renee Paul argues the earth is flat.**

Ad hominem attacks

- Ad hominem is Latin for “to the person.”
- Ad hominem attacks target the individual making an argument, taking attention **away** from the arguments themselves.
- They divert the attention away from the scientific question under discussion and instead attack the person (or group) making the argument.
  - **Person A**: “We should build a bike lane to reduce car traffic and make the city safer for cyclists.”
    Person B: “ You only say that because you ride a bike to work, so your opinion doesn’t count.”
- Similar to **scapegoating**: Singling out a person or group for unmerited blame and negative treatment.

Cherry picking

- Presenting a selection of evidence to support a claim, while ignoring or omitting evidence that contradicts it.
- Examples of mis- and disinformation:
  - **The misinformation that withdrawal alone is an effective method of birth control.**
  - Promotion of natural family planning as an overly reliable pregnancy prevention method.
  - **Some who got measles during the recent outbreak were vaccinated, so the vaccine must not work.**

The appeal to nature fallacy and common sense fallacy

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Appeal to nature fallacy

- Assumes that because there are so many good things that come from nature, that natural is always better than human-made. Which is, of course, untrue (hurricanes, lead, arsenic, measles, etc.).
- Examples of mis-and disinformation:
  - Natural immunity is better than vaccine-induced immunity.
  - **Raw milk is better than pasteurized milk because it is more natural.**
  - **Natural remedies like vitamin A are better than the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine.**
  - Herbal supplements as birth control.

Common sense fallacy

- Argues that a claim is true because it **seems true**, **many people believe it** or it's **just common sense,** without providing the facts to back it up.
  - It's appealing, because it makes complex health issues seem simple by just trusting your intuition, rather than following the scientific evidence. This kind of "it's so simple" messaging can be very persuasive.
- Examples of mis-and disinformation:
  - Taking a shower or "washing out" prevents pregnancy.
  - **You can't get pregnant when you are on your period.**

Discussion

- Mentimeter activity.

Ways to apply this

- Personal online engagement.
  - To learn more, check out The Center for Humane Technology and their documentary, The Social Dilemma.
- Support your teams and staff in how they engage with misinformation online.
- Incorporate prebunking in your health communications work.
  - Become your agency's prebunking expert.
  - Know your community.
  - Anticipate upcoming narratives/trends/announcements.
  - Sign up for the Michigan Health Communications Insights newsletter and check out the Public Health Communications Collaborative for assets and messaging ideas for trending topics.
  - Map your content calendars w/ these events at top of mind (using Arclet or other platforms).

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Final takeaways

- **Prebunking is proactive, not reactive.**
  - We equip audiences with the tools to recognize manipulation **before** it happens.
  - The opposite or “debunking.”
- **Subtlety works best.**
  - Use questions, relatable narratives and humor to guide audiences toward critical thinking.
- **Who delivers the message matters.**
  - Use neutral messengers and introduce them properly to establish credibility and trust.
- **Cultural relevance enhances impact.**
  - References to culture and values make prebunking more relatable.
- **Test, iterate and improve.**
  - Small tweaks in tone, visuals or platform can significantly impact engagement and effectiveness.

Questions?

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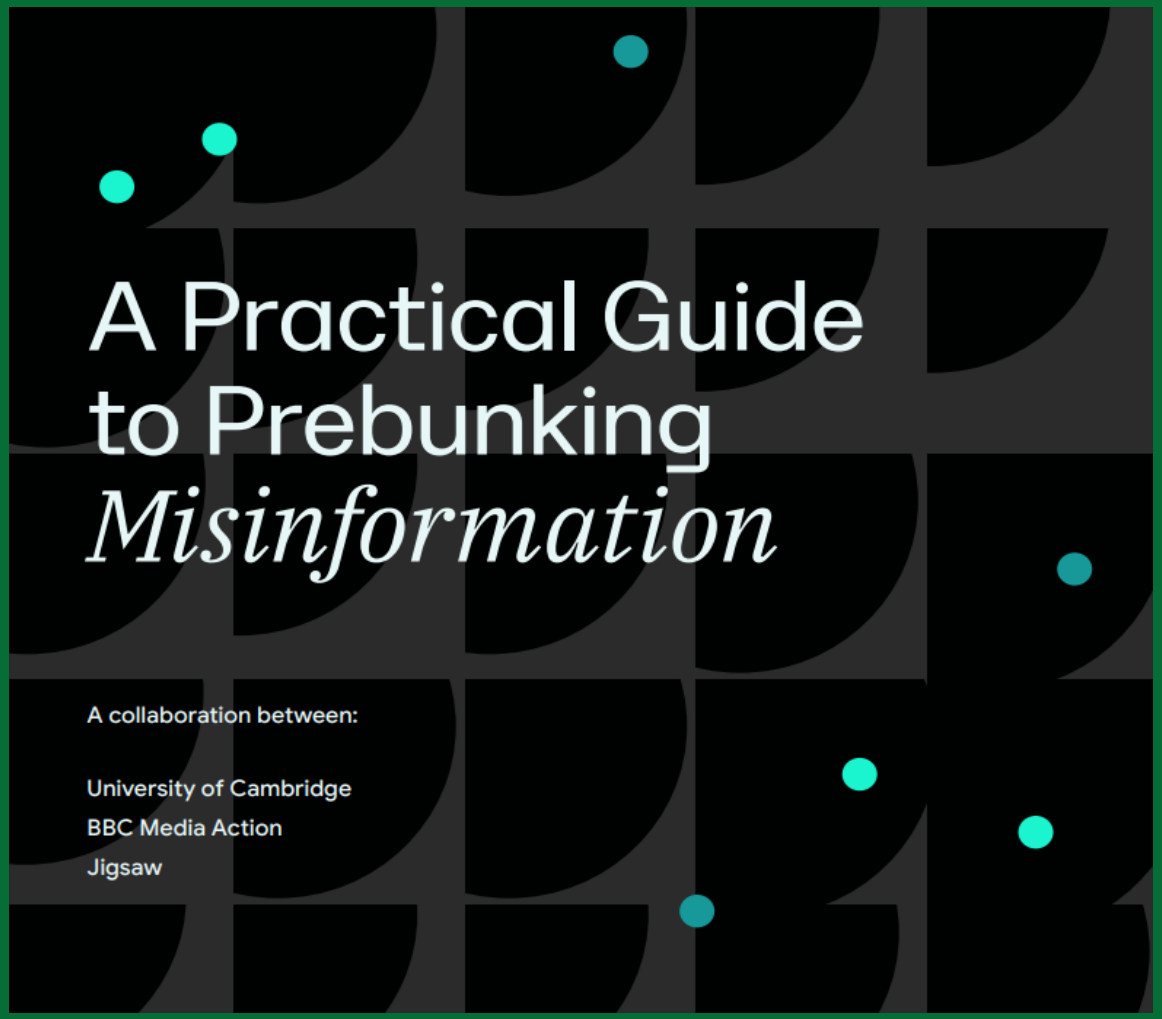
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Mission

MDHHS provides services and administers programs to improve the health, safety and prosperity of the residents of the state of Michigan.

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Agenda

- Level set.
- Icebreaker – Mentimeter Activity.
- Learn about prebunking and debunking.
- Learn common misinformation tactics.
- Discuss ways to apply this – Mentimeter activity.
- Time for more questions and discussion.

Level set





Icebreaker

- Mentimeter activity.

The landscape

- The proliferation of misinformation online threatens public safety and modern democracy.
- Real-life consequences are serious.
  - **Example:** Regions where COVID-19 disinformation thrived experienced higher death rates from the virus, despite vaccine availability compared to neighboring regions.
- **The Illusory Truth Effect**:
  - Objective truth is less important than familiarity.
  - We tend to believe falsehoods when they are repeated over and over again.
- **Heuristics**:
  - People tend to seek out information that reflects what they already believe.

Debunking

- Targets misinformation after it has already spread.
- People often resist corrections, especially when misinformation aligns with their identity or worldview.
- Sometimes, attempts to debunk can even backfire, reinforcing the original false belief through repeated exposure.

Prebunking

- The idea: Show people the tactics and tropes of misleading information **before** they encounter it online or in real life — so they're better equipped to recognize and resist it.
- It helps people build **mental resilience** by explaining how they may be tricked (with cherry-picked statistics, emotional manipulation, etc.).
- By the time people encounter the misleading content, they’re less likely to be swayed because they’ve already seen through the tactic.
- Prebunking assumes no prior capabilities or knowledge of a topic, making it widely usable across age groups and settings.