

GOVERNING IN THE ERA OF 'FAKE NEWS'

*Iowa Municipal Manager's Institute
Thursday, March 15, 2018*

Is blind trust in your government really too much to ask?



*Now more
than ever we
must establish
credibility at
the local level
of government*

- Visibility in community falls short. Engagement is required
 - Service clubs
 - School PTAs
 - Non-profit boards
 - Volunteer opportunities
 - Regular updates through your community's electronic communication channels
 - Silence breeds speculation and mistrust
 - Updates must be regular and credible (weekly at minimum)
 - Embrace interactivity (two-way engagement)
 - Build relationships with media
 - Give their inquiries priority response
 - Respect their work and help them meet their deadlines
 - Don't hesitate to apologize, no matter how insignificant the issue. People will respect honesty and be more willing to trust on future issues.
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Assessing false information and taking action

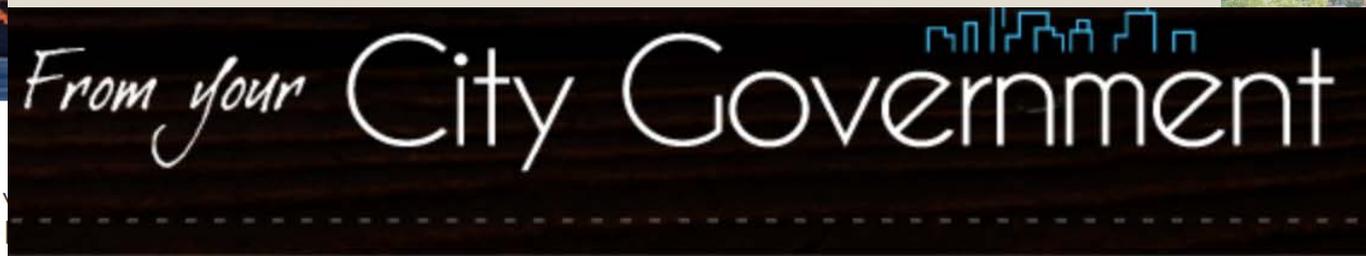
- What is the nature of the false information?
 - Harmless: a response may not be needed at all
 - Impactful: setting the record straight quickly is important
- Where is the information at?
 - City page, news site, resident blog
 - Anonymous poster vs. known resident
- What is the speed of misinformation?
 - One person's grievance: personal contact or acknowledgement
 - Slow building narrative: Some response is needed but a comprehensive response is more important than a timely one
 - Spreading like wildfire: Anticipate where it is going and get in front quickly
- Level of interest
 - Street, neighborhood, city, state, beyond?
 - Isolate messages to area of interest if possible

Setting the record straight...

- Simple reply
 - Take the high road and thank the individual for sharing the concern. Address the concern with facts and offer a phone number where they can get more information (or just vent further)
 - Use a strong social media policy to end abusive posts or foul language
 - A good reply with facts and an offer for an offline follow-up will often end conversations or at least show others that you care and made an effort to help
 - Proactive communication to a particular audience
 - Neighborhood association
 - Program participants
 - Civic organizations
 - Work your network (elected, other cities, civic organizations, etc.) and give them the information needed to change the narrative
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Setting the record straight...

- Official statement
 - Sensitive subjects
 - Issues of wide appeal
 - Consider who sends it (Department Head, City Manager, Mayor or 'The City')
- Truth/rumor sources
 - Dedicated city website pages
 - Project specific materials



TRUTH & RUMORS



is on



3 common misconceptions about code enforcement

Example 1: The Crossing Guard Relocation

- Overview
 - False information spreads because of lack of preparation by city
 - City relocates crossing guard from one school to another
- First mistake – City only notified the district and assumed they would communicate to parents and teachers
- Second mistake – City's front line employees not briefed and told callers/emailers that the School District made the decision
- Misinformation spreads that School District made the decision to pull the guard – parents confused and angry. School District is upset
 - Topic is impactful, spreading fast, and localized
- Response:
 - Frontline staff briefed and begin making calls to people that were given bad information
 - Immediate call to principal and superintendent
 - Formal statement drafted and given to school to distribute (apologize and explain). No city wide dissemination.
 - Personal attendance at next PTA meeting

City of Iowa City Statement on Washington and Dartmouth Intersection Crossing

Lemme Families,

The City of Iowa City needs to apologize for incorrect information that was distributed this morning as a response to concerns about our decision to relocate a school crossing guard away from the Washington and Dartmouth intersection.

The City of Iowa City wants to be clear – this was not an Iowa City Community School District or Lemme School decision, it was a City decision. The Iowa City Police Department operates the Crossing Guard program. We apologize to the Lemme staff and ICCSD community for this communication failure.

We value and appreciate your concerns and comments. This decision was not taken lightly. The safety of your children and our community continues to be our top priority, but due to operational constraints with the Crossing Guard program a difficult decision was made to move the guard to a higher risk location in the community.

For the last several years, the City has struggled to maintain our crossing guard program in its current state. Guard turnover and absences force us to rely heavily on police officers and community service officers to fill-in and operate the program, taking them away from other critical public safety services that our community depends on each day. It is no secret that our community and school district are growing, but we currently do not have the ability to expand our crossing guard program without significantly impacting our Police Department's emergency response duties.

We chose to relocate the crossing guard from Dartmouth and Washington streets because it is an all-way controlled stop, is less traveled, and has lower traffic speeds and better visibility compared to our other currently guarded intersections throughout the community. The crossing is also located immediately adjacent to the school, making it easier for school officials to provide crossing assistance if necessary. The majority of other crossing locations in Iowa City are not located directly next to school property.

As the school year progresses, we will continue to listen to your concerns and feedback, and evaluate the program and our various crossing locations.

We again apologize for the incorrect information that was distributed this morning.

If you have questions or wish to voice additional concerns about this decision please feel free to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

Geoff Fruin
City Manager

Example 2: Free Speech vs. Farmer's Market

- Overview
 - Market vendor makes racially offensive comments on personal social media site after the 2017 Charlottesville incident
 - Citizens call out City for doing business with a white supremacist and claim we can remove the vendor and are choosing not to.
- Misinformation spreads quickly on city's position
 - Topic is sensitive, impactful, spreading fast and reaching national audiences
- Response
 - Formal statement from the City condemning the remarks but explaining the first amendment rights of vendor.
 - Statement sent as widely as possible. Conduct numerous media interviews
 - Worked City networks to explain, including all market vendors
 - Meet personally with group holding protests at Farmer's Market
 - Accommodate protestors, but ensure market is not disrupted and all patrons feel safe

Earlier today, Iowa City Mayor Jim Throgmorton issued a statement in response to the tragic and disturbing events that recently took place in Charlottesville. The Mayor's statement clearly represents our community's views on the recent displays of hatred that have shaken our country. It further expresses Iowa City's core values as a diverse and inclusive city. Mayor Throgmorton clearly states, "We reject hate speech and acts or threats of violence." The full text of his statement can be accessed at <https://www.icgov.org/news/mayor-jim-throgmorton-issues-statement-rejecting-armed-intimidation>.

The City has received multiple concerns about statements posted on a Farmers Market vendors' personal social media page. While City denounces such rhetoric from any source, and while it runs counter to our core values, we do not have the authority to take action to suspend or remove a vendor based on content of speech in such a forum. The Farmer's Market rules govern vendor conduct while vending at the Farmer's Market. To extend such governance outside of the market premises would raise significant First Amendment issues, the essence of which is that government may not prohibit the expression of any idea, no matter how offensive or repulsive one may find such communication.

The Iowa City Farmer's Market is a cherished tradition and over the years has come to represent the best our community has to offer. The core values of Iowa City and the Farmer's Market will continue to guide our great community, irrespective of communication from any single individual or group that exercises their First Amendment right.

The Takeaways

- Silence and lack of transparency/engagement will breed mistrust
 - Engage in community on a regular basis to build credibility – you'll need support and the benefit of the doubt later
 - Update City communication sites often and engage in discussion
 - When you are wrong, late with a response or otherwise not meeting expectations – apologize publicly
 - Know your media and help them with their job
 - Prepare for the need to issue formal statements

 - Local government is the one hope to restore faith in government. Success requires a higher level of engagement and accountability.
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