



Report

DISINFORMATION IN THE CITY

**BRIEF #1: WHAT IS
DISINFORMATION IN THE CITY?**

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This brief is part of a series of three published as part of the Disinformation in the City project, led by the Melbourne Centre for Cities at the University of Melbourne in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF).

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Disinformation impacts cities. In extraordinary times of rapid information-sharing, distrust, and disruption, cities are on the front line. Local authorities are the level of government most accessible to the people and are tasked with leading communities through ever more complex societal and global challenges.

Among those challenges are information manipulation, disinformation, misinformation, mal-information, and information disorder: what's the difference?

The intent of content creators is important, and it distinguishes disinformation from other misleading or harmful information.

In this brief, we refer to disinformation as shorthand for various kinds of information manipulation, acknowledging that such campaigns often contain elements of misrepresented truth (mal-information) and may reach wider audiences where groups or individuals unknowingly—and without intent to harm—share false information (misinformation).

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created to harm, mislead, or evoke an emotional response within a target audience.¹ Disinformation includes what is sometimes also called “fake news”, and propaganda.²

Misinformation is false or misleading information shared without intent to harm, often due to unconscious bias or by accident.³ This means that innocent and well-meaning people can unknowingly spread false, harmful, and misleading information.⁴ The creation and propagation of disinformation, in contrast, is always purposeful.

Mal-information is true information that is used with intent to manipulate or harm. Factual information can be harmful where it is used out of context or combined with mis- and disinformation.

Together, mis-, dis- and mal-information represent what is called information manipulation or information disorder. In a digitally connected world, information manipulation is a highly complex challenge for decisionmakers and practitioners.

Disinformation is often false information. However, through the careful use of mal-information, disinformation can also contain aspects that are truthful. The combination of fake and factual information can be confusing, making it difficult to distinguish between truth and fiction.⁵ Weaving small truths within a larger framework of lies can add credibility to disinformation, and makes it more difficult for others to refute.⁶

WHY DISINFORMATION IN CITIES?

Disinformation and its impacts are of critical importance to cities. This is not only because most of the world's population resides in them but also because of the way disinformation can disrupt the complex social and political fabric of urban life. Local governments are now responsible for much more than roads, rates, and rubbish and operate across an array of policy areas in partnership with other stakeholders. Communicating their activity across diverse policy domains such as climate change, public health, and social cohesion creates new opportunities for bad actors to use disinformation to disrupt local governance.

While disinformation often spreads online, its outcomes are frequently seen on city streets through graffiti, protest, and, at the acute end, social discord, unrest, and violence. Examples abound. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine campaigns fueled protests in cities across the globe.^{7 8} In the climate action sphere, the 15 Minute Cities campaign similarly led to protests on multiple continents, and death threats to city council staff in the UK.⁹ Following a climate emergency declaration in the Australian city of Onkaparinga, protests erupted in council chambers and staff were evacuated for their safety.¹⁰ Gendered disinformation campaigns have forced local councils to cancel Drag Storytime events in cities across North America and Australia.^{11 12}

Understanding how disinformation spreads, and how to respond effectively, is critical for city governments tasked with leading and implementing public policy decisions. Current knowledge, however, is focused primarily on the national and international realms and not readily accessible or translatable for the specifics of urban governance. Yet this need will only grow with the increasing use of novel technologies in urban management.

TYPES OF DISINFORMATION

Disinformation can spread through many media, including websites, blog posts, fake news articles, doctored or AI-generated images, biased viral videos, pseudoscience, forged documents, inflammatory social media posts, and deceptive advertisements. No matter the medium, disinformation campaigns are intentionally designed to trick or mislead people into supporting a particular viewpoint or action.

Common Features of Disinformation

While disinformation can come in many forms, misleading or false narratives usually share some characteristics. Understanding what these are can aid in identifying disinformation.¹³

- **Ideological bias:** Audiences are more likely to believe information that aligns with their own ideology—political, economic, or otherwise. Because of this, disinformation often features ideological framing that will appeal to a target audience.¹⁴
- **Tribalism:** Tribalism is seen in in-group vs. out-group framings, wherein the target audience is part of a “virtuous” or “victimized” in-group, threatened by an out-group (for example, the “Great Replacement” or “White Genocide” campaigns falsely claim that non-whites are intent on eradicating white people and their culture and freedoms¹⁵).
- **Use of strong emotions:** Disinformation uses highly emotive language or imagery to trigger an instinctual response in viewers—typically outrage, fear, or self-righteousness.
- **Difficult to verify:** The specific claims made in false or misleading content are often impossible or very difficult for a viewer to fact-check independently.
- **Exaggerated headlines:** Disinformation campaigns often use eye-catching, sensationalist, and scare-mongering headlines that act as click-bait.

What This Looks Like in Cities

The impact of disinformation campaigns on cities varies. Disinformation can include subject matter that is seemingly unrelated to cities and city governance, such as the falsehoods spread about the United Nations ushering in a shadowy, elitist “New World Order”.¹⁶ In these campaigns, cities are brought into the equation where local contexts are linked to the disinformation narrative by local actors. For example, during Australia’s recent Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum, disinformation brokers proclaimed indigenous rights a plot by the United Nations to “asset-strip” Australia and “remove private land ownership”.¹⁷ These false claims were but a few in a broader anti-Voice to

Parliament disinformation campaign that sowed division in cities across Australia and resulted in unofficial rallies in capital cities including Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane.¹⁸

Disinformation campaigns can also target cities and city councils directly. In the state of Victoria, Australia, an anti-government conspiracy group called “My Place” recently did just that. The organization, which spreads anti-government and subversive disinformation, claims local councils are part of a global agenda to restrict the rights of the citizen. Its self-proclaimed goal is to target councils and “establish constant control over council decisions”.¹⁹ In one incident, My Place followers appeared in the towns of Knox and Whittlesea, accusing councils of using 5G-related radiation to poison people. In a similar event at Yarra Ranges Council, over 100 protesters overran a council meeting reciting disinformation about 5G and 15-Minute Cities. The latter was forced to close its public gallery indefinitely.²⁰

DRIVERS OF DISINFORMATION

Creation

In the internet age, anyone can create disinformation. Generally, though, spreaders of disinformation are motivated by political and/or economic gain.

Politically motivated creators seek to convince or polarize a target audience regarding a particular view or action. Political disinformation, especially in a city context, is often designed to motivate viewers to vote for one candidate over another, or to participate in civil unrest such as a local protest movement.²¹ This form of disinformation is crafted deliberately in pursuit of a political goal, and targets a specific audience or subgroup.

Economically motivated creators produce content for financial gain. Profit is often generated through advertisements that are included in the disinformation source (such as a website, a blog, or online news media). Here, click-bait is used to generate online traffic and increase advertising revenue. Sometimes the creator will claim that the piece is satirical. This, however, may not be immediately obvious to viewers—particularly when the message appeals to underlying beliefs.^{22 23}

Propagation

Whether economically or politically motivated, newly created disinformation is often promoted on social media (including Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook), where it can reach a wider audience. Automated bots are frequently used to increase its exposure.²⁴ The more exposure, the more likely the piece of disinformation will gain traction among audiences.

Social media influencers play an important role in the spread of disinformation through their engagement in false or misleading information. Regardless of whether they believe the information to be true, social media influencers benefit from sharing controversial content insofar as it generates followers, engagement, and—by extension—revenue.

Mainstream media outlets play an equally critical role. When mainstream media reports on fake news, even to discredit or raise awareness, it can unwittingly increase the reach of false or misleading information. Unfortunately, by including disinformation in mainstream discourse, false narratives come to be seen as credible counterpoints in public debate.²⁵

Psychology

Successful disinformation campaigns rely on people's acceptance of false information as true. Human psychology helps explain why people are susceptible to disinformation campaigns.

First, spreaders of disinformation use techniques that appeal to innate human biases or fears, foreclosing critical reflection of the information presented.²⁶ Indeed, disinformation campaigns are more likely to resonate with individuals or groups that are already fearful or distrustful of the individual, group, or institution being vilified. Capitalizing on this, creators of disinformation often construct narratives that appeal to latent feelings of the target group. The use of human biases and fears is seen in the frequent vilification of minority groups (for example, migrant communities) or key institutions such as government, police, news organizations, pharmaceutical companies, and academia.

In addition, false beliefs and true beliefs are generally processed by the brain in the same way. These mechanisms are often referred to as shortcuts by psychologists. One such shortcut is repetition; when the brain receives information repeatedly, it will signal that the information is true. As a result, persistent exposure of disinformation will increase the likelihood of a person accepting fiction as truth.²⁷

Creators of disinformation achieve their goals by exploiting human psychology. In cities, the impact on social cohesion, among other things, is palpable. For example, by using emotive in-group vs. out-group rhetoric, disinformation campaigns have stirred up anti-trans views in cities globally. Similarly, Drag Storytime events have been cancelled in several Australian cities amid threats against participants. Similar occurrences have been documented in cities across the United States and elsewhere, linked to false claims about predatory behavior by Drag Queens.²⁸

IMPACTS OF DISINFORMATION

Cities are especially impacted by disinformation due to their central role in culture and society. Political protests, terrorist attacks, and vandalism, which are often fueled by disinformation campaigns, are far more common in urban areas.²⁹ A study in New Zealand found that disinformation was an exacerbator, influencing lawful protests to become violent.³⁰

The impact on social cohesion is well documented. Using ideological bias and tribalism, disinformation can promote racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic views, creating tension among diverse populations that live in close quarters in city settings. In the worst cases, the polarizing “us versus them” framings can result in outright discrimination and violence.

Other harms caused by disinformation include decreased trust in democratic functioning and participation; increased isolation of individuals and groups; threats to individual and collective well-being from harmful behaviors, especially those related to health disinformation; eroded public confidence in communication; and “information pollution”.³¹

WHO USES DISINFORMATION?

Anyone can create disinformation at any time for any reason. However, those who routinely create and distribute disinformation can be sorted into three broad categories: citizens, media actors, and state actors.³²

Citizens

Citizens or groups with strong political or religious beliefs create and share disinformation to generate support for their cause.

These actors contribute to the disinformation landscape by fostering connections to or friendships with like-minded people online. This process contributes to group identity formation, and may spur the spread of disinformation.³³ Political extremists typically create and distribute disinformation to demonize opposing groups.³⁴ For instance, groups across the political spectrum have been known to cast political opponents as Nazis, while far-right extremists have created false narratives about opponents ushering in a one-world government in service of an ill-defined shadowy elite.³⁵

Disinformation targeting vulnerable or marginalized groups is also common among citizen-produced fake information. In the Spanish town of Almendralejo, at least 20 girls were targeted by local boys, who created and disseminated AI-generated naked images of them online.³⁶

Media Actors

Media actors, including journalists and social media influencers, create and share disinformation for political or economic reasons.³⁷

Media actors, for example, have played a key role in fueling anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment globally. In the Australian city of Launceston, a local newspaper published a fake letter containing highly inflammatory anti-trans rhetoric. The letter falsely accused a trans person of predatory behavior at a local aquatic center, although no incident had occurred.³⁸ The Launceston City Council was forced to make a public statement denouncing the letter as fake.³⁹ However, the article had already been picked up and spread by anti-trans activists online.

State Actors

State actors routinely engage in disinformation campaigns, both domestic and international, in pursuit of their political objectives. Disinformation spearheaded by state actors also includes what is referred to as “propaganda”.

In the domestic realm, disinformation campaigns might be used to influence elections or generate public support (or opposition) for a proposed policy.⁴⁰ The influence of state-actor-led disinformation is evident in election outcomes around the world. In Italy, for example, anti-immigration and anti-EU disinformation campaigns spearheaded by state actors are linked to the election of Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing coalition in 2022.⁴¹

In the international realm, governments have effectively used disinformation to influence politics in other countries. Russia, for one, is widely known for interfering in other countries’ elections, including in the 2016 US elections.⁴² Disinformation was also a key driver of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 full-scale invasion, with targeted campaigns aiming to incite panic and civil unrest in Ukrainian border cities.⁴³

At the city level, the impacts of state-actor disinformation are numerous and range in severity. The now infamous January 6, 2021 insurrection in Washington, DC, fueled by President Donald Trump’s false claims of voter fraud and a rigged election, led to targeted violence in the capital. The incident undermined security in the city and placed the health of US democracy in question.⁴⁴

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: “Occupy Canberra”

Highly successful disinformation campaigns fueled several grievances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2022, thousands of people descended on the Australian capital in a self-proclaimed “Occupy Canberra” protest. The demonstrations were inspired by a similar trucker-led convoy in Ottawa, Canada.⁴⁵ The event was linked to social media groups that amassed over 200,000 followers in the weeks prior.

Protesters took issue with vaccine mandates and COVID-19-related restrictions, fueled by the so-called “Sovereign Citizen” movement’s claims that governments have been overrun by the interests of illegal corporations. But in what has been described as a “hodge-podge of grievances”, the protest also attracted other groups, including QAnon conspiracy theorists.⁴⁶

People traveled from across Australia to settle into unauthorized campsites around Canberra for over a week. The convoy held several rallies during that time, and Canberra residents were warned to avoid the protest sites.⁴⁷

Andrew Barr, chief minister of Canberra, commented that “the right to protest doesn’t extend to stalking our city, harassing business owners and residents and aggressively flouting the law.”⁴⁸

Case Study 2: Anti-Agenda 21 in West Cornwall Township

In cities across the United States, activists have successfully thwarted initiatives connected to Agenda 21—a United Nations program for sustainable development.

In 2013, West Cornwall Township in Pennsylvania passed a resolution (No. 385) that claimed to “expose” Agenda 21 as a United Nations conspiracy to implement extreme environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control. It frames the sustainable development program as antithetical to American values, claiming that it threatens the sanctity of national sovereignty and undermines constitutional property rights. In so doing, the resolution claims that the United Nations seeks a socialist/communist redistribution of global property and wealth.⁴⁹

In West Cornwall Township and elsewhere, spreaders of disinformation claim that a new global political order is being pursued through covert local policy programs. The impact has been the slowing of important emissions reduction and sustainability initiatives. For its part, the Borough of Cornwall pulled out of the Cornwall-Lebanon Regional Comprehensive Plan, which included provisions for guiding future growth and land use.⁵⁰

Case Study 3: Nahel Merzouk

On the June 27, 2023, Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year-old French citizen of Moroccan and Algerian descent, was killed by a Parisian police officer during a routine traffic check.⁵¹ Videos of the murder were quickly circulated on social media, directly contradicting police reports claiming no wrongdoing. The incident spurred widespread riots and protests at police stations in cities across France.

In the aftermath, disinformation campaigns were used to shift public perception of the incident. Images of a Spanish rap artist, El Jincho, who resembles Merzouk, were used to falsely portray the young boy as a dangerous French immigrant.⁵² A decontextualized video of Merzouk was also circulated to depict the teenager as a reckless and dangerous driver. Elsewhere, Merzouk, who had no criminal record, was baselessly accused of setting a car dealership on fire and falsely identified as a gunman in the city of Nice.⁵³

Spreaders of disinformation seeking to promote racism, xenophobia, and political unrest in France have used Merzouk's heritage and violent death as a tool to further their agenda.

Further Reading

The Disinformation in the City Response Playbook was co-created with 40 experts across sectors. This playbook provides guidance and examples for cities and local governments about understanding and responding to disinformation. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/disinformation-city-response-playbook>

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (AMCA) has reported on digital platforms' disinformation measures as well as disinformation impacts. <https://www.acma.gov.au/report-government-adequacy-digital-platforms-disinformation-and-news-quality-measures>

The Digital Industry Group Inc. (DIGI) advocates for the Australian digital industry, supporting national cyber security and online safety. DIGI launched the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation in 2021, overseen by the AMCA. The code has been adopted by several major digital platforms. <https://digi.org.au/disinformation-code/>

The independent Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) International Cyber Policy Centre launched a new interactive website in 2022: Understanding Global Disinformation and Information Operations. <https://infoops.aspi.org.au/>

The European Commission (EC) has developed tools, action plans, and codes to tackle disinformation across the European Union. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>

The East Stratcom Task Force of the European External Action Service is a key player in the EU's fight against foreign interference and information manipulations. The Task Force identifies, tracks, and publishes reports on disinformation from pro-Russian sources. <https://euvdisinfo.eu/research/>

The Center for Information Technology and Society (CITS) provides an interdisciplinary approach to researching cultural change and social innovation related to technology. CITS has produced several brief research articles concerning the kinds, creation, spread, and impact of fake news. <https://cits.ucsb.edu/fake-news>

The Aspen Institute outlines the harms caused by disinformation and provides detailed recommendations for how governments can address them. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Aspen-Institute-Commission-on-Information-Disorder_Final-Report.pdf

UNESCO has collated literature and video testimony concerning online gender-based disinformation and hate speech. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-combat-hate-speech-and-gendered-disinformation-online-unesco-provides-some-ideas>

The American Psychological Association has multiple essays covering the psychology behind fake news propagation and conspiratorial belief formation. <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/fake-news> and <https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/conspiracy-theories>

The Joint Research Centre for the European Union has written several articles on citizen's susceptibility to disinformation and hostile narratives online. <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/search?query=disinformation&sort=relevance>

The Secretary General for the United Nations General Assembly has produced a report on countering disinformation. <https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation>

The European Parliament has investigated the ways in which targeted disinformation campaigns have impacted migrants and minority groups in the European Union. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653641/EXPO_IDA\(2021\)653641_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653641/EXPO_IDA(2021)653641_EN.pdf)

The Rand Corporation has written a detailed report of Russian tactics of disinformation and foreign propaganda. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

The Council of Europe includes disinformation within a broader framework of "information disorder". The council's report, "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making", can be found here: <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>

UNICEF has recently produced a report on the impact of disinformation on the lives of children. <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/2096/file/UNICEF-Global-Insight-Digital-Mis-Disinformation-and-Children-2021.pdf>

The Communication Initiative Network, in conjunction with the University of Cape Town, has produced a report on countering disinformation in the Global South. <https://www.comminet.com/global/content/meeting-challenges-information-disorder-global-south>

The Oxford Internet Institute has produced many reports on the ways in which disinformation influences politics, media, commerce, health-care services and international relations. <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/?s=disinformation>

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