



**Report**

# **DISINFORMATION IN THE CITY**

**BRIEF #2: THEMATIC AREAS AND  
IMPACT**

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This brief is the second in 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).

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).

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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.

Disinformation campaigns in public policy are mobilized to elicit a desired outcome, whether it be in healthcare, climate change, immigration, attitudes toward gender diversity, or another policy area. In this context, “campaigns” refer to organized efforts to spread false information deliberately created to harm, mislead, or evoke an emotional response in a target audience. Such an effort may be limited to a single element, such as a manufactured photo, or it may include a variety of mechanisms used over an extended period.

Responding to a disinformation campaign must be considered in relation to the broader theme or subject it addresses. “Medical disinformation” concerns false or misleading information specifically related to, for example, medicine, vaccinations, or health care. Similarly, “climate disinformation” relates to false or misleading information about climate science, climate change policy, and sustainability planning. And “political disinformation” refers to false or misleading information intended to undermine the integrity of government, governance systems, and/or policies.

Such overarching topics can be labeled a disinformation campaign’s “impact area”, the governance and public policy domain that a campaign is designed to influence. One disinformation campaign, however, often has multiple impact areas. Disinformation aimed at disrupting climate change action may also seek to undermine a political party, government, or policy agenda.

## Disinformation Impact Areas

Disinformation can intentionally and unintentionally impact the functioning of democratic processes by eroding trust, influencing elections, and spurring violence. It can impede and destabilize healthy democratic process through<sup>1</sup>:

- increased social polarization
- erosion of trust in democratic institutions
- changes in electoral behavior and process
- protests, demonstrations and increased violence
- impacting organizational well-being of city administrations

Disinformation impacts cities and city governance in several key areas:

- gender and diversity
- climate, sustainability, and urban planning
- health, vaccines, and well-being

### Increased Social Polarization

Research has linked political disinformation to increased social polarization, the fragmentation of society into groups that hold deeply opposing ideologies, values, or beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Deep social divisions, such as those that exist between far-right and far-left groups, can stifle productive engagement in political debate, prevent cooperation, and impede collective solutions to problems.<sup>3</sup> Polarization can be an unintended consequence of a disinformation campaign created for another objective, such as economic gain. A media outlet, for example, may share disinformation to attract online traffic and revenue.

Political disinformation campaigns, such as those led by Russia in Ukraine over the past decade, seek to sow division. In 2014, Kremlin operatives weaponized disinformation about the threat of fascism and Nazism in Ukraine, laying the foundation for Russian military action and, ultimately, Moscow's annexation of Crimea.<sup>4</sup>

Disinformation-fueled polarization is linked to the use of emotive, sensationalist, and tribalistic language that appeals to a target audience's preexisting biases and ideologies. Research suggests that when a person's identity is enmeshed with a political party or ideology, they are more likely to perceive counter-information, factually based or

not, as a personal attack. This can obstruct democratic deliberation, stifle rational consideration of ideas, and increase partisanship. For city governments, which must engage with citizens to deliver essential services and promote social cohesion, increased social polarization is a serious challenge.

## Erosion of Trust in Democratic Institutions

Disinformation can also erode public trust in democratic institutions, which can lower public participation in democratic processes. Mistrust of media and government is a key factor in the spread and acceptance of disinformation, exposure to which can initiate a negative cycle of increased suspicion, cynicism, and polarization.<sup>5</sup> Populist and anti-democratic politicians may seek to capitalize on this erosion of confidence, potentially leading to even further weakening of democratic political institutions.<sup>6</sup>

For cities and city governance, this process is often reflected in a lack of engagement in local-level decision-making. Cynical constituents who distrust government are less likely to communicate their concerns through democratic channels. The result is a disconnect between people and government that can obstruct the latter's capacity to understand community needs.<sup>7</sup> Mistrust also negatively impacts community resilience, which is often felt most acutely by marginalized communities whose vulnerabilities consequently increase.

## Changes in Electoral Behavior and Process

Disinformation can also impact electoral behavior and, by extension, election results. This occurs primarily in two ways: through decreased electoral participation<sup>8</sup> and swayed votes.

Repeated exposure to disinformation is highly effective in the lead-up to an election and has been shown to increase cynicism and mistrust of politicians, media, and electoral processes.<sup>9</sup> All, however, are central to a well-functioning democracy. When disinformation sows mistrust, or influences voter behavior and outcomes, it threatens the very fabric of contemporary democracy. Foreign election interference, such as Russia-sanctioned political disinformation during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential campaigns, provides examples of this.<sup>10</sup>

Cities are particularly vulnerable to such nefarious efforts. Research shows that voters' opinions of local candidates are more malleable than those of state and national candidates. The latter tend to be highly polarized, while the former are more likely to be influenced by new information. For disrupters with ambitions to erode local democratic trust, stifle voter turnout, or change the political (or demographic) composition of local governments, disinformation is a powerful tool.<sup>11</sup>

## Protests, Demonstrations, and Increased Violence

Political disinformation is linked globally to violent protests and demonstrations. The riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, spurred by disinformation about electoral fraud, is but one example.<sup>12</sup>

Cities bear the brunt of political protests and demonstrations. Urban centers, given their higher population densities and concentration of political institutions, are more likely to see large-scale protests and demonstrations.<sup>13</sup> These can significantly disrupt city functions, including access to critical services. Several cities have even reported changes to council meeting procedures in response to increased violence fueled by fake or conspiratorial information.<sup>14</sup> Other responses can be cost-intensive.

## Organizational Well-Being of City Administrations

Disinformation can seriously impact the individual and collective well-being of city officials who face increased threats, harassment, and even violence. In 2021, the National League of Cities in the United States reported that 81% of surveyed officials had experienced at least one of these.<sup>15</sup> All, however, unsurprisingly harm personal well-being and safety, lower workplace morale, and discourage those considering public service.<sup>16</sup> The issue is pervasive throughout the sector, with women and other underrepresented groups more likely to be targeted.

## Gender and Diversity

Disinformation campaigns targeting gender and community diversity take multiple forms. They exploit existing narratives and prejudice about specific groups to sow social and political division. A common characteristic of such disinformation narratives is “in-group/out-group” framings, in which the “out-group” is othered and demonized.<sup>17</sup> Gender and diversity-related disinformation campaigns often villainize the “other” based on gender, sexual preference, or cultural or religious identity. Disinformation related to organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has increasingly become the subject of campaigns. The 2024 shipping accident that caused Baltimore’s Francis Scott Key bridge to collapse unleashed, among other things, false claims that the accident was caused by “DEI hiring” of poorly skilled employees.<sup>18</sup> Such racially motivated and misogynistic narratives can negatively impact underrepresented groups in cities, the very groups that DEI efforts seek to include.

Gendered disinformation focuses primarily on women, gender-nonconforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and LGBTQ+ persons.

Disinformation about migrant, cultural, and religious diversity sows division by manipulating and reinforcing prejudices against and fear of different groups.

## Gender and Sexuality

Gendered disinformation uses tools ranging from fabricated stories to falsified images and are used to humiliate, sow distrust of, and/or highlight the supposed incompetence of women and gender-nonconforming persons. Gendered disinformation is also used to undermine equity and diversity policies.

Gendered disinformation is routinely seen in political discourse, and it is often interwoven with false information about other issues such as climate disinformation. At all levels of government, women, gender-nonconforming, and LGBTQ+ persons are disproportionately affected by disinformation. This is further exacerbated by intersecting characteristics such as ethnicity and race.<sup>19</sup> This can deter those from underrepresented groups from entering, or staying in, local government.

The use of sexist, transphobic, and homophobic narratives jeopardizes progress toward social cohesion and safety in cities. And disinformation targeting gender and sexual diversity is not directed at just city officials. Others are also at risk. In several Australian cities, drag storytime events have been cancelled amid threats to participant safety and false narratives about predatory behavior within trans communities. Similar situations have arisen in US and European cities.<sup>20</sup> A gendered disinformation campaign in the Spanish town of Almendralejo included the creation and online dissemination of AI-generated nude images of 20 girls.<sup>21</sup>

## Migrants and Cultural and Religious Diversity

Migrants have been the subject of multiple disinformation campaigns and events in cities. These campaigns exploit existing political polarization on migration policy to gain traction for falsified accounts. The German city of Dortmund was the center of a disinformation campaign widely circulated by a right-wing media platform that claimed a mob of migrants had set alight the nation's oldest church on New Year's Eve in 2016 while chanting "Allahu Akbar", drawing on existing anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiment.<sup>22</sup>

The European Digital Media Observatory has categorized migrant disinformation by several broad xenophobic narratives. These include portraying migrants as violent or criminal, as profiteers who waste "our" resources, and recipients of better treatment than local citizens in areas such as supported housing and government financial support. An additional narrative claims that most refugees are men, asserting that this demonstrates economic motivation for migration and questioning the legitimacy of their refugee status.<sup>23</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, one disinformation campaign asserted that Chinese individuals caused the global crisis.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to being targeted by xenophobic narratives, culturally diverse communities, given their generally higher mistrust of authority, can also be more susceptible to disinformation campaigns.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly, those who mistrust government after decades of institutionalized discrimination, will likely be unmoved by authorities' attempts to counter disinformation. In fact, the effort could even entrench suspicion. Language barriers and different communication styles contribute to this. Culturally diverse communities are more likely to be receptive to messages presented in familiar ways and by those they know.<sup>26</sup> This makes disinformation response in cities' diverse social and cultural environs even more complex.

Disinformation targeting gender and community diversity increases community fragmentation and mistrust among groups. It also silences specific voices from contributing to public discourse, with harmful impacts extending to individuals beyond those immediately targeted. It detracts from a democratic society's ability to function.

## Climate, Sustainability, and Urban Planning

Climate disinformation seeks to undermine public confidence in, and progress toward, climate action and other sustainability efforts. Climate disinformation ranges from denial of climate change to rejecting proposed solutions to combat it. Climate disinformation undermines meaningful global action to mitigate and prevent climate-related damage, harming people, including future generations, and the planet.<sup>27</sup>

The independent nonprofit EU DisinfoLab has identified key common strategies used in climate disinformation. They include framing narratives of "alarmism vs. realism", characterizing advocates of climate action as promoters of panic, acting as "climate delayers" to encourage inaction, and spreading broader disinformation narratives about technological control aimed at imposing "an apocalyptic new world".<sup>28</sup>

The impacts of disinformation on sustainable urban planning initiatives are evident in relation to "15-minute cities", which has been the target of disrupters worldwide who peddle false claims of urban planning as a mechanism for government control and surveillance.<sup>29</sup> The 15-minute city planning framework seeks to ensure all basic necessities are accessible within a 15-minute walk or cycle.<sup>30</sup> Some even asserted that a "climate lockdown" would lead to "open-air prisons". Such conspiracy theories have contributed to the abandonment of policies that promote sustainable transport options (for example, walking, cycling, and public transport) over driving.<sup>31</sup> Other disinformation campaigns have jeopardized local sustainability initiatives, including pollution reduction programs.<sup>32</sup>

Climate change is a collective issue, requiring collective action. In the global endeavor to protect the environment, cities will continue to be a key driver of change despite the challenges they face in doing so.

## Health, Vaccines, and Well-Being

Health and well-being disinformation campaigns may include a focus on promoting vaccine hesitancy or anti-public health measures, or target planning initiatives designed to promote healthy living.

Disinformation campaigns can stifle cities' capacities to deliver health care services, thereby eroding public health and safety, an especially ominous threat as cities' higher population density makes them particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks. At the same time, cities and local authorities have varying levels of responsibility for providing health care to their communities, ranging from child immunization programs to administering hospital systems.



A widespread measles resurgence in 2019 reflects the impact of disinformation on vaccine hesitancy, one challenge to urban public health. A safe and effective measles vaccine exists, but disinformation, including the debunked assertion that vaccines cause autism in toddlers, has led many to refuse immunization for themselves and their children.<sup>33</sup> Vaccine hesitancy due to disinformation has been cited as the primary cause of increased measles infection in cities in Ukraine, Samoa, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, and Georgia.<sup>34</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation campaigns built on existing narratives to undermine public confidence in transmission prevention measures and coronavirus vaccines.<sup>35</sup>

More broadly, much disinformation during the pandemic aimed to undermine confidence in legitimate medical and governmental advice. This was initially achieved by casting doubt on the virus' origin and severity. Some sources of disinformation convinced people that the virus was a purposefully released bioweapon. Others claimed that Bill Gates had created the virus to reduce the global population.<sup>36</sup> The campaign stymied the delivery of medical services and spurred threats and violence against doctors in Italy and the United Kingdom.<sup>37</sup>

Health and well-being disinformation can also affect individual behavior, which has a ripple effect on community well-being by, in part, promoting scientifically baseless "home remedies". One such narrative even claimed that ingesting bleach could prevent COVID-19 infection. The US Centers for Disease Control subsequently reported a dramatic increase in calls to poison centers following exposure to household disinfectants and cleaning substances.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, fear and uncertainty regarding the severity of the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus, which catalyzed the spread of disinformation, dominated discourse and media reporting throughout the pandemic.<sup>39</sup> Given unprecedented travel restrictions and widespread adoption of work-from-home practices, many sought reassurance and medical advice from a wide variety of online sources. A large number of these, however, were purposefully unscientific, misleading, and, in the worst cases, dangerous.

Disinformation poses a serious threat to the healthy functioning of liberal democratic cities worldwide. Understanding the impact of disinformation on cities and city governance is the first step toward developing practical solutions for confronting the threat.

## 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 UN's International Telecommunications Union has produced a report on tools and strategies to respond to medical disinformation. It features several case studies from the COVID-19 pandemic. [https://www.itu.int/pub/D-STR-ICT\\_APP-2021-01](https://www.itu.int/pub/D-STR-ICT_APP-2021-01)

A July 2021 New York Times article by Sheera Frenkel accuses Dr. Joseph Mercola of deliberately creating and spreading medical disinformation for economic gain. Frenkel reviews common tactics used by medical disinformers and reflects on how anti-vaccine disinformation gained widespread traction during the pandemic. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/24/technology/joseph-mercola-coronavirus-misinformation-online.html>

The New Zealand Secret Intelligence Service has published a report on threats to the nation's environmental sustainability. Disinformation is among them. <https://security.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/NZSIS-ThreatEnviro-2023-WEB.pdf>

Peter Guest, writing for Wired, reflects on the wave of recent conspiracy theories and online disinformation about the "15-minute city" urban planning concept. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/15-minute-cities-conspiracy-climate-denier>

A recent World Economic Forum report highlights climate change disinformation as one of the most pressing risks to be addressed in the short and long term. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_The\\_Global\\_Risks\\_Report\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf)

Purple Romero addresses in an article for Al Jazeera the relationship between climate disinformation and Chinese nationalism. She notes how the widespread belief in climate change denial is associated with nationalist views and is consequently challenging for local authorities to combat. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/7/3/chinas-new-problem-climate-lies-fuelled-by-nationalism>

The Centre for Democracy and Technology, a nonprofit human rights organization, addresses a wide range of identity-based disinformation, in particular racist and misogynistic content, and effective responses to it. <https://cdt.org/insights/facts-and-their-discontents-a-research-agenda-for-online-disinformation-race-and-gender/>

A report produced from the 2021 Internet Governance Forum, an annual UN-organized conference, focuses on online gender-based disinformation. [https://intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/248/21181](https://intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/248/21181)

Jasmine Zine, writing for The Conversation, reflects on racist disinformation tactics used in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. <https://theconversation.com/how-islamophobia-and-anti-palestinian-racism-are-manufactured-through-disinformation-216119>

The Hewlett Foundation, a philanthropic research organization founded by Bill and Flora Hewlett, has produced an extensive review of political disinformation and political polarization. <https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf>

In a New York Times opinion piece, Jennifer Szalai interviews Elon Musk and reflects on trust and disinformation in the modern digital era. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/31/books/review/elon-musk-trust-misinformation-disinformation.html>

The Institute of Public Policy Research, which calls itself the United Kingdom's leading progressive think tank, has produced a report on mounting distrust in politics. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-12/apo-nid315622.pdf>

Freedom House, a US organization dedicated to defending democracy, has written extensively on political disinformation threats to voter manipulation. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media/digital-election-interference>

The Council of Europe, the continent's top human rights organization, has produced an extensive report on disinformation and electoral interference. <https://rm.coe.int/disinformation-and-electoral-campaigns/16809fa91f>

## Endnotes

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