

DISINFORMATION IN THE CITY RESPONSE PLAYBOOK

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The Melbourne Centre for Cities is designed to foster responsible and cosmopolitan city leadership, and the information it needs, in an interconnected and increasingly urbanised planet. It works across the Faculties of Science, Arts, Architecture, Building and Planning, and Law, at the University of Melbourne. We acknowledge we work, study and travel from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, and do so on many other lands of Traditional Owners domestically in what is now known as Australia as well as overseas, and would like to pay our respect to their elders past, present and emerging in our form commitment toward reconciliation and opening up spaces for indigenous voices in cities.

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Executive Summary

Disinformation impacts cities globally. This has individual, organisational and societal consequences. Cities must acknowledge and address all three for effective response.

In cities, disinformation manifests in physical events, including protests and disruptions. It also has individual impacts for political, organisational and community leaders. Disinformation affects the functioning of city administrations and elected bodies, impacting governance, policymaking and the city's workforce. And it impacts communities, reducing trust and increasing division and polarisation.

Disinformation commonly exploits existing societal fault lines of prejudice and polarisation. In cities, this often focuses on the following communities and themes: First Nations, migrants and cultural diversity; Gender and sexual diversity; Health and wellbeing; Sustainability and climate; and Urban planning. Unanticipated disinformation campaigns in cities also occur unrelated to these topics.

Disinformation drives and thrives on division.

Disinformation drives and thrives on division. Disinformation response must therefore be non-partisan to be effective. This playbook is not intended to change beliefs or diminish the rightful and essential democratic expression of dissent.

Responding to disinformation is an opportunity for cities to 'fall forward' into a new reality. For cities and local governments, this invites reflection and a new imagining of the necessary structures to promote trust, build communities, communicate and listen, and collaborate in multi-level, multi-city, and multi-sector disinformation response.

Build trust in institutions, work with trusted people, use trusted information, and convene in trusted places.

Trust is paramount in countering disinformation. The best ways to promote trust in government are by displaying competence, consistency, and transparency. Cities should base their decision-making on reliable and legitimate evidence, be consistent with their intentions in alignment with stated goals, and communicate their actions and the rationale behind them in ways that communities can engage with.

In addition to the above practices of good governance, creating trust - and trusted information pathways - in cities involves recognising, connecting, and building trust in four key areas: Trusted institutions; Trusted people; Trusted information; Trusted places.

Communicating and listening involves three key steps, along a disinformation response continuum: establishing robust and trusted information sharing networks; listening to assess the types and severity of impact that disinformation narratives might have on different groups and institutions locally; and developing effective communication mechanisms to reach the desired audiences at key times.

Communications should be guided by key overarching principles:

Be present in online and offline platforms and places where communities communicate and congregate.

Be clear and accessible, using short, simple framing in language(s) that communities understand.

Be transparent and accurate

Be positive in framing to provide an important antidote to the cynicism that disinformation drives.

**Be present.
Be accessible.
Be transparent.
Be positive.**

Multi-city collaboration is key to disinformation response, for sharing and learning, collective impact and encouraging innovation.

Multi-sector collaboration allows cities to draw on key expertise for collective action and as a 'brains trust'. In this, city administrations can also play a key role in building the capacity of other sectors within the city to respond to disinformation.

Multi-level collaboration allows cities to benefit from the specialised workforce and existing disinformation response mechanisms at the state, national and supranational levels. In turn, cities can contribute their relatively high agility and expertise in developing local solutions to societal challenges.

Policy settings need to cover elected representatives, city administration staff and volunteers and communities. Internal policies should take a whole of organisation approach, with structured internal policy alignment and communication across work areas including communications, governance, executive, and thematic impact areas.

Workforce safety and staff education are paramount for disinformation response that is safe and effective.

Training, including scenario planning and learning labs, will enable cities to practice and test scenarios so they are better prepared for disinformation narratives and events.

There is no single way to address disinformation. It requires a combination of ongoing responses, with frequent reflection and adaptation.

Introduction

In extraordinary times of rapid information production and sharing, distrust and disruption, disinformation is having an increasing impact on cities. And cities are, therefore, on the front line of disinformation response strategies.

Local authorities are the closest level of government to the people, and they are tasked with leading communities through ever more complex societal and global challenges that affect residents locally.

This playbook has been developed with cities and sector experts to guide disinformation response in the unique city context.

Disinformation (i.e. concerted fabrications that are deliberately misleading) and misinformation (i.e. inaccurate information unintentionally held and/or shared) are nothing new in cities globally. However, during the past decade, disinformation has exploded in both prevalence and impact.

Cities around the world play increasingly sophisticated functional roles not only because they house most of the world's population but also because of the way disinformation can disrupt the complex social and political fabric of urban life.

Local governments are responsible for much more than just 'roads, rates and rubbish' and operate across an array of policy areas, in partnership with other stakeholders. Communicating and enacting activities across diverse policy domains such as climate change, public health and social cohesion creates unprecedented opportunities for disinformation to disrupt local government functioning.

While disinformation often spreads online, its outcomes are frequently seen on city streets through graffiti, protest, and, in extreme cases, in various forms of social discord, unrest and even violence.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine campaigns fuelled protests in cities across the globe.^{i,ii} In the climate action sphere, disinformation related to proposed 15-Minute-Cities and efforts to reduce emissions led to protests on multiple continents, and death threats to council staff in the UK.ⁱⁱⁱ A climate emergency declaration in the Australian city of Onkaparinga witnessed protests erupt in council chambers and staff evacuated for their safety.^{iv} And threatening disinformation campaigns have led local councils to cancel Drag Storytime events in cities across North America and Australia.

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 mainly on the national and international realms and not readily accessible and translatable for urban governance needs. This need will only grow with the increasing use of novel technologies in urban management.

Cities are uniquely positioned to respond to this growing challenge. Their relative size makes them agile. Their proximity to communities gives them awareness of community issues and grievances and makes them capable of comprehensive locally embedded actions. They are highly collaborative, and they are legitimate convenors for multi-sector action in their jurisdictions.

Principles

This playbook is based on the following principles. These underpin the content and provide the context for effective disinformation response in cities. They also provide parameters for effective action:

1 Trust is paramount in countering disinformation. This means that it is crucial to ensure that the process is transparent and inclusive.

2 Disinformation response must be non-partisan to be effective.

3 City disinformation responses must be ongoing, and constantly building adaptive capacity and resilience to disinformation which is now part of the information landscape.

4 Cities are already doing a lot, and they are not alone in this – solidarity and improved outcomes will come from sharing knowledge and experiences.

5 Disinformation in cities has individual, organisational and societal consequences, and all three must be addressed.

6

This playbook is not intended to change beliefs or diminish the rightful and essential democratic expression of dissent.

7

Cities cannot address disinformation in isolation and must integrate into a broader multi-sector and multi-level disinformation response system. All actors involved must contribute to creating an inclusive and enabling environment for cities.

8

Cities need ongoing access to real-time, rapidly deployed and targeted guidance, information, and support in the immediate and medium term.

9

Cities must be able to innovate and experiment. This may require courage in contexts of low trust and incivility.

10

There is no single way to address disinformation, and efforts need to include a combination of ongoing responses subject to frequent reflection and adaptation.





Playbook Development Process

This playbook has been developed at the request of cities. It aims to inform local responses to disinformation and, in doing so, enhance the wellbeing of communities and democracy.

The playbook development process involved 40 representatives from cities, media and tech sectors, civil society and academia. These applied different disciplinary lenses to the challenges and potential responses of cities in their contexts within Australasia, Europe and North America.

The process involved completion of an in-depth cities survey to understand the current experiences and responses employed by participating cities and one peak body for cities (n=14)

The de-identified survey results informed a series of three online workshops that cumulatively created content and recommendations for the playbook.

The draft playbook was reviewed by this group, before being provided to other cities, city networks, disinformation experts and other levels of government for pressure testing.

The process and the playbook responded to the challenge of knowledge fragmentation across sectors involved in disinformation response. For this reason, contributions were invited from multiple sectors.^{vii}

The process was led by the Melbourne Centre for Cities at the University of Melbourne, in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States and in collaboration with a core interdisciplinary research team from the Australian National University (Canberra, Australia); Monash University, Deakin University, and Victoria University (all in Melbourne, Australia).

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About Disinformation

This playbook uses the term ‘disinformation’ with recognition that there are intersections and at times overlaps between this and other types of information pathologies.^{viii}

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created to harm, mislead or evoke an emotional response in a target audience. Disinformation includes what is sometimes also called ‘fake news’ as well as propaganda.

Misinformation is false or misleading information held and shared without intent to harm, often due to unconscious bias or by accident. This means that innocent and well-meaning people can unknowingly hold and/or spread false, harmful and misleading information. 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.

Disinformation creators use techniques that appeal to human biases or fears, limiting critical reflection of the information presented.^{ix}

Therefore, 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 by the disinformation creators.

Capitalising on this, creators of disinformation will often construct narratives that appeal to latent feelings of the target group, with the goal of influencing them towards a particular view or (in)action.

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created to harm, mislead or evoke an emotional response.

Disinformation can come in many forms, it usually presents some key characteristics. Understanding these can assist identification and response:

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 framings that will appeal to a target audience.^x

Tribalism: Tribalism normally manifests in the form of ‘in-group vs. out-group’ framings, where the target audience is part of a ‘virtuous’ or ‘victimised’ in-group allegedly threatened by an out-group (e.g., ‘The Great Replacement’ or ‘White Genocide’ campaigns falsely claim that non-whites are intent on eradicating white people, culture and freedoms).^{xi}

Use of strong emotions: Disinformation uses highly emotive language or imagery to trigger an instinctual response in viewers – typically outrage, fear, or self-righteousness.

Hard to verify: The specific claims made in false or misleading content are often 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.

High rates of social media usage and the genesis of artificial intelligence (AI) mean that disinformation is now easier and cheaper to create and disseminate than ever. Images and videos that used to require manual manipulation with significant skill can now be made by almost anyone using widely available apps. Written content can be generated in seconds.

Disinformation is spread in many ways, including in person and through traditional media but also and overwhelmingly via social media platforms, with some platforms actively supporting its dissemination through the design of their recommendation algorithms.

Anyone can create disinformation at any time for any reason. This includes state actors, media, and members of the public. The motivation for all these actors is often political and/or economic gain. Importantly, these are not mutually exclusive as politically motivated disinformation can depend on an ecosystem of economically motivated creators.

In cities, those spreading and using disinformation (including organised groups, individuals, and elected representatives) vary by thematic area, as outlined in Figure 1 below. Former elected representatives and organised international actors are also identified.

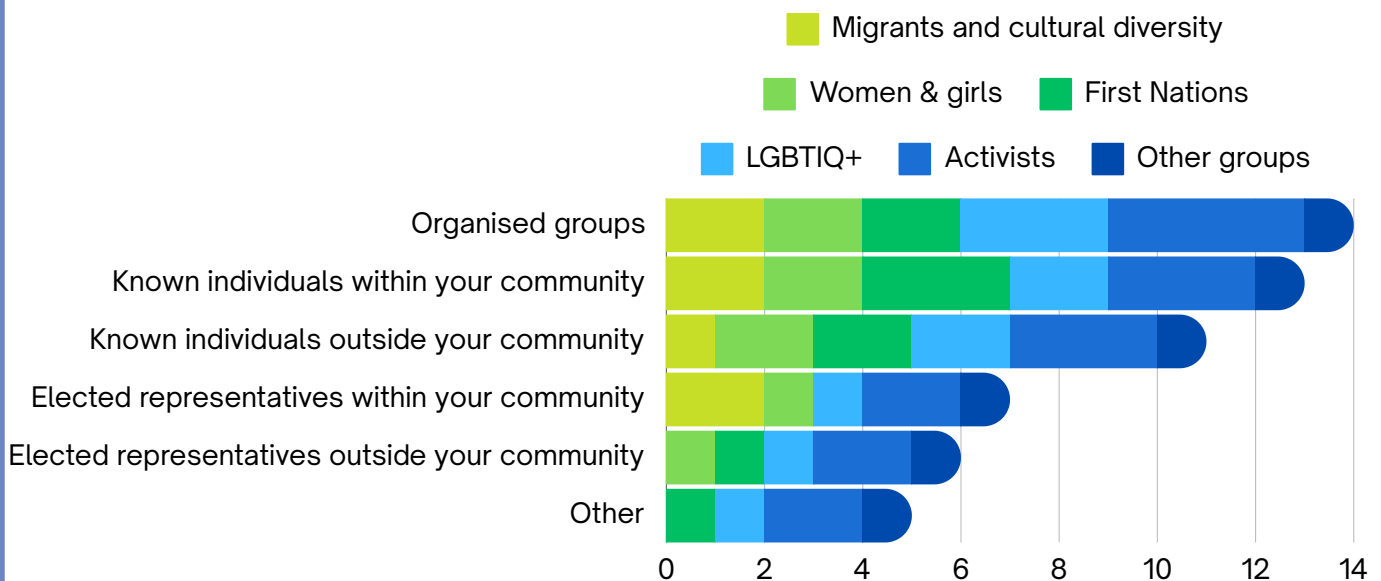
Politically-motivated creators seek to mobilise a target audience towards a particular view or (in)action, often with polarising effects.^{xiii} Political disinformation, particularly in a city context, is often designed to motivate viewers to undertake an action (e.g., voting for one candidate over another) or to participate in civil unrest (e.g., as part of a local or nationwide protest movement).

This form of disinformation is deliberately crafted in pursuit of a political or strategic goal and targets a specific audience or sub-group. In a highly interconnected world, this can originate from geographies far beyond the city limits, yet have significant local consequences. In addition to domestic actors, foreign interference uses disinformation to manipulate local sentiment and behaviour - often focusing on specific groups.

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

Figure 1: Disinformation actors by thematic area

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



About Cities

Most of the world's population lives in cities, and cities are responsible for policy decisions and delivering services that shape the daily experience of their residents and those of surrounding areas.

Critical issues such as education, housing, culture, health, economic opportunity, belonging, and many others are heavily influenced by cities and local government. Despite their importance, cities are often overlooked in policies and analyses related to democracy.

Cities are not simply “beacons of democratic regeneration,” they also concentrate our society's most pressing challenges and injustices.^{xv} Yet, at their best, cities can exemplify well-governed, diverse, dynamic, inclusive, and innovative communities.

People who experience these benefits in their day-to-day lives are less likely to be victims of growing disenchantment, tribalisation, nativism, and other ills that fuel authoritarianism and undermine democracy around the world.

Moreover, cities can be laboratories of democracy, incubating and testing innovative ideas, methods, and approaches to engage and empower their residents in governance. Lastly, cities can and should connect with each other regionally, nationally, and internationally to exchange knowledge and learn from each other on enhancing democratic governance.

Many city leaders do not typically frame their work in terms of democracy, with recent exceptions like the Pact of Free Cities^{xvi} and the Global Declaration of Mayors for Democracy.^{xvii} Engaging and involving residents, fostering inclusive and socially cohesive communities, and governing with transparency and accountability are often considered as essential yet self-evident pursuits.

However, the global challenge to liberal democracy posed by disinformation is eroding trust and social cohesion in cities, and threatening the broader national democratic frameworks in which cities are embedded. Cities must become more intentional, innovative, and ambitious in their role in protecting and fortifying democracy. Indeed, mis- and disinformation response is critical for the resilience

Disinformation is one of the significant challenges facing cities today. Many cities are still grappling with the impact that disinformation can have at the local level and the question of how this could be addressed.

Local governments have an extensive and nuanced understanding of the issues likely to elicit harmful information manipulation, allowing for preventative, preparatory, and mitigating measures, and for the formation of partnerships with trusted cross-sector stakeholders. As disinformation is an emerging challenge and responsibility, cities can experiment with (and adopt) practices and policies suited to their local context, potentially leading to innovative and scalable measures.

Cities are commonly considered the most trusted level of government,^{xviii} and trust is a critical factor in combating disinformation. The trust that cities enjoy therefore provides them with an enormous opportunity to be key actors in responding to disinformation and improving pertinent local policies and practices.

Throughout this playbook, cities are understood in the broadest sense, referring both to the political arm (council) and administration of city governments and to local governments more generally. In this sense, ‘cities’ can be considered as a shorthand for ‘local governance’, and our playbook can therefore be seen as a source of general guidance for all local authorities, including but not limited to cities as social, political, geographic and economic hubs with distinctive characteristics and capabilities.



How disinformation impacts cities

Protests & disruptions

Those responsible for urban governance – both elected representatives and city officials – are increasingly faced with the consequences of concerted disinformation campaigns. These erode cities’ capacity to address collective challenges including climate change, public health, and social cohesion.

This is a far-reaching issue facing cities across the globe, with disinformation taking multiple forms including targeted media coverage, protests, leaflet and poster distribution, graffiti and vandalism, political lobbying, threats and harassment, online messaging, resisting official instructions and orders, damage to infrastructure and community violence.

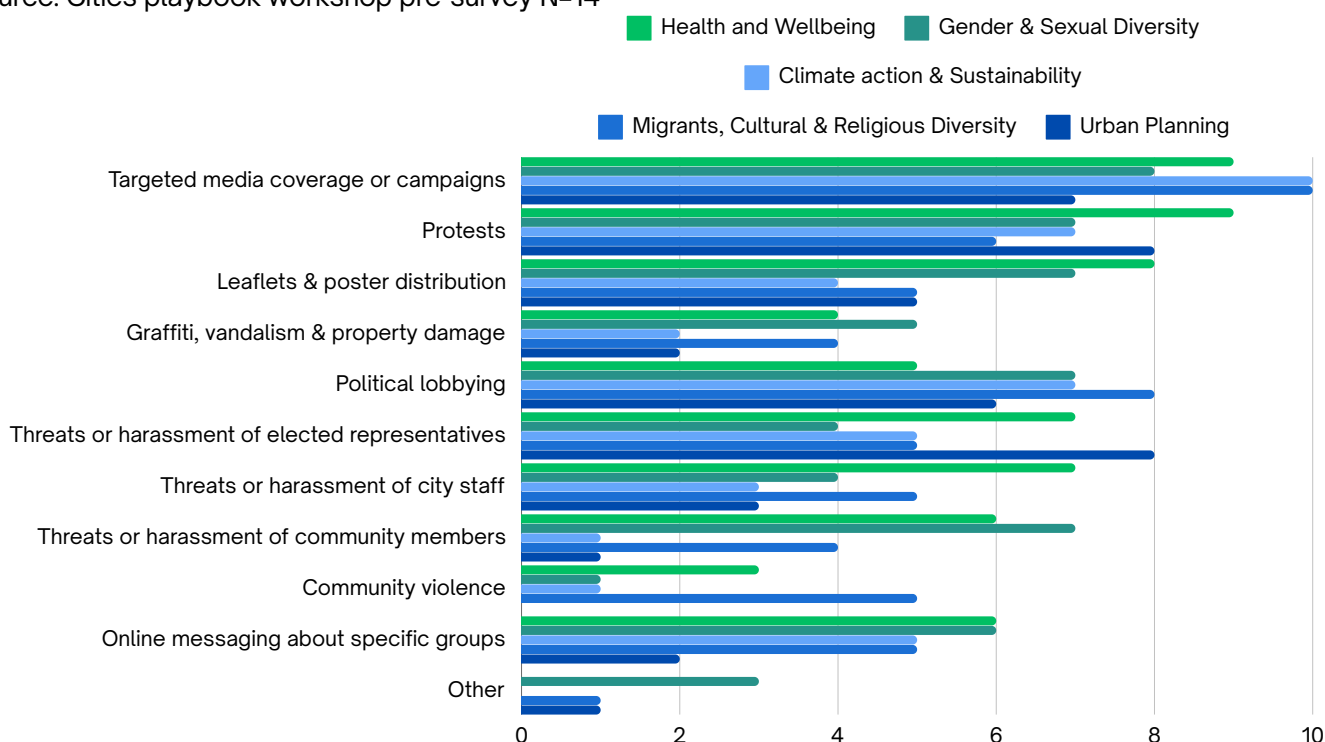
These can be found in Figure 2, distinguished by common themes that will be further elaborated in the section below.

Protests and disruptions arising from disinformation impact city functioning, with disruptions delaying policymaking and hampering debate in council chambers. Not all protests and disruptions in cities are fuelled by disinformation. However, the presence of disinformation has sparked protests and violence in many cities.

Protests and violent demonstrations on city streets impact urban communities, businesses and policing. Disinformation has also driven protests and disruptions in city council meetings and places of decision-making, leading cities to implement additional security measures including physical modification to spaces, restricting public opportunities to pose questions, moving meetings online, and increasing security or police presence at meetings. Governance and policymaking processes have also been delayed or halted.

Figure 2: Manifestations of disinformation in cities

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



Targeting individuals

Targeting of individuals occurs at all levels of city administrations and governments, though disinformation is especially directed at elected representatives and executive level staff. This takes many forms, including falsified accounts of events or speeches, manipulated images and deepfake videos, doxing, harassment and de-contextualised comments or images intended to mislead.

It is often related to specific policy platforms or initiatives and is also used to call into question the legitimacy of election outcomes. Gendered disinformation is also increasingly common, with targeting of women and non-binary people at higher prevalence, using disinformation with humiliating (often sexualised) and misogynistic narratives.

Impacting organisational functioning

Organisational functioning of city governments is affected by disinformation as individualised and general threatening behaviour diminish staff perceptions of safety. In some cases, this has led to reduced staff engagement and enjoyment in their roles, and increased turnover. As a result, some cities have instigated new forms of support and training for staff impacted by disinformation.

Disinformation has also prompted the adoption of new organisational procedures, including sometimes significant changes in communications activities, and the establishment of processes for enhanced internal information-sharing and external connections with disinformation experts. Disinformation has organisational health and safety implications, as well as performance and budgetary impact on cities as organisations.

Impacting communities

Disinformation impacts communities in two main ways. First, disinformation sows and amplifies distrust within and between communities. This reduces trust both in institutions - e.g. local government, health services and other institutions that operate at a community level - and between different groups, whether these are distinguished by culture, political affiliation or other identifiers.

Second, and relatedly, disinformation can erode social cohesion. Indeed, specific (and often already vulnerable and marginalised) groups are over-represented in targeted disinformation campaigns. These groups include First Nations, migrants, diverse cultural and religious groups, LGBTIQ communities, women and girls, and activists.

By using ideological bias and tribalism, disinformation can promote and reinforce racist, sexist, homophobic and xenophobic views, thus creating or exacerbating tension between diverse populations that live in close quarters in city settings. These tensions can result in various forms of threats and harassment, and polarising “us versus them” framings can result in outright discrimination, vilification and violence.

Influencing elections

Elections are impacted by disinformation campaigns to the extent they influence voter behaviour. This occurs in two main ways: First, disinformation can be used to erode public trust in the electoral process and thus stifle voter turnout. Second, targeted disinformation campaigns can influence voter decisions and – by extension – election outcomes.

Cities are particularly vulnerable to the impact of disinformation on electoral behaviour. Research has shown that voters’ opinions toward local candidates are relatively malleable compared to their views about candidates in state and national elections, which tend to be more fixed.^{xix} To this end, local voters are both more pragmatic and more persuadable. This means that the introduction of new information can seriously influence local election outcomes.

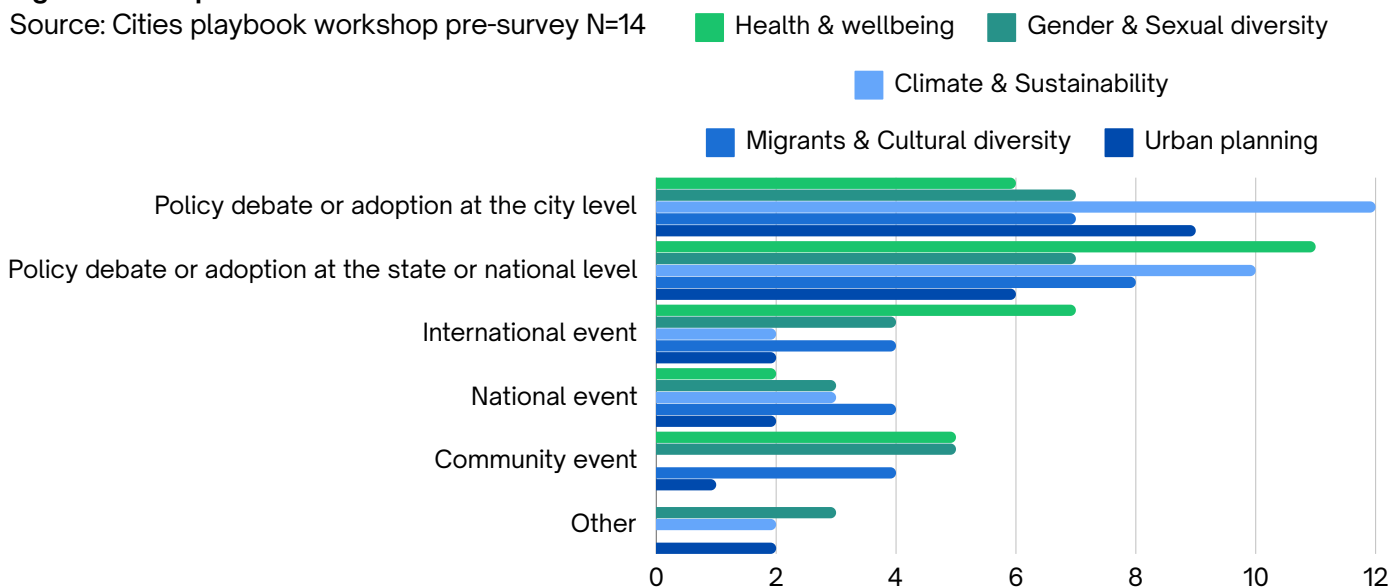
Those with ambitions to erode local democratic trust disenfranchise voters and stifle voter turn-out through tactics including disinformation about voting locations, times and processes. For those seeking to change the political (or demographic) make-up of local governments, disinformation is a powerful tool that carries real local impact.

What sparks disinformation in cities

Prompts for disinformation in cities demonstrate the interconnectedness of events in different locales and levels of government. Figure 4, below, articulates the differing prompts also by thematic area and while local, state and national policymaking are the most prevalent sparks for such campaigns, this differs between themes. This provides valuable insight for cities to pre-empt and plan for anticipated disinformation flashpoints. The themes are outlined further in the section below.

Figure 4: Prompts for disinformation in cities

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14

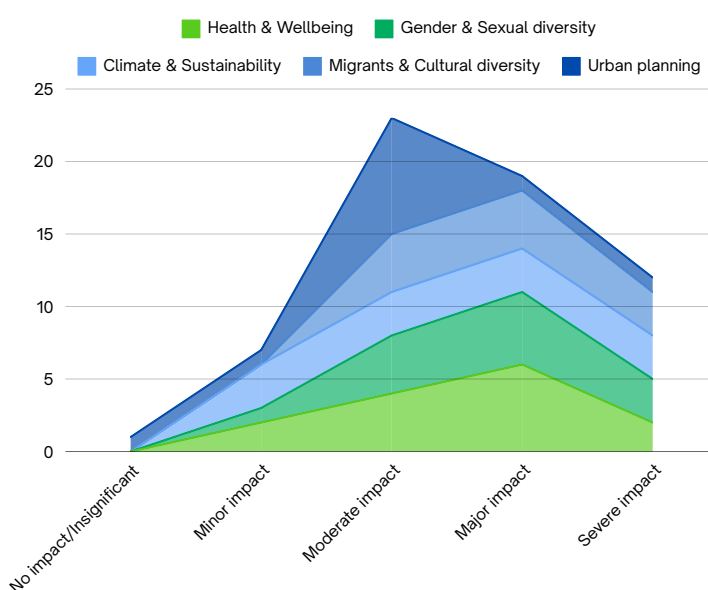


Common disinformation themes

Disinformation in cities revolves around several prominent themes globally. These are: Migrants and cultural diversity - including First Nations, where applicable; Gender and sexual diversity; Health and wellbeing; Sustainability and climate; and Urban planning. The level of interconnectedness between themes is high, especially these latter two as urban planning related to sustainability transitions attracts organised disinformation campaigns globally. Figure 5 presents the severity of impact cities experience from disinformation across these key themes.

Figure 5: Severity of disinformation impact across themes

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14





Migrant Disinformation & Cultural Diversity

Migrants have been the subject of multiple disinformation campaigns and events in cities, where polarising tactics are embedded in false accounts of events to garner support for anti-immigration and anti-diversity movements (or similar). The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) organises migrant disinformation into a number of broad xenophobic or racist narratives. These include portraying migrants as violent or criminal; as profiteers and wasters of ‘our’ resources; as receiving better treatment than local citizens; and framed to question the legitimacy of refugees.^{xx}

Disinformation targeting ethnic and religious minorities often overlaps with migration rhetoric, though differs as it is focused on the characteristics of culture, language and other factors regardless of place of birth. Anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim disinformation have been recurring issues across parts of Europe and elsewhere.

First Nations are also specifically targeted in disinformation campaigns.^{xxi} A recent example from Australia involved significant disinformation before, during and after a national referendum to create a constitutional Indigenous Voice to Parliament.^{xxii}

Example: In the German city of Dortmund, an alt-right news platform published an article in 2017 that falsely claimed a ‘mob’ of more than 1,000 refugee men had embarked on a violent rampage during New Year’s Eve celebrations.

Utilising narratives to portray migrants as both violent and as benefactors of preferential treatment, the article claimed that the ‘mob’ attacked German police and a group of homeless people and set fire to a church. In actuality, the brief fire on netting covering scaffolding near the church was an accident caused by a wayward firework. Dortmund police and officials were quick to condemn the story. They were supported by local, national and international media outlets.^{xxiii,xxiv,xxv}

Sustainability & Climate Disinformation

Climate disinformation seeks to undermine public confidence in, and progress towards, climate action and other sustainability solutions. Climate disinformation ranges from outright denial of climate change to a rejection of proposed solutions. Globally, climate disinformation is undermining meaningful action to mitigate and prevent climate-related harms.^{xxvi}

The EU DisinfoLab identified three common strategies (or narratives) used in climate disinformation. The first is 'Climate realism', which seeks to position so-called 'climate alarmists' as promoting undue panic. The second, 'Climate delay', involves championing inaction through narratives of non-urgency. The third, 'Conspiracy connections' links climate disinformation with broader conspiracy narratives of external technological control and the 'imposition of an apocalyptic new world'.^{xxvii}

Urban Planning Disinformation

Disinformation related to urban planning often overlaps with that targeting sustainability transitions, as noted above. Campaigns related to many 'Ultra Low Emissions Zones' or '15 Minute Cities', for example, follow the blueprint of climate disinformation.

However, urban planning attracts disinformation beyond sustainability, with technology transitions in urban planning also prominently targeted by disinformation campaigns. These include campaigns against 5G rollout on health grounds^{xxviii} or against smart cities based on false claims about government surveillance.^{xxix}

Yet urban planning disinformation is not restricted to these themes and has been reported in relation to many other topics, from infrastructure projects to tree removals. A 2020 research project modelling potential risks to critical infrastructure found that disinformation spread via social media to the general population could be weaponised against London's power grid, with crippling effect.^{xxx}

Example: In 2022, the City of Oxford, in southern-central England, found itself in the midst of a disinformation storm after a local politician proposed a plan to address high levels of traffic and congestion across the city.

The traffic filtering plan, which would apply to private vehicles during peak traffic hours, was designed to limit through-traffic on sections of key roads via camera-monitoring traffic. The plan became the subject of conspiracy-fuelled aggression, largely directed at local councillors. In the process, the traffic filtering proposal was conflated with another urban planning proposal to create a '15-Minute City' - a planning concept that seeks to provide all basic necessities to residents within a 15 minute walk or bicycle ride.^{xxxi}

As a result, Oxford became a flashpoint for 15-Minute City disinformation campaigns around the world. These disinformation campaigns have framed the initiative in dystopian terms, suggesting that the plan is a ploy to strip people of their personal freedoms and assert government control over them.^{xxxii}

Health Disinformation

Health disinformation focuses predominantly on public health measures and health-related planning initiatives, and is used to undermine confidence in legitimate medical and governmental advice.

Disinformation campaigns can stifle cities' capacity to deliver healthcare services and seriously erode public health and safety. The higher population density of cities makes them particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Cities and local authorities have varying levels of responsibility for providing healthcare to their communities, ranging from maternal and child immunisation programs to administering hospital systems.

Health disinformation has been particularly prevalent throughout the COVID-19 global pandemic, but longstanding health disinformation campaigns about vaccines have also led, for example, to local outbreaks of measles;^{xxxiii} contributed to stigma and vaccine hesitancy about the Human Papilloma Virus vaccine^{xxxiv} and plagued efforts to eradicate polio.^{xxxv}

In response to community fears, false cures are sometimes offered, as was the case in the UK where a 'cure' for autism was offered for a significant fee, leading to potential community harm.

Example: New York City, with its diverse population of 8.36 million, became a hotbed for disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This quickly spread through the city's five boroughs, ranging from narratives about vaccine contamination to narratives related to population control. False information drove up vaccine hesitancy and distrust of other public health measures (e.g., masking and quarantining). It also led to threats of violence against health workers.^{xxxvii}

The city response began early in the pandemic. In 2021, city officials, together with the public health department, formed a 'Misinformation Response Unit'. Its goal was to better understand conspiracy theories and misunderstandings around COVID-19 and vaccinations to improve the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccinations across the city.

The Unit monitored mis- and disinformation reports across multiple platforms, including non-English media, before working with community partners to disseminate tailored messages to diverse groups.^{xxxviii}

Gendered Disinformation and Sexual Diversity

Gendered disinformation takes multiple forms, from fabricated stories to falsified images. These are used in concerted campaigns against women and non-binary people — especially decision-makers and public figures — to promote narratives designed to humiliate and sow distrust.

The US Department of State found that gendered disinformation is being used by state and non-state actors through coordinated social-media strategies that target individuals, groups and legislation.^{xxxix}

United Nations Special Rapporteur Irene Khan stated that whilst not new, ‘fuelled by new technologies and social media, [gendered disinformation] has gained traction, threatening, intimidating, harming and silencing women and gender-nonconforming persons.’^{xl} This has widespread negative consequences for both individuals and society.

Gendered disinformation also refers here to the use of humiliating and sexualised content to spread misogynistic messaging in the community that is overwhelmingly about women and girls.

This also intersects with disinformation campaigns against gender and sexual diversity that have been prominent in cities. These especially promote anti-trans and anti-drag rhetoric, with Drag Storytime sessions in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States cancelled because of security threats to participants.^{xli}

‘The negative consequences [of gendered disinformation] go far beyond the targeted individuals and undermine human rights, gender equality, inclusive democracy and sustainable development.’

UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan (August, 2023)^{xl}

Example: The south-western Spanish city of Almendralejo became the site of an egregious gendered disinformation campaign in 2023 when AI-generated nude images of almost 30 school-aged girls were circulated online by a group of boys. The images were altered using clothed photos of the girls to produce deep fake pornographic images. Some parents reported that their daughters experienced deep psychological impact from the incident.^{xliii}

In response, parents formed a local support group to help victims navigate the experience.^{xliii} The mayor of Almendralejo referred to the incident as ‘another case of gender-based violence.’^{xliv}

The incident has since made national and international headlines, prompting women around the world to come forward with their own experiences with AI-generated deep fakes.^{xlv}

On the other side of the world in the town of Bacchus Marsh, Australia, this scenario was repeated half a year later, with 50 girls at a local school targeted.^{xlvi} These deep fakes were described as so ‘graphic’ and ‘disturbing’ that they prompted at least one viewer to be physically ill.^{xlvii}

Unanticipated Disinformation

Disinformation is not always thematic and policy-related, and can relate to any theme and affect any city or locality. Indeed, cities have reported being targeted by disinformation campaigns related to such diverse issues as tree removal, taxation and, as outlined below, alleged Satanic cults.

Whilst recognising the increased likelihood of disinformation in relation to the themes outlined above, disinformation can also take the form of unanticipated narratives, and city response mechanisms therefore need to be adaptive.

Example: Bodegraven in The Netherlands has a population of just under 20,000 people. In 2021, a cemetery on the city's edge was inundated with flower bouquets, predominantly laid by people with no real connection to the city. The flowers were 'placed in honour of the alleged victims of a network of satanic child abuse, which was rumoured to have occurred in the town of Bodegraven in 1982.'^{xlvi}

When the flowers were removed by the municipality, threatening notes were plastered across the city, and the Town Hall received an overwhelming number of concerned and aggressive messages. The incident was driven by an online conspiracy theory, which had been bubbling online for months, unbeknownst to many residents, linking the town with a purported Satanic paedophile cult.^{xlvi}

In response, the municipality issued a statement 'condemning the actions at the graveyard, and sympathising with the people who were being affected by the strange events.' Later, an 'Emergency Ordinance' notice was erected at the cemetery, highlighting the personal impacts – including renewed grief – that the incident had on loved ones and relatives.

City Disinformation Response

Disinformation is impacting many cities, and it is escalating. The clear message from those cities already impacted is that all cities should prepare for disinformation, and that cities' organisational functioning, good governance and reputation as major local employers will soon be determined in part by disinformation preparedness and policies.

Cities are already responding to disinformation in many ways, though in most cases their response remains relatively ad hoc and can benefit from further structuring and integration within broader disinformation response systems.

As presented in Figure 6, overpage, the most common response reported by cities in our survey was formal response on social media (79%), followed by community engagement and capacity building (57%). Local media investment or engagement was also commonly mentioned as was and engagement with disinformers (both 50%). These are further outlined with examples in the below sections.

Less common were the establishment of a system for monitoring disinformation; the provision of training for elected officials and/or staff, adoption of new policies or procedures and engagement with other cities or jurisdictions; modifying physical spaces, removal of graffiti and postponement of initiatives or decisions; establishment of fact checking web page/functions, modifying council meetings or processes, and increased security provisions for staff. One other response was noted: the establishment of an academic network on disinformation.

Responding to disinformation is an opportunity for cities to 'fall forward' into a new reality. For cities and local governments, this invites reflection and a new imagining of the necessary structures to promote multi-level, multi-city and multi-sector collaboration in disinformation response.

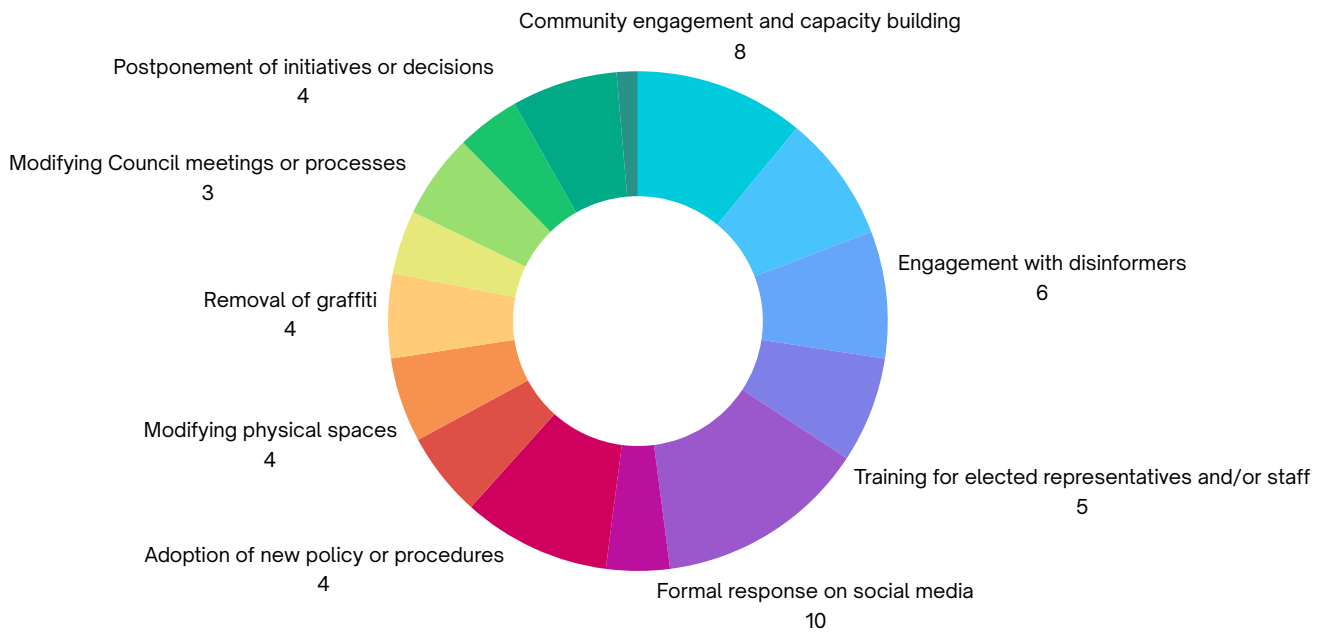
Recently, technological advances, especially in Artificial Intelligence (AI), have gained much attention. While these are important considerations, it is equally pertinent for cities to consider why disinformation takes hold, including the societal divisions and existing narratives that drive its creation and encourage people to accept it. These include existing community sentiments and prejudice around gender, culture, environment and government that are more easily manipulated by disinformation.

Focusing on the roots and the impacts of disinformation, and not just on creation techniques and transmission methods, is important for cities in building resilience to disinformation.

It is equally pertinent for cities to consider why disinformation takes hold, including the societal divisions and existing narratives that drive its creation and encourage people to accept it.

Figure 6: Current city disinformation response activities

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



Why Respond to Disinformation

Disinformation response requires investment of resources and time. It starts with recognition that disinformation is an issue for cities, and that city response is both warranted and beneficial.

Across cities and local governments, different rationales will engage the hearts and minds of those who need to act in response to disinformation. Building such recognition and support is critical to disinformation response. So why should cities respond to disinformation?

1

Disinformation response is good governance.

This is core business, and cities are legitimate actors in responding. The impacts of disinformation are experienced locally, and specifically across communities, governance structures and city administrations. Responsibilities for community resilience largely sit at the city level, and disinformation can impact the ability of cities to deliver on the mandate provided them by their constituents.

2

Protect democracy & political debate.

Public participation and political debate are hallmarks of a well-functioning democracy. In responding to disinformation, cities can play a key role in protecting democratic institutions while also supporting democratic participation and deliberation at the local level. In the absence of an effective disinformation response strategy, disinformation can sow distrust in democratic institutions, stifle public participation in democratic processes, and increase polarisation between groups. For cities and city governance, this is often reflected in a lack of engagement in local-level debate, decision-making and elections. This can result in a disconnect between people and local government, decreasing cities' capacity to understand and respond to community needs.

3

Enable local progress & innovation.

Addressing disinformation blockers enables progress in key policies to address local and global challenges, including climate action and technology transition initiatives. Disinformation campaigns have successfully undermined the roll-out of climate action initiatives and emergent technologies. This is exemplified in disinformation-fuelled protests against 15-Minute Cities that saw the UK government seek to repeal such planning frameworks, and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods across the country.^{xlix}

4

Promote healthy communities.

Disinformation can drive dangerous behaviours by promoting unverified medical information - such as ingesting cleaning products which killed many during the COVID-19 pandemic.^l It can also drive distrust in evidence-based medical information, such as the safety of vaccines.^{li} Enhancing community capacity to critically engage with information can have significant benefits for individual health and wellbeing, and that of the entire community.

5

Support & protect leaders.

Disinformation at the city level often targets leaders. This is a significant stressor and has been referenced by numerous leaders, especially elected representatives, some of whom have stepped away from leadership roles as a result. This can have significant personal and psychological impact, as well as impact for cities as the latter lose the expertise of such leaders, whilst at the same time less people are attracted to run for election, leading to a vacuum in skilled leadership. This also has implications for known pipelines to other levels of government and is especially problematic for diversity as women and other underrepresented groups are particularly targeted through disinformation campaigns.

6

Build community trust & connections.

Social cohesion and social solidarity are key indicators of community health and well-being. These benefit cities economically, culturally, and socially and city governance is enabled and enhanced as a result. Disinformation creates distrust between community members, across age, class, culture, ethnicity, religion and gender. Community members can become polarised in their views, divided from each other, and increasingly anxious and fearful of 'the other'. This reduces community cohesion, with negative impacts for health and well-being and community resilience.

7

Address the financial cost of disinformation.

Disinformation has financial costs, including additional security, additional staff time in responding, additional time for delays in policymaking and decision-making and communications. It also has financial and personal costs related to staff turnover. Disinformation response is therefore also an investment into the future of the city and its workforce.

How to Respond to Disinformation in Cities

Cities have various tools at their disposal to address disinformation, including an existing communications apparatus, organisational capacities, mechanisms for public participation, vast scope of service delivery, and relationships across the city and its many stakeholders.

These can be deployed and expanded to integrate holistic disinformation responses that can help build trust, build community, communicate and listen to communities, collaborate across cities, levels of governance and sectors, and be reflected in policy.

Each of these has different utility and opportunities throughout the stages in the disinformation response lifecycle, as presented below. The disinformation response lifecycle includes three broad phases: Pre-empting and early detection; Spread prevention and pre-bunking; and De-bunking and recovery.

Initiatives throughout these three phases are articulated in the following sections, illustrated with examples from specific cities.

Pre-empting & Early detection



This phase involves the anticipatory work that cities can undertake before a disinformation campaign takes hold. This includes establishing communication mechanisms with communities and having multiple avenues to understand current rhetoric and sentiment, including social media analysis.

It also involves the pre-emptive efforts that can decrease the likelihood that communities will engage with disinformation campaigns. These include creating shared narratives within the community, and ensure that people are heard and feel meaningfully informed about matters that affect them.

Cities' anticipatory work should also involve understanding and addressing social fault lines that exist: the prejudice, fears, harmful, racist and misogynistic narratives. This involves building trust with and among communities. It also means establishing the city's network of multi-sector, multi-city and multi-level communications pathways to receive and contribute up to date information. This is a long-term effort across multiple policy areas.

Spread Prevention & Pre-bunking



This phase includes activities aimed at reducing the extent to which disinformation takes hold. These include measures to reduce the reach and speed at which disinformation is shared, such as reporting disinformation to social media platforms, mainstream media and other registers so that they can enact their removal processes.

Spread prevention strategies may also include activities like graffiti removal. This phase also includes developing the community's capacity to identify and critically engage with disinformation that its members are likely to be exposed to, so that they are less likely to believe or share it. In addition to targeted pre-bunking, general media and digital literacy skills may work to pre-empt harms that come from mis- and disinformation. Strong media and digital literacy skills empower individuals to be resilient to all kinds of mis- and disinformation

De-bunking & Recovery



This phase occurs once a disinformation campaign has taken hold. It involves responding to disinformation with evidence-based content, and providing counter-information and counter-narratives. These may include public statements in support of those affected by disinformation and the development of narratives aimed at promoting a positive discourse about the city and its future.

Recovering from a disinformation campaign can take a variety of forms, depending on the nature of what has occurred. It may require provision of professional support, mediated meetings, and communal recovery efforts similar to those that follow natural disasters to help communities come to terms with what has happened, potentially repair damage to property, and determine a renewed collective vision for moving forward.

The goal of the recovery stage should be to support the community and help it to grow from the experience, so that future disinformation events are less likely and/or harmful.

Building Trust

Trust is the currency of a strong, resilient democracy. This includes trust in institutions and among members of the public. Institutional trust has declined in recent decades, threatening the social license afforded to local governments by their constituents.

Disinformation erodes this trust, by calling into question the validity of every aspect of the democratic process, from decision-making to electoral integrity. This further nurtures distrust of institutions, information sources and people. Trust takes a long time to build, and the importance of being a trusted information authority in countering disinformation narratives cannot be overstated.

The process of responding to disinformation must engender trust. This means that cities should be transparent and inclusive about the goals of their initiatives and the desired outcomes. Initiatives should be clearly contained and only aim to address disinformation rather than to diminish political expression or advocate for a specific policy position.

Any partisanship or attempt to use disinformation responses to spread a specific viewpoint are likely to be counterproductive and exacerbate (rather than reduce) mistrust among members of the public. The language around disinformation is considered partisan in some places, and care should be taken to use non-partisan alternatives as most appropriate.

Beyond the language used, working with all political parties to engender support for disinformation response can be beneficial and, ultimately, necessary to guarantee sustained change.

Building trust takes time and relies on ongoing relationships.

Building trust takes time and relies on ongoing relationships. Yet this process is critical for disinformation response as trust-based relationships help develop information-sharing pathways that people will listen to and share with others. In most cases, local governments do not need to start from zero in establishing trust, as they can rely on many existing trusted relationships across sectors and communities.

Local governments can also play a key role in supporting relationships that promote trust between other groups and institutions within the city. Analysing the existing strength of trusted relationships, and where relationships and trust might need to be strengthened, can help cities focus their efforts to improve the preconditions for disinformation responses.

And finally, cities can promote trustworthiness - both within their own functioning and in others. Trust should be earned, and maintained, through consistent, transparent and competent governance that is respectful and inclusive of all.

Trusted institutions

Institutional trust refers to the extent to which communities and individuals have trust in the public systems and authorities that serve them. Local governments are often considered the most trusted level of government. Within city administrations, different services or departments often enjoy varying levels of trust, for example maternal and child health services may be trusted whilst local law enforcement may not.

Institutional trust also extends to other services and sectors in cities, including the health sector, education, religious institutions and policing. Local governments can play multiple roles in enhancing institutional trust across cities: building trust in their own organisation and decision-making; building trusted relationships with other institutions within the city; and building trust between other groups and institutions in the city.

Competence, consistency and transparency promote trust in government.

Cities that base their decision-making on reliable and legitimate evidence, are consistent with their intentions in alignment with stated goals, and communicate their actions and the rationale behind them in ways that communities can engage with, are more likely to be trusted by citizens. These are all principles of good governance that cities already employ, and it is valuable to centre these in guiding disinformation response efforts to engender trust, and trustworthiness.

Institutional distrust is also driven by perceptions of inequity. Ongoing issues of city administrations and elected representatives not being representative of the demographics they serve remains a source of mistrust in underrepresented communities. In this way, investing in equity and representation is investing in disinformation response.

Institutional trust is not, and should not, be restricted to city administrations alone. Indeed, some level of scepticism towards institutions is valuable in any democracy. However, within each city, residents should have multiple trusted institutions that they can turn to, which effectively engage with the city government.

Supporting and building trusted relationships with those institutions that do have high levels of community trust are key to a well-functioning local democracy, and can serve to enable holistic and targeted disinformation response.

Example: In the early months of 2022, a disinformation campaign amounting to foreign interference emerged in cities across Sweden. Social media influencers and news sites located in the Middle East accused the Swedish Social Services of kidnapping Muslim children and ‘placing them with non-Muslim foster families who forced them to eat pork and drink alcohol.’ By playing on existing distrust between Muslims and state institutions, this disinformation campaign ignited local demonstrations in major Swedish Cities including Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg.ⁱⁱ

In response, one Swedish city instigated a multi-faceted disinformation response effort which included the city’s social services working in partnership with trusted community institutions: the city’s mosques. This has enabled the city to address the disinformation campaign and take steps towards restoring trust. Importantly, this response has been sustained after the immediate aftermath to continue to build trust.

Trusted information

Different information sources and platforms vary in the extent to which they are trusted by different groups. Ensuring information accuracy is important for all city communications, but trusted information and accurate information are not the same thing.

Understanding which information sources and types are trusted by different groups is key to understanding their vulnerability to disinformation and to selecting the most appropriate forms of information for addressing disinformation.

For example, some individuals and groups may value academic research for its rigorous ethics and peer-review processes. For others, academic research represents an elite and alienating institution that presents information in a way that they cannot readily access.

Likewise, storytelling is key to trusted information sharing in many cultures and can have high levels of legitimacy. In others, such information is viewed as too subjective and therefore unreliable. Understanding these differences is key to disinformation response across diverse local communities.

Every action and communication from the local government is an opportunity to enhance institutional trust.

Ensure that there is robust evidence behind decisions.

Guarantee the consistency of decisions by relating them to agreed community and city priorities.

Involve communities in the decision-making process, to encourage collective ownership and responsibility.

Articulate how decisions are fair, including acknowledging why some groups might benefit more and placing this alongside balanced information about why that is important

Ensure that information is presented in language that is accessible and non-technical.

Example: Robust quantitative data is a form of trusted information valued by many organisations, both public and private. Accessing verified raw data can, however, be challenging and resource intensive. In response, the City of Amsterdam in The Netherlands launched an initiative to simplify the exchange of trusted data in 2021.

The Amsterdam Data Exchange (AMDEX) is an Open Data Market with built-in infrastructure and common rules designed to facilitate secure data-sharing between organisations. Through AMDEX, organisations acting as ‘data providers’ can create platforms to share data or data components with other participants on the Open Data Market.

To promote trust and safety, data sharing is governed by frameworks and models. Contracts between parties are also facilitated through AMDEX, ensuring that data is shared on the data owners’ terms. To this end, AMDEX facilitates collaboration and cooperation between multiple actors and sectors, and creates a repository of trusted and verifiable information and ideas. ^{liii}

Trusted people

In every city, and every community, there are people who are widely trusted and people who are not. This can be based on profession – nurses, pilots and librarians, for example, enjoy particularly high levels of trust in the UK according to a 2023 Ipsos poll.^{liv} By comparison, politicians, government Ministers and advertising executives are widely distrusted.

However, by whom exactly people in these categories are trusted may vary within communities, with members of the armed forces, for example, trusted more by men, those with higher incomes, and conservative voters. In general, people trust information that comes from people they identify with, as demonstrated in the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer.^{lv}

Such trusted voices are not limited to professions or formal roles. People with high levels of social and cultural trust within their immediate and extended spheres include key connectors within identity communities, social media influencers, social commentators who publish to large followings and podcasters.

Understanding the different trusted voices within communities provides insight into whom to connect with in order to forge new information pathways and bridges between communities.

Some people who are highly trusted in communities also use disinformation. Understanding who these trusted voices are, and who listens to them, provides cities with an opportunity to proactively provide supports to help such individuals understand the potential harms of disinformation.

Trust is conditional and contextual.

No one is 'universally' trusted, and trust is both conditional and contextual. Faith leaders, doctors, teachers and social media personalities are trusted by certain groups within certain boundaries. Understanding who is trusted, and when, is important in developing disinformation responses, as these are more likely to be effective when information is delivered by trusted sources – especially when this information can help refute disinformation shared widely within the group.

For example, if a political candidate were to make false allegations of electoral fraud against a political adversary, the best-placed person to provide a factual counter-narrative may be another person from the same political party, with a similar level of trust from those susceptible to the message.

Example: Recognising that people within cities are diverse in cultures, languages, histories, ideologies and identities, it can be difficult at times for local governments to effectively connect with all their constituents. This can create barriers when relaying important information, and in combatting false narratives. One way to address these challenges is by empowering trusted individuals to connect with community groups.

When the Australian City of Merri-bek, located in Melbourne's inner-north, initiated the Moreland Connectors program in May 2020 during the lockdown, it was modelled off the 'Community Connectors' framework, originally designed to improve access to health and community services. Initially a pilot funded by the state government, the program has now expanded, with Council support, to include twenty connectors.

Each connector spends two to three hours weekly sharing messages with their communities, advising on communication strategies, reaching out to disconnected individuals, answering community questions, attending training sessions, and participating in monthly Merri-bek Connector meetings. The framework also acknowledges the role of cross-boundary organisations, space and objects (e.g., libraries, newspapers, men's shed), which can bring communities together to connect.^{lvi}

Trusted places

Places also have differing levels of community trust, and many places within cities are contested or considered affiliated with particular groups or ideologies. This is also true of online spaces, including local government community engagement mechanisms.

As with the preceding three areas of trusted institutions, information and people, when responding to disinformation it is important to recognise which spaces are trusted within communities.

Again, this differs across communities and will at times be dependent on the specifics of the disinformation campaign. In general, some communities with historical legacies, and current experience, of institutionalisation may distrust spaces associated with those institutions. These may include health services, police facilities and buildings that house, or have housed, places of incarceration.

Social infrastructure, i.e., the spaces where communities can come together like libraries, community centres and public sports facilities, can offer powerful opportunities to build trust between different groups in a community, which is key to how people respond when faced with disinformation.^{lvii}

By identifying, understanding and engaging with the institutions, information sources, places and people that are trusted by different groups across cities, it is possible to develop targeted disinformation response efforts that can help enhance trust across the community in general.

Example: Libraries have long been a safe and trusted place for local community members, and can make a valuable contribution to disinformation response.

In a project led by University of Pittsburgh Disinformation Lab^{lviii} researchers focused on all four aspects of building trust, providing guidance to each. This includes:

Recognising the existing institutional trust that libraries have, and reinforcing this with communications, including bringing people back to the history and mission of libraries.

Recognising and utilising libraries as a key knowledge hub providing trusted access to verified knowledge and resources from multiple perspectives.

Recognising the highly trusted role of librarians individually, and building on this through focusing on librarians as both professionals and community members.

Recognising the capacity of libraries as trusted spaces, and using this to create opportunities for critical conversations to encourage people to move beyond echo chambers.

Building Community

Disinformation flourishes within fragmented sectors and societies, as it uses and manipulates fault lines of mistrust and prejudice between groups. This phenomenon can be observed explicitly in the framing of disinformation campaigns, for example openly anti-trans campaigns globally. It can also be seen in the way existing prejudices are being used to engage people with regard to unrelated issues.

For example, disinformation surrounding the London UK the expansion of the Ultra Low Emissions Zone in London, UK, included references to the preferential treatment of 'minority religions'^{lxix}. Similarly, disinformation in Baltimore, USA following the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge targeted Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, stating that the accident resulted from under-qualified workers who were hired to fill DEI quotas.^{lxx}

These societal fault lines of prejudice are not only used to target specific groups, they are also manipulated to gain traction for disinformation campaigns seeking to discredit city sustainability initiatives, health initiatives, and initiatives in a number of other areas. In this way, societal fault lines are a key risk factor for disinformation in cities, and addressing them is key to resilience and disinformation response efforts.

Furthermore, these fault lines are used and manipulated not only by local actors but also by external parties, including foreign entities, in order to sow division and distrust. In 2023, for example, the City of Paris was targeted by a suspected foreign-led graffiti campaign using the Star of David that is believed to have been designed to stoke tensions in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict^{lxxi}. The graffiti itself was not disinformation, but its use by foreign actors to imply local sentiment places it squarely into this frame.

Disinformation not only exploits existing societal fault lines, it also contributes to reinforcing and deepening them, increasing polarisation.^{lxxii} This vicious cycle impacts social cohesion across the general community, thus restricting its resilience. This leaves communities more susceptible to future disinformation and less functional in their collective decision-making. It also has particularly negative impacts on targeted groups.

Building bridges between groups within communities and addressing sentiments that drive fragmentation and prejudice such as racism, misogyny and classism are important pre-conditions that can help reduce communities' vulnerability to disinformation. This approach lies at the intersection of equity and inclusion efforts, on the one hand, and disinformation response efforts, on the other hand.

Recognising and addressing community fault lines in policymaking and communication is key to enhancing preparedness and proactive response.

Community building to address polarisation and fragmentation is an ongoing process that requires active investment and careful design. This requires buy-in from both the city and its many stakeholders, and community members. Setting expectations and shared ownership of outcomes is key in maintaining trust through such initiatives. Disinformation response can be an exercise in reducing fragmentation by deliberately building bridges of knowledge and data sharing between people and places in a cooperative environment, and using each disinformation event as an opportunity to further strengthen these bridges between groups.

Create a shared vision

Creating a shared vision that people want to commit to is a powerful force in community building. Such an exercise creates a strong community narrative, building a coherent and clear vision of what the community is working towards and protecting the community itself when responding to disinformation.

This provides a basic framing for cities to orient and anchor disinformation response. Importantly, the visioning process should be inclusive of the many perspectives within communities, allowing all groups to be heard and recognized to enable people to see themselves within the community.

This is no small feat, and storytelling practices can be effective in enabling the diverse threads of community narratives to be woven together so that people feel represented in the process and see both personal and collective benefits in being part of a cohesive community and generating a collective civic identity.

Equally important is that this collective vision is then used by local governments and key city stakeholders – not only for communications, but also for orienting decision-making.

Reinforce social expectations

Developing, communicating and exemplifying social practices for ethical and critical engagement with information, including opposing viewpoints, is key to supporting community respect and safety as well as local democratic functioning. Using the collective vision of community functioning, identity and governance provides an agreed social contract for all actors within cities to critically engage with and ethically use information.

Multiple levers can be used to reinforce agreed expectations, to encourage and support community groups to proactively reinforce social expectations and the collective vision for community. This should be reflected in the framing of disinformation response messaging, drawing a clear line between the response and the collective vision that it is building towards.

Reinforcement initiatives can also be embedded throughout other city activities, for example city grants program can require recipients to demonstrate how they/their project will contribute to agreed social expectations, disinformation response, and/or protecting democracy.

Example: In 2020 as Black Lives Matter protests swept the globe in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a white police officer in the United States, in the UK City of Bristol a statue of slave-trader Edward Colston was toppled by activists. Tensions were high. The statue was a symbol of Bristol's complex relationship with race and its identity as a port city, where historic wealth is inextricably linked with the transatlantic slave trade. Prior to the toppling of the statue, the city's leadership was already engaged in a working group about 'city legacy' with citizens and partners. The toppling of the statue brought an added urgency and in response the We Are Bristol History Commission was established 'to develop a city-wide conversation to help Bristol rediscover and understand our history and how that history led to us to becoming the city we are, so we are better equipped to decide who we want to become.'^{lxiii}

The commission was made up of a wide range of professional historians and academics. The members, terms of reference and all meeting minutes from the commission are made publicly available online. following publication of the Commission's [report](#), work has continued with the opening of a new display about Protest at MShed museum. This shares the context and a range of views to help inform discussion, including across different generations. The Bristol Legacy Foundation was also launched, and works with partners and communities across the city, as well as with other cities internationally who also want to share learning around legacy, memorialisation and reparations, and want to provide appropriate sites of commemoration, education and story-telling.

Bring people together

Community fragmentation often occurs because different groups lack opportunities to meaningfully interact. This occurs spatially, as suburbs and the services within them such as schools and local sporting clubs become more segregated along cultural and socioeconomic lines; temporally, as people have less available time to volunteer or access community spaces due to accessibility of such infrastructure and the extended commitments of working and commuting;^{lxiv} and socially, as groups have increasingly retracted into more homogenous social networks.

Cities can provide structured and incidental opportunities for different groups to come together. This can include urban planning initiatives to bring people together spatially through the design of transit routes, public spaces and zoning for public services. Or it can take the form of incidental and programmatic initiatives as below.

Example: The City of Melton in Australia established a Community Partnership Program (CPP) in 2014, bringing together different groups across the city to work on a project to benefit the community. The groups must differ by culture, ability, age, or another key factor, and must develop a project together, with seed funding from the city.^{lxv}

Over the course of a year, the partners are supported to progress their project, with the hope that they can develop strong and lasting relationships between their communities in the process. Hundreds of projects have been supported through this program.

When anti-Islam and anti-migrant rallies were held in the city in 2015, one former participant in the CPP called a popular radio station to say that he, and many others in the local community, did not support the protesters. In the discussion, he shared his experience of getting to know men from another community through the CPP, and how important this had been in shifting his perspective.

Example: One trust-building approach, tried and tested in Denmark, is to bring people together through moderated debates. Done well, moderated meetings can act as a space to debate opposing viewpoints with open-mindedness and to move toward solutions.

The method, aptly named the ‘Room of Solutions’, engages a trained moderator to oversee debates and ensure that all participants are given the space to voice their concerns. Attendees are given a green and red card to silently signal support or disapproval of an argument or proposal made during the debate.^{lxvi}

On the Danish Island of Bornholm, for example, this method was employed to discuss issues of unemployment and possible solutions. In the City of Middelfart, to use another example, the method was used to explain budget policies to citizens with the intention of making them less susceptible to disinformation regarding city spending.

Understand and address fault lines

Disinformation circulates constantly, and cities need to be able to assess which narratives are likely to take root and have significant local impact. This requires understanding current tension points, historical legacies and community power relations.

In addition to some of the communication and listening tools outlined in the following section, it is also important to analyse and document the fault lines exploited by each disinformation campaign. This will enable cities to continuously refine local understanding of, and responses to, polarisation and prejudice.

Regional and global trends also provide significant insight into the types of narratives that are currently taking hold, which can enhance preparations prior to key known disinformation flash points such as policy adoption and elections.

Such global ‘pulse-checking’ can also provide examples from the experience of other cities, including the impact of disinformation campaigns and the effectiveness of different responses.

Example: Rumours, which are sometimes false and rooted in negative stereotypes, spread quickly in city contexts and can sow division. The anti-rumour methodology, designed by the City of Barcelona as part of its Intercultural Plan, has been a strategy to combat negative and unfounded rumours that adversely affect living in diverse cities. The Anti-Rumours strategy involves the following: (i) Identifying potentially disruptive rumours in a city; (ii) Collecting data and forming narratives to dismantle false rumours; (iii) Supporting and creating an “anti-rumour network” of local actors/ agents; (iv) Supporting and training “anti-rumour agents”; and, (v) Designing and rolling-out anti-rumour campaigns to raise awareness.^{lxvii}

Anti-rumour agents are empowered to engage in respectful conversation with community members. This can occur in informal settings such as a cafe or bar. In the City of Botkyrka, Sweden, for example, anti-rumour cafes were set up in local libraries. This model allows the city to both gain an understanding of rumours and their drivers and create an embedded, city-wide response to address them, including new tools, communication strategies, and resources.^{lxviii} Following its evaluation as an effective strategy, Intercultural Cities at the Council of Europe has produced a comprehensive Anti-rumours Handbook.^{lxix}

Communicating & Listening

The ability to listen to and meaningfully communicate with communities is key to disinformation response. It is critical to being able to rapidly identify disinformation narratives, assess their likely impact in cities, and formulate and enact appropriate communications responses.

This involves three key steps:

- Establish robust and trusted information-sharing networks.
- Listen to understand local disinformation narratives, and assess potential impact on different groups and institutions.
- Develop effective communication mechanisms to reach desired audiences at key times.

Cities report that they have modified, increased and decreased communications as a result of disinformation (see Figure 7, below). This is occurring at an organisational level, and also individually with leadership and elected representatives modifying their use of platforms.

Many cities have expanded their communications by increasing social media use, language diversification, using other channel partners, and providing additional information in response to disinformation.

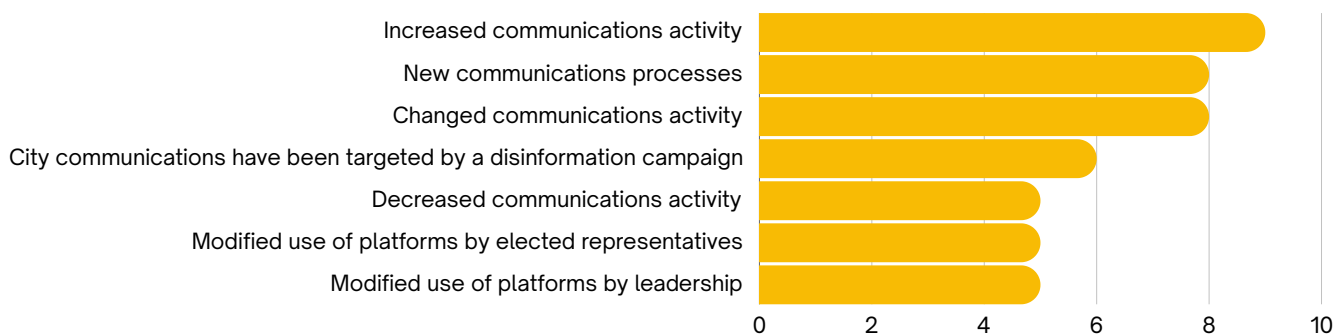
At the same time, cities also report decreasing their communications by shifting away from platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and reducing communications activity to avoid counter-reactions, and avoiding specific topics.

City response measures include additional approvals and oversight processes internally, and invested in higher levels of cyber security. Cities have also increased monitoring of social media and removal of misinformation and inappropriate commentary, and closed comment sections. Communications have also become more targeted, with cities adapting the format, content and selected social media channels for specific content in order to avoid issue-specific polarisation. Some also report placing emphasis on the city's collective identity in communications, for example human rights values.

Specific policy guidance related to communications can be found in the Policy Settings section.

Figure 7: Impact of disinformation on city communications

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



1

Be clear.

Simple is best. Effective disinformation response requires clear and simple messaging. The RESIST 2 Counter Disinformation Toolkit^{bx} from the UK Government provides the following framing for disinformation response

Fact: lead with the truth

Myth: point to false information

Explain fallacy: why is it false?

Fact: state the truth again (and again!)

2

Listen.

Communication is dialogue and involves listening as much as speaking. Listening to the community will enable city leaders to understand the challenges people face, and the things that are important to them. By listening to communities, city administrations can establish trusted communication pathways that can be used to address disinformation. Listening is also key in understanding emergent and long-term pressure points and fault lines that make groups vulnerable to disinformation. Communities have a wealth of knowledge, ideas and skills to contribute to disinformation response efforts. Asking communities for feedback on messaging, suggestions on how to engage with different groups, and ideas on how they want to contribute to, or lead, initiatives to address underlying mistrust, disengagement and prejudice, can be crucial for the effectiveness of disinformation responses.

3

Embrace storytelling.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for city communications to engage disconnected communities and address disinformation. Stories are accessible, enabling people to identify with the information. Stories are framed around emotion, with different emotions triggering different behaviours in the audience. Negative framing can prompt action but can also further division and overwhelm. Sadness, for example, can encourage people to help others but can also make them disengage if they feel that they cannot make a difference. Similarly, anger is powerful in motivating people against a common enemy but can also sometimes make it hard for people to engage with the perspectives of others. Likewise, fear can bring about a ‘fight, flight or freeze’ response which can inhibit action.

By comparison, positive framing can be motivating whilst also promoting a sense of common purpose. Awe, for instance, opens people to understanding different perspectives. Likewise, pride makes people feel good about themselves when they act on behalf of others, inspiring collective action. Similarly, hope gives people a sense that they can make a difference, and this can increase policy support and engagement with key issues. The Council of Europe has released a step-by-step guide, the Human Rights Speech Toolkit, to help with analysis and formulation of narrative-based responses to prejudice and hate speech.

4

Be transparent and accurate.

Establishing trusted communication pathways in general is key for disinformation response, as people are more likely to trust sources that have proven trustworthy in the past. This means ensuring that information is accurate and transparent, including accepting responsibility and communicating mistakes. Honesty is key for building and maintaining trust, and trust is the bedrock of effective communication.

5

Be present.

It is important to share and gather information through multiple channels to provide community members with various sources of input and verification. People are increasingly accessing news and information from non-traditional channels such as TikTok and Instagram. To communicate with their constituents, cities may consider expanding their communication platforms. This decision should be made with consideration for the ethical and security risks involved with each platform. This also includes meeting people where they physically are, and embedding disinformation education, messaging, and engagement through other council services such as health or social services.

6

Be positive.

Positive framing is an important antidote to the cynicism that disinformation drives. Language selection is key to any communications strategy. The right language can be an effective tool in promoting social cohesion and trust, and in facilitating healthy debate. Cities can make strategic decisions at the semantic level (specific words chosen) right through broader policy framings. Many issues and policies can be better received when contextualised in relation to the desired future for the city. By using optimism as a tool, cities can position the information within the longer journey toward a positive end-goal (e.g. a vibrant city free from air pollution).

7

Be accessible to diverse communities.

Communication patterns differ across communities. Addressing people in their own way and own language is critical throughout the entire disinformation response lifecycle. Where resourcing allows, cities can support local media outlets that serve different language, cultural or community groups to increase their own understanding of disinformation and processes for responses so that they can be networked into the city-wide response system.

8

Work together.

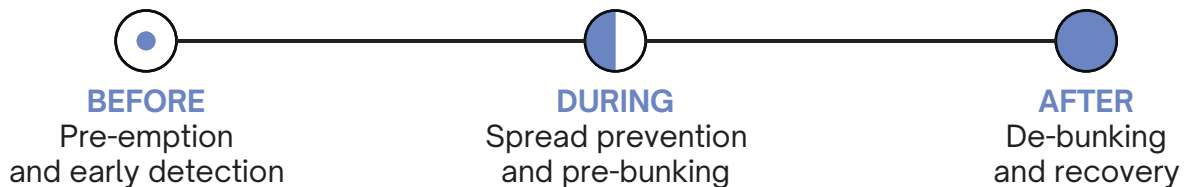
It is important to establish robust and trusted information-sharing networks with a community, based on the trusted institutions, information, people and places outlined previously in the section on Trust. In addition, it is crucial to establish networks internally across departments and work areas, with other cities, and with other levels of government for collective action as outlined in the section on Collaboration. This includes also supporting other sectors to lead specific efforts, such as Taiwan's successful crowd-sourced fact checking initiative, Cofacts.^{lxxiii} All of this should be formally included into the city's disinformation response communication plans.

9

Map the disinformers landscape.

The disinformation landscape is such that we often see repeat offenders that utilise repeat tactics and repeat narratives. As a result, cities can proactively catalogue offenders, narratives and tactics, in ways which can assist in pre-empting future disinformation campaigns. Resources such as First Draft News (now Internet-archived in perpetuity)^{lxxiv} and Justice for Prosperity^{lxxv} in The Netherlands provide insights into the ways in which it is possible to map this landscape. Most fact-checking media provide open submission channels for suspicious claims. Using and advertising these is an important tool for disinformation monitoring.

Disinformation Continuum



Community outreach programs.



Community outreach is an effective tool for reaching community where they are, including those not otherwise communicating with city governments. This enables cities to understand shifts in sentiment as they occur, the impacts on targeted communities, and assist in providing targeted supports and maintaining communication during and after disinformation-fueled events. Outreach should include groups prone to creating and sharing disinformation, and groups targeted.



Social media analysis.



Monitoring social media discourse is important for identifying disinformation both in relation to city initiatives and more broadly. It includes flagging specific content, terms and behaviours to identify and anticipate issues. Collaboration across sectors, levels and cities is particularly useful for providing real-time insights into trends and terms to flag.



Map the disinformers landscape.



Often disinformers use repeat tactics and narratives. They also often connect with known groups and platforms locally and globally. Proactively catalogue offenders, narratives and tactics to pre-empt future disinformation campaigns, understand who is involved, and who might be vulnerable to messaging.



Assemble advisors.



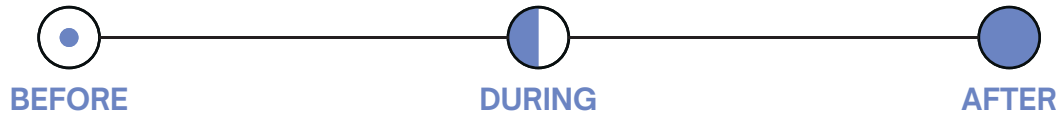
Assemble advisory bodies and brains trust early. Ensure this network of advisors is sufficient to inform your understanding of different communities and sectors across the city. Invest in the onboarding process to develop trusted relationships between advisors. Engage these groups to test information and see if they're appropriate and effective.



Increase frequency of messaging in the lead up to key events.



In the lead up to key events, such as policy decisions, key events or elections, increase communications around potential points.



Increase critical literacy.



Invest in education campaigns and opportunities, both within the organisation and in the community. This includes education-based programs and games-based platforms.



Be fun(ny) with it.



If done well, humour can be an effective tool for approaching sticky subjects. Humour can break down barriers, disarm tension, create connections, and be a memorable source of information. However, timing is critical. Humorously framed communication during crisis situations – even low-severity crises – has been shown to negatively impact trust in cities.



Fill the information vacuum.



Proactively and immediately provide people with clear, comprehensive and factual information – especially after key events. This reduces the risk that the information ecosystem becomes saturated with confusing, false and conspiratorial information.



De-platforming creators.



De-platforming is a tool used in attempt to limit the influence of disinformation campaigners. De-platforming is usually achieved by blocking a social media profile or banning disinformers from speaking in public forums.



Support those affected.



Provide psychologically safe spaces and services for communities affected by disinformation. These can be online and in person. Cities should also provide clear messaging to support targeted groups or individuals, to publicly demonstrate that it does not endorse harmful and false narratives.



Sticky facts & counter-information.



Use robust data and ‘sticky facts’ - simple, evidence-based content delivered in ways that people will remember to counter disinformation.



Providing counter-narratives.



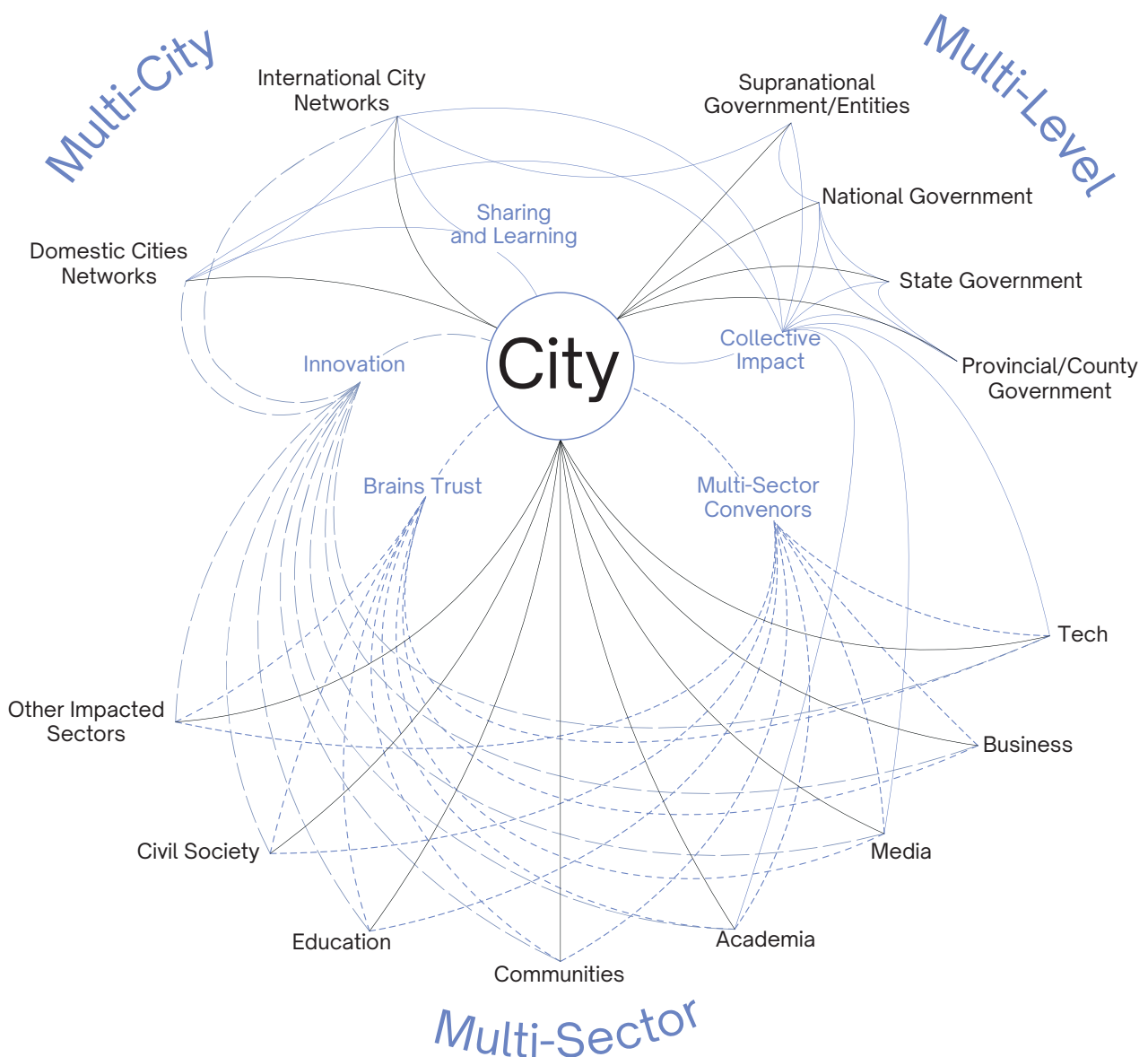
Counter-narratives incorporate counter-information, but engage people through storytelling and personalisation. Counter-narratives can be more effective than simply presenting the facts because they engage people emotionally.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a powerful tool essential in responding to disinformation. Cities can share ideas, experiences, and possible solutions as they respond to complex and multi-faceted challenges. This needs to occur between city departments, between sectors, between different layers of government, and between cities, nationally and internationally.

Although cross-departmental, cross-sector, and international city engagement are increasingly embedded in the structures of many cities, this is not universally so. More is needed for cities to engage meaningfully across municipal and international borders, as well as to engage in vertical communication about disinformation, to receive, analyse and share information with those working to address disinformation at other levels of government.

Figure 8: City collaboration system



Cities currently collaborate in their disinformation response efforts. The sample of cities surveyed for this playbook reported that their highest frequency of collaboration was with local knowledge partners such as universities (57%). Collaboration with other cities (43%) and local civil society is also significant (50%).

Figure 8, below, demonstrates the difference between the current collaboration partners that cities work with and the perceived necessary collaboration partners in the future. The highest discrepancy between the level of current activities and perceived future needs can be found in the areas of multi-level governance and collaboration with technology companies and local businesses.

Collaboration is demanding of human capital and requires consistent attention to four key questions:

What is the purpose of the collaboration?

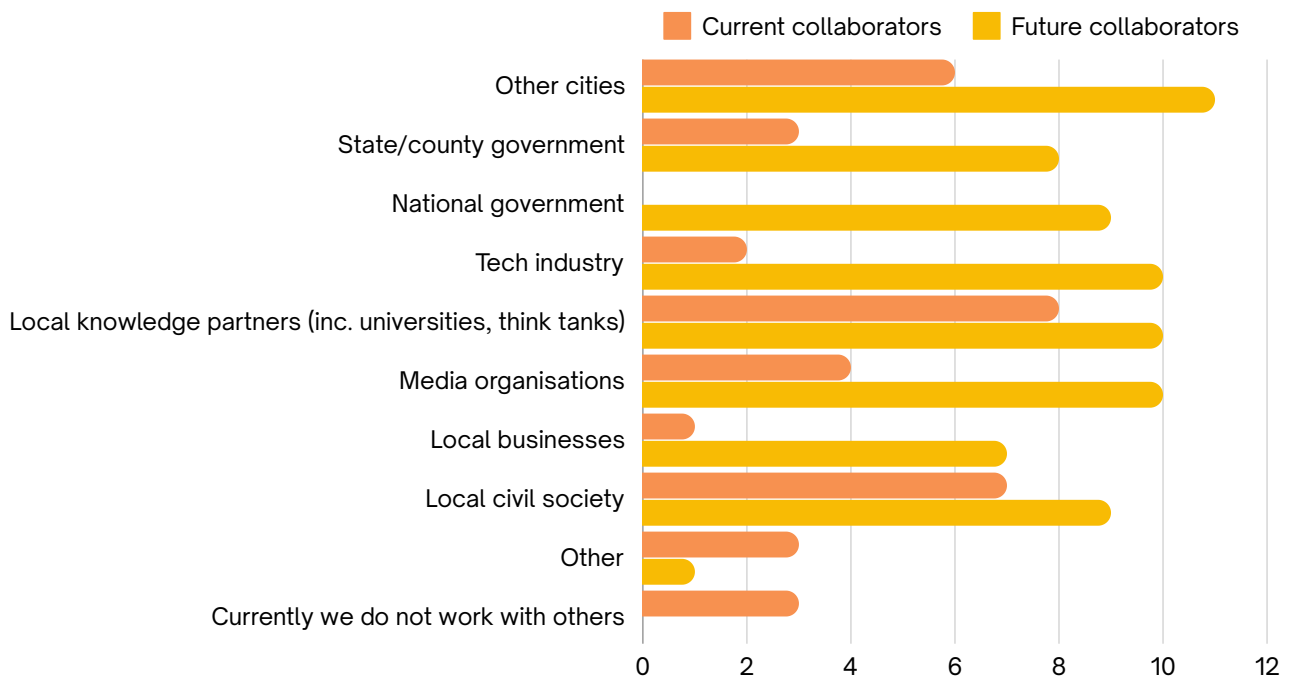
What activities will occur within the collaboration?

What does this collaboration mean and contribute?

What is the form, scope and scale of the collaboration?^{lxxvi}

Figure 9: Current and future collaboration for disinformation response

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



Multi-City Collaboration

Multi-city collaboration across geographies and contexts is now a well-established aspect of cosmopolitan governance. This includes collaboration locally, between neighbouring cities or those within the same province or country, and internationally through formal global networks, ad-hoc alliances and bilateral agreements, to name just a few.

Domestic multi-city collaboration (within the same province or country) is useful and feasible thanks to the similarity of legislative, cultural and (sometimes) political contexts shared by the cities involved. These similarities can be beneficial in identifying common issues and sharing resources – or jointly applying for resources – for response efforts. Such local collaborations are also valuable for advocacy and engagement with other levels of government as well as with other actors from the provincial to the national sphere. National and provincial peak bodies and city alliances are used in a variety of ways to respond to disinformation in cities, drawing on the capacity to influence agendas and negotiate partnerships on behalf of cities collectively.

International multi-city collaboration is particularly useful for learning and innovation, as the diversity of contexts and framing brought to city responses globally far exceeds that which can occur locally. This is important for breaking out mutually reinforcing ‘bubbles’ of good practice that can occur in local contexts that are disconnected from broader developments.

Many cities also find their counterparts beyond their national borders. For example, capital cities may have more in common with other capitals than with secondary cities in their own context. Likewise, major port cities may have more in common with other major port cities, and so forth.

In addition, international networks can be agile in informing responses, separated from local and national politics. They can bring the diversity and legitimacy of international practice to proposed actions, and can gather partners throughout their vast international networks of expertise to inform solutions.

Example: Disinformation-driven campaigns caused significant disruptions in 2023 in the City of Onkaparinga.^{lxvii} Following this, in July 2024 Mayor Moira Were AM, put the below motion to the Australian Local Government Association, seeking to engage the collective influence of the sector in multi-level advocacy.

Motion number 160: *This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to make a strong commitment to preserving a democratic local government in Australia, including national awareness of minority groups who aim to covertly influence and control elections and disrupt local government council meetings across Australia.* (full text^{lxviii})

Example: Strong Cities Network published a City-Led Response Guide in 2024 to inform city responses to the impacts of hate, extremism and polarisation, often fuelled by disinformation and conspiracy narratives and violent extremism.^{lxix} It seeks to fill a gap in resources for local leaders and city officials to respond to an attack or other incident/crisis. It focuses on local responses that both benefit and engage key stakeholders such as local media, survivors and families, social services, community-based organisations, faith leaders and the wider community.

The guide brings is based on international and regional good practices, approaches and lessons learned from 230+ members and other engaged cities and other partners. together insights andThis includes experiences shared by mayors, local government representatives and practitioners at convenings in Helsinki (Finland), Denver (United States), Oslo (Norway), Malé (Maldives) and Surabaya (Indonesia), bringing together global city insights that would be beyond the capacity of individual cities to access.

Benefits of multi-city collaboration

Sharing and learning

Cities are uniquely positioned to learn from each other. Networked information-sharing between cities is valuable as relevant, trusted information can be shared effectively. Learning between cities is particularly valuable because initiatives have been tested in the complex socio-political city context. This means that learnings can be more readily applied across city boundaries. Cities also act as a valuable feedback mechanism for each other, providing valuable external perspectives for each others' initiatives.

Equally valuable are the interpersonal connections between city representatives involved in disinformation response. Inter-city sharing is important for creating community and common purpose between these representatives, and for reinforcing that this is a shared challenge with shared solutions. This playbook and the process of its development are an example of this.

Collective impact

Cities work effectively together to progress shared agendas. This has been seen in climate action, migration, health, and many other areas. The power and influence of disinformation actors and social media platforms often used for dissemination can be vast and hyperspecialised compared to that of an individual city.

Collaboration with other cities, other sectors, and other levels of government can go some way towards shifting this balance. The kind of access and influence that an individual city can hope to achieve is dwarfed by the collective efficacy of many, working in unison, to achieve their aims – one need only look to the impact of city networks in the field of climate change to see this in practice.

Encouraging innovation

Beyond the sharing of ideas and initiatives, innovation is critical in responding to any novel challenges, and broadly supported in principle. Innovation requires time, investment and support, and the collective capacities of cities to invest in such innovation is beyond what most cities could hope to achieve alone.

But just as innovation leads to breakthroughs and successes, it also leads to setbacks and at times failure. Collaboration can provide a valuable 'collective heat shield', where all participating cities shoulder the potential innovation risks and no one city carries the full exposure alone. Sharing can also enhance political will, as Mayors feel more confident in taking action after hearing from peers who are dealing with the same challenges and opportunities.

Cities can be supported to view – and communicate – experimentation and setbacks as part of the learning process, and to be better able to manage and mitigate any sensitivities under this collective umbrella.

Example: The Cities Fortifying Democracy project at the German Marshall Fund of the United States brings together city representatives from Europe and North America, cross-sector stakeholders, and experts to explore what cities can do to strengthen democracy. Specifically, the project focused on advancing innovative thinking, practices, and policies in the areas of youth disenchantment with democracy, multi-racial inclusive communities, bridging divides and building common ground, and combatting disinformation.^{lxxx}

Example: In 2023, the Nets4Dem collaboration was announced, to advance democratic participation across Europe by bringing together fragmented knowledge to generate innovative solutions.^{lxxxi}

The initial partnership includes 12 organisations across Europe, between them bringing together 200+ cities, 50+ research institutions, and dozens of NGOs with a focus on democratic innovation, civic participation, deliberation and education.

Multi-Sector Collaboration

Disinformation impacts many sectors across communities, and effective response can be viewed through the lens of a local response ‘eco-system’.

There are three aspects to this multi-sector response for cities. First, with clear geographical and legislative authority, cities are well placed to convene different entities to inform and enact multi-sector response. This includes harnessing the significant contributions of each sector, as well as establishing robust pathways for advocacy.

Second, cities engage with other sectors to enhance their own, and their respective, disinformation response efforts. And, third, as cities build their own capabilities in disinformation response, they are also well-placed to support the capacity building of others within their local response ecosystem, thereby enhancing collective capabilities.

Cities as multi-sector convenors

Bringing multi-sector actors together enables cities and other parties to access and share critical information. Bringing together different types of sector expertise and applying this expertise to collective problem solving enables collaboration and alignment between response efforts.

Multi-sector collaboration can also create the opportunity for mutual support in times of disinformation crisis. The below example demonstrates a model by which one sector has created global connections for rapid response to disinformation attacks.

Brains trust

Multi-sector ‘brains trusts’ can provide effective support to city response to disinformation – being called on to inform policymaking and business planning, especially at times of crisis. These can include representatives from the sectors below and can be ongoing bodies to call on for specialist advice. An effective example of this is one city’s ‘Academic Studio’, which brings together academics, policymakers, civil society, and businesses to tackle specific and new challenges related to disinformation and social media.

Example: Shots Heard is a ‘digital cavalry’ of over 2000 globally, who support each other in responding to anti-vaccine attacks.

This initiative began in 2017 when a paediatrics practice in the United States was attacked online following the release of a 90 second informational video on the benefits of vaccination against Human Papilloma Virus. The practice experienced significant attacks online, until two other medical groups came to their defence and helped them fight back. The power of collective response was realised, and a network of rapid-response online defenders of science was born.

The Shots Heard around the World Toolkit provides guidance on how to prepare for, defend against, and move forward after an anti-vaccination attack. lxxxii

Example: A European city’s ‘Academic Studio’ brings together academics, policy makers, societal organisations and businesses for city science collaborations. The municipality contributes real time data, whilst other contributors possess the knowledge, tools and methodologies to inform response.

Members meet regularly to tackle and discuss specific urban challenges related to social media and especially focuses on mis- and disinformation. They work on joint research proposals, share (preliminary) research results, data and presentations, and point to other forms of other relevant information.

In 2024, two key areas of focus are: How to deal with dynamic disinformation, i.e. temporary content created and shared on impermanent platforms like snapchat, and; investigating the impact/effectiveness of fact-checking and media literacy interventions.

Local multi-sector response

The disinformation response sector is vast and fluid. The key actors able to address a disinformation campaign may differ from context to context, and each city has its own key trusted organisations.

For this reason, cities should map their own context to understand who is key to multi-sector disinformation response. Several prominent sectors identified for local multi-sector collaboration are outlined below, including their role in disinformation local response and some key resources for capacity building.

Local news media and journalism

Supporting local journalism has been identified as key in addressing disinformation as the decline of this industry has been a factor in declining local civic engagement and trust. Working with local media has clear benefits for city disinformation response.

Cities are also well positioned^{lxxxiii} to strengthen local journalism through the provision of seed funding for innovation, advocating sector needs to other levels of government, and sharing resources to support the continuation of quality journalism in the face of disinformation.

This can be challenging if there are strained relationships between local media outlets and city administrations or politicians. However, the presence of better resourced and equipped local media supporting high quality local journalism is of benefit to all.

Example: Malmö is a Swedish city with a population of approximately 360,000. Following local hate crimes and racist incidents, the city sought to address the interconnected ‘occurrences of hate in the digital space and in the physical space’.

The City of Malmö joined forces with the Police, civil society, local enterprise Common Consultancy, the Swedish Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE) and other Nordic Cities in the Nordic Safe Cities (NSC) network to launch the ‘Safe and Secure Digital City’ initiative.

The project used algorithmic tools to identify hate speech expressed in Swedish to understand when and where hate occurs – and whom it is directed at. The results informed a direction of action, in collaboration with stakeholders.^{lxxxiv}

Example: The Institute for Cyber Law, Policy and Security at the University of Pittsburgh has developed a guide for Best Practices for Local Newsrooms.^{lxxxv} The guide includes key points for focusing on maintaining integrity and trust in local journalism, including clearly labelling content that is opinion-based, and informing readers of the ways in which AI is used in reporting. In addition to advocating the implementation of such practices in local media, these provide valuable guidance for city communications also.

- Share policies and standards online where your audience can review them.
- Explain your approach to covering topics that generate significant disinformation, like elections.
- Help readers separate news from opinion by clearly distinguishing between reporting and opinion pieces
- Be wary of creating headlines that could be misleading, even as they’re strong clickbait.
- When reporting about disinformation, direct people to additional reliable sources for future information.
- When reporting about disinformation and using a visual, use overlays to indicate something is false. Don’t embed or link to false content.
- Use of AI by media is an increasing area of interest and could diminish trust. Make sure you explain transparently how you use AI tools.

Civil society

Civil society provides services and spaces for people to connect and contribute to their community, and many organisations have high levels of legitimacy and trust within their own groups. These include non-government organisations, community groups, sporting clubs and faith-based organisations, and their centrality to the fabric of communities makes them key to disinformation response. At times civil society organisations themselves are targeted by disinformation campaigns and may need support to respond.

Civil society is extremely broad and embedded in communities, which makes it uniquely positioned to understand the different contexts within communities, and to support those targeted by disinformation. Their members are also, at times, involved in sharing disinformation - especially in groups that are highly hierarchical and disconnected from others. This means that they can be powerful actors in speaking directly to the creators and sharers of disinformation within the bounds of their established relationships and trust.

There are many examples of civil society enacting creative responses to divisive events. The example below can be drawn on to respond to physical manifestations of disinformation such as protests and rallies. Demonstrating the breadth of foci and capacities within civil society, these two examples showcase very different types of response.

Academia and think tanks

These actors provide robust research, interdisciplinary expertise and vast international networks. They can produce new knowledge for the public good, and are key in providing evidence-based understanding of disinformation (including its psychological drivers), new technological capabilities, and societal impact to name but a few of their benefits. They are also valuable intermediaries between different sectors that may not easily find common ground.

Amongst some within communities they are highly trusted for their evidence-based research, though in others they are considered increasingly partisan. However, research is critical to understanding and responding to complex city governance issues, and cities largely have existing institutional relationships with universities in their midst. These can be, and are, leveraged for local multi-sector collaboration.

The Eltham butterfly campaign^{lxxxvi} in Eltham, Australia, occurred in 2016 in response to a planned far-right rally against the settlement of up to 120 refugees in the community. Similar rallies had been held in other localities, and had attracted counter-rallies.

In response, community members decided to stage a silent protest using the symbolism of the butterfly and a message of welcome. They created 7500 butterflies to adorn the roads and hang from trees, especially in the area where the rally was planned.

This sent a powerful counter-message of welcome to those planned for resettlement – and others in the community. It also meant that the rally, and all of its photos, included a backdrop of ‘ethereal’ butterflies.

Elections 24 Check^{lxxxvii} is a collaboration among multiple European fact-checking agencies in the ‘global election year’ of 2024. The project involves building a collective database that can be a basis to leverage the power of AI and data analysis.

This collaboration has several goals, including increasing the outreach of fact-checks and speeding up fact-checking through collaboration, as disinformation debunked by one organisation in one country might be relevant and adopted in another.

The Municipal Association of Victoria, a provincial peak body representing 79 local governments in the Australian state of Victoria, collaborated with the University of Melbourne to establish an applied, city-focused academic micro-certificate in Identifying and Managing Disinformation that their member cities, and others, can access in order to build their understanding of, and capacity to respond to, disinformation.^{lxxxviii}

Tech, AI and social media

Tech companies, especially those developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies, are key to disinformation response as they actively expand current capabilities in disinformation creation and dissemination as well as response.

AI enables disinformation creation in the form of artificially generated imagery, text, audio and video and involves many applications that are useful for – and used by – cities and many of their key stakeholders. However, these can also be used to create disinformation by enabling rapid creation of multiple narratives – both targeted and generalist – for nefarious purposes.

Understanding the rapidly changing technological landscape is critical to city disinformation response. In addition, cities need to be able to access and contribute to real-time discussions to influence and regulate AI and social media conduct in relation to disinformation.

Disinformation and AI

There are multiple definitions of AI, but according to AI for Peace’s Non-Technical Guide for Policymakers: AI Explained, it essentially means the ‘ability of a machine to perform cognitive functions we associate with human minds, such as perceiving, reasoning, learning, and problem solving’. There is no single ‘AI technology’, but instead a suite of technologies that can together create machines that are able to act with ‘human-like levels of intelligence’.^{lxviii}

The role of AI in disinformation is twofold. According to the World Economic Forum, ‘AI technologies which can generate ‘deepfakes’ can be used in the production of both misinformation and disinformation’. However, at the same time, ‘AI can also help combat false information through analysing patterns, language and context to aid content moderation.’^{xc}

Given the possibilities and risks associated with AI, and the speed with which it is developing, it is imperative that cities build internal knowledge and capacity to navigate this revolution. The Alliance for Securing Democracy, in Washington DC, produced an AI Election Security Handbook in February 2024, with specific advice related to how AI can impact elections, and suggested responses.^{xcii}

Because disinformation now predominately spreads via social media,^{xcii} major social media companies are increasingly engaged in disinformation response efforts. They can play an important role in combating disinformation spread through actions such as content-labelling. Indeed, flagging false or misleading information online with warning labels, and providing additional context, can make social media users less likely to accept and share false information.

Continued and improved action to address disinformation spread on social media will require advocacy from stakeholders. There is power in numbers and cities have a role to play here too.

Firstly, cities need to engage to understand current capabilities and trends – both to know how disinformation is being enabled and spread and to understand current capabilities to respond.

Secondly, cities need to advocate for their communities and stakeholders with tech companies – especially when local disinformation events occur - to ensure that those deciding on content control mechanisms, safeguards and removal are informed of the situation, and act.

There are other entities involved in such advocacy and the drafting of relevant legislation and terms of operation, including national governments and police. This is a key area where multi-sector and multi-level engagement intersect.

US-based organisation AI Now Institute released a guide for policy-makers on Zero Trust AI Governance.^{xciii} Whilst legal avenues are just one mechanism for addressing disinformation, this guide responds to ongoing issues of accountability of big tech companies. It provides detailed guidance based on three principles:

1. Time is of the essence – start by vigorously enforcing existing laws.
2. Bold, easily administrable, bright-line rules are necessary.
3. At each phase of the AI system lifecycle, the burden should be on companies to prove their systems are not harmful.

Education sector

Schools, early childhood education, and adult and community education services within cities offer powerful expertise and opportunities to deliver structured critical literacy training, pre-bunking and de-bunking opportunities. These can be state-run, such as the example from Finland below, or independently run, such as the Lie Detectors program also outlined below.

Example: Finland repeatedly leads the world in media literacy rankings.^{xciiv} Media literacy is part of the national curriculum in Finland, as part of the cross-sector national media education policy. Children learn critical reasoning skills at all ages starting from pre-school.

For over a decade now, Media and digital literacy skills have been embedded in Finland's national curriculum, across subjects. For example, in Maths students learn how statistics can lie; and in History students explore historical propaganda campaigns.^{xciiv}

Importantly, whilst the Finnish population leads the world in critical media literacy, they have managed to achieve this without creating general cynicism and distrust within society. Indeed, Finland continues to report high levels of overall trust – another key factor in disinformation resilience.

In addition to the above, other sectors that are heavily impacted by disinformation such as the health sector, sustainability sector and those serving specific demographics have considerable insights, networks, and knowledge to contribute to relevant multi-sector response.

Example: Lie Detectors is an independent media literacy organisation that works across Europe. Its goal is to 'counter the corrosive effect of online disinformation and online polarisation on democracy.'^{xciiv}

Recognising the confusing nature and sheer volume of manipulative media online, the organisation deploys professional journalists to work with young people and teachers.

They deliver interactive training sessions designed to improve understanding of journalism and news media to support young people to hone their own fact-checking capacities and make informed decisions when engaging with news media.

Multi-Level Collaboration

Cities operate within differing multi-level governance environments. Existing efforts to respond to disinformation largely occur at the national and supra-national levels, e.g. via foreign offices, interior ministries and the state intelligence apparatus. These established entities provide a potentially valuable resource for cities in accessing higher-level sophisticated information to inform response at the city level. They present advanced capacities and mechanisms, large and highly specialised workforces, significant clout with academic institutions, and significant budget.

In turn, cities hold local knowledge and understanding of the manifestations and impact of disinformation, and unique capacities to address these through their relatively high agility and expertise in developing local solutions to broader challenges. These resources are invaluable in informing legislation and policy at higher levels to ensure its effectiveness downstream. In summary, both cities and higher levels of government have valuable information that can benefit the other in understanding and addressing disinformation across society.

Additionally, the impacts of disinformation at the local and national (and provincial, where relevant) levels are interconnected. For example, disinformation at the local level is causing people to turn away from political careers, potentially interrupting the pipeline of elected representatives which often starts locally before moving to other levels of government, thus potentially undermining democracy both at the local and at the national level.

Advocating the need.

The benefits of multi-level action are broadly recognised within cities who express a strong desire to collaborate with national governments. This is less well recognised in national governments, where many working within national government departments remain unaware of the full scope of work and capacities of cities. Advocacy is necessary in many cases to help national level governments understand how cities enhance such efforts.

Example: The Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, developed a National-Local Cooperation Toolkit on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.^{xcvii} The toolkit contains important guidance on the ways by which different levels of government can establish and implement coordinated responses, including key considerations for the following:

- generating trust between national and local governments, which cannot always be assumed, especially if these are governed by different ruling parties.
- multi-level systems coordination and communication.
- capacity building and supports for local governments to effectively deliver counter-terrorism activities - which includes disinformation response.

Whom to engage with.

Understanding whom to engage with at the provincial and national level can be challenging, as policy and legislative responsibilities for disinformation response likely sit across multiple departments and ministerial portfolios. This is where peak bodies and local city networks can support cities in identifying the structures for effective multi-level engagement.

How to engage.

Cities are already astute at connecting with other levels of governments through a wide variety of advocacy, funding and legislative interactions. However, as disinformation response has largely operated without connection between subnational and national governments, new connections may need to be established between cities and the specific national-level departments, teams, or Ministries.

For some cities, direct approaches to national governments are effective and preferred. For others, including smaller cities, this is another opportunity for multi-city collaboration as peak bodies and city networks can act as a valuable conduit. Such intermediaries can also be useful in enabling flow of information, including for example necessary security clearances for all parties. The structuring of such processes for information sharing are of key importance for both periodical updates and rapid response to disinformation events.

Policy Settings

Disinformation policy is key in structuring responses and accountability. The public policy context of cities and local governments differs widely, and even within legislative environments cities retain significant autonomy over the nature of their activities in responding to disinformation. Outlined below are some key policy areas for cities, framed by several general principles. Effective policymaking in the context of disinformation is in many ways an application of principles of good governance. Policymaking should respond to the diversity of impacted groups and work areas. Figure 10 presents the targets of disinformation in cities, with specific initiatives the most frequent target (64%) followed by individualised targets of elected representatives (57%), city staff/officials and community or groups within the community (both 36%).

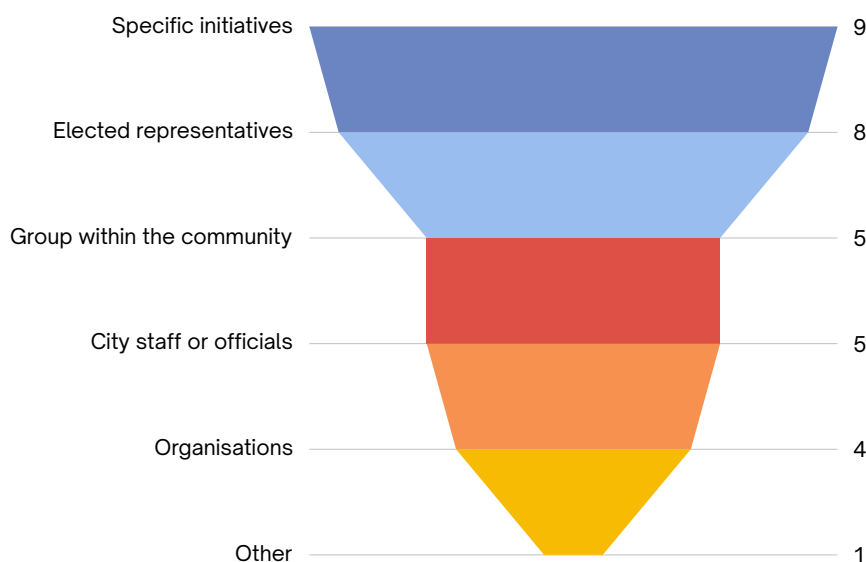
Building on the previous sections, policymaking should be transparent and inclusive. Given the relative unfamiliarity that communities, city administrations and elected bodies likely have with disinformation response, this will likely include some level of education to help people understand associated issues. Community and stakeholder expectations of the scope of city activity in disinformation response differ widely.

Open discussion about the obligations and envisioned role for local government in addressing this issue from the local to the global level will help policies to be appropriate in scope and promote collective buy-into policy solutions. Throughout the policymaking process, sharing information on what is being done and why can build trust as people understand how things work. The policymaking process is subject to disinformation, and proactively providing accessible information throughout the process will help to limit such campaigns.

Disinformation will be part of the information landscape into the foreseeable future. This establishes a new normal for city functioning and for policymaking. Below is a list of principles for policy responses, followed by specific recommendations for policy related to communications, policymaking and governance, and organisational wellbeing.

Figure 10: Targets of disinformation in cities

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



1

Transparency

Transparency of intention in responding to disinformation should be included in any policy framework, accompanied by a clear rationale that is communicated simply. Relating this closely with the agreed community vision will have greater legitimacy and consistency of messaging.

2

Code of conduct

This should include clear expectations and consequences for using disinformation in the workplace. Codes of conduct should be updated to include provisions against the vexatious use of governance or other processes.

3

Whole-of-organisation approach

Internal coordination is key to effective disinformation response. This may be a standing inter-departmental group, with regular communication. As policies come up for review, relevant policy owners can be brought into this group to ensure fluid access to information. Disinformation response is not solely the responsibility of communications teams, requiring a holistic approach across the many services and activities of local governments.

4

Policymaking as flashpoint

Policy endorsement at both the city and other levels of government has been identified as a key flashpoint of disinformation campaigns. This is especially likely in relation to the thematic areas outlined previously but it is not limited to these. Any new policy should thus be considered a flashpoint for disinformation and planned for accordingly. Proactively communicate the policy intentions and process, and plan enhanced communications monitoring and information sharing with communities and stakeholders in the lead-up to policy endorsement can enable the pre-emption of potential disruptions and support implementation of safety measures.

5

Policy coordination

Coordinating policymaking across departments and organisations enables alignment between efforts and enhanced efficacy. It also increases and harnesses actions across differing work areas and organisations. This builds on the collaboration section above but also applies in this context specifically to aligning policies between internal departments, sectors and levels of government rather than promoting shared action between them.

6

Internal policy alignment

Effective disinformation response requires internal coordination across a holistic representation of relevant policy and service delivery areas. Disinformation response policies should interact with other key planning and policy frameworks, both to identify the disinformation risks posed to each policy area and to enable those policy areas to be reflected in whole-of-organisational disinformation response frameworks.

7

Multi-sector

Policy coordination between sectors allows multi-faceted approaches to local initiatives, harnessing the power and influence of others beyond local government. Publicly aligning policy responses across different sector stakeholders that are connected to and trusted by different groups across cities can broaden reach and acceptance of initiatives.

8

Multi-level

Policy coordination between levels of government allows for alignment of intention. Usually national or regional level governments play a role in creating and enforcing legislation related to disinformation, and creating the overarching policy context within which cities then operate. Maintaining city autonomy within such multi-level alignment is important in applying the localised, embedded lens that is cities' strength area.

Communications policy

Disinformation response requires communication and information sharing throughout. Policy settings should draw on the previous sections of this playbook, building trust and working collaboratively. Communications policies should include the following aspects:

Know what's happening.

Integrate the use of multiple, coordinated mechanisms to ensure that disinformation can be identified as quickly as possible. This will include social media analysis, community engagement and information shared from other sectors, levels of government and cities. It should also include clear internal communications mechanisms for staff to flag emergent disinformation risks. Disinformation has global and local drivers, and establishing a wide network within the city and beyond will enable rapid awareness and ability to respond to emergent narratives.

Platforms & presence.

It is important for cities to understand and be present where people get their information. If that is on specific social media platforms, cities should build a presence on those platforms for general communications – not just targeted disinformation response. Mapping the way in which information is accessed and created across demographics within the city will enable more targeted approaches to present information and counter disinformation.

Accessibility.

Cities should communicate messages in ways that people can engage with easily and meaningfully. This includes using multiple languages but also ensuring that communications provide the necessary background for different groups to understand the context within which events occur. Integrating community education about disinformation and listening to communities enables informed bidirectional information sharing.

Information integrity.

Cities should develop robust procedures for ensuring the integrity of the information that they disseminate. For city administrations, mechanisms such as a rapid peer review process - whereby each social media post must be reviewed by a suitably informed colleague prior to posting – can be an agile way to reduce the risk of sharing disinformation. This can be enhanced with staff training in information verification and frequent updates on current disinformation trends and narratives. Such training can also be beneficial for elected representatives, in conjunction with policy mechanisms that put the onus of responsibility on individual politicians to ensure the integrity of the information they share and prohibit the dissemination of disinformation.

Rapid response mechanisms.

Disinformation events can escalate quickly, and it is important for rapid response mechanisms to be easily implemented. When responding to disinformation events, the first 24 hours are critical, and cities have existing structures to support crisis response, which can be built on. It is critical that disinformation response is highly transparent, visible and accessible – even when rapidly unfolding. Such procedures should be planned in advance and refined after each time they are enacted.

Frequent reviews.

Cities should plan periodical reviews to update information and connection networks, and ensure that these are adequate for connecting people within and across communities.

Workforce safety & education

City administrations and local governments have a moral, and in many contexts legal, obligation to provide a safe work environment for employees. This is increasingly threatened by disinformation driving threatening and abusing behaviour towards individuals.

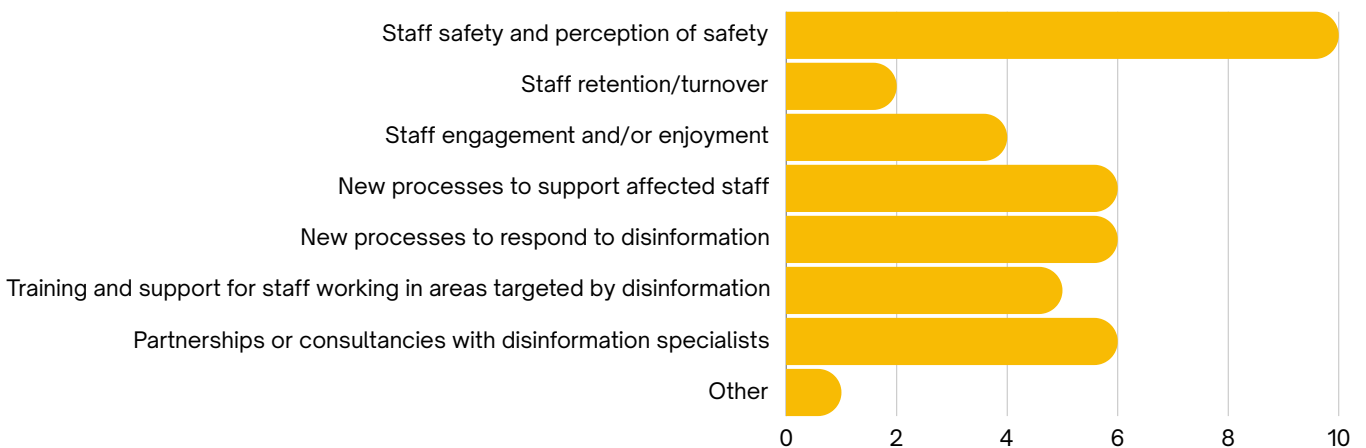
The impact is not limited to individuals who are specifically targeted, with staff members who are personally or professionally connected to broader areas and groups targeted by disinformation also impacted by such campaigns. These ripple effects mean that a variety of support mechanisms should be included in disinformation policy responses.

Figure 11, below, shows the impacts that disinformation has on organisational wellbeing. The most prevalent impact is overwhelmingly staff safety and perceptions of safety (71%), followed by the establishment of new processes to share information or respond, support impacted staff, and engaging consultants or partners with expertise in disinformation responses (all 43%). Establishment of new processes to build staff capacity were reported in 36% of cities. The impact on staff engagement and/or enjoyment and staff retention were also impacted, though less prevalently.

The below support mechanisms are advised, together with an internal mapping process of the levels and types of exposure undertaken to determine who might need which forms of support. Providing safety is an organisational responsibility, not solely an individual one. Organisational responses to the targeting of individuals or initiatives should also be adequately considered and included in policy responses.

Figure 11: Impacts of disinformation on organisational wellbeing

Source: Cities playbook workshop pre-survey N=14



All staff.

Any overarching organizational disinformation response policy should include clear support mechanisms for staff impacted by disinformation. In addition to ensuring that staff know how to flag disinformation internally, it should also include clear steps and pathways for employees to seek help in navigating their response. In addition, staff should be provided with training about disinformation in cities, what it is, how to identify it, and the organisation's policy and procedures for responding.

Staff with direct exposure.

Employees and volunteers are frequently and directly exposed to disinformation and associated negative behaviours, and therefore require additional protective safety mechanisms and training. Such exposure can be distressing and lead to psychological injury.^[i] These groups will likely include social media teams, front of house staff, and thematic staff in areas targeted by disinformation. They may also include executive team members and elected representatives.

Learning from the journalism sector, safety protocols can include frequent rotation of tasks, promoting team group presence and conversation through app-based channels regardless of working location, regular check-ins with teams, buddy systems, and clear mechanisms to raise concerns, flag issues, and access more targeted wellbeing support. These groups should also be provided with trauma literacy training to reduce the risk of psychological injury.

Targeted staff.

Employees and elected representatives who are likely to be targeted by disinformation attacks would benefit from proactive training in managing social media interactions, and having access to clear reporting processes. This should include directions on when and how to seek support in responding, as well as when and how to disengage. If attacks do occur, there should be a clear principle and structure for providing organizational support.

This includes individual and team debriefing, wellbeing and psychological services, support to remove content, and publicly supporting targeted individuals through media statements and staff communications. Such training and support should also be extended to organisational partners across sectors as a key aspect of collaborative disinformation response efforts.



Response preparedness

Test and refine disinformation responses through scheduled activities to ensure that systems are effective, and that different actors understand their roles and are familiar and comfortable operating in this space.

Simulation exercises are useful for developing and testing response models prior to implementation. Just like emergency management and public health, these can help develop informed, reflexive responses and familiarity with the process that can be enacted with agility when necessary.

Lab-based learning is useful in collectively exploring solutions to complex challenges. These provide opportunities for city representatives and other sectors to come together to formulate and interrogate solutions to real life scenarios.

Scan the organisation for opportunities to integrate disinformation response. This includes more than just communicating across departments. An example might be including a criterion in city grant-making guidelines that recipients of municipal funds demonstrate how their project will contribute to strengthening democracy, or an aspect thereof, and what their disinformation mitigation strategy is for the proposed project.

Disinformation now spreads at a speed and scale that cities and societies have never faced before. But cities are adept at rising to new challenges, and indeed the work has already begun.

For this challenge, cities need to be comfortable and confident in their policies and processes, networked as best possible to be able to access and share valuable knowledge, with strong communications and listening pathways across communities and sectors, and investing in building trusting and cohesive communities.

This work is ongoing and will evolve over time. And it is a collective endeavour, with cities across the globe impacted by, and responding to, disinformation.

Glossary of Key Terms

Artificial Intelligence refers to the technologies that allow machines or computers to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings, such as learning, reasoning, and problem solving. AI technology takes a variety of forms.

Astroturfing, often conducted by an organisation or political group, refers to the practice of publishing comments or opinions on social or traditional media with intent to make it appear that ordinary members of the public are in great support of a particular policy, opinion or product.

Cheapfakes, contrary to deepfakes, are manipulated images, video or audio-recordings created with more accessible technology (or none at all). Cheapfakes can be made through photoshop or simply through re-contextualizing real media (e.g., mislabelling or implying they are from a different time period).

Climate disinformation is diverse and can include climate change denial, promoting anti-government agendas, and undermining policy initiatives or green technology uptake

Conspiracism is the belief or advocacy of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories refer to alternate explanations to an event (often harmful or tragic) as the result of the actions or plot of an elite, powerful or sinister group. The event is often used to confirm the existence of this secret group.

De-bunking is a disinformation response tool, referring to the process of showing that something is not true. De-bunking typically involves offering evidence that disinformation is false and presenting the facts.

Deepfakes refer to artificial images, video or audio-recordings that appear authentic. Deepfakes often utilise a real person's image or voice to depict them in a false way. Deepfakes are created through machine learning and can be difficult to detect.

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

Dog whistling is the use of coded or suggestive language in political discourse to communicate or signal a message to a target audience, unbeknownst to wider audiences. The concept is derived from ultrasonic dog whistles, which can be heard by dogs but not humans.

Doxing (derived from “dropping docs”) refers to the act of revealing personal information about someone online, without their consent (e.g., full name, home address, phone number, financial records).

Foreign Interference refers to activities ‘carried out by or on behalf of a foreign government. The activity may be coercive, threatening, deceptive or clandestine.’

Gendered disinformation focuses primarily on women, gender-nonconforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) persons. Gendered disinformation is used to humiliate, sow distrust and/or incompetence of women and gender-nonconforming persons, or undermine policies aimed at equity and diversity.

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.

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

Pre-bunking is the process of de-bunking before disinformation has been disseminated, also referred to as inoculation. To this end, pre-bunking relies on the pre-emption disinformation narratives and tactics.

Social Media Analysis refers to a suite of methods used to collect and analyse social media data. Effective use of social media analysis can help inform strategic communications and decisions, by ascertaining what narratives are gaining traction within the community.

Trolling is the act of leaving insulting messages online to deliberately offend, upset or attack content consumers.

Whataboutism refers to the practice of responding to an accusation by raising a different issue altogether. This is often used in attempt to delegitimize the original accusation or question by diverting attention or by suggesting the advancer is a hypocrite.

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