

Disinformation

Long-term opportunities and challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand

Briefing for the incoming Prime Minister and Government

October 2023



Introduction

The rise of social media and loss of trust in traditional news outlets have made it much easier to spread disinformation. AI and generative AI will add to this risk. This can cause social division, undermine trust in institutions, harm mental health and have an economic cost.

Key points

- Disinformation harms the economy, national security, societal and institutional trust, and public health.
- Democracy suffers when public trust is undermined and social division stoked.
- Disinformation during the pandemic questioned vaccine efficacy and safety and provoked resistance to public-health measures.
- The consequences of disinformation were seen during the parliamentary protests in early 2022.
- Disinformation has caused distrust in elected officials, the media and science.
- Aotearoa New Zealand's multicultural identity and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are vulnerable to manipulation by disinformation.
- Disinformation can be used to amplify tensions or sow seeds of discord that threaten national security.
- Subtle forms of disinformation can combine hard-to-disprove subjective narratives.
- The label can be appropriated to discredit inconvenient opinions.
- Social media algorithms facilitate the dissemination of disinformation by targeting audiences and anonymising sources.
- Artificial intelligence (AI) threatens to make disinformation more sophisticated.
- Generative AI has the potential to both aggravate and inhibit disinformation by helping identify it and as a way to educate people about it.
- Fact-checking and rebuttal of disinformation doesn't go far enough in combating it.
- Governments need to tackle disinformation's root causes, such as what makes individuals susceptible to it.
- Democratic societies need to promote civil rather than uncivil discourse and develop ways to interact with a cynical and sceptical public.
- There is a lack of regulation, legislation, accountability and consequences for spreaders of disinformation.

Context

Disinformation has had a notable effect on democracy in recent years including in the United States, where false claims about the 2020 presidential election contributed to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol, and in Myanmar, where disinformation about the Rohingya minority contributed to genocide and other human-rights abuses.

Disinformation has been used to sow distrust in elected officials, the media and other institutions that are essential for a functioning democracy. Although disinformation alone isn't responsible for the decline in public trust, it exacerbates such sentiments.

It is not only a cause but also a symptom of long-standing societal issues. It has been used to amplify existing divisions in society and to create new ones, as seen globally during the pandemic. It can make it difficult to have informed conversations about important issues and can lead to a decline in civic engagement.

The spread of misinformation and disinformation online, particularly on social media platforms, has been effective in influencing individual decision-making particularly on critical matters such as Covid public-health measures, climate change and politics.

Disinformation poses a significant threat to democracy by unleashing chaos on democratic processes, upending democratic norms and weakening confidence in public institutions. It can spread fast and far across networks anonymously, cheaply and efficiently, turbocharged by generative AI and other manipulated media.

Disinformation's root causes include:

- The rise of social media: social-media platforms are designed to maximise engagement and this can lead to the spread of false or misleading information that is more likely to be shared and liked. Social media algorithms can amplify the spread of disinformation by showing people content similar to what they have already seen.
- The decline of trust in traditional media: traditional media institutions have lost trust in recent years and relative to other liberal democracies trust in our media is rather low.
- Social media allows for disinformation to spread rapidly and yet, for many, is their primary information source.
- A lack of critical-thinking skills: many people do not have the ability to evaluate information. This makes them more susceptible to being misled, especially if false information is persuasively presented.
- Economic inequality: economic inequality can lead to a decline in trust in social institutions and to a greater willingness to believe false or misleading information. Those who are struggling economically may be more likely to feel the system is rigged against them and be untrusting of traditional information sources.
- Political polarisation: political polarisation can lead to the spread of disinformation. When people are divided along political lines they are more likely to trust information that confirms their beliefs even if that information is false. This is because people are motivated to maintain a positive image of themselves and their political group and to avoid cognitive dissonance.

There have been several initiatives in response to disinformation including investing in public-education campaigns to raise awareness of the problem and working with social-media platforms to reduce disinformation's presence on their platforms. These have had little lasting effect. More needs to be done particularly to address the root causes of disinformation, focusing on:

- Strengthening democratic institutions and promoting civic engagement. This can help build trust in institutions and make it more difficult for disinformation to spread.
- Supporting civic- and media-literacy education from an early age. This can help people better understand how decisions are made, be critical of the information they see online and learn to identify disinformation.
- Addressing economic and social inequalities. Disinformation often preys on people's fears and insecurities. Addressing economic and social inequalities can help vulnerable communities be less susceptible to disinformation.

Dealing with these issues requires open conversations led by political and government leaders in partnership with industry and others. This needs to go hand-in-hand with long-term plans to improve social cohesion by building trust in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Actions for consideration

- Introduce systems-thinking and civic education in schools and the community and raise awareness of disinformation at scale rather than engaging in one-off rebuttals.
- In partnership with relevant stakeholders consider measures to deal with the root causes of disinformation over the longer term.
- Consider measures that invest and rebuild trust in local media including funding mechanisms.
- Use innovative democratic tools to consult communities as a step to rebuilding trust, providing greater transparency and agency and providing open and accessible ways to conduct public discourse.
- Work with international partners to push for greater accountability and consequences for those who spread disinformation particularly in relation to foreign interference and state actors.

Key contact



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Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. It means ‘the sharp end of the spear’. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of longterm issues challenging our future.

This document was developed as part of a comprehensive briefing to the incoming prime minister and government. The full document is available informedfutures.org/briefing-to-incoming-government-2023

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