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Information disorder: disinformation, misinformation and a ‘polluted’ information space

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Key issues

- '[Information disorder]' describes the collective issues of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, and the broad ways in which the information space is 'polluted'.
- Information disorder has been described as a 'vicious cycle', reflecting broader societal issues, and, in turn, perpetuating and entrenching these issues.
- Information disorder undermines the right to political participation, threatens social cohesion, amplifies social and political tensions and divisions, and disrupts people's ability to make informed decisions (p. 3).
- Digital platforms and tools facilitate information disorder through:
    - increased speed and scale of content creation and dissemination
    - commodification of content
    - design features, including recommender algorithms
    - artificial intelligence.
- Increased transparency and risk-based regulation can hold platforms to account, while protecting freedom of expression.
- Strengthening the broader information environment and championing information integrity is key in combating information disorder.

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Introduction

An informed public is crucial to a well-functioning democracy. Yet, against a background of high political tension and diminishing trust, information disorder is undermining this aim. Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation are threatening social cohesion, increasing polarisation and creating confusion.

Addressing information disorder and strengthening information integrity is a critical concern for Parliament, and for the health of Australia's democracy.

Definitions

Information disorder is a term and conceptual framework coined by media researchers Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan – and increasingly used by experts and key stakeholders – to describe the collective challenges of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Rather than focusing solely on whether content is 'true' or 'false', information disorder considers the broader ways in which the online information space is 'polluted', skewed and manipulated, and the social harms that may result.

Box 1: Key terms

While there are no universally accepted definitions of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, the following definitions are commonly accepted:

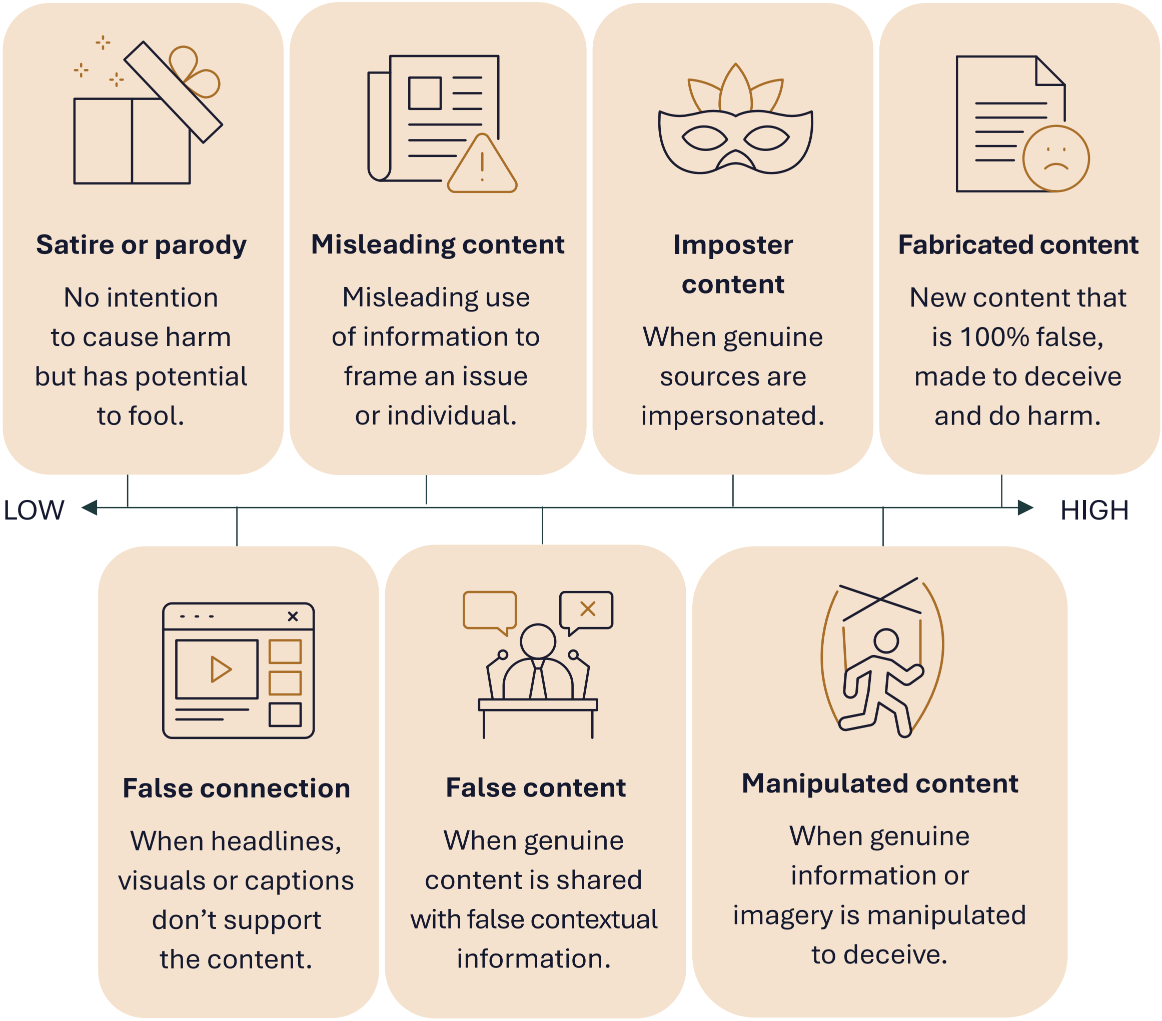
Misinformation:
false or misleading information created or shared regardless of intent.

Disinformation:
false or misleading information shared with the intent to deceive or cause harm.

Malinformation:
true information that is shared with the intent to deceive or cause harm.

Examples of these terms are outlined in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1 7 types of misinformation and disinformation



Satire or parody

No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.

Misleading content

Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.

Imposter content

When genuine sources are impersonated.

Fabricated content

New content that is 100% false, made to deceive and do harm.

False connection

When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content.

False content

When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

Manipulated content

When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

Source: Adapted from Claire Wardle, ‘Understanding information disorder’, *First Draft*, 22 September 2020.

The broad framework of information disorder may be applied to concepts such as algorithmically-driven echo chambers, ‘astroturfing’, opaque and biased recommender algorithms, propaganda, and AI-driven content and campaigns. Emerging concerns include subtle inaccuracies in AI-generated content (‘careless speech’), where ‘accuracy’ and ‘intent’ are conceptually different to human-generated information.

Different types of information disorder are distinct and warrant individual focus and research. As media historian Caroline Jack notes, precise definitions matter:

> The words we choose to describe media manipulation can lead to assumptions about how information spreads, who spreads it, and who receives it. These assumptions can shape what kinds of interventions or solutions seem desirable, appropriate, or even possible (p. 1).

Yet, it can be difficult to accurately apply definitions to different instances of disseminated content, with intent and veracity being hard, if not impossible (paragraph 10), to ascertain, and often dependent on the perspective of the observer (p. 4).

Given the complexity and overlap of different forms of information manipulation, considering the issue of information disorder more broadly – without dismissing the nuances of different types of manipulation – may help identify trends and structural issues that cut across these different forms.

How does information disorder arise?

Societal conditions

Information disorder is not a new phenomenon. Truth and lies, spin and rhetoric have been a feature of public discourse for centuries. Yet, the issue has intensified in recent years, prompting some to describe contemporary society as a ‘post-truth’ world.

Research shows information disorder is a complex issue that is symptomatic of broader societal challenges including declining social capital, civic engagement and trust in science, as well as increasing inequality, political alienation and polarisation (p. 20).

Information disorder has been described as a ‘vicious cycle’, reflective of societal issues and, in turn, perpetuating and entrenching these issues. The speed of this cycle has been greatly facilitated by a changing media environment underpinned by digital platforms and tools. Understanding this dynamic is essential for developing effective policy responses.

The role of online platforms

Digital platforms have transformed the information space. Information can be developed and disseminated at extreme speed and scale, engagement is a prime factor of information’s value, and a few private companies have outsized influence over the information ecosystem.

As communications scholar James W. Carey has observed, communication is not just about the transmission of information but has a ‘ritualistic’ function, acting as a vector for people to exhibit and negotiate values and identity. Social media accentuates this performative role of communication (pp. 43–44), fuelling a culture of reaction and sharing that contributes to the dynamics of information disorder.

Online platforms are not neutral. While the internet was once touted for its potential to democratise information, in reality, information presented to the public is skewed by commercial interests and enables manipulation by actors not working in the public interest. A few core businesses – including, for example, Alphabet (Google) and Meta (Facebook and Instagram) – dominate the market, shaping what people conceive of as ‘the internet’ and mediating what information is made available and how.

Much information on the internet may be better conceived of as ‘content’ within an ‘attention economy’, prioritising user engagement and revenue. Platforms – and the algorithms that underpin them – are often geared towards ‘sensational, emotive, [and] controversial’ content that attracts clicks and reactions, regardless of the factual nature of the information. Recommender systems have also been found to promote content that conforms to a user’s previous behaviour and preferences and excludes ‘different viewpoints or valuable ideas contrary to a person’s existing beliefs’ (p. 5). While the emergence of alternative platforms may chip away at the dominance of ‘Big Tech’, there is a fear that it could lead to fragmented partisan communities.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is further changing how information is created and disseminated online. Generative AI can create highly plausible synthetic media (including disinformation) quickly, cheaply and at scale. Information can be targeted to local contexts, AI-driven bots and followers can be purchased, and whole production chains can be automated. AI chatbots and AI summaries are also altering how people search for information online, deplatforming traditional news outlets and transforming search engines into ‘answer engines’. As predictive processing machines, generative AI has no gauge for ‘veracity’ but merely predicts ‘likely word combinations’. Large language models reproduce biases in underlying training data and often fail to understand nuances in sources. They can create outputs that ‘look plausible but are far from it’, confidently presenting potentially misleading or incorrect information. Some researchers suggest that these are fundamental limitations in the structure and design of AI, and that current ‘safeguards’ are superficial and ineffective.

Social harms and democratic risks

Information disorder is now considered a key concern worldwide. In 2024, the World Economic Forum named misinformation and disinformation as the ‘biggest short-term risks’ to global society. In his 2025 Annual Threat Assessment, ASIO’s Director-General Mike Burgess highlighted the role of social media and online echo chambers, inflamed by misinformation and disinformation, in spreading and cultivating political tensions, conspiracies and grievances.

The precise impact of information disorder online is difficult to measure and some argue that concerns around its impact may be overblown. However, the cumulative effect of information disorder on social cohesion, public opinion and democratic processes appears clear. If ‘a functioning democracy relies on a well-informed public’, then a ‘pervasively misinformed’ public will lead to poor quality societal decisions (p. 354). As the UN Secretary-General noted in 2022, disinformation may be ‘undermining the right to political participation’, pose threats to ‘inclusion and social cohesion’, ‘amplify tensions and divisions’, and ‘affect the full range of human rights by disrupting people’s ability to make informed decisions’ (p. 3).

Recommender algorithms, compounded by confirmation bias, have been found to amplify and spread misinformation at scale, contributing to adverse health effects and real-world violence (see Box 2). Algorithms can make previously fringe or politically extreme content easier to access and more mainstream. This can contribute to and overlap with hate speech. For example, investigations have found that Facebook’s lack of content moderation in Myanmar enabled the spread of ‘hateful and divisive rhetoric’ including misinformation (p. 339), contributing to serious human rights impacts (p. 45). With many major platforms winding back content moderation and safety features, these risks are increasing.

Platforms and the politics of attention are vulnerable to manipulation by malicious actors and coordinated operations. ‘AI slop’, trolls, bots and scams are polluting platforms. There are fears that malicious actors may exploit the design of platforms and AI capabilities to deliberately ‘flood the zone’ with biased, or non-factual information – skewing narratives, stifling genuine debate, overwhelming audiences and causing confusion. There are many instances in Australia of fringe hyper-partisan accounts, amplified by what appear to be bots or sock puppet accounts, leading campaigns to make misleading hashtags trend. These campaigns drown out genuine information and debate. Access to vast amounts of user data also facilitates hyper-targeted communications or advertising, increasing the potential for manipulation and erosion of trust.

Information disorder abounds in response to data voids and news deserts, with misleading or false content propagating in places where there may be a lack of relevant information. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in response to breaking news events (p. 16), where false or unverified information and conspiracy thinking quickly spreads before quality or complete information has time to emerge. Breaking events also give rise to ‘disaster disinformation’, where disinformation is shared online after disaster events, feeding on peoples’ heightened emotions and desire for information.

Foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is also a key concern around the world. While FIMI did not prove to be an issue in the 2025 Australian election, there has been clear evidence of interference in international elections in 2025, suggesting that Australia may not be immune.

Box 2: Misinformation, algorithms and violence: Southport riots, UK, 2024

In July 2024, 3 children were killed in a stabbing attack in Southport, England. Local police were only able to identify the perpetrator as ‘a male’, creating a data void – a ‘vacuum where misinformation was able to grow’. Within hours, false and unverified claims began circulating online, incorrectly identifying the attacker as a Muslim and asylum seeker. By the next day, posts containing this disinformation had achieved an estimated 27 million impressions (impressions are the total number of times content is displayed on a user’s screen).

While platform algorithms accelerated the spread of misinformation, influential ‘super-spreaders’ further picked up and amplified these false claims. This included accounts with ‘purchased blue ticks’ on X, which artificially boosts these accounts’ content. An X account, ‘Channel 3 Now’, which posts news content incentivised by digital advertising, further amplified the false narrative, leading to the content being picked up by larger media outlets, including Russian state-controlled news outlets.

The day after the murders, violent rioting broke out in Southport, spreading across the UK and Ireland over the following week. The UK Home Office stated that the ‘online environment played a significant role in inciting [this] violence’.

A House of Commons inquiry into the riots found that platforms’ responses to the unrest were slow and inconsistent, and often failed to uphold their own terms of service. It also found that closed groups on encrypted platforms (where content is not moderated) were used to coordinate and incite violence.

During sentencing of the Southport offender, it emerged that he had searched for a video of a 2024 stabbing in Sydney – content that had been posted on X and which the eSafety Commissioner had attempted to have taken down – minutes before leaving home ahead of the killings.

Commentary on the Southport riots has subsequently been shared out of context to fuel misinformation about other issues.

New UK police guidelines now encourage disclosure of suspects’ race and nationality in high-profile cases in a bid to combat misinformation. However, some campaigners warn that this may have unintended consequences.

How to address the issue?

Transparency and accountability

Balancing human rights is a central consideration in information regulation. The UN warns that content-based regulation risks unreasonably restricting freedom of expression and protected speech (p. 12). Instead, increased transparency of platforms is the widely recommended approach by global and national bodies, including the UN (p. 6) and the Australian Parliament’s 2023 Senate Inquiry into Foreign Interference through Social Media.

Transparency of platform content and complaints – including consistent and localised datasets (p. 1) – is critical for researchers, policymakers and law enforcement to better understand the nature and extent of the issue and to respond effectively and appropriately. It also increases the accountability of platforms in addressing harmful misinformation.

Built-in transparency features – such as flagging inauthentic accounts or AI generated content, transparency of advertisements and algorithms, and accurate source attribution – help the public critically assess content and make better informed decisions.

However, balancing the needs for transparency and encrypted services remains a conundrum for digital regulation. This is especially relevant to information disorder, as many fringe and anti-institutional groups, who may be susceptible to misinformation, avoid mainstream platforms in favour of encrypted platforms or private communication channels.

Some jurisdictions, notably the European Union (EU), have adopted risk-based regulation that requires certain large platforms to undertake risk assessments related to misinformation and disinformation and to take appropriate mitigation measures (see Articles 34 and 35). The EU’s *Artificial Intelligence Act* applies a similar risk-based approach. Unlike Australia, these regulatory regimes include enforcement powers. However, some platforms are finding ways to avoid compliance. Indeed, as noted earlier, content moderation and safety measures across several major digital platforms have been rolled back in recent years (pp. 10–11).

Information integrity and resilience

Strengthening the broader information environment and championing information integrity is also key in combating information disorder. Fundamental to this is a well-supported, independent and diverse media – the ‘fourth estate’ of democracy. Governments and media should provide timely and accessible factual information, including in simple English and other accessible forms (pp. 2–3). In Australia’s multicultural context, non-English language media must be considered in both regulatory frameworks and content creation.

Efforts should also address the 'demand-side' of information disorder – that being the 'societal vulnerabilities that make individuals susceptible to false or misleading content'. This includes promoting media literacy, 'prebunking' strategies to 'inoculate' the public against misinformation and understanding why certain people may be inclined to seek out misinformation or engage with conspiratorial thinking. Research links these tendencies to various societal inequalities, political alienation, and declining trust in democratic institutions. Stakeholders suggest that boosting civic engagement and increasing transparency of government are key for rebuilding trust in government. Countries with stable and trusted institutions and access to independent information have been found to be the most resilient to misinformation (p. 15).

Parliament's role

While there have been efforts in Australia and internationally to combat the harms caused by information disorder, it is clear that more action is needed, and soon.

In addressing the issue of information disorder, Parliament may need to move beyond a narrow focus on misinformation and disinformation, where 'truth' and 'intent' are hard to gauge, and consider the broader challenge of a polluted information space. Focusing on structural and systemic approaches – rather than individual pieces of content – can address the roots of the issue without infringing on protected speech. Protecting the integrity of the information environment is key to protecting freedom of expression, democracy and social cohesion.

Further reading

- United Nations (UN), *United Nations Global Principles For Information Integrity: Recommendations for Multi-stakeholder Action*, (New York: UN, 2024).
- Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson, *Countering Disinformation Effectively: An Evidence-Based Policy Guide*, (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 January 2024).
- Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), 'Online disinformation and misinformation', ACMA website, last updated 24 September 2025.
- UK House of Commons, Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, *Social Media, Misinformation and Harmful Algorithms*, HC 441, 11 July 2024.
- Irene Khan (Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression), *Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression*, A/HRC/47/25, (United Nations Human Rights Council, 13 April 2021).
- Nell Fraser, 'What's next for misinformation regulation?', *FlagPost,* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library, 2 July 2025).

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