INFORMATION MANIPULATION & HARASSMENT OF LOCAL LEADERS: IMPACTS & IMPLICATIONS

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Acknowledgement and Series Note

In early 2024, the Resilient Democracy Research and Data Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. Now referred to as the Australian Resilient Democracy Network, the Network is designed to encourage interdisciplinary, collaborative and actionable research seeking policy-relevant insights that measure, diagnose and assess pathways strengthening Australia's democratic resilience. The Network is dedicated to sharing the analysis publicly, and to encouraging the use of these ideas to prompt future research collaborations and actionable policy.

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Abstract

The issue of targeted disinformation and harassment of local elected representatives is a local manifestation of broader societal trends. Harassment is enabled by new technologies and capabilities to manipulate information. This includes social media platforms as carriers and amplifiers, and increased capacities to create deep-fake imagery, audio and films as well as the development of bots and AI-generated content that significantly increase the volume and breadth of harassment that can occur.

Local officials frequently manage hostilities alone, reporting experiences of isolation as they seek to avoid hostile situations. They also respond largely through self-censoring, including restricting social media presence, restricting physical attendance at public events for work and in private, and withdrawing from discussion of divisive topics. There are increasingly challenges from communities, and organised campaigns, to undermine the legitimacy and authority of councils, from those who reject the legitimacy of the state, to those who use confrontational tactics to slow or undermine council processes. Within this, public servants and elected representatives face personal threats and abuse, especially when engaging with highly polarised areas including migration, gender and climate action.

Women, LGBTIQ+ and racialized groups are most frequently targeted. In addition to the higher prevalence, the nature of harassment and threats differs, with these groups experiencing xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, racist and misogynistic slurs and disinformation, as well as higher rates of threats towards their families. As targeted individuals withdraw, this limits critical diversity in democratic debate, constrains public engagement, discouraging people from running for election, undermining effective local services, and amplifying specific anti-government agendas.

Targeted disinformation and harassment do not occur in a vacuum, and the rise in these hostile acts is accompanied, enabled, and exacerbated by social, political, and technological conditions. The potential impacts on representative democracy are significant, as self-censoring behaviours and incivility in public discourse coincide to create conditions that stifle democratic debate and effective policymaking. Current regulatory protections are inadequate and not sufficiently accessible to meet the immediate needs of targeted individuals and their organisations. To enhance this, a holistic response model is recommended to respond to the specific behaviours, and their social, political and technological drivers.

Contents

Glossary of terms[i]

Astroturfing refers to the practice of publishing comments or opinions, paying 'impersonators' or taking actions with the intent to misrepresent the opinions, needs and sentiments of ordinary members of the public.

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.

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).

Harassment is unwanted behaviour that seeks to offend, humiliate, discredit or intimidate.

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.

Targeted disinformation refers to the use of disinformation in targeting individuals, misrepresenting their conduct, capabilities or intentions.

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

Introduction

Local governments in Australia and around the world increasingly report targeted disinformation and harassment towards local elected representatives and municipal leaders. This occurs through a variety of mechanisms, including online trolling, doxing, deepfake audio and video and malicious use of city governance processes. The extent and severity of these behaviours warrant urgent action to document the drivers, understand the extent of issues and impacts, and formulate targeted responses to protect those tasked with leading our cities.

Disinformation is both a symptom and driver of the current eroded information environment impacting society, and local government. This environment is characterised by highly siloed and unverified information exchange (predominantly via social media platforms), decreased institutional trust, and increased polarisation[ii]. Targeted disinformation aimed at local elected representatives is different from the important and valuable exercise of democratic dissent or differences of opinion, in that it is knowingly untrue, and is used to erode individual and institutional capacities to govern by undermining, deterring, and intimidating[iii].

As societies globally have experienced a rapid escalation in the use of information manipulation in recent years, so too have they witnessed an increase in public acceptance – and endorsement – of the use of uncivil and hostile behaviours.[iv] Disinformation and harassment are used together to individually intimidate, humiliate and discredit leaders in government, including elected and executive leaders. Such harassment disproportionately impacts women and underrepresented cultural groups[v] with personal impacts on those targeted, including psychological, physical and professional.

The impacts of these behaviours extend beyond individuals and even organisations to impact social cohesion and the local functioning of democracy more broadly. By promoting an adversarial environment and manipulating or muting perspectives in public discussion, disinformation and harassment also impact the ability for local governments to effectively engage in the necessary debate and processes to enable effective future-oriented policy and service delivery, as outlined below. And by coercing the democratic expression of elected representatives, and thus their constituents, the ripple effects of these behaviours can extend to governance and the fulfilment of the local democratic mandate.

Australia is not immune to these pressures. As discussed below, trends suggest urgent action is needed, and that such action warrants sustained investment to address the harms caused by these behaviours, and their societal drivers. Response options rely on enhanced capabilities and coordination between sectors and levels of government. These must be evidence-informed, drawing on a broad knowledge base, provide space for experimentation, and reimagine and extend on existing systems and structures.

In Australia, local government is created and governed under State Government legislation. The role of local government in Australia varies considerably between States and Territories and between metropolitan and regional areas. Local government in Queensland often carries out roles performed by State or Territory Governments elsewhere in Australia. The Australian Capital Territory Government fulfils many local government roles. Also, in Australia's regional and rural areas across all States and Territories, local government is often the most visible level of government and is seen by local communities as playing a broader leadership role than may be the case in many metropolitan areas. Likewise local governments in Australia vary considerably in size from 1.32 million inhabitants in the Brisbane City Council to 1590 residents in the smallest local government - the Shire of Peppermint Grove Council in Western Australia[vi].

Generally, local government in Australia and in many comparable countries is responsible for service delivery that communities rely on to lead healthy lives in healthy environments. It is a level of government responsible for vast workforces, nationally significant public infrastructure assets[vii], and for delivering services as varied as maternal and child health, waste management, libraries, economic development, roads, parklands, leisure centres and care at all ages. In addition, local government holds strategic responsibility for increasingly complex policymaking: for climate change mitigation and resilience, for housing at a time of crisis, and for social cohesion. Influencing or curtailing the capabilities of local government thus has far reaching impacts for the functioning of society, and threatens our collective resilience in an era of polycrisis.

Local government is commonly the most trusted level of government, the one closest to citizens, and the one responsible for decisions that shape people's daily lives and experiences of democratic governance[viii]. That is why cities are often considered critical actors in strengthening democracy and building democratic resilience[ixxxi]. The flipside of this is that local officials are also much more exposed and vulnerable. They not only have less protection, they live in the community that they are governing, with everyday exposure of local officials with the people who are affected by their decisions. This is largely the beauty of local democracy. But it also means that disinformation and harassment campaigns can be much more effective, since people who are consuming disinformation and susceptible to violence and harassment can intimidate and coerce.

This discussion paper is intended to support governments to understand and respond to this issue in a way that does not curtail the democratic expression of differing political opinion. It includes four sections focused on the extent of this issue, impacts, drivers and recommendations for response.

A global issue, locally experienced

The issue of targeted disinformation and harassment of local elected representatives is a local manifestation of broader societal trends. Reports from US[xiixiii], UK[xiv], Canada[xv], Europe[xvixvii] and globally[xviii] all point to the widespread nature of this issue. The Council of Europe (2022) reported that local and regional elected representatives are being increasingly subjected to:

- Abusive, insulting, humiliating, malicious and contemptuous comments.
- Intimidatory, threatening and frightening statements – including threats of harm, physical attacks or death threats and threats of sexual abuse and rape.
- Use of symbols, diagrams, graphics and photographs (real or doctored) designed to intimidate or cause fear and harassment.
- Encouraging and inciting others to abuse, intimidate, or cause fear and harassment for local or regional politicians or their friends and families.
- Posting on online social media designed to spread fake news, manufactured stories, exaggerated examples, out of context comments and quotes.[xix]'

In response, cities and municipal networks have issued statements[xx], launched advocacy campaigns[xxi], and introduced safety programs.[xxii] They have also established observatories[xxiii] and research projects[xxiv] dedicated to the monitoring and responding to this issue.

Australia is not immune, though consistent data is scarce - relying on the small number of privately held survey datasets outlined below, anecdotal accounts, and media coverage to understand the extent of issues and impacts. All of these, however, point to this being a significant and growing issue impacting the ability of Australian local elected representatives to undertake their duties.

This discussion paper reports international trends, citing key reports from the Bridging Divide Initiative at Princeton University, The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law, the Council of Europe, Council of European Municipalities and Regions, Centre for Political Research at Sciences Po University and the UK Local Government Association. To bring this into the Australian context, this is complemented with survey data from the Local Government Association of Tasmania, Victorian Local Government Association, Australian Local Government Women's Association and key anecdotal insights shared between April-October 2025, including in a September 2025 roundtable convened by Municipal Association of Victoria and the Australian National University. These are interpreted with the aid of scholarly literature and key reports from other heavily impacted sectors, particularly journalism.

Harassment of local elected representatives is significant and increasing. In the United States, the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University and Civic Pulse have been conducting quarterly surveys since August 2022 to track local officials experiences of threats and harassment. These surveys track the likelihood of local officials experiencing insults, harassment, threats, or attacks during that three-month period, with a participation of around 400 local government respondents each time. Survey data from Q2 2025 reports a 49% likelihood of experiencing insults, 33% likelihood of harassment; 16% likelihood of experiencing threats; and for just the third time since the survey launched, there were no physical attacks reported for the quarter[xxv].

Disaggregated data by gender and race/ethnicity shows disparity between groups, with the greatest differences being between men and women (survey data only includes two gender categories): Insults (58% women; 45% men; 52% minority culture; 50% non-minority culture); Harassment (42% women;

32% men; 39% minority culture; 35% non-minority culture); Threats (21% women; 16% men; 23% minority culture; 17% non-minority culture). The findings are also presented per population size, with a marked increase in insults, harassment and threats in communities with populations over 10,000.

Also in the United States, The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law surveyed and interviewed 1,700 state and local government officials in 2023 from all fifty US states to understand experiences and impacts of intimidation through threats and harassment. They reported that the volume and severity of abuse had increased in the years prior, with 52% of local officeholders experiencing insults and harassment – including stalking – and more than 18% experiencing threats or attacks within the preceding 18 months[xxvi].

In 2025, the United Kingdom Local Government Association conducted its third annual *Debate not Hate* survey of abuse and intimidation of local elected representatives in England and Wales, with 1,861 respondents. The survey found that 72% of respondents reported experiencing abuse or intimidating in their roles in the preceding 12 months. These rates were higher for people with disabilities (86%), LGBTIQ+ (85%), and women (78%). A quarter of respondents (25%) had personally experienced threats of violence or death against themselves or someone close to them. Fifty-two per-cent of respondents had been targeted by misinformation about them, and 11% had experienced doxing – the unauthorised publication of their personal information. In response, 73% of all respondents 'reported feeling personally at risk when fulfilling their role as councillor', with these rates even higher for LGBTIQ+ (85%), people with disabilities (85%), women (84%), and people from ethnic minorities (84%)[xxvii].

This is consistent with 2025 findings from the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, which reported that 37.5% of disinformation experienced in responding member cities was directed at elected representatives. Again, with women and minority groups disproportionately targeted.[xxviii] This issue has been growing over several years. In France, a 2022 large-scale survey of 3,696 Mayors reported 63% had been victims of acts of incivility, up from 53% in 2020[xxix].

In Australia, a 2025 survey undertaken by the Local Government Association of Tasmania, for which the number of respondents is not provided, found 78% per cent of councillors have experienced abuse, bullying, or intimidation from community members in the past two years.[xxx] This was most frequently reported to have occurred on social media (47%), verbally in public (37%), during a council meeting (35%), and in writing (27%)[xxxi]. Similarly, a 2024 survey of 301 Victorian elected representatives reported high levels of hostility, bullying and harassment in their role, largely from other councillors and members of the public. Eighty per-cent reported experiencing threatening or intimidating behaviour, 59% reported experiencing bullying or (non-sexual) harassment, and 15% reported experiencing sexual harassment. Forty-three per-cent perceived these issues to have worsened during their term[xxxii].

Women, LGBTIQ+ and racialized groups are most targeted. The disproportionate impact of targeted disinformation and harassment on already underrepresented groups in politics is clear. Women, LGBTIQ+, and racialized groups report experiencing significantly higher rates of these behaviours in each of the above surveys. In addition to the higher prevalence, the nature of harassment and threats differs, with these groups experiencing xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, racist and misogynistic slurs and disinformation[xxxiii], as well as higher rates of threats towards their families – including their children - than other officeholders[xxxiv].

This speaks to an existing undercurrent of misogyny and racism that is currently emboldened and amplified by increasingly polarised media, engagement-focused social media algorithms, and political actors manipulating perceived and real grievances. The Australian Local Government Women's Association reported from their sample of seventy women who chose not to recontest Victoria's 2024 local government elections, 80 per cent cited an abusive environment as a contributing factor.[xxxv]

This is consistent with other levels of Australian government. The 2022 report titled It's personal, not just political: Gendered cyberhate towards women and gender diverse people in politics in Victoria, found

that: 'gendered cyberhate is a norm in politics; gendered cyberhate is damaging democracy; and political workplaces need to take responsibility for the online wellbeing of their staff.'[xxxvi]

In the words of Sima Bahous, Executive Director of UN Women:

> **'The world is witnessing the erosion of women's political leadership at the very moment we need inclusive decision-making the most…When women are excluded from the highest levels of leadership, we all lose; as societies forfeit the more equitable, responsive governance that gender-balanced leadership makes possible.'**[xxxvii]

Harassment is enabled by new technologies and capabilities to manipulate information. Technology has rapidly advanced capabilities for both creating and disseminating false and harassing content. This includes generating deep-fake imagery, audio and films as well as the development of bots and AI-generated content that significantly increase the volume and breadth of harassment that can occur. AI generated fake scientific briefs have reportedly been provided to cities across Canada to inhibit climate action[xxxviii]. Deepfake audio has been used to target municipal leaders, including high profile target Lord Mayor of London, Saddiq Khan in 2024 with one manufactured divisive clip reportedly nearly leading to serious disorder[xxxix]. Such tools have been used to target local elected representatives around the world, including reportedly by other local elected representatives or candidates.[xl]

Denmark is the first European country to have introduced deepfake legislation to criminalise their creation and sharing.[xli] In 2025 South Australia became the first Australian state to ban political parties, elected representatives and candidates from creating and sharing 'electoral' deepfakes that 'falsely depict a person performing acts they did not do.'[xlii] Sexual deepfakes, including 'nudify' apps and deepfake pornography is also of increasing concern – across communities, and including elected representatives. While these are not yet commonly reported amongst local elected representatives, their prevalence in targeting others has increased significantly, leading to high profile cases around the world[xliiixlivxlvxlvixlvii].

Use of targeted disinformation is greatly increased by social media and other remote platforms. These operate on algorithms designed to increase engagement – including through amplifying divisive content – with minimal guardrails to ensure information accuracy.[xlviii] The Council of Europe (2022) found that social media platforms afforded perpetrators the ability to hide in relative anonymity, or as least create distance from them and their target whilst also leveraging the opportunity to share their messages with others in the electorate without the filtering of the independent press or the benefit of a critical environment to challenge them[xlix].

Harassment and disinformation come from global actors, locals and within council. Aggressors using targeted disinformation and harassment include local organised groups and individuals, broader networks across Australia and the globe, foreign state actors, and - importantly - other elected representatives[l]. This issue impacts local government leaders from within municipalities, beyond municipalities, and within the chamber.

Foreign actors typically seek to destabilise governments, drive distrust and polarisation, and influence public opinion.[li] Global organised networks often use networks to deliver targeted disinformation and harassment to meet specific social or political agendas such as anti-trans[lii] or climate change denialism[liii]. These often influence local perpetrators, or indeed impersonate locals[liv], where these broader narratives are interwoven with local issues with intent to influence decision-making.

Other political candidates use targeted disinformation and harassment as weapons, with elected representative 'behavioural issues' now the subject of the Local Government Leadership and Behaviour Review by the government of South Australia[lv]. A 2024 qualitative survey of disinformation in fourteen cities across North America, Europe and Australia found that councillors and other elected representatives are notable users, as well as targets, of disinformation.[lvi]

Targeted individuals are self-censoring and withdrawing. Local officials are frequently managing hostilities alone, reporting experiences of isolation as they seek to avoid hostile situations.[lvii] They are also responding largely through self-censoring, including restricting social media presence, restricting physical attendance at public events for work and in private, and withdrawing from discussion of divisive topics[lviiilix]. This has implications for community engagement, and the strong and unique level of connection between local elected representatives and the communities they serve.

Withdrawal from discussing divisive issues also has significant potential consequences for the robust debate that is a necessary feature of democratic governance. The voices most likely silenced, by virtue of their disproportionate targeting, are also likely to be those bringing the greatest diversity of knowledge and lenses to debate. This has implications for equity, legitimacy and innovation in decision-making[lxlxi]**.** As the people elected to represent views and perspectives of their constituents, any use of coercion to restrict such representation undermines their very democratic function.

People are also stepping away from politics. In the US, more than 40% of local elected representatives said this impacted their willingness to run for re-election or higher office – this rose to approximately half for women.[lxii] In France, the number of Mayors who are resigning annually has multiplied by four between 2008-2026, with 2,189 resignations since July 2020[lxiii]. Some of the main causes are tensions in the council (31%), physical health (13%), and mental health (5%). The study found around 40 cases of violence (physical or symbolic) against mayors but didn't establish a causation between the resignations and the threats or incidents of violence[lxiv].

In the UK, 26 per cent of local elected representatives not planning to seek re-election, or undecided, reported their decision was influenced by the possibility of abuse or intimidation. Amongst women this rose to 32%, and people with disabilities 37%.[lxv] In Tasmania, around half of those surveyed who stated they did not plan to seek re-election attributed this to toxic behaviour from community members[lxvi]. This has consequences for the breadth and diversity of candidates in local elections, as well as potentially other levels of government as local politics is a recognised launchpad for political careers[lxvii].

Regulatory and legal pathways do not meet current needs. Addressing targeted disinformation and harassment requires navigating a patchwork of disconnected regulatory and complaints processes**.** These offer differing protections and recourse based on the form of disinformation and harassment, the carriage service involved (if any), and identity of the aggressor. Broadly speaking, there are 'preventative' aspects of regulation, focused on restricting the generation of disinformation, and 'responsive' mechanisms based on its targeted use in harassment, including carriage services and impact.

Disinformation is not in itself illegal in many jurisdictions. Different approaches have been adopted by countries, supranational and subnational governments. In the United Kingdom, the Online Safety Act (2023) criminalises sending false communications with intent to cause psychological or physical harm. Australia's Online Safety Act focuses primarily on the safety of users within online spaces, particularly the removal and restriction of harmful content and with a particular focus on child safety.[lxviii] In this context, there are some forms or tools of disinformation that are illegal or restricted, including creation and carriage of some deepfake pornography and nudes.[lxix] In Australia at the time of writing, a private members bill has been introduced to Federal Parliament to extend such legislation to similarly criminalise non-sexual uses of manufactured 'deep fakes'[lxx], similar to that under debate in Denmark and highlighting the significant gap in current safeguards.

Removal of content is challenging, due to fragmented complaints processes and narrow definitions of harassment. For example, in Australia, the eSafety Commissioner has responsibility for addressing online harms, with the threshold requirement that content 'must target a specific Australian adult and be both: intended to cause serious harm; and menacing, harassing or offensive in all the circumstances.'[lxxi] For complaints that do meet these narrow criteria, the recourse available is to compel the removal of content from online platforms. Individuals can also make complaints directly to online platforms to have content removed. Removal of content, and indeed deplatforming creators in some instances,[lxxii] is important in reducing ongoing engagement however the content does not need to be in circulation for

long to do damage and can be difficult to fully remove from the public realm once it has spread. Instead of focusing on removing individual pieces of content, broader regulation of social media platforms as carriage services that have been demonstrated to algorithmically amplify disinformation is a priority in countries around the world, including with the introduction of the European Digital Services Act.[lxxiii][lxxiv]

Even within existing legal protections, police interventions and law enforcement are not meeting expectations. In France, a 2023 meeting of 2000 Mayors and Deputies in Montpellier reportedly heard that Mayors felt they had to solve rising issues of violence and threats on their own, and could not[lxxv][lxxvi]. In Australia, 22 Victorian elected representatives were quoted by a media outlet in July 2025 expressing their concern at the inadequacy of police response, especially to cyber crime.[lxxvii] In the UK, of the 21% of respondents that had reported abuse or intimidation to police, 30% 'felt the policing response had not addressed their concern at all'.[lxxviii]Applying for an apprehended violence order (AVO) or equivalent to prohibit an individual from contacting the target involves a burdensome legal process, and may require the complainant to personally fund legal representation. Australian local elected representatives express they feel caught in a "no man's land" between protections[lxxix]. In Ireland, a national fund has been established to mitigate the cost to individuals of increased safety provisions necessitated by the current environment, though this reportedly remains under-utilised because of its narrow scope, amounts and conditions[lxxx].

Finally, elected representatives are not only targets but also users of targeted disinformation and harassment. Existing codes of conduct oversight mechanisms and regulatory authorities for elected representatives have not kept pace with this issue. Recent parliamentary inquiries[lxxxi] and reviews of codes of conduct[lxxxii][lxxxiii] in Australia demonstrate broad recognition of this. Largely, these still focus on individual councillor behaviours in relation to defamation and abuse rather than disinformation, though the Office for Local Government Tasmania includes 'misconstruing facts with the intent of causing harm to others' in its guidance material as an example of 'unreasonable conduct'[lxxxiv], yet place the responsibility – including financial responsibility – for prosecuting legal action along these lines with the targeted individual.

Democratic impacts & implications

The potential impacts these behaviours have on representative democracy are significant, as self-censoring behaviours and incivility in public discourse coincide to create conditions that stifle democratic debate and effective policymaking. They also increase distance between elected representatives and their constituents, and discourage candidates from seeking re-election, or new candidates from running.

Impacts on individuals. First and foremost, the impacts of harassment and targeted disinformation are felt by those targeted. This poses a risk to individuals with impacts extending to those around them, including their families. Such harm can include immediate or enduring psychological and physical impacts. It can also include additional burdens of changing daily routines and additional home security modifications or moving house for safety reasons[lxxxv].

Individual psychosocial risk management frameworks focus first on preventing harm where possible, then reducing the impact, and finally building individual capabilities to respond[lxxxvi]. The prevention of disinformation is incredibly difficult globally within existing legislative frameworks. As outlined in the section above, addressing this will require significant enhancement to regulation of both content and carriage services, as well as investment in addressing the underlying social conditions enabling and exacerbating its use. Recommendations for reducing harm and individual response supports are included in the final section of this document.

Impacts on policymaking. Local government organisations are impacted in multiple ways including governance and policymaking. At a very practical level, local governments report the financial cost of increased security, and staffing expenses for legal and governance response to targeted disinformation and harassment, including the vexatious use of governance processes. This redirects constrained resources away from policymaking and service delivery[lxxxvii].

Local policymaking is impacted by targeted disinformation and harassment as targeted individuals withdraw from debate on contentious issues. Individuals are also increasingly targeted in relation to specific policy issues. This latter has been experienced by local elected representatives from around the world in efforts to thwart specific areas of policy advancement, including urban planning and social inclusion[lxxxviiilxxxix]. These inhibit the ability to engage in robust debate about critical policy decisions, limiting this critical aspect of representative democracy.

Innovation in policymaking and governance is also potentially stifled. The patterns of targeting already underrepresented voices, with the aforementioned self-censoring effect, has potential to also reduce innovation as the pool of voices heard becomes more homogenous – with a chilling effect on innovation potential[xcxci]. Furthermore, reports indicate fear of being targeted and harassed has reduced willingness to trial novel solutions. These dual impacts inhibiting policy innovation are particularly damaging for local democracy and policymaking at a time of polycrisis – of climate change, economic inequality, technology and social cohesion - when local governments are tasked with complex decision-making that will deeply impact current and future generations.

Public participation impacts. Public participation in the age of disinformation is challenging. Yet the active role that communities play in local government decision-making is critical to well-functioning local democracy, and when effectively undertaken is the strongest precondition to trust in government.[xcii] As additional safety measures are enacted to shield elected representatives and the organisations they govern from hostile behaviours, this can have the unintended consequence of also making it more

difficult to identify and engage constructively with real community issues and sentiments. The impact this has on legislated local public participation processes warrants further scholarly research.

Further exacerbating this, the technique of 'astroturfing', or misrepresenting the sentiments of local stakeholders is increasingly used by many actors, including foreign state-sanctioned and those with economic interests[xciii]. This has been reported in cities globally, including Australia[xcivxcvxcvixcvii] and makes it difficult for local governments to recognise, communicate and respond to legitimate community concerns and aspirations.

Impacts on trust. Local government is the smallest and most localised level of government in Australia, and often reported to hold the highest level of public trust[xcviii]. This reflects the stronger level of connection people feel to this level of governance by virtue of its presence in local, daily realities and concerns, as well as the proximity and relative accessibility of elected representatives.

At a time when trust in politicians is already low[xcix], targeted disinformation is used to create confusion and false impressions of leaders, their capabilities, and decisions. The content of this drives distrust in the individuals, and by extension the institutions they represent. Trust that they are telling the truth. Trust that they have the necessary capabilities to govern well. Trust that they are acting in the public interest. This in turn impacts social licence – the implicit agreement of communities to accept and enact the decisions made on their behalf[c].

In addition to the impacts on community trust in government, as community members engage in hostile behaviours towards elected representatives and the institutions they govern, this can also decrease government trust in the public, shifting engagement from a frame of collective input and trusted partners in policy implementation to one of risk mitigation and safety protocols. As trust is relational and mutually reinforcing, this impacts the key functional relationship and trust from both sides[ci].

Impacts on elections. Elections are a lightning rod for disinformation at the local level, with candidates subjected to – and at times subjecting each other to – increasingly hostile behaviours. The Disinformation in the City Response Playbook (2025) reports that:

> **'Cities are particularly vulnerable to the impact of disinformation on electoral behaviour…[as] 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. 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.'**[cii]

As targeted individuals, and those who no longer wish to navigate increasingly hostile environments step away from local elected office, the necessary broad pool of competent, representative candidates from which to elect is put at risk. Local officials in the United States expressed fears that harassment and hostility are creating a 'dwindling pipeline of interested community members willing to run for local office' and 'only the most "extreme" voices feel comfortable seeking election and governing.'[ciii]

Beyond these local impacts on candidature, the flow-on effects of the pipeline of elected representation at higher levels of government remain under-interrogated. Local government offers an entry point to politics in every corner of Australia, from a broad variety of professional fields and social contexts**.** As people bringing such varied backgrounds and geographical perspectives turn away from elected roles at the local level, this potentially restricts the flow of candidates moving towards other levels of government. As underrepresented groups are disproportionately impacted, these risk compounding issues of homogeneity of representatives at multiple levels.

Drivers & enablers

Targeted disinformation and harassment do not occur in a vacuum, and the rise in these hostile acts is accompanied, enabled, and exacerbated by social, political, and technological conditions. This includes increasingly entrenched polarisation and inequality within communities; rising populist, hostile and anti-democratic political movements; and the consolidation of private-sector power in increasingly manipulated information environments – all of which have been cited as critical global risks in recent reports[civcv].

Social conditions. Current polarisation of communities is occurring at a time of rising inequality, greater information siloing, and rising inequality. It also occurs within the context of an epidemic of loneliness[cvicvii], global housing crises[cviii], and climate-induced and economic migration[cix]. Community divisions are heightened along multiple fault lines, including legacy sentiment regarding government responses to the COVID 19 pandemic[cx], and current conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine[cxi].

These provide fertile grounds for grievance narratives, with traditionally marginalised groups particularly targeted: migrants, women, LGBTIQA+, and religious and cultural minorities[cxii]. This in turn threatens social cohesion – the collective bonds, trust and belonging that hold communities together[cxiii].

Further compounding these issues are a lack of media and digital literacy across communities. In Australia, a 2024 nation-wide study found that 42% of adults reported they were not confident to check if information found online is true, and over 80% of respondents agreed that media literacy is needed at all ages[cxiv]. Likewise, digital literacy has failed to keep apace with the rapidly expanding world of digital tools available across communities[cxv].

This low literacy intersects with a lack of public interest media reporting at the local level[cxvicxvii], hollowed out newsrooms reliant on advertising revenue as people step away from subscriptions in favour of social media access to traditional media articles, and increasingly – and in many cases openly – biased, hostile and polarised traditional media outlets create ripe conditions for unchecked information manipulation and incivility[cxviii].

Political conditions. Local democracy is under pressure. The issues of targeted disinformation and harassment occur at the intersection of global-to-local political conditions that operate as mutually reinforcing loops to erode democratic functioning. These include the consolidation of power by anti-democratic actors, weaking of balancing institutions, use of political violence, entrenched division and loss of faith in democracy.[cxix]

Populist and anti-democratic actors and movements have rapidly risen to prominence in many parts of the world, amplifying divisive rhetoric and manipulating community disenfranchisement from political processes. Increasingly, such movements are focusing on the local level[cxx]. In Australia – and many other parts - low civic literacy amongst the community makes complex democratic systems and institutions harder to navigate and understand, driving disconnection from, and at times resentment towards, democratic processes[cxxi].

Community expectations of public participation have also changed as people seek accessible, meaningful opportunities to shape decisions in their communities amidst growing cynicism about tokenistic public participation processes to justify decisions that have already been made[cxxii]. Coupled with increasingly busy lifestyles and priorities, people are less engaged in public decision-making - with local governments reporting increasing challenges in attracting people to contribute. Lower levels of

public participation impacts trust in the decisions made, increases the likelihood that they will miss important considerations and community context in their design, and reinforces frustration between communities and governments[cxxiii].

Incivility is at a time of crisis of civility in liberal democracies, a phenomenon linked with deterioration in quality of public debate and increased political polarisation[cxxiv]. This is bolstered by a growing toxic political culture that normalises hostility towards opponents and specific groups within communities and a 'win at all costs' mentality[cxxv]. Within this, community members increasingly endorse hostile engagement. The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report: Trust and the Crisis of Grievance highlighted that 40% of respondents felt hostile activism was justified to drive change, including attacking people online (27%) and intentionally spreading disinformation (25%).[cxxvi]

Technological conditions. The rapid advent of AI, and the extraordinary reach of social media giants have wildly shifted the information ecosystem in recent years. The technology-facilitated consolidation of power in the hands of a handful of private actors has been highlighted as a significant global risk by the United Nations.[cxxvii] This has been coupled with a false narrative of democratisation by social media giants, purporting to provide access for all to have their voice whilst actively pursuing strategies that amplify divisive rhetoric to enhance engagement.[cxxviii]

Coupled with low algorithmic and AI literacy, communities and the slower pace of government decision-making have struggled to keep pace with technological progress leaving communities and systems highly vulnerable to manipulation.[cxxix] The prevalence of mis- and dis-information has reached critical levels, enabled and exacerbated by a small number of powerful tech companies, and opportunistically promoted by many others to satisfy economic and political interests.

> **'Information disorder is a crisis that exacerbates all other crises. When bad information becomes as prevalent, persuasive, and persistent as good information, it creates a chain reaction of harm.' [cxxx]**

In response, governments around the world are actively pursuing digital sovereignty[cxxxi], public interest technological and information infrastructure[cxxxii], safe and ethical AI governance frameworks[cxxxiii] and investing in digital literacy for their citizens[cxxxiv]. Yet, as the Australian government discovered with its unsuccessful Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill, legislation related to the technological amplifiers of disinformation is extremely challenging[cxxxv].

The above conditions coincide to form the current environment in which local leaders are increasingly experiencing targeted disinformation and harassment that is increasingly severe in its consequences, and at the same time increasingly accepted within social and political norms. In the era of polycrisis, this harms individuals and their ability to represent constituents through elected roles and stifling democratic debate and eroding policymaking at a time when local government is tasked with guiding community resilience to the most critical of issues: climate change, inequality, social cohesion.

Response recommendations

Local government is deeply embedded in local communities. Whilst deeply impacted by the issues stated in this discussion paper, it also has a wide range of capabilities to contribute to response efforts. The Disinformation in the City Response Playbook[cxxxvi] provides several key recommendations for local response. This includes extending the response continuum beyond the immediate 'active phase' of disinformation, to invest in pre-emption and prevention, enhancing capabilities to manage disinformation as it manifests, and extending efforts into the recovery phase to support communities to cumulatively develop capabilities and resilience. The playbook also promotes a networked model for trusted institutions, information, people and places, and explicit multi-sector, multi-level and multi-city collaboration and alignment.

The following recommendations focus on addressing the impacts, as well as drivers of targeted disinformation and harassment. Three recommendations focus on the direct impacts: Individual supports; Organisational supports; and Regulation & Advocacy. Three recommendations focus on addressing the drivers and conditions enabling and encouraging these behaviours, working with Media, Community, and Collaborating across sectors, levels of government, and across geographies. One final recommendation seeks to build the Australian data infrastructure to inform ongoing action to address these issues.

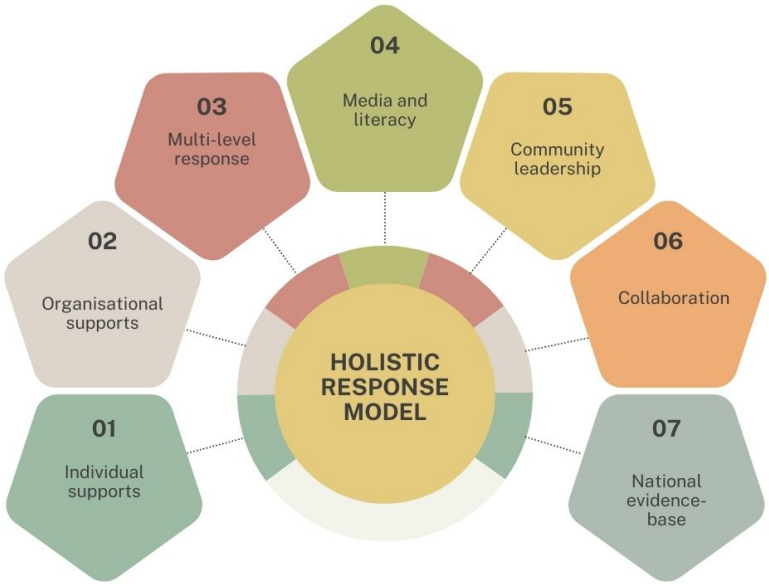
These recommendations are segmented by actor, and all require the following conditions to enable rapid, dynamic and effective response to both impacts and drivers.

Evidence-informed. Testing, evaluating and refining tools and initiatives to measure impact and efficacy.

Broad knowledge base. Bringing together and applying the knowledge and expertise of multiple sectors.

Experimentation. Creating incubation space for the deliberate and ethical testing of novel responses, not all of which will be successful.

Reimagining and extending. Building on and enhancing existing capabilities to integrate response.



Recommendation 1: Individual Supports.

Individuals bear the cost of increased targeted disinformation and harassment and require immediate supports to increase their safety and enhance their ability to navigate harmful behaviours without self-censorship. This includes psychosocial supports, training and development, and enhanced accessibility and timeliness of legal and regulatory responses. These supports are largely in existence and only require funding to be extended to this cohort, or can be rapidly developed and deployed in the immediate term.

Recommendation 1.1: Provide tailored learning and tools for local elected representatives to build knowledge and confidence in undertaking their duties, including anticipatory and pre-emptive responses to disinformation and hostile behaviours.

Recommendation 1.2: Fund on-demand access to psychological and wellbeing supports for elected representatives to call on at times of need.

Recommendation 1.3: Develop and deliver ongoing mentoring and supports to enhance the retention of disproportionately targeted groups in elected leadership.

Recommendation 2: Organisational Supports.

Local governments require targeted investment in capabilities to assist them the support targeted individuals, and effectively respond to disinformation. This includes creating the systems, structures and operating environment to anticipate, identify, triage, and effectively respond to disinformation and harassment. These require investment in evidence-based tools and mechanisms that can be applied across different contexts, requiring moderate (2.1) to significant (2.2) funding in the immediate to medium term, with very significant societal impact.

Recommendation 2.1: Provide tailored learning and tools for local government authorities to building knowledge, systems and structures for effective response, including anticipatory and preventative capabilities.

Recommendation 2.2: Support development of centralised Rapid Response Mechanisms for disinformation that can be accessed by local governments and other key local public authorities in each state and territory.

Recommendation 3:

Multi-level response.

Advocate to those with regulatory powers to enhance protections for elected representatives and city leaders. Work collectively across cities through peak bodies and city networks to advocate for enhanced sector-wide protections, and ensure local government voices inform enhanced regulatory protections and the processes by which they are enforced and upheld. These require sustained efforts and systems capability building in the medium to long term.

Recommendation 3.1: Establish a local regulatory taskforce to formalise the mechanisms by which collective insights from the local government sector can inform regulatory enhancements and advocacy at all levels.

Recommendation 3.2: Develop a multi-level mechanism for enhanced responsiveness to targeted disinformation and harassment used by elected representatives and candidates.

Recommendation 3.3: Enhance law enforcement capabilities to effectively understand and make informed threat assessments to local leaders drawing on global and local intel, leading to broader and more nuanced additional protections.

Recommendation 4:

Media and literacy.

Public interest media access and literacy are key to addressing the conditions enabling disinformation. Working with media and adjacent organisations, it is critical to address both the provision of, and ability to navigate, quality information – especially in local areas known to be 'news deserts'[cxxxvii]. This requires significant funding and capacity building to develop, test and refine multi-faceted digital and media literacy initiatives that are accessible across all parts of communities.

Recommendation 4.1: Establish a local media taskforce to build local information integrity.

Recommendation 4.2: Develop media and digital literacy initiatives with key sectors in communities.

Recommendation 5: Community leadership.

Collaborate with individuals and other sectors within the community to speak out against the use of disinformation and harassment and develop community capabilities and confidence to response. This broadens the potential sphere or impact and reframes the focus to community values and expected behaviours, diffusing the 'community v. council' narrative used by aggressors. This requires moderate funding in the immediate term, sustained through the medium and longer term as disinformation threats and community capabilities evolve.

Recommendation 5.1: Support a large-scale citizens assembly for evidence-informed, community-led decision making on holistic local responses to address targeted disinformation and harassment, and its broader enablers.

Recommendation 5.2: Support community-led initiatives to pilot innovative responses to these issues and their drivers, and to ensure learnings are documented, evaluated, and shared between jurisdictions.

Recommendation 6: Collaboration.

Local government is impacted by societal – and global – trends and mechanisms that they cannot address alone, or in isolation. Effective response thus includes structured multi-level, multi-sector and multi-city efforts to ensure coordination, alignment, and knowledge-sharing. This requires moderate funding in the immediate term, sustained through the medium and longer term as disinformation threats and sector capabilities evolve.

Recommendation 6.1: Support multi-sector response through innovative pilots and enabling connections between sectors impacted by, and responding to, disinformation and its drivers at the local level.

Recommendation 6.2: Provide structured opportunities for Australian local governments to learn from – and contribute to - international best practice, enhance relevant policy mobility and graft innovation across geographies.

Recommendation 7: National evidence-base.

In order to effectively respond to this issue, and to evaluate the effectiveness of responses, we must have a representative, robust, transparent baseline longitudinal dataset to track incidents and impacts of this issue in Australia. This information should be made available in real time for policymakers and others, as learning from existing models at the Bridging Divides Initiative[cxxxviii] in the United States and the recently-established European Observatory for the Defence of Democracy at the Local Level[cxxxix]. This requires minimal-moderate funding, sustained over the medium to long term.

Recommendation 7.1: Undertake longitudinal national surveys of both local elected representatives and general community members to track experiences and sentiments regarding targeted disinformation and harassment and their drivers.

Recommendation 7.2: Support the establishment of a Research to Practice Hub for local disinformation response, bringing together national and global expertise to formulate, trial, evaluate and share rapid learnings on effective, evidence-based solutions.

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