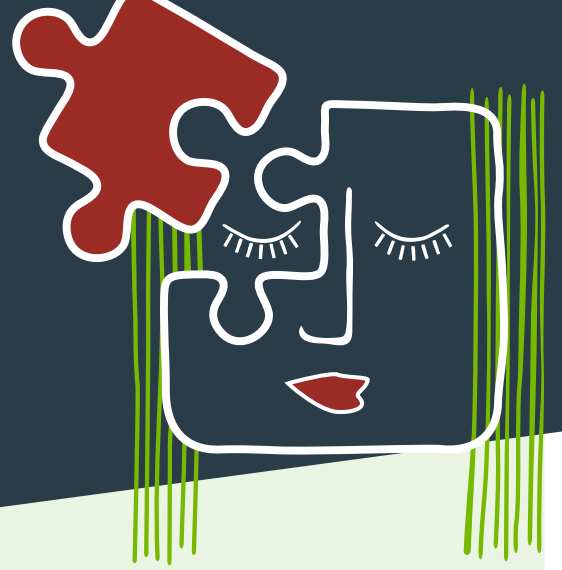


# DEALING WITH *DIS*INFORMATION

Practical tips for managing  
disinformation



*Disinformation has a huge impact on organisations, individuals, and communities, and it is an issue of increasing concern.*



**We live in an age where the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred.**

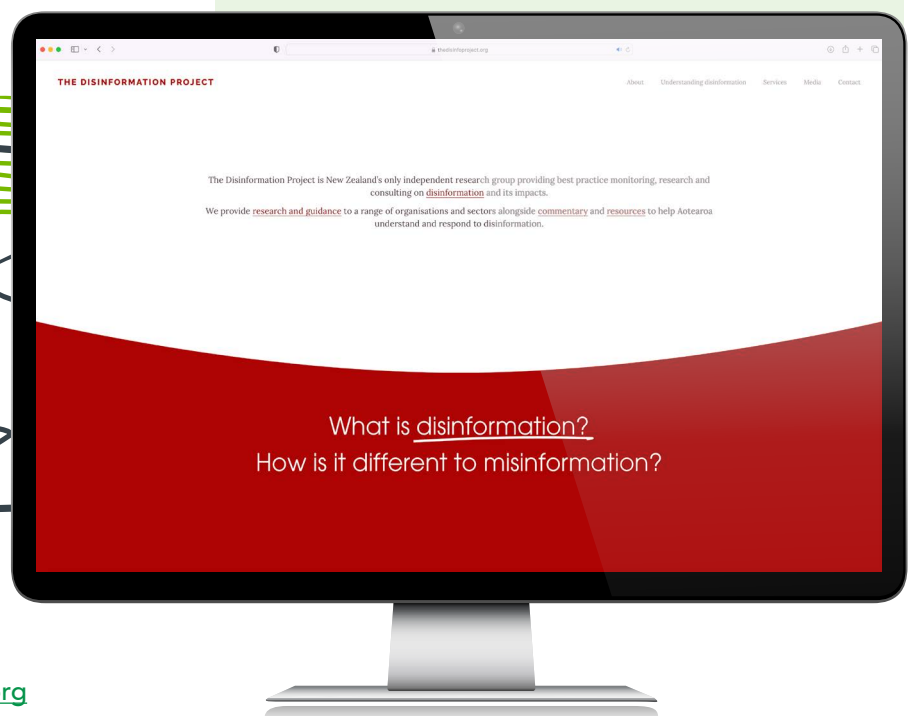
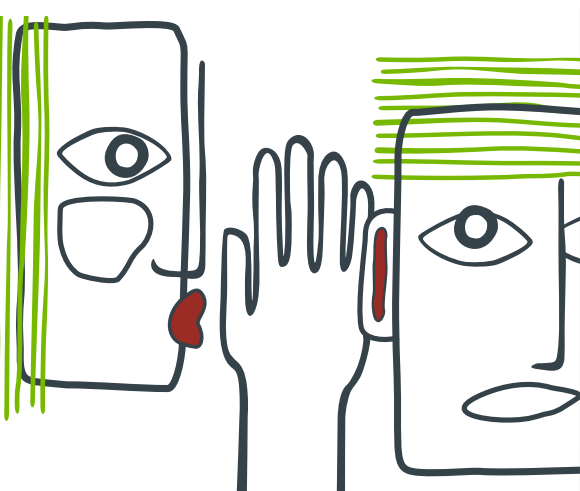
Disinformation has a huge impact on organisations, individuals, and communities, and it is an issue of increasing concern.

This resource covers what disinformation is, how The Disinformation Project identifies and tracks disinformation, the challenges disinformation can cause for organisations, and how to manage disinformation in your work.

## THE DISINFORMATION PROJECT

The Disinformation Project<sup>1</sup> is New Zealand's only independent research group studying disinformation and its impact on Aotearoa.

They also study global patterns of disinformation, but their focus is primarily on helping local communities, organisations and decision-makers understand and deal with disinformation.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thedisinfoproject.org>

## What is disinformation?

Disinformation is defined as false and/or misleading information that has been created and/or shared with an intent to cause harm. This harm could be directed to a group, community or individual.

Disinformation is different from malicious gossip because the resources, framing, and language of disinformation instigates a sense of fear and urgency in people consuming it.

Disinformation themes often respond to, and integrate themselves, into current events, following patterns of existing prejudices or stereotypes.

These false narratives powerfully reinforce themselves through algorithmic escalations across social media platforms, which also allow key figures in disinformation to make a lot of money from increasing engagement. The narratives behind disinformation are easily normalised in these online environments that have little regulation.

## As a growing phenomenon, disinformation is:

- A local and global issue that is having a growing impact on society.
- Spread by individuals and online communities that have shared conspiratorial beliefs.
- Often centred around existing fears, stereotypes and harmful beliefs about groups, as well as a belief that the government seeks to harm people.
- Aided by technology like the internet, targeted online advertising and the use of unmoderated social media platforms.
- Amplified by well-funded foreign groups who seek to benefit from creating disharmony across different countries.
- Ultimately fuelled by a global backlash to progressive issues like public health measures, sharing decision-making with indigenous communities, and marginalised groups winning small gains towards their rights and well-being.

*Disinformation is defined as false and/or misleading information that has been created and/or shared with an intent to cause harm*



## Why is disinformation on the rise?

Disinformation often preys on people's vulnerabilities and fears. For instance, disinformation about climate change speaks to community fears about loss, change, and uncertainty of the future.

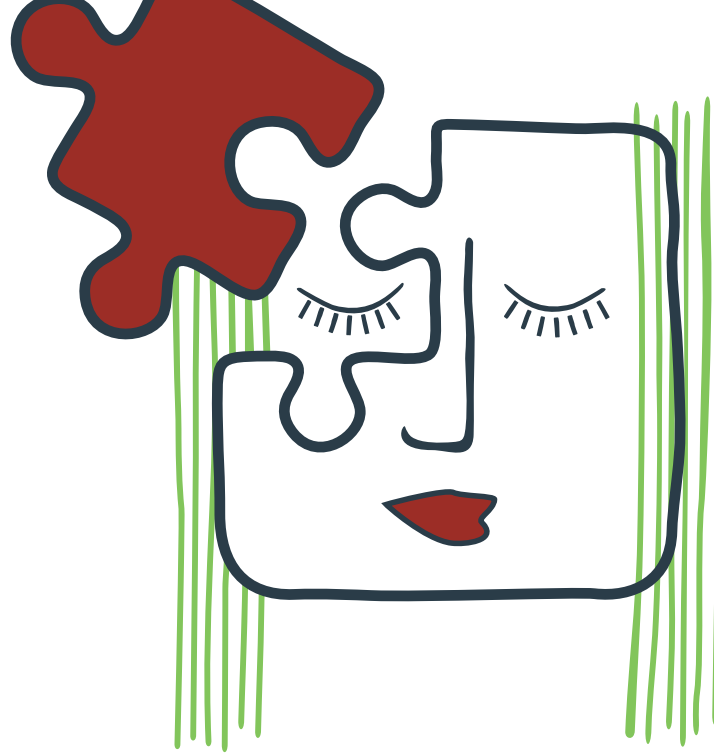
We are living in a time where technology allows for ideas to be spread easily, regardless of their provenance. We have also all experienced a frightening global pandemic, which necessitated strict public health measures which brought to the fore many discussions about state powers and responsibilities.

In addition, many of us live in economic uncertainty and a cost-of-living crisis. In unsteady times, it's easy to fall back on innately held biases about who's to blame for the hardships we face, or who we fear will undermine our freedoms and rights.

## Social cohesion

Disinformation aims to disrupt and target social connection and cohesion. A healthy, socially cohesive society can be understood as one that is concerned for the common good and physical, social, and psychosocial well-being.

Social capital describes the way a community or group shares resources, and how individuals access this through their social networks. This can be understood as an ecosystem or a web of social relationships. A key part of this ecosystem is the concept of 'collective efficacy', which describes how a community can create change and exercise ideas of informal social control by influencing behaviour and norms through social means.



We all experience social networks, social capital, and social control through our families, whānau, community, iwi, faith groups, and more. Research shows that people who are grounded, situated, and able to connect and contribute to their community are less likely to experience negative outcomes, including disconnection, information disorders, social exclusion, and participation in fragmented realities.

The Royal Commission into the 2019 Christchurch Mosque shootings outlines important recommendations for social cohesion. Their recommendations include facilitating public conversations about embracing diversity, and these need to be transparent conversations where information is available and accessible to everybody, includes all communities, and acknowledges that enduring change will take time and investment, requiring conversations to be ongoing.

***Disinformation aims to disrupt and target social connection and cohesion***

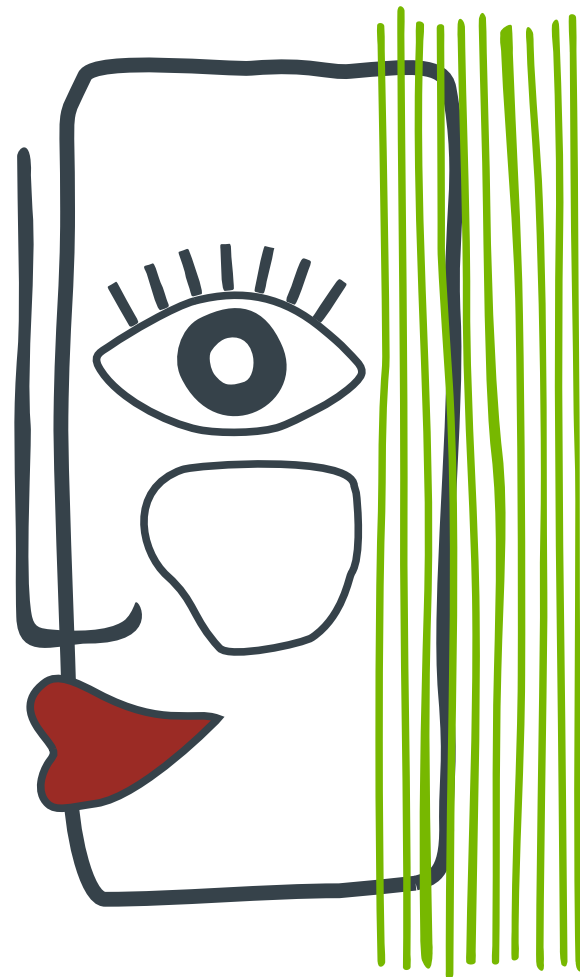
## Changing social networks and community bridging

In all social networks there exists clusters of people interconnected with other peoples in other places. These clusters often invite innovation but are also spaces where radicalisation can occur.

The impact of technology, its speed, algorithms, and broader factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic have created an effect called community bridging. Community bridging takes the central idea of a group – for example, Covid denialists – and bridges it to another narrative connected by the same idea – for example, the erasure of personal freedom. These ideas have equal weight and equal value and hold these communities in the same way, and thus these groups have expanded to believe a plethora of narratives.

Additionally, the increasing tightness of these particular social networks causes those on the outside to be viewed as the 'other' and are tightly excluded from that group, leading to an increasing sense of division and tension. Communities originally built around the denial and minimisation of Covid-19 are now organised and motivated around a set of other powerful disinformation narratives such as white supremacy, strict gender roles and climate change denialism.

***The increasing normalisation of prejudice based on false information requires leadership as a form of mediation***



## Dangerous speech

The Disinformation Project uses a category called 'dangerous speech' to categorise material observed and analysed by the Project that is believed to increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group. It is important to note that dangerous speech is not speech that should be banned or censored. Rather, it refers to speech that is likely to be risky or harmful to certain groups.

However, the increasingly violent nature of dangerous speech facilitates a growing acceptance of racism, misogyny, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice by audiences.

## Mitigating disinformation

The increasing normalisation of prejudice based on false information requires leadership as a form of mediation. Business, government, and community leaders should use their platform to say unequivocally that they value diversity, human dignity, and efforts to redress inequities.

The first step for organisations wishing to mitigate disinformation is acceptance. Disinformation is now a reality of social media, and the social media landscape is not the same as it was five or ten years ago. Acceptance can be tricky – it involves understanding how loud and corrosive the influence of disinformation can be and that heightened abuse, targeting and harassment are now commonplace for some types of public communications. However, a powerful anchor for you and your organisation can be found in understanding why your work is important in this environment and why you are committed to continuing to providing good sources of information about what you do best.

While in the past, a social media campaign with any kind of negative reaction would be considered a failure, today's environment means that negativity is inevitable and unavoidable. This makes it important to be aware of any content that is likely to be targeted by disinformation and to have processes in place to deal with it.

Think about who in your organisation is responsible for responding to disinformation, and how they will be supported. Having an explicit process allows content moderators or those in your organisation dealing directly with disinformation to feel supported.

These processes and systems can include content planning and resourcing. Put extra resourcing behind work that is likely to be targeted by disinformation, such as risk mapping and triaging.

***Identifying what risky content looks like in your organisation means that you can respond more effectively and efficiently to disinformation.***

It is tempting for organisations and individuals to self-censor their content to avoid being targeted. However, this is counterproductive and contributes to silence and erasure, known as the 'chilling effect'. Organisations should not steer away from upholding diversity and inclusion for fear of retribution, especially when this aligns with your organisation's values.

