

# Disinformation thrives on division in our cities

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

strategies.

Disinformation (which is the concerted fabrications that are deliberately misleading) and misinformation (the inaccurate information unintentionally held and/or shared) are nothing new in cities globally.

However, during the past decade, disinformation has exploded in both prevalence and impact.

In cities, disinformation manifests in physical events, including protests and disruptions. It also has individual impacts for political, organizational and [community leaders](#).

Disinformation affects the functioning of city administrations and elected bodies, impacting governance, policymaking and the city's workforce. And it impacts communities, reducing trust, increasing division and polarization and exploiting existing societal fault lines of prejudice.

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

The [report](#), "Disinformation in the City Response Playbook," aims to inform local responses to disinformation and, in doing so, enhance the well-being of communities and democracy.

## **Build trust in institutions, work with trusted people**

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

Local governments are responsible for much more than just 'roads, rates and rubbish' and operate across an array of policy areas, in partnership with other stakeholders.

Their relative size makes them agile. Their proximity to communities gives them awareness of community issues and grievances and makes them capable of comprehensive locally embedded actions.

They are highly collaborative, and they are legitimate convenors for multi-sector action in their jurisdictions.

Communicating and enacting activities across diverse policy domains like [climate change](#), public health and [social cohesion](#) creates opportunities for disinformation to disrupt local government functioning.

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

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, [anti-lockdown](#) and [anti-vaccine campaigns](#) fueled protests in cities across the globe. In the climate action sphere, disinformation related to [proposed 15-Minute-Cities](#) and efforts to reduce emissions led to protests on multiple continents, and [death threats to council staff in the U.K.](#)

A [climate emergency declaration in the Australian city of Onkaparinga](#) witnessed protests erupt in council chambers and staff evacuated for their safety.

And threatening disinformation campaigns have led [local councils to cancel Drag Storytime events](#) in cities across North America and Australia.

Understanding how disinformation spreads, and how to respond effectively, is critical for city governments tasked with leading and implementing public policy decisions.

## **Competence, consistency and transparency**

Disinformation creators use techniques that [appeal to human biases or fears](#), limiting critical reflection of the information presented.

Therefore, disinformation campaigns are more likely to resonate with individuals or groups that are already fearful or distrustful of the individual, group or institution being vilified by the disinformation creators.

Cities are uniquely positioned to respond to this growing challenge.

They are responsible for policy decisions and delivering services that shape the daily experience of their residents and those of surrounding areas.

Trust is paramount in countering disinformation. The best ways to promote trust in government are by displaying competence, consistency and transparency.

Cities are commonly considered the [most trusted level of government](#), and trust is a critical factor in combating disinformation.

The trust that cities enjoy therefore provides them with an enormous opportunity to be key actors in responding to disinformation and improving pertinent local policies and practices.

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

city-level response is both warranted and beneficial.

The process of responding to disinformation must engender trust.

This means that cities should be transparent and inclusive about the goals of their initiatives and the desired outcomes.

Initiatives should be clearly contained and only aim to address disinformation rather than to diminish political expression or advocate for a specific policy position.

## **Reliable and legitimate evidence**

New York City, with its diverse population of 8.36 million, became a [hotbed for disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). This quickly spread through the city's five boroughs, ranging from narratives about vaccine contamination to narratives related to population control.

False information drove up vaccine hesitancy and distrust of other public health measures (eg masking and quarantining).

It also led to threats of violence against health workers.

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

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

This enabled the city to address the disinformation campaign and take steps towards restoring trust.

While [disinformation](#) now spreads at a speed and scale that cities and societies have never faced before, cities are adept at rising to new challenges. That work has already begun with tools like the "Disinformation in the City Response Playbook."

Provided by University of Melbourne

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