# Measuring, monitoring and diagnosing the impact of mis /dis information to support future (non-legislative) policy development

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## Acknowledgement and series note

In early 2024, the Resilience Democracy Data and Research Network was established as a collaboration between Australian researchers, civil society leaders and government agencies. 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 making research findings and insights widely available. This paper has been written to prompt ideas for future collaborative research of the network.

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## Abstract

This discussion paper outlines the state of the information environment in Australia in comparison to other countries, focusing on the perceived threat of misinformation and disinformation on public information quality. Drawing on international literature, data, and recent Australian case studies—including the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum, and political campaigns like 'Mediscare' and the 'Death Tax'—it examines the scale, nature, spread, and effects of misinformation in democracies. Within the context of existing policy such as Australia's voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, and 2023 draft exposure bill extending the functions and sanctions of the Code, the paper identifies key lessons to shape a data-driven research agenda aimed at enhancing democratic resilience and social cohesion in Australia.

# 1. Introduction

Since Donald Trump's US Presidential election in 2016, when the term "fake news" entered the public lexicon, concerns about truth in public discourse have intensified. While misinformation, disinformation, and fake news<sup>1</sup> are not new, the internet has dramatically amplified their spread and weaponisation, making it easier than ever to disseminate false information and cause harm.

Fake news and its variants such as propaganda have been around for centuries: a famous early example of it being The 'Moon Hoax' of 1835, orchestrated by Benjamin H. Day's New York *Sun*, that claimed telescopic observation of life on the moon. The paper later admitted the stories were faked as a diversion from uncomfortable debates around slavery (Mott 1962, 226).

While there is not perfect agreement between policy-makers, academics and journalists on definitions, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) outline three concepts: misinformation, defined as false content that is spread without the intention of causing harm; disinformation, considered as false content that is spread with the intention of causing harm; and a third category, malinformation, defined as truthful content spread also with the intention to damage or cause harm such as malicious rumours (see also Carson and Wright 2023, 2). In recent times, a central concern in the US has been the circulation of disinformation by malicious foreign actors seeking to seed discontent and disarray, but there is less evidence for this concern in Australia. Certainly, researchers have identified disinformation that claims environmental activists started the devastating 2019 Bushfires, but it is not clear who was behind this or what impact it had (Knaus 2020), There is also some findings of bot and troll activity by Russia's Internet Research Agency in the Australian Twittersphere (Sear and Jensen, 2018).

This discussion paper is largely focused on domestic threats of mis and disinformation rather than foreign influence operators. One aspect of the domestic threat is the visible appropriation of fake news techniques by party machines to weaponise the more traditional scare campaign (e.g. Mediscare, Death Tax). This is discussed below in the case steady section of the paper.

More broadly, Australians' concerns about the online spread of mis- and disinformation (henceforth referred to as misinformation) domestically have grown as more people rely on online sources for news (Newman et al. 2024); and, at the same time, traditional media have lost advertising revenue to online competitors, leading to newsroom cutbacks and fewer journalists to counter the threat with credible information. The rise of social media and digital technology has revolutionised the information landscape, creating a high-choice media environment – Australians can access information from across the globe. This environment is expanding while at the same time fragmenting audiences across media spheres and platforms.

This transformation from a media landscape to an information landscape where the boundaries of journalism are more blurry than in the past as opinion infuses with fact, and barriers to entry for producing news, are low, is reshaping civic engagement in democracies. Political actors and citizens no longer need to mediate messages through traditional media gatekeepers. It has on the one hand democratised mass communications, and on the other, facilitated the online spread of problematic content. At the same time, local news is collapsing in Australia, creating news deserts, as has also occurred in the U.S. (Abernathy, 2018). The decline of trusted local news was further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic with an estimated 164 media outlets closing down (Public Interest Journalism Initiative, 2021, p. 3).

Yet, Australian research into this changing information landscape and effects of misinformation is largely lacking. The Australian research field is small and under-resourced with the exception of scholars mentioned in this discussion paper and good work being done at research centres such as the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society; University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Media Transition; News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra; Digital Media Research Centre at Queensland University of Technology and specific research project's such as the authors' on political and institutional trust based at Griffith University.

Political trust is low in Australia (only 30% of Australians say 'people in government' can 'usually' or 'sometimes' be trusted to do the right thing) – which we know due to the excellent work of Distinguished Professor Ian McAllister and colleagues at Australian National University through Australia's longest running political survey, the Australian Election Study (see Cameron and McAllister, 2022: 101). However, even this critical work that informs many other studies relies on regular applications (with no guarantees) for funding to the Australian Research Council (ARC).

Media trust is also relatively low in Australia (40% say they 'trust the news as a whole'). The annual monitoring of Australian media consumption patterns in the Digital News Report, shows that Australian news media trust at a low but stable 40 per cent compares unfavourably to some high-trusting countries such as Finland at 69 per cent (Newman et al. 2024: 113). However, distrust in news media in Australia rose sharpy by 12 percentage points to 33 per cent in 2024 (Park et al., 2024, 9).<sup>2</sup> The report authors find this increase in distrust is growing faster than the falling rate of trust (trust fell three percentage points over the same time period), suggesting active distrust in the news is a growing problem. It occurs amid increasing public concern about information quality, particularly misinformation, with three out of four Australians expressing worry— an 11 percentage point rise from 2022—placing Australian concern about misinformation among the highest globally (Park et al., 2024: 9, 15, 19). Further, interest in the news is falling across countries, including Australia. Termed "news avoidance", this phenomenon is most common in women and young people according to cross-national surveys (Newman et al.2024: 26). Thus, monitoring how Australians get their information, the state of 'distrust' and of 'news avoidance' may be important to help understand the ongoing threat of misinformation to democracy. Again, this area of research is under-resourced and relies on collaboration with University of Oxford's Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

The impact of misinformation on trust matters because scholars argue that misinformation threatens the epistemic integrity of democracy, contributing to polarisation, fragmentation, declining institutional trust, and weakening support for democratic norms (Ecker et al. 2024). Global leaders have identified it as the world's most pressing issue (WEF 2024). Policymakers are developing remedies to counter misinformation based on this assumption (EC 2021). To understand the contemporary information environment and the threat of misinformation to democratic resilience and social cohesion, this discussion paper outlines the latest international research and where available, referring to Australian misinformation studies. It draws on these findings for developing a research agenda around data-driven practical ways to strengthen democratic resilience and social cohesion in Australia. The paper proceeds with a section on the Australian policy context, then reviews research into the spread and impacts of misinformation, followed by a section reviewing the state of knowledge regarding countermeasures. The paper concludes with a summary of findings and recommendations for government action.

# 2. Australian policy context

Since 2021, Australia has managed online misinformation through the voluntary Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, developed by the Digital Industry Group (DIGI) with eight current signatories. Following the example of the EU, which shifted from a voluntary code to mandatory co-regulation, the Albanese Government proposed a stricter regulatory framework modelled on the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) (Carson et al. 2024: 8). The proposed amendment would strengthen regulatory oversight and impose stiff penalties on platforms failing to address false information spread. At the time of writing, the 2023 proposal had not progressed beyond draft phase after widespread public concern expressed through more than 20,000 submissions and public commentary that the new law would seriously restrict freedom of expression. Thus, platforms continue to self-regulate.

In terms of political communications, while all political ads must carry a message of authorisation, there is no legal requirement for truth in political advertising, although the Albanese Government is likely to produce a draft bill for it in late 2024. Such legislation is in operation in the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia. The proposal for federal legislation is hotly debated with Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers arguing the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) should not take on this role of arbiter of truth in political communications. Speaking at the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in 2022 he stated: "Good luck to whoever is doing that. It just shouldn't be the AEC. That's our strong view, not because we don't want to but because we don't think it's appropriate. It really could damage our standing as an independent, neutral, nonpartisan organisation." (JSCEM 2022: np).

Thus, at the time of writing, expert opinion about this legislative direction to manage political falsehoods and misleading content is contested. A central concern is to avoid government overreach and to balance democratic fundamentals such as freedom of speech and association with the state's responsibility to protect citizen's from real-world harms.

There is little doubt that Australian universities, civil society and government could be doing more to work together to assess the effectiveness of these policy proposals and changes and to trial a range of mitigation measures that are highlighted in the recommendations section and discussed in more detail below.

# 3. The spread and impact of misinformation

## 3.1 Assessing the extent of misinformation: How significant is the issue?

Studies on the harmful effects of misinformation are inconsistent. Notwithstanding widespread concern, overall social science research struggles to provide clear and consistent evidence of widespread social damage. Where consensus lies is in findings that highlight that certain vulnerable groups are more heavily affected and that misinformation can impact beliefs and behaviour under some circumstances (Altay, Berriche, and Acerbi 2023; Budak et al. 2024; Ecker et al. 2022; Ecker, Tay, et al. 2024).

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Research using digital trace data suggests that globally, contrary to widespread perceptions, the information environment is not 'rife' with misinformation. Public discourse across countries sometimes overstates exposure to harmful content by relying on aggregate statistics without appropriate population-level denominators, individual-level statistics skewed by extreme values, and engagement metrics that do not accurately represent actual exposure levels (Budak et al. 2024). Rather, false and misleading information represents a miniscule portion of people's overall information diet. In the U.S. context it constitutes less than 1% of regular news consumption and less than 0.1% of total media consumption (Watts, Rothschild, and Mobius 2021; Grinberg et al. 2019). One key reason for low prevalence and low exposure is that news itself makes up only a tiny fraction of people's overall media consumption, between 14% of Americans' media diet and 3% of French internet usage – with misinformation representing just 0.15% and 0.16% respectively (Allen et al. 2020; Cordonier and Brest 2021). In Australia, analysis of the 2022 federal election suggested that election news constituted a fragment (17.7%) of Australian's overall media consumption online (Carson and Jackman, 2022: 143)

Regarding virality, it is unclear whether falsehoods spread, on average, slower or faster than truth. Some studies about science-based evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pulido et al. 2020) or hyperpartisan news on Australian X/Twitter (Bruns and Keller 2020) suggest the former, whereas another influential study attests higher virality to misinformation over truth (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). There is some evidence of the algorithmic motivation/reward for spreading misinformation which may suggest that platform-end (not just user-end) changes would also bring about change (Ceylan et al. 2023).

However, definitions and methodological choices account for different findings. For example, some studies find a higher prevalence of misinformation (e.g. up to 15% of climate related tweets), when the definition is broadened beyond blatantly false content (Rojas et al. 2024). Similarly, estimates of its circulation are higher in studies that include misleading information spread by politicians and mainstream media (Hameleers et al. 2022) or when based on perceptual measures (Müller and Schwarz 2021). In Australia, the topics most frequently identified as being targets of mis/dis information are health (COVID-19 virus); climate change and political campaigns such as the Voice to Parliament referendum (Cook and Brooke, 2021; Knaus 2020; Carson et al 2024.). Studies are mixed in their findings about who is disproportionately exposed to misinformation and who engages with it. For example, Zhou and colleagues (2023) find people with higher levels of news exposure and more diverse news diets are more likely to access unreliable sources. They find the driver behind exposure to misinformation is greater political interest and people with more expansive and diverse news consumption patterns. Most studies find "misinformation amounts to a small fraction of all the information circulating online, and that only a small number of people engage actively with it." (Zhou et al.2023: 12), hence a small minority consumes most of the misinformation (González-Bailón et al. 2023). Specifically, misinformation clusters among older, politically more engaged segments of society, and, crucially, among ideologically homogeneous networks of strong partisans (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Grinberg et al. 2019). This is an important discovery because it means that despite generally small circulation and exposure, congenial information will be more readily available for politically motivated individuals.

## 3.2 Belief in misinformation

Another reason for caution in understanding the threat of misinformation to democracies is

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how to interpret people's actions when encountering misinformation. Using digital trace data, some studies infer belief in misinformation when tracking people's sharing and liking behaviour online. Yet, while sharing of both true and false news is indeed correlated to accuracy beliefs, there are also many other reasons for engaging with news content, such as socialising, expressing emotions, or signalling group membership (Altay, De Araujo, and Mercier 2022; Acerbi 2019; Metzger et al. 2021). People may also engage with mis- and disinformation not because they believe it, but as a way of expressing their rejection or disbelief of the content. Engagement metrics therefore do not necessarily reflect belief. Survey-based research on the other hand may also exaggerate the prevalence of misbeliefs due to methodological flaws, such as the lack of "Don't know" options, which encourages guessing and inflates reported beliefs in misinformation by significant margins (Luskin and Bullock 2011; Graham 2023). Self-report surveys can also be unreliable.

With these caveats in mind, on average and across countries, true news items are perceived as accurate at a much higher rate than false news items (Arechar et al. 2023; Acerbi, Altay, and Mercier 2022). Nevertheless, based on a comprehensive review by Ecker et al. (2022), people are generally susceptible to misinformation with factors such as cognitive styles, source cues, and motivated reasoning influencing the formation and persistence of false beliefs. Research in the Australian context specifically shows that the strongest correlates of conspiracy beliefs are social and existential factors, rather than critical thinking or rational accuracy-driven motives (Marques et al. 2021). This highlights that belief in misinformation is more complex than simply a lack of critical thinking.

Therefore, while people do not believe *every* falsehood they encounter, which is consistent with "minimal effects" research on advertising and persuasion in general (Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck 2020; Kalla and Broockman 2018) *some* people do believe *some* falsehoods. Exposure to misinformation strengthens misperceptions among those audiences that already have strong priors or are already motivated more by directional rather than accuracy goals, in particular on politically charged issues (Nyhan 2020). Misinformation belief is also stubbornly sticky, because the *mis*informed (different from the *un*informed) are more confident about their belief than the average citizen (Kuklinski et al. 2000).

#### 3.3 Impact on attitudes and behaviour

Belief in misinformation does not necessarily lead to changes in attitudes or behaviour, as people tend to consume favourable information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, reinforcing rather than altering them (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019). Furthermore, common misbeliefs, such as conspiracy theories, are often held in ways that limit their behavioural influence and serve as post hoc rationalisations of distrust in institutions (Mercier 2020). Although correlational studies link misbeliefs to behaviours like vaccine refusal, it is not self-evident if these beliefs directly cause such behaviours, as they might instead stem from underlying factors like low institutional trust (Uscinski et al. 2022). Indeed, distrust has been identified not only as a consequence of misinformation, but also as a cause (Tay et al. 2024).

Still, there is growing evidence that misinformation affects attitudes and behavioural intentions (Ecker et al. 2022). For example, recent research demonstrates that misinformation predicts reactionary collective actions, such as supporting and participating in anti-lockdown or antielection protests (Thomas et al. 2024), inaccurate perceptions of institutional performance (Mauk and Grömping 2023) or delayed consensus formation around scientific facts in public opinion (Lewandowsky et al. 2019). Misinformation disseminated by agenda-setting elites, such as a political figurehead, is particularly efficacious (Arceneaux and Truex 2023).

Finally though, there is also evidence that alarmist media discourse about the deleterious effects of misinformation breeds cynicism and distrust in and of itself (Jungherr and Rauchfleisch 2024). The very fact that public commentary about an "infodemic" is so widespread may lead some people to the cynical conclusion that nothing and no one can be trusted anymore, undermining beliefs in the fairness of institutions because of its presumed influence on others (Nisbet, Mortenson, and Li 2021) or via priming through elite discourse about misinformation (Van Duyn and Collier, 2019).

## 3.4 Trends in mis- and disinformation narratives in Australia

As most studies reviewed above are coming out of the U.S. and Europe, further research is required to replicate these studies in the Australian context. This section summarises what we do know from data-driven studies about misinformation on political issues – for full details see the individual research papers cited.

Beginning with the Mediscare campaign during the 2016 Australian federal election, we investigated a misleading narrative propagated by the Labor party that the Coalition would privatise Medicare (Carson et al. 2020). The study used mixed methods combining a large-N dataset of public opinion from Vote Compass (more than 20,0000 respondents a day) with a content analysis of Labor campaign press releases, news stories, and television advertisements featuring former Prime Minister Bob Hawke. In essence, the study found that targeted television advertising increased the salience of healthcare as a 2016 election issue for a short period after each TV advertisement aired, increasing voter support for Labor. Plotting the advertisement exposure and spikes in media coverage showed it correlated with an increase in Labor voter support and arrested Labor's polling slump. The key lessons here are that mainstream media and advertising combined with negative, misleading campaigning can affect the salience of that issue and affect voter behaviour in weakly aligned partisans. The reinforcement effect was temporal (about three days) and did not have a persuasion effect on conservative partisans' vote intention.

In 2019, the federal Coalition took a lesson from Labor's Mediscare campaign playbook when it claimed a Labor government would introduce an inheritance tax later framed as the "death tax". The claim was false as this was not current Labor policy. Employing content analysis of 100,000 media articles and eight million Facebook posts to trace the false claims, we identified the death tax narrative was not as widespread as some academic, political, and media commentary suggested at the time, however it was persistent and endured during the election year (Carson et al. 2021). This was owed to the actions of both left and right wing political and third-party actors that both perpetuated and refuted the claims across different traditional and digital communicative spaces. The narrative evolved over time with five distinct versions, with social media and traditional media both responsible for allowing the falsehood to spread. Importantly, refutation also led to further amplification of the false narrative. Further, mainstream media reportage often focused on the 'death tax' campaign without disabusing its readers that it was not real Labor policy. This study showed that mainstream and social media both play a significant role in spreading fake news as do political actors, and that both respond dynamically in intertwined interactivity to issues and current events creating a media environment complicit with the weaponisation of fake news. This entwined activity online and offline and the reassertion of the falsehood and refutation (with each new version) gave the false narrative longevity across media spheres. We theorise this phenomenon as "recursion" because the narrative reaches audiences online and offline in waves, changing and spreading with each iteration.

In the third study, during the 2023 Voice to Parliament referendum campaigns, we detected various forms of misinformation about: the issue, the election process and the election administrator, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Our published 66-page report on the referendum identified several reasons for the Yes case defeat and thus we caution against overstating the effects of misinformation on the outcome (Carson et al. 2024a). However, analysing big data comprising over 3.3 million mainstream news stories and social media posts about the referendum from January 1 until the referendum date on October 14, revealed a concerted campaign attacking the AEC, that mimicked language from US elections such as accusations of "rigged" and "stolen" and false accusations that the AEC was complicit with illegal, multiple voting expressed on social media through the hashtag "#voteoften". A followup survey experiment with almost 4,000 respondents confirmed that Australians exposed to misinformation in the absence of any refutation had lower levels of trust in the electoral authority than those who were not exposed. Caveats to note from the research were that the effect size, while significant, was small and that baseline public trust in the AEC was high (Carson et al. 2024b). The conclusions from the study were that electoral misinformation can threaten electoral integrity by lowering trust in the AEC, and that for specific segments of the population fact-based refutations by the electoral authority had limited impact. This suggests less technocratic explanations might be explored using a more accessible communication style to warn voters about electoral misinformation, particularly those with low political interest. As noted above, this type of electoral misinformation is more potent when it is repeated by political elites (Arceneaux and Truex 2023) as was the case in the Voice to Parliament campaign.

A separate study of social media platform X also highlighted the extent of the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories about the Voice to Parliament (Graham 2024). The author noted that this highlighted the challenges of fostering meaningful discussion in Australia's current media and political landscape, especially on issues of First Nations' representation. Amid these concerns and as it had done during the 2022 federal election, the AEC created a disinformation register to inform citizens about false messages. Through agreements with online platforms, some falsehoods were removed, and the AEC used its social media to counter false claims. This promising non-legislated response by the AEC warrants further research to understand its efficacy at reducing belief and spread of misinformation.

In the case studies above we highlight several lessons from studying misinformation in Australia, including the value of data-driven methodologies and the critical importance of access to big data. However, access is increasingly restricted as technology platforms like X and Meta deny or restrict researchers' access to their Application Programming Interface (API), with vital tools like CrowdTangle being decommissioned. Additionally, proprietary data sources like Meltwater are prohibitively expensive for many researchers. We suggest there is a role here for government to ensure researchers have adequate access to digital data to trace and measure the effects of misinformation spread.

The three studies identify the role that political elites and both mainstream and social media play in spreading and giving salience to misinformation that has the potential to harm public perceptions of election integrity. Without appropriate sanctions these actors will continue to

weaponise false narratives to gain political advantage, enabled by the very same institutions that lose (more) trust with each iteration of misinformation. How long the effects last is an area for further inquiry, but the Mediscare study suggests effects wane after a few days if the narrative is not repeated, providing supportive arguments for ensuring truth in political advertising, taking down falsehoods, or reducing their algorithmic spread. On the first point however, it is not clear what agency is best placed to manage truth in political advertising as the Voice to Parliament experiment demonstrated that high trust in the AEC should not be taken for granted by allocating it to a role that can be politicised. Its disinformation register and public digital literacy campaign like "Stop and Consider"<sup>3</sup> provide alternative pathways forward to tackle misinformation about the election process.

# 4. Countering misinformation

This section focuses on international misinformation countermeasure findings and domestic policy responses. Researchers have tested various individual-level interventions aimed at improving truth discernment (Kozyreva et al. 2023; 2024; Lewandowsky and van der Linden 2021; Pennycook and Rand 2022). Classical reasoning interventions such as accuracy nudges, media and digital literacy tips, inoculation, or debunking aim to enhance deliberate, effortful processing of information to identify falsehoods, while motivated reasoning interventions focus on reducing defence motivation by addressing identity threats and cognitive dissonance (Ziemer and Rothmund 2024). The Cranky Uncle game, which combines gamification, humour, and interactive elements to build resilience against climate misinformation is an example of a media literacy intervention; it has been successfully launched in Tanzania to combat vaccine hesitancy and is currently being trialled with Arabic-speaking Australians in Melbourne (Cook et al. 2023).<sup>4</sup> An example of an inoculation intervention is the *Bad News* game that preemptively exposes, warns, and familiarises people with the strategies used in misinformation (Roozenbeek and van der Linden 2019).<sup>5</sup> The most recent generation of interventions leverage artificial intelligence to reduce misinformation beliefs, such as the *debunkbot*, which uses personalised evidence-based dialogues with large language models like GPT-4 Turbo to durably reduce belief in conspiracy theories by 20% on average (Costello et a. 2024).<sup>6</sup>

Comparing the effectiveness of such interventions is challenging due to differences in testing environments, stimuli, and methods. However, meta-analyses or explicitly comparative studies provide some indication that media literacy tips and pre-emptive fact-checking show the greatest impact, while skill-building interventions like inoculation and media literacy have more lasting effects than item-specific interventions (Fazio et al. 2024; Chan et al. 2017; Guess et al. 2020). In Australia, most causal research has focused on assessing the effectiveness of fact checking. Fact checking studies have shown that even when a falsehood is successfully debunked, a third of respondents would still share or interact with the false claim knowing that it was false, largely for politically motivated reasons, which may stimulate further spread and amplification of the content with the assistance of recommendation algorithms employed by digital platforms (Carson et al. 2023).

This suggests further research on *platform-level* interventions is warranted. Of the existing studies there is some evidence showing that content-flagging and forwarding restriction policies may be efficacious (Ng, Tang, and Lee 2023), while more drastic measures like deactivation have little discernible effect on misinformation exposure or beliefs (Allcott et al. 2024). Reducing algorithmic-driven exposure to content from like-minded sources diversifies

the content people see, but has no measurable effects on affective polarisation, ideological extremity, or misinformation belief (Nyhan et al. 2023). This indicates that interventions need to be carefully calibrated in order not to overshoot the target, given that many of them imply trade-offs between reducing harm and limiting speech (Kozyreva et al. 2023).

At the *institutional level*, Australia is developing regulatory interventions, as outlined in section 2. Other countries are setting up dedicated agencies to coordinate and centralise their misinformation response, specifically fortifying against foreign interference. Taiwan's Cognitive Warfare Research Centre, for instance, established under the Ministry of Justice, focuses on countering Chinese disinformation through research, analysis, and policy implementation, working closely with both state and civil society (Huỳnh et al., 2024). And Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency builds national resilience by identifying and countering foreign malign information influence, particularly from Russia, collaborating with various sectors, including media and civil organisations. Both institutions focus on proactive defence against external misinformation threats, however as of the time of writing there is no robust evidence yet to evaluate their effectiveness. While, as noted above, foreign interference is of less concern in Australia than domestic misinformation, valuable lessons can still be learned from such central capabilities that coordinate misinformation research and action.

# 5. Conclusion and next steps

This discussion paper provided an overview of the current state of knowledge on measuring, monitoring and diagnosing the impact of mis /dis information to assist in identifying a research agenda around data-driven practical ways to strengthen democratic resilience in Australia. In this concluding section, we summarise the key findings from the analysis, and present a set of recommendations.

## 5.1 Findings

We find that the information environment has evolved into a complex, hybrid ecosystem that is expanding across platforms and fragmenting audiences, with most Australians now accessing their information online. To better understand this environment, researchers need access to expensive proprietary data now that Meta and X have restricted journalists' and researchers' access to their APIs. The Voice to Parliament study above was able to do this using proprietary data from social listening provider Meltwater. But this requires steady funding sources.

Despite public fears, misinformation comprises only a small fraction of overall media consumption, particularly in Western democracies like Australia. However, while misinformation is generally limited in scope, it disproportionately affects specific groups, particularly those who are politically engaged and within ideologically homogeneous networks. A data-driven research agenda would aim to focus in on these vulnerable groups and enlist civil society support to reach vulnerable communities.

Political elites, mainstream and social media and domestic groups on social media can undermine institutional trust if they contribute to the spread and persistence of misinformation, often through recursive and iterative amplification of false narratives. The influence of misinformation on public opinion and behaviour tends to be short-lived unless continually reinforced by repeated exposure through media and political discourse, and further study is warranted to better understand the temporal effects of misinformation.

Any research design needs to consider that engagement with misinformation online does not necessarily reflect belief in falsehoods and that motivations for sharing or interacting with misinformation can vary widely. As the Voice to Parliament referendum demonstrated, there are different types of misinformation and a critical study area is misinformation that threatens to undermine trust in democratic institutions, particularly during elections, where false narratives about processes or authorities can lower trust and perceived legitimacy. Strong guard rail institutions such as the Australian Electoral Commission and National Anti-Corruption Commission are examples of institutional mechanisms to support democratic resilience and an obvious study target to test public trust and resilience. The efficacy of guardrails specifically focused on foreign misinformation, such as the Taiwanese Cognitive Warfare Research Centre is another area for Australian-based research to learn from these international experiences.

## 5.2 Implications

Bolstering democratic resilience requires a whole-of society-approach, with the involvement of key stakeholders including: digital platforms, media organisations, politicians, academics, public servants, and civil society. Research into pre-bunking and debunking interventions like media literacy campaigns and fact-checking studies show some effectiveness in combating misinformation, though their impact varies and may be limited by political motivations or cognitive biases. Examining multi-pronged approaches and different forms of messaging (i.e. investigating visual cues and humour) beyond a reliance on fact-based cognitive reasoning are understudied areas and worthy of further exploration. In addition to individual-level epistemic interventions, such as inoculation and media literacy, including the various innovations outlined in the 'Strengthening Australian Democracy' report (Strengthening Democracy Taskforce, 2024), it is also important to develop more research into existential motives (e.g., threat reduction) and social motives (e.g., belonging and esteem) in reducing misinformation beliefs. In terms of promoting social cohesion, this suggests a focus on reducing perceived divides within society and addressing collective narcissism, that is the belief in the superiority of one's group.

Institutionally, there is a need for large-scale, interdisciplinary collaboration, shared infrastructure, and data access to better understand misinformation. International initiatives such as the International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE)<sup>7</sup> or the Institute for Research on the Information Environment (IRIE)<sup>8</sup> can provide a model for facilitating research on interventions to counter misinformation, fostering democratic engagement, and promoting evidence-based policymaking. These draw on lessons from the natural sciences, such as the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the European Center for Nuclear Research (CERN)which were set up to wrestle with similarly intractable problems.

Of great concern to social science researchers is access to digital data, which is critical for tracing and understanding the spread of misinformation. Restrictions by platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Meta are limiting researchers' ability to study these phenomena. There is a need to expand the research agenda to measure critical community capabilities in questioning and understanding media, as well as resilience to misinformation campaigns. Additionally, tracking trust levels across various information platforms and using natural language processing (NLP) to monitor how misinformation is disseminated by media outlets and politicians are essential.

## 5.3 Recommendations

Following from the review of available research and case studies in the Australian context, this paper presents some specific recommendations for government action. These highlight a need for data-driven research into effective interventions to enable carefully calibrated policy responses to strengthen social cohesion and democratic resilience, while balancing the reduction of misinformation's harms with the protection of free speech:

- 1. **Misinformation monitoring:** Establish regular monitoring of misinformation in the Australian public information environments, including social listening tools to track trending false narratives across different platforms and media, which are essential for timely response.
- 2. **Targeted survey:** Implement an annual, representative survey on misinformation prevalence, key topics, and population segmentation, as well as media trust across different platforms, co-designed by government and academic bodies.
- 3. **Data access:** Enable academic research to access and analyse social media and proprietary data, such as Meltwater, to understand the speed and spread of misinformation.
- 4. **Evidence-based countermeasures:** Fund rigorous experimental research on the efficacy of governmental and societal responses to misinformation, including regulation, public communication, digital and media education, inoculation, or identity threat reduction.
- 5. **Interdisciplinary collaboration:** Encourage regular knowledge-sharing symposiums between researchers and policymakers, modelled on EU initiatives under the Digital Services Act (DSA).
- 6. **Trusted flaggers program:** Create a program to alert online platforms to misinformation and illegal content, similar to the European Union's trusted flagger initiative.
- 7. **Coordination in misinformation research and action:** Invest in bodies, akin to the Institute for Research on the Information Environment or Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency to foster synergistic research efforts and translational bridges between research and policy, and to coordinate responses to misinformation across government agencies, respectively.

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# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For our purposes, misinformation is defined as the spread of falsehoods, while disinformation is a subset that refers specifically to the *intentional* spread of false information to cause harm or for personal gain (Gibbons and Carson 2022). Fake news is a somewhat vague term to describe an array of inaccurate content that mimics news formats (Wardle 2018) and is sometimes used as an umbrella term for mis and disinformation (Carson and Gibbons 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Distrust is a measure in the 2024 Digital News Report from survey respondents (N=2,003) who say they disagree with the statement 'I can trust most news most of the time' (for more details see Park et al., 2024, 113). Trust is a measure of those who answer affirmatively to this question.
- <sup>3</sup> <u>https://www.aec.gov.au/referendums/learn/stop-and-consider.html</u>
- <sup>4</sup> <u>https://crankyuncle.com/</u>
- <sup>5</sup> <u>https://www.getbadnews.com/en</u>
- <sup>6</sup> <u>https://www.debunkbot.com/</u>
- <sup>7</sup> <u>https://ipie.info/</u>
- 8 <u>https://informationenvironment.org/</u>