Information resilience

How misinformation undermines social cohesion, trust and democracy

A report prepared for
the **National Science and Technology Council**

| **chiefscientist**.gov.au

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Executive summary

This report describes how misinformation impacts societal processes through, but not limited to, four different mechanisms. It is intimately embedded with other underlying systematic socio-economic and psycho-social processes (Tay et al. 2024). In this way, misinformation can act in an incendiary manner, inflaming existing social debates and cleavages in societies, or taking root through societal inequities or institutional weaknesses.

- Misinformation is a broad social concern because of its ability to shift attitudes, values and behaviours to more extreme positions, undermining common ground for agreement across society (i.e., **polarising debate**). This can exacerbate partisan disagreement over even basic facts and potentially **undermine social cohesion**.
- Misinformation spread unintentionally or intentionally (as disinformation) can enhance mistrust and may harm both domestic and international relations. Misinformation can also **undermine integration** by acting as a powerful tool for radicalisation through the arousal of strong emotions, such as anxiety and anger.
- Misinformation can **damage trust across societal institutions** and may actively fuel distrust. As a result, positive collective engagement toward common goals and values can be reduced, as well as compliance with broader norms and values, if not laws themselves.
- Misinformation can undermine democratic resilience when it embeds dysfunctional beliefs, potentially sowing and enhancing misguided fear, disproportionately affecting vulnerable subgroups. All these elements can **interfere with informed democratic decision-making**.

Beyond the actual content of what is communicated (i.e., the precise message), the impact of information is enhanced when it:

a) comes from a credible source

b) is simple in its messaging

c) aligns with pre-existing beliefs

d) is repeated.

Continuous developments in digital technology and social media platforms mean that misinformation has (and will have) an ever-increasing impact by providing:

a) dramatic increases in scope, reach and speed of dissemination and uptake

b) low cost, universally accessible, high-speed information-diffusion

c) substantive increase in content production that can be finely targeted and interactive in nature via new developments in generative AI.

Introduction

Report purpose

The impacts of mis- and disinformation are felt through Australian society, challenging and potentially undermining its very foundations, including informed constructive democratic debate, public health, and even national security. More than two thirds of Australians agree more work needs to be done to combat misinformation (Park et al. 2023).

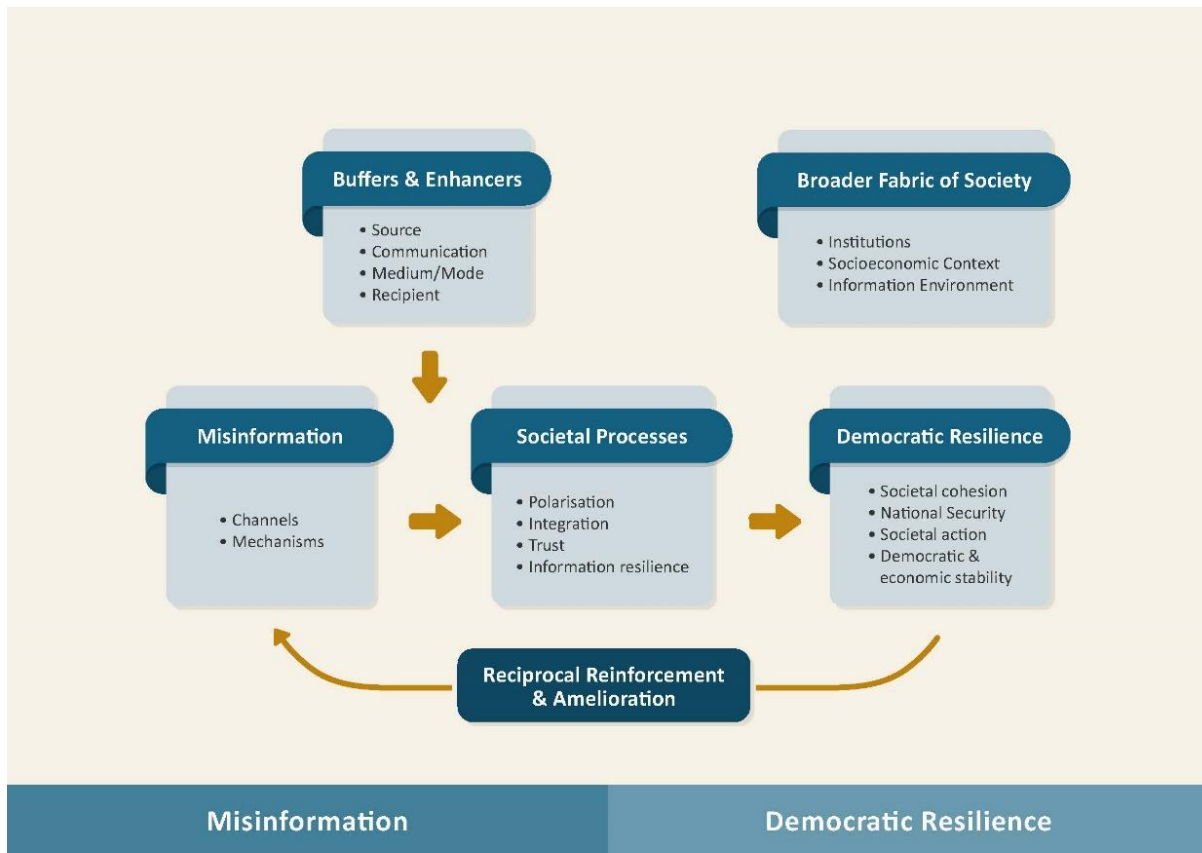
Unfortunately, practical reviews that speak to the Australian context, to simplify and coalesce a diverse literature base are lacking.

To offer this insight we organise existing evidence around how misinformation undermines democratic resilience by impacting information resilience, trust, and social cohesion. In turn we describe factors that often facilitate or buffer the impacts of misinformation. This offers a causal model, represented in Figure 1, that can help clarify how:

1. Misinformation fuels polarisation to undermine social cohesion.
2. Misinformation undermines national security.
3. Misinformation impedes societal action.
4. Misinformation challenges democratic resilience.

We note from the outset that data are not always available for all paths (or institutions) and, as such, this necessarily places restrictions on the scope of this review.

Figure 1: Proposed relationships and questions examined.



Concise definitions

To streamline the report, a concise set of descriptions follow with the full set in Appendix A.

- **Misinformation** and **disinformation**: all forms of false or misleading content. These vary in intent and strategic deployment in the information environment.
- **Trust**: degree to which people feel they can rely or depend on someone or something.
- **Social cohesion**: group members' shared subjective sense of common bonds and common purpose.
- **Information resilience**: an individual's and a society's capacity to ward off or recover from the negative impact of misinformation when encountered.
- **Democratic resilience**: how democracies can prevent or react to challenges without losing their democratic character.

Complex systems: misinformation and society

A cyclical process occurs between misinformation and broader societal factors, such as economic disadvantage, education, and social cohesion itself.

Misinformation is, by definition, information that is misleading. The extent to which it captures a population's attention depends as much on the information as it does on the societal context. It is deeply embedded with a variety of socio-economic and psycho-social processes (Tay et al. 2024). In this way, misinformation can act in an incendiary manner by inflaming existing social debates and amplifying existing fissures (Pickard 2019).

At the same time, societal inequality, exclusion and sub-optimal education, for example, may affect susceptibility to misinformation (Badrinathan 2021), which in turn can fuel polarisation that can undermine societal cohesion (Matema and Kariuki 2022). As such, the societal context is not just a consequence of misinformation but may well be a limiting factor on individuals' idiosyncratic information resilience (Koetke et al. 2022). Indeed, there is frequently a cyclical process (as shown in Figure 1) between misinformation and factors such as social cohesion in which one may feed into the other (Ribeiro et al. 2017). These processes can also create conditions in which individual factors such as intellectual humility (Koetke et al. 2022) and scientific curiosity are fostered or suppressed, leading to either the buffering or enhancement of misinformation.

1 Misinformation and democratic resilience

In an effort to examine the impact of misinformation on social cohesion and democratic resilience – highlighting work within Australia where evidence is available – we organised this section along four pillars. Although these four pillars serve to structure our report, we recognise they serve more as an illustrative than exhaustive function.

1.1 Misinformation fuels polarisation to undermine social cohesion

The diversity of democratic societies is the very basis upon which misinformation can feed and prosper. Divergent 'partisan truths' can emerge from normal social-psychological processes, but so can social cohesion and democratic resilience.

A diversity of attitudes and values exist within any vibrant democracy. It is precisely this diversity that is both a common target and a common enabler of misinformation. **Misinformation often facilitates the shifting of attitudes and values within this diverse landscape to more extreme positions**, potentially undermining common ground for agreement and cohesion (Matema and Kariuki 2022). This can exacerbate partisan disagreement over even basic facts (Osmundsen et al. 2021).

Abrasive or confrontational exchanges between protagonists, propelled by misinformation, in turn may intensify and normalise polarisation (Tucker at al. 2018). As a process, this may undermine social norms regarding acceptable and respectful societal discourse and political debate. Such effects exacerbate political and social cleavages (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), legitimise hyper-partisan politics (Jones 2019), and offer permission for nefarious political activities (e.g., harassing) that target or even grievously harm political candidates (Heller 2021). This is precisely the case in which leadership that collaboratively helps to construct, embed, and give positive meaning to a shared sense of 'us' becomes essential (Haslam et al. 2020).

Even outside such hyperpolarised contexts, **people are often more accepting of information that aligns with their existing attitudes and values** while rejecting opposing information (Kunda 1990). This, in turn, can intensify polarisation by effectively forming an 'echo chamber' that amplifies the effects of misinformation (Guess et al. 2018). For example, merely reading false news posts – including political posts that are extremely implausible but consistent with one's political ideology – makes them subsequently seem more plausible, increasing the individual's likelihood of buying into them (Pennycook at al. 2018).

1.1.1 Social cohesion as a victim of polarisation

The ultimate victim of such polarisation is social cohesion itself. Social cohesion, of course, has been held up by successive governments as evidence of the health and success of Australian democracy since the early 20th century (Markus 2021). But it is more than just a political catchphrase. As indicated above, the very definition of an achievable resilient democracy presupposes diversity of opinions, if not diversity in beliefs over what are and are not facts. In this context, however, social cohesion is not a lack of debate, questioning or disagreement. Instead, social cohesion in a democracy definitionally requires acceptance of diversity – what can be called 'agreeable disagreement'.

Research demonstrates that **diversity in practice succeeds when group members share diversity in principle as a value** (Van Knippenberg et al. 2007). Moreover, it is groups with shared norms of debate and critical evaluation rather than consensus that emerge with better collective outcomes (Postmes et al. 2001). Democratic resilience, then, is predicated on an agreed understanding of a 'superordinate category' – of 'all of us Australians together' – defined by values of diversity and critical evaluation. This, unfortunately, is easier said than done, particularly when subgroups adopt 'partisan truths' that challenge this 'agreed understanding'.

Take, for example, recent research on Australian attitudes toward same-sex marriage during the national plebiscite. Not only did opponents and supporters generally view their own position as factual (and the 'other side' as wrong), but each side often viewed the other as 'prejudiced' while they, themselves, were nothing short of 'Australian' (Platow et al. 2023). Here we see both the challenges that democratic diversity poses for both truth and social cohesion. Indeed, a well-known 'in-group projection' effect (Wenzel et al. 2017) appears to have occurred whereby each side in the debate may have 'projected' its own position onto the shared group of Australia: each side claimed truth while denying full Australianness to the other.

This represents, at minimum, the nascent breakdown in cohesion, as Australian citizens who disagreed with 'us' were seen as less Australian. Perceptions of truth and national identity became tied. This tests the resilience of democracy, not only in its form as prejudice itself, but in its ability to lay foundations for the rise of demagogic leaders. Independent research, involving hypothetical scenarios, shows how leaders can enhance their support by unfairly favouring life-long citizens over recent immigrants in the distribution of health care services (Platow et al. 1997) and by providing democratic voice more to 'us' than 'them' (Platow et al. 1998). It thus can, under certain circumstances, become politically expedient to capitalise on these divisions if not sow their seeds (Haslam et al. 2020).

As a more direct example of the potential role of misinformation, misleading narratives about the causes of the devastating 2020 bushfires in Australia have been argued by some authors to enhance polarisation within the broader Australian society (Zheng and Bhatt 2022) (e.g., shift discussion among some away from climate change to blaming arson alone (Weber et al. 2022)). Negative consequences, including community 'disconnections,' also emerged in Australia as a result of COVID-19 misinformation (Leung et al. 2021).

Such divisions and consequent undermining of social cohesion present additional challenges to the resilience of democracy, one of which is the breakdown of trust in fellow citizens, institutions and the information they provide. Research among Australians has shown that **a common identity can foster trust, even among strangers** (Foddy et al. 2009). Without this common identity, trust dissipates as people seek certainty rather than risk potentially misplaced trust (Platow et al. 2012). Moreover, people begin trusting information itself by accepting it as 'true' when provided by 'us' and consistent with 'our way of thinking' (Wang et al. 2023).

1.1.2 Misinformation, sub-group disunity and isolation

When groups have disparate views, even within the same society, they tend to be less willing to consider each other's perspectives (Turner 1991). When beliefs are polarised, the majority itself does not need to be misinformed for negative consequences to ensue. Rather, if a subgroup is large enough, it may stall decision-making. For example, if masks were effective in protecting against COVID-19 but groups and individuals were polarised about the efficacy of masks, a government may be reluctant to impose a mandate even if it is the optimal choice (Lyons and Fowler 2021). This reluctance, of course, can prolong and/or increase the severity of a pandemic. Clearly, **polarisation through misinformation can be detrimental for societal decision-making and citizen welfare** (Azzimonti and Fernandes 2023).

Misinformation may also **undermine social cohesion by highlighting perceived isolation and injustice experienced by individuals in society, particularly among those in marginalised groups** (Amazeen et al. 2024). Misinformation may also amplify narratives in a way that marginalised groups feel alienated or wrongly blamed for societal issues, just as the same narratives may fuel societal resentment (Jaiswal et al. 2020). This may include such things as false claims about crimes being committed by certain demographics (Thomas and Wendling 2024) and fabricated stories of welfare abuse (Keep 2023). The power of such strategies as a form of influence is in that they not only reinforce the general unfairness and persecution perceived by these groups, but also serve to stigmatise and create hostility towards them across more mainstream society (Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies 2021).

This process of constructing false narratives effectively structures intergroup relations within a society (McGarty et al. 2002), casting fellow citizens as outsiders (Sibley and Barlow 2009) in a way that can hamper efforts for trust building and cooperation (Brewer 2008). Reduced trust has, in turn, been shown to create a space where misinformation may gain greater leverage (Agley and Xiao 2023).

1.2 Misinformation undermines national security

Misinformation and associated indoctrination material may be disseminated as a tool on the internet to identify and socialise potential new recruits to extremist ideologies.

Misinformation can challenge aspects of **national security**. For example, online misinformation related to Australia's policies in the South China Sea or its stance on international issues can amplify tensions within communities, creating security vulnerabilities (Voo 2024). Such campaigns drive distrust and harm international relations, affecting both internal stability and global standing (Patton 2024).

Similarly, misinformation and associated indoctrination materials have been **spread on social media to identify and socialise potential new recruits to extremist ideologies (Shuck 2015) as well as intensify radicalisation processes (Piazza 2022)**. Aligned with our comments above, extremist movements may target isolated or poorly integrated individuals and communities (Schmid 2013). Extremists are often savvy communicators deploying a variety of tactics to achieve extreme goals and recruit new members (Kydd and Walter 2006). For example, extremists may use common hashtags when commenting on topical issues or embed news reports into their propaganda to lure users from mainstream to extremist content (Roberts-Ingleson and McCann 2023). Also, connection to a like-minded 'community' can have feed-through effects. Extremist propaganda and misinformation can be presented as an irrefutable truth leading to a sense of superiority (Rahman 2018). Misinformation can be a reliable tool for radicalisation when it employs strong emotions, such as anxiety and anger, among targeted individuals (Roberts-Ingleson and McCann 2023). Even when relatively small segments of the community experience and 'become the consequences', this poses national security risks by, for example, supporting and participating in terrorism at home and abroad (e.g., Syria), financing it, engaging in ideological violence that reflect minorities or local homegrown extremism (e.g., Christchurch massacres), or to misogyny in schools (Roberts and Wescott 2024).

1.3 Misinformation impedes societal action

Misinformation can limit and break down valuable actions at a societal level, such as positive collective engagement with things like climate action and vaccine uptake.

Misinformation can have an incredibly damaging effect on trust across societal institutions. Not only does it reduce trust, but **misinformation may actively fuel distrust** (Jain 2021) in key pillars of societal function including experts (Kim et al. 2023), politicians (Ognyanova et al. 2020), citizens (Hoes et al. 2022), authorities (Filkuková et al. 2021), governmental institutions (Denner et al. 2023), social media (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Jain 2021; Ognyanova et al. 2020), and society itself (Wong et al. 2021).

The evidence is remarkably consistent across experimental studies (Denner et al. 2023), natural experiments (Lovari 2020), simulation studies (Ma et al. 2024) and survey research (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Jain 2021; Kim et al. 2023; Ognyanova et al. 2020; Hoes et al. 2022; Filkuková et al. 2021; Wong et al. 2021). In turn, a lack of trust undermines societal processes that impact:

- Positive collective engagement: **misinformation can impede positive collective engagement** on a raft of societal issues such as climate change (Van der Linden et

al. 2017), public health (Salmon et al. 2015). For example, misinformation about environmental science, particularly climate change, reduces public understanding and support for policies that seek to tackle these issues (Lovari 2020). The rapid spread of misinformation during emergencies or crises can challenge emergency responses, sow confusion and endanger lives (Daume 2024).

- Public health and compliance*:* **misinformation, particularly around health, may discourage or sow distrust in public health**, reducing vaccination rates, or promoting unsafe practices such as alternative cures for cancer. The issue of health misinformation prompted the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to collaborate with the American Psychological Association to create strategies to counter its effects. Focusing on Australia, only 48% of pregnant women intended getting vaccinated, despite being at risk of contracting COVID-19 (Tran 2024). This hesitancy potentially increased the risk of hospitalisation and risked additional pressure on Australia's public health resources (Tran 2024).
- Acceptance and compliance: key health or societal functions with which citizen engagement is sought, such as vaccination (Loomba et al. 2021) and orderly voting (Reedy et al. 2014), may be ignored.

1.4 Misinformation challenges democratic resilience

Misinformation can embed dysfunctional beliefs, sow misguided fear, and interfere with informed democratic decision making – particularly among vulnerable subgroups.

Misinformation can impact information resilience by undermining the legitimacy of credible information sources, sowing confusion and leading to distrust about what is accurate or not (Altay et al. 2023). Discordant information spreads doubts about the credibility of these sources, such that people no longer turn to them as reliable sources of guidance, instead seeking information from unverified or biased platforms (Brashier 2024). Misinformation can cause financial losses in a variety of ways, including but not limited to fraud, influencing personal financial decisions, disrupting the financial system, affecting business operations, etc. (ACMA 2020).

Ultimately, misinformation can:

- **Embed dysfunctional beliefs.** This can occur, for example, via 'false equivalence', in which a major falsehood is equated with a far less consequential one from an alternate party (Alterman 2016).
- **Sow and enhance misguided fear.** Misguided fear can be spread through social networks in a way that can influence public attitudes and behaviours throughout society (Khafaga et al. 2023). Information designed to induce fear of harm can successfully change people's attitudes, intentions, and behaviours in certain circumstances if people believe they can take effective actions to avoid harm (Tannenbaum et al. 2015).

- **Disproportionately affect vulnerable subgroups.** Frequently the most vulnerable members of society are most prone to misinformation. They may be amongst lower socio-economic groups, bereft of adequate support and educational opportunity, or socially isolated and by implication those that society might most seek to protect. Such groups are particularly prone to misinformation (Brashier 2024).
- **Interfere with informed democratic decision making.** Misinformation can be employed as a strategy of political persuasion to influence election outcomes. Social scientists have begun making analyses both within laboratory contexts and of social media posts and have nascent bodies of evidence suggesting the veracity of this proposition.

Tables 1a–d: Summary of research findings

Table 1a: Polarisation

Input: Misinformation	Societal process: Polarisation	Outcome: Societal cohesion	Societal value
• Promote extreme values. • Intensify confrontation. • Influence public through inflammatory narratives.	• Intensify opposing positions and adversarial communication. • Echo chamber effect.	• Exacerbate partisan disagreement. • Fuel public misunderstandings and divisions. • Harm societal decision-making and welfare.	• Cohesive harmonious society.

Table 1b: Integration

Input: Misinformation	Societal process: Integration	Outcome: National security	Societal value
• Affect national policies. • Recruit and radicalise poorly integrated individuals and groups.	• Fuel conflicts. • Induce isolated individuals to join extreme groups.	• Amplify tensions within communities. • Harm international relations • Intensify extremism and radicalisation processes.	• Multi-cultural society.

Table 1c: Trust

Input: Misinformation	Societal process: Trust	Outcome: Societal action	Societal value
• Misinformation targeting key pillars of societal functioning.	• Reduce trust. • Fuel distrust in key pillars of societal function.	• Undermine positive collective engagement and public health risks and compliance and acceptance and compliance.	• Adaptation.

Table 1d: Information resilience

Input: Misinformation	Societal process: Information resilience	Outcome: Democratic and economic stability	Societal value
• Undermine the legitimacy of credible information sources. • Spreading confusion.	• Undermine confidence in credible sources. • Seek information from unverified platforms.	• Embed dysfunctional beliefs. • Sow and enhance misguided fear. • Interfere with democratic decision making.	• Democratic and institutional stability.

2 What is the psychology of misinformation?

The nature of human psychology means that identifying misinformation is not automatic. People often assume information is true the first time they are presented with that information, and repeated presentations make that information seem even more true.

From a cognitive (mental) processing perspective, there are a variety of ways in which people are vulnerable to misinformation (Greifeneder et al. 2021). **When people process incoming content, they have a tendency to assume it is true**. This is due to initial mental representations that support comprehension and cooperative communication norms assuming shared content to be true, relevant and informative (Gilbert et al. 1993).

People are **also inclined to process information with a focus on meaning rather than thinking about accuracy** (Erickson and Mattson 1981). Indeed, actively assessing veracity of incoming claims requires more mental effort (Gilbert et al. 1990). Such a process is not efficient and typically not primed (i.e., cued, suggested, or even encouraged) in online contexts (Globig et al. 2023). Moreover, in assessing veracity, people tend to draw on heuristic strategies (i.e., rules-of-thumb), considering 'metacognitive' cues such as simply how easy it is to process incoming information (Schwarz et al. 2021). If the information is easy to process, people tend to evaluate it more favourably and because a variety of factors impact the ease of processing information – from the presence of a related picture to the style of font or accent in a message – cognitive processing experiences can distort perceptions of truth (Newman and Schwarz 2023).

A factor of particular concern in this context is the simple repetition of information. Decades of research show that **mere repetition of content can increase perceptions of its veracity** (Hasher et al. 1977). People are more inclined to believe repeated content regardless of whether it is low or high plausibility, and even when they have demonstrated prior knowledge that a claim is false or at odds with their own beliefs and attitudes (Jiang et al. 2024). Over time, people tend to retain the general message and fail to draw on source information, so if messages are shared repeatedly from a low-quality source, the repeated claim may still be assessed as more true (Henkel and Mattson 2011). These memory processes are critical in understanding the impact of exposure to misinformation – because initial impressions in the moment may nonetheless be overridden by loss of critical source information over time, such as recalling the context in which the information was encountered (e.g., from a low credibility website or social media).

Simple repetition in online spaces is a concern because misinformation can be amplified through strategic campaigns and the increase in perceived truth can rise with increasing

exposures (Hassan and Barber 2021). Further, repetition does not simply increase perceptions of truth, it may create illusory perceptions of social consensus (Jalbert and Pillai 2024).

3 What enhances or weakens the effects of misinformation?

Fully understanding how misinformation affects trust, social cohesion and resilience requires also considering a variety of factors that can influence how individuals process and respond to misleading information and as a result enhance or weaken the effects of misinformation. These factors can be grouped into four categories that refer to features of *the source*, the *communication*, the *channel of communication* and the *recipient*. Each category discusses factors that can influence the spread of misinformation, the recipients' ability to resist it and the overall impact on trust and social resilience.

3.1 Features of the source

People are more likely to believe any information (misinformation or true information) as true if they perceive the source of that information to be credible, trustworthy, expert, and a member of their own group.

The source of the information is a critical factor that affects how misinformation is received (Moore et al. 2025). People, for instance, tend to **believe information more when it comes from sources they deem trustworthy** – often sources that they find attractive, powerful, or represent characteristics similar to themselves (Briñol and Petty, 2009). People tend to believe information when they perceive the source is trustworthy because they have confidence in the dependability of the source and believe it will yield relatively favourable outcomes. More broadly, **shared social group membership can enhance these perceptions, leading individuals to trust information from in-group members more readily than information from out-group members** (Peterson and Allamong 2022). While this can arguably be a practical and even rational approach to processing information, research shows it can also cause people to overlook whether a source possesses relevant expertise and thus lead to greater belief in misinformation (Mahmoodi et al. 2015). Relatedly, research has found that highlighting a source's low expertise can significantly damage its credibility and reduce its impact, making it an effective strategy for reducing public belief in disinformation (Swire-Thompson et al. 2024).

3.1.1 Building informed trust

Distrust in the source of a communication is a vulnerability factor for misinformation (Tay et al. 2024). Fortunately, research suggests paths forward. **Developing 'informed epistemic trust' – a discerning value in expertise with an understanding of how knowledge is created (Osborne and Allchin 2025) is a critical target and can be considered a protective factor** (Fasce and Picó 2019). A recent study investigating trust in scientists across 68 countries found that despite general trust in scientists, variation was present across countries (Cologna et al. 2025). Australia had relatively high trust in scientists and there was no evidence of an association between political orientation and

trust in science (whereas in some European countries and the U.S., higher levels of conservative political orientation were associated with lower trust in scientists). These data suggest the foundation is present in Australia to further support education regarding evidence-based epistemologies.

3.2 Features of the communication

Features of the communication itself, such as emotional appeals, provision of evidence, and (again) repetition, can all affect the acceptance or rejection of misinformation.

People are also sensitive to the way information is communicated to them and draw on simple heuristics in evaluating the trust and credibility of incoming information (Schwarz et al. 2021). As mentioned, when information is easy to process, people tend to evaluate it more favourably and because a variety of factors impact the ease of processing information – from repetition to the presence of a related picture to the style of font or accent in a message – cognitive processing experiences can distort perceptions of truth (Newman and Zhang 2020). In addition, some forms of misinformation may appear more credible due to emotional appeals and sensationalism (Bago et al. 2022). Moreover, messages that evoke outrage are more likely to be shared (and with less scrutiny) (McLoughlin et al. 2024). Thus, **to the extent that messages can be tailored for a given individual such that they are easy to comprehend and perceive and can attract the attention of the recipient, the more these messages may acquire trust, credibility and perceived veracity**.

Further, **people tend to seek out, positively evaluate, and preferentially retain information that aligns with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs** (Lord et al. 1979). Misinformation that serves a political strategy, for example, can thus make it harder for people to assess the accuracy of information particularly if it aims to reinforce existing partisan views (Hameleers and Van der Meer 2020).

3.3 Features of the channel of communication

All information is communicated through a specific medium or 'channel'. When channels feel (or are) 'personal' – like face-to-face communication or even social media – people are inclined to trust the information. More distant, traditional media – like newspapers – are becoming less trusted. Artificial intelligence is becoming problematic as it often blurs the line between personal and distant channels.

The channel through which misinformation is communicated plays a significant role in how far it spreads and how individuals process it (Di Domenico et al. 2022). The next sections specifically discuss the unique features of some key channels of communication.

3.3.1 Traditional media

Traditional media, including television, radio and newspapers, have historically served as gatekeepers of information but are not immune to spreading misinformation and disinformation. Declining trust in media institutions and the push for rapid, 24-hour news cycles can lead to errors or rushed reporting that spread inaccuracies (Tsfati et al. 2020). **Certain outlets may intentionally present biased or misleading information to appeal to specific audience segments**, a strategy that can further entrench misinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).

The influence of traditional media remains significant, especially among older demographics who rely on it as a primary information source (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). However, less research has examined vulnerabilities of young people within this arena. This raises opportunities for further research. Journalistic norms such as fact-checking, source verification and adherence to accuracy are designed to counter misinformation. However, **the norm of 'balanced coverage' can inadvertently contribute to misinformation when issues with clear scientific or factual consensus are presented as if they have two equally valid sides, a phenomenon known as 'false balance'** (Dixon and Clarke 2013). This practice can give unwarranted legitimacy to fringe or unsubstantiated claims, especially in controversial areas like climate change or vaccine safety, potentially misleading audiences by suggesting scientific debate where there is none (Boykoff and Boykoff 2004).

3.3.2 Social media

Digital communication technologies, such as social media platforms and websites are central to the spread of misinformation (Wand and Zhou 2022) because they are:

- low cost
- universally accessible
- easy to use
- allow for a high speed information diffusion
- are susceptible to interception and unauthorised access
- allow for high personalisation due to platform-specific features such as algorithms.

The nature of social media is predominantly visual content. Misinformation communicated in this format has the potential to exert a strong influence on memory and beliefs (Newman and Schwarz 2023). The more individuals are exposed to misinformation (even when it is labelled as false), the more they may perceive it as credible, and publish and share it, which then leads to a cycle of misinformation reinforcement (Effron and Raj 2020).

Social media platforms are a prominent conduit for misinformation and disinformation due to their rapid, decentralised information-sharing capabilities. Content on platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, TikTok and Instagram can reach vast audiences with little editorial oversight, amplifying the spread of falsehoods through viral sharing and algorithm-driven recommendations (Cinelli et al. 2020). Therefore, **social media may be easier to manipulate than traditional media**. Sensational or polarising

information often garners more attention, driving user engagement and platform profits, while also inadvertently amplifying inaccuracies (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

Other research has shown that in online communication, individual anonymity does not lead to normlessness (as some traditional analyses suggest). Instead, anonymity enhances a psychological sense of a shared identity with others with whom one is communicating. This shared identity – through paths identified above in 'Features of the Source' – enhances social influence and conformity to localised norms. Although misinformation research has not examined this directly, there is strong evidence for these social influence and persuasion effects (Spears and Postmes 2015).

3.3.3 Generative AI and chatbots

Generative AI models, such as ChatGPT and large language models (LLMs), have popularised chatbots as a new channel of communication and added a new layer to misinformation by generating realistic but potentially false text, images or videos. These **AI models have the capability to create coherent and believable narratives that can be easily mistaken for accurate information if not properly vetted** (Zellers et al. 2019), particularly as information presented on chatbots can sound authoritative but lack cues commonly used for assessing veracity (e.g., source). Moreover, **the models are built by 'learning' from existing data without discernment about the veracity of the data** and information created can feed back into these models as true data used to train future LLMs, thus contributing to further misinformation (Garry et al. 2024).

3.3.4 Direct interpersonal communication

Interpersonal communication through friends, family and colleagues is another critical channel for misinformation spread. Unlike public media, private conversations lack scrutiny, enabling misinformation to be shared and reinforced without challenge (Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Furthermore, individuals tend to trust and act upon information received from close social contacts, especially when it aligns with pre-existing beliefs (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). As such, **private communication can create 'echo chambers' where misinformation circulates unchecked and often persists even when exposed to corrective information** (Berger 2014). Social networks can also normalise misinformation through repeated exposure and peer endorsement (Fazio et al. 2022).

3.3.5 Interaction of channels

The channels mentioned above are not isolated; they often interact, amplifying the potential for misinformation to spread across platforms and reach diverse audiences. Misinformation originating on social media may be picked up by traditional news outlets seeking to cover trending topics, which can legitimise fringe content and extend its reach to broader audiences (Gupta et al. 2013).

Conversely, narratives or 'facts' that appear in traditional media can gain a second life on social media, where they are reinterpreted or distorted by users and influencers, potentially resulting in altered or sensationalised versions of the original information (Tsfati et al. 2020).

Generative AI further complicates this space by creating hyper-realistic content that can be easily shared via chatbots also across both traditional and social media. Moreover, interpersonal communication acts as a reinforcement mechanism, where individuals share and validate misleading information with close others, such as through conversations or via private channels on various communication and social media platforms (Vosoughi et al. 2018).

This **cycle of cross-platform information transfer creates a complex web where misinformation can proliferate through multiple, reinforcing channels, making correction efforts particularly challenging** (Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

3.4 Features of the recipient

People vary on a variety of dimensions, such as age, intelligence, conscientiousness and agreeableness. These, and other factors, can impact people's acceptance of misinformation.

The recipient's psychological (Miller et al. 2024)**, social** (Badrinathan 2021) **and demographic factors** (Kim et al. 2019) **also play a role in how misinformation is processed and how resilient individuals are to misinformation**. A robust body of work shows that when people have higher cognitive reflection – the tendency to draw on analytical processing, rather than relying on intuitions or feelings about content – they are better at discerning true from false content (Arechar et al. 2023). Some research suggests that people who are higher on extroversion perform more poorly at distinguishing between true and false claims, other personality variables return mixed results (Calvillo et al. 2024). One study found that those higher in extroversion may also have a tendency to share without verification, yet the opposite pattern was found with those who are high on neuroticism (Sampat and Raj 2022). Research highlights an increasing vulnerability to misinformation in older adults, with higher sharing and exposure rates (Brashier 2024; Brashier and Schacter 2020). Intellectual humility is associated with greater misinformation discernment (Prike et al. 2024) and consequently less misinformation receptivity (Bowes and Fazio 2024). Further, individuals higher in intellectual humility are more likely to engage in investigative behaviours (Koetke et al. 2022). Some initial, cultural-level research has also suggested that likelihood of accepting misinformation may increase when people are particularly high in psychological need satisfaction (Huang et al. 2024). Finally, people facing economic inequality are more likely to hold the view that society is breaking down, facilitating engagement in conspiratorial thinking and endorsement of related misinformation.

3.5 Summary

Table 2 presents a preliminary summary and interpretation of the literature that allows us to suggest key factors that may enhance or weaken the effect of misinformation. When reading the summarised data in Table 2, it is essential to recognise that each of the factors has been found to impact social cohesion, trust and/or information resilience to **varying** degrees.

Moreover, the research currently does not allow us to determine whether the absence of factors leads to the opposite effects. This is because in any given situation, there may be other factors present that mask the absence of another. Therefore, further research is needed to determine which of the factors has the greatest impact and requires the most intervention attention.

Table 2: Key factors that enhance or weaken the effects of misinformation

Source of communication	Communication itself	Channel of communication	Recipient of communication
Misinformation may have more pronounced effects when **sources** are perceived to be: • trustworthy • attractive • credible • powerful • similar to oneself (including shared group membership).	Misinformation may have more pronounced effects when **communications** are: • sensationalised • accompanied by an emotional appeal • easy to process (easy to perceive and understand) • serving a political strategy.	Misinformation may have more pronounced effects when shared by **channels** that are: • social media platforms and websites • presented in a 'false balance' manner • presented visually • repeatedly exposing people to the communication • invoking a sense of shared identity • coherent and easy to understand • communicated second-hand through friends, family and colleagues.	Misinformation may have more pronounced effects when **recipients** are: • lower in cognitive reflection • in older age groups • experiencing a social or political identity alignment with the communication.

4 Conclusion

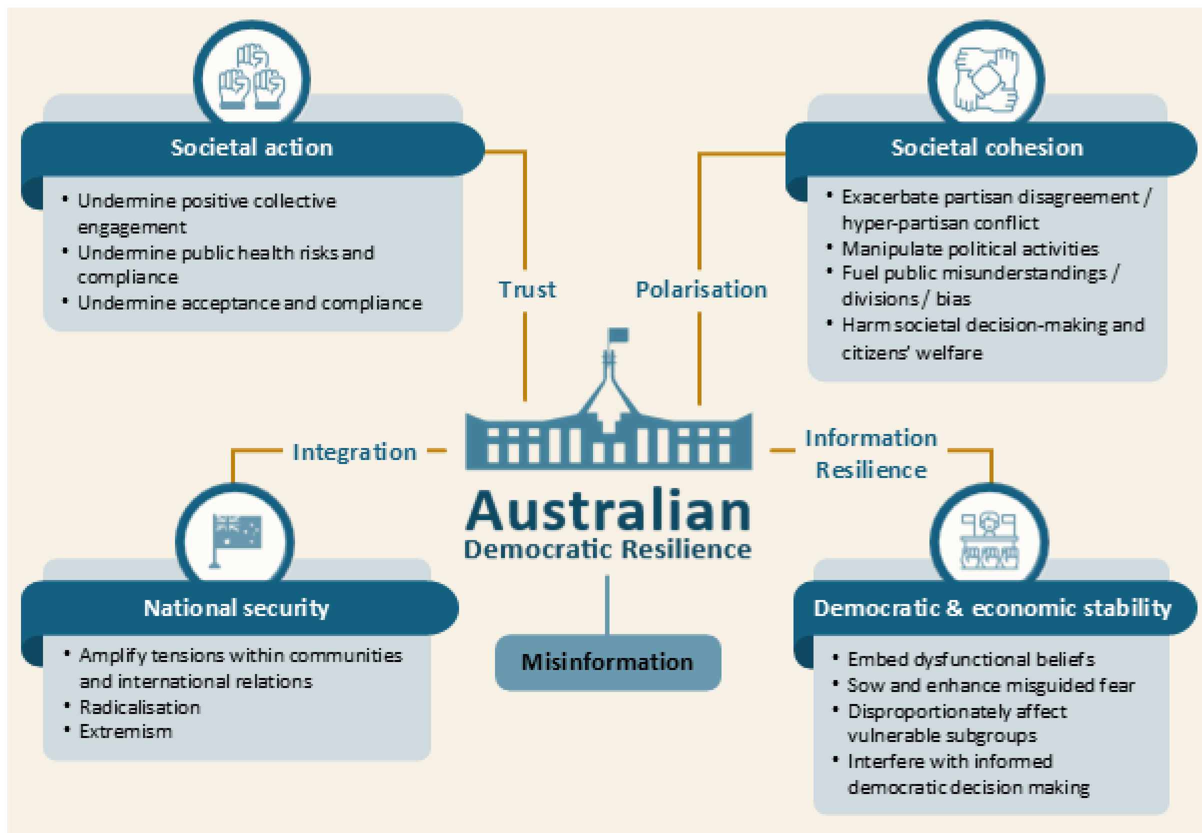
Understanding the role of misinformation in individual and democratic resilience requires not only a scientific analysis of human psychology, but a political analysis and a reflection on shared values about what a vibrant democracy actually looks like.

Misinformation has the potential to negatively impact democratic resilience through core societal functions, as summarised in Figure 2.

The review suggests that **the risks of misinformation should not be ignored**. Technological and platform advances as well as the geo-political climate and societal conditions provide both the highway for dissemination and the context where it is consumed and takes root in attitudes and beliefs. For example, the capacity of large language models to develop dynamic and persuasive content targeted at individuals' fears, ideologies, or concerns at scale means the precision, and spread of misinformation are likely to be far greater in the future.

With the prior points made, we are careful to highlight some of the deficiencies within the current literature base. There is less clarity in the research evidence about the connections at the broader societal level. The framing of the question underpinning this review implies that trust, social cohesion and information resilience may positively influence democratic resilience, and that misinformation operates to put resilience at risk. Traditional models of a healthy democracy suggest that continuity and effectiveness are predicated on high levels of generalised political trust (Dimdins et al. 2024) whereas 'aggregate low levels of trust' place democratic functioning at risk (Van der Meer and Zmerli 2017) through the emergence of 'heightened partisan polarisation' amplified by or linked to the effects of misinformation (Rudolph and Hetherington 2021).

Figure 2: Summary of review findings in Australian context



Alternatively, the 'critical citizen' model of trust in a democracy suggests that comparatively lower levels of trust or 'political distrust' and criticism of political institutions play a very important role in democracies and are indicators of the health, strength and resilience of a democracy (Carstens 2023). This model relies on an assumption that trust in democratic principles remains strong (e.g., acceptance of diverse views as legitimate) and distrust is viewed as healthy because the critiques are drawn from a desire to ensure that civil institutions perform according to those democratic principles. This recognises diversity and variation of strongly held (polarised) political views (e.g., in parliamentary democracies) and suggests that social cohesion around the valuing of democracy links to democratic resilience.

An extension of the 'critical citizen' model suggests that democracies are functioning well while distrust is contained and focused on 'partisan political institutions' (such as government, politicians) and not on the 'non-partisan' institutions (such as the judiciary, science) (Warren 2017, 2018). The concern is when there are low levels of political trust in both partisan and non-partisan political institutions (Dawson and Krakoff 2024) and misinformation amplifies the distrust. **While it can be concluded that misinformation can heighten or amplify distrust and affect engagement, behaviour and decision-making, the evidence for direct causal links remains unclear** (Adams et al. 2023).

One final point related to this reflection is that we have characterised members of society more or less as perpetrators or victims of misinformation. However, believers in potential misinformation may become the perpetrators of it, in turn (Haslam et al. 2023). This actually brings this report back full circle to the full definition of social cohesion

(Appendix A). There can be partisan social cohesion among a sub-set of society, but clear polarisation at a broader societal level. In the end, understanding the role of misinformation in individual and democratic resilience requires not only a scientific analysis of human psychology, but a political analysis and a reflection on shared values about what a vibrant democracy actually looks like.

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Appendix A: Definitions

Misinformation and disinformation

Misinformation and **disinformation** vary in intent and strategic deployment in the information environment. As inferring intent can be challenging and existing research generally does not distinguish between the two, here we use the term misinformation to broadly refer to *all forms of false or misleading content*, including but not limited to intentionally created and disseminated disinformation; this allows us to align this report with the understandings of both experts and lay people (Pickard 2019). A key reason why the research literature does not differentiate between mis- and disinformation is because research has focused on people's abilities to identify any information as factually correct or incorrect, regardless of the communicator's intent. This focus remains in the current report, although we do recognise that features of communication source (e.g., trustworthiness, as we discuss below), are important.

Trust

Trust refers to the reliance on or confidence in the dependability of someone or something to yield relatively favourable outcomes to oneself when those outcomes are actually unknown. Trust manifests through people's willingness to place their fate in the hands of others without being assured of specific outcomes by external cost-reward structures (i.e., structure ensuring specific outcomes thereby removing the need for trust (Badrinathan 2021)). Subjectively, trust is the degree to which people feel they can depend on others to do what those others say they will do without causing harm. Trust facilitates peaceful and stable social relations that are the basis for collective behaviour and productive cooperation (Matema and Kariuki 2022).

Social cohesion

Social cohesion is often variably defined, but broadly represents group members' shared subjective sense of common bonds and common purpose. This manifests in mutual collaboration through consensually agreed-upon procedures and practices (e.g., laws). Subjectively, social cohesion is experienced through strength of the bonds linking members to the group (and, subsequently, trust (Badrinathan 2021)), the sense of belongingness and community within the group, and the feelings of positive social attraction toward fellow group members (Koetke et al. 2022). Once the parameters of social cohesion are in place, democratic societies and institutions can peacefully weather diversity, debates and disagreements; social cohesion is not uniformity in attitudes and opinions, but agreement about who and what 'we' are (Ribeiro et al. 2017). The research on misinformation has paid limited attention to cohesion in a broad sense, focusing instead primarily on how misinformation polarises communities, breaking down this shared sense of 'we', and limiting or removing the basis for respectful diversity, debate and disagreement. This polarisation highlights a critical caveat: social cohesion,

as defined, can occur within societal subgroups while conflict obtains between them. Polarised debates over who 'we' are at the societal level would indicate a lack of societal cohesion despite social cohesion within the subgroups (Osmundsen et al. 2021; Tucker et al. 2018). For this report, our attention will be focused primarily on social cohesion at the societal level.

Information resilience

Information resilience is a subtype of a broader concept of individual resilience, or the capacity to be steadfast and adapt in the face of challenges or adversity (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). In its more focused form, information resilience refers to individuals' and society's capacity to ward off or recover from the impact of misinformation when encountered (Jones 2019). Across the misinformation field, researchers infer resilience based on specific measures relevant to a given intervention, such as web page navigation, assessing credibility of content, information and civics engagement. Other more psychological measures include information discernment (the ability to differentiate between factual and misleading content), and misinformation effects on memory, reasoning, decision-making, beliefs, and attitudes.

Democratic resilience

Democratic resilience describes how democracies can 'prevent or react to challenges without losing [their] democratic character' (Heller 2021). This can be achieved through the persistence of 'democratic ideals' among the population (Haslam et al. 2020), including the recognition of 'the legitimacy of political opponents', 'peaceful resolution of disagreements', and 'unequivocal support for civil liberties of minorities' (Kunda 1990). Democratic resilience is reliant, in part, on a shared set of values and institutions enabling the maintenance of a diversity of other values, opinions and lifestyles under a shared national social identity. Democratic resilience frequently is a downstream beneficiary of social cohesion and institutional trust. National security is part of this and refers to the protection of a nation's stability and well-being from various threats, including military, economic, social, and environmental factors that can significantly impact the quality of life and choices available to the government and its people.