



Australian Government

National Science and Technology Council

Information resilience: understanding and protecting against misinformation

Synthesis report

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The purpose of this publication is to provide an evidence base on information resilience for policy makers.

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Background

In 2024 Australia's National Science and Technology Council, the Prime Minister's pre-eminent science advisory body, commissioned a series of reports on the topic of misinformation.

The Council recognised that there was work underway on misinformation across many levels of government, and that regulation and other policy measures to limit the negative impacts of misinformation may be needed.

In an era of fast-changing technology, the Council appreciates there are challenges associated with attempting to temper technological advances through regulation.

The Council decided to investigate how to build resilience in the Australian community to ensure it is less vulnerable to information threats however they arise. It subsequently commissioned 4 reports to provide an evidence base to answer the question:

What makes individuals and populations susceptible to believing misinformation and disinformation – and what makes them resilient?

This summary provides a snapshot of the findings of the reports. Further detail (including references) is available in the full reports.

What is misinformation?

Typically, misinformation is understood to be false or misleading information spread regardless of the intent to mislead. Disinformation is false or misleading information that is deliberately spread.

In this summary and the 4 reports 'misinformation' is used as a broad term to describe all false or misleading information, regardless of intent. This is because this is how researchers in the field generally approach the topic.

Why is misinformation a problem?

Misinformation presents a serious risk to Australia's social cohesion and democratic resilience. While misinformation has always been present in human society, the advent of social media and AI has accelerated its coverage, speed and impact.

Fundamentally, misinformation undermines trust in each other and our institutions. It does this in 4 key ways:

1. It can shift attitudes, values and behaviours to more extreme positions. This undermines common ground for agreement across society, even over basic facts, thereby threatening social cohesion.
2. It can enhance mistrust which can harm both domestic and international relations. This includes by acting as a powerful tool for radicalisation by arousing strong emotions such as anxiety and anger.

3. It can damage trust in societal institutions, meaning that people are less likely to work together towards common goals and values, or comply with societal expectations.
4. It can undermine both democratic resilience and decision making by fostering dysfunctional beliefs and misguided fear.

In addition to its impact at a societal level, misinformation can also cause direct harm to individuals. This can include basing important health or financial decisions, for example about the benefits of vaccinations or investments, on false information.

Why are we susceptible to misinformation?

We are inherently vulnerable to misinformation because of our psychology and how our brains function. Psychology research shows that we often assume new information is true. When we see new information we are more likely to think about what it means than whether it is accurate. In addition, the more we see information, the more credibility we give it, regardless of its validity.

We are also more likely to believe information if it is simple, comes from what we think is a trustworthy source or a member of our own group, or is aligned with our pre-existing thinking.

When we encounter new or substantial amounts of information, we often need to process that information quickly. There are mental ‘short-cuts’ that help us do this. However, when we are faced with large volumes of information, much of it new, threatening, simple, targeted at us, and seeming to come from likeminded people, these shortcuts can make us vulnerable to believing misinformation.

To identify if information is reliable we need to make judgements about its trustworthiness.

Neuroscience research shows that trust is a complex process that involves multiple regions and brain processes. These include:

- interpersonal sensitivity
- attention, perception and recognition
- executive function and cognitive control
- emotional regulation
- memory, knowledge and learning
- risk assessment and decision making.

All these processes work better when we are socially connected and have sound physical and mental health.

Our ability to assess the trustworthiness of information is likely to be better when we are happier and healthier. Poor physical and mental health is likely to reduce cognitive function making individuals more vulnerable to misinformation.

Events and other factors that impact physical and mental health across society can also have society-wide impacts on our ability to manage misinformation.

How can we build resilience to misinformation?

Being ‘resilient’ to misinformation means that we, as individuals and as a society, can ward it off, or recover from its effects.

To do this, we need to be able to make appropriate judgements about the information we encounter. This requires knowledge about the information environment, and skills to respond appropriately to misinformation. We cannot rely on mental short-cuts which may not work for us in online environments.

Psychology and education research demonstrates that resilience to misinformation can be developed through education and capacity building programs. These can be delivered before, during or after the misinformation is encountered.

Strong information literacy can be established through the Australian Curriculum, which teaches media literacy, critical and creative skills from early primary to senior secondary students. However, a comprehensive approach to developing and reinforcing these skills and awareness across all ages is likely needed. Foundational information literacy skills could be supplemented by ongoing campaigns and programs that respond to the changing information environment.

To be resilient we also need our brains to function as well as they can. Knowing about misinformation is not sufficient if we do not have the capacity to apply our skills when we see misinformation.

Neuroscience shows us that better sleep, diet, exercise and social connectivity supports mental and physical health and cognitive function. It is therefore likely that they will also help people to be more resilient to misinformation. Programs and activities that enhance mental and physical health such as mindfulness or public health campaigns could be an effective tool to support information resilience.

Programs that increase social connectivity may help too. These can be supported by trusted institutions embedded in our communities, including our galleries, libraries, archives and museums. Such institutions can also enable access to diverse information sources and educate or up-skill people at risk from misinformation. People who could benefit most include older Australians and those from lower socio-economic or regional-remote communities.

As a society, being resilient to misinformation requires us to have a secure and shared sense of basic facts, identity and who or what to trust. This can help us avoid unconsciously moving to extreme or polarised positions where we no longer identify with or have confidence in each other as Australians.