

Disinformation: sources, spread and impact



Overview

- Disinformation is the deliberate creation and spread of false and/or misleading content. Misinformation is the inadvertent spread of such content.
- Disinformation spreads through a complex interaction of social media, online news sites, traditional media, and offline spaces.
- Evidence suggests that people may be more likely to believe disinformation if it aligns with pre-existing beliefs, provokes an emotional response, if they are repeatedly exposed to it, or if it comes from a source they trust.
- People may intentionally share disinformation to further a political agenda or achieve social validation, rather than because they believe it. It is more common for people to unintentionally share misinformation.
- Disinformation is included on international risk registers due to its perceived potential to undermine democratic elections and promote social unrest.
- Research indicates that disinformation can influence beliefs, but evidence that it influences behaviour is inconclusive and difficult to research robustly.
- Counter-disinformation initiatives include media literacy, fact-checking, and improving access to trustworthy information.
- Commentators suggest that disinformation is not something that can be solved, but rather reduced and managed. Policy considerations include protecting freedom of expression, ensuring access to reliable information, regulating social media platforms, and keeping up with increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence technology.

Background

The UK Government defines disinformation as the “deliberate creation and spreading of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead people either for the purpose of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain.”¹ This is distinguished from misinformation, defined as “the inadvertent spread of false information.”¹

Disinformation is identified as a concern by the UK Government and several international organisations, including the United Nations and the World Health Organisation (WHO).²⁻⁶ In January 2024, the World Economic Forum labelled disinformation as the biggest short-term risk globally, due to its perceived potential to undermine democratic elections,^a promote societal unrest, and increase censorship through counter-disinformation initiatives.³

Distinguishing between misinformation and disinformation is not always possible. Content can be created as disinformation and unknowingly shared as misinformation. It is often extremely difficult to identify the original source of disinformation and the motives behind it.⁷⁻¹¹ This POSTnote refers to ‘mis/disinformation’ when the distinction is uncertain.

Disinformation is not new,^{b 13-15} but advances in technology and global connectivity have increased its production and dissemination.^{3,15,16} This includes generative artificial intelligence (AI), which can produce plausible text, images, video and audio based on a user’s prompt.^c AI has become more accessible, cheaper, and easier to use (PN 708).¹⁷⁻¹⁹

Types of disinformation

Disinformation may be entirely fabricated, or it may feature information that has been reconfigured or taken out of context (Table 1).²⁰

It is often based on ‘wedge issues’, topics that are considered divisive in societies.^{9,10,19,21} Recurring themes include health, conflict, and elections.

^a Over the next two years, as close to three billion people are expected to vote across several countries, including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

^b For example, under King Edward I of England (r.1272-1307) “a statute was passed which made it a grave offence to devise or tell any false news of prelates, dukes, earls, barons, or nobles of the realm.”¹²

^c Generative AI can use machine learning techniques to create new data that have similar characteristics to the data it was trained on. Generative AI applications include chatbots, photo and video filters, and virtual assistants.¹⁷

Table 1 Types of disinformation

Some examples include:

<p>Fabricated content</p>	<p>Content that is false, including AI-generated pictures, videos, and audio ('deepfakes').</p> <p>In November 2023, a deepfake audio clip of London mayor Sadiq Khan was widely circulated on social media.²² The simulation of the mayor's voice called for pro-Palestinian marches to take precedence over Remembrance weekend commemorations on the same day. Journalists have suggested that the clip inflamed real-world violence in counter-protests.²²</p>
<p>Manipulated content</p>	<p>Genuine content that has been manipulated, such as a doctored image.</p>
<p>False context</p>	<p>Content that is genuine but has been reframed, such as a real photograph used in a different context.</p> <p>False context images have been identified as a powerful and low-tech form of mis/disinformation.²³</p> <p>After a climate protest in London's Hyde Park in 2019, photos began circulating showing that protestors had left the area covered in rubbish.²⁴ However, one of the images was taken in Mumbai, and the second was from a celebratory event, not a global warming protest.²⁴</p>
<p>Imposter content</p>	<p>False or misleading content that misuses well-known logos and branding (such as those of mainstream news providers).</p>
<p>Misleading content</p>	<p>Misleading information used to frame an issue or individual. For example, comment and opinion presented as fact, or misleading use of statistics.</p>
<p>False connection</p>	<p>Where headlines, visuals, or captions, such as sensationalist and "click bait" headlines don't support the content of an article.</p>

Source: First Draft²⁵ and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees²⁶

How common is disinformation?

A 2023 global survey by the Reuters Institute indicated that the public perceives disinformation as widespread. More than half (56%) of participants reported that they worry about distinguishing what is "real and fake" on the internet when it comes to news.²⁷

Researchers and academics disagree on the prevalence of mis/disinformation.

Several studies suggest that disinformation may be a small percentage of the overall information the average person consumes.^{8,28,29}

In 2021, Ofcom published analysis showing that, between 2018 and 2020, “trustworthy” information websites^d attracted around two billion visits every month from UK visitors, while “untrustworthy” websites attracted 14 million (approximately 140:1 ratio).³¹

A study by Reuters Institute found that, in the UK, between 2017 and 2021, web traffic to “untrustworthy”^e news sites represented less than 1% of all traffic to news sites, and less than 3% of Facebook engagement (likes, shares, and comments).³²

Other academics argue that the prevalence of disinformation may be underestimated, since existing research focuses on well-documented disinformation sites and measures direct engagement with them (likes, shares).³³ Exposure to disinformation can occur without clicking on a website’s source,³³ and is frequently spread by other channels, including offline.^{7,28,34} These factors are less well captured by existing research.^{7,33}

The prevalence of disinformation may also be difficult to determine where researchers have limited access to data (such as on social media platforms).^{f 10,34}

Sources and motives

Sources of disinformation can be difficult to identify. Campaigns often use a multi-faceted approach, where new or existing mis/disinformation is gradually released from, or amplified through, a variety of sources over extended periods.³⁶

Foreign states

Foreign state-backed disinformation may aim to provoke confusion, aggravate political polarisation, undermine democracy, and/or sow distrust in societies.^{37–39}

In July 2023, UK-based technology company Logically reported that a network of government officials from the People’s Republic of China had been publishing disinformation on social media with the aim of delegitimising the findings of a UN human rights investigation into Xinjiang province.⁴⁰

Research suggests that Russian-led disinformation campaigns relating to Ukraine have been operating for almost a decade.⁴¹ The Bioweapons Disinformation Monitor group (King’s College London) identified October 2021 as the starting point of

^d Trustworthiness was based on independent ratings by NewsGuard, who employ journalists and editors to rate news outlets from 0 to 100 based on nine journalistic norms of credibility and transparency, including whether they publish false content and/or use deceptive headlines.

^e This study also used the NewsGuard ratings outlined above.

^f Article 40 of the European Union’s Digital Services Act has a transparency clause allowing vetted researchers to request data from very large online platforms (VLOPs) and search engines (VLOSEs) to conduct research (see [counter-disinformation initiatives](#)).³⁵

Russia's most recent alleged disinformation narrative that the US is funding biological weapons research in Ukraine.⁴²

Politicians and journalists

Academic and industry stakeholders have raised concerns that statements made by senior political officials and journalists can be sources of disinformation.^{7,10,28,43}

In 2020, the Oxford Internet Institute reported findings that government agencies had used disinformation in attempts to shape public attitudes in 62 of 70 countries surveyed.⁴⁴

An analysis of 55,000 media stories, 5 million tweets, and 75,000 Facebook posts illustrated that a mainstream American media organisation was central to spreading the unevicenced claim made by former US President Donald Trump that election fraud was a "major concern" with mail-in ballots.^{45,46}

In a 2021 Reuters Institute survey of UK adults, 66% said they were concerned about what was "real" and "fake" on the internet. The most common concern was mis/disinformation from domestic political actors and journalists.⁴⁷ Respondents were more concerned about misinformation coming from their government than foreign governments.⁴⁸

In June 2023, the House of Commons Procedure Committee recommended extending the ministerial corrections system, which allows Ministers to correct the official record after making an inaccurate claims, to all UK Members of Parliament.⁴⁹ The same report also recommended a number of measures to improve the visibility of corrections on Hansard.⁴⁹

Activist networks

Disinformation may be spread by groups with ideological agendas, such as climate change denial and anti-vaccination groups.^{50,51}

There is evidence of the same disinformation campaigns advocating on multiple sides of political issues,⁵² which may obscure the involvement of state actors.⁵³ State-actors may also amplify disinformation narratives produced by activist networks.⁵⁴

Research by US academics has detected social media accounts associated with the Russian Internet Research Agency impersonating US activists both in support of, and against, certain issues, including Black Lives Matter, gun rights, and immigration.⁵²

Individuals and companies

Business owners, celebrities, influencers, and trolls⁹ may be motivated to produce or spread disinformation, to promote political/ideological agendas or for financial gain.^{9,19}

Analysis by the New York Times illustrated how a doctor in Florida published over 600 articles that claimed Covid-19 vaccines were "a medical fraud" and promoted his own

⁹ This term refers to individuals who deliberately post inflammatory, antagonistic, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content, typically online.

alternative health treatments.⁵⁵ The articles were translated into multiple languages and shared widely across social media.⁵⁵

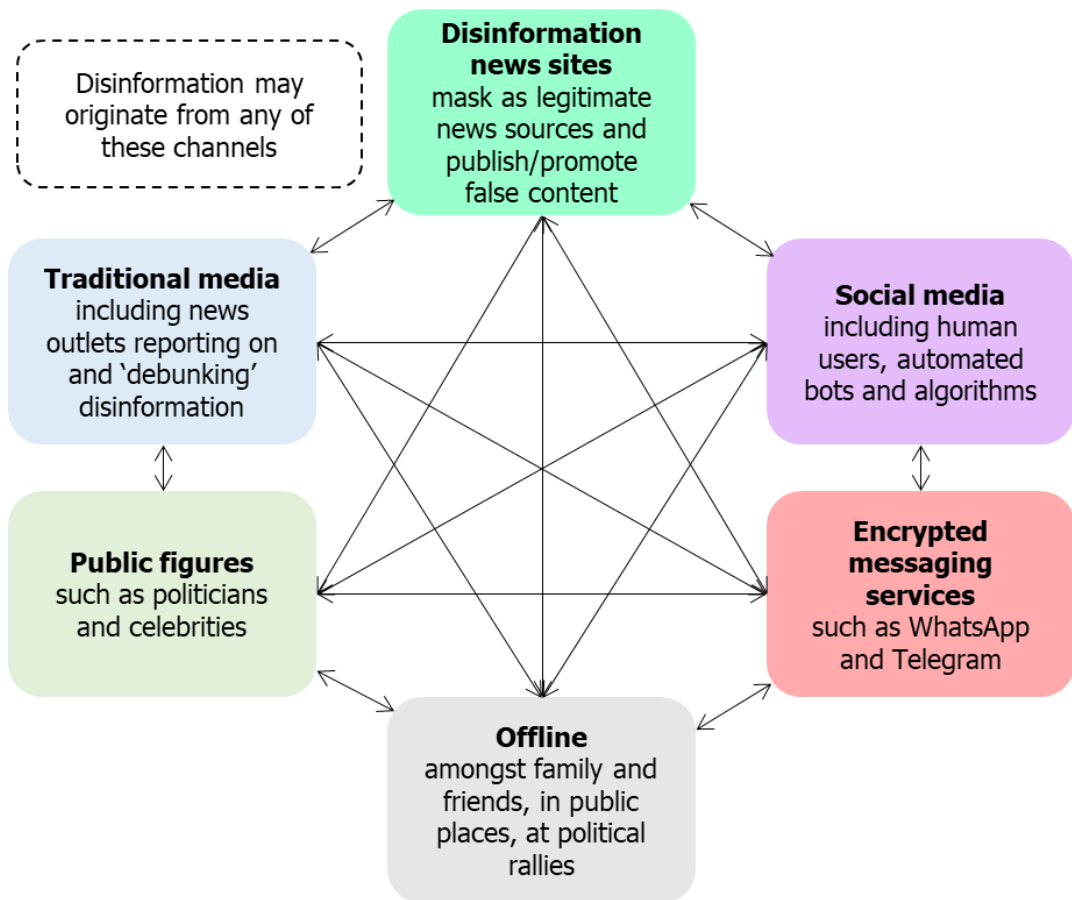
Companies may spread disinformation for financial gain. For example, media platform openDemocracy have alleged that some fossil fuel companies have funded think-tanks that advance inaccurate information about climate change.^{56,57}

How disinformation spreads

Disinformation spreads through a complex interaction of social media, online news sites, traditional media, and offline spaces (Figure 1).^{7,43}

For example, disinformation may be planted on the internet or expressed by a public figure, spread by several disinformation news sites (masking as legitimate news sources), circulated through social media, and picked up by traditional news media outlets, where it may be inadvertently or purposefully amplified (Figure 2).^{58,59}

Figure 1. Examples of how mis/disinformation may spread.



Source: Adapted from First Draft News.⁶⁰

Social media

Academic, government, and industry stakeholders attribute the connectivity of social media and the ability to build global networks as central in the circulation of mis/disinformation.^{2,47}

In November 2023, market research company Ipsos surveyed internet users across 16 countries and found that 56% use social media as their primary source of news, and 68% say that disinformation was most widespread there.⁶¹ The prevalence of disinformation differs across platforms.⁶²

Social media algorithms may increase the spread of disinformation by amplifying content with high user engagement.⁶³ Social media 'bots', automated programmes that simulate human behaviour online, can also be used to like or click disinformation at scale to boost engagement metrics ('like/click farming').^{64,65}

One study tracked the spread of fact-checked false news stories on Twitter (now X) between 2006 and 2017.⁶⁶ Within their sample, inaccurate news stories spread faster and more widely than credible information online.⁶⁶

Encrypted messaging services

In 2023, Ofcom identified encrypted messaging services, such as WhatsApp, as a key channel for mis/disinformation spread.⁶⁷ Services where users can easily share content onward are identified as particularly risky.⁶⁷ In 2020 WhatsApp introduced forwarding labels^h following a series of lynch mobs in India that were associated with mis/disinformation circulating on its network.⁶⁸

The scale of distribution is hard to quantify since end-to-end encryption means that content cannot be accessed.^{21,69}

Encrypted services are also inaccessible to [fact-checking initiatives](#). The Online Safety Act 2023 includes powers to compel messaging services to examine encrypted content.⁷⁰ However, platforms such as WhatsApp and Signal express concern that this undermines user privacy (see [privacy and censorship](#)).⁷⁰

Disinformation news sites

Disinformation news sites may pose as legitimate news sources, and produce or amplify false and/or misleading content.^{9,19,71}

Since February 2022, NewsGuardⁱ has identified 471 illegitimate news sites amplifying disinformation related to the Russia-Ukraine war.⁷² By March 2024, they had identified 750 AI-generated sites propagating false narratives that operated with little or no human oversight.⁷³

For example, a false article claiming that the Prime Minister of Israel's psychiatrist had died by suicide appeared on an AI-generated news site in November 2023.⁷⁴ The content had been extracted from a satirical blog published in 2010. It was broadcasted on Iranian state television and shared across multiple social media platforms, including by a member of the Indian Parliament.⁷⁴

Offline

Disinformation can spread offline through various channels, including print and broadcast media, statements made by politicians in speeches or at rallies, and through word of mouth. For example, activist networks may distribute leaflets or run stickering campaigns to promote an agenda or discredit other sources.⁷⁵⁻⁷⁷

During the Covid-19 pandemic, 'anti-vax' protestors were reported to have run stickering campaigns in public places. In one case, a group used flyers designed to

^h Forwarding labels help users know if their contact wrote the message sent or if the message originally came from someone else.

ⁱ NewsGuard is a technology company that provides trust ratings for over 7,500 news and information websites.

look like official NHS literature, with QR codes that directed readers to vaccination conspiracy theories.⁷⁸

It can be harder to detect the spread of disinformation offline.⁷⁶ Offline disinformation is more likely to be missed by moderation and fact-checking initiatives which tend to focus on online media (see [counter-disinformation initiatives](#)).⁷⁶

Public susceptibility to disinformation

Believing disinformation

There is mixed evidence on how susceptible people are to believing disinformation.^{79–81}

Academic studies^j and survey data suggest that people may be more likely to believe mis/disinformation when:

- It aligns with **pre-existing values and beliefs**.^{82–84}
- It provokes an **emotional response**.^{85–88} Emotive content is amplified through algorithms on social media.⁸⁹ Increased likes and shares have been shown to improve the trustworthiness of content.^{90,91}
- It is shared by people they **trust or view as credible**, such as politicians, religious leaders, or community members.⁴³
- They are **repeatedly exposed** to it.^{33,92,93} This may occur even when the content is implausible⁹⁴ and/or at odds with their political views.⁹³
- They **distrust particular institutions** (such as government, police, and mainstream media) and/or have had negative experiences interacting with them.⁹⁵

Other research suggests that people who have greater cognitive reflection and are more deliberative^k are better at discerning false content.^{79,96–98} However, stress and anger can lead to a reduction in deliberative thinking.^{99,100}

People can strengthen their beliefs over time as they search for evidence that aligns with their existing views, and hold conflicting evidence to much stricter standards

^j Academic studies include observational studies, data simulations and controlled lab-based experiments in the field of experimental psychology. Research is also summarised in meta-analyses and review papers (see [POST research glossary](#)).

^k Researchers use the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) as a measure of the propensity to engage in analytical reasoning.⁹⁶ Deliberation is defined as a slow process of reasoning in opposition to intuitive reasoning.⁹⁷

(‘confirmation bias’).¹⁰¹ This process can be reinforced through the creation of ‘filter bubbles’^l on social media platforms.

Sharing disinformation

People do not necessarily share mis/disinformation because they believe it.^{33,102}

In a 2022 survey of 707 Facebook users, researchers found that 33% of participants shared inaccurate headlines because they believed them, 16% shared them despite perceiving them as inaccurate, and 51% shared them due to “inattention to accuracy”.^{33,103}

People may knowingly share inaccurate content to:

- further a political agenda^{104,105}
- signal a shared identity^{106,107}
- spark discussion or debate¹⁰⁸
- achieve social validation¹⁰⁹
- evoke an emotional response¹¹⁰
- entertain others (for example, humour or irony)^{108,111}
- produce “chaos”^{m 112,113}

A survey of Facebook users during the 2016 US general electionⁿ suggested that 10% of people knowingly shared false/misleading material online,¹¹⁷ and 0.1% of online users were responsible for sharing 80% of the false/misleading information.¹¹⁸

One academic study suggested that most people avoid intentionally spreading mis/disinformation to protect their reputation, even when content aligns with their political views.¹¹⁹ Another study indicated people are more likely to share dubious content with friends and family offline than to large audiences online.¹²⁰

^l Filter bubbles refer to the ways in which information provided through digital platforms can be personalised based on an individual’s web history (see House of Commons Library Briefing on [Preventing misinformation and disinformation in online filter bubbles](#)).

^m The “need for chaos” refers to a desire to “watch the world burn” without caring about the consequences.¹¹² Across eight studies of individuals living in the US, researchers showed that the ‘need for chaos’ is a strong predictor of motivations to share hostile political rumours, even after accounting for partisan motives.¹¹²

ⁿ The 2016 US election is often used as a case study for disinformation because there is substantial evidence that the Russian Internet Research Agency engaged in a wide-ranging disinformation campaign.^{114,115} These campaigns did not stop after the election.¹¹⁶

Implications of disinformation for society

The UK Government, international organisations, and third-sector stakeholders are concerned that disinformation amplifies political divisions, undermines social cohesion, and interferes with democratic processes (such as elections).^{16,43,121}

Whilst studies indicate that disinformation can influence beliefs, the extent to which it leads to behavioural change and/or real-world effect is inconclusive and difficult to measure.^{122,123}

Psychological impact

Research suggests that frequent exposure to mis/disinformation can hinder the ability to identify credible information.^{123–126} A consequence may be distrust of all information,^{91,127} including from sources traditionally considered reliable (such as regulated media).^{119,128,129}

There is some evidence that the perception of high levels of mis/disinformation can have psychological impacts, including worry and stress.^{130,131} This was prevalent during the Covid-19 pandemic, when perceived mis/disinformation increased public fear of the virus and related government measures ([RR 02](#)).^{36,43,132}

Behavioural impact

There is evidence that changes in behaviour have occurred at the same time as increases in, and exposure to, mis/disinformation. However, evidence for direct causation is sparse.¹²³

Research suggests that behavioural change is usually the result of multiple drivers, including pre-existing beliefs, cultural/religious values, education, and location.^{51,123}

Health

During the Covid-19 pandemic, over fifty UK 5G telephone masts were vandalised following false information that they were spreading the virus ([RR 02](#)).^{43,133}

Studies also suggest that people who are susceptible to Covid-19 mis/disinformation are less likely to get vaccinated, recommend vaccination to friends and family, or comply with government public health guidance.^{134–139}

In September 2020, a study of 4,000 UK respondents by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Imperial College London found that the proportion of respondents who said they would “definitely” get the Covid-19 vaccine fell from 54.1% to 47.9% after participants were shown vaccine misinformation.¹³⁹

The WHO states that disinformation is likely to be more impactful in emerging health pandemics when there is heightened panic and an absence of evidence-based cures.⁴³

Economics

Disinformation has disrupted markets¹⁴⁰ and destabilised economic behaviours in a small number of cases.¹⁴¹

An AI-generated image of the Pentagon on fire was linked to a reduction in the value of the stock exchange.^{o 142,142} Pepsi's stock market fell by 4% after a viral disinformation news story of its CEO telling Donald Trump supporters to "take their business elsewhere."¹⁴³

Local violence

Investigative journalism group Bellingcat suggest that real-world impact of mis/disinformation may be more pronounced in local contexts, such as in communities with existing tensions.¹⁴⁴

In September 2022, violence in Leicester broke out between Hindu and Muslim communities. Technology company Logically attributed this to "false and inflammatory" narratives circulating on social media, some promoted by journalists and other influential individuals.¹⁴⁵

Political behaviour

There is limited evidence directly linking exposure to disinformation and a change in voting intentions.¹⁴⁶

A report by Oxford University and analytical firm Graphika found that Russia employed an extensive social media disinformation campaign in the 2016 US election, promoting Donald Trump as candidate.¹¹⁶ One study found an association between changes in opinion poll numbers and the volume of tweets from the campaign.¹⁴⁷ However, other research suggests it had minimal effects on voting behaviours, since disinformation content heavily targeted 1% of US Twitter users who already "strongly" identified as Republicans.^{118,148}

Similar results were found in research looking at the impact of 'fake news' in the 2013 and 2018 Italian general elections.¹⁴⁹

Counter-disinformation initiatives

The UK Government, social media companies and third-sector organisations have attempted to address the production and spread of disinformation through various strategies.

Limiting the spread of disinformation

Some counter-disinformation initiatives focus on limiting the spread of disinformation once it has been published.¹⁵⁰ This includes fact checking, removing content, or labelling it as false.¹⁵⁰

^o The stock exchange is used as a proxy for confidence in the US market.

Accuracy prompts, such as asking people whether they have read an article before sharing it, have been shown to improve the quality of content people share on social media.¹⁵¹⁻¹⁵³

Fact-checking

In the UK, fact-checking organisations predominately operate according to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)^p Code of Principles.¹⁵⁴ Fact-checking organisations operate independently and are sometimes employed by social media companies.

Some international media organisations, including Reuters and the BBC, have introduced fact-checking initiatives where journalists make their verification process transparent to viewers.¹⁵⁵

Fact-checkers focus on content that is demonstrably incorrect (such as a photo taken out of context), with fact-checked posts warning users that content is false or providing additional context. It is up to platforms to decide whether content is removed.

The IFCN proposes that the aim of fact-checking is not to remove or censor content, but to reduce the spread of disinformation and support people to make informed choices about the information they consume.¹⁵⁶

In 2023, the UK fact-checking charity Full Fact published 624 fact checks and requested more than 180 corrections.¹⁵⁷

Evidence on the effectiveness of fact-checking is mixed.¹⁵⁰ A 2023 academic review¹⁵² and 2024 study¹⁵⁸ concluded that fact-checked warning labels reduce the belief and spread of misinformation and reduce positive reactions (such as 'likes') to content.¹⁵⁸

Other research has found that, even when someone is exposed to a fact-check, they may continue to believe the original mis/disinformation (the 'continued influence effect').^{83,159,160} This means that attempts to counter mis/disinformation after it has gone viral may have limited effect.¹⁶¹

Fact-checking programmes may be expensive to roll out on scale, as they require trained journalists who are subject to the international standards of best practice.¹⁶² AI fact-checking tools have not yet been shown to be as accurate as human journalists.^{117,161}

Technology company Meedan suggests that fact-checkers could extend their impact by responding to broad categories of mis/disinformation, rather than individual claims.^{16,21} Meedan estimated that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, there were over 1,500 related misleading claims on social media, which could be categorised into ten

^p The International Fact-Checking Network ([IFCN](#)) is an organisation that aims to promote best practice in fact-checking and provide a place for collaboration between fact checkers worldwide. Activities include monitoring trends in fact-checking, providing training resources and hosting the annual fact-checking conference #GlobalFact.

themes. They proposed that each theme could be responded to with a correlating explainer article.^{q 16,21}

The role of technology companies

Some social media companies have committed to limiting the spread of disinformation.

Meta has employed third-party fact checkers and removed accounts displaying 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour', a communication tactic that uses authentic, fake and duplicated social media accounts to conceal a real identity.^{163,164} Other companies, including OpenAI, Amazon and Google, have committed to developing "watermarking" for AI content ([PB 57](#)).¹⁶⁵

Full Fact states that allowing social media companies to regulate mis/disinformation is undemocratic as it relies on decisions made outside the elected UK Government.¹⁶⁶

Other commercial and not-for-profit stakeholders emphasise the need to regulate the business model underpinning social media platforms,^r as it is not currently in their financial interests to heavily moderate mis/disinformation that generates engagement.^{19,168,169}

Technology company Logically identifies actors behind disinformation campaigns. It uses AI to detect patterns of online behaviour (such as 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour') and identify recurring disinformation themes.^{16,170,170} Other organisations view monitoring online behaviour as an infringement on privacy.¹⁶⁹

Preventing people from engaging with disinformation

Upstream strategies focus on preventing people from engaging with disinformation in the first place.

This includes 'inoculation' and 'pre-bunking' methods, where people are deliberately exposed to mis/disinformation.¹⁷¹ This has been shown to increase the ability to identify and disregard mis/disinformation.¹⁷¹

Media literacy

Media literacy involves education on how to access, evaluate, create, and act on all forms of communication.¹⁷² It is one of the key interventions used by the UK Government against mis/disinformation.¹⁷³

^q For example, instead of fact-checking every post that makes inaccurate claims on the origin of Covid-19, there could be one comprehensive article that outlines existing scientific research on where the virus comes from, including accounting for scientific uncertainty. This one article is used to response to all content identified as relating to the theme.

^r Social media platforms are funded through targeted advertising that relies on viral content. Deceptive content online has been shown to generate high engagement and virality, meaning it is often actively funded by advertising firms.¹⁶⁷

Meta-analyses have shown that undertaking media literacy training improves individuals' ability to identify disinformation, and reduces their willingness to share it.^{174–176}

In 2023, Ofcom reported that improved media literacy skills had increased the ability of social media users in identifying fake social media profiles (60%, up from 55% in 2021).¹⁷⁷

However, some academics suggest that media literacy can increase scepticism of all information.^{81,178} In the same 2023 Ofcom study, 41% participants were able to identify a genuine social media post as genuine, but 41% also thought the post was fake.¹⁷⁷ Media literacy may also be insufficient to determine the accuracy of sophisticated AI-generated content.¹⁷⁹

Industry and not-for-profit stakeholders have stated that media literacy initiatives require investment to be rolled out at scale.^{10,166,180}

Government and regulation of disinformation

Government approaches to countering mis/disinformation are predominately legislative (Table 2) and focus on monitoring disinformation trends (Table 3).

Table 2 Legislation relevant to disinformation

The Online Safety Act (2023)

This legislation includes the **False Communications Offence** (Section 179): an offence for a person to send a message that conveys information they know to be false, which is intended to “cause non-trivial psychological or physical harm to a likely audience.”¹⁸¹

The Act requires Category 1 services^s to ensure that they adhere to their own terms and conditions on removing mis/disinformation (Section 71). Category 1 services must swiftly remove mis/disinformation where it amounts to a criminal offence.

Under the Online Safety Act 2023, the regulator **Ofcom**^t is required to:

- Address online content that is illegal and harmful to children, by improving the systems and processes that services use to address them.¹⁷⁹
- Produce a media literacy strategy to generate awareness of mis/disinformation (Section 165).¹⁸¹ This is due to be published before 2025.¹⁷⁹
- Establish and maintain an advisory committee on mis/disinformation (Section 152) which will provide advice on how regulated services should counter disinformation.¹⁸¹

Ofcom states that in its role as regulator, it will “not make decisions about whether individual pieces of content are true.”¹⁷⁹

Full Fact has suggested that the Online Safety Act is limited in addressing mis/disinformation, due to its overall focus on harmful content aimed at children (excluding adults), and lack of AI regulation. Other non-profit stakeholders express concern that the Act does not provide enough regulatory oversight over social media companies.^{19,166,169}

The National Security Act (2023)

The **Foreign Interference Offence** (Section 13) addresses malicious activity conducted by foreign powers, including state-sponsored disinformation campaigns.⁶⁷ It is listed as a priority offence under Schedule 7 of the Online Safety Act.

Ofcom has stated that attributing the source is a key challenge for identifying disinformation activities under the Foreign Interference Offence.¹⁷⁹

^s Category 1 services refer to larger online platforms. Ofcom will publish advice to the Secretary of State regarding categorisation in Spring 2024. The Secretary of State will then set thresholds for categorisation in secondary legislation.¹⁷⁹

^t Information on Ofcom’s overall approach and timeframe can be found on their [roadmap to regulation](#).

Table 2 Legislation relevant to disinformation (continued)

The European Union's Digital Services Act (2022)

The Digital Services Act 2022 is mandated by EU law. It applies to all businesses that offer services to EU citizens (including non-EU service providers, such as in the UK).

Article 34 requires very large platforms to conduct risk assessments on "any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes, and public security".¹⁸²

Article 40 has a transparency clause, where online platforms must divulge data to accredited researchers for research purposes, including on how their algorithms work.³⁴ This may help researchers better understand the sources and spread of disinformation. The Act classifies eight online behaviours that are signs of a disinformation campaign.^{u 182}

Social media platforms, as signatories to the Code of Practice on disinformation, must report to the EU Commission outlining steps they are taking to identify and curb these behaviours. Companies that do not comply with the Code risk fines of up to 6% of their global annual turnover.¹⁸²

There is a mandate for large online platforms to partner with fact-checking organisations.¹⁸²

^u The European Union's Digital Services Act (2022) defines eight online behaviours that can signify a disinformation campaign: creation and use of fake accounts, account takeovers and bot-driven amplification; hack-and-leak operations; impersonation; malicious deep fakes; purchase of fake engagements; non-transparent paid messages or promotion by influencers; creation and use of accounts that participate in coordinated inauthentic behaviour; and, user conduct aimed at artificially amplifying the reach or perceived public support for disinformation.¹⁸²

Table 3 Government department responsibilities for monitoring disinformation

<p>The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT)</p> <p>National Security Online Information Team (NSOIT), formerly the Counter Disinformation Unit</p>	<p>As of February 2023, DSIT leads the policy area on disinformation. The department heads a media literacy strategy that is due to end in 2025. It publishes a yearly Online Media Literacy Action Plan. In 2024, £2million funding was added for media literacy.¹⁸³</p> <p>Within DSIT, NSOIT uses publicly available data to “develop an understanding of disinformation narratives and trends”.¹ It focuses on content targeted at UK audiences which may pose a risk to public health, public safety, or national security.</p> <p>DSIT has regular meetings with social media platforms (Meta, Google, X, TikTok).¹⁸⁴</p>
<p>Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)</p>	<p>FCDO works with foreign policy teams overseas, mitigating risks of disinformation on international populations.¹⁸⁵</p>
<p>Home Office</p>	<p>The Home Office monitors disinformation that is state backed, alongside wider online safety issues such as terrorism and sexual exploitation.¹⁸⁶</p>
<p>Ministry of Defence (MoD)</p>	<p>The MoD includes operational units who look at online environments, and conduct research on the psychology of behaviour and the future evolution of mis/disinformation.¹⁸⁷</p>
<p>Cabinet Office</p> <p>Government Communication Service (GCS)</p>	<p>GCS sits in the Cabinet Office. It has created resources for civil servants to help them understand what causes people to believe false information and how to develop effective counter-disinformation strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RESIST¹⁸⁸ and RESIST 2¹⁸⁹ • The Wall of Beliefs¹⁹⁰ <p>Government Communication Service International (GCSi) works on communications around mis/disinformation overseas.¹⁹¹</p>

Future policy considerations

Industry and non-profit stakeholders state that disinformation is a complex issue that cannot be solved with a single solution.^{9,10,21}

Many propose that policy makers should adopt an approach that considers the multiple ways that disinformation spreads and is amplified (online and offline), its sources (foreign and domestic), and to balance regulation with freedom of expression.^{7,10}

Government officials and third-sector organisations propose that disinformation is not something that can be solved but instead, reduced and managed.^{10,156,187}

Freedom of expression, privacy, and censorship

Academic stakeholders have expressed concern that extensive regulation of content may be a perceived threat to freedom of expression.^{8,192} This can reduce trust between government and society, especially if there is a perception that citizens' expression is regulated more than politicians' or journalists'.^{123,193}

Categorising disinformation is not as straightforward as judging information as true or false, which presents a challenge for prescriptive approaches.^{28,123,192,193}

For example, scientific claims are based on available evidence, which is sometimes overturned by future evidence. Some topics may also have a greater degree of scientific consensus than others.^{123,193,194}

Academic stakeholders suggest that interventions regulating mis/disinformation should be proportionate to the evidence base, and if preventative measures are introduced, this intention should be explicitly communicated.¹²³

Industry stakeholders propose using opt-in approaches. For example, rather than regulating encrypted devices, technology company Meedan proposes that users could be given the option to download fact-checking applications, a similar approach to virus protection software.²¹

Artificial intelligence

AI-generated disinformation is becoming more sophisticated and believable ([PN 708](#)), which makes it more difficult for individuals and platforms to identify through conventional means.¹⁷⁹ Examples include 'deepfakes' and hyper-realistic synthetic text, generated by Large Language Models, such as the popular chatbot ChatGPT.¹⁹⁵

Generative AI tools are becoming better at accumulating people's online data, enabling content to target individual characteristics and beliefs.¹⁹⁵ Technology

company Logically has expressed concerns that these methods can be co-opted for targeted campaigns promoting an agenda to a particular audience.^{v 19,169}

AI can also be used as a tool to detect disinformation campaigns and scale up fact-checking efforts.¹⁹⁶ However, non-profit stakeholders propose that investment into AI research may divert attention from understanding the broader contexts in which disinformation is produced and believed.^{10,144}

Producing good information

Stakeholders across industry and non-governmental sectors propose that building trust in independent experts is key in addressing susceptibility to disinformation,^{101,197} as is ensuring the accessibility of good quality information from a range of credible sources.^{8,21,28,198}

Improving accessibility to, and engagement with, good quality information, could include disseminating coherent, evidence-based narratives,¹⁹¹ greater transparency in journalistic processes,⁸¹ and/or involving communities in the production of local open-source journalism.¹⁴⁴

Research indicates that people who regularly consume independent, professionally produced journalism are more resilient to disinformation.¹⁹⁹ In evidence submitted to Parliament, academics found that those who engaged with a wider range of news websites were better at judging false content stories as false.^{w 200}

^v For example, the Cambridge Analytica scandal involved unauthorized harvesting of millions of Facebook users' data for political profiling. This data was allegedly used to target and influence voters during the 2016 US presidential election and other political campaigns.

^w Based on statistical analysis of data from a large-scale online survey (in the UK and the Netherlands) between May and October 2020. Submitted to parliament as part of the Trust in Broadcasters enquiry.

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