



Australian
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Policy Brief

Global Survey

Local innovation
in disinformation
response:
Lessons for
countering
(violent)
extremism

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Acknowledgement & Series Note

This policy brief is the first in a series of three from the Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies project. This project seeks to understand the impacts and responses to disinformation at the city or local level, deriving learnings and recommendations for how these are, and can be, used in disrupting disinformation ecologies that drive violence and extremism.

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The Australian National University acknowledges, celebrates and pays our respects to the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of the Canberra region and to all First Nations Australians on whose traditional lands we meet and work, and whose cultures are among the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

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Introduction

Disinformation, or the deliberate sharing of falsehoods, increasingly impacts the governance, health and social relations of localities globally. Disinformation 'ecologies' formed of false narratives, the platforms enabling them and the actors using them, are often organised and interconnected, and used to progress broader social, economic or political interests in the local arena.

Disinformation flows along societal faultlines, exacerbating and manufacturing prejudice and grievance to create the psychological and social conditions for its willing reception.ⁱ Bastioned by the economic incentives of online 'click bait' and algorithmic-driven engagement on social media, this has rapidly become an era-defining global challengeⁱⁱⁱ. Under certain conditions, false narratives spread from place to place rapidly and effectively across a wide variety of issue areas in a process of contagion. As with the communal threat of contagious disease, the impacts of this disinformation contagion can be viewed as a collective trans-boundary threat facing societies and nations, at times driving social unrest, hate speech, and violent disorder.^{iv} The local impacts of this are experienced across cities and localities, as false narratives are shared, amplified and recreated both online and offline.

Recent disinformation contagion has hit cities across the globe, amplified by – and at times created by – groups with extremist agendas. In the United Kingdom, riots and protests swept cities and towns across the nation following the killing of children in Southport, stoked by disinformation actively promoted by far-right extremist groups.^v In Australia, several murders of police officers in the Victorian township of Porepunkah (2025) and rural Queensland (2022) by individuals associated with an extremist anti-democratic ideology founded on disinformation sent shockwaves across the country^{viii}.

Disinformation ecologies operate within a context of growing polarization in contemporary societies, characterised by major socio-economic and political changes restructuring of the labour market, increasing labour precariousness, unemployment, declining trust in institutions and mainstream political parties and the decline of labour unions.^{viii} Ideological polarization includes narratives based on simplistic 'black and white' representations of complex socio-economic and political realities and constructions of identity/belonging.

This is exacerbated by both traditional and social media. In the former, sensationalist coverage fuels and reproduces anxieties, for instance around immigration, which can contribute to mainstreaming essentialist and securitized understandings of cultural identity and diversity. In the latter, algorithms based on incentive structures that reward outrage, simplification, and antagonistic framing tend to create 'echo chamber' effects by re-proposing to users like-minded groups and similar contents, thus increasing polarisation and normalizing extreme positions. This has intensified since popular platforms such as Meta and X abandoned third-party fact-checking.^{ix}

Disinformation is not new, but it has gained momentum in the current context: exacerbated by AI tools and a fragmented information environment, it contributes to spreading ideological polarization, thus creating fertile ground for extremism. Ideological polarisation can be conducive to radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist movements although it does not necessarily drive individuals to take violent action. Indeed, ideology alone is usually not the only or even the main driver of radicalization and violent extremism (VE): causes of engagement in VE are often social rather than ideological.

Engaging in violent extremist movements or actions is usually shaped by a combination of c push (demand-side), pull (supply-side) and personal (individual) factors^x playing out at different levels. At the macro-level socio-economic, political and ideological polarized contexts, digitally mediated networks and disinformation contents spread narratives to mobilize individuals and normalize extremist ideas.

At a time of increasing grievances due to economic insecurity, inequality and decreasing opportunities for pro-social engagement^{xi}, the convergence of multiple crises, declining trust and social cohesion, disrupting disinformation ecologies at the local level is key to addressing new waves of (violent) extremism.

Methodology

This policy brief is the first in a series of three from the Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies project. This project seeks to understand the impacts and responses to disinformation at the city or local level, deriving learnings and recommendations for how these are, and can be, used to disrupt disinformation ecologies that drive violence and extremism. Our findings offer global perspectives on the breadth of practice in local programmatic and frontline practitioner interventions in understanding and addressing disinformation fuelling violent extremism, social polarisation and grievances.

Survey data is presented from the Disinformation: Local Impacts and Responses global survey, collected between October and December 2025. The survey was administered by The Australian National University. Human Research Ethics Committee Protocol ID H/2025/0463. Survey questions build on the framing developed in the Disinformation in the City Response Playbook^{xii}, including extending disinformation response along a continuum from anticipatory to recovery, and an explicit focus on collaboration between cities, between different levels of government, and between sectors.

Four areas of inquiry provide a baseline understanding of the type and breadth of existing practice in relation to disinformation ecologies, and their real or potential relationship with (violent) extremism: Local manifestations and impacts of disinformation; Existing and planned responses to disinformation; Collaborators and structures for disinformation response; and Connections between disinformation response and addressing violent extremism. Survey respondents were recruited via social media, city and municipal networks and professional connections. Responses were invited from any sector impacted by disinformation or involved in any aspect of addressing disinformation, polarisation, prejudice and/or grievances at the local level. The survey received 121 responses that met the inclusion criteria for analysis (footnote inclusion criteria). These were from city of local government (n76); academia (n17); civil society or not for profit organisations (n12); private or for-profit organisations (n5); cities networks or municipal peak bodies (n4); state or provincial government (n1); national government (n1); international NGO (n1); and 'other' responses from think tank, self-employed, media and professional networks (n4).

Responses were received predominantly from Australia (n40); United Kingdom (n44) as the key geographical focus areas of the Disrupting Disinformation Ecologies project, with a smaller number from other parts of Europe (n14), Asia-Pacific (n15), Africa (n5); and North America (n3) (see Figure 1 for more detail). These responses provide descriptive qualitative insights into local impacts and practices of disinformation response. These in turn provide lessons for countering (violent) extremism.



Figure 1: Locations of survey respondents (country)

Local disinformation

Localised disinformation response occurs across many sectors. The pervasive nature of disinformation impacts all sectors yet poses risks to organisations working in highly targeted areas. These include organisations working with populations (eg. migrants), in activities (eg. healthcare provision), and at times (eg. disaster response) known to be particularly targeted by disinformation.

Central within local response and resilience ecosystems are city and local governments. Local government authorities are a key element of local democratic functioning, with responsibility for the governance and delivery of complex services, policymaking, and enacting the processes of democratic representation and public participation at the most local level.

Local governments hold a unique legislated governance role that position them within multi-level frameworks of governance and public service delivery. As local governments function as the 'first mile' of democracy in the lives of billions, they also hold responsibility for many activities that have become lightning rods for disinformation globally, including climate resilience^{xiii}, urban planning^{xiv}, public health^{xv}, and social cohesion.^{xvi} Local governments are increasingly impacted by, and responding to, disinformation and its manifestations.

Beyond this, they operate within local ecosystems of organisations working to build and serve dynamic, safe, diverse communities. The below sections present lessons for both local governments, and across multiple sectors at the local level.

Examples of local disinformation

Disinformation was reported in cities across the globe, with a wide variety of focus areas and themes. This included many examples of disinformation about migrants, including rumours about migrants being housed at a local hotel (United Kingdom); anti-immigration protests in Australia in August 2025; and a mainstream media headline implying that 'veterans had to move out of their homes to make way for asylum seekers', when 'in fact it was just an office that had to move' (United Kingdom).

Disinformation was reported targeting general (national) elections (United Kingdom, Samoa, Indonesia, Czechia) and local elections (United Kingdom, Philippines). Beyond this, it has been reported in reaction to political posts, presumably on social media (United Kingdom, Australia, United States,) and used in 'political distortions' (United Kingdom). Local elected representatives and staff have been targeted with threats and abuse (Australia, United Kingdom).

The breadth of disinformation examples is quite extraordinary, from reporting in local press about planning applications (United Kingdom) and road safety schemes (United Kingdom) to disinformation related to health and wellbeing, such as 'free birthing' (Australia), a movement promoting childbirth without medical supports. Threats to freedom of expression in relation to international events such as the murder of US influencer Charlie Kirk were noted (South Korea), and about the war in Gaza (Australia, Italy, United Kingdom).

Policy debate and adoption was by far the most reported prompt for disinformation, at both the local/city (38%) and state or national (30%) levels. Examples of local disinformation relate to issues of planning, infrastructure, transport and waste, as well as social policy related to immigration, migrant housing and LGBTQIA+ messaging. Examples of impacted national and state level policymaking also include a strong focus on migration, security and geopolitics and digital ID cards. First Nations policy and lawmaking was also noted.

International events with key impacts felt at the local level include – overwhelmingly - the war in Gaza, the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the geopolitical ripple effects of elections and populist leaders.

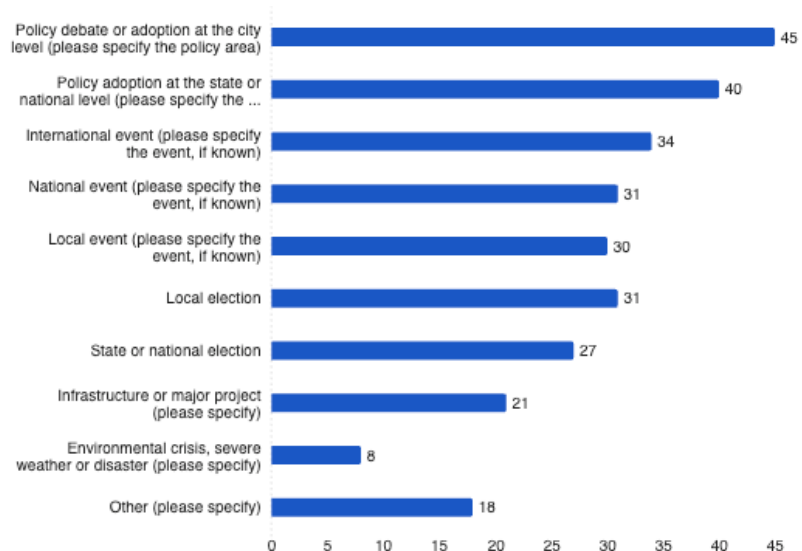


Figure 2: Prompts that led to disinformation campaigns impacting the local level (n=120)

Disinformation impacts

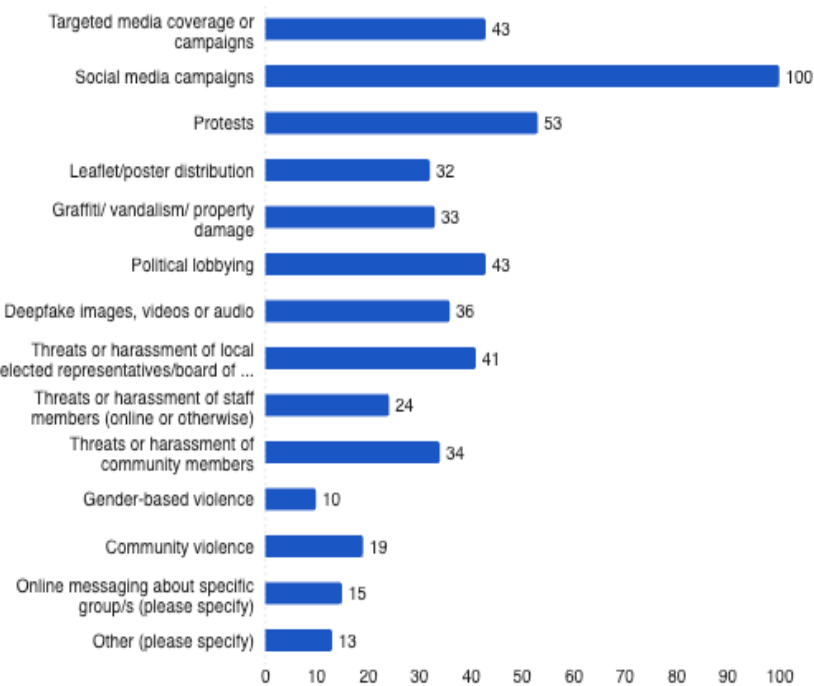


Figure 4: Local manifestations of disinformation (n=120)

The impact of disinformation on local organisations and their work is significant. Of 115 global survey respondents, 37 (32%) reported major or severe impact on their organisations in the preceding 12 months, while a further 72 (63%) reported minimal or moderate impact. Just six (5%) reported disinformation having no impact on their organisation. Of these six responses, three are from city and local government, and one each from civil society, academia, and the private sector.

Figure 3: Significance of disinformation impact on organisation's work (past 12 months) (n=115)
Local government respondents rated their level of impact as: none 4%; minimal 18%; moderate 45%; major 17%; and severe 9%. All other sectors (combined) rated their level of impact as: none: 8%; minimal 22%; moderate 28%; major 33%; severe 10%.

This disinformation manifests locally in numerous ways. Social media campaigns (83%), targeted media coverage or campaigns (36%); political lobbying (36%) leaflet or poster distribution (27%) graffiti/vandalism/property damage (28%). Online messaging about specific groups was reported by 13% of respondents, which differs from the higher figures of specific targeted groups shown in Figure 4.



The use of deepfake images, videos or audio were reported by 36 respondents (30%) across 31 cities or localities, reflecting the global experience of rapidly increasing and accessible AI capabilities to generate harmful content.^{xvii}

Reported violent expressions of this disinformation include: community violence (16%); gender-based violence (8%); and threats or harassment (online or otherwise) of: local elected representatives or board members (34%); community members (28%); and staff (20%). Local protests (violent or non violent) were reported by 44% of respondents.

Disinformation targets

Targeted groups | Within localities, specific groups are known to be disproportionately targeted by disinformation. The most frequently reported targeted group is elected representatives (56%). Leaders of public institutions are also a target in one third of respondent localities (34%). Emergency management personnel were reported targets in a smaller number (7%) of localities. Across communities, migrants and culturally diverse groups were reported targets in just over half of the respondent localities (51%).

Gender non-conforming and/or LGBTQI+ communities (30%), Religious groups (30%) and activists (29%) are all targets in just under one third of localities. Women and girls (23%) are targeted in more than twice as many localities as men and boys (9%). It is worth noting that being 'targeted' by disinformation can be interpreted in two ways: as a subject and as an audience. Disinformation was also noted to target police, other clans, journalists, political groups, and geographical communities among others.

Disinformation targeting groups, and individuals within them, serves to increase polarisation - further entrenching social and political divisions and distrust.^{xviii}

Targeted organisations | Disinformation also impacts the functional capacity of local organisations in multiple ways, and with varying degrees of reported severity.

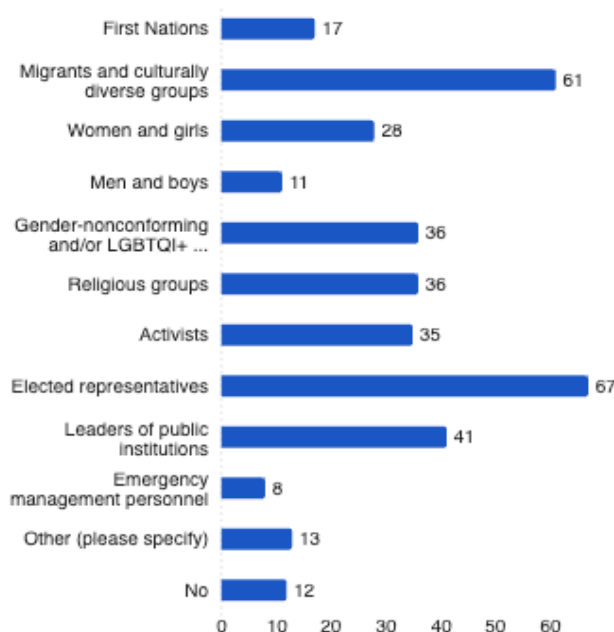


Figure 5: Specific groups targeted by disinformation within locality (past 12 months) (n=120)

Community engagement and formal public participation processes were the most impacted activity at 81%, of which 20% categorised this impact as major, and 7% severe. Trust and organisational reputation was the area severely impacted with the highest frequency (12%), with 78% of respondents reporting some degree of impact.

The levels of impact reported across other domains of organisational functioning were also high, with over three quarters of all respondents reporting impact to policymaking and adoption (78%); governance processes (77%); and modified public communications (77%) speak to a high degree of interruption to organisational functioning, though a lower number (50%) reported interrupted service delivery.

Staff safety (74%) and local elected/board representative safety and/or retention (66%) and staff retention (58%) speak to the direct human impacts, and personal costs of disinformation that individuals encounter in the course of their work. Almost two thirds (64%) of respondents reported the financial cost of disinformation to their organisations, of which 8% classified this impact as severe.

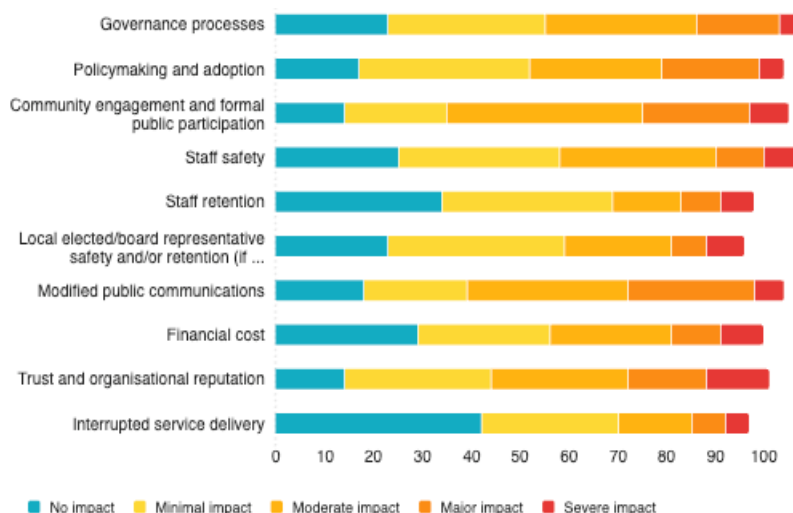


Figure 6: Impacts of disinformation on organisations (past 12 months) (n=111)

Noting the small sample sizes, civil society reported that disinformation has mainly impacted ('major/severe impact') community engagement (27%), staff safety (22%) or staff retention (22%), financially (18%) and, most of all, modified public communication (40%). Private sector reported disinformation mainly impacting ('major/severe impact') community engagement (25%), elected/board staff retention (50%), modified public communication (60%), and has had financial impact (60%). Cities and local governments report being primarily affected in relation to trust (31%), then public communication (28%) and, to a lesser degree, financially (13%).

Disinformation, Violence & Extremism

Violence fuelled by disinformation was reported in cities and localities across the globe, from London to Mogadishu, Turin to Manila. One third of survey respondents reported this, with a further 23% unsure. Violence does not in itself equate to extremist violence, but there are many intersections as extremist groups use disinformation to incite political violence, attacks and local disruption.^{xx} Likewise, most disinformation does not lead to physical violence, but that violence risk increases when disinformation intersects with existing grievances, identity threat, and mobilisation capacity. It is also the case that disinformation can contribute to a continuum of violence that may manifest in non-physical forms of harm online, for example through cyber-bullying, harassment, or stalking.^{xx} It is often in the context of a specific event that the link between disinformation and offline or online violence becomes apparent. Such flashpoint events are often highly polarised in nature, stimulate heightened emotions and garner attention, with a 'spotlighting' effect that can be readily manipulated for economic and political benefit.^{xxi}

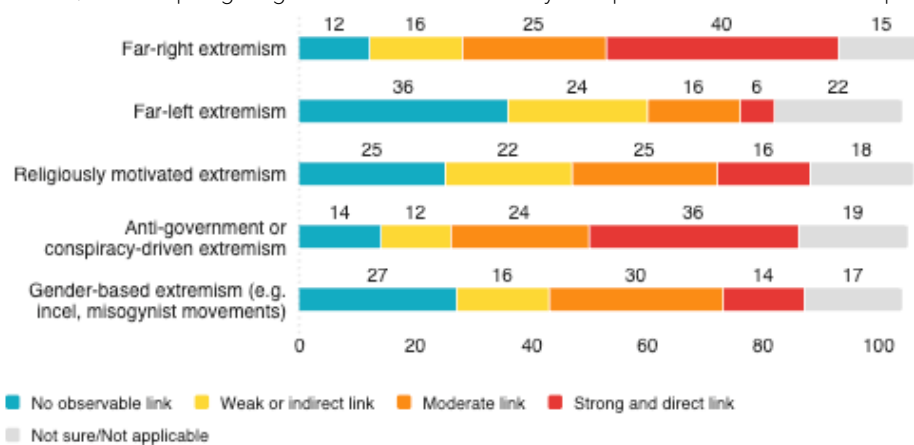


Figure 7: Identified links between disinformation and extremism (n=106)

The observed link between disinformation and extremism - beyond violence - is more prevalent, with 76% of respondents reporting a link with far-right extremism, of which 38% characterised this as strong and direct. Similarly, 68% of respondents reported this link with anti-government or conspiracy-driven extremism, of which 34% found this link to be strong and direct. Fifty-nine per cent of respondents observed links between disinformation and religiously motivated extremism, and 57% of respondents observed this link with gender-based extremism such as incels and other misogynistic movements. Forty-three per cent reported links in their work between disinformation and far-left extremism.

Physical manifestations of disinformation including protests, civil unrest and even violence can impact cities, where population density and complex social challenges shape residents' day-to-day lives.^{xxii} Twenty-seven survey respondents (23%) provided specific examples where their city or locale had experienced disinformation-fuelled violence. Of these, the majority were located in Australia (n8) and United Kingdom (n10), with others located in Southeast Asia (n1 in Indonesia and n2 in the Philippines), Europe (n1 in each of Czechia, Italy, and The Netherlands) and Africa (n1 in each of Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan).

Identifying the triggers of disinformation-fuelled violence | The events or conditions that triggered this violence varied across responses. Notably, 70% of United Kingdom respondents in this section cited anti-immigration narratives as key in fuelling protests, clashes and/or attacks offline. The Southport murders were specifically cited by 30% of UK respondents as an event that sparked disinformation-fuelled violence. The rise of populist right politics and the increasing popularity of the UK's political populist right party, Reform, were also highlighted by two UK respondents as an important influence shaping the conditions for growing anti-immigration sentiment.

In Australia (n8), anti-government sentiment and/or political backlash was reported by 38% of the cohort, alongside racial, ethnic and/or class divisions cited by 50% of respondents as key triggers of disinformation-fuelled violence in Australia. Local and national elections were identified as key flashpoints for violence by respondents in Indonesia (n1) and the Philippines (n1), where coordinated disinformation campaigns spread rapidly online and via social media (see case study one, below). In South Sudan, online disinformation contributing to racial and ethnic prejudices in ways that exacerbated civil conflict was identified as the core driver, and an Ethiopia-based respondent specifically noted disinformation driving civil conflict.

Local responses to disinformation-fuelled violence | When asked how their organisation responded to these events, a combination of different approaches was identified. Efforts to debunk disinformation (n8) through a combination of fact-checking, removing false information and/or pro-active communications, as well as community-centred engagement (n5), emphasising community resilience and social cohesion clearly came through in the data.

Legal action (n5) and robust public statements (n10) alongside digital literacy campaigns (n1) were also identified as core elements of responses to instances of disinformation-fuelled violence. Notably, a small number of those who responded to this section stated that they/their organisation did not respond, out of safety/welfare concerns, and in one instance because they felt the scale of disinformation, they faced was too great to effectively respond to it.

Response effectiveness | In evaluating the efficacy of these responses, debunking efforts (n6), community collaboration (n7) and intervention online to remove disinformation (n3) were identified as the most effective responses to events, though it is notable that n5 (19%) reported their organisation's responses had limited or no impact in addressing disinformation. Citing challenges their organisations faced in effectively responding, n5 indicated the sheer scale of disinformation against the comparatively limited resources of organisations to effectively address it presented a particular challenge. Resilient online echo chambers (n3) were a further challenge identified, which some associated with a difficulty in changing prejudicial opinions (n2).

Finally, when asked what new initiatives or changes have been planned or implemented since these events of disinformation-fuelled violence, respondents cited additional support, security and safety among practitioners and organisations positioned to respond to disinformation as a key initiative (n6). Three respondents stated that their organisations had yet to identify new initiatives (with n2 citing more investigations required), whilst n5 stated that no initiatives or changes were or are likely to be identified.

Outlined below are two case studies taken from this cohort who responded to survey questions 11-15. These respondents outline the conditions/events that sparked disinformation-fuelled violence in their localities and go on to trace their organisation's response to it, evaluating the effectiveness of these responses and the challenges they faced, and their plans for the implementation of additional disinformation response initiatives in the future.

Case study one | Location: Indonesia | Sector: National government

Triggers and responses | The respondent reports that in May 2019, *"widespread disinformation surrounding the Indonesian presidential election triggered mass protests and violent clashes in Jakarta. False narratives circulated across WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter alleging election fraud, vote manipulation by the Election Commission (KPU), and foreign interference. These unverified claims mobilized supporters to stage demonstrations that escalated into riots...resulting in multiple casualties and property damage."*

They go on to note the measures that were taken in the aftermath of these disinformation fuelled events: *"Government agencies and civil society organizations responded through a combination of public clarification, digital literacy campaigns, and law enforcement coordination"*, noting in particular the importance of collaborating with communities and the effectiveness of *"rapid fact-checking combined with community based digital literacy outreach"*.

Challenges and future work | *"False narratives spread faster than official clarifications, often amplified by influencers and coordinated online groups. Many citizens were more likely to trust peer-shared messages than government statements. It is all understandable in a community with trust issues to the government. As part of the government, I will initiate an informal Civic Resilience Support Group to respond to rising disinformation and declining trust in democratic institutions. The group will bring together public servants, journalists, educators, and young citizens to foster open dialogue and strengthen critical thinking. We plan to hold casual monthly meetups that combine fact-checking practice, discussions on ethical communication, and emotional support for individuals affected by online harassment. The goal is to build a more empathetic, informed, and resilient civic community from the ground up."*

Case study two | Location: The Netherlands | Sector: City or local government

Triggers and responses | In outlining the trigger, the respondent reports, “multiple youth groups in our area have been fighting for a while. This exploded in September. After a fight at a fair a local boy got kidnapped and beaten up. He was misidentified and had nothing to do with the dispute. The videos and images of him getting beaten up were widely circulated online and led to fake bomb threats, AI-generated images of schools exploding, fake news about fights at schools etc.”

Schools in the area responded by closing for several days, as they could not verify the threats.

“Everyone was overwhelmed with how quickly the fake news spread and felt unable to counter it by giving factual information. The police and mayor tried to keep people calm, to no avail.”

The respondent notes that their organisation is deeply aware of the major impact disinformation can have but simultaneously reports that there is limited confidence in knowing what effective responses look like.

“The police are still investigating the events and updating our mayor... more money is going towards youth workers and social workers to prevent something like this from affecting as many kids as it did. I can't say much was effective, really...[t]aking the threat of disinformation seriously is effective and understanding that we have to educate people about this and the effects it can have.”

Challenges and future work | *“The sheer speed. Disinformation spreads so quickly we can hardly counter it. It has a much wider reach than the mayor's factual information. How do you combat that? As a local government we are not equipped to deal with something like this.*

We're only about 2 months out from the initial event so it's still early days. Since then we've started looking into how we can educate people to increase their awareness and their overall digital literacy. A conversation has started in our 'regional safety council' about how we can respond to this in a more effective way as a region, not just as a single city.”

Lessons learned

Speed and scale | both case studies report the way online disinformation rapidly spreads and multiplies as significant challenges. The technological affordances of social media platforms^{xxiii} and increasingly vast access to AI further contribute to fast flows of disinformation. With the potential to overwhelm authorities and organisations, The Netherlands case study in particular reveals that there were limited, reliable mechanisms upon which they could satisfactorily draw on to respond to events without feeling overwhelmed by them. This highlights the importance of anticipatory efforts to pre-empt disinformation, and systemic capability development along an elongated response continuum to disrupt the burgeoning abilities, speed and contagion of disinformation. Local resilience alone cannot, however, compensate for the impacts of systemic amplification dynamics and (social media) platform design choices for which broader regulatory oversight and enhanced guardrails are key.

Contexts of insecurity | notable within these two examples are the differential but related ways in which disinformation perpetuates a sense of unease and insecurity already affecting local contexts. In the Indonesian case study, disinformation preyed upon a sense of distrust towards politicians and unease at the robustness of the political process already present within communities. In the Netherlands case study, a context of escalating youth violence made the potentiality of school disruption and threats of violence sufficiently plausible to shape school actions and ultimately their temporary closure. As previously identified (see Trijsburg et. al., 2024), disinformation's impact is moulded by established social and political faultlines, and issues related to global conflict, climate change and/or social and economic policy that may produce insecurity in the everyday lives of people can contribute to disinformation's potency.^{xxiv} Addressing social and political conditions is key to addressing the willingness of people to engage with it and interrupt the economic and political incentives for its use.

Collaborative responses | both case studies emphasise the necessity and promise of collaborative and collective responses to disinformation events. Notably, in the case study of Indonesia, the respondent describes being in the process of establishing a multi-sector, multi-level network positioned to share, support and implement effective responses to disinformation. In the Netherlands case study, the respondent identified the desire to respond in a more collective and co-ordinated approach that engages multiple locales and stakeholders in different regions. Both indicate the potential of increased collaboration and multi-sector engagement to enhance the effectiveness of disinformation responses.

Disinformation Response

The level of preparedness of local organisations to disrupt disinformation ecologies is at varying stages of evolution and formalisation. Twenty-one (19%) respondents reported that their organisations currently have a formal policy, procedure or strategy related to disinformation, while 52 (46%) do not. The remaining 40 (35%) are unsure. Fewer still (8%) have incorporated disinformation response into other relevant organisational strategies, including Countering Violent Extremism; Venue Hire Policy; Media and Social Media Policies; and Crisis Communications Plan.

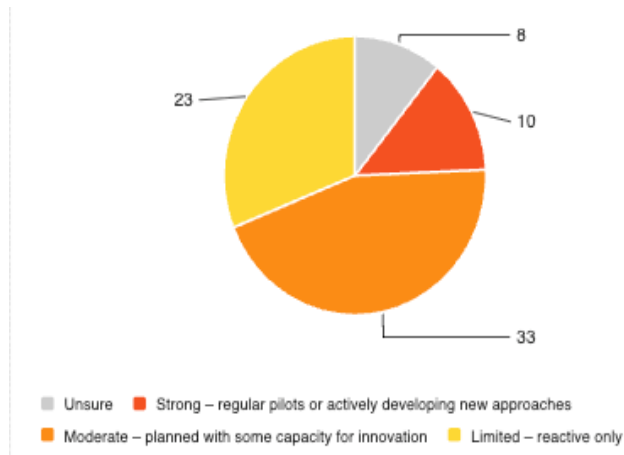


Figure 8: Self-rating of organisational response to disinformation (n=74)

The perceived level of response to disinformation also varies considerably. Fourteen percent of respondents felt their organisation's response was strong, though this fell to just 5% for city or local governments. Twenty-seven per cent of civil society respondents felt their response was strong, and zero academic respondents. Moderate response was most reported with highest prevalence in local government (53%) and civil society (36%). Academia reported limited response most frequently (40%). It should be noted that these latter two sample sizes are small for this question (n21 combined).

Multi-phase response

Disinformation narratives and events do not occur in isolation, as context-specific events occur within a broader information ecosystem that is increasingly characterised by its structured insularity, pollution and manipulation.^{xv} In this context, response to disinformation events such as riots, specific time-bound narratives and events that impact communities can be framed as an ongoing process, more suitably viewed through a community resilience lens with crisis response embedded within it than through a lens of incident response alone.

The Disinformation in the City Response Playbook^{xvi} frames this response continuum in three phases, the wording of which has been further refined here for clarity: Anticipatory, Active, and Recovery.

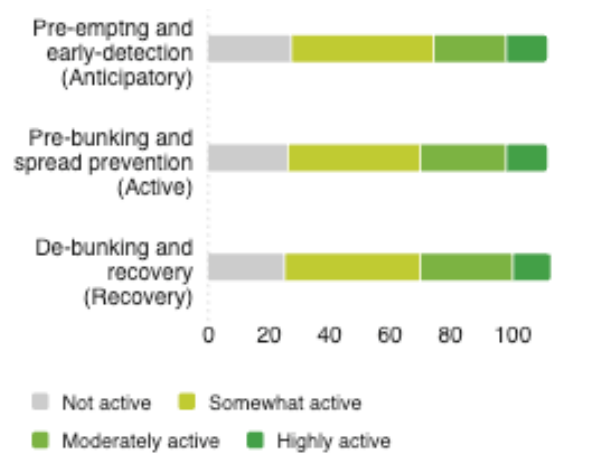


Figure 9: Current disinformation response activity (phased) (n=112)

Figure 9 shows reported activity across the three phases appears to be relatively consistent, with a marginal increase in activity through progressive phases. Moderate and high-level activity increased from 34% (Anticipatory) to 38% (Active) and 38% (Recovery). This did not equate to individual respondents reporting consistent activity across the three response phases, however, with an even split between organisations that report varying levels of activity across the three phases (n56) and organisations reporting the same activity levels across the three phases (n56).

Response activities

Broadly speaking, local disinformation responses can be characterised as organisationally-oriented – focused on the capabilities, processes and protocols necessary to enable the organisation to fulfil its mandate or mission - and community oriented, building relationships, capabilities and providing supports to those the organisation serves.

Externally, the most prevalent proactive, or primary prevention, activity reported was community events that explicitly aim to foster shared values, belonging or civility (46%), followed by community education and capacity building such as media literacy programs (29%) and local media investment or capacity building (24%). These are non-specific in their focus on disinformation, rather building the foundations of social cohesion and information infrastructure upon which effective disinformation response might occur. A smaller number of respondents reported pre-bunking or specific preventative information provision (17%) indicating significant scope for additional proactive measures aligned with known disinformation-prompting events of policy debate, international events, disasters and elections.

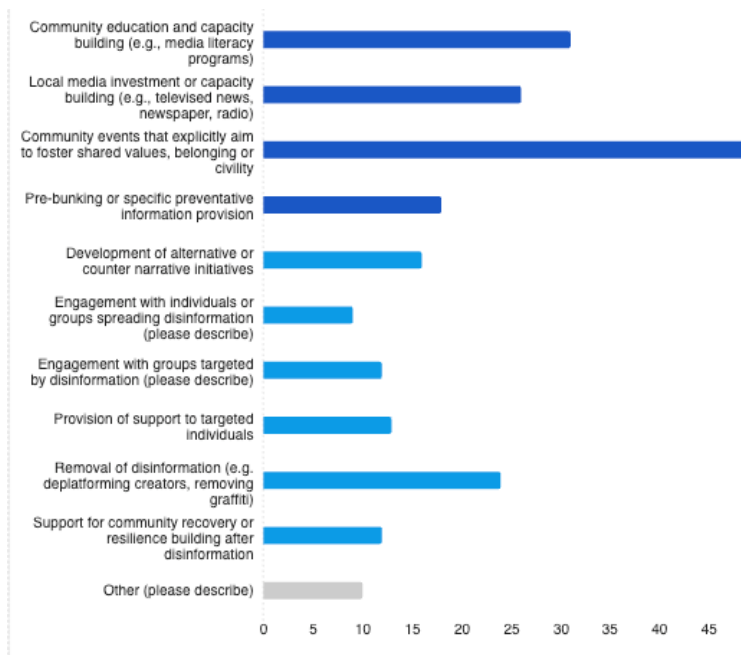


Figure 10: Reported disinformation response activities (Community oriented) (n=107)

Organisational responses to disinformation employing the following activities: 107 Responses

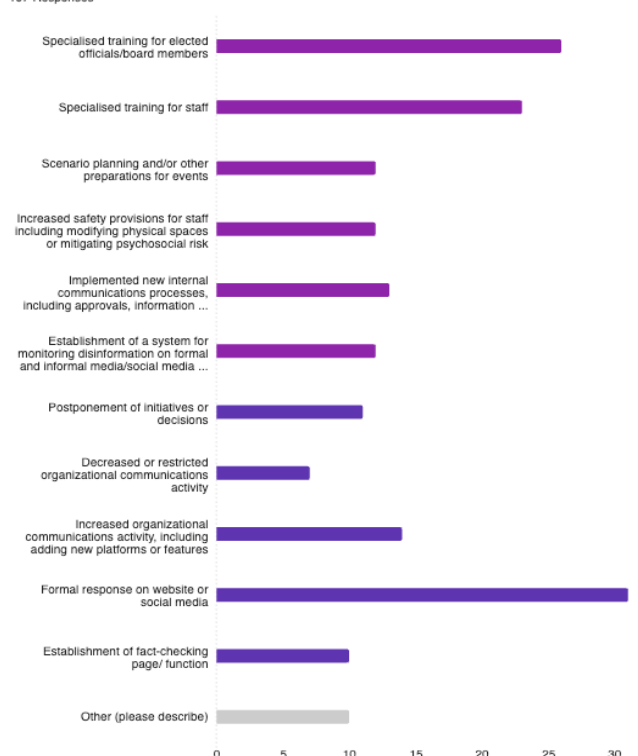


Figure 11: Reported disinformation response activities (Organisationally oriented) (n=107)

The most prevalent reactive external response was removal of disinformation, including deplatforming creators and removing graffiti (22%). More organisations reported engaging directly with groups targeted by disinformation (11%) and providing supports to targeted individuals (12%) than engagement with individuals or groups spreading disinformation (8%).

Internal responses included specialised training for elected representatives or board members (24%) and slightly less reported specialised training for staff (21%). More in-depth proactive organisational preparations such as scenario planning and establishment of systems to monitor disinformation were far less frequently reported (both 11%).

Formal responses on websites or social media were the most frequently reported reactive response (24%), with a greater number of respondents reporting increased organisational communications activity (13%) in response to disinformation compared to those restricting organisational communications activity (7%).

Disinformation response in practice

Community Education and Capacity Building | Barangay Information Portal (Philippines) brings together local government, education and religious organizations in order to verify viral claims and build social media literacy. Prioritising transparency and accountability, the Portal seeks to build citizen engagement and good governance processes that better reflect the challenges of today. Some of the tasks barangay residents can complete through this portal include the reporting of incidents, tracking financial assistance or applying for a barangay ID. Their streamlined interface eliminates barriers to engagement, an important aspect of their efforts given the cross-generational and whole-of-society impact issues of disinformation have^{xxvii}.

Digital Literacy | Google Be Internet Awesome (United States) is an interactive, gamified digital literacy campaign targeting children. Its focus is on offering children the tools and knowledge to navigate online spaces safely and with confidence. It prioritises five features or tools to support a safe internet experience for children, including teaching young people to treat online communication the same way as face-to-face communication; teaching children how to identify a potential scam; and how to use the internet for good. These tools in developing digital literacy in children have been shaped by Google partners in digital safety and are intended to be used by educators as well as families^{xxviii}.

Local media investment | Byline Times (United Kingdom) is a monthly newspaper funded by its readers and focused on delivering robust, factual information outside established media and without engaging in the daily news cycle. Vigorously transparent, the Byline Times online does not track website visitors or use cookies, as part of its broader commitment to fairness. The newspaper is also dedicated to reporting on communities and regions that it feels have been misrepresented by established press outlets. With a section titled 'Fact', Byline Times makes clear the distinction between articles deriving information from official documents and intelligence, from that of 'Arguments', a section based on "honestly held opinions"^{xxix}.

Community events for shared belonging | Brave Spaces Café (United Kingdom) provides opportunities for dialogue in community spaces where different points on a journey of learning and growing are acknowledged. Community members engage in critical dialogue through conscious questioning and active listening. While all are expected to make their best effort to be respectful, there is an understanding that someone may say something that result in unintentional offense and hurt feelings for those around. A primary assumption of Brave Spaces is that everyone speaks with the positive intent of seeking greater knowledge and understanding. This project extends from the lessons of existing international good practice, such as the anti-rumour cafés in Botkyrka, Sweden.^{xxx}

Alternative narratives | Strengthening Towns' Activation for new Narratives on Diversity (STAND) (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland) aims to deconstruct negative narratives at the local level, supporting local authorities in promoting new positive narratives which value diversity within society. Municipalities and civil society organizations can play a key role in the creation and dissemination of alternative narratives capable of promoting intercultural principles of equality, recognition of diversity, interaction and participation. To do this, STAND provides training and tools for municipal staff and members of local associations and supports the co-construction of new narratives around neighbourhoods, initiatives and local policies.^{xxxi}

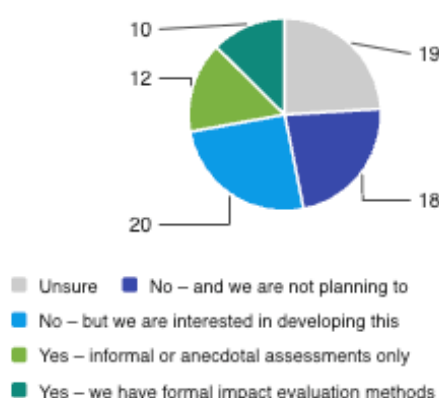
Multi-sector collaboration | Talk it Up (Australia) is a series of thought-provoking conversations held at libraries with different voices, to discuss local solutions to global problems. In 2025 this focused on misinformation and disinformation and brought together leaders from research, education, health, and the water sectors to provide multiple sector perspectives on these issues and to propose a multi-sector frame for local response efforts^{xxxii}. Libraries have played a key role in disinformation response efforts globally, building on their position as trusted and well-networked institutions within local communities.

Analysis and data collection | Hope Not Hate (United Kingdom) are an organisation focused on researching, investigating, analysing and campaigning against far-right movements and actors in the UK. Through their research, investigative efforts and community engagement, Hope not Hate have been authorities on the changing nature of the UK far-right for over twenty years, with much of their research contributing to the successful disruption of far-right terror groups and attacks. They prioritise community engagement and use their research to campaign for change both online and off, from social networking platforms to the ballot box at elections. They also publish their insightful analytic report Fear and HOPE annually^{xxxiii}.

Fact checking | Rappler's (Philippines) fact-checking network across education and the media sector is a core feature of the news network's mission of "speaking truth to power" and delivering transparent and community-centred journalism. Launched online in 2012, Rappler employs a team of data analysts, researchers and journalists specifically focused on disinformation, and in 2017 it became a signatory member of the International Fact-Checking Network. Rappler corrects false claims made by public officials and public personalities both internally and externally and calls for their readers to contact them if a suspected false claim is circulating online, with the slogan "let us battle disinformation one Fact Check at a time"^{xxxiv}.

Impact evaluation

The intention and anticipated outcomes of these responses vary, with organisations reporting prioritisation of goals as primarily increasing individual capacities to navigate disinformation by promoting flexible and critical thinking (64%); fostering emotional wellness and resilience (61%); reducing problematic social media use (58%); and providing pro-social support (45%). The more systems-oriented goal of advancing safety and regulatory protections was also prioritised (59%), as was the community-level goal of increasing belonging for all (60%).



The extent to which these are aligned with the above reported activities is unclear, as most respondents either have not evaluated the impact of their disinformation response activities (51%) or are unsure if their organisation has done so (26%). Of the remaining third, 12 respondents (16%) reported they undertake informal or anecdotal assessments only, and 10 (14%) have formal impact evaluation methods. Two respondents selected multiple options, including one (City or local government/Bangladesh) that selected all five options, demonstrating the breadth of existing evaluation practices even within organisations.

Figure 12: Impact evaluation of its disinformation response activities (n=74)

Formal impact evaluation frameworks currently used are described as multi-faceted in nature, drawing on multiple data sources and including frequent communication between response actors. Together, these use multiple indicators to "help us see not only how far our response reached, but also whether it restored trust and calm within affected communities." (City or local government/The Philippines).

Four aspects of current monitoring and impact assessment:

1. Monitoring outputs | Community and staff feedback to initiatives, as well as the reach and accuracy rate of information initiatives.
2. Monitoring narratives | Analysing emails, social media and local press.
3. Monitoring performance | Auditing the responding organisation's social and ethical performance.
4. Monitoring incidents | Analysing the rate and type of conflicts, online hate speech, or community tensions and threat assessments.

Local Response Ecosystems

Collaboration between organisations is essential for effective disinformation response. This includes different levels of government, the public sector (health, education), civil society/not for profit organizations, including international NGOs, academia and the private sector, the media and tech sectors. Each are impacted by, experience, and respond to disinformation differently. Each may have distinctive sets of skills and knowledge as well as forms of power and influence that can serve to tackle disinformation. The topical challenges raised by contemporary disinformation ecologies indeed require such sustained multi-sector 'whole-of-society' multisystemic responses.^{xxxv}

In the local landscape, due to their geographical and legislative authority, city and local governments are well placed to harness other sectors' knowledge and expertise and to lead in the implementation of multi-sector responses. In this respect, they can act as 'multi-sector convenors', bringing together various relevant entities and their expertise to facilitate collective problem-solving. Further, 'brain trusts' are multi-sector on-going bodies which inform city policy and can advise cities in the context of disinformation crises.^{xxxvi} Local response thus depends on the variety of standpoints, expertise and networks that collaborating across sectors can bring to countering disinformation.

Collaboration between cities

This policy brief shows that city and local governments encounter the impacts of disinformation early and acutely, through disruptions to governance, staff safety, public trust, and community cohesion. Referred to here collectively as 'cities', these are often the first to observe how narratives take hold locally and can spill into offline consequences.^{xxxvii}

At the same time, the limits of individual city-level response when acting alone are also clear, particularly when disinformation campaigns happen across jurisdictions, escalate rapidly, or draw on actors and infrastructures beyond municipal reach. Disinformation travels trans locally, even when it appears hyper-local. In other words, cities experience impacts locally but not independently. It is within this gap, between local insight and trans local dynamics, that cooperation across multiple cities becomes important. If cities are the first mile of democracy, multi-city cooperation is how that first mile becomes better designed and more effective by becoming integrated into a system of inter-connected pathways.

Cities and local officials are often better placed than regional or national governments to know what divisions and tensions in their communities are susceptible to being exploited or inflamed, and which local actors can be helpful in effectively addressing these. It is helpful to learn from and work with others, not only actors across multiple sectors and levels of government, but with different cities.

Exchanging and learning from other cities is acutely valuable because that experience and insight comes from analogous complex urban contexts. This can help cities to i) prepare and anticipate what related or similar disinformation campaigns might find traction at home and to respond with more speed; ii) to learn and innovate based on what other cities have done and are doing, allowing cities to adapt and improve local responses to maximize effectiveness locally, and iii) enable innovation and de-politicize disinformation response through collective and international legitimacy.^{xxxviii} Overall, these benefits of multi-city cooperation also come together to become a form of collective risk mitigation, as it enables cities to operate and react faster, more effectively, and based on experience and insights of others, thus lowering uncertainty.

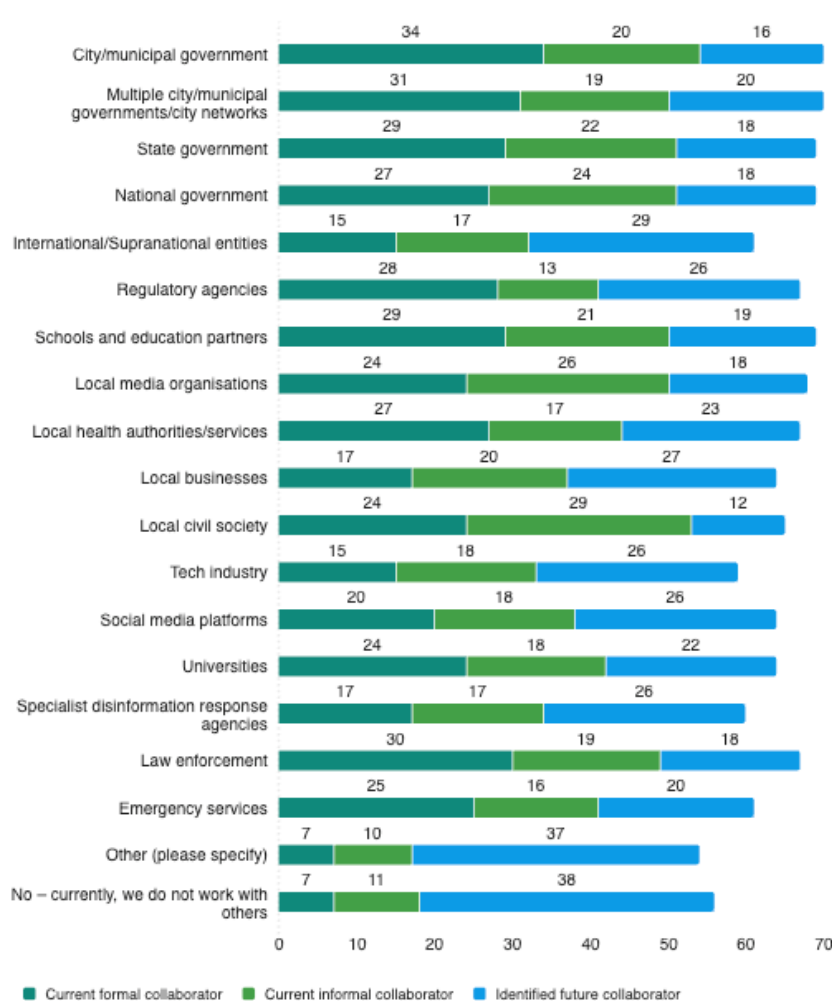


Figure 13: Collaboration for local disinformation response (current formal, information and future) (n=75)

Cities are formally collaborating mostly within city government, with other cities and city networks, and other public entities (state/regional and national government, regulatory agencies, schools and education partners, local health authorities/services, and law enforcement), with the exception of international and supranational entities, where there is much less formal collaboration. There is a markedly lower level of formal collaboration with private and civil society partners (local media organizations, businesses, civil society, tech industry, and social media platforms), although with most of these there is a significant level of informal collaboration.

The inherently cross-sector nature of the challenge and importance of engaging with all actors mentioned above is evident for cities, given that where there are lower levels of formal and informal collaboration, these actors are identified as future collaborators. This shows that with certain actors there is a recognition it would be beneficial to engage them but probably lack the capacity or channels to do so easily, and so there is an unmet need for some form of collaboration.

Collaboration between sectors

Most CSOs (civil society organizations)/NPOs (not for profit organisations) engage with other CSOs/NPOs (91%) and with academia (80%), based both on formal and informal collaborations. To a lesser extent, they interact with local media organizations (60%) and with international/supranational entities (67%). Local businesses (78%) and cities (78%) are their most targeted collaborations for future endeavours, but many identify schools too as partners in prospective collaborations (60%).

Likewise, cities/local governments mainly collaborate with their equivalents – other local governments actors (88%)- or with state/national institutions (80%) and law enforcement agencies (80%). They engage to a lesser extent with CSOs/NPOs (64%), the media (66%), regulatory bodies (59%) and universities (46%), both formally and informally, although future collaborations between cities and all these sectors are foreseen/developing to some extent. Cities identify the tech industry (41%) and specialist disinformation response agencies (39%) as their main prospective collaborators: this is a key area where multi-sector engagement interplay with multi-level collaborations such as with national governments and enforcement agencies.^{xi}

Multi-city collaboration can be done both with other cities in the same country and internationally.^{xxxix} Both these avenues for cooperation are valuable. Within the same country, it can be easier to operationalize learning on policy and practice given the shared legal/policy context, and it is easier to develop mechanisms for mutual support or advocate to higher levels of government to improve multi-level responses. International cooperation and global networks can be more valuable in supporting the innovation in responses, accessing specialized expertise or experience, and de-politicizing the response. Eighty nine percent of city respondents answered they had formal or informal collaboration with other cities and eighty percent had formal or informal collaboration with multiple cities/city networks.

Finally, academia's formal collaborations are predominantly with other universities (60%) and with national government (60%) although engagement with cities/local government actors (70%) is significant when taking into account both formal and informal collaborations.

While many CSOs/NPOs collaborate with multiple other sectors in all three phases of disinformation response (pre-emption and early detection (40%), pre-bunking and spread prevention (50%), de-bunking and recovery (40%)), cities/local government actors are mainly collaborating with actors in their own sector (42%) or with multiple other sectors (34%). Private sector/FPOs do not answer, or collaborate with other sectors in all phases of response (67%) (only 3 cases).

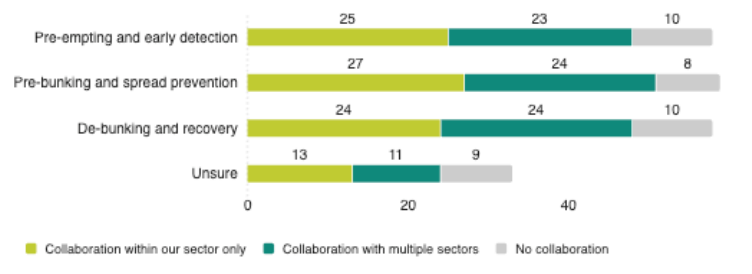


Figure 14: Extent of collaboration per response phase (n=64)

The value of collaboration

Intra-sector collaborations are not only most common but also mostly valued, across the board of respondents. In the same vein, for CSOs/NPOs, collaborations with their equivalent (the so-called third sector) rank first (56%) (very/extremely valuable), followed by collaborations with universities (44%), regulatory agencies (44%), media organizations (44%) and international/supranational entities (44%). The latter are likely to act also as funder of the disinformation response initiatives by CSOs/NPOs. Universities too considered that the most valuable collaborations occurred with other academic actors (50%).

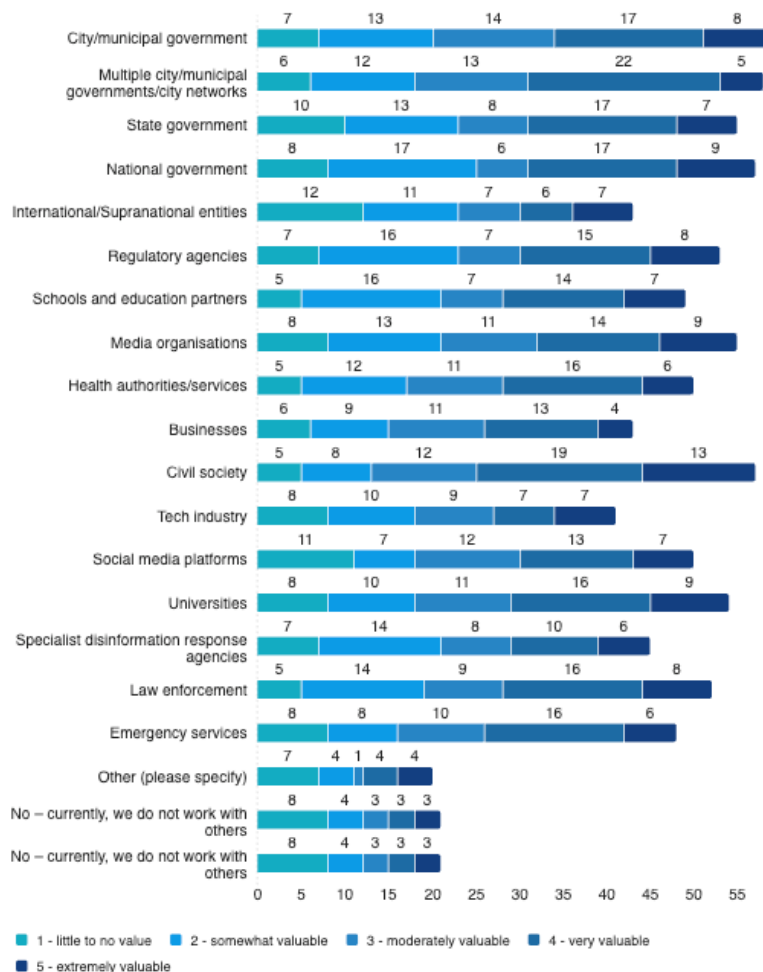


Figure 15: Perceived value of collaboration for disinformation response (n=69)

This could indicate that the most valuable collaboration is taking place with partners who likely benefit from a higher level of trust and where collaboration is likely easier to initiate (other cities, as well as local, public and civic actors). There does not appear to be any correlation between how much city respondents value their collaboration with different actors and whether this collaboration is formal or informal. This means that informality is not necessarily a weakness and there is not necessarily a need to formalize ongoing informal collaborations.

Actors who might have a more distant relationship and/or less trust, such as international and supranational institutions (33%), the private sector (28%) and both the tech industry (33%) and social media platforms (35%) in particular, regulatory agencies (48%), and universities (33%), are considered less valuable collaborators for the city respondents.

Given these results, it appears that trust and proximity are key factors in the volume and value of current collaborative engagements of cities. We can assume that the ease and speed of engagement and the shared local context are more important in determining collaboration than formal authority or specialized expertise, which would be more prevalent among other levels of government and specialized public or private sector actors. This also indicates that cities value collaborating horizontally and via practice-based learning. Of their collaborations with other actors, both cities/local government actors (52%) and CSOs/NFPs (40%) mostly appreciated the sharing

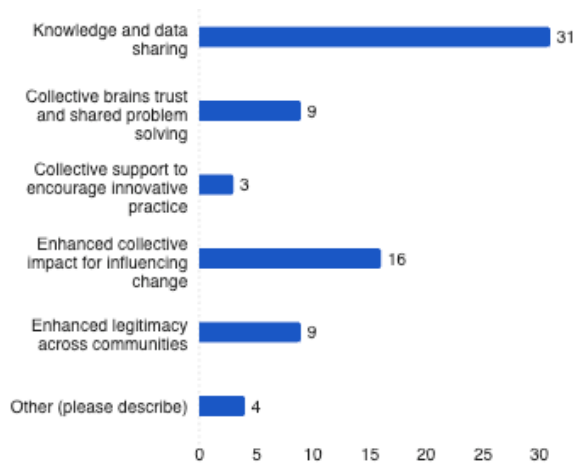


Figure 16: Most valuable aspect of collaboration (n=72)

of knowledge and of data. Instead, academic actors considered that the most valuable aspects of collaborating were enhancing collective impact for change (30%) and enhancing legitimacy across communities (30%).

This indicates that while both cities/local governments and the third sector benefit from collaborations at a basic level (exchange of information), so called 'horizontal learning' does not equate collective response capacity. There is opportunity to further extend the potential impact of such collaboration through collective effort. Problem solving by bringing together skills and expertise across sectors to find solutions appears only rarely in the responses (20% in academia, 10% in civil society, 10% city/local government).

Collaboration within and between localities help better understand and predict how certain narratives can intersect with social divides and grievances, and dynamics that might connect with violent extremism. In this, sharing observations and experiences, especially from cities with similar social, economic, or anthropological features can be effective for detection and developing responses. Vertical coordination is, however, key for the integration of disinformation response and preventing/countering violent extremism to enable the flow of information and enhance all areas of response from primary prevention to crisis response. From a city/local government perspective, collaborating across sectors offers the benefit of other sectors/organisations' distinctive awareness of – and legitimacy within – communities, as well as expertise in the complex interconnections between disinformation and multiple strands of extremism.

Barriers to collaboration

The actors that most city respondents identified as "future collaborators" were international/supranational entities (45%), tech industry (41%), specialist disinformation response agencies (39%), and social media platforms (36%). This indicates both the potential strategic value that is seen in working with these actors in disinformation response and the higher barriers to engagement. These higher barriers to engagement could be due to lack of trust, absence of effective channels, platforms or venues for engagement, and non-alignment of mission.

Also, more generally, cities are generally lacking the capacity to address this issue with sufficient resources (21% identified 'access to dedicated funding' as most valuable to enhance organisational response to disinformation), and cities also have a significant asymmetry in the capacities (26% identified 'training and capacity building' as most valuable to enhance response) and mandate to address this issue through collaboration with partners (16% identified increased multi-sector, multi-level and local collaboration as most valuable to enhance response). Therefore even when more collaboration can be strategic and impactful, it is not always possible. This also contributes to explaining why most collaboration is happening horizontally and locally, where these collaborations are easier and require less effort to initiate and maintain.

Though it is clear cities are impacted by disinformation and are well-placed to detect and address it, it is not commonly accepted that disinformation response is a core mandate of local government. The cities that engage locally, nationally, and internationally on this topic are the ones that have realized that there is a gap, that it is a priority to engage others in addressing it, and have the capacity to do so. This remains a relatively minority. Cities broadly agree on which actors are important for disinformation response, but it is not clear that there is an identified ideal model for how to work together effectively. While collaboration and exchange are widespread, there is little evidence for long-term, structured engagement of cities to capture and analyse lessons, evaluate effectiveness, and advocate for needed governance and institutional changes to respond to disinformation more effectively at a local level. The relatively weaker vertical collaboration of cities with state, national, and international actors that we see in the survey responses points to an opportunity to strengthen collaboration across different levels of governance within countries and then internationally with supranational actors.

Disrupting Local Disinformation Ecologies

Local actors are impacted extensively by disinformation and its physical – including violent – manifestations. They are responding in a wide variety of ways, individually and collectively. The anticipated future needs for effective local disinformation response are significant to meet increasing speed, scale and constantly evolving capabilities for disinformation. Such continued enhancement of local response to disrupt disinformation ecologies will require additional capabilities and resources. Respondents identified the most valuable support to enhance their ability to respond to disinformation locally and disrupt disinformation ecologies.

1. Access to dedicated funding and staff

Addressing disinformation redirects resourcing from other critical activities of local actors. Twenty-seven per cent of respondents identified access to dedicated funding as the single most valuable support to enhance their response, with a further 7% identifying dedicated staffing (combined 34%). This need was slightly lower in city and local government respondents (21%) and academia (20%), though much higher in civil society (55%). This speaks to the ongoing financial constraints within which these three sectors operate, and the precarity of funding.

Dedicated funding and staffing needs to enable efforts along an extended disinformation response continuum, extending from anticipatory to recovery and resilience-building. This means project-based short-term grants are insufficient alone, and need to be complemented with ongoing or medium-term funding programs.

2. Training and capacity building

Most local actors are not specialised disinformation response experts and require additional training and capability development to understand and disrupt disinformation ecologies. Twenty-four per cent of all respondents identified this as the most valuable support, with 26% of city and local government and 40% of academic respondents naming this their greatest need. An additional 14% identified the need for better understanding of the online (threat) landscape, better access to community level data, policy frameworks and tools, public engagement support (combined 38%).

Training and capacity building includes formal staff training programs, organisational and multi-sector scenario planning, systems development and the development and adoption of frameworks and tools to support and monitor consistent, transparent and effective response.

3. Increase collaboration and coordination

Local response requires collaboration and coordination across organisations and sectors. This is already occurring, and respondents identified many additional future sectors to enhance their collaboration and coordination. While horizontal and intra-sector collaboration is strong, vertical and inter-sector collaboration and coordination will need to further improve. Eighteen percent of respondents prioritised increased collaboration supports, including multi-level, multi-sector, within sectors and locally. There is significant scope for doing this, both in further extending the type and number of partners across sectors, and in further deepening collaboration to move beyond sharing information towards shared problem solving, activating multi-sector 'brains trusts'. Central within this is the role of city and local governments as 'multi-sector convenors', able to legitimately bring together the diverse knowledge, experience and skills in disinformation response held by other actors.

Strengthening collaboration and coordination between those departments and organisations working in disinformation response and those in preventing/countering violent extremism is particularly important to share intelligence and mitigating measures. Likewise, greater coordination is key between generalist disinformation monitoring and response (often undertaken by specialist communications teams) and highly targeted or impacted policy areas. Collaboration offers many benefits and opportunities to enhance functioning, though any increase in collaboration will require ongoing resourcing and capacity building to navigate relevant structures and systems across organisations and sectors.

4. Stronger legislation and regulation

Disinformation ecologies are fuelled and enabled by platforms and entities well beyond the sphere of influence of local actors. Regulating these platforms, including social media, AI and specific political and economic entities is critical to all aspects of disinformation response. Just 7% of respondents listed stronger legislation and regulation and their single most valuable required support, though 35% identified regulatory agencies as future collaborators, and 39% identified international/supranational entities – many of which have a focus on regulation and influencing regulatory frameworks. Investing in stronger legislation and regulation is not in itself sufficient to address local disinformation, yet it will not be possible to meaningfully disrupt disinformation ecologies fuelling violence and extremism without it.

Figures

Figure 1. Survey Question 1.2: Please provide the following information: Country

Figure 2. Survey Question: Q7: As far as you are aware, what prompted these disinformation campaigns with impacts at the local level? (Select all that apply)

Figure 3. Survey Question: Q5: In the past 12 months, how significant was the impact of disinformation on your organisation's work?

Figure 4. Survey Question: Q8: How has this disinformation manifested? (Select all that apply)

Figure 5. Survey Question: Q6: Have specific groups been targeted in your locality, or the localities you serve, in the past 12 months? (Select all that apply)

Figure 6. Survey Question: Q9: As far as you are aware, how has disinformation impacted the following activities of your organisation's work in the past 12 months?

Figure 7. Survey Question: Q20: To what extent, if any, have you observed a link in your work between disinformation and the following areas?

Figure 8. Survey Question: Q26: How would you describe your organisation's level of response to disinformation?

Figure 9. Survey Question: Q16: In which ways is your organisation currently active in responding to disinformation? (Select all that apply)

Figure 10. Survey Question: Q17: Has your organisation responded to disinformation with any of the following activities? (Select all that apply)

Figure 11. Survey Question: Q17: Has your organisation responded to disinformation with any of the following activities? (Select all that apply)

Figure 12. Survey Question: Q28: Has your organisation evaluated the impact of its disinformation response activities?

Figure 13. Survey Question: Q23: Which of the following does your organisation collaborate with (formally or informally), or intend to do so in the future, to address disinformation? (Select all that apply)

Figure 14. Survey Question: Q22: To what extent does your organisation collaborate with others during the following disinformation response phases?

Figure 15. Survey Question: Q24: How valuable is this collaboration currently for your organisation in responding to disinformation (select all that apply)

Figure 16. Survey Question: Q25: What is most valuable about these collaborations?

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