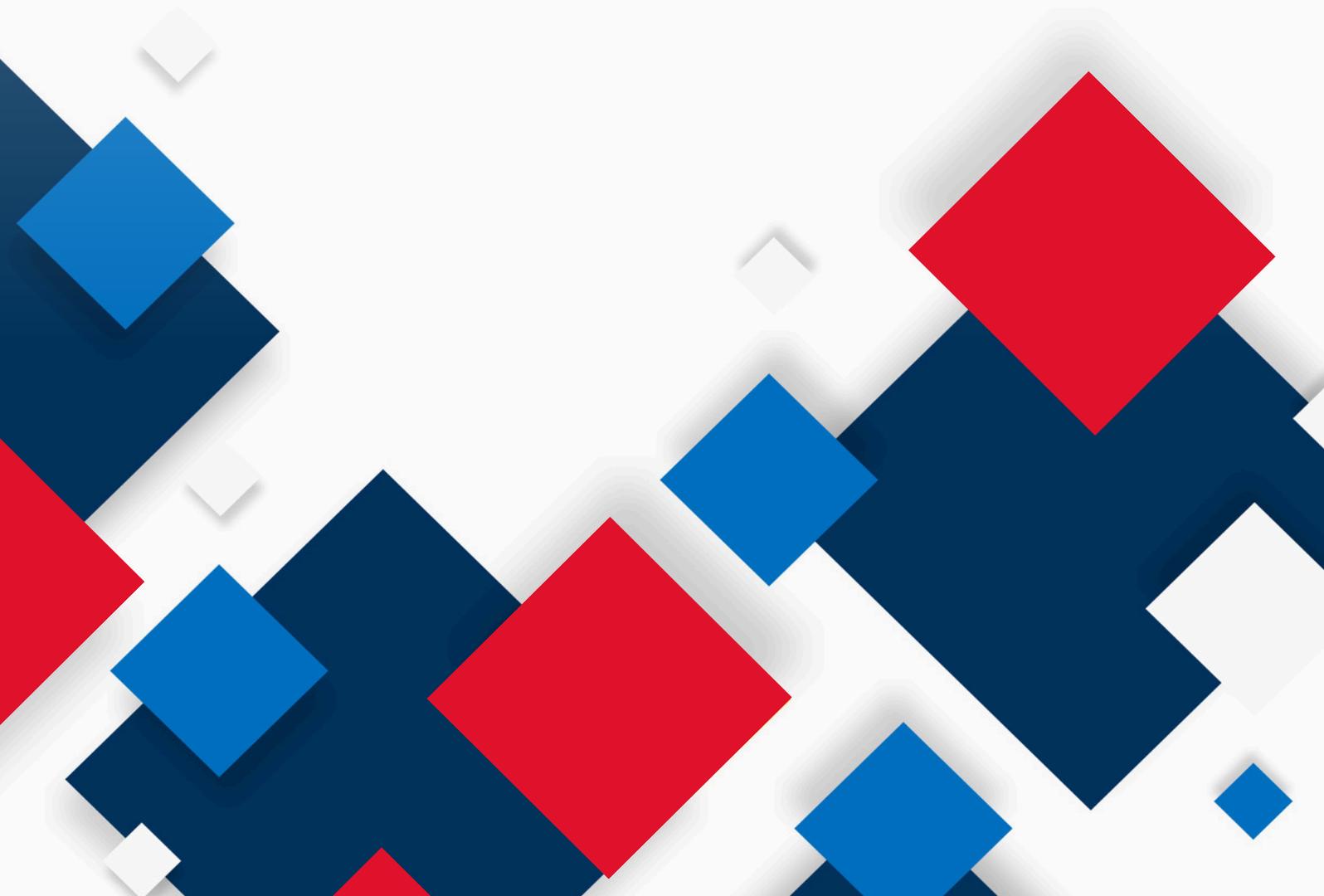


# Understanding and Mitigating Disinformation: A Primer for Policymakers and Stakeholders

Kendrick Chan and Chris Alden



Originally written for a roundtable organised by the LSE IDEAS, the LSE Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa, META, and GK Partners, this subject primer explores what disinformation is, and the mechanisms and conditions in which it operates. It is intended to inform policy discussions around the topic by providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of disinformation, so as to facilitate more robust responses at tackling disinformation.

# What is disinformation?

While there are different definitions, disinformation generally involves false information that is deliberately spread with the intent to deceive or mislead an audience. Unlike misinformation, which is the spread of incorrect information without malicious intent, disinformation is strategically crafted to manipulate perceptions and achieve specific objectives. Disinformation leverages upon social media, news platforms, and other digital channels to influence public opinion, disrupt democratic processes, and exacerbate societal divisions. The implications of disinformation are far-reaching, affecting areas such as national security, public health, relations between countries, and so on.

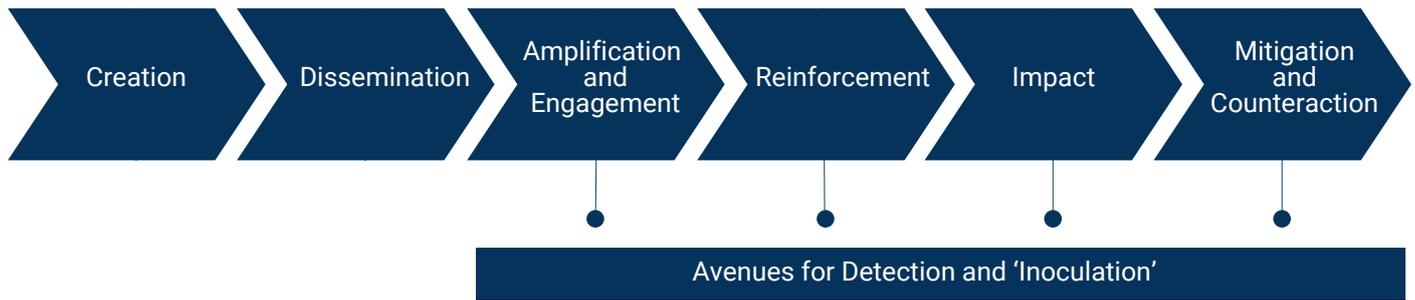
 Key traits	 Source of Origin	 Example
<p><b>Disinformation:</b> False information deliberately spread with the intent to deceive or mislead.</p>		
<p> Intentionality, deceit, harm.</p>	<p> Often originates from obscure sources.</p>	
<p> A state actor releases a forged document claiming a rival country's leader is involved in illegal activities, intending to undermine their credibility.</p>		
<p><b>Misinformation:</b> Incorrect or misleading information spread without the intent to deceive.</p>		
<p> Unintentional, incorrect information, often spread by well-meaning individuals.</p>	<p> Can originate from both obscure and mainstream sources.</p>	
<p> A social media user shares a hoax article about a celebrity death, believing it to be true and without any intention to deceive.</p>		
<p><b>Propaganda:</b> Biased or misleading information used to blatantly promote a particular political cause or ideology.</p>		
<p> Bias, manipulation, political/ideological motives, emotive appeal.</p>	<p> Often originates from well-known, official, or authoritative sources.</p>	
<p> A government launches a media campaign portraying its military actions in a positive light while intentionally omitting civilian casualties and other negative aspects.</p>		
<p><b>Fake News:</b> Commonly-used term in popular culture that can be used refer to disinformation, misinformation, or propaganda.</p>		
<p> Resemblance to real news, intent to deceive, often sensationalist.</p>	<p> Can originate from obscure sources but can also be spread through mainstream channels for virality.</p>	
<p> A website publishes a false story about a politician being arrested for corruption, complete with fake quotes and doctored images, to attract clicks and generate ad revenue.</p>		

# What Does Disinformation Thrive On?

Disinformation campaigns, often adopting a *'poison the well'* approach, thrive on exploiting various societal fault lines. Some of these are listed here:

- **Political polarisation:** Disinformation leverages existing divisions to deepen mistrust between political groups by spreading false or exaggerated information about figures, policies, or events.
- **Social and cultural tensions:** Disinformation highlights differences related to religion, ethnicity, and gender to provoke intra-community hostilities.
- **Economic inequality:** Disinformation amplifies grievances by spreading misleading information about economic conditions or policies, often targeting elites or corporations.
- **Public health crises:** Disinformation exploits public health crises such as pandemics to sow fear and uncertainty about diseases and treatments to undermining public health efforts.
- **National security:** Disinformation stokes fears about terrorism, espionage, and war by downplaying or exaggerating certain threats and enemy capabilities.
- **Electoral processes:** Disinformation undermines confidence in the democratic process by spreading false information about voting procedures and election outcomes.
- **Environmental issues:** Disinformation aims to generate opposition to scientific consensus on issues such as climate change and natural disasters under the guise of 'debate'.
- **Technology:** Disinformation capitalises upon public mistrust or misunderstanding of certain emerging forms of technology to spread false claims about their actual impact.
- **Immigration and refugee crises:** Disinformation capitalises on upon existing fears and prejudices to spreading false narratives about crime and cultural integration.
- **Historical and national identity:** Disinformation manipulates or inflames nationalist sentiments and historical grievances, often through the narration of distorted historical events or revisionist history.

# Sequential Process Chain of Disinformation (1/2)



Stage	What occurs
Creation	<p>There is usually a <b>motivation</b>, such as political gain, financial profit, social disruption, or ideological influence</p> <p>The <b>source</b> can include state or state-sponsored actors, organised groups, or individuals.</p> <p><b>Content generation</b> involves creating fake news articles, doctored images or videos, misleading statistics, or manipulated quotes.</p>
Dissemination	<p>Different <b>platforms</b> are utilised to seed disinformation, such as social media, blogs, forums, or websites.</p> <p>To <b>distribute</b> the disinformation, fake or compromised social media accounts, automated bots, or influences are commonly deployed</p> <p>Posting is chosen to happen at <b>strategic timings</b> to maximise reach and impact, often aligning with key events or developments.</p>
Amplification and Engagement	<p>In disinformation campaigns, <b>network effects</b> are everything – the more users engage with a piece of content, the more likely they are to perpetuate its spread.</p> <p>Social media <b>algorithms</b> prioritise 'engaging' content, leading to its higher visibility.</p> <p>Targeted audiences more are likely to <b>interact</b> with the content (i.e., liking, commenting, sharing) which further amplifies its reach.</p> <p>Specific user groups are also likely to believe and share the content amongst each other, leading to <b>echo chambers</b> that reinforce false beliefs. They may also <b>misinterpret</b> or add their own biases to the disinformation, leading to more varied and widespread false narratives.</p> <p>Although this is not always used, sensationalist content increases the likelihood of <b>virality</b>, leading to increased engagement, sharing, and visibility.</p>
Reinforcement	<p>Continuous and <b>repeated exposure</b> to disinformation reinforces belief in false narratives, solidifying 'cognitive biases'</p> <p>Influencers can also serve as an <b>endorsement</b> function and lend it credibility and wider audience reach.</p>

# Sequential Process Chain of Disinformation (2/2)

Stage	What occurs
Impact	<p>Disinformation can shape <b>public opinion</b>, sway voter behaviour, influence policy decisions, and exacerbate social divisions.</p> <p>It can also lead to <b>behavioural changes</b> resulting in real-world actions based on erroneous beliefs, such as protests, violence, or public health decisions.</p> <p>Prolonged exposure to disinformation can erode <b>institutional trust</b> in governing institutions, media, and democratic processes.</p>
Mitigation and Counteraction	<p>Governments formulate and implement <b>policies and regulations</b> to increase accountability and establish clear guidelines and standards regarding disinformation.</p> <p>Supporting, or investing in, <b>partnerships</b> that brings together stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, tech companies, civil society, and even international organisations) to collaboratively tackle disinformation.</p>
<b>What about detecting disinformation and bolstering information ecosystem resilience?</b>	
Detection and 'Inoculation'	<p><i>Detection often occurs once it starts to be amplified and often involves the following:</i></p> <p>Independent bodies or civil society organisations conduct '<b>fact-checking</b>' to identify and debunk disinformation, often by providing corrections and/or context.</p> <p>Social media platforms may undertake <b>measures and actions</b> such as removing, labelling, or de-amplifying false content.</p> <p>Public information or awareness campaigns can help <b>educate</b> the public about disinformation and improve digital information literacy to reduce susceptibility.</p>

**About the authors:**

Kendrick Chan is Head of the Digital International Relations in the Information Age project at LSE IDEAS.

Chris Alden is Professor of International Relations at LSE and Director of LSE IDEAS.



THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

**LSE IDEAS** is the LSE's foreign-policy think-tank and informs policy debate and connects academic research with the practice of diplomacy and strategy through sustained engagement with policymakers and opinion-formers.

The **LSE Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa (FLIA)** focuses on engagement with Africa through cutting-edge research, teaching and public events, strengthening LSE's long-term commitment to placing Africa at the heart of understandings and debates on global issues.

**Meta** has a mission of "Giving people the power to build community and bring the world closer together".

**GK Partners (GKP)** is a management and development consultancy specialising in responsible business, social enterprise, programme implementation and sustainable development policy and practice.

#### **LSE IDEAS**

Floor 9, Pankhurst House  
1 Clement's Inn, London  
WC2A 2AZ

+44 (0)20 7107 5619

[ideas@lse.ac.uk](mailto:ideas@lse.ac.uk)

[lse.ac.uk/ideas](https://lse.ac.uk/ideas)

