



A guide to false information affecting local authorities and their communities



“An unexciting truth may be eclipsed by a thrilling falsehood”

This is a shortened version of a guide produced for the Local Government Association (LGA), which outlines definitions of mis/dis/malinformation and its impacts on communities and local authorities. For further information, links, case studies and further resources please visit the [Local Government Association website](#).

This guide is designed to specifically support the work of communications officers, officers working in the PREVENT and counter-extremism space, and political officers.

Misinformation refers to verifiably false information that is shared without an intent to mislead.

Disinformation refers to verifiably false information that is shared with an intent to deceive and mislead.

Malinformation deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information.

Please note, in this guide the term false information is used to cover all three of the above.

False information is something that all communications and public-facing staff working in local government should be aware of and have a basic understanding of how to combat. This document offers an overview of key issues and best practices.

Encountering false information – narrative, brand and intent

You will most likely first encounter false information as individual messages containing false or misleading information. They become concerning when it becomes clear that the messages are linked to broader narratives.

Narratives are a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. They are stories that are designed to influence a target audience. If you see lots of messages on a topic, it is likely that you will be able to identify one or more of the narratives that they fit into or help to construct.

Narratives are in essence simple stories that give shortcuts to understanding complex issues. They often express things about identity, community, and purpose. They are often not literally true, but rather they carry the aggregated, distilled beliefs of a community built up over time by many people across many statements. This includes information about the values, identities and beliefs that drive these narratives, and with whom they have credibility.

We call this the brand.

A **brand** is what people think and feel about somebody or something, the characteristics and qualities that distinguish it from everything else. It is not about the person behind the account, but rather about the persona that the account attempts to project to resonate with certain target audiences.

Closely connected to the brand is the intent.

Intent is notoriously difficult to determine. However, if you weigh up the kinds of brands that share problematic messages and narratives, a picture should begin to emerge. Often, the position of the account within its community i.e. how its brand fits with the other brands it engages with – can help to reveal intent. Intent may vary quite widely even among those who produce the same kinds of messages, who adhere to similar narratives, and whose brand values overlap. Gaining a picture – sometimes called situational awareness – of what, who, how, and why disinformation is being spread is the first step to combatting it.

Adversarial actors

Adversarial actors tend to build audiences by linking their activities to trigger issues/narratives. These issues tend to be politically controversial and in tackling misinformation about them it is important to distinguish between legitimate political positions and illegitimate exploitation of controversy.

The effect of false information is not only to increase controversy in a manner that attributes malice to one side in a debate, but to discredit legitimate support for the opposing side by tainting it by association with conspiracy theories, thereby turning disagreement into potentially bitter division. The technique of raising fear by spreading false or misleading content is perhaps the single most common denominator.

Preparing for disinformation

There are several tools available to help you decide whether individual pieces of false information content require a response. An assessment should be made as to whether a response is helpful. In some circumstances it can be more harmful to respond and could risk increasing the reach of false information. An optional framework to use is the IRE framework below. This could link to your risk assessment rag rating:

Level	When to use	Steps to take
Ignore	Fringe content, low visibility, little resonance	Monitor silently without drawing attention to claims
Inform	Misunderstandings, growing engagement	Proactively put out correct information without amplifying falsehood directly
Refute	Clearly false and harmful claims which are resonating	Publicly and directly correct claim using factual evidence and clear arguments
Escalate	Co-ordinated or malicious campaigns with negative/dangerous social impact	Involve platform Trust and Safety team and fact-checkers. Consider legal / policy steps

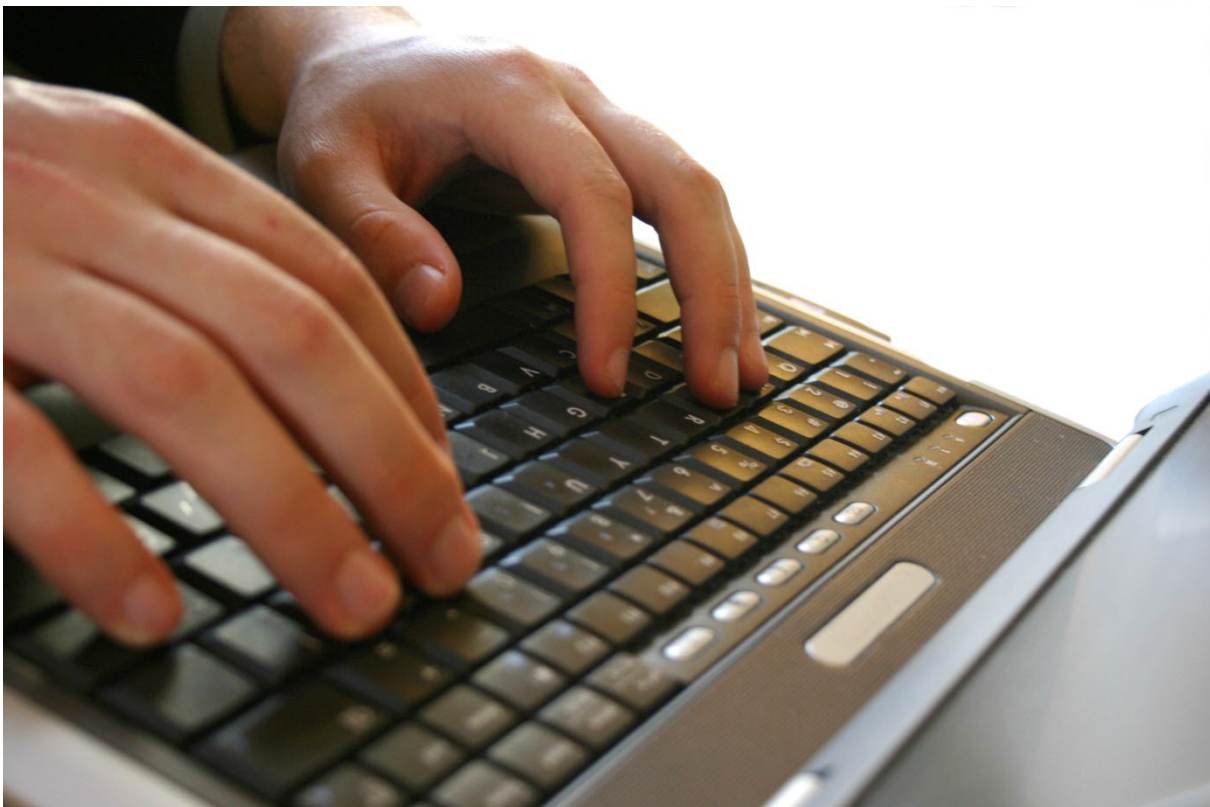
These tools are designed to ask simple questions about the issue and how it relates to your work. You should, for example, consider the effects of the false information on your key business areas, such as your ability to do your job, the effects on specific segments of the public you serve, and potential risks to society. The matrix, set out below, may be tailored to answer questions specific to your priorities and needs:

	Our priorities	Key questions
Objectives to protect	Policy areas and responsibilities	1. Is the false information harmful to our priorities? In what ways?
Information to protect	Key messages and narratives	2. What problematic communication techniques and behaviours have you identified? 3. What misleading or manipulated content is being spread? What are the main messages and narratives we should be aware of? What is untrue or misleading about them?
Brands to protect	Core values	4. What values and interests do the accounts spreading mis or disinformation wish to project, and to which target groups?
Audiences to protect	Key stakeholders and audiences	5. How widely is false information spreading, and to which target groups?

Other considerations

Other factors you should consider include the **reach** of the false information, for example whether it is likely to reach large audiences or remain a niche topic. It is also useful to conduct **regular risk assessments** so that you are clear about how false information can affect your priority policy areas, who the main influencers are, and who your key audiences will likely be. Together, weighing up these factors can help you to decide whether a response is proportionate and appropriate.

Some councils conduct annual risk assessments identifying eight to ten known topics that are vulnerable to false information. They do this by, for example, drawing on dialogue through community support officers to triangulate with other data sources. The resulting sentiment analysis is helpful for horizon scanning on new and emerging threats; including horizon scanning in someone's actual role can be helpful. Horizon scanning should be done in compliance with RIPA (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000) as community perception of surveillance will increase distrust and remove future transparency.



Responding to false information

In weighing up whether to act, it is important to consider not just the potential reach of the false information, but also the likely **reach of any response**. Once you have decided to respond to the false information, it is worth considering the different tools at your disposal. While in many cases a straightforward rebuttal will suffice, some false information issues are more systemic and require different approaches. In some cases, more than one tool should be used as part of a coordinated effort. The main communicative tools worth considering include:

- **Inoculation/prebunking:** If you want to proactively counteract false messaging before it has become widely spread, you can attempt to strengthen the resilience of your audiences by warning them about false information they are likely to encounter.
- **Debunking/fact checking:** If you simply want to counteract the impact of the false information by asserting the truth, fact checking and debunking are widespread practices that perform an important role in ensuring that false information does not go unanswered. *Remember that you might not be the most credible voice for debunking falsehoods.* Be cautious about fact-checking or pre-bunking too early, based on assumption or limited data. If you inadvertently share incorrect information while trying to be timely, this will undermine trust and increase the risk of future false information.
- **Awareness campaigns:** If you want to proactively shape public debate about issues likely to be subjected to disinformation, you can use a campaign approach involving robust narratives and brands.
- **Network building:** If you know that an issue is likely to persist in the medium or long term, it is important to develop networks capable of shaping an effective response over time. Collaboration with community leaders, interest groups, journalists, and researchers can generate credibility with audiences.
- **Counter-narrative:** If you notice that false narratives develop into shorthand, or a delivery mechanism, for false information content, you may wish to tackle those narratives head on. Countering narratives involves exposing falsehoods and contradictions in the stories of how important issues are explained to different audiences and, where possible, replacing them with a truthful narrative.
- **Counter-brand:** If a persistently hostile actor spreads false claims, you may have political support to expose either the groups or interests spreading them. This involves explaining and projecting your identity and values, exposing the negative behaviour and contradicting values of those who do harm.
- **Resilience building:** If you know that a false information issue requires long term efforts, you can create information programmes designed to increase the ability of target audiences to critically engage with false or manipulated information. Source criticism and media literacy are key tools for building public resilience.

In some cases, **creating networks** among local government representatives and non-statutory organisations, such as commissioned services, facing similar challenges can be considered a countermeasure. Things that are happening locally may in fact be connected to national, and even transnational coordinated efforts.

Community engagement is made much more difficult if the local government communications do not align with reality. There is a risk of alienating the public and undermining credibility and trust. Community level engagement is an important way to keep other forms of communication more realistic and credible.

Pre-emptive comms is more easily done if an organisation is horizon scanning or has strong links to communities and can give an accurate ‘temperature control’ regarding community feeling. If pre-bunking or fact-checking are too risky, an alternative is to focus on **communicating harm reduction**, rather than communicating truth. This is a middle ground temporary measure to avoid communication/information voids.

Perceived silence from local government can contribute to an **information void** and lead to community irritation. This becomes harder when local government is reliant on information or clearance from other parts of government, particularly if their responses are slow or there is reluctance at the political level to be linked to certain issues. It can therefore be helpful to share this information on how the process works with communities, providing reassurance and assurances that the community voice is being listened to.



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