



Disinformation & Information Threats and Responses – Post Session Guide:

Session Objectives

- Understand what disinformation is and how it spreads
- Recognise its impact on communities
- Identify who spreads it and why
- Learn strategies to counter and build resilience



Understanding Information Threats

Disinformation: False info spread knowingly (**D**isingenuous)

Misinformation: False info spread mistakenly (**M**isinformed)

Malinformation: True info used maliciously or out of context

> All forms contribute to information vacuums and fuel division, but individual or community responses may differ according to intention.



How It Spreads

- Media & Platforms: Social media, encrypted chats, fringe platforms
- Shock Events: Vacuums filled with speculation and rumour
- Amplifiers: Influencers, trolls, state actors, fringe communities

Conspiracy Theories:

“Broad beliefs that are underpinned by the notion that secret groups arrange and design world events to impose their worldview upon society via deception. These plots can be identified through a particular reading of culture, politics, and society, often resulting in discrimination of one or more groups. Conspiracy theories are, through their need for a narrativised and connected worldview, vulnerable to exploitation as a form of mis- or disinformation, or the insertion of additional narratives by different actors.”

The Marketplace of Rationalisations – Dr. Dan Williams

“... social structures in which agents compete to produce rationalisations for what people want to believe in exchange for money and social rewards.”


“...rationalisations rarely take the form of outright falsehoods or ‘fake news’. Instead, they are optimised for providing epistemic justifications of predetermined conclusions. It is only because of the biased way that such reasons are selected and produced that their cumulative effect on individuals is often to entrench them in unfounded beliefs.”

The Brain on Disinformation

Remember – we’re already ‘wired’ simply being online. Disinformation and unexpected information only enhance this, so our response may be different ‘online’ than ‘offline’.

- Neurology: Dopamine, Adrenaline, fear/stress responses, instant gratification
- Cognitive Biases: Confirmation bias, conjunction fallacy
- Psychology: Identity fusion, heuristics, groupthink, connection (“Youtube Face”)

Key Indicators of Disinformation

- Spikes in community tensions and/or hate incidents/speech
- Bot-like activity (e.g. 70+ posts per day, username with random letters or numbers, only re-sharing others content)
- Sensationalist language/Clickbait
- Thought-terminating quotes e.g. – “It is what it is”, “Boys will be boys”
- Contradictory beliefs by the same individual/group e.g. – Princess Diana is in hiding, and Princess Diana was really murdered by the Royal Family
- Emerges around commemorative or high-profile events – (This also provides us with an opportunity to pre-bunk/share correct information ahead of false information being viewed. )

Protecting yourself

- **Proactivity is better than reactivity**
 - Check your online footprint (personal and professional).
 - Free tools exist for data breaches.
 - Think about historic personal social media posts.
 - Revisit old profiles.
 - Google yourself, look through multiple pages.
- “Red team” yourself - think like a bad actor when drafting comms or even looking across your old activity online.
- Take steps to delete or cleanse anything you don’t want out there.
- Focus attention on clearly false and easily refuted dis/misinformation. Focus your attention **here**.

Strategic Response: I.R.E.

Ignore: Fringe, low-visibility content – Monitor silently

Inform: Misunderstanding, growing engagement – Share accurate info without amplifying mis/disinformation

Refute (Correct & Contextualise): False & harmful claims – Use facts & clarity to debunk

Escalate (includes Safeguarding): Malicious or coordinated disinfo efforts – Alert platforms, fact-checkers, or legal

Communication & Community Trust

- Fill information voids proactively (say what you can, say why you can’t – be timely)
- Be honest about what’s known and unknown
- Encourage uncertainty over opposing viewpoint change
- Use concise FAQs and consistent messaging
- Amplify moderate voices
- Avoid censorship where possible (but not with hate)
- Show empathy— Regulation before confrontation, Connection before persuasion

Regulation & Connection Example: “I can see why that story feels worrying. I don’t have all the answers yet, but I do know there’s a lot of misleading information circulating around this.

What I *can* do is share what we know so far, and explain what’s still unclear.”

Critical Thinking & Resilience (See ‘Tools in Action’ below for some examples)

- Socratic Method: Ask “What do you mean?” and “Why?”
- Challenge False Dichotomies: Look for middle ground
- Inoculation: Expose to low-risk misinformation to build resistance, Pre-Bunk to alert
- Gamification & Brain Training: Practice discernment
- Classroom debate practice
- Algorithmic Resistance: Browse incognito, prune/curate algorithm, use greyscale

Why It Matters

- Prevents hate, polarisation, and loss of institutional trust
- Reduces the likelihood of community harm and cohesion ruptures
- Supports social cohesion and resilience-building
- Helps professionals engage with confidence and curiosity

Final Takeaways

- Use your existing skillset: Active listening, Professional Curiosity, reflect, Active Bystander approaches
- You don’t need to be a disinformation expert—start with understanding themes
- Always ask: ‘What’s the root need driving this belief?’

SEE TOOL SECTION BELOW

Tools in Action (this is not an exhaustive list, there are many ways to enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills for dis/misinfo resilience building!):

- Critical thinking helps us understand the problem; problem solving helps us respond proportionately. They come as a pair.

Socratic Method Example

The Socratic Method uses probing and inquisitive questions to enhance critical thinking. Verbal communication enables people to identify for themselves, that there are gaps or inaccuracies in their knowledge, using this 5-step approach:

Receive > Reflect > Refine > Restate > Repeat

Example:



Statement: "People from X group are always causing trouble."



Socratic Questions to ask:

- What do you mean by 'always'? Have you seen this personally or heard it from someone else?
- Can you think of any individuals from that group who don't fit that description?
- Could it be that a few individuals are being used to represent a whole community?
- Why do you think this idea is shared so often online? Who might benefit from it being believed?
- What might a more complete version of this story look like?

Recommended video:



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USo7V6kwfEk>

Illeism Example (Creating Objectivity)

Illeism is the act of referring to oneself in the third person. It helps create emotional distance and can make it easier to reflect objectively. Illeism also increases our problem-solving ability, which in turns promotes critical thinking skills.

The below example is specific to prejudicial attitudes, but improving our problem solving and critical thinking skills, generally, has a positive effect in building resilience to dis/misinformation.



Statement: "I just don't trust people from that community."



Illeism Prompt:

- "Why does (insert own name here) feel uneasy about that community? What experiences or stories might be influencing (insert own name here) thinking?"
- "What would (insert own name here) say if someone made a similar assumption about his own background?"
- "What does (insert own name here) want to understand better before forming a firm view?"

(Amend the language for younger participants)



Challenging False Dichotomy

False dichotomies present an issue as having only two opposing sides, ignoring complexity or middle ground. Challenging them can reduce polarisation.

Example:



Statement: "You either support free speech or you're supporting censorship."



Challenge Prompts:

- "Is it possible to support free speech while also challenging harmful misinformation?"
- "Can we create a space where diverse opinions are shared but hate is not tolerated?"

- "What if it's not about being 'for' or 'against', but about finding a reasonable balance?"
- "Could there be ways to support expression without fueling division or harm?"



Inoculation Theory – Pre-Bunking

It is often more effective to highlight incoming misinformation before someone sees it themselves. Particularly if there is a high risk that they will come across it, anyway. Always risk assess first.

- Show, Tell, Alert – either low-risk dis/misinformation ('small doses') or something with the potential for a bigger impact, in a controlled way - i.e – “Have you heard about the false information about X going around? It’s harmful because...”
- Create – work with groups to create their own low-risk disinformation using psychological and technical tools. If we know how to make something, we know how to identify when others have done the same.
- Train your Brain through games like [‘Cranky Uncle’](#)



Professional Curiosity

Professional Curiosity is moving beyond what we immediately see or hear, and investigating beyond surface level. Avoiding assumptions and asking questions to build understanding without confrontation.

It can be useful in realising many types of harm. In the context of dis and misinformation, it may help us to identify, for example, when a conspiracy belief incorporates hateful narratives or ideology, and either highlight it to the person we are supporting, thus promoting critical thinking, or respond if the harmful beliefs are already entrenched.

Example:



Pupil: “Those lines up in the sky are actually chemtrails, used to control the population. It’s the same people who control the banks and the news”



Curious Supporter: “Interesting. I’ve seen those trails too, but why do you think they’re chemtrails and not just vapour?”



Pupil: “My mate sent me a video showing how they take ages to disappear. It’s got to be man-made by those elite families, the Rothschilds are in control of everything”.



Curious Supporter: “That’s a pretty big claim – the idea that these trails are part of a big plan by powerful families. I’ve heard the Rothschild name brought up in lots of different theories (highlights that this isn’t a new idea) – why do you think that name comes up so regularly?”



Pupil: “I’m not sure, but they’re super rich and have always been involved in world events – people say they control the banks and governments and stuff”



Curious Supporter: “It is true that the Rothschild family were a wealthy banking family many years ago in Europe. They were Jewish and very successful. Over time lots of myths have been created about them. Sometimes those myths are used to unfairly blame Jewish people for global problems. Do you think that might be what’s happening here?...”

According to the response here, you can decide whether you continue to use this as a learning opportunity, for example you may want to highlight the words often used in conspiracy material like ‘elites’, ‘sheep’, ‘they’ or coded language. Or, whether you now have a concern that the pupil already knew about the hateful/ideological narrative, and therefore there may be other safeguarding or response tools required by you or an external agency.



Supporter Round-Off: Ensure you round off the conversation by thanking the person for openly talking to you and reflecting that it’s helpful to question who and why is creating or sharing the story.

Leave the dialogue door, open. 