

Disinformation Tactics

Australian Electoral Commission

<https://www.aec.gov.au/media/disinformation-tactics.htm>

Electoral disinformation doesn't spread on its own. People trying to circulate misleading or deceptive information about an election or referendum often use the below techniques to convince people to believe, and then spread, bad information.

Research tells us that once you're familiar with the below techniques, you should be able to identify disinformation and be more resistant to future attempts to manipulate you.

Emotional language

What is it?

Emotions are powerful tools of persuasion. Research shows that using emotional words, especially ones that evoke negative emotions such as fear or outrage, increases the viral potential of social media content. This use of negative emotional words to manipulate is sometimes referred to as "fearmongering".

Spot the signs

- Look for emotionally charged words in a social media post, article or video
- These words are included to make you feel strong, and usually negative, emotions like fear or outrage
- If these words were removed, would the post, article or video be as interesting to you?

Examples

"The AEC made a DISGUSTING decision about the election. They're all soulless public service robots!"
"A candidate for the election has been doing terrifying campaigning, targeting helpless senior citizens!"
"Alarming new laws risk eroding our freedoms."

Incoherence

What is it?

Incoherence occurs when someone uses two or more arguments to make a point that cannot logically all be true at once. It's a technique most commonly seen in longer discussions about a particular (usually very polarising) topic.

Spot the signs

- Look for the same individual making multiple arguments for the same larger point, and
- Look for two or more of these arguments contradicting or ruling each other out

Examples

"This election is completely unpredictable, but if my party doesn't win it must be rigged!"
"The only way to strengthen our democracy is by boycotting this election."

False dilemmas

In a false dilemma (or false dichotomy), a limited number of choices or sides are presented as mutually inclusive, when in reality more options are available. It's also known as the "either-or fallacy".

Spot the signs

- Two alternatives presented as the only available choices
- These alternatives are not actually the only choices
- The fact that other options are available is concealed

Examples

"If you don't vote for my party, you're un-Australian."
"If you don't accept a how to vote card, you're being rude."

Scapegoating

What is it?

Scapegoating is when a person or group is singled out or takes unwarranted blame for a particular problem. Scapegoating is commonly seen throughout history, but it remains common even today.

Spot the signs

- A serious and complex problem is discussed
- Blame for the problem is cast on a single group or individual who cannot reasonably be responsible for the entire problem
- The complexity of the problem is reduced to the role played by this individual or group

Examples

“The election campaign has become completely toxic because of people like [individual name].”

“The reason my party lost the election is because [a generation] all votes the same way.”

“There is no point in voting because the AEC won’t count your vote properly.”

Personal attacks

What is it?

A personal attack (also called an ad hominem attack) is when someone attacks the person making an argument, instead of addressing the argument itself. Personal attacks are commonly used to redirect the listener away from the subject at hand and towards an individual. They can be, but aren’t necessarily, a distraction, as in some cases messenger credibility is relevant to the argument at hand.

Spot the signs

- The speaker is targeted rather than the argument
- The speaker's alleged negative characteristics are used as justification that their argument is wrong
- These negative characteristics are unrelated to or irrelevant to the argument being addressed

Examples

“Why are you telling me how to vote when you didn’t even go to university?”

“You can’t possibly understand the electoral process if it’s only your first-time voting.”

“Don’t vote for that candidate, someone with their history can’t be trusted to make good decisions.”

Just Asking Questions

What is it?

This technique allows people to cast doubt on something (like an election) without making any definitive claims. Instead, claims are phrased as questions. By using this technique, the person asking the questions can claim that they’re not making allegations, while making allegations. This can sometimes also be a “trick questions”.

Phrasing something as a question can also mean the questioner may not feel they have to provide any evidence for their claim. People using this technique can appear to be very reasonable and polite, though the questions being asked are typically unreasonable. Some users will also ‘spam’ questions to a number of different individuals, or in the comments threads of multiple news outlets. This increases the chances that an authority figure will take the question at face value and attempt to respond in good faith, which can add the appearance of legitimacy to an otherwise illegitimate claim.

It’s important to remember that most questions are perfectly legitimate. If you have questions about an election or referendum, or any aspect of Australia’s democracy, you can ask us on social media.

Spot the signs

- Look for questions asking about very unlikely or momentous hypothetical scenarios
- If the claim wasn’t phrased as a question, and was presented without evidence, would you believe it?

Examples

“Why won’t the AEC talk about the risk of drop bears at polling places?”

“Hey AEC, will you confirm that every count in the country was conducted incorrectly last night

“When will the AEC prove that ballot papers haven’t been lost or stolen?”

Cherry-picking

What is it?

Cherry-picking occurs when information is provided without context, often to convince a reader that the information indicates something nefarious. This is especially common on social media, where short posts and videos limit the information that is included. This deliberate release of specific pieces of information can sometimes also be referred to as “mal-information”.

Facts or historical information can also be cherrypicked and used to build excitement for something unlikely.

Spot the signs

- A screenshot of a document, social media post or video without a link back to the original or explanation of the original source
- A graphic edited to make numbers appear differently than they should.
- Political or referendum messages without an authorisation message
- Quotes from people or extracts from documents that are highly edited or include just a few key words.
- Specific pieces of information about someone that, without context, could mislead people about the whole story.

Examples

An image from a news article that doesn't include the date it was published – something that was true four years ago might not be accurate today.

"If you don't vote in person, then your vote may not be counted on Voting Day!"

Further information and research on disinformation tactics can be found here:

- Inoculation Science (2023) *Truth Labs for Education Project*. Available at <https://inoculation.science/inoculation-videos/>.
- Pilditch, T. et al. (2022). [Psychological inoculation can reduce susceptibility to misinformation in large rational agent networks](#). *Royal Society Open Science* 9, 211953.
- Varazzani, C. et al. (2022), [Misinformation and Disinformation: An international effort using behavioural science to tackle the spread of misinformation](#), *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*.
- Roozenbeek, J. et al. (2022). [Technique-based inoculation against real-world misinformation](#). *Royal Society Open Science* 9, 211719.