MAY 2025
READOUT

# Disinformation Challenge Area

## NABS+ COMMUNITY EVENT

## OVERVIEW

**The objective for the meeting was defined as agenda setting to identify current and emerging policy, practice and research needs in terms of the construction, communication and consequences of disinformation and allied forms of harmful information manipulation. It was confirmed to focus in particular upon state-linked threats, accepting a need for clarity with regards to state-linkages and backing.**

This was contextualised by insights from preliminary meetings held so far that identified 4 topic areas of interest in relation to disinformation: resilience at the individual, group and societal levels; deterrence frameworks and how they can be applied to information manipulation threats; risk/harm prioritisation, especially for governments; and responding to the 'new world order' in terms of the changed geopolitical posture of the US.

It was identified that from a governmental perspective there are a multiplicity of approaches, definitions, methodologies, technical solutions and methodologies in circulation.

It is challenging to keep across all of these and to be able to sort the 'signal' from 'the noise' in terms of which are the most useful, meaningful and worthy of investment.

In part as a response to this complexity, departments across HMG are increasingly seeking to integrate their efforts and to consolidate, in an effort to deconflict with each other, avoid duplication and develop a more strategic approach. This includes thinking about how to organise for emerging and future threats, such as those enabled by AI technologies.

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From the perspective of the research community, there is a desire to better understand evidence needs of decision-makers, and the importance of developing 'trusted research' relationships. In this regard there is a lot that can be learnt from approaches developed in relation to radicalisation, cyber-security and CSAM. The view from behavioural and social science research accents the importance of not just seeing these issues as technical or data problems, but connecting them to wider

social problems and challenges to do with political polarisation, social tensions around immigration and racism, and decaying levels of social cohesion.

A key recurring theme was how to prioritise particular risks, threats and harms, especially given the challenges in demonstrating causality in this area. There was a feeling that episodes where disinformation (and allied forms of information disorder) induce violence, are critical. More generally, developing and utilising 'theories of change' may provide a structured framework for thinking about how and why disinformation effects arise (or not).

Another key theme was recognising the limits and constraints on governments and the fact that other actors may have better capacities and capabilities in terms of the design and delivery of counter-measures. This raised important questions about trust in the messenger for any intervention, and levels of scepticism and distrust in government amongst many key audience segments.

Developing this theme, there was a strong perception of there being opportunities to learn from other countries, such as Taiwan and Sweden, where different, and potentially relatively impactful approaches have been developed and implemented. This includes not seeking to respond to isolated and individualised disinforming narratives, but developing more strategic positions. Relatedly, research based accounts may not be the most effective mechanisms for shaping public opinion on these issues, and other more popular vectors need to be explored.

Reflecting the latter point, there was a consensus amongst participants, that a key need was not necessarily to commission more research, but find ways to better marshal and share what is already available. Any such effort should seek to reach across the different communities of interest including practitioners, civil society and academia, enabling the timely sharing of new and emerging research insights. This would probably require the convening of regular meetings for this purpose.

## KEY INSIGHTS

- How people engage with and spread disinformation is strongly influenced by identity, ideology, and belonging.
- Disinformation circulates both online and offline, so responses must go beyond digital spaces.
- Skills, research, and resources need to be easier to find, share, and build upon.

This roundtable was one of three held as part of the NABS+ Community Event, designed to surface key challenges, priorities, and research needs across national security and defence. Insights from these discussions directly shaped the focus of the newly launched NABS+ Commissioning Call.

For more details on the call topics and how to apply, visit: https://crestresearch.ac.uk/nabs/commissioning

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