

# Report | Information Manipulation and Harassment of Local Leaders: Impacts and Implications

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The issue of targeted disinformation and harassment of local elected representatives is a local manifestation of broader societal trends. Harassment is enabled by new technologies and capabilities to manipulate information. This includes social media platforms as carriers and amplifiers, and increased capacities to create deepfake imagery, audio and films as well as the development of bots and AI-generated content that significantly increase the volume and breadth of harassment that can occur.

Local officials frequently manage hostilities alone, reporting experiences of isolation as they seek to avoid hostile situations. They also respond largely through self-censoring, including restricting social media presence, restricting physical attendance at public events for work and in private, and withdrawing from discussions of divisive topics. There are increasing challenges from communities and organised campaigns to undermine the legitimacy and authority of councils, from those who reject the legitimacy of the state to those who use confrontational tactics to slow or undermine council processes. Within this, public servants and elected representatives face personal threats and abuse, especially when engaging with highly polarised areas including migration, gender and climate action.

Women, LGBTIQ+ and racialised groups are most frequently targeted. In addition to the higher prevalence, the nature of harassment and threats differs, with these groups experiencing xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic, racist and misogynistic slurs and disinformation, as well as higher rates of threats towards their families. As targeted individuals withdraw, this limits critical diversity in democratic debate, constrains public engagement, discouraging people from running for election, undermining effective local services, and amplifying specific anti-government agendas.

Targeted disinformation and harassment do not occur in a vacuum, and the rise in these hostile acts is accompanied, enabled, and exacerbated by social, political, and technological conditions. The potential impacts on representative democracy are significant, as self-censoring behaviours and incivility in public discourse coincide to create conditions that stifle democratic debate and effective policymaking. Current regulatory protections are inadequate and not sufficiently accessible to meet the immediate needs of targeted individuals and their organisations. To enhance this, a holistic response model is recommended to respond to the specific behaviours, and their social, political and technological drivers.

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