

# Understanding viral disinformation in food and agriculture

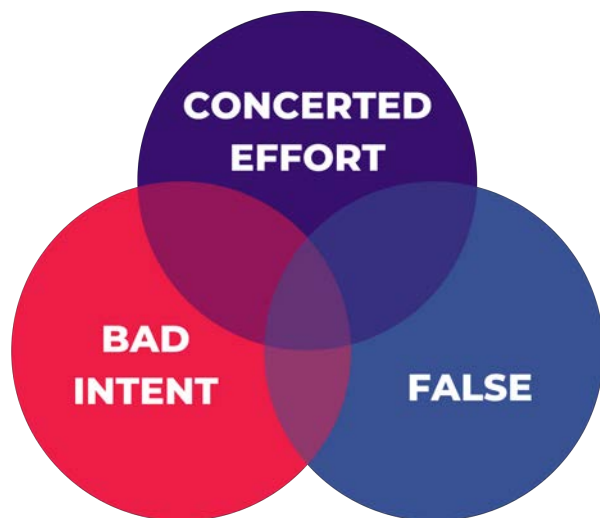
Jane Richter, Communication Manager, Berries Australia

AgriFutures Australia recently hosted a webinar led by Sarah Nolet from consultancy firm Tenacious Ventures, to provide a better understanding of a new challenge facing food and agriculture industries, viral disinformation, and to share recommendations on how industry can respond to this emerging threat.

## What is disinformation?

Where *misinformation* refers to inaccuracies that are mistakes, *disinformation* is a deliberate falsehood spread in a concerted effort with bad intent.

In short, telling lies with the intent to harm in a structured and strategic way.



## Who spreads disinformation & why?

Government, individuals and organisations all carry out disinformation campaigns for a variety of reasons. Such is the way of our world today, there are even 'professional' organisations that offer a service for paying clients where they will create and enact a disinformation campaign.

The two main motivations are:

- Political & ideological: to promote a cause or viewpoint, or attack an opponent's position
- Financial & economic: new revenue opportunities or market disruption

Ultimately the purpose is to persuade a target group of individuals to listen to and adopt a set of opinions that supports the objectives of those responsible for the disinformation who we refer to as "threat actors".

## How are disinformation campaigns waged?

The important point to understand is that campaigns are iterative, which means there is a continuous feedback loop which shapes the campaign as it unfolds. There are typically a series of steps which threat actors follow which starts with a period of 'social listening' to understand the information sources of the target audience and who they are currently influenced by.

They will then design and build the infrastructure to be used to disseminate the campaign. This is typically digital and could include social media profiles for 'spokespeople' that are real or imaginary, for example, that will be used to amplify the messaging from the campaign.

The third step is to create the campaign content which may include both genuine and misleading content with the more benign content designed to provide a credible surrounding and disguise for the disinformation material.

The deployment phase is the active step where messaging is spread and amplified. The goal here is to reach the widest possible audience and can include encouraging cross-posting, sharing in multiple languages and engaging paid influencers to leverage reach to more people.

At this point the active feedback loop kicks in and the threat actors monitor, patrol and control the responses to the disinformation, re-shaping the messaging to guide discussion in the direction that is wanted. This might be achieved by infiltrating existing conversations or using third parties to steer the debate.

The final stage is the 'actualisation' and is the end result that has been sought by the campaign, which could be for individuals to vote in a certain way or attend a protest, for example.

Throughout the campaign, the threat actors are continually monitoring, evaluating and tweaking the campaign tactics to achieve the intended outcome.

## Why would threat actors target food and agriculture?

- Food is linked to health and wellbeing and so is a deeply personal and emotional topic, meaning people are likely to hold strong views
- Trade in food and agriculture is essential and as such can get caught in the political crosshairs
- Advancements in agriculture are dependent on innovation and technologies that can be unfamiliar, complex and often misunderstood by the general public

All of these factors make this area fertile ground for threat actors to cause confusion and fear.

## What are the risk factors for disinformation attacks?

### Uncertainty & Confusion

Any issue with a high degree of unfamiliarity or fragmented messaging. An example would be an emerging crisis.

### Subjectivity

Issues that are not entirely fact based and are open to interpretation. Production practices where opinions may differ over the 'best' way to achieve a certain outcome.

### Emotiveness

Issues that arouse strong emotional reactions. The live animal export trade is one such area in agriculture.

### Controversy & Conflict

Issues that are associated with historical conflict or controversy. An Australian example may be water usage in the Murray Darling basin.

## Why would threat actors target agricultural producers as an audience?

Producers are an identifiable community with common interests and often underlying belief systems and values that can be targeted.

They are also a strong political force and could be targeted in attempts to influence election or policy outcomes.

Ultimately, we are reliant on farmers for our food production and so this group is at the heart of food security and could be targeted to cause widespread disruption.

## What can be done about disinformation campaigns?

Essentially there are two main approaches that can be used: **prevention or response.**

### Prevention

Prevention strategies for industry organisations should focus on three areas:

1. Increasing the acceptance of reliable information through increasing trust in the traditional media and strengthening engagement with audiences
2. Decreasing the acceptance of false information by pre-emptively addressing high risk topics and improving audiences' ability to recognise and reject false information
3. Stopping the spread of false information by acting quickly to stop viral activity, inhibiting the capabilities of threat actors and improving your response readiness

*As an individual producer, there are a number of actions that you can take:*

1. Establish a presence for your business on social media platforms and share authentic and transparent stories of farm life to educate, inform and even entertain audiences to build trust
2. Engage directly with your industry body to ensure that messaging is consistent and unified
3. Ensure that you critically evaluate and validate information you receive before sharing or engaging with it
4. Be mindful of the information that you share online

### Response

There are four main strategies that can be deployed in response to a disinformation campaign:

1. Raising the alarm by notifying other interested parties about the disinformation campaign
2. Assessing the scale and severity of the disinformation campaign and identifying how to neutralise it
3. Directly address the disinformation claims, including educating unwitting actors who may spread misinformation
4. Counteracting the threat actor and their tools and tactics by taking measures to stop the campaign going viral

*As an individual producer you can also respond in these ways:*

1. Notify others – including your industry association – if you see something that you suspect is a campaign of disinformation
2. Where relevant, acknowledge and debunk the disinformation through your own channels
3. Always fact check information and sources before sharing further
4. Don't be afraid to report suspicious posts and activity to the social media platforms for further investigation

Berries Australia conducts an ongoing campaign of 'social listening' for issues in the Australian berry industries using a digital monitoring tool. We are always keen to hear from growers or industry stakeholders about any concerns that you may have and urge you to contact us directly:  
**rachelmackenzie@berries.net.au or 1300 201 713**

**You can watch the full Webinar recording at** [www.youtu.be/GCstfWBnSds](http://www.youtu.be/GCstfWBnSds)

**You can download the *Future Forces – A ten-year horizon for Australian agriculture* report at** [www.agrifutures.com.au/product/future-forces-a-ten-year-horizon-for-australian-agriculture](http://www.agrifutures.com.au/product/future-forces-a-ten-year-horizon-for-australian-agriculture)

### Acknowledgements

AgriFutures Australia – previously known as the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) - is one of 15 Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) that service the Research, Development and Extension (RD&E) needs of Australian rural industries. They represent the research needs for 13 rural industries (chicken meat, rice, honey bee and pollination, ginger, tea tree oil, pasture seeds, export fodder, thoroughbred horses, kangaroo, buffalo, deer, goat fibre and ratite), delivering research and innovation that aims to give farmers and producers real returns, as well as prepare them to thrive into the future.