Countering misinformation about refugees and migrants

An evidence-based framework

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UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

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Executive summary

Misinformation is a growing threat to social cohesion and democracy. In recent years, refugees and migrants have been unfairly targeted, undermining Australia's multicultural foundations. Bad-faith actors have, without evidence, used refugees and migrants as scapegoats, framing them as threats to community interests. This pattern reflects a broader global trend. As digital platforms have made misinformation harder to contain, xenophobic rhetoric has gained traction.

The harshest consequences fall on refugees and migrants, who face discrimination and punitive policies. However, the harm extends to society as a whole. When people base their shared understanding and public discussions on false information, it weakens our democracy. It's vital to tackle this growing challenge.

About this report

This report aims to help you understand how misinformation works and what to do about it. Drawing on behavioural science and evidence-based strategies, it sets out an easy-to-follow framework for countering misinformation. While the focus is on addressing misinformation in the Australian debate about refugees and migration, the framework can be adapted for use in other countries and across a variety of issues.

This is not a messaging 'playbook' that prescribes specific wording for every falsehood that may arise. Instead, it provides a structured framework with key principles and a step-by-step approach to help you engage with misinformation effectively. This framework is designed to equip you to respond across a range of situations—including unforeseen falsehoods that may emerge in the future. It also lays the groundwork for you to develop more tailored messaging and campaigns, aligned with your expertise, scope and voice.

Complementing the framework, the report includes **how-to guides** that offer practical examples demonstrating how it can be applied to both existing and anticipated misinformation narratives.

The behavioural science of misinformation

Behavioural science investigates how people process information, form beliefs and respond to media, shaping their attitudes and behaviours. Its insights reveal how misinformation takes hold—fueling false beliefs, poor decisions and broader societal harm. Understanding these dynamics is the first step you can take to counter misinformation effectively.

Six key behavioural principles drive the spread and impact of misinformation:

- **Hot states** – Fear, anger and anxiety make people more reactive and less critical of misleading claims.
- **Messenger effect** – The credibility of the source influences whether misinformation is accepted or rejected.
- **Mere-exposure effect** – Repeated exposure to a falsehood increases our belief in it.
- **Confirmation bias** – People seek and believe information that aligns with their pre-existing values.
- **Cognitive load** – When people are overwhelmed by information, they rely on mental shortcuts, making them more susceptible to falsehoods.
- **Continued influence effect** – Once misinformation harm is embedded, it persists even after the false claim is debunked.

An evidence-based framework for countering misinformation

Building on these six principles and an extensive review of the research, we developed an evidence-based framework to help you counter misinformation about refugees and migrants. The framework provides a step-by-step guide to help you decide what actions to take when you're faced with falsehoods. Its insights may also be useful when designing broader campaigns.

Figure 1: Decision tree for countering misinformation
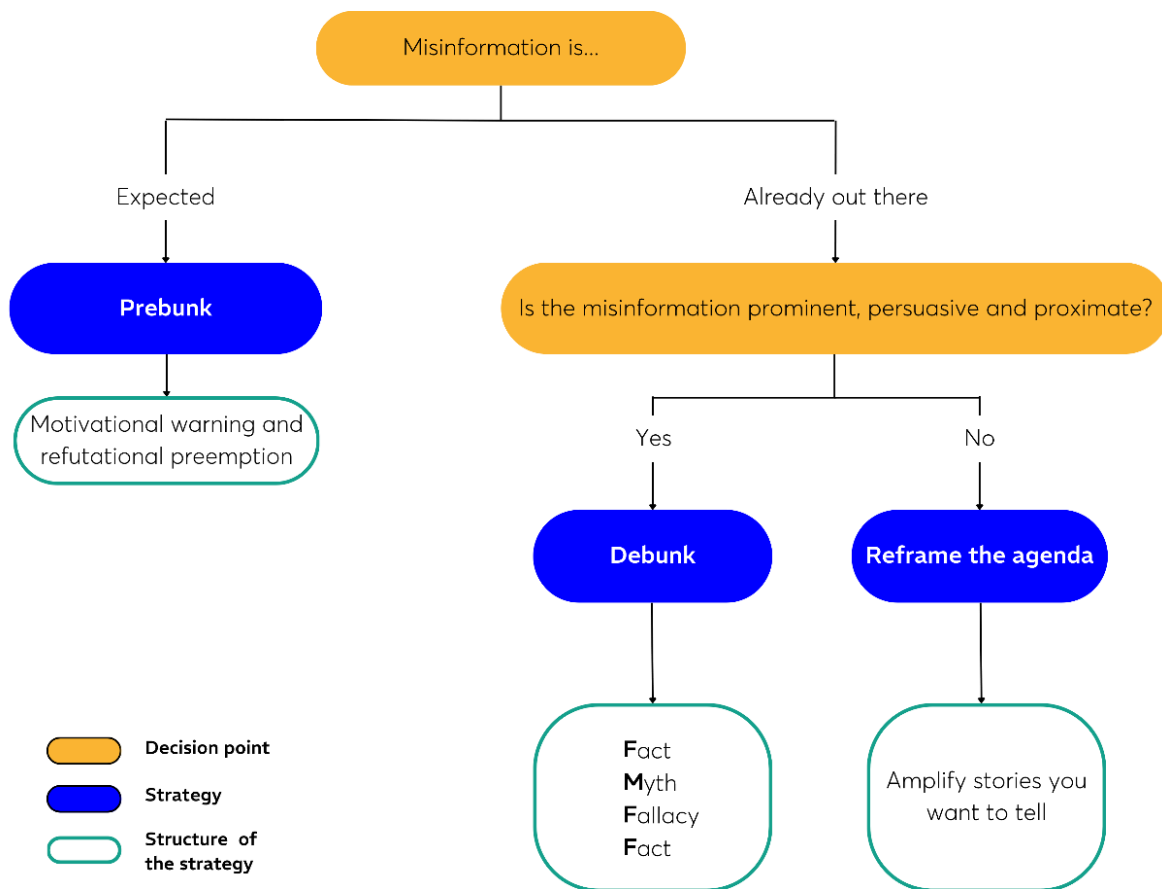
First, determine whether the misinformation is expected or already out there.

If you know that false information is likely to spread but hasn't yet, prebunk. This technique helps people recognise and resist misinformation before it takes hold. Similar to inoculation of infectious diseases in medicine, prebunking exposes individuals to small doses of misinformation in order to build up their resistance to future exposures. Effective prebunking includes two key parts:

1. **Motivational warning** – Alerts people to bad-faith actors, encouraging scepticism and critical thinking.
2. **Pre-emptive refutation** – Explains why misinformation is false, helping people to recognise and resist similar falsehoods.

When misinformation is already circulating, you should assess the 3Ps:

If misinformation is *not* Prominent, Persuasive and Proximate, [reframe the agenda](#). Instead of amplifying falsehoods, shift your resources to sharing stories that reinforce accurate information and resonate with your audience's values.

If misinformation is Prominent, Persuasive and Proximate, [debunk](#). Use the **FMFF method** (Fact, Myth, Fallacy, Fact) to make corrections clear, credible and effective by stating the truth, presenting the myth, explaining its flaws, and reinforcing the correct fact.

Behaviourally informed engagement strategies

Misinformation interventions are only successful if people engage with them. To maximise reach and impact, we offer seven behaviourally informed strategies to drive wider engagement:

1. **Achieve volume through consistency, repetition and coordination**
2. **Use targeted channels**
3. **Use familiar, relatable messengers**
4. **Leverage social norms**
5. **Appeal to your audience's values and emotions**
6. **Use humour to attract attention**
7. **Act quickly**

Glossary

Misinformation: False or misleading information that is shared, regardless of whether the person sharing it knows it's untrue.

Disinformation: False or misleading information that is deliberately created and spread to deceive people.

Migrant: A person who chooses to move to another country, usually for work, education or family reasons.

Refugee: A person who has been forced to flee their home to find safety in another country. Refugees are protected under international law, where the term has a more specific meaning. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their home country owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

Prebunking: Proactively exposing people to misleading tactics or false information to help them recognise and resist anticipated misinformation.

Debunking: Reactively correcting false or misleading claims by providing clear evidence and exposing flaws in reasoning.

1. Setting the scene

Misinformation about refugees (who are forced to flee to find safety) and migrants (who move by choice) is on the rise in Australia and globally.[1] It both fuels and is driven by the increasing politicisation and polarisation of public debate on these issues. This erosion of truth is undermining social cohesion, harming refugees and migrants, and weakening democratic processes. In this section of the report, we outline the ways misinformation about migration and refugees is shaping public debate in Australia and globally, and the consequences of this distortion.

This report focuses on refugees and migrants together, as they are often conflated in the public discourse. However, when counteracting misinformation it's important to be aware of the distinction between refugees and migrants (see **Glossary**) and the diversity of their lived experiences. This report uses the word misinformation to refer to false information, whether it's disseminated inadvertently or with the intention to mislead (commonly referred to as disinformation).

It hasn't always been this way

We know that welcoming refugees and migrants can be done in a compassionate, sustainable and manageable way—because we have done it before. In the decades following the Second World War, Australia, like many other nations, welcomed large numbers of refugees and migrants.[2] Political leaders across the spectrum recognised that the contributions of the new arrivals would make their countries stronger. A range of schemes enabling refugees and migrants to settle in Australia not only upheld humanitarian values but also helped make Australia what it is today, delivering significant social and economic benefits for everyone.[3]

This was not only a source of prosperity but also a point of national pride. In the years following the end of the discriminatory White Australia policy, migration helped transform Australia into a vibrant, cosmopolitan hub of culture, cuisine and commerce.[4] The economic benefits of migration have been widely documented by organisations such as McKinsey[5] and the International Monetary Fund,[6] as well as leading economists.[7] The economic and social contributions of migrants are also recognised by a significant majority of the Australian public.[8]

Scapegoating refugees and migrants for political gain

Refugees and migrants have long been subjected to racism, which has been entrenched in Australia's systems, institutions and public discourse since colonisation.[2] Exploiting xenophobia for political advantage is an age-old strategy that prioritises fear over facts and blames newcomers for social challenges.

Misinformation is particularly pervasive ahead of elections, when political campaigns often exaggerate or distort the impacts of migration. This is nothing new—Australia's 2001 'children overboard' affair, in which a government trailing in the polls spread false allegations about refugees, is a stark example of how misinformation can be wielded for electoral gain.[10]

Australian politicians have continued to employ these tactics. Migration has been falsely blamed for everything from housing shortages to inflation. Rather than addressing challenges with real solutions, these strategies sow division, scapegoat migrants and ignore the immense positive contributions they bring to society.[11]

Misinformation about refugees and migrants is a global problem

This is not only an Australian issue. We are currently witnessing a dangerous global trend in which refugees and migrants are increasingly exploited for political gain. A stark example came during the 2024 U.S. presidential debate when Donald Trump falsely claimed that migrants in Ohio were 'eating the pets'. Though entirely untrue,[12] this baseless claim spread rapidly across social media in posts, memes and remixes. Such misinformation fuels fear and embeds hostility toward newcomers far beyond the United States.

In Europe, after the 2015-2016 displacement of people from Syria's civil war, a study of almost 7.5 million tweets identified a surge in far-right activity.[13] Refugees were increasingly framed in xenophobic terms, portrayed as threats to Europe's security, economy and culture. The study also found that the refugee influx was deliberately politicised, with certain hashtags strategically weaponised to amplify divisive narratives and mobilise political groups.

Digital platforms are amplifying misinformation

Misinformation spreads quickly on digital platforms that enable fast, furious and free-flowing discussion. Social media sites allow rumours, unverified information and conspiracy claims to be instantly liked and shared. AI-generated misinformation, including highly convincing deepfake images and videos, is adding fuel to the fire.[14] In these environments, political leaders can be reluctant to challenge falsehoods that serve their interests. Instead, they often double down, engaging in 'disinformation laundering'—citing dubious sources that lack credibility or evidence. An example is Trump's handling of the false claim that migrants were 'eating pets'. Rather than disavowing the rumour once proven wrong, he repeatedly referenced it as something he had merely 'heard' or seen 'reported', enabling the misinformation to persist and gain further traction.

Digital platforms also amplified misinformation during Australia's 2023 referendum on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament. Despite the 'Yes' vote having more than 60% public support in 2022, the proposal was ultimately defeated after facing a well-funded, highly coordinated and often misleading 'No' campaign. Opponents used inaccurate claims, vague language, innuendo and rumour to sow doubt and confusion.[15] The specific details of the Voice were drowned in a fog of exaggerated and unrelated fears, reflected in the campaign's use of emotive keywords like 'Marxist', 'globalist' and 'Trojan' on social-media platform X.[16] The playbook of misinformation and manufactured fear was effective and the Voice was rejected.

Misinformation harms us all

While misinformation about refugees and migrants puts us all at risk, the worst consequences impact refugees and migrants themselves. Harms include discrimination, social exclusion and a hostile policy environment. Some misinformation specifically targets established migrant communities,[17] sowing division among those most affected to erode their support for policies that offer protection.

In the longer term, misinformation also damages wider societal values. When misinformation spreads, it undermines informed decision-making and impairs our collective choices. Campaigns driven by misinformation lead to flawed laws, poor policymaking and a weakening of democratic institutions. Public trust and social cohesion, the foundations of our peace and prosperity, may begin to collapse under the weight of misinformation.

The need for an evidence-based approach

Now more than ever, debates about refugees and migration need to be informed by facts not fear. Building on a growing body of research on the most effective ways to combat misinformation, this report sets out an evidence-based framework. Informed by behavioural science, it equips you with strategies to counter misinformation about refugees and migration. In doing so, it builds on existing toolkits,[18] playbooks[19] and campaigns[20] that specifically apply to Australian debates about refugees and migration. It also complements recent anti-racism initiatives including the Australian Human Rights Commission's recent National Anti-Racism Framework.[21] While presented here in the context of refugee and migration issues in Australia, the framework set out in this report can be applied in a range of contexts.

2. The behavioural science of misinformation

Behavioural science provides valuable insights into how humans process information and respond to media, shaping their attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. These insights help explain how misinformation harms individuals by shaping false beliefs and poor decision-making. Below are six key principles from the behavioural science literature that influence the consumption and spread of misinformation. These principles informed the development of the evidence-based framework to counter misinformation set out in **Section 3 of this report**.

Hot states

Description: Hot-state decision-making occurs when emotion or heightened arousal influences our judgement and behaviour.[22] In such states, we are more likely to deviate from rational decision-making and act on immediate desires or impulses.

Relevance to misinformation: False content is often created with the intent to trigger strong emotional reactions such as outrage.[23] In such heightened emotional states people tend to impulsively accept[24] and share[25] misinformation without fully reading or verifying it.

Messenger effect

Description: We give different weight to information depending on who is communicating it.[26] We are generally more receptive to messages from individuals who share our demographic or cultural background,[27] who we perceive as credible[28] or expert,[29] or whose values or ideology align with our own.[30]

Relevance to misinformation: People can rely on messengers as shortcuts to assess message validity, trusting posts from friends or family even when they contradict expert consensus.[31] Similarly, trust in communication channels is influenced by perceived credibility, with individuals favouring content from independent or mainstream media depending on their pre-existing attitudes toward those sources.[32]

Mere-exposure effect

Description: Repeated exposure to information increases its perceived familiarity and, in turn, its favourability.[33] More than 400 published studies have explored this effect, showing its influence on voting behaviour, advertising, musical preferences and attitudes towards people.[34]

Relevance to misinformation: When misinformation is viewed multiple times it appears more credible[35] and accurate[36], and we are more willing to share it.[37] This is particularly relevant in the age of social media, where false content tends to be amplified through repeated sharing, personalisation and algorithmic reinforcement.[38]

Confirmation bias

Description: We tend to seek out or evaluate information in a way that fits with our existing values, beliefs and preconceptions.[39] This can lead to selectively focusing on content that supports our views, dismissing conflicting evidence and interpreting ambiguous information in a biased way.

Relevance to misinformation: People are more likely to accept falsehoods that align with their values and beliefs, and reject accurate information that challenges them.[40] This explains why corrections often fail—once false information becomes ingrained, individuals tend to dismiss or ignore contradictory evidence.[41] Confirmation bias can be self-reinforcing, driving individuals to seek information that aligns with their beliefs and values, strengthening group consensus and creating echo chambers. Confirmation bias can be deliberately exploited to amplify misinformation. Research shows that misinformation framed to resonate with people's core values spreads more easily, further entrenching false narratives.[42]

Cognitive load

Description: Our capacity to perform mental work is a limited resource.[43] When we have too much on our mind or are distracted, we're more likely to take shortcuts and miss important details.

Relevance to misinformation: In the digital age, endless access to information can be overwhelming. Under such conditions we are less likely to critically evaluate information, increasing our susceptibility to accept and share false content.[44] Social media users in particular are exposed to high volumes of competing information. This creates the perfect environment for misinformation to go viral.[45]

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Continued influence effect

Description: False information can continue influencing people's thinking and decision-making even after it has been corrected or debunked.[46]

Relevance to misinformation: Even when corrections lead people to update their factual beliefs, misinformation often leaves a lasting impact on emotions, judgements and decision-making.[47] This lingering effect helps explain why corrections frequently fail to change political support or voting intentions for candidates linked to the spread of misinformation.[48]

3. A framework for countering misinformation

This framework is an evidence-based, practical guide for countering misinformation. It draws on academic research investigating the effectiveness of interventions to counter the harms of misinformation, as well as on the behavioural science principles **described in Section 2 of this report**. While the focus of this report is on refugees and migrants, the framework can also be applied to misinformation in other contexts.

The framework takes you step-by-step through deciding what actions to take when you confront or expect misinformation – and what strategies are most effective in each circumstance. Also, the evidence underpinning the framework can inform your broader communications campaigns.

With clear instructions on when and how to act, the framework is easy to apply, adapt and implement against misinformation. It's not intended to be a rigid rulebook. Think of it as advice that you can tailor to your voice, needs, resources and objectives.

How to decide what action to take

Use the decision tree on the following page, which is adapted from the *Debunking Handbook (2020)*,[49] to determine how best to respond to or prepare for misinformation. Each decision point in the tree leads to strategies that will help you target your resources effectively. Below we break down each step of the decision tree, explaining the strategies to employ in each circumstance.

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Figure 2: Decision tree for countering misinformation and engagement strategies

Decision point · Strategy · Structure of the strategy

Misinformation is...

Expected → **Prebunk** → Motivational warning and refutational pre-emption

Already out there → **Is the misinformation prominent, persuasive and proximate?**

Yes → **Debunk** → **F**act **M**yth **F**allacy **F**act

No → **Reframe the agenda** → Amplify stories you want to tell
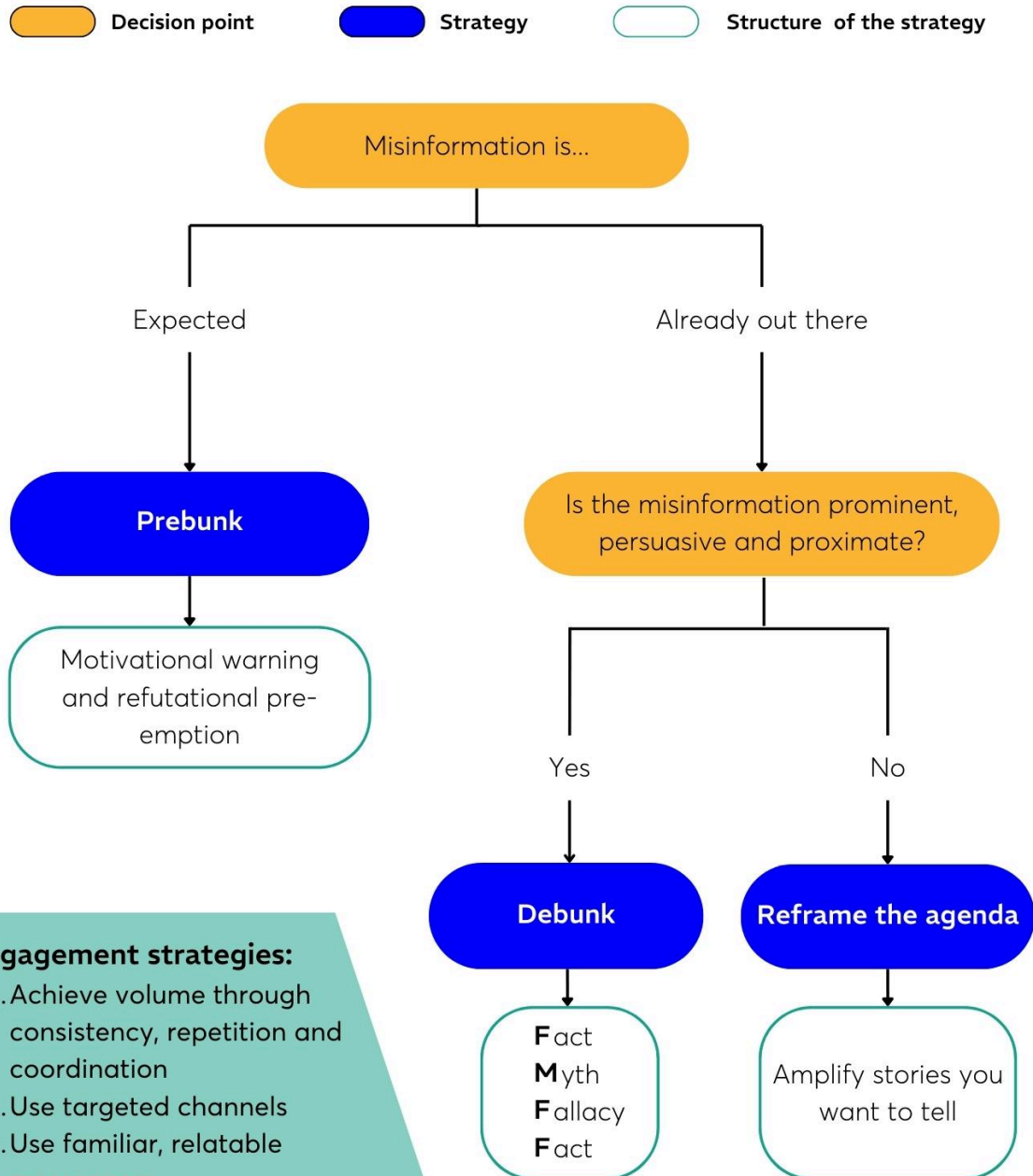
Engagement strategies:
1. Achieve volume through consistency, repetition and coordination
2. Use targeted channels
3. Use familiar, relatable messengers
4. Leverage social norms
5. Appeal to your audience's values and emotions
6. Use humour to attract attention
7. Act quickly

Is the misinformation expected, or already out there?

The first step to countering misinformation is deciding whether the false content is something you expect to appear, or something already circulating. This distinction determines whether you will take a proactive or reactive approach.[50]

If misinformation is anticipated, you can take steps to address it before it gains traction using a strategy called prebunking. Prebunking is a proactive measure that is effective at reducing the harms of misinformation before it spreads and takes hold.[51] If misinformation is allowed to spread unchecked, it can be challenging to reverse the harms of initial exposure (see 'Continued Influence Effect' in **Section 2 of this report**).[52] The next pages will set out strategies for how to effectively prebunk expected misinformation. However, accurately predicting misinformation before it emerges is not always practical or possible.[53]

When misinformation has already started circulating, you will need to decide how to most strategically address the falsehoods and limit their impact (see **section on the 3Ps criteria below**). This may be through debunking, or reframing the agenda.

Being clear about whether misinformation is expected or existing ensures your actions will be targeted and effective.

When misinformation is anticipated, prebunk

Prebunking is a proactive strategy to build resilience against misinformation before it takes hold.[54] Analogous to inoculation of infectious diseases in medicine, prebunking exposes people to small doses of misinformation to strengthen their resistance against more harmful falsehoods. This small 'dose' should be sufficient to promote recognition of and immunity to similar falsehoods in the future, but not so much that harm is experienced.[55] Research has shown that prebunking is one of the most effective ways of countering misinformation.[56]

Prebunking includes a motivational warning and a pre-emptive refutation

The structure of a prebunking message includes two key components:

1. A motivational warning: Alerts your audience to the existence of agendas or motivations of bad-faith actors who aim to mislead. This warning encourages a

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mindset of scepticism, where people are more likely to critically evaluate claims, question sources and resist being swayed by deceptive messaging.

2. A pre-emptive refutation: Explains how specific misinformation is false or misleading, providing your audience with tools to recognise and dismiss similar false content in the future. Pre-emptive refutations can take either or both of the following approaches:[57]

a. **Technique-based**: Highlights the persuasive tactics that misinformation spreaders use, such as emotional manipulation or selective framing.[58] A key advantage of this approach is its scalability. Teaching people to recognise manipulation techniques promotes critical thinking that can then be applied more broadly.[59] For example, someone who recognises misleading arguments in climate science is likely to also spot false refugee or migration narratives that use similar tactics or reasoning.[60]

b. **Issue-based**: Provides audiences with a deeper understanding of a specific issue, making them more resistant to false claims in that field.[61] This approach is effective because it proactively informs people about issues where they are likely to encounter misinformation. When delivering issue-based messages, it can be especially effective to connect with widely shared values, such as family, freedom, fairness, or the principle of treating others as one would want to be treated.[62] However, educating audiences about complex or polarising topics can be challenging,[63] and issue-based refutations are less likely to generalise to spotting misinformation on different topics.

In the short term, issue-based refutations tend to be more effective than technique-based refutations.[64] However, both forms can be combined in the same prebunking intervention. You can find a worked example of a prebunking message in **Section 5 of this report**.

Prebunking can be passive or active

Most prebunking messages tend to be *passively* communicated, where the audience receives pre-prepared information (see worked example in **Section 5**).[65] However, research shows that inoculation can be even more effective when audiences actively participate in identifying and refuting misinformation, in a process known as *active inoculation*.[66] For instance, online misinformation games like **Bad News** and **Go Viral!** challenge participants to spot or create false narratives on various topics. Consider using similar gamification techniques to further enhance the impact of your messaging.

Case study: The power of audience participation

In 2022, UN Women Australia partnered with TikTok creator **@tiktok10quiz**, who is known for their fast-paced quiz videos that challenge audiences on general knowledge. In this partnership, @tiktok10quiz created a video in their usual style, where viewers were asked to guess what happened first or what is likely to happen first between two options.

The first seven questions focused on various historical or hypothetical scenarios, such as: '*Which came first: music videos or TV advertisements?*' and '*Based on current scientific estimates, which is more likely to happen first: robot-run farms or a space hotel?*' For the final question, the creator asked: '*What will happen first: humans living on the moon or global gender equality?*' The answer? '*Humans living on the moon—because, on current trends, global gender equality is due in 2154. That's 132 years away.*' The video ended with a call to action: '*Let's change that—ACT NOW at unwomen.org.au.*'

The video was highly successful, achieving over 250,000 likes and more than 4.7 million views. This case study demonstrates how incorporating active audience participation can drive impact.
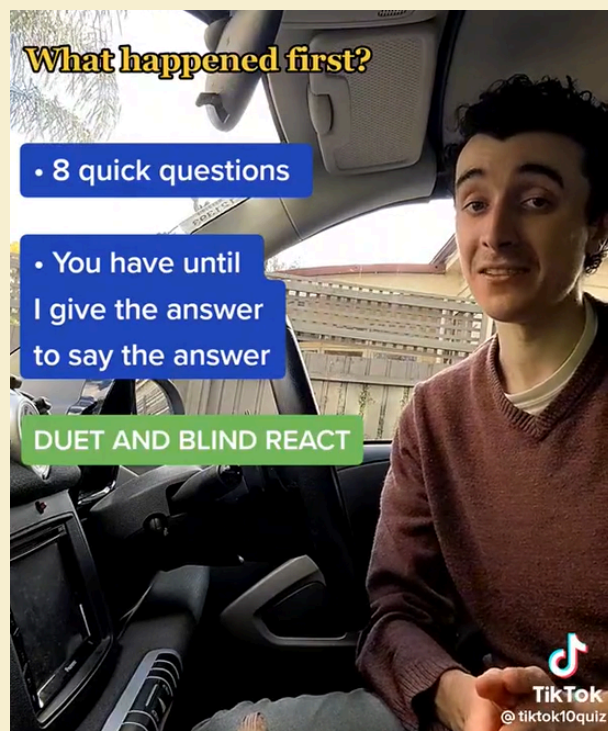
Counter misinformation by strengthening media literacy

Prebunking can be further strengthened by investing in media literacy as a long-term foundation.[67] Media literacy programs, such as **Newshounds**, educate the public to think critically when engaging with media. This involves adopting a more sceptical mindset, verifying information across multiple sources and recognising markers of bias.[68] While achieving widespread media literacy is beyond the capacity of any single organisation, it's a shared responsibility that policymakers, educators, advocates and the public can collectively pursue.

When misinformation is circulating, first assess the 3Ps

Not all misinformation is worth your time and resources. The sheer volume of falsehoods in circulation makes it impractical to address every claim.[69] In today's crowded attention economy, responding to every piece of misinformation could prove counterproductive.

To decide which misinformation to address, use the 3Ps criteria.[70] Is the misinformation:

- **Prominent:** Is it gaining traction or visibility?
- **Persuasive:** Does it have the potential to change beliefs or behaviour?
- **Proximate:** Is it relevant to your audience or cause?

When misinformation is *not* prominent, persuasive and proximate, reframe the agenda

Sometimes, the best response to misinformation is not to engage with it at all. Responding to specific misinformation can sometimes amplify it (see the 'Mere-exposure effect' **in Section 2 of this report**) and risks allowing bad-faith actors to set the agenda.[71] However, recent research has shown that these back-firing effects are rarer than previously believed.[72]

When a piece of misinformation isn't a priority (ie, it isn't prominent, persuasive and proximate), reframe the agenda by instead amplifying the stories you want to tell. Focus on crafting compelling, clear and values-driven messages that align with your goals and resonate with your audience.[73] This approach draws your narrative to centre stage and prevents bad-faith actors from dictating the conversation.

Prominent, persuasive and proximate misinformation should be debunked

Debunking is one of the most widely used strategies to counter misinformation.[74] It involves correcting false information after it has begun to circulate. While it's a reactive approach, debunking can be highly effective if the message is designed following evidence-based strategies.[75]

Research supports the effectiveness of debunking interventions that follow a specific structure: the fact, myth, fallacy, fact (FMFF) method.[76] FMFF messages have four components:

1. **Fact**: Start with a clear, simple and concrete statement of what is accurate. Avoid ambiguous corrections like, 'This is not true.' Instead, provide an explanation that fits the context and is easy to understand.
2. **Myth**: Flag the misinformation, but carefully, in a diluted form. Clearly identify the claim you are addressing, but mention it only once to avoid reinforcing it through repetition (see 'Mere-exposure effect' in **Section 2 of this report**).
3. **Fallacy**: Explain why the misinformation is misleading by citing one or both of the following:
   - **Empirical claims**: Give evidence that refutes the misinformation.
   - **Fallacies**: Call out manipulation techniques being used, such as logical errors or cherry-picking data. The **FLICC taxonomy** below can help you to identify the fallacies at play.
4. **Fact**: Conclude by reiterating the accurate information. Ensure that the truth is the last thing your audience receives, as we tend to remember and prioritise information at the end of a message.[77]

Choosing the fact that fits best

Using the FMFF method, facts come first and last. While debunking is about correcting misinformation, it's important to recognise that we are often more persuaded by emotions, values and stories than by facts and statistics.[78] This understanding can inform your FMFF intervention. When choosing among facts that would usefully counter a specific piece of misinformation, consider which will be most compelling to your audience and align with their core values.[79] The 'Engagement strategies' in **Section 4 of this report** can support you to craft the most

compelling response for your target audience, whether in debunking, prebunking or reframing the agenda.

Detecting the logical fallacies

Between restating the facts, state the myth briefly and call out why it's wrong. To identify which fallacy is at play, use a taxonomy known as FLICC.[80] The FLICC taxonomy (see **Appendix A**) includes many manipulation techniques common in misinformation, organised under the following five core techniques:

- **Fake experts**: Relying on individuals who lack the necessary expertise but claim credibility.
- **Logical fallacies**: Errors in reasoning that lead to flawed conclusions.
- **Impossible expectations**: Setting unrealistic standards for evidence.
- **Conspiracy theories**: Suggesting secret plots without credible evidence, often to dismiss established facts.
- **Cherry-picking**: Selectively presenting information that supports a biased viewpoint while ignoring other relevant information.

You can also use AI tools to help identify fallacies in circulating misinformation.[81]

4. Engagement strategies

Misinformation interventions are only effective if people actively engage with them. However, those most vulnerable to misinformation are often the least likely to do so.

To help you bridge this gap, consider using these seven evidence-based, behaviourally informed engagement strategies to enhance the effectiveness of your misinformation interventions. These strategies can be used alongside all strategies in the framework for countering misinformation in **Section 3 of this report** – whether you are reframing the agenda, prebunking or debunking. The framework focuses on when to respond and how to structure your intervention effectively. The engagement strategies below support you to create and communicate interventions that are compelling, accessible and impactful.

1. Achieve volume through consistency, repetition and coordination

Successful communications campaigns rely on consistent, repeated messaging delivered at high volume.[82] Repetition increases the chances of people encountering the message and builds credibility through the mere-exposure effect—where familiarity enhances trust.[83] To maximise impact, simplify core messages into emotionally resonant phrases and repeat them across multiple channels. For best results, campaigns should be coordinated between an ecosystem of allied actors.[84]

2. Use targeted channels

Decide who you want to reach and communicate to them via the channels they already use. Investigate where your audience spends their time and gathers information. This might include large or small media outlets; social-media platforms; online forums; blogs; podcasts; community centres; or industry events. Choose the channels that align with your audience's habits and preferences to ensure your message not only reaches them but also resonates with them. For instance, one study found that TikTok videos can be effective for addressing and debunking video-based misinformation,[85] highlighting its potential as a channel for engaging younger audiences who consume large amounts of video content.

3. Use familiar, relatable messengers

Who delivers a message is just as important as what is being said. Choosing the right messenger is essential for credibility and influence. An effective messenger should be known, trusted or relatable to your target audience (see 'Messenger effect' in **Section 2 of this report**). For example, if your target audience is non-university-educated men, someone with experience in their industry may be a more effective messenger than an academic expert or government official. It's important to allow a messenger to communicate in their own style. If a message is too off-topic, or different from their usual style or content, this can introduce scepticism and mistrust.

4. Leverage social norms

People don't act in isolation. We often look to others to guide what we think, believe or do. You can leverage this tendency by incorporating social norms into your messaging or intervention (for example, 'three-quarters of young adults say that immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Australia'[86]). This can boost the effectiveness of prebunking and debunking strategies.[87] For the best results, social-norms messaging should be evidence-based, credible and delivered by relatable messengers.[88]

5. Appeal to your audience's values and emotions

People are more likely to trust and engage with information that aligns with their values and worldview.[89] Rather than relying solely on facts, frame messages around your audience's identity, concerns and aspirations.[90] Because different people prioritise different values, tailoring messages to appeal to the distinct values of your target audience increases impact.[91] A powerful strategy is to frame arguments in a way that resonates with core supporters while also appealing to sceptical audiences.[92] For example, messages based on the race-class narrative framework lead with shared values, expose divisive political tactics and present a unifying vision.[93]

People are more likely to engage with information that evokes an emotional response. To maximise impact, use messaging and imagery that resonates emotionally with your audience. Narratives, personal messages, facial expressions, body language and aesthetics all play a role in creating emotional connection.[94]

6. Use humour to attract attention

Humour is a powerful tool for capturing attention and ensuring your message is memorable. It has been shown to increase the spread and potency of online misinformation.[95] Likewise, it can be an effective strategy to help people better recognise and challenge misinformation.[96] BIT conducted a trial in Europe to test whether a misinformation intervention could be more engaging by incorporating humour and enhanced visual elements.[97] We found that messages that used humorous 'memes' had a 76% higher engagement rate than 'standard' messages. When used thoughtfully, humour can break down barriers and encourage your audience to connect with your message on a personal level.

7. Act quickly

Misinformation spreads rapidly because it's often more novel, emotionally charged and persuasive than the truth.[98] A 2018 study analysing more than 126,000 tweets found that misinformation travels 'farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly' than accurate information.[99] With the rise of deepfakes and AI-generated content, this trend has likely intensified.[100] Timely intervention is essential to arrest the harm and spread of false content before it gains widespread traction.

5. How-to guides

The following pages provide practical examples of how to apply this report's prebunking and debunking strategies to both anticipated and circulating misinformation narratives.

These are not intended as word-for-word messaging guides, but to demonstrate how the strategies can be applied in practice.

They include the following topics:

Prebunking

- Anticipated misinformation: Implications of US policy

Debunking

- Misinformation example: Safety
- Misinformation example: Housing
- Misinformation example: Migration numbers
- Misinformation example: Border control

How-to guide: Prebunking anticipated misinformation

Anticipated misinformation: Implications of US policy

Countries around the world are introducing more restrictive migration and refugee policies. In the United States, President Trump has introduced new border-control measures and announced plans for mass deportations. Some European leaders are considering following suit. In this context, misinformation may circulate in the near future. Bad-faith actors could claim that Australia must adopt tougher migration and refugee policies to align with global trends. The argument would likely suggest that without such measures, Australia risks becoming a more attractive destination for those deterred by stricter rules elsewhere.

How to prebunk this anticipated myth

Below is an example of messaging that counters an anticipated misinformation narrative using the best-practice prebunking approach. Tailor this example to your specific audience and broader communications strategy.

Warning

Motivational warning

In the current political environment, we'll see the tried and tested strategy of blaming refugees and migrants for all manner of problems. Certain politicians want us to be afraid so that we feel like we need their heavy-handed policies. Don't let them trick you into thinking we need to throw out our shared values of fairness and compassion.

Technique-based refutation

Pre-emptive refutation

They'll use fear-mongering to make you feel unsafe, painting refugees and migrants as a faceless threat rather than real people. This trick is designed to stoke fear and distract you from more important issues. It's part of a 'divide and rule' trick certain politicians think they can use to win elections.

Issue-based refutation

Australia is a geographically isolated island, and this gives it much more control over its borders than other countries. Like it or not, we already have some of the toughest border controls in the world. As Australians, we pride ourselves on fairness, compassion and giving everyone a fair go. Instead of adding fuel to the race to the bottom we are seeing around the world, Australia can demonstrate leadership in responsible migration management while staying true to its values and international commitments.

Sources: A Pronk, The price of deterrence: Australia's path to maintaining sovereign borders (Clingendael, 2024); A Shachar & D Ghezelbash, How and Why 'Ideas Travel' in Migration Law and Policy (2024)

How-to guide: Debunking identified misinformation

Misinformation example: Safety

A false narrative suggests that migration is making our communities less safe. This narrative claims that criminals are being recklessly released into the community, that security checks for visa holders are inadequate and that Australia is 'importing' dangerous individuals.
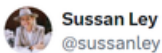
Sussan Ley
@sussanley

If you live in Frankston and you've got a problem with Victorian women being assaulted by foreign criminals, vote against Labor.

Dutton accuses PM of putting foreign-born criminals 'ahead' of interests of victims in Australia following replaced Direction 99

Peter Dutton has slammed the government's revised immigration direction, accusing the Prime Minister of putting New Zealand citizens and foreign-born criminals "ahead of the interests of those victims here in Australia".

> **Decide: Is this myth...**
> - **Prominent:** Is it gaining traction or visibility? &
> - **Persuasive:** Does it have the potential to change beliefs or behaviour? &
> - **Proximate:** Is it relevant to your audience or cause?
>
> **If NO - Re-frame the narrative**
>
> **If YES - Debunk this myth**

⌄

Below is an example of messaging that counters a misinformation narrative using the best-practice FMFF strategy for debunking misinformation. Tailor this example to your specific audience and broader communications strategy.

Fact

Lead with the FACT

Whether we were born in this country, or arrived later, we all want to be part of a community where we can feel and be safe. Research unequivocally shows that migration is not linked to an increase in crime, and may in fact reduce crime.

Myth

Warn about the MYTH

But some politicians think they can win our votes by making us fear one another, based on where we're from, what language we speak or how we came here.

Fallacy

Explain the FALLACY*

Just because a few people break the law doesn't mean all migrants and refugees should be blamed. Pointing the finger at entire groups based on the actions of a few is wrong.

Fact

End with the FACT

The majority of Australians (92%) agree that those of us born overseas are just as likely to be good citizens as those of us born here. A safe community is one where we look out for our neighbours and they look out for us, no matter where we're from.

* Fallacies can be categorised using the FLICC taxonomy.

Sources: M Sydes, Immigration, Ethnicity, and Neighbourhood Violence (2022) *Race and Justice*;
K Benier & A Higginson, The Myth of Australia's Migrant Youth Gang (2024) *Journal of Youth Studies*.

How-to guide: Debunking identified misinformation

Misinformation example: Housing

A common misinformation narrative claims that high levels of migration are a key driver of the housing crisis, pushing up rents and house prices. It suggests that cutting immigration would help Australians into homes, and it is often broadened to arguments about prioritising 'existing' citizens to 'restore the great Australian dream'.
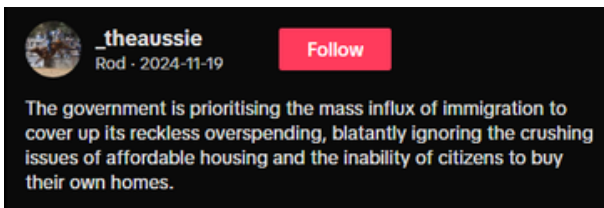
Decide: Is this myth...
- **Prominent:** Is it gaining traction or visibility? &
- **Persuasive:** Does it have the potential to change beliefs or behaviour? &
- **Proximate:** Is it relevant to your audience or cause?

If NO - Re-frame the narrative

If YES - Debunk this myth

Below is an example of messaging that counters a misinformation narrative using the best-practice FMFF strategy for debunking misinformation. Tailor this example to your specific audience and broader communications strategy.

Fact

Lead with the FACT

When Australia's borders were closed during COVID-19, migration was at its lowest in a century—yet house prices still <u>went up</u>. The idea that cutting migration will magically solve the housing crisis doesn't hold up against the evidence.

Myth

Warn about the MYTH

But instead of tackling the real issues, some political actors are blaming migrants, as if they're the main reason housing has become unaffordable.

Fallacy

Explain the FALLACY *

They are oversimplifying the problem to distract you from the actual causes. The housing crisis has been a long time in the making, and it's now this severe because of past policy choices and mistakes piling up. It's easier for them to blame migrants and divide us, than to take real action.

Fact

End with the FACT

There are many drivers of Australia's housing crisis, including a <u>lack of housing</u>, <u>rising construction costs,</u> and <u>tax breaks that distort the market</u>. Migration is only a <u>small piece of the puzzle</u>. Don't let them trick you into using migrants as a distraction from real housing policy reform.

*Fallacies can be categorised using the <u>FLICC taxonomy</u>

Sources: A Gamlen, <u>Five myths poisoning Australia's migration debate</u>, *The Mandarin* (2024); P McDonald, <u>Is immigration worsening the housing crisis</u>, *SBS* (podcast, 2024)
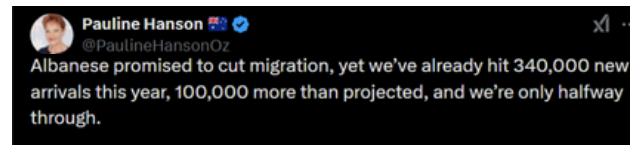
How-to guide: Debunking identified misinformation

Misinformation example: Migration numbers

Certain politicians and commentators have been spreading misleading narratives that allege that Australia's migration levels are out of control. They claim that migration has 'skyrocketed' or is at 'record highs', and cite figures that suggest more migrants are arriving than were projected or planned for.

'Out of control': Anthony Albanese's big migration fail revealed in budget update

The budget update has confirmed the government's plan to slash net migration to 260,000 this financial year has missed the mark – by a long way.

> **Pauline Hanson** 🇦🇺 ✓
> @PaulineHansonOz
> Albanese promised to cut migration, yet we've already hit 340,000 new arrivals this year, 100,000 more than projected, and we're only halfway through.

Decide: Is this myth...
- **Prominent:** Is it gaining traction or visibility? &
- **Persuasive:** Does it have the potential to change beliefs or behaviour? &
- **Proximate:** Is it relevant to your audience or cause?

If NO - Re-frame the narrative

If YES - Debunk this myth

Below is an example of messaging that counters a misinformation narrative using the best-practice FMFF strategy for debunking misinformation. Tailor this example to your specific audience and broader communications strategy.

Fact

Lead with the FACT

Right now, migration is much lower than what was predicted five years ago, and is slowing down. The real story is that migration plummeted during COVID-19, then only partially bounced back. The drop was much bigger than the rebound.

Myth

Warn about the MYTH

Some politicians and commentators are trying to make you think that migration is higher than it actually is. This misleading claim is designed to make you feel insecure for political gain.

Fallacy

Explain the FALLACY *

These claims cherry-pick data. They show only the parts that fit their argument while ignoring the longer-term trends and historical context.

Fact

End with the FACT

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, overall migration numbers since 2020 have been lower than historical trends and are slowing down.

Sources: ABS, Overseas Migration (2023-24); A Gamlen, Explaining the 2024 Net Overseas Migration Surge, ANU Policy Brief (2024); A Gamlen, Five myths poisoning Australia's migration debate, The Mandarin (2024)

*Fallacies can be categorised using the FLICC taxonomy

Misinformation example: Border control

This myth claims that Australia's borders are no longer secure and that we do not control who enters the country. It's often framed in alarmist language about Australia being overwhelmed by people seeking asylum. This false narrative is often rolled out following the arrival of people seeking asylum by sea.

The Australian
https://www.theaustralian.com.au › Nation › Politics
Labor effectively concedes it has lost control of borders

Pauline Hanson's One Nation
The Boats Are Still Coming

Decide: Is this myth...
- **Prominent:** Is it gaining traction or visibility? &
- **Persuasive:** Does it have the potential to change beliefs or behaviour? &
- **Proximate:** Is it relevant to your audience or cause?

If NO - Re-frame the narrative

If YES - Debunk this myth

Below is an example of messaging that counters a misinformation narrative using the best-practice FMFF strategy for debunking misinformation. Tailor this example to your specific audience and broader communications strategy.

Fact

Lead with the FACT

Australia is an island, and this gives it much more control over its borders than other countries. No one can enter without a visa. Like it or not, we have some of the toughest border controls in the world.

Myth

Warn about the MYTH

When it comes to boat arrivals, some people try to mislead you that even one boat means we've lost control.

Fallacy

Explain the FALLACY*

This argument sets impossible expectations and blows isolated incidents out of proportion. It's unrealistic to expect zero arrivals forever. An occasional boat arrival does not indicate weak borders.

Fact

End with the FACT

The truth is, it's almost impossible to get into Australia without permission. The real issue is how we can work together to ensure a fair and compassionate approach to people seeking asylum. Our history shows that we can be true to these values while keeping our border secure.

Sources: A Pronk, The price of deterrence: Australia's path to maintaining sovereign borders (Clingendael, 2024); T Crowley, How does Australia's boat turnbacks policy work, and has it changed? (ABC, Feb 2024)

* Fallacies can be categorised using the FLICC taxonomy

Appendix A: FLICC TAXONOMY

John Cook's **FLICC taxonomy** categorises a range of logical fallacies and rhetorical techniques used to spread misinformation. You can use this to help you craft debunking messages that follow the fact-myth-fallacy-fact (FMFF) method.
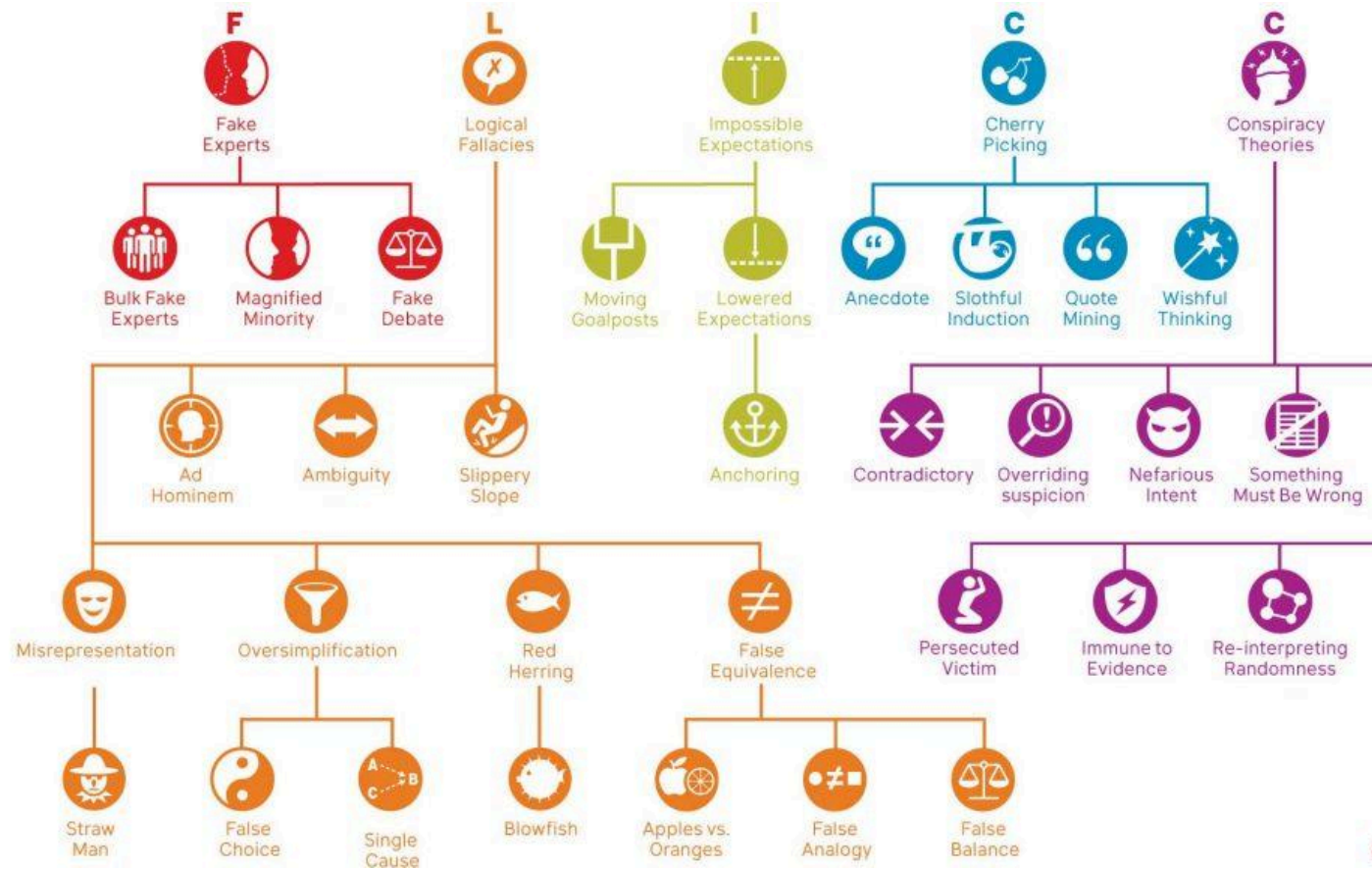
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