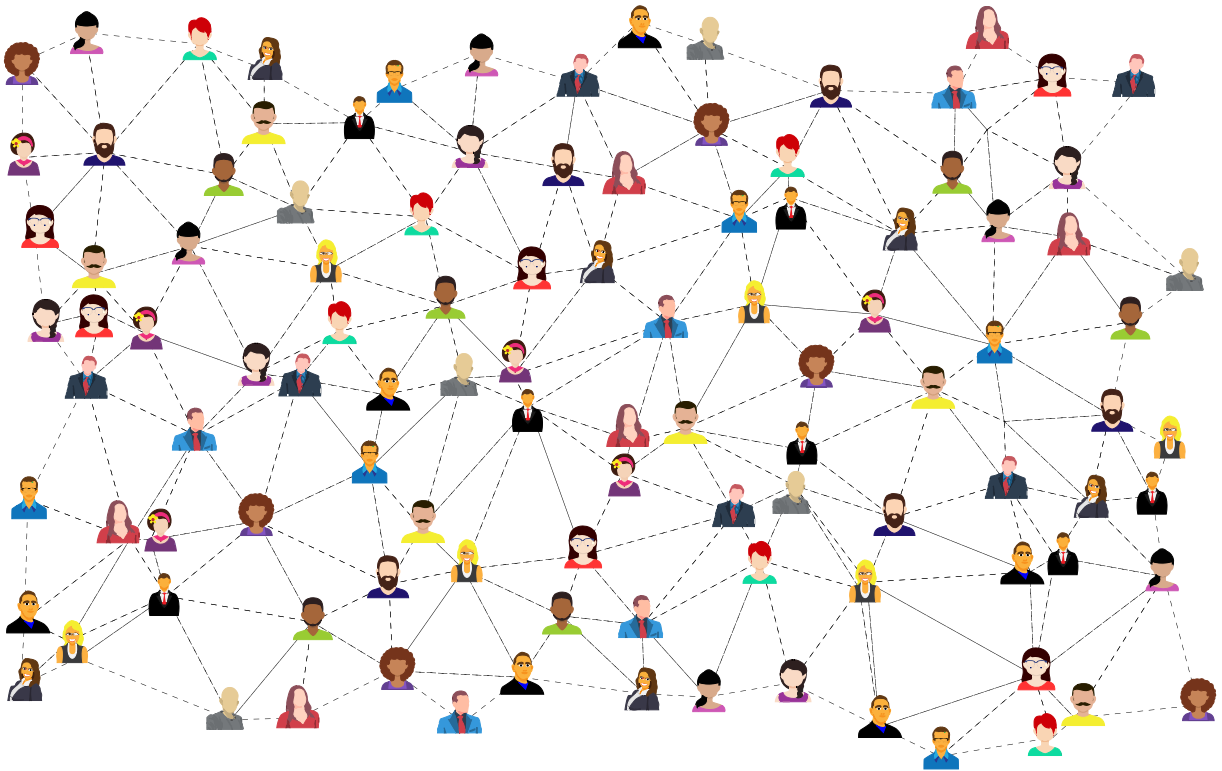

Disinformation Impacts on Community and Voluntary Organisations

Challenges to Social Cohesion in Ireland



Dr Shane Murphy & Dr Eileen Culloty

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Research Context

Disinformation harms democracy by undermining trust and evidence while amplifying social divisions. Research has primarily focused on macro-level impacts, investigating the influence of disinformation on electoral outcomes and public attitude shifts. Impacts on the community and voluntary sector have received less attention.

This is important because these organisations play a key role in maintaining social cohesion. For example, they provide essential services, represent the interests of marginalised groups, and create an arena for civic engagement and participation. As such, the sector ought to be a key pillar in the effort to counter disinformation as it is ideally placed to promote accurate information and media literacy within communities.

However, the sector operates in a complex context. There is often confusion about its role and areas of operation. In addition, there are long-standing debates about governance models and the state's reliance on voluntary organisations. More recently, some organisations have been subject to targeted campaigns, especially if they address issues such as migration or gender. Across Europe there are attacks on the legitimacy of NGOs with calls for them to be defunded. These challenges are particularly relevant in Ireland where the community and voluntary sector is large and deeply embedded in the state.

Aims

This report seeks to understand how Irish community and voluntary organisations are experiencing and negotiating these issues. Specifically, it aims to understand:

- the extent to which the sector encounters disinformation and hostility;
- the consequences for day-to-day operations, and
- actions taken or proposed in response.

Methodology

This study employed mixed methods to investigate disinformation's impact on the Irish community and voluntary sector. Data were collected through a partnership with The Wheel, Ireland's national association of community and voluntary organisations, charities, and social enterprises.

Survey

A survey distributed to The Wheel network yielded 200 responses. Questions covered disinformation prevalence, targeted narratives, operational impacts, and current response capabilities. The survey included both closed-ended Likert scales and open-ended questions to capture detailed experiences.

Interviews

Following the survey, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted between November 2025 and January 2026 with organisations that had experienced direct disinformation or harassment, using purposive sampling to ensure representation of firsthand experiences. Interviews explored four key areas: reputational damage, impacts on staff and volunteers, service user consequences, and organisational response strategies.

Analysis

Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory approach, using the survey results to identify patterns and qualitative interviews to provide deeper contextual understanding of how disinformation affects operations and the specific mechanisms through which organisations respond to these challenges.

This report presents an accessible, high-level overview of the results. A more detailed analysis of the results will be developed into a conference presentation and a research article. These will be available on the EDMO Ireland website.

Survey Results

There were 200 responses to the survey representing community groups and mid- to large-sized charities working across a range of social issues, with particular exposure among those engaged in areas such as migration, race, and gender equality.

Exposure to “anti-NGO” narratives

The survey inquired about exposure to “anti-NGO” sentiment and anti-NGO narratives. While such sentiment can represent legitimate questioning of organisations and should not automatically be considered disinformation, these narratives are often indicative of a coordinated pushback against the sector.

Among respondents, 85% reported encountering “anti-NGO” narratives online. These encompass criticisms that the sector is:

- “A waste of taxpayer money” (67%)
- “Corrupt” (56%)
- “Unaccountable” (55%)

Day-to-day implications of mis/disinformation

The survey asked respondents to explain how mis/disinformation, including anti-NGO narratives, impacts the ability of the organisation to function day-to-day.

The most prevalent responses were:

- 85% say it’s impacting their objectives
- 55% say it forced them to adopt new communications strategies
- 42% say it is damaging their credibility
- 26% say they experience direct targeting and harassment

Interview Themes

Five key themes emerged from 20 semi-structured interviews conducted to understand the impacts of disinformation on civil society organizations' day-to-day operations.

The research revealed that disinformation affects these organisations through multiple interconnected pathways, each presenting distinct challenges to their functioning and effectiveness. The themes capture the range of operational impacts that organisations reported experiencing, from broader societal perceptions to direct tactical pressures and internal organisational dynamics.

- **Societal Distrust: Delegitimisation of the sector and its expertise**
- **Funding and Bureaucratic Pressures**
- **Direct Targeting and Staff Safety**
- **“Baiting” Emails**
- **Internal Disruption**

Societal Distrust

Findings

Misinformation is delegitimising the sector by:

- treating frontline expertise as opinion rather than evidence,
- dismissing advocacy work as political or unrealistic, and
- framing organisations as ideological, extreme, or corrupt.

This systematic devaluation of professional knowledge and community representation undermines the credibility and authority that civil society organisations rely upon to carry out their essential functions.

“You’re radical just by virtue of working in this sector.”

Impacts

Interviewees reported reduced influence in several interconnected ways as policymakers, media, and partners become less willing to engage with organisations that have been delegitimised by misinformation.

In response to this diminished credibility, organisations often soften their language and recommendations to appear less confrontational or ideological, further diluting their impact.

Meanwhile, the stigma and distrust generated by disinformation campaigns drive service users away, undermining the organisations' ability to reach the communities they serve and reducing their overall effectiveness and influence within the civic landscape.

Funding and Bureaucratic Pressures

Findings

Funding narratives have emerged as a common vector of attack in disinformation campaigns against civil society organisations, with perpetrators using loaded language such as "wasteful," "overpaid," "bloated," and "unaccountable" to create negative perceptions. These attacks often involve decontextualizing funding figures by stripping them of essential operational costs, presenting spending in a misleading light. Additionally, spending is consistently framed as "taxpayers' money" to imply misuse of public funds, thereby undermining public trust in these organisations' financial operations and legitimacy.

“It’s just looking for any cudgel to use against the sector, especially organisations who are helping ‘the wrong’ people.”

Impacts

Interviewees report that increased compliance demands are a significant challenge as audits, reporting, due diligence, and funder requirements bring substantial time commitments that divert resources from core mission activities. The administrative burden has become so substantial that some organisations are avoiding funding opportunities altogether, determining that the effort required outweighs the potential value. This compliance-driven resource reallocation means that frontline work suffers as organisations must increasingly dedicate time and energy toward demonstrating their legitimacy rather than delivering essential services to their communities.

Direct Targeting and Staff Safety

Findings

Interviewees report that staff and volunteers face routine harassment including online abuse, filming, doxxing, hostile questioning, and coordinated complaints. This harassment is particularly acute in migration and LGBTQ+ work contexts, where interviewees described the abuse as often racist, misogynistic, or focused on physical appearance.

The frequency and intensity of these attacks have created significant safety concerns and operational challenges for organisations working with vulnerable communities.

“They love being able to put a face to it.”

Impacts

Interview findings reveal that increased security measures have prompted significant operational changes within organisations, with some leaving social media platforms often on Gardaí advice, while others have ceased posting staff and service-user images and minimally promote events.

These security adaptations include implementing cameras, event security, screening procedures, and policies against lone working. The research shows that these measures have had negative impacts on staff wellbeing, morale and retention, with some services becoming harder to access as the openness that once facilitated community engagement now creates security risks.

“Baiting” Emails

Findings

Interview findings reveal that organisations have identified specific 'bait' tactics designed to extract controversial responses from civil society professionals and representatives. These tactics include posing as displaced people asking how to enter Ireland illegally, and posing as under-15s requesting hormones or medical access without parental knowledge. The research identified tell-tale signs that help identify such bait attempts, including stilted tone that may be AI-generated, atypical sender profiles, and pointedly direct messages that seem designed to provoke emotional or defensive responses.

This evidence suggests that manufactured content and disinformation are being used strategically to polarise conversations and create content that can be used to attack or discredit organisations working with vulnerable communities.

“They don’t need to be ‘successful’ to slow you down and waste time and resources”

Impacts

Bait messages are effective at disrupting work because safeguarding protocols operate on a precautionary principle. The use of safeguarding language automatically triggers mandatory referrals to Tusla and An Garda Síochána, requiring staff to treat all incoming messages as legitimate by default, including those that appear suspicious. This approach ensures that genuine concerns are never missed, even if it means handling potentially false positives.

Internal Disruption

Findings

Interview findings reveal that disinformation circulates within the sector, with false narratives being repeated by staff, volunteers, board members, councillors and local partners. Anti-migrant narratives were identified as particularly disruptive, while some staff expressed reluctance to work with certain groups due to fears shaped by online narratives.

“People who are supposed to be supporting the work become a barrier.”

Impacts

Interview findings reveal that disinformation leads to weaker participation with lower service uptake and reduced cohesion, while internal conflict strains trust and impacts recruitment and retention. Local collaboration weakens when boards, councillors, or partners accept false narratives, creating a cycle of diminished community engagement and organisational effectiveness.

Conclusion

The harm is cumulative

- Distrust, harassment and internal disruption compound, eroding both the sector's capacity and the public infrastructure it sustains.

Service users absorb the cost

- When organisations are forced to retreat or self-censor, the people who rely on their services are impacted first.

The sector cannot defend itself alone

- There are limits to how much the community and voluntary sector can achieve without support from policymakers, platforms, regulators, media and funders – and they are already stretched incredibly thin

About EDMO

In 2020, the European Union created the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) to promote scientific knowledge on online disinformation, advance the development of fact-checking services, and support media literacy programmes. EDMO is based at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. EDMO's work is implemented by an Executive Board, which coordinates the activities of the EDMO Network.

The EDMO Network includes 14 hubs operating across 28 countries in the EU and EEA. The EDMO Ireland hub is coordinated by Dublin City University (DCU) with TheJournal FactCheck and NewsWhip.

Website: <https://edmohub.ie/>

LinkedIn: EDMO Ireland

