

Questions regarding the Misinformation Report (May 2021)

Request

Dear Classifications Office,

I hope this finds you well.

I have been reading your recently released report and I am having a difficult time understanding it.

It does not include a glossary and so I am not able to define the terms used. Of particular importance is the term Misinformation as it plays a central role in the publication.

One reference in the report that is of particular concern is to "Claims that Covid-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu" and seems to suggest that this statement would qualify as Misinformation. This is in the second paragraph of the introduction and so has a prominent place in the report.

The obvious problem with this being labeled as Misinformation is that large numbers of very well qualified professionals cite data driven research that demonstrates exactly that. There is clearly a legitimate scientific debate there and like your office acknowledges "The Classification Office cannot restrict or ban content on the basis of fairness, balance or accuracy."

My questions for you are:

What is the definition of Misinformation used by the Classification Office and/or the authors of this report.?

Is it the view of the Office that describing the danger of COVID 19 as comparable to the common flu, is Misinformation?

If yes, what process has been followed in making this determination?

Who determines what is Misinformation and what is information?

How can this process be contested?

I am requesting the answers under the OIA and appreciate the time you take in answering my questions.

Kind Regards

Response

Thank you for your email and request for information under the Official Information Act 1982. This was received on 2 July, 2021. I have responded to your questions below.

What is the definition of Misinformation used by the Classification Office and/or the authors of this report?

This is a complex topic and a lot of thought has gone into the terminology used. You can find an explanation of terminology on [page 11 of the research report](#). You can find additional information about the methodology [in this PDF document](#), including a full list of statements associated with misinformation for the purposes of analysis.

Is it the view of the Office that describing the danger of COVID 19 as comparable to the common flu, is Misinformation?

The report does not make any specific assertions about the comparability of COVID 19 and the common flu.

However, the Chief Censor's introduction states:

"Many of us will have read articles online, seen posts, or had conversations that seem completely at odds with what we know about the virus. **Claims that Covid-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu**, or even that it is a hoax."

We're comfortable with making this observation in the introduction to the report. The statement "Covid-19 is no more dangerous than the common flu" is one that we would associate with misinformation based on the available scientific evidence – and also taking into account the context in which this sort of statement may be used in conjunction with other forms of misinformation in order to downplay the dangers presented by the virus.

While the term 'dangerous' could be interpreted in different ways, it seems clear that Covid-19 has proved to be significantly deadlier than typical strains of the common flu, with almost four million confirmed deaths since the start of the pandemic. You can read more about the differences between Covid-19 and influenza [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

It's also important to note that the report acknowledges that evidence may continue to emerge on various topics, and the Introduction goes on to say:

"It is quite possible that one or more of the subjects we associated with misinformation in this research might yet turn out to be not so misinformed after all with the emergence of new evidence. History tells us that truth is not fixed and immutable, and it is healthy for diverse and inclusive societies to accommodate a broad range of views and beliefs."

In any case, this specific statement was not included in the survey itself and does not form part of the findings or analysis in the body of the report.

If yes, what process has been followed in making this determination?

As above, we did not make any claim about whether Covid-19 is 'comparable' to the flu. We do believe the idea that Covid-19 being "no more dangerous" than the

common flu is associated with misinformation, based on current evidence and broad scientific consensus.

Who determines what is Misinformation and what is information?

We based our research analysis on general consensus around key topics and prior research, in consultation with a range of subject matter experts. The term 'misinformation' has a specific meaning in the report (see the link provided above about terminology), and we are satisfied that statements or beliefs characterised in the report as being associated with misinformation meet this definition. Again, there may be cases where new evidence emerges that challenges the idea that some of these beliefs are in fact associated with misinformation. In any case, as stated previously, the comment you have highlighted in the Introduction did not form part of our research analysis.

How can this process be contested?

I have outlined above the approach we took in this research project for identifying specific statements as being associated with misinformation, and provided links to further information about our methodology and terminology. I hope this response is useful.

Ngā mihi