

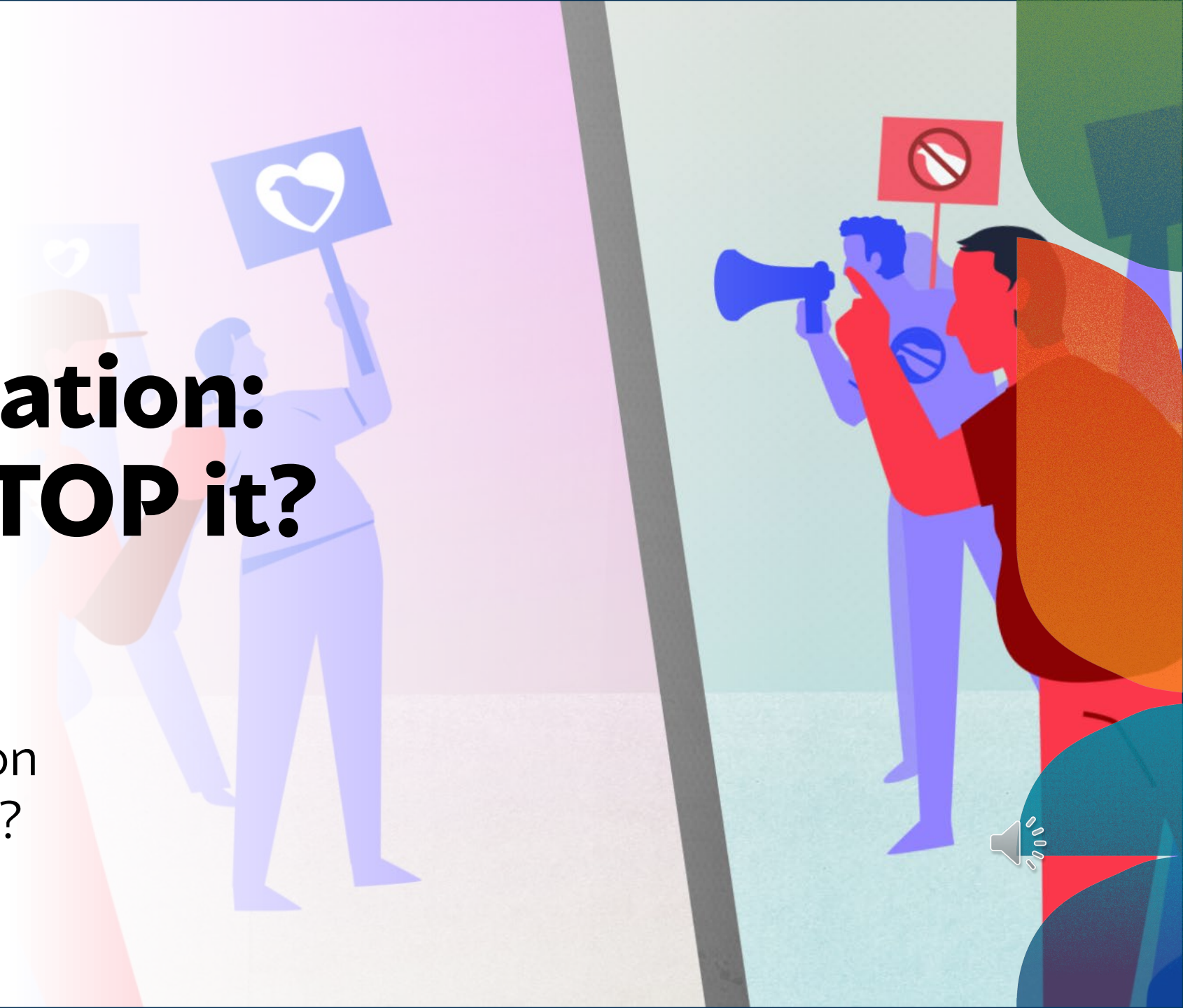


British Columbia's  
Office of the Human Rights  
Commissioner

# Misinformation: Can you **STOP** it?

## Mini bite 3

Why is misinformation  
a human rights issue?



# Learning goals

- explore why misinformation is a human rights issue
- consider how misinformation impacts human rights and democracy

# Reflect and record

Why is misinformation a human rights issue?

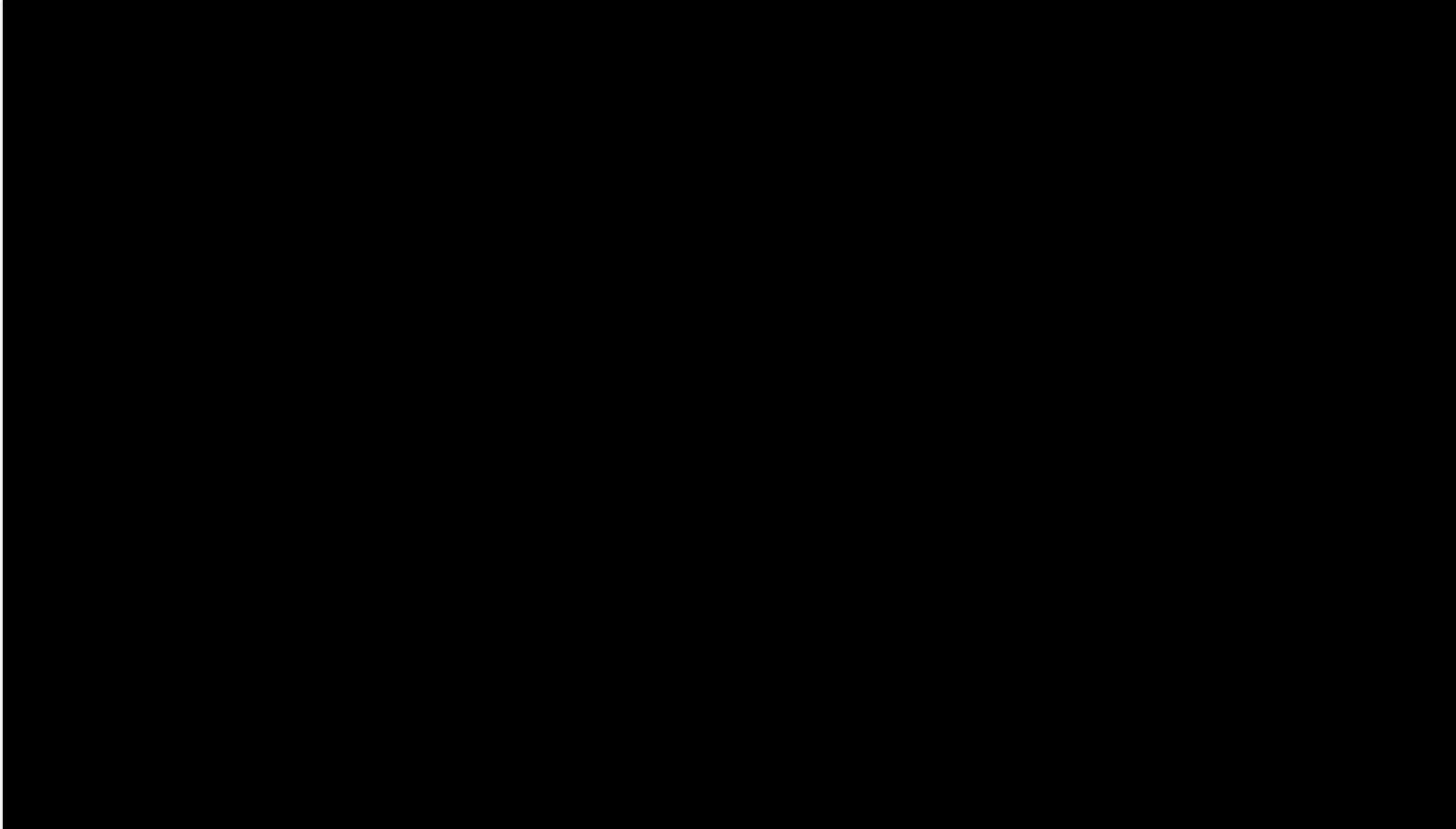
How does it harm you and those you care about?

How does it harm specific groups?

How does it harm all of society?



# Some responses to these questions



Video link: <https://youtu.be/fVNpCVfbLIs>

# Misinformation is a human rights issue

Misinformation can:

- promote divisiveness and polarization
- strengthen prejudices, biases and stereotypes
- lead to development and spread of conspiracy theories
- provoke discrimination and hate
- limit our ability to make informed choices
- harm democracy

# Promotes divisiveness and polarization

## What polarization looks like

- deepens divisions
- turns groups against each other
- produces barriers to collaboration to address common challenges

## Tendencies misinformation builds on

- accepting or rejecting information based on our current beliefs
- acting quickly when strong emotions are provoked

## How misinformation promotes divisiveness and polarization

- benefits from periods of crisis to deepen divisions
- targets groups on one side of an issue to amplify values and beliefs and discredit others
- may influence groups on both sides of any issue
- achieves goals that are often unrelated to the crisis

# Reflect on polarization

Can you think of an issue in which polarization has divided our society?

How did disinformation contribute to this polarization?



# Contributes to the spread of conspiracy theories

## What conspiracy theories look like

- blaming a serious issue on a group or event with no evidence that group is responsible
- promotes dehumanization, vilification, hate and violence

## Tendencies misinformation builds on

- identify the source of a problem, feel safe and find solutions
- find a group to blame when the source isn't clear

## How misinformation contributes to spread of conspiracy theories

- benefits from a time of crisis
- places blame for an issue on a specific group
- achieves goal of harming or discrediting this group
- shifts focus away from the true source of a problem

# Example of spreading conspiracy theories

## Spreading of COVID-19 conspiracy theories

- large number of COVID-19 deaths, especially in long-term care homes
- fear for safety created urgency to identify source
- speculation that markets and laboratories in Wuhan, China were sources
- conspiracy theories blamed China and people of Chinese origin
- in 2020, ¼ of B.C. residents believed COVID-19 was a Chinese bioweapon
- source of COVID-19 virus not identified but likely an animal—World Health Organization, 2025
- history of conspiracy theories blaming Asian, Indigenous and Jewish people for diseases
- based on unfounded, negative stereotypes about cleanliness

# Reinforces prejudices, biases and stereotypes

## What strengthening prejudices, biases and stereotypes looks like

- reinforces existing prejudices
- contributes to spread of biases and stereotypes against marginalized groups

## Tendencies misinformation builds on

- unconscious bias against unfamiliar people makes us feel safe
- automatic response to distrust and fear others
- brain's process of grouping things together supports memory and creates sense of belonging

- contributes to stereotypes about specific groups of people based on experiences with one member of group

## How misinformation reinforces prejudices, biases and stereotypes

- modifies context
- places blame on unrelated group or event
- builds on existing biases and stereotypes
- supports development and spread of harmful attitudes and behaviours
- provokes discrimination, hate crimes and radicalization

# Example of contributing to discrimination

## Discrimination

- harm based on a personal characteristic that is protected under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*
- creating barriers, causing harms and increasing disadvantages

## Examples of misinformation targeting LGBTQ2SAI+ people

- increased misinformation targeting LGBTQ2SIA+ people, especially against trans people
- builds on values, fears, biases and stereotypes
- one example is misinformation about SOGI 123

## Examples of impacts on LGBTQ2SAI+ students

- builds on values, fears, biases and stereotypes and contributes to discrimination
- presenting SOGI 123 as a threat to safety harms LGBTQ2SAI+ students and staff supporting them
- contributes to negative stereotypes and harmful comments and behaviours
- limits LGBTQ2SAI+ students' awareness of right to equality and supports
- 62% of LGBTQ2SAI+ students feel unsafe at school
- 11% of heterosexual, cis-gender students feel unsafe at school

# Commissioner Govender's thoughts

The following clip is from the third installment of the Beyond the Headlines: Gender Identity and Expressions live conversation from July 14, 2025.

[Video link: https://youtu.be/Px2Q135kxjA](https://youtu.be/Px2Q135kxjA)

# Example of contributing to hate crimes

## Hate crimes and hate speech

- hate crimes are crimes based on targeted groups' protected characteristics
- hate speech
  - expressed publicly
  - targets person or group with protected characteristic
  - uses extreme language to express hatred based on that characteristic
  - describes targeted group in way that is likely to expose them to detestation and vilification

## How misinformation contributes to hate crimes

- findings of BCOHRC's inquiry into hate in the pandemic
- fueled by COVID-19 conspiracy theory that COVID-19 virus was produced in Chinese lab
- conspiracy theory contributed to increase in anti-Asian hate incidents

## Examples of impacts

- 58% attributed anti-Asian COVID-19 conspiracy theory to hate incident
- includes 89% of survey participants of East Asian ancestry

“An older Caucasian lady started yelling at us ... about bringing the virus here and told us to get off the streets.

She then ... coughed in [my child’s] face.

My seven-year-old is confused and doesn’t understand how we had anything to do with the virus.”



# Example of contributing to radicalization

## Radicalization

- development of extreme political, social or religious views in opposition to general accepted ones
- can lead to increased discrimination, hate and violence

## How misinformation contributes to radicalization

- Internet and media sites primary source of far-right radicalization
- 90% of youth receiving support from anti-radicalization group recruited online
- may target people experiencing social, emotional and economic challenges
- joining a group provides sense of belonging and shared community
- radicalizing misinformation builds on biases and stereotypes and blames specific group

## Examples of impacts

- search of TikTok accounts using topics "masculinity" and "loneliness"
- misogynistic content in 13% of recommendations on first day
- 56% of recommendations later in the week

“When I was recruiting, the Internet had only sort of just come out, but it took months if not years to radicalize a person. But with technology and social media now, people can radicalize in a weekend.”



# Reflect on examples

Can you identify prejudices, biases and stereotypes that contributed to conspiracy theories, discrimination, hate crimes and radicalization in our province?

What role did misinformation play?



# Limits our ability to make informed choices

## Importance of making informed choices

- trustworthy information needed to make informed decisions
- decisions may impact human rights
- misinformation undermines shared sense of truth
- difficult to ensure decisions are based on information that is true

## Role of misinformation

- creates content that looks real
- contributes to a sense of overwhelm
- provokes mistrust in all information

## Impacts

- vary from minor to serious
- prevents us from protecting ourselves and those we care about

# Undermines shared sense of truth

## Minimizes distinction between fact and fiction

- opinions are based on values, experiences and world views
- facts are supported by evidence
- misinformation builds on growing belief that opinions are as valid as facts in all matters
- misrepresents opinions as truth

## Builds on unfounded notions of free speech

- freedom of expression protected in Canada, subject to reasonable limits
- discriminatory speech and hate speech prohibited as reasonable limits in certain contexts
- desensitizes us to impacts, making it easier to deny equal rights to targeted groups
- misinterpretation of free speech, truth and opinion undermines our understanding of truth

# Excludes important voices

Pushes out voices of impacted groups

- discrimination and hate provoked by misinformation threatens safety of these groups
- impacted groups may avoid or reduce participation
- 62% of trans and non-binary people avoid public spaces fearing harassment
- silencing of Indigenous voices limits access to expertise on adapting to global warming
- limits access to expertise and information that could influence our choices

Promotes distrust in reliable sources

- contributes to distrust in mainstream media, scientists and government
- prevents access to information needed to make informed decisions
- over 2/5 of Canadians seek information from social media not connected to government, scientific or news organizations
- increases risk of basing decisions on unreliable sources

# Example of limiting ability to make informed choices

## Misinformation about the measles vaccine

- Canada lost measles elimination status in November 2025
- over 5,000 cases of measles cases between fall 2024 and November 2025
- misinformation about vaccine safety limited ability to make informed choices
- devastating health impacts for children, elders and immunocompromised

## Role of polarization

- polarization of people into those supporting and against vaccines
- prevented understanding concerns of each group and finding a common solution
- increased spread of misinformation on unrelated issues

# Reflect and record

Can you think of examples of decisions that have been impacted by:

- undermining our shared sense of truth
- excluding important voices?

What role did misinformation play?



# Misinformation harms democracy

- undermines our shared sense of truth
- reduces trust in governments and the organizations that hold them accountable
- impacts results of elections
- limits transparency and accountability of democratic societies

# Reduces trust in government and watch-dogs

## Evidence of loss of trust in governments

- 66% of Canadians: “Much of the information we receive from news and official government accounts of events can’t be trusted”
- 52% of public polled: “Most news organizations are more concerned with supporting an ideology or political position than with factual information”

## Impacts of loss of trust

- difficult to develop policies to meet public’s needs
- increased public resistance to government policies

## Example

- initial public resistance to mandatory seat belt policies

# Impacts results of elections

## Perceived impact of misinformation on 2025 election

- loss of trust in governments contributes to misinformation influencing votes
- 77% believe misinformation had a major impact on 2025 federal election results
- 9% believe misinformation had no impact on the results

## Example of misinformation

- Cyabra analysis of fake social media profiles targeting 2025 federal election
- investigated 2,451 profiles mentioning Mark Carney
- 1/3 of profiles were negative
- 76% of profiles connected Carney with Ghislaine Maxwell or Jeffery Epstein
- included images portraying Carney as a “child molesting pervert”

# Limits democratic transparency and accountability

## How it works

- governments responsible for laws and policies in public's interest
- informed, evidence-based decisions needed to develop laws and policies and evaluate their outcomes
- misinformation influences government decisions
- contributes to policies that are not evidence-based
- interests of majority and those of minority groups may not be met

## Example: Responses to toxic drug crisis

- unregulated drug toxicity leading cause of death for people 19 to 59
- studies demonstrate harm reduction and safe supply reduce death and harm
- evidence-based recommendations from leading experts include increasing safe supply and providing wide range of options for those in recovery
- B.C. government ended pilot safe supply program in 2026

# Example of limiting accountability

- PBS analysis of data from President Trump's first year in office
- misrepresented outcomes of economic policies
- overall, prices are increasing
- some specific items declined in price

MISINFORMATION:  
**CAN YOU**



Track down the truth



Outsmart the outrage



Poke at the point of view

# Reflect and record in Handout 4

Can you think of examples of misinformation that impact human rights by:

- promoting divisiveness and polarization
- supporting the spread of conspiracy theories
- promoting discrimination, hate crimes and radicalization
- limiting our ability to make informed decisions
- harming democracy

Can you identify examples of misinformation that impact human rights in other ways?

What can we do to stop the spread of misinformation to protect human rights?

# Next Mini Bite

We can all stop the spread of misinformation





British Columbia's  
Office of the Human Rights  
Commissioner

# Thank you

STOP



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Contact:

[info@bchumanrights.ca](mailto:info@bchumanrights.ca)

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