Netsafe response to Draft National Security Long-term Insights Briefing - 22 November 2022

What do you think about the ten features outlined in the briefing (page 23-24) that could support Aotearoa New Zealand's national security?

Netsafe fully supports efforts to engage and inform the public about national security risks that affect Aotearoa New Zealand and in particular the proposals to engage in debate with, seek advice from, and partner with organisations outside of Government.

Netsafe has a particular focus on online safety and reducing online harms. Thousands of reports are made to Netsafe annually concerning all aspects of online harms including scams, online bullying, image based sexual abuse, hate speech, and mis and disinformation. Through these reports Netsafe is able to gain an insight into what online harm issues are circulating at any given moment.

A particular issue at the moment concerns mis and disinformation. Aotearoa New Zealand's experiences of, and responses to, mis and disinformation appear to be lagging behind a number of jurisdictions overseas which already have public resources, frameworks or codes in place in an attempt to address the issue (see e.g. the European Commission's resources and Code on disinformation: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation). Apart from the voluntary industry code developed by Netsafe - the Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Practice for Online Safety and Harms (https://nztech.org.nz/the-code/) outcome 6 and 7 of which seek to address harms caused by mis and disinformation - there is not yet any formal legal regime which seeks to prevent or mitigate harms caused by mis and disinformation (nor indeed any formal, accessible and easily understood definition of the terms).

Approaches taken by other jurisdictions is to ensure better education for both public and private actors and both children and adults to help identify mis and disinformation, including media and digital literacy training and critical thinking and source checking. Equipping everyone with the tools to help them critically analyse information whether in the form of traditional media or online sources /social media appears vital. Finland for example starts early in educating its primary aged children on media literacy and is, as a result, ranked as having "the highest potential to withstand the negative impact of fake news and misinformation," according to the 2021 Media Literacy Index.

In addition to Government taking a central lead, given the likely levels of distrust and cynicism in some parts of society and, in particular, to address concerns about limits to freedom of expression, leadership and guidance on this issue, ought also to come from sources independent of Government.

Civil society, academia and private actors also have a role to play in educating and informing the public about the risks to society if mis and disinformation is not addressed. Tackling mis and disinformation therefore needs to be seen as a whole of society issue with no one actor or agency having sole responsibility to address the issues.