

Te Tiriti information disorder

What is it and why does it matter to philanthropy?

Background

In 2025, the Centre for Social Impact published a Te Tiriti o Waitangi Resource that illustrated the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a living framework for philanthropy – particularly in relation to:

- effective governance
- the pursuit of equity and social inclusion, and long-term systems change
- the value of relational approaches
- the social accountability of philanthropic institutions.

This companion insights paper builds on the 2025 resource, addressing key complementary pātai:

- *What does information disorder look like in a Te Tiriti context?*
- *Why does this matter to philanthropy, and what accountabilities do philanthropic organisations with a stated commitment to Te Tiriti have to address it?*

What is information disorder?

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) introduced the term “information disorder” to describe the spectrum of false, misleading and harmful information circulating within contemporary media and education ecosystems. Rather than treating all problematic content as “fake news”, their framework distinguishes between three related but distinct dynamics and definitions:

Misinformation

False or misleading information shared with deliberate intent to cause harm, often arising from misunderstanding, oversimplification or incomplete knowledge. The person sharing the information may believe it to be true.

Disinformation

False or misleading information deliberately created or amplified to mislead, manipulate or cause harm. Distinct from misinformation, it is more strategic, often emotionally charged and designed to influence wider perception or behaviour.

Malinformation

Accurate information used in a misleading or harmful way. The information itself may be factually correct, but it is selectively presented, removed from context or framed in ways that distort meaning or inflame division.

These dynamics do not operate in a neutral environment. They reflect underlying assumptions about what is considered credible knowledge and evidence. In Aotearoa, this can result in mātauranga Māori and lived experience being more readily questioned or required to meet additional validation thresholds. Therefore, impacting the effectiveness of Te Tiriti education.

Te Tiriti and information disorder

Te Tiriti information disorder takes many forms, creating a pattern of influence over time. Some common examples include:

- Binary interpretations of Te Tiriti that don't acknowledge historical, cultural and language complexities/understandings.
- Describing Te Tiriti as a means for privileging Māori over others, rather than as a basis for partnership and inclusion.
- Using quotes from historical figures or legal decisions to illegitimise Te Tiriti, whilst omitting essential context.
- Framing Te Tiriti education as ideological rather than a foundational part of the civics curriculum in Aotearoa.

These patterns are reinforced where dominant frameworks privilege simplified, Western interpretations of history and governance. Relational, contextual and Indigenous knowledge systems can be marginalised. In this way, information disorder is not only about inaccurate content, but about which forms of knowledge are recognised as legitimate.

In the widely circulated pamphlet (500,000 copies), Stop Co-Governance, authored by Julian Batchelor in 2023, a selective citation of Tā Apirana Ngata is used and illustrates how historical texts can be lifted from context and repurposed to support contemporary ideological arguments. The issue is not Ngata's scholarship itself but its decontextualisation and re-purposing to support specific anti-Tiriti narrative¹.

Information disorder² has unique implications in a Te Tiriti context because Te Tiriti o Waitangi sits at the intersection of history, Aotearoa identity, law, education, political debate and policy.

In Aotearoa, historical and constitutional literacy is uneven. This gives information disorder the opportunity to travel fast, displacing a more nuanced understanding of Te Tiriti. The impacts of this are wide-reaching and systemic. Harmful narratives polarise public discourse and disrupt the social cohesion and equity that many philanthropic organisations are working to advance. In contrast, Te Tiriti itself is not only a framework for partnership, but a blueprint that protects the conditions that make partnerships possible.

¹ For more detailed examples of mis/dis and mal information please refer to the resources listed in our references.

² We do not want to give unnecessary space or energy listing the many examples of information disorder impacting Te Tiriti education that we were subjected to reading in order to prepare this paper.

Why does Te Tiriti information disorder matter to philanthropy?

In Aotearoa, historical and constitutional literacy is uneven. This gives information disorder the opportunity to travel fast, displacing a more nuanced understanding of Te Tiriti.

The impacts of this are wide-reaching and systemic. Harmful narratives polarise public discourse and disrupt the social cohesion and equity that many philanthropic organisations are working to advance. In contrast, Te Tiriti itself is not only a framework for partnership, but a blueprint that protects the conditions that make partnerships possible.

For philanthropic organisations on a journey of working with Te Tiriti frameworks, or that have publicly stated a commitment to Te Tiriti, there is an accountability to understand information disorder and for deep engagement in addressing its impacts.

For Māori governors and decision-makers, these conditions can create an additional layer of responsibility. Alongside governance roles, there is often an expectation to interpret, translate and correct misunderstandings of Te Tiriti. This work is ongoing. It carries personal and collective weight. There is increasing presence of Tangata Tiriti, Pākehā and Tauīwi allies advocating for Te Tiriti understanding. This is important. However, the responsibility for holding and protecting meaning continues to sit disproportionately with Māori.

How can philanthropy address Te Tiriti information disorder?

Possible actions might include:

1. Investing in staff and trustee fluency in Te Tiriti principles and how these are translated into operational practice, as well as capability for recognising misinformation tactics.
2. Growing skills in evaluating assumptions about evidence, authority and knowledge validation, what counts and who decides.
3. Continuing collaborative, trust-based partnerships with tangata whenua – with clear and ongoing public communications about the constitutional need for, and mission-critical value of, these partnerships.
4. Investing in Tangata Tiriti, Pākehā and Tauīwi organisations to increase their understanding of Te Tiriti and their capability to operate within Te Tiriti frameworks. Further, support these organisations to work with their communities to strengthen Te Tiriti fluency, recognise information disorder, and develop relationships with tangata whenua. This ensures that responsibility for Te Tiriti understanding is shared across governance and leadership.
5. Invest in actions that protect against and reduce the traction of Te Tiriti information disorder, including:
 - Support recognition of Mātauranga Māori as authoritative and valid within public and institutional understanding.
 - Stewardship work that situates historical documents – including those of leaders like Tā Apirana Ngata – within their full intellectual and political context, growing public historical understanding.
 - Provision of accessible and high-quality public constitutional/Te Tiriti education, as well as building educator confidence and capability in Te Tiriti teaching.
 - Research translation through accessible public platforms.
6. Invest proactively in positive Te Tiriti narratives, including:
 - Positive stories of partnership from across the philanthropic and community sectors.
 - Support evidence-informed dialogue and advocacy.

Holding Knowledge and Responsibility

A further dimension of Te Tiriti information disorder is the lived experience of those required to navigate it.

For Māori leaders, governors and decision-makers, engagement with Te Tiriti is not abstract. It is grounded in lived and intergenerational knowledge. Within environments where information disorder is present, this can create an ongoing expectation to explain, justify and defend that reality.

This dynamic is not neutral. It is cumulative. It carries cultural, relational and personal weight.

There is genuine appreciation for allies who actively advocate for the intent and application of Te Tiriti education within Aotearoa. These relationships matter.

Recognising this dynamic shifts the focus from increasing knowledge alone to rebalancing and sharing the responsibility amongst us all within decision-making environments.

Conclusion

In an era where historical fragments can be repurposed and complex governance models reduced to slogans and 30-second sound bites, philanthropy's role expands beyond funding equity initiatives. It includes investing in the civic literacy, historical context and relational trust that make equity work sustainable, enduring and embraced across the diversity of community within Aotearoa.

Te Tiriti is not only a framework for partnership, but a blueprint that protects the conditions that make partnership possible.

*Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou
Ka ora ai te iwi*

With your food basket and my food basket, the people will thrive

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