Dealing with disinformation:

Strategies for digital citizen empowerment

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About
Digital Future Society

Digital Future Society is a non-profit transnational initiative that engages policymakers, civic society organisations, academic experts and entrepreneurs from around the world to explore, experiment and explain how technologies can be designed, used and governed in ways that create the conditions for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Our aim is to help policymakers identify, understand and prioritise key challenges and opportunities now and in the next ten years under key themes including public innovation, digital trust, citizen empowerment and equitable growth.

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Foreword

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Digital disinformation + coronavirus = infodemic

Why the COVID-19 pandemic makes a holistic approach to tackling (digital) disinformation more urgent than ever

Our teams were putting the final touches on this report as the world was about to be turned on its head. By now the timeline is familiar: on 8 December 2019 a patient in Wuhan City, China, came down with a strong pneumonia of unknown origin.[1] 31 December: Chinese health authorities inform the World Health Organization (WHO) about a cluster of atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province. On 9 January, China confirms the first death related to these cases. 12 January: China shares the genetic sequence of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). A day later, Thailand reports the first imported case of COVID-19. From then on, the pandemic picks up speed and rapidly takes us to 2 April, when a million cases are officially confirmed worldwide.[2]

A few weeks earlier, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus highlighted during his Munich Security Conference speech that COVID-19 is not simply a health crisis. "We're not just fighting an epidemic," declared Ghebreyesus, "we're fighting an infodemic" where disinformation is far quicker and potentially stronger than the virus.[3] Since then, examples of how this infodemic has spread in tandem with the coronavirus have become increasingly visceral.

When the Institute for Society and Technology (ITS) and Digital Future Society Think Tank teams first connected, our initial conversations were about Spain and Brazil, and a series of events that had brought disinformation practices in the age of digital media to the forefront of public debate. Like many, we were concerned with the media tactics associated with the rise of right-wing parties on both sides of the Atlantic, an increased polarisation of society, and a growing distrust in public institutions and scientific knowledge.[4] We were interested in exploring what the ITS team had learnt from the Brazilian national election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, but also previous elections,[5] and how WhatsApp, with over 120 million users in Brazil,

[1] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-spread-covid19-pandemic-timeline-milestones/

[2] https://www.devex.com/news/covid-19-a-timeline-of-the-coronavirus-outbreak-96396

[3] https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference

[4] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305119885328

[5] https://www.codingrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Report_DataElections_PT_EN.pdf

had offered the perfect breeding ground for the spread of disinformation during the last election period.[6]

Right now, there is a global feeling of acceleration, of hurtling towards the future. This report on how to deal with disinformation from a citizen empowerment perspective puts us right at the centre of the coronavirus pandemic and its associated infodemic. As COVID-19 propagates worldwide, so does disinformation. We are constantly subjected to an unseen scale of data collection in our digital lives, including data about our whereabouts and social interactions. We watch the daily news on the virus spread and contagion. We also hear a lot of noise and consume vast amounts of social media content, often related to or fed by the same public institutions that should be leading us in this time of uncertainty.

Global leaders have been drivers of polarization of information related to the coronavirus pandemic. Some have pushed one view and quickly moved to another, such as those in northern Italy and the UK. Others have fully dismissed the crisis, such as Bolsonaro, who likened the virus to a "measly cold,"[7] calling the lockdowns a "media trick,"[8] or promoting a massive TV ad campaign with the slogan "BrazilCannotStop."[9]

Online conversations about the novel coronavirus are constantly evolving and becoming more polarised – all while feeding hate, racism and xenophobia, conspiracy theories, health misinformation and geopolitical tensions. A confluence of existing clusters of online disinformation are mixing under the coronavirus tag in unprecedented ways.[10] While the precise outcomes of this clustering are still unknown, they should not be underestimated. Citizen empowerment to understand, de-activate and break these infodemic "chains" is more urgent than ever before. The dark atmosphere breeding online is likely to slowly permeate our streets and communities. Just recently, protesters in the small town of Novi Sanzhary in Ukraine attacked buses with evacuees brought from China based on a fake email claiming that passengers were infected with COVID-19.[11]

By now we have all seen how the pandemic is making so many social inequities and existing social problems more apparent. Those working front-line jobs delivering basic services that have enabled the quarantine of millions are the same people so often referred to as the "working poor."[12] The list goes on: the precarity of gig workers, the invisibility of those feeding the informal economy, the fragility of healthcare systems. Digital disinformation will add an unknowable layer of complexity to all of these areas and more. Like the coronavirus, the global infodemic knows no borders. Disinformation does not affect everyone in the same way; it feeds on poverty, inequality, anger, and despair. That is to say, the digitally illiterate, the less educated, and the Global South are more prone to disinformation and will suffer more acutely from its consequences.

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[6] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/30/whatsapp-fake-news-brazil-election-favoured-jair-bolsonaro-analysis-suggests

[7] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus.html

[8] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/23/brazils-jair-bolsonaro-says-coronavirus-crisis-is-a-media-trick

[9] https://www.france24.com/en/20200328-brazil-s-bolsonaro-questions-coronavirus-statistics-says-sorry-some-will-die

[10] https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/Graphika_Report_Covid19_Infodemic.pdf

[11] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51581805

[12] https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/27/coronavirus-revive-west-welfare-states-solidarity/

Disinformation is inherent to any information ecosystem. As we note in the report, it has existed long before coronavirus, and will remain long after the virus has been tamed. However, what we are currently witnessing and personally experiencing is an unprecedented scale and weaponization of information. We need to get a step ahead of this process and anticipate the real social consequences being bred online. The topics of disinformation being clustered under the coronavirus tag are not new, but their promoters have been using the pandemic to push their agendas even harder. We need to support, care for and empower those that will suffer the hardest impact of this crisis while we provide the tools to narrow the digital divide, inequality and marginalisation. Only then can we move a step closer to reduce the "privileged" position that the disinformation clusters have on coronavirus right now online.

With this very timely report, ITS and the Digital Future Society Think Tank advocate for the need to understand and act upon disinformation from a holistic perspective. First and foremost, we need to prioritise cooperation – global digital cooperation that favours a multi-stakeholder and multi-strategy approach. The multidimensional crisis that we are currently living has only reinforced this need and the only way out, as Yuval Noah Harari has expressed in multiple recent articles, is through global solidarity, exchange and cooperation at different levels with the support and willingness of a "well-informed public."[13] Secondly, we must avoid feeding the polarisation of public debate and our society. We need to practice empathy in our communities, and privilege science over populist discourse. Digital and media literacy is crucial in the face of this crisis, and now more than ever we must invest in solutions based on the holistic approach described in this report.

Lastly, we need to tackle, understand and act upon each of the three phases of misinformation: production, dissemination and consumption. While the production chain might be harder to identify and target, the last two phases can be mitigated by the actions of users as critical and aware consumers of content. Apps and oversight boards for social media platforms might help, but functional techno-solutionism alone will not put an end to digital disinformation.

Carina Lopes, Head of Digital Future Society Think Tank

Fabro Steibel, Executive Director at the Institute of Technology and Society of Rio de Janeiro

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[13] https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75

Contents

Executive Summary

The dissemination of false or misleading information is not a new or simple tactic. It has been a common practice, especially in political arenas, since ancient times. However, the phenomenon has evolved considerably as society embarks on the fourth industrial revolution, with disinformation in the digital sphere becoming increasingly difficult to identify, classify and counteract.

When Oxford Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as the 2016 word of the year,[14] it became clear that societies worldwide were facing a major paradigm shift that saw terms like "alternative facts" enter official orders of the day.[15] This shift reflects not only societal transformations, but also a decline in an essential ingredient for social cohesion: trust. Such changes fuel the spread of disinformation, defined as the deliberate sharing of false or deceptive information with the intention to do harm. This is particularly troubling since access to information is a form of empowerment for citizens, whose ability to engage in issues of public interest from climate change to gender equality depends on the amount of factual knowledge they possess. In that sense, technologies like social media play a crucial role in facilitating access to information and advocacy processes by stimulating citizen participation.

In the interest of promoting citizen empowerment in the age of disinformation, this report seeks to understand what disinformation is, why its effects are so damaging, and how policymakers can tackle its negative impacts. Underpinned by the hypothesis that citizens can and should be empowered by better information production, consumption, and circulation, this report addresses two research questions:

- **Which tools, initiatives and policies are already working to help citizens become more critical consumers of information?**

- **How can policymakers and practitioners be better informed on systemic, long-term approaches to deal with disinformation?**

To answer these questions, the research was based on the analysis of five different case studies featuring initiatives led by a variety of stakeholders, who apply a multidimensional approach to address the problem of disinformation. This report is an attempt to understand such a pressing issue for our democracies.

First, we lay out an analysis of the state of the art about disinformation, starting with its historical roots through its mainstreaming and weaponisation with the rise of the internet and social media platforms. Second, the report examines the stakeholders involved in this issue as well as the strategies they are implementing to combat disinformation. Five international initiatives tackling disinformation are analysed, including the main challenges faced and how each might be replicated in other contexts. Finally, the report lays out three sets of recommendations for policymakers and other players in media and technology ecosystems, drawing on the success factors identified in each case study.

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[14] Oxford Languages 2016

[15] NBC News 2017

Glossary
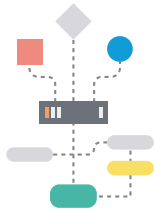
Algorithm

A procedure for solving a mathematical problem in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation.
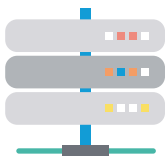
Bot

Short for robot, an autonomous program designed to interact with other systems or users in specific ways. A bot usually performs predetermined tasks. It also refers to the use of automation on social media. In the context of disinformation, bots are often designed to emulate real users.
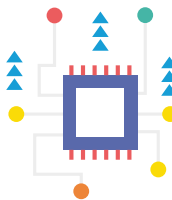
Computational propaganda

The use of digital tools like bots to manipulate public opinion by amplifying or suppressing political content, disinformation, or hate speech on social media networks.
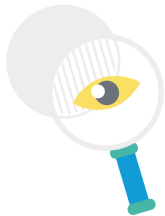
Confirmation bias

Coined by British psychologist Peter Watson in 1960, the term explains the tendency of individuals to remember, interpret or search for information in order to confirm initial beliefs or hypotheses.
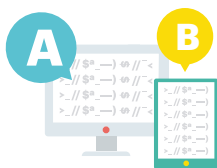
Digital literacy

An individual's ability to find, evaluate, and compose clear information through writing and other media on various digital platforms. Digital literacy does not replace traditional forms of literacy, but rather builds on the skills that underpin them.

Disinformation

False, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm.[16] It includes:

- False context: Genuine content purposely presented out of its original context.

- Impostor content: When genuine sources are impersonated.

- Manipulated content: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated.

- Fabricated content: New content designed to deceive and do harm. This type of content can be in a textual format, such as completely fabricated news sites, or it can be visual, when a graphic or video is created with false, inaccurate or misleading information.

Empowerment

The process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in terms of personal agency (controlling one's life and claiming one's rights).
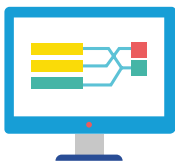
Fact-checking

The act of checking factual assertions in a non-fictional text in order to determine the veracity and correctness of each statement. This may be done before or after the text has been published or otherwise disseminated.
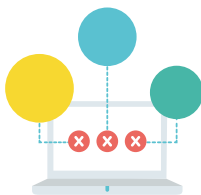
Fake news

While the term has no straightforward or commonly understood meaning, it is often used to explain the phenomenon of information manipulation during and since the 2016 federal election in the United States. Because the term "news" refers to verifiable information in the public interest, information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news in the first place. In this sense, "fake news" is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information that does meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest — i.e. "real news."[17]

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[16] Real411.org (n.d.)

[17] UNESCO, Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training

Freedom of expression

The ability of an individual or group to express their beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and emotions about different issues free from government censorship. In addition to being guaranteed in the constitutions of countries including the United States, France and Brazil, this right is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
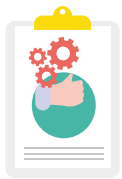
Filter bubble

A state of intellectual isolation that can allegedly result from personalised searches when an algorithm determines what information a user sees based on that user's personal data, such as location, click behaviour and search history. As a result, users rarely encounter information that challenges their viewpoints, thereby becoming isolated in cultural or ideological bubbles.

Hate speech

Abusive or threatening speech or writing that expresses prejudice against a particular group, especially on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation.

Hoax

A falsehood deliberately fabricated to masquerade as truth.

Malinformation

Information that is based on reality but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, or country. An example is a news article that reveals a person's sexual orientation without justification for the public interest.

Media literacy

An educational approach that provides a framework to access, analyse, evaluate, create, and participate with messages in a variety of forms, from print to video to the internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens to participate in a democracy.

Misinformation

Information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true. It includes:

- Satire and parody: Satire and parody can be considered an art form. However, as more and more citizens obtain news via social media, confusion as to whether content is satirical is increasingly common.

- False connection: When headlines, visuals or captions have little or nothing to do with the content.

- Misleading content: Misleading use of information to frame issues or individuals in certain ways by cropping photos or selectively editing quotes or statistics.

Propaganda

Information packaged in a certain way to influence people — voters, for example — that does not necessarily convey factual truth, but rather focuses on eliciting emotional reactions to an idea or message.

Psychographics

A qualitative methodology used to describe consumers' psychological attributes. Psychographics have been applied to the study of personality, values, opinions, attitudes, interests, and lifestyles. With social media, digital marketing actions are based on users' personal data to create those profiles and then, choose the public target for commercial or political propaganda.
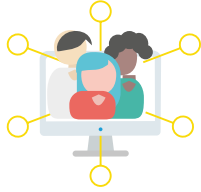
Socialcasting

A new model for information distribution in which many (people, outlets, sources) speak to many, as on social media. Contrasts with the broadcasting model, where one or few (people, outlets, sources) speak to many.

Social media platforms[18]

The term refers to interactive computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities or online networks.

Zero-rating

Zero-rating is the practice of providing "free" online browsing under certain conditions for users, such as restricting access to certain websites or platforms, or subsidising the service with advertising.

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[18] This report uses the term "platforms" to refer to social media platforms unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

Disinformation is old news

The dissemination of false or misleading information is by no means a new tactic. It has been a popular political strategy used throughout history and its roots date back to ancient times, when soon-to-be Emperor of Rome Octavian spread propaganda to discredit his rival, Antony.[19] Other notable instances, such as during the 1899 Boer War or the establishment of the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in 1933 Germany, demonstrate how the logic of disinformation is deeply entrenched in politics and primarily seeks emotional appeal, especially during moments of crisis.

While disinformation is not new, the methods, strategies and technologies for its success have evolved significantly over time. The method used in ancient Rome — the spread of slogans on coins — was updated centuries later with the invention of the printing press, which increased the reach of information and reshaped the logic of its production, consumption and distribution. Approximately four centuries later, these dynamics experienced another shift when broadcasting began to serve as the basis for communications and radio and television became the most widely-used mass communication channels.

With the increased sophistication of telecommunications, disinformation has now gone digital. The widespread use of the internet in the 1990s fuelled exponential growth in amounts and flows of information, considered revolutionary and emancipating at the time. The very notion of citizen empowerment took on a new meaning with what was thought to be a promising tool for power redistribution.[20] According to scholar Manuel Castells, the internet is the basis of a network society and works intrinsically to incorporate ever more people and resources.[21] It follows that empowerment can come from the possibility to access those resources and influence information flows for decision-making. Even marginalised groups can use the internet to gain influence in the digital public sphere and shape realities according to their ideas and strategies.[22]

The evolution of the internet itself has had important consequences for citizen empowerment.[23] For example, its diffusion dynamics have shifted from broadcasting to socialcasting, where users become "prosumers" that not only consume but also produce information. The development of social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube

[19] Posetti and Matthews 2018

[20] Mansell 2016

[21] Castells 2009

[22] Castells 2011

[23] Naik and Shivalingaiah 2008

facilitates content production and empowers marginalised voices to occupy once exclusive arenas. Nevertheless, content production differs greatly from news production, which implies investigative methodologies and fact-checking processes. As journalism also goes digital, it becomes even easier for ill-informed actors to influence public debates through the production of misleading content.

Another important element to consider is the business models of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.[24] In the context of citizen empowerment and disinformation, two factors are relevant: the rewarding of inflammatory or polarising content and the attention economy principle.[25] Social media algorithms prioritise and amplify content that generates more clicks. In the attention economy where time and attention are scarce resources, people need stronger incentives to continue using a service or product. For this reason, platforms are designed to fuel continuous use, not only by rewarding clicks but also through features such as the infinite scroll.

Disinformation involves different stakeholders who essentially strive for distinct — and in many cases opposing — goals. While malicious parties conduct disinformation campaigns to manipulate public discourse, democratic governments and civil society organisations strive to maintain democratic values in the public sphere. Media actors, from independent to mainstream players, are also key stakeholders, as are platforms. Finding common ground between a plurality of actors requires an inclusive multi-stakeholder approach.

This poses one of the biggest challenges to tackling disinformation since information is an empowering tool for citizens, who engage in public interest issues based on the amount of knowledge they possess.[26] In that sense, social media plays an important role in facilitating access to information and to advocacy, stimulating increased participation and activism. For instance, social media platforms are gaining traction in elections, with some studies suggesting their power in spreading electoral propaganda exceeds that of television in countries like Brazil.[27]

When it comes to strategies to mitigate disinformation, there is no silver bullet. On one hand, a diverse set of stakeholders is fundamental in order to gain a holistic understanding of the scenario and citizens' needs. On the other, different strategies can be developed by each or a combination of stakeholders such as fact-checking, media and digital literacy programmes, technological tools and modifications on platforms and public policies. In this regard, the goal of this report is to address the issue of disinformation from a citizen empowerment lens, providing theoretical and practical insights into disinformation mitigation. Two research questions led the work:

- **Which tools, initiatives and policies are in place to empower citizens become more critical consumers of information?**

- **How can we better inform policymakers and practitioners on systemic and longer-term approaches to deal with disinformation?**

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[24] Bradshaw and Howard 2018

[25] Amnesty International 2019

[26] Goldzweig et al. 2019

[27] VEJA 2018

To answer these questions, the report first examines the state of the art of disinformation, from its historical roots through to its digital weaponisation on the internet and social media platforms. Next comes a comprehensive overview of key stakeholders involved in disinformation and citizen empowerment. Against this backdrop, governments, civil society organisations, media corporations, tech platforms and multilateral bodies have been implementing different strategies to counter the massive spread of disinformation and mitigate its negative social consequences. For the purpose of this report, four of these strategies have been identified and will be explored further:

1 The creation of **fact-checking agencies** or collaborative projects to verify news such as Newtral

2 **Digital and/or media literacy initiatives,** as in the cases of Media Monitoring Africa and Chicas Poderosas

3 The development of **technological tools** like that of CoFacts in Asia

4 **Public policies** crafted at national and regional levels, such as those developed in the European Union

The analysis of each case study demonstrates how each strategy has made gains in the broader public understanding of and empowerment in the face of the disinformation phenomenon. The final section of this report presents three sets of recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders identified in Section 2, drawing on key learnings obtained from the initiatives analysed in the case studies. It is paramount that policymakers take action based on evidence with the goal of empowering citizens and civil society actors to fight disinformation. As those mandated to protect democracies and their citizens, policymakers are best placed to act on these recommendations.

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Disinformation
in context

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How (dis)information spreads in the digital age

It is on the internet, and especially through social media, that disinformation is more sophisticatedly constructed and spread. According to the Digital News Report 2019, the number of people using social media for news consumption grew between 2018 and 2019; more than half of the world's population (54%) uses Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram to get informed.[28] This trend demands deeper analysis and strategies to mitigate its negative consequences, especially in terms of citizen empowerment.

Two structural elements of the digital age are fundamental in understanding how platforms create the ideal conditions to spread disinformation. One is the exponential growth in information flows and the other is the difficulty of tracking original sources of information, especially in closed instant messengers such as WhatsApp. The sheer quantity of information flows in an "internet minute" is also indicative of this difficulty with 1 million Facebook logins, 41.6 million messages sent on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, 3.8 million Google searches and 4.5 million videos viewed on YouTube every minute.[29]

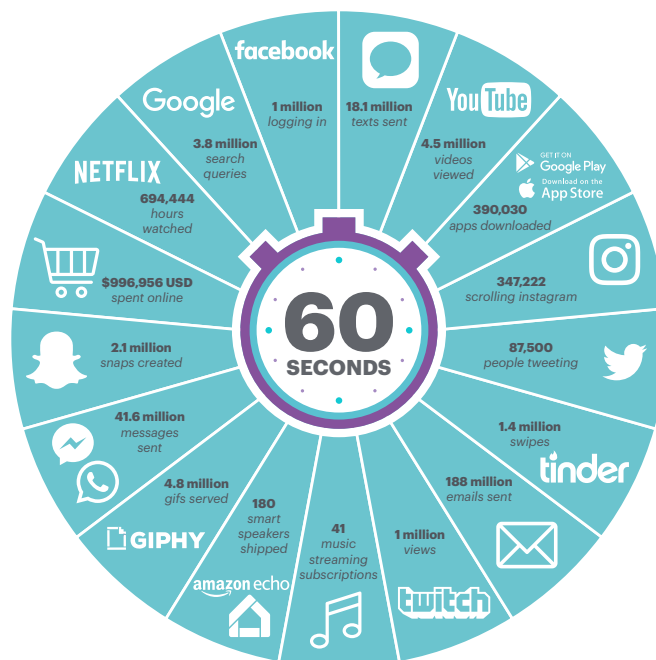Figure 1 - What happens in an internet minute? Image source: Lewis and Callahan 2019.

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[28] Newman et al. 2019

[29] Desjardins 2019

No single government, civil society organisation or company can control all the information circulating in the digital environment. Therefore, empowering citizens and media professionals to better understand the dynamics of information flows and encouraging the production and circulation of informed, high-quality content is necessary to mitigate the negative impacts of both mis- and disinformation.

In addition to changes in the scale and speed of information consumption and production, there is a network structure that favours the use of technologies, particularly social media, to manipulate information. The business models of social media platforms are based on collecting and processing personal data to train algorithms that define the content that reaches each user according to their psychographic profile.[30] This algorithmic infrastructure can lead to the formation of filter bubbles in which users only see information with which they are more likely to agree, thereby limiting public debate and barring access to contradictory opinions, the foundation of any democratic regime.

The use of automated bot armies has proven to be another tactic to make information go viral during different electoral processes around the world, including in the US, Brazil and India. The 2019 Troops Trolls and Troublemakers report detected organised disinformation campaigns in at least 48 countries, with instant messengers playing a central role.[31] The report concludes that "there is no doubt that individual social media users can spread hate speech, troll other users, or set up automated political communication campaigns. Unfortunately, this is also an organised phenomenon, with major governments and political parties dedicating significant resources towards the use of social media for public opinion manipulation."[32] The report also showed how authoritarian regimes use social media campaigns to target their own populations, while only a few target foreign publics. In contrast, almost every democracy in the sample conducted organised social media campaigns that target foreign publics, while campaigns by political parties targeted domestic voters. These findings highlight how attempts to polarise public debate during elections fuel the profusion of disinformation even in countries with a robust public communication system, such as the United Kingdom.

In the case of the 2018 Brazilian elections, a survey showed that 20% of the entire electoral debate was carried out by bots.[33] In a review by fact-checking agency Lupa of 100,000 political images, 46 of the 50 most widely shared images during the election were categorised as disinformation.[34] This data serves not only to demonstrate the risk to democracy, the right to information, political participation and better decision-making in these countries, but also the scale of the challenges faced by those seeking to counter the global disinformation crisis.

[30] Zuboff 2019

[31] Bradshaw and Howard 2017

[32] Ibid.

[33] FGV DAPP 2017

[34] Marés and Becker 2018

Beyond fake news

Disinformation must be understood as a systemic phenomenon that involves multiple actors and takes different forms. Seeking to understand it only from the logic of fake news is misguided, as it is an insufficient frame for sound analysis and the term itself engenders misinformation.[35] In his 2018 article Stop Talking About Fake News, philosophy researcher Joshua Habgood-Coote raises several discerning questions:

- Does fake news apply only to news spread by online news media, or can it occur in traditional media?

- Can fake news apply to an individual posting on social media without doing so on behalf of a news outlet? For example, can we apply this label to WhatsApp messages?

- Does satire or news parody fall under fake news?

- Does fake news apply to completely false stories, to partially true stories, or stories that are true but spread with malicious intent? For example, are true stories that are part of a flood of indistinguishable true and false stories considered fake news?

- Does fake news only apply to acts performed with certain kinds of intentions?

- Does fake news only apply to claims which are spread widely?[36]

To avoid the oversimplification of this term, it is essential to understand two core elements that characterise the phenomenon of disinformation: facticity and intentionality. Disinformation implies the intentional production and manipulation of fallacious information and seeks to damage a given actor that consumes it. In this sense, apart from completely falsified news itself, disinformation can be described as:

- News spread out of context

- With suppression of certain elements

- With false connections between the title and body of the stories or

- With intentionally manipulated media (images, text, videos, etc.)

It is also important to distinguish between disinformation and misinformation, which refers to misleading or false content produced and shared without intentional harm, either through journalistic misrepresentation or in the form of satire or parody. The latter cases may be considered as real information if the consumer has no prior knowledge of context to understand the humour and irony embedded within satirical content.

[35] Wardle 2017

[36] Habgood-Coote 2018

Misinformation scenarios should be considered when analysing the extent of information dissemination in the digital age, so that measures to combat and remediate harm are not disproportionate.

7 TYPES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

SATIRE OR PARODY
No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool

MISLEADING CONTENT
Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual

IMPOSTER CONTENT
When genuine sources are impersonated

FABRICATED CONTENT
New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm

FALSE CONNECTION
When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content

FALSE CONTEXT
When genuine content is shared with false contextual information

MANIPULATED CONTENT
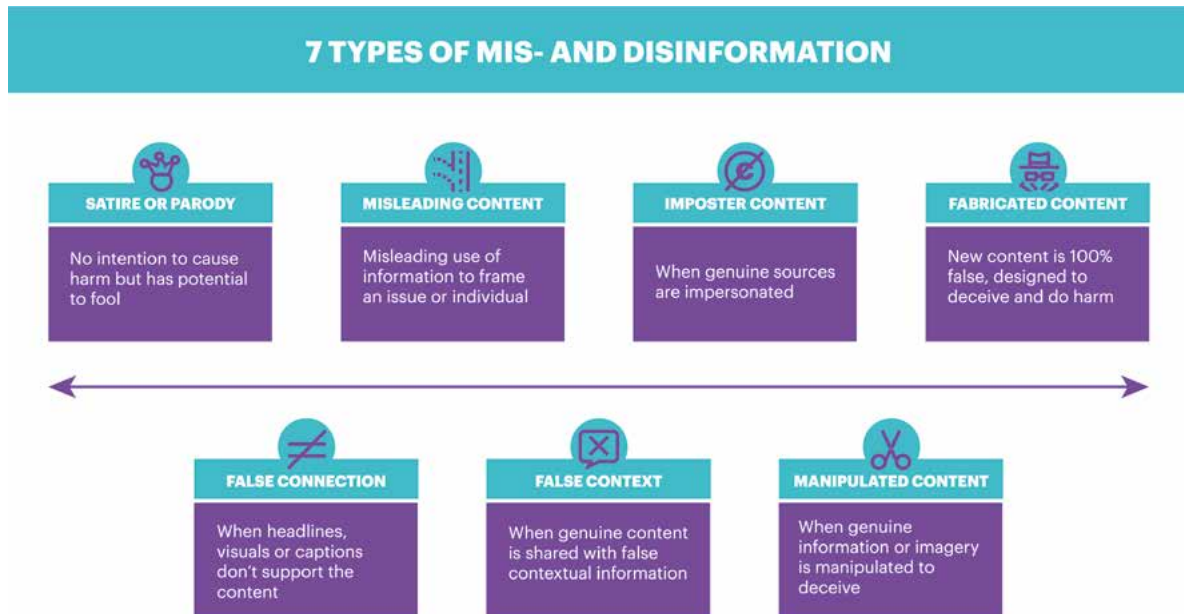When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive

Figure 2 - 7 types of mis- and disinformation. Image source: Wardle 2017

Why is disinformation so challenging?

Many academics have tried to understand why and how disinformation has become such a powerful global phenomenon, affecting different countries, social classes and political contexts. Most research efforts start from the assumption that news not only informs, but deepens political identities and points of view, the effect of which has proven fundamental for the viral spread of false content. In addition to the experience of "information overload" that overwhelms the attention and causes readers to skim the headlines, it is important to emphasise the attractive potential of headlines and their effect on confirmation bias.[37] The latter is one of the reasons why people share information even if it is false: because it reinforces prior ideological positions and preconceptions about reality.

As social beings, humans tend to "collectivise" similar ideas and opinions to reinforce them, which makes us trust closer groups, such as friends, family or public figures we admire.[38] This adds to the technical aspect of disinformation, which has to do with how platforms and networks are built as well as the policies that govern them. For example, in countries such as Brazil, the so-called "zero-rating practice" creates favourable conditions for disinformation since it allows users to access only the headlines shared on instant messenger apps and social media, while access to the original publication (and consequently to the full content of the article) is reserved for users with higher data packages.[39] In addition to fomenting disinformation, this practice violates the principle of network neutrality enshrined in the Brazilian Internet Bill of Rights.[40]

On top of all these factors, a wide educational gap exists between citizens who can deal with new technologies and the new dynamics of information production, consumption and dissemination and those who struggle, especially older generations who are more prone to believe and share false content.[41] Not only do journalists mismatch knowledge about data use and new technologies for narrative building, but so do most social media users and consumers of information reflected in digital media. Factors such as filter bubbles, the use of bots for information manipulation, data collection and processing, and the very differences between disinformation and misinformation are not yet part of educational curricula or cultural milieu in many countries, especially in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

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[37] Cope and Molloy 2019

[38] Najle and Jones 2019

[39] Banis 2019

[40] Souza et al. 2017

[41] Guess et al. 2019

Disinformation as citizen disempowerment

Information is an essential tool for citizen empowerment and serves as the foundation of a robust democratic society. For the past 50 years, activists, researchers, and decision-makers have been advocating for access to information and the ability to share information to empower citizens, regardless of who and where they are. This is due to the power of information to mobilise, increase transparency and accountability, and stimulate participation, active citizenship, lifelong learning and social change. For instance, information was accorded a central role in national development processes in the 1960s. At that time, researchers demonstrated how information and communication could contribute to the modernisation of institutions in emerging economies.

The advent of social media platforms was a boon for freedom of expression advocates around the world who saw new ways for citizens to express themselves, share content, and personalise media consumption. Social media also plays an important role in raising awareness and translating it to action in the physical world. For instance, huge mobilisations for political change such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and the 2013 protests in Brazil were largely coordinated using social media platforms.

At the same time, many studies show that voters use social media as an informational source when deciding which candidate to vote for, turning them into hotbeds of political contention, automated social media account proliferation, and disinformation.[42] A strong democracy requires high-quality news from an independent media, a pluralistic climate of opinion, and the ability to negotiate public consensus.[43] However, powerful political actors are increasingly leveraging social media to manufacture consensus, manipulate public opinion, and subvert democratic processes, which can lead to the disempowerment of citizens.

Given this context, social media channels can be considered both arenas for the democratic debate of ideas, freedom of assembly and development of consensus as well as prone to the dissemination of disinformation thanks to their algorithmic infrastructure and business models. If citizens lack access to high-quality information about their political context, for instance, they cannot make decisions based on a constructive process of creating their own opinions and desires after analysing different points of view. Moreover, disinformation has the potential to deepen distrust not only in information but also in institutions, resulting in weaker democracies and disempowered citizens, unable to define the direction of their own futures.

A recent Mozilla survey found that disinformation is a top concern worldwide; only 3% of 60,000 respondents said they were not at all worried about it.[44] Another important finding showed that citizens feel powerless as individuals to do anything to combat disinformation.[45] Only 15% feel they have the necessary tools, while almost all respondents place responsibility on platforms like Facebook, Google, and YouTube, considering these platforms better equipped to address the issue. At the same time, 86% of all respondents cited education as the most important tool to tackle the problem of disinformation.[46]

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[42] VEJA 2018

[43] Bradshaw and Howard 2018

[44] Mozilla 2019

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

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Who can help?

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Identifying stakeholders and strategies

A variety of stakeholders have been trying to mitigate the negative consequences of disinformation using different strategies such as media and digital literacy, fact-checking, public policies and technological tools. While not an exhaustive list, this section provides an overview of the strategies being adopted worldwide. A more detailed and contextualized analysis of successful efforts and their commonalities will be assessed in the case studies section.

Regulation to combat disinformation

Many countries have enacted information laws for various reasons, whether to empower the government to remove false information from the internet, to block media deemed to threaten national security, or even to criminalise the sharing of false or misleading content online.[47] Nevertheless, using regulation to combat disinformation also invites criticism. These efforts may pose serious risks to freedom of expression and other fundamental rights, often viewed as potential avenues for censorship, online mass surveillance and other misguided responses. It is thus essential to understand the fine line between content regulation and censorship.

According to journalist and professor Mário Messagi, censorship is "something that is exercised prior to the publication of any content, even if it does not alter or prohibit it. Regulation is the establishment of rules of operation of an area. We cannot prevent anyone from saying or publishing whatever they want, but we must regulate, for example, how to exercise the right to reply [...]. Also, ensuring that opinion is free does not mean that it has no responsibilities."[48]

The grey area between regulation and censorship has real consequences for citizen empowerment. For instance, one week after the French parliament approved an anti-disinformation law, among the first of its kind in Europe, it was challenged in the country's constitutional court as a violation of freedom of speech.[49] Recent laws in Burkina Faso,[50] Cambodia,[51] Malaysia[52] and Kenya[53] have also been repelled in attempts to censor journalists. Countries like China, Cameroon, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Italy, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia have already made arrests based on "fake news."[54] These arrests are arguably ill-advised, based on broad legislations such as the illegality of a tweet for breaching "public

47 Funke and Flamini 2018

48 Declatra 2015

49 20 Minutes 2018

50 Ross 2019

51 Thul 2019

52 The Straits Times 2018

53 Committee to Protect Journalists 2018

54 Funke and Flamini 2018

order, religious values, public morals and privacy" or reporting "any news without being able to prove either its truth or good reason to believe it to be true."[55] At the same time, information laws or content regulation can also be empowering for citizens, protecting them from defamation or harm, as in the case of online harassment, for example. A balanced approach that takes these complexities into account is key.

Investing in media literacy to empower citizens

The promotion of media literacy has been a main strategy employed by a diverse array of stakeholders, from governments to civil society organisations. Moreover, governments are also realising the insufficiency of relying solely on regulation to tackle the mis- and disinformation problem. For instance, a UK parliamentary report on disinformation states the statutory duty of the Office of Communications is to promote media literacy, recommending it as "a fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths."[56] In addition to legislation, governments have launched or supported media literacy programmes in the UK[57] and Indonesia.[58] Other countries like Canada,[59] Finland,[60] and Australia[61] have already incorporated digital literacy into national educational curricula.

International organisations have also relied on media literacy as a tool for citizen empowerment by ensuring people can critically engage with information. Since 1970, UNESCO has funded global research into media literacy, publishing reports, curricula and policy guides. During the 2013 Global Forum for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy, the Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL) was launched.[62] This joint initiative of UNESCO and other international stakeholders such as the United Nation Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), UNICEF, Open Society Foundation, IREX, the European Commission and other partners has garnered the participation of 80 countries. The focus of the initiative is to "enable the media and information literacy community to speak as one voice on certain critical matters, particularly as it relates to policies and to provide a common platform for related networks and associations globally."[63]

The media's role in citizen empowerment

Media entities also have a part to play in mitigating both mis- and disinformation. Private actors are the ones running the platforms where disinformation campaigns originate and spread. Algorithm-based, advertising-driven social media dynamics have served as

[55] O'Grady 2018

[56] Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019

[57] BBC News 2018

[58] Gerakan Nasional Literasi Digital 2018

[59] Media Awareness Network 2010

[60] Kiili and Eskelä-Haapanen 2015

[61] Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority n.d.

[62] UNESCO 2013

[63] Ibid.

significant vehicles for false content. For this reason, measures that have been adopted by the private sector are included in this report, even when these do not necessarily aim to empower citizens. Whereas traditional media are striving to maintain trust and relevance in an increasingly digital space, it can be surmised that the main concern of major platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google is to respond to the flood of criticism they have been receiving on the subject.

Facebook claims that in the past two years, their "efforts to fight false news have expanded dramatically" and that "helping to protect elections" is a top priority.[64] For instance, Facebook created its own fact-checking initiative in collaboration with independent agencies certified by the International Fact-checking Network to identify false or misleading content and limit its circulation.[65] In parallel, Facebook has partnered with researchers around the world to study how disinformation and other problematic content spread on its platforms.[66]

The Facebook-owned service WhatsApp has also been engaged in funding research projects worldwide to better understand the problem of disinformation. WhatsApp has also supported media literacy programmes in the countries where it has the largest number of users, such as India, where the service is collaborating with seven organisations to discuss how to build and scale an educational programme.[67] WhatsApp has also partnered with the NASSCOM Foundation to provide Indian citizens of all ages with training to spot false information and to stay safe on WhatsApp.[68]

Together with Mozilla, Google, and Twitter, Facebook voluntarily signed the European Code of Practice on Disinformation in 2018. However, the following year's analysis of signatories' self-assessment reports reveals the extent to which these companies are falling short.[69] From Africa[70] to the European Union,[71] private sector efforts have been challenged as largely insufficient by both governments and civil society.

In contrast, the traditional media industry has seen the formation of partnerships between rival news organisations. For instance, in Norway, Faktisk was launched in 2017 — a collaboration between the four most widely-read Norwegian news outlets that has them fact-checking each other's reporting.[72] Similar collaborations can be found in the United States[73] and France.[74] The European Broadcasting Union's report on building audience and trust highlights the importance of joint media operations: "a fact-checking operation that is independent of its founders gets covered by various media outlets — more so than a single checking operation. Media groups that can debunk their own reports (and fund tools that do the same) is a bold signal of their commitment to corporate social responsibility."[75]

[64] About Facebook 2019

[65] Lyons 2018

[66] Funke 2019

[67] The Times of India 2018

[68] Chaturvedi 2019

[69] European Commission 2019

[70] Kozlowska 2018

[71] European Commission 2019

[72] Dahlback 2019

[73] Mantzarlis 2016

[74] Davies 2017

[75] Jääskeläinen and Olij 2018

A context-based approach

To counter the spread of mis- and disinformation in a more agile way, many governments, such as that of Nigeria[76] and the Netherlands,[77] turn to awareness-raising campaigns. Also, context matters; it is crucial to understand the agendas behind massive mis- and disinformation campaigns, especially in polarised jurisdictions where disinformation has served as a political weapon, foreign or domestic.[78] For instance, following the European Council's call to address Russian disinformation campaigns,[79] the East Stratcom Task Force was created.[80] To date, the Task Force has catalogued, analysed and raised awareness of over 7,000 cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation through a weekly Disinformation Review.[81] This initiative is designed to increase public awareness and understanding of Russian disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital disinformation and media manipulation.[82]

Other countries that have been suffering from massive political disinformation campaigns such as Brazil,[83] Mexico[84] and Italy[85] have published special sections on official government websites to counteract disinformation during election periods. However, these initiatives demand a more proactive attitude from citizens, who must seek out this information themselves. Also, as in the case of Mexico, government agencies may not enjoy sufficient political independence and receive criticism for only checking news in ways that benefit incumbent politicians.[86] Other, more innovative approaches can emerge from governments when they set aside political agendas. One such example comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where disinformation around the Ebola epidemic jeopardised adequate responses to reach patients and contain the spread of the virus. The government created a tip line to counter disinformation about the disease so that communications experts could rebut rumours with accurate information via WhatsApp or local radio in real time.[87]

These initiatives, whether derived from public policies, the private sector or civil society, are generally aimed at young audiences. In contrast, fact-checking strategies are often targeted at the adult or senior audience, being considered the most likely to inadvertently share false information.[88] However, digital literacy cannot be acquired through formal education alone, especially if the goal is to reach a broader audience. In fact, one European Audiovisual Observatory report found that only 7 out of 145 projects evaluated in the study target "older people."[89] As the case studies analysed in this report show, there is a tendency to combine media literacy approaches with fact-checking tools to raise awareness and strengthen citizens' media literacy skills simultaneously. For instance, projects such as Africa Check and CoFacts provide target users with tools and resources to learn how to spot disinformation and fact-check news themselves.

[76] Ebuzor 2018

[77] Pieters 2018

[78] Higgins 2017

[79] European Council 2015

[80] European External Action Service 20188

[81] EUvsDisinfo 2019

[82] Ibid.

[83] Tribunal Superior Eleitoral 2018

[84] Verificado 2019

[85] Commissariato di P.S. online n.d.

[86] Tardáguila 2019

[87] Spinney 2019

[88] Guess et al. 2019

[89] European Audiovisual Observatory 2016

It is important to highlight that media literacy initiatives should not be promoted as a panacea against the disinformation crisis, but should complement a more holistic approach. As such, mainstream media and social media platforms have a key role to play alongside citizens and political institutions in tackling this crisis. In this regard, innovative public policies, technological tools and rethinking network structures, algorithms and architecture policies are critical to address the underlying causes of mis- and disinformation while there is no regulatory solution at hand.

The measures taken under the Action Plan Against Disinformation launched in 2018 by the European Union offer an instructive example not only of innovative public policy but also of a more comprehensive approach.[90] Although deeper engagement is still needed, the Code of Practice on Disinformation represents the first time that key industry players have agreed, on a voluntary basis, to self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation. Additionally, the Rapid Alert System is a groundbreaking example of governments coordinating a response to ongoing disinformation campaigns, though it too has fallen short of expectations.[91] As the initiatives mentioned thus far are too new to measure their effectiveness, this report examines more mature initiatives in the next section.

What we have seen so far is how disinformation is a social, context-bound phenomenon, as well as a highly complex technological one. Thus, any impactful approach must be grounded in a comprehensive and holistic strategy that goes beyond regulation. Tackling disinformation as it emerges is as important as understanding its root causes, as is providing the right tools for the different stakeholders involved. The remainder of this report delves further into specific strategies for action, aiming to shed light on what has proved successful in terms of mitigating the negative effects of disinformation in different countries and contexts.

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90 European Commission 2018

91 Apuzzo 2019

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Case studies

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Hands-on success stories

Disinformation is a complex phenomenon that entails a multidimensional approach to solutions.[92] This report showcases five different initiatives that have been working to combat disinformation, following such an approach not only by mitigating negative effects but also by focusing on increasing citizen empowerment to deal with the phenomenon. Each case study unpacks the context in which the initiative was developed, how strategies were implemented as well as each initiative's relative impact, considered in quantitative terms (for instance, number of citizens affected), as well as qualitative, such as projected sustainability of the project.[93]

The case studies were compiled using both primary and secondary sources, including interviews with individuals directly involved in each initiative. The cases were selected based on the following criteria:

- Application of at least two of the strategies previously outlined for tackling disinformation (fact-checking, tech tool, media literacy, or public policy)

- Geographic balance and diversity

- Demonstration of impact according to the initiative's own theory of change

- Innovation: developing a new tool, strategy or practice to tackle disinformation while empowering citizens

The case studies also highlight the main lessons learned in order to draw conclusions on how to tackle the problem, as they expose shortcomings in implementation processes while revealing possibilities for innovative solutions. By presenting each case in the manner described above, it is possible to identify initiatives or strategies that could be replicated in different contexts or even scaled, as policymakers could learn from the approaches and solutions presented in this piece to implement in their local contexts.

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92 European Commission High-level Group on fake news and online disinformation 2018

93 So and Staskevicius 2015

CoFacts

CoFacts is a collaborative fact-checking project based in Taiwan that combines a chatbot with a hoax database, integrated within LINE, the most popular messaging app in Thailand and Taiwan.[94] This form of spreading disinformation is especially challenging to control and is common worldwide. Although LINE is not the most popular messaging app in every country, the solution developed by CoFacts is replicable. In addition, the project's trajectory and evolution serve to illustrate how an in-depth analysis of the target audience and the accessibility of the proposed solution is important to ensure its adoption and impact in terms of citizen empowerment.

Context

In Taiwan, dubious information often circulates through LINE, a popular instant messenger app with more than 194 million users worldwide.[95] In countries such as India and Brazil, for example, disinformation becomes viral much faster within instant messenger applications than on public social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. The CoFacts initiative presents an innovative way to combat disinformation on closed messaging platforms.

Initiative

The project was the idea of web developer Johnson Liang, winner of the g0v hackathon organised by the Taiwanese government in late 2016. After receiving part of the g0v Civic Tech Prototype Grant which distributed 315,000 EUR among 24 projects, the CoFacts initiative was deployed. Since launch, the user base has grown steadily, reaching 30,000 users in 2018.

Users can send any information received in closed chats to the CoFacts chatbot integrated within LINE. The chatbot then checks whether the information matches any entry in the hoax database maintained by a collaborative group of fact-checkers. If there is a match, it is sent to the user. If not, the new information is added to a queue for editors to check and further update the database. The project aims to empower citizens to quickly access different perspectives directly within an app they already use, while simultaneously empowering fact-checkers to reach a broader audience.

Founder Liang's vision is for the entire population of Taiwan to be able to quickly access different perspectives on information that circulates on digital platforms, enabling them to form opinions and make decisions based on critical thinking while staying protected from manipulation.

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[94] Iqbal 2019

[95] Ibid.

"In an era that is [saturated by] information and opinions, diverse perspectives may be time-consuming to find," says Liang. "With CoFacts, everyone can freely access the findings curated by editors. In this way, when users encounter disinformation in group chats, they can get the verification they need more quickly, and focus on persuading the others in the group to not trust the rumour. Hopefully some of these users may come to CoFacts and become editors that contribute replies for other LINE users."

Takeaways

The most prominent challenge for CoFacts is scalability: there are simply not enough active editors to process the volume of potentially false content. 36 new messages appear in the database every day, with fewer than 4 active editors to respond. Another challenge is lag time; a problem faced by all fact-checkers.

As Liang explains, "Fact-checking individual articles is simply too slow. By the time an article has been checked, many users have already read the article and much of the damage has already been done."

When the project was launched in 2016, its founders wanted to help citizens who did not know how to search online and were more likely to unknowingly forward disinformation within closed messaging platforms. It turns out that the people they want to serve (those who don't know how to use Google) also had problems understanding the chatbot interface. Also, the chatbot data indicates that CoFacts users are mostly young people under the age of 40.

For this reason, the project's target audience has changed to those who are already aware of the disinformation problem and want to help to spread different viewpoints but feel overwhelmed by the amount of disinformation they receive in LINE and feel helpless fighting disinformation alone. According to CoFacts' founders, these people should be encouraged, supported and work together so that citizens never have to face disinformation alone.

Chicas Poderosas

Chicas Poderosas is a unique initiative featuring empowerment on the production side of information. The organisation not only focuses on strengthening and building capacity of marginalised media producers by bringing new voices to the public debate in Latin America, but also creates a support network for journalists coming from collectives such as women of colour, LGBTQ and other marginalised groups.

Context

Latin America's historical background of colonisation has proven to be fertile ground for the entrenchment of conservative religious beliefs and patriarchal structures that contributed to the exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from the public sphere. From politics to the formal labour market, these demographics do not occupy many positions of power; less than a third of Congressional seats in the region are occupied by women.[96] In media, the numbers are even scarcer; one study found that in Mexico only 1% of televisions is owned by women.[97]

Within this context, Chicas Poderosas tries to solve two problems. First, the digital revolution that is quickly disrupting journalism: media outlets and newsrooms that cannot or do not incorporate the technological dimension are not surviving. Secondly, there is a lack of women leadership within news and media organisations, leading to weak representation in terms of whose voices are heard and which stories are told. Chicas Poderosas' motto is "when women are not making the news, we lose 50% of the stories." In that sense, without all voices being represented in the media, societies are making less informed decisions, and half of the population is less empowered than the other.

Initiative

The initiatives incubated by Chicas Poderosas are spread across Latin America, contributing directly to media and digital literacy for citizens. Chicas Poderosas now has over 5,500 members across 18 countries.

Considering representation and leadership as core foundations, the organisation's work is based on capacity building towards empowerment and skill development for women journalists and media professionals. According to the CEO of the organisation, "we use storytelling to show the world the reality of people — mostly women — who are made invisible. When they are not seen, no policy or legislation is created considering their needs." Chicas Poderosas applies at least two of the empowerment strategies identified in this report: media/digital literacy and fact-checking.

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[96] Gonzalez 2018

[97] Ibid.

The first is implemented together with news production professionals. Through "mediathons", Chicas Poderosas trains women in technical skills, from content production to data management, and in leadership skills, such as emotional intelligence and team management. The idea is for participants to bring this knowledge back to their own organisations. In 2019, Chicas Poderosas ran three mediathons, in Colombia, Argentina, and Mexico. Over 100 women were trained in each event, which were aimed at marginalised communities and territories such as Popayán, Colombia, where the content focused on environmental issues.

The second strategy, fact-checking, is carried out through New Ventures Lab (NVL), an accelerator for small women-run media outlets, to support their development. From 2018 to 2019, the organisation implemented two editions of NVL, each consisting of week-long training sessions and mentorship over a period of 20 weeks. Both editions had 30 participants. Delivering more than 200 hours of mentoring and online training, the groups were supported by 80 high-performance mentors throughout. Many of the organisations selected to take part in NVL are fact-checking agencies, implementing innovative approaches to this strategy such as humour — with meme-based debunking — and channel choice, for example using WhatsApp to spread checks that were reported on that channel.

Takeaways

Two challenges are worth mentioning: the first connected to disinformation attacks and the second related to financial sustainability. Chicas Poderosas as an organisation has suffered from disinformation attacks, questioning their work and credibility of their team, accusing them of "charlatanism", especially with their own fact-checking product, El Poder de Elegir. In order to overcome this, the team created a strategy of explaining step-by-step how the process of fact-checking works. After overcoming the crisis, El Poder de Elegir was translated into Portuguese, attracting Brazilian users.

The second challenge, financial sustainability, is a common hurdle among civil society organisations. Even though Chicas Poderosas was successful securing funds for some of their projects, they have not been able to obtain core funding to support their eight full-time members. Therefore, the very existence of the organisation is threatened.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA)

MMA has been implementing media literacy initiatives that increase transparency and civil society's capacity of scrutiny since 1993. Even though the project to combat disinformation was developed specifically for the 2019 South African national election, it is innovative for combining four different strategies: media literacy, public policy advocacy, fact-checking and development of tools for civil society. The project emerged from a partnership with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), media organisations and a media regulatory agency, resulting in a tight collaboration between different stakeholders and enabling project scalability and continuity over the years. MMA is an important success story that can be replicated by other countries facing viral disinformation threats during electoral periods. The project shows that choosing a multiple strategy approach and creating an ecosystem of partners are critical to achieving a positive impact, both in terms of citizen empowerment and effective governance.

Context

With disinformation being one of the key threats endangering a free and fair election, Media Monitoring Africa and the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa launched a portal designed to combat it. MMA contributed its expertise and work on disinformation, and experience in developing digital literacy campaigns. The specific problems the initiative tackles are:

- Threats posed by manipulative agents through disinformation in digital media

- The large gap for dealing with disinformation on social media locally and in relation to elections both in terms of corrective action and transparency

- A climate of fear, powerlessness and possible apathy on the part of citizens, and

- Lack of knowledge and awareness, specifically in terms of what disinformation is and how to stop it

Initiative

Established in 1993 in Johannesburg, MMA has evolved from a pure media monitoring project to an innovative organisation that implements media strategies for change using technology, social media and data.

In general, MMA acts as a watchdog, promoter of ethical and fair journalism and supporter of human rights. Their vision is to create a responsible, quality media environment that enables engaged and informed citizenry in Africa and the world. To realise this vision, MMA works to develop a free, fair, ethical, and critical media culture across the continent by addressing three key areas from a human rights-based perspective: media ethics, media quality, and media freedom.

In the 24 years since its inception, MMA has undertaken the following actions, leading to a theory of change based on:

- Disseminating findings of media research and analysis

- Generating original rights-based content in mainstream media

- Training journalists, audiences and media executives on rights-based reporting and media literacy

- Undertaking media lobbying and advocacy

Through these actions, MMA seeks to contribute to a diverse, ethical and accountable media culture with which citizens will engage more critically and constructively. A specific example is their partnership with the IEC during the South African elections of 2019, for which MMA developed the following tools for fact-checking and countering disinformation:

- A Draft Code for the IEC to use in dealing with disinformation in the lead up to elections.

- The Real411[98] digital disinformation reporting platform (a world first), to enable citizens to flag disinformation in a matter of minutes. Complaints can be made about content in any of the 11 official languages of South Africa. The system enables users to view and track their complaints as they go through the system.

- A Digital Disinformation Complaints Committee that ensured complaints would be reviewed by 3 experts before being submitted to the IEC Directorate of Electoral Offences.

- The Political Advert Repository (PAdRe)[99] is another first for South Africa. PAdRe was supported by all political parties to upload their online ads to enable people to discern real ads from false ones.

- Journalism Online Harassment Portal - The pre-election period saw an increase in online harassment of journalists; the portal served as a method to report and respond to the attacks.

- In addition to the PAdRe and the Real411 system, MMA created additional tools such as RoveR,[100] Open and Disclose,[101] and KnowNews.[102]

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[98] Real411.org.za n.d.

[99] Padre.org.za 2019

[100] Rover.directory n.d.

[101] Openanddisclose.org.za n.d.

[102] Newstools.co.za n.d.

In terms of media literacy, part of the Real411 initiative included a communication strategy that played radio ads in all 11 official languages. The campaign was also supported by articles, media interviews and online campaigns. The strength and credibility of the Real411 system was secured through a partnership between MMA, the IEC, South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) and the National Press Council. The complaints and how they were resolved were published on the Real411 website, creating transparency. Ultimately, the impact of Real411 is evidenced by the IEC's desire to integrate the system into its operations for all future elections.

Takeaways

MMA learned that while journalists supported the portal, they did not make use of it to report any incidents, signalling the need to find more effective ways of addressing online harassment. Also, while all political parties had committed to the IEC that they would upload adverts to PAdRe, only three parties actually did. The critical need for such a portal, especially given the rise of disinformation and microtargeted adverts, means MMA needs an improved engagement strategy for the next election. According to the MMA, the following elements contributed to the initiative's success:

- The existence of key partnerships to combat disinformation, achieved through the cooperation with the government and media organisations

- Innovation using technology to help combat the spread of disinformation

- Spreading awareness of disinformation among citizens, educating them how to help stop it and to encourage greater participation against disinformation during election periods

- Enabling an engaged citizenry by providing a way for people to feel empowered to combat disinformation while feeling safe from intimidation and online harassment

- Protecting and responding to threats against journalists

The Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media (SOMA)

SOMA combines an international network of fact-checking agencies and other diverse initiatives in a collaborative online space. Through the platform, members can exchange knowledge and collaborate on the development of innovative technological tools to combat disinformation. SOMA is co-funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

Context

The SOMA project was launched in November 2018 to support European organisations seeking to jointly fight disinformation. It provides a platform for a multidisciplinary community, which already has over 40 members in more than 20 countries in Europe and beyond.[103] Its members include tech and media experts, fact-checkers and academic researchers, who work to integrate different development projects while exchanging data and knowledge. The initiative was conceived by five partners:

- Athens Technology Centre (Greece) – The project coordinator and centre of tech expertise has been developing technological tools to tackle disinformation for many years. One example is Truly Media,[104] a platform that enables real-time collaboration and provides verification tools for trustworthiness assessments of online information. Another example is Truth Nest,[105] an app that analyses Twitter profiles to detect bots.

- Pagella Politica (Italy) – A fact-checking organisation dedicated to verifying claims made by politicians and public figures, using publicly available or specifically requested data.

- LUISS Data Lab (Italy) – A research centre focused on social media and data science to measure the propagation of false content. In addition to improving existing SOMA project tools with more functionalities and algorithms, the lab has been developing its own tools to measure the impact and spread of disinformation on social networks.

- University of Aarhus (Denmark) – Performs analyses on the propagation of false information on social networks through big data collection and applied machine learning.

- T6Ecosystems (Italy) – A consultancy that is developing an impact assessment methodology to quantify and measure both the impact of disinformation and SOMA's performance in tackling it.

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[103] SOMA Disinfobservatory 2018

[104] Truly.media 2017

[105] TruthNest 2018

Initiative

The SOMA project seeks to play a crucial, albeit overlooked, coordination role. According to the project coordinator, SOMA aims to raise awareness, promote media literacy and help build impact metrics and best practices to tackle the disinformation problem. One of its main goals is to facilitate and promote multi-stakeholder collaboration by hosting several organisations that work together against disinformation within Europe and abroad.[106]

Project coordinator Nikos Sarris explains the main challenge of SOMA as one of resources: "The resources are scarce and, unfortunately, all over the world the media and fact-checking organisations that want to combat the phenomena [find] that the resources are never enough. The problem is so huge that what we are trying to achieve now is help them to understand that working [collaboratively] makes their work easier and they can scale results to a greater extent."

Another goal of SOMA is to empower and facilitate the work of diverse organisations in combating disinformation and to provide an integrated solution for this purpose.[107] Since SOMA results are publicly available, more individual users are expected to benefit from the project's work.[108] In addition, SOMA develops media literacy sessions to teach students and media professionals how to manage and counter disinformation. The project is defining a comprehensive framework to map the impacts of disinformation and to measure its own impact.

Beyond the primary goal of helping organisations and professionals, SOMA extends its activities to the public and to external researchers and partners. For instance, SOMA develops media literacy programmes such as workshops and webinars on the use of Eurostat's databases.[109] Initiatives such as Eunomia,[110] WeVerify,[111] Provenance[112] and SocialTruth[113] have joined SOMA as partners.

Finally, SOMA has launched two national centres for research into disinformation: Aletheia, hosted by the Luiss Data Lab in Italy, and Remid based at Aarhus University in Denmark. These centres are expected to foster national disinformation research, including work on disinformation in specific verticals such as health and the climate emergency.

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[106] SOMA Disinfobservatory 2018

[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Eunomia.social 2019

[111] WeVerify n.d.

[112] Funke 2019

[113] Socialtruth.eu n.d.

Takeaways

SOMA welcomes any fact-checkers, media organisations, researchers, social media influencers, and non-governmental policymakers carrying out activities in disinformation or fact-checking to join the project.

The project coordinator credits the reach and influence of the European Commission for SOMA's positive publicity and dissemination track record. Many organisations are interested in joining the initiative. While in one sense this is an indicator of the project's success, it is also a challenge. One project member claims that adding more partners brings additional operational challenges, especially in terms of collaboration logistics.

Another challenge SOMA faces is the introjection of collaborative culture into the daily work of partner organisations, as well as a lack of training. As project coordinator Sarris explains, "[Partners] have joined the platform, but they all have their day to day work and is difficult to inject this collaborative aspect in the day to day work. They have the tools, but some training needs to take place."

In addition to providing funding, the public sector has been fundamental in disseminating and communicating the project work. Using European Commission channels to disseminate project results to broader audiences has been crucial for the project success so far.

The European Commission has also played the important role of intermediation with big platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google. Thanks to the support of the European Commission, researchers have easier access to essential data. According to the SOMA project coordinator, the legitimacy brought by the public sector is critical especially in the wake of scandals involving platform-provided data, such as the Cambridge Analytica case, after which platforms became more reluctant to grant researchers' access to their data.

Newtral

Newtral is a fact-checking platform and part of the International Fact-checking Network. The project takes an innovative approach focused on user experience and citizen empowerment through information. Newtral also focuses on engaging younger audiences, understanding that they are more likely to obtain information through social media and closed messaging platforms. Newtral aims to adapt their voice, tone and content to these audiences, seeking to engage youth in political debates while empowering them as citizens to recognise and resist disinformation.

Context

The Newtral initiative originated when its founders brought fact-checking to Spain six years ago through a live fact-checking project on primetime TV. Newtral itself was created two years ago, with the goal of evolving from television productions to a full-fledged independent information platform in Spain.

CEO Tomás Pastor explains that Newtral faces two major challenges in combating disinformation. The first is technological, since citizens are exposed to a huge amount of information across platforms:

"Today, how do we identify all the information that we receive on social media? How do we distinguish all the fake news and hoaxes that we see every single day on our mobiles by any media that we follow?" asks Pastor. "It is very difficult for anyone to fight this amount of disinformation in the media and on social networks."

The second challenge Newtral tries to tackle is the decline in trust in traditional media, combined with the fact that new generations increasingly seek to inform themselves through alternative channels such as social media and closed messaging platforms.

"The last few years have seen a decrease in the reputation of traditional media, newspapers, television, et cetera. And that has become a real issue for new generations and new audiences," explains Pastor. "They no longer go to traditional media to get informed. They are getting informed, but through social networks, like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp or other messaging tools."

Initiative

Newtral benefits from diverse sources of funding including television ads, the Newtral Education project and the Facebook External Data Verification Program.[114] Newtral has a total staff of 78 people, with 14 full-time fact-checkers.

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[114] About.fb.com 2019

After observing the behaviour of their audiences on television and online, Newtral discovered their audience (with an average age of 25) demonstrated interest in more than fact-checking results. "They don't want only results of our verification, they want more," said Pastor. "They want sources, they want to understand what the data are." Newtral therefore decided to become an independent platform that provides a series of tools to empower and engage their audience.

The first tool they developed is for fact-checking. Over the past year, Newtral has published over 1,000 verifications on its website. They also provide a fact-checking service through WhatsApp, among the first of its kind in Spain. Users can send dubious articles to the project's WhatsApp and a professional fact-checker will investigate and respond directly to the requestor. Last year, the tool processed over 6,000 messages through this channel. However, the challenge remains that this service is extremely time and resource-consuming. According to the project coordinators, the Newtral audience seems to understand the nature of the fact-checking process; more than 90% of user queries are related to understanding whether news is reliable or accurate.

The second tool developed by the project, and one of the most used during the election period, is Transparentia. Using this platform, citizens can compare each party's platforms by category, such as environment, culture, etc. It also allows Spanish citizens to access and compare the remuneration of the country's politicians as well as their declared assets throughout the year. Though this information is already publicly available, inconvenient formats (such as PDF files) and dispersion across government platforms made finding this information difficult. The Transparentia tool is designed to remove this friction and facilitate citizens' access to this type of information in a single place. Transparentia also enables users to consult the budgets of all municipalities of Spain in a uniform and visually friendly manner, allowing users to compare between them and gain a stronger awareness of public spending.

The third and final tool developed by Newtral is a mobile game called Pronostika. Every day, three questions are sent to users, who answer with a prediction about what will happen. The questions are based on international political issues from around the world, not just Spain. The app also provides a link to additional information on the subject so that the player can access the most relevant insights into that political situation before voting. After submitting an answer, users can compare their answers with others. By asking only questions about the future, Newtral seeks to engage citizens by sparking interest in political discourse, informing themselves and formulating their own opinions. Launched four months ago, Pronostika has 15,000 registered users and more than one million responses, showing active user engagement.

Takeaways

The Newtral project strategy seeks to be increasingly citizen-centred by adapting its approach and using technology to strengthen its reach. For example, the Pronostika app is innovative in its approach to engaging citizens, not only in actively seeking factual information but also in cultivating a stronger interest in politics. The Transparentia platform also serves as a citizen empowerment tool by making access to publicly available information easier and more user-friendly.

4

Conclusions and recommendations

Towards empowered and informed digital citizens

Disinformation is inherent to any information ecosystem. Although technologies have evolved throughout the centuries — from slogans engraved on Roman coins to computational propaganda — disinformation is a persistent problem that evolves alongside them. The scale and level of weaponisation of disinformation are the hardest facets to tackle and can have lasting consequences on democracies.

Borrowing from climate change literature, the concepts of adaptation and resilience may be useful as the structuring principles for solutions.[115] Solutions based on adaptation entail creating new ways to adjust to the impact of the disinformation phenomenon and, given its fast-changing nature, applying methodologies that allow for rapid prototyping and testing. Resilience is about anticipating the consequences of disinformation and ensuring people are less prone to suffering from them. When combined, these principles could guide our societies back into healthier democracies that cherish debate and rely on a multiplicity of viewpoints based on evidence, trust, and equality.

This section presents three sets of recommendations designed for policymakers and other stakeholders fighting disinformation. First, tackling the issue effectively cannot be a one-person job nor a silver-bullet approach to solutions. Secondly, it is important to think in long-term spans, since disinformation is a constant phenomenon and does not only strike during election periods, even though its effects may be felt more acutely during elections. Finally, since information goes through a three-stage process from production to dissemination to consumption, solutions must be developed holistically, addressing all three phases.

[115] Shaftel et al. 2019

1 **Any initative tackling disinformation requires a multi-stakeholder and multi-strategy approach.**

- **Look beyond single strategies.** As the case studies in this report have shown, combining more than one strategy to tackle a specific aspect of the problem can lead to stronger positive impacts. Policymakers and practitioners should think across several different strategies and combine them.

- **Never work alone.** A collaborative approach and the creation of partnerships are key. Each stakeholder can bring their expertise to the table to develop more robust solutions.

- **Be audience-driven.** For solutions directed at youth, include them in the process of designing and defining outcomes. If aimed at older generations, adapt content and formats to ensure uptake.

2 **Building healthier public spheres alleviates polarisation and decreases incentives for sharing inflammatory and harmful content.**

- **Understand the specific needs of each stakeholder** to provide more effective assistance:

  - **Citizens** must be empowered and literate to critically consume information. A holistic approach to media and digital literacy, including skills such as critical thinking, empathy, tolerance, indigenous knowledge, as well as political and financial competences, is required.[116]

  - **Academia and researchers** need financial support and legal backing for research that feeds policy and programmes, with access to private sector databases to inform their work.

  - **Public sector actors** need more awareness and deeper knowledge of the disinformation issue to be better equipped to formulate effective policies and programmes.

  - **Private sector/media actors (traditional and digital)** must be empowered to regain trust. Working in close partnership with the public sector is one way to foster such empowerment.

- **The information market can no longer escape regulation,** but such regulation must be implemented with caution. The thin line between freedom of expression and censorship must be taken into consideration.

- As stewards of information markets and the digital public sphere, **social media platforms** are key players and must be held accountable.

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[116] UNESCO 2017

3 **Information flows through three stages: production, consumption and dissemination. When tackling disinformation, it is necessary to address each of these fronts.**

- **Recognise that information now travels via socialcasting dynamics and no longer broadcasting.** The logic of "one message to all" is being replaced by "many messages to few", meaning media channels, political figures, and influencers speak to carefully crafted audiences. Following the example of Chicas Poderosas and their core strategy of empowering women in media, stimulating more people to enter this new information arena means heterogeneous voices and views to counterbalance hegemonic narratives.

- **Learn about the process of producing disinformation.** Even though it is dispersed, it is possible to track niches of structured disinformation production by "following the money" or conducting investigative approaches underpinned by data science. For instance, the East Stratcom Task Force uses data science to catalogue, analyse and raise awareness about the origins and production process of pro-Kremlin disinformation.

- **Track and analyse patterns of disinformation consumption.** Consider CoFacts and their construction of a chatbot inside the most popular closed messaging app in Taiwan. By understanding on which platforms disinformation appears as well as the profiles of "disinformation consumers", it is possible to develop a network of "information ambassadors", responsible for sharing fact-checking reports and verified content.

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Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the following Digital Future Society Think Tank colleagues for their input and support in the production of this report:

- **Carina Lopes** – Head of the Digital Future Society Think Tank
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Citation

Please cite this report as:

- Digital Future Society. (2020). Dealing with disinformation: Strategies for digital citizen empowerment. Barcelona, Spain.

Appendix

Appendix

This table lists additional existing responses to the global disinformation crisis undertaken by governments, multilateral bodies, the private sector and civil society organisations. While not an exhaustive list, the table provides an overview of initiatives being adopted worldwide, according to the scope of this report.

Where	Stakeholder	Initiative	Institution	Strategy	Summary
Global	Multilateral body	MIL Curriculum for Teachers	UNESCO - GAPMIL	Media literacy	A guide available in ten languages for educators with the main competencies to integrate media and information literacy (MIL) in their classrooms.
Global	Multilateral body	MIL Clicks	UNESCO - GAPMIL	Technology tool Media literacy	Uses social media to hone citizens' media literacy skills, especially youth, and to engage in peer education.
Global	Multilateral body	International Clearing House on MIL	UNESCO - GAPMIL	Media literacy	Develops research, educational material and publications in media and information literacy.
Global	Private sector	Crowd Tangle	Facebook	Technology tool	Online crowdsourcing tool that allows journalists and researchers to flag disinformation and shows what content is spreading where in real time.
Global	Private sector	Ad Library API	Facebook	Technology tool	Provides data on ads related to politics or issues on Facebook in the US, UK, Brazil, India, Ukraine, Israel and the EU.
Global	CSO	Learn to Discern (L2D)	IREX	Media literacy	Innovative methodology on media literacy training to help people of all ages develop healthy habits for engaging with information, online and offline.

Where	Stakeholder	Initiative	Institution	Strategy	Summary
Global	Private sector	Fact-check Tools for Developers	Google	Technology tool Fact-checking	Tools for fact-checking organisations to include their content in Google search and news results
Global	Private sector	WhatsApp Misinformation and Social Science Research Awards	WhatsApp	Research	The goal of these research awards is to facilitate high quality, external research on these topics by academics and experts who are in the countries where WhatsApp is frequently used, especially in places where there is relatively limited research.
Regional	CSO	Disinformation Toolkit	InterAction	Media literacy	A guide for international advocacy organisations and humanitarian groups to be better prepared for disinformation attacks.
Africa – Democratic Republic of Congo	Government	WhatsApp and local radio tip line	WhatsApp	Technology tool Public policy	The government created a tip line to counter disinformation about the Ebola epidemic so that communications experts could rebut rumours with accurate information via WhatsApp or local radio in real time.
Africa - Nigeria	Government	National Campaign Against Fake News	Ministry of Information and Culture	Public policy Media literacy	The government works with both traditional and social media, as well as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), to raise awareness among Nigerians not to share any news or message unless they can vouch for its source and authenticity.
Africa	CSO	AfricaCheck	Africa Check	Fact-checking Technology tool Media literacy	Calls itself the continent's first fact-checking organisation and has operated since 2012. Includes several tools, such as InfoFinder, available to platform users as part of the 'How to Fact-Check' section.
Asia - Taiwan	CSO	CoFacts	G0v - Civic tech community	Fact-checking Technology tool	Collaborative fact-checking project that combines a chatbot with a hoax database, integrated within LINE, a popular instant messenger app in Asia.

Where	Stakeholder	Initiative	Institution	Strategy	Summary
Asia - Indonesia	Government	Siberkreasi	Communication and Information Ministry	Public policy Media literacy	SiberKreasi, or the Creative Cyber Movement, is Indonesia's national movement for digital literacy. It was created to overcome the threat of negative content spreading on the internet and aims to encourage citizens to actively participate in spreading positive content through its various programmes.
Europe	Multilateral body	Action Plan Against Misinformation	European Union	Public policy	Plan for a coordinated response to disinformation based on on four pillars: i) improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; ii) strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation; iii) mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation and iv) raising awareness and improving societal resilience.
Europe	Multilateral body	Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis (SOMA)	European Commission (Horizon 2020 Programme)	Fact-checking Technology tool Media literacy	Following the European Commission Communication on tackling online disinformation, SOMA has been launched to provide support to a European community that will jointly fight disinformation.
Europe - Belgium	Government	Mon Opinion	Ministry for the Digital Agenda	Technology tool Media literacy	The federal government has created an online citizen participation platform to host debates, organise town hall meetings/citizen assemblies and submit proposals on how to deal with disinformation.
Europe - Norway	Private sector	Faktisk	VG, Dagbladet, NRK	Fact-checking	Despite being rivals, the most widely-read Norwegian news organisations decided to join forces and launch a joint project to fact-check each other's reporting.
Europe-Finland	CSO	Faktabaari EDU	Faktabaari	Fact-checking Media literacy	With their voter literacy toolkit, Faktabaari aims to introduce methodological fact-checking to empower future voters (students) and their educators with pedagogical material to build awareness.

Where	Stakeholder	Initiative	Institution	Strategy	Summary
Europe - Spain	CSO	Newtral Educación	Newtral	Fact-checking Media literacy	Newtral Education is geared toward empowering citizens to conduct their own fact-checking, so that they may verify claims or photos on their own as well as be able to double-check the work done by fact-checkers.
Middle East	CSO	Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut	LAU School of Arts and Sciences	Media literacy	Provides training, curricular material and resources to advance digital and media literacy education in the region, not only in Arabic, but also grounded in Arabic cultures and concerns.
North America	Multilateral Body	International Fact-Checking Network	Poynter Institute	Fact-checking	The International Fact-Checking Network is a unit of the Poynter Institute dedicated to bringing together fact-checkers worldwide. The IFCN was launched in September 2015 to support a booming crop of fact-checking initiatives by promoting best practices and exchanges in this field.
North America	Private sector	The Trust Project	Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Google, the Democracy Fund, The Knight Foundation, Facebook	Fact-checking Technology tool Media literacy	The Trust Project is a consortium developing transparency standards to help citizens easily assess quality, credible journalism. The organisation has developed a new digital standard called the Trust Indicators, underpinned by research based on interviews with real people who explained what they value in news and when they trust it. The Trust Indicators are standardised disclosures about a news organisation's ethics and other standards for fairness and accuracy, a journalist's background, and the work behind a news story. Leaders from 100 news organisations collaborated to create them. The Trust Indicators are the first to give search engines and social media platforms the consistent technical standards they need to surface quality news. The project's external tech partners (Google, Facebook and Bing) are using the Trust Indicators to display quality journalism.

Where	Stakeholder	Initiative	Institution	Strategy	Summary
North America - Canada	Government	Digital Citizen Initiative	Government of Canada	Public policy Media literacy	The Digital Citizen Initiative is a multi-component strategy that aims to support democracy and social cohesion in Canada by building citizen resilience against online disinformation and building partnerships to support a healthy information ecosystem. Its two main elements are citizen-focused activities (digital literacy programming) and a Digital Citizen Research Programme.
North America	Government	Senate Bill No. 830 (changes to the Educational Code)	Government of California	Public policy Media literacy	This bill defines "digital citizenship" and "media literacy" and requires the California State Department of Education to make available to school districts on its website a list of resources and instructional materials on media literacy, including media literacy professional development programmes for teachers.
North America - Canada	CSO	Apathy is Boring	Apathy is Boring	Media literacy	Apathy is Boring is a non-partisan, charitable organisation that supports and educates youth to be active and contributing citizens in Canada's democracy.
Latin America - Brazil	Government	Clarifications about false information	Superior Electoral Court	Fact-checking	Website to help inform the Brazilian electorate about the false information disseminated on social networks. It provides links from fact-checking agencies, where users can search for news articles and verify their authenticity.
Latin America - Mexico	Government	Verificado Notimex	NOTIMEX - Mexican State News Agency	Fact-checking	The project is designed to debunk false news on social media as well as to fact-check dubious content published by traditional media outlets, such as newspapers, radios and TV channels.
Latin America	CSO	Hablatam	Conectados al Sur Universidad de Chile UDELAR Universidad del Rosario Faro Digital ITS Rio Wikimedia Argentina	Media literacy	A research initiative to better understand relations between young people and new technologies, focusing on disinformation and quality of information. Besides research, the project includes disinformation workshops for youth in Latin America.

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