



Better Information Ecosystem

E-DISCUSSION SUMMARY

5-30 October 2020

SUMMARY REPORT – UNDP/UNESCO SPARKBLUE CONSULTATION

**FORGING A PATH TO A BETTER INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM -
EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE, MEDIA, INTERNET AND
PEACEBUILDING RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION**

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the alarming impact of false and misleading information on global and national responses. The current tsunami of disinformation is reaching a wider audience than ever before, further eroding public trust in state institutions and news media, widening social divides and destabilizing already fragile contexts. It is causing real physical and societal harm. It is a threat not only to short term public health outcomes, but also to long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights, and social cohesion.

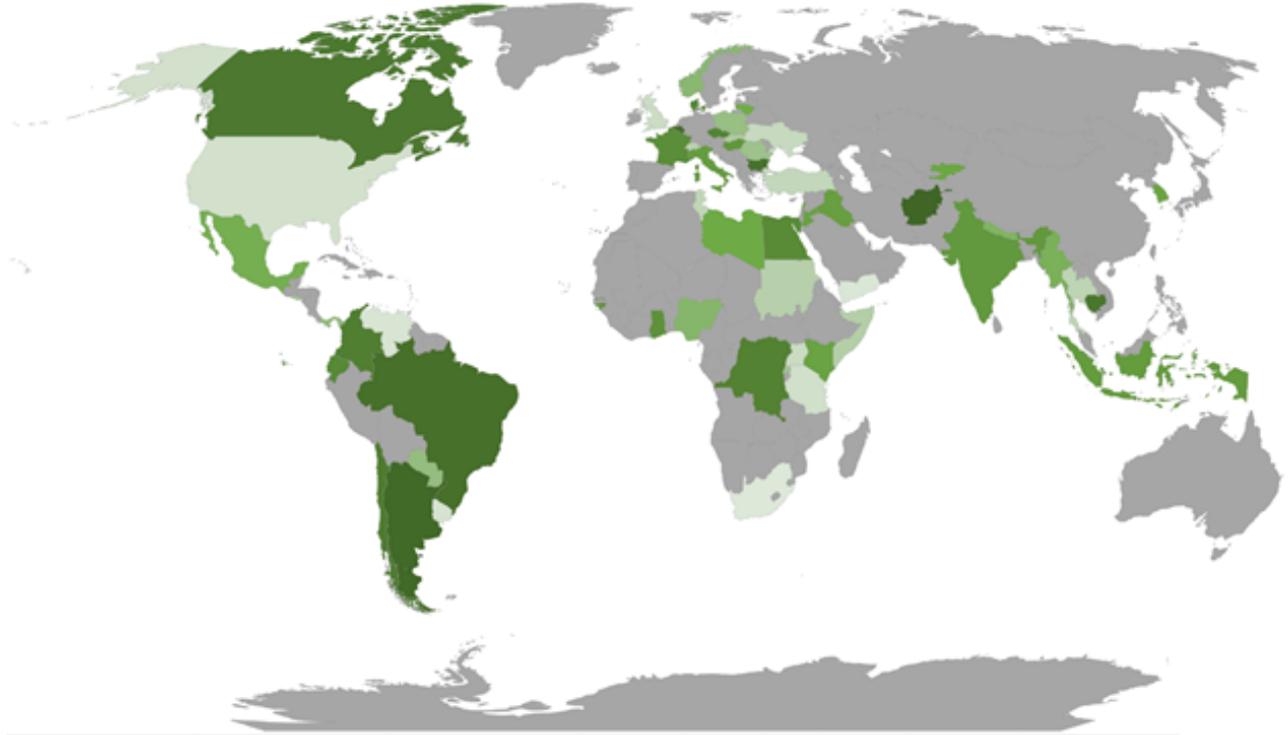
In October 2020, UNDP and UNESCO launched a global consultation on the impact and optimum responses to the growing problem of disinformation, including and extending beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This four-week exercise aimed to sharpened understanding and intervention by each UN organization, that will result in stronger policy advice and products for a range of partners, interlocuters and member states.

This report summarises key points raised by the consultation participants. The views and opinions below are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of UNDP and UNESCO.



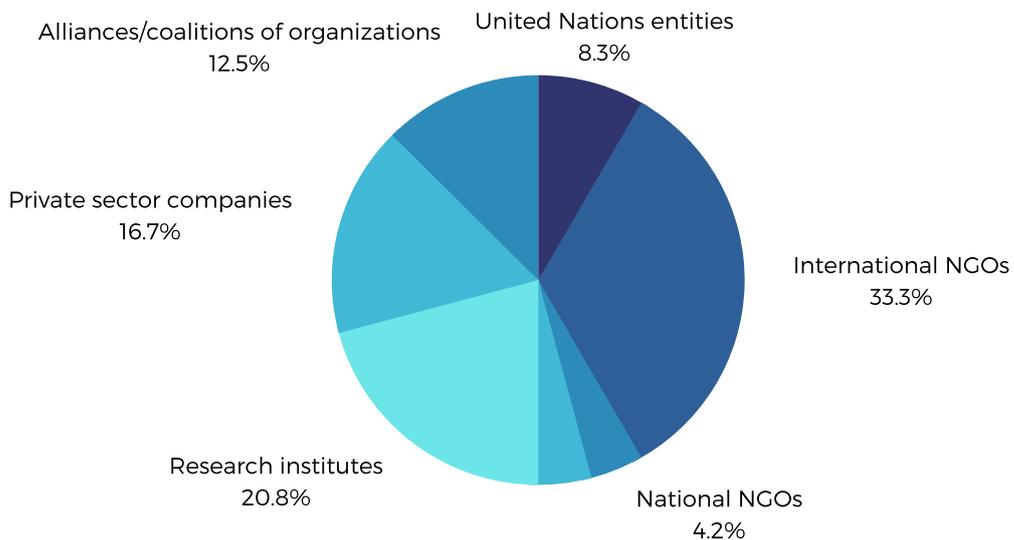
CONSULTATION SNAPSHOT

162 participants from 59 countries



The consultation received contributions from individuals as well as 24 different organizations across key stakeholder groups:

- 2 United Nations entities (UNDP and UNESCO)
- 8 international NGOs
- 1 national NGO
- 1 governmental body
- 5 research institutes
- 4 private sector companies
- 3 Alliances/coalitions of organizations



KEY POINTS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

The consultation took place through asynchronous dialogue in three virtual discussion rooms. The below text summarizes the main elements put forth by participants:

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 1

A problem analysis: what is the impact of disinformation on political and social landscapes, democratic processes, media, marginalised groups and the general public?

An important step to developing effective responses to disinformation is understanding how it is impacting on our society and systems of governance. The first discussion room aimed to determine the scope and severity of impact that disinformation is having in different contexts and as perceived by different stakeholders and communities. While the manifestation of disinformation varies from context to context, some common concerns emerged in the discussion which can be categorised broadly in three main areas:

1) Governance and democracy, 2) Social cohesion and 3) Fundamental rights.

GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

Public trust in state institutions, mainstream media and political actors is being eroded due to exposure to disinformation. There is a pattern of disinformation unduly influencing public perceptions of democratic institutions, a trend which has been amplified and exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contexts where levels of public trust in those institutions is already low, **vulnerability to disinformation** appears to be higher. In the context of the pandemic, one of the most visible ramifications of this today has been disregard for, and even resistance to, COVID-19 governmental guidance and preventive measures, which is damaging not only public health outcomes, but also to the ability of societies to come together and work collectively towards recovery.

The use of disinformation strategies by political actors in the domestic or international sphere feeds into generalised confusion and distrust and serves to further damage citizen-state relations. The absence of verified information, as well as growing distrust in legitimate news media and official information sources, has contributed to a trend of individuals **seeking and falling prey to misinformation and disinformation from unreliable sources** which do not adhere to basic journalistic standards of verification and public interest.

The quantity and virality of disinformation often increase alongside **democratic processes** such as elections. This harms the public's ability to access accurate information about the choices available to them. As a result, the **legitimacy of democratic processes is undermined and public participation suffers**.

Political candidates, particularly women, find themselves the targets of these efforts. Political advertising is sometimes weaponised to target specific communities with disinformation which may discourage voting or increase political polarisation, a phenomenon exacerbated by a lack of transparency of the financing of political advertising.

More broadly, we see the **degradation of public debate**. On the one hand, the quality of the discourse diminishes with increased exposure to divisive disinformation. On the other hand, **parameters of the agenda are being influenced** by false or misleading narratives. In effect, disinformation is changing the nature of political discourse by distorting subjects and refocusing debate around fringe issues.

SOCIAL COHESION

Disinformation is being used as a strategy to drive **political and social polarisation**. False content reinforces stereotypes and plays on existing fears and divisions. These can be ethnic, racial, religious or nationality based, among other characteristics. Exacerbated social divisions due to disinformation are detectable at intercommunal, national and regional levels. Intimidating tactics such as online harassment and trolling are turned against activists, human rights defenders, journalists and others who attempt to expose, contradict or investigate disinformation campaigns.

Disinformation is frequently used as **a tool for political gain**, to attack or discredit political opponents. It reinforces polarising rhetoric and is particularly potent as it increases existing political divides and tensions and can turn public opinion against a political player. The use of these tactics by state actors themselves contributes to the lack of public trust in government and its institutions.

Finally, **disinformation is resulting in the further stigmatisation** of already marginalised groups. Fears of civil unrest or targeted attacks driven by disinformation are raised even in relatively stable contexts. Groups which have historically faced discrimination are particularly vulnerable to this, as disinformation often reinforces or amplifies existing prejudices.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The confusion and chaos created by a polluted information landscape creates a threat to the **right to information**. The quantity of disinformation in circulation, lack of trust of mainstream media sources and low levels of media and information literacy reduce the ability to decipher what is accurate and trustworthy. This has knock-on effects on public health efforts, elections, climate change initiatives, vaccination drives and other issues of public interest.

The regulatory and legislative responses to disinformation, even those that are well-intentioned, are at times contributing to a **shrinking civic space** and **diminished freedom of expression**. Legislative countermeasures against disinformation can be weaponised by state and non-state actors against civil society activists, political opponents and media professionals in an effort to stifle opinion, limit free expression and delegitimise opposing views, including when these groups push back against this kind of content manipulation. Laws and policies aimed to counter disinformation also risk curtailing legitimate speech.

Source	Insights
UNDP staff Chile	"One of the most adverse effects of information pollution is the deterioration of public debate. Since sharing false information is associated with political participation in social networks, there are more obstacles to debate and contrast different positions because of wrong or biased notions inside different groups. Information pollution in social networks about political issues also contributes to delegitimize a system that is already highly delegitimized, as is the case in Chile."
Anonymous contributor Uganda	"I think that currently in Uganda, the most significant risks of disinformation on the relationship between citizens and the state is its potential to cause civil unrest, and if not quickly curbed, even war. When especially young people who have no other means of obtaining information but to hear it from others or from unregulated social media absorb disinformation especially of a political nature, they become agitated and want to act radically."
UNDP staff Lebanon	"At the same time that many people are distrustful of the government and its leaders, they also depend on them to survive Lebanon's many concurrent crises. Given the lack of trust in the government as a whole and the dependence on individual political and religious parties, people are foregoing universal guidelines and safety measures in favour of individual messaging attached to their existing social networks."
International NGO staff, Democratic Republic of the Congo	"The confidence in traditional media is very low, on one hand because the population accuses the media of being bought by the government, and on the other hand because of the existence of several radios which employ untrained and inexperienced journalists who do not respond to the listeners needs and remain superficial."

These remarks suggest that more needs to be done not only by states, but also by media and Internet channels alike, to build trust and counter disinformation, and that the stakes are high in terms of peace and stability.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 2

Drivers, enablers and risk mitigation: how does context influence the spread of disinformation, how can we better monitor, anticipate and prepare?

The second discussion room explored how context can contribute to the spread of disinformation. The conversation was grounded in the hypothesis that an accurate analysis of a socio-political context can help to pre-emptively reduce the appeal and spread of disinformation and to detect trends and patterns before these gain traction.

DRIVERS

Disinformation is often a sign of a **weak relationship between communities and those who govern**. Diminished trust in public and state institutions, a lack of transparency in decision-making, and corruption create fertile ground for the germination of disinformation. Inconsistent, contradictory or absent official communication drives people towards alternative information sources, which package content in a more compelling way. And while disinformation is a global issue, how it is **devised, delivered and distributed can be very localized**. Central to this localization is **politics as a core driver for disinformation**. The hyperpolarization of politics favours those who are able to group “us” vs “them” on any given issue. New communication methods have increased the speed, spread and severity of disinformation, with algorithms inadvertently amplifying and elevating content that elicits negative emotions such as fear and anger.

From politics to money, **disinformation has become a commodity**. Content that attracts more impressions and ‘engagement’ earns revenue, regardless of the intent or accuracy of such content.

While major **drivers of disinformation are politics and money**, the phenomenon is about contestation for power. Disinformation is a tool to sow confusion to achieve or reinforce power and can ultimately disempower those who are affected by it.

ENABLERS

The enablers of disinformation stretch across all aspects of governance, public and private. At the national level, **regulation of social media companies is largely absent**, and where it exists it is difficult to enforce.

It is well known that sensationalism sells. Accordingly, the algorithms that internet companies use in content curation are developed in a way that often promotes sensationalist disinformation. Research has found how political disinformation is spread more broadly and quickly than factual content.

Effective content moderation by platforms has proven difficult on a global scale, both because of sheer volume of content and the huge number of languages and contexts to cover, and the tendency of companies to avoid investing unless regulation or public opinion compel them to do so.

Another contextual factor favouring disinformation is the ability to **post disinformation online without consequence**, and to co-ordinate campaigns across different channels – both media and social media. **This** is seen to create a space for disinformation actors to make money, drive political agendas or sow confusion.

Combined with the overwhelming amount of information that inundates people's search for answers and knowledge, a general confusion has emerged in many societies as to **which information sources can be considered "trusted"**. As a result, personal and group identity plays more and more of a role in terms of what sources are deemed trusted, **driving certain segments of the public away from previously trusted information** sources such as mainstream media and authorities.

A lack of media and information literacy, particularly in older demographics; limited knowledge of verification efforts; and limitations in access to affordable hardware, software and connectivity, particularly in economically disadvantaged populations, all have a negative effect on the ability to source accurate information and detect disinformation. Some internet companies have foregrounded authoritative channels on the Covid-19 pandemic, but such contributions to countering disinformation remain largely confined to this topic.

MITIGATION

As the pressure to address disinformation has increased, a plethora of responses have been developed. Internet companies have invested in content moderation, civil society organizations have developed and participated in fact-checking systems and alliances, media have further developed self-regulation and codes of conduct, and governments have adopted laws and policies; yet none of the responses have fully resolved the problem of disinformation.

For example, fact-checking is very beneficial, but it is often a reactive, catch-up game that fact checkers cannot win. There are not enough resources, fact-checking is often slower than the production of disinformation, and such efforts are often discredited by those with a political interest in spreading disinformation.

For internet companies, **current business models which use algorithms to increase reach and usage** end up bringing fringe sites and ideas to the fore, and even expressly recommending extremist content and groups. **This runs against their efforts to fact-check and to moderate egregious cases of disinformation.**

However, initiatives such as creating ‘speed bumps’ on the platforms to limit the extent and speed of distribution, verification of users, concentrating assessment on viral content, publishing comprehensive databases of political advertisements and conducting human rights impact assessments would all contribute to strengthening platforms’ abilities to address disinformation.

The continued efforts of trust-building by third parties, such as civil society actors and fact-checkers, can shed light on the issues that need attention. Professional organizations for journalists and media institutions have the ability to give legitimacy to genuine information sources.

The localization of disinformation suggest that **local communities have a large role to play in any solution**. Involving local communities in governance decisions and communicating with them transparently are important to dissuade those inclined to spread disinformation. This is compounded by the challenge of influential individuals acting as ‘super spreaders’ of disinformation. These disinformation spreaders are diverse, from social media influencers to political actors to pseudo news sites.

Understanding the local context must be the first step. Little analysis has been conducted on understanding the disinformation landscapes outside the USA and Europe. Understanding who the sources of disinformation are and how trust can be built are critical to providing a solution to the current ‘disinformation tsunami’.

Source	Insights [1]
From Ghana	“There are about 3 main drivers of disinformation: (i) Politics - Politicians and their surrogates intentionally create fake news to discredit their opponents or government interventions. Citizens then believe some of this fake news and it affects their confidence in government or otherwise; (ii) Bloggers - Many bloggers depend on followers to earn money and they believe fake and sensational news attracts followers. So, they create fake news to gain followers and they get paid based on the number of followers they have; (iii) The advent of social media has also become a primary driver of disinformation. Posting and sharing information of social media is not that much regulated.”
From Venezuela	“The primary source of disinformation in Venezuela comes from political confrontation. In our cases, political hyperpolarization affects almost every topic in social discussions and deepens social cohesion deterioration. The traditional national media are more prudent about polluting information. But the social networks are the preferred field for disinformation disseminators. Hyperpartisan behaviour has a strong correlation with disinformation in social networks.”
From Ukraine	“Civil society plays a crucial role in monitoring disinformation and providing training to journalists and other representatives of civil society to enhance early warning capacity. However, as is the case in many countries, media literacy of the population is generally quite low and fact checking is limited to a small community of civil society organisations and engaged citizens.”

[1] Some of the quotes have been translated and slightly edited for grammar purposes.

These views identify a range of actors producing disinformation and countering it, noting contexts of polarization and people's levels of capacity to understand how disinformation instrumentalises content.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION ROOM 3

The path forward: forging effective solutions and partnerships

The COVID-19 pandemic has created significant new impetus to tackle disinformation. In face of unprecedented challenges, the last year has seen a surge of innovation and collective thinking about how to effectively respond to disinformation. Three main principles emerge through contributions to this discussion:

- 1) Solutions need to be developed collectively by the diverse civil society, academic, private sector, UN and government stakeholders which are impacted by and/or are equipped to address disinformation;
- 2) There is a need to pilot and measure responses in different contexts and to develop an evidence-based body of best practice and learning in this field;
- 3) Human rights must be protected in any policy or programme response.

OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNANCE

Transparency can help to ensure oversight and accountability of internet companies regarding how content is promoted, curated, and targeted, as well as their level of success in enforcing their own policies and protecting users' data privacy. There are diverging views about the desirability and feasibility of centralised internet regulation. One area of agreement is that policy makers at all levels should consult widely in order to take into consideration existing evidence and research, fully recognise and respond to the complexity of the challenge and act in a coordinated manner. They should also assess the impact of their responses.

Regional level norms can help avoid a myriad of contradictory or incompatible national legislations attempting to govern international internet companies. They can aim to improve transparency and accountability of internet companies and provide rights-based frameworks to countries to mitigate and avoid potential risks to fundamental freedoms posed by inappropriate national responses, such as internet shutdowns. Regional bodies can further support countering disinformation efforts by committing funding to test new approaches and innovations.

National level policy should be based on evidence and built with broad participation. It needs to strike a balance between reasonable oversight and protection of the rights to freedom of expression, opinion and information as well as privacy and association. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a trend of poorly developed or overly broad national legislation that unduly restricts human rights, reducing legitimate freedom of expression and access to information. While evidence-based policy may effectively stem the creation and dissemination of disinformation, reactive legislation can and has been weaponised to silence political opponents and dissenting voices.

Focus should also be given to developing policies to **build public resilience** to information pollution, including creating an enabling environment for free, pluralistic and professional media and investing in media and information literacy. Harmonisation, both cross-border and across national and regional efforts, will be critical to ensuring a coherent and enforceable response to information pollution.

Self-regulation by internet companies, along with greater transparency, has the potential to allow for voluntary adherence to agreed standards of transparency and data privacy, as well as efforts to reduce financial and political incentives to spread disinformation. Online advertising companies also have a role to play in enabling the dissemination of disinformation and should be part of the solution. However, if self-regulation is to be effective, there is a need to provide much greater transparency into internet companies' stated policies and their enforcement. Co-regulation may be appropriate in some circumstances.

Internet companies can take other steps towards more public interest focused business models. This could include actively directing advertising revenue to legitimate news sources; more extensive moderation capabilities, both geographically and linguistically; and more transparency around data access and content moderation and curation. Strategies can also be employed to reduce sharing and virality of messages in closed messaging services.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COORDINATION

Recognising the complexity of the issue and the number of concerned actors, multi-stakeholder initiatives can ensure a coordinated and coherent response. These groups could also play an oversight or co-regulatory role if sufficiently independent from government and corporate influence.



MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Media and information literacy (MIL) can help create public resilience to disinformation by building capacity to verify information channels and sources. MIL can empower the public to be part of the solution and create new norms of information integrity. It is important to adapt content and methodology depending on the demographic group, particularly for marginalized populations. Institutionalizing MIL through the education system or mobilizing networks of influencers to promote MIL can ensure greater access, particularly for marginalized groups. Internet companies themselves can participate in these efforts by disseminating MIL content through their platforms.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Designing effective and inclusive communication and engagement strategies ensures that all communities can access accurate, comprehensible and relevant information. Creating opportunities for dialogue allows communities to be part of the solution, deepening their understanding of the issues and fostering a sense of ownership. This can include mobilizing influencers, using local languages, promoting fact-checked information, and building knowledge hubs. It can also entail support for journalists to produce independent and compelling content and engage more effectively with their audiences.

FACT CHECKING

Fact- and source-checking by journalists and civil society groups is an ever-growing field. The fact-checking community is innovating to improve the speed, quality and reach of these initiatives. This includes investigating and revealing sources of disinformation as well as engaging vulnerable groups to increase their understanding of the motivations behind disinformation and improve their confidence in the fact-checking process. Other innovations include crowdsourced fact-checking, integrating fact checking tools into browsers and platforms, and using artificial intelligence to identify disinformation. Fact-checkers are increasingly being engaged by internet platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to flag false content.

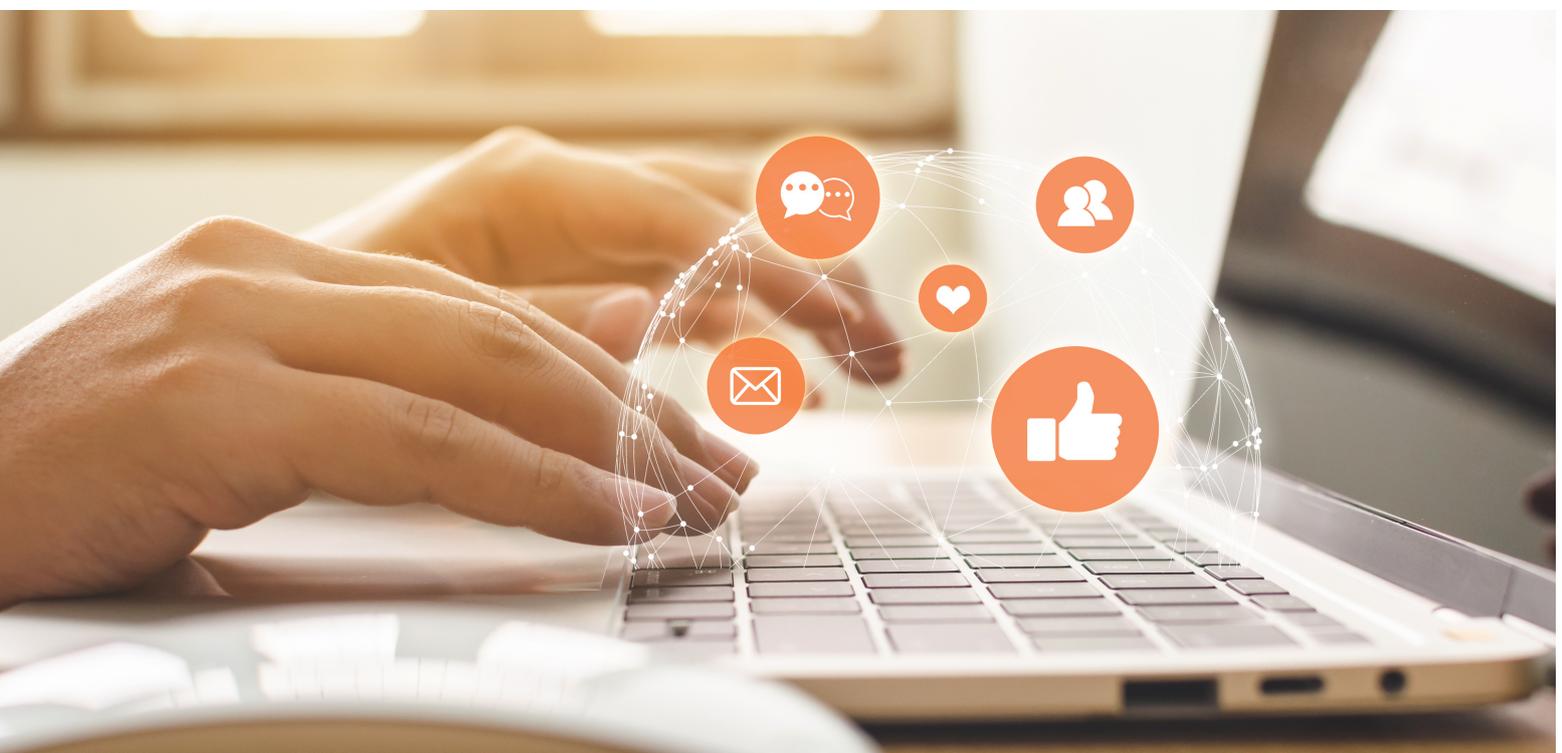
MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Creating an enabling environment for free, pluralistic and professional news media can help to build public trust in news organisations as reliable sources of information. Practical media development support, such as social media guidelines; disinformation training for journalists; and disinformation hubs, tools and resources, should be complemented by dedicated funding for areas such as investigative journalism and journalism fact-checking networks.

Journalists also need to be adequately protected as they can become targets of disinformation and defamation efforts.

Organization	Testimonies
Farm Radio International	Radio broadcasters and journalists are vital for getting good information to people, but they also need access to good information. COVID-19 was new and fake news was almost as common as good information. Farm Radio shared information in a variety of ways, from print resources, to an IVR system, to Facebook chatbot. But perhaps one of the more effective tools was our WhatsApp discussions with expert guests.
UNDP Uruguay	We noted how an increased number of what at the time was referred to as fake news emerged around several of the candidates and parties. We reached out to a number of stakeholders worried about this development – and joined forces with the Association of Uruguayan Press, UNESCO, the Astur Foundation and Fredrich Ebert Stiftung to promote the signature of an ethical pact between all the political parties to not engage in and discourage the spread of disinformation in the context of the elections.
DisinfoLab	We need to form best practices for political campaigning and a clear distinction between disinformation and strategic communications. Disinformation cannot become a regular political campaigning strategy. Political candidates should commit to respecting best practices for online campaigning and funding should be conditioned on fair and transparent online campaigning.

These comments provide insight into the positive possibilities to use media, social media and social messaging – the very platforms the spread disinformation – to counter disinformation, including during elections.



FURTHER INFORMATION NEEDED ON DISINFORMATION AND CERTAIN GROUPS

This consultation provided a valuable and diverse set of opinions, perspectives and evidence-based conclusions. Yet rather than being seen as an exhaustive process, this consultation represents the beginning of an ongoing exploration of the issue of disinformation and how it can be best countered while respecting human rights.

Looking ahead, some areas and groups which were mentioned particularly emerge as warranting further nuanced understanding including:

YOUTH

The role of youth in these dynamics emerges as an area requiring further investigation and recognition of the diversity of roles young people play in society and in digital communications. The lack of representation of youth in the consultation inhibits the extent to which insights can be extrapolated.

WOMEN

Gendered disinformation was not addressed in detail. When gender was mentioned, participants alluded to the effect of disinformation discouraging or excluding women from participation in political processes or public office. Further understanding is needed of how disinformation and lack of women's perspectives in available information impacts on women and men in general, and particularly on women in the public eye such as women in public office and journalists, and what specific strategies are needed to address misogynistic disinformation.

REFUGEES

Refugees are particularly vulnerable to concerted disinformation campaigns, including when host communities are already facing poverty and other challenges that government services are not able to alleviate. Understanding the unique risks and threats posed by targeted disinformation against migrants, refugees and other mobile and vulnerable populations will be an important part of humanitarian responses.

In addition to their current efforts and initiatives, UNESCO and UNDP will continue to advocate for greater transparency by internet companies to better understand the original, spread and impact of disinformation, and ultimately, how it can be overcome.

ANNEXES:

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CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

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- UNDP Nepal
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- UNDP Chile
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- UNDP Kenya
- UNESCO

MODERATORS

- Busara Centre: Ruth Canagarajah
 - Internews: Stijn Aelbers
 - Overseas Development Institute: Sherine El Tarabousli-McCarthy, Louise Shaxton
 - Search for Common Ground: Ema Billings Fong
 - UNDP: Rawhi Afghani, Daria Asmolova, Doruk Ergun, Simon Finley, Niamh Hanafin, Jenny Mceneaney, Monica Rijal, Emanuele Sapienza
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-

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