

FOREWORD

UNESCO works to strengthen journalism education, and this publication is the latest offering in a line of cutting-edge knowledge resources.

It is part of the “Global Initiative for Excellence in Journalism Education”, which is a focus of UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The Initiative seeks to engage with teaching, practising and researching of journalism from a global perspective, including sharing international good practices.

Accordingly, the current handbook seeks to serve as an internationally-relevant model curriculum, open to adoption or adaptation, which responds to the emerging global problem of disinformation that confronts societies in general, and journalism in particular.

It avoids assuming that the term ‘fake news’ has a straightforward or commonly-understood meaning.¹ This is because ‘news’ means verifiable information in the public interest, and information that does not meet these standards does not deserve the label of news. In this sense then, ‘fake news’ is an oxymoron which lends itself to undermining the credibility of information which does indeed meet the threshold of verifiability and public interest – i.e. real news.

To better understand the cases involving exploitative manipulation of the language and conventions of news genres, this publication treats these acts of fraud for what they are – as a particular category of phony information within increasingly diverse forms of disinformation, including in entertainment formats like visual memes.

In this publication, disinformation is generally used to refer to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them. This is often combined with parallel and intersecting communications strategies and a suite of other tactics like hacking or compromising of persons. Misinformation is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent. Both are problems for society, but disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology.

¹ See Tandoc E; Wei Lim, Z and Ling, R. (2018). “Defining ‘Fake News’: A typology of scholarly definitions” in *Digital Journalism* (Taylor and Francis) Volume 6, 2018 - Issue 2: ‘Trust, Credibility, Fake News’.

The purveyors of disinformation prey on the vulnerability or partisan potential of recipients whom they hope to enlist as amplifiers and multipliers. In this way, they seek to animate us into becoming conduits of their messages by exploiting our propensities to share information for a variety of reasons. A particular danger is that ‘fake news’ in this sense is usually free – meaning that people who cannot afford to pay for quality journalism, or who lack access to independent public service news media, are especially vulnerable to both disinformation and misinformation.

The spread of disinformation and misinformation is made possible largely through social networks and social messaging, which begs the question of the extent of regulation and self-regulation of companies providing these services. In their character as intermediary platforms, rather than content creators, these businesses have to date generally been subject to only light-touch regulation (except in the area of copyright). In the context of growing pressures on them, however, as well as the risks to free expression posed by over-regulation, there are increased – although patchy – steps in the frame of self-regulation.² In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion focused his annual report on the issue, urging the Internet companies to learn from self-regulation in the news media, and to better align with UN standards on the right to impart, seek and receive information.³ Within this fast evolving ecology of measures taken by both states and companies, there is a very significant role for journalists and news media, which is where this publication comes in.

Discerning differences

Disinformation and misinformation are both different to (quality) journalism which complies with professional standards and ethics. At the same time they are also different to cases of weak journalism that falls short of its own promise. Problematic journalism includes, for example, ongoing (and uncorrected) errors that arise from poor research or sloppy verification. It includes sensationalising that exaggerates for effect, and hyper-partisan selection of facts at the expense of fairness.

But this not to assume an ideal of journalism that somehow transcends all embedded narratives and points of view, with sub-standard journalism being coloured by ideology. Rather it is to signal all journalism contains narratives, and that the problem with

2 Manjoo, F. (2018). What Stays on Facebook and What Goes? The Social Network Cannot Answer. *New York Times*, 19 July, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/technology/facebook-misinformation.html> [accessed on 20/07/2018]; <https://www.rt.com/usa/432604-youtube-invests-reputable-news/> [accessed on 15/07/2018]; <https://youtube.googleblog.com/> [accessed on 15/07/2018]; <https://sputniknews.com/asia/20180711066253096-whatsapp-seeks-help-fake-news/> [accessed on 15/07/2018].

3 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. UN Human Rights Council 6 April 2018. A/HRC/38/35. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/096/72/PDF/G1809672.pdf?OpenElement> [accessed on 20/07/2018].

sub-standard journalism is not the existence of narratives, but poor professionalism. This is why weak journalism is still not the same as disinformation or misinformation.

Nevertheless, poor quality journalism sometimes allows disinformation and misinformation to originate in or leak into the real news system. But the causes and remedies for weak journalism are different to the case of disinformation and misinformation. At the same time, it is evident that strong ethical journalism is needed as an alternative, and antidote, to the contamination of the information environment and the spill-over effect of tarnishing of news more broadly.

Today, journalists are not just bystanders watching an evolving avalanche of disinformation and misinformation. They find themselves in its pathway too⁴. This means that:

- ▶ journalism faces the risk of being drowned out by the cacophony;
- ▶ journalists risk being manipulated by actors who go beyond the ethics of public relations by attempting to mislead or corrupt journalists into spreading disinformation⁵;
- ▶ journalists as communicators who work in the service of truth, including “inconvenient truths”, can find themselves becoming a target of lies, rumours and hoaxes designed to intimidate and discredit them and their journalism, especially when their work threatens to expose those who are commissioning or committing disinformation⁶.

In addition, journalists need to recognise that while the major arena of disinformation is social media, powerful actors today are instrumentalising ‘fake news’ concerns to clamp down on the genuine news media. New and stringent laws are scapegoating news institutions as if they were the originators, or lumping them into broad new regulations which restrict all communications platforms and activities indiscriminately. Such regulations also often have insufficient alignment to the international principles requiring that limitations on expression should be demonstrably necessary, proportional and for legitimate purpose. Their effect, even if not always the intention, is to make genuine news media subject to a “ministry of truth” with the power to suppress information for purely political reasons.

In today’s context of disinformation and misinformation, the ultimate jeopardy is not unjustifiable regulation of journalism, but that publics may come to disbelieve

4 Despite the threat, according to one study the newsrooms in one country lacked systems, budget and trained personnel dedicated to combating disinformation. See: Penplusbytes. 2018. *Media Perspectives on Fake News in Ghana*. <http://penplusbytes.org/publications/4535/> [accessed 12/06/2018].

5 Butler, P. 2018. *How journalists can avoid being manipulated by trolls seeking to spread disinformation*. <http://ijnet.org/en/blog/how-journalists-can-avoid-being-manipulated-trolls-seeking-spread-disinformation>. See also Module Three of this handbook.

6 See Module Seven

all content – including journalism. In this scenario, people are then likely to take as credible whatever content is endorsed by their social networks, and which corresponds with their hearts – but leaves out engagement with their heads. We can already see the negative impacts of this on public beliefs about health, science, intercultural understanding and the status of authentic expertise.

This impact on the public is also especially concerning for elections, and to the very idea of democracy as a human right. What disinformation seeks, particularly during a poll, is not necessarily to convince the public to believe that its content is true, but to impact on agenda setting (on what people think is important) and to muddy the informational waters in order to weaken rationality factors in people’s voting choices⁷. Likewise, the issues of migration, climate change and others can be highly impacted by uncertainty resulting from disinformation and misinformation.

These dangers are why confronting the rise of ‘fake news’ head-on is an imperative for journalism and journalism education. At the same time, the threats also constitute an opportunity to double down on demonstrating the value of news media. They provide a chance to underline in professional practice the distinctiveness of delivering verifiable information and informed comment in the public interest⁸.

What journalism needs to do

In this context, it is a time for news media to tack more closely to professional standards and ethics, to eschew the publishing of unchecked information, and to take a distance from information which may interest some of the public but which is not in the public interest.

This publication is therefore also a timely reminder that all news institutions, and journalists whatever their political leanings, should avoid inadvertently and uncritically spreading disinformation and misinformation. In much news media today, the elimination of positions providing internal fact checking has to an extent led to the function now being assumed by the “fifth estate” of bloggers and other external actors who call out mistakes made by journalists – though after they are already disseminated.

This emergent phenomenon can be welcomed by news media as reinforcing society’s interest in verifiable information. Journalists should bring the work of independent fact-checking groups to larger audiences. But they should know that where external

7 Lipson, D (2018) *Indonesia’s ‘buzzers’ paid to spread propaganda as political elite wage war ahead of election*, ABC News: <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-13/indonesian-buzzers-paid-to-spread-propaganda-ahead-of-election/9928870?pfmredir=sm> [accessed 17/8/18].

8 See also: Nordic Council of Ministers. 2018. *Fighting Fakes - the Nordic Way*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers. <http://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/latest/news/fighting-fakes-nordic-way> [accessed 12/06/2018].

actors demonstrate systemic failure in a given news outlet, this puts a question mark over at least that institution's brand as a professional source of news. The media should be careful that external post-publication corrections do not become a substitute for internal processes of quality control. Journalists have to do better and "get it right" in the first place, or forfeit the possibility of a society to have believable media.

In sum, a game of catch-up corrections by external watchdogs is not one in which journalism is a winner. Journalists cannot leave it to fact-checking organisations to do the journalistic work of verifying questionable claims that are presented by sources (no matter whether such claims are reported in the media, or whether they bypass journalism and appear directly in social media). The ability of news practitioners to go beyond "he said, she said" journalism, and to investigate the veracity of claims made by those being covered has to be improved.

Journalism also needs to proactively detect and uncover new cases and forms of disinformation. This is mission critical for the news media, and it represents an alternative to regulatory approaches to 'fake news'. As an immediate response to a burning and damaging issue, it complements and strengthens more medium-term strategies such as media and information literacy which empower audiences to distinguish what is news, disinformation and misinformation. Disinformation is a hot story, and strong coverage of it will strengthen journalism's service to society.

This handbook therefore is a call to action. It is also an encouragement for journalists to engage in societal dialogue about how people at large decide on credibility and why some of them share unverified information. As with the news media, for journalism schools and their students, along with media trainers and their learners, this is a major opportunity for strong civic engagement with audiences. As an example, 'crowd-sourcing' is essential if media are to uncover and report on beneath-the-radar disinformation that is spread on social messaging or email.

UNESCO's roles

Funded by UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), this new resource provides a unique and holistic view of the different dynamics of the disinformation story, along with practical skills-building to complement the knowledge and understanding presented.⁹ It is part of UNESCO's record of encouraging optimum performance and self-regulation by journalists, as an alternative to the risks of having state intervention to deal with perceived problems in the freedom of expression realm.

⁹ The 61st meeting of the IPDC Bureau in 2017 decided to support the Global Initiative for Excellence in Journalism Education by making a special allocation to develop new syllabi on new key topics for journalism. Progress was reported to the 62nd meeting of the IPDC Bureau in 2018, which then allocated an additional amount to support this curriculum.

The publication comes on the heels of two earlier UNESCO works “Teaching Journalism for Sustainable Development: New Syllabi”¹⁰ (2015), and “Model Curriculum for Journalism Education: A Compendium of New Syllabi” (2013). These publications in turn are sequels to UNESCO’s seminal “Model Curriculum on Journalism Education”¹¹ published in 2007 in nine languages.

Other publications of ongoing value and within UNESCO’s publications relevant to journalism education and training include:

- ▶ Model course on the safety of journalists (2017)¹²
- ▶ Terrorism and the Media: a handbook for journalists (2017)¹³
- ▶ Climate Change in Africa: A Guidebook for Journalists (2013)¹⁴
- ▶ Global Casebook of Investigative Journalism (2012)¹⁵
- ▶ Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists (2009)¹⁶
- ▶ Conflict-sensitive reporting: state of the art; a course for journalists and journalism educators (2009)¹⁷

Each of these publications has proved valuable in scores of countries around the world, where journalism educators and trainers, as well as students and working journalists, have improved their practice in various ways. In some places, they have had the flexibility to adapt entire multi-year programmes in line with the new knowledge and inspiration; in others, it has been a matter of integrating elements from the UNESCO resources into existing courses. The quality and coherence of this new publication can be expected to generate the same value for readers.

Since UNESCO is an intergovernmental organisation, it does not take sides in the geopolitics of information contestation. As is well known, there are varying claims and counter-claims about disinformation. Such knowledge should inform the reading of this text, as well as inspire readers to help gather further evidence about various cases.

¹⁰ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/teaching-journalism-for-sustainable-development/> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹¹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/model-curricula-for-journalism-education/> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹² <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-releases-model-course-safety-journalists> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹³ <https://en.unesco.org/news/terrorism-and-media-handbook-journalists> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/climate-change-in-africa-a-guidebook-for-journalists/> [accessed on 12/06/2018].

¹⁵ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/the-global-investigative-journalism-casebook/> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹⁶ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001930/193078e.pdf> [accessed 12/06/2018].

¹⁷ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/publications-and-communication-materials/publications/full-list/conflict-sensitive-reporting-state-of-the-art-a-course-for-journalists-and-journalism-educators/> [accessed on 12/06/2018].

Meanwhile, avoiding relativism, the handbook firmly embeds within its pages the following competencies as constituting unassailable foundations for assessment and action:

1. Knowledge that news – produced by transparent actors and which is verifiable - is essential for democracy, development, science, health and human progress,
2. Recognition that disinformation is not a side-show, and that combatting it is mission critical to news media,
3. Commitment to enhanced professional journalistic skills as essential if inclusive and accurate journalism is to compete as a credible alternative to counterfeit content.

Other powerful and vital literacies covered in this publication, which are especially relevant to journalists and news media outlets, include:

1. Knowledge and skills to set up newsroom systems to ensure that there is systematic monitoring, investigating and reporting on disinformation,
2. Knowledge about the value of partnerships between media institutions, journalism schools, NGOs, fact-checkers, communities, Internet companies and regulators, in combatting information pollution,
3. Knowledge about the need to engage the public on why it is important to cherish and defend journalism from being overwhelmed by disinformation or being targeted by malicious actors directing disinformation campaigns against journalists.

Overall, this publication should help societies become more informed about the range of societal responses to disinformation problems, including those by governments, international organisations, human rights defenders, Internet companies, and proponents of media and information literacy. It particularly highlights what can be done by journalists themselves and by the people who educate and train them.

We hope that, in its modest way, this handbook can help to reinforce the essential contribution that journalism can make to society – and also to the Sustainable Development Goals’ ambition of “public access to information and fundamental freedoms”. UNESCO thanks the editors and the contributors for making this publication a reality. It is therefore commended to you, the reader, and we welcome your feedback.

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