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Please see the full Summary Collection and related contents in The Communication Initiative and La Iniciativa de Comunicación and UNESCO websites.



SUMMARY

6

## Summary of the report: Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression

Chapter on:

# Educational and Empowerment Responses to Disinformation

“ Ensure that empowerment and labelling responses operate in tandem with educational responses for best effect. ”

*Excerpt from the original Report*

*Teachers, lecturers and civil society advocates will find this summary of particular interest.*

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**BROADBAND COMMISSION**  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT





## SUMMARY 6

### Background:

This global study maps diverse international responses to disinformation, along with the impacts of counter-disinformation measures on the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Featuring case study examples from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was published in the context of the 10th anniversary of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, which was co-founded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Disinformation is a challenge to freedom of expression and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relevant to the Broadband Commission (specifically, SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, and SDG 16.10 on public access to information and fundamental freedoms).

The report introduces a typology of disinformation responses that are categorised by their aim of targeting particular aspects of the problem, rather than in terms of the actors behind them (e.g., internet companies).

● This particular summary focuses on some of the responses that fall within the umbrella category of responses aimed at supporting the potential “victims” of disinformation campaigns - specifically:

- **Educational responses**, which aim at promoting citizens’ media and information literacy (MIL), critical thinking, and verification in the context of online information consumption, as well as journalist training. Of particular relevance are:
  - Critical thinking
  - News and advertising literacy
  - Human rights awareness
  - Identity issues
  - Understanding of algorithms and data
  - Knowledge of the political economy of communications (including economics, psychology and sociology around the production, targeting, and spread of disinformation).
- **Empowerment responses**, which focus on practical aids that can empower citizens and journalists to avoid falling prey to online disinformation.

As the Balancing Act study explains, scientists and fact-checkers have been researching what makes citizens believe and spread false or misleading content. One example of a factor they have identified is “confirmation bias”, i.e., people’s tendency to read and believe content that conforms to their existing worldviews. Moreover, online news and information sharing and commenting behaviour is influenced by the behaviour of people’s like-minded online social connections (“homophily”). Receiving content from trusted sources such as friends and families adds credence to the credibility of this content. Possibly linked to all this, researchers have found that the nature of social networks and search engines can lead to polarisation; when polarised online communities are exposed to disinformation that conforms to their preferred narratives, this content tends to be believed and shared.

In this context, educational initiatives in the wide field of MIL may be formal and informal, and spread across a range of social institutions from schools through to cities, transportation systems, and media/social media. UNESCO also operates with a concept of Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which includes competencies around identity and values. Complementing MIL and GCED efforts are initiatives and resources that are aimed at educating journalism students and professional journalists in tools, methodologies, and resources for verifying, investigating, and debunking online disinformation. These tools are often developed and facilitated by journalists, journalism educators, researchers, and civil society organisations.

## Examples of outputs produced by educational responses to disinformation include:

- **Online games** - e.g., the global **International Factchecking Network’s** role-playing card game (in English, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish) for teens 15-18 years of age, with students playing newsroom journalists covering a controversial referendum, marred by online propaganda and disinformation.
- **School-based approaches** - e.g., the school media club run by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) **African Centre for Media and Information Literacy (AFRICMIL)** and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) student-oriented MIL activities of the **Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB)**.
- **Teacher training** - e.g., the Brazilian **Educamidia** project and the European **YouCheck!** project.

- **Media-content approaches** -e.g., a series of documentaries, special reports, and features produced by the [Beyond Fake News](#) project, delivered via TV, radio, and online across the BBC's networks in Africa, India, Asia Pacific, Europe, and the Americas.
  
- **MIL training for online influencers and youth organisations** - e.g., initiatives that are being explored with the support of UNESCO in India, Kenya, and Nigeria.
  
- **Online verification toolkits and educational materials** - e.g., [Edutopia's](#) New York Times lesson plan, which is aimed at improving the general public's understanding of verification and fact checking.
  
- **Outputs aimed at improving journalistic professionalism include:** journalist-oriented verification literacy materials; resources aimed at strengthening accuracy in reporting (often country- and language-specific); academic research in the field of disinformation; and tutorials to help journalists learn about OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) and content verification tools and the best practices for their use.

The Balancing Act study notes that evaluating MIL and GECD initiatives in changing citizens' disinformation consumption and sharing behaviour is a challenging and largely unresolved problem. There is also the need for independent evaluation of the impartiality and comprehensiveness of MIL materials and training, in particular those created by the internet communications companies. Other challenges include, how to help the general public (especially those holding polarised views) to see the value of MIL and invest the time to learn and practice mindful social media engagement behaviour. In addition, MIL faces limits if it does not go wider than news, fact-checking and content verification, and if it operates without holistic encompassing of wider digital citizenship skills - including freedom of expression and other online and offline freedoms.

Both a challenge and an opportunity is that of making MIL and GCED education accessible to children worldwide, estimated to constitute one-third of internet users globally. Ensure a fully comprehensive, multi-stakeholder MIL provision would require governments around the world to make MIL an integral part of their national school curricula; to invest in professional training of their teachers in MIL; and to work closely with civil society and, media organisations, independent fact-checkers, and the internet communication companies...

## Possible options for action in the educational category of responses:

- **International organisations** -

Work towards providing MIL educational initiatives and materials for under-served countries, languages, and demographics.

- **Internet companies**

-Foster interdisciplinary action research projects designed to experiment with educational responses to disinformation, and report on these experiments to aid knowledge sharing.

- **Individual states** - Earmark funding and support for interventions for older citizens, who are both a key voter demographic and a primary risk group for spreading disinformation.

- **News media** -

Collaborate with journalism schools on counter-disinformation projects involving both researchers and students to improve the capabilities of graduates and deepen their understanding and practice.

- **Civil society** - Increase

work in MIL innovation such as anti-disinformation games, and develop creative ways to empower constituencies beyond the educational system who are at risk from disinformation.

Hand in hand with educational responses are **empowerment responses** that focus specifically on external methods, tools, and websites to assist users in recognising disinformation and its sources. These tools and cues are intended to help citizens and journalists to avoid falling prey to online disinformation, and to encourage good practices among journalists and internet and media companies when publishing information. The majority of these initiatives try to help the general public by making them more aware of potential issues, but some also aim to reach those who produce or disseminate news, such as journalists and bloggers, as well as the media organisations themselves.

These responses aim to provide mechanisms to signal disinformation or potential disinformation. Thus, informative metadata is added, labels are made more visible, and friction is added to sharing. Trust-based initiatives, which focus on highlighting good practices in the media and promoting and rewarding compliance with professional standards, are based on the idea that particular media sources can be flagged as trustworthy, thereby encouraging common standards and benchmarks that can be adopted by those who produce journalistic content.

The criteria for what constitutes truthful news media are contested, and private accreditors are often criticised. Facebook assesses what constitutes a state-media operation, and labels it as such, eliciting protests for who is included and who escapes the moniker.

● These empowerment initiatives aim to produce outputs such as:

- Transparency about the provenance of content (with hopes that block-chain technology may help in future).
- Tools and resources for assessing credibility of news sources, feeding into accreditation schemes and content curation systems;
- Methods and protocols for better provision of cues about information to the end user, enabling improved awareness of trustworthy and untrustworthy information and sources.
- Tools for rating news sources, articles, and authors - carried out either by trained professionals or communities.
- Use “traffic light” systems that make it clear what is trustworthy and what is suspicious. This is particularly important for the general public who cannot be expected to become expertly media and information literate overnight, despite the benefits that educational initiatives afford.

● A concluding recommendation relevant to educational and empowerment responses to disinformation:

*“ In the bigger picture, it is also important to ensure that a society’s emphasis is upon solving the root causes - and engines - of the disinformation problem, rather than simply building resilience to it as if this was a stand- alone solution. ”*