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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

1

Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression

Highlights of the full report

“ In totality, this research affirms that freedom of expression, access to information and critical, independent journalism - supported by open and affordable internet access - are not only fundamental human rights, but should be treasured as essential tools in the arsenal to combat disinformation - whether connected to a pandemic, elections, climate change or social issues. ”

Excerpt from the original Report

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SUMMARY

1

Disinformation can cause harm in confusing or manipulating citizens; creating distrust in international norms, institutions, or democratically agreed strategies; disrupting elections; or painting a false picture about key challenges such as climate change. It can also be deadly, as the COVID-19 “disinfodemic” has illustrated. 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. In so doing, the report presents analyses, a typology, a response assessment tool, and sector-specific recommendations to address the lifecycle of online disinformation - from production to transmission, reception, and reproduction. 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).

The full chapters include:

1. Introduction
2. Typology of Disinformation Responses
3. Research Context and Gaps
4. Identification Responses
 - 4.1. Monitoring and fact-checking responses
 - 4.2. Investigative responses
5. Ecosystem Responses Aimed at Producers and Distributors
 - 5.1. Legislative, pre-legislative, and policy responses
 - 5.2. National and international counter-disinformation campaigns
 - 5.3. Electoral-specific responses
6. Responses within Production and Distribution
 - 6.1. Curatorial responses
 - 6.2. Technical / algorithmic responses
 - 6.3. Demonetisation and advertising-linked responses
7. Responses aimed at the Target Audiences of Disinformation Campaigns
 - 7.1. Normative and ethical responses
 - 7.2. Educational responses
 - 7.3. Empowerment & credibility labelling responses
8. Challenges and Recommended Actions
9. List of Sources Consulted

A key insight to emerge from the research is that disinformation cannot be addressed in the absence of freedom of expression concerns. Actions to combat disinformation should support, and not violate, this right. Access to reliable and trustworthy information, such as that produced by critical independent journalism, is a counter to disinformation.

The study presents a framework for capturing the complete disinformation lifecycle - from instigation and creation, to the means of propagation, to real-life impact.

Questions can be asked within the stages of the lifecycle



Instigators - e.g., who are the direct and indirect instigators and beneficiaries of the disinformation? What is their relationship to the agent(s)? Why is the disinformation being spread - what is the motivation?

Agents - e.g., Who is operationalising the creation and spread of disinformation?

Messages - e.g., What is being spread? How is false or misleading content mixed with other kinds of content? How is the realm of unknowns being exploited by disinformation tactics? Are messages seeking to divert from, and/or discredit, truthful content and actors engaged in seeking truth (e.g., journalists and scientists)?

Intermediaries - e.g., Which sites/online services and news media is the disinformation spreading on? How is it spreading? Are intermediaries sufficiently accountable and transparent in implementing necessary and proportionate actions to limit the spread of disinformation?

Targets/Interpreters - Who is affected? What is their online response and/or real-life action?



The findings are organised into a typology of 11 different categories of responses to disinformation. These range from identification and investigatory responses, through to policy and legislative measures, technological steps, and educational approaches.



● An assessment tool for disinformation responses

For each category of response, the reader will find a description of work being done around the world, by which actors, how it is funded, and who or what is targeted.

The report further analyses the underlying assumptions and theories of change behind these responses, while weighing up the challenges and opportunities.

Each category of response is also assessed in terms of its intersections with the universal human right of freedom of expression, with a particular focus on press freedom and access to information. Finally, case studies of responses to COVID-19 disinformation are presented within each category.

The analysis highlights that different interventions need to be aligned. Accordingly, the study calls for multistakeholder consultation and cooperation in the fight against disinformation. It also recognises that a multi-faceted approach is needed - including rebuilding the social contract and public trust in democratic institutions, promoting social cohesion (particularly in highly polarised societies), and addressing business models that thrive on disinformation content.

The study also provides **a 23-step disinformation assessment tool**. It is designed to analyse whether responses are in accordance with international human rights norms, paying additional attention to access to information and privacy rights.

A sample question in the tool: Are the responses gender-sensitive and mindful of particular vulnerabilities (e.g., youth, the elderly) relevant to disinformation exposure, distribution and impacts?

The study encourages the broadband community and donors to invest further in independent fact-checking, critical professional journalism, media development, and media and information literacy (MIL), especially through educational interventions reaching children, young people, older citizens, and vulnerable groups.

In addition, it calls for actors to promote privacy-preserving, equitable access to key data from internet communications companies in order to enable independent analysis into the incidence, spread, and impact of online disinformation, especially in the context of elections, public health, and natural disasters.

● The study makes recommendations for each of several stakeholder groups. Some examples:

- **Intergovernmental and other international organisations**
 - increase technical assistance to Member States to help them develop regulatory frameworks and policies, in line with international freedom of expression and privacy standards, to address disinformation.
- **Individual states** - increase transparency and proactive disclosure of official information and data, and monitor this performance in line with the right to information and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicator 16.10.2, which assesses the adoption and implementation of constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information.
- **Political parties and other political actors** - speak out about the dangers of political actors as sources and amplifiers of disinformation, and work to improve the quality of the information ecosystem and increase trust in democratic institutions.
- **Electoral regulatory bodies and national authorities** - work with journalists and researchers in fact-checking and investigations around electoral disinformation networks and producers of “dark propaganda”.
- **Law enforcement agencies and the judiciary** - ensure that law enforcement officers are aware of freedom of expression and privacy rights, including protections afforded to journalists who publish verifiable information in the public interest, and avoid arbitrary actions in connection with any laws criminalising disinformation.
- **Internet communications companies** - work together in a human rights frame to deal with cross-platform disinformation, and share data about this.
- **The media sector** - consider mythbusting and investigative collaborations into disinformation with other news organisations and audiences, including internationally.
- **Civil society** - partner with journalists, news organisations, and researchers on investigative and monitoring projects about disinformation and responses to it.