

DISINFORMATION TOOLKIT 2.0



How Civil Society and Non-governmental Organizations
Can Combat Harmful Mis- and Disinformation

OCTOBER 2021

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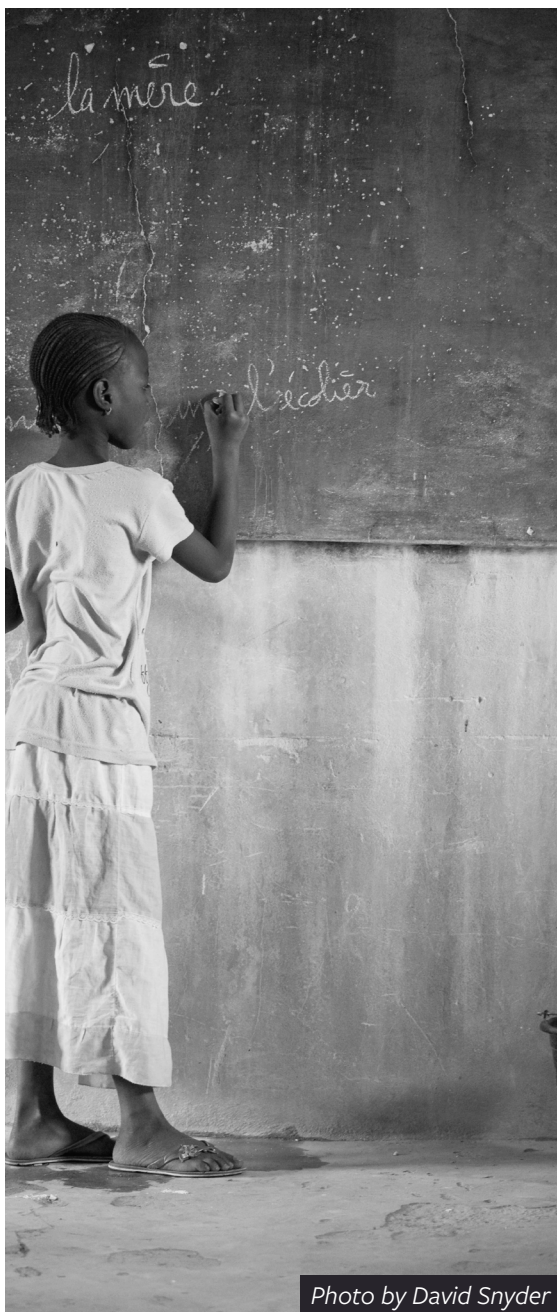


Photo by David Snyder

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LETTER FROM INTERACTION'S CEO

On behalf of InterAction's Member organizations, a community of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) active globally, we are pleased to present this resource on disinformation.

Disinformation entered the public consciousness in the United States after the 2016 presidential elections but is now a threat affecting our sector's work. Although this problem has long been an issue for our community, the nature of these trends and behaviors—and the rapid rate at which they can manufacture dissent about assistance internationally, sow confusion about the communities our Members support, or directly counteract the critical, life-saving work they do around the globe—is new and worrisome.

Indeed, understanding how information can be weaponized and ultimately harm our work is critical for the humanitarian and international development sectors. Our Members serve the most vulnerable populations in challenging environments, whether due to evolving political and economic crises or natural disasters. Many of the communities our Members support live in information vacuums, where credible and critical information is either unavailable or difficult to access. The spread of false information with the intent to manipulate or harm can mean the difference between life or death in these environments. We believe supporting our Members to work with each other to identify and push back on online disinformation will decrease our sector's vulnerability to false information and propaganda,

which is designed to divide communities, cause harm, or spark violence.

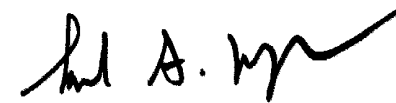
To tackle this new threat, NGOs in the development and humanitarian sectors must adapt. Critical to this adaptation is preparing our leaders, staff, and local partners for this challenge. Bolstering their awareness and capabilities will promote conversations that will allow our Members to better respond to disinformation threats and challenges and better support vulnerable people around the globe. It is also essential for our sector to work closely with others working on related issues such as digital literacy and security, including researchers, governments, and private sector partners seeking solutions that address the challenge of disinformation.

As the largest U.S.-based alliance of nonprofits that work worldwide, we believe it is critical to raise awareness of and build our resilience to the evolving threat of disinformation. Whether NGOs are helping prevent the spread of COVID-19, promoting democratic governance, combating climate change, or providing emergency assistance to vulnerable people in conflict zones, we are all united by the shared mission of making the world a more peaceful and prosperous place. Confronting this new challenge is indeed critical to our mission and worthy of our time, attention, and resources.

We hope this toolkit continues a critical dialogue within our community about the scale of the problem

we face concerning online disinformation and, more importantly, what we can do to protect ourselves and the people we help from its harmful effects. As a community, we remain committed to leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and resources of the NGO community and our partners in government and the private sector to build stronger defenses against disinformation and those who propagate its negative impacts on vulnerable people.

Stay safe and be well,



Samuel A. Worthington

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INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

InterAction's original Disinformation Toolkit debuted in June of 2018 and remains one of the most accessed items on the InterAction website. The 28-page toolkit provides recommendations and tools for international civil society organizations that are the subject of disinformation.

Disinformation Toolkit 2.0 builds on its predecessor by looking more broadly at the many ways disinformation impacts the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs that are active in defense of human rights, humanitarian action, and across sectors of international development around the globe.

This report includes framing context to strategically understand and respond to disinformation in the aid sector (part 1), followed by three separate but linked sets of analyses, recommendations, and tools (parts 2, 3, and 4) spanning core perspectives relevant to InterAction Member organizations. Finally, this document includes relevant resources, databases of potential counter-disinformation partners, and policy perspectives among the annexes. With the exception of part 1, each section of this report includes tools, examples, and recommendations for organizations and individuals targeted by disinformation or confronting its harmful impact in the context of their civil society, development, or humanitarian work.

This second iteration of the Disinformation Toolkit takes inspiration from three sources:

- A desk review of dis- and misinformation related work on InterAction Members' and Associate Members' websites, as well as the latest research and recommendations from global experts, researchers, think tanks, and universities;
- More than 60 follow-up interviews with InterAction staff across sectors, disinformation experts across the InterAction community, as well as researchers and relevant civil society, NGO, donor, and foundation staff;
- Peer review by more than 20 InterAction staff, InterAction Member organization staff, and sector experts.

We look forward to feedback on this document as well as collaboration on and around the disinformation challenge with our Members and organizations across the sector working to eliminate extreme poverty, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people.

ROADMAP

While InterAction recommends reading this report in full, those looking for a specific type of background or assistance will find the below roadmap helpful in identifying the section or sections most relevant to their needs.

■ Part 1: Why is disinformation a problem for international CSOs and NGOs now?

A conceptual review of the nature of the challenge of disinformation in the context of foreign aid and the work of civil society organizations and NGOs around the globe. For readers wishing to better understand why conversations of disinformation and misinformation have proliferated lately with a focus on global trends in authoritarian influence and technology adoption. [Take me there →](#)

■ Part 2: How is disinformation used against international CSOs and NGOs?

For CSOs and NGOs that themselves have been the target of disinformation attacks or are concerned that they might be. This section includes examples, specific steps organizations can take to inoculate and respond to disinformation that targets them or their staff, and links to deeper technical guides created by InterAction Member organizations and other experts. [Take me there →](#)

■ Part 3: How can disinformation exacerbate the stigmatization of marginalized populations and drive societal conflict?

For CSOs and NGOs working to support populations that may face disinformation attacks, exposing them to discrimination and potentially violence. This section provides examples and considerations for responding in this context. [Take me there →](#)

■ Part 4: How is the impact of disinformation felt across sectors of international development?

This section provides examples, resources, and tools for NGOs active in the promotion of democracy, rights, and good governance; global health and COVID-19 response; environment and climate work; and economic growth projects. In addition to providing critical resources for practitioners within each of these sectors, this section is intended to drive the cross-pollination of strategies and approaches to responding to disinformation as it manifests across sectors. [Take me there →](#)

■ Annex 1: Which partners, initiatives, and tools might CSOs and NGOs find useful?

This section includes a series of links to databases, lists, and resources created by other organizations. The intervention and partner databases will be particularly useful for organizations facing the threat of disinformation in their work. [Take me there →](#)

■ Annex 2: Policy considerations

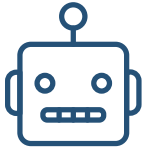
While the strategies and tactics to respond to and prepare for disinformation attacks are helpful for organizations encountering disinformation in or through their work, in the long term, policy must change in accordance with the threat that dis- and misinformation pose online. This section provides links to the work of organizations—within and beyond the InterAction alliance—that are considering policy responses. [Take me there →](#)



TOOLKIT TIP

Navigate through this toolkit by using the tabs at the top of each page. Hover over a tab to see a brief description of that section's content. You can return to this roadmap any time by clicking the location icon below.

DEFINITIONS



Coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB):

A term created by Facebook to describe “groups of pages or people to mislead others about who they are or what they’re doing.”¹ Often used in reference to fake accounts, or bots, being used to promote specific social media posts, but can also refer to groups of people promoting dangerous, harmful, or hateful content. Facebook posts monthly reports about their actions against CIB networks, and Internet research organization Graphika publishes long-form reports highlighting the actors and incentives behind CIB takedowns.^{2,3}



Disinformation:

According to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), disinformation is “the use of half-truth and non-rational argument to manipulate public opinion in pursuit of political objectives.”⁴ It is used by powerful political actors to “degrade public trust in media and state institutions, and... amplify social division, resentment, and fear.” Further, “analysts generally agree that disinformation is always purposeful and not necessarily composed of outright lies or fabrications. It can be composed of mostly true facts, stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message, and is always part of a larger plan or agenda.”



Fake news:

According to NED, “fake news generally refers to misleading content found on the internet, especially on social media. One analysis lays out five types of fake news, including intentionally deceptive content, jokes taken at face value, large-scale hoaxes, slanted reporting of real facts, and coverage where the truth may be uncertain or contentious.” Fake news may be presented as a website designed to look like legitimate news operations but promotes stories with a financial or political motivation. Fake news tends to use social media algorithms to spread quickly through the digital space. Fake news is a colloquial term that has been used in political contexts since at least the 2016 U.S. elections. This term is not favored by scholars due to its inexact definition.⁵

DEFINITIONS (CONTINUED)



Information operations (I.O.):

According to Mercy Corps' 2019 Weaponization of Social Media report, coordinated disinformation campaigns “designed to disrupt decision making, erode social cohesion and delegitimize adversaries in the midst of... conflict. I.O. tactics include intelligence collection on specific targets, development of inciteful and often intentionally false narratives and systematic dissemination across social and traditional channels.”⁶



Misinformation:

According to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), misinformation is the inadvertent sharing of false information, including disinformation, to others. “While misinformation may begin as disinformation, it is spread with indifference to its truth value, or a lack of awareness that it is false. Misinformation may be spread to entertain, educate, or provoke. As such, a single false narrative or piece of content may cross this blurry line from disinformation to misinformation and back again, depending on its various sources and their perceptions of the truth or falsity of that narrative.”⁷ This definition proposes a distinction between disinformation and misinformation, hinging on the *intent* of the spreader, which can be difficult to discern.



Propaganda:

According to the Social Science Research Council, propaganda is “the intentional manipulation of beliefs” or “communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with political goals of the propagandist.”⁸ SSRC acknowledges that this definition includes disinformation as well as “true information framed in such a way as to obtain compliance.” Propaganda has been a popular term in the U.S. for a long time, but it “did not acquire significantly negative meanings until the World Wars. Since then, rivals have frequently labeled their opponents’ messages as propaganda.”⁹

PART 1: Why is disinformation a problem for international CSOs and NGOs now?

An Evolving Global Threat

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Governments, non-state actors, and influential individuals have used disinformation campaigns to spread false information deliberately, influence public opinion, or obscure the truth throughout history. While 20th-century Soviet propaganda—*dezinformatsiya*—is commonly cited as the origin of disinformation, this phenomenon is as old as human ambition itself. Prior to his coronation as the first emperor of the Roman Empire in 27 BCE, Octavian carried out a disinformation campaign against Mark Antony, his opponent in the last war of the Roman Republic, by circulating coins with defamatory slogans.¹⁰ Much later, Gutenberg's printing press democratized access to information and dramatically increased the spread of disinformation across Europe and eventually the world.¹¹

While Octavian's coins and Gutenberg's press required planning, resources, and physical distribution networks, disinformation today is distributed far more efficiently. The recent growth of global internet infrastructure, mobile data networks, and social media has created an information ecosystem that includes more than half of the world's population. No fewer than 4.2 billion people are active social media users, a full 54% of the global population.¹² Sixteen years after it was

created in a college dorm room, Facebook connects 2.7 billion people, while WhatsApp connects 2 billion people only 11 years since its launch.¹³ According to marketing and research firm We Are Social, global social media adoption has nearly *doubled* in the past six years.¹⁴

The scale *and* the velocity of this mass, rapid evolution in human communication has by no coincidence come at a moment of generational distrust in traditional democratic institutions. From government to the private sector to mass media, the digital space has exacerbated the destabilization of democratic society's guardrail institutions. For example, in the information sphere, newspaper, TV, and radio editors were once the primary gatekeepers of what appeared in the headlines and what appeared in the back-pages, balancing shock value with newsworthiness. Today, machine learning algorithms perform this task, with a clear preference for the type of shock value that disinformation campaigns are often designed to elicit. This transition has contributed to the development of an information ecosystem in which lies and disinformation spread at least six times faster than the truth.¹⁵

To understand why shock value has been so prioritized, one must understand the business model of the most popular social media networks, which use machine learning algorithms to perform billions of empirical tests on users daily, determining precisely the mix of content and format to keep each individual user scrolling and engaging as long as possible.¹⁶ In a way, the early TV news mantra “if it bleeds, it leads” has been re-validated, and the commercial logic remains the same—the more shocking or divisive the content, the more engagement it generates, and the more ad revenue it creates for platforms.^{17,18} Disinformation campaigns represent a key component of this shock value economy.

According to disinformation researcher Dr. Joan Donovan, “the business model for today's social media giants, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter has been to pursue scale... shareholder KPIs [key performance indicators] were pegged to expanding the user base. This approach has a significant weakness: when a platform's growth depends on openness, it's more vulnerable to malicious use.”¹⁹

“Lies and disinformation have been shown to spread at least six times faster than the truth.”

– Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, *Journal of Science*

While certain platforms have launched crowd-based initiatives to respond to the rise of disinformation on social media, such as Twitter’s new “misleading post” feature, relying on users themselves to identify disinformation campaigns ignores the fact that it is the unfettered openness of such platforms that has incentivized the growth of high shock-value content—including disinformation—capturing users’ eyes and advertisers’ wallets.²⁰ These business models have flourished in a political environment that has eschewed digital rights legislation, permitting the harvesting, manipulation, and sale of personal and behavioral data to third parties without the awareness or consent of the vast majority of users.²¹

Around the globe, the rapid growth in social media adoption has accelerated mass confusion about COVID-19, antipathy about migration, and denial of climate change, widening societal fissures and granting mass influence to anyone with a few thousand dollars and a goal in mind. “With the right message, a fringe organization can reach the majority of a nation’s Facebook users for the price of a used car,” says Zahed Amanullah, a counter-terrorism expert at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, who proved this point by reaching a full two-thirds of Kenyans on Facebook for only \$10,000.²²

“With the right message, a fringe organization can reach the majority of a nation’s Facebook users for the price of a used car.”

Equally troubling is the trend of governments using disinformation to impact elections, dodge accountability, delegitimize democratically-elected leaders, attack civil society and NGOs, and shield their patrons and supporters from accountability.^{23,24} Freedom House’s *Freedom on the Net* report highlights recent examples of this trend from a wide range of countries, including Brazil, China, Syria, Ethiopia, Venezuela, the Philippines, Turkey, Sudan, and Vietnam.^{25,26} This challenge has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided a window for autocratic governments to close civic space further, cracking down on civil society and dissent.²⁷ At the same time, some governments have deployed disinformation campaigns against marginalized groups, scapegoating them for COVID-19’s impact, fueling discrimination and violence against already vulnerable people.²⁸

In line with the clear threat disinformation presents to the dignity, health, and livelihoods of people around the globe, disinformation represents a significant threat to international CSOs and NGOs, and to the people they support around the globe.

– Zahed Amanullah, *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*

Global Societal Trends Exacerbating Disinformation

While the advent of social media has accelerated the spread of disinformation, tech platforms are not its sole driver. Researchers W. Lance Bennett of the University of Washington and Steven Livingston of George Washington University explore how global societal trends, including polarization, a loss of trust in institutions, media distribution, and other factors, have led to the current wave of disinformation in the public sphere. According to Bennett and Livingston, “The breakdown of authority in democratic institutions, combined with the growth of alternative information channels producing popular political mythologies, is mobilizing many citizens to join the upsurge in support for movements and parties outside the center, particularly on the right. As these radical right movements reject the core institutions of press and politics, along with the authorities who speak through them, there is a growing demand for alternative information and leadership that explains how things got so out of order. There is no shortage in the supply of such information.”²⁹

Following the work of Bennett and Livingston, researchers Humprecht, Esser, and Aelstrecent highlight five key risk factors which determine a society’s resilience or susceptibility to disinformation.³⁰ These factors include:

1. **High levels of societal polarization.**

Researchers from the Free University of Amsterdam have shown that high levels of political extremism are associated with a belief in conspiracy theories.³¹ Further, extremists' tendency toward simple solutions to political problems, such as violence, results from pathologies designed to confuse people about the cause, implication, and solution to complex real-world problems. InterAction's Together Project (described on page 12) has confronted societal polarization in its work, bringing CSOs together around common solutions.

2. **Low levels of trust in news media**

also contribute to high susceptibility to disinformation. As Humprecht says, "in environments in which distrust in news media is higher, people are less likely to be exposed to a variety of sources of political information and to critically evaluate [them]." Further, "research has shown that in countries with wide-reaching public service media, citizens' knowledge about public affairs is higher compared to countries with marginalized public service media. Therefore, it can be assumed that environments with weak public broadcasting services are less resilient to online disinformation."³²

3. **Societies with highly distributed media landscapes** are more likely to offer more entry points to disinformation narratives than countries with more concentrated

media markets. Concentrated media markets, particularly ones dominated by public broadcasting services, are more adept at re-enforcing true narratives over disinformation due to the time-tested reputation of those services.³³

4. **Large media markets** create perverse economic incentives for the spread of disinformation and fake news, which utilize shocking and often unbelievable headlines to garner clicks and generate revenue for propagators. According to the Global Disinformation Index, "We are attracted to 'drama' even more than pictures of cute kittens. In an internet world, attention is finite and the demands on it are infinite. This means that only the content which calls loudest will get our attention. In the case of YouTube's content moderation, critics have claimed that their formula is 'outrage equals attention' in order to increase engagement and ad revenues."

5. **A high rate of social media use** is an important indicator of susceptibility to disinformation, given the ease and efficiency with which disinformation purveyors can build networks and distribute content via social media. As Humprecht says, "a media diet mainly consisting of news from social media limits political learning and leads to less knowledge of public affairs compared to other media sources."³⁴

This research analyzed wealthy countries, but by no coincidence, the same dynamics are present in many of the developing and crisis-affected countries where InterAction Member NGOs and international civil society organizations operate, where democracy has long been in retreat and civic space is actively closing. In these country contexts, state repression, corruption, and weak institutions are on the rise as part of a global trend of rising illiberalism, enabled in part by the growing adoption of mobile data, smartphones, and social media tools, which accelerate disinformation and distrust.³⁵

Tech Adoption Has Accelerated Disinformation in Developing Countries

While disinformation attacks focused on the U.S. political ecosystem occupy significant public mindshare, the problem of disinformation is equally severe, if not more so, in developing and crisis-affected countries, where InterAction's 170+ Member CSOs and NGOs are most active. To understand how and why, it is important to understand the trends that have undergirded the rapid growth of internet and social media adoption over the last five years, which have been concentrated in low- and middle-income countries. First, it is important to note that between 2015 and 2021, the global population of social media users has doubled. According to We Are Social's January 2021 report (see graphic below), there were more than 2 billion social media users in 2015, while the January 2021 report indicates 4.2 billion users in 2021.

While this growth trend itself is massive, trends reported at the global level obscure the fact that the bulk of growth in adoption of internet use, smartphones, *and* social media has been concentrated in emerging economies. As the graphic below highlights, adoption has essentially flatlined in advanced economies while it has skyrocketed in developing countries. For example, between 2013 and 2018 (the time period the report covers), social media use in emerging economies increased from a median of 34% of the population to 53%, while in advanced economies it actually decreased. The trend is similar for internet and smartphone adoption.

The Alliance for Affordable Internet's 2020 Affordability Report explains this trend: Following the U.N. Broadband Commission's definition of internet affordability as 1GB of mobile broadband for no more than 2% of the average monthly income, "On average, prices in low- and middle-income countries have become more affordable, moving from 7.0% of average monthly income in 2015 to 3.1% in 2019. Countries like Rwanda, Ecuador, and India have seen the cost of 1GB mobile broadband come down by more than 60% during this time period."^{36,37}

This trend is the result of a confluence of factors, including:

- Regulatory changes such as market liberalization and accompanying robust investments in physical network infrastructure.

- Mobile network operators competing to expand data services and capture market share.
- Economies of scale resulting in cost reductions for each additional user.
- The advent of cheap smartphones, which typically come pre-loaded with Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media and messaging apps.
- Programs like Facebook's Free Basics, which provides a free, simplified version of the internet in developing countries.

As a result, 9 of the 10 countries with the highest number of Facebook users are classified by the World Bank as middle income.^{38,39} Further, 14 of the top 20 are middle income, and 9 of the top 20 are *lower* middle income in contrast to the earlier days of Facebook, when usage was concentrated in high-income countries.

Of Indonesia's 270 million people, more than half have an active Facebook account. Of Mexico's 128 million, more than 70% have a Facebook account.

Many of these countries are strategic priorities for the United States. In total, they received foreign aid obligations aggregating at \$2.7 billion in the 2020 U.S. foreign aid budget. They also include 8 of the top 40 recipients of the 2020 U.S. foreign aid budget by obligation.⁴⁰

“On average, prices in low- and middle-income countries have become more affordable, moving from 7.0% of average monthly income in 2015 to 3.1% in 2019.”

– Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2020 Affordability Report

PART 2: How does disinformation harm civil society and NGOs when they are targeted?

Disinformation & the Closing of Civic Space

Disinformation attacks on civil society organizations, NGOs, their leaders, and staff are one way that repressive leaders and governments use their power to close the civic space for dissent, protest, and free speech and solidify their hold on power. InterAction Member Oxfam explains that recent autocratic leaders launch such attacks on civil society actors to protect or strengthen their political and economic patronage networks and that such attacks hinge on a language of nationalist or traditional values, “alongside concerted ideological efforts to discredit or delegitimize specific civil society actors.”^{41,42} The International Center for Nonprofit Law (ICNL), also an InterAction Member, explains that the growth in the global movement for climate justice has been met with an accompanying crackdown on civic space for activists around the globe. A variety of methods have been deployed to quell dissent, including “laws criminalizing legitimate expression and assembly, to attempts to paint activists as ‘eco-terrorists,’ to civil lawsuits and physical persecution.”⁴³

In this context, disinformation campaigns are a potent tool for closing civic space. As powerful actors leverage disproportionate access to, or control of, local and social media platforms, they spread disinformation designed to malign civil society

Disinformation campaigns are a potent tool for closing civic space.

Powerful actors leverage disproportionate access to or control of local media platforms and social media channels to spread disinformation.

organizations, their leaders, and political goals by falsely associating them with bad actors, blaming them for crises, and launching rhetorical attacks in order to provoke a reaction and justify repressive policies such as state-led discrimination and human rights abuses, lawlessness and an increase in social tensions.⁴⁴

The arrival of the digital age, signaled by the sweeping adoption of mobile technology and social media in middle- and low-income countries, was hailed initially as a game-changing tool for civil society, particularly youth who represented the early adopters of social media platforms. The Arab Spring, a series of citizen-driven uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa during the early 2010s, spread across the region thanks in part to ad hoc networks of youth connected via Facebook, a civic space which repressive governments around the region had not previously seen as a threat. Since the Arab Spring,

though, such governments and their leaders have worked together to crack down on digital civic space in new ways made possible by the opacity of the data economy, proliferation of artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms built to reinforce societal biases, and lack of rights-based regulatory frameworks governing new technology.^{45,46,47,48}

Understanding these strategies and the role disinformation plays in closing civic space and cementing authoritarian rule highlights the urgency of the challenge of combating disinformation targeting civil society and NGOs.

The Together Project

InterAction's Together Project is a hub for advocacy and solidarity for U.S.-based NGOs that provide development and humanitarian relief around the world, particularly faith-based organizations who confront targeted prejudicial regulations in the U.S. due to their operating principles or faith.

In response to an unfounded but successful disinformation attack, one Member of the Together Project was forced to spend over \$100,000 in a single year on consultants to improve search results related to their organization and its leaders. Another Member was a repeat target of disinformation that capitalized upon a single funding error and had to expend significant resources to counter bad press.

The Together Project helps Members prepare for, prevent, and respond to disinformation that threatens their legitimacy and future funding opportunities. Since 2017, its anti-disinformation efforts have been highlighted by the International Civil Society Centre's 2019 [Innovation Report](#) and [Solidarity Playbook](#).

The Together Project currently focuses on two priority issues: 1) Disinformation and Discrimination and 2) Advocacy and Solidarity. Together Project Members and partners meet regularly with government bodies, the NGO community, and international civil society groups to address issues and provide solutions that support the effective delivery of foreign aid. Not only have their efforts

increased the awareness of these operational issue areas, but they have also expanded the network of invested actors in foreign assistance.

The Together Project continues to produce tools for U.S. NGOs to counter disinformation attacks and, specifically for faith-based organizations, to advocate for themselves against discriminatory regulations. Through advocacy and stakeholders' dialogues, the Together Project identified certain technical operational issues, such as bank de-risking, as both a driver and a consequence of disinformation attacks on NGOs. Banks efforts to de-risk themselves impede on the sector's ability to put the philanthropy of U.S. citizens and U.S. Government foreign aid to its intended purpose in communities around the world. When de-risking decisions are based on disinformation, it is not only damaging to an organization's reputation but can impact the effective delivery of aid. If a humanitarian crisis occurs abroad and a U.S. NGO's ability to respond is slowed by a bank's de-risking measures, the delay could cost lives. When a disaster strikes, every moment of our response matters.

In 2020, the Together Project began production of several deliverables to continue combating the targeted disinformation and regulatory attacks on its Members. The two-part webinar series "Understanding Disinformation in the INGO Community" shared background information on the roots of disinformation and response tactics.

In 2021, the group released, [Coming Together to Save Lives: An Exploration of InterAction's NGO Members' Interfaith Collaboration](#), which highlights the solidarity and effectiveness of faith-based organizations in global development. Faith-based leadership and interfaith collaborations have created pathways for NGOs to address many issues, including disinformation. The increased scale of global problems calls for organizations—faith-based and secular—to come together in strong partnerships to create effective, long-term solutions.

The tools and engagement led by the [Together Project](#) emphasize the importance in inclusion and discussion in strengthening civil society. The Project's anti-disinformation work reflects a need for unified, informed responses across the NGO sector. For more information about the Together Project, visit InterAction's [website](#) or contact [Princess Bazley-Bethea](#), Director of the Together Project and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

The Together Project recommends the below resources on disinformation actors:

- Center for American Progress – [Fear Inc. 2.0 Report](#) [Funders Research](#)
- Georgetown – [Bridge Initiative Research](#)

Philippines

Background:

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte rode to power in 2016 on the back of a social media-driven disinformation campaign targeting his political opponents, journalists, foreigners, CSOs, and NGOs. Since his election, a campaign of extrajudicial killings—nominally in service to Duterte’s war on drugs—has claimed as many as 20,000 people’s lives, most with total impunity on the part of the killers.^{49,50,51,52}

Disinformation Challenge:

According to Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, Duterte has used social media-driven disinformation to lead people “to believe the government’s draconian measures [are] justified” and “hit the credibility” of trusted news sources and other human rights defenders (HRDs) by “chipping away at facts, using half-truths that fabricate an alternative reality by merging the power of bots and fake accounts on social media to manipulate real people.”⁵³

Using Facebook, Duterte and his followers have consistently launched disinformation attacks on Duterte’s enemies, falsely associating opposition leaders with criminals, fabricating stories implicating them in crimes, or accusing them of infidelity.⁵⁴ These attacks have been amplified by a network of pro-Duterte Facebook groups, which create, share, and promote these accusations, as well as pro-Duterte material, out across the Philippines—the

country with the highest Facebook penetration rate in the world with over 83 million users.^{55,56}

Impact:

According to the Philippine Commission on Human Rights’ July 2020 report, under Duterte, 134 HRDs “have reportedly been killed since the beginning of the term of the current administration.” Broadly speaking, a “climate of impunity” has been established in which HRDs are a legitimate target of violence. Further, the report contends that this dynamic is “largely attributable to the pronouncements of the President.”⁵⁷

ICSC’s Solidarity Playbook

The International Civil Society Center’s (ICSC) Solidarity Action Network has covered the closing civic space extensively and, in 2021, published a Solidarity Playbook which includes a variety of case studies from around the globe on how civil society organizations are responding to repressive actions by governments, including disinformation campaigns. This resource includes recommendations on how civil society organizations can respond to attacks through solidarity, collective action, and a unified voice.

[Learn more](#) ↗

Brazil

Background:

Like President Duterte in the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro rode a campaign of divisive rhetoric and social media-driven disinformation to the Brazilian Presidency, which he assumed on January 1, 2019.

Disinformation Challenge:

Bolsonaro and his supporters have used disinformation attacks in a variety of ways throughout his presidency, including a campaign of defamation targeting his own pro-quarantine health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, before Mandetta’s firing in April of 2020.⁵⁸ In the Brazilian Amazon, massive wildfires broke out in 2019 and again in 2020, set by illegal loggers, land grabbers, ranchers, and miners who act with Bolsonaro’s backing—both implicit and at-times explicit.⁵⁹ Bolsonaro joined local police in providing rhetorical cover to the business interests responsible for the fires by placing the blame at the feet of local firefighters and NGOs, accusing them of using the crisis for fundraising.⁶⁰

Impact:

Since taking office, Bolsonaro has continued to employ the same methods: attacking his detractors and critics, subjecting Brazilians to some of the highest COVID-19 case and death rates in the world, and providing cover for massive deforestation in the Amazon, where deforestation has increased to more than 200% of pre-Bolsonaro levels. This deforestation has caused great harm to Indigenous

communities' livelihoods and continues to impact the Amazon's ability to absorb the world's carbon dioxide emissions, exacerbating global climate change.⁶¹ According to March 2021 research in the journal *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*, "that current warming... in the Amazon Basin largely offsets—and most likely exceeds—the climate service provided by atmospheric CO2 uptake."⁶²

Disinformation in Active Crises & the Humanitarian Context

The urgency and consequence of the work of civil society and international NGOs during crises are one reason disinformation attacks on their work have proliferated in recent years. This trend has been accelerated by the rapid efficiency with which disinformation can be created and disseminated to local and international audiences, competing directly with fact-based reporting from legitimate news organizations via social media. Bad actors—either state or non-state—may have strategic, tactical, political, or economic interests in exacerbating tensions, sparking conflict, and scapegoating humanitarian organizations.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross' Humanitarian Law and Policy blog, "malicious actors can take advantage of the information environment to disrupt or derail humanitarian activities by mounting a defamation campaign against humanitarian organizations, tarnishing their image and thus eroding peoples' trust." Effective

Disinformation Challenges a Multi-Faith Alliance

A Jewish NGO operating internationally has been repeatedly targeted over its advocacy for the protection and resettlement of refugees, including affected Muslim populations, as well as its partnership with a Muslim humanitarian organization. When board members of the Muslim organization made anti-Semitic comments, the Muslim organization took immediate corrective action and the Jewish NGO maintained the partnership. Yet, disinformation attacks against the Jewish NGO persist, including accusations that they knowingly partner with an anti-Semitic organization, despite the evidence to the contrary.

[Learn more](#)

humanitarian action depends on relationships of trust between NGOs and key actors, including vulnerable populations themselves, governments, and non-state actors. It is by maintaining such relationships that NGOs are able to operate during crises. Still, without trust—which is directly hindered by disinformation—there is no way for humanitarian actors to operate safely in crisis settings.⁶³

Further, disinformation campaigns can diminish the political will of international donors and the global public to support humanitarian operations in such environments by falsely aligning humanitarian organizations with terrorists or other bad actors or by blaming humanitarians for crises themselves.

Syria

Background:

Volunteer first responders known as the White Helmets gained international attention for their search-and-rescue operations in the aftermath of Syrian and Russian airstrikes. This group includes former bakers, builders, and students (among others) who chose to stay in Syria to save their fellow citizens and has received funding and training from international donors and governments.⁶⁴

Disinformation challenge:

Disinformation spread by Russia and Syrian state media accuse the White Helmets of planning or carrying out chemical attacks actually perpetrated by Syrian Government forces, an information war tactic that enables bad actors to use force in pursuing their political and economic goals, killing

or maiming civilians who might stand in their way while attempting to blame aid organizations and civil society for the violence.^{65,66}

Impact:

Such attacks exacerbate the enabling environment for mass-scale human rights violations, turning aid organizations into “legitimate targets” while inoculating bad actors from international reproach and accountability for their actions.^{67,68,69} Disinformation attacks focused on the reputation of aid groups threaten public and donor financial support, as has been the case with Russian disinformation against the White Helmets, directly degrading the ability of such organizations to save lives during conflict.⁷⁰

Nigeria

Background:

Boko Haram and other militant groups have caused at least 30,000 deaths since 2009, displacing more than 2 million people and leaving at least 10 million people in need of humanitarian assistance according to a 2020 report by Nigerian news outlet HumAngle, which focuses on security across Africa.⁷¹ Local and international humanitarian organizations have emerged as a result of the government’s inability to quell the violence, providing medical care, shelter, and other relief materials to victims and vulnerable populations. Through 2021, the targeting of aid workers has been a consistent challenge, resulting in kidnappings, deaths, and ongoing challenges to

the life-saving work of civil society and NGOs in Northeast Nigeria.^{72,73,74}

Disinformation challenge:

According to HumAngle, “In some cases, disinformation and misinformation campaigns are propagated by online trolls, propaganda channels and questionable associations shifting the blame for the conflict to NGOs... More worrisome is the trend that sees top government officials and politicians making unsubstantiated claims against INGO and NGOs in both private and public functions.” A series of accusations by Nigerian Government officials against NGOs active in the region were reported by Nigeria’s Premium Times in late 2019, including unsubstantiated claims that NGOs in the region were supplying food and medication to an “outlawed armed group.”⁷⁵ Subsequent accusations by Borno South senator Ali Ndume state “some non-governmental organizations (NGO) are aiding the operations of Boko Haram insurgents in Borno State.”⁷⁶

Impact:

This state-sanctioned disinformation campaign has increased the risk of providing aid and sowed distrust of life-saving aid organizations among the public. The campaign has had a direct impact on NGOs’ ability to operate effectively—or at all—and to provide essential services to affected communities that depend on them to meet their basic needs.

Responding When CSOs & NGOs Are Targeted

Developing and deploying strategies for anticipating and responding to disinformation is an evolving area of practice. Organizations must support staff in developing thoughtful, dynamic methods to prepare and respond. To do so requires organizations to move from ad hoc responses to more streamlined, systematic workflows and processes, which vary depending on the particular risks that organizations, staff, and programs face. It should be noted that if your organization is operating in a high-risk context, this document is meant to provide general guidance but should not be considered a detailed guide. Additional analysis would need to be done to mitigate safety risks.

Staff Roles

In thinking about how disinformation does or may affect your organization and its work, engaging relevant teams across your organization is crucial. Technical, program, communications, and security staff will each have an important role in your organization’s response to disinformation.



For Technical Staff and Program Designers:

At the program design phase, depending on the program’s focus and potential for political exposure, consider researching potential historical disinformation narratives or

cultural flashpoints related to your work. Additionally, communications professionals should think about building in rumor tracking and response methods into communications plans, particularly for programs with high public visibility.



For Program Managers and Staff:

When managing a program, liaise with project communications staff and your headquarters communications team to build in periodic reviews of social media chatter related to your organization, project, and the focus of your work in-country. When rumors and gossip appear, be ready to liaise with your organization's global communications and security teams to add to your project's technical expertise and re-deploy budgeted resources as necessary.



For Communications Staff:

Discuss your organization's disinformation-related risks to identify potential weak spots and opportunities for proactively preparing for a possible attack, including pre-bunking or anticipating narratives and pre-seeding messaging on social media and through partners. Conduct a media threat assessment as part of larger risk assessments (see the Risk Assessment Tool at the end of this section) and seek to answer the following questions:

1. Has your organization suffered from a disinformation event before? How did you

respond, and what procedures are in place guiding such a response?

2. If so, was the organization able to determine who was behind it and why?
3. What steps did the organization take before the disinformation event? Are these defensive steps still valid or sufficient? Why or why not?
4. What steps were taken after the attack to inoculate the targeted projects, individuals, or local partners from future attacks? Have these steps been formalized in policy for other projects or individuals which may be at high risk of disinformation attacks?

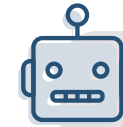
Train team members on how to identify disinformation:

1. Are you aware of what early warning signals might be? For example, are you aware of what a bot might look like? Do you know how to detect a false domain?
2. Consider whether it is better for your organization to respond in its own voice, or to work with mission-aligned local partners and thought leaders to respond through authentic local voices.



For Security Staff:

Disparaging attacks against organizations and leaders, even if false, have, in the past, posed physical threats to local offices and individuals. Therefore, online disinformation should be an issue security leads are



Tools for Media Monitoring, Detecting Fake Domains or Twitter Bots

Sprout Social

Social media monitoring and engagement tools

Access Now

Fake Domain Detective

Twitter Bot Detector

Indiana University

briefed on as they develop risk mitigation, emergency crisis response plans, and seek to answer the following questions:

1. Who might gain by undermining your organization's credibility?
2. What tools do they have at their disposal (e.g., access to state media)?
3. What is the appropriate response, if any at all?

Security staff might also conduct a digital security assessment and provide recommendations on secure data collection and communication, particularly in country contexts where there is high risk of surveillance.

Lastly, determine if there is an active community of practice or network among NGO or CSO security staff to share information about mis- and disinformation threats, targets, risks, and to strategize in the event a coordinated response is warranted. Collective security management has proven to be helpful in such circumstances, and domestic security networks should be linked up to global counterparts as well.

Assessing Digital Security Risks

The Global Interagency Security Forum provides guidance on digital security for non-experts in humanitarian contexts. This guide is available in English, Spanish, and French.

[Learn more](#)



For Legal and Policy Advisors:

Legal and policy advisers associated with CSOs and NGOs should consider the following steps when their organizations are targeted by disinformation.

1. Which legal and regulatory frameworks are applicable in the relevant country context? It's important to understand how local laws and policies may relate to free speech, mis- and disinformation, and what qualifies as an infringement of rights.
2. What are the political dynamics of the problem? What is the likely source? What is the likely intent? How might this impact the response strategy?
3. Stakeholder and power analysis/mapping and strategy development for action- to include domestic, regional, and global actors as relevant (working with communications, programs, security, etc.).

Developing a Risk Mitigation Plan

This section summarizes steps you might consider taking to develop a strategy for identifying and responding to online disinformation that could affect your organization's operations and the safety of your staff.

Think about your strategy in five parts, which are detailed below:

1. Evaluate your media and information ecosystem to determine where your disinformation risk is greatest.
2. Determine who is spreading the false information about your organization, leaders, or programs and develop a hypothesis about why they are sharing this information.
3. Determine what they are spreading or saying and how it is spreading.
4. Determine whether and how to counter this information and work with your organization's leaders to design workflows within your organization.
5. Confer with like-minded NGOs or similar stakeholders and develop a collective understanding and response plan to disinformation attacks.

The following are approaches to taking these actions. These suggestions should be viewed as conversation starters for you and your staff that will require additional institutionalization, based on your

organization's work and structure. The steps that you decide to take should be tailored to the unique context in which your organization operates.

1. YOUR MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

Understand all forms of media in which disinformation is spread—print, websites, and social media. One of the biggest ecosystems to analyze is the online media environment in which your programs operate. One of the first questions to ask yourself is: How vulnerable is my media environment to abuse?

Consult your national staff and learn how information flows within the communities that matter most to your organization. If context-appropriate, conduct

Assessing Your Media Ecosystem

Listening Post Collective has a brief document that includes a specific set of steps to assess local media ecosystems.

[Learn more](#)

Internews provides a set of eight key questions organizations should ask relative to the communities where they operate.

[Learn more](#)

a rapid, anonymous survey among beneficiaries to determine access to TV/radio/newspaper; access to technology including mobile phones and mobile data; adoption of messaging apps; social media; and community information hubs or influential people in your community of focus. Keep in mind that collecting or storing data about beneficiaries or affected populations digitally can be dangerous, especially as it relates to mis- and disinformation in contexts where authorities who are surveilling civil society are also the perpetrators of disinformation.

Possible discussion questions for your project or program communications staff could include:

Questions about your audience:

1. How do people get information about news, politics, and their community? How does the answer change with gender, age, economic status, location, and other key demographic factors?
2. What are the sources of information most important for political news (e.g., people, institutions, technology tools)?
3. How does the nature of these sources affect their spread and influence in your community (e.g., information in newspapers travels much slower than on Facebook)?
4. What information sources seem to matter to your core audiences?

Questions about your threats:

1. Who are the distributors (i.e., who shares the posts that go viral) that affect your work or your organization? Are there specific Facebook or messaging groups that are particularly present?
2. Who are likely creators (i.e., who develops the content that goes viral) of false claims that affect your work or your organization? This refers both to individuals and organizations that may be propagating such claims.
3. Do you have any hypotheses on how they disseminate their information and messages?
4. What are their motivations?

2. WHO CREATES DISINFORMATION? WHY?

Disinformation researchers cite two primary actors that create and disseminate disinformation content:

1. **State or state-aligned groups and political actors with political goals.** In the Philippines, the president's office has built a propaganda machine, in the form of fake accounts and bot networks, that disparages organizations and journalists and disseminates narratives with specific political goals.⁷⁷
2. **Non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations, extremist groups, political parties, and corporate actors.** During the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, anti-immigration news outlets published a number of false stories claiming that a large international

NGO was working with human traffickers as part of their search and rescue program. While false, the NGO was forced to divert valuable resources to fight these accusations. These groups have political aims to recruit supporters, create confusion, or disparage groups who oppose them.⁷⁸

Be careful to distinguish groups with politically motivated goals from individuals and groups motivated by economic incentives that create and disseminate false information. These are actors who have identified methods to earn a living by creating and disseminating false information; they may support state and non-state actors in achieving their political goals. In the United States, reports of Macedonian teenagers building false information content farms showed how these cottage industries generate revenue and created an industry around the creation and dissemination of false information.⁷⁹ On the political side, propagators aim to sow confusion or discontent among targeted communities. In Myanmar, for example, Facebook has been repeatedly jammed after major terrorist attacks with doctored photos and false information about the attacks from outside sources.⁸⁰

3. WHAT ARE THEY SAYING? WHERE IS IT APPEARING?

Disinformation is disseminated through the Internet through websites; social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter; and messaging applications

such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, LINE, Viber, and Instagram. However, the medium which is being used to distribute disinformation will vary depending on how actors are seeking to reach their intended audiences.

Commonly cited areas where disinformation has appeared include the following:

- Websites
- Facebook pages
- Messages through Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, LINE, Instagram, and others
- Posts in public or private Facebook groups
- Comments on highly visible news pages
- Instagram
- Twitter
- Traditional newspapers, radio, and television

Organizations may consider developing a system to record and log problematic posts, photos, or text content in a spreadsheet as they occur and share these materials with other groups who are experiencing attacks or observing worrisome trends. By aggregating and collecting this information, research partners may be able to support research that identifies sources and networks leading to the spread of disinformation.



Rumor Tracking How-to Guides

The USAID Breakthrough Action program has developed two brief guides to help project teams develop rumor tracking systems:

[COVID-19 Rumor Tracking](#)

[Creating a Real-Time Rumor Management System for COVID-19](#)

More details on each are provided in the *Misinformation, Global Health & COVID-19* section.

4. DECIDE WHETHER AND HOW TO TAKE FURTHER ACTION

Have discussions with your communications and security teams to determine whether actions need to be taken to counter disinformation.

Depending on the circumstances and your organization's goals, the following options may be appropriate for your response to disinformation attacks:

Advantages and Disadvantages of Countering Online Disinformation

ACTION	ADVANTAGE	DISADVANTAGE
Do not respond directly. Instead, let the disinformation die out organically while you continue to monitor conversations.	Allows a conversation that may not be visible to your audience to die out quickly. Does not “throw gas on the fire” or grant additional legitimacy to the false information at the core of the attack.	Audiences that have engaged with the disinformation may harbor negative views about you and your organization. Posts or messages could continue to be shared on “slow burn” for a long time, undermining your local organizations’ relationships and efforts.
Directly counter the disinformation through your organization’s existing online media channels. ⁸¹	Allows organizations to correct false statements or claims about them or their work. (If this course is taken, it should be done swiftly.) Can be effective if the organization is trusted in the community and has deep local ties.	Developing and publishing content and monitoring response to it requires time, human resources, and significant local knowledge to do effectively. There is also the possibility that counter- messages can backfire, open your organization to unwanted political attention or conflict, or reinforce initial false claims or disinformation.
Respond to disinformation through mission-aligned local partner organizations and influencers	Leverages local influence and networks of trust to counter harmful narratives. Protects your organization’s position as an apolitical outsider with a focus on helping people.	Could expose your defenders to criticism as “mouthpieces” for outsiders. May not be as direct or targeted as when your organization’s communications team refutes disinformation.
Promote alternative messages that provide information to your audience through new narratives.	Changes the narrative by presenting new information or alternative messages.	Developing and publishing content, and then monitoring response to it, takes time and human resources.

5. CONFER WITH LIKE-MINDED NGOS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Identify and coordinate with partners who share the same vulnerabilities. Consider joining the country-level NGO forum or relevant country-focused InterAction Working Group if your organization is not already a Member. There is significant value in identifying and working with like-minded organizations to discuss vulnerabilities and attacks when they occur.

While disinformation attacks often target individuals and institutions, they are often more broadly targeted at civil society organizations, national NGOs, or international NGOs in humanitarian settings. Given these shared interests, it is typically more effective and safer to join forces, pool resources, undertake collective analysis, joint strategy development, and action planning. It also helps to speak collectively to U.N. agencies and other international organizations who may have access to more resources as part of a collective response strategy.

As an example of collective response, InterAction's Together Project has developed a space for Muslim-interest foundations in the U.S. to find allies who can carry important messages to different constituencies, including larger interfaith coalitions. These relationships have allowed the alliance to strategically deploy surrogates to promote positive messages at the local level (whether it is commemorating a holiday, supporting disaster response, or sharing

InterAction Working Groups

InterAction hosts more than 30 Working Groups that help NGOs coordinate their work, advocate with one voice, and learn and share key lessons. Through InterAction's country-focused working groups, Members collectively elevate issues related to disinformation with USG and other country and multilateral stakeholders where they have influence and can support the NGO community.

[Learn more](#)

content around significant political events) and to members of Congress when advocating for specific issues. Working together as a network and addressing the problem together has been an essential part of sharing insights and brainstorming solutions.

If your organization has experienced a disinformation attack with international media coverage, you may also consider the following actions:

1. **Archive social media content.** If this is an area of increased vulnerability for you, consider connecting with open source investigation labs or media organizations that focus on archiving social media information (see recommendations

in the Databases of Disinformation Partners, Initiatives and Tools section of this document).

2. **Discuss the event with partners and donors** to ensure you can “pre-bunk” the narrative before they hear it from other sources. Examine what happened to you and your colleagues with critical stakeholders, including your partners and donors.
3. **Contact vendors.** Disinformation is also an urgent issue for technology platforms to address. If there were any issues related to engagement with the platforms directly in requesting removal of content, tell your organization's policy contact.
4. **Conduct a formal, after-event assessment.** Discuss how you would have handled the event differently or resources that you wish you would have had. Examine and assess the experience and work across your organization to establish protocols to prepare you and others in your organization for the next event.

Engaging & Enabling Local Staff

It is important for local staff teams to be involved in threat assessment and response activities related to disinformation. Local staff's knowledge of local language(s), history, politics, and culture position them to more quickly and easily identify problematic trends and narratives as they occur. Additionally, access to a broader range of communications channels, including through both traditional and digital media, as well as through through contacts

such as friends and family, give local people valuable perspectives on what an appropriate and proportionate response might be. Ensure that your project or program communication teams are led or staffed by local people. Discuss and identify standard operating procedures for team members to share patterns and behaviors.

Local staff may be more likely to identify problematic trends and narratives as they occur and have valuable perspectives on an appropriate response.

- Develop an internal system for documenting and reporting instances of disinformation online that may affect an organization's operations (see [Rumor Tracking How-To Guides](#) or Internews' guide to Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context below).

Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context

This document from Internews is a detailed technical guide to understanding audience preferences, rumor tracking, and responding for organizations working with affected populations in humanitarian contexts.

[Learn more](#)

- Discuss the issue with staff, and designate a preferred method of communication around the problem, in order to highlight the importance of sharing events internally when they occur. Doing so allows organizational leaders to get a more accurate picture of threats against the organization in real-time.

Longer-Term Strategies: Building Community Resilience

Proactive measures to establish relationships, build trust, and promote information about what organizations are doing and who they are, help to make a strong defense against false claims. Inversely, groups with weak relationships that infrequently share information with their communities will be more susceptible to disinformation attacks. Practitioners know this work is essential, but it is not a priority when working under stress or in crisis environments where immediate relief or protection are needed. Below are suggestions to get started quickly and take steps toward preparing your organization to be ready if and when an unexpected disinformation event occurs.

- **If resources permit, have your project communications team proactively develop relationships with credible information sources.** Based on the media ecosystem assessment suggested above, build relationships with a network of trusted journalists. Organize one-on-one meetings to brief them on your

work, regularly invite them to your events and activities if appropriate, and maintain a drumbeat of information to these journalists.

- **Develop a plan for proactively communicating who you are and what you do locally.** Working on sensitive issues means there is often a tension between needing to be discreet and needing to be more vocal to correct inaccurate information or promote accurate details. Encouraging the spread of your messages can help you shape your narratives and help others reject information that may be inconsistent with their beliefs about your organization. If you do not proactively share what your organization does and what you stand for—or work with local partners to do so—then someone else may fill information gaps with inaccurate information.
- International NGOs and civil society organizations often feel uncomfortable proactively advocating for their work. At times, this is due to operational concerns about sensitive work, but other times it is due to a desire to spend resources on efforts perceived more directly related to the work itself. **Organizations often can do more to promote who they are and the work they do and proactively share these messages with their partners and stakeholders.** Discuss with your colleagues your approach to balancing proactive communications about your activities and

events, with the potential risk of that information negatively affecting communities you support.

In Practice

CSOs and NGOs should work to anticipate risk and share resources before the crisis. NGOs have noted the benefit of developing systems for translating stock messages to be used in crisis situations. Translators Without Borders, through a proactive communications “words of relief” program, translates critical messages before crises. The organization developed a library of statements on topics such as flood warnings to build up resilience when attacks or disasters occur so people are more informed. This was deployed with success through the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) during the 2017 hurricane season in the Caribbean. Messages were translated into Creole and Spanish in late September and October of 2017. Translators Without Borders emphasized the need to provide the right content that is both relevant and in an accessible format.

While this toolkit focuses primarily on online disinformation campaigns, some audiences may have other mechanisms to receive and share information (which may be through traditional media due to lack of access to technology, connection, or trust in those sources). Effective responses to those campaigns need to appreciate the information landscape in that particular context.

Risk Assessment Tool: Assessing the Vulnerability of Your Media Environment

Specific factors make media more prone to abuse in areas undergoing a major transition or conflict.⁸² Assessing the presence of these factors can help you and your colleagues determine how vulnerable media might be to abuse by state and non-state actors.

How to use this tool:

On the following page, mark a tally under “likely,” “somewhat likely,” or “unlikely” under each indicator. Add up the tallies for the column at the bottom of the spreadsheet.

Once you’ve evaluated your risks, take your total in Column 1, multiply it by two, and add it to the sum from Column 2. Then read the description below that corresponds with your score.

12-22: High Vulnerability

Prioritize developing a disinformation response plan with your in-country colleagues. Continue to monitor threats and update your plan as needed.

6-11: Medium Vulnerability

Discuss a disinformation response plan with your in-country colleagues as a team. Continue to monitor threats and update your plan as needed.

1-5: Low Vulnerability

Ask your communication and security staff to develop a response plan.

	Indicator	Column 1: Likely or true	Column 2: Somewhat likely or true	Column 3: Unlikely or not true
Social media use and access				
	Social media adoption and usage is high.			
	People rely on social media as a primary news source.			
	The social media accounts with the highest number of followers or readership sharing political news are run by a small number of people with similar viewpoints or political views.			
Traditional media institutions				
	State capture of traditional media is high and the state wields a strong influence on media organizations.			
	There is significant coercion by the state towards independent media sources, preventing them from providing truly independent perspectives on current events.			
Journalists and media professionals				
	There are significant challenges for journalists to carry out their work. They may be harassed or targeted to deter them from doing their work.			
	There is a lack of diversity in ownership of media outlets, leaving those outlets vulnerable to government manipulation.			

Indicator	Column 1: Likely or true	Column 2: Somewhat likely or true	Column 3: Unlikely or not true
Government institutions			
<p>There is a lack of legislation to protect journalists and media outlets from state abuse.</p> <p>Or existing legislation is poorly enforced and has the same effect in terms of poorly protecting journalists and media outlets from abuse.</p>			
Civil society			
<p>Perspectives of vulnerable voices (e.g., persecuted minorities, opposition groups) are hardly visible. They are often subject to harassment and abuse on social media or in traditional media.</p>			
<p>There is a recent history of attacks against civil society organizations online.</p>			
Dangerous content			
<p>There is documentation that content is being created and disseminated (offline or online) in an organized way to create fear among and between groups of people.</p>			
Sum of responses by column:			
	Column 1	Column 2	Column 3

PART 3: How can disinformation accelerate the stigmatization of marginalized populations during crises?

Defining the Challenge

InterAction’s Humanitarian Policy and Practice team has explored how disinformation can disproportionately impact marginalized populations in an October 2020 report [Countering Stigmatization in the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19](#). As per the report, “Harmful rumors, hate speech, false narratives propagated rapidly and widely via social media, and word-of-mouth often reinforce preexisting stigma.”⁸³ Marginalized populations already face disproportionate social and economic exclusion, and a lack of access to services due to intersecting identities and malicious state policy and towards them, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, stigma associated with discrimination along racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, sexual identity, disability, and political lines, has contributed to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people with intersecting, pre-existing vulnerabilities.

In some instances, the spread of misinformation targeting these groups, in addition to the additional anxiety and stress of COVID-19 lockdowns, has led to violence against vulnerable people. In some contexts, governments and political leaders have used vulnerable groups as convenient scapegoats, blaming them for the spread of COVID-19 and distracting the public from holding leaders themselves accountable. This dynamic leads to more extreme forms of

Is there a link between social media-driven hate speech and real-world violence?

2020 research indicates a direct link between social-media driven hate speech propagated online and real-world violence. In a new paper, *Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime*, researchers Karsten Müller of Princeton University and Carlo Schwarz of Bocconi University examined the dynamic by looking at recent events in Germany. According to the research, social media-driven hate speech—including outright disinformation campaigns—against migrants has been associated with higher incidence of attacks on refugees, particularly in locations featuring high engagement with the far-right *Alternative for Germany* party’s Facebook presence. Further, this research found that internet outages, which reduced engagement with social media, were consistently associated with lower incidence of violent attacks on refugees.

[Learn more](#)

discrimination, and eventually to violence against that marginalized group, as has been the case in Lebanon, Greece, and the United States during the course of the pandemic.

Tech platforms, whose role in the spread of mis- and disinformation is well documented, have been a key tool for leaders and governments wishing to scapegoat and stigmatize marginalized groups. The widespread availability and speed of publishing to social media platforms has been leveraged to amplify and disseminate hate speech in politically contentious environments, which has led to opportunities for individuals and organized groups

to prey on the public’s existing fears and grievances, embolden violent actors, and trigger violence. The speed with which mobile technology and social media have been adopted in recent years has accelerated their potential for this type of impact, with the recent tragic example of attacks on the Rohingya people in Myanmar.

Disinformation and Genocide

In Myanmar, a government-run disinformation and hate campaign against the Rohingya, a traditionally marginalized group based in the West of Myanmar, led to a campaign of violence against this community in 2017. In a report examining the incident, the United Nations described this incident as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” The violence grew in large part, says the U.N., due to unsubstantiated rumors and doctored photos that went viral on Facebook which either spread or re-enforced dangerous, false beliefs about the Rohingya. The images, even when debunked, fueled waves of anti-Rohingya fervor that opened the door to real world violence by state forces against the Rohingya people; villages were burned, people were killed, and more than 740,000 people were displaced.

[Learn more](#)

Responding to Mis- & Disinformation When Marginalized Groups Are Targeted

InterAction’s report [Countering Stigmatization in the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19](#) offers a series of recommendations on responding to dis- and misinformation targeted at marginalized groups, with an aim to limit its stigmatizing effect. These methods should be considered in addition to the recommendations offered previously in this report:

- Community-driven models based on dialogue, empathy, colloquialism, and trust ensure that positive outcomes spread further through effective two-way communication.
- Organizations should work with traditional actors who are already trusted figures within the community. This includes local doctors, influencers, or community connectors with access to the broader community.
- Messaging should provide factual information *and* seek to promote social cohesion, providing positive narratives that counter misinformation.
- Explaining the truth is preferable to debunking myths because addressing myths can increase their spread. This is especially dangerous when dealing with misinformation targeting marginalized groups, which plays on pre-existing societal stereotypes.

- It’s important to root programming in client preferences regarding language, how information is shared, and online versus offline means of communication, especially when attempting to support marginalized groups, which often connect and communicate in closed or private groups for safety.

These additional resources bolster these core recommendations and provide detailed technical guidance for organizations seeking to track and respond to rumors, disinformation, and misinformation impacting marginalized people and exacerbating stigma during crises:

- Save the Children and Breakthrough Action’s February 2021 guide to [Disrupting COVID-19 Stigma](#) includes important considerations and resources to support country programs in both recognizing and working to reduce stigma around COVID-19.
- UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC’s guide for preventing [social stigma associated with the coronavirus disease](#) is a brief summary of key recommendations and resources to prevent the spread of stigma associated with COVID-19.
- [Defusing Hate: A Strategic Guide to Counteract Dangerous Speech](#) (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

- UNICEF’s August 2021 publication, **Digital Misinformation/Disinformation and Children**⁷, explains how policymakers, civil society, tech companies, and parents and caregivers can act to support children as they grow up by pushing back the rising tide of misinformation and disinformation.
- Plan International’s October 2021 publication, **The Truth Gap**, describes how misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning, and leadership of girls and young women. This report was informed by a survey of more than 26,000 girls and young women from 26 countries and discovered (among other key findings) that 9 out of 10 have been harmed by false information and lies online.

SignPost

The International Rescue Committee and Mercy Corps’ SignPost is an information and community engagement platform that operates via the social media and digital platforms already used by crisis-affected and marginalized people. This platform provides individuals with critical information relevant to their lives during crisis in which they may be far from their families, homes, and other elements of recognized support systems. SignPost was launched by IRC and Mercy Corps in 2015 at the height of the European refugee crisis and was developed with the support of technology companies such as Google, Cisco, TripAdvisor, Twilio, Box, Facebook, and Zendesk. The platform delivers contextualized information based on the unique and specific problems that affected populations face. It is customized and designed specifically for each crisis context and “meets people where they are” by communicating through the channels which affected populations already use.

[Learn more](#)⁷

PART 4: How does disinformation impact international development across sectors?

This section explores how disinformation impacts the work of NGOs across sectors of international development, and how certain organizations are responding, including new strategies, approaches, tools, and materials recently published.

Democracy, Rights & Governance

Democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) assistance is at the leading edge of the response to disinformation, which directly counteracts CSOs' and NGOs' efforts to promote free and fair elections, competitive political systems, accountable government and anti-corruption, efficient service delivery, empowered civil society, and effective independent media. At the core, disinformation attacks the trust between people that undergirds the democratic systems and civic institutions that citizens rely on to protect their rights and their quality of life, as well as that of their family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues.⁸⁴

DRG programs ask: If people—or groups of people—don't trust one another, how can they share a vision of purpose, direction, and mutual fate? How can they feel a sense of unity and shared purpose? How can they trust the institutions that are the result of shared purpose? Disinformation works to create filter bubbles, or alternate realities, where one person's wrong is another's right, where important events are not so important, and vice versa.⁸⁵ In essence,

deployed strategically over time, disinformation creates divisions within and between cultures along the lines of values and identity.⁸⁶ The power of disinformation to divide has been made clear by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen powerful actors and authoritarian governments use the threat of the virus to pit groups of people against one another, bolstering their own power and weakening democratic institutions.⁸⁷

NGOs working to support democracy, rights, and good governance around the globe recognize the corrosive impact of disinformation on social cohesion and trust in society, tipping the scales of power away from civil society and rights defenders and toward authoritarians, their patrons, and supporters. Conversely, combatting disinformation improves the quality of the information in an ecosystem, better prepares people and institutions for strategic disinformation campaigns, prevents societal fissures from widening into broader divisions, reduces tension, and mitigates conflict in the long term.

The rest of this section profiles organizations working to combat the presence of disinformation around the globe through the lens of democracy, rights, and governance, as well as some of the methodologies and tools they use.

USAID's New Disinformation Primer

In February 2021, USAID's Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance released a Disinformation Primer, exploring why disinformation matters in foreign aid, how it works, what social factors contribute to its growth, specific challenges, and emerging solutions across sectors of society.

[Learn more](#) ↗

IREX

IREX, a global development and education organization that works to empower youth, cultivate leaders, strengthen institutions, and expand access to good information, designed the Learn to Discern (L2D) media and information literacy methodology.⁸⁸ L2D empowers individuals, communities, and systems (education, media, and others) to identify and use good quality information to make decisions, curb the spread of mis- and disinformation, recognize and avoid manipulative information, and participate in the digital space without undermining their own and others' wellbeing, dignity, and humanity.

According to IREX, media literacy is a key component of counter-disinformation strategies and provides a human-centered solution that bolsters critical skills among citizens and communities struggling with manipulative content while platforms and policy-makers grapple with long-term tech-based solutions:

“While technology-centered, self-policing solutions—filtering software, artificial intelligence, modified algorithms, and content labeling—do have the ability to make changes quickly and at scale, they face significant ethical, financial, logistical, and legal constraints.”⁸⁹

– Kristin M. Lord, IREX CEO & Katya Vogt, *Global Lead for Media and Information Literacy Initiatives in the Stanford Social Innovation Review*

Initially designed in Ukraine to equip adults with skills to withstand Kremlin disinformation, L2D has been successfully adapted in 17 countries including the three Baltic states, the Balkans, Georgia, Jordan, Tunisia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and the United States. L2D is a growing, impact-driven body of work that both meets near-term priorities (preparing citizens to cast an informed vote or navigate COVID-19 misinformation) and works with local systems on long-term solutions (integrating critical information engagement skills in secondary and higher education).

From youth-led peer-to-peer trainings in Guatemala, Tunisia, and Jordan; to social media literacy tools and play-based approaches in Ukraine, Indonesia, and Georgia; to blended (online and facilitated) virtual courses, including Very Verified; to integration into secondary and higher education in Ukraine, Jordan, and the Baltics, L2D programs expose the mechanics of manipulation and bring positive shared values into the “digital public square,” sustainably re-wiring individual and community norms.⁹⁰ This includes reflections on individual and media biases and stereotypes (e.g., focusing on appearance of women vs. their achievements, negative portrayal of migrant populations) and championing of digital civility and empathy.^{91,92}

A recent independent randomized control trial conducted by the RAND Corporation found L2D's media literacy messages and videos shared on social

Very Verified

IREX's Very Verified (V.V.) Course is an online/offline media literacy and critical thinking course developed in Ukraine and adapted for use in Jordan, Indonesia, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Evaluation shows a 31% improvement in media analysis skills and significant improvement in ability to navigate the digital information environment. Available in English, Ukrainian, and Russian.

[Learn more](#)

media to be effective in reducing engagement with disinformation among U.S. voters.⁹³

IREX provides multiple L2D resources for free, including:

- [L2D training manuals in English and Georgian](#)
- [Literata Online Lessons and Games in Bahasa for Indonesia](#)
- [Resources for youth and educators in the Baltics](#)
- [Additional resources on the IREX L2D site](#)

National Democratic Institute (NDI)

According to NDI, a nonpartisan NGO that supports democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world, “it’s not enough just to fight byte for byte with disinformation attacks as they emerge. If that’s our strategy, we’ll never keep up. What we also need to do is build up the integrity of the underlying information space so it’s resilient to the disinformation that will inevitably break through.”⁹⁴ NDI supports local partners in countering disinformation and other harmful forms of content while promoting information integrity in the political sphere through its INFO/tegrity framework, which it grounds in four key questions:

1. Who is producing and distributing the disinformation? What are the sources?
2. What is the content? What are the narratives and themes?
3. How is it being disseminated? Through what channels and behaviors?
4. To whom is it being targeted and, more importantly, who is consuming the disinformation and who is most vulnerable to believing or acting on it?⁹⁵

Based on the responses to those questions, INFO/tegrity deploys a customized mix of the following five approaches through NDI programs:⁹⁶

- **Election Monitoring:** Working with local actors during the campaign period to promote an

informative and accurate information ecosystem around elections. NDI includes disinformation experts as part of its election monitoring approach as well as direct technical assistance to nonpartisan election monitors around the globe to reduce the influence of disinformation and other threats to information integrity.

- **Civic Engagement:** NDI provides resources and training to civil society organizations, media, political parties, and others to protect themselves from disinformation, hate speech, and other harmful forms of content, and promote information integrity concepts.
- **Tools, Training, and Methods for Partners:** NDI provides local partners with tools and training to identify, analyze, expose and disempower disinformation campaigns, in addition to hosting “boot camps,” on social media tools and communications strategy. [Learn more](#)
- **Tech Sector Engagement:** Through the Design 4 Democracy (D4D) Coalition, and its own connections, NDI and its partners work to amplify voices from local civil society to tech companies, escalating issues (particularly around elections), developing training with practical guidance, and creating opportunities for engagement with all stakeholders.
- **Building Knowledge and Trusted Networks:** NDI acts as a convener of like-minded

organizations that are combatting disinformation in their work around the globe, in addition to conducting polling, surveys, and research to better understand the nature of the challenge in communities around the globe.

The Design for Democracy Coalition

The Design for Democracy Coalition (D4D) is a network of organizations united by the belief that tech companies have a responsibility to confront the challenges faced by democracy in the digital age and the commitment to promoting democracy and human rights as core design principles in the tech sector.

[Learn more](#)

Tweets that Chill

NDI’s series of resources on disinformation, hate speech and its relationship to gender and marginalized groups.

[Tweets That Chill: Analyzing online violence against women in politics](#)

[Engendering Hate: The contours of state-aligned gendered disinformation online](#)

International Republican Institute (IRI)

Launched in 2015 by the International Republican Institute (a nonpartisan NGO), the Beacon Project works to counter malign state-sponsored interference campaigns that seek to subvert democracies in Europe by promoting data-driven analysis and policymaking.⁹⁷ Geographically, the Beacon Project covers wider Europe with a specific focus on Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Baltic states, where Russia is actively deploying disinformation campaigns to sway public opinion and destabilize democracies.

The project's approach is to:

- Expose false, manipulative, and corrosive narratives promoted by malign actors;
- Identify social vulnerabilities among groups receptive to disinformation;
- Facilitate a coordinated response by the transatlantic community, European governments, and civil society.

Coalition Building: Beacon works with more than 500 active members from 27 countries, with backgrounds in political parties, national parliaments, the European Parliament, governments, academia, tech, civil society, nonprofits, and media. It has supported CSO partners in the production of over 120 publications from 18 countries, trained or briefed over 1,700 people, monitored elections, convened or participated in almost 250 training and networking events—reaching an audience of almost 9,500, and supported joint research and collaboration across the region.

Credible Research: The Beacon Project's research is focused on understanding how mis- and disinformation are used to exploit and widen societal fissures. The project conducts rigorous public opinion and media monitoring research which drives data-driven, strategic, and tactical responses to malign narratives and disinformation campaigns.

Engaging Policymakers: Through the Beacon Project, IRI convenes elected officials, political party members, and policymakers throughout the focus countries to discuss how to address disinformation.

More information is available on the [Beacon Project website](#).

Beacon Project Community Mapping

The Beacon Project has published a comprehensive dashboard, which identifies organizations and initiatives engaged in identifying, monitoring, analyzing, and debunking dis- and misinformation as well as foreign malign influence across Europe and Eurasia. This resource is available for free online.

[Learn more](#)

International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)

IFES is a U.S.-based nonprofit organization that works with election management bodies (EMBs), civil society, public institutions, and other stakeholders across the world to build resilient democracies that deliver for all. The Foundation has been active in designing and implementing interventions to promote information integrity, by working closely with EMBs to strengthen strategic and crisis communication, develop codes of conduct for online political behavior, and monitor electoral disinformation.

IFES also delivers programming and thought leadership on online political advertising, campaign finance, social media, and the differential impacts

Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech

IFES' Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions outlines how the latest generation of disinformation is amplifying hate speech and offers a framework for designing interventions to effectively counter these dual threats.

[Learn more](#)

of disinformation on women and other marginalized groups, while simultaneously equipping civil society actors to monitor and report on online harms.

IFES works through the Design 4 Democracy Coalition (described above) to better inform tech companies' response to the harmful impacts of disinformation on democracy. IFES authored the EMB, legal and regulatory, and gender chapters of the new Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) Countering Disinformation Guide, described below.

International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL)

ICNL is an NGO that works to improve the legal environment for civil society, philanthropy, and public participation around the world. ICNL has created a COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker to monitor government responses to the pandemic which affect civic freedoms and human rights, especially focusing on emergency laws. The tracker includes profiles by country that describe legislation passed which aims to curb civic freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information is displayed through an interactive map which is sortable by issue, type of measure, and the date of enactment. As of early April 2021, the tracker reports 107 countries with emergency declarations, 56 countries with declarations that affect free expression, 139 countries with measures that affect free assembly,

and 59 countries with measures that affect privacy. [View the tracker](#)

Atlantic Council

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is one of the premier research and action partners for CSOs and NGOs looking to combat disinformation in a particular context or related to a particular theme. DFRLab has operationalized the study of disinformation by exposing falsehoods and fake news and continues to document human rights abuses and build digital resilience worldwide.

[Learn more](#)

Additionally, the Council's annual 360/Open Summit brings together experts across six continents with policymakers, journalists, civil society, and industry for four days of cutting-edge programming focused on human rights and democracy in a hyperconnected, online world. [Learn more](#)

Lastly, a recent report, Democratic Defense Against Disinformation 2.0, takes stock of how governments, multinational institutions, civil-society groups, and the private sector have responded to the disinformation challenge. [Learn more](#)

Additional DRG-Related Tools & Methodologies

The NDI, IRI, and IFES, all members of the CEPPS coalition, have collaborated to release a new comprehensive guide to countering disinformation and promoting information integrity, particularly in the context of elections and political party support, which includes a database of interventions, topical sections, and response framework. Review the [guide](#) in its interactive, online format and access the database, or download it.

IRI, NDI, and the Stanford Internet Observatory released [Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond](#) in September of 2021, which is intended to help leapfrog the first six months of the electoral preparation process. The playbook lays out the basics of the problem, the core elements of a response, and points to trusted resources for those looking to do a deeper dive.

In September 2020 the U.N.'s Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development released a comprehensive study [Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while respecting Freedom of Expression](#). This study is action-oriented and includes a typology of disinformation responses, a suite of sector-specific actionable recommendations, and a 23-point framework to evaluate potential responses to disinformation.

EUvsDisinfo is a project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force and was established in 2015 to counter Russian disinformation affecting the European Union and nearby countries. This platform uses data analytics and media monitoring across 15 languages to identify, compile, and expose disinformation campaigns and make this information available as a keyword-searchable database free to the public. [Learn more](#)

COVID-19 & Global Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened the door to an information epidemic or “infodemic” of misinformation related to the causes, symptoms, and treatments of COVID-19, according to the World Health Organization.⁹⁸ Further, this epidemic of “misinformation costs lives. Without the appropriate trust and correct information, diagnostic tests go unused, immunization campaigns (or campaigns to promote effective vaccines) will not meet their targets, and the virus will continue to thrive. Furthermore, disinformation is polarizing public debate on topics related to COVID-19; amplifying hate speech; heightening the risk of conflict, violence, and human rights violations; and threatening long-term prospects for advancing democracy, human rights, and social cohesion.”⁹⁹

Many NGOs are responding to the COVID-19 infodemic, leveraging their experience responding to misinformation that spread rapidly during the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Mercy Corps,

Internews, Project Concern International (PCI), and Concern Worldwide detail their experience combatting Ebola rumors and how this prepared them for the tidal wave of misinformation that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic.^{100,101,102,103}

Typically in the health space, practitioners refer to focus on combatting misinformation instead of disinformation, as health practitioners typically prefer to avoid the politics of intent and accountability implied by the use of the term ‘disinformation.’ Additionally, mis- and disinformation narratives typically are referred to as ‘rumors’ in reference to the way they spread through communities, just as an infectious disease might.

Many global health organizations are confronting both the COVID-19 and the accompanying infodemic in their work around the globe. This section profiles the work of a few.

COVID Misinformation & Social Media

An April 2020 social media analysis conducted by RTI International found a massive upswing in the incidence of COVID-19 discussion during the early months of 2020, and that mis- and disinformation narratives spread rapidly, woven in with the broader conversation about the disease.

[Learn more](#)

Save the Children

Save the Children is a global health and youth-focused NGO that has been active for more than 100 years. Save the Children is the prime for the Global USAID Funded READY project, which aims to augment capacity for humanitarian response to major disease outbreaks. READY consortium partners include John's Hopkins Center for Communication Programs (CCP), which leads risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities. READY has developed several resources, including Operational Readiness Training and COVID-19 preparedness micro-trainings that include RCCE elements. In addition, READY has developed an **RCCE Toolkit** that offers NGOs and other humanitarian response actors a suite of guidance and tools they can use to rapidly plan and integrate RCCE into their COVID-19 response.

In addition to the work of READY, Save the Children has also developed, implemented, and monitored RCCE strategies in Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Guatemala through the USAID Breakthrough ACTION project, which is led by the Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs. Through these programs, Breakthrough ACTION and Save the Children have developed strategies that focus on engaging communities and community leaders and groups to have two-way communication with communities for feedback and tracking of rumors, disinformation, and misinformation, all through community volunteers and leaders.

CCP also developed a set of technical global goods, available online to the public and other practitioners. Below some of these resources are highlighted, while the full list of resources can be found [here](#).

- **COVID-19 Communications Network**
Houses 429 SBC resources for COVID-19 response, including 68 from other USAID-supported projects.
- **Synthesized Guidance for COVID-19 Message Development**
A summarized, indexed reference of accurate, standardized COVID-19 information from trustworthy sources, disaggregated by user groups. The information in this guide is presented in simple, clear language to support message and material development for social and behavior change interventions.
- **Real-Time Rumor Tracking for COVID-19: System Design and Implementation Guide**
Written for humanitarian or public health organizations as well as national governments seeking to document rumors in a systematic and dynamic fashion. Reviews the role of rumors in a public health or humanitarian emergency, and includes a summary of the community-based approach taken by Breakthrough ACTION during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also lays out an application of this approach using the District Health Information System 2 (DHIS2) open source software platform.

Gender, Misinformation & COVID-19

Breakthrough ACTION's guide to Integrating Gender Into COVID-19 Risk Communication and Community Engagement Response highlights the fact that "The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated gender and social inequalities around the world."

This guide recommends that when seeking to counter COVID-19 misinformation, practitioners:

1. Ensure that rumor tracking systems tap into channels used by both women and men.
2. Assess whether rumors fuel gender-based inequalities, stigma, and discrimination and design responsive messaging.
3. Identify both female and male influencers who can amplify correct information in their communities or social circles, including those who can reach marginalized populations.

[Learn more](#)

- **Virtual Pretesting During COVID-19** [↗](#)

Tips and tricks to use digital platforms to conduct pretests of public health messaging virtually, to ensure content and images are accurate, credible, and will motivate the behavior changes needed to prevent the spread of the disease and mitigate its impact.

- **Using Social Media to Disseminate COVID-19 Information** [↗](#)

Details the steps and considerations programs can take to develop an overarching social media strategy to disseminate COVID-19 messages and combat misinformation. This document also provides a list of relevant tools and resources for implementation.

- **Managing Nutrition Myths and Misconceptions During COVID-19** [↗](#)

Covers social and behavior change strategies for combating misinformation and supporting programs in responding to COVID-19 related misinformation that affects nutrition.

- **Using SMS and IVR Surveys During COVID-19** [↗](#)

Technical brief intended to serve as guidance for systematically administering Short Message Service (SMS) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR)-based surveys to collect data from a stratified sample of participants. Includes a number of reference documents and resource people to contact for additional information.

Internews

Internews is a global NGO that empowers people worldwide with the trustworthy, high-quality news and information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account.

As part of the Rooted in Trust project, funded by USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance, Internews is countering the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. The project is global in reach and

operates across priority countries, including the Philippines, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Mali, Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Colombia.

In terms of approach, Rooted in Trust is grounded in a deep understanding of hyper-local information ecosystems based on empirical research and deep community engagement, including the Social Media Influence Mapping approach. This approach promotes impact on the global and local levels and focuses on vulnerable communities first affected by COVID-19.

Ebola and the DeySay Rumor Tracker

Internews' experience responding to COVID-19 misinformation builds on prior work combatting Ebola misinformation in 2014. In addition to approaches such as public testimony, events, debates, and radio bulletins, to counter rumors about Ebola, Internews led the development of the DeySay rumor tracking system alongside The Liberian Red Cross, UNICEF, and PCI.

According to a 2015 report, when the Ebola crisis was still active, "DeySay begins with an SMS short code, provided by UNICEF free of charge to hundreds of health workers, NGOs and volunteers on the ground throughout Liberia. When anyone connected to the system becomes aware of a rumor, they text it via the short code to a central coordination hub in Monrovia. The information is then collected, analyzed for trends, and disseminated to local media partners in the field with details about the rumor so they can stop its spread. Once the system is fully functional, aid workers and social mobilizers in the relevant regions will be put on alert so they can go door-to-door to calm anxieties and correct misinformation. In conjunction with the rapid response system, DeySay also produces a weekly newsletter for local media throughout the country and partners on the ground."

[Learn more](#) [↗](#)

Rooted in Trust employs a technique called *Social Media Influence Mapping* to tune in to conversations about COVID-19 from specific vulnerable groups such as migrants, LGBTQ+ groups, refugees, women, and people in specific geographical regions and language groups. By mapping and analyzing these conversations, Internews is able to collect rumors, listen to community perceptions on COVID-19, and better understand the specific, narrow, and often private channels where quality information can be shared to have a targeted impact. This approach is led by key local organizations and contacts in each environment, and messaging is implemented by local risk communicators and local media.

More tools, including guides, webinars, and podcasts are available on the [Rooted in Trust website](#).

PATH

PATH, a global health NGO that partners with public institutions, businesses, grassroots groups, and investors to solve the world's most pressing health challenges, has documented how misinformation has exacerbated the challenge of combatting COVID-19 in a number of country contexts. PATH's 'human-centered design' approach to combatting misinformation, built on deep engagement with local populations and health institutions, has included both high- and low-tech strategies.

In Kenya, "digital technologies are not the only way to share timely health information on COVID-19—

and are often not the best way. Many communities do not have reliable internet connectivity or power, so limiting outreach to digital connections prevents them from accessing information in a timely manner and will only further entrench inequity. Instead, PATH deploys a mixture of high- and low-tech approaches to reach communities."¹⁰⁴ According to Edward Anyanda, coordinator, Kakamega County MNCH Alliance, a key partner to PATH in Kenya, "within semi-rural and rural [areas] like our county of Kakamega, knowledge within the community is often passed through gossip... [Misinformation thrives] mostly because the common channels that pass information aren't fully compatible with the communities' needs; for example language and interactive engagement styles."¹⁰⁵

COVID-19 misinformation has also presented major challenges in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) according to Guy Bokongo, PATH's advocacy and policy lead in DRC: "Some Congolese suspect that the pandemic is a ruse—a ploy for more funding from international donors, which corrupt politicians could then divert to their own pockets." According to Guy, many of the 13 million people in the capital city of Kinshasa are struggling, "they don't care about the name of the disease, let alone technicalities about its transmission." In response, Guy and his team are creating videos in which trusted locals share correct information about COVID-19 and why it matters to local people. According to Guy, the most effective spokespeople are high-level officials who have themselves recovered from COVID-19. "People are

really surprised that someone close to the head of state could be affected. Now these recovered people are known and influential."¹⁰⁶

PATH has taken a human-centered design approach to messaging during the COVID-19 crisis in Kenya and the DRC, but also in Uganda and India. In each of these contexts, PATH has sought to incorporate deep local research and engagement with a flexible outreach approach, "looking beyond digital—using traditional media, trusted community leaders, and analog connections to reach rural communities. Printed materials like billboards, posters, and guidelines for health facilities reinforce messaging on radio and television using influential community champions. PATH engages with community leaders, who are important partners in elevating the voices of their people and helping respond to concerns from local communities. Even simple activities such as using vans equipped with loudspeakers can share information in remote communities on COVID-19, help dispel misinformation, and connect individuals with essential health services. It is by using all the tools at our disposal and working directly with ministries of health and community leaders that we can ensure trusted, evidence-based information reaches everyone."¹⁰⁷

As of March 2021, PATH, in the process of conducting research on vaccine acceptance, using machine learning to capture and analyze sentiment and misinformation trends about vaccines in a variety of country contexts across Sub-Saharan Africa.

COVID-19 Misinformation, Human-Centered Design & the 9 Principles of Digital Development

Many global health organizations have turned to human-centered design (HCD) based approaches to create COVID-19 interventions that are tailored to local populations' preferred methods of interpersonal and mass communication. HCD is a design methodology that incorporates deep ethnographic-style research and engagement among stakeholders, and an iterative approach to the design of solutions. While HCD is tech agnostic—applicable whether the resulting solution leverages new technologies or not—it is considered highly conducive to building locally-tailored tech tools, tech-enabled messaging campaigns, and intervention strategies with a tech component.

9 Principles of Digital Development distill the core concepts of HCD and synthesize them with 'lean start-up' approaches used by Silicon Valley tech companies to help global development and public health practitioners build tech tools that are more effective and more sustainable, including tools relevant to the fight against COVID-19 misinformation. These guidelines are endorsed by more than 250 organizations including NGOs, donors, multi-laterals, and private companies, including PATH, Save the Children, Internews and others mentioned in this document.

[Learn more](#)

World Vision

World Vision, a Christian NGO that works in nearly 100 countries to help children, families, and communities reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice, has leveraged a pre-existing WhatsApp-based network of faith leaders to combat COVID-19 misinformation. This approach leverages World Vision's global learning and experience in the health sector, as well as deep local connections to faith leaders, who "are often the most

trusted and authoritative voices in the communities" they serve.¹⁰⁸

Esther Lehmann-Sow, World Vision's Partnership Leader for Faith and Development, explains that World Vision runs "WhatsApp groups in countries right across Latin America, Asia, Africa, Middle East, and Eastern Europe. These are moderated by mentors to ensure accurate and up-to-date information is conveyed. This approach has previously helped us increase awareness, improve

uptake of recommended behavior, and decrease stigma around HIV and AIDS, Zika and Ebola." Further, World Vision works "with faith leaders so they can use their influence on parents and local governments to adopt behaviors that protect and provide for children. In this case, faith leaders are playing a key role in our efforts to protect children from the potentially catastrophic secondary effects of COVID-19."¹⁰⁹

According to World Vision, the WhatsApp groups—which operate much like a telephone tree—reach an estimated 88,000 people, many of whom receive core public health messaging tailored to local communication channels and patterns and often in partnership with leaders from other faiths for broader reach. In Sierra Leone, for example, Pastor Peter Kainwo and his district's Chief Imam, Alhaji Mustapha Koker, began planning for the arrival of COVID-19 before it was detected. "We began speaking to each other's congregations and then moving our sermons to radio and television when we needed to isolate. But for many poor communities, they do not have access (to radio and television) so we bought megaphones and speakers, and with the blessing of authorities, started visiting villages, and educating them in this way. We have written jingles for the children so they can remember important messages."¹¹⁰

Additional Health-Focused Tools & Methodologies

- **Coronavirus Facts Alliance via Poynter** [↗](#)
The Poynter Institute’s #CoronaVirusFacts / #DatosCoronaVirus Alliance maintains a database of more than 9,000 fact checks related to COVID-19 and the global vaccination effort. These fact checks relate to stories across more than 70 countries and are provided by more than 100 fact-checkers.
- **Mitigating Medical Misinformation: A Whole-of-Society Approach to Countering Spam, Scams, and Hoaxes** [↗](#)
Created by Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, this brief targets a broad range of actors, including the public health sector, civil servants, media workers, technology companies, and civil society organizations, and proposes a unified methodology for documenting disinformation and responding in concert with actors across the spectrum of stakeholders.

Economic Growth & Agriculture

According to USAID’s February 2021 Disinformation Primer, “disinformation costs the global economy \$78 billion per year, including share price loss, brand reputation management, and investment in political disinformation campaigns.”¹¹¹ In the economic sphere, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns have been used to attack specific industries, particularly in the context of international trade, as one facet of geopolitical and economic competition between countries. False accusations of impurities or pests in specific agricultural value chains have been deployed to justify tariffs or embargoes on particular goods, sending lightly coded messages and increasing domestic pressure on the target country’s government. One example is China’s recent ban on the importation of Taiwanese pineapples, citing

“harmful creatures” in the fruit, which could pose a threat to Chinese agriculture.¹¹²

Economic disinformation of this sort directly counteracts the work of NGOs that support smallholder farmers, agricultural cooperatives, the agricultural sector broadly, and actors up the value chain, as well as and the families whose livelihoods depend on these economic activities.

Crystal Fund

The USAID YES-Georgia program is implemented by the Crystal Fund, a Georgian NGO, and supports emerging women entrepreneurs and professionals with skills development, business training, mentoring, and access to finance, especially in the wine sector.¹¹³ The program is part of USAID’s efforts to bolster the

Countering Misinformation in Georgia

The London-based Zinc Network runs USAID’s Georgia Information Integrity Program (GIIP), a new program designed to counter Russian-based disinformation in Georgia. This project takes a novel approach integrating deep cultural experience, local civil society partners, and an agile communications approach to identify disinformation and respond effectively through the online and traditional channels where it spreads most quickly. Additionally, GIIP encourages innovative ways to build resilience, such as working with Georgian organizations to map the sources and measure the impact of disinformation, disseminate messages strongly grounded in facts, and co-create new tools and methods for responding to disinformation.

[Learn more](#) [↗](#)

resilience of Georgia’s economic and political systems and comes amid ongoing political and economic tensions with Russia, which has targeted Georgia’s wine industry since the early 2000s.

A 2018 report by Deloitte, funded by USAID, highlights the history of political tensions and disinformation surrounding Georgian wine, illustrating this dynamic: “In 2006, political tension between the Russian and Georgian governments spilled over into the trade sector, with Georgian wine excluded from the Russian market based on alleged breaches of food safety requirements. The sudden loss of the Russian market hit [Georgian wine] very hard, with an 80% reduction in sales from 2005 highs between 2006 and 2011.”¹¹⁴

More recently, as political tensions again spiked in 2019, Russia announced that it would increase scrutiny of Russian alcohol, including wine, on public safety grounds. According to The Independent, “Then as now, Russia ratcheted up economic tensions by masking economic sanctions under the pretext of sanitary norms. Then, the sanctions were a thinly veiled—and poorly heeded—warning to then-president Mikheil Saakashvili about his Euro-Atlanticist intentions.”¹¹⁵

While the Yes-Georgia program does not directly combat Russian economic disinformation, it does work closely with wine producers around Georgia to help them improve business practices and diversify export markets to limit dependency upon the Russian

market.¹¹⁶ In response to Russian political and economic disinformation targeting Georgia, USAID launched the Georgia Information Integrity Program in late 2020.

Climate & Environment

Climate-focused dis- and misinformation continue to spread through social media and messaging apps, with a significant impact on the public’s understanding of the issue and its urgency. According to Owen Gaffney of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, “social media reports have created a toxic environment where it’s now very difficult to distinguish facts from fiction. One of the biggest challenges now facing humanity is our inability to tell fact from fiction. This is undermining democracies, which in turn is limiting our ability to make long-term decisions needed to save the planet.”¹¹⁷

The recent debut of Facebook’s Climate Science Information Center is an acknowledgment of the severity of the challenge, as well as the difficulty in designing effective solutions through the platforms which exacerbate the problem to begin with.¹¹⁸ According to D.W., “posts about climate change will now automatically be labeled with an information banner that directs people to accurate climate science data at the company’s Climate Science Information Center.”¹¹⁹ It remains to be seen if this approach will have an impact on the problem.

InterAction’s NGO Climate Compact

On the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, April 22, 2020, InterAction and 80+ Member NGOs launched the NGO Climate Compact to pledge concerted, unified, and urgent action to address climate change.

The purpose of the Compact is to initiate large-scale change across our sector. It recognizes that the environment is central to achieving our mission to serve the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.

[Learn more](#) ↗

While thousands of NGOs around the globe are working to combat the harmful impacts of climate, Internews’ work through the Environmental Journalism Network stands out.

Internews

According to its website, Internews established the Earth Journalism Network or EJN, “in 2004 to enable journalists from developing countries to cover the environment more effectively. We are now a truly global network working with reporters and media outlets in virtually every region of the world. In our mission to improve the quantity and quality of environmental reporting, EJN trains journalists to

cover a wide variety of issues, develops innovative online environmental news sites, and produces content for local media—including ground-breaking investigative reports. We also establish networks of environmental journalists in countries where they don't exist and build their capacity where they do. We do so through workshops and the development of training materials and by offering Fellowship programs, grants to media organizations, story stipends, and support for story production and distribution. Watch the video above to learn more about our work.”¹²⁰

EJN works with journalists around the world to help them debunk climate misinformation and ensure journalists are well-prepared to push back on mis- and disinformation and its impacts on climate and society.¹²¹ Through its website, EJN publishes weekly content on the relationship between the natural world and society, including fact checks and debunks of climate misinformation, resources for reporters, opportunities for journalists, geospatial tools for journalism, examples of data journalism, and special reports.

International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL)

ICNL's June 2020 briefer on the **Closing Civic Space for Climate Activists**⁷ highlights the ways in which civic space is closing for civil society leaders and organizations advocating for climate justice.¹²² This briefer highlights legal and extralegal measures

used to target civil society actors around the world, including threats to assembly; threats to association, expression, and the right to information; threats to public participation; and other forms of harassment such as trolling, stigmatization, and physical attacks.

ANNEX 1: Which partners, initiatives & tools might CSOs and NGOs find useful?

For civil society organizations and NGOs which operate in the humanitarian action and international development spheres, partners with deep experience in rumor tracking, media, and communications as well as local civil society organizations with knowledge of culture, politics, actors, history, and connections are both important components of any strategy to push back on disinformation.

- In December of 2020, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published **Mapping Worldwide Initiatives to Counter Influence Operations**⁷ as part of its Partnership for Countering Influence Operations (PCIO), which describes and lists more than 460 initiatives and organizations around the globe working to combat disinformation, as well as highlighting the need for more knowledge sharing and skills-building initiatives.¹²³
- **Disinfo Cloud**⁷ is an initiative of the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) and is available through a free sign-up process. This database includes nearly 300 organizations, including those that provide machine learning analysis of social media, media monitoring, fact-checking, media literacy, social network mapping, and more.
- A recent National Endowment for Democracy report **Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation: An International Forum Working Paper**⁷ provides a list of nearly 200 organizations all working to combat disinformation around the globe. This database includes the organization's regional focus as well as information on their initiatives.
- The **CEPPS Guide to Countering Disinformation**⁷ (mentioned also in the Disinformation, Democracy, Rights, and Governance section) includes an intervention database with nearly 300 examples listed by intervention type, country or region, and implementing organization.
- **Duke Reporters' Lab Fact-Checking Database**⁷ is a map of more than 300 fact-checking organizations around the globe.
- **E.U. Disinformation Lab**⁷ is a research, knowledge sharing, advocacy, and outreach initiative focused on the impact of disinformation in the E.U. They provide a list of dozens of initiatives focused on countering disinformation in Europe and elsewhere.
- **The Project on Computational Propaganda**⁷ by Oxford's Internet Institute provides dozens of resources for combatting disinformation, categorized by purpose and language. This resource provides tools in Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish.
- The **Campaign Toolkit**⁷ is a free resource produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue for organizations looking to create and deploy online campaigns against hate, polarization, and extremism. It contains resources for running information campaigns online, including how CSOs and NGOs can access free credits from many major online ad networks, including Google, Facebook, and others. Resources are available in English, French, German, Arabic, and Urdu.
- Through the **Countering Truth Decay Initiative**⁷, RAND Corporation has identified and characterized a select few online tools developed by nonprofits and civil society organizations to target online disinformation.

ANNEX 2: Policy considerations

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

In late December 2020, Carnegie's Partnership for Countering Influence Operations (PCIO) published a systematic review of 84 public policy proposals related to disinformation released since 2016. In addition to providing a database of these policy papers, this analysis found that:

- The majority of policy recommendations were focused on tech platforms and government due to their preeminent access to data and resources, while recommendations for civil society, academic and multi-lateral organizations have received less attention despite their important role in combatting disinformation.
- The most frequent policy recommendations had to do with data and information sharing, media literacy, supporting fact-checkers, platform regulation, moderation, and transparency, followed by better cross-national coordination, oversight, and sanctions. There were relatively few recommendations related to norm building; user autonomy and privacy; platform accountability; and anti-trust (among others).
- More than half of the policy papers called for greater coordination between actors, especially

cross-sector collaboration, despite the fact that nearly three-quarters of the papers reviewed included no citations of other research, suggesting that further coordination between policy researchers and their recommendations may help to advance a unified agenda.

[See the summary and full database](#)

National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

NED's January 2021 paper, *Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation*, looks at the role of civil society organizations in combatting misinformation by mapping current initiatives (described in the section above) and surveying CSOs working on this issue. The authors highlight the following insights:

- Civil society must prioritize skill diffusion and knowledge transfer initiatives, which is seen to be lacking, given the number of isolated initiatives taking place across this sector.
- A lack of access to social media data is hampering the ability of civil society organizations to determine the depth of the challenge, as well as the efficacy of current approaches.

- There is a deep need to improve coordination among civil society actors working on the disinformation challenge. Too many initiatives operate in isolation.
- Civil society organizations enjoy uneven access to tech platforms. Many, particularly in developing countries, were ignored entirely when sharing concerns with platforms.

[See the full analysis and recommendations](#)

New America

- New America's January 2018 *Digital Deceit* explores the business models behind disinformation and proposes a series of reforms to digital advertising technology for tech platforms, governments, and civil society to consider. These reforms focus on transparency, cybersecurity, public education or media literacy, public service journalism and fact-checking, corporate responsibility or platform accountability, and consumer or user empowerment.

[Learn more](#)

- Another relevant resource from New America is the Ranking Digital Rights project, which evaluates the digital rights record of some of the most popular tech platforms. This project proposed a series of reforms for tech companies and governments related to re-empowering citizens in the digital sphere. These recommendations include the need for tech platforms to empower users' control of data, more transparency, and greater accountability on the part of platforms and their algorithms to users, among others.

[Learn more](#)

International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL)

ICNL has published a briefer on the legal dilemma of cracking down on disinformation while respecting free speech; a challenge with which governments around the world are now grappling. In *Responding to the Disinformation Dilemma: A Policy Prospectus of Legal Responses to Disinformation*, ICNL recommends three legal approaches to combatting disinformation around the globe:¹²⁴

1. The use of existing laws, including tort law, cyber-bullying and cyber-stalking laws, as well as fraud.
2. New laws to curb disinformation and coordinated inauthentic behavior (which have already been enacted in certain sub-national jurisdictions) such as anti-bot laws and transparency laws.
3. Newly proposed legal and regulatory rules which are not currently in place, such as two-way enforcement of terms of service, independent regulatory agencies or administrative tribunals representing users' digital rights, enforceable complaint and review mechanisms, deeper investments in media literacy among the public, transparency requirements for content moderation, and platform-level controls on the forwarding of messages.

[Learn more](#)

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