

Internews' submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the issue of disinformation

March 2021

Internews welcomes the opportunity to present its insights on the issue of disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression to the Special Rapporteur for her upcoming report to the Human Rights Council, to be presented in June 2021.

Internews is the world's largest media and information development organisation. We work in over 80 countries by training journalists, providing digital security support, and offering advice to media businesses so they can operate sustainably. Rumour-tracking and the countering of misinformation has long been a core element of Internews's work.

In this time of global pandemic – and the resulting restrictions on communications –countering mis- and disinformation has never felt more pressing.

We have focused in our response on addressing the first question posed in the call for responses as we believe that a focus on understanding community needs is the first step to addressing, and framing the responses to, the challenges posed by government and corporate action in this sphere.

1. What do you believe are the key challenges raised by disinformation? What measures would you recommend to address them?

i) Challenges

The key challenges raised by disinformation include:

- Threats to the effective operation of democracy and the defence of universal human rights
- Threats to the health of individuals and communities
- Threats to the safety, security and economic wellbeing of individuals and communities.

One of the central challenges raised by disinformation is that it is centred on information demand. When trustworthy, accurate information – disseminated by trusted actors – is lacking, those who disseminate disinformation can step in easily to fill the void.

Disinformation actors feed into community anxieties and seek to exacerbate existing divisions. Events and externalities such as elections, mass shootings, or Covid-19 are opportunities for disinformation actors because they open up new areas of information demand.

Where good, trusted sources of information are in short supply, malign actors are more easily able to fill the void. Disinformation actors can further entrench this cycle by seeking to undermine good information providers – including the media. As disinformation circulates within the community it may take on its own life, with little effort or control from the original creator, effectively blending into misinformation.



Figure One: A malign actor will identify existing community anxieties and target them with disinformation that erodes trust and exacerbates existing divisions and fears – a vicious circle.

Without the constraints of truth and ethics, or the financial expense of good reporting, disinformation actors are able to ‘flood the zone’ with very low resource costs. So long as disinformation actors are able to operate unchecked, combatting disinformation with only the same tools as we use to tackle misinformation (such as fact-checking, media literacy, or investment in quality journalism) is unlikely to be effective. Moreover, so long as “engagement” continues to serve as the driving force behind platforms’ revenue structures, disinformation and misinformation will not only continue to be amplified at greater rates than quality information but will also represent a significant source of revenue for these corporations at the expense of the health and well-being of communities and the information that serve them.

ii) Measures to respond to disinformation

Internews’ work has [shown](#) that effective responses to misinformation are collective and community centered. Disinformation, however, is, by definition, adversarial. Targeted communities, and the trusted sources of information within those communities, may be potential allies in countering mis- and disinformation – but these communities are also the territory that disinformation actors seek to control.

“In a warm information war, the human mind is the territory. If you aren’t a combatant, you are the territory. And once a combatant wins over a sufficient number of minds, they have the power to influence culture and society, policy and politics.”

To be effective, therefore, any measures that seeks to address disinformation must do more than keep people informed with facts by also working to limit the effectiveness of disinformation actors and their capacity to operate at local, regional, and global levels.

To tackle disinformation effectively requires a holistic response that makes it harder for malign actors to operate by:

- increasing their resource costs;
- limiting their reach, and;

- increasing the risk of meaningful repercussions for their actions.

The more we limit the capacity of disinformation actors the more chance opportunity good information providers have of making some inroads in addressing community information demand. This is where digital platforms have a large role to play as those in the best position to add friction to online disinformation and to amplify credible, good information produced at the local level. Notably, low costs, potential for wide or high-quality reach, and low accountability are all affordances currently provided to disinformation actors to an unprecedented degree by digital platforms. At the same time, the costs of positive action should be lowered, making it easier for trustworthy actors to operate through:

- financial support for trustworthy and independent media;
- regulatory and legislative systems that encourage a pluralistic media sector that serves entire populations and especially underserved and underrepresented communities.

In order to be effective, any response to disinformation at a global scale must have at its center approaches that that are remain community driven and demand centered in order to be effective. In our view, responses at global level have too often adopted a one size fits all approach that fails to take into account the specific ways in which mis- and disinformation plays out at local level. A lack of effective tracking and monitoring at local level, coupled with global policies, means efforts to tackle mis- and disinformation often fail to have meaningful impact for those most impacted by deliberate and malicious disinformation campaigns.

We know from experience that effective disinformation campaigns are highly targeted and localized. While platform companies and technical experts may be required to access and analyze complex data, **it is members of the target community who are most able to recognize and interpret suspicious behavior and alert outsiders to attacks.**

Strengthening connections between both grassroots activists and global technical experts is a key area where the international community can make a significant impact. By equipping local information providers and civil society actors with the skills and resources to identify, monitor and escalate instances of disinformation, and simultaneously incentivizing and equipping digital platforms with the tools to engage and respond appropriately at local level, it is possible to materially impact the ability of disinformation actors to operate freely. While this will not stop disinformation, it may slow it down enough to give good information a chance.

Summary

Internews is engaged in a number of active programmes internationally aimed at addressing mis- and disinformation. Rather than the top-down approach which focuses almost exclusively on the role on platforms and governments, Internews approaches the problem of mis- and disinformation from the demand side – i.e. the communities who receive, share and are impacted by mis- and disinformation, including where such disinformation can lead to harm.

We believe an approach to tackling the issue of disinformation that focuses on supporting and empowering communities most affected by disinformation would make a considerable impact in addressing this growing ill.