INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **February 22, 2022**

From: **Sophia Lalani, Senior National Security Advisor, A/AID**

CC: **Gideon Maltz, Sonali Korde, Colin Thomas-Jensen**

Subject: **USAID's Response to Disinformation Across Bureaus**

Administrator,

In response to your request to better understand the scope of disinformation and USAID's response to disinformation in areas where USAID works, we commissioned four case studies to describe four different types of disinformation environments USAID faces: Ethiopia (state-sponsored disinformation and hate speech); Nepal (PRC influenced propaganda against U.S. development programs); Central Asia (disinformation targeting USAID employees) and Ukraine (Russian anti-West, anti-NATO disinformation). These are attached as tabs. While these are not exhaustive, they provide illustrative examples of the types of disinformation in the field and a review of USAID's response and capabilities.

USAID programs to counter mis/dis/malinformation (MDM) include financial support for media and digital internet literacy, financial support to organizations that conduct fact checking mechanisms, and training and equipment to increase quality journalism. Elements of counter-disinformation programming also feature in our work across other sectors, for example USAID provides grants to health organizations to conduct public health campaigns combatting COVID-19 disinformation, financial support to organizations conducting gender and social media monitoring, among other approaches. Because USAID has been in Ukraine for 30 years, there is some data regarding the effectiveness of USAID programming there, which found significant increases in the number of respondents able to identify the difference between true and false information. However, little survey data regarding USAID program effectiveness is available for the other case studies.

Gaps in USAID and USG Approach to Disinformation: Our scoping exercise has revealed several gaps in the USG and USAID's approach to disinformation. First, we are not sharing examples of disinformation or information manipulation – or potential responses – across the agency. Bureaus and missions are developing ad hoc solutions, without systematically sharing best practices, data, or analytics. In addition, it is not clear if all Missions are prepared and trained on responding to MDM. Nor do we have a clear method for Missions to report MDM against our work or staff. Across the USG no one entity owns the disinformation problem set: DHS, including the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), DOJ, DOD, the FBI, ODNI, and the broader intelligence community have their own efforts to identify, expose, and even carry out punitive measures (such as OFAC sanctions against Russian individuals believed to be behind the 2016 presidential elections interference). Domestic agencies including CISA, the Census Bureau, and the CDC analyze disinformation that undermines their

work. Meanwhile the Federal research community including Sandia National Laboratories, DARPA, and the National Science Foundation are supporting a range of related projects related to identifying information manipulation. The interagency's struggle to assess, plan for, and counter Russian disinformation targeting Ukraine or Government of Ethiopia's efforts to incite violence against Tigrayans provide current examples of how the lack of coordination prevents the USG from being postured to effectively address national security risks of disinformation.

Interagency engagement : USAID attends the Information Integrity and Resilience IPC, which has met biweekly since May 2021 and is developing a National Security Memorandum on how to respond to disinformation; this will go to Deputies on March 1. Unfortunately, most of the discussion to date has focused on the domestic threat and operational response efforts, leaving us very light on strategy for the international aspects of disinformation. While there has been agreement that better interagency coordination is needed, meetings have bogged down in disagreement over which agency controls what: ODNI and DOJ want the IC to avoid any role when purely domestic actors engage in disinformation, and while NSC would like State's Global Engagement Center to take on a coordinating role, USAID believes it should co-own foreign disinformation efforts because it overwhelmingly owns the relevant programming by dollar amount, and its field presence allows for early warning of disinformation campaigns. No concrete alternatives have been offered to overcome the impasse.

Next Steps: DDI/DRG has taken the closest thing to an overall lead role within the Agency in coordination with the missions. They published a Disinformation Primer and assembled the Information Domain Task team Disinformation task team that gathers 20 individuals from various bureaus and technical offices to discuss NSC updates, USG policy and research development, multilateral updates (e.g. WHO infodemic updates), and interagency coordination.

The team appreciates any feedback or steers on the suggested path forward on both intra-Agency and interagency next steps. One next step we are considering is to formalize this team and add representation from additional offices or bureaus. This task team would complete a stock taking of all USAID assets, capabilities and gaps. As one option, we could create a Sector Council on disinformation that DRG could co-chair with PPL to encourage coordination across the Agency. We are also considering drafting a USAID strategy on MDM, which currently does not exist. DAA Johnny Walsh has indicated that the first Summit for Democracy featured little direct focus on disinformation, and it would be reasonable to look at ways to incorporate it in deliverables this year and/or Year of Action work with partners. The team is in the early stages of refining USAID capabilities and responses and crafting USAID's role within any interagency coordination process, and will refine these deliverables as we develop and strengthen the task team.

Information Memos:
Info Memo: Disinformation and Programming in Ethiopia
Info Memo: Disinformation and Programming in Ukraine
Info Memo: Disinformation and Programming in Central Asia
Info Memo: Disinformation and Programming in Nepal

USAID Disinformation Primer (DRG Center)

INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **February 17, 2022**

From: **Jonathan Dworken, AFR/EA and Brittany Brown, CPS/OTI**

Subject: Ethiopia Mis/Disinformation

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- ~~(SBU)~~ The conflict in northern Ethiopia, exacerbated by government suppression of information, is the frontline of the mis/disinformation battlefield.
- A "war of narratives" playing out on social media and state-owned media was propagated with targeted mis/disinformation in Ethiopia.
- ~~(SBU)~~ Throughout the conflict, Ethiopian public opinion of the United States has drastically declined. Through a barrage of social media and other means, the Government of Ethiopia (GOE) took deliberate efforts to (1) discredit and undermine the U.S. government's (USG) calls for a ceasefire, (2) counter GOE embarrassment resulting from a more aggressive USG posture, (3) reduce credibility of USG efforts to identify atrocities and prevent further violence, and (4) inflame pre-existing perceptions of U.S. bias in favor of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Pro-government media posts have also made claims that USAID and other donors are using humanitarian assistance as political leverage (going insofar as claiming humanitarians facilitate arms smuggling to support one party to the conflict). As a result of President Biden's recent call to Prime Minister Abiy, the perception of a constructive USG role has improved.
- Mis/disinformation within Ethiopia (via social media and government communications) has also been used effectively to change internal political and ethnic power dynamics. Ethnic mis/disinformation has been particularly effective and has served to jeopardize the fragile status quo that exists in this ethnic federation.
- ~~(SBU)~~ USAID, and the Department of State based on a National Security Council (NSC) request, have worked to address and monitor the impact of mis/disinformation in Ethiopia (including its effect on furthering intercommunal conflict).

BACKGROUND:

~~(SBU)~~ Biased information, intercommunal hate speech, and mis/disinformation undermine the prospect for national consensus, peace, and good governance in Ethiopia. In particular, divisive information, frequently elevated by social media algorithms, is deepening social and political polarization and sparking violence in communities with historical grievances. The effect of these is particularly acute and visible in the context of the conflict in Northern Ethiopia, where disinformation (accompanied by a communications blackout and restricted access to Tigray) has led to competing narratives by the conflicting parties, including allegations of war crimes, atrocities, genocide, and conflict progression. Coordinated amplification of targeted (competing) narratives via Tweets addressing the Tigray conflict (both supporting and opposing Ethiopia's government) led to confusion and continues to undermine efforts for peace.

~~(SBU)~~ The GOE regularly promoted disinformation on social media to undermine voices calling for dialogue. In November 2021, prominent Prosperity Party member and State Minister

of Peace Taye Dendea Aredo alleged on Facebook that USAID was leaving Ethiopia due to the GoE's refusal to open the Humera corridor (Tab 1–A). He further argued that USAID has been in Ethiopia but "literally changed nothing." Social media posts have also used disinformation to further a narrative that USAID's humanitarian assistance in northern Ethiopia is political in nature and gone insofar as to claim that humanitarians facilitate arms smuggling to one party to the conflict - the TPLF (Tab 1–B, C, D).

~~(SBU)~~ Additionally, there is a diaspora-driven social media campaign to counter alleged Western government bias against the GOE. Ethiopia's sizable diaspora—both in the United States and around the world—plays a significant role in the information space, such as in propagating misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (MDM) within Ethiopia. The combined use of satellite television stations and social media platforms by some individuals within the diaspora to spread hate speech is one of the main drivers of harmful narratives in Ethiopia. Some members of the diaspora also serve as major financial and moral supporters of Ethiopian-run television stations that are key propagators of hate speech in the country. Efforts to identify a large portion of MDM as it occurs struggle to trace MDM as it spreads through Ethiopia's dozens of languages.

The #NoMore campaign, an online project started within the global Ethiopian diaspora in the second half of 2021, is a movement to counter alleged foreign interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia and alleged intentional dissemination of false information regarding the conflict in Northern Ethiopia. The campaign accuses the USG of backing the TPLF and has organized demonstrations in the United States, Canada, and around the globe. According to the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) reports, U.S. Embassy posts receiving the most engagement were those specifically commenting on the deterioration of Ethiopia's security environment and urging U.S. citizens to leave. The most popular responses to these posts conveyed sentiments of betrayal by the USG, suggesting the USG was favoring the TPLF and engaging in colonialist practices. Articles in state-owned media outlets discussing the #NoMore campaign specifically referenced you as Administrator (Tab 1–E).

~~(SBU)~~ With respect to good governance, one observed trend according to GEC reports is of posts with high co-tweet counts that characterize international involvement in the ongoing crisis in Tigray as a threat to Ethiopian sovereignty, including through the use of hashtags such as #DemocracyShallWin.

~~(SBU)~~ USAID Programming to Counter Mis/disinformation in Ethiopia:

In 2021, the NSC tasked the interagency to create an interagency action plan, with top-line messages, specific goals, and accompanying lines of effort, for mitigating hate speech (and disinformation) during the sensitive election and post-election period (Note: the Ethiopian presidential election happened in several rounds starting in summer 2021), including amplifying credible local voices promoting peace, cohesion, and reconciliation and coordinating with like-minded international partners. The plan included a human rights analysis of Ethiopia's Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation enacted in 2020 and provided recommended action for the USG to pursue both through diplomacy and through programming. In August 2021, a Strategic Communications and Outreach Plan developed for review by the NSC identified priority actions, including combating online hate speech and dis/misinformation that hardened ethnic divisions among Ethiopians and entrenched the crisis. Megatalkers were also developed and agreed upon.

USAID is countering mis/disinformation (and hate speech) in Ethiopia, contributing programming to various lines of effort within the aforementioned interagency action plan. In summary:

- USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) currently has about 15 activities addressing mis/disinformation (and hate speech) in Ethiopia. Designed to better understand where online hate speech translates into offline violence and supporting locally led actors and initiatives to mitigate such violence, these activities partner with local media outlets, media professionals, community radios, youth, government officials, and civil-society organizations nationally. OTI equips and networks key stakeholders to produce accurate, fact-checked, and unbiased information in an accessible manner and supports activities to limit the influence of mis/disinformation and hate speech from triggering conflict. To date, OTI has supported about 83 radio shows; fact-checked over 390 news pieces; trained 1,121 influencers (mostly youth); and worked with about 83 media outlets. Additional activities are under development.

  To better understand the relationships among mis/disinformation, good governance, and conflict mitigation, OTI also supports a local organization in producing biweekly social media monitoring reports. These media monitoring reports contribute to additional USAID and USAID partner analysis into the nexus and dynamics of online and conventional media rhetoric and offline acts of intercommunal violence. The reports are used to build interagency understanding on a fast-moving and highly contentious problem set. OTI shares them with GEC/State Department who are in process of sharing them with Big Tech (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) to flag false content or hate speech on their respective platforms. Local civil-society organizations, academics, think tanks, and media organizations within Ethiopia also use them to raise awareness about MDM and build media literacy.

- USAID/Ethiopia/Office of Democracy and Governance also supports countering mis/disinformation through several programs that strengthen fact-checking, train journalists and media houses on identifying and reporting on disinformation, and support entities that produce reports assessing the scope and impact of disinformation. In addition, USAID/Ethiopia supports training of journalists and media houses in reporting on conflict and human rights issues, which includes support for content creation around investigations and news stories on human rights and gender-informed conflict-mitigation reports. USAID/Ethiopia also provides support for development of public media programming around hate speech and disinformation.

Lessons Learned:

USAID has derived a number of lessons learned from its activities that are affecting current and future programming. Of note, there is a conflict-sensitive reporting knowledge gap among media professionals in Ethiopia as they need to better understand how their reporting can inadvertently trigger violence and how they can mitigate against this; fact-checking programs struggle to securing advertising over concerns with being associated with "sensitive" programs; and there are benefits to linking youth in USAID-funded activities who have expressed an

interest in gaining fact-checking experience/knowledge to other USAID partners who have technical expertise in fact-checking to support the development of those skills among youth.

NEXT STEPS:

- USAID will continue to implement activities countering mis/disinformation (and hate speech) in Ethiopia, contributing to various lines of effort within the aforementioned interagency action plan. Note that USAID does not provide messaging guidance to our partners, and the efforts are not aimed at countering a particular type of mis/disinformation (e.g., disinformation related to USG assistance).
- USAID also plans to explore the nexus of online rhetoric and offline violence through potential future programming to support better research and early action in this space.

Drafted: CPS/OTI: Vassia Stoilov
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Bureau Level Clearances:	**Clearance:**	**Date:**
AFR/EA: Jonathan Dworken	Clear with edits	1/27/2022
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RMT/RM: Jesse Pleger	Clear with edits	1/26/2022
DDI/DRG:	Info by request	1/26/2022
USAID/Ethiopia: Sean Jones	ok with edits	1/27/2022
ES: AForden	clear	2/10/2022
ES: JHurley	clear	2/10/2022
ES: EBakely	clear	2/10/2022
ES: ECarr	clear	2/11/2022
ES: JBernton	clear	2/11/2022
NST: CThomas-Jensen	clear	2/17/2022
CoS: GMaltz	Clear	2/22/2022

Tab 1 - Examples of Disinformation

A.



Taye Dendea Aredo
November 21, 2021 ·

Bye USAID

Fortunately, USAID is said to be leaving Ethiopia. The government's refusal to open the Humera Corridor is the reason. According to Mrs Samantha Power, the leaving is to make the people of Ethiopia sense the force of USA! For Ethiopian patriots, this is huge opportunity!

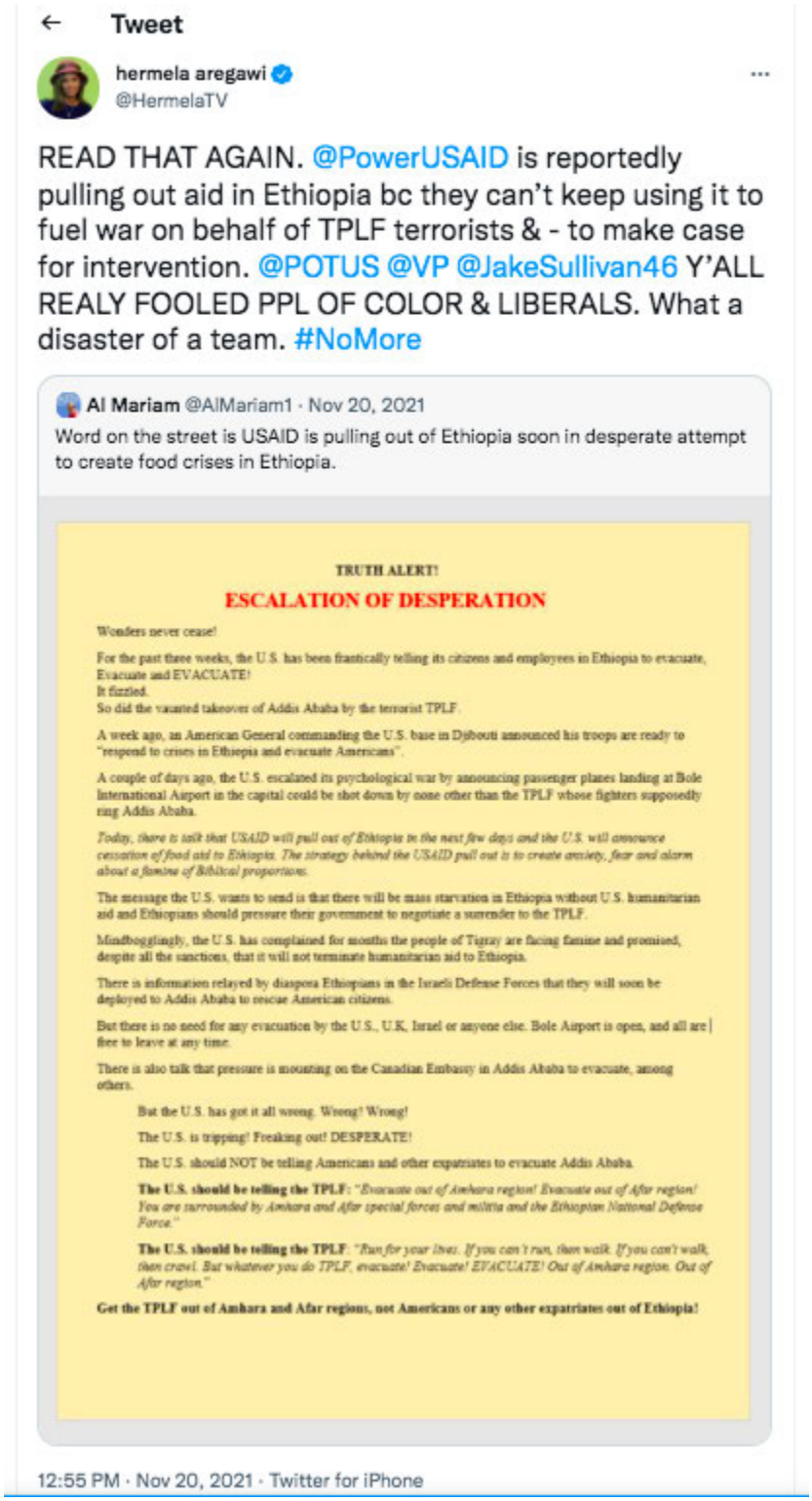
Just two important issues. One, USAID has been in Ethiopia for almost 30 years, but has changed literally nothing! Only created dependency attitude! Hence its leaving cannot negatively affect Ethiopians! In the contrary, it will motivate us to help ourselves.

Two, the aim of USAID has been mistakenly understood by many to be supporting the needy. Now it has become clear that USAID is trying to change regimes contrary to the will of the people! It is clearly saying "Because we feed you, we shall elect a government for you". This is the worst insult for the people! Actually, it shows their ignorance about us! Ethiopians are not the types of people who exchange their freedom & independence for food! #NoMore #Neocolonialism!

10K 1.1K Comments 1.2K Shares

Share

B.



← Tweet

hermela aregawi
@HermelaTV

READ THAT AGAIN. @PowerUSAID is reportedly pulling out aid in Ethiopia bc they can't keep using it to fuel war on behalf of TPLF terrorists & - to make case for intervention. @POTUS @VP @JakeSullivan46 Y'ALL REALY FOOLED PPL OF COLOR & LIBERALS. What a disaster of a team. #NoMore

Al Mariam @AlMariam1 · Nov 20, 2021
Word on the street is USAID is pulling out of Ethiopia soon in desperate attempt to create food crises in Ethiopia.

TRUTH ALERT!

ESCALATION OF DESPERATION

Wonders never cease!

For the past three weeks, the U.S. has been frantically telling its citizens and employees in Ethiopia to evacuate, Evacuate and EVACUATE!
It fizzled.
So did the vaunted takeover of Addis Ababa by the terrorist TPLF.

A week ago, an American General commanding the U.S. base in Djibouti announced his troops are ready to "respond to crises in Ethiopia and evacuate Americans".

A couple of days ago, the U.S. escalated its psychological war by announcing passenger planes landing at Bole International Airport in the capital could be shot down by none other than the TPLF whose fighters supposedly ring Addis Ababa.

Today, there is talk that USAID will pull out of Ethiopia in the next few days and the U.S. will announce cessation of food aid to Ethiopia. The strategy behind the USAID pull out is to create anxiety, fear and alarm about a famine of Biblical proportions.

The message the U.S. wants to send is that there will be mass starvation in Ethiopia without U.S. humanitarian aid and Ethiopians should pressure their government to negotiate a surrender to the TPLF.

Mindbogglingly, the U.S. has complained for months the people of Tigray are facing famine and promised, despite all the sanctions, that it will not terminate humanitarian aid to Ethiopia.

There is information relayed by diaspora Ethiopians in the Israeli Defense Forces that they will soon be deployed to Addis Ababa to rescue American citizens.

But there is no need for any evacuation by the U.S., U.K, Israel or anyone else. Bole Airport is open, and all are free to leave at any time.

There is also talk that pressure is mounting on the Canadian Embassy in Addis Ababa to evacuate, among others.

But the U.S. has got it all wrong. Wrong! Wrong!

The U.S. is tripping! Freaking out! DESPERATE!

The U.S. should NOT be telling Americans and other expatriates to evacuate Addis Ababa.

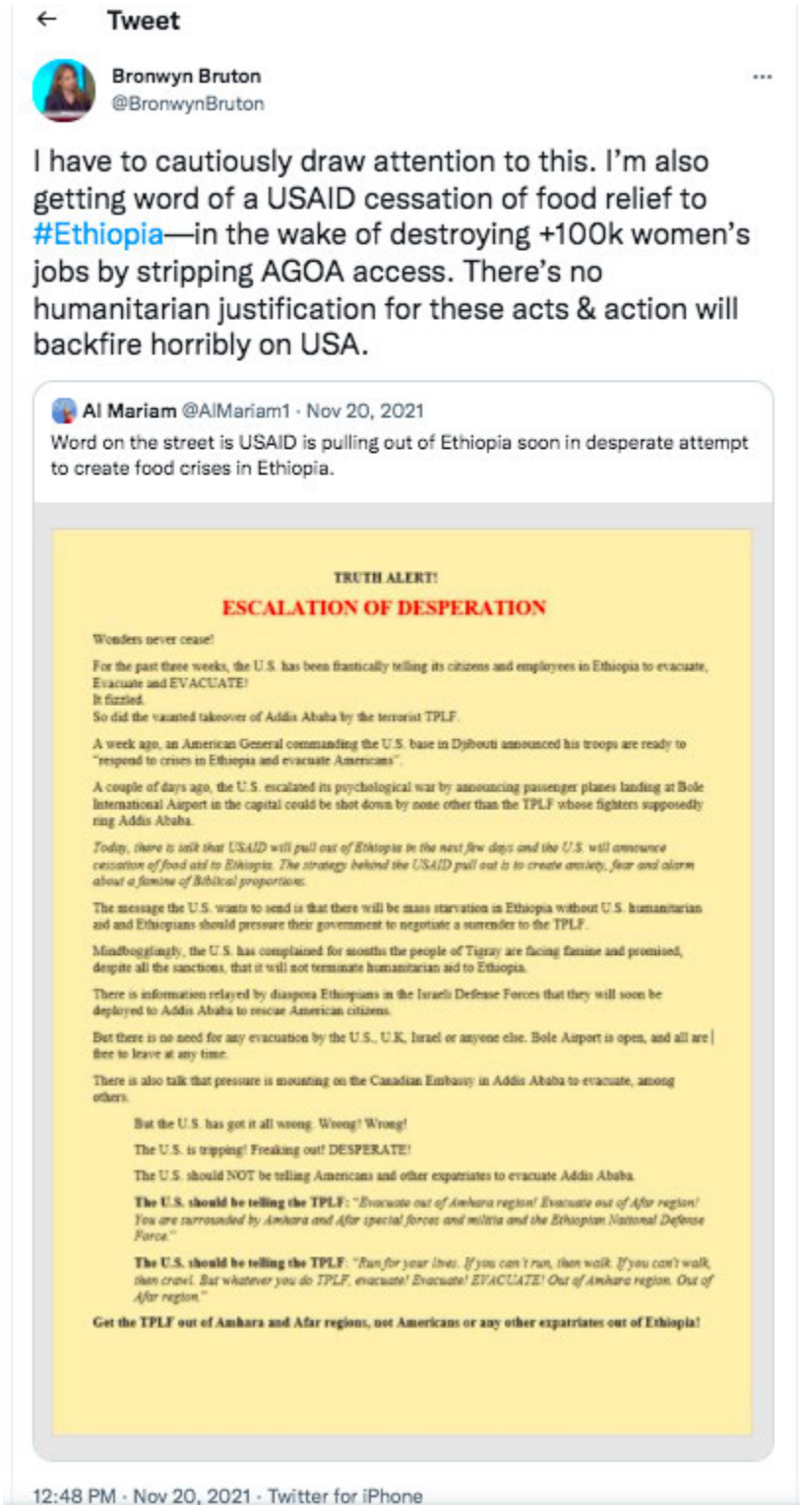
The U.S. should be telling the TPLF: *"Evacuate out of Amhara region! Evacuate out of Afar region! You are surrounded by Amhara and Afar special forces and militia and the Ethiopian National Defense Force."*

The U.S. should be telling the TPLF: *"Run for your lives. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do TPLF, evacuate! Evacuate! EVACUATE! Out of Amhara region. Out of Afar region."*

Get the TPLF out of Amhara and Afar regions, not Americans or any other expatriates out of Ethiopia!

12:55 PM · Nov 20, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

C.



← Tweet

Bronwyn Bruton
@BronwynBruton

I have to cautiously draw attention to this. I'm also getting word of a USAID cessation of food relief to #Ethiopia—in the wake of destroying +100k women's jobs by stripping AGOA access. There's no humanitarian justification for these acts & action will backfire horribly on USA.

Al Mariam @AlMariam1 · Nov 20, 2021
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The U.S. is tripping! Freaking out! DESPERATE!

The U.S. should NOT be telling Americans and other expatriates to evacuate Addis Ababa.

The U.S. should be telling the TPLF: "*Evacuate out of Amhara region! Evacuate out of Afar region! You are surrounded by Amhara and Afar special forces and militia and the Ethiopian National Defense Force.*"

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Get the TPLF out of Amhara and Afar regions, not Americans or any other expatriates out of Ethiopia!

12:48 PM · Nov 20, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

D.

borkena

Ethiopia to expel some humanitarian organizations over arms smuggling

July 15, 2021

The state of war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia shows no improvement as the TPLF is attempting to take it further south and west of the region. According to claims by Ethiopian government, the rebel group seem to be getting support from groups operating in the country under the cover of humanitarian aid.



Redwan Hussien, State Minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia

Ethiopia on Wednesday warned that it could expel some humanitarian organizations over activities to arm the rebels in Tigray, Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which the Ethiopian parliament declared as a terrorist group.

Spokesperson of the Ethiopian State of Emergency Task Force, Ambassador Redwan Hussien, also State Minister in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia, organization that is using humanitarian activity as a cover to arm TPLF could be expelled from Ethiopia.

He did not name the names of the organizations involved in facilitating arms smuggling to support the TPLF.

Mr. Redwan also talked about the unilateral humanitarian ceasefire and TPLF's response to it. He said the terrorist organization is carrying out active renewed aggression and that the Ethiopian government could reconsider the unilateral humanitarian ceasefire decision.

In the past two weeks, the TPLF made incursions to the Amhara and Afar regions of Ethiopia with the objective to "recover lost land." In the Amhara region, it took control of Korem and Alamata towns where it reportedly carried out massacres of civilians on alleged grounds of supporting the operations of the Ethiopian Defense Force. However, Mr. Redwan did not talk about that.

Mr. Redwan also called on the International Community to condemn TPLF rejection of the Humanitarian ceasefire. Ethiopia is facing one of the toughest challenges in its history, highlighting pressure on Ethiopia to disintegrate the country and calling on what he called friendly countries to help Ethiopia reverse the situation.

It is unclear if the rebel forces are still in control of Korem and Alamata. What is clear is that they are in control of the capital Mekelle – a city which the Ethiopian government said is no longer a center of gravity.

Amahra regional state announced on Tuesday that the region is facing existential threat after the TPLF declared war on the region and deployed forces in the Raya and Wolkait front to reverse the TPLF advance.

Regional states, like Oromia, Sidmama and Somali, have dispatched contingents of special forces to help reverse TPLF aggression in the Amhara and Afar regions of Ethiopia.

This week, Debretsion Gebremichael, leader of the terrorist junta, as the Ethiopian government and most Ethiopians call it now, spoke this week to the media saying that his fighters will continue what he called "struggle" until "invading forces leave Tigray."

E.

borkena

Ethiopia: What is the African #NoMore movement about?

November 21, 2021

The anti-War #NoMore movement has been the top trending hashtag for weeks until Twitter temporarily blocked it.



Eritreans and Ethiopians staged demonstrations across many cities in Europe and North America as part of the ongoing #NoMore movement. Picture shows protestors marching in London.

By Teshome Borago

The anti-War #NoMore movement has been the top trending hashtag for weeks until Twitter temporarily blocked it. While Twitter has censored it in several countries, it remains the top trending African campaign on Twitter and other social media platforms.

What exactly is #NoMore about?

Currently organized by the Horn of Africa Hub, the #NoMore campaign was created by a coalition of Ethiopian and Eritrean activists led by former Al Jazeera & CBS journalist Hermela Aregawi. Its central objective is to oppose the ongoing Western media disinformation campaign, Western economic warfare, diplomatic propaganda and military interventions in Africa in general, and the "Horn of Africa" in particular. Its current focus is on Ethiopia, where a US-backed TPLF insurrectionists waged a brutal war that displaced millions of Ethiopians and killed thousands, including most notably slaughtering over a 1200 Amhara civilians in Maikadra town.

This war initially began when TPLF ethnic-profiled & massacred hundreds of Non-Tigrayan federal officers in November 2020; rejecting two years of peace-building attempts by the Nobel Peace Prize winning Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Since then, the Western corporate media-intelligence complex portrayed the TPLF rebels as victims facing the stereotypical African dictatorship: despite TPLF committing mass atrocities and the current Ethiopian administration being the country's first democratically elected government. In an effort to embolden the rebels, President Joe Biden's top official Samantha Powers began fabricating "*ways to embarrass"* Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy (according to investigation by *Politico* media) while Biden's team continued imposing economic sanctions on Ethiopia and its Eritrean allies. To tilt the military balance in favor of the heavily-armed TPLF rebels (who were already trained by US Army & had accumulated over 80 percent of Ethiopia's arsenal) Western powers recently imposed arms embargo on the new democratic government of Ethiopia.

#NoMore is thus being supported by Africans and others worldwide who oppose insurrectionist rebels in Africa as well as support nonviolent democratic reforms in the continent. The recent global #NoMore marches organized by the Horn of Africa

Hub are co-sponsored by the Answer Coalition and the US-based Black Alliance for Peace (BAP) which opposes "western military power to impose western control of African land and resources," among others. BAP is led by Green Party's 2016 US Vice-Presidential nominee Ajamu Baraka who labeled TPLF a "western proxy" and claimed "the same individuals who now hold positions in the Biden administration were accomplices in the U.S.-led NATO decimation of Libya, hiding behind a modern-day version of the 'White man's burden' otherwise known as "Responsibility to Protect (R2P)." In addition to Samantha Powers' role in the catastrophic 2011 US Libya military intervention (which Obama said was his "biggest mistake"), several former CIA operatives who helped TPLF rebels in the 1980s, including Gayle Smith, was recently on a tour of Africa influencing US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to support TPLF rebels.

Who is TPLF?

TPLF, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is a pseudo-leftwing ethnic supremacist organization that became a Western proxy against the 1980s socialist regime in Ethiopia. Despite once being flagged as a terrorist organization, the TPLF quickly became a darling of the CIA and US intelligence operatives who viewed a geopolitically independent and united Ethiopian state as a major threat to Western interests in Africa.

Before this latest episode of war, the TPLF rebels historically waged a vicious war in the 1980s, and ultimately came to power in 1991 with US support after sacrificing tens of thousands of Tigrayans thru conflict and conflict-led famine, including the diversion of Western aid for its successful war campaign. Once in power, the TPLF created an ethnic apartheid system that led to two decades of reoccurring ethnic-cleansing, while mismanaging the economy to put millions more Ethiopians dependent on foreign aid and keeping the country at the bottom of the world in GDP-per-capita rankings. When TPLF lost power thru peaceful nationwide protests in 2018, it began to sabotage the transitional government and ultimately trigger the current war for power. As the vicious TPLF rebels have support exclusively among ethnic Tigrayans (who make-up around 5% of total Ethiopian population), the rise of famous ethnic Tigrayan peace activists like Hermela Aregawi has put a spotlight on the exploitation of average Tigrayans by the Tigrayan elite millionaires, some of whom have several DC lobbyists that influence US politicians and work with Western media, including CNN journalist Nima Elbagir. Having had early access to

the inside operations of TPLF members living in the West, the Tigrayan journalist Hermela exposed several schemes including their methodology of pushing a "Tigray Genocide" narrative in 2020, well before the Ethiopian government even began responding to the TPLF insurrection. Since then, the rebels have also held Tigrayans who refused to fight as hostages inside Tigray, by turning humanitarian aid routes in neighboring Afar and Amhara provinces into war-zones. In October, the TPLF shutdown the last remaining humanitarian aid transportation that came via UN aid flights, by forcing those Aid planes to abort landing and create a "No Fly Zone" in order to protect TPLF military installations from government airstrikes. According to the UN, most of its aid trucks meant for humanitarian aid have also disappeared in Tigray as they are being diverted by TPLF and used to transport Tigrayan rebels invading neighboring provinces.

Pro-democracy Tigrayans and all Ethiopian Peace activists worldwide have since demanded the TPLF rebels to stop the war and disarm.

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: February 14, 2022

From: Margot B. Ellis, A-AA/Europe & Eurasia

Subject: USAID Programmatic Response Options to Kremlin Information Manipulation Efforts in Ukraine

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- (U) The Kremlin has stepped up its malign information operations in Ukraine as tensions have increased. While spending is not broken down per country, the Government of Russia plans to spend $2.88 billion from 2021-2025 to expand the global reach of RT, Rossiya Segodnya, and Sputnik, its international broadcasting entities.
- (U) USAID/Ukraine's media-related programs total $60 million and assist partners to address disinformation by augmenting high-quality, independent media production capacity and providing content monitoring and analysis support. They could expand or pivot as the situation warrants, including to address information manipulation.

BACKGROUND:

(U) **Information Landscape in Ukraine.** The Kremlin has been ramping up its disinformation offensive in Ukraine in the past few months, using Russian state-owned broadcasters and trolls on social media platforms to portray the West as the aggressor and the government in Kyiv as its puppet. The Government of Ukraine (GoU) has taken steps to counter Kremlin-sponsored disinformation, including banning several Kremlin-linked media outlets and establishing two new centers to combat disinformation. At the same time, the GoU has been increasing pressure on independent media outlets in the past few months, including threats of criminal prosecution against media outlets and journalists critical of the GoU and underfunding the public service broadcaster in spite of legal requirements, while a bill threatening media independence has been registered and awaits review by parliament. See Tab 1 for more details.

~~(SBU)~~ **USAID's Media and Information Integrity Support in Ukraine.** Globally, USAID views the challenge of information manipulation through a development lens and thus approaches it as an information integrity issue, as well as a cross-sectoral issue that affects other development goals, including economic growth, health, and the environment. Programs generally aim to increase resilience in the media and information space, rather than engage in information/psychological operations or strategic communications to amplify U.S. foreign policy narratives, which are in the purview of the Department of Defense and Department of State, respectively. For more information, see Tab 2.

~~(SBU)~~ USAID's support to independent media development in Ukraine in the past 30 years has helped advance major successes in the information space, including strengthening plurality and diversity of new, independent media sources; creating strong local media support organizations that conduct expert polling and media monitoring and mentor other burgeoning organizations in the region, such as in Belarus; and supporting new legal reforms related to the

media sector, including the key reform of Ukraine's National Public Service Broadcaster (UA:PBC) and the law on access to public information.

(U) USAID/Ukraine's Media Program in Ukraine (MPU) aims to strengthen the role of media in democratic processes in Ukraine and expand citizens' access to high-quality information to counter malign influence and support European integration. Last year, an online comedy show that debunks disinformation, *Newspalm*, reached 2 million views, was picked up by 14 regional TV channels across the country, and won accolades from Ukrainian public figures. In another example, an MPU-supported blogger who covers disinformation reached 1.3 million views on TikTok and 1.8 million on YouTube. Her most popular video was about a newly created pro-Russian TV Channel that has the same hosts, guests, narratives, and management as recently GOU-blocked channels. The most liked comment on her channel was "Now we know more about information bubbles, political manipulations, and the life of journalists from the inside. Your account is a jewel in the media sphere." In comparison, and to demonstrate what USAID's partners are up against, Anatoly Shariy, a popular pro-Kremlin blogger in Ukraine known for xenophobic rhetoric, receives on average 1 million views per video on YouTube and TikTok, and some of his videos on TikTok have received as many as 5 million views.

~~(SBU)~~ USAID/Ukraine's Transformation Communications Activity, in collaboration with USAID/Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) Ukraine Confidence Building Initiative, supports the creation of social impact entertainment that serves as an alternative to Kremlin-backed disinformation efforts and advances themes consistent with a unified, stable, and democratic Ukraine that is on the path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. A recent initiative, Dialogue with Donbas, featured a 12-episode series with a popular host for both Ukrainian and Russia-speaking audiences who engages in a dialogue with Ukranians in Russia-controlled Donbas. Since December 2021, the series has reached 1.6 million viewers, 10 percent of whom reside in Russia or Russian-occupied areas and who are highly susceptible to Kremlin-led narratives. Beyond the audience figures for the series, however, the data on engagement are important. Viewers of the series actively commented on videos and entered into discussions with viewers who hold pro-Kremlin views. Analysis of these debates over time suggests that Kremlin-supported propaganda does not have the same support as it did in the past.

~~(SBU)~~ USAID partners also include the GoU's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (CSC) under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, and the Center for Countering Disinformation under the National Security and Defense Council. Both help advance the GoU's partnerships with civil-society organizations (CSOs) and its capacity to communicate proactively with the public. For example, with USAID support, the CSC created the December 24 video (about Kremlin propaganda regarding its military escalation on Ukraine's border) that has been viewed more than 1.2 million times and confronts malign narratives and promotes resiliency. In another example, the CSC released an analytical piece the day of the January 14 cyberattacks (which left several GoU websites inaccessible, including the Foreign Ministry and the Security and Defense Council), debunking the suspected-Russian hackers' claims and leveraging civil society and media partners, most of which are USAID supported, to increase the reach of the post across the country.

(~~SBU~~) **USAID Response Capacity:** USAID/Ukraine, in cooperation with OTI, has assessed that its existing portfolio of programs can pivot, expand, or redirect resources in response to a potential further invasion, as per below. Please find more information on these programs in the fact sheets in Tabs 3-8.

NEXT STEPS:

- (~~SBU~~) USAID and its partners are continuously monitoring the situation on the ground regarding disinformation and adjusting programming as needed. **USAID/Ukraine and USAID/OTI have obligated $12 million for existing media activities that support ongoing work to strengthen media independence and are responding in real time as the crisis evolves.** The GoU and local partners, with USAID support, are rapidly adapting and responding to address disinformation narratives as they emerge, as demonstrated by the CSC's response to Ukraine's most recent cyberattack.

- (~~SBU~~) **USAID/E&E regional programs could shift existing funds or absorb additional resources.** One program supports a regional news exchange where partners across nine countries collaboratively develop content, exchange stories, and rapidly respond to crisis events. For example, the news exchange created a virtual newsroom during the crackdown in Belarus, as well as the 2020 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. E&E could shift current or additional resources to expand content on Ukraine. In addition, two regional grantmaking programs, the Black Sea Trust and the Prague Civil Society Centre, could shift/absorb funding to support local partners to address disinformation in Ukraine.

- (~~SBU~~) **OTI is developing and scaling local and national content in coordination with the GoU and CSO partners.** OTI's work with local civil-society and media experts has focused in the key regions of Kharkiv (bordering Russia and Donbas), Zaporizhzhia (near the Azov Sea), Kherson (bordering Crimea), and Zakarpattia (ethnically diverse region that is a target of Russian disinformation). Capacity exists, with additional funding, to further accelerate these organizations' responses to disinformation campaigns and provide high-quality, locally relevant information. Additionally, OTI's readily available media and disinformation monitoring tools and partners can be used and scaled.

- (U) **USAID's Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance's Human Rights Support Mechanism can respond to urgent and unforeseen needs and opportunities through small, rapid funds focused on supporting local implementers.** The mechanism's funds could be used to respond to threats to freedom of expression and broader restrictions on human rights resulting from mis/dis/mal-information.

- (U) DDI's Innovation, Technology, and Research Hub supports the **Digital APEX mechanism, which has funding available to provide both preventive and responsive cybersecurity assistance to Mission partners across sectors.** This contract has worked with journalists, political parties, private-sector organizations, and other partners at high risk of cyberattack, helping them prevent/mitigate attacks and protect their data and operations.

Attachments:

Tab 1—~~(SBU)~~ Disinformation Landscape and Low Levels of Trust in Media in Ukraine
Tab 2— ~~(SBU)~~ USAID/Ukraine Media Programming and USAID's Broader Approach to Mis/Dis/Mal-Information
Tab 3—(U) OTI/Ukraine Fact Sheet
Tab 4—~~(SBU)~~ OTI/Ukraine's Approach to Addressing Disinformation
Tab 5—(U) USAID/Ukraine's Transformation Communications Activity
Tab 6—(U) USAID/Ukraine's Media Program in Ukraine
Tab 7—~~(SBU)~~ USAID/EE's Strengthening Eurasian News
Tab 8—(U) USAID/EE's Regional Investigative Journalism Network

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Approved: E&E/A-AA: Margot Ellis

Bureau Level Clearances	**Clearance Status**	**Date**
EE/DAA:L. Magno	Clear	2/02/2022
EE/DAA: A. Sokolowski	Clear	1/31/2022
EE/TSO/DG: S. Avanesyan	Clear	1/25/2022
EE/TSO: D. Brown	Clear	1/26/2022
EE/EECA: C. Johnston	Clear	1/26/2022
EE/EECA: C. Brearley	Clear	1/27/2022
EE/PO: J. Mina	Clear	1/27/2022
DDI/DRG: J. Walsh	Clear	2/3/2022
DDI/ITR/T S. Byers	Clear	1/28/2022
CPS/AtA: R. Jenkins	Clear	2/1/2022
CPS/OTI/DIR: B. Brown	Clear	1/28/2022
CPS/OTI/FPD: M. Van Leeuwen	Clear	1/26/2022
CPS/OTI/EUR: J. Gattorn	Clear	1/25/2022
ES: DKuhnForfa	Clear	2/9/2022
ES: JHurley	Clear	2/10/2022
ES: EBakely	clear	2/10/22
NSC: AMenghetti	Clear	2/10/2022
ES: ECarr	Clear	2/11/2022
ES: JBernton	Clear	2/11/2022
CoS	Info	2/14/2022

Tab 1—Disinformation Landscape and Low Levels of Trust in Media in Ukraine

(U) Ukraine is fighting against Kremlin hybrid warfare, political interference, and disinformation aimed at undermining Ukraine's cybersecurity, infrastructure, and governance. Out of the more than 13,500 cases about Kremlin-sponsored disinformation campaigns that the European Union's (EU) European External Action Service has cataloged, exposed, and debunked since 2015, Ukraine is mentioned in nearly 40 percent. The most prevalent and dangerous myths that the Kremlin promotes about Ukraine include anti-Western narratives, such as that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is "aggressive" and inflames tensions, that Ukraine continues to commit atrocities and human rights violations in the east against Russian-speaking populations, and that the West and the EU have abandoned Ukraine. A recent report from the Center for European Policy Analysis noted that domestically, the Government of Russia is preparing Russians for the prospect of imminent war using Russian state media, propagandists, and politicians, while trolls and bots are increasingly amplifying both domestic and international messaging on social media. Russian international broadcasting entity RT has also been publishing more op-eds from Western academics willing to make arguments that align with Kremlin-supported talking points and narratives. Last year, the Government of Russia announced plans to spend $2.88 billion from 2021-2025, with about $450 million for 2021 alone, to increase the reach of broadcasting entities RT, Rossiya Segodnya, and Sputnik.

(U) Ukraine is taking steps to counter Kremlin-sponsored disinformation. Earlier this year, the Zelenskyy administration banned a number of Kremlin-linked media outlets from responding to Russian aggression in the information arena. The GoU has created two new organizations to combat disinformation: the Center for Countering Disinformation within the National Security and Defense Council, and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy's Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security.

~~(SBU)~~ At the same time, the president's office has been increasing pressure on independent media outlets in the past few months, including: pressure on publication owners to not publish stories about corruption among some political and financial elites; unrealistic demands to political talk shows for interviews/coverage, including on the editorially independent public service broadcaster; attempts to cancel the screening of a documentary film on Zelenskyy's offshore businesses revealed in the recent Pandora Papers leaks; and threats of criminal prosecution against media outlets and journalists who are critical of the GoU. A bill threatening media independence has also been registered and awaits review by parliament. Finally, the government is seeking to expand funding for state media to amplify its message, while decreasing funding for the public service broadcaster, which the government has consistently underfunded since its founding in 2017 in spite of legal funding requirements.

(U) Pressure on the information landscape from without and within may be helping to raise distrust of Ukrainians toward all media. A recent survey in Ukraine suggests trust in Russian media is virtually nonexistent, while citizens' trust of domestic media is also low. According to a Kyiv International Institute of Sociology survey conducted by telephone in December 2021, 32 percent of Ukrainians trusted Ukrainian media, compared to 30 percent in December 2020, and 39 percent said they did not trust Ukrainian media, compared to 43 percent in 2020. At the same time, just 3 percent trusted Russian media, compared to 4 percent in 2020, and 79 percent distrusted Russian media, up 1 percent from 2020. The highest overall media trust

levels were found in central and southern Ukraine, at 33 percent. The lowest levels were found in eastern Ukraine, at 28 percent. The most mistrust in Ukrainian media was found in the east, at 45 percent, and the least mistrust in western Ukraine, at 34 percent. Ukrainians living in the eastern part of the country showed the most trust in Russian media, at 6 percent, while only 2 percent of those surveyed in the western regions trusted Russian media. The highest mistrust levels in Russian media were found in western Ukraine, at 84 percent, while the lowest mistrust levels, at 63 percent, were found in eastern Ukraine. The survey was not able to interview anyone in the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea.

Tab 2: USAID/Ukraine Media Programming and USAID's Broader Approach to Mis/Dis/Mal-Information

(U) **USAID Media Programming in Ukraine.** Since 2018, USAID's Media Program in Ukraine has supported 53 local media support organizations and more than 500 independent media outlets through grants, training, and technical assistance. Under this program local partners not only expose disinformation campaigns, but provide high-quality, locally relevant information. Their efforts have helped improve media literacy in the areas of increased consumption of high-quality content by citizens, the ability of pupils and teachers to identify disinformation and hidden advertising, and the ability of local experts to conduct media monitoring and engaging pre-bunking and de-bunking fact-checking campaigns. In its annual survey on media consumption, USAID-supported Internews found a significant increase in the number of citizens who correctly identified the difference between true and false information, from 11 percent of respondents who identified all three stories correctly in 2020 to 24 percent in 2021. Moreover, only 6 percent of respondents failed to provide a single correct answer, a significant improvement compared to previous years, which were as high as 32 percent.[1]

~~(SBU)~~ **USAID's Broader Approach to Mis/Dis/Mal-Information and Programming Examples.** Beyond the Ukraine context, USAID views the challenge of mis/dis/mal-information[2] through a development lens and thus approaches it as an information integrity issue, as well as a cross-sectoral issue that affects other development goals, including economic growth, health, the environment, and other areas outside of democracy and governance. Programs generally aim to increase resilience in the media and information space, rather than engage in information operations or strategic communications, which are in the purview of the Department of Defense (DoD) and Department of State (DoS) respectively. DoD and DoS often focus on threat actors and aim to amplify U.S. foreign policy narratives, counter messages, or conduct psychological operations to try to change citizens' sentiments.

(U) USAID's approach to countering mis/dis/mal-information is to strengthen local actors, including media practitioners and content creators—like bloggers, citizen journalists, influencers, or journalists—who provide fact-based, ethical, high-quality news and information. We also work with actors focusing on strengthening the resilience of the information space, such as troll hunters, data scientists, media literacy educators, or civil-society activists.

~~(SBU)~~ USAID's media development programs focus on three areas: supply, demand, and the legal enabling environment. These programs help address mis/dis/mal-information directly and indirectly within each area. On the supply side, USAID programs bolster the capacity of local media outlets to provide professional, trusted news and information and operate as well-managed businesses. For example, in the Western Balkans, the Balkan Media Assistance

[1] The survey found that there are no major demographic differences between those who believe in disinformation in Ukraine. There is an almost even split between women and men and people who went to university vs people who did not. People with higher education are a little less likely to believe in some forms of disinformation. Very young people seem a little less likely to believe disinformation but the age group with the highest vulnerability is 26-35.
[2] Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant, while dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm. Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere. Definitions taken from the Council of Europe and used in USAID's Disinformation Primer.

Program has helped key partner outlets increase revenue by more than 1,000 percent (aggregate across the ten key partners), broaden their audience reach by 70 percent, and improve organizational capacity by an average of 15 percent. Moreover, our partners' work goes beyond the E&E region, for example through the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's (OCCRP) reports that outline corrupt schemes that are global in nature, such as the Pandora Papers about the secretive global offshore services sector and the Pegasus Project, which details how corrupt regimes used spyware to surveille their own citizens, including journalists, activists, and political dissidents. In 2021, OCCRP's stories garnered nearly 40 million unique views, and it added over one million new visitors to its website. USAID has provided support to OCCRP since 2007 to strengthen its network of local partners, build capacity, and provide core operational assistance.

~~(SBU)~~ Additionally, the Strengthening Eurasian News program partners with an outlet in Nicaragua and frequently covers common disinformation tactics among authoritarian actors. A recent report from July 2021, "Putin's Playbook: Strongmen around the world are using Russian tactics to quell dissent" reached 250,000 people from Georgia, Moldova, and Nicaragua. USAID's support also improves the skills of civil-society actors to understand, track, and educate audiences about disinformation efforts, whether they are via internal or external actors. For example, in Ukraine and Moldova, USAID's support has enabled troll-hunting organizations to report more than 200 inauthentic accounts to Facebook, which later disabled these accounts. Support also fostered the creation of the first national fact-checking coalition in Moldova and strengthened the members' skills in gathering near real-time data on disinformation efforts in advance of the 2019 parliamentary elections. In Georgia, Facebook credited the USAID-supported International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy for its removal of more than 500 pages, 100 Facebook accounts and 120 groups, and 56 Instagram accounts that were spreading disinformation.

(U) On the demand side, our programs strengthen public demand for high-quality, independent reporting through media and digital literacy—by teaching audiences to be more critical consumers of information; to understand the watchdog role of the press in a liberal democracy; and to understand how information manipulation works, how disinformation flows, and how and why they might be vulnerable targets of information operations. In Indonesia, under a USAID program, the use of memes, viral videos, and explainers targeting audiences identified as already consuming socially harmful disinformation has positively affected these users' abilities to assess the credibility of online information. Users were nearly 16 percent more likely to identify a misleading headline as very or somewhat inaccurate.

(U) Finally, USAID programs strengthen the legal and regulatory operating environment for press freedom and information integrity to promote the growth of a more competitive, rights-respecting, and high-quality media marketplace, while allowing the sector to fulfill its function as a watchdog of democratic society without fear of legal sanction. More specifically, USAID's support helps create an operating environment for media that is not captured by political or financial elites; is able to balance freedom of expression with security issues; and creates an atmosphere free of intimidation and harassment or violence against journalists. While much remains to be done on this front in the E&E region, USAID programs have helped lead to

laws improving transparency of media ownership (Ukraine, Moldova), the creation of a public service broadcaster (Ukraine, Georgia), and privatization of state media (Ukraine).

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

OFFICE OF TRANSITION INITIATIVES

UKRAINE

December 2021



WHY USAID/OTI IS IN UKRAINE

The U.S. Government's strategy for stability in Europe includes countering Russia's destabilizing measures that corrode democratic institutions and governments. Since 2014, USAID/OTI has supported the country's transformation to a modern, democratic country and bolstered its resistance to Russia's efforts to undermine that transition. USAID/OTI helps to advance stability and national unity in Ukraine and mitigate the effects of Kremlin malign influence by advancing efforts towards the reintegration of Donbas and Crimea, strengthening abilities to counter disinformation and malign narratives, and addressing emerging threats to national cohesion and stability.

USAID/OTI's ROLE IN UKRAINE

USAID/OTI partners with Ukrainian government institutions, influential change-makers, and media outlets to champion reintegration efforts and promote unity and stability. USAID/OTI also fosters positive attitudes and promotes cross-contact line connections to lay the groundwork for reintegration. By focusing on Russian-language media content, USAID/OTI helps Ukrainian media reach key audiences who are susceptible to malign narratives and disinformation through engaging content. The program's three objectives are to:

- Advance efforts towards the reintegration of Donbas and Crimea;
- Increase availability of Russian-language content to counter disinformation and malign narratives; and
- Address emerging challenges to stability and national cohesion.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- USAID/OTI partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to support the launch of the Crimea Platform and provided technical and operational assistance for the Crimea Summit in August 2021, on the eve of Ukraine's 30th anniversary of independence. The MFA first announced the Crimea Platform in September 2020 as a multi-tiered approach to draw international attention and galvanize efforts around ending the occupation and human rights violations in Crimea.
- USAID/OTI increases people-to-people engagement across the line of contact. Working with grassroots participants from both the Non-Government Controlled Areas (NGCA) of Donbas and Government Controlled Areas (GCA), USAID/OTI supports dialogue sessions aimed at developing connections across the line of contact by discussing common issues and proposing solutions. These sessions help lay the groundwork for peacebuilding and provide a bottom-up flow of information to inform the Government of Ukraine's policies and planning for eventual reintegration of the NGCAs.
- USAID/OTI works with government, civil society, and broadcasters to create Russian-language content to challenge the Pro-Kremlin and anti-democratic narratives that portray Ukraine in a historically inaccurate light and as a failed state. The TV and digital content offers a Ukrainian perspective that illustrates Ukraine's achievements as a diverse, modern country.

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

680
USAID/OTI activities to date

355
Local partners to date

722,650
Participants in USAID/OTI civic engagement activities

Sectoral Focus

Youth Engagement
Action Research
Civic Engagement
Community Dialogue
Strategic Communications and Media
Peace and Reconciliation

FAST FACTS

Start date: 7/2014
Partner: Chemonics International

$5.8 M
Current FY21 Funding
$4M TI , $3.25 non-TI

$79.8 M
Total Budget to Date



USAID/OTI UKRAINE PROGRAM'S COUNTER DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

USAID/OTI's Ukraine program uses a multifaceted approach to countering disinformation by focusing on addressing the harms from hostile state information operations aimed at stoking tensions and undermining democracy. This approach includes: support for the production of creative content that tackle important macro narratives being pushed by the Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned media; technical and strategic assistance to the Government of Ukraine (GOU) on approaches to countering disinformation; support for local media outlets and civil society organizations in vulnerable regions of Ukraine to improve the quality of their locally relevant, factual content. Underpinning these approaches are ongoing research and close coordination with other USAID programs, the Embassy Public Affairs Section, DOD, and other key donors such as the UK and EU.

NARRATIVES & CREATIVE CONTENT

PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY

Combined with the targeted, specific media narratives about how bad things are in Ukraine, the Kremlin also relies on its film, TV, and music industry to use soft power that promotes the Kremlin worldview. Oftentimes this content has high production value and slick promotion – appealing to many Ukrainians and others in the former Soviet region. This creates an opportunity to develop quality content that challenges Kremlin narratives and highlights an accurate portrayal of Ukraine and Euro-Atlantic values.

RESPONSE

On the broadest scale, OTI works on supporting creative content that promotes Euro-Atlantic values and helps reinforce Ukraine's pluralistic national identity, especially amongst audiences who are most vulnerable to Kremlin-backed disinformation efforts. This includes populations living in the non-government controlled areas (NGCA's) of Donbas and occupied Crimea as well as audiences in southern and eastern Ukraine. Support consists of full content production, marketing and promotion, and underwriting script development and pilot episodes.

- ***High Quality Social Impact Content:*** The flagship approach through which OTI identifies content to support is through the PitchUA process. PitchUA, created and designed by OTI, is an open call for Ukrainian creatives to pitch their concepts in line with themes that advance the overall objective of a unified, stable, and democratic Ukraine that is on the path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. OTI, through input from an advisory panel of leading U.S. and European film and TV experts, selects a variety of social impact content to support on an annual basis. OTI pairs Ukrainian creatives, civil society experts, and international experts to support the production of TV, web/digital, and film content that is of a high enough caliber to compete on a broad scale with other commercial products

on the market. OTI also partners with content producers outside of the PitchUA process on an ad hoc basis to ensure it is able to support other new compelling content through smaller production efforts or through dedicated broadcasters for the NGCAs and Crimea. Since 2018, OTI supported content has received multiple industry awards in Ukraine and internationally, has been watched cumulatively nearly 200 million times – and has organically reached audiences in other countries in the region.

- ***Leveraging Private Sector Funding:*** It is critical that OTI partners with the private sector to leverage resources beyond what the program is able to offer. For example, as part of the PitchUA process, OTI requires recipients to find private sector funding to cover the majority of production costs. OTI's contributions range from 10% to 50% depending on the overall scale of the product. Additionally, OTI does not pay for airtime, rather, it requires the partners to already identify their distribution networks and agree with TV channels or their digital platforms to air the content for free.

STRATEGIC & TECHNICAL SUPPORT

PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY

The Government of Ukraine has historically lacked a coherent or proactive approach to countering disinformation due to a lack of expertise. However, the launch of the Center to Counter Disinformation (CCD) under the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) and the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (CSC) under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (MCIP) provide an opportunity to increase the expertise and strengthen the GOU's technical ability to more proactively counter disinformation.

RESPONSE

Immediately upon the announcement of these centers, and at the request of the Office of the President of Ukraine, OTI engaged top international experts to advise both GOU centers as they began establishing themselves. This support included strategic planning, development of the vision, mission and mandate of the centers, organizational structure, workflows and processes to monitor, analyze, and respond to disinformation threats, and simulations of how the centers might work together and with other government ministries and civil society partners on real world disinformation threats.

- ***Center for Strategic Communications (CSC):*** Given the public facing mandate of the CSC and its role to proactively communicate with the public and partner with civil society, OTI has deepened its support for the CSC to enable it to produce high quality content and be readily recognized as a credible institution. This includes embedding short-term technical experts, the provision of real time / daily monitoring tools to quickly identify information threats, support for the rapid development of targeted campaigns on key narratives and other creative communications products, such as podcasts and video blogs that air on national channels.

- ***Ministry of Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories (MRTOT):*** OTI partners with the MCIP, civil society experts, and the MRTOT to monitor, analyze, and respond to specific disinformation threats related to the work of the MRTOT. Given the MCIP's mandate (i.e. to be more public facing, partner with civil society, etc), this is the higher priority for our assistance.

SUB-NATIONAL MEDIA & LOCAL FOCUS



- ***Key Regions:*** While OTI has handed off work in Donetsk and Luhansk to other USAID long-term development programs, it continues to work in regions vulnerable to disinformation and other smaller content producers to reach target audiences in the NGCAs and Crimea. These regions include Kharkiv (bordering Russia and Donbas), Zaporzhzhia (Azov Sea), Kherson (bordering Crimea), and Zakarpattia (target of RU disinformation trying to drive wedges in the ethnically diverse region). As such, OTI has been working with local civil society and media experts in each of the regions to improve their responses to disinformation campaigns and to provide quality, locally relevant information.

- ***Improved Quality and Audio/Video Content:*** An important part of reaching vulnerable audiences is to provide high quality audio/visual content. OTI has supported key local independent outlets to improve their audio/visual content and not just rely on audiences to consume dense, long reads, but rather engage them with stimulating short-form content that can also be consumed on mobile devices.

- ***Creative Approaches and Using Humor:*** As mentioned above, OTI works with content producers to infuse humor into their products to resonate with audiences in a break from pure journalism or informational content. This includes humorous videos, working with comedians, and memes.

ONGOING RESEARCH & EVALUATION

Regular research and evaluation of audiences and performance of content underpins OTI's approach to counter disinformation.

- ***Audience segmentation:*** OTI draws upon a series of research commissioned by the program as well as other media consumption data, including social media analytics, to inform approaches to better reach target audiences, and selecting the best platforms to do so (i.e. YouTube, social media, TV channels).

- ***Focus Groups and One-to-One Interviews on Content:*** Beyond the research mentioned above, OTI conducts focus groups with target audiences and one to one interviews on specific pieces of content that enable OTI to better understand which formats and approaches are most effective for conveying narratives and countering disinformation.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

RECENT EXAMPLES OF OTI COUNTERING DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE

1. LAUNCHING VIDEO SERIES TO COUNTER KREMLIN DISINFORMATION

On December 24, 2021, the MCIP CSC launched the first video in a series of three, developed with OTI support, aimed at confronting the Kremlin's current increasingly aggressive narratives and promoting the resilience of the Ukrainian public during this tense period. By exposing the falsehoods and cynicism of the Kremlin's words and encouraging Ukrainians to see through the lies and to stand together, the videos highlight the discrepancies between the Kremlin's previous and current military actions and their dubious claims of "peaceful" intentions.

Since its launch, the first video has been watched over 800,000 times and received mostly positive comments and likes. This extended reach is attributed to the CSC's excellent coordination with civil society and independent media partners throughout the country, many of which are USAID/Ukraine or OTI-supported including Detector Media, Internews Ukraine, StopFake, Vox Ukraine, Euromaidan Press, Lviv Media Forum, Texty.org.ua, Infopost Media, Nakipelo, and the Institute for Central European Strategy.

2. ENABLING A CRITICAL GOU RESPONSE TO THE INFORMATION WAR

OTI has been supporting the development of the CSC since its inception through technical assistance that incorporates international best practices, including from civil society. This assistance focused on helping the center establish its organizational vision, mission, objectives, structure and workflows, optimize collaboration with civil society and independent media, and learn how to create compelling content that reaches vulnerable audiences. It has enabled the CSC to become the key public facing counter disinformation body within the GOU. In the current 2022 crisis and rapidly escalating situation, OTI increased its support to the CSC to produce creative video content and rapidly respond to the dynamic information threats coming from the Kremlin. In practice, the CSC has been able to assess, investigate, and report out in record time on viral narratives and attacks, including the recent cyber attack on January 14.

3. SUPPORTING JOURNALISTS TO TAKE ON KREMLIN DISINFORMATION

OTI and Ukrainian Journalist Roman Tsymbalyuk, the last Ukrainian journalist accredited in Russia, recently ran a 12 episode series starting in December 2021 concentrated on reaching out to Ukrainians in the NGCA's to establish a dialogue with them through high quality engaging content. Prior to this partnership, Tsymbalyuk left Russia and returned to Ukraine permanently due to increasing pressure against him by Russian authorities. Given his notoriety, large following, and creative approach to developing compelling content—the series, titled Dialogue with Donbas, has reached over 1.6 million people with 10 percent residing in Russia or Russian occupied areas including the NGCA's. The videos have attained over 105,000 engagements cumulatively, with over 12,000 comments across Roman's and Channel 24 YouTube channels.

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TRANSFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY

VALUES-BASED COMMUNICATIONS

The broad support of Ukrainians for European integration and democratic values is consistently undermined by pervasive Russian disinformation and other negative narratives designed to weaken public confidence in the country's democratic reforms.

Skepticism about reforms and European integration is caused by, among other things, a pervasive disinformation-driven narrative that Ukraine is not on the path to realize its potential as a prosperous, democratic, European country; and reform communications efforts that have not been to date effectively coordinated or targeted. This skepticism exists across the country, but is highest among Russian-speaking residents of southern and eastern Ukraine. However, Ukraine's diverse media, creative production sector, civil society, and government have the potential to create compelling communications initiatives that engage citizens in a discussion about a European vision for the country and a common set of civic values.

OBJECTIVE

In July 2020, USAID launched the Transformation Communications Activity (TCA) a five-year project aimed at increasing resilience of Ukraine's democracy through innovative communications initiatives and

partnerships that engage Ukrainians in a conversation about the country's democratic transformation and European integration. TCA aims to achieve this by:

- Equip key stakeholders with information to conduct data driven communications efforts;
- Increased quality and quantity of strategic communications on key reform dividends; and
- Enable Ukraine's civic leaders and creative sector to broaden the use of socially impactful media content.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

During its first year of implementation, TCA has partnered with government, civil society, and the creative sector to develop communications initiatives around critical reforms and COVID-19. Key achievements include:

- Finalizing 12 research and data products including: Transitional Justice Research, COVID-19 Vaccination Perception Research, COVID-19 Monitoring Platform, and General Vaccination testing. Two of these products are now informing the implementation of the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Ukraine and the Transitional Justice Research is being used by the Crimea Working Group at the Office of the President. TCA has developed 142 strategic communications interventions, including the first of 30 Presidential Forums Ukraine30 which formed the platform for vaccination communication efforts. TCA with UNICEF were the first to support the COVID-19 Vaccination Communication Center, under the Center of Public Health (CPH).
- Providing communications plans, qualitative research, and a media monitoring platform to ensure data driven communications approaches for the Center and the Ministry of Health. TCA provides similar support on the topic of Land Reform, with TCA's securing 410 publications in regional and national press, 3 TV broadcasts, and a social media trend resulting in 20,000 Facebook followers for Land Reform. Similarly, TCA's support to E-driving license campaign reached almost 20 million people, and E-baby campaign witnessed a 60% increase in applications since the start of the TCA campaign.
- Organizing the third iteration of the PitchUA and receiving 330 applications from media content development that were provided support with Hollywood and Ukrainian experts for 76 short listed applicants. The competitions was for content around three socially-impactful themes – I feel changes, Media Matters, and Uniting Ukrainians. Masterclasses with Hollywood experts have also commenced for the broader creative community in Ukraine.

FAST FACTS

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER: Chemonics International

DURATION: July 2020 – June 2025

TOTAL PROJECTED INVESTMENT: $24,000,000

CONTACT INFORMATION: Iuliia Nechyporenko, inechyporenko@usaid.gov

USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Internews
Local voices. Global change.

MEDIA PROGRAM IN UKRAINE

The new USAID-funded Media Program in Ukraine will empower local media to expand Ukrainian citizens' access to high-quality news and information. This project, implemented by Internews from 2018-2023, is the largest media development activity in Ukraine's history, and represents a significant US $35m investment in Ukraine's independent media sector.

The last four years have seen a raft of important media reforms in the realms of access to information, transparency of media ownership and public service broadcasting. The Media Program will support Ukrainian organizations in their efforts to successfully implement these reforms, increase the availability of high quality media content, improve media self-regulation and ultimately help media provide citizens with the information they need to be resilient against malign influence, strengthening efforts towards European integration.

MEDIA PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:

- Increase high-quality, engaging content throughout Ukraine, particularly in the East and South.
- Increase public demand for quality information.
- Implement critical media reforms.
- Strengthen and sustain key media institutions and processes.

THE NEW MEDIA PROGRAM WILL TARGET ITS EFFORTS ON:

- journalists,
- media managers,
- media outlets,
- media support organizations,
- educators,
- citizens, and
- officials working on reforms.

ACTIVITIES WILL INCLUDE:

- Support for public broadcasting company UA:Pershiy and local affiliates.
- Increasing and improving content production on reforms.
- Improving elections coverage.
- Strengthening professional development and cross-regional linkages.
- Supporting investigative journalism.
- Providing legal assistance to journalists on access to information.
- Streamlining media literacy efforts.
- Expanding media monitoring efforts.
- Strengthening and expanding media partnerships and coalitions.

IT WILL ALSO EXPLORE NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS WITH:

- IT professionals,
- social entrepreneurs,
- private sector representatives, and
- creative communities.

GRANTS FOR UKRAINIAN ORGANIZATIONS:

The Media Program will provide extensive grant support to Ukrainian organizations to enable them to carry out the following activities:

Engaging content production for TV, radio, online, or print media, with targeted support for content creators focusing on the East and South.

Election-related activities including the production of balanced content that fosters public debate on policy issues, voter education, legal assistance for journalists covering elections, and training in how to cover elections in ways that build public confidence in the process.

Media monitoring to assess the quality and impartiality of media coverage as well as covert attempts to manipulate public opinion.

Production of hard-hitting investigative stories and data journalism projects.

Advocacy to expand media literacy more broadly into the national school curriculum, including at primary school level, and teacher training, especially in the East and South, to increase schools' use of media literacy modules.

Support for local groups to roll out media literacy events at all education levels, particularly in the East and South.

Support for local initiatives that create feedback mechanisms for audiences to report false stories, media manipulation, or other professional violations to media outlets or media watchdogs.

In addition to planned grant support, the Media Program will also **establish a flexible rapid reaction pool** to allow the project to respond to unique opportunities and unexpected events.



Photos by: AUP; Internews; IAB; S. Savchenko

TERRITORIAL OUTREACH:

The Media Program in Ukraine is a nationwide initiative that will have a particular focus on media assistance in the East (Donetsk, Luhansk) and South (Kherson, Mykolayiv, and Odesa).

For more information go to www.internews.in.ua

Strengthening Eurasian News (SEN)
Duration: 3/2018-3/2023
Amount: $6,500,000
Implementing Partner: Free Press Unlimited

Strengthening Eurasian News (SEN) provides support to the Russian Language News Exchange, a multi-lateral donor effort led by seed-funding from the Government of The Netherlands (see below). SEN aims to increase access for citizens to objective, fact-based news in Russian through tailored, comprehensive support to independent media in the Europe and Eurasia region. By bringing Russian-language independent media outlets together from across the region to form a cooperative news exchange that is financially viable, innovative, and competitive, SEN supports a strong, networked alternative news base in response to Kremlin disinformation efforts. The activity's interventions include support for increased cross-border reporting and content sharing among the members; and intensive mentoring on business management, strategic financial development and revenue diversification, and modernizing members' digital presence.

The Russian Language News Exchange was established in 2015 with seed support from the Government of The Netherlands, and started activities in September 2016. Its core partners include: *Ziarul de Garda* (Moldova), *Novaya Gazeta* (Russia), *Caucasian Knot* (Russia), Hromadske TV (Ukraine), Meydan TV (Azerbaijan), *JAM News* (Georgia/South Caucasus), and EuroRadio (Belarus). Current donors include the governments of The Netherlands (€1.3 million), European Commission (€1 million), Poland (€330,000), United Kingdom (€250,000), and the Czech Republic (€300,000, plus in-kind support, as news exchange is based in Prague).

ACTIVITY BRIEF

Regional Investigative Journalism Network (RIJN), also known as **Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)**

USAID

Bureau for Europe and Eurasia/ Washington



OCCRP exposed the Russian Laundromat, an immense scheme that enabled more than $20 billion to be pumped out of Russia and move across Europe through a complex system of bribery and exploitation of the legal system. Its reporting led to major reforms in the Latvian banking system, the closure of 19 firms in the U.K., and criminal investigations in Moldova, Russia, and Montenegro. Read the full story and other OCCRP reports at: https://www.occrp.org/en/laundromat/

Partners:
International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) + Journalism Development Network

Geographic Targets:
South East Europe (SEE), Western Eurasia (WE) and the Caucasus (CAU)

Project Duration:
3/15/11 – 3/14/22

Contact Information:
Shannon Maguire, USAID AOR
smaguire@usaid.gov

Chief of Party:
Drew Sullivan
[redacted]

Activity Background

The Regional Investigative Journalism Network (RIJN) is designed to support, network and strengthen the capacity of investigative journalists and organizations across Europe and Eurasia. Its goal is to generate increased citizen demand for change through production of high quality, documented, fact-based, cross-border investigative journalism. Based on a successful pilot conducted in South East Europe, RIJN is known by the name of one of its implementing organizations, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP).

OCCRP builds capacity through a mentoring approach that partners local investigative journalists with their peers across the region and highly-experienced investigative editors, resulting in the production of collaborative, cross-border content. RIJN/OCCRP is a centrally funded and managed program of USAID's Europe and Eurasia Bureau. It operates in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine, while also coordinating and leveraging ties to organizations and experts around the world.

Program Goal

Build citizen demand to reduce corruption, fraud, and other criminal activities through increased exposure to professionally produced investigative journalism.

- Objective 1: Investigative journalists and/or centers in three sub-regional geographic areas are virtually and actually linked to create collaborative, regionally significant content.
- Objective 2: Use of secure, shared communications systems and digital technology applications is increased.
- Objective 3: Investigative journalism is conducted according to high professional standards.
- Objective 4: Collaboratively produced content is web-published for broad distribution and/or replication, and usage is tracked.

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INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **February 7, 2022**

From: **Karen Freeman, A-AA/ASIA**

Subject: Information Manipulation in Central Asia and USAID Programmatic Response Options

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have expanded their disemmination of disinformation in Central Asia through a well-funded effort that endangers U.S. foreign assistance priorities, including programming, people, and partners, by promulgating false accusations about the United States to undermine democracy and facilitate autocratic control in the region.

- Since 2015, the Kremlin has been expanding its media influence by creating media cooperation agreements with more than 50 local media organizations around the world. The Department of State estimates that The Kremlin spends $1.4 billion annually on these media operations around the world. Even this large figure, however, is likely an underestimate.

- In January 2022, several Russian-language media outlets spread disinformation claiming U.S. involvement in fomenting violent conflict in Kazakhstan. One "investigative journalism" report even shared the name and contact information of an American USAID employee currently serving in Kazakhstan, further insinuating that USAID programming is a cover for promoting U.S. interests across the former Soviet Union including business interests, geopolitical interests, and the collection of information on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

- USAID is countering disinformation across four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) using three USAID implementing mechanisms that support media literacy, anti-trolling interventions, fact-checking mechanisms, capacity development for media outlets and training to increase the quality of journalism. At last count in April 2021, the Agency has allocated approximately $3.9 million to countering disinformation within these implementing mechanisms; however, additional funding could expand our programming to counter disinformation from the PRC and the Kremlin and support an information environment that is resilient to disinformation and state control.

- Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are requesting assistance to improve media literacy, develop journalistic professionalism, and combat disinformation, while the Kyrgyz Republic is interested in increasing Kyrgyz language programming, which would challenge the dominance of Russian media. Civil society and independent media outlets are generally interested in the support USAID could provide to counter disinformation because they are often the targets.

BACKGROUND:

Russian Video Accusing USAID Involvement in Kazakhstan Unrest and Putting USAID Staff at Risk: In the wake of the violence that erupted throughout Kazakhstan in early January 2022, several Russian-language media outlets spread disinformation claiming U.S. involvement in fomenting the conflict, with some reports also claiming Ukraine's complicity. Most prominent was a faux investigative journalism report that aired on Rossiya-24 (a Russian government-owned news channel) and circulated widely online. This network news–quality propaganda piece claims that USAID directed the protests in Kazakhstan and bought off loyal Kazakhs, creating a "force" that, at the right moment, was directed to engage in violence, including terrorist acts. The broadcast shared the name and contact information of an American USAID employee currently serving in Kazakhstan as well as contact information for the USAID/Kyrgyz Republic Mission Director. The piece also reiterated claims that under the cover of humanitarian assistance and democratic and economic reforms, USAID promotes U.S. interests across the former Soviet Union (referring specifically to Ukraine and Belarus) including business interests, geopolitical interests, and collecting information on behalf of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

Central Asian Information Ecosystem: This propaganda piece as "pure disinformation" is at the extreme end of the Russian information campaign in Central Asia. Russia's primary tactic is to establish an information hegemony that ensures wide dissemination of Moscow-friendly narratives. Its television programming in particular, *Channel One*, is broadcast across Central Asia and consistently ranks among the most-viewed stations. Some local broadcasters translate and repack this content, passing along Russian state propaganda to Central Asian audiences in local languages. Russian content also comes from myriad Russian sites via social media platforms, and even internet material that appears in local languages is often translated from content that appeared first in the Russian Federation. In the print and digital mediaspace, Central Asian media outlets use Russian language newswires (i.e., Sputnik, RT) for content and tend away from using western newswires (AP, Reuters, etc.). Russian propaganda retains its hegemony for several reasons. Russia's historic and cultural relationship with the region enables the Kremlin to create false information that achieves automatic plausibility in the eyes of targeted populations. Since most of the Central Asian population speaks Russian, media originally produced in Russian does not incur additional translation expenses. Russian broadcasts are well-financed and offer superior production quality (on par with mainstream U.S. media outlets) that attract higher viewership compared to local media outlets. As a result, local independent media outlets struggle for audience share and face difficulty in attracting financing to grow. Investigative journalism and independent media institutions across the region face continuous censorship attacks from national governments, and journalists critical of any of the Central Asian governments are frequently the center of disinformation attacks.

Russian propaganda has actively promoted the narrative that the United States is behind the "color revolutions," popular protest movements that have unseated long-standing regimes in the post-soviet space in the early 2000s (including the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2004 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005). This narrative pervades Russian coverage of the popular protests in Kazakhstan. Given the active information controls that many of the governments of the region exercise, there is little space for alternative information to emerge from popularly consumed media sources. Governments in the region are quick to align with or initiate their own smear campaigns against protesters and foreign funders, using the excuse of preventing a color revolution as a pretext to tighten laws and regulations governing local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), embracing the Russian practice of conducting widespread investigations into NGO financing and activities and, in sporadic worst cases, revoking the licenses and abilities of these organizations to operate (this only happened on a mass scale in Uzbekistan in 2005 following protests and a massacre in Andijan). In 2012, following mass protests due to widespread fraud in the Russian elections, the Russian Federation ejected USAID from the country, accusing it of meddling in domestic politics and the NGOs it supported as organizing the protests.

The PRC is a relative latecomer to the information game but has recently bolstered its "soft power" efforts across the region, which includes some nascent disinformation efforts. To date, the PRC appears uninterested in roiling Moscow by being seen to interfere in post-Soviet space. This may be changing, as the PRC has shown a new assertiveness surrounding topics like Xinjiang and anti-Chinese protests in Central Asia. Though several independent outlets, notably in the Kyrgyz Republic, objectively report on Xinjiang, some state media and pro-PRC publications reprint Beijing state media and official government statements to refute U.S. narratives about Xinjiang, discredit activists and media outlets that condemn PRC treatment of the Uyghurs, criticize U.S. sanctions in response to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) actions in Xinjiang, and warn of U.S. interference in China's internal affairs. The PRC has also conducted operations to influence journalists, such as offering an online meeting titled, "Seeing the Real Xinjiang" during which 40 journalists from Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries, including from Central Asia, were "acquainted" with the pleasant life of national minorities living in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. Lastly, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the *People's Daily*, now publishes in the Kazakh language on its website.

Similar Incident of Pure Disinformation in the Kyrgyz Republic: Doxxing U.S. Personnel in Kyrgyz Republic: In July 2020, after U.S. Embassy personnel left the Kyrgyz Republic on ordered departure due to COVID-19, a local Pro-Russia newspaper (*Delo Nomer*) published an article accusing the U.S. Embassy Bishkek for evacuating 31 diplomats, "including six undercover CIA agents," earlier in the pandemic because "the Americans knew of the coming mass fatal disease." (Tab 2). The article concluded that "the speed of the well-organized evacuation leaves no doubt that Americans are involved in the pandemic" and provided names and photographs of several U.S. diplomats (including USAID officers) and their family members. Some of the photos appeared to be taken at passport control at the airport. Although no surprise that the slandering of U.S. diplomats serving in the Kyrgyz Republic continues unabated by pro-Russian media, the ease of obtaining the personal information of Embassy staffers elicited

particular concern. In response, the Embassy sent a note of protest to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs and received the MFA's assurance that the matter would be investigated. However, there was no follow-up prior to October 2020 when a popular revolution ousted the government, and no follow-up has occurred since.

USAID Programming to Counter Disinformation in Central Asia: The Regional USAID/Central Asia Mission currently manages a regional media program, MediaCAMP, implemented by Internews, covering Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. MediaCAMP is designed to develop a more balanced information environment and to increase openness among youth and adults for differing ideas, opinions, and perspectives as a way to stimulate civic participation. The activity addresses challenges in the media landscape by strengthening journalistic professionalism, increasing media coverage in local languages, improving media literacy of the population to become critical consumers of information, advocating for an improved legal-regulatory environment for media, and improving financial sustainability of media outlets.

USAID/Kyrgyz Republic (USAID/KR) supports independent media to expand their market share, strengthen financial sustainability, and support the local production of innovative fact-based content. USAID/KR has supported local media and civil-society organizations to better identify and combat domestic and imported disinformation, including training a cohort of cyber activists to monitor social media for unauthentic and/or coordinated behavior. In 2022, USAID/KR will launch a new media-support activity in the Kyrygz Republic, which will include a more sustained and sophisticated effort to monitor, analyze, and expose malign influences on and disinformation in the media.

USAID/Tajikistan buys into the USAID/Central Asia-managed multi-country MediaCAMP activity. Pending Fiscal Year (FY) 2022 funding in Calendar Year 2023, USAID/Tajikistan team is planning a new, bilateral five-year media activity that would promote a balanced information environment in Tajikistan by increasing openness among youth and adults to different perspectives, thereby increasing their civic participation.

USAID/Uzbekistan also buys into the MediaCAMP activity; however, its interventions are more constrained by the Government of Uzbekistan's rejection of Internews' application to register its office in Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, MediaCAMP is able to provide fellowships and technical assistance to local independent media to produce high-quality content with a successful track record of reported issues being resolved due to the quality of coverage that leads to better audience reach and engagement. In addition to MediaCAMP, USAID/Uzbekistan's Legal Reform Program improves the quality of journalistic standards including truthfulness and objectivity, shares advice on ongoing legal reforms and media law, and provides vital free legal aid to journalists, bloggers, and media workers who face governmental pressure.

The U.S. interagency had made "Offering alternatives to the Russian media narrative in Central Asia" a priority action in the NSC-approved Implementation Plan for the U.S. Central Asia Strategy (2019-2025). Priority action items include strengthening professionalism of media professionals, expanding the capacity of domestic media organizations, increasing market share for local independent media, demonstrating alternative narratives about the United States, and

offering regional English language learning opportunities as a viable alternative to Russian-led information sources. There has not been any noteworthy engagement between USAID and Congress on disinformation specific to Central Asia.

NEXT STEPS:

- Deputy Administrator Adams-Allen will join a town hall with the USAID Central Asia Regional Mission on February 14, 2022, and use this opportunity to discuss the disinformation attacks against U.S. government personnel and stress the value that the Office of the Administrator places on the safety of USAID staff.

- USAID/ASIA is initiating informal conversations with DDI and the interagency to determine what programming and partnering possibilities are appropriate, given respective predominant capabilities, resources, and expertise.

- Following the January events in Kazakhstan, MediaCAMP is planning to introduce new activities into its Work Plan. In particular, the activity will add a focus on production of media content about fighting disinformation by traditional and online media outlets for broader audience reach and engagement.

- Separately, USAID's Central Asia Regional Mission has engaged Internews headquarters and is considering additional support for vulnerable journalists by providing equipment and technological solutions to build their reporting capacities in emergency situations and offering training and technical assistance to improve their security practices. This is still in the discussion phase now, with no concrete actions identified yet. USAID/KR has been implementing a similar effort to help beneficiaries strengthen their cyber security and cyber hygiene to prevent attacks, while also maintaining an emergency fund for psychosocial support, legal assistance, replacing seized/stolen equipment, etc., to support those who have already suffered violence or State-sponsored attacks.

- With additional resources, USAID could expand legal aid to journalists and bloggers, raise awareness among the government and civil society on freedom of speech and free media values, and support leading government agencies and advocacy groups to address their priorities for improving reporting on anti-corruption and investigative journalism, Countering Violent Extremism, religious freedoms, trafficking in persons, etc.

- USAID's efforts to counter disinformation in Central Asia would benefit from providing technical assistance for local researchers to assess local populations' information consumption habits, their values and beliefs as they relate to information consumption, popular narratives that pervade the information space, and which initiatives, such as fact-checking or messaging campaigns, are most effective. There may be opportunities to perform deeper analysis on media ecosystems in rural communities to assess the feasibility of nurturing demand for domestically produced content in the local language.

- Another opportunity to addressing the dominance of Russia-produced news and information and disinformation in Central Asia may be for USAID to partner in promoting free licenses and translation (into local languages) of high-quality western

media sources—that could include, for example, AP, that local media could reference and/or rebroadcast. One of the reasons local outlets rebroadcast Russian-produced media in Central Asia is because it is free and in a language that they speak.

Attachments:

Tab 1 - ~~(SBU)~~ Full Summary of USAID Programming to Counter Disinformation in Central Asia
Tab 2 - Front Page Article of Pro-Russia Newspaper, *Delo Nomer*, Accusing U.S. Personnel of Involvement in the COVID-19 Outbreak ("The Americans Knew Everything..."

Drafter: Asia/SCAA: Kyle Farrell [redacted]
Approved: Asia/A-AA: KFreeman Clear 2/4/22

Bureau Level Clearances	**Clearance Status**	**Date**
ASIA/DAA: AKaur	Clear	1/28/22
ASIA/SCAA: JGilpin	Clear	1/28/2022
DDI/DRG/CSM: JMachleder	Clear	1/28/2022
ASIA/TS/DGPS: NGoodrich	Clear	1/28/2022
LPA: DRayburn	Clear	2/9/2022
ES: EJones	Clear	2/4/22
ES: KWilliams	Clear	2/11/22
ES: EBakely	clear	2/7/22
ES: ECarr	clear	2/11/2022
CoS: GMaltz	clear	2/14/2022

Tab 1: ~~(SBU)~~ Full Summary of USAID Programming to Counter Disinformation in Central Asia

Kazakhstan

The USAID/Central Asia Regional Mission is implementing the multi-country Central Asia Media Program (MediaCAMP), which is designed to develop a more balanced information environment and increase openness among youth and adults for differing ideas, opinions, and perspectives as a way to stimulate civic participation. The activity addresses challenges in the Central Asia media landscape by strengthening journalistic professionalism, increasing media coverage in local languages, improving media literacy of the population to become critical consumers of information, advocating for an improved legal-regulatory environment for media, and improving financial sustainability of media outlets. The five-year, $15 million program is implemented by Internews and runs from October 1, 2018, through September 30, 2023.

MediaCAMP provides financial and technical assistance to local independent media and content producers to produce high-quality, engaging local content that involves innovative formats, promotes inclusion, and encourages collaboration. This content, produced in Kazakh and Russian languages, serves as a counterbalance to the spread of fake news, rumors, and disinformation, as well as the trend of entertainment and clickbait in the media.

Pending FY 2022 funding (start date October 1, 2023); the USAID/Central Asia Regional Mission plans to design a new, multi-country activity to advance the integrity of the information space, build societal resilience to disinformation, and promote accountability. The activity will conduct media literacy and disinformation awareness public campaigns, incubating new fact-checking organizations. To conform with a changing media landscape, the activity will focus on social media "influencers" and content creators to build youth coalitions and increase their voices. The activity will also build capacity of news organizations and journalists to develop and professionalize investigative and data journalism as well as provide content production grants to produce high-quality media products that stimulate demand for facts and data. Lastly, USAID will continue to strengthen the population's media literacy through curricula development and provide grants for innovative tools and ideas to promote media literacy.

Tajikistan

USAID/Tajikistan buys into the USAID/Central Asia–managed multi-country MediaCAMP activity. Pending FY 2022 funding (in Calendar Year [CY] 2023), the Tajikistan team is planning a new, bilateral five-year media activity that would promote a balanced information environment in Tajikistan by increasing openness among youth and adults to different perspectives, thereby increasing their civic participation. The program would work with partners from media, academia, and civil society to improve content quality and audience engagement across traditional and "new" media platforms; strengthen media outlet financial sustainability and professionalism of journalists, bloggers, and citizen reporters; increase the wider public's media literacy; and strengthen the legal and regulatory enabling environment for media.

Uzbekistan

USAID/Uzbekistan buys into the USAID/Central Asia–managed multi-country MediaCAMP activity. MediaCAMP's activities in Uzbekistan, however, have been constrained by the Government of Uzbekistan's rejection of Internews' application to register its office in Uzbekistan. MediaCAMP provides fellowships and technical assistance to local independent media and content producers to produce high-quality, engaging local content that involves innovative formats, promotes inclusion, and encourages collaboration. This content, produced in Uzbek and Russian languages, serves as a counterbalance to the spread of fake news, rumors, and disinformation, as well as the trend of entertainment and clickbait in the media. More and more, the content produced under this activity has resulted in tangible impact, with reported issues being resolved due to the quality of coverage that leads to better audience reach and engagement, despite challenges in the operating environment. Resources permitting, USAID/Uzbekistan plans to continue supporting media activities through bilateral programming after the completion of MediaCAMP.

In addition to MediaCAMP, USAID's Legal Reform Program subgrantee NGO Center for the Development of Modern Journalism in Uzbekistan has assisted journalists and bloggers in improving the quality of journalism in Uzbekistan by identifying problem areas, providing training, and creating high-quality content that meets the highest standards of truthfulness and objectivity. In Uzbekistan, media and journalist activities are regulated by 17 laws that target freedom of speech. Critical support is needed to increase journalists' and bloggers' awareness on ongoing legal reforms and media law. Under this program that has been operating since 2020, USAID plans to conduct training of trainers (ToT) for local/regional trainers in the field of media law, who will provide information sessions on media law throughout the country. In addition, the program provides vital free legal aid to journalists, bloggers, and media workers who face pressure imposed by officials from all levels of government and who are in desperate need for specialized legal assistance to address those issues.

Turkmenistan

MediaCAMP does not have programs in Turkmenistan, given the Government's stance on independent media.

Kyrgyz Republic

In the Kyrgyz Republic, USAID's Media-K activity supports independent media to expand their market share and strengthen financial sustainability, as well as supporting the local production of innovative fact-based content and strengthening the integrity of the local information ecosystem. In particular, USAID has supported local media and civil-society organizations to better identify and combat domestic and imported disinformation, including fact-checking organizations such as Factcheck.kg, and fact-checking initiatives, such as MediaBlockPost. USAID has trained a cohort of cyber activists composed of journalists from multiple newsrooms to monitor social media for unauthentic and/or coordinated behavior, compile lists of suspicious accounts, and report them to social networks. Hundreds of troll accounts have been deactivated because of their diligent efforts. USAID also provides grant and expert support to a local Anti-Trolling Investigative Group to investigate troll farms and other coordinated disinformation activities by local and foreign malign actors. In the run-up to recent parliamentary elections, USAID specifically addressed disinformation through an election-related media literacy campaign, including supporting related investigative reporting. Finally, USAID

supports journalists and media organizations to strengthen their cyber security and cyber hygiene to prevent attacks, while also maintaining an emergency fund for psychosocial support, legal assistance, replacing seized/stolen equipment, etc., to support those who have already suffered violence or State-sponsored attacks.

In 2022, USAID will launch a new media support activity in the Kyrygz Republic, which will include a more sustained and sophisticated effort to monitor, analyze, and expose malign influences on and disinformation in the media. The activity will develop and expand the institutional capacity among local actors with the objective to develop local research capacity and support appropriate, data-driven interventions by local media and civil-society actors. The activity aims to provide: support for research methods for data and narrative analysis of disinformation; media monitoring research on disinformation on different platforms (broadcast, online, mobile); newsroom education, and awareness on disinformation narratives; exchanges with regional and/or global anti-disinformation practitioners; fact checking and investigative reporting on disinformation; and support for local troll-awareness and troll-busting initiatives or platforms. Finally, the activity will focus on developing local, Kyrgyz-language outlets and content to reduce the market share and impact of Russia-financed, Russia-language content.

Tab 2 - Front Page Article of Pro-Russia Newspaper, *Delo Nomer*, Accusing U.S. Personnel of Involvement in the COVID Outbreak ("*The Americans Knew Everything…*")



Посольство США в Бишкеке предусмотрительно провело массовую эвакуацию своих сотрудников - из республики выехал 31 американский дипломат. Среди них - шесть сотрудников ЦРУ, работающих в посольской резидентуре под дипломатическим прикрытием.

АМЕРИКАНЦЫ ЗНАЛИ ВСЁ...

Никто в Кыргызстане, кроме них, не ждал, что страну накроет мощная волна смертельных болезней.

С 19 по 24 марта КР покинули:

1. Дастин Рив Бикаль, сотрудник политико-экономического отдела посольства США в КР (сотрудник ЦРУ); 2. Дирек Тимоти Гер, сотрудник отдела политико-региональных отношений (ЦРУ); 3. Колин Мэллой Краш, сотрудник политико-экономического отдела (ЦРУ); 4. Паузрс Джон Кеевин, эксперт отдела политико-региональных отношений; 5. Кори Элизабет Бикаль, сотрудник отдела по связям с общественностью; 6. Райан Скотт Бартлетт, сотрудник отдела региональной безопасности; 7. Джон Райан Монро, директор отдела программы и тренинга Корпуса мира США в КР; 8. Нелли Фредерика Гибсон Кейси, заместитель начальника отдела по социальным вопросам; 9. Дэрил Томас Джолли, ассистент военного атташе; 10. Алдер Берри Бартлетт, программный офицер ЮСАИД; 11. Эдриен Марта Стоун, сотрудник административно-технического отдела ЮСАИД; 12. Стивен Мэтью Райдер, начальник отдела технического обслуживания; 13. Николь Оуэнс, заместитель ассистента заместителя главы дипмиссии; 14. Кирстен Айпса Селинджер, начальник отдела по связям с общественностью; 15. Майка Монро Сэнидж, сотрудник политико-экономического отдела; 16. Марла Джудит Гилпман, вице-консул; 17. Дилан Фредерик Дегнан, ассистент начальника отдела региональной безопасности; 18. Гэри Бейтс Линдин, директор миссии ЮСАИД в КР; 19. Мэтью Френсис Протасио, зам. программного офицера миссии ЮСАИД.

С 20 апреля по настоящее время из КР выехали:

20. Бауэр Нозль, директор программы "Демократическое управление" ЮСАИД; 21. Хоплер Николь, советник по вопросам культуры; 22. Томас Брукс Селинджер, глава политико-экономического отдела (ЦРУ); 23. Крис Скотт Кеннер, эксперт отдела политико-региональных отношений (ЦРУ); 24. Эвели Льюис Мортимер, начальник отдела - атташе по делам сухопутных войск США; 25. Шена Коплин Крам, сотрудник отдела по связям с общественностью; 26. Эндрю Бейтс Линдин, практикант отдела по связям с общественностью; 27. Лина Николайчук, делопроизводитель отдела региональной безопасности; 28. Кира Брук Макмиллан, секретарь отдела кадров; 29. Нейтанс Эндж, второй секретарь, командир морской пехоты США; 30. Эндрю Дэмрон Макбрайт Ватсон, официальный представитель ЦРУ США в КР; 31. Джеми Робертс Ватсон, сотрудник отдела политико-региональных отношений.

Из 69 дипломатов посольства США в КР на территории Кыргызстана остаются 38.

Явно для наблюдения за ситуацией остались пять американских разведчиков из числа известных сотрудников посольской резидентуры. Это:

1. Дональд Лу, посол США в КР; 2. Брайан Стиммлер, заместитель посла; 3. Джеймс Роб Макмиллан, эксперт отдела политико-региональных отношений; 4. Майкл Генри Бейрд, военный атташе; 5. Донг-Су Каохуу, эксперт политико-экономического и коммерческого отделов.

Массовой эвакуацией дипломатов посольство США не ограничилось. В течение трёх дней - 17-19 марта - из кыргызской глубинки были отозваны 77 волонтёров Корпуса мира США. В Бишкеке их разместили в отелях "Дамас" и "Жаннат". Затем авиарейсами Бишкек - Москва и Бишкек - Стамбул вывезли из Кыргызстана и отправили в США.

Последние волонтёры покинули нашу республику 21 марта.

Столь же массово, насколько известно, американские дипломаты эвакуировались из соседнего Казахстана.

После чего на города Бишкек, Алматы, Нур-Султан обрушилась эпидемия коронавируса и атипичной пневмонии - ужасающая по своим масштабам!

Поспешность, с которой американцы эвакуировали своих граждан из Кыргызстана, и чёткая организованность при этом не оставляют сомнений в их причастности к пандемии.

Ежедневно кыргызстанцы умирают от коронавируса и пневмонии.

Против нас и нашей страны ведётся бактериологическая война...

Или у кого-то есть ещё сомнения в этом?

INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **February 4, 2022**

From: **Karen Freeman, A-AA/ASIA**

Subject: Information Manipulation in Nepal and USAID Programmatic Response Options

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- You are receiving this information memo because USAID/Nepal assesses that due to the intense politicized nature of the anti-MCC sentiments, current USAID engagement on the MCC Compact ratification issue may risk drawing USAID into the mire of dis/misinformation surrounding the Compact and jeopardize the Agency's long standing relationship with the Nepali people.
- Non-ratification of the Compact would hurt Nepal's economic growth and international standing. It also has the potential to impact the broader development relationship with the Government of Nepal, which would require more targeted USAID engagement efforts in the future.

BACKGROUND:

Information Manipulation in Nepal: Information manipulation in Nepal is pervasive and has affected Nepal's domestic and foreign policies. Embassy Kathmandu has worked for several years to combat dis/misinformation related to the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact. USAID/Nepal staff and programs have largely escaped being the target of dis/misinformation due to USAID's historic relationship with Nepal and substantial development successes. However, in early January 2022, USAID was drawn into sensationalized news stories due to the heightened political sensitivities surrounding the MCC Compact. Mission Kathmandu—with MCC leadership in Washington, D.C., and its resident office in Kathmandu—is seeking to combat the damages of People's Republic of China (PRC)-led disinformation through outreach with key Nepali government leaders, influencers, and press.

Dis/Misinformation in Nepal and the IPS: In Nepal, the IPS has been distrusted since its inception. Certain Nepali stakeholders, influencers, and the public have misconstrued the IPS as a military and PRC-containment strategy, alleging it contravenes Nepal's stated "non-alignment" foreign policy. Some local journalists and media outlets sympathetic to the PRC have propagated this misinformation. Dis/Misinformation surrounding the IPS intensified in June 2019, when the Department of Defense released its IPS Report, which included language about strengthening the U.S. defense relationship with Nepal. Critics of the IPS seized on this language alleging a revelation of intent by the United States to align Nepal militarily against the PRC. The U.S. Embassy launched a concerted media and public relations effort to dispel this

disinformation and has continued to engage with the Government of Nepal (GON), civil society, and media stakeholders to clarify misconceptions.

Dis/Misinformation in Nepal and MCC: The MCC Compact, signed in September 2017, has become the target of disinformation, propagated by those seeking to damage the U.S.-Nepal bilateral relationship. Alongside the IPS, online disinformation efforts have connected the MCC Compact to alleged U.S. military intentions. Anti-MCC sentiments and dis/misinformation about MCC's purpose in Nepal have festered on social media, gaining prominence as politicians and media actors repeat or amplify incorrect information.

The planned $500 million MCC Compact, on top of which the GON has pledged to commit an additional $130 million—the largest planned host-government up-front contribution of any partner government in the history of the MCC—aims to increase the availability and reliability of electricity, facilitate cross-border electricity trade between Nepal and India, and maintain road quality. MCC requires that Nepal's parliament ratify the Compact; however this requirement for legislative approval of Compacts creates a scenario wherein the act of ratification may become politicized. This has occurred in Nepal, where parliamentarians have leveraged their support and potential vote on the Compact for political gain. After four years, the Compact now stands on the brink of either being ratified by parliament, suspended, or terminated. Suspending or terminating the Compact may be seen as a strategic victory for the PRC and others seeking to weaken U.S. partnerships in the region, and would validate the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. [Note: Sri Lanka's Compact, while officially discontinued due to lack of partner-country engagement in December 2020, faced a similar dis/misinformation environment as Nepal, with the Compact becoming politicized.]

The PRC actively campaigns against the MCC through information manipulation, lobbying by the Chinese Ambassador to Nepali leaders, media interviews by PRC-supported professors, op-eds in the locally popular *Global Times*, as well as reportedly influencing journalists. PRC efforts have contributed to a narrative that insinuates the Compact threatens Nepali sovereignty.

January 2022 - Recent high-level engagements inch the MCC Compact toward ratification: Through high-level political meetings and engagements, the Embassy has and continues to address disinformation publicly and privately surrounding the MCC Compact. Per a January 21, 2022, cable (MRN: 22 KATHMANDU 64) "During separate January 19 and 20 calls with MCC Acting Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mahmoud Bah, both Prime Minister (PM) Sher Bahadur Deuba and Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Center (CPN-MC) Chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) again promised to put the MCC Compact on Parliament's agenda by the end of January, with a ratification vote in the following weeks." However, despite recent positive momentum, internal politicking continues to affect any vote on ratification, as PM Deuba remains concerned his party/coalition does not have enough votes to pass the Compact. Recent criticism from other like-minded donors, though, appears to have rattled Prachanda. As the aforementioned cable reports, during a meeting of Nepal's Foreign Minister (FM) Narayan Khadka with Germany's Ambassador to Nepal Thomas Prinz around January 13, Prinz

responded to Khadka's request for development assistance by saying, "When you refuse a $500 million grant on the table, it becomes difficult for us to convince our government in Berlin for more funding." Khadka noted to Embassy officials that he related this conversation to Prachanda. Although Parliament was scheduled to convene on January 30, 2022, to take up the MCC Compact, the session was delayed due to COVID-19. Parliament will now reconvene on February 9, 2022, though Embassy Kathmandu is skeptical that MCC will be debated as it is not currently on the session agenda.

Chinese pressure against MCC continues: PRC's Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi continues to meet with senior Nepali officials to lobby against ratification, with pressure against the Compact becoming increasingly overt in recent weeks. Regarding PRC politicking, per cable reporting (MRN: 22 KATHMANDU 64) PM Deuba instructed his Foreign Ministry to summon Ambassador Hou to reprimand her for her undiplomatic interference on U.S.-Nepal bilateral issues like MCC. FM Khadka had conveyed to Post officials that he will meet Ambassador Hou after his COVID-19 isolation ends. Post has attempted to contact FM Khadka to verify whether the meeting took place, but has not yet received a response. U.S. Ambassador to Nepal Randy Berry continues to raise meddling by the PRC to senior GON officials, and the Embassy has also addressed PRC interference with media stakeholders.

Dis/Misinformation attempts regarding USAID/Nepal: On January 8, 2022, during an advocacy event to make a new road more accessible for people with disabilities, a USAID implementing partner used the Agency's logo on a banner. The development of this segment of road is funded by the PRC, and a photo of the banner with USAID's logo surfaced on social media and in the *Kathmandu Post* (Tab 5). A flurry of tweets trended on social media, connecting the protest to MCC and questioning USAID's role in the internal matters of Nepal.

USAID/Nepal swiftly responded with a clarification social media post, which was retweeted by the U.S. Embassy in Nepal's official account (Tab 4). USAID/Nepal also reached out to the implementing partner to ensure proper usage of the USAID logo. As a result of this quick action, the social media uproar quieted down.

USAID/Nepal programs that work to counter information manipulation: USAID/Nepal's activities work to help strengthen Nepal's democratic processes and greater decentralization of authority, in line with Nepal's 2017 transition to Federalism. Through promoting transparency, accountability, and greater civic engagement across its programming, the Mission helps combat information manipulation through creating greater access to information and the ability to digest it appropriately. USAID activities have helped create greater access to information, empowered civil society stakeholders to manage information appropriately and identify misinformation outlets, and improved capacity of GON and local officials to help dispel and stop the spread of misinformation. Because of USAID's support, The Electoral Commission of Nepal is now executing a strategy to combat misinformation and cyber threats in preparation for upcoming general elections. And, citizens have increased their reporting of sources of fake news, and journalists are better prepared to investigate and report on issues related to disinformation in Nepal. Specific activities and results include;

- **Policy Dialogue (Niti Sambad):** USAID's Niti Sambad activity works with stakeholders across government and civil society to promote proper use of information and to stop the spread of misinformation. Niti Sambad has engaged with 133 Parliamentarians—of which 45 were women—to run workshops on disinformation and cybersecurity and has also led roundtables with provincial assembly members on identifying and countering misinformation. The activity has also supported the Electoral Commission of Nepal to conduct virtual orientations on the impact of misinformation and provided support to strengthen cyber security and awareness to prevent external actors from compromising electoral data. Niti Sambad has also implemented training sessions for Nepali youth leaders on how to combat the COVID-19 info-demic. Within weeks, these youth leaders reported 50 instances of fake news to the Press Council of Nepal out of which the Council suspended 7 online news portals.
- **Civil Society: Mutual Accountability Project (CS:MAP):** USAID's CS:MAP activity prepared a COVID-19 reporting guideline and shared it with journalists and media organizations to avoid misinformation and disinformation in their work related to COVID-19. The CS:MAP activity also provided an orientation to youth leaders of Local Discussion Action Groups (LDAGs) and to Community Reporters on COVID-19 and related issues including the importance of sharing accurate information. CS:MAP supported the Federation of Nepali Journalists by providing legal analysis of local laws. This helped inform their networks of reporters that they were legally and safely able to share media that is critical of PRC engagement in Nepal.

NEXT STEPS:

- Post recommends that USAID not engage in any MCC messaging related to Nepal that can become public, and that USAID/Washington avoid external engagement specific to Nepal's MCC Compact at this time. MCC leadership and the Department of State's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs continue to engage with senior GON officials regarding ratification of the Compact and deadlines for actions. As the situation evolves, in coordination with interagency colleagues and Embassy Kathmandu, we may revisit this position. [Note: Given the nuanced nature of politics in Nepal, the environment of misinformation and anti-MCC rhetoric, and the lengthy discourse regarding the Compact, any public engagement from USAID at this time may serve as fodder for those peddling anti-U.S. propaganda rather than meaningfully advancing the Compact toward ratification. It also may cause anti-MCC sentiments to shift or expand focus and target USAID as a foreign aid organization.]
- USAID/Nepal will continue to work closely with Embassy Kathmandu's Public Affairs Section colleagues to develop joint responses as mis/disinformation efforts continue, and proactively develop a joint longer-term strategy.
- USAID/Nepal will also continue to engage with DDI's Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Center to explore how its tools and central mechanisms can further support Mission efforts to address mis/dis/malinformation broadly in the information ecosystem of Nepal.

Attachments:

Tab 1 - Info Memo for Administrator Power on Nepal MCC (#1 - 12/17/21)
Tab 2 - MRN: 22 KATHMANDU 64 - Nepal: MCC Inches Towards Ratification Vote
Tab 3 - MRN: 21 KATHMANDU 1202 - MCC and RSO Nepal - Bridging the Gaps in Power Grid Security
Tab 4 - January 2022 - USAID Logo and disinformation
Tab 5 - Kathmandu Post: Article on USAID logo and civic march
Tab 6 - Kathmandu Post: MCC CEO Mahmoud Bah Interview with Kathmandu Post

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Drafter: Asia/SCA:Sanjay Iyer:[redacted]
Approved: Asia/A-AA: KFreeman clear 2/4/2022

Bureau Level Clearances	**Clearance Status**	**Date**
ASIA/DAA: AKaur	Clear	2/3/2022
ASIA/SCA: TDell	Clear	2/2/2022
ASIA/TS: NGoodrich	Clear	1/27/2022
ASIA/TS: KOwusu-Boakye	Clear	1/27/2022
DDI/A-AA: KFickenscher	Clear w/edits	1/28/2022
DDI/DAA: JWalsh	Clear	1/27/2022
DDI/EMD: MSarwar	Clear	1/27/2022
DDI/DRG/DRI: DParzik	Info	1/27/2022
DDI/DRG/DRI: MKaran	Clear w/edits	1/27/2022
DDI/DRG/PCI: AONeill	Clear	1/27/2022
LPA/PE: SLajaunie	Info	2/8/2022
LPA: DRayburn	Clear	2/9/2022
USAID/Nepal: SKeyvanshad	Clear	2/2/2022
USAID/Sri Lanka	Info	1/28/2022
DOS/Nepal Desk: CDennison	Clear	1/27/2022
MCC/Nepal Program Officer: SAli	Clear	1/28/2022
ES: EJones	Clear	2/4/2022
ES: KWilliams	Clear	2/11/2022
ES: EBakely	clear	2/7/2022
ES: ECarr	clear	2/11/2022
ES: JBernton	Clear	2/11/2022
CoS: GMaltz	Clear	2/14/2022

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INFORMATION MEMO FOR ADMINISTRATOR POWER

Date: **December 17, 2021**

From: **Karen Freeman, Acting Assistant Administrator for Asia (A-AA/Asia)**

Subject: Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact in Nepal to Potentially Go to Parliamentary Vote on Ratification

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Prime Minister (PM) Sher Bahadur Deuba, leader of the ruling parliamentary coalition and head of Nepal's Congress Party, has promised to bring the MCC Compact to a parliamentary vote on ratification during the December 2021 winter session of parliament. [Note: Per cable reporting, during a December 20 meeting with U.S. Ambassador Randy Berry, PM Deuba said the earliest the MCC Compact will be submitted on the parliamentary agenda for ratification would be December 29.]
- While USAID's activities in Nepal are not part of the MCC Compact, over the years USAID has helped develop the foundation for the compact's areas of focus. The failure to ratify the Compact slows Nepal's ability to grow its hydropower sector and will affect Nepal's economic growth. The Government of Nepal (GON) signed in 2017 and committed to contributing $130 million in additional funding toward support of the compact.
- Nepal's ratification of the Compact in the near future would be a big step forward in the U.S.-Nepal development relationship. If ratification fails, the Compact will likely be suspended or terminated. A suspended or terminated Compact would be a victory for those fueling disinformation around USG goals in the region, similar to the discontinuation of the Sri Lanka MCC compact.

BACKGROUND:

The U.S.-Nepal development relationship spans more than 70 years, and USAID has contributed to some of Nepal's most dramatic and remarkable development successes. USAID's Mission in Nepal works on a variety of development issues, from nutrition, health, and food-security programs, to strengthening natural resources management and disaster risk reduction and reconstruction activities. The timely assistance that USAID provided to the GON during its second COVID-19 wave in May-June 2021 has solidified relations between the USG and the GON. USAID's activities are a point of strength in U.S.-Nepali relations, especially in light of contentious issues such as the MCC Compact and misinformation spread about it.

Related to the scope of the MCC Compact, USAID's now completed Nepal Hydropower Development Project helped establish the Electricity Regulatory Commission (ERC) and mobilized more than $1.7 billion in new investment. Our new flagship energy activity, Urja Nepal, builds on these successes, supporting the ERC and advancing Nepal's energy potential.

Recent shifts in Nepal's parliament have created a more conducive environment for ratification, but infighting between different factions continues to stymie progress. Per a

statement from MCC on October 29, 2021, "The delays to ratification jeopardize the critical and timely support this $500 million grant would provide to help more than 23 million Nepalis access reliable energy and safer roads. The decision whether to move forward with the compact now rests with Nepal."

Recent movements towards ratification: Historically ambivalent about the Compact, Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka "Prachanda," a former PM and leader of Nepal's communist-maoist party and key coalition member, in recent months has indicated his willingness to support ratification of the Compact. This positive movement follows months of intensive engagements and a series of visits to Nepal by MCC Vice President Fatema Sumar, Department of State Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia (SCA) Donald Lu, and SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Kelly Keiderling, all of whom engaged senior Government of Nepal (GON) officials to help advance ratification. Prime Minister Deuba and his coalition partner have committed to ratifying the compact by February 2022. The MCC plans to brief its Board on its plans to set a consequential deadline during the December 14 board meeting. [*Note from MCC: The communication of any MCC-established deadline is sensitive and should not be shared without prior consultation with MCC.*]

Reelection of PM Deuba as Nepali Congress President: The 14th general convention of the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) party, which took place December 10 - 12, reelected current party president PM Sher Bahadur Deuba. Deuba's reelection will give him some political momentum and confidence as Parliament reconvened on December 14, with ratification of the MCC Compact potentially on the agenda for Nepal's winter session of parliament. Post sees a window of a few months during which it can advocate for key bilateral priorities including MCC ratification, refugee issues, approval of the Lincoln School memorandum of understanding (MOU), and increased defense cooperation.

Chinese pressure against MCC ratification continues (Tab 2 and Tab 3): Per Nepali media outlet *Nagarik*, after learning that the GON is preparing to bring to vote the MCC Compact in parliament for ratification, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has pressured all political parties not to take any further action on the matter in the immediate term. As the *Nagarik* front page story reports, a source claims that a PRC government official has put pressure on all the major parties of Nepal not to table MCC in the parliament. After the government convened the parliamentary session, the PRC official telephoned the leaders of all parties in Nepal, reminding them how close and historic Nepal-PRC relations have been, and urged them to reconsider the MCC Compact, the source said. Per a December 20 cable (MRN 21 KATHMANDU 1204), PM Deuba noted to U.S. Ambassador Randy Berry that he reacted angrily during a recent meeting when PRC Ambassador Hou Yanqi specifically pressured him not to ratify MCC. As the cable reports, 'While the PRC has previously sponsored a widespread press and social media disinformation campaign against the Compact, Hou's brazen and direct lobbying against the project marks a new step for the PRC in Nepal. Hou's direct pressure campaign on the PM and other parties underscores the PRC's willingness to intervene in internal politics of Nepal.' The Embassy plans to protest these actions with Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka on December 21.





Tab 5 - Kathmandu Post: Article on USAID logo and civic march

USAID logo seen in civic march on Chinese-implemented Ring Road project. Nepalis see the geopolitical side of it

Aid agency denies its association in the campaign organised to demand that the Koteshwar-Kalanki section be made friendly for the disabled and pedestrians.



Dinesh Regmi/TKP

Shuvam Dhungana
Published at : January 9, 2022
Updated at : January 9, 2022 23:49
Kathmandu

As if the hullabaloo over the Millenium Challenge Corporation is not enough, the United States in Nepal has found itself embroiled in yet another controversy.

The USAID, a United States agency that administers foreign aid and assistance to various countries, on Saturday scrambled to dissociate itself from a civic campaign organized to demand that the 8.2 km Kalanki-Maharajgunj section of the Ring Road be made friendly for disabled persons, cyclists and pedestrians.

On Saturday afternoon, a group of people including cyclists, environmentalists, people with disabilities and artists organised what they called a "civic concern march."

A banner carried by the campaigners had the logo of USAID.

Nepalis on Twitter were quick to see a geopolitical connotation in the US "involvement" in the Ring Road widening project undertaken by China.

"If you are invited to a program, you should first ascertain who has funded it otherwise you might get into trouble," wrote Rameshore Khanal, a former finance secretary, on Twitter.

Replying to Khanal's tweet, journalist Kanak Mani Dixit wrote, "If the invitation is for a good cause then we should participate without asking anyone. Even if it is later learnt that someone has funded the cause, we should not be afraid, nor regret, just look at the cause."

And replying in the thread, another journalist Rudra Pangeni questioned, "What to do when they need funds to even organize a rally [march] demanding sidewalks?"



Deepak KC/TKP

The USAID then posted a message on Twitter denying its involvement in the campaign.

“USAID/Nepal supports its local partner PHASE Nepal to empower individuals with disabilities to live independently and with dignity. We commend their work on disability inclusion across the country,” the American aid agency tweeted. “USAID/Nepal did not in any way initiate the organization of a civil protest in Kathmandu today. We are aware that USAID's logo was inappropriately used in the banners for this event and we are looking into the matter closely.”

PHASE Nepal is a non-governmental, non-profit and non-political and non-religious organization working in nine remotest districts of Nepal such as Humla, Mugu, Bajura to name a few, according to the organization's website.

Communications officer Meetum Bantawa Rai of PHASE Nepal refused to speak on the issue. “I can’t speak on this regard, we will inform later,” she told the Post.



Deepak KC/TKP

Meanwhile, the march organizers 'Ringroad civic concern' issued a statement on Sunday saying their attention was drawn towards 'some mistakes made by one of the participant organizations.' The statement said they express sadness over the use of the USAID logo on one of the banners used and denied having received any kind of financial, technical or other assistance from USAID. The organizers' rebuttal statement however does not include PHASE Nepal, the organization that had used the USAID logo, in the march.

Many in Nepal believe that the US-China rivalry oftentimes plays out in Nepal, and they see the MCC, under which Nepal is supposed to receive $500 million in grants, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under which China has pledged infrastructure projects, as the two economic giants' tools to expand their influences.

While the MCC has failed to get through Parliament in the wake of deep divisions among politicians and communities, no substantial progress has been made in Nepal under the BRI.

American officials in the past have used some oblique phrases to suggest any development initiatives from China in Nepal should be in "Nepal's interest rather than China's."



Deepak KC/TKP

The MCC has become a controversial topic in Nepal as some say it has some clauses that undermine Nepal's sovereignty. The United States has denied—through press statements and public service announcements. In September, Nepal's Finance Ministry even wrote to the MCC headquarters outlining some concerns raised in the public sphere regarding the American grant. The MCC headquarters provided a point-wise rebuttal. Immediately after, MCC deputy vice president Fatema J Sumar visited Nepal and held a series of meetings with Nepali political leadership.

While the Chinese have made open statements that they have no objections to Nepal receiving the MCC grants, some reports claim the north has invested in discrediting the American grant programme.

Saturday's episode involving USAID comes amid Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's push to get the MCC through Parliament. In this regard, Deuba sought the support of KP Sharma Oli, the chair of the CPN-UML that has been obstructing the House proceedings for months.

Saturday's march started from Narayan Gopal Chowk, a stone's throw from the US embassy in Maharajgunj, and ended at the nearby Sankha Park, where a function was organized which involved poetry recitation, live painting to create awareness, and live music, among other activities.



Deepak KC/TKP

On December 25, the group had prepared a joint memorandum of demands requesting the government and stakeholders to make the 8.2 km road section, which is being widened, friendly for all users besides vehicles. Ever since it became operational, the road section has earned notoriety for being dangerous for pedestrians—some even calling the stretch a death trap.

The construction of an eight-lane road began in the year 2013.

The Chinese government handed over the eight-lane Koteshwar-Kalanki section of the Ring Road to the government in January 2019. The road section was completed in five years at the cost of Rs5.13 billion.

Amid the back-and-forth on social media over the use of the USAID banner in the campaign, some users were quick to show their humorous side.

“I demand that the Ring Road intersection (chok) where the protest took place with the USAID banner be named ‘geopolitics chok’,” wrote a Twitter user with the handle @KTmite.

Anup Ojha contributed reporting.

Tab 6 - Kathmandu Post: MCC CEO Mahmoud Bah Interview with Kathmandu Post

‘We cannot keep the MCC grant on hold indefinitely’

Mahmoud Bah, acting chief executive officer at MCC, says delays in ratification put Millennium Challenge Corporation compact in a position where the US can no longer wait.



‘The agency is prohibited by US law from funding any kind of military assistance or training.’ Photo via mcc.gov

Jagdishor Panday
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Kathmandu

The United States cannot keep the $500 million grant assistance under the Millenium Challenge Corporation on hold indefinitely, a top MCC official has said.

In an email interview with the Post and its sister paper Kantipur, Mahmoud Bah, acting chief executive officer at the MCC, said that accepting the $500 million dollar grant from MCC and the American people “is Nepal’s choice and only Nepal’s choice.”

The American grant, signed between the governments of Nepal and the United States in September 2017, has become a major divisive force in Nepal. The MCC-Nepal Compact has been in Parliament since July 2019 awaiting approval.

The grant is to be used for building electricity transmission lines and improving road projects. While Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's party, the Nepali Congress, appears keen on endorsing the grant through Parliament, his coalition partners, particularly the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and the CPN (Unified Socialist) are against passing it "in its existing form". The main opposition CPN-UML, which was ready for MCC's parliamentary approval when it was in power, has changed its tune and maintains that it has not made any position on the US grant.

In 2017 also, when the grant was signed, Deuba was leading the government backed by the Maoist Centre.

"Since 2017, MCC has remained committed to helping the people of Nepal while waiting for Parliament to fulfil the Nepali government's requirement for international agreements—parliamentary ratification," said Bah. "Every major political party in Nepal, and successive governments since 2012, have sought the MCC compact. Additionally, each of these governments, and its political leaders, have supported the ratification of the MCC-Nepal Compact in its original form."

MCC emerged as a politically divisive force when the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), formed after the merger between the UML and the Maoist Centre), was in power. Amid a raging infighting in the party, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, then co-chair of the party, weaponised the American grant against the other chair KP Sharma Oli. Some of the UML leaders, including Bhim Rawal and Jhala Nath Khanal, too stood against the grant's parliamentary approval.

The NCP, however, was invalidated by the Supreme Court on March 7 last year. Dahal got his old party, the Maoist Centre, back. A group within the UML split in August last year to form the CPN (Unified Socialist).

When the Deuba government was formed on July 13 last year, there were expectations it would move the MCC in Parliament for its endorsement. In September last year, the Finance Ministry even wrote to the MCC headquarters detailing the concerns surrounding the MCC in Nepal. The MCC headquarters provided pointwise clarification just ahead of the visit of one of the senior officials, Fatema Z Sumar, to Kathmandu. She held meetings with Nepali leaders from across the political spectrum.

The American grant, however, continues to remain stuck in Parliament.

Bah said the US assistance has been the target of a sophisticated and malicious misinformation and disinformation campaign to discredit MCC and the government of Nepal in order to prevent the MCC-Nepal Compact from progressing and helping improve the lives of millions of Nepalis.

"You will notice that each time the government of Nepal seems poised to move forward towards ratifying the MCC compact, there is a sudden increase in false and misleading statements about MCC, especially on social media and YouTube," said Bah. "It is even more disheartening when some of Nepal's political leaders have perpetuated these misleading statements, which only hurts the people of Nepal."



Photo via mcc.gov

The MCC-Nepal agreement has become one of the most politically debated topics in Nepal. Why is the United States providing $500 in grant to Nepal?

To help build a brighter future for the people of Nepal. Since Nepal requested consideration and MCC selected Nepal as eligible for a smaller threshold grant in 2011, the government of Nepal has demonstrated its commitment to democratic governance, investing in its people, and economic freedom. It is this commitment that led MCC's Board of Directors, chaired by the Secretary of State, to select Nepal as eligible for a larger compact grant in December 2014.

The government of Nepal then led the development of this compact programme, teaming with MCC's technical experts to conduct joint analysis and create a programme that would benefit the people of Nepal. A cornerstone of MCC's grant programmes around the world is a partner country's ownership of the development and construction processes. The government of Nepal has been in the driver's seat from the very beginning. It has led in all phases of the compact's development process—approving every aspect of the MCC-Nepal Compact.

In September 2017, the governments of Nepal and the United States formally signed the $500 million-dollar MCC-Nepal Compact agreement—a partnership that will help Nepal's economy grow, advance stability, create jobs, support regional security, and reduce poverty for nearly 23 million Nepalis. Through 300km of new, high-voltage power lines and the upgrade and improved maintenance of Nepal's roads, this compact will increase the availability and reliability of electricity and make travel and transportation in Nepal less costly, safer, and more sustainable. More efficient clean energy transmission and improved road infrastructure will also support Nepal's own needs to address climate change and the ambitious, admirable commitments the government made in Glasgow. Because of its strong belief in the value of its partnership with MCC, the Government of Nepal committed an additional $130 million dollars for the compact's projects—the largest up-front contribution by a partner country in MCC's history.

Since 2017, MCC has remained committed to helping the people of Nepal while waiting for Parliament to fulfil the Nepali government's requirement for international agreements—parliamentary ratification. Every major political party in Nepal, and successive governments since 2012, have sought the MCC compact. Additionally, each of these governments, and its political leaders, have supported the ratification of the MCC-Nepal Compact in its original form.

What correspondence has MCC received from the government of Nepal? Has the Nepal government committed to ratifying the compact within a certain timeframe?

On September 3, 2021, MCC received a letter from the government of Nepal requesting clarification on several debated topics related to the compact. On behalf of the US government, MCC responded to this letter on September 8, 2021 to ensure that Nepal's political leaders and the people of Nepal better understood the MCC-Nepal Compact, our agency, and how our partnership is designed to help reduce poverty and foster economic growth in Nepal.

On September 29, 2021 MCC received a letter co-signed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal [Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) chair], expressing their support for the MCC-Nepal Compact, as well as their commitment to secure the support needed for parliamentary ratification by a specific time.

Since signing the compact in September 2017, MCC and the government of Nepal have been eager to start the construction phase of the compact. However, MCC cannot begin the compact's construction phase until the parliament ratifies the agreement, per the requirements of Nepali law, nor can we keep $500 million dollars in grant assistance on hold indefinitely. This message was conveyed by the US government directly to the Nepali government, and in their September 29, 2021 letter to the MCC Board of Directors, Prime Minister Deuba and former prime minister Dahal agreed there is a sense of urgency and set an internal deadline for the Government of Nepal to move forward on the compact. I am grateful for their collective commitment to the MCC-Nepal Compact and to the people of Nepal.

What was the decision of the recent meeting of the MCC Board of Directors in relation to Nepal Compact?

During its December 2021 meeting, MCC's Board of Directors discussed the status of the Nepal Compact and reiterated its support for the MCC-Nepal partnership to enhance economic prosperity and reduce poverty for the people of Nepal. The Board also discussed the longstanding delays that have persisted across multiple Nepali governments in ratifying the compact, noting the need for the Nepal government to act swiftly if it still desires the $500 million dollar grant.

US officials claim there has been intentional spread of misinformation about MCC in Nepal. Why do you think it is happening?

It is true, MCC has been the target of a sophisticated and malicious misinformation and disinformation campaign to discredit our agency and the Government of Nepal in order to prevent the MCC-Nepal Compact from progressing and helping improve the lives of millions of Nepalis. You will notice that each time the government of Nepal seems poised to move forward towards ratifying the MCC compact, there is a sudden increase in false and misleading statements about MCC, especially on social media and

YouTube. It is even more disheartening when some of Nepal's political leaders have perpetuated these misleading statements, which only hurts the people of Nepal.

Thankfully, many Nepalis are learning more about the actual programme as documented in the grant agreement and the truth about MCC. They have started voicing their support for the brighter future this programme will bring. They know the intentional politicization and misinformation aimed at derailing the progress of this compact jeopardizes valuable resources that are needed to lift up the people in Nepal. More concerning is the influence of outside actors against the interest of the Nepali people who are seeing the daily burden and challenges created by the lack of reliable electricity and high cost of transportation. It is important that the people of Nepal know these malicious attempts to derail this compact have not deterred MCC and the United States from helping our Nepali friends. Nepal is a sovereign country, so it is the people of Nepal, and only the people of Nepal, should decide, not outside actors.

There have been even protests with charges like MCC is linked to a security strategy. How do you respond?

I have proudly worked at MCC in countries around the world for more than a decade, and I can assure you MCC has no relationship to the US military or any military activity. In fact, the agency is prohibited by US law from funding any kind of military assistance or training. Each of Nepal's political party leaders has acknowledged to me that they know this to be true, and that they know MCC has one goal with this compact—to reduce poverty and improve the economic outlook for the people of Nepal. But don't just take my word for it. Please examine the record and history of MCC compacts around the world, including countries that have pursued second compacts.

MCC is part of a holistic US government approach to diplomacy, foreign affairs, and international development. MCC compacts are always focused on two things: reducing poverty and fostering economic growth. More importantly, MCC grants are designed and implemented by partner countries, meaning the MCC-Nepal Compact will be implemented by the Government of Nepal; not MCC. I urge you to please read the compact and understand the program ME and make your independent assessment of the benefit of the programme for the people of Nepal. MCC is a development agency with a strong reputation for transparency and accountability around the world.

What will happen if parliament fails to ratify the compact?

I want to be clear, accepting a $500 million dollar grant from MCC and the American people is Nepal's choice and only Nepal's choice. No other country should decide for Nepal. But these grant funds cannot remain on hold indefinitely. The Nepal government must act swiftly and ratify the compact so we can start with the construction phase of the programmes. Ultimately, MCC's Board of Directors will decide what happens if delays continue.

Some high-level American officials have said the US-Nepal relations will not be affected if Nepal is unable to ratify the compact, but they "will be concerned". What does that mean?

For me, I am worried about how these ratification delays have impacted the millions of Nepali people who just want more reliable electricity for their families, especially during a global pandemic. There is no other form of development grant assistance available at this scale that will positively impact nearly every person in Nepal like the MCC-Nepal Compact.

Based on the conversations I have had with many of Nepal's leaders and the letter from Prime Minister Deuba, I believe right now, in January 2022, there is a path forward to ratify this compact. Additionally, Nepal's business and civic leaders have been vocal about the importance of this compact to help ensure Nepal realises its own economic goals and aspirations. Once the grant programme is ratified, MCC and the Government of Nepal can begin the process to improve roads, expanding energy access, and build the infrastructure needed for Nepal to generate additional resources through trade and energy exports. For more than 70 years, the United States and Nepal have built a friendship based on our shared values, including respect for individual freedoms and the sovereignty of all nations. This friendship will continue regardless of the MCC-Nepal Compact.

The compact document does not mention ratification. However, this has been put forth as a condition. Is ratification an international requirement or a requirement set by Nepal? Can you clarify?

In Nepal, as in all other MCC partner countries, a grant from MCC has the status of an international agreement. This is a critical part of MCC's dedication to transparency in all our grant programmes. Nepal's Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs found the compact would require parliamentary ratification in order to obtain the status of an international agreement.

The MCC-Nepal Compact is not unique. The Government of Nepal has ratified many other international agreements. Furthermore, the government committed to this requirement when signing the compact in 2017 as one of the actions it must take to begin the construction phase of the compact. Many other MCC partner country governments have ratified compact agreements. This includes Mongolia, Morocco, Senegal, Moldova, Tanzania, and Ghana to name a few.

Is MCC willing to wait until Nepal's elections?

Elections are critical for any country, and I understand they are particularly important to the people of Nepal. Unfortunately, continued delays in ratification have put MCC in a position where we can no longer wait. The time has come for the government to take action and decide if it would like to continue its partnership with MCC. We all know that the longer construction projects are delayed, the more expensive they become, and the longer Nepali communities must wait for reliable power and improved road conditions. But I am encouraged by the commitments made by Prime Minister Deuba and former prime minister Dahal. MCC is eager to begin helping the people of Nepal. The only thing preventing projects from moving forward is parliamentary ratification.

Do you have any particular message for the people of Nepal on MCC's behalf?

For close to 75 years, the United States and Nepal have built a bond that extends halfway around the world and into our homes as family and friends. The MCC-Nepal Compact is a continuation of this friendship. Since our partnership began to take shape in 2012, MCC has remained committed to the people of Nepal, and we have remained committed to our agreement with the Nepali government since signing our compact in 2017. We can advance economic growth for all of Nepal. The only thing preventing this is delayed ratification. With Parliament's help, MCC and the government of Nepal can begin to improve the transportation sector, creating business opportunities, and building a modern electrical system that will increase access to energy while protecting the climate. If the people of Nepal want to begin building this future for their families, I encourage them to let their government

representatives know—now is the time to ratify the MCC-Nepal Compact. The United States will always remain committed to the people of Nepal.

CENTER OF EXCELLENCE ON DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE

DISINFORMATION PRIMER

February 2021



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

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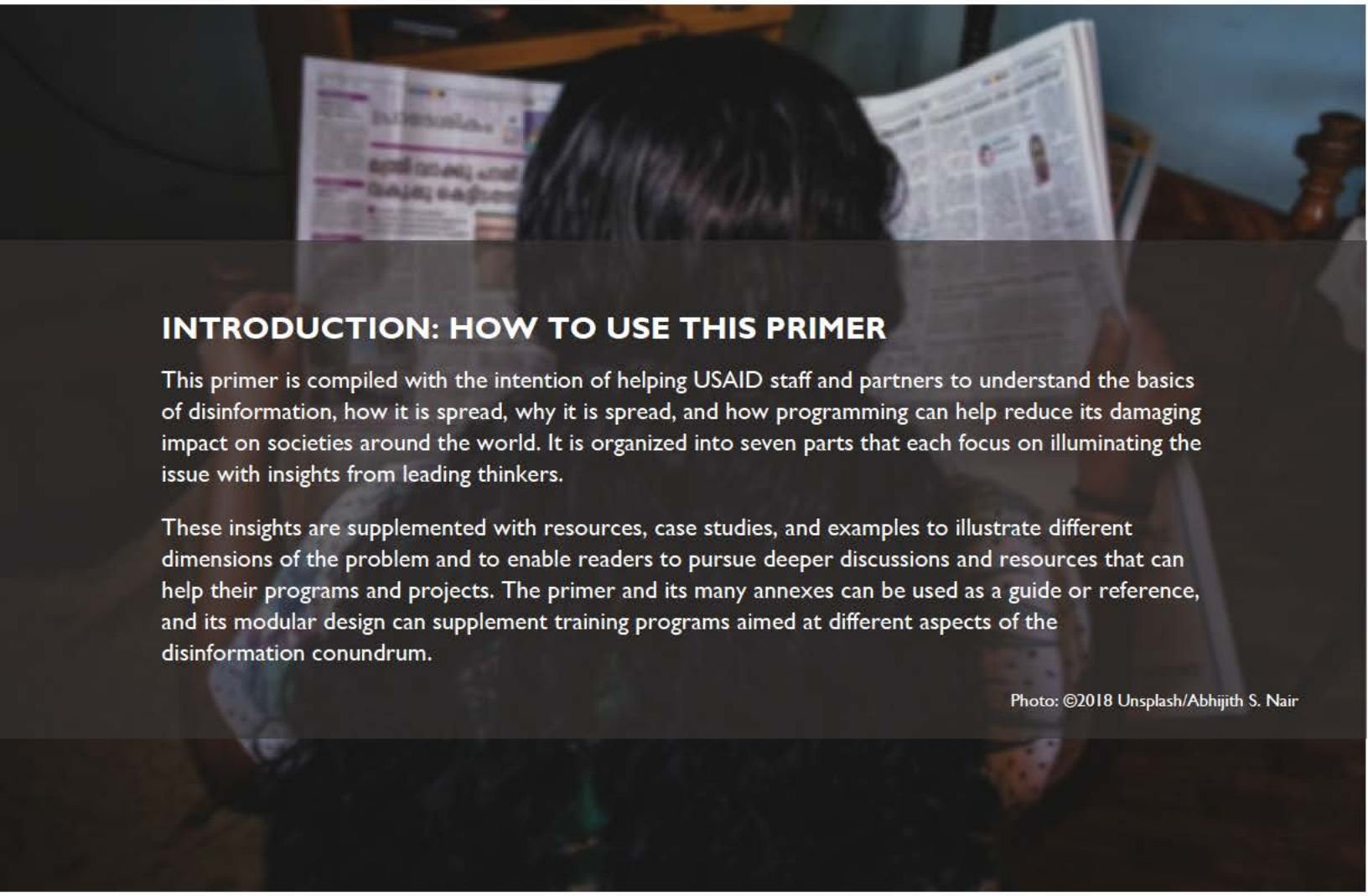
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DISINFORMATION PRIMER

This primer presents an overview of disinformation culture to give readers a sense of key concepts, terminology, select case studies, and programmatic design options. Disinformation is by no means new. Although social media platforms have emerged as the most efficient spreaders of false information, disinformation is also spread through analog media such as radio, television, and newspapers. It is, however, the combination of traditional analog media, in concert with new digital technologies, that allows information to spread faster and more broadly (even across borders) in unprecedented ways. Experts have described this phenomenon as "information disorder," a condition in which truth and facts coexist in a milieu of misinformation and disinformation—conspiracy theories, lies, propaganda, and half-truths. They have labeled its ability to undermine democracy and individual autonomy "a wicked problem," i.e., a problem that is difficult and complex, such as poverty or climate change. Despite the immensity of the challenge, there are promising ways that journalists, civil society organizations, technology specialists, and governments are finding to prevent and counter misinformation and disinformation. This primer presents several programmatic ideas to consider for standalone or integrative approaches as part of democracy and governance-related programming.



INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS PRIMER

This primer is compiled with the intention of helping USAID staff and partners to understand the basics of disinformation, how it is spread, why it is spread, and how programming can help reduce its damaging impact on societies around the world. It is organized into seven parts that each focus on illuminating the issue with insights from leading thinkers.

These insights are supplemented with resources, case studies, and examples to illustrate different dimensions of the problem and to enable readers to pursue deeper discussions and resources that can help their programs and projects. The primer and its many annexes can be used as a guide or reference, and its modular design can supplement training programs aimed at different aspects of the disinformation conundrum.

Photo: ©2018 Unsplash/Abhijith S. Nair

I. PART ONE: WHY DOES DISINFORMATION MATTER?

Part One explores how the well-worn and known tactics of disinformation are being adapted and used around the world. Evidence is mounting that "false information can reach more people, penetrate more deeply into social networks, and spread much faster than any time in history."[1]

Experts from academia, government, civil society, and media agree that disinformation is a problem with social, political, and economic ramifications. A study done by Prevency, a German international consulting company for reputational risk and crisis management, found that disinformation costs the global economy $78 billion per year, including in share price loss, brand reputation management, and investment in political disinformation campaigns.[2]

USAID staff and partners around the world need a working knowledge of the scope and form of disinformation since it impacts many levels of programming and interventions across all development sectors. While it is daunting to define terms, this primer provides key terminology and tools to better identify ways to counter and prevent it.

Disinformation comes from both homegrown and foreign sources. *Foreign Policy* noted in a recent article that "as research has increasingly shown, homegrown disinformation is making democracy sicker than any foreign efforts can."[3] The article goes on to point out:

> "There are immense incentives for disinformation built into democratic institutions themselves. Treating disinformation as an alien disease ignores the fact that it is perfectly compatible with democratic norms and thrives inside democratic states. A recent report[4] by the Oxford Internet Institute, for example, found that politicians inside 45 democracies have used social media for 'amassing fake followers or spreading manipulated media to garner voter support.'[5]"

Disinformation is a core challenge for democracy, rights, and governance promotion, yet it is not the only problem. Other key information challenges include censorship and freedom of expression; internet freedom and digital rights (including throttling and internet shutdowns); political polarization; and the demise of traditional journalism business models and related new challenges of the financial viability of the news industry in the digital age. Each of these challenges creates fertile ground for, or amplifies disinformation by, limiting the free and open access to facts, data, and information in our societies.

As the spread of disinformation online has grown rapidly in recent years, global internet freedom has been declining rapidly (for the ninth year in a row in 2019). Since 2016, Freedom House has reported on new governments contributing to the spread of disinformation. Freedom House also has observed new malicious actors taking advantage of the failure of democratic states to successfully regulate online campaign finance and transparency rules that are essential for democratic elections. This trend is worrisome. Many more democratic leaders are employing this strategy domestically. In this way, democratic governments are also falling prey to state-sponsored disinformation because they cannot use more draconian methods to exercise power.

Additionally, repressive governments have gained access to new tools to collect and track data on entire population sets and are utilizing them to effectively increase popular support for themselves. They use social media surveillance tools and artificial intelligence to "identify perceived threats and silence undesirable expression." This trend has created an environment where civil rights are being abused and activists are being repressed and denied the possibilities of the digital sphere for a variety of religious,

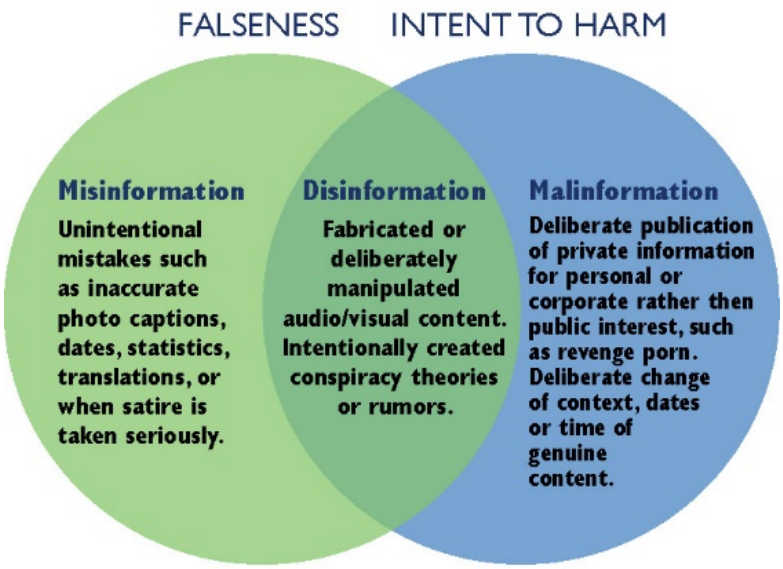
social, and political speech. Of the 65 countries Freedom House assessed in 2019 in its *Freedom on the Net Report*, 47 (the highest number to date) have arrested online users for religious, social, or political posts. Such cooptation and control of the digital space further allows authoritarian leaders to engage in domestic disinformation campaigns more easily and widely.

A. DISINFORMATION, MISINFORMATION, AND MALINFORMATION

Disinformation, or **information that is shared with the intent to mislead people**, is increasingly a global phenomenon. It has become more prevalent with the rise of social media and the digital economy and a lack of digital and media literacy among consumers of online media.[6] Disinformation is often used as a catch-all term for all false information, but it is distinguished from misinformation by its purposeful intent to deceive. **Misinformation**, on the other hand, is **false information spread by someone who believes false information to be true**. (See Figure 1.) The impact of disinformation and misinformation can be the same.[7] Whether false information is shared intentionally or not, it is still dangerous.

Additionally, **"malinformation"** is deliberate publication of private information for personal or private interest, as well as the deliberate manipulation of genuine content. This is often done by moving private or revealing information about an individual, taken out of context, into the public sphere.

Figure 1: Information Disorder



Source: https://internews.org/impact/disinformation

Researchers across disciplines have shown in a variety of ways how networked disinformation capitalizes on predictable human behavior in digital spaces. In a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) study, **researchers found that false information travels on average six times faster than authentic, true new stories**. The study's data showed false information "diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information," suggesting people are more likely to share false stories for their novelty and because they "inspire fear, disgust, and surprise in replies." **Media literacy**, or **the ability to methodically consider the meaning and source of a post or news article**, is the most important factor in identifying false or misleading news. As a Yale University study found, "Susceptibility to fake news [false news] is driven more by lazy thinking than it is by partisan bias *per se*."[8]

B. DISINFORMATION AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY, RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE

Posing an existential threat to democracy, the spread of misinformation and disinformation is having an "absolutely corrosive" impact on the institutions and norms that enable democratic governance.[9] The impact it has on prospects for democratic development is an urgent matter for those involved in strengthening democratic institutions. Ideally, in a healthy democracy, citizens and policymakers can draw from a common set of facts to deliberate and make decisions. In an era where mis- and disinformation is so prevalent, democratic progress and order is threatened by faulty information—conspiracies, lies, half-truths, distortions, and propaganda.

Four Ways in which Disinformation Impacts Democratic Development

- Interferes directly with the ability of democratic societies to determine what is in the public interest through open discussion
- Leads to a loss of information integrity and often to impediments of press freedom
- Can interfere with civic society and distort political engagement
- Exacerbates polarization and social fracturing

Most worryingly, disinformation is a significant force that can undermine democracy and good governance, free and fair elections, access to information, rule of law, protection of human rights, independent media, and civil society action. Critical to every aspect of good governance, information integrity enables political parties to debate and share ideas, concerns, and solutions. It opens opportunities for citizens to influence public policy dialogue. It promotes economic innovation as entrepreneurs refine and improve on the goods we produce. And it enables governments to respond effectively to public health and other emergencies.

Democratic societies rely on journalists, media outlets, and bloggers to help shape local and national dialogue, shine a light on corruption, and provide truthful, accurate information that can inform people and help them make the decisions needed to live and thrive. Yet, the public sphere has taken on an increasingly toxic and polarized quality. The nature of how people access information is changing along with the information technology boom and the decline of traditional print media. Because traditional information systems are failing, some opinion leaders are casting doubt on media, which, in turn, impacts USAID programming and funding choices.

Our technology-enabled society, with all the vaunted benefits of increased connection, efficiency, and transparency, has also led to erosion of individual privacy, trolling, cyberbullying, cyber or information warfare, and dubious and deceitful abuse and misuse of tech platforms in deliberate efforts to erode democracy and public trust and extort money and power. As numerous scholars have argued, tech platforms have preferred profit over their users, failing to provide even basic controls to help support civic engagement over extremist speech. Indeed, studies such as Siva Vaidhyanathan's *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* demonstrate that social media platforms find extremism far more engaging—and hence more profitable—so their platform design encourages it.[10]

Today's digital communications and media landscape is complex and has given rise to a new set of challenges and considerations for democracy support. Across all USAID programming countries, this requires a solid understanding of disinformation and robust approaches for countering and preventing it.

Two current examples from Brazil and Myanmar illustrate the threat posed to democracy by rampant disinformation. The way in which disinformation is manifest is very much context based. One must consider how information is consumed in a particular country or community. For example, in Myanmar effective information manipulation relies on Facebook, which is almost synonymous with the internet since it is provided free with a mobile phone data plan. Recent developments with the Myanmar military displacing civilian leadership in a coup in January 2021 have underlined issues of internet freedom and disinformation. Likewise, in Brazil, cheap data plans that only include access to the likes of WhatsApp and Facebook makes citizens more likely to consume social media in which false claims are echoed by unreliable sources.

Disinformation impacts the prospects for democratic development in a number of ways:

1. **It undermines trust in democratic institutions by reducing their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public.** Disinformation interferes directly with the ability of democratic societies to determine what is in the public interest by dominating and distorting the public discourse and corrupting the process of democratic decision-making. The spread of disinformation is a tactic that authoritarians use to dominate people and societies. [11] Governments also sometimes use it as a tool of foreign policy.[12] When the strategy leads to political success, it provides motivation for the winners to restrict the free flow of information by those who would dispute them and to undermine constitutional protections for free speech.[13]

2. **It leads to a loss of information integrity.** Online news platforms have disrupted the traditional media landscape. Government officials and journalists are not the sole information gatekeepers anymore. As such, citizens require a new level of information or media literacy to evaluate the veracity of claims made on the internet. False beliefs spread across the internet because almost anything is being promoted by someone. Authoritarian leaders add to the loss of information integrity by delegitimizing the media, claiming news sources are faulty or corrupt, i.e., the weaponization of "fake news." The loss of information integrity itself further undermines trust in the media's ability to provide fact-based information. **It leads to a loss of press freedom.** The weaponization of "fake news" (calling a partisan or otherwise opinion-heavy article or outlet "fake news" in order to discredit it) has also led some governments to propose or pass anti "fake news" bills, which have had a chilling effect on freedom of speech and are used to target or silence independent media.

3. **It can distort political and civic engagement.** Social media platforms offer democratic benefits by connecting citizens with each other in ways more easily possible in a digital space, encouraging voter turnout, and giving voice to minority viewpoints. However, in conjunction with disinformation, the same platforms can provide the means for suppression of civic and political engagement. The use of trolls, doxing, flooding, and other tactics have resulted in a dramatic reduction in constructive social and political engagement. Simple widespread mistrust about the accuracy and authenticity of online information may be enough to demotivate political engagement.[14]

4. **It exacerbates polarization and social fracturing.** Information technology creates many opportunities to engage with and learn from different perspectives. On the other hand, new information technology has been used to reinforce stereotypes and create insular communities with similar values, histories, and experiences, providing a home for disaffected populations to promote their own views. This is further complicated by "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers"[15] created by

social media, in which false claims are repeated and magnified, increasing polarization and making democratic discourse more difficult as citizens turn to different sets of false information as facts.

5. **It can have a disproportionate impact on marginalized populations, resulting in online violence, intimidation, and harassment using false narratives.** Disinformation on social media often involves targeted harassment campaigns that seek to silence and marginalize opposing opinions and/or specific groups in society, such as women or ethnic groups, and make it appear that disinformation actors preside over greater consensus. Such harassment and attempts to silence voices have been used to discourage and discredit women candidates for political office in many countries.



II. PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION DISORDER

Although disinformation has become a hot button issue over the past several years, the manipulation of media has been used as a political tactic in the past and is by no means a new phenomenon. Information disorder, a term coined by Claire Wardle[16] an expert on misinformation and disinformation and co-founder of First Draft, refers to the current media climate and the ways in which the media ecosystem is polluted.[17]

Photo: ©2017 Unsplash/Kayla Velasquez

This term offers an alternative to the term "fake news," which has been coined and promoted for political purposes. As noted by *The Conversation*, "Not only do different people have opposing views about the meaning of "fake news," in practice the term undermines the intellectual values of democracy and there is a real possibility that it means nothing. We would be better off if we stopped using it."[18] Furthermore, as noted by assistant director-general of communication and information at UNESCO Frank La Rue:

> "Fake news is a bad term primarily because it is a trap. It is not news. Just the term generates mistrust of the press and of the work of journalists. Political leaders have started using the term against the press, which is especially serious. This is a crucial moment when we have to defend journalism. We have to promote a journalism of honesty, a journalism that is seen to build the truth."[19]

Information disorder. A condition in which truth and facts coexist in a milieu of misinformation and disinformation—conspiracy theories, lies, propaganda, and half-truths. In fact, Groundviews identified 10 types of misinformation and disinformation. (See Figure 2. First Draft News also prepared illustrative examples of each type; see Annex 2: Types of Misinformation & Disinformation, to study them.)

The threats of information disorder have worsened as social media and internet use become more ubiquitous and as digital technology writ large has taken on a bigger role in democracy and governance programming. It is a central area of study to understand how and why there has been such an expansive erosion of democracy over the past 10 years[20]—since 2010, the number of "Free" nations in

Freedom House's Freedom in the World index has decreased by six percent while "Not Free" nations increased by 10 percent.[21,22]

Information disorder has impacted nearly all facets of society. Globally, people of all ages are spending a significant amount of time consuming and sharing content online. In this way, the magnitude of today's crisis of information disorder is directly correlated to the proliferation of cell phones, increasingly widespread internet access, and availability of social media. The ubiquity of mobile phone access has led to a surge in internet activity throughout the developing world, often through zero-rating that provides internet access without financial cost and offers a limited range of options in terms of which websites users can access.[23]

Notably, in Myanmar, Facebook has come under fire for its role in spreading disinformation exacerbating hate speech and contributing to widespread unrest and violence. In fact, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called out Facebook for its role in propagating hate speech and inciting the violence that led to the 2017 genocide of the Rohingya people, which resulted in the deaths of more than 24,000 Rohingya Muslims by Myanmar's state forces. The hate speech leading to the genocide spread quickly via online channels and was not shut down due to a

Figure 2: Groundviews' Series on Media Literacy



Source: https://groundviews.org/2018/05/12/infographic-10-types-of-mis-and-disinformation/

lack of Burmese-speaking content moderators on Facebook. According to Reuters, Facebook only had two Burmese-speaking content moderators in 2015, despite repeated warnings that the online media platform was contributing to violence against the Rohingya people. In response, the United Nations set up an Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar in 2018 to collect evidence for use in future prosecutions. As reported by *Malay Mail*, "UN investigators said Facebook had played a key role in spreading hate speech that fueled the violence. Facebook says it is working to stop hate speech and has deleted accounts linked to the military including senior army officials but preserved data."[24]

Key to the current debate about the disinformation problem is the role that social media plays as a vector for disinformation. The rise of social media use and online content creation information has resulted in a media-saturated world, one that requires a fairly high level of critical thinking from users and consumers—i.e., digital literacy and media literacy.

Although social media was designed to connect us, societies were not prepared for its abuse. The prevalence of online and social media has opened the door for bad actors to use coordinated campaigns to promote and manipulate distorted information for their own ends. The proliferation of coordinated inauthentic activity online greatly threatens the free exchange of ideas and information that democracy is built on while simultaneously challenging societies that are still in the process of developing democratic governance.

Myanmar and Civil Society Resistance to Disinformation – Inspiration from the Flower Speech Campaign

Civil society can play an active role in countering the type of malinformation that comes in the form of hate speech. In 2014, the Flower Speech campaign (also known as the Panzagar campaign) was launched to counter hate speech in Myanmar in response to the rise in in anti-Muslim violence. The Flower Speech campaign was founded by Nay Phone Latt, executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organization, who was himself sentenced to more than 20 years in prison in 2008 for blogging about the 2007 Saffron Revolution. In the flower campaign, hate speech is countered by efforts to promote responsible use of social media and raise awareness of the implications of online behavior. Through partnerships with local graphic designers and Facebook to create a set of positive 'digital stickers' that users can share on the social media platform, the movement has led to some users posting photos of them holding flowers to further spread the message of peace.

Both wealthy and developing countries have struggled to adapt to the large amounts and variety of misinformation and disinformation circling on the internet. However, in developing countries, the results can be both life-threatening, as well as detrimental to democratic governance. In extreme cases, misinformation and disinformation has led to violence against ethnic minorities and impacted the outcome of elections.

Annex 3: Emerging Solutions, provides links to some of the key research centers working on information disorder that regularly put out guides, toolkits, newsletters, and webinars. This research focuses on helping differentiate between the real and the fake online. These are useful for those working to debunk false news and promote factual, truthful information.

A. WHY PEOPLE USE DISINFORMATION

According to research published by *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, some reasons that use of misinformation is so rampant include:

- *Rumor:* Societies have struggled with the misinformation-spreading effects of rumors for centuries, if not millennia—what is perhaps less obvious is that even works of fiction can give rise to lasting misconceptions of the facts.
- *Politics:* Governments and politicians can be powerful sources of misinformation, whether inadvertently or by design.
- *Vested Interests:* Corporate interests have a long and well-documented history of seeking to influence public debate by promulgating incorrect information. At least on some recent occasions, such systematic campaigns have also been directed against corporate interests, by nongovernmental interest groups.
- *Media Fragmentation:* Though the media are, by definition, seeking to inform the public, it is notable that they are particularly prone to spreading misinformation for systemic reasons that are worthy of analysis and exposure. The internet and the growing use of social networks have fostered the quick and wide dissemination of misinformation. The fractionation of the information landscape by new media is an important contributor to misinformation's particular resilience to correction.[25]

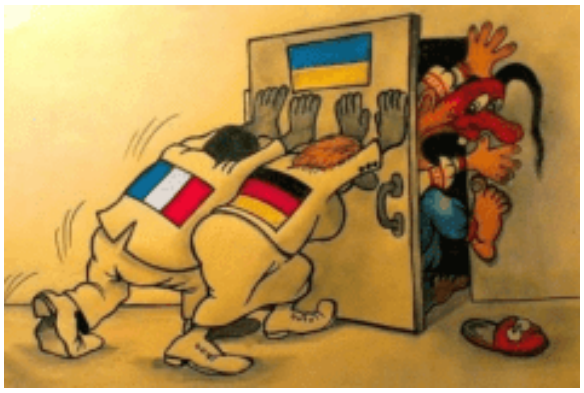
Additional reasons information disorder is on the rise include:

- The erosion of trust in institutions, especially government and media institutions.[26]
- Environments where trust is low are ripe for the spread of disinformation.
- Misuse of technology, through bots and cyborgs spreading disinformation.[27]

In the political sphere, the ability to win elections is now correlated with a political actors' capacity to manage social media platform messaging. For example, Ukraine's staggering landslide election of both President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Servant of the People Party in 2019—sweeping away 80 percent of all Members of Parliament (MP)—was based on almost no concrete policy formulations. Zelenskyy built a formidable campaign machine based on social media and a fictional characterization he embodied (as Ukraine's president in a comedic television series) that his opponents could not match.

This use of disinformation has played a central role in the deterioration and backsliding of democracies around the world.[28] Governments and others who propagate information disorder have created social fissures, contributing to a breakdown of public trust in government institutions and media. This effectively destabilizes and fractures the civic institutions that once upheld/demanded transparency and accountability in political discourse. As the 2020

Figure 3: Russian Produced Meme to Persuade Ukrainians against Euro-Integration



Source: EuroMaidan Press -- http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/12/15/a-guide-to-russian-propaganda-part-4-russian-propaganda-operates-by-law-of-war/

Edelman Trust Barometer Report finds, 76 percent of a global data sample agreed with the statement, "I worry about false information or fake news being used as a weapon."[29]

B. HOW TO IDENTIFY DISINFORMATION

Figure 4 was developed by ProQuest to assist in the steps for identifying disinformation.[30] It is very useful to consider when confronted with a news article, social media post, or email that contains claims that seem dubious. While being adept at spotting the different types of false content takes practice, it does become easier. (See Annex 3, Emerging Solutions, for more resources on learning how to identify disinformation.)

C. CONTEXT AND SOCIAL FACTORS OF DISINFORMATION

In assessing a society's risk for problems associated with information disorder, it is vital to consider several contextual and social factors, such as issues of age, gender, and other marginalized groups; access to technology and the internet; levels of political polarization in society; and legal norms related to content regulation that may impact how issues like hate speech are dealt with.

Rise of Digital Technology

Digital technology has supplanted many of the forms in which people traditionally obtained information. With the rise of the number of platforms and use of digital technology, consumers now remain more exposed to disinformation. Trends that contribute to this challenge are:

Figure 4: Step-By-Step Guide to Combatting Disinformation

1. **Do a Visual Assessment**
   Assess the overall design. Fake news sites often look amateurish, have lots of annoying ads, and use altered or stolen images.
   Overall, does the news article and website seem high quality?
2. **Identify the News Outlet**
   The Wall Street Journal and CNN are examples of news outlets. If you haven't heard of the news outlet, search online for more information.
   Is the news outlet well known, well respected, and trustworthy?
3. **Check the Web Domain**
   Many fake news URLs look odd or end with ".com.co" or ".lo" (e.g., abcnews.com.co) to mimic legitimate news sites.
   Does the URL seem legitimate?
4. **Check the "About Us" Section**
   Trustworthy news outlets usually include detailed background information, policy statements, and email contacts in the "About/About Us" section.
   Does the site provide detailed background information and contacts?
5. **Identify the Author**
   Fake news articles often don't include author names. If included, search the author's name online to see if he or she is well known and respected.
   Does the article have a trusted author?
6. **Identify the Central Message**
   Read the article carefully. Fake news articles often push one viewpoint, have an angry tone, or make outrageous claims.
   Does the article seem fair, balanced, and reasonable?
7. **Assess Spelling, Grammar, and Punctuation**
   If the article has misspelled words, words in ALL CAPS, poor grammar, or lots of "!!!!," it's probably unreliable.
   Does the article have proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation?
8. **Analyze Sources and Quotes**
   Consider the article's sources and who is quoted. Fake news articles often cite anonymous sources, unreliable sources, or no sources at all.
   Does the article include and identify reliable sources?
9. **Find Other Articles**
   Search the internet for more articles on the same topic. If you can't find any, chances are the story is fake.
   Are there multiple articles by other news outlets on this topic?
10. **Turn to Fact Checkers**
    FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, PolitiFact.com are widely trusted fact-checking websites.
    Do the fact checkers say the news story is true?

Source: https://blogs.proquest.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Fake-News1.pdf

Digital technology has become the norm among people across the globe:

- Global internet penetration is currently at 59 percent.[31]
- More than five billion people have mobile devices, and over half of these connections are smartphones: a median of 76 percent across 18 advanced economies surveyed have smartphones, compared with a median of only 45 percent in emerging economies.[32]

In many societies, the amount of time spent online has skyrocketed:

- In 2019, the average time spent on the internet was 10 hours in the Philippines, 9.3 hours in Brazil, 8.25 hours in South Africa, 7.5 hours in the U.A.E., 6.3 hours in the United States, and 5.5 hours in China.[33,34]

The growing dominance of social media as a source of information is happening all over the world:

- On Twitter, a total average of 500 million tweets are posted daily; on Facebook there were 1.63 billion daily active users in September 2019.[35]
- India alone is home to 290 million Facebook users. To put this into perspective, if India's Facebook users were a country, its population would rank fourth in the world.[36]
- More than 70 percent of internet users in Kenya, South Africa, Bulgaria, Chile, Greece, and Argentina get their news from social media.[37]

The pervasiveness of Facebook's Free Basics Internet.org—which provides a pared-down cell phone internet experience providing access to mainly social media—has affected internet usage. Social media is becoming synonymous with the internet:

- In many countries, such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines, "opening the internet" on a digital device means opening Facebook. In 2014, Quartz found that 65 percent of Nigerians and 61 percent of Indonesians surveyed agreed with the statement: "Facebook is the internet."[38]
- The Philippines, for example, is a good illustration of how Facebook has penetrated into the social structure: "Free Basics was launched in the Philippines in 2013. By 2018, almost two-thirds of the country's 110 million people were using Facebook, according to Buzzfeed. In the Philippines, the word 'Facebook' is interchangeable with 'internet,'" writes Maria Farrell.[39]

Though the platforms may change, the problems that social media brings with it remain the same. WhatsApp, now owned by Facebook, is also making significant headway globally. WhatsApp remains a widely used platform outside of the United States for information sharing. However, WhatsApp's encrypted, and non-public nature makes it difficult to research and analyze.

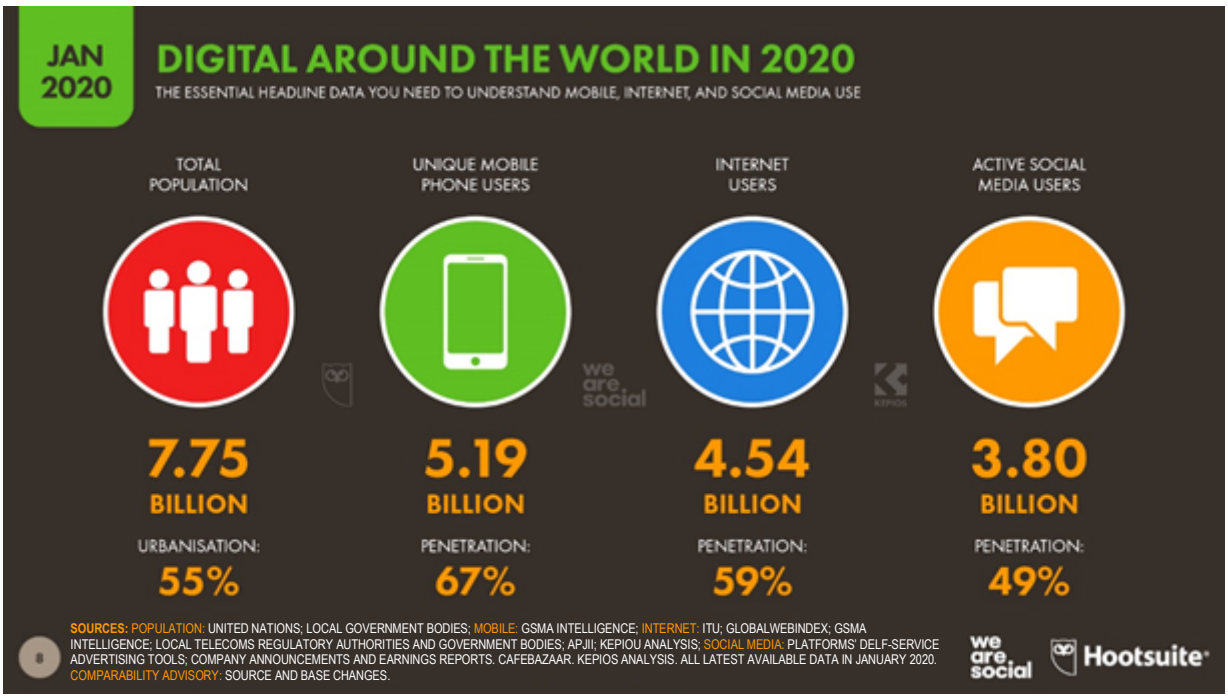
- According to a survey conducted by Reuters in 2017, WhatsApp has become one of the leading news sources in Brazil, Malaysia, and Spain, nearing 50 percent of the population who say they use it for their main news source on a regular basis.[40]
- According to Digital Information World,[41] WhatsApp has 1.5 billion users from 180 countries, which makes it the most popular instant messaging app worldwide. (Facebook Messenger is in second place with 1.3 billion users.)
- WhatsApp has one billion daily active users. The biggest market for WhatsApp in India with over 200 million users; Brazil has 120 million users.

Figure 5: Popular Messaging Apps



Source: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview

Figure 6: Digital Connectivity is on the Rise Globally



Source: https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media

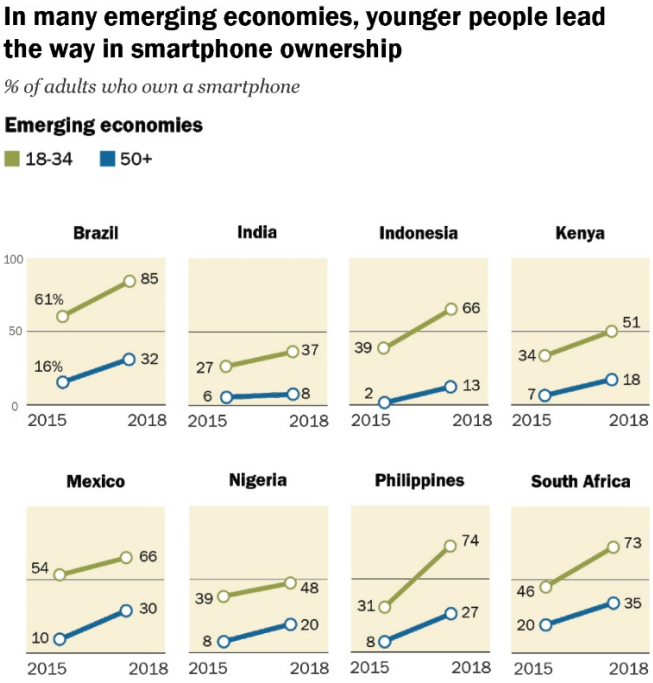
Cross-Cutting Issues

USAID has several cross-cutting issues, such as gender and youth, that are important to link with how people choose to counter and prevent disinformation in their society.

AGE

One of the key questions that needs to be considered in terms of countering and preventing disinformation is whether there are generational differences in terms of news consumption, susceptibility to false news and information, and access to and ability to use technology. For instance, around the world, younger users with a higher education level and higher income are more likely to have smartphone access than their elders.[42] However, statistics show that older people have rapidly caught up and, when they cannot, they often rely on younger users to access the information they need. Moreover, some studies have shown that people aged 65 and older are almost four times more likely to share false news on social media than younger people and that in some instances they are more responsible for the spread of disinformation.[43]Social science research is increasingly interested in the question of whether the consumption of false news is a matter of generational differences. One study found that age plays a key role and has a strong effect on the dissemination of false news. According to the study (Guess, et al.), "on average, users over 65 shared nearly seven times as many articles from fake news domains as the youngest age group."[44]

Figure 7: Smartphone Ownership



Note: Data for 35-to-49-year-olds not shown. Tunisia not surveyed in 2015.
Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q46.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In a U.S. study conducted by College Reaction, 69 percent of Gen Z (born mid-1997 to early 2012) students claimed it is somewhat or very easy to discern between true and false information online.[45] However, a majority of middle schoolers in the same generation could not determine the difference between an advertisement and a news story, while 30 percent of the surveyed students found a fake news story to be more credible than a real story.[46] The U.S. experience, however, differs drastically from youth in Finland where children in primary and secondary school are taught about media literacy as a core part of their education, and beneficiaries from Finland's whole of society approach to the disinformation problem. Finland's government launched an "anti-fake news" initiative in 2014 "aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists and politicians how to counter false information designed to sow division."[47]

Some studies have shown elders, who may have less facility with digital technology, to be more immune to disinformation because they rely on other forms (books, education, experience) to assess the validity

of claims.[48] Still this bias, coupled with a decrease in memory, may also hinder their ability to discern disinformation.[49]

GENDER

In the Global South, women and men often experience digital technology very differently; however, they use it almost equally in both advanced and emerging economies.[50] Where resources are thin, families often do not have the time or money for women to have access to the internet. Moreover, it is often true that women often have less access to the internet because of local gender norms.

Figure 8: Gender Dynamics and Online Violence



Source: https://www.icfj.org/news/online-attacks-women-journalists-leading-real-world-violence-new-research-shows

Furthermore, in the spread of disinformation, gender has often been exploited by autocrats and those in power to discredit journalists and eliminate government critics.[51] Female journalists across the Middle East have been repeatedly targeted with doctored photos of them in sexually compromising positions, claims that they achieved their jobs by being sexually promiscuous, and online defamation campaigns that utilize misogynistic language to discredit them and their news coverage.[52] For more information on this, especially on how women politicians are disproportionately affected by false news, see the Council on Foreign Relations report on Gendered Disinformation, Fake News, and Women in Politics.[53]

Stories like the one below are examples of an overall climate that contributes to the discrediting of female journalists, violence against them, and the danger of covering women's issues in general. A *Reporters Without Borders* report on violence toward journalists covering women's issues found that of all forms of violence and retaliation against these journalists about 40 percent is cyber harassment specifically.[54] It is also worth noting that online violence often accompanies physical violence.[55]

Use of Disinformation Tactics to Suppress Journalists

In India, journalist Rana Ayyub was slandered by fake images and tweets insinuating that she was a porn actress.[56] The coordinated attacks occurred after Ayyub began fighting for the justice of an 8-year-old girl who was raped over several days and then murdered. The doctored video of Ayyub was shared over 40,000 times, including a share by the ruling nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) fan page. It ultimately sent her to the hospital for heart palpitations and anxiety.[57]

HATE SPEECH AND DANGEROUS SPEECH

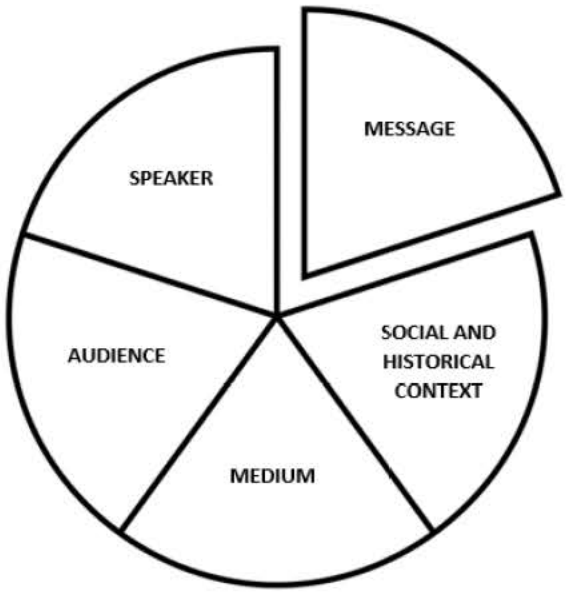
Hate speech and dangerous speech are considered a potentially life-threatening aspect of information disorder.

The definition of **hate speech** is often contested, particularly because it is such a charged topic, and legal and social organizations offer alternative definitions for the same act. This topic is particularly controversial because there tends to be fine lines drawn in democratic societies regarding what is considered acceptable free speech and what is not. Some definitions consider hate speech a verbal attack made on a group based on a shared identity while others agree that an attack on an individual can be considered hate speech.[58] Likewise, some definitions insist that specific identity markers must be included in hate speech (such as membership in an ethnic or social grouping) while others address any attack on identity.[59]

PeaceTech Lab defines hate speech as a deliberate attack or expression that vilifies, humiliates, and discriminates against others based on their ethnic, national origin, religious, racial, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, or other shared identity. This can lead to a larger societal impact influencing acts of violence.[60] Hate speech is rooted in larger social grievances that are potentially incendiary and often lead to serious violence and injustice and new research indicates hate incidents online and offline peaking in tandem.[61]

Another term, ***dangerous speech***, is any form of expression (speech, text or imaged) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group. The Dangerous Speech Project has put forward a framework that considers the speaker, the audience, and the medium, as well as the message and context in determining risk—which is an interesting comparison with the distinction between misinformation and disinformation (i.e., intent versus other factors). Disinformation is also explicitly a category of

Figure 9: The Dangerous Speech Five-part Framework



Source: https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/

dangerous speech, where it has the capacity to lead to violence and other types of harm.[62]

Understanding how to recognize hate speech and dangerous speech is particularly important to combatting their spread online through platforms like Facebook and Twitter, where hate speech and disinformation are often tightly linked.

It is worth noting the concerns about hate speech in the context of conflict (pre or post). A noted example is the *Radio des Milles Collines* in Rwanda, which called for direct attacks against the Tutsi minority and for which the journalists of that radio were called before the International Court of Justice in The Hague and charged with crimes against humanity. Hate speech, particularly in fragile states marked by conflict, can lead to violence and other harm so it is essential to understand the challenges for labeling hate speech as such.

D. FOREIGN-SUPPORTED INFORMATION DISORDER

The geopolitical dimensions of information disorder are another key contextual factor to understand. Disinformation is a long-practiced means of statecraft. One of the common forms of disinformation comes from governments and political actors that are working to gain influence. Both the Government of Russia and the People's Republic of China have used disinformation tactics to misinform, change narratives, and accumulate further support for their foreign policies. However, the respective governments approach information warfare in very different ways. One key difference is that Russia focuses primarily on information manipulation while China employs censorship and other forms of information control to suppress other viewpoints and control the narrative.[63]

"We've seen quite a significant uptick in misinformation generated by foreign state actors, particularly from Russia and China," according to Dr. Phil Howard of the Oxford Internet Institute. "In fact, 92 percent of the misinformation from state-backed agencies around the world originates from Russia and China."

—From CBC News article "COVID-19 disinformation being spread by Russia, China, say experts," https://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/world/covid-19-disinformation-being-spread-by-russia-china-say-experts/ar-BB14B35i

While the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns may appear focused on creating chaos for the United States and other Western countries, the reality is that it hopes to utilize disinformation to weaken perceived adversaries in order to achieve strategic goals, including restoring Russia to great power status, preserving its sphere of influence, protecting the Putin regime, and enhancing its military effectiveness.[64]

The Kremlin's Disinformation Methods

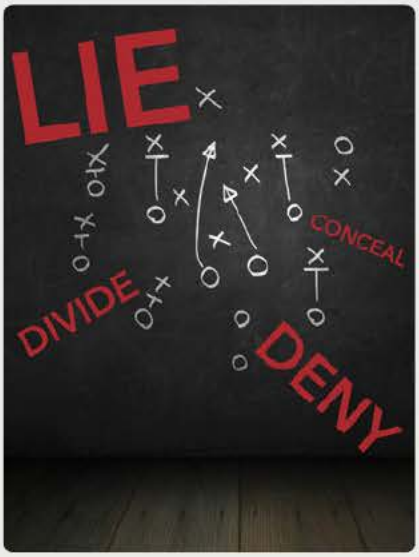
Kremlin-supported propaganda, disinformation, and information manipulation primarily relies on its advanced network to spread easy-to-understand messages that exemplify a clear narrative of the United States as the aggressor and Russia as the only country brave enough to stand up to U.S. hegemony.[65] Russia has been utilizing strategic disinformation tactics since the 1950s to try to influence the perceptions of people worldwide. The Russian government has for years included disinformation and misinformation as part of "active measures," or covert influence operations.[66] In fact, the word "disinformation" is derived from the Russian term *dezinformatsiya* (дезинформация).[67] Highly coordinated disinformation campaigns are meant to influence the perceptions and actions of others and make it highly difficult to discern between the real and the phony. The goal of these campaigns is to

weaken perceived Russian adversaries, often by fracturing the bonds of societies in order to try to weaken or cripple alliances in the West, with the goal of ultimately making it possible for Russia to outcompete the United States and Europe.[68] (Note: It is not just Russia versus the United States; Russia also uses disinformation against Europe and others, and they used it extensively in Ukraine to try to influence events.)

Rules of the Russian Playbook

Russia's strategy for disinformation is a seven-step process intended to ultimately fracture societies from the inside.

1. Look for cracks and social divisions within the target society.
2. Create a big lie.
3. Wrap the lie around a piece of truth.
4. Conceal your hand (make the story seem like it came from somewhere else).
5. Find a useful idiot (who will take the message and push it to foreign audience).
6. Deny everything.
7. Play the long game, resulting in a major political impact years from now.[69]



Since 2015, the Kremlin has begun expanding its media influence by creating media cooperation agreements with over 50 local media organizations around the world.[70] The messages shared through these networks play on strong emotions and tend to do very well on social media, where users have been shown to interact with content that is emotional in nature.[71] Thus, in countries where both the United States and Russia have been working to develop influence, the Kremlin tends to put forth narratives that are easy to understand, play to the emotions, and disingenuously offer a clear good guy–bad guy paradigm.[72] Comparatively, the United States has often struggled to offer effective fact-based alternatives to such narratives. This is particularly relevant in countries where USAID works to promote democratic governance.

A key example that merits consideration is the massive disinformation campaign lodged against the White Helmets, known as the Syria Civil Defense, during the Syrian civil war.[73] Russia in particular used propaganda and other disinformation tactics to sow seeds of doubt about the work of the White Helmets and to undermine their humanitarian mission. As *The Guardian* reported, "The aim was to flood the media ecosystem with falsehoods that would erode trust among supporters, especially donor governments."[74] Notably, the challenge of countering Kremlin influence is also felt in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (and other post-Soviet states)—countries that are looking to orient their cultures, politics, and economies away from Russia, but face the challenges of ongoing Russian state efforts to exacerbate polarization and conflict. Strategies for these areas,

Factory of Lies: The Russian Playbook

Factory of Lies: The Russian Playbook is an NBC explainer on how Cold War tactics have continued to be used by Russia as a way of subverting the media.

Available at: https://youtu.be/hZrfZU-uZqU

ripe for exploitation, are often based on the goals of weakening the country or destroying its independent, Western, or democratic resolve.

The internet and social media have given the Russian government an immediacy and reach that it never had previously to continue spreading disinformation and lies while simultaneously slowly tearing away at the fabric of democracy.

In August 2020, the Department of State's Global Engagement Center published a report discussing how Russia utilizes a variety of tactics and channels to create and amplify disinformation and propaganda.[75] Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem is a collection of official, proxy, and unattributed communication channels and platforms consisting of five main pillars: official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation. The Kremlin's willingness to employ this approach provides it with perceived advantages:

- It allows for the introduction of numerous variations of the same false narratives. This allows for the different pillars of the ecosystem to fine-tune their disinformation narratives to suit different target audiences because there is no need for consistency, as there would be with attributed government communications.
- It provides plausible deniability for Kremlin officials when proxy sites peddle blatant and dangerous disinformation, allowing them to deflect criticism while still introducing pernicious information.
- It creates a media multiplier effect among the different pillars of the ecosystem that boost their reach and resonance.

The Four Ds Approach

The Government of Russia's strategy for dealing with negative reporting on its actions revolves around four tactics:

1. Dismiss the critic.
2. Distort the facts.
3. Distract from the main issue.
4. Dismay the audience.[76]

This strategy allows the Kremlin to maintain control over the information being spread by virtue of discrediting the individual or organization sharing the information, distorting information to fit their purpose and to support state interests, distracting from the situation at hand where it may be at fault, and launching accusations elsewhere and dismaying the audience by warning that moves that negate state interests will have disastrous consequences for those planning them. These strategies—along with a

reliance on Kremlin-controlled media and paid or sympathetic commentators in the West—allow the Government of Russia to spread its messages and influence public perceptions around the world.[77]

Chinese Communist Party's Disinformation Methods

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deliberately seeks to reshape the current world order to Beijing's advantage. The CCP deploys comprehensive, coordinated, "whole-of-government" influence campaigns to promote and maintain Party narratives domestically and globally.[78]

According to a careful observer, the CCP's propaganda apparatus is a critical component in promoting and maintaining its narrative domestically and globally. Its efforts to use censorship, intimidation, coercion, economic incentives, and propaganda to control the information space are a significant component of its attempts to expand its influence worldwide. This approach to information control actively seeks to downplay concerns regarding China's state abuse and surveillance of Tibetans, Uighurs, and members of other ethnic minorities.[79]

Helpful Resource

"Canary in a Digital Coal Mine," a new documentary from the National Democratic Institute, shows how digital activism and collaboration between the government and its citizens in Taiwan has helped withstand the threat of disinformation. The film features Taiwan's civic tech community, led by the organization g0v, which uses open data and public tools to fight for transparency and democracy.

Watch at: https://www.facebook.com/National.Democratic.Institute/videos/642583006293528/

Changing Tactics

There are increasing indications that Beijing is taking a more aggressive approach to information manipulation similar to Moscow. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that Beijing is increasingly promoting disinformation, pushed out by state media, its officials, and CCP-affiliated social media accounts, bots, and trolls. Beijing also undertook concentrated efforts to push conflicting theories about the pandemic which were intended to sow doubt, deflect blame, and create the idea that the PRC is superior to the United States in responding to international health crises like COVID-19. Observers saw an increasing confluence or convergence of Kremlin, CCP, and Iranian regime false narratives regarding the pandemic.[80] These three adversaries' state information ecosystems have often converged to spread anti-U.S. disinformation, especially to include spurious claims that the United States caused or exacerbated the COVID-19 pandemic. This convergence appears to be a result of "opportunity," not intentional coordination, but all three actors are more routinely leveraging the information tools of the others in their campaigns. Also, the Kremlin and the CCP share a common agenda in discrediting democracy and advancing non-democratic governance systems (especially as being more effective in responding to the pandemic).

The PRC's "Sharp Power" Methods

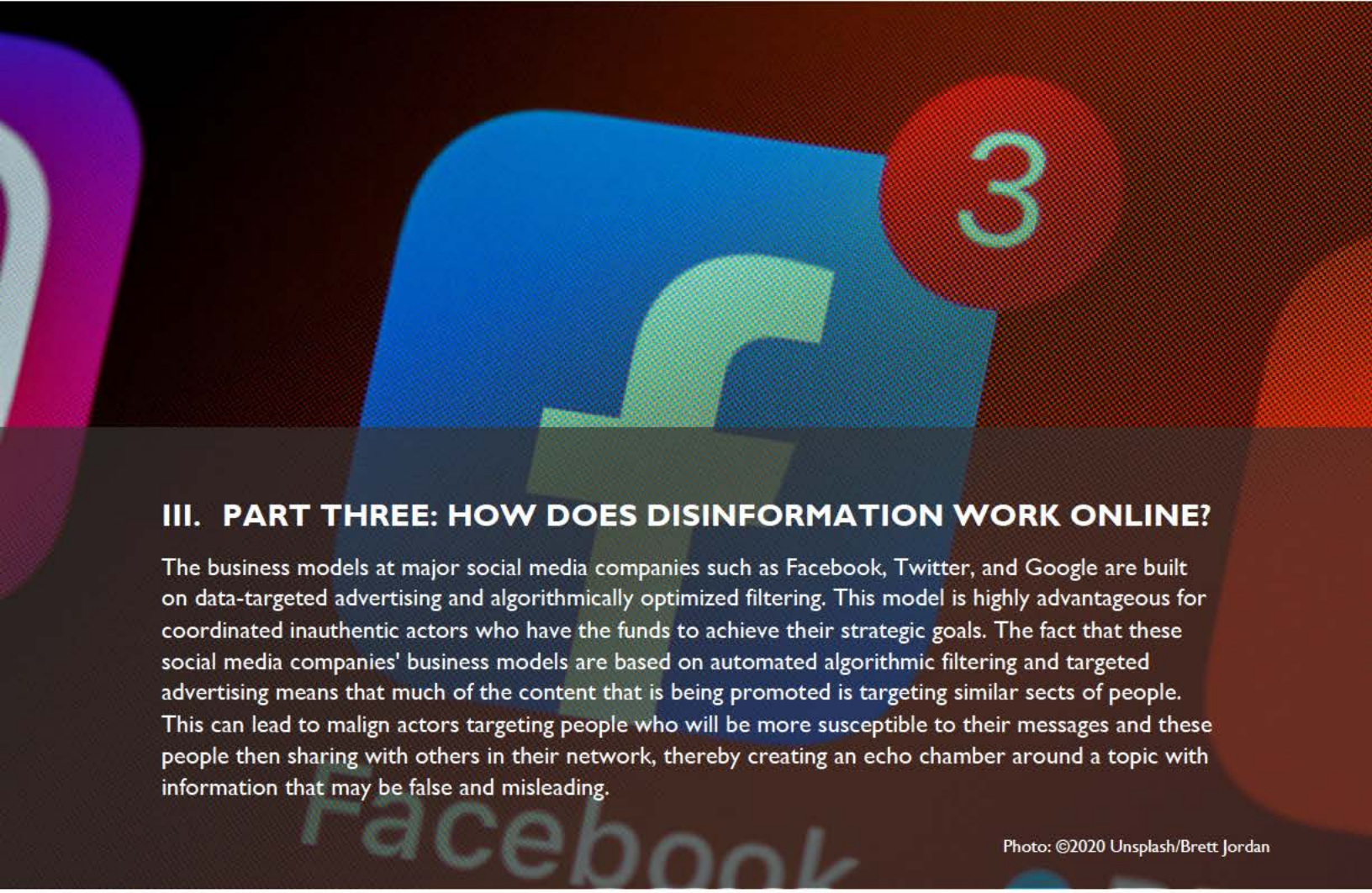
The Sharp Power methods are more about the PRC's control over the narrative about China than disinformation, *per se*. They are a small subset of the CCP's malign influence toolkit. The CCP utilizes all elements of statecraft—such as diplomacy, military, propaganda, and economic levers, in addition to its United Front Work Department (UFWD) —to exert its malign influence abroad. The UFWD, a department under the CCP Central Committee, is responsible for establishing the narratives around strategic issues, especially those concerned with territorial concerns and unification. Major concerns of

the UFWD regard ethnic minorities issues. The CCP seeks to "shape and control information flows, bully governments and corporations, infiltrate and corrupt political systems, and disrupt and debase civil institutions," according to the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. These efforts allow the CCP to control domestic and international narratives around Beijing and shape a positive international perception of the PRC to support CCP narratives.[81] These methods are primarily used to control the narrative from what they refer to as the "five poisons:" Taiwanese, Uighurs, Tibetans, Falungong, and pro-democratic activists—the five groups that are most at danger of tarnishing the PRC's global image.[82] Taken collectively, Beijing's "sharp power" strategy seeks to employ "covert, coercive, or corrupting" methods to shape the international world order in areas favorable to CCP interests.

Beijing also has the advantage of platforms like TikTok and WeChat (Chinese-originated applications) that are increasingly used all over the world, which have been used as tools to control and suppress information, especially as it relates to CCP priorities. In particular, the Chinese government blocks information on WeChat and even removes information from private chats.[83] In this way, Beijing controls the narrative about the PRC and maintains a positive image as an alternative to a democratic society. While Beijing has seemingly chosen to focus on the Chinese diaspora, Chinese mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as places to utilize their influencing strategy, the CCP is working to perfect this strategy in order to utilize it in other contexts abroad to influence public opinion.[84]

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the Beijing-based StarTimes television operator provides a popular digital television service, including CCP state propaganda, in the cheapest package available but does not offer alternative international media outlets.[85] StarTimes Vice Chairman Guo Ziqi has stated that their aim is "to enable every African household to afford digital TV, watch good digital TV, and enjoy the digital life." Ultimately, however, this highlights China's strategy of showcasing a positive image toward the world and providing services to developing countries at scale, albeit through the lens of the CCP. Beijing presents itself as a developing country among equals in the developing world and encourages those countries to replicate the CCP's authoritarian governance if they want to pursue economic development without democratization.[86] This view is explicitly intended to offer an alternative to U.S. international leadership and democratic governance. It is also a central tenet of Beijing's media strategy.

The CCP's investment in media bureaus overseas, content-sharing agreements, and the distribution of content in multiple languages clearly exemplifies Beijing's strategy to influence positive attitudes toward China globally. A 2015 Reuters investigation found that CCP-funded programming was available in 14 different countries.[87] By 2018, a *Guardian* report revealed that the number had grown considerably to 58 stations in 35 countries.[88]



III. PART THREE: HOW DOES DISINFORMATION WORK ONLINE?

The business models at major social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google are built on data-targeted advertising and algorithmically optimized filtering. This model is highly advantageous for coordinated inauthentic actors who have the funds to achieve their strategic goals. The fact that these social media companies' business models are based on automated algorithmic filtering and targeted advertising means that much of the content that is being promoted is targeting similar sects of people. This can lead to malign actors targeting people who will be more susceptible to their messages and these people then sharing with others in their network, thereby creating an echo chamber around a topic with information that may be false and misleading.

Photo: ©2020 Unsplash/Brett Jordan

Disinformation thrives best in digital spaces when dissemination agents can construct an effective illusion that changes the behaviors of many authentic users in ways that verify, elevate, and amplify false narratives. Behavior change is sought around things like voting behavior, physical confrontations, conflict, geopolitical orientation, and disruption of democratic deliberation. To better understand the way new technology is used to manipulate social media users and disinform the public, it is imperative to understand some key terms in this field and that this is an evolving space and new types of manipulation are likely to appear.

While there are a multitude of actors working to spread disinformation around the world, research and evidence supports that state actors, and specifically political candidates and national leaders, are increasingly utilizing social media platforms to spread disinformation about their opponents, manipulate voters, and shape elections. Although in the past, negative campaigning has been utilized in close races and against opponents, the difference now can be seen in the use of artificial intelligence, sophisticated data analytics, and political trolls and bots. Information pollution is increasingly used as a tool to encourage skepticism and distrust and polarize voting constituencies and undermine the democratic process.[89]

The spread of disinformation can occur through manual channels that require manpower, automation, or a combination of both. The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) published a 2019 report that finds "growing evidence of computational propaganda around the world."[90] OII's Propaganda Research Project (COMPROP) investigates the interaction of algorithms, automation, and politics. Their work includes analysis of how tools like social media bots are used to manipulate public opinion by amplifying

or repressing political content, disinformation, hate speech, and junk news. COMPROP found evidence of organized social media manipulation campaigns in 70 countries, up from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017.

Manipulation Technique Key Terms and Definitions

Astroturfing: An organized activity that is intended to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement in support of or in opposition to something (such as a political policy) but that is initiated and controlled by a concealed group or organization (such as a corporation).

Bots: Social media accounts that are operated entirely by computer programs and are designed to generate posts and/or engage with content on a particular platform.

Clickbait: Something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest.[91] This tactic involves creating a misleading or inaccurate post using a provocative headline or image that lures the victim to click and read the content, which is often unrelated or less sensational than the headline itself.

Content Farm: A website or company that creates low-quality content aimed at improving its search engine rankings. Also known as a content mill or factory, its main purpose is to maximize pageviews and revenue generated by advertising on those pages while minimizing the costs and time needed to create the content.[92]

Cyber Troops: Government or political party actors tasked with the use of social media to manipulate public opinion online.[93]

Gaslighting: Technique of deception and psychological manipulation practiced by a deceiver, or "gaslighter," on victims over an extended period. Its effect is to gradually undermine the victims' confidence in their own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance, thereby rendering them pathologically dependent on the gaslighter.[94]

Manufactured Amplification: Occurs when the reach or spread of information is boosted through artificial means.[95]

Microtargeting: To direct tailored advertisements, political messages, etc., at (people) based on detailed information about them (such as what they buy, watch, or respond to on a website); to target (small groups of people) for highly specific advertisements or messages.[96]

Sock Puppets: A sock puppet is an online account that uses a false identity designed specifically to deceive. Sock puppets are used on social platforms to spread or amplify false information to a mass audience.[97]

Trolling: The act of deliberately posting offensive or inflammatory content to an online community with the intent of provoking readers or disrupting conversation. The term "troll" is most often used to refer to any person harassing or insulting others online.[98]

Troll Farm: A group of individuals engaging in trolling or bot-like promotion of narratives in a coordinated fashion.[99]

This research is important to track as it shows the growth in use of computational propaganda (using algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks) and social media manipulation by countries, governments, corporations, private actors, civil society, and parties.[100]

The OII research includes a systematic content analysis of news articles on cyber troop activity; a secondary literature review examined public archives and scientific reports, country-specific case studies, and expert consultations. Of the 70 countries where social media manipulation campaigns occurred in 2019, OII broke down the demographics of global disinformation spread as such:

- 87 percent used human accounts.
- 80 percent used bot accounts.
- 11 percent used cyborg (bot + human) accounts.
- 7 percent used hacked or stolen accounts.

OII's report offers other key findings that synthesize both demographic and psychographic data about global disinformation spreaders. The findings demonstrate the adaptability of digital disinformation campaigns that can be employed by a variety of players and the prominence of Facebook as the platform of choice when engaging in digital manipulation campaigns.

Countering Malign Influence Requires Awareness on Data Protection

The Cambridge Analytica (CA) scandal provides an important case study on the relevance of psychographics and how they are used and manipulated in disinformation campaigns with devastating outcomes for events such as elections.

Of interest to the CA story is how Facebook data could be mined for millions of people and then used to create psychographic profiles. These profiles, in turn, were used for marketing and microtargeting campaigns. According to reports by NBC, "The idea behind the project was that political preferences can be predicted by personal details that people voluntarily provide on their social media accounts. By analyzing the details that users share online, CA could predict individual behavior, which included voter preferences and how to influence that preference."

For an in-depth look at the CA-Facebook scandal, watch the documentary *The Great Hack*, which shows how illicit use of personal data can be harvested and used for malign purposes.

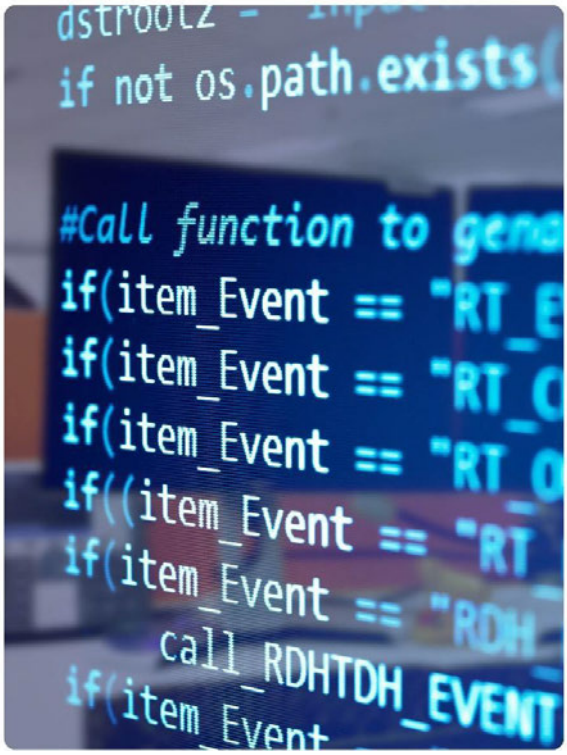
Gaining a better understanding of the "who" is imperative to all facets of re-establishing information integrity within an information ecosystem. Knowledge of these profiles, their motives, and favored modes of digital intervention should inform both the information diagnostic process and tactical solutions to suppress the circulation of false news.

A. How Algorithms Amplify Disinformation

An algorithm, as a sequence of instructions telling a computer what to do, is usually built to collect information, recognize patterns, or reach people with particular profiles. Where they can find out how the algorithm works, disinformation agents can craft dissemination strategies to piggyback on a platform's algorithm. In other words, players can game the algorithm to gain access to more digital real estate than would otherwise be possible through simple manpower.

While platform algorithms present users with a litany of navigational and engagement options, they are generally built to elevate and amplify engagement to generate profits. Social media platforms amass

profits through paid, targeted advertisement. Through user data analysis, brands can locate specific social media profiles and audiences whose interests, beliefs, and social behaviors align with their target market audience.



Posts and threads that garner lots of attention and engagement become prime real estate for marketing. Platforms, therefore, are financially incentivized to attune algorithms to amplify posts with the most engagement. Disinformation narratives, troll attacks, gaslighting, and clickbait can generate outrage, opposition, ugly discourse, and/or salacious curiosity that will keep the user's attention and engagement. In this way, computational platform algorithms become accomplices to the dissemination of disinformation because the discourse, which undergirds platform profits, is effectively programmed to elevate sensational content.[101]

Noteworthy in understanding the significance of algorithms: these systems shape the information environment regardless of manipulation from disinformation actors, i.e., YouTube's recommendation algorithm or Facebook's Newsfeed make decisions about what billions of people see by prioritizing types of content they can limit what you see. The key takeaway: bad actors can exploit the algorithm, but without more transparency and accountability we can have bad information outcomes even without bad actors.[102] It is also worth noting the importance of algorithms and the effect they can have on news outlets' business model and bottom line in a digital economy. In the business model of social media platforms' algorithms prioritizing content that gets the most views and interaction, which often prioritizes disinformation and misinformation since they spread more quickly and widely.

B. Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior

Coordinated inauthentic behavior[103] (CIB) is a term coined by Facebook in 2018 to describe the operation of running fake accounts and pages on an online social platform to influence discourse among users. Facebook releases monthly reports that track CIB on its platform and the actions it has taken to address it. As a violation of its community standards, Facebook will remove posts deemed to be taking part in CIB.[104] For the purpose of this primer, we will be discussing coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of political actors.

Advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, search engine optimization, and bots have allowed for disinformation agents to manipulate information and influence the public sphere using coordinated inauthentic activity. They contribute to a significantly less free internet, where certain voices are amplified above others because of the resources at their disposal and the malicious practices they utilize. Some have called this tactic "censorship by noise," in which artificially amplified narratives and campaigns drown out legitimate dissent.

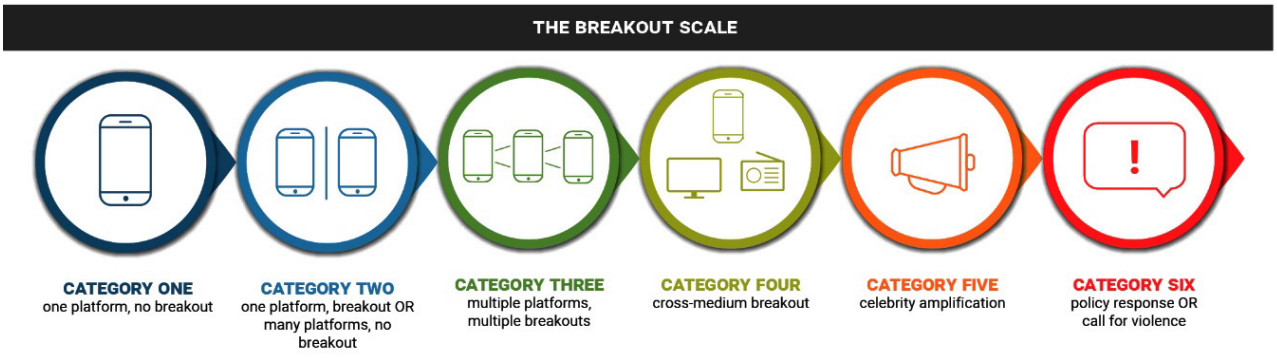
In particular, coordinated inauthentic actors have been able to utilize online systems to their advantage by using algorithms. Algorithms offer a unique opportunity for actors to coordinate messages because many times, the users they hope to influence reside in a filter bubble of content with other users who share similar beliefs and ideals. In turn, these filter bubbles allow content that may otherwise be flagged as inauthentic or false to pass by undetected. As Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott argue, targeting and using these algorithms is not an abuse of the platforms as they were designed to market and sell to us; however, the unintended consequences can undermine democracy and spread disinformation.[105]

C. How Disinformation Spreads Across Online Platforms/Applications

Disinformation agents have a variety of advantages when utilizing the internet and social media platforms to share content. Strategies used to mask the originator include the placement, layering, and integration of media messages; this makes it difficult for fact-checking organizations to trace the source of the disinformation. Disinformation agents often obscure their efforts in order to dust off their fingerprints and in doing so work through proxies. While finding the origin of the information is possible, it requires a level of investigative journalism to track it down beyond the capacity of most users and journalists. Additionally, tech companies' advertising models, which are primarily focused on maximizing profit, contribute to the spread. Finally, the organic information ecosystem also makes it easier for information to spread, and the message to be amplified. In sum, the cumulative effective of disinformation has varying degrees of impact, ranging from little to no effect to causing severe harm.

The "breakout scale" (Figure 10) provides useful indicators of the growth of disinformation across online platforms. Each of its six categories demonstrates a growing impact as content travels across multiple platforms (even including offline media and policy debates) and whether it will remain isolated to a few communities or spread through many communities and become a larger or even global phenomenon.[106] The importance of the work by Nimmo and others seeking to map, measure, and understand the disinformation effect on society is that there's an urgent need to put in place preventative measures, including undertaking research studies and engaging in ongoing media monitoring in order to be prepared for the amplification of disinformation that can lead to chaos or worse.

Figure 10: Ben Nimmo's, Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations



Source: https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-breakout-scale-measuring-the-impact-of-influence-operations/

Disinformation Spread on Social Media Platforms[107]

In a few decades, the online media industry has grown from a new frontier with privileged access for tech-savvy groups and individuals to one that supports the most profitable and growing industries. The internet provides a unique advantage for malign actors to spread false content and let it organically amplify as it spreads across platforms. Some conspiracy theories and false claims originate on niche platforms such as conspiracy forums on 4chan or Discord or gaming platforms like Twitch. Platforms such as these enable users to coordinate to grow followers and spread content to large social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.[108]

In this way, platforms that cater to very niche and small audiences have significant influence. A post shared from one of these original sites can cross to intermediate sites such as Twitter, direct-messaging groups, and Reddit, where they gain traction and are then be amplified further on massive social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. Journalists, politicians, and influencers find the content and push it on to even larger audiences. This content now becomes part of the public record and credible news outlets often feel obliged to cover or debunk it, providing it with even more traction. In this way, disinformation goes viral, self-propagating itself from fringe groups to major news outlets. As disinformation takes over, it is an enormous challenge to halt its momentum or inoculate people against it.

The rise of big data analytics, "black box" algorithms (an invisible process through which machines learn about social patterns), and computational propaganda (use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks) have raised concerns from policymakers. The social media business model that includes advertising and data sales promotes controversial posts and information (even though Facebook and YouTube have worked on addressing this lately). These promotion tools have been used in many countries to expand the reach of divisive social media campaigns, to intensify political conflict, and to weaken public trust in the media, democratic institutions, and electoral outcomes. The threats to democracy are further intensified by micro-targeting of messages to specific users through sophisticated and proprietary algorithms.

As *Foreign Policy* argued in an article's headline: Disinformation Is Drowning Democracy:

> "In the new age of lies, law, not tech, is the answer. From India to Indonesia to Brazil, democracy is being compromised by online domestic disinformation campaigns from political parties seeking to gain an advantage. Democratic institutions have not been able to keep up and have instead deferred to tech firms, trusting them to referee online behavior. But this is a task far beyond the limited capabilities and narrow motivations of companies such as Facebook and Twitter. If the democratic recession is to end, democratic institutions need to create new rules and hold the responsible parties to account.[109] "

Disinformation Spread on Chat Applications

It is also important to recognize the role that chat applications such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram play in the spread of online disinformation. Particularly in countries in Africa and the Middle East and the Global South as a whole, chat applications are an important medium being used to disseminate key political information, activity coordination, and a platform for sharing news and current events. Additionally, many of these chat applications in the Global South host large groups in

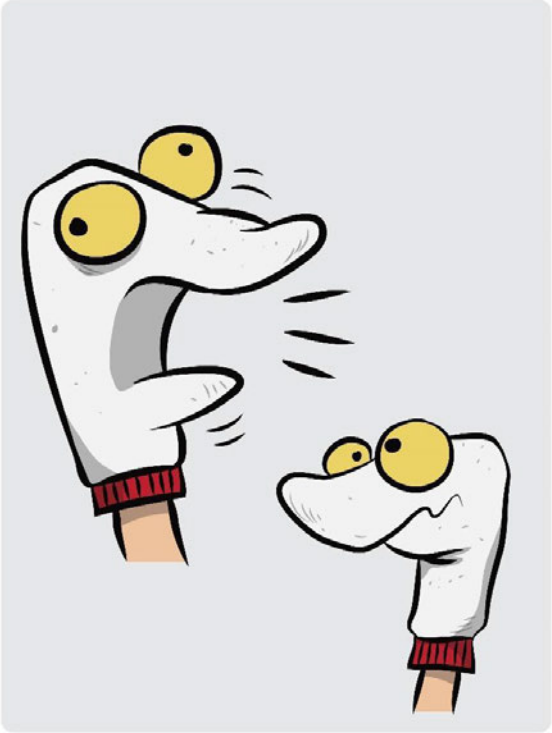
which entire communities can participate. A 2018 Oxford report on computational propaganda found evidence of social media manipulation campaigns occurring on chat platforms in about a fifth of the countries that were surveyed; many of the countries were from the Global South.[110]

Chat applications are closed - metrics and data about how they work are not accessible. They are therefore hard for researchers to study and difficult for companies to moderate. The applications use end-to-end encryption and offer users security and privacy. Growing in usage globally, these applications have the potential to spread messages to rather large groups. Because of this, some have been limiting the size of groups with whom you can share to address large-scale dissemination of mis/disinformation. Another response to slow the viral spread of mis/disinformation on closed messaging platforms has been to limit the number of times a user can share messages. More on WhatsApp and closed messaging systems is found above in the section on Context and Social Factors of Disinformation (page 13).

D. Troll Farms and Sock Puppets: Case Study from the Philippines

A case study that illustrates many of these tactics is the current state of information disorder in the Philippines, widely considered to be patient zero of the disinformation tactics that are now used globally.[111] Because Facebook *is* the internet in the Philippines, content farms, troll farms, and sock puppets have been effective in both the spread of disinformation and the suppression of opposition voices.

Troll Farm: A clear example of a troll farm is Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte's propagated use of trolls to target and defame political opponent and vocal critic Leila de Lima. After pornographic images went viral in 2016, in which de Lima was falsely attributed as the woman pictured, troll farms coordinated by the Duterte election campaign pushed the false narrative within Facebook communities.[112] Trolls used the false content to shame her, attribute her to other scandals, and attack de Lima's character in efforts to delegitimize her as a viable political candidate in the then-upcoming election.[113] Though the video was ultimately exposed as false, de Lima's reputation was stained, and she was arrested on drug charges, which she denies, six months later.[114] Since her detainment, critics have pointed to trolls' spreading of conspiracy theories and misinformation on Facebook to helping lead to her arrest, as well as to distort the public's understanding of the national issue of drugs and further damage the country's democratic processes.[115]



Sock Puppet: The publication *Rappler* investigated suspicious accounts linked to online Facebook groups and came across "Mutya Bautista," a supposed software analyst at a Filipino broadcast network using a Korean pop star's picture for their profile. Although "Bautista" has only 21 Facebook friends, they are connected to over 160 groups, each with tens of thousands of members. In these groups, the persona and other sock puppet accounts chime into political discussions with

real users, repeat false narratives, post politically motivated family anecdotes, and link to false news stories in comments.[116] Sock puppets such as "Mutya Bautista" can be used to support the illusion that false narratives are believed by regular citizens or to drown out those voicing opposition to the falsities in attempts to sway opinion on the perceived power and support behind their position.



IV. PART FOUR: WHAT SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO DISINFORMATION?

This part explores the social dimension of disinformation, drawing from the latest psychological and sociological research, to consider why we are so susceptible, as humans, to disinformation. It is essential to understand why humans are susceptible to misinformation and disinformation and who is vulnerable. People not only consume disinformation; they call for it themselves, demanding content that they think serves a purpose in their lives, whether it is true or not or in their own interest. How do we understand the factors that drive this consumption of disinformation (the demand side) and make it more likely to be accepted and actionable? And what do we need to know about the social factors promoting the production of disinformation (the supply side)?

Photo: ©2020 Unsplash/Mike Stoll

A. CONSUMPTION OF DISINFORMATION (THE DEMAND SIDE)

A useful—although imprecise—distinction about the drivers of disinformation is that they can be passive or active. Passive drivers are largely subconscious; they require no conscious motivation for individuals to seek out and consume false claims. For example, a person may share information without even reading if it comes from a trusted family member or friend (this is called "familiarity effect;" see Annex 4: Passive & Active Drivers of Disinformation). On the other hand, active drivers are informed by an individual's thought processes and efforts to understand ideas and reach conclusions through cognitive processes.[118] In this way, a person may believe information that confirms or conforms to a deeply held conviction (confirmation bias).[119]

Some passive and active drivers of disinformation and the reasons disinformation can be psychologically difficult to discern are described below.

Passive Drivers of Disinformation

In general, people are great passive consumers of information that is passed on to them. This tendency is amplified online and can result in many individuals reading and reacting to often emotionally provocative content. Coordinated inauthentic actors rely on this emotional content, to reinforce or encourage people to act. In evaluating what factors lead to accepting information without taking the time to critically engage with it, Woolley and Joseff provide a useful list of cognitive drivers (see Annex 4, Passive and Active Drivers of Disinformation, for more detailed definitions of passive drivers of disinformation) that make it difficult for an individual to discern between truth and falsity and, in turn, make it easier to manipulate them into believing false content.

For example, online content, such as pictures of people in distress, can prime individuals ("priming") by reinforcing existing subconscious biases, thus shaping their perceptions or behaviors. Or by the repetition of a claim ("repeat exposure") many times over, a claim that was clearly false on first reading may be taken as more valid than it is. "Truth biases" such as the tendency to believe printed or online claims on their face may generally serve us well; in the digital sphere, however, they also open us up to even absurd claims.

People tend to overestimate the depth of their knowledge regarding topics they care about. This provides them with an illusion of truth or explanatory depth in the information presented to which they are exposed[120] and may reinforce their beliefs. This "belief perseverance" may be helpful to explain why individuals often remain staunch in their beliefs even after reading contradictory claims. When individuals are asked to think critically about their beliefs and shown information that contradicts them, they often maintain that their beliefs are still correct. Such perseverance of beliefs even when they have been debunked by fact-checking has been thought to create a "backfire effect" in which beliefs are reinforced by the attempt to debunk them. However, some current research suggests that debunking efforts may work well if the facts are relatively unambiguous.[121]

Active Drivers of Disinformation

Active drivers are distinguished by the conscious pursuit of fact claims that serve the purpose of the information consumer. Woolley and Joseff's list illustrates some of the reasons that drive people to seek out false information. (See Annex 4, Passive and Active Drivers for Disinformation, for more detailed definitions of passive drivers of disinformation.)

A common driver is "directionally motivated reasoning" in which people actively consume disinformation to reinforce a specific conclusion they want to reach for political, ideological reasons or in order to reinforce their preexisting opinions (see also "confirmation bias" and "prior attitude effect").[122]

Even if an individual knows that information is false, she or he may be driven to believe it anyway. This often relates to societal pressures that may influence which beliefs individuals publicly adhere to.

An individual might think it is important to believe even dangerous ideas if they are important to a group in which she or he belongs ("bandwagon effect"). Similar to this phenomenon is "consensus bias," in which an individual may believe false claims because of the perception that everybody else believes them and "in-group favoritism" in which specific group identities are at stake.

Often, active consumption of disinformation may require a person to ignore contradictory beliefs or knowledge of facts. This effect, "preference falsification," occurs when individuals suppress their true opinion in favor of societal pressure to support another preference.[123]

The rapid spread of and demand for disinformation may be attributed to laziness or lack of capacity to exercise critical thinking when consuming information. Gordon Pennycook and David Rand, psychologists who have studied and research psychological demand for disinformation, examined the extent to which participants were able to think critically about disinformation in a series of cognitive tests. They showed participants true and false headlines taken from social media from diverse sides of the political spectrum. The results of the study showed that participants who on the first test had shown

preference for utilizing their cognitive reflection did better at discerning the true headlines from the false no matter their political affiliations. [124]

B. PRODUCTION OF DISINFORMATION (THE SUPPLY SIDE)

Anyone with a keyboard can produce disinformation (the supply side) in the form of posts on social media or on the profusion of "news" sites catering to every taste. Disinformation is produced by governments, companies, and individuals to purposefully manipulate public perception and political events.

On social media, fact-checking services are still-developing rules and algorithms are starting to scrutinize this information supply. But even while it is possible to take down or remove the worst posts, for every post taken down multiple mutations of the original disinformation will take their place. Twitter received 27,500 legal requests to remove tweets from July to December 2019 from 98,000 accounts due to suspicious activity.[125] However, this cut-off of supply can have a strangling effect on free expression: as Twitter notes, 193 accounts subject to legal action by governments were of verified journalists and news outlets, and much of the removed information continues to circulate in some form of retweets.

Outrage over "fake news" is overwhelmingly targeted at the creators and distributors of misinformation. That is understandable since they are responsible for releasing half-truths and outright falsehoods into the wild. However, there are indubitably as many drivers or reasons for producing disinformation as there are human interests—albeit political destabilization, ideology, hate, illegal activity, theft, and other criminal activity are age-old motivators. Many observers stress that the supply of disinformation will always be an issue, but we must really focus on the demand side as much as possible.[126]

On the other hand, most suppliers of disinformation are not criminal elements and the ability to understand the motive and the capacity of the supplier to discern the truth are a significant component of digital media literacy. As Pennycook and Rand point out, "Analytic thinking is used to assess the plausibility of headlines, regardless of whether the stories are consistent or inconsistent with one's political ideology."[127] Memes are an important delivery mechanism for producers of disinformation. The disinformation narrative is often couched in the form of memes (an idea that propagates rapidly). The term is now used most frequently to describe captioned photos or GIFs that spread online; the most effective are humorous or critical of society.[128] Memes can be fun to share, but researchers note they also can be dangerous and are a common means through which disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation is spread.[129] They are considered effective because they are catchy, they go viral or have the tendency to spread fast, and they can be shared widely to a large group of followers with relative ease.[130]

Meme Warfare: Design in the Age of Disinformation

The internet dream has become a nightmare as the information we share is increasingly false and misleading, often with tragic real-world consequences. This video features designer and illustrator Dan Stiles, whose clients range from Arctic Monkeys and Tom Petty to McDonalds and Google, as he examines our role as creatives tasked with creating, collecting, and disseminating information in this radically altered media environment and what we can do to help restore order.

Source: https://www.adobe.com/max/2020/sessions/meme-warfare-design-in-the-age-of-disinformation-od6303.html

C. EXPOSING DISINFORMATION

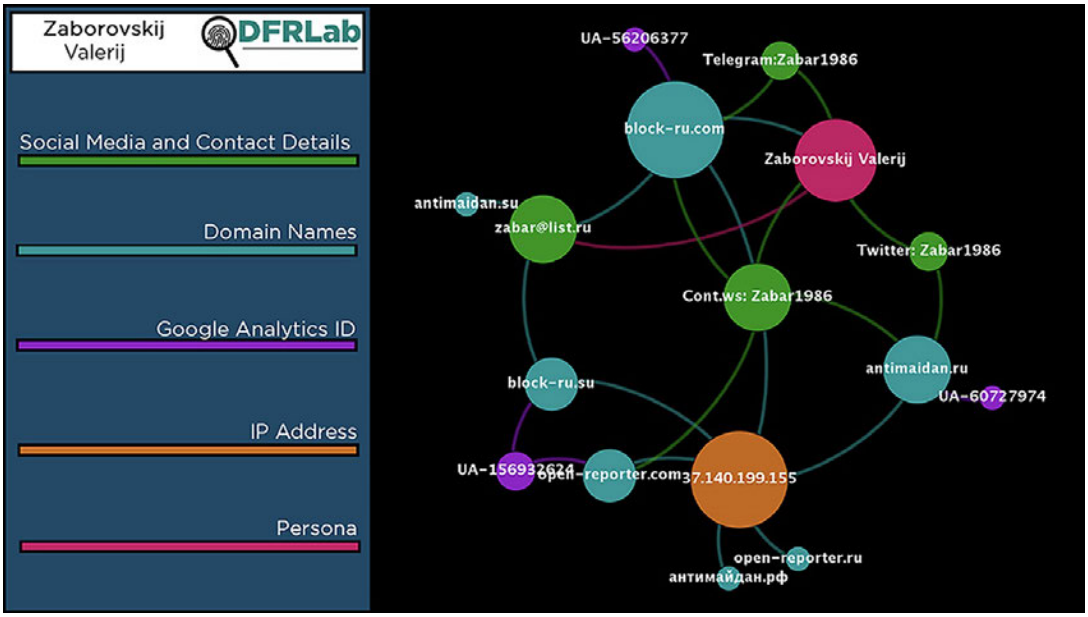
When we have evidence of disinformation messages and hate speech and believe they are spreading rapidly, how do we monitor and find out through appropriate research how and how broadly they are circulating? Digital forensics and network analyses as well as traditional media monitoring have emerged as some of the best approaches to track the flow of disinformation. Exposing disinformation is often the first step in countering it.

Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis is a useful research method both as a diagnostic tool and as a means to develop a strategy for countering and preventing disinformation. Exposing disinformation is really the first thing you need to do. It is the first intervention that must happen and this research can provide an evidence base to inform program design. The analysis of social networks and their role in diffusing new ideas or deepening belief in existing ideas has been advancing rapidly in the last decades. Detailing types of relationships, gaps, and strongly interconnected communities help to understand both the capacity of false information to propagate and the difficulty in correcting it in isolated communities.

Social network "diffusion models" developed originally for epidemiological purposes to track the spread of disease are used regularly to provide graphic maps and algorithms tracking the spread of disinformation. The diffusion model in Figure 11 (below) shows how a network of social media, individuals, and domains enabled the spread of a Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation campaign in Ukrainian elections.[131] Diffusion models have been particularly helpful in understanding the reach and impact of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to trace the sources of information through social media posts and reposts. Social network analysis is a useful research method both as a diagnostic tool and to develop a strategy for countering and preventing disinformation.

Figure 11: Valerij Zaborovskij's Diffusion Model



A network is a complex system of actors—called "nodes" in graphic representation—each connected by a series of relationships. Information as well as resources can pass between nodes that have established some relationship. A relationship need not be a deep one. In fact, distant relationships, sometimes with

people whom we have never even met, can open access to new ways of thinking or to resources that are otherwise out of our reach.[132] In a network graph, the weight or strength of the relationship, the direction of the relationship and the degree or distance of people connected by multiple relationships all can tell us something about how rapidly and effectively a piece of information will pass from one person to many.

The graphs in Figure 8 and 9 shows how a network formed around attempts to influence international perceptions on pro-Indonesia disinformation about the separations movement in West Papua. As Benjamin Strick shared in a blog post, "The campaign, fueled by a network of bot accounts on Twitter, expanded to Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. The content spread in tweets using specific hashtags such as #FreeWestPapua, #WestPapuaGenocide, #WestPapua and #fwpc."[133] The full SNA graph produced by Strick can seem daunting (see below); however, it contains important information. If we zoom in on a section, for example, the graph reveals central nodes—actors who are important to disseminating information widely. Knowing this can improve the focus of countering disinformation programming and help to cut off disinformation flows.

Figure 12: Full SNA on Disinformation in West Papua

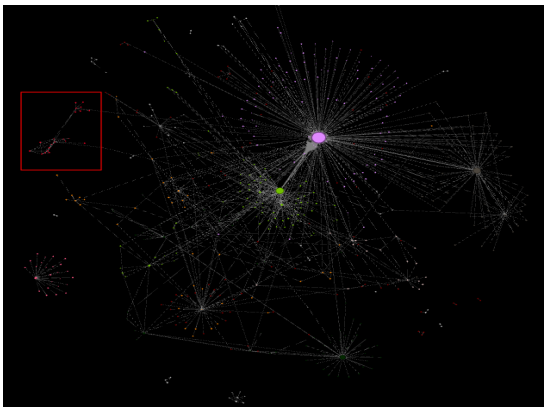
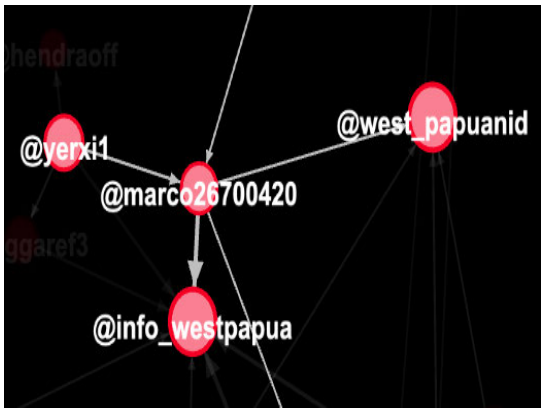


Figure 13: Zoomed in SNA for Papua, Showing Central Nodes



Another social network analysis, conducted by Graphika, linked inauthentic coordinated behavior to influence the 2020 elections in Myanmar to the military who displaced civilian leadership in a coup in January 2021. The analysis tracked numbers of posts, numbers of shared posts, and even the time of day in which posts were shared to reveal the coordination.[134] Facebook removed over 70 accounts. According to Graphika's report that details the social network analysis research:

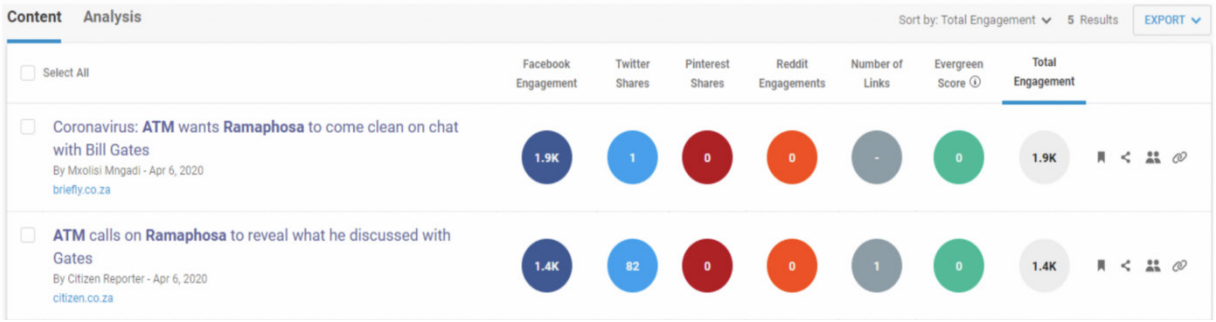
> As it announced the takedown, Facebook said, "We identified clusters of connected activity that relied on a combination of fake, duplicate and authentic accounts to post content, evade enforcement and removal, manage Pages and drive people to off-platform websites including military-controlled media domains. These accounts often used stock female profile photos and photos of celebrities and social-media influencers. … We began our investigation after reviewing local public reporting about some elements of this activity. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to members of the Myanmar military."[135]

Digital Forensics

Digital forensics take a deep look at the data about posts (e.g., number of shared posts). Two of the most-followed fake accounts removed by Facebook this year were focused on Philippine news,

according to network analysis firm Graphika. Digital forensics found these originated from individuals in China; Facebook has also shut down another account with links to Philippine military and police.[136]

Figure 14: Forensics on the Spread of Fake Coronavirus Information by Fringe Parties in South Africa



Source: DFRLab

Figure 14 uses digital metrics to quantify the spread of disinformation about coronavirus by South African fringe parties, showing how significant a role Facebook played. Forensics such as these are very helpful in identifying both where and how people are engaged in the digital media ecosystem.[137]

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab (DFRLab) publishes research along these lines. Looking at how Facebook identified and removed disinformation posts associated with the United Russia party, the research considers the wide scope of data that can be gathered from likes to followers and the types of online activity carried out by suspicious accounts. A look at how these digital networks are connected provides us with a map that can inform policy that would target the most central players, as represented by the larger circles, representing domains, social media accounts, implementing partner addresses, personas, and Google analytics IDs. Based on this network map, for example, one might expect that a counter-campaign would target and watch for information passing by these means. Facebook, for example, removed 40 specific user accounts, 17 pages, one group, and six Instagram accounts for coordinated inauthentic behavior.[138] Digital forensics (often available as open-source software) provide available data on the backend of internet use—unique users, page clicks, and visits, for example—as critical clues about the spread and origins of mis/disinformation. The approach can help supply data needed for Social Network Analysis (SNA for short) in the digital realm and quantitative information on the reach of websites or other platforms that are needed to inform counter disinformation programming.

Data Analytics for Social Media Monitoring

Data Analytics for Social Media Monitoring : NDI Guidance on Social Media Monitoring and Analysis Techniques, Tools and Methodologies is a guide to help researchers, election observers, technologists and others understand the best practices, tools, and methodologies for developing online observation and monitoring for social media networks. It presents an introduction to the relevant concepts when studying these issues, as well as a review of how to build a complete picture of the socio-technical context in a country or region, including the local parties' online presence, social media and internet penetration rates, local media, ethnic and religious divisions, and a host of other factors that manifest in the online space.

Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_Social%20Media%20Monitoring%20Guide%20ADJUSTED%20COVER.pdf

The National Democratic Institute has developed robust data collection guidelines to help researchers, election observers, media programs, and others to compile and collect meaningful digital forensics and improve media monitoring efforts.[139]

Media Monitoring

While digital forensics focus more on the means and sources of disinformation, media monitoring efforts highlight content issues to understand the impacts and way in which untrue narratives are being constructed. Methods can include social media monitoring, message monitoring, social listening, and more traditional content analysis. All these methods consider the actual words and meanings used to construct disinformation.

Social media monitoring is the process of identifying and determining what is being said about an issue, individual, or group through different social and online channels. It is also used by businesses to protect and enhance the reputation of their brands and products. The method uses bots to crawl the internet and index messages based on a set of keywords and phrases.[140]

Message monitoring analyzes the tropes, narratives or specific messages that a bad actor is putting forward. In this way, it monitors platforms to look at what are the key messages that extremist or conspiracy groups are putting out to see if there are specific messages that they are repeating in talking points. This is a way to understand how individuals are recruited by groups like Al Shabab in Somalia, in order to counter their influence. In long-term programs, such as democracy building or civil society strengthening, it is helpful to look at sources of disinformation and monitor the messages over time.

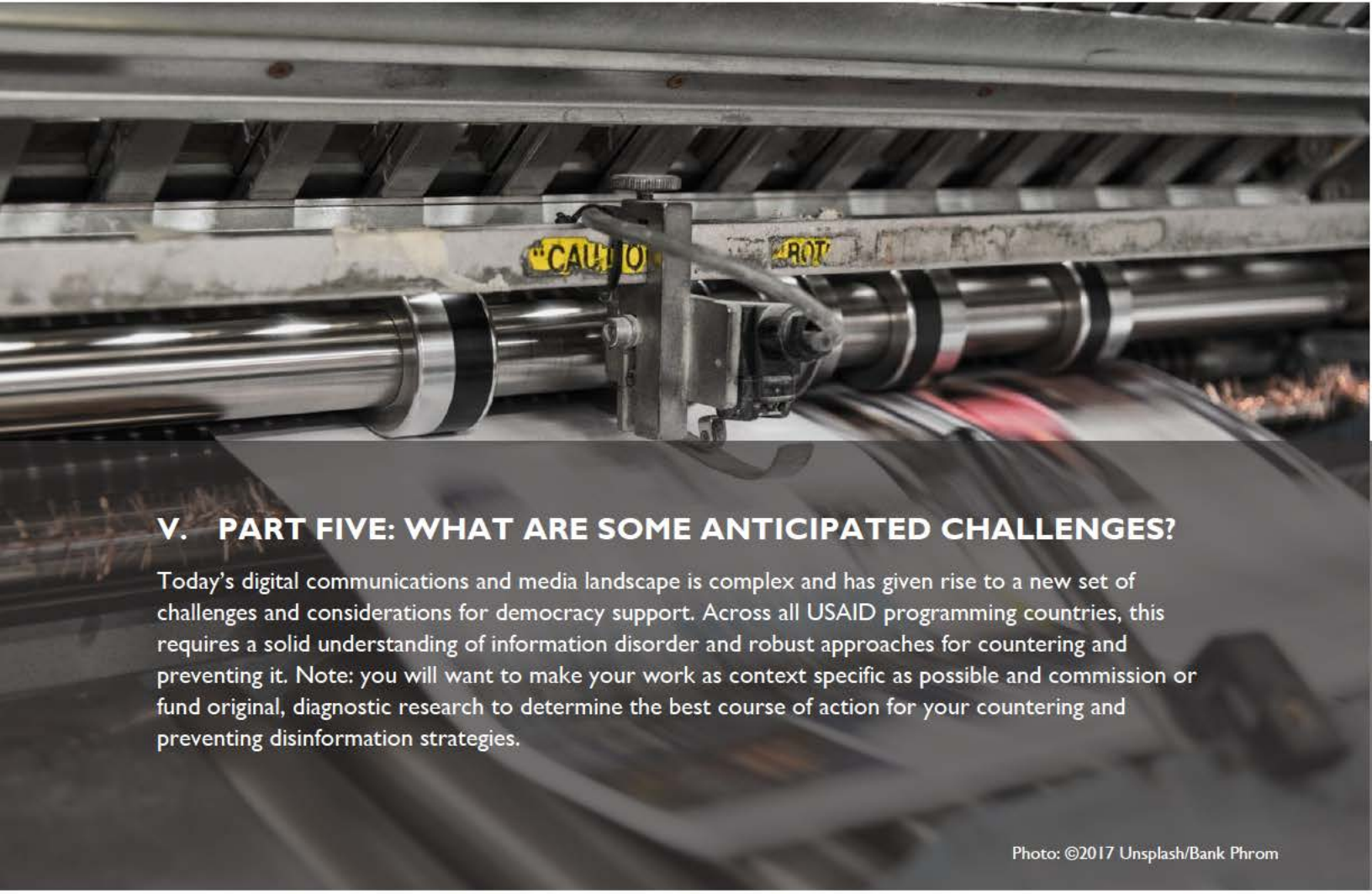
Social media listening is a means of attaining interpersonal information and social intelligence from social media to understand how relationships are formed and influence the way we listen to and communicate with one another.[141] Fact-checkers can use social listening to develop a more comprehensive understanding of disinformation consumption and groups that might find value in receiving fact-checked articles. Social media listening tools often measure positive, negative, or neutral sentiment. Listening takes perceptions and emotions into account and has been an area of growth among corporations as a way of improving their marketing. Surveys and interviews as well as coding messages for emotional content are ways to listen in on how messages are moving individuals. This can be particularly powerful in campaigns against disinformation because it enables reacting in real time to would-be consumers of disinformation, as well as addressing the issues that make them susceptible to it.

Natural language processing (NLP) is the relationship between computers and human language content. It refers to speech analysis in both audible speech, as well as text of a language. NLP systems capture meaning from an input of words (sentences, paragraphs, pages, etc.). In this way, NLP proponents are working toward a greater capacity of computers to detect fake or fabricated messages that are often couched as satire or hidden within unrelated topics.

For more information, see the Media Monitoring section of Annex 5: Section-by-Section Resources.

Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) is another strategy utilized for identifying and debunking disinformation. This refers to the multi-method approach of collecting and analyzing free, publicly available information and cross referencing it against other public sources.[142] Publicly available information often includes material from satellite images, social media posts, YouTube videos, and online databases, among other sources.[143] OSINT is noted for its accessibility as a free tool that anyone can use.

For more examples, see the OSINT section of Annex 6: Section-by-Section Resources.



V. PART FIVE: WHAT ARE SOME ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES?

Today's digital communications and media landscape is complex and has given rise to a new set of challenges and considerations for democracy support. Across all USAID programming countries, this requires a solid understanding of information disorder and robust approaches for countering and preventing it. Note: you will want to make your work as context specific as possible and commission or fund original, diagnostic research to determine the best course of action for your countering and preventing disinformation strategies.

Photo: ©2017 Unsplash/Bank Phrom

Looking forward, combatting disinformation will remain a serious challenge for societies around the world and a danger to democratic governance. As technology continues to outpace the development of solutions, disinformation tactics will adapt and innovate to remain effective. These inevitable cycles of new disinformation techniques and solutions that provide temporary patches are evolving and becoming more sophisticated in the global competition over the control of information.

Future action should concentrate more on critical research and the expansion of knowledge on technology innovation, programming, and information systems. There remains ample opportunity to explore and develop more tech-based tools and approaches. However, to best address disinformation, action and research cannot be left to technology experts alone: the general public and civil society organizations need to gain a basic understanding and grasp of digital and information literacy.

The following sections present a sample of trending disinformation tactics, rising threats, and potential opportunities. As technology continues to innovate and learn from its previous shortcomings, new evolutions of tools and tactics present concern for future information disorder. From the expansion of artificial intelligence capabilities to the exploitation of existing vulnerabilities, anti-disinformation approaches will face new challenges from varying angles.

A. EXPLOITATION OF AREAS OF DECLINING MEDIA COVERAGE

The changing media landscape, from the closure of newsrooms and print newspapers to the rise of digital media consumption, has led to the emergence of news deserts: areas in which residents have limited access to news and information outlets.[144] News deserts can include areas where news is unavailable in minority languages, areas in conflict, and areas with a high degree of state control. The problem of news deserts is a familiar problem in international development: addressing the lack of access to news in the Global South is the focus of the media development sector.



Research from the University of North Carolina found that news deserts tend to occur in communities that are much poorer, less educated, and older.[145] In a period marked by disinformation and misinformation, the rise of news deserts positions already-vulnerable populations in an even more disadvantageous situation, cutting them off from critical access to education, health, safety, and political information, among other topics. It also has a negative effect on local governance—the management of budgets, elections, and local problem-solving, for example.

Although local newspapers have tried to transition to digital operations, the rise of Big Tech has inhibited their success. With Facebook and Google sharing 80 percent of the digital ad market, smaller organizations are left competing amongst themselves for the remainder of the market, limiting the amount of ad revenue they can generate.[146] Steve Cavendish explains that "print dollars that many news chains have walked away from have been replaced by digital dimes or even digital pennies," leaving them to scale back or close. Ultimately, the rise in news deserts may result in more people turning to social media as their primary sources for news and information. While social media platforms may be widely accessible, they continue to be channels for disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation to spread. These platforms are not a replacement for the institution of a democratic, free media.

Consequently, disinformation actors exploit local news deserts, which has led to a new and growing phenomenon called "pink slime journalism,"[147] a low-cost way of distributing thousands of algorithmically generated news stories, often with political bias. Designed to look like real, local news sites, they are in fact low-cost, automated sites that often push partisan agendas. These pink slime sites capitalize on news deserts left when regional newspapers go broke. While these stories can be factual, they are not based on investigation and may parrot fake claims made in news releases or from opinion leaders. Increasingly pink slime operations are funded by political parties in the United States or by foreign governments (e.g., Iran), highlighting a critical need for transparency.

Pink slime propagators own multiple newsletters and outlets, which enables them to be profitable and makes the niche media essentially a pay-to-play proposition akin to advertising.[148] Because of its diversion from critical analysis, pink slime journalism is an effective megaphone for disinformation.

B. UNDERSTANDING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA SPACES

Discussions on disinformation and misinformation often revolve around assumptions of state actors driving the issue. However, problematic information more regularly originates from networks of alternative sites and anonymous individuals who have created their own "alt-media" online spaces.[149] These alternative spaces include message board and digital distribution platforms (e.g., Redditt, 4chan, or Discord); conspiracy news sites (e.g., RT and 21st Century Wire); and gaming sites. According to Eliot Higgins, founder of Bellingcat, the alternative media ecosystem has become a prominent driver of disinformation, yet not many organizations, journalists, or researchers are engaged in this topic. [150] This present failure to address alternative media systems threatens and undermines other efforts to counter disinformation.[151]

While information on alternative systems such as conspiracy theories may seem farcical or preposterous to an outsider, to users these spaces enable them to collaborate and validate their own claims and interpretations of the world that differ from "mainstream" sources.[152] With this, individuals contribute their own "research" to the larger discussion, collectively reviewing and validating each other to create a *populist expertise* that justifies, shapes, and supports their alternative beliefs.[153] As these discussions become larger, "mainstream" institutions may pick up on the issue but because they do not understand the platform or alternative media system more generally, they may unknowingly provide wide coverage of misleading information.

C. "NARRATIVE CONTROL" BY STATE ACTORS

Authoritarian and hybrid regimes tend to clamp down on dissenting voices while more democratic regimes struggle to find the best balance in the effort to control the narrative, often justifying these actions as a way of addressing mis/disinformation. The use of legislation and policy, as well as internet shutdowns are discussed below.

Illiberal Legislation and Policy

Trends in legislative action around information disorder issues suggest many governments are under the impression that disinformation can be "legislated away." However, countries who have chosen this route have met many obstacles and criticisms along the way. Outcries around censorship or the broadening of executive powers haunt many governments who attempt to regulate citizen behavior in digital spaces.

In Nigeria, for example, after disinformation campaigns rattled the country's 2019 elections, the Nigerian senate took up a "social media bill" to criminalize the posting of false content on social media if the content is deemed to destabilize public trust in the government, attempt to influence elections, or compromise national security.[154] Critics say the bill will jeopardize digital freedoms of expression while granting the government sweeping, unchecked authority over the country's media environment.

Nigeria's social media bill is almost identical to Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill (POFMA). The October 2019 legislation established a nine-member committee to preside over the prohibition of posting politically motivated false statements and the creation of inauthentic online accounts (bots or sock puppet accounts) within digital platforms. The committee can charge individuals or entire media outlets if content is deemed false or misleading or if implementation of the law serves greater public interest.[155]

Both the Nigerian and Singaporean laws are subjective in nature in that they rely on an interpretation of a user's digital actions and intent. Some critics argue this is impossible to concretely access. Likewise, the gray area of intent can become an easy decoy for governments trying to exercise censorship under the guise of law. The constant swarm of controversy surrounding many such bills often causes them to slow and stall in legislative processes.[156]

Taking disinformation legislation a step further, the Ukrainian government attempted to develop new legislation to criminalize the persistent dissemination of disinformation, create a new ombudsperson to tackle disinformation, and oblige non-governmental media organizations to somehow merge to form a supervisory body that would accredit journalists and determine good-quality from bad-quality media.[157] Ukrainian civil society was united in strongly criticizing this approach, and the government dropped the idea. The weaponization of the disinformation dilemma and consequential chilling effect erodes the integrity of journalism and information within societies.

Case Study: Nicaragua

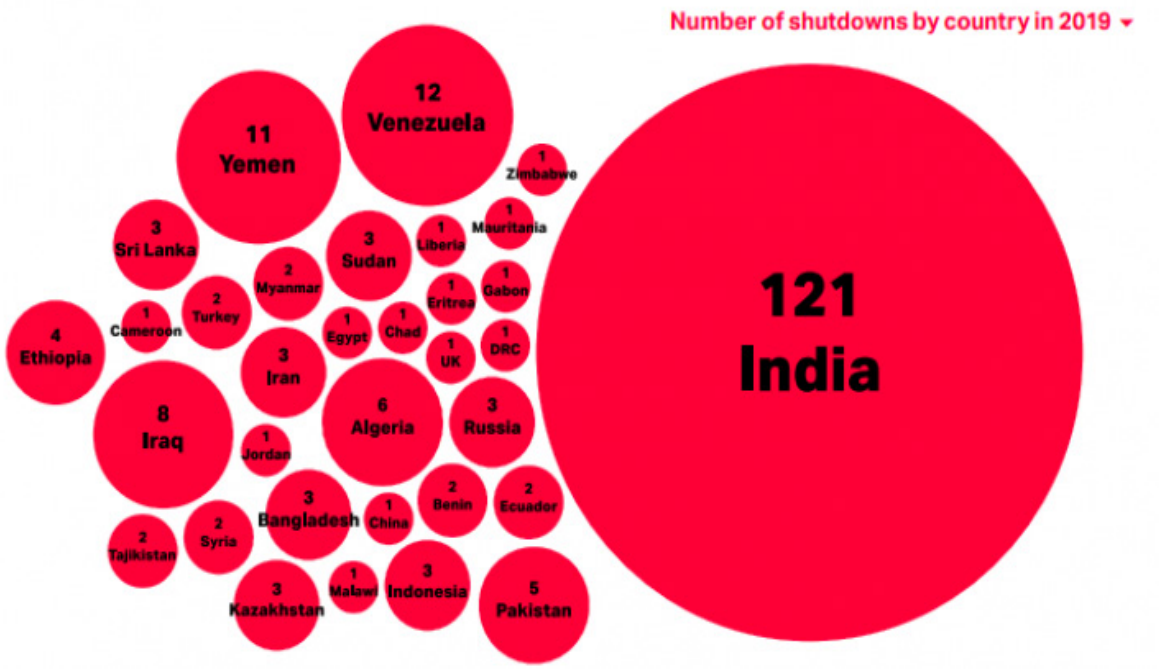
Nicaragua passed legislation in October 2020 that will criminalize spreading "fake news" on social media. The Nicaraguan example has sounded the alarm bells for press freedom advocates. Given the political nature and imprecise nature of the term "fake news," such a law would be difficult to apply fairly and is likely to be used to increase political repression. Rights groups believe the law is a specific attempt to silence them.

Source: Lopez, I. (2020, October 27). *Nicaragua passes bill criminalizing what government considers fake news.* National Post, Reuters. https://nationalpost.com/pmn/news-pmn/crime-pmn/nicaragua-passes-bill-criminalizing-what-government-considers-fake-news

Some governments believe that internet shutdowns or slowdowns are a solution to the problem; they are not. According to AccessNow, the impact of shutdowns affects journalism and access to information, education, refugees, healthcare, and business, not to mention violates the fundamental right to access to the internet as an essential right in the 21st century.

AccessNow's *#KeepItOn* campaign reported 216 internet shutdowns worldwide in 2019. These broadband and mobile network disruptions represent 1,706 total blackout days in 33 countries.[158] National and local governments that implement internet or platform blackouts often justify the action as a measure of public safety or national security against the social harms of fake news. However, international free speech and press freedom advocate organizations denounce blackouts as authoritarian and hazardous during public crises where impediments to current and accurate information is life-threatening. The issue of internet shutdowns is important to monitor because it opens a pandora's box that threatens several areas USAID programming addresses and the use of broadband and mobile networks is often critical to program outreach. Moreover, the economic impact of internet shutdowns is a big deal. They cost $2.4 billion between July 1, 2005 and June 30, 2016, according to the Brookings Institution.[159] And, just a few years leader, the trend worsened. Research firm Top10VPN published a report that analyzed the economic impact of internet shutdowns throughout the world in 2019. Their research traced 18,225 hours of internet shutdowns around the world in 2019 and noted that this carried a total economic loss of $8.05 billion.[160]

Figure 15: Number of Internet Shutdowns in 2019



Source: https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/02/KeepItOn-2019-report-1.pdf.

The governments of Cameroon and Venezuela have also engaged in internet shutdowns and platforms bans. However, in both countries, the governments have used network access as leverage within existing political conflicts. In Cameroon, English-speaking regions lived without internet access for 240 days in 2017, amid continued civil unrest. Similarly, in Venezuela, President Nicolás Maduro has used internet shutdowns frequently over the last seven years and, in the last year, access to Facebook, SnapChat, Instagram, Google, Twitter, and YouTube vacillated during periods of heavy civilian protest. Both governments have wielded network access to stifle dissent, expand pluralistic ignorance, and silence oppositional voices in digital spaces.

Internet Blackout in Sri Lanka Harmful for Civic Space

In Southern Asia, where blackouts have become common, the Sri Lanka government disabled access to multiple platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, SnapChat, and Viber) after the 2019 Easter bombings, claiming the bans protected citizens from misleading, unverified, or speculative content during the national crisis. The president also pointed at digital platforms as an enabling space for terrorism and hate groups, such as the one responsible for the bombings. The ban had a significant impact on the public in a country where Facebook is often a primary means of both news information and communication with loved ones.

D. DEEPFAKES AND CHEAP FAKES

Deepfakes are videos, images, and audio generated using artificial intelligence to synthetically render realistic depictions of speech and action.[161] Most notably, the technology has been used to manipulate facial expressions and speech, as well as swap the faces of individuals into videos. While altered and manipulated content already circulates online, the development of deepfakes intended to misinform will "significantly contribute to the continued erosion of faith in digital content," according to *Brookings*.[162]

People are more likely to have a visceral reaction to videos, images, and audio rather than text, so deepfakes propel a more rapid spread of altered media.

Cheap fakes are audio-video manipulations created with cheaper, more accessible software (or none at all).[163] They may be subtle, such as slowing down the speed at which a video is played making it appear that the speaker's speech is slurred or altering the background or an otherwise insignificant aspect of a picture.

Many Artificial Intelligence tools, including deepfake-specific technologies, have free and open access, enabling the creation of fake content to expand readily.[164] In the future, cheap fakes are likely to be uploaded by amateurs with satirical or political motives and influence campaigns of foreign origin or with advertising goals. However, despite their aim, cheap fakes' wider proliferation in online spaces will further blur the authenticity of the digital world.[165]

To date, ongoing research and mitigation efforts have concentrated on automated deepfake detection, developing algorithms to recognize modified media. Academic studies have also uncovered indicators of deepfakes, including unnatural blinking patterns, distorted facial features, lighting inconsistencies, and more. [166] However, as deepfake technology continues to rapidly improve, these efforts are likely to be short lived. More funding and research are needed to support the discovery and development of longer-term solutions and tools to detect deepfakes.

E. Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Generated Propaganda

Previously, dubious media outlets, articles from nonexistent authors, troll factories, and comment armies have been deployed from Russia, Poland, Philippines, and elsewhere to saturate online spaces with fake content in order to manipulate public opinion.[167] However, because writing articles, comments, and social media posts can be time consuming, those behind these operations often gave away indicators of their illegitimacy with their rapid activity, including plagiarizing or recycling writing, using stolen profile photos, and using repetitive phrasing in high volumes of text.[168] While these influence campaigns have been unraveled and attributed, advances in AI-generated content could eliminate these tells, leaving them untraceable.



Emerging as the ideal tool for propaganda, AI-generative text resolves the time and effort needed for original content production. Artificial-intelligence research lab OpenAI has already released a beta version of GPT-3, a long-form text generator that works by taking text input and predicting what should follow.[169] This tool reportedly can produce long-form articles, tweets, poems, and other texts that are

difficult to distinguish from a human's writing. Tools like GPT-3 present yet another challenge for internet platforms and users to discern what and whom to trust.[170] If people are left questioning whether content is tied to an actual person or an AI-generator, new divisions over verification of users and moderation on platforms could also emerge.[171] Those desiring more assurances of legitimacy may call for increased account verification or physical existence validations on sites. Meanwhile, those in disagreement with increased moderation could turn to the alternative media systems with minimal restrictions.



VI. Part Six: What are Some Emerging Solutions for Disinformation?

Emerging solutions for combating disinformation are coming from many different directions across sectors, including approaches to counter violent extremism, prevent hate speech, address national security and foreign interference, improve journalism, engage academia and education organizations, and enhance political communications, among others.

Photo: ©2020 Shutterstock/EtiAmmos

Wardle and Derakhshan in their disinformation report for the Council of Europe provide recommendations targeted at technology companies, national governments, media organizations, civil society, education ministries, and funding bodies, with each broken into its own set of suggestions.[172] (See table below to find the recommendations.)

A. WHAT CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA CAN DO

Civil society through its groups, networks, and citizens acting on their own provides an important constituency in addressing mis/disinformation. And yet civil society's critical role is sometimes not adequately supported. As Dr. Joan Donovan, director and lead researcher of the Technology and Social Change Research project at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard Kennedy School, has said, "The lack of attention to civil society responses is a major gap in the research and it is becoming increasingly clear that the guidance for journalists does not translate easily to civil society."[173] In order to activate citizen approaches, Donovan advocates a three-pronged approach for strengthening civil society to counter disinformation: Detect, Document, and Debunk (*aka* the 3Ds approach). The 3Ds approach, however, takes time and a lot of research, planning, and strategy. The guidance and examples in Annex 5, Quick resources for Planning a Disinformation Strategy, may help with planning and design for civil society-led approaches to countering and preventing mis/disinformation.

What could technology companies do?



- Create an international advisory council.
- Provide researchers with the data related to initiatives aimed at improving public discourse.
- Provide transparent criteria for any algorithmic changes that down-rank content.
- Work collaboratively.
- Highlight contextual details and build visual indicators.
- Eliminate financial incentives.
- Crack down on computational amplification.
- Adequately moderate non-English content.
- Pay attention to audio/visual forms of mis- and dis-information.
- Provide metadata to trusted partners.
- Build fact-checking and verification tools.
- Build "authenticity engines"
- Work on solutions specifically aimed at minimizing the impact of filter bubbles: a. Let users customize feed and search algorithms. b. Diversify exposure to different people and views. c. Allow users to consume information privately. d. Change the terminology used by the social networks.

What could national governments do?



- Commission research to map information disorder.
- Regulate ad networks.
- Require transparency around Facebook ads.
- Support public service media organizations and local news outlets.
- Roll out advanced cybersecurity training.
- Enforce minimum levels of public service news on to the platforms.

What could media organizations do?



- Collaborate.
- Agree policies on strategic silence.
- Ensure strong ethical standards across all media.
- Debunk sources as well as content.
- Produce more news literacy segments and features.
- Tell stories about the scale and threat posed by information disorder.
- Focus on improving the quality of headlines.
- Do not disseminate fabricated content.

What could civil society do?



- Educate the public about the threat of information disorder.
- Act as honest brokers.

What could education ministries do?



- Work internationally to create a standardized news literacy curriculum.
- Work with libraries.
- Update journalism school curricula.

What could funding bodies do?



- Provide support for testing solutions.
- Support technological solutions.
- Support programs teaching people critical research and information skills.

Supply-side Responses (Producers)

Many approaches seek to address the "supply side" of disinformation and misinformation, attempting to limit the influx or supply of false or misleading information to media systems and publics.[174] The following supply-side responses (fact-checking, redirecting, debunking, pre-bunking, legal/policy, counter-disinformation campaigns, open-source intelligence, supporting local journalism support, and increasing transparency in journalism and advertiser outreach) are among the emerging practices that provide examples of how civil society groups and individual citizens are countering dis/misinformation by targeting it where and how it originates and spreads today.

Fact-Checking Approaches

Why does fact-checking matter, and is it effective? Fact-checking, just like journalism, is about informing audiences about the truth. Even if it is a limited audience, or if people disagree, calling out disinformation attempts to hold people and institutions accountable. Sometimes fact-checking efforts are picked up by larger outlets and reach wider audiences, but even if they are, publishing fact-checking is only the first step in an incremental process. When watchdogs expose untruths, this can become a resource for public action, particularly when mobilized by political campaigns or social movements. They can also identify trends and help trigger an institutional response by regulators, courts, or legislators.

In the last few years, fact-checking organizations have become more effective and grown tremendously. The Reporter's Lab hosts a database of reporting projects that regularly debunk political misinformation and viral hoaxes. As of 2019, the database counts 210 active fact-checking organizations in 16 countries, up from 59 sites tallied in 2014.[175]

Bringing these organizations together, the International Fact Checking Network provides resources, monitors trends, and promotes basic standards for fact-checking organizations through its code of principles.[176] Many of these organizations work in USAID program countries; it is worth reaching out to them when developing disinformation programming. A few examples of fact-checking organizations are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

The Effectiveness of Fact-Checking

The effectiveness in fact-checking is the subject of numerous studies. These studies have often produced contradictory results. In one key study, researchers from three universities teamed up to analyze the results of the studies and determine the effectiveness of fact-checking across research studies. The resulting study helps shed some light on the fact-checking landscape and the ins and outs of what works in fact checking. It found that:

- Fact-checking with graphical elements is less effective than those without,[177] and simple messages are more effective when informing the public on false information.[178]
- Fact-checking an entire statement rather than individual elements is more effective.
- When fact-checking, debunking an idea is more effective when it is refuting ideas in line, as opposed to, a person's own ideologies.[179]

While it is important to consider the limitations of fact-checking—it is not a panacea for all disinformation—fact-checking is highly prized by many people and is especially important for media outlets and others who are in the business of investigating and reporting facts.

Redirection Method

The Redirect Method primarily relies on advertising using an online advertising platform such as Google AdWords, targeting tools and algorithms to combat online radicalization that comes from the spread and threat of dangerous, misleading information.

The method redirects users through ads who seek to access mis/disinformation online to curated YouTube videos uploaded by individuals around the world that debunk these posts, videos, or website messages. The Redirect Method, a method used to target individuals susceptible to ISIS radicalization via recruiting measures, is being adapted in several countries to combat vaccine hesitancy and hate speech.[180] The method was developed by a collaboration among private and civil society organizations and is documented on The Redirect Method website. The collaboration provides 44 steps in the organization of an online redirect campaign. Other examples of the use of redirection are being employed by groups around the world.

Debunking and Discrediting

The Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the U.S. Department of State recommends a combined debunking and discrediting approach, which is explained in GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches #2: Three Ways to Counter Disinformation and GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches #4: What Works in Debunking.

Key points include:

- A "counter-brand" approach, which involves discrediting the "brand"—the credibility and reputation—of those making false allegations.
- Highlighting false claims seen as obviously absurd and particularly offensive and objectionable by target audiences
- Changing the frame from the false allegation to the misdeeds and lack of credibility of those spreading disinformation
- Creating moral outrage: truth is a sacred value; spreading vicious disinformation violates this sacred value, creating moral outrage.
- Recognizing that the mind often reasons by associations rather than logic.

See the GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches for more details.

Prebunking

As a measure to counter disinformation and make debunking more impactful, Donovan recommends prebunking, which she defines as "an offensive strategy that refers to anticipating what disinformation is likely to be repeated by politicians,

Five Steps to Execute a Prebunking Strategy

1. Take a look at fact-checking websites and databases to get a sense of the trends in misinformation.
2. Map out which misinformation trends are popular on Twitter (or other social media) in politicians' stump speeches.
3. Find additional source material with the facts about the misinformation likely to be repeated.
4. Prepare your social networks for the high potential for misinformation.
5. Turn "prebunk into debunk" by immediately posting correct information anywhere you can. Finally, in using prebunking techniques, she counsels that speed matters.

Source: Dr. Joan Donovan, Shorenstein Center, Harvard, [@BostonJoan]. Tweets. https://twitter.com/BostonJoan

pundits, and provocateurs during key events and having already prepared a response based on past fact checks."[181] Prebunking is drawn from inoculation theory, which seeks to explain how an attitude or belief can be protected against persuasion, and people can build up an immunity to mis/disinformation.[182]

Other researchers have also pursued the prebunking track, including Dutch researchers who developed a game called Bad News,[183] which helps people spot misinformation and disinformation. According to the developers, it helps people to talk about the truth and reduces their susceptibility to misinformation. Based on initial research of users who have played Bad News, it has been an effective approach and led to improved psychological immunity against online disinformation. Another prebunking game (funded by the Global Engagement Center) is called Harmony Square. The theory behind this game also draws on inoculation theory; learn more about this in this Harvard Misinformation Review article

Legal and Policymaking Advocacy

As information pollution and disinformation begin to affect the ways in which democracies function, governments have become aware of the importance of combating false information online. While there is government support to find ways to combat the information disorder, democracies are struggling to find the best way to regulate disinformation online. There is an inherent contradiction between the democratic ideal of free speech and the regulation of online content. Despite this, some governments have been developing policies that are intended to combat the spread of hate speech and disinformation, while simultaneously working hard to preserve free speech online.

However, when democracies pass new laws to curb the spread of disinformation, authoritarians can adopt these laws as yet another tool to criminalize free expression. So, there is great risk of making the situation worse by regulating online speech. A very clear example is Germany's NetzDG law (requiring social media to take down harmful content) that was later adopted by Russia, Venezuela, and other countries as a means of silencing opposition.[184]

The Advisory Network to the Media Freedom Coalition, a group of 17 national, regional, and international organizations, delivered a statement at the ministerial meeting of the 2020 Global Conference for Media Freedom and put forward the following guidance to support legal and policymaking advocacy that seeks to deal with the disinformation problem:

- Respect media freedom while tackling disinformation.
- Efforts to combat disinformation and "fake news" must start with governments, which should not criminalize this but also must commit to not perpetuating disinformation and fake news.
- Counter the criminalization of journalism through so-called anti-fake news laws and anti-terrorism laws.
- Promote media engagement in countering disinformation by expanding access to information mechanisms and by supporting journalistic investigations revealing the sources and dissemination patterns of disinformation and highlighting the role of government representatives in spreading disinformation.[185]

Because disinformation is considered a wicked problem, some have called for new ways to regulate the free flow of information with co-regulatory models. Some ideas were outlined recently in the Disinformation as a wicked problem: Why we need co-regulatory frameworks policy-paper from Brookings Institution.[186]

> To effectively manage disinformation and related online problems, governments and platforms will need to develop an architecture to promote collaboration and build trust among stakeholders. There are several models for multi-stakeholder collaboration, among them the industry-led Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and the government-led Information Sharing and Analysis Centers (ISACs). Those that prove successful have in common continuous adaptation and innovation and a focus on trust-building and information-sharing.

A few examples of resources for legal and policy approaches are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

MESSAGING CAMPAIGNS

Messaging campaigns have provided a new front where disinformation can easily spread to large amounts of people. Messaging campaigns refer to messages that contain false information that pass through networks like Facebook Messenger, Twitter Direct Message, and WhatsApp private and group messaging. These large-scale campaigns are difficult to track because of the encryption security available on most messaging apps. Despite this increased difficulty, there are new top-down and bottom-up approaches that are being utilized to help stop the prevalence of messaging disinformation campaigns.

A few examples of resources counter-disinformation campaigns are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

LOCAL JOURNALISM SUPPORT

Bolstering local journalism is key to countering and preventing disinformation. Two pivotal studies provide an evidence-based set of findings that show why support to quality, independent media is key. One study notes that "results indicate local newspapers hold their governments accountable, keeping municipal borrowing costs low and ultimately saving local taxpayers money."[187] A second study observed, "We find newspapers have a robust positive effect on political participation, with one additional newspaper increasing both presidential and congressional turnout by approximately 0.3 percentage points."[188]Furthermore, major research undertaken by the United Nations and the International Center for Journalists cited quality journalism as a major force for identifying and exposing disinformation,[189] citing that the 'viral load' of disinformation will only grow if journalism continues to suffer death blows inflicted by the (COVID-19) pandemic. The importance of good, quality local journalism as the key to fighting false news and noxious content was nicely argued in a pair of articles written by Emily Bell at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and a Guardian columnist and by Alan Rusbridger former editor of the Guardian and Chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. As Rusbridger sums it up "against evasion and lies, good journalism is all we have."[190]

As social media has expanded as a primary way for many individuals to receive their news, there has been a decrease in funding for local journalism and a need for better support.[191] This change is largely a result of advertising revenue that is being redirected towards online media sources. Total global newspaper advertising revenue may lose about $23.8 billion in annual revenues from 2012 to 2021. More than 10 percent of this decline, around $3 billion, is an estimated loss of annual revenue for local news media around the world.[192] Television news is still holding its own in places such as the Philippines; however, more than 80 percent of Filipinos say they now go online for their news and spend four of their 10 hours online accessing social media.[193]



Photo: IREX Learn to Discern (L2D) media literacy program in Jordan

Some prominent international organizations acting in this space include:

Internews builds lasting change by ensuring people have access to quality, local information. To do so, Internews works with local partners to grow sustainable organizations and offers capacity-building programs for media professions, human rights activists, and information entrepreneurs.[194]

IREX promotes "vibrant information and media systems." IREX supports journalism and media organizations through trainings on reporting, media law, media safety, and digital security. IREX also provides additional support to consumers via media literacy programs, training citizen journalists, and diversifying and distributing television content.[195]

International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) seeks to build the expertise and storytelling skills of journalists around the world. ICFJ focuses on five key areas: news innovation, investigative reporting, global exchange programs, specialty journalism, and diversity promotion.[196]

In the vacuum created by the loss of local newspapers, the Brookings Institution finds that readers turned to outlets covering national stories that may have strong partisan leanings or concentrate on partisan conflict.[197] As a result, Brookings observed that "in places where news consumers cannot balance their news diet with local alternatives, voters tend to be more politically polarized."[198] Understanding the value of local journalism and the challenges it faces, some civil society organizations have committed themselves to revitalizing and protecting local news efforts. Through providing funding, training, and other resources to journalists and local outlets, organizations ensure that communities have sustained access to information through a more local lens and without a dependence on large-scale, potentially partisan media houses.Over the years, media development civil society organizations have been formed and have become active in most parts of the world. A useful list of local, regional, and international organizations can be found at the Global Forum for Media Development.

Transparency in Journalism

As the spread of disinformation online grows and even reputable news agencies have mistakenly shared false information, there is a need for better trust and transparency standards to hold media agencies accountable. Some very basic standards such as bylined articles, public display of address and registration information, and disclosure of funding sources and editorial board, for example, can assist readers to understand the sources and reliability of the information they read. By developing standards for media agencies, journalism will be held to greater account for what it publishes. Examples of ongoing initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust and strengthening transparency in journalism are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

Advertiser Outreach

In order to disrupt the funding and financial incentive to disinform, attention has also turned to the advertising industry, particularly with online advertising. A good example of this is the concerted response to the discovery of the websites traced to the village of Veles outside of Skopje, Macedonia, which showed how easy it was to exploit the digital advertising model to flood the news ecosystem with fabricated content. *Wired Magazine* profiled the Veles case study in 2017.[199]

As most online advertisers are unaware of the disinformation risk of the domains featuring their ads due to the automated process of ad placement, they inadvertently are funding and amplifying platforms that disinform.[200] Thus, cutting this financial support found in the ad-tech space would obstruct disinformation actors from spreading messaging online. Efforts have been made to inform advertisers of their risks, such as the threat to brand safety by being placed next to objectionable content, through conducting research and assessments of online media content. Additionally, with this data, organizations hope to aim to redirect funding to higher-quality news domains, improve regulatory and market environments, and support innovative and sustainable models for increasing revenues and reach.

A few examples of advertiser outreach are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

Demand-Side Solutions

Other groups have centered their efforts on targeting the opposite side of disinformation, the "demand." With demand-side solutions, the focus shifts to reducing the general societal acceptance or tolerance of distorted and fabricated items.[201] These approaches are often viewed as more important for sustaining long-term impacts as they concentrate on why and how disinformation influences society and the strategies to develop societal resilience against it. Different demand-side solutions often look to

governments, tech giants, and social media companies to promote education and training, raise awareness, or advance other efforts toward building more resilience against disinformation.

Media Literacy, Education & Training

In response to today's challenging information environment, many civil society organizations view media literacy, education and training programs as critical mechanisms for hardening communities against disinformation. These projects strive to assist consumers in understanding how to access, assess, and critically evaluate different types of media, as well as process and analyze media messages. They seek to promote the development of healthy habits and behaviors for information consumers and provide them with the tools and other resources for identifying accurate, high-quality content from disinformation.

A few examples of media literacy, education and training are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

Civil Society Advocacy and Public Awareness Campaigns

A multitude of civil society organizations, both local and international, are pushing for better accountability and transparency. Other approaches are concentrating on providing research and advocacy on the vulnerability of countries to disinformation and exposure.

To build societal resilience against disinformation, the public must be aware of and understand the issue. Public awareness campaigns serve to inform and educate communities about disinformation, build public recognition of it, and promote actions or other resources for combating it.

A few examples of civil society advocacy and public awareness campaigns included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

Digital Literacy & Security

Civil society organizations have also sought to increase digital literacy and security skills to empower the online community to identify and counter disinformation. Digital literacy trainings provide lessons and resources for understanding how to identify, evaluate, and compose information on digital platforms. This type of literacy expands understanding of how to navigate, read, and interpret in a digital environment, as opposed to media literacy that focuses primarily on understanding and interpreting journalism. Furthermore, digital security initiatives produce and provide tools and behaviors for maintaining safety of personal identities and information online that protect people and groups from becoming the target of mis/disinformation.

An example is the Digital Society Project, which seeks to provide data on the intersection of politics and social media. Topics include online censorship, polarization, misinformation campaigns, coordinated information operations, and foreign influence in and monitoring of domestic politics. It uses the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) framework, also used by USAID in Journey to Self-Reliance (JSR) metrics, to assess various digital issues including misinformation.

Elections-focused Programming Efforts (both Supply- and Demand-side Solutions)

To defend the integrity of democratic elections worldwide, reducing disinformation has been central to elections-focused programming in all these common goals:

- Building the capacity of election management bodies to combat disinformation during electoral periods.

- Strengthening and adapting citizen election observation to incorporate disinformation monitoring and exposure efforts.
- Adapting international election observation to integrate monitoring of the information environment, including social media.
- Supporting independent media election coverage capacity and resources to increase the supply of accurate information during elections.
- Increasing incentives for ethical online conduct by political parties and campaigns (such as facilitating norms for online Codes of Ethics for political parties).

As social media has changed how audiences consume and spread political information, focus has shifted to monitoring the transformed information environment before and during election periods. Emphasis has been placed on citizen election and campaign finance monitoring, focusing on exposing disinformation on social media and other digital platforms during election campaigns. Election management bodies (EMBs) tend to have significant power to regulate speech and can set some ground rules. Media platforms have been compelled by EMBs to be transparent about political advertising during an election season.

A report produced by the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age puts forward recommendations to governments and internet platforms to safeguard the legitimacy of elections. As the report notes, "For the foreseeable future, elections in the democracies of the Global South will be focal points for networked hate speech, disinformation, external interference, and domestic manipulation."[202]

Disinformation assessments have also been incorporated within international election observation and management missions. With this, organizations have offered trainings and guidance for election bodies and other stakeholders in regulating speech, campaign violations, and the prosecution of violations.

A few examples of elections-focused programming and disinformation assessments are included in Annex 3: Emerging Solutions.

There is also advocacy working to motivate social networking platforms, advertisers, governments, and other parties to improve the information environment with pertinence to the integrity of elections. In particular, advocacy aimed to achieve greater transparency in political advertising, close fake accounts and bots, and de-monetize suppliers of disinformation. An example of this is European Commission's "Code of Practice on Disinformation," a self-regulatory Code of Practice to fight disinformation and ensure transparent, fair and trustworthy online campaign activities ahead of the 2019 European elections. Signatories included Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mozilla, Microsoft, and TikTok.[203]

In more closed environments, with governments seeking to suppress opposition, trainings for political candidates, parties, and activists have become valuable resources for learning how to disseminate messages in adverse and media-saturated communities. An example of this work in more closed environments is NDI's "Raising Voices in Closing Spaces," a workbook offering a step-by-step approach to strategic communications planning for citizen election observation groups and other civil society organizations to break through in closing or closed political environments. The guide offers strategies, tactics, and hypothetical and real-world examples for overcoming challenges in repressive environments.[204]

B. WHAT GOVERNMENTS CAN DO

Governments allocate state resources and execute strategies in order to protect their citizens and the integrity of their information systems/democracy from the harms imposed by information disorder. This proves difficult to accomplish through traditional, analog legislative action because disinformation networks transcend the national borders where legislative mandates are confined. We will examine below several countries that have attempted to quell the production and dissemination of disinformation through legal and regulatory measures.

Though it can be well-intentioned, criminalizing the spread of disinformation in digital spaces presents even more negative ramifications for democratic governance. In countries where disinformation legislation has been introduced, creating or sharing digital content and information becomes risky and punishable. The resulting chilling effect ultimately hampers democratic protections for a free press and the freedom of expression. Likewise, any whole scale internet or platform shutdowns pose the same anti-democratic results while also creating information vacuums within communities amid public health or safety crises. As USAID negotiates the entangled, disinformation landscapes that intersect global and local programming, programs should be wary both of legislative efforts to limit expression online and internet/platform blackouts for the dangers they pose to democracy.

Whole-of-Government Approaches

There are very few examples of whole-of-government approaches (integrated activities of government agencies increasing coherence in policy development on an issue) in the disinformation space. Policymaking is likely to take time and will need to be significantly informed by the private sector and civil society. Two examples in Scandinavia are discussed to illustrate this approach.

Some governments have seen success in whole-of-government approaches in which government agencies, social institutions, and civil society collaborate to collectively close the digital, education, and social fissures that disinformation campaigns need to infiltrate media and political landscapes.

In Sweden, for example, the whole-of-government approach (a comprehensive approach that involves government, private and civil society sectors and media) attempts to be as multi-faceted as the issue itself. Focused on maintaining the integrity of its electoral processes, the Swedish government has poured resources into shoring up its electoral infrastructure by safeguarding electronic voting machines and providing new training for civil servants and voting officials. The government, electoral bureaus and cybersecurity agencies have committed to forming an inter-agency cooperative to combat the issue.[205] Sweden has also focused on bettering public media literacy through enhancing high school curriculums as a long-term strategy against information disorder. Lastly, five of the country's most prominent media news outlets have created a scrupulous and highly visible fact-checking collaboration to maintain the integrity of Swedish media and spread mutual oversight over multiple media stakeholders.[206] Sweden's approach has required weaving together resources to defend the many susceptible ports of entry that misinformation and disinformation penetrate in media landscapes and societies.

In Finland, response to the global information crisis has included a sweeping media literacy education effort. In junior high and high schools, Finnish students use a digital literacy toolkit in order to understand how to implement best practices in their own social media engagement. In the world of electoral and media professions, Finland has dedicated resources to disinformation trainings and workshops for civil servants and journalists.[207] This approach seeks use of public pedagogy and a more robust media literacy secondary curriculum to intervene at every level of societal strata, in hopes that

many small contributions by individuals will add up to big structural changes that make a nation less vulnerable to disinformation. Critics of the Finnish strategy call it too slow moving to address such a fast-moving problem and worry that there are not concrete ways to measure its success.[208] Taiwan and Lithuania provide other good examples of whole-of-government approaches to mis/disinformation.[209]

Strategic Communications and State Coalitions

On a broader scale than the individual efforts of governments within their respective countries, coalitions among states and policy stakeholders are expanding global efforts to fight disinformation, such as EUvsDisinfo and the Atlantic Council.

The EUvsDisinfo is a flagship strategic communications project of the European External Action Services, East StratCom Taskforce since 2015 to "increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital disinformation and media manipulation."[210] EUvsDisinfo has hands in three major areas to stymie global disinformation. The project conducts data analytics of media spaces to identify and publicize disinformation campaigns started by the Kremlin or pro-Kremlin media outlets; the data is archived in an open-source, dedicated database that tracks disinformation around the world. The project also publishes summaries, articles, and reports both within the research community and for wider general readership in order to make a technical and complex issue accessible to the broader global communities it impacts. Lastly, EUvsDisinfo engages with governments, media outlets, universities, and civil society organizations by offering training resources to better prepare and problem-solve around issues of information disorder.

Another example of strategic communications is The Atlantic Council, a "nonpartisan organization that galvanizes U.S. leadership and engagement in the world, with allies and partners, to shape solutions to global challenges."[211] Among the numerous capacities through which Atlantic Council conducts international work, their recently published *Democratic Defense against Disinformation 2.0* provides a current snapshot of global disinformation campaigns at work, including proposed solutions, progress made, and criticisms and recommendations made to the U.S. executive and judiciary branches regarding urgent steps needed in the path toward a healthier information ecosystem.

Legal and Regulatory Measures

While there are examples of legal and regulatory measures intended to address disinformation, the difficulty is that many are controversial because they also restrict freedom of expression.

To achieve good legal and regulatory approaches to disinformation will require civil society and independent media organizations to have a significant voice in policymaking through multi-stakeholder collaboration. Governments face very real tradeoffs in developing regulations on digital rights, disinformation and dangerous speech, while balancing protections for freedom of speech, transparency, and privacy. Regime type is an important variable to consider.

Guidance on good practices regarding regulation and policymaking in this area was put forward by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, with Article 19 and the Center for Law and Democracy. These standards can be useful in evaluating legal and policymaking processes and

frameworks; some important ones are excerpted here from the section on Standards on Disinformation and Propaganda:

a. General prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including "false news" or "non-objective information," are incompatible with international standards for restrictions on freedom of expression, as set out in paragraph 1(a), and should be abolished.

b. Criminal defamation laws are unduly restrictive and should be abolished. Civil law rules on liability for false and defamatory statements are legitimate only if defendants are given a full opportunity and fail to prove the truth of those statements and benefit from other defenses, such as fair comment.

c. State actors should not make, sponsor, encourage, or further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda).

d. State actors should, in accordance with their domestic and international legal obligations and their public duties, take care to ensure that they disseminate reliable and trustworthy information, including about matters of public interest, such as the economy, public health, security, and the environment.[212]

C. WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS CAN DO

The issue of misinformation reminds many of the saying, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."[213] This saying becomes especially concerning in reference to social media platforms, whose technologies have significantly impacted the ways in which people communicate and share information. Because social media offers free, open access to reach widespread global publics, discussions have turned to calling for the platforms to respond to the online environments and issues they have created. More specifically, focus has narrowed in on social media's automated algorithms that have provided an easy and rapid mechanism for misinformation to spread and be amplified, leaving truth to be buried amongst this free reach of falsehoods.[214] Thus, critics argue that social media platforms must take greater responsibility for themselves and increase platform regulation and oversight and question whether self-regulation is sufficient.

With the algorithms of Facebook, Google, Twitter, and the other social media platforms driving how people access and consume today's information, these organizations hold the power to change the way information flows online and to address the conditions they created for enabling misinformation to flourish.[215] Social media companies' business models amplify and further complicate the existing issues of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Although these companies are part of this problem, they can and will need to be collaborators for determining solutions and best practices.

"It is difficult for the truth to get out if someone shares falsehoods and benefits from free reach and automated algorithmic amplification. The facts must be given a chance for a proportional response."

—Joshua Lowcock, chief digital and global brand safety officer at Universal McCann

What is Platform Accountability?

As explained in previous sections of the primer, the ability for forms of disinformation and misinformation to spread rapidly via social media positions social media companies not only as gatekeepers and facilitators of information-sharing and communication, but also for political interaction and engagement. Thus, policymakers, civil society, academia, and the public have become increasingly interested in understanding the political implications of social media, calling for operations that would make the platforms more democratically accountable.[216] Tactics to expose disinformation—such as: (1) fact-checking, (2) content moderation, and (3) labeling of sources—can be found in the next subsection. Accountability initiatives have been growing in response to increased awareness of disinformation: for example, see Facebook's Community Standards Enforcement Report.

In considering how and by whom platforms should be held accountable, discussion extends to platform governance. Robert Gorwa, a scholar from the University of Oxford, explains platform governance as an "approach necessitating an understanding of technical systems (platforms) and an appreciation for the inherently global arena within which these platform companies' function."[217] In essence, the approach necessitates more knowledge about how platforms govern or influence publics via their platform practices, policies, and affordances while also acknowledging that their conduct is informed by local, national, or international forms of governance. [218]

Currently, there are three governance "lenses" being utilized for thinking about social media platform regulation and policy: (1) self-regulation, (2) external governance, and (3) co-governance. The first lens represents the presently dominant mode of governance, a rather laissez-faire relationship between governing institutions and social media companies, in which the companies dictate their own platform improvements and transparency efforts. The second lens encapsulates governments enacting legislation regulating social media platforms. Lastly, the third lens seeks to provide greater democratic accountability without severe disruption to the status quo. As noted earlier, the challenge with this approach is striking a balance between combatting the spread of disinformation and harmful content while also preserving free expression online. Proponents of this lens have proposed the creation of specialty organizations, third-party adjudication systems, or ombudsman programs that would act to address and investigate platform complaints as well as set ethical frameworks and standards, among other tasks.[219] Some examples are ICANN, a not-for-profit, public benefit organization that regulates domain names, and the Internet Governance Forum, which includes all stakeholders on governance questions in open and inclusive fora.

Current Platform Initiatives

As a result of public concern, this has become an exciting and rapidly moving space where platforms are developing solutions to be responsible to their consumers, as well as where government and civil society organizations are leading additional efforts to influence platform initiatives. There are many discussions about the unregulated power of social media and other digital platforms. Below is a non-exhaustive list of how social media companies are creating solutions internally and how global civil society groups and human rights defenders are encouraging greater platform accountability.

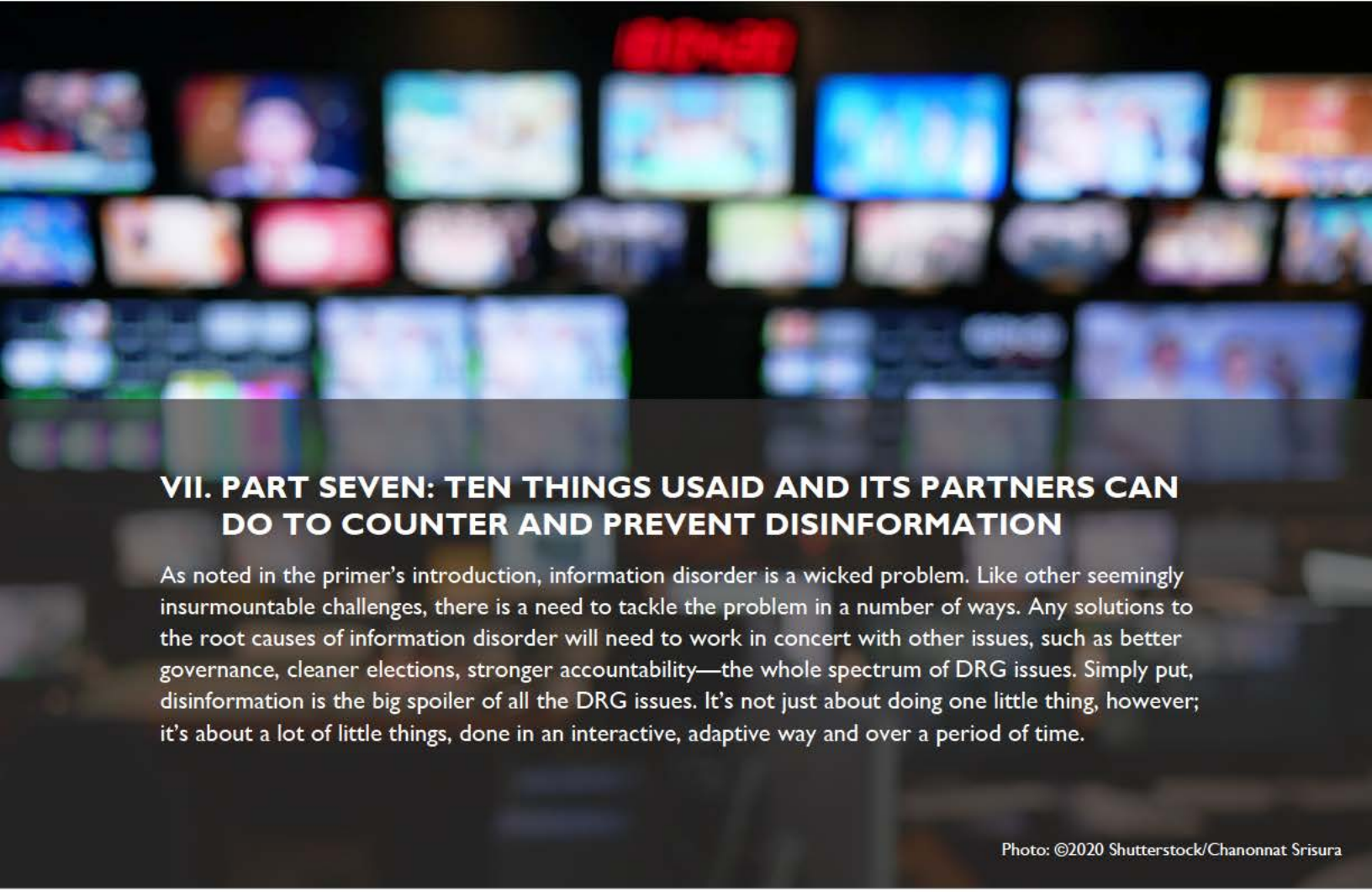
Models for Platform Governance: An essay series on global platforms' emerging economic and social power, Centre for International Governance Innovation

Content Regulation and Human Rights, Global Network Initiative

The following table highlights a few social media initiatives (as of late 2020) to address disinformation and misinformation.

Initiative	Social Media Platform	Notes
Fact-Checking Program	Facebook	With a three-step approach of "identify, review and act," Facebook has independent fact-checkers assess and rate the accuracy of stories through original research. Facebook may act by reducing distribution, including sharing warnings, notifying previous sharers of misinformation, applying misinformation labels, and removing incentives for repeat offenders.[220]
Oversight Board	Facebook	This internationally diverse group formed to protect freedom of expression by making independent decisions on content issues and providing policy advisory opinions to Facebook.[221] *Note:* Facebook's Oversight Board has been the subject of much criticism, as highlighted in an article in the Harvard Business Review.[222]
Expansion of Hate Speech Policy to Include Holocaust Denial	Facebook	In response to the rise in anti-Semitism globally, Facebook expanded its hate speech policy to include Holocaust denial. Any content that "denies or distorts the Holocaust" is now banned. *Note:* Facebook's decision to undertake action on hate speech related to Holocaust denial is also perceived with skepticism and critique.
New Warning Labels about COVID-19 Information	Twitter	Twitter added new labels on tweets about COVID-19 that link to a Twitter-curated page or external trusted source for additional information on the claims of the tweet. Tweets conflicting with public health experts would be covered by a warning from Twitter. Misleading information with a severe propensity for harm would be removed from the site.[223]
Birdwatch	Twitter	Twitter is potentially developing a new product called "Birdwatch," which will likely involve crowdsourcing to address disinformation and provide more context for tweets in the form of notes.
Encouraging Users to Read Articles Before Sharing	Twitter	Twitter tested a feature on Android that will prompt a message suggesting the user should read an article before sharing it.[224]

* Regarding Facebook, numerous experts from academia, journalism, civil society, government, and other sectors point out the outsize problem that the company creates in terms of the spread of disinformation. These critiques make clear that the social media giant struggles to strike a balance between allowing free expression and enabling the spread of potentially dangerous hate speech, extremism and disinformation.[225] These concerns should be taken very seriously, as Facebook is the biggest social network in the world, with more than 2.7 billion users.[226]



VII. PART SEVEN: TEN THINGS USAID AND ITS PARTNERS CAN DO TO COUNTER AND PREVENT DISINFORMATION

As noted in the primer's introduction, information disorder is a wicked problem. Like other seemingly insurmountable challenges, there is a need to tackle the problem in a number of ways. Any solutions to the root causes of information disorder will need to work in concert with other issues, such as better governance, cleaner elections, stronger accountability—the whole spectrum of DRG issues. Simply put, disinformation is the big spoiler of all the DRG issues. It's not just about doing one little thing, however; it's about a lot of little things, done in an interactive, adaptive way and over a period of time.

Photo: ©2020 Shutterstock/Chanonnat Srisura

While it may not be possible to eradicate information disorder, **doing nothing is not an option**. There are steps that must be taken to help alleviate the problem and ensure that the progress and successes USAID has made around the world are not jeopardized.

Note: you will want to make your work as context specific as possible and do original, diagnostic research to determine the best course of action for implementing more effective strategies.

A. TEN STEPS FOR DEALING WITH DISINFORMATION

1. **Conduct a disinformation diagnostic**. Take stock of the information environment in your country. The Public Affairs Section, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and/or the Global Engagement Center at the State Department may have some information, often on a smaller scale. The assessment could be part of a standalone media program or integrated into larger governance programming. An assessment should understand cultural notions attached to information legitimacy and norms for accepting the veracity of information. Some regions are culturally preconditioned to be much more skeptical (e.g., former Soviet republics) while others experience wide deference to authorities (many Asian societies).

An assessment would look for answers to the following questions.

(a) What are the biggest threats/vulnerabilities for disinformation?

  (i) What are likely disinformation themes, aims, and main sources of disinformation?
  (ii) Who is most vulnerable to the disinformation being spread?
  (iii) What are the common disinformation narratives?
  (iv) Who are the main disinformation purveyors?
  (v) How does it spread across communities, and who are the most vulnerable?

(b) What is the media ecosystem in your country like?

  (i) What is the makeup of mainstream media, including state, public service, and private media as well as community media and alternative media?
  (ii) What is the social media landscape like in your country, and what are the most popular platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.)?
  (iii) What are the most common ways that different segments of the population consume information?
  (iv) Where do different people get their information? Is it online or through TV, radio, print or peer-to-peer sources?
  (v) How do people access the internet? (mobile/desktop)

(c) What is the media literacy landscape? What are the media literacy levels?

(d) What is the rate of mobile and internet penetration?

(e) What does current research say about the state and nature of the media and social media, including levels of press freedom, internet freedom and any threats or vulnerabilities that exist regarding access to information?[227]

2. **Carry out actor mapping.** Assess the key stakeholders who contribute in positive and negative ways to the media and information ecosystem in your country.

(a) Who are the malign actors?

(b) Are there civil society organizations, associations, or institutions that seek to root out disinformation, increase public awareness, engage in fact checking, or contribute in a positive way to countering the disinformation problem?

(c) Who are the allies, and who are the foes? Are there media, civil society, academics, think tanks, businesses, or government agencies that you can work with?

(d) Are there gaps in the actors (fact-checking or media development organizations, for example), and could these gaps be addressed by partnering with international CSOs or companies?

3. **Support media literacy initiatives.** Given the changing nature of mass media and news and information consumption habits, youth as well as other segments of the population benefit from opportunities to learn critical thinking skills and to acquire the knowledge to spot disinformation and other aspects of information disorder. Participants of media literacy programming can also serve as good boosters or spreaders of critical thinking. However, media literacy, like other aspects of

knowledge and learning, requires "booster shots" in which individuals learning about how the system works can get updated skills and knowledge on new developments and techniques of media manipulation. Efforts to get media literacy into the curriculum of primary and secondary schools on a broad scale are considered best practice, but media literacy programs can be run through schools, libraries, and other community-level partnerships, and they should be integrated across subjects, as well as serve as part of a civic education curriculum. If possible, they should also target a variety of age groups, from children to adults and seniors. As part of media literacy efforts, include ideas and tactics for prebunking.

4. **Fund independent media and local public interest journalism.** High-quality, independent, local news is under threat. Endangered by changing business models, big tech's domination of the digital advertising market, and pressures stemming from media capture, concerns over press freedom, and the overall safety of journalists, the future of news will require substantial investment and partnership with donors as well as experimentation with different models and approaches. As advocated by the Knight Foundation, one of the best forms of resilience against mis- and disinformation is journalism.[228]

5. **Support media monitoring and fact-checking initiatives specifically.** As shared by Lithuania's Elves in their fight against the disinformation trolls, you cannot fight disinformation with disinformation. You need to fight back with the truth and good reporting. Local actors also need to know where and how disinformation is spreading. This same sentiment is shared by leading journalists and experts on disinformation, who argue that the best defense against the lies, propaganda, conspiracy theories, and other bad information that is circulating is the truth.[229] Truth, transparency, and facts are an essential piece of fighting back against the wicked problem of information disorder. Distortion of the facts is a moving target, so the ability to do fact-checking needs to be sustained over time.

6. **Stay up to speed.** Disinformation is a growing field and threat, and there is a need to stay current on new research and tools for identifying disinformation trends and threats and to stay abreast of the different disinformation narratives that could undermine USAID's work. While this requires sustained effort, the cost of inattention is too high if ignored.

7. **Support internet governance and digital rights initiatives.** Digitalization and the spread of internet technologies has already led to the next frontier of information access. It has, unfortunately, also provided another way to prevent citizens from accessing information. Criminals and politicians are known to muddy the waters and engage in malign activities, often using the internet and the disinformation playbook to gain money and power. Just as human rights advocates have argued that internet access is a human right and that there is a fundamental right to access of information, there is also a right *not* to be disinformed. The internet freedom and digital rights sector that USAID has supported and partnered with around the world is a vital source of expertise and collaboration in the fight against disinformation. Consider potential partnerships with digital security trainers, digital forensic investigators, digital literacy specialists, internet governance experts, and others who can work with your local USAID programs as part of democracy and governance programs. For example, working with the Internews-led Internet Freedom Consortium, a program funded by USAID, can help to address these issues in countries where USAID works.[230]

8. **Engage government.** Where it is possible, reach out to local government and national government officials to begin a dialogue, if one is not already in place, about how USAID can partner in countering and preventing disinformation. The information disorder problem puts USAID's work at risk, but it also tarnishes local economies, jeopardizes public health systems, and wreaks havoc on peace and stability. USAID can be a positive partner in putting out strategic messaging and countering disinformation narratives that may occur in a given country. USAID can also partner with ministries and schools to support media literacy efforts or broker partnerships to help support investments in needed infrastructure or systems required to counter and prevent disinformation.

9. **Collaborate and engage with other international partners** (civil society, media, social media platforms, internet governance forums, and other donors). Countering and preventing disinformation programming is a growing field and one that is likely to be a major component of programs for some time to come. Given the rising influence of both Chinese- and Russian-backed disinformation efforts that put USAID's democracy and governance programs at risk, look for ways to form synergies with others working to support and strengthen democracy in the country where you operate. Collaborative partnership will be stronger, and funding can be better leveraged to support smarter program designs, with shared goals and objectives to help local civil society, human rights organizations, and independent media firmly establish their presence as part of efforts to combat the information disorder problem. As part of a push for collaboration, support multidisciplinary approaches. Some of the best examples in countering and preventing disinformation involve collaborative approaches that include data scientists, social scientists, and journalists.

10. **Measure the impact of your efforts to counter and prevent disinformation.** Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are vital to helping USAID colleagues and others understand the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of countering disinformation programs. Because there are so many unknowns in terms of what works and what does not in the field of countering disinformation, research and learning opportunities are important, and data collected should be shared with both USAID and its implementing partners. To support robust M&E, partner with local research firms, institutes or universities. There is a growing number of specialists with the right research skills and social science and computer science training to support your M&E programs in this space. Key skills include: social network analysis, content analysis and media monitoring, discourse and narrative analysis, and social media analysis. Before you begin new programs, make sure to capture baseline data, and include appropriate funds to also carry out an endline study. The "before and after" aspects of what you can capture through M&E are essential to program reporting.

ANNEX I: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The field of disinformation has a particular lexicon: a stock of terms used to study and understand the broader field of information disorder and a particular vocabulary that is used by scholars and practitioners writing about the phenomenon. Definitions are collected from leading sources in the disinformation field.

Term	Definition
Algorithm	An algorithm is a fixed series of steps that a computer performs in order to solve a problem or complete a task. For instance, social media platforms use algorithms to compile the content that users see. These algorithms are designed to show users material that they will be interested in, based on each user's history of engagement on that platform. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Artificial Intelligence	Computer-based automated decision-making, inspired by human-like intelligence. Automated decisions might be directly implemented (e.g., in robotics) or suggested to a human decision-maker (e.g., product recommendations in online shopping). AI often incorporates machine learning (ML), in which predictions are based on patterns "learned" from existing data. (USAID, 2019) Also see Machine learning.
Astroturfing	Organized activity that is intended to create a false impression of a widespread, spontaneously arising, grassroots movement in support of or in opposition to something (such as a political policy) but that is initiated and controlled by a concealed group or organization (such as a corporation).
Backfire Effect	This effect is when beliefs are reinforced in the very attempt to debunk them.
Black box algorithms/ Black hat SEO (search engine optimization)	Describes aggressive and illicit strategies used to artificially increase a website's position within a search engine's results: for example, changing the content of a website after it has been ranked. These practices generally violate the given search engine's terms of service as they drive traffic to a website at the expense of the user's experience. (First Draft)
Bot	Bots are social media accounts that are operated entirely by computer programs and are designed to generate posts and/or engage with content on a particular platform. In disinformation campaigns, bots can be used to draw attention to misleading narratives, to hijack platforms' trending lists, and to create the illusion of public discussion and support. (Shorenstein Center, 2018) Also see Sock puppet.
Cheap Fakes	An audio or video manipulations created with cheaper, more accessible software (or none at all). They may be subtle, such as slowing down the speed at which a video is played, making it appear that the speaker's speech is slurred, or altering the background or an otherwise insignificant aspect of a picture.
Clickbait	Web content with misleading or sensationalist headlines that entices readers to click through to the full story, which is generally a disappointment. Clickbait's goal is usually to generate page views and advertising revenue. (Hootsuite, 2019)
Computational propaganda	Use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks.[231] (Woolley & Howard, 2017)

Term	Definition
Content Farm	A website or company that creates low-quality content aimed at improving its search engine rankings. Also known as a content mill or factory, its main purpose is to maximize page views and revenue generated by advertising on those pages while minimizing the costs and time needed to create the content.[232]
Content Moderation	The process by which content is moderated on digital media platforms and users are warned/blocked, according to public terms of service agreements and platform "community standards." (Data & Society, 2019)
Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior	A term coined by Facebook in 2018 to describe the operation of running fake accounts and pages on an online social platform in order to influence discourse among users.
Cyber Troops	Government or political party actors tasked with the use of social media to manipulate public opinion online.[233]
Dangerous Speech	Any form of expression (speech, text or imaged) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or participate in violence against members of another group.
Debunking	Publicly uncovering false information that is disseminated in order to influence or rather manipulate the whole of society or at least its major parts.[234]
Deep Fakes	Deepfakes are videos, images, and audio generated using artificial intelligence to synthetically render realistic depictions of speech and action.[235]
Digital Literacy	The ability to "access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital devices and networked technologies for participation in economic and social life. This may include competencies that are variously referred to as computer literacy, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, information literacy, and media literacy." Digital literacy includes both hard skills related to the use of hardware or software and digital soft skills related to the use of digital media and information. (USAID, 2019)
Digital Media	Digital media includes the user-generated content and underlying software applications that make up internet-based communication tools, such as websites, mobile applications, news aggregators, social media platforms, search engines, and messaging/chat services. (USAID, 2019)
Digital Security	The practice of understanding one's digital footprint, identifying localized risks to information systems and taking reasonable steps to protect one's owned assets from loss or capture. (USAID, 2019)
Disinformation	Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Doxing	Doxing, or doxxing, is the internet-based practice of researching and publicly broadcasting private or identifying information about an individual or organization.

Term	Definition
	The methods employed to acquire this information include searching publicly available databases and social media websites, hacking, and social engineering.
Echo Chamber	An environment or social space where individuals are interacting with ideas and beliefs similar to their own. Existing ideas are thus reinforced, and they avoid being challenged by alternative ideas.[236]
Fact Checking	Fact-checking (in the context of information disorder) is the process of determining the truthfulness and accuracy of official, published information such as politicians' statements and news reports. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Filter Bubble	A situation that arises by virtue of an algorithmic filter, where internet and social media users interact with material that supports their own beliefs and ideas, and in turn algorithms continue to provide the user with similar content.[237]
Flooding	Flooding is spamming with unsolicited or misguided junk mail, chat, or social media messages such as advertising, brochures, or fake solicitations.
Gaslighting	A technique of deception and psychological manipulation practiced by a deceiver, or "gaslighter," on victims over an extended period. Its effect is to gradually undermine the victims' confidence in their own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance, thereby rendering them pathologically dependent on the gaslighter.[238]
Hate Speech	The use of speech to make direct attacks against an individual or a group of people based on a series of protected characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and physical or mental ability. (USAID, 2019)
Inauthentic Actors	Individuals or organizations working to mislead others about who they are and what they are doing.[239]
Information Disorder	A condition in which truth and facts coexist in a milieu of misinformation and disinformation—conspiracy theories, lies, propaganda, and half-truths.
Internet Freedom	The U.S. Government conceptualizes internet freedom as the online exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms regardless of frontiers or medium. The same rights that people have offline must also be protected online—in particular, freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice. (USAID, 2019)
Internet Governance	The development and application by governments, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the internet. (United Nations, 2017)
Machine Learning	A set of methods for using computers to recognize patterns in data and make future predictions based on these patterns. Machine learning can be "supervised" or

Term	Definition
	"unsupervised," depending on the level of human oversight. (USAID, 2019) Also see Artificial intelligence.
Malinformation	Deliberate publication of private information for personal or private interest, as well as the deliberate manipulation of genuine content. Note that these information are based on reality but are used and disseminated to cause harm. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)
Manufactured Amplification	Boosting the reach or spread of information through artificial means.[240]
Media literacy	The ability to methodically consider and reflect on the meaning and source of a post or news article.
Meme	An idea or behavior that spreads from person to person throughout a culture by propagating rapidly and changing over time. The term is now used most frequently to describe captioned photos or GIFs that spread online; the most effective are humorous or critical of society. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Message Monitoring	Message monitoring analyzes the tropes, narratives, or specific messages that a bad actor is putting forward. In this way, it monitors platforms to look at the key messages that extremist or conspiracy groups are putting out to see if there are specific messages that they are repeating in talking points.
Microtargeting	Directing tailored advertisements, political messages, etc. at people based on detailed information about them (such as what they buy, watch, or respond to on a website); targeting small groups of people for highly specific advertisements or messages.[241]
Misinformation	Misinformation is information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who do not know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Natural Language Processing	The relationship between computers and human language content. It refers to speech analysis in both audible speech, as well as text of a language. NLP systems capture meaning from an input of words (sentences, paragraphs, pages, etc.).
Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)	The multi-method approach of collecting and analyzing free, publicly available information and cross-referencing it against other public sources.[242]
Persona	The creation of a representative user based on available data and user interviews. Though the personal details of the persona may be fictional, the information used to create the user type is not. Personas can help bring a target audience to life. (Usability.gov, 2019)
Pink Slime Journalism	A low-cost way of distributing thousands of algorithmically generated news stories, often with political bias.

Term	Definition
Platform Related	A social platform is a web-based technology that enables the development, deployment, and management of social media solutions and services. It provides the ability to create social media websites and services with complete social media network functionality. (Examples include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and others.) Some disinformation is purposefully spread through algorithms that target specific audiences or inauthentic actors who gain a following in social media. Others are an unintended consequence of the way we share information or gain followers on social media platforms, such as the Echo chamber and the Filter bubble.
Prebunking	An offensive strategy that refers to anticipating what disinformation is likely to be repeated by politicians, pundits, and provocateurs during key events and having already prepared a response based on past fact checks.[243]
Propaganda	True or false information spread to persuade an audience but often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments.
Redirecting	Sending a user to a different site or reference that can serve to debunk or offer context to information presented in social media or on a website.
Satire	Satire is writing that uses literary devices such as ridicule and irony to criticize elements of society. Satire can become misinformation if audiences misinterpret it as fact. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Social Media Listening	A means of attaining interpersonal information and social intelligence from social media to understand how relationships are formed and influence the way we listen to and communicate with one another.[244]
Social Media Monitoring	The process of identifying and determining what is being said about an issue, an individual, or a group through different social and online channels. It is used also by businesses to protect and enhance the reputation of their brands and products. The method uses bots to crawl the internet and index messages based on a set of keywords and phrases.[245]
Sock Puppet	A sock puppet is an online account that uses a false identity designed specifically to deceive. Sock puppets are used on social platforms to inflate account's follower numbers and to spread or amplify false information to a mass audience. Often confused with a meat puppet, which is another actual individual using a false identity for the same purpose. (Shorenstein Center, 2018) Also see Bot.
Troll Farm	A troll farm is a group of individuals engaging in trolling or bot-like promotion of narratives in a coordinated fashion. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Trolling	The act of deliberately posting offensive or inflammatory content to an online community with the intent of provoking readers or disrupting conversation. The term "troll" is most often used to refer to any person harassing or insulting others online.

Term	Definition
Verification	Verification is the process of determining the authenticity of information posted by unofficial sources online, particularly visual media. (Shorenstein Center, 2018)
Web Analytics	The measurement, collection, analysis and reporting of internet data for purposes of understanding and optimizing web usage. (Usability.gov, 2019)

ANNEX 2: TYPES OF MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION

The following examples were provided by First Draft News (https://firstdraftnews.org) to help illustrate and provide examples of the various types of misinformation and disinformation.

Fabricated content
https://www.vice.com/en_in/article/jgedjb/the-first-use-of-deepfakes-in-indian-election-by-bjp
Indian politician uses deepfake to show himself giving a speech in a different language.

False connection
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QilIhGzhW7o
The title of the video plays on anti-Chinese sentiment that is prevalent in Latin America to get people to click on the video and share. A textbook example of False Connection.

False context
https://twitter.com/AFPFactCheck/status/1221732075885101061
Video allegedly from Wuhan province where coronavirus originated is really from Indonesia.

Imposter content
https://twitter.com/elisethoma5/status/1215604086780743680?s=20
Fake screenshot that shows *Newsweek* article about Iran air strikes. Shows side-by-side comparisons of real/fake screens.

Satire or parody
https://factcheck.afp.com/australian-couple-quarantined-onboard-diamond-princess-cruise-reveal-wine-drone-delivery-story-was
The "news" about an Australian couple on cruise ship ordering wine via drone was debunked. The couple admitted that it was a joke post on Facebook for their friends.

Manipulated content
https://twitter.com/jamescracknell/status/1254395457033379843?s=21
Daily Mail edited a photo to make two people in a garden to appear closer than they really are.

Misleading content
https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-51020564
BBC Trending investigates cases of disinformation on Australian bushfires maps on social media.

ANNEX 3: EMERGING SOLUTIONS

Fact-Checking Initiatives
Africa Check is a nonprofit organization established in 2012 to promote accuracy in public debate and the media in Africa. Devised by the nonprofit media development arm of the international news agency AFP, Africa Check is an independent organization with offices in Johannesburg, Nairobi, Lagos, and Dakar. Africa Check produces reports in English and French, testing claims made by public figures, institutions and the media against the best available evidence. They have fact-checked more than 1,500 claims on topics from crime and race in South Africa to population numbers in Nigeria and fake health cures in various African countries.
Chequeado is the main project of the La Voz Pública Foundation. They are a nonpartisan and nonprofit digital medium dedicated to the verification of public discourse, the fight against disinformation, the promotion of access to information and the opening of data. Chequeado has been online since October 2010 and was the first site in Latin America dedicated to speech verification; it is among the top 10 fact-checking organizations in the world.
iRasKRIKavanje (Serbia) is a leading source for debunking disinformation in Serbia. With more than half a million monthly readers, it has been fact-checking media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as covering the government's response to the crisis. Its posts have been regularly republished by the leading Serbian daily newspapers and portals.
PopUp Newsroom (global—some work has been in Mexico and Sweden) is a concept focused on collaboration between competing newsrooms in order to drive innovation, especially as it relates to the online disinformation sphere.[246] In Mexico, the organization helped launch *Verificado*, with more than 90 partners working to address disinformation around the 2018 elections.
TruthBuzz (global—with fellows and partners in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and U.S.) is an initiative sponsored by the International Center for Journalists to help reporters utilize compelling storytelling methods that improve the reach and impact of fact-checking and help audiences learn to identify the true from the false.[247] TruthBuzz fellows work together with a newsroom and receive training from **First Draft News**. One fellow's project supported Tempo.co, an Indonesian investigative reporting outlet, to reach a younger audience and begin introducing fact-checking approaches.[248]
Ukraine has developed some significant fact-checking initiatives. **VoxUkraine** uses a scientific analysis method to assess major economic and political processes and decisions in Ukraine. Among others, a key project by the Vox team is **VoxCheck**, a fact-checking service that identifies disinformation narratives being spread online. **TEXTY.org** is a Ukrainian nonprofit data analysis group that fact-checks and combats disinformation
What's Crap on WhatsApp (Africa) combats misinformation and disinformation on WhatsApp by utilizing the app itself to spread a fact-checking podcast. The show encourages users to send misinformation and disinformation to the organization's WhatsApp number and then the show producers create short podcast episodes that debunk the rumors and send them to their subscribers, who can easily forward them along to the groups in which the misinformation and disinformation spread in the first place.[249]

Examples of Elections-Focused Programming

ISFED's Fact-a-lyzer was created by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, which was established for the 2018 presidential election in Georgia. Fact-a-lyzer is a pilot social media monitoring tool used for the election. The tool's software aggregated and monitored the Facebook content on public pages for political actors and groups, assigning tags to the posts. This data was then used to identify and analyze content trends.[250]

IFES's Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity examines the challenges disinformation presents to electoral integrity and the responses electoral management bodies and international nongovernmental organizations can take to mitigate threats.[251]

NDI's Disinformation and Electoral Integrity: A Guidance Document for NDI Elections Programs describes the National Democratic Institute's programmatic approaches to mitigating, exposing, and countering disinformation in the electoral context. The document stresses the importance of using open election data to deter disinformation and advocacy to counter it.[252]

Supporting Democracy's Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections provides an in-depth explanation of social media's role in elections, its impact on the electoral process, methodological approaches to monitoring it, data collection and analysis tool, and approaches for making an impact with social media monitoring.[253]

Examples of Coalitions

EUvsDisinfo is an EU-spearheaded project started in 2015 to "increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital disinformation and media manipulation."[254] EUvsDisinfo has hands in three major areas. First, it conducts data analytics of media spaces to identify and publicize disinformation campaigns started by the Kremlin or pro-Kremlin media outlets; the data are archived in an open-source, dedicated database. Second, the project publishes summaries, articles, and reports both within the research community and for wider general readership. Third, it offers training resources for governments, media outlets, universities, and civil society organizations.

The Atlantic Council is a "nonpartisan organization that galvanizes US leadership and engagement in the world, with allies and partners, to shape solutions to global challenges."[255] Among the numerous capacities through which Atlantic Council conducts international work, their recently published Democratic Defense Against Disinformation 2.0 provides a current snapshot of global disinformation campaigns at work, proposed solutions, progress made, and criticisms and recommendations made to the U.S. executive and judiciary branches regarding urgent steps needed in the path toward a healthier information ecosystem.

Resources for Legal and Policy Approaches

Poynter's **A Guide to Anti-misinformation Actions Around the World** has a regularly updated mapping by the Poynter Institute of both the positive and negative actions that governments have carried out to combat misinformation.[256]

UNESCO's **Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression** is unique in its global scale and comprehensiveness, but it is also highly action-oriented, with a suite of sector-specific actionable recommendations and a 23-point framework to test disinformation responses.

OxTEC's **A Report of Anti-Disinformation Initiatives** is a 2019 report by the Oxford Technology and Elections Commission (OxTEC) that analyzes fake news landscapes around the world, the governmental measures to address disinformation, and the geopolitical contexts facing each example. The report features examples from 19 countries in four continents.[257]

Examples of Counter-Disinformation Campaigns

A Counter-Disinformation System That Works details the formula **Debunk.eu** and its partners are using to counter disinformation in Lithuania. Using a combination of "geeks," or IT and AI experts developing algorithms to detect false claims; "elves," or volunteers who research and debunk false stories; and journalists, who publish finished stories about the debunked claims, Lithuanian anti-disinformation activists claim to have established a successful, fully integrated system.[258]

Russia's Disinformation Activities and Counter-Measures: **Lessons from Georgia** is a report from think-tank European Values about the main lessons learned from the fight against pro-Kremlin disinformation in Georgia.[259]

Examples of Local Journalism Support

Internews is aimed at building lasting change by ensuring people have access to quality, local information. To do so, Internews works with local partners to grow sustainable organizations and offers capacity-building programs for media professions, human rights activists, and information entrepreneurs.[260]

IREX promotes "vibrant information and media systems." IREX supports journalism and media organizations through trainings on reporting, media law, media safety, and digital security. IREX also provides additional support to consumers via media literacy programs, training citizen journalists, and diversifying and distributing television content.[261]

International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) seeks to build the expertise and storytelling skills of journalists around the world. ICFJ focuses on five key areas: news innovation, investigative reporting, global exchange programs, specialty journalism, and diversity promotion.[262]

Examples of Media Literacy

Digital Security Project seeks to provide data on the intersection of politics and social media. Its indicators cover topics including online censorship, polarization, misinformation campaigns, coordinated information operations and foreign influence in and monitoring of domestic politics. It uses the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) framework, also used by USAID in Journey to Self-Reliance (JSR) metrics, to assess various digital issues including misinformation.

IREX's Learn to Discern (L2D) is a worldwide media literacy training project for all ages that focuses on developing healthy information engagement habits and increasing the local demand for quality information. Its approach and curriculum are designed to meet the current needs of media consumers, adapting to the local context. L2D has been used in Ukraine, Serbia, Tunisia, Jordan, Indonesia, and the United States to address challenges stemming from misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, and influence campaigns. [263]

NewsWise is a free cross-curricular news literacy project for 9- to 11-year-old children across the United Kingdom, supported by the Guardian Foundation, National Literacy Trust, the PSHE Association, and Google. It features resources—including guides, webinars, and activities—for teachers and families.[264]

Examples of Public Awareness Campaigns

#ThinkB4UClick (Think Before You Click) is a campaign by #defyhatenow to raise awareness about the dangers of misinformation, fake news, and hate speech in South Sudan. It seeks to educate the public on these terms and explain how their individual actions can mitigate the issues to create safe online and offline spaces for healthy and informed discussions.

Elves vs. Trolls is an informal internet army of Lithuanians trying to counter what they describe as hate speech and pro-Russia propaganda.

The War on Pineapple, promoted by the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency (CISA), uses the concept of pineapple on pizza to promote understanding of foreign interference in five steps: targeting divisive issues, moving accounts into place, amplifying and distorting the conversation, making the mainstream, and taking the conversation into the real world.

ANNEX 4: PASSIVE & ACTIVE DRIVERS OF DISINFORMATION

In *Demand for deceit: How the way we think drive disinformation*, Samuel Woolley and Katie Joseff compile a list of cognitive active and passive drivers that explain ways individuals can be manipulated into believing false content. These "cognitive drivers of consumption, acceptance, and sharing of disinformation" are broken into passive and active categories.

Passive Drivers	
Belief Perseverance Effect	Continued influence of initial conclusions (sometimes based on false, novel information) on decision-making and individual beliefs.
Familiarity Effect	Information which is repeated or delivered in a manner consistent with past experience (for example, in a frequently heard accent) is often deemed more credible.
Misinformation Effect	False information suggested to individuals after the fact can influence their perception, especially as time passes and the memory weakens.
Priming	Shaping an individual's perceptions and behavior through exposure to subconscious stimuli.
Repeat Exposure	Individuals may respond more positively to stimuli that they have seen frequently than to stimuli they have seen only a few times; persists even when exposure is subliminal, and individuals are unaware that they have seen a stimulus.
Truth Bias	The default assumption that information is credible.
Virality and Heightened Emotion	Information which evokes fear, disgust, awe, anger, or anxiety may be much more likely to be spread by individuals over social media.

Active Drivers	
Bandwagon Effect	The tendency of individuals to be more likely to adopt beliefs that they believe are common among others.
Confirmation Bias	Suggests that individuals seek out information that agrees with their preexisting beliefs.
Consensus Bias	The tendency to believe information that is perceived as consensus.
Disconfirmation Bias	Suggests that people actively reason against information which conflicts with preexisting beliefs.
Directionally Motivated Reasoning	The desire to reach a specific conclusion, and thus to lend more credibility to information favoring that conclusion.
In-group favoritism	The tendency to favor one's "in-group" (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, religious preference, partisan affiliation, geographic location, etc.) over one's out-group.
Preference Falsification	Occurs when individuals express preferences (e.g., favored politician or policy) in response to perceived societal pressures and do not communicate their true opinion.
Prior Attitude Effect	Suggests that people regard information that supports their beliefs ("pro-attitudinal information") as more legitimate than counter-attitudinal information (sometimes called the prior attitude effect).

Source: Woolley, S, & Joseff, K. Demand for deceit: How the way we think drives disinformation. Working paper. National Endowment for Democracy. https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Demand-for-Deceit.pdf

ANNEX 5: QUICK RESOURCES FOR PLANNING A DISINFORMATION STRATEGY

1. Disinformation and Elections

NDI Disinformation and Electoral Integrity

IFES Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity

Protecting Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age

DRI Guide for Civil Society to Monitor Social Media During Elections

2. Disinformation Research Institutions

Harvard Kennedy School/Misinformation Review

First Draft News

Stanford Cyber Policy Center

Atlantic Council's Digital Disinformation Primer

3. Disinformation and Civil Society

ComProp Navigator

Interaction: disinformation toolkit for civil society

USG Resources for Analytics

Global Engagement Center's DisinfoCloud

Global Engagement Center's Counter-Disinformation Dispatches

4. USG Policy/Strategy

National Security Strategy, December 2017 Pillar III: Preserve peace through strength"- Information Statecraft – "activate local network: local voices are most compelling and effective in ideological competitions"

DoS/USAID Joint Strategic Plan FY 2018-2022 Strategic Objective 1.4: Increase capacity and strengthen resilience of our partners and allies to deter aggression, coercion and malign influence by state and non-state actors

USAID Countering Malign Kremlin Influence Objective 2: Resist the manipulation of information

National Defense Authorization Act 2016, 2017, 2020

USG Organizations engaged on disinformation:

- USG Organizations: Historical—The U.S. Information Agency
- DoS/Global Engagement Center (GEC)
- DoS/GPA Social Media Presence
- U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)

ANNEX 6: SECTION-BY-SECTION RESOURCES

A. INTRODUCTION—SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

The Wilson Center, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the University of Washington hosted a discussion on disinformation campaigns and potential ways to combat them. This video captures key aspects of the issues presented in the Primer. Panelists provided a historical overview of disinformation campaigns, assessed current patterns in disinformation, and discussed the potential challenges that lie ahead. Key concepts covered included: Disinformation Defined, Goal of Disinformation, Russian Disinformation, RT, Sputnik and Bots, and Identifying Disinformation.

https://www.c-span.org/video/?463432-1/panelists-discuss-combatting-disinformation-campaigns

ComProp Navigator is an online resource guide for CSOs to learn more about digital disinformation topics and address their concerns; it is curated by civil society practitioners and the Project on Computational Propaganda.[265]

https://navigator.oii.ox.ac.uk

B. PART TWO: UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION DISORDER—SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Dean Jackson for National Endowment for Democracy's International Forum Democratic Studies created three issue briefs to offer insights into various part of mis/disinformation:

- Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and "Fake News" is helpful on defining disinformation.
- Issue Brief: How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics
- Issue Brief: The "Demand Side" of the Disinformation Crisis is helpful on how psychology and cognitive biases help perpetuate the reach and impact of disinformation.

For a look at how Finland has taken on mis/disinformation:

- Media Literacy in Finland Sets the Bar: Web Extra: Finnish Kids Got Education | Full Frontal on TBS
- Media literacy in Finland is the media literacy policy and the national media education policy document, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019.

For some insights into China:

- The Hoover Institution has a project called China's Global Sharp Power, which examines China's role in "digital authoritarianism," among other topics.
- Also read the exhaustive Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation: A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Elections by Aaron Huang of the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School.

To learn more on how algorithms amplify disinformation:

- What is an algorithm? in *The Economist*, August 30, 2017

- Misinformation has created a new world disorder: Our willingness to share content without thinking is exploited to spread disinformation by Claire Wardle in *Scientific American*, September 1, 2019.
- How misinformation spreads on social media—And what to do about it by Chris Meserole, Brookings Institution, May 9, 2018.

On how disinformation spreads across online platforms/applications:

- WhatsApp as a tool for fear and intimidation in Lebanon's protests, by Emily Lewis in Coda, November 12, 2019.
- Disinformation from China floods Taiwan's most popular messaging app, by Nithin Coca in Coda, October 7, 2020

C. PART FOUR: WHAT SOCIAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO DISINFORMATION?

Resources for Media Monitoring:

- Bakamo.Social is a strategic social listening consultancy that uses technology and human understanding to find meaning in the millions of conversations that take place online every day. https://www.bakamosocial.com/
- East Stratcom Task Force (EU) was set up to address Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns. In March 2015, the European Council tasked the High Representative in cooperation with EU institutions and Member States to submit an action plan on strategic communication. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en
- KremlinWatch is a strategic program of the European Values Center for Security Policy, which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies. https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/
- Memo 98 is a Slovakia-based specialist media monitoring organization, with extensive experience of delivery media analyses on behalf of international institutions as well as technical assistance to civil society groups. It offers specialized media monitoring services in the area of disinformation.
- Moonshot Consulting seeks to find audiences vulnerable to violent extremist and false messaging, works to better understand them, and then builds an evidence base to deliver campaigns and interventions to make information safer. http://moonshotcve.com/work/
- Researchers from the University of Notre Dame are using artificial intelligence to develop an early warning system that will identify manipulated images, deepfake videos, and disinformation online. The project is an effort to combat the rise of coordinated social media campaigns to incite violence, sow discord, and threaten the integrity of democratic elections. https://news.nd.edu/news/researchers-develop-early-warning-system-to-fight-disinformation-online/

Examples of open-source intelligence (OSINT):

- "How to Conduct an Open-Source Investigation, According to the Founder of Bellingcat" is an article about Eliot Higgins, founder of the open-source investigation website Bellingcat, and his

workshops to teach journalists, NGOs, government agencies, and other interested parties how to use OSINT for their investigations. Bellingcat provides an online investigation toolkit that is updated regularly and provides open-source and free software. [266]

- First Draft Basic Toolkit also provides links to open-source and free software of use to newsrooms for newsgathering, verification, and responsible reporting.
- Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) uses open-source research to expose and explain disinformation; the DFRLab seeks to build "the world's leading hub of digital forensics analysts (#DigitalSherlocks)," promoting objective truth, protecting democratic institutions and norms, and forging greater digital resilience worldwide.[267]
- "Civil Society Tracks Trolls and Fakes, Prompts Facebook Action in Moldova" is an article describing Trolless, a platform that enabled Moldovan users to report fake profiles, troll accounts, and suspicious activity and material. Once reported, the Trolless team would investigate and publish their findings, providing verification or more information about the suspected accounts and content.[268]

D. PART FIVE: WHAT ARE SOME ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES?

To learn more about some of the technologies mentioned in this section:

- The Hamilton 2.0 dashboard, a project of the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, provides a summary analysis of the narratives and topics promoted by Russian, Chinese, and Iranian government officials and state-funded media on Twitter, YouTube, state-sponsored news websites, and via official diplomatic statements at the United Nations. https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/hamilton-dashboard/
- Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Generated Propaganda lab OpenAI has already released a beta version of GPT-3, a long-form text generator that works by taking text input and predicting what should follow. https://openai.com/blog/openai-api/

E. PART SIX: WHAT ARE SOME EMERGING SOLUTIONS FOR DISINFORMATION?

On debunking and discrediting:

- The Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the U.S. Department of State recommends a combined debunking and discrediting approach, which is explained in GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches #2: Three Ways to Counter Disinformation and GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches #4: What Works in Debunking.

ANNEX 7: WHAT TO READ & WATCH

Select key books to help orient your knowledge and understanding of disinformation studies

Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism by Safiya Umoja Noble

Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy by Siva Vaidhyanathan

Communication Power by Manuel Castells

Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media by Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard (Editors)

How Propaganda Works by Jason Stanley

How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict by Nina Jankowicz

Lie Machines: How to Save Democracy From Troll Armies, Deceitful Robots, Junk News Operations, and Political Operatives by Philip Howard

Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age by Renee Hobbs and Douglas Rushkoff

Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia The Surreal Heart of the New Russia by Peter Pomerantsev

This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality Adventures in the War Against Reality by Peter Pomerantsev

Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest by Zeynep Tufekci

Key podcasts of interest

All Things Policy, Episode 354; *Ordering the Information Disorder:* https://player.fm/series/all-things-policy/ep-354-ordering-the-information-disorder

CSIS, *Confronting the Problem of Fake News in Africa:* https://www.csis.org/events/confronting-problem-fake-news-africa

Democracy in Danger; produced by the Deliberative Media Lab with support from the UVA Democracy Initiative and the College of Arts and Sciences: https://medialab.virginia.edu/democracyindanger

Demystifying Media at the University of Oregon, Episode 39; *Fighting a New Era of Disinformation with Claire Wardle:* https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/demystifying-media-podcast

The Disinformation Age: https://www.mikehind.co.uk

Interpret; *Health Misinformation & Polio in Pakistan with Carlotta Dotto:* https://www.buzzsprout.com/739217/4387205-health-misinformation-polio-in-pakistan-with-carlotta-dotto

NED's Power 3.0; blog posts and podcast episodes related to media and technology: https://www.power3point0.org/category/media-information-technology/

New York Public Radio, On the Media; *Ukraine's Remedy for Fake News: News About Fake News:* https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/ukraine-remedy-fake-news-more-news

The Nordic Co-operation, The Foreign Desk; *The Threats to Democracy:*

https://www.norden.org/en/information/foreign-desk-threats-democracy

NPR, Rough Translation; *Ukraine vs. Fake News:* https://www.npr.org/2017/10/17/544458898/ukraine-vs-fake-newsPodcast Brunch Club: Disinformation and Fake News; January 2020 Listening List: https://podcastbrunchclub.com/fakenews/

The Poynter Institute; *Is fact-checking the antidote to misinformation?* https://www.spreaker.com/user/newsu/misinformed-episode-3?utm_medium=widget&utm_source=user%3A10628419&utm_term=episode_titleRecode Decode, Episode 524; *Phil Howard and Emily Bell: Disinformation in 2020, from "Plandemic" to Bill Gates to "Obamagate"; while* US-focused, this podcast contains very useful information and explanations that will be helpful to teaching and understanding the disinformation challenge

Documentaries and Useful YouTube Videos

After Truth: Disinformation and the Cost of Fake News: https://www.hbo.com/documentaries/after-truth-disinformation-and-the-cost-of-fake-news

Al Jazeera—*India: Fake News and Agitprop:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0LgwL6rMPk&list=PLzGHKb8i9vTwQ4uKHdPDjqhnAap_h1mdh&index=39

Al Jazeera—*How Fake News Could Shape Kenya's Election:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pz65C9fQpdM&list=PLzGHKb8i9vTwQ4uKHdPDjqhnAap_h1mdh&index=13

Al Jazeera—Inside Story: *Should Social Media Be Regulated?* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QaXVetsuIg&list=PLzGHKb8i9vTwQ4uKHdPDjqhnAap_h1mdh&index=56

Fact or Friction: Reporting on Hong Kong's Protests: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blUwA7NkITU&list=PLzGHKb8i9vTwQ4uKHdPDjqhnAap_h1mdh&index=53

MIT's *Moon Disaster:* https://moondisaster.org

New York Times' *Operation Infektion:* https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html

TED—*How Can We Protect in the Age of Misinformation: Sinan Aral:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7ORAKULel4

TED Global—*How to Seek Truth in an Era of Fake News: Christiane Amanpour:* https://www.ted.com/talks/christiane_amanpour_how_to_seek_truth_in_the_era_of_fake_news?referrer=playlist-the_value_of_skepticism

A Thousand Cuts: https://www.athousandcuts.film

*Trust M*e Documentary: https://www.trustmedocumentary.com/?gclid=CjwKCAjww5r8BRB6EiwArcckC9U5UTNVNdfKHjV_GGfFGXTu8DQNjLqltYKlRYKGc-TJwtjpPmyX8RoCSCoQAvD_BwE

Washington Post's *Fakeout* Series: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwkoFkA2UoI

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Filter bubble is where a group chooses to preferentially communicate with each other, to the exclusion of outsiders. See Annex I for a glossary of useful disinformation terms.

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