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SUMMARY

3

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

Chapter on:

Identification Responses to Disinformation

“ There is some concern that drawing attention to falsehoods can help amplify them. Nevertheless, the operating assumption is that the work of verification and debunking remains essential as a means for surfacing truth and for holding individuals, public figures, institutions and the media accountable for inaccurate claims... ”

Excerpt from the original Report

*Fact-checkers
will find this
summary to be
of particular
interest*

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BROADBAND COMMISSION
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT





SUMMARY 3

Background:

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

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

This particular summary focuses on identification responses, which include:

Spotting what content is false and misleading - Carried out by news organisations, internet communications companies, academia, civil society organisations, and independent fact-checking organisations. Within this category:

- **Verification** is an editorial technique to verify the accuracy of a statement, documents, and/or the platforms and identities (human and digital) of those producing or transmitting content.
- **Fact checking** - Entails applying verification not only to the process of journalistic work (and its outputs) but also to third-party claims, statements, and datasets circulating outside the legacy media sphere, especially on social networks. Increasingly, fact-checking also involves a process of proactive de-bunking - i.e pre-emptively exposing lies.
- **Investigative responses** - Which go beyond the question of assessing whether a given message/content is false to provide insights into disinformation campaigns, including the originating actors, degree of spread, and affected communities.

Global fact-checking work described in this study is being undertaken by organisations such as First Draft, International Fact Checking Network (IFCN), Duke University Reporters' Lab database, and Facebook Third-Party Fact Checking network. The latter represents the biggest organised international network dealing with disinformation, and it covers both Facebook and Instagram (since May 2019), but it is relevant more widely, as false or misleading content on Facebook is often cross-posted on other social networks like Twitter, YouTube, or (Facebook-owned) WhatsApp. Three studies concluded that reduction in engagement with disinformation on Facebook after the 2016 United States (US) presidential election could be partially attributed to fact-checking interventions. Regional fact-checking responses are carried out by AfricaCheck, Argentina's Chequeado, and Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis (SOMA) in Europe; national responses are also outlined in the full Balancing Act study.

The challenge for fact-checkers is to implement objective standards and operate transparently in all languages, at scale, and with impact. Achieving this in practice is far from straightforward. Fact-checking also needs to be consistent with international standards for freedom of expression and other human rights like privacy, and to recognise that certain content (e.g., opinion, humour) does not lend itself to verification.



The Balancing Act suggests that international and regional institutions, governments, internet communications companies, foundations, and news organisations could:

- **Make available resources for independent fact checking**, including facilitating the fact-checking of political content and political advertising.
- **Support the principle of access to information**, especially in regard to both authorities and internet companies, in order to increase transparency and enable fact-checking organisations themselves to work more accurately and transparently.
- **Promote fact-checking results as trustworthy sources of information**, useful for citizenship, for the news media, and for media and information literacy (MIL) interventions.
- **Promote trans-disciplinary research** into fact-checking responses to disinformation.
- **Help to develop collaborative fact-checking operations** worldwide, especially in partnership with news organisations.

- **Reinforce fact-checking capacity** within news organisations through specialist-training and editorial projects to support accountability reporting applied to corporate, government, and political actors and actions.
- **Develop international standards and an accountability** approach to enable transparent and objective appointment and assessment procedures for the people and organisations involved in fact checking, and evaluate their performance over time.

Going beyond fact-checking, investigative reports typically aim to help news organisations, governments, fact-checkers, internet companies, and others understand the dynamics of disinformation campaigns in order to deploy effective counter-measures. Such action could include content takedowns or demotion, labels, legal processes, transparency and accountability measures, and regulatory or company policy reform.

A range of initiatives work on organised investigations into disinformation and produce in-depth reporting. These include:

- Entities with a primary focus on disinformation (e.g., Digital Forensic Research Lab of the Atlantic Council)
- Entities with methodologies relevant to disinformation (e.g., open-source intelligence, or OSINT)
- Investigations by existing non-governmental watchdogs or monitors with a thematic or sectoral freedom of expression focus
- In-depth investigations by news outlets
- Action-oriented academic research
- Commercial entities working in social network analysis and cyber-security
- Investigations by internal company threat mitigation teams.

A challenge to note is that journalists conducting investigations into disinformation are vulnerable to attacks against them, such as online harassment.

Recommendations for action include:

- Electoral regulatory bodies and national authorities could work with journalists and researchers in fact-checking and investigations around electoral disinformation networks and producers of “dark propaganda”.
- Political parties and other political actors could submit their online political adverts to independent fact-checking processes.
- The media sector could increase investment in fact-checking, debunking, and disinformation investigations; ensure robust lines of questioning about responses to disinformation; enhance accountability and transparency with regard to political actors, states, institutions, and the corporate sector; and undertake coverage of the issues of transparency, accountability, and independence of institutions and individuals engaged in fact-checking and/or evaluation of the credibility of sources of information.
- All stakeholders could recognise the need to invest in critical, independent investigative journalism as a defensive measure against disinformation, particularly in light of COVID-19.
- Internet companies could provide broader and better access to their datasets to independent researchers studying disinformation in the interests of knowledge sharing to combat disinformation; provide more financial support to independent fact-checking networks; and apply fact-checking to all political content (including advertising, fact-based opinion, and direct speech).
- Donors and research organisations could increase investment in interdisciplinary and collaborative investigations, fostering cooperation between academic researchers, commercial data scientists, NGOs, and news organisations.