



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

**IPDC** THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME  
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION

# JOURNALISM, 'FAKE NEWS' AND DISINFORMATION

*A Model Course for Journalism  
Educators and Trainers Worldwide*



Sustainable  
Development  
Goals



# JOURNALISM UNDER THREAT

Information is the engine of development in the 20th and 21st century. This is fueled by independent news media that can act as a trusted guardian of public interest, and as an essential part of society's checks and balances on power. But recent developments have put journalism under fire.

Political, technological, economic and social transformations are inexorably reshaping the communications landscape and raising many questions about the quality, impact and credibility of journalism. In addition, the information ecology is being contaminated by orchestrated campaigns to spread untruths via disinformation. This disruption is accompanied by manipulation of half-truths via mal-information, and by the unwitting sharing of misinformation.

This is the context in which UNESCO is publishing a model curriculum on a highly topical and significant subject. The new resource is aimed mainly at journalism educators and trainers, but is also of direct interest to practicing journalists and others who are interested in the quality of information in circulation.

Political parties, health professionals, businesspeople, scientists, election monitors, NGOs and others will also find useful insight in this publication. The idea is not to prescribe a curriculum, but to present knowledge resources for insight and adaptation as each reader sees fit.

Finding ways through contemporary information challenges is of utmost importance for society, including governments, Internet companies, educators, NGOs, etc.

While some governments are seeking to tackle the problems through regulation, it is unlikely that this can resolve the matter at scale. Moreover, it carries major risks of abuse, where legitimate freedom of expression and authentic journalism can become subject to new censorship by a 'Ministry of Truth'.

Another response is by companies seeking technological solutions, which may mitigate and flag some problems. These steps too carry their own risks – especially if left only to algorithms. Technical measures should never exclude having people to assess and curate information based on a clear and transparent editorial policy informed by international standards on rights to free expression, association, privacy and redress options.

In other responses, attention is being given to making audiences more discriminating and resilient, through empowering them with critical Media and Information Literacy competencies. These steps are also part of the solution, although they are generally of a medium-term nature.

## HOW CAN JOURNALISTS AND JOURNALISM STUDENTS PLAY THEIR OWN PART?

For journalists and journalism students, it is mission-critical to understand the nature and magnitude of both the threats and have a holistic view of the attempts to counter them.

This model curriculum sets out how media actors need understand that their best contribution is by exemplary journalistic practice that serves as a highly valued and credible alternative to corrupted information. This means doubling down on verification and ethical journalism in the public interest, and learning new skills to deal with the new threats like 'deep fakes'.

The curriculum additionally shows that journalists also need to ramp up their coverage of disinformation actors, even outside of election times. Further, that journalists can partner with others, including communities, in combatting pollution of the information environment.

# JOURNALISM, 'FAKE NEWS' AND DISINFORMATION

## *A Model Course for Journalism Educators and Trainers Worldwide*

For those directly involved in empowering journalists and student journalists, this study provides a framework for inquiry, and lessons to help navigate the increasingly murky information environment. It examines the deployment of 'fake news' as a term to discredit journalism, and sets out an alternative framework covering disinformation and misinformation, and (to a lesser extent) mal-information and emotive propa-ganda. The lessons are contextual, theoretical and in the case of digital verification, extremely practical. The curriculum falls into two distinct parts: the first four modules frame the problem and give it context, while the last four focus on responses to 'information disorder' and its consequences.

### COURSE MODULES AND CONTRIBUTORS

#### **1** *'Truth, Trust and Journalism: Why It Matters'*

encourages learners to think about the broader significance and consequences of disinformation and misinformation, and how these feed the crisis of confidence in journalism. *(Cherilyn Ireton)*

#### **2** *'Thinking about Information Disorder: Formats of Misinformation, Disinformation and Mal-information'*

unpacks the problem and gives a framework for understanding the dimensions of the problem. *(Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan)*

#### **3** *'A Selected History of Propaganda, Hoaxes & Satire in the Communications Ecosystem'*

puts disinformation, misinformation and propaganda in a historical perspective. *(Julie Posetti & Alice Matthews)*

#### **4** *'News Industry Transformation: Digital Technology, Social Platforms and the Spread of Dis/Misinformation'*

elaborates on how the disinformation crisis is magnified in the context of 24/7 on-demand digital news consumption patterns and dramatic newsroom cutbacks. *(Julie Posetti)*

#### **5** *'Combatting Disinformation & Misinformation through Media & Information Literacy'*

asks how those who promote journalism, including educators, practitioners and media policymakers respond to the challenges. *(Magda Abu-Fadil)*

#### **6** *'Fact-checking 101'*

explains the discipline of verification that distinguishes professional journalism from other kinds of information and opinion. *(Alexios Mantzarlis)*

#### **7** *'Social Media Verification: Assessing Sources and Visual Content'*

encourages learners to think about the broader significance and consequences of disinformation and misinformation, and how these feed the crisis of confidence in journalism. *(Tom Trewinnard & Fergus Bell)*

#### **8** *'Combating Online Abuse: When Journalists and their Sources are targeted'*

deals with the emerging issue of disinformation-driven targeting of journalists online, highlighting new digital threats including psychological impacts of gendered online harassment. *(Julie Posetti)*

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## Cherilyn Ireton

is the Executive Director of the World Editors Forum, the global network for editors within WAN-IFRA. She is a seasoned newspaper professional, having spent more

than 20 years on South African newspapers, as a journalist and editorial manager on the country's leading titles.



## Julie Posetti

is an internationally award-winning Australian journalist and academic. She is a Senior Research Fellow with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of

Oxford. There, she leads RISJ's new Journalism Innovation Project. Posetti is the author of UNESCO's global study 'Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age' (2017).

## UNESCO SERIES ON JOURNALISM EDUCATION

UNESCO works to strengthen journalism education and the publication 'Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation' is the latest offering in a line of cutting-edge knowledge resources, called UNESCO's Publication Series on Journalism Education.

It is part of UNESCO'S work to engage with media teaching, practice and researching from a global perspective, and the promotion of shared excellence in journalism education.

## UNESCO'S IPDC

This curriculum and the UNESCO Series on Journalism Education are funded by UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The IPDC is the only multilateral forum in the UN system designed to mobilize the international community to discuss and promote media development in developing countries.

The Programme provides support for projects that help to build safe, free, independent and pluralistic media, and projects that support journalism education. IPDC further conducts relevant media research using a suite of dedicated indicators, and it monitors judicial follow-up to the cases of killed journalists.

## 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Freedom of information as well as free, independent and quality journalism are indispensable for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in building peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

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Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 seeks to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels'. Target 16.10 aims to 'ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements'. The IPDC plays a role in global monitoring of two indicators related to Target 16.10.