SYNTHESIS REPORT

Context

COVID-19 is not only one of the most significant health crises of our times, but is also an information crisis taking place in a dynamic and constantly evolving scientific environment with uncertainty on many fundamental issues. The information crisis is the result of the plethora of available information and the difficulty in differentiating true from false – or even fake – information, and identifying what content is in a grey and evolving scientific zone.

Rumours, fake news and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 are proliferating online. They threaten people’s health, discredit public action, delegitimize preventive measures, spark diplomatic tensions and provide background for a surge of stigma, hate speech and hate crimes against various groups and nationalities believed to be associated with the coronavirus. The coronavirus has indeed given rise to a pandemic of misinformation and disinformation further affecting the fabric of societies already fractured by the sanitary crisis and its dramatic economic, political and social consequences.

In this context, education can play an important role in minimizing these risks and promoting values of solidarity and human rights by ensuring that young people, as well as their educators and parents, acquire core competencies of digital citizenship that build resilience to disinformation and misinformation and the exploitation of these by hate-mongers. Education
can also help young people engage in the online environment in a safe, sensitive, critical, ethical and accountable way as well as encourage them to play a role in pioneering educational initiatives that contribute to promoting digital citizenship.

Objective

The webinar, part of the UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response webinar series, aimed to:

1. Examine ongoing challenges of disinformation, misinformation and hate speech during the COVID-19 crisis;
2. Highlight possible educational responses that can help young people engage positively in the current online environment based on values promoted through global citizenship education.

The webinar findings will feed into the preparation of a *Global Ministerial Conference on Addressing and Countering Hate Speech through Education* that UNESCO is planning together with the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect.

Key challenges

'The COVID-19 pandemic raises unprecedented challenges, placing extraordinary pressure on societies threatened by potentially devastating political, social and economic consequences, and generating a wave of hate speech and a pandemic of disinformation and conspiracy theories. This has important human rights implications, now and in the long-term, including on the right to education and the right to information and participation, which are core to UNESCO’s mandate'. *Vibeke Jensen, Director of the Division for Peace and Sustainable Development at UNESCO*

Trust is a key currency – it needs to be generated in public life and maintained in digital spaces. As people are questioning the responsiveness of schools and hospitals during the pandemic, public trust in government institutions is being undermined. People tend to trust information from sources they know (e.g. religious institutions, political parties, ethnic groups) rather than experts. This phenomenon has been amplified during COVID-19 as science is dynamic knowledge that has put into question the traditional role of experts as reference points.

The proliferation of fake news online during the pandemic has reinforced this by discrediting public action and fuelling stigma, discrimination and hate speech. Junk news outlets, which have existed for years, have woven the coronavirus into their existing reporting angles, for example, by blaming migrants or other specific groups as the origin of the problem ([Computational Propaganda Research Project](https://computationalpropaganda.org/), Oxford Internet Institute). By producing divisive, inflammatory content, sometimes backed up by states, junk news outlets have contributed to the pandemic of disinformation. Social media algorithms have enabled the wide dissemination of such junk news by driving traffic to websites thus fostering virtual ‘echo chambers’ and increasing polarization within societies.
'In relation to education and media, one of the real problems with junk news outlets is that they frame themselves around being critical of mainstream discourse and try to appeal to people who think of themselves as highly media literate and critical consumers of media. So, junk news is already wearing the clothes of people promoting critical media literacy skills. This is one of the real problems.'
Jonathan Bright, Senior Research Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute

Devising effective counter-strategies

'One of the crucial points made is to insist on science as dynamic knowledge which changes according to new discoveries and research. In order to define fake and true we need an approach that is based on verification of data and is able to contextualise information. This is what education can give. It is important that children acquire their own methodology and are able to detect in an overloaded environment what is data-based and what is not.'
Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education at UNESCO

Helping people navigate the sea of information and differentiate what is true from what is not is an essential step to counter disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. Education and digital citizenship can help address ignorance to counter both disinformation and misinformation. Misinformation is a label given to false information that is not created or circulated with the intention of causing harm. Disinformation describes content deliberately created or circulated, with the knowledge it is not true, and with the intention to harm a person, social group, organization or society. It is, however, frequently impossible to accurately pinpoint the intention behind untrue content, and it is also extremely complex to determine what, objectively speaking, constitutes harm.

Addressing a range of hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting freedom of speech. It means keeping that range from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly the incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, which is prohibited under international law (UN Strategy and Action Plan against Hate Speech). Therefore, in our response to disinformation and hate speech, we must ensure that freedom of expression, notably freedom of the press and freedom of information, which are crucial foundations of democracy, development and dialogue, and preconditions for protecting all other human rights, are upheld.

Strategies to counter disinformation, misinformation and hate speech should consider:

1. Fostering access to verifiable and reliable information which makes the right to freedom of expression meaningful - by ensuring citizens’ rights to seek and receive information, fact-checking and monitoring information, providing adequate legislative and policy responses that do not suppress legitimate freedom of expression, as well as working with producers and distributors of information to prevent disinformation and hate speech online and “curate” content where necessary.

2. Educating young people to enable them to be active consumers, sharers and producers of information and become an informed and accountable generation of digital citizens – by teaching global citizenship, how to debate and share perspectives, developing empathy and other socio-emotional skills, acquiring media and information literacy
(MIL), as well as raising awareness about their rights and responsibilities on-line, including how to act when faced with hatred.

'I think global citizenship education is essential and valuable and within that media literacy is very important to teach children how to search for information and how to stand up for themselves. Many young people are passive online when they see hate speech because they are intimidated. We need to empower them not only with digital skills but with critical thinking and fact-checking skills.' Victoria Ibiwoye, Youth Representative to the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Group

Global, regional and country-level initiatives

'One of the biggest things we are noticing is that people are more interested in popularity than factuality and would rather listen to a celebrity or influencer than a scientist or epidemiologist. In fact, people with the largest voice do not have the facts and those with the facts do not have the large voice. Our best bet is in converting every user into a fact-checker and a critical user.' Nelson Kwaje, Leader of #defyhatenow, Digital Media and Training teams

Combating misinformation by making each user become an informed, active, critical and accountable user of information is at the heart of the UN Verified campaign, which was launched in May 2020. Partnering with a social mobilization organization called ‘Purpose’, Verified invites the global public to come together to counter misinformation by signing up to become ‘digital first responders’ and share verified UN content with their networks on the coronavirus crisis. The campaign relates to information on both the global health crisis and the ensuing socio-economic crisis and encourages solidarity on the road to recovery by enlisting people to promote verified information.

Civil society and youth-led initiatives are being pioneered around the globe to counter misinformation and disinformation and engage in favour of respect, solidarity and human rights. Such initiatives aim to help children and young people have access to pluralistic and verified information, feel their voices are heard and ensure that their legitimate grievances lead to meaningful changes. For example:

- #defyhatenow seeks to support those voices in South Sudan, Cameroon and Ethiopia acting against conflict to go ‘viral’ within and outside the country in which they take action. Its Digital Media and Training teams create a space for people to express their opinions online in a civil way and without spreading disinformation that can lead to violence. Furthermore, #defyhatenow helps bring scattered communities together and into an online peace-building framework, and bridges gaps of knowledge and awareness of social media mechanisms between those with access to technology and those without.

- OneAfricanChild Foundation is an NGO in Nigeria addressing inequality in education by supporting disadvantaged children through global citizenship and peace education. The organization is 100% youth-led, working with local young leaders to empower the community through humanitarian efforts. It promotes digital citizenship through media...
and information literacy (MIL) training, and encourages young people to have a digital footprint that aligns to human rights and sustainable development and guides them how to act when faced with hate online.

Teachers and educators play a vital role in preparing youth to be thoughtful and active participants to foster democratic societies in the digital age. The Teaching Channel’s Deep Dive on Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age is an initiative in the United States which aims to revisit civic education taking into account the way young people engage online through interactive and peer-based acts, where individuals exert their voices and influence on issues of public concern. For example, the Digital Civics Toolkit is a collection of resources for educators to support youth by exploring a range of civic opportunities and dilemmas via modules focused on Exploring Community Issues, Investigation, Dialogue, Voice, and Action.

‘Inequality is highlighted in that some young people, when they are at home and separated from the school support structure, have other structures to draw on, but others do not. One of the other big dimensions of inequality is access to technology and broadband. Schools can give access to a variety of effective supports in relation to misinformation.’
Joseph Kahne, Co-director of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG) at the University of California, Riverside

Education and digital citizenship: the way forward

Digital citizenship starts with building an informed citizenry. Education can help young people understand what they know and what they do not know, differentiate what is credible and authoritative from what is not, and why they are responding to messages in a particular way.
Guy Berger, Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO

Digital citizenship and education have a key role to play in helping young people navigate the current online environment and be more resilient to ideologies of hate as well as becoming actors against (rather than targets of) hate-speech, disinformation and misinformation. When devising education and digital citizenship strategies, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- Addressing both the consumers and suppliers of information – by educating young people to be fact-checkers and critical users of information (through MIL) as well as developing policies and ecosystems that keep different actors accountable, including search engines and social media platforms whose attention-diverting algorithms often amplify hate speech, misinformation and disinformation;

- Developing a comprehensive competency framework for learners anchored in SDG target 4.7 that promotes global citizenship, mutual respect, participatory dialogue, critical thinking and a sense of agency for learners in the way they engage online;
• Ensuring that all schools, including those in disadvantaged areas, help bridge the digital divide by developing curriculum and policies that highlight digital citizenship as a priority as well as develop youth’s skills in daily school practice;

• Building the capacities of teachers and educators to:
  o 'Meet young people where they are' by helping them become aware of their own biases, understand the politico-economic aspects of communications, including how Internet companies operate, fact-check information, research opposing and diverse opinions;
  o Engage young people through social media on civic and societal issues to increase their interest;
  o Encourage young people to pioneer initiatives in their schools and communities that counter disinformation and hate speech, as well as promote digital citizenship.

For additional information

UN Verified Campaign
https://www.shareverified.com/en

Oxford Internet Institute
https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/

UNESCO
https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced
https://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-freedom-expression
https://en.unesco.org/covid19
https://en.unesco.org/MILCLICKS

Country-level resources
https://defyhatenow.org/
https://learn.teachingchannel.com/ed4democracy
https://www.civicsurvey.org/

Digital Civics Toolkit
Stay in touch

UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response

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