

# LEARNING FROM INNOVATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

## MISINFORMATION

Learning from Innovation in LAC is a thematic knowledge brief series jointly developed by the UNDP Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean and the UNDP Accelerator Labs. It seeks to advance our understanding of key structural development challenges in LAC by capturing emerging lessons learned from innovative approaches to tackling these issues in countries across the region, with an emphasis on the work being done by the [Accelerator Labs](#).

### THE CHALLENGE OF MISINFORMATION IN LAC

The spread of false information—both unintentional (“misinformation”) and intentional (“disinformation”)—is hardly a new phenomenon. However, as digital technologies have advanced the speed and reduced the cost of information flows, it has become an increasingly pervasive issue in societies across the world. This has been propelled in particular by the rise of social media and messaging platforms, which have enabled a wide range of actors (from citizens to bots to politicians) to publicize unverified information to massive audiences more easily than ever before. According to a recent study, people in Latin America report some of the highest levels of concern about misinformation in the world (trailing only behind Africa)—with 65% of the region’s respondents stating that they were concerned about what news is real and what news is fake on the internet.<sup>1</sup> The large volume of false information being created in the LAC region carries with it potentially deleterious consequences for a broad set of important development outcomes. Most notably, it risks eroding the quality of the democratic policy process if public debates become based on false rather than true information. This can be particularly harmful if the false information has been created with the intention of inducing certain outcomes (such as influencing voting behaviors). Among other

things, it also risks undermining social cohesion and destroying trust as targeted false information campaigns can serve to widen rifts between groups and stoke processes of polarization.

### INNOVATION AND MISINFORMATION IN LAC

The UNDP Accelerator Labs offer a unique opportunity to advance the way that we think about misinformation in the region as well our approaches to combatting misinformation. As the Labs work to pick up signals from the ground, they are able to reveal new insights about what misinformation looks like, how it spreads in different contexts, and how different approaches might be more or less effective in the fight against it. In the LAC region, the Accelerator Labs and the UNDP team in eight countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay) are working on innovative ways to turn off the taps of false information flows in the region and to reduce the reach and impact of these flows. These initiatives engage with misinformation across a wide range of issue areas (from elections to COVID-19 to violence against women) and experiment with different types of digital and analog tools to combat it (from participatory fact-checking platforms to communication campaigns to capacity-building workshops). Table 1 provides country-specific descriptions of these initiatives.

1 Reuters Institute (2021). Reuters Institute Digital News Report.

**TABLE 1.** Selected UNDP innovation initiatives related to misinformation in LAC

### Argentina

As a part of a larger global Accelerator Lab initiative involving Labs across multiple countries, the Lab led the Argentina chapter of the [Healthy Internet Project](#). This project was a joint initiative with Chequeado and TEDxRiodelaPlata and sought to adapt a browser extension (originally developed by TED international) enabling users to flag content they see on the Web as “harmful” (distinguishing between false content, hate speech, and harassment) or “valuable” with only a few clicks. Together with their partners, the Lab conducted a small-scale pilot to test the extension, focusing on misinformation being spread about COVID-19 vaccines, a topic of great relevance in the public debate at the time when the tool was being tested (May-July 2021).

### Bolivia

UNDP Bolivia developed a national media network for peace, of which a fundamental pillar is to fight against misinformation and fake news. As part of this initiative, during 2021 and 2022, UNDP Bolivia developed various capacity-building activities to strengthen the digital skills of journalists in the country. In addition, they conducted a study to assess the current state of misinformation and fake news at the national level.

### Colombia

The Lab is building an information system to allow CSOs, media actors, and citizens to find source information about different topics of national development interest. The first public use of this system is expected to help fight misinformation and disinformation regarding the [Truth Commission's](#) 5,000-page report about the history of the conflict in Colombia.

### Dominican Republic

UNDP through the Accelerator Lab, UNESCO and Citibeats conducted an experiment to understand the phenomenon of misinformation during the pandemic, based on citizen perceptions. Through Citibeats, an artificial intelligence platform for social listening, the project was able to map, categorize, and identify different types of opinions, conversations and hoaxes that could inform citizen needs, trends, and questions regarding the impact of COVID-19. The findings of the [report](#) reveal how governmental measures generated spikes in societal conversations about the different topics of study.

### Guatemala

As part of their work in supporting the waste management sector in the context of new regulatory Transition Plans, the Lab is working with various stakeholders to combat misinformation and missing information regarding different components of the plans. In particular, the Lab is working to combat misinformation surrounding the following issues: a lack of clarity on the regulations for all stakeholders involved or with potential interest to be involved; a lack of clarity in the regulation regarding sanctions, responsibilities for monitoring, and the relationship between ministry duties and municipal duties; gaps in information between different actors regarding how much sustainable best practices for waste management cost and how municipalities operate with their limited revenues; lack of awareness among many households and waste generators (including industries) regarding waste sorting and recycling practices done by private and informal actors; and limited understanding of the risks of using certain plastics in the market.

## Panama

In 2020, UNDP Panama worked on an initiative subsidized by the Oslo Governance Center (OGC-UNDP), together with CO Venezuela, to listen to what was being discussed on social networks regarding the effects of COVID-19 and groups in a situation of vulnerability. The initiative focused on groups of women and the LGBTIQ+ population. Based on the results (hate language, misinformation, and malicious information) a communication plan was developed to deal with the situation. At the beginning of 2021, the team designed and disseminated the campaign “Del Hilo al Hecho” together with counterparts. They also started working with Google and the OGC to support the National Women’s Institute in directing search traffic on Google on attention and complaints of gender violence directly to their contact portal.

## Peru

UNDP Peru worked to support the initial promotion of the “[Ama Llulla](#)” network. Ama Llulla is the first collaborative media verification network in Peru, open to all media outlets that are interested in combatting disinformation in the 2021-2022 electoral cycle. The Ama Llulla network is made up of 25 members including 11 digital media networks and 14 radio stations. During the 2021 General Elections, Ama Llulla succeeded in delivering 116 verification reports, 156 podcasts (in Spanish and multiple indigenous languages), 3 intensive training workshops on verification for network journalists, and 1 volunteer program for youth to support verification efforts.

## Uruguay

In 2021, the Lab worked on misinformation related to COVID-19. Through a series of experiments they sought to understand what aspects and strategies helped people to make informed decisions regarding vaccination in a context of rapid and massive dissemination of inaccurate information. In 2022, the Lab is working on generating information about digital violence against women. As a strategy for generating evidence for public policy and experimenting with new tools that contribute to effective actions in social policies with a gender lens, they are working to create a real-time public dashboard that provides information on digital violence against women.

## EMERGING LESSONS

Learning is central to the process of innovation. While each of these innovative initiatives has resulted in a unique set of context-specific lessons learned, many of these lessons share common elements. In particular, the following four key lessons regarding the fight against misinformation are emerging across multiple country contexts:



### 1 | CLOSING INFORMATION GAPS

#### Investing in complementary efforts to combat “missing” information

The knowledge being generated by the Labs reveals that efforts to combat misinformation require complementary investments to combat “missing” information. Gaps in true information (such as a limited evidence base or a limited public understanding of specific issues) can serve as a fertile ground for misinformation to grow and flourish. This means focusing on several different aspects of filling in information gaps, including investing in research to expand the information base in cases where evidence is limited as well as investing in communication efforts in cases where information is not effectively reaching all relevant stakeholders.

The work of the Labs shows how this type of information gap can promote confusion and hinder the effective cooperation between actors, as people’s understandings are based on different sets of information (both true and false). For example, in the context of supporting actors to adopt a waste management Transition Plan in **Guatemala**, the work of the Labs showed how different stakeholders (such as municipal and central government actors) have vastly different understandings of the same issues and how limited spaces for dialogue over proposed regulatory changes has limited the effective take-up of transition plans. In this context, solving for missing information can play a critical role in stopping the flow of misinformation. However, even when information is available, if it does not reach all relevant audiences though effective publicity than it can still remain “missing.” This is particularly relevant for certain marginalized audiences who may have more systematically

limited access to information due to various factors such as language or technological barriers. The Ama Llulla network in **Peru**, for example, seeks to overcome some of these barriers by prioritizing the communication of verified information not only in Spanish but also in multiple indigenous languages as well as going beyond online communication channels to disseminate information on local and regional radio stations. A robust democratic public dialogue requires expanding access to reliable and trustworthy information sources for all citizens.



## 2 | STRENGTHENING OUR COGNITIVE DEFENSES

### Addressing the roots of why misinformation is effective in shaping our behavior

The knowledge being generated by the Labs challenges the assumption that exposing misinformation as false is enough to stop it from influencing people’s perceptions or their actions. If the false information in question has actually been strategically designed to exploit our various cognitive biases and emotions to trigger some type of reaction, this makes combatting it much more difficult. This is in fact quite common in cases where false information is intentionally disseminated for politically (or otherwise) motivated reasons. In these cases, the false information serves not only to confuse people by competing with true information, but actually aims to elicit some sort of action from people (such as influencing them to vote a certain way or to participate in a certain protest event). Combatting this type of false information requires approaches that go beyond simply flagging content as false or providing correct information—it requires addressing some of the root causes of why some misinformation can be so virulent.

The work of the Labs suggests that people need greater “metacognition” about their own emotional and cognitive biases to more be resilient to the effects of misinformation. Research conducted to inform efforts in **Colombia** to develop a system of communication to combat misinformation highlights how this poses a unique and pressing challenge. In this way, solutions to misinformation require not only addressing “supply” side factors but also


“demand” side factors such as information literacy. While this can take many different forms, it is important to highlight the role of offline engagement with actors as a critical factor. For example, in the context of combatting misinformation during elections in Bolivia, the project revealed the importance of conducting training workshops for various stakeholders, such as journalists, to better prepare them in the fight against misinformation. Understanding why some types of false information are so effective can also be helpful for shaping more effective strategies for communicating true information. Oftentimes the type of true information needed to inform public dates is less compelling than the type of false information that can be strategically crafted. For example, it tends to offer a more complicated and nuanced perspective that can be more difficult to understand than simple messaging; it is also often communicated in more technical rather than emotional terms. If true information were instead disseminated in a more salient narrative framing, it is possible that this could help to cut through the cognitive biases and echo chambers exploited by the dissemination of false information. Moreover, behavioral experiments from a project in **Uruguay** to combat misinformation around COVID-19 vaccines point to the finding that when it comes to effective communication, information must not only be relevant and precise but also be given at the right time and pace. Also, results from an initiative in the **Dominican Republic** that used an ethical artificial intelligence platform to analyze data from different media sources reinforce the importance of communication for strengthening trust in institutions in a “post-truth” environment where bias is extensive.



## 3 | BUILDING FOR A DYNAMIC SYSTEM

### Preparing for the complexity and speed that characterize networked information environments

The knowledge being generated by the Labs underscores the importance of designing solutions to combat misinformation that embrace the dynamic nature of the problem. Information spreads rapidly within complex networked



environments comprised of a variety of actors (including both humans and bots) and it flows in multiple directions. Moreover, any actions taken to combat misinformation could also prompt new reactions from the actors in the network (including those generating, spreading, or receiving the misinformation)—which could fundamentally reshape the nature of original problem that the solution was designed to combat. This is particularly worrisome when interacting with automated actors like bots which may be able to react faster than humans. In some cases, efforts to combat misinformation could actually spark a backlash in which they end up reinforcing the false information that they set out to disprove.

The work of the Labs points to how this type of dynamic environment can create situations where solutions end up instead potentially triggering unintended negative consequences, particularly in the case of sensitive issues. For example, in the context of a project in **Uruguay** designed to collect real-time information on digital violence against women, the team and their government counterparts are facing a difficult decision about whether to make the information public—on one hand, making it public could help spur collective action in society to address the problem; but on the other hand, it could unintentionally empower trolls and end up worsening the problem. The work of the Labs suggests, however, that with the right types of listening tools it can be possible to design solutions that seek to pre-empt some of these dynamics. For example, in order to be more effective in their efforts to combat potential false information about the Truth Commission Report, a project in **Colombia** used social listening tools to first identify what people were saying so that they could pre-emptively develop content to respond to the types of misinformation that they expected to emerge related to the publication. Effectively listening to networked information flows, however, requires different types of tools as well as expertise in using those tools. For example, a project in **Panama** that used listening exercises to uncover misinformation being spread about vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19 pointed to the importance of using both quantitative and qualitative listening tools as well ensuring that analysts have the relevant skills to appropriately interpret the outputs from these listening tools.




#### 4 | WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

##### **Leveraging collective participatory approaches to ensure that solutions do not grant any single actor too much control over the information environment**

The knowledge being generated by the Labs demonstrates the power and potential of participatory bottom-up approaches to combat misinformation. Efforts to combat misinformation interact with prevailing governance dynamics and power asymmetries in important ways—in particular, in terms of protecting issues such as freedom of the press, freedom of information, and freedom of speech. Top-down approaches led solely by individual actors such as government agencies or the owners of technology companies (such as social media or messaging platforms) risk concentrating the power to control and censor the information environment too heavily in a single entity's hands. In contrast, more participatory tools that are created, owned, and operated by the public or a wide coalition of actors can help to curb the spread of misinformation without risking this type of concern.

The work of the Labs reinforces the notion that collaboration among stakeholders is required to effectively combat misinformation—neither government, civil society, media agencies, or the private sector can solve this issue on its own. Leveraging the collective intelligence of citizens by involving everyday internet users is critical for success, given both the massive and decentralized scale of the challenge as well as the broader need to protect societies' plurality of voices. This was reflected, for example, in the context of a project in **Argentina** that aimed to combat misinformation on COVID-19 vaccines. Its use of a browser-extension to flag harmful and valuable content was only operationally feasible due to the engagement of the users who chose to participate. However, it is important to involve not only citizens but to also invest in empowering a broader coalition of actors to combat misinformation in their communities—including, for example, journalists,



community-based organizations, and youth. This is highlighted, for example, in the context of the Ama Llulla project to combat misinformation around elections in **Peru**. The project not only leverages a collaborative approach to working (which makes it possible to carry out both more and higher quality information checks and to expand the reach of its dissemination) but also seeks to invest in building a future generation that is more resilient to fake news by training today's journalists and youth.

### SUMMING UP

The knowledge being generated by the Labs and the country office innovation initiatives supports the notion that effectively combatting misinformation requires first rethinking our assumptions about questions such as why it arises in the first place, how it works to exploit our cognitive and emotional biases, how it interacts with other information in dynamic networks, and who should have the power to control it. While the rise of digital technology has turbocharged the challenge of misinformation, it is important to remember that effective solutions to combat it will require both digital and analog approaches. As highlighted in this brief, the experiences of innovation efforts in the region point to four key emerging lessons: (i) effectively combatting misinformation requires investing in complementary efforts to also combat “missing” information; (ii) effectively combatting misinformation requires addressing the roots of why misinformation is successful in shaping our behavior; (iii) effectively combatting misinformation requires developing solutions that can adapt to the complexity and speed that characterize networked information environments; and (iv) effectively combatting misinformation requires leveraging collective participatory approaches to ensure that solutions do not grant any single actor too much control over the information environment.