# Responding to COVID-19

# Information Pollution

**May 2020**

# PURPOSE

This detailed guidance note is part of the *Informed and Engaged Societies* focus area of UNDP's governance response to COVID-19, as outlined in Guidance note #10.  It is also in direct response to several UNDP Country Office requests for support in this area. This note is intended to provide practical guidance on how COs can design effective rapid responses to information pollution and how to situate those in longer-term approaches. As such it provides both immediately practicable intervention approaches as well as longer-term programmatic considerations.  Specifically, the note aims to provide:

**1. Key definitions and common terminology**

**2. Options for immediate to short-term initiatives to counter information pollution**

**3. Guidance for long-term strategies**

**4. Policy recommendations**

**5. Useful resources and resource hubs**

# Context

COVID-19 presents an unprecedented global health communications challenge. Curbing the infection rate is a top priority for governments around the world, compelling citizens to adopt behaviours that are punitive economically and socially, particularly in developing countries and amongst vulnerable and marginalised populations.  The urgency of the situation, its rapid evolution and the crippling impact on lives and livelihoods have led to an enormous public demand for information.  However, this has come at a time when public trust in democratic institutions, including mainstream media, is at an historic low, amplifying the influence of rumours, informal news sources and fringe journalism.  Faced with an overwhelming volume of information, the public has the almost impossible task of determining what to believe. The intentional and unintentional dissemination of misleading, inflammatory and false information is heightening fear and confusion, leading to high-risk behaviours, and driving acts of violence and stigmatisation.

According to WHO, this "infodemic" presents a major challenge to the global pandemic response.  At the global level, the tech giants that monopolise online platforms are largely unregulated and information is easily weaponised for political, ideological and economic interests. At the national level, lack of government transparency and accountability, low professional journalism standards, poorly adapted regulation, low digital and media literacy, and existing social divides and inequalities are all drivers that increase the appeal and impact of alternative information sources.   The resulting confusion of information is having negative repercussions not only on immediate public health outcomes, but also for human rights, social cohesion and conflict prevention. As such, UNDP has a critical role to play through its mandate to promote informed, inclusive societies, respect for human rights and protection of vulnerable populations.
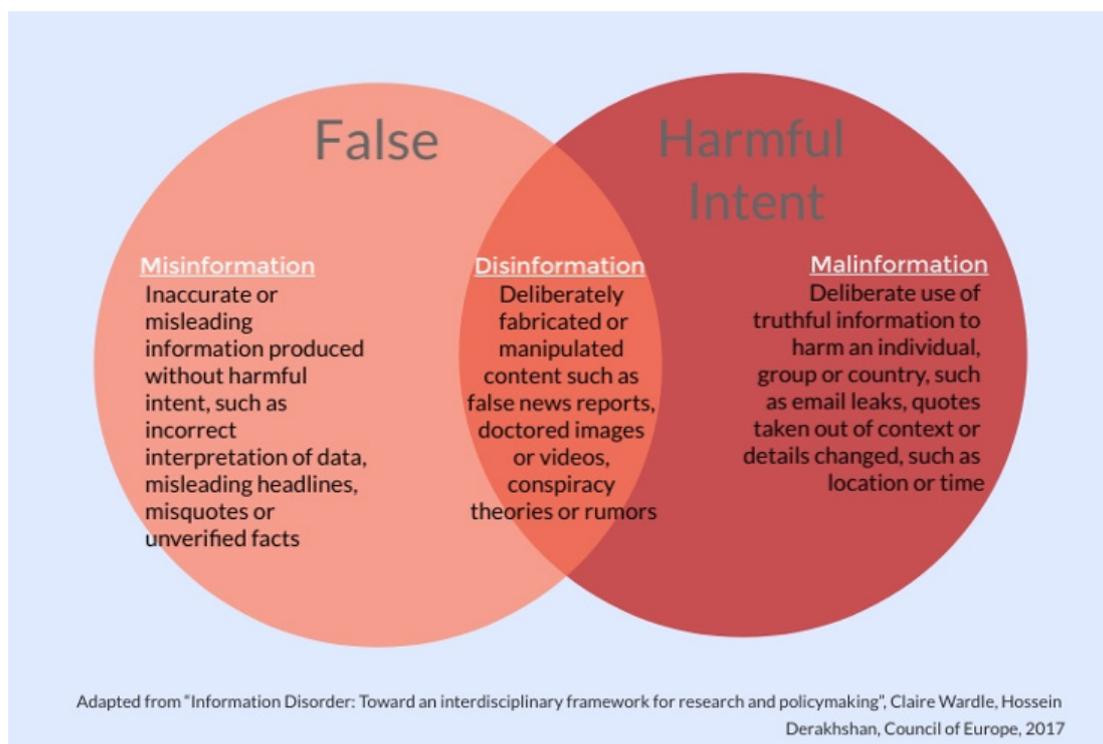
# KEY DEFINITIONS

Terms such as misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably. A 2017 Council of Europe report provides a helpful typology, distinguishing between information that is false, information that is intentionally harmful and information that is both false and intentionally harmful:

1. **Disinformation**. Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.

2. **Misinformation.** Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

3. **Mal-information**. Information that is based on real facts, but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.[1]

All of these information subsets can be spread both intentionally (via automated social media accounts, troll factories, special interest online groups and chatrooms, etc) or unintentionally (shared on social media platforms by users, picked up by mainstream news media, etc).

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1      "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking", Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, Council of Europe, 2017

False

Harmful Intent

**Misinformation**
Inaccurate or misleading information produced without harmful intent, such as incorrect interpretation of data, misleading headlines, misquotes or unverified facts

**Disinformation**
Deliberately fabricated or manipulated content such as false news reports, doctored images or videos, conspiracy theories or rumors

**Malinformation**
Deliberate use of truthful information to harm an individual, group or country, such as email leaks, quotes taken out of context or details changed, such as location or time

Adapted from "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking", Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, Council of Europe, 2017

Other popularised terms, most notably "fake news", have become unhelpful conflations of many different concepts. Given that "fake news" has also been co-opted by political actors to delegitimise unfavourable media, the consensus is that it should not be used at all. The phrase "Information Disorder" has emerged in recent years as a catch-all description of damaging or dangerous forces within the information ecosystem. While recognising the prevalence of this definition, it conversely implies that an "information order" is a desirable outcome, which is a controversial and largely defunct concept. As the debate around terminology continues to evolve, the term used in this guidance note to describe the current state of the information eco-system through the intentional or unintentional creation or dissemination of false, misleading, or manipulated information is "information pollution".

# RESPONSES

**Information pollution** can take numerous forms, from misleading headlines to false advertising, rumours, conspiracy theories, memes and sophisticated illicit campaigns to shift public opinion. Furthermore, the causes driving the phenomenon are diverse.  The solution does not lie within one government institution or UN portfolio and requires a diversity of expertise including IT, legislation and policy, press standards, media and digital literacy, human rights and social cohesion.  Not only this, but national contexts are highly diverse. Pre-existing socio-political dynamics need to be taken into consideration in the design of any response. Interventions must include understanding the roles of:

1. **Government:** Is government promoting and enabling free flow of accurate information? Are any new or existing restrictions on media or freedom of expression hampering open debate and exchange? Is government promoting narratives that are exacerbating socio-political divides?

2. **Mainstream media:**  Are journalists able to report freely on COVID-19? Do journalists have full and regular access to information sources? Are there significant incidents of sensationalism, stereotyping or inaccurate information in the mainstream media?  Is there informed, moderate debate and discussion about COVID-19?

3. **Social Cohesion:** Is the county in violent conflict? Are certain groups being scapegoated or blamed for COVID-19? Are there functioning mechanisms and platforms for public exchange and dialogue with decision-makers? Is there an trust deficit in government communication channels or mainstream media

4. **Public:** Are there high levels of public digital and media literacy? Where is the public turning to for information? Who are the influential individuals or groups inside or outside the country influencing discourse?

# Short term responses:

Many of the standard programmatic and policy responses to information pollution require a medium- to long-term horizon. However, short-term responses can effectively focus on identifying, analysing, and addressing information pollution trends which are having the most negative impacts and identifying gaps in existing COVID-19 communication strategies. Efforts to tackle COVID-19 information pollution should be clearly aligned to UNCT responses and, where appropriate, complement and enhance, and not duplicate, existing national pandemic communication strategies.

**Six key intervention areas** can be rapidly mobilised to have impact over the shorter term:

**Map and monitor information landscape**

A lightweight and rapid assessment can provide critical data to help design a response to information pollution and improve the impact of ongoing health communications. Ongoing monitoring provides a continuous flow of updated information to feed into fact-checking, rumour management and source-verification efforts. Initial assessments and ongoing monitoring can aim to map:

- Common mis-/disinformation messages and their potential impact
- Level of public comprehension and acceptance of factual COVID-19 information
- Key channels, influencers and amplifiers of disinformation online and offline
- Demographic and geographic hotspots of information pollution
- Trusted information sources, particularly for vulnerable or marginalised groups

**Improve the conflict-sensitivity and accessibility of COVID-19 messaging**

Strengthen existing COVID-19 communication strategies and ensure that COVID-19 related information is inclusive, appropriate and relevant, and is not exacerbating existing conflicts or creating new ones. By tracking and flagging divisive narratives and identifying groups which feel alienated and unrepresented in COVID-19 messaging, UNDP can support official communications strategies to adapt and respond.

**Reduce sensationalism, stigmatisation and inaccuracies in online and legacy media**

Engage regulatory bodies, media managers, news editors, and other stakeholders to address and reduce incidents of incitement, hate speech, discrimination and stigmatisation in mainstream media and online news services and promote conflict-sensitive reporting.

**Increase public capacity to verify information**

Create and/or promote publicly accessible fact-checking tools, foster public discourse about the risks of spreading false information, publicise verified information sources, and promote responsible information sharing.

**Increase platforms for inclusive public engagement and discussion**

Create opportunities through existing media programs, online forums, SMS and other technologies to foster dialogue and build trust between health authorities, government representatives and communities, particularly marginalised or vulnerable groups.

**Amplify influence of credible information sources (official and unofficial)**

Identify and engage actors with credibility and influence to disseminate messages related to disease prevention, and to promote tolerance and solidarity. These may include unofficial sources such as musicians, artists, local peacebuilders and mediators, religious leaders, online influencers, youth and women leaders. It may also require engaging one-to-one with certain "spoilers" who are currently playing a negative role by promoting mis-/disinformation.

| INTERVENTION STAGE | INDICATIVE INTERVENTIONS | STAKEHOLDERS & PARTNERS |
|---|---|---|
| **Map and monitor information landscape** [Resource link](#) | • Support monitoring initiatives of online and offline press, popular social media platforms and broadcast media<br>• Collect existing data from national and international sources tracking information pollution<br>• Use data analytics (online listening) software to detect online trends and patterns<br>• Interview actors with significant online or offline following (YouTubers, Instagram influencers, religious leaders, youth leaders, etc)<br>• Conduct online focus groups<br>• Conduct desk reviews of media penetration and trusted public information sources (Pew, Gallup, Edelman Brothers, national sources)<br>• Map existing actors and initiatives at the national or local level engaged in monitoring and countering mis-/disinformation and fact-checking | Local CSOs<br>State or non-state media-monitoring organisations<br><br>Journalists networks and unions<br>National institute of statistics<br><br>Partners with existing online networks<br><br>Data analytics firms such as Symosos (contact digital@undp.org for more details) |
| **Improve conflict-sensitivity and accessibility of COVID-19 messaging** [Resource link](#) | • Support translation and distribution of print and broadcast materials in local languages<br>• Support production of conflict-sensitive, accurate and engaging radio, TV and online content addressing COVID-19<br>• Support co-production COVID-19 news bulletins across multiple media channels (media synergy)<br>• Create WhatsApp and other online channels to distribute messaging<br>• Support dissemination of COVID-19 information to community radio stations and other local communication channels<br>• Mobilise all existing national UNDP online channels to share accurate information | NGOs with media production capacity<br><br>National, regional and community media outlets<br><br>Ministries of health, communications, planning<br><br>Media production companies |
| **Increase public capacity to verify information** [Resource link](#) | • Support production of multimedia campaigns raising awareness of impact of false information, how to verify information, and how promote accurate information<br>• Widely disseminate verified sources of information and online information verification resources<br>• Repurpose and promote existing fact-checking tools and initiatives<br>• Establish fact-checking, media monitoring and social media monitoring networks and systems | Government communications regulatory body<br><br>UNESCO<br><br>Online and offline media outlets<br>Media production companies/NGOs<br><br>Youth groups |
| **Reduce sensationalism, stigmatisation, and inaccuracies in online and legacy media** [Resource link](#) | • Provide fact-checking and source-checking resources and training for news journalists, editors and popular online news services<br>• Encourage sign on to a journalism code of ethics<br>• Provide conflict-sensitivity guidance/training for journalists and talk show hosts<br>• Link journalists and trained experts to foster regular sharing of quality information<br>• Facilitate remote daily press briefings with health authorities<br>• Support government regulatory bodies to engage with media outlets to collaboratively address problematic information or complaints from the public<br>• Provide communications and press relations training to government/medical spokespersons | Media outlets, journalist networks, production companies<br><br>Government health authorities<br>Peacebuilding and media-focused organisations<br><br>Government communications regulatory body |

| INTERVENTION STAGE | INDICATIVE INTERVENTIONS | STAKEHOLDERS & PARTNERS |
|---|---|---|
| **Increase platforms for inclusive public engagement and discussion**<br>**Resource link** | • Support production of interactive radio/TV/online shows so the public can engage directly in the national conversation around COVID-19<br>• Create platforms for effective collaboration between health authorities, media and civil society groups<br>• Establish public feedback mechanisms using accessible technologies, including for vulnerable groups | Media outlets and online news editors<br><br>Government spokespersons<br><br>Representatives of vulnerable groups |
| **Amplify influence of credible information sources (official and informal)**<br>**Resource link** | • Identify and engage a network of influential actors as spokespersons to fight discrimination, intolerance and misinformation<br>• Mobilise existing community-based networks and organisations to promote safe behaviours and reinforce health messages<br>• Develop and distribute to key influencers daily talking points<br>• Facilitate the signing of a COVID-19 code of conduct between political actors<br>• Set up multi-stakeholder task force to support government on effective communication strategies<br>• Engage in mediation efforts with influential spoilers | Local and international peacebuilding and mediation NGOs<br><br>Religious, tribal, ethnic, community leaders<br><br>Youth leaders, musicians, artists<br><br>Political parties |

# MEDIUM TO LONG-TERM RESPONSE

**Policy and legislation**

Provide policy and legislative support to national governments to create a regulatory environment which enables professionalism of media and transparency of social media platforms without impeding on press freedom and the right to information. Advise governments on navigating associated risks such as surveillance, censorship and propaganda.

**Government-citizen trust building**

Reinforce vertical cohesion through investment in mechanisms for government-citizen dialogue and engagement, and support efforts to improve transparency and accountability of state institutions and to build trust and collaboration at all levels.  Support development and dissemination of accurate, inclusive and diverse media content which reaches all communities.

**Digital monitoring and fact-checking**

Support digital and human-managed systems of online data collection, analysis, and fact-checking. Ensure policymaking and programming is informed by accurate data concerning information pollution trends, risks and patterns.

**Press and media standards**

Promote professionalism of online and traditional journalism through ongoing training, accredited journalism courses, curriculum development and other media development actions.  Facilitate collaboration between state regulatory bodies, media outlets and other stakeholders to address hate speech, incitement, stereotyping and other high-risk information pollution.

**Public education and engagement**

Build public digital and media literacy and promote constructive online citizen engagement, critical analysis and information verification skills.  Raise public awareness of the existence and risks of information pollution.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the short-term, particularly as emergency legislation is hastened through many national parliaments, government-targeted messaging should reinforce the need to:

Protect the right of access to information for all citizens and communicate rapidly and openly with the public

Ensure any information-related legislation is reasonable, proportionate and timebound

Ensure responses are consistent with international standards on freedom of expression

Promote media and digital literacy at all levels of society

Maintain constructive dialogue with media, civil society and other stakeholders

# USEFUL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE HUBS

## ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

2019 Report on UNDP's Engagement with the Media for Governance, Sustainable Development and Peace

UNDP Digital Strategy

NDI - Disinformation during elections guidance note

Article 19 COVID-19 resources

UNESCO Information Sharing & Countering Disinformation

Communications Initiative COVID-19 Hub

The Compass COVID-19 resources

First Draft News resources for reporters

The Poynter Institute's COVID-19 resources for journalists

## RESOURCE ORGANISATIONS

BBC Media Action

Internews

Search for Common Ground

Evidence Aid

Translators without Borders

UNESCO

Access Nowa

Build Up

First Draft News

Centre for Humane Technology

International Fact Checking Network

Article 19

Disinfo EU

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