

UNDP Information Pollution Webinar



Series Summary



AUGUST 2020

Introduction

This webinar series was a governance response to the information pollution affecting the Covid-19 pandemic from March to July 2020. Below is a summary of each webinar, including a UN Talks webinar, on the topic of information pollution. Each summary includes the key takeaways as well as a list of resources that can be utilised to respond to misinformation and disinformation challenges.

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Session 1

Covid-19 and misinformation

Key takeaways:

This year has seen a new wave of information pollution and to combat this negative trend this webinar aims to focus on establishing trust, especially during pandemics. It is more important than ever to support COs in tackling information pollution in order to rebuild society.

Summary

Fredrik Konnander (Head of Counter Influence Branch at Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) discussed the Swedish 'Vulnerability approach' to tackling information influence and Covid-19. This bottom up approach recommends mapping threats and risks of misinformation/disinformation first, understanding the consequences and where vulnerability lies. From there, working backwards and staying ahead of your adversaries.

Furthermore, they devised tactics such as:

- Training communicators to handle disinformation using a handbook
- Coordinating information between different agencies
- Supporting daily press conferences
- Using experts to disseminate information since they have more knowledge and are not politically affiliated
- Communicating in different languages
- Having one dedicated place for verified information

These are all tools against information pollution which help to enhance trust between sender and receiver. Finally, it is important to start early to manage information pollution.

Anyia Schiffrin (Colombia University) spoke about public health messaging in societies where governments have low levels of trust. Even in countries like Vietnam, governments can still promote handwashing and staying at home. Since older populations are not as likely to use social media, radio and leaflets should not be underestimated. An important take away is remembering to utilize multiple

forms of messaging and working with medical staff to not disseminate wrong information and working with journalists to provide *better* information.

In the Q&A, the discussion touched on working with marginalized groups, and people who are deaf. Engaging with local collaborators/NGOs was highlighted, as well as utilizing research on how people receive their primary information. Finally, it was noted that it is more beneficial to *repeat correct information* than repeating debunked false information (counter messaging) several times.

Resources

[The Communication Initiative Network](#)

Convene the communication and media development, social and behavioral change community for more effective local, national, and international development action

[Interactive Radio Drama Online Training from Theatre for a Change](#) – Online (Oct 1)

Learn how to produce Interactive Radio Drama for the prevention and response to Covid-19, and sexual and gender-based violence.



Session 2

Mistrust, lies and information disorder: a big-data guide to identifying, tracking and countering disinformation in our digital age

Key takeaways:

The objective of this session was to get an inside approach on big data from the tech-companies themselves. Alto Analytics shared key uses of tech solutions to help analyze trends and AI algorithms in information pollution to get a deeper understanding of how information pollution spreads.

including deep fakes and malicious actors. Over the past few years, they have developed a tried and tested Disinformation Analysis Framework which is helping large organizations to prepare, protect and be proactive in dealing with new threats in digital arenas.

Summary

James Whittington, Executive Director of [Alto Analytics](#) helps make sense of the public digital sphere. By employing big data mapping of digital relationships and patterns, they can uncover, monitor and understand trends and techniques of disinformation and misinformation



Resources

While most of Alto work is confidential, they have published a number of case studies which provide examples of some of their approaches, methodologies and results including:

- **The role of anti-vaxxers in the digital sphere:** https://www.alto-analytics.com/en_US/the-influential-role-of-anti-vaccine-narratives/
- **Anti-immigration themes in Italian politics:** https://www.alto-analytics.com/en_US/the-construction-of-anti-immigration-messages-in-italy/

- **Potential disinformation ahead of the EU parliamentary elections:** https://www.alto-analytics.com/en_US/europes-parliamentary-elections-in-the-digital-ecosystem

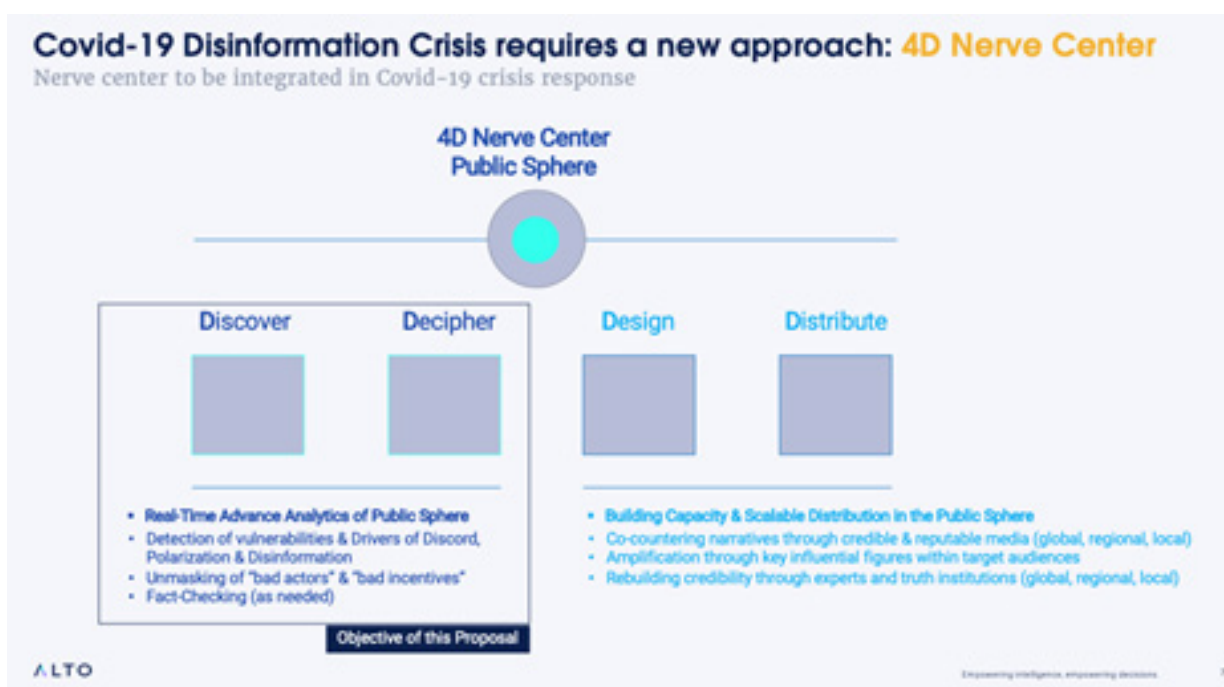


Photo: Graph from Alto Analytics presentation

Session 3

Supporting effective local strategies to address misinformation and disinformation in the context of Covid-19 pandemic: focus on conflicting sensitivity and community engagement

Key takeaways:

The webinar looked at the role of rumors in narratives of disinformation and the impact it can create in communities. Namely, hindering individuals from making informed decisions. The strategies that were highlighted to combat this included sourcing rumors and working with community members and religious leaders to dispel to the wider population.

Summary

Michael Shipler (Vice President, Strategy at [Search for Common Ground](#)) shone light on three types of rumors:

- *organic*: due to lack of transparency
- *mis-amplified truths*: someone who

amplifies their own version of the truth

- *manufactured truths*: seeds distrust in authority

Rumors function in similar ways to real viruses and prevent people from taking appropriate action to stay healthy. Furthermore, rumors hurt health crisis responses. During the Ebola crisis, there were also attacks on healthcare workers. Now during Covid-19, religious groups blame each other in certain areas (e.g. Hindus blaming Muslims for spreading virus).

A country-level example from the DRC paid attention to rumors and found out if misinformation gained traction and where. Working with people in the community who are already trusted helps debunk mis/disinformation. This is not always



Photo: UNDP Somalia, social distancing video competition winner

experts, but rather people who are visible in society such as mobile phone sellers or taxi drivers.

Nadia Wuensche (PCVE Technical Expert UNDP) gave insight into how the UNDP CO in Somalia tackled information pollution. In the early stages, Covid-19 was believed to be a foreign virus that did not affect Somali/Africans. Others believed Covid-19 was divine punishment and good practicing Muslims were immune. Some of the adverse effects of this information pollution was that many were deterred from wearing face masks in fear of being labelled as a bad Muslim.

The CO engaged religious leaders to develop and disseminate religious

guidance around Covid-19, including messaging such as 'you are under the protection of Allah at home' or using mosque speakers to encourage social distancing. Another initiative has been running a competition with best social distancing video and collaborating with phone companies to play Covid-19 messages whilst waiting to connect.

Resources

Search for Common Ground Covid-19 and Religious Engagement policy brief
https://www.sfcg.org/covid-19/files/COVID-19_and_Religious_Engagement.pdf

Search for Common Ground Covid-19

Tackling epidemics - Our approach (pdf)

This document has a section dedicated to information management and rumor management, as well social cohesion and conflict sensitive approaches.

https://www.sfcg.org/covid-19/files/Search_Tackling_Epidemics-SFCG_Approach.pdf

Search for Common Ground all

Covid-19 related policy briefs:

<https://www.sfcg.org/covid-19/>

Social distancing competition winner

from Somalia (Facebook video):

<https://www.facebook.com/undpsom/videos/604319896864649/>

Session 4

Online and digital strategies to address misinformation and disinformation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

Key takeaways:

The webinar focused on targeting audiences and creating engagement, having creative and culturally aware messaging, social cohesion, finding the right person to disseminate, and figuring out what is/isn't working to create successful communication strategies.

Summary

Alasdair Stuart (Senior governance advisor/senior research manager [BBC Media Action](#)) described previous projects at BBC Media Action (including Ebola-outbreak) to investigate and remedy information pollution; underlining

the constant *battle for engagement*. Mis/disinformation often appeals to emotions which is why it is more frequently shared than true information. Content creation should therefore not only focus on facts but creative messaging.

Ankur Garg (Country Director, Indonesia BBC Media Action) gave some final recommendations for dealing with the pandemic including the idea to create generic content for wide dissemination since language can easily be changed. Additionally, he illustrated creative messaging, namely a radio drama, *Balada Yayang Bebeb*, which debunks myths related to Covid-19.

Joanna Nassar (UNDP Peacebuilding advisor, Lebanon) explained how Lebanon's approach to counter

information pollution has been awareness-raising of impact of spreading falsehoods and to create a sense of responsibility. A national level campaign to count to 10 before sharing focuses on ‘pausing and verifying’. This has been disseminated through infographic videos on Facebook and engaging local influencers.

Learning notes/recommendations

- Link to the local developmental challenges
- Design it with the target audience
- Partner with national actors and build a sense of national ownership
- Engage social media influencers
- It’s not a short-term activity or one-shot activity. Design it over phases and spread it out over time
- Apply conflict sensitivity rules throughout

Fabio Oliva (Peace and Development Advisor Cambodia) explained how their office repurposed the [UNDP Media Alternatives Project](#), originally designed to strengthen media resilience to address information pollution surrounding Covid-19 and promote social cohesion. Current challenges are dealing with a

low sense of urgency around Covid-19 and keeping momentum on information pollution.

The project was redesigned along 3 directions:

1. Provide life-saving health information with WHO guidance
2. Challenge harmful myths and misinformation
3. Promote solution-focused communications (stigma, domestic violence, mental health)

To conclude, he highlighted the need to distinguish *misunderstanding* and *misinformation*.

Daria Asmolova (Research and analysis digital strategy, UNDP) dived into how UNDP can use technology to fight information pollution. Such as *fact-checking websites*, chatbots, and browser extensions. However, some of these are still being developed. More powerful are the *social media listening tools* such as Crowdtangle and Meltwater which are useful to track the most discussed keywords on country level. The findings from these tools can be used to analyze conversations and create debunking material, flag accounts that are active in spreading lies, and review media coverage to identify outlets that may benefit from training or partnerships. Some limitations of these tools include costs of subscription



Photo: Screenshot from Oliva's presentation

services, and the temptation to generalize findings. Social media is just one source, and in many countries, this is a small piece of the puzzle.

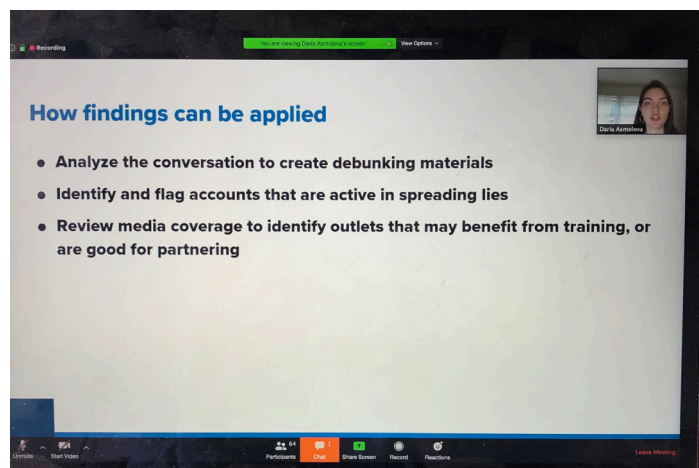


Photo: Screenshot from Asmolova's presentation

Resources

Webinar recording: <https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/74f245fe-cba5-4b49-8999-1f101b8cc286?list=studio>

BBC Media Action, Handbook for the Media: the new coronavirus and Covid-19 (pdf)
<http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/covid19-handbook-for-media-english.pdf>

BBC Media Action, Lifeline manual which provides tips for media practitioners on how to help audiences during health emergencies (several languages)
<https://lifeline.bbcmmediaaction.org/communicating-in-public-health-emergencies/>

BBC Media Action website

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction>

The Media Alternatives Project (UNDP)

<https://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/projects/the-media-alternatives-project0.html>

Crowdtangle is an online tool to track trends on social media (website)

<https://www.crowdtangle.com/>

Meltwater is a social listening and social media analytics company (website)

<https://www.meltwater.com/en>

Session 5

Press freedom, journalism standards, and regulation in a time of Covid-19 information pollution

Key takeaways:

The media has an important role to play in public health emergencies, but they are often faced with challenges. This webinar explored how the media is an essential provider of credible information, but only when journalists can operate freely, and their audience is literate.

Summary

Guy Berger (Director for Strategies and Policies in Communication and Information, UNESCO) spoke about how the media plays an informational role keeping people up to date. In countries where there is no proper media, the

population is at a disadvantage:

1. Information is the most important task for the media
2. The media acts as a watch dog
3. Media counters the spread of bad information: where there is no public media; what you're left with is social media

Additionally, economic constraints placed on newspapers are real threats during the pandemic. In Africa most news are printed and sales are needed to keep journalists employed.

Finally, media pluralism is important: news are facts, but we have to be open with narratives in order to be able to debate policies. It is important to teach journalists to present unknowns, e.g. 'we know this, but not this.' It is an assumption that

journalists actually know how to counter information pollution. Capacity building for journalists is instead critically needed.

Hassan Jalloh (Project Manager Media Development, Sierra Leone) spoke on lessons learned in Sierra Leone where there is high level of illiteracy, and therefore media illiteracy. This means receiving news from poor sources and overreliance on social media which causes more exposure to information pollution.

The challenges facing Sierra Leone is that there is resistance against Covid-19 measures since there is little trust towards governments. Furthermore, there is little support for media's role in national development. The CO is conducting journalist training on international standards, reporting guidelines for

Covid-19, engaging independent radio networks and established information source for daily Covid-19 updates.

Resources

Webinar recording: <https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/fb63c1ac-f758-46f6-bd81-2f69d355d8a0?list=studio>

Combating the disinfodemic: Working for truth in the time of COVID-19 (links to two policy briefs)
<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/disinfodemic>



***Journalist, press freedom and Covid-19
(issue brief):***

[https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/
pf0000373573](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373573)

***International Press Institute, Covid-19:
Number of Media Freedom Violations
by Region*** (updated statistics page)

[https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-
monitoring/](https://ipi.media/covid19-media-freedom-monitoring/)

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)

Training programme information

[https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-
who-and-knight-center-launch-mooc-
journalists-facing-covid-19-pandemic](https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-who-and-knight-center-launch-mooc-journalists-facing-covid-19-pandemic)

Session 6

Supporting and building capacity of fact-checking organizations as one of the most effective ways of countering Covid-19 information pollution

Key takeaways:

Fact-checking has become a vital task during the pandemic to debunk myths surrounding Covid-19 to ensure contagion remains low and health systems afloat. However, there are those who benefit from disinformation who would like their claims to go unverified.

Summary

Baybars Orsek (Director of [International Fact-Checking Network](#) (IFCN)) explained IFCN services and underlined their commitment to the Code of Principles, an accreditation IFCN has created. This code outlines a commitment to the following

principles: Non-partisanship and fairness, standards and transparency of sources, transparency of funding and organization, methodology and open and honest corrections policy.

During the pandemic, the IFCN has launched #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance to uncover misleading and false information about Covid-19.

Zurab Khrikadze (UNDP) introduced how Georgia has been tackling problems of information pollution. It was highlighted that there was a greater need to identify unauthentic behavior on Facebook, and that fact-checking remains ever more important ahead of the elections. **Tamar Kintsurashvili**, editor-in-chief at Myth Detector introduced their national fact-checking initiative and discussed how journalists and mainstream media need more fact-checking competence. Myth

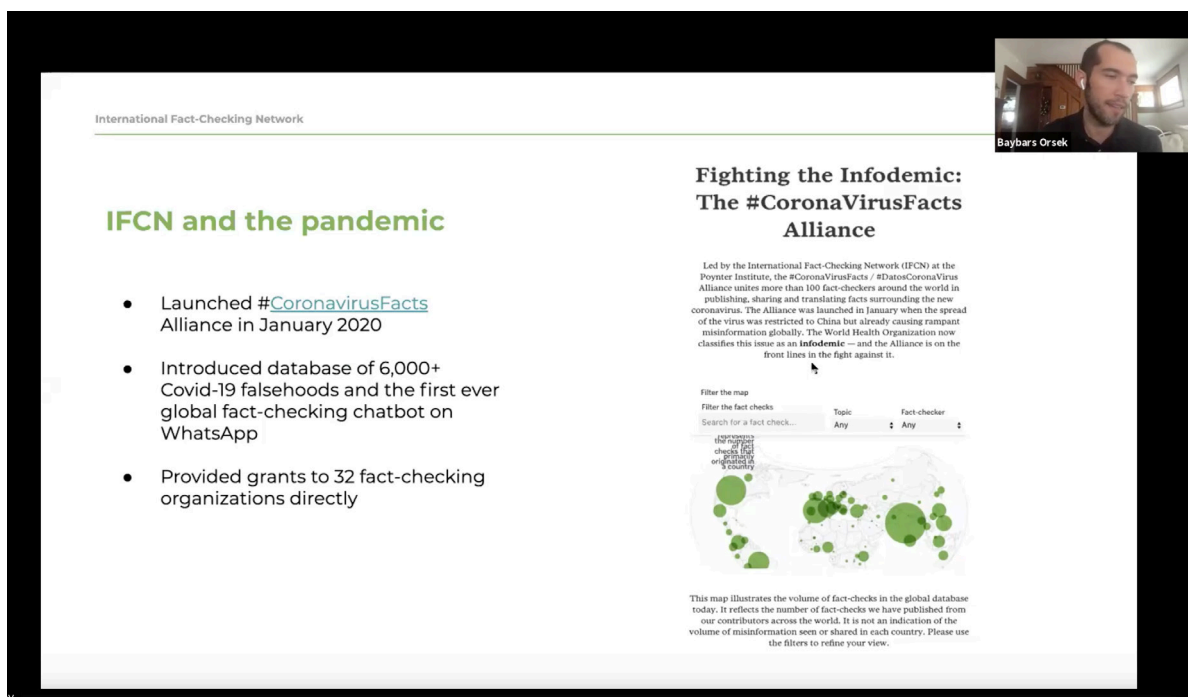


Photo: Orsek presenting IFCN initiatives during the pandemic

Detector has established a media literacy lab for youth to be able to differentiate between truth and falsehoods in Georgia.

Adulai Bary, established [Nobaschecker](#) in Guinea-Bissau to tackle the threat of disinformation during Covid-19. This initiative includes journalists, economists and doctors. They have utilized social media, websites and radio broadcasting to debunk over 100 fake news and instead present verified facts to the whole population (urban and rural). Nobaschecker also gives people the opportunity to engage and notify about mis/disinformation.

The challenges going forward were highlighted to be reaching a higher number

of people, awareness of all information pollution circulating, retaliation, and most worryingly, the high amount of information pollution make people less likely to consume or accept information.

Resources

Webinar recording: <https://web.micro-softstream.com/video/26786f59-510f-45d2-b67a-48a1c7add8ef>

Covid-19 resources, Pontyer (IFCN): <https://www.poynter.org/covid-19-poynter-resources/>

Nobaschecker:

Fact-checking website in Guinea-Bissau:

<https://www.nobaschecker.org/>

Myth Detector:

Identifies fake news by means of fact-checking and raising the level of media literacy.

<https://www.mythdetector.ge/en>

UN Talks

Tackling the Infodemic of Covid-19

Key takeaways:

The seminar series #UNtalks, co-hosted by UNDP Sweden and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, held a webinar on the topic of information pollution during Covid-19. The webinar explored what Covid-19 information pollution encompasses as the first pandemic in the social media era. Public health responses are endangered by mis/disinformation. Despite most people looking for health information, digital illiteracy remains problematic amidst mixed messaging containing falsehoods about Covid-19. Measures such as '[Share Verified](#)', protecting press freedom and working with local actors are all techniques to combat information pollution.



Photo: Malin Herwig, Director a.i (UNDP Oslo Governance Centre) opens the webinar

Summary

Per Olsson Fridh (State Secretary to the Minister of Development cooperation in Sweden) underlined that access to reliable information is important. The right to health, does not only depend on reliable health services, but the possibility for people to *stay informed* and make informed decision about themselves. Information pollution is therefore crucial. Information travels fast and it impacts decision making at all levels. We need to access the best possible information. Not necessarily the most amount information, but we need to help people *navigate the flow of information* that is out there.

Covid-19 occurs at the same time when we see a backsliding of democratic values. This has restricted freedom of expression and movement of journalists (also before Covid-19). Human rights are under pressure and now further risks undermining governance. Therefore, it is important to *protect and ensure that civil society, journalists and human rights defenders have a space to work*. We need to ensure a space for accountability

for the decision makers.

Another aspect is strengthening *digital literacy*. Ensuring the correct information is out there is important, but it is also important to build resilience by equipping people with digital literacy to withstand information pollution themselves.

Melissa Flemming (Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, United Nations) warned that disinformation is making this virus much more dangerous since it is the first pandemic in the social media era. Misinformation is travelling faster than the virus and this endangers the public health response. Despite the amount of correct information available, producers of mis/disinformation make theirs look authentic. Studies show people are looking for correct information, but have problems navigating the information landscape. For example, a quarter of Youtube videos that mention Covid-19 contain misinformation. In response, UNDP has launched the initiative “[Verified](#)”

– partnered with Purpose. The aim is to flood the internet with good information.

Jocelyn Mason (Resident representative UNDP Somalia) shared examples of information pollution from Somalia. Rumors spread that the disease was divine punishment. Al-shabaab were early to make a statement about Covid-19 but changed their messaging a month later to acknowledge that the disease is also contagious to Muslims, but their messages were still xenophobic. A while later, they adapted their messaging once again to raise concerns over the impact Covid-19 has over the Muslim world, and began providing services.

This example illustrates the governance challenge of how to combat messages containing disinformation from other sources. The CO in Somalia has been providing credible information through locally trusted voices. Such as government agencies, religious leaders, and social media influencers. Furthermore, they



Photo: Webinar panelists Per Olsson Fridh (left) and Melissa Flemming (right)

contacted cellphone operators to play a message while waiting for phone calls to connect to disseminate good information.

Resources

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNYz9OgTbKs&t=354s>

Share Verified:

UNDP initiative, partnered with Purpose, to flood the internet with verified information

<https://shareverified.com/en>



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