UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Submission to the report on disinformation | DW Akademie | 15 Feb 2021

In recent years, online disinformation has contributed to mistrust, polarization and division in societies across the globe. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 health emergency, false information about Covid-19-related symptoms, pathology, and effective countermeasures have been jeopardizing public health responses amid the pandemic.

Governments and social media platforms have undertaken efforts to counter the so-called infodemic, with varying results. A comprehensive response to this challenge requires measures on different levels, considering content-producers, distribution channels, and audiences, while respecting freedom of expression. Professional journalism and viable media sectors are essential in any strategy to counter the infodemic.

As this complex issue requires different roles for different actors with many potential lines of action, DW Akademie would like to highlight Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as one significant approach to tackling the spread of dis- and misinformation.

Media and Information Literacy: key to the infodemic response

As internet access and the use of digital media expand, so does the number of people that finds themselves surrounded by an endless stream of information. Many people experience challenges navigating the accompanying pitfalls. Studies carried out during the pandemic suggest a clear need to strengthen media and information literacy (MIL) in audiences. In a global study conducted by German Friedrich Naumann Foundation, over half of the respondents described difficulties in separating factual news from dis- and misinformation.[1] In addition, the current Edelman Trust Barometer finds that only a quarter of the survey respondents apply "informational hygiene".[2]

Over the course of 2018 and 2019, DW Akademie conducted an extensive study on MIL in 6 African countries - the MIL Index.[3] Young women and men between the ages of 15 and 35 were asked how they access, use, create and engage with media and digital information. While the results varied according to country, the MIL Index highlighted the common need among young people to strengthen both analytical and reflective skills with regards to media and information. Dis- and misinformation are encountered daily, although awareness of its possible harmful impact is often limited. Trust in media varies according to country. In some cases, it has resulted in a more complacent, reserved and less critical attitude.[4]

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[1] Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung, 2020: Globale Studie: Desinformationen durchdringen Gesellschaften weltweit, https://www.freiheit.org/de/freedomfightsfake-globale-studie-desinformationen-durchdringen-gesellschaften-weltweit
[2] Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, 23-28, 45; https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer
[3] The six countries were Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, and Uganda. DW Akademie: Media and Information Literacy Index, https://www.dw.com/en/dw-akademie/mil-index/s-54253270
[4] Findings include that the participants were able to critically reflect issues such as the trustworthiness of media, but they seldom put that reflection to use. Furthermore, in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda youth are withdrawing from

Viable media ecosystems indispensable

Independent media play a crucial role in verifying and distributing information. Professional journalists provide citizens with accurate information. Especially in times of crisis, audiences turn to the news organizations they know and trust, such as legacy and public service media. However, independent media have been operating under the pressure of press freedom violations, restrictive legal and political frameworks, and structural challenges brought on by digital transformation. Media viability therefore plays a key role and must be fostered in order to mitigate the spread of dis- and misinformation.

DW Akademie provides a framework to assess the state of media viability within a country, the Media Viability Indicators (MVIs). It offers media managers, media development experts, activists, and scholars a practical tool to gather data and evidence by evaluating individual media outlets or entire information ecosystems. The MVIs consider a range of aspects covering politics, economics, communities, technology, and content to enable the development of more effective strategies. They provide global experts with a common language on this important topic, sorely needed to many media ecosystems' challenges, including that of dis- and misinformation.[5]

Accurate reporting, including transparent fact-checking, can help to create awareness of what reliable, credible information looks like. While fact checking alone is not able to change individual beliefs and assumptions developed by dis- and misinformation, it may have a positive effect on critical thinking and enhance MIL.[6]

Disinformation: new urgency to act amid Covid-19 pandemic

In 2020, the issue of disinformation and misinformation has gained additional attention against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. The consequences of dis- and misinformation amidst the global health emergency have proven to be fatal: hundreds of cases have been documented in which people have died due to false information, often spread via digital media.[7] Furthermore, dis- and misinformation have affected public trust towards vaccinations, severely undercutting strategies to ensure public health and stop the pandemic.[8]

Social media platforms, including messaging apps, have been identified as main drivers of dis- and misinformation, due to their reach and operating mode. However, social media companies have been reluctant to act and communicate transparently on the issue. Thus, there are only rough estimates of what it would actually entail to effectively combat the issue on these platforms. Indeed, the scope of the infodemic appears daunting: when one platform claimed to have removed tens of millions of

public discourse for fear of reproachment or because it is dominated by their elders. The main driver behind this is the selective bias of local media. Ibid.

[5] DW Akademie: Media Viability: New indicators show what is at stake, https://www.dw.com/en/media-viability-new-indicators-show-what-is-at-stake/a-47874028

[6] Andrew Tompkins, Is fact-checking effective? A critical review of what works – and what doesn't,

[7] COVID-19–Related Infodemic and Its Impact on Public Health: A Global Social Media Analysis, 2020, https://www.ajtmh.org/content/journals/10.4269/ajtmh.20-0812

[8] Measuring the Impact of Exposure to COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation on Vaccine Intent in the UK and US, 2020, https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.10.22.20217513v1.full.pdf; Edelman Trust Barometer 2020

pieces of misinformation related to Covid-19, observers estimated that only a fraction of misinformation in circulation had, in fact, been deleted.[9]

Platforms have been investing in algorithms to automatically moderate content. According to reports, these algorithms were put to the test in early 2020, when many employees responsible for filtering and removing harmful content were not able to work due to lockdown measures. The results were ambivalent: more harmful content was removed than in previous years, but there was a tendency to overblock. Social media accounts of activists and journalists were closed, often with no immediate possibility to appeal the decision. News articles and health information were deleted, while posts involving hate speech, child exploitation and other harmful content remained up, due to the algorithms' inability to spot violations of community guidelines.[10]

Experts have pointed out a need for more community involvement when it comes to human-rights based content regulation on social media. They call for the design of more adequate and effective responses that reflect international standards of freedom of expression and access to information.[11]

Recommendations

- MIL provides a mitigating force against the spread of dis- and misinformation and enables audiences to participate in creating and ensuring a civic space, which is respectful, pluralistic, and engaged. Therefore: DW Akademie recommends strengthening MIL in all parts and on all levels of society, especially in countries where social media is used as the main source of information and/or where independent media systems are weak. Approaches in this regard could include ensuring MIL is integrated in national curricula.
- DW Akademie recommends strengthening the work of independent and professional news media by creating an enabling environment for accurate reporting. This includes creating the legal, economic, and professional conditions necessary for journalists to provide fact-based information to their audiences and debunk falsehoods.
- DW Akademie recommends calling upon social media companies to significantly step up their efforts to prevent the spread of dis- and misinformation and become fully transparent on their handling of disinformation. Here, communities and end-users should be involved in creating systems to ensure content regulation and fact-checking on social media that is based on human rights.

DW Akademie is part of Deutsche Welle (DW). It is the center for education and knowledge transfer at Germany's international broadcaster. Its activities include international media development, a traineeship for future DW journalists, the International Media Studies Master's program, media

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[9] Ranking Digital Rights: It's Not Just the Content, It's the Business Model: Democracy's Online Speech Challenge, 2020, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/REAL_FINAL-Its_Not_Just_the_Content_Its_the_Business_Model.pdf
[10] What happened when humans stopped managing social media content, 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-content-moderation-automation/
[11] Renata Avila, Fighting racism and hate speech with community solutions, https://www.dw.com/en/a-55522082

training for specialized professionals and a broad range of multimedia courses for learning German. Together with our partners, we work to make free and transparent media possible in many parts of the world. We are committed to improving political and legal conditions, strengthening responsible and diverse journalism, and helping people acquire professional media skills.