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Good Practice Principles for

Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation

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Public institutions should invest in innovative research and use strategic foresight to anticipate the evolution of technology and information ecosystems and prepare for likely threats. Counter-misinformation interventions should be designed to be open, adaptable and matched with efforts to professionalise the function and build civil servants' capacity to respond to evolving challenges;

4 Transparency

Governments should strive to communicate in an honest and clear manner, with institutions comprehensively disclosing information, decisions, processes and data within the limitations of relevant legislation and regulations.Transparency, including about assumptions and uncertainty, can reduce the scope for rumours and falsehoods to take root, as well as enable public scrutiny of official information and open government data;

5 Timeliness

Public institutions should develop mechanisms to act in a timely manner by identifying and responding to emerging narratives, recognising the speed at which false information can travel. Communicators can work to build preparedness and rapid responses by establishing co-ordination and approval mechanisms to intervene quickly with accurate, relevant and compelling content.

6 Prevention

Government interventions should be designed to pre-empt rumours, falsehoods, and conspiracies to stop mis- and disinformation narratives from gaining traction. A focus on prevention requires governments to identify, monitor and track problematic content and its sources; recognise and proactively fill information and data gaps to reduce susceptibility to speculation and rumours; understand and anticipate common disinformation tactics, vulnerabilities and risks; and identify appropriate actions, such as "pre-bunking

7 Evidence-based

Government interventions should be designed and informed by trustworthy and reliable data, testing, and audience and behavioural insights. Research, analysis and new insights can be continuously gathered and should feed into improved approaches and practices. Governments should focus on recognising emerging narratives, behaviours, and characteristics to understand the context in which they are communicating and responding.

8 Inclusiveness

Interventions should be designed and diversified to reach all groups in society. Official information should strive to be relevant and easily understood, with messages tailored for diverse publics. Channels, messages and messengers should be appropriate for intended audiences, and communication initiatives conducted with respect for cultural and linguistic differences and with attention paid to reaching disengaged, underrepresented or marginalised groups. Adequate resources and dedicated efforts can support responsive communication and facilitate two-way dialogue that counteracts false and misleading content;

9 Whole-of-society collaboration

Government efforts to counteract information disorders should be integrated within a whole-of-society approach, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the media, private sector, civil society, academia and individuals. Governments should promote the public's resilience to mis- and disinformation, as well as an environment conducive to accessing, sharing and facilitating constructive engagement around information and data. Where relevant, public institutions should co-ordinate and engage with non-governmental partners with the aim of building trust across society and in all parts of the country.

INTRODUCTION

Governments are operating in a rapidly changing media and information ecosystem,[1] which provides unprecedented opportunities to engage with the public but also presents challenges regarding how people consume and share information, affecting who and what they trust. In particular, social media platforms have shown a tendency to facilitate the spread of emotional and polarising content including, critically, mis- and disinformation (Smith, 2019[1]). While these phenomena predate the digital age, new communication technologies have amplified their volume and reach (Lewandosky et al., 2020[2]).

The fracturing and personalisation of the news people consume – facilitated on social media platforms by the provision of individualized "information diets" – risks exacerbating divisions between communities that may increasingly lack a shared body of news or a shared understanding of reality (Ávila, Ortiz Freuler and Fagan, 2018[3]). Disagreements about basic facts can cause or aggravate the erosion of public conversation, contributing to political paralysis and harming engagement and democracy (Kavanagh, 2018[4]). The pervasive and global spread of mis- and disinformation and information disorder more widely[2], furthermore, poses acute and far-reaching challenges to governments and societies. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how misleading or false claims can affect policy uptake and vaccine confidence in ways that can threaten public health and people's lives.

The range of policy interventions to combat this challenge continues to grow, and to cross disciplines. That said, efforts to improve media and information ecosystems stand out due to their potential contribution to build societal resilience to false narratives online and offline. To that end, the initiatives analysed as part of these Good Practice Principles attest to how much governments rely on the public communication function[3] to help prevent, respond to, and mitigate the spread of mis- and disinformation.

More broadly, a focus on communication goes hand-in-hand with a drive to support all partners in the ecosystem, to build a more viable space for the diffusion of reliable news and information. Indeed, governments do not communicate in a vacuum – traditional media and fact-checkers, technology companies, civil society, and citizens themselves are essential to generate and amplify trustworthy content. Governments are well-positioned to lead multi-stakeholder efforts that strengthen the information environment by engaging and co-operating with a wide range of actors. As governments experiment with new and diverse approaches to counteract mis- and disinformation, the OECD has conducted a comparative analysis of good practices and drawn from these a set of Good Practice Principles for Public Communication Responses to Mis- and Disinformation (hereafter "Good Practice Principles").

To properly frame the intent and focus of these principles, it should be noted that there are important policy and regulatory considerations, such as those related to strengthening transparency around processes and data held by social media companies and reducing the economic and structural drivers of mis- and disinformation, among others, that are not treated

[1] This is understood as the space where citizens, journalists and institutions (governmental, civic and private) create, spread and engage with information, governance frameworks and each other.
[2] Misinformation describes situations where false or misleading information is shared but no harm is intended; the sharer may not even be aware the information is false. Disinformation is when false, manipulative and/or misleading information is knowingly shared with the intention of causing harm or influencing the information environment. Disinformation and information influence operations may be spread by foreign or domestic actors. See (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017[21]) and (Lesher, Pawelec and Desai, 2022[88]).
[3] Public communication is distinct from political communication, which is linked to elections or political parties, and is understood as the government function to deliver information, listen and respond to citizens in the service of the common good (OECD, 2021[16]).

directly in this analysis. Such broader responses, however, inform the overall thinking behind the Good Practice Principles and are the subject of other streams of work of the OECD [4].

The Good Practice Principles emerged from observed practices in public communication responses to the challenges of mis- and disinformation across OECD Member and non-Member countries. They also build on and complement the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government [5] and the OECD Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector [6].

The Good Practice Principles may serve as a useful tool for policy makers in addressing the spread of mis- and disinformation in a holistic manner, and in turn rebuild trust in the information ecosystem necessary in a democracy. They relate most directly to public communication interventions, but are relevant and applicable to a broader range of responses against this phenomenon. The Good Practice Principles support broader initiatives under Pillar I – Preventing and Combating Mis- and Disinformation of the OECD's Reinforcing Democracy Initiative and broadly aim to help:

- **Stimulate a multi-disciplinary discussion** on what has worked to address low public trust toward information from official and mainstream sources;
- **Compile a range of good practices** on how the public communication function can help counter mis- and disinformation and address underlying causes of mistrust in information;
- **Help guide government efforts to co-operate** with media, civil society organisations, the private sector and individuals to support media and information ecosystems that promote openness, transparency and inclusion.

This document presents a brief overview of the challenges presented by the spread of mis- and disinformation, as well as the role of governments in responding to these challenges through their public communication functions and other related initiatives. The document then discusses good practices on which the principles are based, organised according to three levels of interventions. It then outlines the nine Good Practice Principles, highlighting how they relate to a holistic approach to counteract the spread and impact of false and misleading content. Ultimately, the ongoing identification and mapping of practices will enable the OECD and governments to continue to expand the knowledge base and support countries' attempts to put the principles into use.

The implementation of the Good Practice Principles will need to take into account individual circumstances, including with respect to information environments, institutional frameworks, public education and media literacy, legislation and available online platforms. Appropriate and effective public communication responses will therefore vary and depend on these circumstances, though the Good Practice Principles aim to provide general guidance and direction to countries as they seek to counteract the threats faced.

[4] For more information on OECD work on preventing and combating misinformation and disinformation: https://www.oecd.org/governance/reinforcing-democracy/.
[5] https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0438
[6] https://www.oecd.org/digital/digital-government/good-practice-principles-for-data-ethics-in-the-public-sector.htm

THE EVOLVING CONTEXT OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

The proliferation of mis- and disinformation concerning public policy, official messages and scientific data can create significant challenges for governments in their efforts to ensure accurate information reaches all groups in society. Research from Europe and the U.S. suggests that internet and social media use affects levels of trust and may further polarise pre-existing beliefs and opinions (Ceron, 2015[5]; Klein and Robison, 2019[6]). In a 2018 Flash Eurobarometer Survey, 83% of the EU respondents agreed that "fake news" is a problem for democracy in general (EC, 2018[7]), highlighting the perceived threat even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the spread of mis- and disinformation online may build on and aggravate a deeper-seated crisis of trust toward sources of news. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, only 35% of respondents claim to trust what they see on social media. Confidence in traditional media is higher, at 53%, but is at a 10-year low and declined by eight percentage points between 2020 and 2021 (Edelman, 2021[8])[7]. In addition, 67% of respondents were worried that journalists and reporters are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are incorrect or exaggerated, and 66% say the same about government and political leaders (Edelman, 2022[9]). Worryingly, research has also noted an increase in the phenomenon of news avoidance, whereby citizens deliberately turn away from information, which can signal disengagement with policy and public issues (Fletcher et al., 2020[10]).

By casting evidence and facts into doubt, false and misleading content can work against policy goals and sow distrust, for example, in the context of COVID-19 responses and overcoming vaccine hesitancy, elections, or on topics such as migration and climate change (OECD, 2020[11]), (Commission d'experts Les Lumières à l'ère Numérique, 2022[12]). Trust is the foundation on which the legitimacy of public institutions is built. It is a multifaceted concept, and its influence on the outcomes of public policies is significant and tangible, as is its role in supporting social cohesion and policy implementation that requires behaviour change from citizens. For example, research suggests that higher levels of trust in the government are associated with both lower COVID-19 infection rates and higher vaccination rates (Bollyky and al., 2000[13]). Finally, given the correlation between the spread of misinformation and levels of mistrust, policy-makers should consider not only the specific context under which populations are mistrustful, but also the degree of perceived legitimacy and credibility of relevant institutions (Donovan, 2020[14]).

Government efforts to build effective communication and community engagement strategies can build resilience in the information space and promote trust by showing that institutions are responsive, reliable, and that they value integrity, openness, and fairness, which are the key drivers of trust identified by the OECD (OECD, 2017[15]). Governments must also focus on ensuring the public communication function can respond to the rapidly evolving context.

[7] Based on a survey of 15 525 respondents from 28 countries, including OECD members Australia, Canada, Colombia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The use of social media and the ubiquity of mobile communications and messaging have dramatically altered the media and information ecosystem, disrupting traditional models of communication and circumventing previously established methods of verifying and sharing news and data. While this shift has empowered people and enabled more effective collaboration within and between governments and stakeholders, it has also multiplied opportunities for the spread of false and misleading content.

To date, however, governments have met these changes largely through ad hoc and isolated approaches (OECD, 2021[16]). In part, this varying response within and across governments is due to the specific contexts and needs faced by countries. Each country is faced with a different information environment, including variations in threats, actors, institutional frameworks, public education and media literacy, legislation and relevant online platforms. The most appropriate and effective public communication responses will therefore vary for each country. That said, there are enough consistent aims to which countries can aspire in their efforts to use the function to respond to the threats posed by mis- and disinformation. These Good Practice Principles aim to help clarify communicators' understanding of how to strengthen the resilience to the challenges faced.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

Through providing timely and accurate information, public communication, as a core government function, can play an important role in helping governments respond to the novel and evolving challenges posed by the spread of mis- and disinformation. While governments cannot single-handedly combat these challenges, institutionalising robust responses can help create a healthy information and communication environment (OECD, 2021[16]). More broadly, by enabling and expanding opportunities for participation in policy-making, public communication can strengthen democratic engagement, which can further contribute to shaping policy outcomes. To realise its potential for supporting good governance, the principles of open government, and democracy, public communication must be transparent, respectful of the values of honesty, integrity and impartiality, and conceived as a means for two-way engagement with citizens. In this way, it can serve to respond to the challenges of mis- and disinformation, help build institutional trust and support democracy (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021[17]).

The identification of effective communication practices can clarify how communication can help minimise negative consequences of problematic content and strengthen information ecosystems. Public communication can provide essential opportunities to both react to and prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation, as well as serve as a source of accurate, reliable and timely information and data. Filling data vacuums, and "managing the creation and dissemination of trusted information so that it is not excessive, overwhelming or confusing" (WHO, 2020[18]) are core pillars of trustworthy communication. Even where information is still unclear or being collected – as is often the case in crises – the public will often demand information; governments should consider how to anticipate and respond to citizens' needs honestly, transparently and with the best information possible, while pre-empting the spread of rumours and falsehoods.

Since the escalation of the mis- and disinformation challenge in the last decade, furthermore, many governments have designated new structures within their cybersecurity agencies, electoral oversight bodies, communication units, and most recently in their public health agencies. The cross-cutting nature of the information disorders, including mis- and disinformation, highlights the need for versatile and whole-of-government capacity, and for strategic foresight to future-proof institutional responses. It is especially important that dedicated units, agencies, or other offices are adaptable and have built-in mechanisms for continuous learning, evaluation, and training.

Beyond the public communication function, ensuring a healthy information ecosystem requires a systemic and holistic approach (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[19]). This involves looking at the spaces in which communication is delivered and the actors that can contribute to the flow of trustworthy information. For example, equipping citizens with the necessary skills and awareness to be responsible producers and consumers of content and supporting fact-based, rigorous, and independent journalism are key elements of building sound media and information environments. Media diversity, particularly at the local level, has suffered with the rise of social media platforms and the related decline in advertising

revenues, whereas clickbait and sensationalistic reporting has grown (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[19]). This trend aggravates the vulnerability of the information ecosystem and undermines an essential avenue for trustworthy news and government accountability.

Given the speed of changes to the ecosystem in which people, organisations and institutions communicate, responses require engagement between relevant actors at the local, national and international levels. Interventions will need to support media, civil society, fact-checkers, and the research community, as well as involve online platforms, as vital allies in the common effort to tackle information disorders. Governments are unlikely to overcome these challenges alone: co-operation and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders is essential for an effective whole-of-society response. Finally, the threats posed by mis- and disinformation to policy and governance – including repercussions on public confidence in vaccines, confidence in elections, understanding of climate change – are at least in part a symptom of larger societal issues. Recognising these underlying factors is essential to designing appropriate responses, as is understanding the role each stakeholder can play in delivering them.

GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The nine Good Practice Principles are drawn together from the experiences and insights of a wide range of countries, to help define the factors that underpin diverse responses and make them more effective. Ultimately, the Good Practice Principles aim to help governments ensure policies and communications are informed by and promote open government principles [8]. The Good Practice Principles are based on – and illustrated by – relevant emerging practices in the field of countering mis- and disinformation and analysis of the factors that make them effective. The collection of practices is not exhaustive. Legislative and regulatory measures on the diversity and independence of the media; the strength of a country's civic space; considerations concerning content moderation, transparency requirements and business models of social media platforms; and addressing new models of regulatory policy making are additional factors. While these issues also contribute to the fight against the threats posed by mis- and disinformation, the scope of the practices that inform the principles focus on those that directly involve government initiatives to strengthen the two-way flow of information and constructive engagement between governments and non-government partners.

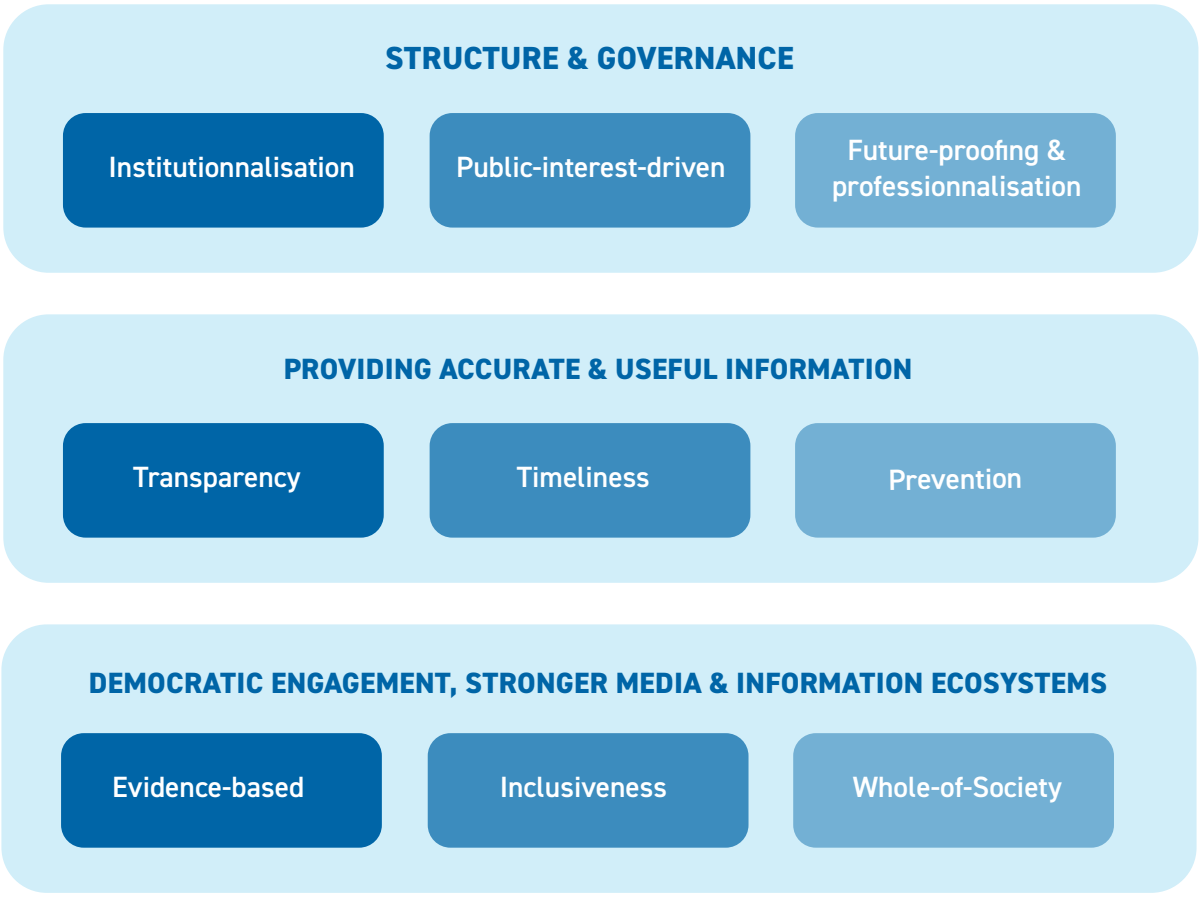
OECD work developing the principles was originally supported by the UK Government as part of the global vaccine confidence initiative of its 2021 G7 presidency. The OECD subsequently gathered information, discussed and presented draft principles and practices with Members and other stakeholders both bilaterally and via a number of high-level OECD and G7 events focused on mis- and disinformation; as well as via the OECD Working Party and Expert Group meetings and outreach.

In mapping their application, it is useful to note that the practices included here may be relevant across more than one of the nine principles discussed below. It may also be useful to conceive of the principles as structured across three interlinked clusters focused on:

- The structure and governance of the public communication function to counteract mis- and disinformation, including the need for **institutionalisation** of the function; the need for it to be **public-interest driven** and differentiated from political communication; and for **future-proofing and professionalisation** to continually respond to emerging challenges and opportunities;
- Efforts to provide accurate and useful information, thereby highlighting the importance of **transparency** and honest communications; the **timeliness** of responses; and the role of **prevention** through anticipating and pre-bunking mis- and disinformation;
- Strengthening the role of public communication as a means to support democratic engagement and stronger media and information ecosystems by using **evidence-based** approaches and ensuring **inclusiveness** of messages and channels to engender two-way and responsive communications. Communicators should also work with all relevant public and private stakeholders in the information ecosystem as part of a **whole-of-society** approach.

[8] As outlined in the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (OECD, 2017[36]).

The Good Practice Principles are:



1. Institutionalisation

Governments should consolidate interventions into coherent approaches guided by official communication and data policies, standards and guidelines. Public communication offices will benefit from adequate human and financial resources, a well-co-ordinated cross-government approach at national and sub-national levels, and dedicated and professional staff.

What does Institutionalisation look like?

Formalising definitions, policies and approaches can help governments shift from ad hoc and fragmented approaches to counteracting mis- and disinformation, to more structured and strategic approaches. Institutionalization can provide clarity of purpose, help set concrete metrics for measuring impact and justify allocations for resources to this endeavour.

First, defining the problem to solve is an essential start to developing targeted and consistent responses (Wardle, 2020[20]). In the context of information disorders, there are multiple terms to describe diverse challenges, with the most commonly used terms being misinformation and disinformation.

While online mis- and disinformation threats are dynamic phenomena, adopting official definitions and using them consistently across official materials can help institutionalise approaches and ensure they accurately address the multiple causes and manifestations of the problem. However, as of 2020 just over half (54%) of Centres of Government surveyed by the OECD had adopted a definition of at least one of the terms "disinformation", "misinformation", or "malinformation" (OECD, 2021[16]). In its work, the OECD has drawn on the following definitions used by Wardle and Derakshan:

- **Misinformation:** "when false information is shared, but no harm is meant". This consists typically of rumour or misleading content shared unknowingly by individuals.
- **Disinformation:** "when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm". Disinformation can often be traced back to actors with malicious motives and can be part of concerted large-scale campaigns.
- **Malinformation:** "when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving what was designed to stay private into the public sphere" (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017[21]).

Additionally, defining the approach and scope of relevant interventions in a way that gives clear guidance on measurable objectives, roles and responsibilities can help build and consolidate responses to mis- and disinformation. In practice, such guidance can take the form of a framework, a strategy, or policy and legislation. Due to the cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary nature of this challenge, formal guiding documents that encompass all dimensions of the response across platform governance, communication, media and information literacy, and beyond can be useful. For example, the United Kingdom's Government Communication Service developed the RESIST toolkit [9] to help public sector communications professionals, policy officers, senior managers, and advisors develop responses to disinformation. The toolkit provides good practices to monitor, assess, and counter mis- and disinformation.

Clear and well-implemented strategies can be particularly useful in situations where rapid and sometimes decentralised responses to the spread of mis- and disinformation may be required. Such guidance can complement the use of official definitions by clarifying the challenges and systematising responses, as well as empower autonomous action while ensuring initiatives are aligned with institution-wide messages. Nevertheless, in 2019, the OECD found that only 38% of Centres of Government had a strategy in place to govern the response to mis- and disinformation (OECD, 2021[16]).[10]

The relatively low proportion of governments that have developed strategies or documents to guide interventions on countering mis- and disinformation does not mean that they have not engaged with the issue. These findings suggest, however, that public institutions may have been inadequately prepared to face the wave of health misinformation that accompanied COVID-19 (OECD, 2021[16]).

[9] The Toolkit can be found at: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/

[10] Note that the Report is based on 64 survey responses (from both Centres of Government (CoG) and Ministries of Health (MH)) from 46 countries (including 35 OECD members) and the European Commission; 39 countries replied to the CoG survey and 24 to the MH survey.

An additional consideration relates to where the responsibility lies for tackling this challenge. OECD data shows that of those surveyed, 64% of governments indicated there were specific structures, teams, or individuals responsible for communications related to countering disinformation. Many of these teams are structured around monitoring online conversations and disseminating accurate information using online platforms (OECD, 2021[16]).

Continuing to analyse the relevance, impact and effectiveness of these teams will be a focus of future analysis. Building capacity horizontally across government can be demanding and difficult, at least in the near-term. For this reason, some countries have centralised counter-disinformation capacity under dedicated structures that are designed to provide support to all government institutions. A degree of centralisation of resources, in the form of a dedicated unit or agency, can help build the right expertise and capacity efficiently, as well as put it to the service of other parts of government. For example, the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) is a centralised agency in the UK's Cabinet Office that monitors media and online content for the whole of government. It leverages a number of software and analytics to track emerging narratives in online discourse in real-time.

Governments may also seek to promote horizontal co-ordination to ensure efforts draw on both technical expertise on disinformation and issue-specific knowledge (e.g. in public health or elections). For example, the French cabinet adopted a decree in July 2021 to establish an office run by the Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security to identify foreign interventions and bots spreading content that aims to destabilise the state politically. Notably, activities will also be assessed by an ethics committee whose members will also include non-governmental representatives (Fitzpatrick, 2021[22]). Similarly, the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency began operations on 1 January 2022, and was set up to identify, analyse and respond to the impact of undue information influence and other misleading information.[11]

In addition to tracking and responding to specific content, establishing effective co-ordination mechanisms within governments can be a useful tool. Creating multi-faceted teams can bring different perspectives to the design and implementation of communication initiatives, as well as help facilitate rapid responses to crises and misleading or incorrect information. For example, the Government of Canada established a co-ordination mechanism, involving the ministries of Democratic Institutions, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, and National Defence to improve the government's ability to "identify threats, emerging tactics and systems vulnerabilities" in preparation for the 2019 election (Government of Canada, 2019[23])."

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated efforts to increase intra-governmental co-ordination in this regard. The rapid spread of myths about the causes of the virus, fake cures, and vaccine conspiracies have added urgency to efforts to work across government to counter such narratives. In Italy, for example, a taskforce was set up in April 2020 to facilitate collaboration on responses to COVID-19-related disinformation between the Centre of Government, the Civil Protection Department, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Italian Communications Regulator. Additional instruments, such as the weekly newsletter shared by the French Service d'information du Gouvernement, can help raise awareness

[11] For more information, see: https://www.mpf.se/en/

across government of issues and threats, and contribute to more co-ordinated responses (OECD, 2021[16]).

National governments can also continue to support international efforts to provide more institutionalized and structured support. , as noted by the OECD, while individual experts are often responsible for communicating specific guidance and advice, they should be guided by clear principles and supported by government institutions and international networks of communicators and experts benefiting from open sharing of data and information (OECD, 2020[24]). In December 2018, the European Commission published a comprehensive Action Plan Against Disinformation, with the aim of building capabilities and strengthening co-operation between EU Member States and EU institutions. Specifically, it aims to improve the capabilities of institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; strengthen co-ordinated and joint responses; mobilise the private sector to tackle disinformation; and raise awareness and improve societal resilience (European Commission, 2018[25]). For its part, the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service (EEAS) established the EUvDisinfo programme, which provides dedicated staff focused on identifying, compiling, exposing and debunking disinformation (EUvsDisinfo, 2022[26]). Similarly, in 2014, NATO founded an independent StratCom Center of Excellence, whose goal is to contribute to the strategic communications capabilities of NATO, allies and partners, including via research and preparations regarding threats posed by disinformation (StratcomCOE, 2022[27]).

2. Public interest driven

Public communication should strive to be independent from politicization in implementing interventions to counteract mis- and disinformation. Public communication should be separate and distinct from partisan and electoral communication, with the introduction of measures to ensure clear authorship, impartiality, accountability, and objectivity.

What does Public interest driven look like?

Politicians, political actors and parties do not always command the same level of trust across all groups in society, and can alienate segments of the public that have diverging political views. Institutions and civil servants, on the other hand, tend to be perceived as less partial (Edelman, 2021[8]). In addition, politicisation of information and messages can have repercussions on the degree of transparency and the perceived reliability of government institutions as sources of information (Fairbanks, Plowman and Rawlins, 2007[28]; Heise, 1985[29]). It is therefore important to make explicit distinctions between political versus institutional content.

For the purpose of public communication, avoiding the risk of being seen as driving a political message or being seen as a tool of propaganda can maintain trust in the information shared, which is an important element of responding to mis- and disinformation. Such distinctions can be aided by putting in place mechanisms to insulate public communication institutions from political pressure and clarifying the separation between the two functions in relevant documents and structures.

For example, keeping institutional platforms and social media handles clear of political or potentially politicised content, and establishing clear authorship and branding are mechanisms to facilitate this distinction. In the Netherlands, the Principles of Government Communication (Government of the Netherlands, 2017[30])state that information shared by governmental sources "should always be focused on the content of policy, not on image building for individual members of government." The guidelines also include specific provisions on attributing communication and making official channels recognisable.

Establishing clear guidelines, standards, directives, or legal requirements for appropriate use can help manage the distinction between political and institutional communication and can ensure the function is conducted in the interest and service of the public. The Norwegian Government developed a set of guidelines (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, 2019[31])concerning ethics and the relationship between political leadership and the civil service, in which political neutrality is listed as a core obligation, and Finland's Central Government Communication Guidelines (Prime Minister's Office, Finland, 2016[32])stress that the division of duties and communications by public servants and political communications should be clearly delineated. Furthermore, in Italy, Law 150 of 2000[12] designates public communication roles and responsibilities to be covered exclusively by civil servants, whereas press office and spokesperson roles can be appointed externally.

Ultimately, it is likely impossible to completely remove politics from communications on institutional platforms. Similar to the considerations related to the ethical use of data for public sector, as noted by the OECD, data use by governments should serve the public interest, and public sector organisations and officials should aim to contribute to public integrity[13] and deliver benefits for society (OECD, 2021[33]). Ultimately, regarding public communication, actions that limit association of channels and messages with specific political ideologies or parties can make them more valuable in combating mis- and disinformation amid increasingly polarised information ecosystems.

3. Future-proofing and professionalisation

Public institutions should invest in innovative research and use strategic foresight to anticipate the evolution of technology and information ecosystems and prepare for likely threats. Counter-misinformation interventions should be designed to be open, adaptable and matched with efforts to professionalise the function and build civil servants' capacity to respond to evolving challenges.

What does Public interest driven look like?

The rapidly changing technologies and challenges facing civil servants tasked with tackling misinformation require a focus on introducing and maintaining specialized skillsets. Through simulations, trainings and joint exercises, civil servants can gain flexibility to evolving needs and help share expertise across the government. The OECD Recommendation of the Council for Agile Regulatory Governance to Harness Innovation[14] reiterates these priorities. Specifically, it recommends that governance frameworks and regulatory approaches are forward-looking

[12] For more details see: https://www.forumpa.it/open-government/comunicazione-pubblica/legge-150-del-2000-cosa-prevede-la-prima-e-a-tuttoggi-unica-legge-quadro-sulla-comunicazione-pubblica/

[13] The OECD Recommendation on Public Integrity defines public integrity as "the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in the public sector". For more information see: https://www.oecd.org/gov/ethics/OECD-Recommendation-Public-Integrity.pdf

[14] https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0464

through developing institutional capacity, assigning clear mandates, conducting systematic and co-ordinated horizon scanning and scenario analysis, anticipating and monitoring the implications of high-impact innovations, and fostering continuous learning and adaptation (OECD, 2021[34]).

OECD research found, that 40% of respondents had established teams tasked with developing and implementing training on countering disinformation. Across surveyed governments, it is one of the competencies that has the least amount of dedicated training, which suggests an opportunity to expand professionalisation efforts in this area (OECD, 2021[16]). One example of such training comes from the United Kingdom, whose Government Communication Service (GCS) delivers a training programme on how to "recognise and respond to disinformation as a government communicator". The course is available to all GCS employees, with six modules released weekly and in a way that enables participants to complete lessons on their own time.[15]

The growing prominence of audio and video content similarly calls for innovation to process misinformation across these mediums. Additionally, advanced competencies in data science are increasingly useful in establishing sophisticated methods that make tracking and analysing content, or spotting co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour and illicit adverts more manageable at scale. Such skills are also key for developing digital tools that support continuous monitoring and specific actions. Specialised communication competencies for filling information voids, debunking and pre-bunking similarly require dedicated training, as well as the application of behavioural science-based interventions and related expertise.

Moving forward, governments will need to continue to explore the specific challenges that the spread of mis- and disinformation pose to other critical policy areas, such as climate change and youth. For example, a forthcoming OECD policy paper finds that young people are more likely to be exposed to mis- and disinformation and are concerned about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on misinformation, which may pose a risk of division and disassociation from democracy among the younger generations (OECD, 2022[35]).

Preparedness for election-related mis- and disinformation is likewise a growing priority, as is more fully understanding the effects of misleading content on public debate and policy making related to climate change.[16] Applying strategic foresight and seeking to gain a better understanding of the similarities and differences between mis- and disinformation related to specific policy areas, who is involved, how it is spread, and the impact of proposed solutions are useful approaches to planning for the evolving information landscape. Lessons from the spread of false and misleading content around COVID-19 can be examined to inform the analysis and response related to other policy priorities.

Future-proofing the public communication function will also require efforts to understand the opportunities, and not just the challenges, presented by rapid changes to information ecosystems. New technologies and avenues for people to get and share information and to break down barriers continue to be developed. A recognition of the strategic potential of public communication, a timely investment to strengthen it as a government function, and

[15] For more information, see: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/courses/understanding-disinformation-in-partnership-with-gcsi/

[16] See Treen K Md, Williams HTP, and O'Neill SJ. Online misinformation about climate change. WIREs Clim Change. 2020; 11:e665. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.665 for additional background on climate change misinformation.

efforts to utilize technology consciously as a means to facilitate two-way dialogue can help ensure governments can be more constructive actors in information ecosystems.

Thinking strategically about how media can facilitate effective information exchange and the implications of changing technologies on how people get and share news will be increasingly useful. To that end, the Government of Ireland set up an independent Future of Media Commission, which examined the challenges faced by public service broadcasters, commercial broadcasters, print and online media platforms. The commission also held public dialogues focused on issues related to funding sources, changes in audience behaviour and changes in technology.[17]

Governments should build structures to share research and findings on what works regarding future-proofing efforts, both within government and internationally. In this regard, the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats[18] runs joint exercises and simulations to help staff practice responses to mis- and disinformation and familiarise governmental and external stakeholders with each other's modes of working, providing valuable preparation.

4. Transparency

Governments should strive to communicate in an honest and clear manner, with institutions comprehensively disclosing information, decisions, processes and data within the limitations of relevant legislation and regulations. Transparency, including about assumptions and uncertainty, can reduce the scope for rumours and falsehoods to take root, as well as enable public scrutiny of official information and open government data.

What does transparency look like?

Transparency is a pillar of open and good government. It is critical to making the relationship between public officials and citizens more dynamic, mutually beneficial and based on trust (OECD, 2017[36]). Indeed, public communication delivers information and meets citizens where they are most likely to see and engage with it, thereby promoting proactive transparency (OECD, 2021[16]).

At the same time, uncertainty and lack of clarity, particularly regarding fast moving or complex policy issues (e.g. COVID-19 and climate change), can often be a reason for withholding information. Fears that presenting information as uncertain could undermine people's trust may encourage officials and experts to project certainty, even where situations are not clear.

Nevertheless, research indicates that honesty, even about uncertainty, can boost confidence in messages (van der Bles et al., 2020[37]). Moreover, withholding information, however tentative, on less known subjects opens the door to rumours and speculations, as documented widely during the pandemic and other crises. Communicating uncertainty is therefore necessary to prevent and curb mis and dis-information. In this respect, there is room for communicators to be more open and transparent about the degree of certainty of claims, levels of risk, and margins of error in data presented (van der Bles et al., 2020[37]). Public communicators should

[17] For more information, see: https://futureofmediacommission.ie/
[18] For more information, see: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/training-and-exercise/

also exercise caution when communicating new or uncertain developments, such as potential scientific or medical breakthroughs, and rely on respected experts to explain scientific uncertainties (OECD, 2020[24]). To help provide guidance for communicating transparently and honestly, the UK Home Office developed an "Uncertainty Toolkit for Analysts in Government", which explores what messages about uncertainty should be communicated and how to communicate those messages effectively (UK Government Actuary's Department, 2020[38]).

Enabling access to and sharing of data (see (OECD, 2021[39])) across sectors is also critical in the fight against misinformation. The identification, tracking and monitoring of mis- and disinformation sources can help reduce risks that individuals use and share unreliable and inaccurate information. Indeed, such proactive efforts can complement good data governance while taking into account rights to privacy. Identifying appropriate mechanisms by which to mandate platform transparency is a rapidly evolving and critical area of discussion.

To facilitate public-private access to and sharing of data on mis- and disinformation, governments can also consider promoting partnerships and trustworthy data access mechanisms. Co-ordinating between platforms and government could be done through, for example, an information sharing and analysis organisation (ISAO) or information sharing and analysis centre (ISAC) (DiResta, 2021[40]) and (Vijayan, 2019[41]). Data sharing partnerships may range from open data initiatives related to mis- and disinformation to more restricted or secure data access and sharing arrangements between governments, technology companies and independent researchers.

For example, in 2015, President Obama signed the "Executive Order – Promoting Private Sector Cybersecurity Information Sharing" directing the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to encourage development of ISAOs for private companies, non-profits, government departments, and state, regional and local agencies to share cyber threat information and best practices. The executive order also established limited liability protections for organizations that voluntarily share threat intelligence with each other and the government via these avenues (US Government Office of the President, 2015[42]).

As noted by the OECD, "governments should be open about how data is being used, for what purpose, and by whom (OECD, 2021[33])." Supporting proactive access to information provision and the development of open source tools and use of open government data can be used as a means to help process and understand global information sources and obtain insights from subsequent data.

Along these lines, France's Ambassador for Digital Affairs has made data and information available in an effort to promote the sharing of solutions and the co-creation of open tools to strengthen public, private and civil society actors in their efforts to respond to relevant challenges. It seeks to promote transparency in the fight against mis- and disinformation, and has developed a glossary of terms relating to information disorders, an open source tool to track changes to online services' terms of service, and a tool to identify suspicious accounts using an algorithm that calculates the probability that a given account is a bot (French Ambassador for Digital Rights, 2022[43]). Defining shared information and data

standards, including around open government data, can also help not only to reinforce the interoperability of efforts, but to build a common narrative, supported by trustworthy and coherent information and data by different public actors.

Thinking critically about how governments themselves can be transparent – in their communications and in their actions related to responding to mis- and disinformation – will be a pillar of ensuring effectiveness and of building openness and trust. As laid out by the Santa Clara Principles 2.0, a set of principles designed to guide content moderation discussions, "states must recognize and minimize their roles in obstructing transparency of companies, and must also provide transparency about their own demands for content removal or restriction."[19]

5. Timeliness

Public institutions should develop mechanisms to act in a timely manner by identifying and responding to emerging narratives, recognising the speed at which false information can travel. Communicators can work to build preparedness and rapid responses by establishing co-ordination and approval mechanisms to intervene quickly with accurate, relevant and compelling content.

What does timeliness look like?

The speed with which false and misleading narratives can spread is one of the fundamental changes to the information ecosystem and has altered public communicators' roles and responsibilities. Researchers have found that messages containing false information were 70% more likely to be shared than accurate messages, and that inaccurate and misleading content spreads many times faster compared to true content, an effect that is even more pronounced with political news (Brown, 2020[44]), (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018[45]). Responding to this reality is of particular concern regarding when and how governments share information and data with the public. The ability to share accurate content quickly, as well as to identify, track, and, where needed, counteract emerging false messages are increasingly recognized as important elements of the function.

Identifying ways to ensure people have access to useful and accurate information and data, including as open government data, as quickly as possible is a first step, which online and digital tools greatly facilitate. For example, in part in response to the spread of misinformation on social media about COVID-19, the Government of Korea developed the CoronaNow[20] website and mobile application. This tool provides citizens with instant, relevant and easily accessible information on the spread of COVID-19 – confirmed cases, testing and deaths – based on data from the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as practical information on nearby screening locations, online shops selling affordable face masks, news updates on domestic actions taken to contain the virus. Indeed, the application was developed to counteract the increase of misinformation on social media about COVID-19, which generated anxiety among the public. CoronaNow's main goal is to aggregate content disseminated

[19] See: https://santaclaraprinciples.org/
[20] http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/bdBoardList.do?brdId=16&brdGubun=161&dataGubun=&ncvContSeq=&contSeq=&board_id

across different platforms to provide accurate and unbiased official sources of information concerning the pandemic (OECD, 2021[16]).

To equip communicators in their efforts to track emerging threats and to respond rapidly and effectively, governments should put in place structures, staff and resources to ensure departments at all levels are sufficiently equipped and that counter-misinformation efforts are mainstreamed. The UK Government established the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) at the centre of government to concentrate monitoring and response efforts across the administration. The RRU is responsible for co-ordinating with and supporting all departments in tracking and devising responses to mis- and disinformation in their issue-areas. In addition, in preparation for the 2021 elections, the German Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) co-ordinated with social networks to facilitate fast reactions to potential threats, and established a unit to detect automated bots and co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour (Miguel, 2021[46]). These efforts should be undertaken carefully, however, so as not to inhibit freedom of speech, particularly regarding content takedowns.

In addition to sharing accurate information quickly and tracking potential threats, public communicators can take measures to debunk, or rebut, false claims. For example, in the run up to the 2020 election, the United States Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) maintained a Rumour Control site[21], which helped ensure official and correct information was available to the public and fact-checkers looking to debunk rumours in an effort to anticipate and help address common election-related mis- and disinformation. Similarly, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) created a Disinformation Register ahead of the 2022 federal election. This online tool lists pieces of disinformation regarding the federal election process, as well as actions the AEC took in response.[22] Specifically regarding COVID-19, the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the European Commission have also set up debunking pages with up-to-date facts against emerging COVID-19 rumours and serve as repositories of accurate information.[23]

Debunking a false claim effectively requires speed, accuracy and a careful consideration of the context. Debunking should be applied strategically and guided by the prevention of harm. Indeed, debunking can even be counterproductive if it draws attention to a rumour. Considering where in the "life-cycle" (Donovan, 2020[14]) of media manipulation the misinformation falls will be important to target responses appropriately. Establishing and regularly reviewing thresholds for responding to a particular falsehood – for instance, a given level of engagement or spread – can simplify decision-making processes and make debunking more effective (Lewandosky et al., 2020[2]).

A growing body of behavioural science and cognitive psychology literature indicates that content to debunk a falsehood should include the following elements: stating the accurate fact upfront, noting what was incorrect and explaining why, and reinforcing the fact (Chan et al., 2017[47]). The Debunking Handbook 2020 was compiled by a group of academic experts to offer guidance on when and how to debunk false content (Lewandosky et al., 2020[2]); NATO similarly published a best practice guide on fact-checking and debunking (Pamment and Kimber, 2021[48]). These lessons can be integrated into existing communication strategies, and

[21] https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol
[22] For more information, see: https://www.aec.gov.au/elections/federal_elections/2022/disinformation-register.htm
[23] For more details on these pages see: https://www.fema.gov/disasters/coronavirus/rumor-control and https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en

establishing and regularly recalibrating guidance for when and how to debunk can facilitate decision-making for communicators.

6. Prevention

Government interventions should be designed to pre-empt rumours, falsehoods, and conspiracies to stop mis- and disinformation narratives from gaining traction. A focus on prevention requires governments to identify, monitor and track problematic content and its sources taking into account privacy rules; recognise and proactively fill information and data gaps to reduce susceptibility to speculation and rumours; understand and anticipate common disinformation tactics, vulnerabilities and risks; and identify appropriate actions, such as "pre-bunking".

What does prevention look like?

Public communication is an important prevention tool when it is used proactively to shape the information landscape on sensitive subjects. Prevention is an area of key importance, as avoiding a falsehood spreading in the first place is better than correcting it once it has taken root. The need to provide proactive information and get ahead of misleading and false narratives was confirmed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, where information voids on causes and treatments for the disease were linked to the spread of false health advice (Brennen et al., 2020[49]). Gaps in available data can be exploited to manipulate or misrepresent facts. Indeed, research suggests that authorities may not have adequately anticipated demands for information, data, or the needs of society (Lovari, D'Ambrosi and Bowen, 2020[50]).

Filling voids is a useful element to prevent the spread of mis- and disinformation. Providing accurate information, particularly in anticipation of questions on issues vulnerable to misinformation, is a valuable tool for governments and public communicators. The sharing of open government data via easily accessible, clear and timely sources can more effectively prevent the spread of falsehoods and build credibility (Southwell, Thorson and Sheble, 2017[51]). Data dashboards and visualisation tools can facilitate the understanding of the data, and therefore, the work of communicators, journalists and civil society actors alike in using and re-using data, and translating it for consumption by wider publics.[24]

Making information and data available on government websites or portals only goes part of the way in filling information voids. It is also necessary to amplify the reach of these facts, by disseminating them across multiple channels and encouraging their access by media and stakeholders. Governments have worked with social media platforms and civil society organisations to highlight, surface and prioritise content from authoritative sources. They have also co-operated with fact-checkers and platforms to flag and remove disinformation in situations where the content is illegal or in breach of the platforms policies, as well as benefited from free advertising to help disseminate critical and accurate information (OECD, 2020[52]).

[24] For examples, see the OECD Report Open Data in action: Initiatives during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2021) https://www.oecd.org/gov/digital-government/open-data-in-action-initiatives-during-the-initial-stage-of-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf

Beyond providing information, monitoring open and public communication channels to spot problematic content and emerging narratives is a key feature of developing effective communication responses to mis- and disinformation. Monitoring, especially for sensitive issues, should be conducted routinely and frequently to anticipate possible responses. Preventive monitoring should be comprehensive in its focus, by covering all open platforms possible, within the limits of available regulations on personal data protection and privacy, and the respect of rights and fundamental values (for more information, see the OECD Privacy Guidelines & the OECD Good Practice Principles for Data Ethics in the Public Sector).

The use of a wide range of both free and licensed analytics tools facilitates the work of communicators. More sophisticated approaches are needed for activities such as identifying co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour.[25] Nevertheless, monitoring cannot be fully automated –it requires critical analysis, fact-checking and human oversight.

There is also scope to proactively limit the susceptibility of the public to false and misleading content. Indeed, studies have shown that if people are warned about efforts to sow doubt, they resist being swayed by mis- or disinformation. To that end, pre-bunking – or attempting to "inoculate" the public to misleading messages – requires anticipating potential misunderstandings or disinformation attacks, which means listening to and engaging with the audience to understand their concerns (Blastland et al., 2020[53]). At its core, pre-bunking is about "warning people of the possibility of being exposed to manipulative misinformation, combined with training them in advance on how to counter-argue if they did encounter it," with the idea that such activities will reduce susceptibility to misinformation (Roozenbeek and van derLinden, 2021[54]). Pre-bunking can focus on correcting a specific false claim or narrative, flagging bad sources of information and pointing out sources controlled by governments or that purvey mis- and disinformation, as well as logic-based approaches that explain tactics used to create and share misleading content. Pre-bunking activities may indeed be strengthened if implemented in tandem with filling information voids (Garcia and Shane, 2021[55]).

For example, Spain has informed the public on scientific advances in possible hoaxes and rumours that may arise based on advice from this COVID-19 Scientific Analysis Group (OECD, 2020[11]). The US CISA site uses a logic-based approach that provides information on what mis- and disinformation look like in an effort to inform the public of key issues and threats. The site provides a set of infographics that gives an overview of the mis- and disinformation threat. It also includes specific examples of how individuals can help stop foreign influence operations, such as recognizing the risk, questioning the source, investigating the issue, thinking before sharing a link, and discussing the threat with friends and family to share knowledge.[26]

Pre-bunking has also been applied via innovative and interactive games, and is now being adopted by social media platforms to warn users about false claims they might encounter on all posts relating to vulnerable topics (Ingrham, 2020[56]). Cambridge University's Social Decision-Making Lab developed the Go Viral! game as a pre-bunking tool against COVID-19 related misinformation. While governments cannot – and should not – serve as "arbiters of truth," pre-bunking is a useful example of how governments can help prevent the spread of damaging and misleading content.

[25] Specialist platforms with advanced analytical capabilities and AI-based tools are emerging in this space. For example see Graphika, https://graphika.com/how-it-works.
[26] For more information see: https://www.cisa.gov/publication/stop-disinformation-products

7. Evidence-based

Government interventions should be designed and informed by trustworthy and reliable data, testing, and audience and behavioural insights. Research, analysis and new insights can be continuously gathered and should feed into improved approaches and practices. Governments should focus on recognising emerging narratives, behaviours, and characteristics to understand the context in which they are communicating and responding.

What does Evidence-based look like?

Leveraging public communication to counteract mis- and disinformation requires an evidence base to define the problem and track its evolution, while devising and testing appropriate responses. This evidence basis includes an understanding of what problematic content is circulating, how it is being spread and by whom, as well as knowledge of how the public reacts to such messages and their information consumption habits more widely. All of this data is increasingly accessible and easier to gather and analyse thanks to online platforms and analytical tools. As stressed in the OECD report on Public Communication (2021[16]), the availability of data and insights from digital channels unlocks opportunities for an evidence-based and data-driven communication that is more precise and more impactful.

Gathering and analysing data on media and digital content, as well as on audiences, is therefore important for devising effective communication, both pre-emptive and reactive, against mis- and disinformation. Such information can be gathered through online platforms' data and analytics, as well as more traditional tools such as polling and focus groups. Frequent and up-to-date data on patterns in information consumption, perceptions, and demographic factors can also inform public communication activities.

Notably, communicators can gather audience insights to gain a deeper awareness of the public's motivations, fears, understanding of and attitudes toward relevant subjects, as well as media consumption habits (OECD, 2021[16]). OECD data shows that 41% of Centres of Government (CoGs) report using audience insights to inform communication planning only on an ad-hoc basis. Such findings suggest that there is still significant scope to adopt more sophisticated methods for insight gathering and make this a more regular feature of designing communications (OECD, 2021[16]).

Beyond its use in developing more tailored and effective communication, insight gathering can expand into a mechanism for social listening. This practice does not refer to snooping or tracking individual or group speech or actions, which would be contrary to data privacy and democratic principles guiding this work. Social listening refers to efforts to extrapolate trends and more generalised understanding of how members of the public are exposed to, react to, and share content, including mis- and disinformation and efforts should be conducted in a transparent and ethical manner (OECD, 2021[16]).

Through organisational or social listening practices, including by monitoring and analysing audience comments and attitudes online and offline in increasingly precise ways, governments can be well-positioned to respond appropriately to citizens' demand for information and

their feedback (Macnamara, 2016[57]). More continuous and committed efforts to listen to and understand public sentiment, and to look beyond the headlines of influential media, can thus contribute to greater accountability and responsiveness (Macnamara, 2017[58]). This practice has been applied, for instance, by the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in their COVID-19 vaccine campaign. Amid spiralling rumours about vaccines' efficacy and safety, the CDC produced regular COVID-19 Confidence Insights Reports using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, based on social listening exercises.[27] The reports enabled the agency to pinpoint interventions and fill information voids with accurate and clear messaging.

Behavioural insights are particularly useful to understand drivers of behaviour, how people interact with content, how misleading information can stick, as well as the effectiveness of different approaches. Cognitive and psychological factors such as information overload, confirmation biases and a tendency to believe information that is repeated (Shane, 2020[59]) all impact the design of communications.

Behavioural science research has highlighted that people can differ considerably in terms of the content they find compelling or persuasive. Accounting for human psychology can help communicators develop more effective responses to mis- and disinformation and predict how audiences will receive them (OECD, 2021[16]). Behavioural insights can help uncover the mechanisms that motivate people to believe and share mis- and disinformation. The Behavioural Insights team in the Netherlands' Government Communications Office has developed a brief with five key emotional factors (autonomy, recognition, justice, security, and connectedness) to know and leverage in public communication (Public Information and Communications Service of the Government of the Netherlands, n.d.[60]).

Behavioural experiments are an increasingly common way of gaining insights on the types of content and format that may be most effective in changing attitudes and nudging behaviours (for instance discouraging the careless sharing of content by social media users). In this way, behavioural experts can also help provide empirical foundations for communication efforts (OECD, 2021[16]). For example, in 2021, the Government of Canada, in partnership with the OECD and the French Government, conducted an experiment to investigate and influence Canadians' intentions to share true and false news on social media. It found that people may share news headlines even if they believe the headline to be false or questionable, though the experiment also found that exposing recipients to prompts that either focused respondents' attention on the accuracy of the content they saw or provided media literacy tips significantly increased participants' intentions to share true over false headlines. These results provide compelling support for how simple and scalable online interventions presented to individuals before they engage with news may improve the quality of information circulating online and indicate areas of future exploration that can enhance knowledge related to global behavioural challenges like mis- and disinformation (OECD, Forthcoming[61]).

The monitoring and evaluation of public communication activities – and specifically those dedicated to responding to mis- and disinformation – is another component of evidence-based public communications. Evaluation helps ensure that this government function is efficient, achieves impact, and contributes to policy objectives and government priorities, including

[27] For more information, see: https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/vaccinate-with-confidence.html

responding to mis- and disinformation (OECD, 2021[16]). Beyond assessing, careful evaluation can also promote a culture of transparency and accountability by facilitating more open decision-making processes, encouraging continuous learning by building evidence of what works and what does not, and promoting accountability by providing information about the outcomes of relevant initiatives (Macnamara, 2020[62]).

Generating and collecting data systematically to measure public communication initiatives, including media monitoring, review of social media impressions and other online analytics, are useful tools to measure the outputs and outcomes of communication initiatives. Considerations include how to measure the reach of messages, as well as effects on policy goals (for example, when it comes to vaccine uptake, social distancing, mask wearing, etc.). Evaluations can pull from a range of such data to assess results and enable the incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process. Specifically related to mis- and disinformation, evaluation helps ensure that communicators successfully dispel falsehoods, help identify challenges in countering disinformation, and provide lessons in overcoming them (OECD, 2021[16]).

While almost 90% of OECD Member and surveyed non-Member governments conduct at least some evaluation of public communication activities, only 18% of surveyed countries reported evaluating responses to disinformation on a regular (rather than ad hoc) basis. In addition, only two countries selected 'to help civil servants monitor the impact of government responses to disinformation' as a priority in their programmes to counter disinformation, indicating it is a line of work that may benefit from more focus (OECD, 2021[16]).

Developing more consistent and strategic approaches to evaluation could allow for greater understanding of the impact of communication initiatives, for example on vaccine confidence, as well as support the insights evaluation can provide to inform activities, reflect on lessons learnt, and build resilience for future crises. Through the regular evaluation of communication-based and other activities, as conducted, for example, by the Netherlands' National Cyber Security Centre, governments can systematically build evidence of what works and what does not in their national context (OECD, 2021[16]).

8. Inclusiveness

Interventions should be designed and diversified to reach all groups in society. Official information should strive to be relevant and easily understood, with messages tailored for diverse publics. Channels, messages and messengers should be appropriate for intended audiences, and communication initiatives conducted with respect for cultural and linguistic differences and with attention paid to reaching disengaged, underrepresented or marginalised groups. Adequate resources and dedicated efforts can support responsive communication and facilitate two-way dialogue that counteracts false and misleading content.

What does inclusiveness look like?

Acting on the evidence gathered is the next step to ensuring inclusive communication that responds to the public's needs. Drawing on the evidence collected about audiences and

social listening, targeting all parts of society with tailored and resonant messages, following a multi-channel approach, and amplifying their reach with a range of trusted messengers are all practices that enable greater inclusiveness and trustworthiness of public communication. These actions draw on practices and approaches discussed under "evidence-based", and apply them to the pursuit of counter-disinformation responses that account for the diverse contexts and features of specific audiences.

Not all groups in society are equally at risk of exposure to false content, and not all are equally vulnerable to believing it. Factors such as news avoidance, levels of trust, age, gender, ethnicity, income, education and political orientation are among the predictors for engaging with misinformation (Grinberg et al., 2019[63]; Nielsen et al., 2020[64]). More fully understanding how people engage with information can also suggest which approaches might be most useful. Different groups in society may be hard to reach with verified information via mainstream communication channels. Therefore, efforts at inclusion can serve to reduce the relative vulnerabilities of certain groups and ensure they are exposed to official and verified information.

As COVID-19 has demonstrated, inclusive public communication that can reach all segments of society with verified information and advice is essential to ensuring policy implementation, especially where widespread compliance is needed. Similarly, it can mitigate the negative effects of the rapid and wide spread of mis- and disinformation among vulnerable groups, fostering a more cohesive society and saving lives.

Achieving inclusiveness with communication begins with understanding what channels of communication are likelier to reach each different group and what content or messages will be more resonant. This multi-channel approach can help to reduce the risks of exclusion, ensuring that the message reaches all groups regardless of the tool used (e.g. digital platform vs. non-digital communication channels) (OECD, 2020[65]). This requires an evidence-based approach for more precise and impactful communication, as discussed in the previous principle (an international overview of the use of evidence in the function is included in Chapters 3 and 4 of the OECD report on Public Communication (2021[16]).

Specific efforts are necessary to ensure communication responses are tailored to reach marginalised groups or those less likely to be exposed to or trust official information. This inclusive outreach may require capacity to understand languages and cultural features. Failing to do so, and excluding parts of the population from public messages, can increase digital inequalities and social disparities and magnify certain populations' vulnerability to mis- and disinformation. Instead, public sector organizations should inform and listen to all voices, especially minority ones (Lovari, D'Ambrosi and Bowen, 2020[50]). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia developed a range of tailored content aimed at Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander communities in remote areas. This was delivered on selected channels and was designed to encourage word-of-mouth spread of health guidance among community members.[28]

Argumentation through reasoning, statistics and facts can fail to resonate with some publics. Facts alone are often not sufficient to persuade and motivate desired behaviour changes. For this reason, communication practitioners may combine reason with emotion, and facts with

storytelling. For example, approaching the subject of vaccinations in terms of the positive social norm and the protection of one's community can be a powerful addition when highlighting vaccines safety. Personal accounts and images of others being vaccinated can similarly build trust and resonate more than statistics (Lewandowsky, Stephan; et al, 2021[66]). At the same time, emotions and storytelling are key factors exploited in disinformation campaigns, which often draw on unverifiable or distorted anecdotes to sow fear and distrust, whether toward vaccines, migrants, or other issues.

Government communication channels and communicators, on their own, have limitations in terms of public reach and trust, and may not be the most effective or persuasive. The extent to which they are perceived as associated with a given political figure or party can affect how trusted they are, particularly amid increasing polarisation. Due to this trend, and to an increasingly fragmented information ecosystem, communicators have turned to approaches specific to hard-to-reach groups and underserved communities.

In the case of the COVID-19 response, reaching specific segments of the population has often involved bringing in credible and trusted messengers, whether members of a given community, scientists and doctors, or influencers and celebrities. Finland enlisted the help of around 1500 social media influencers on a voluntary basis to ensure diverse and trusted voices disseminated health guidance to disengaged or hard-to-reach groups (Heikkilä, 2020[67]). Italian government campaigns[29] featured public figures, athletes, musicians and regular citizens to reinforce health guidance and promote vaccinations, in an effort to appeal to a wide variety of publics who may be less compelled by government content or spokespeople.

Research has shown that one of the most effective ways to reduce vaccine hesitancy related to childhood immunizations is via direct conversations between parents and trusted paediatricians (Edwards and Hackell, 2016[68]). The finding that doctors, scientists and community members tend to be trusted more when it comes to vaccine information points to the essential role of pursuing an inclusive approach (Privor-Dumm and King, 2020[69]). In addition, emphasizing medical consensus about vaccine safety is likely to be an effective pro-vaccine message. To that end, clinicians and public health officials can highlight the high degree of medical consensus on vaccine safety to help ensure the public has confidence in the information shared (van der Linden, Clarke and Maibach, 2015[70]).

Along these lines, doctors and community and religious leaders can also play a crucial role. During the COVID-19 pandemic, scientists and doctors became leading spokespeople across several governments in daily and weekly public briefings. In Belgium, scientists delivered information and explanation of government health measures, and Slovenia enlisted the assistance of doctors and medical students to answer questions about COVID-19 on a dedicated hotline. The service answered more than 135 000 calls concerning the rules on crossing the border, movement and gatherings, testing, and other health concerns. In the UK, community champions (also known as health champions) are local volunteers who promote health and wellbeing and help bridge the gap between government services and communities.[30] Findings suggest that community champions are likely to be effective where trust in formal services is low; given that they are generally trusted members of the

[29] For more information, see: https://www.governo.it/node/17220
[30] For more information, see: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources

community, they are more likely to reach isolated or marginalised individuals. Such trusted access and local engagement is particularly important, as the community champions can share tailored information to different communities, dispel myths and counteract mis- and disinformation (Kamal and Bear, 2022[71]) (United Kingdom Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, 2020[72])

By partnering with non-governmental messengers in a transparent and open way, and empowering them to communicate shared messages, governments can amplify their reach even among disengaged publics. Governments can also support trusted messengers by providing information and guidance. For example, the US "Community Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation"[31] provides "trusted messengers" with practical, step-by-step recommendations and actions. Research suggests that "ingroup" habits have a big influence on group members, so positive messaging from community leaders around policy priorities, such as vaccinations, can be helpful (Lewandowsky, Stephan; et al, 2021[66]). Flexible public communication efforts could empower more trusted local experts and organizations that can engage with communities and amplify official messages.

The use of alternative channels, across both digital and non-mainstream media, can also further inclusion. Beyond leveraging digital channels such as social media, and especially its targeted advertising functions, communicators can think about planting their messages in non-traditional and even "hostile" outlets. In Italy, the *#threesimplerules*[32] campaign to curb the COVID-19 pandemic involved messages and design targeted to young audiences through social media ads.

Finally, the wave of digitalisation that is transforming the information ecosystem has had repercussions for how governments can put in place inclusive and responsive communication. Digital tools can allow public communicators to provide informal and continuous participation in democratic discourse. Digital channels, primarily social media, can facilitate direct interaction between institutions and large numbers of citizens. In doing so, they open up possibilities for engagement on an "always on" basis, rather than being limited to designated initiatives for specific needs at a given time (Macnamara, 2017[58]).

Nevertheless, the potential of social media to promote citizen engagement and participation may still be under-explored. For instance, OECD data shows that only 15% of Centres of Government (COGs) surveyed have developed guidelines for engaging with citizens via social media (OECD, 2021[16]). Strategic use of digital tools can encourage more responsive and inclusive communication, and help governments act upon the insights and evidence gained to counter act potentially damaging content.

9. Whole-of-society collaboration

Government efforts to counteract information disorders should be integrated within a whole-of-society approach, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the media, private sector, civil society, academia and individuals. Governments should promote the public's

[31] https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/health-misinformation-toolkit-english.pdf
[32] For more information, see: https://www.governo.it/node/15529

resilience to mis- and disinformation, as well as an environment conducive to accessing, sharing and facilitating constructive engagement around information and data. Where relevant, public institutions should co-ordinate and engage with non-governmental partners with the aim of building trust across society and in all parts of the country.

What does Whole-of-society collaboration look like?

The threats posed by mis- and disinformation cannot be solved by governments acting alone. Every actor in society, whether individuals or organisations, has a role to play in reducing the spread of false and misleading content and contributing to a more resilient information ecosystem. The interlinked and global nature of the responses to mis- and disinformation highlight the need to include expertise from across multiple sectors in discussing potential solutions. The lack of clarity on the multiple facets of the problem and potential solutions, combined with the complex, global and rapidly evolving nature of information disorders, calls for a more conscious effort to facilitate collaboration between various actors. As noted by the European Commission, "the best responses are likely to be those driven by multi-stakeholder collaborations (European Commission, 2018[73])." Reinforcing information spaces will depend on empowering both government and non-governmental voices and facilitating the free flow of information.

Non-government initiatives to tackle information disorders are plentiful. Social media companies continuously update their content policies, upgrade their moderation capabilities, apply content labels or introduce limits to sharing of content via messaging apps. Media organisations have taken steps to boost their fact-checking capacity; academia and think tanks are leading innovative research across behavioural, technology-based and policy solutions. Likewise, community and non-profit organisations are implementing a wide range of initiatives to strengthen public resilience to disinformation and developing tools for stakeholders to contribute to curbing its spread.

- **Co-ordination and support of multi-sector engagement**

Collaboration and communication can encourage greater information-sharing between governments, the private sector, academia, and civil society to promote increased understanding of the nature and extent of the problem and enable assessment of the effectiveness of responses. Such co-ordination and engagement can also strengthen the ability to monitor emerging risks and develop consensus-based approaches to addressing them. Governments can prioritise efforts to encourage and support these stakeholders' efforts and contributions to a common cause. Governments are uniquely positioned to steer, co-ordinate, fund and otherwise support the work of other actors as a means of creating efficiencies and building on their initiatives.

For example, the 2018 EU Code of Practice on Disinformation[33] is the first framework setting out commitments by platforms and industry to fight disinformation. Signatories commit to a range of self-regulatory actions, including around transparency in political advertising, closing fake accounts and demonetizing purveyors of disinformation. The EU is continuing

[33] For additional information, see: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation

to add signatories, as well as updating and strengthening the Code of Practice to evolve toward a co-regulatory instrument as outlined in the proposed Digital Services Act (European Commission, 2021[74]).

Co-ordinated and comprehensive approaches will in turn support efforts to make society more resilient to disinformation. Initiatives that bring together a wide range of actors are important to raise awareness, share knowledge and information and collect data. Indeed, as noted by the OECD, multi-stakeholder approaches can help identify risks, define boundaries and channel government actions involving the access to, sharing and use of data (OECD, 2021[33]). Such efforts can also promote agile and effective collaboration across policy and communications departments.

This is the substance of a proposal by the Belgian Expert Group on False Information and Disinformation, which recommended the establishment of a permanent forum for stakeholder consultation and pooling of expertise across government, academia, media, civil society and technology companies. The proposal envisions several aims for such a forum, from exchange and knowledge sharing between experts, to the centralisation of information and initiatives to foster co-ordination and cooperation between different actors. The creation of the platform would also send the signal that the responsibility for keeping societal debate balanced and factual lies with actors from across society (OECD, 2021[16]).

The European Commission has funded the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) to support a multi-stakeholder approach to combatting disinformation. The Observatory serves as a hub for fact-checkers, academics and other stakeholders to collaborate and link with media organisations, media literacy experts, and provide support to policy makers. Activities focus on joint activities and training for fact-checking organisations in Europe; mapping, supporting and co-ordinating research activities on disinformation throughout Europe; building a public portal of relevant materials to counteract disinformation and promote media literacy; and design a framework to ensure secure and privacy-protected access to platforms' data for academic researchers. EDMO is managed by a consortium of academic, civil society and private partners, and is independent from public authorities, including the European Commission (European Commission, 2022[76]).

To develop effective policies to counteract the threat posed by mis- and disinformation, governments must also continue to develop their understanding of the primary challenges and opportunities. Research into regulatory responses and their effectiveness will be core to devising and improving solutions, while refining understanding of this multi-faceted problem. While the most direct avenue to support this is through increased direct funding for research, governments should also work to ensure academia, regulatory bodies and other relevant agencies are engaged in conversations about research needs and that research findings are incorporated into policy development.

• Media and information literacy

Ultimately, maintaining freedom of expression and an open internet means being able to coexist with some degree of mis- and disinformation. To mitigate the inevitable risks this poses, governments ought to build resilience at the level of individual citizens, who need to be able to differentiate between accurate and false or misleading information. To this end, promoting media and information literacy (MIL) is a primary policy intervention to shield society from the relevant threats and take advantage of the potential benefits to online and social platforms.

Media literacy refers to citizens' abilities to analyse, evaluate and create content critically and responsibly. Media and information literacy efforts seek to empower the public to become critical consumers of news to help ensure the media can fulfil its role to improve democratic governance (Mcloughlin and Scott, 2010[77]). Digital literacy, on the other hand, refers to individuals' abilities to engage with content in digital formats, as well as a basic understanding of common digital technologies.

MIL is commonplace in many countries' education curriculum from an early age. Where it is conducted in a comprehensive way, it can be a powerful way to create more critical-minded citizens equipped with the skills to consume information and participate constructively in public life. The National Media Education Policy of Finland[34] outlines the national effort to provide high quality, systematic and comprehensive media education, using a variety of actors. Finland's efforts are structured as part of the country's broader strategic effort to strengthen democracy and education, and are built on media literacy activities that began in the 1950s.

Similarly, since 2010 and in response to disinformation threats, public schools in Estonia have taught children media literacy to students of all ages, and students in high school take a mandatory 35-hour «media and influence» course (Yee, 2022[78]). In 2018, the US state of California passed a bill requiring the State's Department of Education website to list resources and instructional materials on media literacy, including professional development programs for teachers.[35]

Building resilience of school-age children and young people via MIL initiatives in the education system can bring dividends over the long-term. However, counteracting current vulnerabilities in older populations that have adapted to digital tools in their adult life will require different approaches. In the UK, the communications regulator, Ofcom, developed the Making Sense of Media programme of work, which is designed to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of UK adults and children alike.[36]

Reinforcing civic skills and providing financial assistance for research and citizen-focused activities can complement MIL activities. For example, Canada's Digital Citizen Initiative[37] provided financial support focused on strengthening citizens' critical thinking about online

[34] For additional information, see: https://medialukutaitosuomessa.fi/mediaeducationpolicy.pdf
[35] For additional information, see: https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB830
[36] For additional information, see: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research
[37] For additional information, see: https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-disinformation.html

disinformation, their ability to be more resilient, as well as their ability to get involved in democratic processes. Funding supported civic, news, and digital media literacy, reaching more than 12 million Canadians including youth, seniors, minority communities, in all official languages, etc.

- **Support for independent, high-quality and diverse media**

Furthermore, supporting the operation of high quality, public service, local, community and independent media can help support a media and information ecosystem conducive to democratic engagement. Despite ever increasing opportunities for the public to engage with news and information online, many traditional media markets are shrinking rapidly. The challenges faced by many media outlets is a particular concern given the role media pluralism plays in supporting well-functioning democracies, good governance and reduced corruption.

Counteracting the threats to trusted local, independent and public service news sources may include identifying independent, non-partisan and effective measures to support local media. Governments could also support initiatives, both domestically and via international development support, that provide training to citizen journalists and to traditional outlets on how to manage public engagement to foster participation in news production through citizen and community journalism.

Clear and independent oversight can maintain impartiality and help ensure any government support provided to news providers is done in a means that promotes democratic engagement and the free exchange of information. Canada's 2019 budget introduced a five-year tax package of CAD 595 million to counteract the increasing loss of jobs in news media. These measures would allow media outlets that are recognised as a "Qualified Canadian Journalism Organizations" to receive a 25% refundable tax credit on newsroom salaries and would offer a personal income tax credit to Canadians who buy digital subscriptions (Pinkerton, 2019[79]).

- **Facilitating transparency and stakeholder participation**

Finally, policies and interventions to address the challenge of information disorders on society can be strengthened by drawing citizens into decision making processes. Participatory and community-led strategies can be used to help ensure that diverse local voices are taken into account by policymakers, that local concerns are understood and citizens co-design policies and programmes. Deliberative democracy initiatives, such as citizen juries and assemblies, have the potential to encourage calmer, more evidence-based discussion (Suiter, 2018[80]), as well as build a pool of informed citizens who can effectively advocate and represent informed positions on divisive topics.

Related to vaccine uptake, the aim is to build confidence and to overcome cultural, socioeconomic, and political barriers that lead to mistrust (Burgess et al., 2021[81]). This was the case in Finland, which in March 2020 organized National Dialogues with civil society partners to engage with and listen to citizens on how they were handling the crisis and what their needs were. The initiative involved a wide range individuals whose perspective were

used to enhance government's resilience to the COVID-19 pandemic (Government of Finland Ministry of Finance, 2020[82]). In the context of addressing pressing questions on information, speech and democracy, the Government of Canada funded Citizens' Assemblies on Democratic Expression (2020-2023),[38] to bring together more than 120 randomly selected Canadians to examine the impact of digital technologies on Canadian society. The 2020 assembly developed 33 recommendations focused on efforts to reduce misinformation and empower users; to promote accountability and awareness of citizens; and to support independent journalism.

Exercises such as these can help provide constructive responses to fundamental questions about democratic values at a time when these are threatened by mis- and disinformation. Continuing to identify examples of how governments are pursuing a whole-of-society approach and identifying what works – and what does not – will be a pillar of identifying how a multi-sector approach can build resilience to mis- and disinformation.

[38] For additional information, see: https://www.commissioncanada.ca/

MOVING FORWARD

The OECD will continue to engage in multi-disciplinary discussions and expand the mapping of policy responses and good practices to help ensure the public communication function can be best used to counteract the threats posed by mis- and disinformation and reinforce democracy more widely. The OECD will collect evidence of effectiveness and impact of relevant communication practices, institutional frameworks, and efforts to engage with civil society, media, academia and the private sector to support more resilient information ecosystems. It will also continue to collect practices that inform the application of the principles, engage with Members and partners on country specific analysis, and explore the impact of the spread of mis- and disinformation on specific policy areas, such as climate change.

In addition to actions that address immediate threats or that strengthen the resilience of societies to mis- and disinformation via the public communication function, efforts can be made to also explore complementary regulatory and policy measures. One area of focus may include, for example, efforts to increase online platforms' transparency, given that many of the Good Practice Principles rely on online platforms to voluntarily provide data and information. Governments may rely on platforms to provide data used to conduct audience and behavioural insights, or to promote authoritative information to debunk or 'pre-bunk' misinformation narratives. Developing insights into how mis- and disinformation is shared, its impact on the relationship between citizens and governments, as well as how levels of trust in the key institutions of public life are changing and the effectiveness of various responses will all serve to inform policy.[39] Enabling the collection of this data will likely require regulatory responses mandating increased transparency and data sharing. While not a focus of these Good Practice Principles, understanding how regulatory responses can reinforce transparency and positively affect the role of public communicators will remain a focus of this area of work moving forward.

Online communication spaces are constantly changing. The OECD anticipates that these Good Practice Principles will likewise continue to evolve so as to remain relevant and comprehensive. Building an international knowledge base is particularly useful to respond to the rapidly changing and complex trade-offs concerning the response to mis- and disinformation. The OECD will therefore continue to work with Members to ensure that these Good Practice Principles inform the analysis and understanding around effective policy response to relevant challenges more broadly.

[39] Another effort to increase understanding of and transparency around online content-sharing platforms can be found in the collection of and access to standardised transparency reports from these services about their policies and actions on terrorist and violent extremist content (TVEC) online; for more information, see the OECD Voluntary Transparency Reporting Framework (https://www.oecd.org/digital/vtrf/)

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