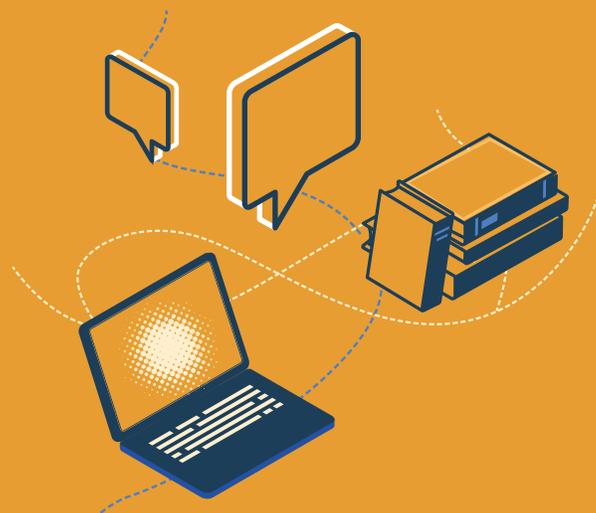


Toward a Globally Networked Counter-Disinformation Response

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The entire set of Global Insights essays can be found [here](#).

A loosely connected, constantly learning global network of counter-disinformation responders—with the benefit of greater access to platforms and additional resources from funders—can serve as a bulwark against evolving threats to the integrity of the information space. Although these threats travel across borders rapidly, civil society organizations countering them can respond by learning from one another's innovations, successes, and failures. New innovations in the field include media development in closed messaging platforms like WhatsApp, addressing offline sources of disinformation, empowering investigative journalism to hunt down disinformation networks, and better equipping under-threat organizations in illiberal and authoritarian settings.

This vision recognizes the essential role that networked communities of civic activists and journalists can play when equipped with research and response tools, opportunities to learn from each other about shared challenges driven by a common digital revolution, and genuine access to social media platforms and regulatory bodies.

The threat to democracy from disinformation was spotlighted on the world stage this year when the Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to Filipino journalist Maria Ressa for her pioneering work countering digital disinformation and supporting independent media in an increasingly hostile environment in the Philippines. In her words: “the collapse of democracy starts with the breakdown of facts. And if you don’t have facts, you don’t have the shared reality to find the right path. This is a global problem.”¹

The explosion of information accessibility, polarization in traditional media, and the rise of social media have all contributed to democracy’s global decline over the past fifteen years. As our understanding of the challenges deepen, a new vision is emerging to combat it. Driven by novel research and learning across borders, this vision recognizes the essential role that networked communities of civic activists and journalists can play when equipped with research and response tools, opportunities to learn from each other about shared challenges driven by a common digital revolution, and genuine access to social media platforms and regulatory bodies.

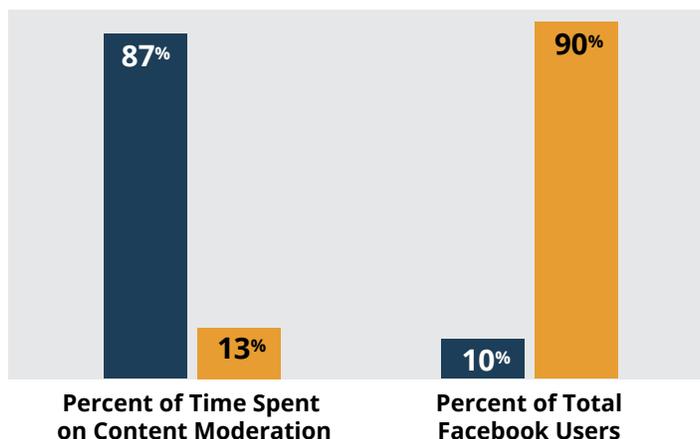
Learning from the Transformation of Global Disinformation

Some claim that counter-disinformation is overestimating the damage caused by the manipulation of the information space.² However, globally, civic activists and counter-disinformation organizations still remain far behind the pace of the threat.

In places like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, local information environments are polluted by foreign or domestic sources—or both—that can spark offline violence. Over the past fifteen years, global disinformation has moved from an ad- and bot-focused model to a more comprehensive network, backed by state-affiliated, authoritarian media enterprises from the likes of Russia, China, Gulf authoritarians, and local illiberal leaders. Overt propaganda from state-affiliated entities is often backed by covert accounts that seek to amplify these half-truths and “malinformation.” Disinformation-for-hire practices by “public relations” firms, for instance, have provided an easy-to-access tool for Gulf authoritarians and illiberal leaders to punish opponents and influence foreign information environments to their advantage.

Mismatch between Facebook’s Content Moderation Resources and User Base

■ United States ■ Rest of World



Source: The International Dimensions of the Facebook Papers⁴

of interventions in 80-plus countries; another was able to survey 53 organizations, admitting to a much larger field; and the International Forum for Democratic Studies’ own research and survey with Oxford Internet Institute researchers was able to identify 175 counter-disinformation organizations.⁵ There are difficulties “mapping the field” because there is so much going on, but these are actually good problems to have.

Civil society has the unique capability to move fast, adapt easily, and share information generously. An entrepreneurial, risk-taking model of civic activism and independent journalism has emerged. It is driven by new innovations in the field, but often rest on poorly resourced organizations. They need to be better supported by funders unafraid to invest in responses whose impact might be initially difficult to measure or might fail to meet their mark.

Innovations in Civil Society Responses to Disinformation

Innovation to meet the growing challenges of digital disinformation is occurring nearly everywhere in the world. Czech organizations, for instance, are intentionally decentralizing their disinformation-hunting work down toward the level of everyday citizens in their societies.⁶ Satirists and humorists are exposing disinformation by laughing their way through it with their audiences.⁷ Teams of forensic data analysts are creating hubs to share techniques across national and regional boundaries.⁸ New technologies like artificial intelligence are no longer solely a tool of those who peddle disinformation; counter-disinformation organizations are using them to effectively combat malign activity, too.⁹

In this Global Insights series, we have identified new and innovative methods and perspectives developed by civil society organizations focused on countering disinformation. Building on the International Forum for Democratic Studies’ research on COVID-19’s impact on the field, the Forum has convened interdisciplinary contributors that include counter-disinformation researchers, policy advocates, fact checkers, independent media practitioners, and government experts to advance understanding of innovations in this space.¹⁰ These workshops inspired us to publish these four essays on addressing disinformation beyond platform-centered solutions, combating it in the non-digital sphere, and focusing on the regional challenges in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

These acute problems occur in many places around the world when, for example, the world’s largest content moderation operation (Facebook) spends only 13% of its staff hours moderating mis-information in areas outside the United States that make up 90% of its user base.³

While the ability of disinformation to travel transnationally has been widely documented, it is also true that the work and learning of counter-disinformation by civic activists and independent journalists has started to travel transnationally. As threats in the information space have proliferated, so has the number of organizations whose efforts seek to mitigate their damage. One organization has counted 117 different types of interventions operating just in Europe and Eurasia; a second research project catalogued more than 280 different types

Disinformation networks—whether foreign-sourced or domestic in nature—are moving into new, understudied apps and digital platforms, beyond Facebook, Twitter, or “fake news” websites created out of thin air. As the editor of Africa’s WhatsApp-based paper *The Continent*, **Sipho Kings** analyzes the operations of his counter-disinformation and independent online newspaper on closed platforms. As consumer choices for information consumption and communication multiply into new encrypted messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, Signal, or WeChat, innovative news outlets are experimenting with how to connect better with audiences. Approaches include delivering information from sources that are more trustworthy, more local, and more curated than mass media or the major social media platforms.

Utilizing trusted messengers and better understanding the local information environment are crucial elements in any response to disinformation. Kings notes the challenges of sustainable funding in ad-free environments like WhatsApp but finds these encrypted messaging systems also provide avenues for countering disinformation in closed societies, where everyday communication among some citizens has gone underground and away from government censors.

The creative use of local humor, trusted messengers, and fact-checking in underserved local languages, as well as pushing out content in popular local platforms, is vital to countering disinformation. **Laura Livingston**, who researches the effects of communication on violence at Over Zero, provides a clarion call to focus on the *offline* challenges associated with *online* disinformation. Livingston contends that off-platform sources of disinformation, including those in tightly knit local community circles, can be just as dangerous as a lie-riddled Facebook group. In this context, exposing the underlying psychological aspects of why disinformation flourishes, as such, could be as critical as exposing the latest bot network. Detailing the makeup of target audiences can offer deeper insights and therefore might go further than simply mapping how falsehoods travel online among them.

In the last couple of years, the counter-disinformation field has rapidly begun to mature. A growing number of organizations utilize advanced methods, such as machine learning, big data, and data visualization to tackle the problem. At the same time, **Casey Michel** argues that affecting change in the public consciousness is more likely to emerge from journalism that helps audiences understand the impact of the threat upon everyday society or the network’s operative infrastructure. Investigative journalists bring a special skill set that can be even more powerful than the data-centric, platform-mining approaches to modern disinformation research. They can track down the trolls behind electoral influence operations, follow disinformation-for-hire money from Russia to LLCs in advanced democracies, and expose the violation of disclosure requirements of coopted social media influencers.

The Facebook Papers, perhaps the biggest story in 2021 about the counter-disinformation challenge, was the result of in-depth investigative journalism, boosted by the power of 17 different global news organizations working across borders and newsrooms to produce a comprehensive and remarkable news coverage that delved deep into various whistleblower claims about the platform’s malfeasance. Major investments in networked investigative journalism could help answer one of the more difficult—but absolutely critical—questions that many counter-disinformation organizations struggle to address: who is actually behind these networks and how do they operate?

Despite recent, positive developments in counter-disinformation efforts, illiberal and authoritarian regimes threaten to undermine this progress. Powerful actors threaten the physical safety of civic activists and independent journalists routinely—Maria Ressa’s experience further illustrates this point. **Jonathan Ong**, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, reviews the challenges local, counter-disinformation

organizations face while operating under repressive regimes. He also examines the ambivalent, and at times discordant, relationships between foreign supporters and local organizations that both work toward countering disinformation in these societies. Funders, researchers, and other civil society organizations from outside of these closed settings must adapt their approach to collaboration and support, in full recognition of the repression these organizations face.

Connecting Civil Society Responses Across Boundaries

A trailblazer in democracy activist circles, Igor Blažević of the Prague Civil Society Centre urged civil society activists to devote one-quarter of their time to look beyond the immediate crises and democratic backsliding within their own countries and, instead, focus outwardly to learn from other organizations that are innovating, failing, and succeeding to support democracy elsewhere.¹¹ That “one-quarter” is the spirit of this essay collection.

The contributors to this series agree that local responses are essential to building trust and understanding the threat disinformation poses to democracy and information integrity. Snopes isn't best equipped to address fact-checking needs in Slovakia. East Africa's Pesa Check likewise isn't suited to undertake such work in Germany—but they *can* learn from each other's successes and failures. They *can* benefit from data collection tools that funders, research organizations, and governments have developed. They *can* do a better job when they have strong, steady access to and partnership with companies such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Reddit, or a seat at the table when organizations at the UN, OSCE, or national bodies meet to regulate the information space. An Eastern European organization's successes could help fuel innovation in West Africa. A tactic that upended Russian trolls in Latin America might be effective in India.

This vision of a global network of counter-disinformation organizations that adapt together, act quickly, and enjoy sustained success is ambitious. These essays represent early steps that can get this nascent but growing community closer toward fulfilling that vision. Of course, more work remains. Many organizations need standards to ensure high-quality work and training to get them there.¹² Funders need greater coordination to avoid duplication in mission sets or overwhelming recipient organizations.¹³ Venues for cross-disciplinary and multi-regional learning need to be consistent. Civil society groups, many of which are small and modestly resourced, need to be incentivized and supported to learn and adapt in a meaningful way. These organizations need data, staffing, and access.

As local responses around the world evolve to keep pace with unfolding threats to the integrity of the information space, civil society must take up the charge to innovate in order to meet the challenge. In fact, in any number of ways, they already are doing it.

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Endnotes

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