BBC MEDIA ACTION
INSIGHT

Key insights from BBC Media Action's research into information disorder around the world

BBC Media Action has conducted research into information disorder across the regions we work – from Nigeria to Afghanistan to Indonesia – aiming to understand how audiences perceive mis- and disinformation and how it affects their lives.

Context

Advances in technology, increasing access to both traditional and social media, and changes in how people interact with information (e.g. declining levels of trust in news and people wishing to create a 'social identity' through information sharing) are propelling the spread of false information at a speed and scale not seen before. This has resulted in information ecosystems that are dangerously affected by information disorder - people making critical decisions about their lives and livelihoods and influences how they participate in society and interact with each other.

Information disorder: A collective term to capture the range of disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, rumours, myths, conspiracy theories, hyperpartisan content, propaganda and manipulated media that contribute to the spread of false or misleading information.[1]

Disinformation: Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country. This may be to stir up anger or violence or cause confusion to benefit a particular actor personally, politically or financially. Disinformation can become misinformation when those spreading it believe that it is true.[2]

Misinformation: Information that is false, but not spread with the intention of causing harm.[3]

The projects

This research summary pulls together insights drawn from projects in 15 different countries. This includes research in North Africa (Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia), in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Zambia) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Ukraine and Afghanistan), and in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region (Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, and Solomon Islands).

This research undertaken in each country varies in scope, purpose and methodology. This ranges from projects in Indonesia and Nepal, where the aim is to understand the information ecosystem to inform future programming using a mix of digital, quantitative and qualitative research methods to projects in North Africa, where content was produced to inoculate audiences against tactics used to spread disinformation (e.g. scapegoating or emotional manipulation).

Taken together, this research provides valuable insights into how people are engaging with information disorder in often neglected markets and regions, integral to informing effective programming where BBC Media Action works.

Research methodology

We have developed our research approach to understand information disorder, learning as we go. Methods that we have used include:-

[1] First Draft

[2] UNESCO
[3] UNESCO

- Digital research techniques such as social listening to better understand the online information environment that audiences interact with. This has included working with a technology partner to leverage AI (specifically, natural language processing) to analyse the large datasets from social media and draw out insights.
- Nationally representative surveys to provide a view of overall trends in the country and perceived prevalence of fake or misleading information and to enable comparisons across different audience groups (like gender, education as well as by behaviour e.g. heavy, moderate and light social media users).
- Focus group discussions which allows a more detailed view of issues faced by specific communities and an opportunity to see how people engage with different types of information.
- In-depth interviews and key informant interviews to give a more granular understanding of barriers and enablers of specific groups of people who are particularly vulnerable to information disorder.

Recently, in Afghanistan, Indonesia, and Nepal, we have moved past simply asking audiences about their perceptions of information disorder to testing specific disinformation narratives in surveys, allowing us to better understand how effectively audiences are able to assess the veracity of information they encounter. The key findings below aggregate some of the insights drawn from this diverse set of projects, some of which are ongoing.

Key findings

o **Perceptions of prevalence:** In all of the countries where BBC Media Action conducted research, audiences perceive mis- and disinformation to be prevalent and report seeing it often. In North Africa, 39% of Tunisians and 35% of Libyans reported encountering mis- or disinformation on a daily basis. Across the globe in the Pacific, 49% of Solomon Islanders report seeing it at least weekly. Similarly in Afghanistan, about 50% of survey respondents reported having encountered mis- or disinformation. In Somalia and Sierra Leone, focus group participants indicated that it was 'very common' and that they 'had encountered' it, respectively.

o **Impact:** Audiences also reported several negative impacts on their lives caused by information disorder. For example, focus group participants in Ethiopia and Zambia pointed to mis- and disinformation contributing to increased conflict, religious hostilities, political instability, breakdown of trust, and hindering community development. Participants in Ethiopia and Somalia also highlighted the nefarious effects information disorder can have at the individual level, including stress, depression, anger, and affecting individuals' overall well-being and productivity, with some participants noting they had fallen victim to scams shared with disinformation.

o **Mitigations:** Audiences in the different countries used two main techniques to mitigate the risk of information disorder: checking the sources of information and cross-checking with other sources. The former was reported by 39% of survey respondents in Libya, 78% in Cambodia; and focus group participants highlighted this method in Zambia, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Likewise, 22% of survey respondents in Libya, as well as focus group participants in Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Somalia, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Solomon Islands stated that they cross-checked with other sources in order to verify the information they received. On the other hand, there are many people who do not take any action in response to mis- or disinformation. This was the case for 64% of survey respondents in Tunisia and 25% in Libya, as well as among focus group participants in Ethiopia and Afghanistan

o **Sharing:** In some cases there was a certain level of ambivalence towards the sharing of mis- or disinformation. For example, 34%

of survey respondents in Tunisia (particularly men and respondents in rural settings) said that, "it is more important that information is shared quickly than that it is checked for accuracy." Focus group discussions in Libya and Algeria reflected a similar trend. In Cambodia, 34% of survey respondents reported sharing posts or links to content without reading it first – a trend that was particularly salient among young respondents. And in Sierra Leone, some focus group participants indicated that they were comfortable knowingly sharing disinformation as long as they perceived that it supported a cause they cared about. This reflects focus group discussions in Tunisia where participants said they would trust information if it aligns with their existing beliefs.

o **Media literacy:** The research also highlights that audiences do not necessarily feel equipped to effectively respond to information disorder. Participants in Ethiopia and Zambia, for example, highlighted a lack of digital media literacy and education among the general population.

"People do not question about the credibility of the information or message they receive from others. We do not have that kind of skill, in general. Culturally we believe what we read from social media as well as mass media."
KII, Communication expert, Ethiopia

This is coupled with overall lower levels of education in some countries, as highlighted by participants in Ethiopia, Zambia, Somalia, and Solomon Islands. Some people in these environments also indicated that they felt they lacked a sufficient variety of sources that would allow them to cross-check information effectively, as was the case in Zambia and Somalia.

From my perspective, people do not have the ability to distinguish what is true in the news. The community itself is biased. People follow one media source and became biased. The social effect is huge. This influences their thoughts, and they live in this fake news environment. This is very dangerous."
FGD participant, Myanmar

Key implications

- These findings show that audiences across countries where BBC Media Action works are aware of information disorder and its risks. However, they do not always feel equipped to effectively mitigate those risks. BBC Media Action's work can help fill that gap by providing media literacy programming and supporting public interest media.

- There remain gaps in understanding how widespread belief in mis- and disinformation is. Our ongoing projects that ask audiences about specific narratives will help fill this gap, and this should be replicated in more contexts.

- Our research has identified a variety of vulnerable groups across the countries where we work. These include individuals with lower educational attainment, who also lack key digital literacy education and skills, as well as hyper-engaged users, who are motivated to share information quickly before checking their facts. All of the vulnerable groups we identified should be priority groups for future interventions in their respective countries.

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