DW Akademie

Detoxing information ecosystems

A proactive strategy for tackling disinformation

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This paper presents a novel approach to coming to terms with the challenges associated with disinformation. It diagnoses a tendency towards stand-alone solutionism and a reactive mindset in most current media development strategies in this realm. It proposes a more holistic, proactive way of tackling the problem. We argue that anti-disinformation measures are most effective when they combine: 1. Short- and medium-term methods for detecting and preventing disinformation, 2. Innovative support for public interest media, and 3. Media education as well as advocacy for public trust in independent, reliable journalism.

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Defining disinformation as a "wicked" problem

Disinformation is for the information ecosystem what pollution is for nature. It upsets the existing equilibrium, harms organisms and prevents the overall system from functioning to the benefit of everyone. Thus, it may seem that any activity that combats disinformation has merit, because it helps to prevent it or even eradicate it.

This stance, however, sells short the complexity of development cooperation interventions. Every intervention has consequences. Imagine treating a contaminated stream by pouring dishwashing liquid into it. Some may say this "cleans" the stream, cancelling out the pollution. But of course, the consequences for flora and fauna could be as dire as the pollution itself. In the same way, the unintended effects of possible solutions to a vague, complex problem such as disinformation need to be carefully considered.

A first step would be to regard disinformation as a "wicked" problem (compare Rittel/Webber 1973). Wicked problems are complex challenges influenced by a myriad of different fac-

tors. They do not have clear definitions or boundaries and are often interconnected with other complex problems. In the case of disinformation, these connections include geopolitical conflicts, waning trust in democratic institutions, increasing polarization of societies, the dominance of big tech companies or the debate around climate change.

These kinds of problems are also particularly prone to changing their shape according to the perspective of the observer. In the case of disinformation, state actors may focus on foreign influence operations, while journalists would include the activities of those state actors themselves in their approach to disinformation.

Wicked problems cannot be tackled with simple, linear solutions which stay at the surface level, only addressing the most obvious symptoms of the problem rather than its root causes. There are no one-size-fits-all methods and the problem is persistent. It cannot be eradicated permanently.

A note on terminology

We use the term disinformation because we focus specifically on "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Other terms such as "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference" (FIMI) (EU Stratcom 2021) or "Information Disorder" (Wardle and Derakhskan 2017) are either too specific or too broad for our purposes. However, it is important to remember that even the term disinformation has certain drawbacks:

1. Many types of present-day communication such as memes and gifs are not aimed at informing. They may be part of general narratives made up of hate speech, rumors, conspiracy theories and disinformation. Judging their veracity is difficult if simple statements of fact are lacking.

2. The term disinformation can be weaponized in a similar fashion as Donald Trump used the term "fake news." It can be utilized by authoritarian powers to discredit the very upholders of truth, whether they be independent media, civil society actors or representatives of the opposition.

3. In an influential article by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) the authors differentiate between mis-, dis-

and malinformation. According to this definition, disinformation excludes false information that is produced without intent to mislead as well as true information framed in a misleading manner.

4. Labelling something as disinformation is also a question of entitlement, especially in political discourse. In many countries, media are affiliated with political factions. The neutral ground from which to determine what is true and what is not is very narrow in these contexts.

5. Sustained talk of disinformation can invite authoritarian regimes or social media platforms to overregulate the free flow of information and opinions. As UNESCO (2020) stresses, "people have a right to express ill-founded opinions and make non-factual and unsubstantiated statements."

When using the term disinformation, it is important to take these caveats into account and to acknowledge the fuzziness of the concept. As Claire Wardle told DW Akademie in an interview, "I think we have to be clearer around the fact that there's really no term that can help encompass all of this."

And yet, diverse actors are involved in many uncoordinated short-term activities aimed at stopping it. If historians looked back at this period, ponders Claire Wardle, Director of the Information Futures Lab, in an interview with DW Akademie, they would diagnose a "sudden panic about the impact of disinformation", followed by a great many uncoordinated initiatives "with not quite enough money" to have the impact they were designed to have.

To be effective, strategies need to take the consequences of individual actions into account. For example, fostering a critical attitude amongst media consumers can reduce general trust in media (Maksl et al 2015) and invite overbearance of regulatory interventions, to the detriment of freedom of expression (Jungherr / Rauschfleisch 2022). Or fact-checking initiatives might contribute to the spread of conspiracy theories by making people aware of them (Nyhan/Reifler 2010) and contribute to the lack of trust that established media outlets are experiencing (Gwen Lister / Toivo Njabela 2021). These unintended negative consequences need to be factored in when developing a strategy against disinformation. And evidence needs to be collected to make sure that both positive and negative effects of interventions are appraised and fed into a learning process, to make sure approaches improve over time.

Disinformation as information ecosystem pollution

One of the most effective strategies against disinformation is fostering a healthy, vibrant information ecosystem. This requires a proactive, holistic, long-term strategy. Simply reacting to individual cases ad hoc because it is currently on the donor agenda will lead to many reactive, piecemeal, short-term strategies that do not yield the desired effects. Only if programs take the complexity of the issue into account and develop a proactive strategy that combats disinformation while nurturing good quality information can they hope to make a meaningful contribution.

Information ecosystems consist of several parts that need to be in place for the whole to be able to function, just as natural habitats need vegetation, animals, and natural resources like water, air and minerals in order to thrive. DW Akademie has developed the Media Viability Indicators to identify the many prerequisites for healthy information ecosystems (Moore et al 2020). Fellow media development organization IREX boils the elements that information ecosystems need down to four factors (IREX 2017):

– **Content that matters:** Relevant, reliable information

– **Multiple channels:** Unrestricted flow of information through diverse independent channels

– **Dynamic engagement:** Safe citizens with critical thinking skills

– **Transformative action:** Individuals and communities acting freely upon information.

If these preconditions are met, the result is what the Carnegie Endowment has termed information integrity, i.e. an information ecosystem that is characterized by "consistency, reliability, accuracy, fidelity, safety, and transparency" (Adam et al 2023).

Disinformation compromises this type of information ecosystem. It encourages the spread of unreliable content, pollutes the free flow of information, and jeopardizes citizens by letting them base their decisions on false assumptions about reality. The consequence is an environment characterized by permanent uncertainty and instability, where there is no trust whatsoever in any type of information, whether it be true or false. As Hanna Arendt put it, "If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer." (Cited in: Gais 2023). The result is what is known as the "liar's dividend" (Chesney / Citron 2018). Disinformation makes it easy for liars to perpetually deny the truth and to sow the seeds of distrust whenever anyone says something that runs counter to their own narratives.

Newer developments like social media and artificial intelligence exacerbate the problem because they lower the cost of producing misleading content and call into question the very concept of individual responsibility in communication. As Peter A. Bruck, president of the International Center for New Media in Salzburg, told DW Akademie in an interview, "We are now entering a phase where a text is no longer tied to an author. This relationship is dissolving. The traditional links of individual people or a community of speakers, and the knowledge and values they share are disappearing."

Eight guiding principles for anti-disinformation strategies

As illustrated above, interventions to combat disinformation in existing ecosystems are a risky business. It is important to correctly identify pollution, to combat it cautiously and to support the self-healing power of the ecosystem, rather than introducing alien means that themselves compromise the integrity of the system as a whole. We have identified eight guiding principles that can help prevent this from happening:

1. **A human rights-based approach:** Media development strategies should be based on human rights and aim to strengthen freedom of the media and freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the Civil Pact (CCPR/C/GC/34). As Irene Khan, the UN Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, put it, "In most cases, the best antidote to disinformation is not legal restriction but the free flow of diverse and verifiable sources of information, including through independent, free and pluralistic media, trustworthy public information, and media and digital literacy" (UN 2021).

2. **Consumer and localized orientation:** Projects should take into account that media use, especially the use of social media platforms, varies depending on the country and/or population group and/or language. This user behavior must be understood thoroughly from inside the country or region. Outsiders can hardly understand the semantic nuances of disinformation, let alone be able to qualify something as disinformation or not, or be able to judge what effects it will have in a specific environment. Professor Herman Wasserman of the University of Cape Town stressed in an interview with DW Akademie that "we have to look at what are the social drivers, the economic drivers, political drivers" of disinformation in a given region, "only when we understand the context well, can we design better responses."

3. **Conflict and context sensitivity:** Interventions in conflict-ridden or polarized contexts are always at risk of favoring certain parties and actors may be labelled as hostile parties themselves, especially in the context of fact-checking and verification. This can put the involved organization or their partners at risk. It is therefore necessary to conduct a thorough risk assessment before launching disinformation projects.

4. **Political sensitivity:** Many countries have anti-disinformation or cybercrime legislation that suppress freedom of expression and opposition voices. Even fact-checking may constitute a felony if it makes disinformation public that is prohibited by law. Therefore, the political and legal context needs to be analyzed diligently before planning interventions.

5. **Transparency and independence:** Media development organizations should not take on the role of judging right or wrong. No universal standard can be applied for classifying disinformation. Political discourse thrives on the diversity of opinions, politically unpopular statements are not automatically disinformation just because they do not suit one party. Even scientific findings can be falsified by new research findings. Projects should enable partners on the ground to create structures and develop capacities that enable them to detect inauthentic or manipulative behavior. Media development organizations should remain fair and independent.

6. **Do no harm:** Often, disinformation projects put the safety of participants or employees at risk. Accompanying measures to ensure individual and organizational security (physical, psychological, digital, legal and financial) should be taken to protect those potentially being targeted.

7. **Tech-sensitivity:** Most media development organizations are not technology companies. Nevertheless, their disinformation projects increasingly have tech components. These should always take into account the impact that the introduction or prioritization of technological solutions can have on democratic processes and independent media. Tools like artificial intelligence are not an end in themselves, neither can they be the only solution.

8. **Open source and digital security:** If technological solutions are adopted, it is important to allow for the continuation of usage by partners after termination of the intervention. Organizations should consider what enabling provisions need to be made in this respect. Open source tools need to remain independent and to be maintained by a global community of coders. The tools should provide for digital safety and data protection.

These principles can help boost the effectiveness of media development intervention while safeguarding against harmful effects for local media markets and the information ecosystem as a whole.

Specific challenges for the fight against disinformation in the Global South

Recent years have seen a flood of initiatives, new actors and activities addressing disinformation. Most of these have, however, focused on the Global North. Specific factors that need to be taken into account in the Global South are the following (compare: Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022):

– Digital platforms are mighty global players, thus it is hard for Global South governments or bodies to hold them accountable for their actions. For the most part, only Global North laws and regulation are taken seriously by the big tech companies, though there may be spill-over effects from those to the Global South.

– The large platforms are also negligent in enforcing their community guidelines in the Global South, due to their commercial priorities and limited consequences if they do not do so (Paul 2023). Even if new artificial intelligence tools arise to enable more efficient monitoring, it is doubtful whether these would cover the many languages that exist beyond the ones most commonly spoken in the Global North.

– Many countries in the Global South often lack democratic institutions. There is a narrow line between regulating against disinformation, censorship and other forms of stifling opposition voices. Thus, proponents of freedom of expression should be wary of adaptations of regulation such as the EU's Digital Services Act, because the outcomes could be markedly different. As a study by US think tank CIMA found, during the previous decade, 105 misinformation laws were enacted or amended in 78 countries. These "laws are often vague and allow governments to define prohibited content at their own discretion." (Lim and Bradshaw 2023) This shows that the fight against disinformation can be used to in fact stifle freedom of expression.

– In countries with a colonial background, disinformation can utilize prevalent anti-Western sentiments to mobilize support for geopolitical purposes. This can also lead to fact-checking initiatives funded by Western donors being viewed as activities run by foreign agents. As Herman Wasserman said, "if we want to understand disinformation both in the Global North and in the Global South, we have to understand it within the historical, social and political dimensions."

– Consumers in the Global South often put less trust in public institutions. This is especially true for rural citizens who rarely have access to public health services, banking or legal institutions. That is why they are particularly vulnerable to falling prey to rumors or disinformation that may be rooted in local traditions.

– The majority of research currently published stems from the Global North and draws its samples mainly from the US and Europe. It also often refers to (previously) easily accessible sources like Twitter/ X. "There's a clear asymmetry in knowledge production on the topic", Wasserman reiterated in an interview with DW Akademie. "So we don't yet know enough about what is going on in the Global South."

– Finally, there is the danger of propagating stereotypes of underdevelopment, victimization, chaos and authoritarianism when dealing with disinformation in the Global South. Citizens and societies in the Global South possess agency and are not helpless victims. As Wasserman pointed out, "the Global South has a longer history of this type of political disinformation", suggesting that "the Global North can actually learn" from that experience instead of vice versa.

DW Akademie's anti-disinformation strategy: Three strategic spheres

Based on the above considerations concerning the complexity of the problem of disinformation as well as the related risks, DW Akademie has developed a three-pronged approach. It tackles disinformation in three distinct spheres:

1. Detect and alert;
2. Create and design;
3. Educate and advocate.

## Sphere 1: Detect and Alert

The first sphere aims to identify and expose actors, methods and systems of disinformation. The focus here is primarily on acute, deliberate disruptions to the information ecosystem. Approaches are equivalent to a disaster response unit. After a first assessment they go straight to work, eradicating the pollution caused. They also try to contain it, prevent it from spreading and try to find the responsible parties involved.

There is certainly value in professional efforts to rectify false claims. Firstly, not many people have the skills and the time to collect evidence and take a balanced decision on the veracity of public statements. And secondly, such thorough examina-

tion needs to be made public so that citizens have a place they can turn to in order to find out whether a claim is true or not.

From a strategic perspective, however, Detect and Alert measures should not only combat disinformation that has gone viral or moderate such content on websites and social networks. They should strike earlier and go deeper. Approaches like prebunking aim to inoculate citizens before they encounter false claims to prevent them from going viral (van der Linden 2024). Moreover, scientific evidence has shown that simple fact-checks have short-term effects and cannot prevail against persistent disinformation narratives. This is why debunking and prebunking need to be supplemented by investigative journalism, digital forensics or the use of Open Source or Web Intelligence (OSINT/WEBINT) in order to dig deeper, exposing disinformation campaigns and networks that lie behind the individual cases of deception.

All Detect and Alert approaches presuppose some kind of accountability on the part of the exposed. Detecting disinformation and then alerting the public as to its existence only make sense if there are consequences for the perpetrators. This can range from deplatforming of their social media accounts to legal action. One of the key stakeholders here

DW Akademie's triple sphere strategy against disinformation
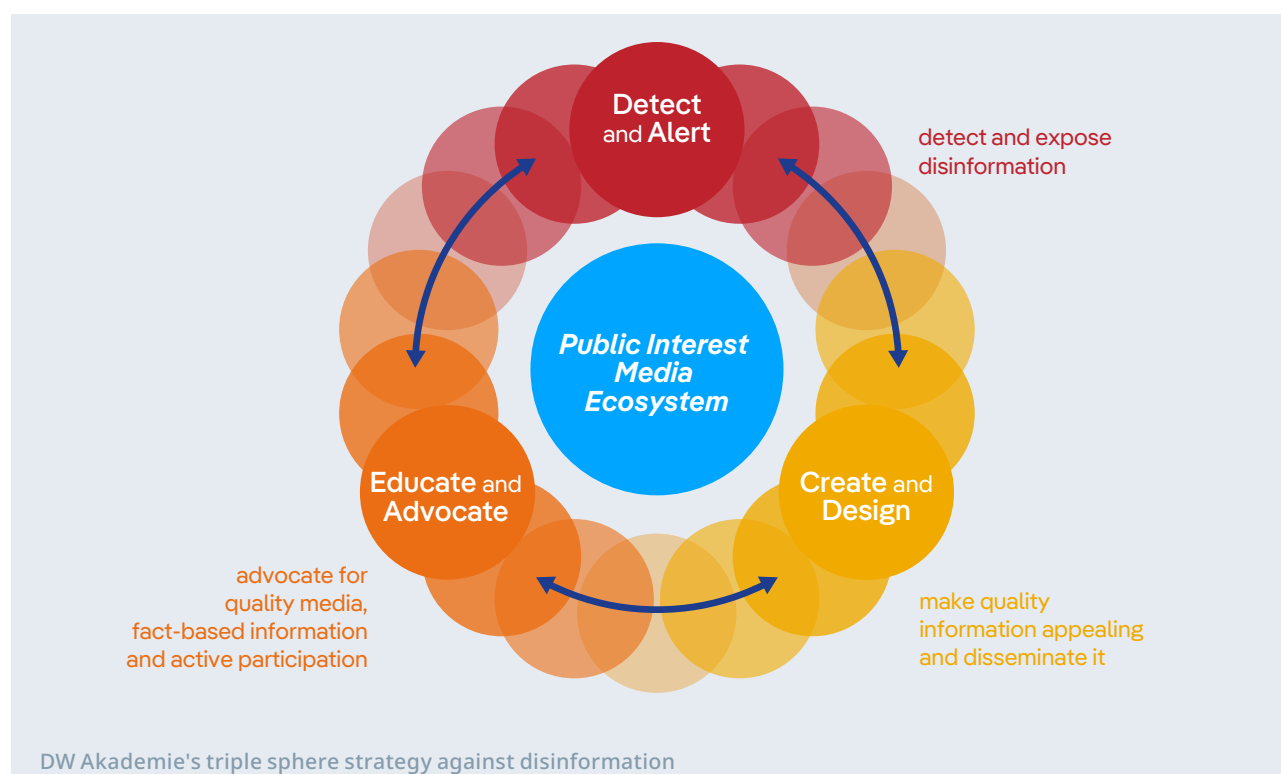
are the big technology companies like Meta and Google. In an interview with DW Akademie, Guilherme Canela, Chief of the Freedom of Expression/Safety of Journalists Section at UNESCO, stressed that big tech has not lived up to its due diligence obligations in the past. That is why UNESCO has published a set of principles that can help align stakeholders with human rights (UNESCO 2023).

Verification desks in Kenya

Media organisations struggle to provide quality news in times of polluted information ecosystems. DW Akademie and PesaCheck support media houses in Kenya in establishing verification desks. Journalists receive step-by-step training to build the skills they need to tackle fast-evolving disinformation. The Media houses Management receives consultancy to set up relevant editorial processes and to optimize journalistic products for their target audiences. The verification desks are closely linked to the editorial team of Pesacheck that supports them on the job. The verification desks report about the verified claims to inform their audiences and to make them aware of misleading and manipulative contents as they emerge.

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Approaches in this sphere include:

– **Fact-checking/debunking** is a method for evaluating controversial claims. It is used, in particular, for the verification of political and public statements, online rumors and hoaxes as well as specific controversies with potential for conflict. The aim is to provide citizens with a clear assessment of these statements so that they can make informed decisions.

– **Prebunking** refers to strategic measures to prevent disinformation before it gets into circulation. This is an attempt to inoculate people against disinformation, much in the same way as vaccines help build resilience against a virus. Prebunking identifies or anticipates false narratives as

early as possible, provides corrections or warnings before the content circulates widely and sensitizes citizens to the tactics behind the messages.

– **Content moderation** is defined as the control, evaluation and categorization of content on the internet. This content includes text, photos or videos published by users on social media portals or rating platforms. Content moderation is carried out by those responsible for the channels, but is also offered as an independent service.

– **Deplatforming** involves blocking or deleting a group or an individual from communication platforms, and denying them further access to the deplatformed accounts. This step can usually only be taken by the platform providers themselves and requires sufficient evidence to prove that the accounts involved have repeatedly violated their code of conduct, spread illegal content, or used a false identity (such as bots).

– **Investigative reporting** is a journalistic discipline that uncovers systematic shortcomings in politics and society by gaining access to secret information through covert sources (such as whistleblowers or leaked data). In the context of disinformation, investigative journalism can help identify motives, agendas, campaigns and networks that lie behind individual cases of false claims.

– **Social listening/network analysis** are techniques that help analyze what content people are engaging with on social media and how that content is being shared. They can help identify disinformation as it emerges and trace it back to its origins.

– **Digital forensics** is the practice of identifying, acquiring, and analyzing electronic evidence. It plays a big role in identifying, mitigating, and eradicating cyber threats. Evidence can come from different sources such as computers, mobile phones, remote storage devices, other devices with an IP address, and any other digital system.

– **OSINT/WEBINT** are abbreviations for Open Source Intelligence or Web Intelligence. OSINT refers to the use of openly accessible data sources such as mass media (TV, radio, print), public data provided by state bodies, academic publications and openly accessible data bases. WEBINT specifically refers to intelligence retrieved from online content such as social media and websites.

Sphere 2: Create and Design

The emphasis of the second sphere is on supporting high quality information within the information ecosystem. These approaches bolster innovation in the production and distri-

bution of attractive, reliable content in order to (re-)establish the dominance of such information over content that aims to mislead and harm citizens. As Claire Wardle points out in the interview with DW Akademie, anti-disinformation strategies are often focused on the 20% of toxic content in the ecosystem. "We don't do very much with the 80% of the information ecosystem that we could strengthen." This sphere addresses the 80%. It epitomizes the proactive, constructive character of DW Akademie's strategy, providing the ecosystem with the nourishment it needs to offer audiences attractive journalism they can trust.

Some may argue that the Create and Design sphere amounts to what media development is doing anyway. Though that is true, we would maintain that independent journalism is not living up to its full potential. Journalists (and journalism trainers) should be encouraged to think outside the box, experiment-

CINergy in Eastern Europe and the Balkans

In times of aggressive disinformation campaigns in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, innovative and new ways to provide the public with reliable facts are becoming increasingly important. DW Akademie's CINergy project brought together young, creative people from the media sector, e.g. influencers, fact checkers, journalists or employees of non-governmental organizations, along with academics from the media sector or other experts, to jointly develop media products. The goal was to develop and communicate new, constructive narratives through innovative distribution channels. They were supported by mentors who assisted them in developing their ideas. In the end, three innovative fact-based approaches emerged that connected people/communities across countries or regions and were published to counteract disinformation. An example: the project Democracy in Danger told stories of people affected by totalitarian regimes in the past or present.

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Participants in DW Akademie's CINergy project

ing with and creating new innovative forms of storytelling. Journalism needs to become less elitist and break down complex topics in a way that audiences can understand. It should not shy away from approaches like gamification or animation to help get its message across. While new disciplines like data journalism have not yet reached their full potential, emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual/ augmented reality can also contribute to making journalistic content more attractive. Also, knowing the preferences of one's audience is paramount to reaching them. As Walid Al-Saqaf, Associate Professor in journalism at Södertörn University in Sweden, told DW Akademie in an interview, a thorough understanding of the culture and the context are key, but also knowing how to "make it much more enjoyable to read what the facts are."

In today's complex information environment, audiences are fragmented across a multiplicity of platforms. Public interest media are competing with many different actors for users' attention. The provision of relevant, reliable information has transformed from a supply-side to a demand-side market. This calls for careful consideration of distribution strategies, making sure that content goes to the audience, instead of vice versa. This includes considering what content works on which (emerging) platforms and optimizing content for new interfaces, including AI curation.

A third component of this sphere, beyond innovation in production and distribution, is nudging audiences towards independent, reliable information. Nudging is an important building block in designing the information ecosystem in a way that makes it more likely that citizens will encounter high quality content. For example, studies have shown that small messages prompting users to pause and think about whether a headline is true or false makes users less likely to share false information with friends (Fazio 2020), thus decreasing the spread of disinformation in the system as a whole.

This sphere includes the following approaches:

– **Explainer journalism** provides its audience with additional information about stories to ensure that they fully understand the background to current events. It represents a conscious departure from the hectic news cycle ("churnalism") to focus on the "how and why" rather than the "who, what, when and where".

– **Gamification and animation** refer to novel ways of packaging journalism and making clear the importance of public interest media. News games and quizzes can be used to help citizens understand the role journalism plays in providing vital information and fostering constructive dialogue. In an increasingly visual context on video platforms and in social media, journalism can also use animation to attract attention and convey its messages.

	Detect and Alert (short-term): Recognize acute disturbances in the media ecosystem and expose actors, methods and systems responsible for it.
Sphere 1	› fact-checking, verification, investigative reporting, OSINT, digital forensics, research, data journalism, campaign detection
Sphere 2	Design and Create (medium to long-term): Make quality information attractive and enhance possibilities for dialogue and the spread of public interest content in media ecosystems.
	› Community-based journalism, podcasting, gamification, AI, video storytelling, influencers
Sphere 3	Educate and Advocate (long-term): Establish the value of quality media and fact-based information as an important factor for the prosperity of communities and advance active democratic participation.
	› Trust Initiatives, MIL, Policy / Regulation, Constructive Journalism, ampaigns, advocacy, social network engagement

Summary of the approaches in DW Akademie's triple sphere strategy against disinformation

– **Data journalism** combines quantifiable evidence with narrative context to draw attention to certain trends. The focus is on novel insights and visualizations, to tell a story grounded in large amounts of data. In the disinformation context, data journalism can trace its prevalence and spread across networks, but it can also be an antidote to oversimplified narratives that mislead rather than inform.

– **Augmented and virtual reality** are technologies that immerse users in environments or layers of information that they would otherwise not be able to access. Augmented reality (AR) adds digital elements to a live view, often by using the camera on a smartphone. Virtual reality (VR) is a visceral, immersive experience that replaces the actual environment by a simulated one. Both rely on special, still quite expensive devices, but the cost is expected to decrease, allowing more citizens to access engaging VR/AR content and journalism.

– **Distribution design** is about knowing when public interest media need to put what content on which platforms to provide their audiences with engaging, relevant information. Media outlets need to monitor the information landscape and make sure they go where their audiences are. They also need to know how to lead those audiences back to spaces where they can effectively monetize their content.

– **Generative AI** has come to the fore as the next big disruption of the information ecosystem. As yet it is unclear how emerging new interfaces like ChatGPT and Gemini will change the face of information provision — but many observers agree that they will certainly do so, with consequences for where and how audiences get their news and also for how the media produce their information. As Felix Simon puts it in an article, "AI will play a transformative role in reshaping news work, from editorial to the business side" (Simon 2024). Public interest media need to be a part of this development while ensuring that revenue share models prevent Generative AI providers from taking without giving. At the same time, these interfaces are spreading a great deal of disinformation themselves ("hallucination"). A new system of checks and balances needs to be put in place, and public interest media should play a role in this process.

– **Nudges** "steer people's choices in directions that will improve their lives" (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). In the case of disinformation, small reminders to consider the veracity of information before sharing it or prioritizing more credible sources in algorithms can improve the choices users make. But these interventions should be unbiased in the sense that they should be in line with what users themselves would regard as better choices upon reflection.

Sphere 3: Educate and Advocate

The third sphere is about raising awareness for the importance of reliable information and public interest media. These measures aim to educate the public and advocate for a legal and political environment that fosters the free flow of information and quality content. If the first sphere is about an immediate response to pollution and the second one is about creating biodiversity, the third sphere targets the fertile ground on which a functioning information ecosystem can thrive. On the one hand, good information can only prosper if it is valued by the audience and if the political and legal context facilitates it. On the other hand, Educate and Advocate is also about fostering a responsible society that rejects disinformation in all its forms.

A first step towards reaching these goals would be to create informed communities in which journalism is not detached from, but an integrated part of the community. If media gain local trust and (again) become the go-to-place for accurate information, disinformation sources will have difficulties

Agenda against disinformation project in Latin America

The rise of left- and right-wing populist actors in Latin America has fuelled polarization and acted as a catalyst for disinformation, especially on social media. DW Akademie facilitated digital encounters between 24 experts from academia, media and civil society from 20 organizations to develop an "Agenda against Disinformation" in Latin America. In four multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral analysis groups they discussed mechanisms, trends and knowledge gaps, focusing on the particularities in the Latin American context. The resulting findings and practical recommendations served to inform organizations, donors and decision makers on the current requirements in the fight against disinformation in the region.

AGENDA CONTRA LA DESINFORMACIÓN

Banner of the "Agenda against Disinformation" facilitated by DW Akademie in Latin America

piercing the protective shield of these communities. Citizens will regard media as a vital part of their lives and they will even be prepared to defend them against threats from outside. Both community-driven and constructive journalism can serve to regain this public trust.

The Educate component stands primarily for resilient citizens through Media and Information Literacy education, while the Advocate part involves different aspects of fostering good quality information.

Education can go a long way in helping people analyze and reflect why they fall for misleading content. As Claire Wardle succinctly put it in the interview with DW Akademie, "we need to shift our perspective from classifying every post to understanding the social contexts of this information, how it fits into narratives and identities." That is because veracity of information as a motivational factor often plays second fiddle to what Jeff Jarvis has termed a "sense of belonging" (Jarvis 2024). This consistent finding in recent research (Ziemer and Rothmund 2024) alerts to the fact that education is not just about skills for finding out if something is true or not, but also about being prepared to question one's own motivations and behavior.

Advocacy includes training and consulting policy makers for regulation practice that prevents disinformation from spreading while safeguarding freedom of expression. But it also involves campaigns for freedom of expression and access to information, as well as taking part in trust initiatives that seek to label good quality media and information sources that fulfill certain standards.

This sphere includes the following approaches:

– **Community-driven journalism** works with and for the community rather than merely telling stories about it. It lends an ear to the needs and concerns of its local audience, asking rather than telling its community what is important. It is a continuous process of trust building and dialogue, as opposed to the approach of "parachuting in" and leaving once an event is done.

– **Constructive / solutions journalism** are types of journalism that go beyond simple descriptions of challenges, identifying ways of tackling them and thus contributing to solving the problems. They respond to the usual negativity bias of news by focusing on pathways out of bad situations rather than merely the situations themselves. These types of journalism can also focus on disinformation as a community challenge and help in identifying strategies to cope with and combat the problem.

– **Advocacy measures** can take many forms. In the context of disinformation, the common thread of advocacy

activities is that they raise awareness for the importance of information integrity and a healthy information ecosystem, while at the same time identifying the risks that disinformation can bring. Common methods include sensitizing policy makers through training or consultancy, lobbying for free-speech-sensitive regulation, campaigning and building networks and initiatives for trust in quality journalism.

– **Critical thinking** is an important outcome of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) training. It is a crucial prerequisite for citizens' resilience against disinformation and is fostered by encouraging media users to analyze how and why disinformation is created and reflect on how they encounter and share this type of content themselves. The MIL approach harmonizes well with the nudging component in the second sphere. As research has shown, the combination of nudging (see above) and boosting (conveying specific competencies through training, see Hertwig and Grüne-Yanoff 2017) seems to be most effective in raising disinfomation resilience (Jahn et al 2023).

Outlook

Rumours, propaganda and lies have accompanied humankind from its very beginnings. We cannot identify a point in time when the information ecosystem was absolutely pollution free. And yet disinformation has evolved, accompanied by shifts in the way it has been produced and spread, and in the way it is combatted. While in the age of artificial intelligence and social media, disinformation is gaining momentum - the cost of production and distribution tending toward zero - the very institutions that serve as a counterbalance are under threat. Public interest media have lost their traditional revenue models and are fighting for survival, human rights defenders are on the defensive amidst shrinking spaces for civic engagement, and global democratization is encountering autocratic backlash from within and without (Freedom House 2023). Disinformation may not be the single cause of these trends, but it is also not a mere symptom: it plays its part in amplifying these tendencies. It is time to take effective action, combatting the pollution of the information ecosystem, and putting disinformation actors on the defensive, remembering that technology does not constitute the biggest threat to democracy, it is real people using that technology to spread their deceptive narratives (Kleis Nielsen 2024). We need to adopt a holistic and proactive strategy to 1. Detect disinformation and alert society, governments and platforms to take action, 2. Create and design engaging public interest media to act as a counterbalance, and 3. Educate citizens and advocate for information integrity, (re-)establishing trust in the institutions we depend upon for our well-being. Only if we manage to reduce the pollution of our information ecosystems, safeguarding diversity and freedom of expression, and providing the fertile ground on which relevant and reliable information can prosper, will citizens be empowered to make informed choices and play an active role in transforming their societies toward an equitable future.

Literature

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