Input for Report on Disinformation

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, bringing together members from more than 150 countries worldwide. We welcome the Special Rapporteur's initiative to further examine key questions around disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression, and would like to thank the Rapporteur for the opportunity to offer inputs.

Access to information and intellectual freedom are among the key ethical and institutional commitments of the global library field; while information literacy has long been an important competency which libraries work to support and champion among their communities. Drawing on library experiences with the above, this input highlights some good practices and key considerations around freedom of opinion and expression in addressing challenges raised by dis- and misinformation.

Disinformation: challenges and responses

Misleading or false information online – as well as the extent and pace of its spread and evolution – continues to pose major (and well-recorded) challenges to human rights worldwide. From the point of view that access to quality information (in a broad sense) drives development and enables people to exercise their rights more effectively,[1] misleading or false information can negatively impact people's ability to make informed decisions and effectively exercise their rights to health, to a fair election, and to non-discrimination, amongst other things.[2]

However, equally well-articulated are key human rights concerns around the measures that have been proposed or adopted in response to the rise of online dis- and mis-information. As already pointed out in the call for contributions and the work of the predecessors of the Special Rapporteur, responses can amount to censorship, legal or regulatory frameworks which disproportionally restrict freedom of expression, or block access altogether. Some of the more concerning examples that have been pointed out include broadly defined laws or regulations criminalising 'fake news' and internet shutdowns. The number of journalists imprisoned on "fake news" charges, for example, has grown over the past 7 years.[3]

The variety of responses – regulatory and private

A joint 2020 publication by ITU and UNESCO highlights four broad types of responses to disinformation – those based on identification, those focusing on the actors producing and distributing, those targeting production and distribution mechanisms, and those focusing on the target audiences of disinformation.[4]

On the policy and regulatory side, the report noted the distinction between restrictive and enabling measures – where the former, seeking to restrict behaviour or content, can indeed be a 'slippery slope' in their impacts on freedom of expression, and must therefore be subject to international standards including legitimacy, proportionality, necessary, etc. On the other hand, 'enabling' measures include such steps as supporting transparency, broadening access to information, media literacy and fact-checking initiatives.

It is also increasingly common for regulations to put more responsibility on internet platforms and intermediaries.[5] In other cases, companies themselves decide to take more proactive steps and

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[1] https://da2i.ifla.org/
[2] https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67341
[3] https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CPJ.2020.Annual.Report.pdf
[4] https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/2_typology_of_disinformation_responses_36_40_balancing_act_disinfo.pdf
[5] See e.g. https://www.internetjurisdiction.net/uploads/pdfs/Internet-Jurisdiction-and-ECLAC-Regional-Status-Report-2020_web.pdf

measures. An example here is several multinational platforms and advertising industry representatives signing up for the voluntary EU Code of Practice on Disinformation. A recent review of its performance pointed out that, while a unique and valuable instrument, it sees some limitations inherent to a self-regulatory approach; and that a lack of access to data currently makes independent evaluations of the impacts of self-regulating measures challenging (and makes follow-up recommendations).[6]

This too raises important considerations – a commonly expressed reservation is indeed that the influence of large global platforms on what constitutes lawful speech is increasing. In 2020, the former Special Rapporteur pointed out that such platforms not being an "arbiter of truth" doesn't mean they should "be the facilitator of untruth".[7]

Some of the key challenges here include the fact that, as is often pointed out, mis- and dis-information which is potentially harmful is not a binary, but rather could take the form of anything from out-of-context text, images or audio, to misleading or biased news, to deliberately fabricated stories and 'synthetic' audio. ITU and UNESCO (2020), for example, note some criticism that has been raised about Facebook's internal ranking categories that attempt to reflect these nuances, as well as questions related to such categories as political speech or opinion.[8]

Furthermore, moderation at scale, as well as moderation that is sensitive to local context and non-global languages, remains a challenge.

Altogether, the questions raised here underline the need for more information on the effectiveness of such measures, particularly when they have the potential to negatively impact freedom of expression. Transparency from digital platforms on the measures they take, the processes they follow, and the impacts they have would therefore be an important (even if not by itself sufficient) step which may not bear such strong impacts on freedom of expression. Such an approach has already been encouraged within the narrower scope of Article 17 of the EU's Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market.

Media and information ecosystems: questions of diversity and access

A fairly common suggestion is that a mix of measures needs to be adopted in order to properly address the challenges of disinformation. One of the possible measures seeking to empower, rather than in any way restrict or control behaviour, focuses on supporting exposure (and/or production) to a diversity of quality media.[9]

However, as a 2018 UNESCO publication points out, "A particular danger is that 'fake news' in this sense is usually free – meaning that people who cannot afford to pay for quality journalism, or who lack access to independent public service news media, are especially vulnerable to both disinformation and misinformation."[10]

While the Digital News Report registered increases in payments for online news in several countries in 2020, most people do not opt to purchase access to paywalled content.[11] The question of affordability of access to content is one that libraries address directly through their work, providing access to quality journals, periodicals and newspapers.[12] Insofar as access to quality materials can

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/assessment-code-practice-disinformation-achievements-and-areas-further-improvement
[7] https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/david-kaye-how-the-saudis-hacked-jeff-bezos-phone/id1011668648?i=1000465561834
[8] https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/4_identification_responses_65_95_balancing_act_disinfo.pdf
[9] See e.g. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/619013/IPOL_IDA(2018)619013_EN.pdf;
https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/13636/file
[10] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552
[11] https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/
[12] E.g. https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/travel_and_recreation/sport_and_leisure/public_library_services.html,
https://www.colorado.edu/libraries/2020/01/10/libraries-print-and-digital-newspaper-collections-are-growing

be a helpful measure to address some impacts of disinformation, it is crucial to ensure that the necessity to pay for quality content does not end up replicating existing inequalities.

Furthermore, fostering access to a diversity of quality sources does not just avoid negative impacts on human rights – it helps deliver on people's rights to information and development.

Media and Information Literacy – a sustainable response to disinformation

As the IFLA Statement on "Fake News" and "Fake News" infographic outline,[13] we believe that media and information literacy is the most sustainable way to address disinformation challenges without compromising human rights. While no-one can be perfectly media literate, helping people take a critical – and curious – approach, and be aware of how information is produced and shared has well recognised potential.

Clearly, this is a field in development. Media and/or information literacy (as well as other adjacent competencies like data literacy or news literacy) have long been referenced in discussions and recommendations on addressing disinformation (whether as a possible solution, or part of a policy mix) – e.g. the 2020 "Countering Online Misinformation Resource Pack" published by UNICEF,[14] the work of the UNESCO MIL Alliance, "Regulatory Authorities for Electronic Media and Media Literacy - Comparative Analysis of the Best European Practices" implemented by Council of Europe,[15] and others.

Some recommendations highlight the importance of developing a comprehensive curriculum and implementing MIL measures through schools in particular. However, in our opinion it is equally important to ensure that lifelong learning opportunities are available to people who cannot access MIL training at formal educational institutions. Libraries in particular have extensive experience working as such informal and semi-formal learning and training hubs, open to all participants to ensure equitable access.

A 2016 research report published by the European Parliament highlights this role in the sphere of media literacy learning in particular; and libraries from around Europe – from Finland to Latvia to the Netherlands – have been active in delivering such interventions.[16]

Alongside not restricting freedom of opinion and expression, media and information literacy can also help deliver on other human rights that access to information helps facilitate – i.e. the right to health, or to a free and fair election. A 2018 publication by CILIP points out a link between information literacy and citizenship, where information literacy can help individuals understand the world around them and be engaged citizens, to play a part in a democratic society – and to express informed views.[17]

Targeting and tailoring outreach initiatives

It is important to note that there may be differences in how various audience groups encounter and respond to disinformation – for example, with some research suggesting that older users are more likely to share articles from fake news domains.[18] As such, there is value in the possibility to reach out to target audiences with an approach tailored for them – for instance, libraries in Lithuania launched several media information literacy projects focusing on older learners.[19]

Consideration within the media literacy discourse in the library field is also given to questions of participant self-selection, and reaching out to users who may benefit from media literacy learning

[13] https://www.ifla.org/node/25805; https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/67341
[14] https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/13636/file
[15] https://rm.coe.int/regulatory-authorities-for-electronic-media/1680903a2a
[16] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/573454/IPOL_IDA(2017)573454_EN.pdf; https://rm.coe.int/1680783500
[17] https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf
[18] https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/1/eaau4586
[19] https://blogs.ifla.org/faife/2019/10/24/167/

yet would not ordinarily be eager to sign up, feeling either little need for such support, or being happy in their present situation.[20] Some possible solutions are outlined, for instance, by the American Library Association – e.g. drawing on existing interactions to promote media literacy, to raise interest and awareness.[21]

Another example from the US is the "Wash and Learn" program, carried out by Libraires Without Borders, which set up physical and digital libraries and information services in laundromats to reach underserved and lower-income populations. Among other offers, the programme helped users navigate their information needs and addressing questions ranging from information literacy, to health literacy, to legal literacy.[22]

Scalability, replicability, cooperation

Focusing on another distinct target group, the University of Washington Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) implemented the *Mobile Information Literacy* project centred on digital and information skills of mobile-centric users. In Kenya and Myanmar, they worked with libraries and other organisations to set up training with modules ranging from ICT basics to online etiquette to credibility of information and sources.[23]

Some of the key findings from the project included the importance of taking into account the local context and norms when preparing and implementing the curriculum, and the capacity for this training to "cascade", with participating librarians later using these skills to help train others.[24] Another takeaway from these and other library experiences is the capacity to cooperate with other stakeholders – from civil society to formal education institutions to media to public authorities – to ensure equitable and effective delivery of media and information literacy learning opportunities.[25]

Impacts and effectiveness

Research on best practices and impacts of media and information literacy continues; with some evidence suggesting that media literacy interventions can bring about changes in how the users evaluate information – and, in some cases, even behavioural changes (e.g. fact-checking);[26] [27] and a potential association between information literacy and the ability to detect fake news.[28]

A note of caution is of course in order - media literacy training needs to follow up-to-date understanding of the informational environment; and more research and cross-disciplinary collaboration is needed to understand what works best and to continue refining approaches to media and information literacy education.[29] Similarly, effective media and information literacy training depend on action by governments to allow libraries and other relevant institutions to develop the skills to teach media literacy effectively, and draw on the latest research.

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[20] Which is another discussion within the media literacy and fake news discourse. Some research suggests "third-person effects of fake news" - that people tend to view themselves and their in-group members as less susceptible to fake news than out-group members - https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563217306726?via%3Dihub

[21] http://www.ala.org/tools/sites/ala.org.tools/files/content/%21%20FINAL%20Media-Lit_Prac-Guide_WEB_112720.pdf

[22] http://library.ifla.org/2188/1/164-lachal-en.pdf

[23] https://tascha.uw.edu/publications/mobile-information-literacy-full-curriculum-guide/

[24] https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/item/39657/Mobile_Information_Literacy_Clark_AfLIA_2017.pdf? sequence=1; https://tascha.uw.edu/publications/kenyan-public-librarians-role-in-mobile-centric-information-access/

[25] https://rm.coe.int/regulatory-authorities-for-electronic-media/1680903a2a

[26] https://www.irex.org/insight/ukrainians-self-defense-against-disinformation-what-we-learned-learn-discern

[27] https://www.pnas.org/content/117/27/15536

[28] https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0002764219869406?journalCode=absb

[29] See e.g. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/DataAndSociety_Media_Literacy_2018.pdf