Understanding the Context Around Content:
Looking behind Misinformation Narratives

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The entire set of Global Insights essays can be found *here*.

Misinformation, while normally consumed online, is not purely an online problem. Offline dynamics like intergroup tensions, competing world views, and institutional distrust compounds, reinforces, and amplifies the particular features of social media that serve to spread misinformation. Solutions to curtail the spread of disinformation need to account for the offline context that fuels online content.

Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Brexit, and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, efforts to understand and address misinformation or "fake news" have been at the forefront of the public agenda. Research and reporting have exposed misinformation campaigns and algorithms that weaponize (and monetize) our human biases, as well as online troll farms, bots, and other "computational propaganda"[1] that exploit these features to alter electoral outcomes, drive polarization, or even incite violence. Commentators have, in turn, often characterized misinformation as a technical, online problem, largely derivative of the structure and popularity of social media and messaging apps globally.

Yet it is misleading and distracting to consider misinformation a purely online problem, divorced from the contextual features that contribute to its plausibility, resonance, and offline impacts, including polarization and violence. Misinformation does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it taps into, reinforces, and supercharges offline dynamics: worldviews, intergroup tensions, and longstanding grievances. It also gains credibility from trusted messengers, often influential community figures who spread the content through various fora.

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Consider the following examples of viral misinformation, where social media is one factor in a web of dynamics—online and offline—that contribute to misinformation's spread and impact.

- In Sri Lanka, offline altercations between Buddhist and Muslim Sri Lankans were recorded and uploaded to Facebook with false or misleading captions, fueling anti-Muslim rumors, deadly protests, and revenge attacks across the country.[2] The videos tapped into Buddhists' narrative of being under threat from a minority population, a longtime source of tension within Sri Lanka. Local leaders, including influential monks, shared this content both online and in-person, granting these videos credibility as they urged for revenge.

- Influential members of the South Sudanese diaspora circulated provocative Facebook posts containing false or misleading content about violence between the Dinka and Nuer tribes in South Sudan, tapping into their long history of violence. In-country South Sudanese further spread this content, both online and by word-of-mouth, allowing it to reach, influence, and drive violence, even among offline populations.[3] Commentators note clear links between such "social media [posts], word of mouth, and ending up with a gun...or a machete."[4]

- More recently, COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation have exploited deeply rooted institutional distrust, intergroup tensions, and prejudices that drive polarization, encourage threats against government and public health officials, and incite violence.[5]

In each of these instances, social media enabled this content's spread, but contextual dynamics—salient narratives, intergroup tensions, and credible messengers—were integral to its impact.

To fully address online misinformation, interventions must grapple with its more analog root causes. They must also engage and develop trust with the communities that misinformation targets.

Highlighting these dynamics is not to dismiss the particular features of social media that make online misinformation particularly challenging. These factors, like algorithms that privilege inflammatory content, an absence of gatekeepers, likes and shares that misleadingly depict fringe views as mainstream, and the ability to reach millions of people instantaneously, amplify and accelerate its spread and reach. Instead, we acknowledge these dynamics to emphasize that social media must be considered and addressed as part of a broader information ecosystem in order to combat misinformation effectively.

To fully address online misinformation, interventions must grapple with its more analog root causes. They must also engage and develop trust with the communities that misinformation targets. Such efforts benefit from conflict prevention and mitigation approaches that long predate the advent of social media: conflict early warning and response systems, prejudice reduction programming, and behavior change campaigns. Research spanning social psychology,[6] decision sciences, communications, anthropology, and sociology similarly has much to offer.

What does a more holistic response to misinformation look like in practice? Given this problem's multifaceted and dynamic nature, there is no single intervention, discipline, or organization that can combat misinformation alone, particularly in the absence of structural platform reforms. Instead, civil society, media entities, and researchers can consider and adopt a constellation of approaches, both online and offline, to address misinformation and its root causes. Below is a non-exhaustive list of potentially promising approaches and interventions.

- **Conduct a context analysis**: Programs will benefit from conducting a collaborative context analysis, where civil society organizations, interdisciplinary researchers, and community leaders pool their expertise on the type of misinformation spreading, the intergroup dynamics and belief systems it exploits, the individuals that lend it credibility, and the audiences it influences and why. This process benefits from stakeholders' diverse insights and creates a shared foundation for collective problem solving and intervention design.

  For example, Sisi ni Amani-Kenya, a Kenyan violence prevention organization, partnered with diverse community leaders to anticipate the types of dangerous rumors that might circulate throughout the 2013 election cycle, ranging from divisive intergroup narratives (e.g., "they're coming to get us") to misinformation about new voting procedures and documentation requirements.[7] The organization understood the risks of such misinformation, given Kenya's history of violence and recent constitutional changes.

This context analysis positioned Sisi ni Amani-Kenya and its partners to circulate clarifying information on voting processes proactively and develop research-informed, rapid response rumor interruption tactics that cut off viral misinformation before it triggered violence.

- **Understand your target audience:** Misinformation resonates among different communities for different reasons. Thus, it's critical to learn as much as possible about the audience(s) you seek to influence: their worldview, salient identities, views or concerns related to popular topics of misinformation, and trusted information sources.

For instance, in the Czech Republic, Transitions Online recognized that senior citizens circulated misinformation about migrants and refugees, both online and by word of mouth. Seeing the importance of engaging this new audience in media literacy programming, Transitions collaborated with organizations with existing relationships with seniors to gain access to this community via trusted gatekeepers, learn more about their concerns and questions surrounding misinformation, and pilot longer-term programming.[8]

Anti-vaccine misinformation spreading across the United Kingdom illustrates the importance of local networks to counter these inaccurate narratives.

- **Leverage trusted messengers:** Even perfectly crafted counter-messages or interventions will prove unpersuasive absent messengers who are trusted and influential among a target audience. It is vital to identify and engage individuals or institutions who can reach and persuade various groups that are vulnerable to misinformation. Engaging and activating effective messengers, however, requires significant effort.

In Great Britain, Imams leveraged their credibility to conduct webinars, online communications campaigns, and one-on-one Zoom calls to debunk anti-vaccination misinformation targeting the country's Muslim population.[9] Similarly, in Israel, Rabbis addressed vaccine misinformation circulating among ultra-orthodox communities.[10] Furthermore, in Moldova, Watchdog.MD worked with social media influencers to debunk and share counter-narratives to election-related misinformation.

- **Address the narratives underlying misinformation:** Addressing worldviews and intergroup biases that misinformation taps into can also help counter its negative impact.

In Poland, online misinformation has targeted migrants and refugees, reinforcing anti-Muslim prejudice among segments of the public. To address this issue, Over Zero partnered with Fundacja Ocalenie, the Polish Hospitality Foundation, and scholars at the University of Warsaw's Center for Research on Prejudice to implement and evaluate a series of workshops to address anti-refugee and -Muslim prejudice and hate speech

among communities not typically engaged in NGO work. In addition to increasing empathy toward Muslims and refugees, the workshops also prompted participants to question the online misinformation targeting these groups.[11]

Responses to misinformation must recognize the broad web of dynamics that render it a particularly challenging problem.

- **Build a rapid response infrastructure:** Recognizing how quickly misinformation spreads, resonates, and can drive action, including violence, identifying and responding to harmful narratives in real-time is critical. Efforts to rapidly detect and respond to misinformation benefit from collaboration among actors with access to and trust among different communities.

  In Indonesia, a network of journalists, fact-checkers, civil society, academia, internet users, and social media platforms—all with different reach—developed a response system to detect and respond to election-related misinformation in real-time.[12] This network produced daily articles debunking prevalent misinformation, and even live fact-checked the presidential debate, responding to false claims before they could become entrenched.[13]

- **Expose the mechanisms of misinformation:** Confirmation biases, echo chambers, and the near-inherent virality of content that appeals to our negative emotions all contribute to misinformation's spread. Exposing the psychological dynamics of fake news, including its interplay with our belief systems and worldview, can empower consumers to better detect misinformation.[14]

  In Ukraine, Serbia, Tunisia, Jordan, Indonesia, and the U.S., among other countries, IREX has developed contextually specific online media literacy curricula that exposes the mechanisms of misinformation and empowers students to identify and reject misinformation and the harmful narratives it carries.[15]

- **Address the full information ecosystem:** A misinformation response strategy must consider and address the broader information ecosystem, online and offline, contributing to misinformation's reach and impact. Targeting only one platform where misinformation is spreading will thus insufficiently address what is a much broader problem.

  In Indonesia, Peace Provocateurs recognized that a combination of SMS, offline communications, and Facebook posts depicting intergroup tensions and altercations contributed to the virality of related misinformation. In response, the group assembled a network of students, lecturers, religious leaders, and journalists to detect, verify, and respond to the misinformation through a combination of offline communications, SMS, and Facebook and Twitter posts.[16] (Note: This case also exemplifies an effective rapid response infrastructure.)

Responses to misinformation must recognize the broad web of dynamics that render it a particularly challenging problem. While platform algorithms contribute to the spread of misinformation, offline dynamics—whether salient narratives, intergroup tensions, local histories, or credible messengers—are central to its resonance and impact. Thus, to combat the digital, you must also consider the analog.

KEY POINTS:

- Misinformation is not solely an online problem; offline dynamics and activities also contribute to misinformation's spread and resonance.

- Political conflict, social upheaval, economic stress, and other sociological or psychological are among the offline dynamics that contribute to misinformation's impact and these factors must be considered to understand the intractability of global misinformation.

- Misinformation affects all levels of society. It is paramount to construct responses that take all contextual variables into account; otherwise, success in countering misinformation will remain elusive, particularly in the absence of structural platform reforms.

- A constellation of programs, organizations, and initiatives that build on well-established objectives (like conflict prevention and economic aid) must all be leaned upon—along with social media platform reforms—to meet this challenge.

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Endnotes

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7   Seema Shah and Rachel Brown, "Programming for Peace: Sisi Ni Amani Kenya and the 2013 Election," ICTs, Statebuilding and Peacebuilding in
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    www.npr.org/2021/04/23/990281552/religious-leaders-had-to-fight-disinformation-to-get-their-communities-vaccinate.

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11 Forthcoming reports will further elaborate on this work and its impact.

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14 Woolley and Joseff, "Demand for Deceit: How the Way We Think Drives Disinformation."

15 IREX, Learn to Discern (L2D) - Media Literacy Training, *www.irex.org/project/learn-discern-l2d-media-literacy-training*.

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Photo credit: Manchester, UK. December 12, 2020. "Freedom Rally protest with anti-vaxxer sign text Poison Vaccine . Piccadilly Gardens march starting down Market Street," John B. Hewitt/Shutterstock.