RESPONSES TO MIS/DISINFORMATION

Practitioner experiences and approaches in low income settings

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Introduction

This chapter is informed by the experience and response to mis and disinformation by BBC Media Action, the BBC’s international media support charity. It draws on the work and analysis of numerous colleagues and country offices. BBC Media Action works in 26 mostly low-income and fragile countries, and this experience heavily informs this chapter. The chapter is not intended to reflect the perspective of the BBC itself, although it does incorporate some of the lessons and experiences of the wider BBC.

In this chapter I summarise some of the strategies and approaches that a media support organisation is using to combat mis- and disinformation. The diversity of approaches and contexts that are described makes it difficult to provide a single theoretical framework or reference a particular body of literature as these are now vast. Programmes draw on particular theoretical reference points and literature according to context and objective.

The approaches outlined here are highly specific to different political, social, and economic contexts, but populism is not necessarily a key factor in shaping the strategies and approaches outlined here. Populism is often a product of particular information and communication environments of the type that are now the norm. If information and communication environments privilege misinformation and disinformation, diminish access to trustworthy information, enable patterns of communication that drive societal fragmentation and polarisation, and create a hostile environment for dialogue and debate across societal divides, we argue that they provide fertile ground for populism and authoritarianism to gain ground. BBC Media Action believes that improving the character and quality of the information and communication environment – privileging the availability of and access to trustworthy information, increasing societal capacity for debate and dialogue across societal divides, enabling a diversity of voices to be heard – makes societies more resilient to (although certainly not immune to) populism as well as authoritarianism. The evidence for the practical efficacy for this approach is fragmented, not only from our own experience but more broadly, and towards the end of this chapter, we suggest better ways through which learning and evidence can draw on practitioner experience. However, it should be said at the outset that our analysis tends to focus on populism less as a driver than as a consequence of dysfunctional information and communication environments.
Responses to mis/disinformation

Definitions

We use the following definitions.

Misinformation is untrue information spread by a source who believes it to be true.

Disinformation is untrue information spread by a source who knows it is untrue (i.e. it is a deliberate lie).

Our projects generally seek to identify the principal problem to be addressed and design accordingly, but it is rare that they tackle only one of these challenges. In other words they take a blended approach to tackling both misinformation and disinformation.

Fake news is understood by most people to mean anything that is not true, covering all types of mis/disinformation. Academic papers and institutions such as the European Commission reject the use of the phrase ‘fake news’, although the BBC does continue to use the phrase principally because it is one which their audiences use and recognise (EU 2018). BBC Media Action tends to avoid this term unless it remains the most effective way of engaging people.

We also recognise that the terms misinformation and disinformation are used in civic discourse interchangeably. It is sometimes helpful to think of the phenomena as the spread of untrue information in a world where trust in reliable sources is in decline, where there are solutions on the demand side (e.g. building trust and media literacy) and the supply side (e.g. reducing the amount of untrue information being spread).

Our projects may seek to address two different perceived problems: the organised sharing of disinformation and the organic spread of misinformation.

Principles and foundations

In the following sections, we outline some of the strategies and approaches that BBC Media Action is taking to respond to misinformation and disinformation, but at the outset, some of the principles and foundational components that inform our approach should be spelled out.

Research and context

There are few if any template approaches to tackling misinformation and disinformation. Effective strategies need to be rooted in thorough research and understanding of context. This means:

- Audience research focused on understanding, for example, how people access information, how they communicate, who they trust, and which information sources they most value. Patterns of access will look very different within countries as well as between them. For example, in Myanmar, where BBC Media Action has devised a major programme combatting rumour and misinformation, almost one-third of the population use Facebook daily, but almost half never use it, according to our research.1 Those who do use it tend not to trust it, with just 44 percent of people saying they trust what they access on social media. Effective strategies cannot be devised unless they are rooted in this kind of detailed, contextual knowledge. Research approaches are also tailored to context ranging from traditional nationally representative surveys and qualitative research to artificial intelligence techniques focused on discourse analysis, influencer maps, audience segmentation, and other approaches.
- Political economy analysis and media mapping focused on understanding ownership and power structures in the media and communication space; who is generating information content with what purpose; the conditions and potential for public interest media to
survive and thrive; and the influence over media of government, oligarchs, and political actors, as well as the incentives and objectives of organised efforts to subvert or confuse the information and communication space.

• Real-time learning of what works. There are few tried and trusted solutions to tackling misinformation and disinformation, and those solutions that are proving effective now in one context are unlikely to do so at another time in another. Learning within organisations and across organisations is vital in developing an effective knowledge based of what works and what does not. So, too, are investing in and respecting practitioner research. While there is substantial research informing policy responses, there are currently quite poorly developed learning systems capable of sharing insights between those organisations designing and implementing strategies to address these challenges (further analysis of this issue is focused on later in this chapter).

Theories of change

Developing project-specific theories of change is vital to ensuring complete clarity of what change is expected to come about and understanding the logic of how and why that intervention is likely to achieve the change required. At its most basic, for example, it encourages assessment and challenge of why logical responses (such as the provision of factual information) are expected to provide an effective response to the often emotionally driven behavioural drivers of misinformation.

A mix of responses and a multidisciplinary approach

Misinformation is complex and multi-faceted, and effective responses are likely to involve a mix of strategies. Some of these are outlined later in this chapter. Misinformation is organic, generated virally, amplified by a multiplicity of actors and forces, and rooted in the social reality of human nature. No one strategy is likely to be effective in this context; a range of responses is required, and a high degree of collaboration between different organisations designing and implementing those responses is likely to be required.

BBC Media Action has strong skills and networks in the field of working with media and journalism, in research, in editorial and digital capacities, and in a long history of working in partnership to shift social and behavioural norms. A truly multidisciplinary response requires many more skills than this, especially from the behavioural sciences, data analytics, and political economy, among other areas. Similarly, effective research into impact assessment is likely to draw on similar approaches.

Informed by BBC values

Our approach is heavily informed by BBC values. These are particularly:

• Public service, placing the public interest above all others, and putting audiences or people at the heart of any strategy.
• Universality, with a particular focus on engaging those who cannot afford to pay for accurate information as well as encouraging fact-based dialogue across divides in society.
• Due impartiality, with a focus on improving access to factual information as well as exposure to a diversity of perspectives, whilst not amplifying perspectives which are factually untrue or not supported by science.
Responses to mis/disinformation

- Trust and ensuring that all activities work towards the creation of more trusted information and communication environments and ensuring that information provision, platforms for public debate, and other forms of citizen engagement are underpinned by fact.

- Putting people at the heart of what we do. Our research and programming are focused on understanding, engaging, and listening to people, and we argue that media support strategies are unlikely to succeed unless they are rooted in meeting the information and communication needs of people. In supporting media we recognise that the principal challenge is in finding systems capable of supporting journalists, programme makers, and other media professionals. Our investments in technological solutions and platforms are substantial and growing, but technology is not our first point of entry to addressing the challenges of media development. People and politics are.

- Creativity and innovation. Rooted in the research process, BBC Media Action prizes highly the creativity of its approach. This means that the organisation is consistently experimenting with new approaches, platforms, technologies, and partnerships.

- Scale. Our partnerships are designed to engage everyone in society, especially those who are economically and politically marginalised. Our programmes, implemented with our partners, are successful in engaging a representative cross section of society, both economically and demographically, with a particularly strong track record of engaging young audiences.

- The BBC. At the heart of the twenty-first-century media development challenge is addressing the challenge of how to attract audiences across demographic, political, and other areas whilst also maintaining trust. The BBC is itself engaged in a major process of change and reinvigoration in order to ensure it remains the most trusted information source in the world and one capable of continuing to engage all sections of society, including young people. BBC Media Action also draws on this expertise and experience whilst designing its own programmes to meet these objectives.

Working at scale

Misinformation works at scale. Responses need to work at similar scale to be effective. However, scale is achieved by misinformation by appealing to emotional triggers that encourage people to share information even if they know it to be untrue. Sharing factual information cannot easily tap into the same emotional drivers and faces huge challenges in achieving the same virality as misinformation. Working at scale can therefore involve maximising the continuing capacity to reach broadcast and online audiences through our partnerships and networks; BBC Media Action seeks to work at large scale. Through its capacity building and broadcast partnerships, it reaches more than 100 million. The bulk of this is achieved through national and local partnerships with broadcast, digital, and other media institutions. Some of it is achieved through partnerships with the language services of the BBC World Service.

Investing in local/national media

BBC Media Action focuses heavily on working to support the capacity, capability, and sustainability of in-country media and other trustworthy institutions and entities. Tackling misinformation cannot be restricted to a set of tactical interventions or externally supported projects. It ultimately depends on the existence of an information ecosystem capable of making trustworthy, credible information accessible and appealing across all of society. These media development activities can range from a 15-year support programme to the most the trusted
independent media institution in Iraq, called Al Mirbad, to support to networks of community broadcasters in countries as diverse as Nepal, Tanzania, and Zambia to working to establish public interest media systems in contexts as diverse as Libya, Myanmar, and Tunisia. Some of this work is rooted in a broad strategic effort to support public interest media systems which can be commercial, community, or publicly subsidised. Some of it is specifically contextualised to counter misinformation or disinformation. For example, we have worked with public service broadcasters in the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, which have large minority Russian-speaking populations but where the provision of independent information from within these states in the Russian language has been extremely limited.4 As a consequence, these populations largely access content produced from within Russia itself, including disinformation. Support has focused on working with national public service broadcasters and others to develop strategies better able to improve independent reporting and information provision (including entertainment) in the Russian language. In addition to this, substantial training, business mentoring, and other strategies are adopted to strengthen independent media in the countries in which BBC Media Action operates.

Local ownership and agency
A key principle of our work is that misinformation efforts should be locally owned and directed. Almost all implementing staff are drawn from the country concerned, and from research to programme development, strong efforts are made to ensure that programmatic strategies and content are driven by partners, people, and realities on the ground. It should be acknowledged, however, that this is not always easy. BBC Media Action receives almost no institutional funding, with 96 percent of its income tied to specific project deliverables. This means having a strong focus on programmatic impact, which requires careful consideration if it is to support, rather than override, local or national interests. Similar consideration is required to ensure adherence to BBC values, which stress a commitment to values such as due impartiality and constrain programmatic advocacy or campaigning.

Acute or chronic disinformation
Designing effective responses also needs to be rooted in understanding whether disinformation is acute or chronic. The distinction is most obviously seen in humanitarian, health, and similar responses. At a time of disaster – conflict, epidemic, or natural disaster, for example – rumour and disinformation can complicate the response. Combatting rumours of acute disinformation – for example, falsely claiming that a cure exists for a particular disease, which can lead to people dying by taking that treatment, and false claims that people or groups are carriers of a particular disease – are examples of acute disinformation. Disinformation around the efficacy of vaccines – part of a sustained narrative over time and multiple geographies and often linked to populist politics – is an example of chronic disinformation (more obviously disinformation than misinformation). Strategies to combat the latter needed to be rooted in the overall public health (or equivalent response) involving building the trust and legitimacy of any effort designed to encourage people to adopt (in this case) a particular behaviour, such as getting their children vaccinated.

Working in partnership and coordination
Huge numbers of organisations and agencies are increasingly tackling mis- and disinformation. Coordinating efforts with others is a key component of any effective response, although
the architecture for doing this effectively in many settings is very weak. BBC Media Action works with a broad constellation of actors, depending on the media context. These range from national online platform partnerships to large-scale community radio networks, partnerships with commercial media networks (working with 200 broadcast partners across Nigeria, for example) to national commercial and public service or state broadcasters capable of engaging more than a third of a country’s adult population. Internationally, we work with academic, policy, and other media development partners both in generating learning of what works and does not work and applying and communicating that learning across the development and media development communities.

**Strategies**

The key strategies that are used fall into the following categories. As outlined earlier, they rarely stand alone and involve a mix of approaches:

**Rational-based responses**

Rational-based responses are aimed at helping ensure that public debate is underpinned by factual information, which enables citizens to sift trustworthy from untrustworthy sources of information and increases the availability of, access to, and predominance of trustworthy information. It is recognised that the emotional triggers that drive misinformation are not necessarily effectively countered by rational-based responses, but we consider them an essential component of any response. These include:

- **Providing factual information.** While this may be obvious, the more factual information populating the public sphere and the more that information reaches across society, the more difficult it is for misinformation and disinformation to take hold. BBC Media Action and its partners reach more than 100 million people worldwide, and it often works with the BBC World Service, which itself reaches more than 400 million people worldwide. Public demand for information that people can trust tends to grow markedly in times of crisis, such as during epidemics, social unrest, or other emergencies. BBC audiences both nationally and internationally tend to spike sharply at times of crisis as people turn to information they can trust. Factual information also needs to be engaging and relevant to people across society and is more likely to take the format of an interactive youth-produced digital and broadcast programme than any conventional news reporting format. Misinformation that reflects the lived reality of people is likely to be shared and believed more than factual information, however accurate or trustworthy, that does not reflect that lived reality. Factual information needs to be rooted the reality of people’s lives if it is to have salience.

- **Fact-checking.** We support media partners, especially during elections or at other times of high political tension, to carry out fact-checking. The BBC itself now has a well-established process, Reality Check, which some of these activities are often modelled on, although it is key that strategies are context specific. To be effective, fact-checking needs to have the ability to reach a similar number of people as are exposed to disinformation. It also has to have a way of cutting through to people in ways that resonate with them. Highly creative, context-specific approaches are often required. This is just one of a range of interventions that link to the BBC. The BBC World Service has mounted a major 'fake
news’ season, and BBC Monitoring is a preeminent source of monitoring and analysis of how misinformation is manifested in different contexts around the world.

- **Media literacy.** We carry out school- and high school–based media training, often adapted from the BBC’s own School Report Programme. Media and digital literacy programmes are also developed, aimed at the broader general public, although there are few of these. A key challenge with media literacy is how to achieve sustained impact at scale, and this is an area where special focus on collaborative research and learning is required to discern what works and what doesn’t.

- **Systemic interventions, including an international fund for public interest media.** Misinformation cannot ultimately be tackled without building a healthy public interest information ecosystem. The pressures on independent media and other mechanisms and institutions vital to such an ecosystem extend well beyond what any project or set of interventions can address. Ultimately, they depend on a political economy that can support and encourage public interest media in all its forms. BBC Media Action has been documenting the political economy of the media in different countries for many years, highlighting both the increasing levels of political co-option of independent media and the rapidly intensifying economic pressures that are collapsing business media models around the world (Bhandari et al. 2016; Deane 2013). The most intense pressures, and often the most acute democratic and societal effects, are in resource-poor states. This has led us to recommend the creation of a new international fund for public interest media (Deane and Taki 2020). It would raise funds from bilateral donors, who currently only allocate 0.3 percent of development funding to international media support, as well as technology companies and others with resources and an interest in supporting public interest media. A major feasibility study, supported by the Luminate Group, has been developed, outlining how such a fund could be operationalised, including recommendations around its governance, structures, and measurement and learning processes.

**Emotion-based responses**

Sharing misinformation and disinformation is widely acknowledged to be effective because it appeals to issues of emotion, of identity, and of lived reality. No purely rational response to misinformation can be expected to succeed. While the evidence of the efficacy of emotion-based responses in tackling misinformation is not yet strong, our experience suggests that substantial impact can be achieved. Narrative-based strategies have been deployed for years to shift social norms, to tap into and sometimes positively challenge negative norms deep rooted in group identities and to improve social cohesion, including among groups with histories of devastating conflict (Staub 2014).8

An example is provided by a programme in Myanmar designed to counter rumour and misinformation. These interventions take the form of televised public service announcements, a YouTube miniseries and working with a v-logger/influencer. Its central emphasis is focused on appealing to people’s social responsibility with a punchline asking the audience to consider three questions: ‘Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?’ Audience research carried out around the programmes suggest they are effective at encouraging people to pause and think before sharing information they cannot be sure of. The communication content uses images of modernity, lifestyle, and fashion, with traditional deities. Another example is a drama produced in response to the Ebola emergency, which dramatised real-life scenarios illustrating how people within families dealt with fear often arising from misinformation. According to Yvonne Macpherson, who designed it, ‘drama can tap in to observational or social learning – by listening to or
Responses to mis/disinformation

watching the consequences of characters’ decisions, people will draw parallels and practice what others do’.

BBC Media Action supports multiple dramas, soap operas, and other narrative formats using a broad range of traditional and other platforms and focused on diverse objectives, ranging from improving social cohesion, shifting social norms, and changing behaviour to improving health and building political participation. The evidence of impact in these areas suggests significant impact could be achieved in tackling misinformation.

When and how to respond

Responding to misinformation and disinformation is often focused on contexts and times when it can be most effective and when misinformation and disinformation are either most prevalent or most damaging. These examples include:

Elections. Misinformation tends to spike around moments of political intensity or crisis, most predictably during elections. BBC Media Action carries out specific programmes drawing on the strategies and approaches described earlier. However, tackling misinformation during elections is usually embedded in broader programmes of activities designed to work with national or local partners to improve public debate and coverage or foster political participation. Examples of programmes include broadcasting electoral debates with presidential or other electoral candidates in partnership with national or local media, voter education (for example, how to get registered), media training, and programmes to defuse social tension or reduce the risk of electoral violence. During the 2018 presidential election in Sierra Leone, a set of interventions was designed, building on a long-standing programme of media support in the country which, among other networks, had established the most popular Facebook page in the country with 500,000 followers. This involved designing and delivering in-depth training sessions on responsible use of social media to three key groups – journalists, election management bodies, and young people who are active on social media – and producing a range of media content (films and graphics) to inform wider audiences about more responsible use of social media (Ferguson 2018). Internationally, there are also efforts to encourage a much greater prioritisation of media engagement and media support by electoral assistance organisations, electoral commissioners, and others. Media support conventionally involves short programmes of media training, but our experience is that supporting provision of and access to trustworthy information and platforms for public debate and mitigating misinformation requires a long-term approach across the electoral cycle. Misinformation and disinformation around elections have intensified in recent years, with the use and abuse of data analytics services offered by international actors to specific political actors who can afford to pay for them becoming an especially acute challenge. Multiple strategies are required to respond to these challenges – technological and regulatory as well as informational – and from multiple actors (governments, international regulatory bodies, technology companies, and the media themselves), but an organised response to support access to trustworthy information and platforms for public debate is key.

Emergencies. Some of the most damaging effects of misinformation are manifested at times of disaster, humanitarian crisis, conflict, or other emergency situations. Challenging rumours and providing accurate information have been key in, for example, responses to the Ebola epidemic, the Rohingya response, Nepal’s 2015 earthquake, and civil war in Libya. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is just beginning to materialise
in terms of scale and crisis, and the informational characteristics of that – what the secretary general of the World Health Organization dubbed an ‘infodemic’ – are emerging in what will be seen as its infancy. The value, importance, and public appreciation of trustworthy information accessible via public interest media tends to intensify at such moments.

The need for fresh approaches to learning

The evidence base supporting the efficacy of different strategies to address misinformation is, we believe, weak. This applies globally but is especially the case in low-income settings. There is an extraordinary proliferation of energy, imagination, and expertise being brought to bear to tackle the challenges in all their diversity and complexity. The fact remains that proven strategies are scare. To the extent that clear strategies are identified and evidence built, the information and communication landscape is so fast moving that these strategies may quickly prove redundant.

Outlined here is just a sample of the kinds of strategies that BBC Media Action adopts, but throughout, the emphasis has been on designing strategies through strong research, adapting them to context, and learning from implementation and from the work of others.

There remains a structural problem, however, in that there are few effective and sufficiently well-structured spaces for learning what works and what does not work in tackling misinformation and disinformation, especially among practitioners focused on addressing these challenges. There are multiple conferences and convenings, but these are poor at building a collective and cumulative evidence base capable of enabling rapid adaptation of strategy.

BBC Media Action has proposed the creation of a collaborative Media Development Lab designed to turbocharge learning of what works (and what doesn’t) in tackling misinformation and supporting independent public interest media. The lab would be designed to focus on geographic and political contexts where access to trustworthy information and debate often matter most – where media markets are weakest, resources most scarce, conflict most likely and most devastating, and democracy and the prospects for democracy most fragile. It would be designed to blend and provide an organising framework for practitioner experience, practitioner research, and academic research and expertise to best enable strategic adaptation and impact of efforts to tackle misinformation. Currently, there is little in the way of rigorous collective lesson learning and investigation into what works and what does not work in these approaches and often not a great deal of collective confidence that some of the most commonly established strategies (such as media literacy) will prove impactful at scale.

BBC Media Action has an extensive network of researchers on the ground from the countries in which it works, generating real-time analysis and learning of what works and what does not work, and some other organisations have similar capacities. There is a strong appetite to share learning and certainly also to learn from the best of what others are doing. A media development lab would be a useful and effective way of generating such learning.

Notes

1 BBC Media Action Nationally Representative Survey, December 2019, asked of social media users (n=1,181). While as much data as possible is published externally on BBC Media Action’s data portal (bbcmediaaction.org/dataportal), the research is principally focused on ensuring maximum possible project impact and, for resourcing reasons, is not always externally available.


3 For example, due impartiality does not mean giving credence to voices that deny man made climate change.
Responses to mis/disinformation

4 ‘Understanding media habits and information needs of Russian speakers in the Baltics’, BBC Media Action Research Summary, April 2018.

5 We are conscious that the term trustworthy is contentious, difficult to define, and challenging to measure. We are guided by BBC editorial guidelines in supporting trustworthy content but realise that trustworthy content can be produced that is partisan or is inconsistent with these guidelines in other ways. For the purposes of this chapter, the focus is on news, information, and platforms for public debate that are fact based, serve the public interest, and are found trustworthy by a cross section of the public.


References


