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# DISINFORMATION ABOUT MIGRATION: AN AGE-OLD ISSUE WITH NEW TECH DIMENSIONS<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Many spheres of life have become subject to disinformation. Across the world, it is implicated in the resurgence of vaccine-preventable diseases, the disruption of politics and the amplification of social divisions. Disinformation may be an age-old phenomenon, but it thrives in a digital environment. Digital technologies have been revolutionary in expanding access to information and opportunities for expression, but they have also created a world in which it is relatively easy to manipulate information and to coordinate harmful campaigns against individuals and groups, including migrants, as well as organizations and even countries.

Regulation has not kept pace with these changes. Roughly half of the global population and almost 70 per cent of 15–24-year-olds access the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Much of this online activity is dominated by a few tech companies. Facebook, the world's largest social media platform, has 2.85 billion users and it owns WhatsApp, which has one billion users.<sup>3</sup> Across these and other platforms, disinformation travels at speed and scale. To take one example, a conspiracy-theory video about COVID-19 was viewed more than eight million times within a week of its release.<sup>4</sup> Platforms struggled to block the video as users across the world uploaded new versions and translated it into multiple languages.

Platforms have long struggled to contain disinformation about migration and the extremists who propagate it. However, anti-migrant disinformation cannot be blamed on technology alone. Far-right actors mobilize online and offline, while news media and politicians stand accused of distorting migration issues and leaving the public misinformed.<sup>5</sup> Against this background, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified disinformation about migrants, who were variously attacked for introducing the virus or causing an increase in cases.<sup>6</sup> Health crises have historically been exploited to advance xenophobic agendas,<sup>7</sup> but the pandemic coincided with a resurgence of far-right and extremist ideologies in many countries. At the same time, disinformation has direct impacts on migrants and potential migrants. Many lack reliable information to inform their migration choices<sup>8</sup> and must negotiate the rumours and false claims that circulate in their networks.

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2 ITU, 2020.

3 Tankovska, 2021.

4 Morrish, 2020.

5 Ekman, 2019; McAuliffe et al., 2019.

6 Maniatis and Zard, 2020.

7 Fidler, 2019.

8 Crawley and Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Vammen et al., 2021.

Developing effective countermeasures for online disinformation is clearly an urgent goal. It is also a challenging one. The issues are complex and difficult to disentangle, while scientific research is in its infancy and tends to be concentrated in rich, well-resourced countries. Current countermeasures may be grouped into three broad areas: technological approaches that aim to automate the evaluation of online content and behaviour; audience approaches that aim to upskill the public and build resilience to manipulation; and regulatory and policy approaches that aim to increase transparency and accountability in the digital environment.<sup>9</sup> Activities in these areas are being advanced by a wide range of stakeholders, including tech companies, policymakers, researchers, NGOs, journalists and entrepreneurs. Given the complexity of the problem, it seems clear that no single approach will be sufficient.

These issues are examined in this chapter. Although some examples of anti-migrant disinformation are cited, we aim to avoid the unnecessary and unethical amplification of hateful content. Instead, the aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the structural features of the information environment that enable anti-migrant disinformation, as well as an overview of proposed countermeasures. The Concepts section outlines the key definitions for understanding disinformation and presents a transmission model of the online disinformation process. The Context section examines the factors shaping disinformation about migration in terms of society, politics, media and technology. It then outlines best practices in building public resilience to disinformation and the major insights from current research. The Issues and Challenges section focuses on major gaps in our understanding of disinformation and the current barriers to advancing this work. Finally, the Conclusion identifies broad suggestions and implications for policymakers and other stakeholders seeking to counteract disinformation generally and about migration specifically.

## Concepts

This section introduces key definitions and presents a model of the online disinformation process. Here, we focus on the definitions necessary for a broad understanding of the topic. The lexicon of terms and concepts describing online disinformation is ever evolving as new practices emerge in response to countermeasures and technological trends. For a regularly updated overview of manipulation tactics and related resources, see the *Media Manipulation Casebook*.<sup>10</sup>

Although definitions vary, disinformation is typically defined by its nefarious intent.<sup>11</sup> **Disinformation** is false information that is created or disseminated with the intention to deceive the public for financial, political or social gain. In contrast, **misinformation** is false information that is shared without an intention to deceive. For example, a journalist might misprint a financial sum, but such unintentional mistakes will be acknowledged and corrected. In practice, disinformation and misinformation often overlap. For example, disinformation actors may promote a false story about migrants and members of the public may believe and share the story on the assumption that it is true. Audience research in Kenya and Nigeria, for example, found that people have a strong desire to keep up with the latest news and this enables the dissemination of disinformation, even when those sharing it have good intentions about verifying information.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Culloty and Suiter, 2021.

10 <https://mediamanipulation.org/>.

11 Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017.

12 Chakrabarti et al., 2018.

## Key Definitions

<i>Disinformation:</i>	false information that is deliberately created and disseminated.
<i>Misinformation:</i>	false information that is created or disseminated by mistake.
<i>Information void:</i>	a salient topic about which there is a lack of reliable information.
<i>Illusory truth effect:</i>	the tendency to believe false information after repeated exposure.
<i>Bad actors:</i>	people who intentionally create and propagate disinformation.
<i>Coordinated campaign:</i>	a bad actor network that cooperates to manipulate opinion.
<i>Amplifiers:</i>	influential people who spread disinformation among their networks.
<i>Hyperpartisan media:</i>	media outlets with a strong ideological position.
<i>Fabricated content:</i>	content that is entirely false.
<i>Manipulated content:</i>	genuine content that has been distorted.
<i>Decontextualized content:</i>	genuine content that is removed from its original context.
<i>Disinformation harms:</i>	the negative impacts of disinformation on individuals, groups and societies.
<i>Hate speech:</i>	pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are. <sup>a</sup>
<i>Xenophobia:</i>	when individuals are denied equal rights on account of the real or perceived geographic origins of the said individuals or groups. <sup>b</sup>

a UN, 2019.

b UNHRC, 2017.

An information void occurs when there is high demand for information about a topic, but a lack of reliable information.<sup>13</sup> In the early months of COVID-19 there was high demand for information about the virus, but the supply of reliable scientific information was low. This deficit created a vacuum in which disinformation and rumours could circulate. Over time, repeated exposure to disinformation can create an illusory truth effect. This phenomenon is linked to memory, as familiar information is more easily recalled and appears more reliable as a result.<sup>14</sup> On this basis, best practice in correcting disinformation recommends avoiding any unnecessary repetition of false claims.<sup>15</sup>

13 Shane and Noel, 2020.

14 De Keersmaecker et al., 2020; Hasher et al., 1977.

15 Wardle, 2018.

Bad actors is a generic term for those who intentionally create and propagate disinformation. They may be States, corporations, social movements or individuals and their motivations span a spectrum of political, ideological and financial interests. They also vary considerably in terms of the audiences they target and the levels of coordination involved. Amplifiers are the media pundits, politicians, celebrities and online influencers who help popularize disinformation – whether intentionally or not – by spreading it among their large networks. Finally, hyperpartisan media are ideological outlets that frequently amplify disinformation. In the United States of America, for example, hyperpartisan media regularly give credence to disinformation stories and thereby push disinformation agendas on topics from economics to international relations.<sup>16</sup> Disinformation campaigns against migrants are heavily aligned to right-wing political and media actors, including the resurgence of far-right, nationalist and xenophobic ideologies.<sup>17</sup>

*Fabricated* content includes content that is entirely invented. This includes fake news stories, such as the false story about Pope Francis endorsing Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign,<sup>18</sup> or “deep fake” videos that are generated entirely from computer technology. *Manipulated* content includes genuine content that has been distorted, such as selectively edited video clips. For example, an online video from 2019 deceptively combined quotes from a talk by Bill Gates to create the impression that he supports sterilization and population control. The video resurfaced in 2021 across multiple social media platforms.<sup>19</sup> *Decontextualized* content is genuine content that has been removed from its original context, such as old photographs that are accompanied with false captions linking them to present-day events. An analysis of almost one million tweets during the United States–Mexico border crisis found that decontextualized images were the most prominent type of disinformation.<sup>20</sup> This visual disinformation was also more likely to be shared and amplified by high-profile individuals.

To date, much of the popular discussion on disinformation has focused on content. However, focusing on content alone can obscure the operation of coordinated disinformation campaigns whereby a network of bad actors cooperates to manipulate public opinion. Across its platform, Facebook uses the concept of “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” to describe networks of pages and accounts that “work together to mislead others about who they are or what they are doing”.<sup>21</sup> In reality, coordinated campaigns extend across multiple platforms and the power of these campaigns lies in the cumulative effect of endlessly repeating negative stories about migrants and minorities.

In addition, less attention has been given to understanding and measuring disinformation harms. A harm-based approach requires considering the impact on those targeted and affected by disinformation campaigns, as well as wider impacts on society.<sup>22</sup> In the case of migration, disinformation harms are associated with hate speech and xenophobia, which promote hostility and discrimination towards migrants, which in turn can help legitimize anti-migrant policy approaches.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, disinformation and the absence of reliable information can cause harm to migrants by negatively influencing their decisions and awareness of rights.<sup>24</sup>

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16 Vargo et al., 2018.

17 McAuliffe et al., 2019.

18 Evon, 2016.

19 Reuters, 2021.

20 McAweeney, 2018.

21 Gleicher, 2018.

22 Pasquetto, 2020.

23 Mossou and Lane, 2018.

24 Carlson et al., 2018.

## Coordinated campaigns by the far right

Far-right disinformation attacks have increased by 250 per cent since 2014; this trend is expected to continue, as the extended economic downturn caused by COVID-19 is likely to create political instability.<sup>a</sup> Online, there is considerable evidence of increased cooperation among far-right actors. A study of almost 7.5 million tweets during the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 identified a surge in far-right activity whereby refugees were framed in xenophobic terms and presented as a threat to Europe's security, economy and culture.<sup>b</sup> Subsequent studies have identified coordinated campaigns ahead of national elections,<sup>c</sup> and in opposition to the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.<sup>d</sup> Proponents of this campaign were responsible for almost half of the most popular YouTube videos about the Global Compact and promoted a false claim about a requirement for States to outlaw criticism of migration.<sup>e</sup> As much of this activity coalesces around the issue of Muslim migration, Islamophobia appears to be a uniting factor for different far-right groups.<sup>f</sup>

a Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020.

b Siapera et al., 2018.

c Avaaz, 2019; Davey and Ebner, 2017.

d McAuliffe, 2018.

e ISD, 2019.

f Froio and Ganesh, 2018.

The online disinformation process: reduced to its basic constituents, online disinformation, when it is successful, is a process that involves different actors and consecutive stages. In essence, bad actors create and push disinformation using online platforms as a means of distribution and promotion, while audiences give disinformation meaning and impact through their willingness to engage with it (see Figure 1). Of course, any given scenario of online disinformation is more complex than this simple transmission model suggests. Nevertheless, it provides a means of identifying how various countermeasures attempt to intervene and disrupt this process.

As noted, bad actors may be defined collectively by their common intention to deceive or manipulate the public. Much of what is known about bad actors comes from researchers and investigative journalism, rather than data supplied by technology platforms. The aim of this work is to identify the extent of disinformation and the nature of manipulation techniques. For their part, platforms have taken steps to remove fake accounts, while independent technology developers have developed many publicly available tools to identify manipulated content and deceptive activity.

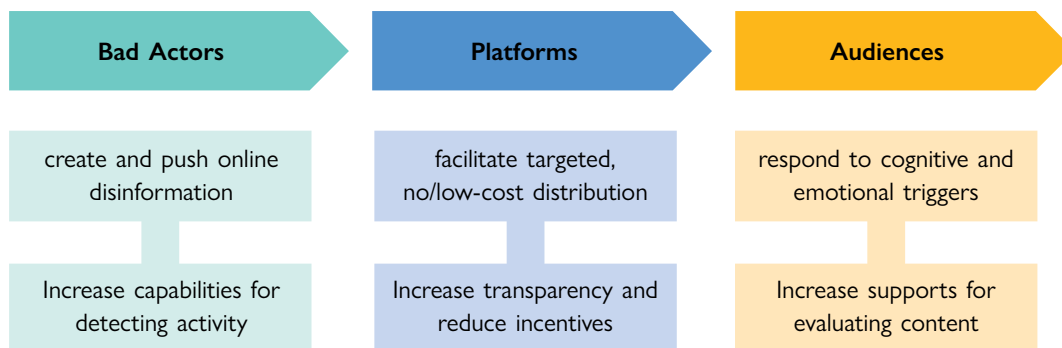
Platforms enable disinformation by facilitating no-cost or low-cost and targeted distribution. Engagement metrics, recommendation algorithms and the online advertising industry also incentivize low-quality and sensational content. On this basis, platforms are the focus of policy and civil society efforts to reduce incentives for bad actors and to increase transparency and accountability. For example, under the European Union's self-regulatory Code of Practice of Disinformation,<sup>25</sup> platforms provide greater transparency about online advertising; although the European Union's own evaluation of the Code identified serious shortcomings with it.<sup>26</sup>

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25 European Commission, 2018.

26 ERGA, 2020.

Figure 1: The online disinformation process



Source: Authors' own work.

Finally, audiences are arguably the most important component of the process. After all, disinformation only becomes a problem when it finds a receptive audience willing to support or share it. Many factors influence audience receptivity to disinformation, including prior knowledge and bias, repeated exposure to false claims, and willingness or capacity to critically examine new information. Disinformation content often appeals to the existing biases of target audiences and is highly emotive in attempting to provoke outrage.<sup>27</sup> A core focus of interventions in this area is on educational and empowering initiatives that help audiences evaluate the credibility of content.

However, while highlighting the central role of technology, it is also important to recognize that technology does not operate in isolation from other social forces. A recent comparative analysis of 18 countries examined national levels of resilience to online disinformation.<sup>28</sup> It identified the following factors as likely predictors of vulnerability: a political environment characterized by populism and social polarization; and a media environment characterized by low trust in news, weak public service media, large advertising markets and high use of social media. As such, all these factors need to be considered and addressed for a comprehensive response to disinformation.

## Contexts

This section examines how factors relating to society and politics, media and technology influence disinformation about migrants and migration. It then outlines current thinking about best-practice approaches to increasing societal resilience to disinformation.

There is a long global history of disinformation campaigns against migrants and minorities. One illustrative example is the *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which emerged in Russia in 1903. It foreshadows the fake stories, fabricated evidence and high-profile amplifiers that animate contemporary disinformation. A fake document was presented as a leaked plot for Jewish domination. This conspiracy theory gained traction and spread internationally through the press and pamphlets and through the endorsement of major public figures including the American industrialist Henry Ford. Two important lessons can be drawn from this case: successful disinformation amplifies existing prejudices and relies on structures of communication power and influence.<sup>29</sup> In other words, specific instances of

<sup>27</sup> Bakir and McStay, 2018; Paschen, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Humprecht et al., 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Culloty and Suiter, 2021.



disinformation need to be contextualized against wider historical patterns of prejudice, inequalities and access to power.

Society and politics: In many countries, high-profile political actors have normalized disinformation about migration and rely on sympathetic media to do so.<sup>30</sup> Often, these arguments centre on economics. Public anxieties about economic implications and social change are channelled against migrants, even though unemployment rates and wage deflation are the result of State economic policies and not migration.<sup>31</sup> In South Africa, for example, studies consistently find that migration is a net economic benefit for the country, but migrants are scapegoated as a cause of high unemployment.<sup>32</sup> In the United States, Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign generated fears about Mexicans "swarming" over the southern border and promised to "build a wall" to protect the integrity of the State. Although Trump's rhetoric was largely directed at Mexicans, hyperpartisan media outlets extended the fearmongering to include Muslims.<sup>33</sup> In the United Kingdom, pro-Brexit rhetoric focused heavily on migration from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Legal European Union migration was frequently confused with asylum-seeking as the Vote Leave campaign stoked up fears of an imminent arrival of millions of Turks<sup>34</sup> and the right-wing press amplified these views.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, bad actors actively promote distrust in elites and institutions. In many respects, the so-called "post-truth crisis" is a crisis of trust. Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to further declines in trust. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer found that a majority of respondents across 27 countries believe that government leaders (57%), business leaders (56%) and journalists (59%) are purposely trying to mislead the public.<sup>36</sup> However, while these figures provoke alarm in Western countries, Eurocentric ideas about audience trust in government and traditional media are not easily translated to any country where there has been a historical lack of media freedom.<sup>37</sup> Across North Africa, for example, social media have presented new opportunities for freedom of expression in counterpoint to State-aligned media.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, social media give migrants and people on the move opportunities for self-expression and the ability to raise human rights concerns.<sup>39</sup>

Media: Journalists are frequently criticized for providing negative coverage of migration. In some outlets, the use of fear as a framing device results in a perpetual flow of "bad news" about migrant crime, public unrest and violence.<sup>40</sup> As such, news media provide bad actors with stories that can be repurposed and decontextualized to promote their own agenda.<sup>41</sup> During the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–2016, European news media played a central role in framing the arriving refugees and migrants as a crisis for Europe, while affording little attention to migrants and their experience.<sup>42</sup> This narrative also prevails in North Africa, where media coverage often accentuates discrimination and racism.<sup>43</sup> Stereotyped and negative images of migrants perpetuate a discourse of migration as an "invasion" or

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30 Crandall et al., 2018.

31 Hogan and Haltinner, 2015.

32 McKaiser, 2019.

33 Benkler et al., 2018.

34 Ker-Lindsay, 2018.

35 Morrison, 2019.

36 Edelman, 2021.

37 Schiffrin, 2018.

38 Deane et al., 2020.

39 Creta, 2021.

40 Philo et al., 2013.

41 Ekman, 2019.

42 Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017.

43 ICMPD, 2017; Pace et al., 2020.

a “burden”, which exacerbates prejudice and hostile attitudes. These views have been linked to the rise in anti-immigrant political parties and the intensification of anti-immigrant rhetoric in politics.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, there are also examples of news media exposing injustices in the way that migrants are treated, but investigative journalism is under pressure. Contemporary newsrooms are under-resourced and journalists often lack the time and money to provide in-depth, contextual coverage. Journalists may also lack adequate training to achieve this, while some newsrooms are subject to capture and control by political and financial interests, resulting in a culture of self-censorship.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, much media coverage of migration lacks the necessary context and is superficial, simplistic and ill-informed, if not also politically biased. Even in countries with high levels of media freedom, news coverage tends to reflect the priorities and concerns of governments.<sup>46</sup>

### Encouraging better media practices

Several organizations – including IOM, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the OPEN Media Hub – launched the Migration Media Award in 2017.<sup>a</sup> This initiative aims to reward journalists for providing high-quality reporting about migration in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Similarly, in 2017 IOM launched the South American Migration Journalism Award to recognize the work of journalists who adopt a human rights approach to migration coverage. This includes highlighting the positive contributions of migrants, challenging the negative perception of migrants and contributing to the prevention of xenophobia, racism and discrimination.<sup>b</sup> Announced in 2020, the Global Migration Media Academy will provide a free platform for journalists and students to learn best practices in reporting migration and countering disinformation.<sup>c</sup> Encouraging fair, evidence-based reporting, in line with standard requirements of ethical journalism, may in turn create a space for evidence-based debates about migration policy.

Migrants and potential migrants also need reliable information about transit and their destination countries. Digital technologies provide a means of supporting migrants in their decision-making.<sup>d</sup> The online platform InfoMigrants was developed by a consortium of European media outlets and agencies.<sup>e</sup> Co-financed by the European Union, it aims to counter rumours and disinformation by providing objective and balanced news about the countries migrants have left, the countries they travel through and the countries in which they hope to settle. The news service is provided in five languages: French, Arabic, English, Dari and Pashto.

a See details at [www.migration-media-award.eu](http://www.migration-media-award.eu).

b IOM, 2017.

c IOM, 2021.

d McAuliffe, 2016.

e See details at [www.infomigrants.net/en/](http://www.infomigrants.net/en/).

**Technology:** While the advent of the Internet promised a new frontier for freedom of expression and access to information, the online world is dominated by a small group of companies. These have grown far beyond their original focus – online shopping, web search, social networking – to become vast infrastructures upon which entire sectors of social and economic life are dependent. The business model is relatively simple: they offer users free

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44 Allen et al., 2017.

45 Schiffrin, 2018.

46 Allen et al., 2017.

access to content and services, while accumulating data that generate revenue through personalized advertising and other data-based services.<sup>47</sup>

As these platforms are designed to maximize engagement, rather than information exchange or civil debate, they provide multiple opportunities for disinformation to flourish. Engagement metrics – views, likes, shares, fans and followers – incentivize attention-grabbing content, including disinformation,<sup>48</sup> while opaque algorithms influence the content that people see and can sometimes push them into “rabbit holes” of extremist and conspiratorial discourse.<sup>49</sup> As advertising businesses, Google and Facebook are implicated in financing disinformation. For example, Google provides three quarters of the advertising revenue earned by disinformation websites.<sup>50</sup> In this context, some argue that social media platforms have given rise to a culture of digital hate.<sup>51</sup> Nativist, racist and xenophobic narratives that were previously marginalized on fringe websites – where people had to actively seek them out – now reach a wider audience on popular social media platforms.<sup>52</sup>

While technology platforms have amassed an unprecedented influence on daily life, they have not developed – or been required to develop – commensurate structures of governance and accountability. To counteract disinformation, technology platforms partner with fact-checkers and media outlets and experiment with audience interventions. To varying degrees, they rely on human moderators to evaluate content. However, technological or automated approaches to content moderation form the core of the platforms’ responses.<sup>53</sup> The chief advantage of a technological approach is the promise of moderating content at speed and scale, but there are also major shortcomings in terms of accuracy, reliability and oversight. Moreover, human oversight for content moderation is often outsourced to poorly resourced contractors.<sup>54</sup> In 2018, the United Nations accused Facebook of playing a “determining role” in the incitement of genocidal violence against Myanmar’s Rohingya population. An investigation by Reuters revealed that Facebook’s human moderators and its algorithmic moderation system were unable to comprehend the regions’ languages.<sup>55</sup>

### Disinformation as a catalyst for harmful views

A recent study investigated how disinformation drives hostility towards Rohingya refugees on Facebook. Over a nine-month period beginning in January 2020, the study analysed posts and comments on Facebook pages in Bangladesh and Malaysia. The vast majority of posts in both Bangladesh (80%) and Malaysia (77%) were either positive or neutral in their sentiment towards Rohingya refugees. However, the majority of comments generated by these posts were negative: 58 per cent in Bangladesh and 70 per cent in Malaysia. A prevalent theme within these negative comments alleged that refugees benefit from preferential treatment – from NGOs, governments and the international community – while placing a strain on the resources of the host countries. These and related claims intensified throughout the period, resulting in a social media persecution of Rohingya occurring in parallel to their offline persecution.

*Source: Urquhart, 2021.*

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47 Wu, 2017.

48 Shao et al., 2018.

49 Hussein et al., 2020.

50 GDI, 2020.

51 Ganesh, 2018.

52 Ekman, 2019; Farkas et al., 2017.

53 See Alaphilippe et al., 2019; Bontcheva et al., 2020.

54 Roberts, 2019.

55 Stecklow, 2018.

As noted, the post-truth crisis is in some ways a crisis of trust. The rapid evolution of digital communication has occurred without adequate development of norms to guide people in their decisions about whom or what to trust online. As a result, many researchers and entrepreneurs have developed new tools to detect disinformation and provide guidance to users. For example, InVid<sup>56</sup> is a free verification platform that evaluates the credibility of online videos, while Logically<sup>57</sup> combines artificial and human intelligence to evaluate the credibility of online sources and stories. More recently, major tech companies and media – including Microsoft, Twitter, BBC and Adobe – have formed the Content Authenticity Initiative to set standards for trustworthy online content.<sup>58</sup> While these and many similar innovations are locked in an “arms race” with bad actors, who will inevitably seek new ways to evade detection, the lasting significance may be the development of norms and standards for the production and reception of information online.

## Building societal resilience to disinformation

Certain traits are associated with susceptibility to disinformation, including low cognitive ability, low topic knowledge, motivated reasoning and weak levels of media literacy. For example, some studies find that older people and those with strong partisan bias are more likely to believe disinformation.<sup>59</sup> In many countries, disinformation about migration is subject to low levels of public knowledge<sup>60</sup> and a resurgence of nationalist sentiment, which is linked to hostility towards migrants.<sup>61</sup> These factors contribute to anti-immigrant disinformation. However, other researchers argue that situational factors (e.g. pausing to consider accuracy) and cognitive factors (e.g. the ability to evaluate information) are more important than prior knowledge or partisan bias.<sup>62</sup> This is important, because it suggests that audience-focused countermeasures may have a significant impact.

Information corrections and pre-bunking: There is growing evidence that succinct and repeated corrections can reduce misperceptions. A study of misperceptions about migration found that providing correct information reduced negative attitudes towards migrants, while also increasing factual knowledge.<sup>63</sup> However, the content and format of a correction matter. Content matters, because simply stating that information is wrong may do little to dislodge misperceptions. In contrast, providing an explanation is more effective, because it helps the audience to update their knowledge. Format matters, because audiences might only skim the content. If the correction fails to prioritize correct information or puts undue emphasis on false claims, then the important facts may be lost. To avoid these scenarios, best practice recommends a “truth sandwich” approach, whereby the correction begins with correct information before explaining the nature of the disinformation and why it is incorrect. In the final step, the correct information is reinforced again.

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56 [www.invid-project.eu/](http://www.invid-project.eu/).

57 [www.logically.ai/about](http://www.logically.ai/about).

58 <https://contentauthenticity.org/>.

59 Guess et al., 2020.

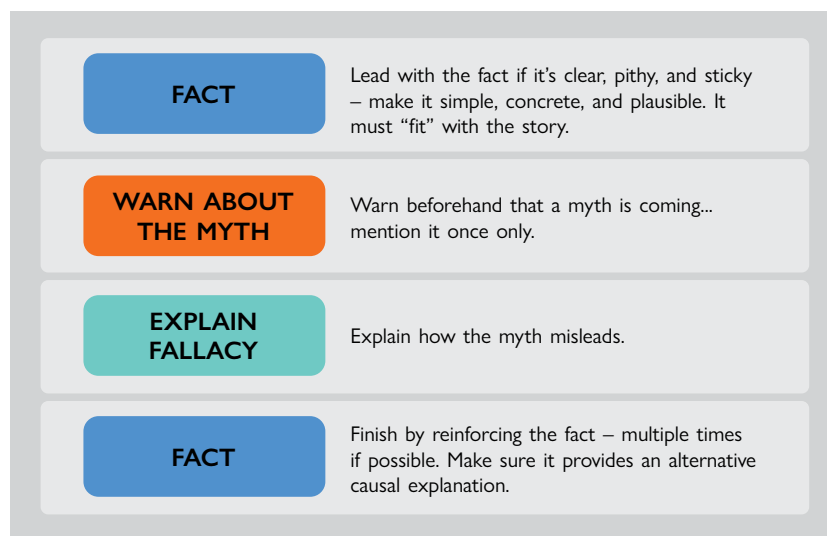
60 Alesina et al., 2018; Grigorieff et al., 2020.

61 Hiers et al., 2017; Feinstein and Bonikowski, 2021, McAuliffe et al., 2019.

62 Pennycook and Rand, 2019.

63 Grigorieff et al., 2020.

Figure 2: Debunking Steps



Source: Lewandowsky et al., 2020.

Corrections are a defensive strategy that responds to disinformation after it has been disseminated. There are obvious limitations, given the volume of disinformation in circulation and the challenge of reaching all those who have been exposed to it.

Alternatively, pre-bunking is an offensive strategy that anticipates disinformation and forewarns the public about manipulation tactics.<sup>64</sup> This approach is sometimes compared with an inoculation. The core idea is that once people have learned to recognize manipulation tactics and are already armed with correct information, they will be able to reject disinformation when they encounter it. The advantage of pre-bunking is scale, as the technique can be embedded in media literacy materials and disseminated through online games and other engaging materials. In 2018, Dutch researchers developed the Bad News game in collaboration with the media platform DROG.<sup>65</sup> In this free online game, players use misleading tactics to build their own fake news empire. A large-scale evaluation with 15,000 participants found that people's ability to identify and resist disinformation improved after game play, irrespective of their education, age, political ideology and cognitive style.<sup>66</sup> A more recent version of the game, Harmony Square,<sup>67</sup> was developed to focus on manipulation tactics during election campaigns.

64 Cook et al., 2017; Roozenbeek et al., 2020.

65 [www.getbadnews.com](http://www.getbadnews.com).

66 Roozenbeek et al., 2020.

67 <https://harmonysquare.game/en>.

Stopping the spread of disinformation: Within popular discussions of disinformation, there is an unfortunate tendency to assume that disinformation-sharing metrics are an indicator of public belief levels. In contrast, audience studies from Africa, Asia and Europe indicate that people share disinformation for a variety of reasons, including self-expression, entertainment and a desire to warn others about potential danger.<sup>68</sup> The last motivation is notable, because disinformation often plays on people's emotions by generating fear about threats to the safety of loved ones and communities. In these circumstances, the civic desire to inform others and the social desire to be the first to share new information contribute to the spread of disinformation.<sup>69</sup> The challenge then is to find ways to harness people's sense of civic duty to encourage positive practices.

A promising strand of research in this area finds that simply prompting people to pause and think about the accuracy of a message greatly improves their ability to reject disinformation, while also reducing the intention to share disinformation.<sup>70</sup> Most platforms have explored a limited version of this approach by attaching information labels to content, while Twitter additionally prompts people to open a news link before retweeting it. More generally, many media literacy campaigns endorse a "stop and think" message. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Pause campaign<sup>71</sup> encouraged people to reflect before sharing information online. The campaign consists of videos, graphics and colourful animations that emphasize the importance of only sharing trusted and accurate science-based social media content.

Trusted and accessible information sources: Disinformation corrections typically rely on expert sources, which are generally considered to be more credible than peers.<sup>72</sup> However, credibility concerns perceptions of trustworthiness in addition to expertise,<sup>73</sup> and in some scenarios, trustworthiness may matter more than expertise.<sup>74</sup> Efforts to provide accurate information about the risks of migration must contend with the fact that potential migrants have a general distrust of official information campaigns and authorities, including governments and international organizations.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, relying on news media or governments to correct false information may be ineffective in cases where people already distrust these institutions.

In this context, trusted peers play an important role in promoting reliable information. To counteract COVID-19 disinformation, the United Nations' Verified initiative relied on a novel approach to engaging citizens as trusted community messengers.<sup>76</sup> The initiative invited people to become information volunteers who receive a daily feed of reliable information that is optimized for social sharing. While COVID-19 served as a catalyst for the advancement of peer-led campaigns, they have been employed previously in the context of migration. For example, the Mistakes by Word of Mouth campaign in Costa Rica relies on participatory principles and trusted peers to counteract rumours about migration regularization.<sup>77</sup>

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68 Banaji and Bhat, 2019; Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019; Chakrabarti et al., 2018.

69 Chakrabarti et al., 2018.

70 Pennycook et al., 2020.

71 [www.takecarebeforeyoushare.org/](http://www.takecarebeforeyoushare.org/).

72 Vraga and Bode, 2017.

73 Swire-Thompson and Ecker, 2018.

74 Benegal and Scruggs, 2018.

75 European Commission, 2018; Vammen et al., 2021.

76 <https://shareverified.com/en/>.

77 <https://somoscolmena.info/en/cr>.



**KANERE migrant-led news:** Kakuma in north-western Kenya is the site of one of the world's largest camps for displaced people. It is also home to KANERE,<sup>a</sup> the world's first fully independent refugee-camp news outlet. The name KANERE is short for

Kakuma News Reflector. Founding editor Qaabata Boru is a refugee himself. He now lives in Vancouver, Canada where he edits KANERE remotely and oversees a multinational team of 17 reporters. KANERE began in 2008 with a mission "to create a more open society in refugee camps and to develop a platform for fair public debate on refugee affairs." It has focused on issues that matter to refugees, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the legal rights of refugees and the alarming suicide rate among female residents. Boru explained, "We are the first contact with the community. Through this, we're able to build trust." As a trusted news source, KANERE has been on the front line of countering false information and ensuring that refugees have access to reliable information. During COVID-19, KANERE monitored and debunked the myths and rumours about COVID-19 circulating in the camp. These rumours undermined public health care and, in some cases, stigmatized certain groups. To counteract the false information, KANERE published reports online and reached out to different parts of the camp using a loudspeaker to broadcast credible information.

a <https://kanere.org/>.

Finally, reliable information needs to be accessible for target audiences. By tailoring information to audiences' preferred formats and channels, the message is more likely to be received and shared. For many people, visual information is more engaging and accessible than text. Providing accessible information requires effort – not least because accurate information may be more complicated than rumours. Studies indicate that information corrections are more likely to gain attention when they are visual.<sup>78</sup>

## Issues and challenges

This section outlines the key challenges for countering disinformation about migration. As online disinformation is a relatively new phenomenon, these challenges primarily concern gaps in knowledge and associated issues with data access and the unequal distribution of platform and research resources.

**Knowledge gaps:** There are significant knowledge gaps concerning the impact of disinformation and the long-term effectiveness of countermeasures. Regarding impact, big-data studies reveal the scale or volume of false information about migration. However, evidence of disinformation campaigns does not necessarily translate into an impact on society or democracy. Further research is needed to understand the mechanisms through which disinformation has influence. This is important to ensure that attention and resources are focused on disinformation that is likely to have an impact. Regarding countermeasures, although the emerging consensus holds that information corrections are effective in terms of reducing false beliefs, there is much that is not well understood. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed to understand whether the effects are long-lasting. Current research indicates that corrections are less effective when the disinformation was originally attributed to a credible source; when people have been

78 McAweeney, 2018.

exposed to the disinformation multiple times prior to correction; and when there is a time delay between the initial exposure and the correction.<sup>79</sup> Other studies indicate that corrections may reduce false perceptions, but do little to challenge underlying attitudes.<sup>80</sup>

A related issue concerns the lack of diversity in research. Much of the funding and resources is concentrated in wealthy nations and there is a considerable lack of quantitative and qualitative research from other regions. In addition, the various platforms have largely declined to share relevant data with independent researchers, which greatly impedes efforts to assess the scale and nature of the problem and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Moreover, platform interventions are highly selective and tend to be concentrated in Western countries, where they face intense scrutiny from policymakers. For example, the major platforms intervened to counteract disinformation during the 2020 presidential election in the United States, but did not provide the same supports for contemporaneous elections in Sri Lanka and Nigeria.

Platform regulation: The persistence of major knowledge gaps surrounding disinformation on technology platforms is indicative of the failure of self-regulation. In response to concerns about disinformation and related issues, the platforms have engaged in transparency initiatives. Aside from the fact that these initiatives have been found wanting,<sup>81</sup> transparency without accountability achieves very little. Accountability implies independent oversight or audits by experts who have the capacity and remit to evaluate the situation with the interests of the public and the protection of fundamental rights in mind. Stronger regulation could also compel platforms to cooperate with vetted disinformation researchers and investigators to identify disinformation threats and to evaluate the effectiveness of countermeasures.

Definitional ambiguities: There is a risk that the term “disinformation” will be extended to all kinds of content that is deemed problematic or distasteful. Some countries have already introduced new laws against disinformation,<sup>82</sup> which have been criticized for their potentially chilling impact on freedom of expression. There are ongoing debates about how to balance fundamental rights with the need to mitigate public harms.<sup>83</sup> The definitional ambiguity surrounding disinformation presents a challenge in this process and has wider implications.

In many cases, the boundaries between false information, opinions and interpretations of evidence are unclear. In contrast with scientific issues about which there is an established consensus, such as climate, issues of a social and political nature pose particular difficulty, because the facts are often not absolute. Regarding migration, for example, there are ongoing academic debates about how to assess statistics on migration and crime,<sup>84</sup> a topic that animates sensational media coverage and activism by anti-immigrant actors.

In other cases, the types of content produced by bad actors are inherently not factual. For example, campaigns targeting migrants exhibit a “malevolent creativity” in their use of sarcasm, in-jokes and memes.<sup>85</sup> Such cultural content is problematic,<sup>86</sup> but often falls outside the remit of factual claims, and its ambiguous nature can create difficulties in establishing intention. Thus, there is much work to be done across conceptual, practical and policy levels.

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79 Walter and Tukachinsky, 2020.

80 Nyhan and Reifler, 2015.

81 ERGA, 2020.

82 Funke and Flamini, 2020.

83 Bontcheva et al., 2020; Ponsetti and Bontcheva, 2020.

84 Ousey and Kubrin, 2018.

85 de Saint Laurent et al., 2020.

86 Marwick and Lewis, 2017.



## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the factors shaping disinformation about migration and a range of countermeasures that seek to improve the information environment. In many respects, current efforts to counteract online disinformation appear to be piecemeal and uncoordinated. However, disinformation, including disinformation about migration, is a multifaceted problem. Building resilience to disinformation is a long-term project that needs to address overlapping societal issues, including declining levels of trust and increasing polarization. In the immediate term, greater cooperation is required across sectors and across borders to detect and counter disinformation campaigns. This is especially true in the context of migration, where migrants need access to reliable information as they cross borders and where coordinated disinformation campaigns are already transnational. One positive outcome of the COVID-19 crisis has been the consolidation of international collaborations such as the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance.<sup>87</sup> Launched in January 2020, it united more than 100 fact-checkers from 70 countries who benefit from shared resources and pooled expertise.

Consolidating the issues discussed in the chapter, we highlight the following as a non-exhaustive set of broad suggestions for policymakers, technology platforms, NGOs, media and researchers:

### Policymakers:

- Require greater accountability from digital platforms;
- Develop mechanisms for co-regulatory oversight of digital platforms;
- Protect media freedom and freedom of expression;
- Engage with stakeholders to ensure that responses are appropriate and in line with evidence-based best practices;
- Invest in initiatives to monitor, assess and counter disinformation.

### Platforms:

- Provide sufficient data access for research and oversight;
- Roll out interventions in all regions at risk of harmful disinformation campaigns, particularly during elections;
- Work with vetted stakeholders to identify threats in good time;
- Develop and embed best-practice norms for labelling online information.

### NGOs, journalists and other media stakeholders:

- Ensure that migrants have access to reliable and accessible information;
- Provide training and resources for journalists to report responsibly on migration and disinformation about migration;
- Provide repeated corrections in accessible formats to counter false claims;
- Educate the public about media literacy and disinformation.

### Researchers:

- Conduct studies on the effectiveness of countermeasures;
- Cooperate with researchers from poorly resourced countries to reduce geographical knowledge gaps.

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87 [www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/](http://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/).

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