

**Disinformation:
The importance of
Independent Journalism and
Media Literacy**

**Submission by Free Press Unlimited to the
Human Rights Council's Advisory Committee**

Introduction

Free Press Unlimited welcomes the opportunity to submit input to the HRC's advisory committee's study on the impact of disinformation on the enjoyment and realization of human rights. We applaud the recognition in Res 55/10 of the impact of disinformation on the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and the freedom to seek, receive and impart information. We furthermore appreciate the invitation in line 7 underlining the role of states in improving access to diverse and verifiable sources by promoting independent, free, plural, and diverse media. In our submission, we seek to argue that we need a different approach when "addressing" disinformation. Instead of focusing on combating the sheer amount of dis- and misinformation that circulates online and offline, we argue that we need to focus on creating an environment in which reliable information can thrive and reach citizens. In this submission we draw from our experience in how this can be achieved. Facts need to be prioritized over falsehoods and half-truths. An informed citizenry is an autonomous and empowered citizenry. Less receptive to disinformation.

Disinformation is a long-standing pre-digital phenomenon, the threat it poses to democracy amplified by digital platforms, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and modern communication channels. Since our submission to the UNSP in 2021 on the impact of disinformation on the right to freedom of expression, crises have emerged around the globe highlighting the debilitating impact of disinformation on the enjoyment of the right to access information. In crisis contexts, independent media acts as a lifeline, informing citizens whether they are in danger and how to seek help. Disinformation is difficult to discern in the absence of plural and reliable information in these settings, and can therefore also result in a broader erosion of trust in media, science, and public institutions. Disinformation can furthermore serve to discredit journalists and to polarize in post-conflict contexts.

In this input we emphasize a two pronged approach in addressing disinformation: media literacy and improving access to diverse and reliable information. This two-pronged approach enables citizens to be able to make critical judgments about the information they consume using a plurality of sources. Strategies that aim to suppress or counter individual pieces of disinformation, such as fact-checking initiatives, only present a short-term solution in a broader mosaic of approaches. Our two-pronged strategy is less sensitive to the volume of disinformation in circulation, but instead focuses on creating more resilient citizens. In our view this constitutes a more sustainable approach to countering the negative effects of disinformation on human rights. The approach requires long-term investment in quality journalism and the promotion of media pluralism combined with media literacy to foster societal resilience to disinformation. There is both a role to be played by state actors in facilitating a free and independent media ecosystem, as well as by social media platforms, who have a responsibility in accordance with the UNGPs to prevent harming human rights, such as by amplifying disinformation. States in turn have a responsibility to accordingly regulate platforms.

We substantiate our approach drawing from the successes of an initiative in the Eastern-European EU context, SCIENCE+. Created in response to rampant disinformation

during the COVID-19 crisis, SCIENCE+ outlets collectively reach 18 million readers per month, and its collaborations have brought new content strategies that build resilience of Central European societies to disinformation about public health. SCIENCE+ demonstrates how independent media can be supported and amplified to foster resilience to disinformation through access to reliable and dependent information. The role of independent media is key in combating the challenges that disinformation poses to the enjoyment and realization of the freedom of expression, right to life, and right to privacy.

Introduction	2
The impact of disinformation on the exercise of human rights during global crises	3
Supporting Independent Media: Lessons from SCIENCE+	5
Access to information: challenges and recommendations	6
Conclusion	8

The impact of disinformation on the exercise of human rights during global crises

In crisis situations across the globe, independent media acts as a lifeline, informing citizens how to [find shelter from airstrikes, avoid active warzones, and where to obtain humanitarian aid](#). In crisis contexts, disinformation is easily circulated, competing with reliable information. Deficiencies in reliable information occur as the ability of journalists to obtain, record, and disseminate information are impacted by [poor living conditions, the threat of violence, and demolished infrastructure](#). For example, our partners in Congo DRC report that [it is extremely difficult for journalists to do their work due to constant fighting and a deprivation of basic needs, whilst being simultaneously made a target by warring parties](#). Disinformation in these contexts can impact the right to life by hampering access to life-saving information, can undermine trust in public institutions and independent media, and destabilize fragile conflict- and post-conflict situations. It is furthermore difficult to trace, disseminated by [online trolls, content farms, governmental actors and other propaganda channels](#).

Disinformation that obscures life-saving information: Impacts on the right to security of person (article 3), the right to seek and receive information (article 19)

Scarcity of reliable information that has been scrutinized by professional journalists, allows disinformation to overwhelm the public information sphere, impacting the right to life. Disinformation poses a life-endangering threat by both misleading and diluting reliable information available. For example, in Sudan, the warring parties RSF and SAF employ fake accounts on social media to manipulate the public, spreading false information as to where the public is safe. Scarcity of available information enables disinformation to take hold as people scramble for truth in high-stake and polarized situations. Another example of how disinformation undermines human rights in conflict zones is how civilians in Lebanon were falsely alerted in October of last year as to where bombings took place in October, instilling fear and sowing chaos among the population. According to our partners from the Silat Wessel outlet in Lebanon,

“People are scared by all the disinformation and no longer know who and what to believe.” As such, it is made clear how disinformation impacts the right to access information as it undermines the ability of citizens to discern life-saving reliable information from falsehoods.

Disinformation that undermines trust in independent media: Impacts on freedom of thought (article 18), and the right to freedom of opinion and expression (article 19)

The example from the Lebanese context illustrates that disinformation works to broadly erode trust in independent media on the whole. Actors that seek to promote violence and spread uncertainty actively undermine the work of independent journalists using disinformation, as this allows them to shape public debate, accepted narratives, and perceptions. For example, our partners in Sudan report that the RSF and the SAF have invested extensively in disinformation campaigns, using ‘rogue agents’ to use complaints mechanisms on social media environments such as Meta to block independent journalism pages. With 90% of the Sudanese media infrastructure destroyed, citizens overly rely on [social media](#), where disinformation can be easily disseminated without balanced counter-narratives. There is thus a clear case for facilitating and protecting a pluriform media environment where information is spread through different channels. As such, malignant actors know to physically interfere with communication infrastructures by cutting off electricity and internet service networks.

Our partners in Lebanon furthermore report that a significant amount of disinformation is spread through encrypted messaging apps such as Whatsapp, forwarded from phone to phone, making it exceedingly difficult to trace the source of these false messages. Insidiously, disinformation also undermines the impact of independent journalism when it does reach the intended audience, as citizens find it increasingly difficult to discern false from truthful information. Media literacy is thus a key aspect in tackling disinformation, necessarily in tandem with amplifying and enabling the dissemination of quality journalism.

Disinformation intended to destabilize and incite violence: Impacts on the right to be free from violence, right to not be discriminated against (article 21)

Disinformation also poses a threat in exacerbating social tensions in both crisis and non-crisis situations through the promotion of hate speech and by inciting violence. For example, our partners in Sudan point to the dissemination of hateful and harmful rhetoric as a tactic used by warring parties to fuel ongoing conflict. Disinformation can also be used to polarize and destabilize in post-war contexts. Polarizing content can fall into a grey area, containing (partially) true information but in a way that is intentionally misinterpreted, manipulated, and misleadingly framed.

In Syria, for example, [disinformation campaigns by the fallen Assad regime](#) prevail in an attempt to fuel [sectarian discord and delegitimize the new government](#). Such campaigns exaggerate, sensationalize, and decontextualise [incidents against Alawites and Christians, aiming to escalate the fragile situation back into conflict](#). For example, false information has been spread about [Christmas trees being removed by the new government or of the existence of female slave markets](#) in an attempt to play on emotional charges in the aftermath of the civil war. Independent media plays a crucial role in a just transition in Syria, by providing facts to citizens

they can strengthen and restore social cohesion by promoting transparency, accountability, and a shared narrative. Without independent media, the information landscape becomes narrow, allowing authoritarian and destabilizing powers to manipulate and shape accepted discourse to polarize and undermine public debate. As such, exposure to an array of perspective [facilitates critical thinking and allows citizens to triangulate a balanced account of events](#). Media literacy can only serve its purpose insofar that there is a plurality of information available.

Social media channels also bear a responsibility in how disinformation and online hate are disseminated. Algorithms optimized for engagement not only create information echo chambers but also promote controversial, hateful, and provoking content. For example, Amnesty International concluded that [Facebook's algorithms promoted hateful content and violence against the Rohingya](#). Social media platforms profit from maximizing user engagement and targeting ads through algorithms, achieved by recommending similar personalized content, which can work to algorithmically persuade users to the extent that [shared sense of reality can be altered](#), contributing to social division.

Disinformation used to smear and discredit: Impacts on the right to non-discrimination (Article 7), right to be free from attacks upon honour and reputation (Article 12), and the right to freedom of expression (Article 19)

Journalists are also targeted specifically through smear campaigns, allowing hateful content to take further hold, and impacting their ability to enjoy their right not to be attacked upon their honour or reputation in accordance with Article 12 UDHR. Both mis- and disinformation are rife in conflict zones such as the [Gaza](#) strip, where [journalists are systematically threatened and attacked by the IDF](#). UNWRA as a humanitarian organization also [reports active disinformation campaigns employed by Israel to discredit its work and block donations](#). Worryingly, journalists are increasingly framed as enemies of the people worldwide, even in stable regions. Whilst FPU has in earlier reports called attention for vilification of journalists by political actors in South America, this trend is also seen to gain traction in the Global North. For example, we observe an increase in harmful political rhetoric directed towards journalists in the Netherlands, and in the [U.S. context, President Trump and Elon Musk have been attacking journalists, targeting traditional reporters from major outlets](#) on self-owned media platforms.

Supporting Independent Media: Lessons from SCIENCE+

To check the facts, the facts must first be available and accessible. Much attention has been given this year to the significance of fact-checking in response to disinformation after [Meta announced its decision to end its fact-checking program in the US](#). However, fact-checking is a piece of the puzzle, not the whole picture. Media-literacy is needed to build societal resilience to disinformation. This is contingent on an independent, plural media landscape, where citizens can first and foremost access reliable information.

Independent journalists can be supported and amplified through the facilitation of cross-sector and cross-border coordination and exchange. We advocate for bolstering local journalists and media outlets, as local journalists understand why certain forms of disinformation spread more easily in their contexts and know how to build trust and credibility among local audiences. We therefore recommend measures that invest in local media landscapes by building capacity and skills. [Initiatives from the Eastern European context](#), for example, show that cross-border partnerships of independent media and newsrooms can break down barriers to communication, restore trust in journalism, and foster regional expertise.

An example initiative that applies this approach in response to disinformation is the SCIENCE+ initiative. SCIENCE+ was developed in response to the jarring reality revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic of the low public awareness of, and the high volume of disinformation spread about, public health risks in Central and Eastern European countries in the EU. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the importance of media literacy and the role of disinformation in undermining critical public health information. A lack of reliable information and transparency [made people vulnerable for the spread of the virus](#) and susceptible to disinformation,¹ contributing to mistrust of [vaccines](#) and lockdown measures and exposed to fallacious [COVID-remedies](#).

SCIENCE+ aims to strengthen the quality of medical journalism and to improve the availability of trustworthy information about public health. SCIENCE+ operationalizes this by facilitating the sharing of expertise and coordination between journalists, academics, fact checkers, and officials from more than 40 organizations and institutions. The initiative focuses on small media outlets, which invest in trust-based relations with audiences and adopt audience friendly formats to disseminate reliable news. This is done through knowledge exchange and teaching small outlets how to deal with political pressure and be resilient to disinformation. The dissemination of a newsletter, organization of conferences, training, and forming of new collaborations speak to the impact of the SCIENCE+ initiative. The outlets collectively reach 18 million readers per month, and its collaborations have brought new content strategies that build resilience of Central European societies.

Access to information: challenges and recommendations

Ensuring that citizens have access to high-quality, fact-based journalism represents a preventative, rather than remedial approach to disinformation. Our two-pronged approach of improving access to information combined with media literacy thus presents a sustainable way to tackle the impact of disinformation on human rights. This approach, however, requires a strong independent media landscape, which is under threat worldwide. We highlight a number of points of concern and have formulated recommendations to ensure independent journalists are protected and access to information is safeguarded.

¹ See also our submission to the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in 2021.

The right to freedom carries with it duties and responsibilities; states have a responsibility to foster a free, independent, and diverse media environment. Countering disinformation must not result in the removal of legitimate journalistic content and suppressing free and independent journalism. In line with this, states should refrain from passing harmful anti-disinformation laws that suppress the freedom of expression. Disinformation laws passed in countries including Hungary, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Botswana, Zambia, the Philippines, Russia, and most recently [Pakistan](#) serve to censor journalists and exercise pressure on critical voices, standing in the way of independent and free press.²

An ongoing crisis in media business models worldwide is currently undermining the viability of media-outlets. Repressive public spending policies that exclude small-scale outlets and prompt self-censorship make it difficult for independent journalists to survive and sustain their livelihoods. For example, in Serbia, local outlets suffer from economic hardship and a lack of governmental support, which has contributed to democratic backsliding. Because local media is dependent on project-based co-funding models, [outlets are left financially vulnerable and susceptible to external influence](#). States need to put measures in place to support local public interest media and ensure a fair distribution of income for independent journalists in the age of social media.

In this vein, states have the responsibility, in line with the UNGPs, to ensure social media platforms operating in their jurisdiction do not cause adverse human rights impacts. Platforms must be held accountable for amplifying disinformation through profit-optimized algorithms. States should require algorithm transparency and regulate the advertisement structures of platforms to counter profit incentives that reward polarizing and sensational content. Legislation such as the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), which sets guidelines for advertisements, requires a risk assessment of spreading illegal content and disinformation, and mandates a degree of algorithm transparency, is a start in this regard, but more steps should be taken globally to ensure adverse impacts are averted.

The safety of journalists is a prerequisite for the promotion of an independent, free, plural and diverse media landscape. Journalists require access to the most basic necessities as well as adequate equipment and protective gear to do their jobs safely, but safety does not only embrace physical safety. Journalists also require psycho-social, digital, and legal safety to do their jobs well. As such, adequate regulatory measures must be in place to protect the safety of journalists, both online and offline. States must be held accountable for repressive legal and political environments that suppress the freedom of expression and endanger journalists' safety.

A role is also to be played by social media platforms and by states in ensuring their regulation. Under the [UNGPs](#), states are obliged to ensure that legislation and policies are implemented to ensure that corporations respect human rights. Corporations, including social media platforms, should respect human rights in accordance with the UNGPs and seek to prevent adverse human rights impacts linked to their operations, products, and services. States

²Ibid.

should require platforms to assess the risks and their responsibility in freedom of expression and carry a responsibility in countering online hate against journalists. This can be done through the creation of escalation channels, and moderating within different cultural contexts.

Conclusion

In our submission, we commend the recognition of the importance of promoting access to diverse and verifiable sources by promoting independent, free, plural, and diverse media in resolution 55/10. Disinformation remains a persistent and evolving threat to the enjoyment and realization of human rights, particularly in crisis contexts where access to reliable information is already compromised. Our submission highlights the far-reaching consequences of disinformation on the right to life, freedom of expression, and public trust in independent journalism, while underscoring the role of social media platforms and state actors in both exacerbating and mitigating these harms.

This submission has served to solidify our stance: a two-pronged approach must be adopted towards disinformation by means of bolstering access to information whilst improving societal resilience to disinformation through the promotion of media literacy. This requires a commitment to strengthening and amplifying independent and local media and to upholding journalist safety. The successes of the SCIENCE+ initiative demonstrates the impact of this strategy.

However, independent journalism is increasingly under threat due to repressive disinformation laws, economic constraints, and targeted attacks on journalists. Addressing these challenges requires urgent action from states, social media platforms, and the international community. Governments must refrain from weaponizing disinformation laws to suppress free expression, ensure financial sustainability for independent media, and uphold journalist safety. Meanwhile, social media companies must be held accountable for algorithm-driven amplification of disinformation and online hate. Addressing disinformation requires long-term commitment to upholding press freedom. A pluralistic and resilient media landscape is not only essential to counter disinformation, but also a cornerstone of democratic societies where human rights can be fully realized.