Innovation in Counter-Disinformation:
Toward Globally Networked Civil Society

EDITED BY
John Engelken
Kevin Sheives

FEATURING ESSAYS BY
Kevin Sheives
Sipho Kings
Laura Livingston
Casey Michel
Jonathan Corpus Ong

NED NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

FORUM INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR DEMOCRATIC STUDIES

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By Kevin Sheives
Associate Director, International
Forum for Democratic Studies,
National Endowment for Democracy
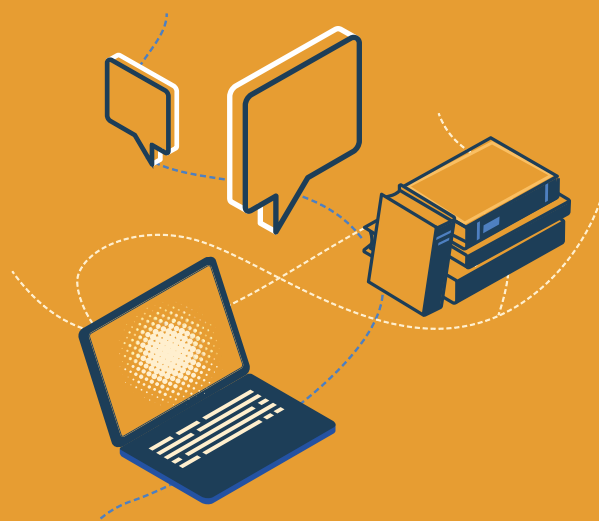
The entire set of Global Insights essays can be found *here*.

A loosely connected, constantly learning global network of counter-disinformation responders—with the benefit of greater access to platforms and additional resources from funders—can serve as a bulwark against evolving threats to the integrity of the information space. Although these threats travel across borders rapidly, civil society organizations countering them can respond by learning from one another's innovations, successes, and failures. New innovations in the field include media development in closed messaging platforms like WhatsApp, addressing offline sources of disinformation, empowering investigative journalism to hunt down disinformation networks, and better equipping under-threat organizations in illiberal and authoritarian settings.

This vision recognizes the essential role that networked communities of civic activists and journalists can play when equipped with research and response tools, opportunities to learn from each other about shared challenges driven by a common digital revolution, and genuine access to social media platforms and regulatory bodies.

The threat to democracy from disinformation was spotlighted on the world stage this year when the Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to Filipino journalist Maria Ressa for her pioneering work countering digital disinformation and supporting independent media in an increasingly hostile environment in the Philippines. In her words: "the collapse of democracy starts with the breakdown of facts. And if you don't have facts, you don't have the shared reality to find the right path. This is a global problem."[1]
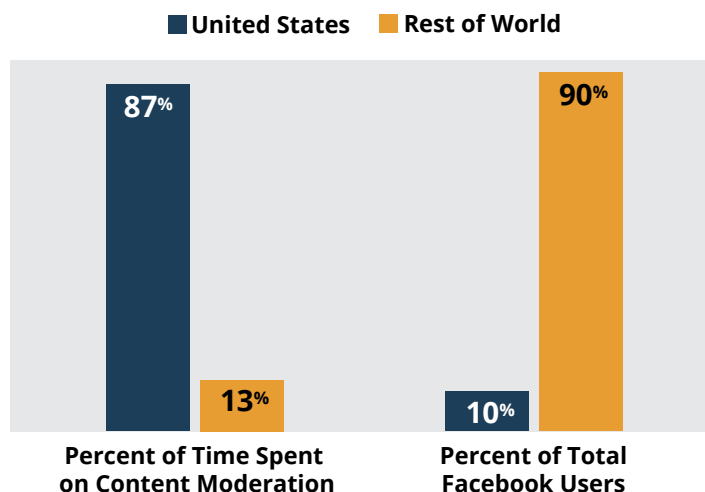
The explosion of information accessibility, polarization in traditional media, and the rise of social media have all contributed to democracy's global decline over the past fifteen years. As our understanding of the challenges deepen, a new vision is emerging to combat it. Driven by novel research and learning across borders, this vision recognizes the essential role that networked communities of civic activists and journalists can play when equipped with research and response tools, opportunities to learn from each other about shared challenges driven by a common digital revolution, and genuine access to social media platforms and regulatory bodies.

Learning from the Transformation of Global Disinformation

Some claim that counter-disinformation is overestimating the damage caused by the manipulation of the information space.[2] However, globally, civic activists and counter-disinformation organizations still remain far behind the pace of the threat.

In places like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, local information environments are polluted by foreign or domestic sources—or both—that can spark offline violence. Over the past fifteen years, global disinformation has moved from an ad- and bot-focused model to a more comprehensive network, backed by state-affiliated, authoritarian media enterprises from the likes of Russia, China, Gulf authoritarians, and local illiberal leaders. Overt propaganda from state-affiliated entities is often backed by covert accounts that seek to amplify these half-truths and "malinformation." Disinformation-for-hire practices by "public relations" firms, for instance, have provided an easy-to-access tool for Gulf authoritarians and illiberal leaders to punish opponents and influence foreign information environments to their advantage.

Mismatch between Facebook's Content Moderation Resources and User Base

■ **United States** ■ **Rest of World**

87%

13%

90%

10%

Percent of Time Spent on Content Moderation

Percent of Total Facebook Users

Source: The International Dimensions of the Facebook Papers[4]

These acute problems occur in many places around the world when, for example, the world's largest content moderation operation (Facebook) spends only 13% of its staff hours moderating misinformation in areas outside the United States that make up 90% of its user base.[3]

While the ability of disinformation to travel transnationally has been widely documented, it is also true that the work and learning of counter-disinformation by civic activists and independent journalists has started to travel transnationally. As threats in the information space have proliferated, so has the number of organizations whose efforts seek to mitigate their damage. One organization has counted 117 different types of interventions operating just in Europe and Eurasia; a second research project catalogued more than 280 different types of interventions in 80-plus countries; another was able to survey 53 organizations, admitting to a much larger field; and the International Forum for Democratic Studies' own research and survey with Oxford Internet Institute researchers was able to identify 175 counter-disinformation organizations.[5] There are difficulties "mapping the field" because there is so much going on, but these are actually good problems to have.

Civil society has the unique capability to move fast, adapt easily, and share information generously. An entrepreneurial, risk-taking model of civic activism and independent journalism has emerged. It is driven by new innovations in the field, but often rest on poorly resourced organizations. They need to be better supported by funders unafraid to invest in responses whose impact might be initially difficult to measure or might fail to meet their mark.

Innovations in Civil Society Responses to Disinformation

Innovation to meet the growing challenges of digital disinformation is occurring nearly everywhere in the world. Czech organizations, for instance, are intentionally decentralizing their disinformation-hunting work down toward the level of everyday citizens in their societies.[6] Satirists and humorists are exposing disinformation by laughing their way through it with their audiences.[7] Teams of forensic data analysts are creating hubs to share techniques across national and regional boundaries.[8] New technologies like artificial intelligence are no longer solely a tool of those who peddle disinformation; counter-disinformation organizations are using them to effectively combat malign activity, too.[9]

In this Global Insights series, we have identified new and innovative methods and perspectives developed by civil society organizations focused on countering disinformation. Building on the International Forum for Democratic Studies' research on COVID-19's impact on the field, the Forum has convened interdisciplinary contributors that include counter-disinformation researchers, policy advocates, fact checkers, independent media practitioners, and government experts to advance understanding of innovations in this space.[10] These workshops inspired us to publish these four essays on addressing disinformation beyond platform-centered solutions, combating it in the non-digital sphere, and focusing on the regional challenges in sub-Saharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

Disinformation networks—whether foreign-sourced or domestic in nature—are moving into new, understudied apps and digital platforms, beyond Facebook, Twitter, or "fake news" websites created out of thin air. As the editor of Africa's WhatsApp-based paper *The Continent*, **Sipho Kings** analyzes the operations of his counter-disinformation and independent online newspaper on closed platforms. As consumer choices for information consumption and communication multiply into new encrypted messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, Signal, or WeChat, innovative news outlets are experimenting with how to connect better with audiences. Approaches include delivering information from sources that are more trustworthy, more local, and more curated than mass media or the major social media platforms.

Utilizing trusted messengers and better understanding the local information environment are crucial elements in any response to disinformation. Kings notes the challenges of sustainable funding in ad-free environments like WhatsApp but finds these encrypted messaging systems also provide avenues for countering disinformation in closed societies, where everyday communication among some citizens has gone underground and away from government censors.

The creative use of local humor, trusted messengers, and fact-checking in underserved local languages, as well as pushing out content in popular local platforms, is vital to countering disinformation. **Laura Livingston**, who researches the effects of communication on violence at Over Zero, provides a clarion call to focus on the *offline* challenges associated with *online* disinformation. Livingston contends that off-platform sources of disinformation, including those in tightly knit local community circles, can be just as dangerous as a lie-riddled Facebook group. In this context, exposing the underlying psychological aspects of why disinformation flourishes, as such, could be as critical as exposing the latest bot network. Detailing the makeup of target audiences can offer deeper insights and therefore might go further than simply mapping how falsehoods travel online among them.

In the last couple of years, the counter-disinformation field has rapidly begun to mature. A growing number of organizations utilize advanced methods, such as machine learning, big data, and data visualization to tackle the problem. At the same time, **Casey Michel** argues that affecting change in the public consciousness is more likely to emerge from journalism that helps audiences understand the impact of the threat upon everyday society or the network's operative infrastructure. Investigative journalists bring a special skill set that can be even more powerful than the data-centric, platform-mining approaches to modern disinformation research. They can track down the trolls behind electoral influence operations, follow disinformation-for-hire money from Russia to LLCs in advanced democracies, and expose the violation of disclosure requirements of coopted social media influencers.

The Facebook Papers, perhaps the biggest story in 2021 about the counter-disinformation challenge, was the result of in-depth investigative journalism, boosted by the power of 17 different global news organizations working across borders and newsrooms to produce a comprehensive and remarkable news coverage that delved deep into various whistleblower claims about the platform's malfeasance. Major investments in networked investigative journalism could help answer one of the more difficult—but absolutely critical—questions that many counter-disinformation organizations struggle to address: who is actually behind these networks and how to do they operate?

Despite recent, positive developments in counter-disinformation efforts, illiberal and authoritarian regimes threaten to undermine this progress. Powerful actors threaten the physical safety of civic activists and independent journalists routinely—Maria Ressa's experience further illustrates this point. **Jonathan Ong**, who teaches at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, reviews the challenges local, counter-disinformation

organizations face while operating under repressive regimes. He also examines the ambivalent, and at times discordant, relationships between foreign supporters and local organizations that both work toward countering disinformation in these societies. Funders, researchers, and other civil society organizations from outside of these closed settings must adapt their approach to collaboration and support, in full recognition of the repression these organizations face.

Connecting Civil Society Responses Across Boundaries

A trailblazer in democracy activist circles, Igor Blaževič of the Prague Civil Society Centre urged civil society activists to devote one-quarter of their time to look beyond the immediate crises and democratic backsliding within their own countries and, instead, focus outwardly to learn from other organizations that are innovating, failing, and succeeding to support democracy elsewhere.[11] That "one-quarter" is the spirit of this essay collection.

The contributors to this series agree that local responses are essential to building trust and understanding the threat disinformation poses to democracy and information integrity. Snopes isn't best equipped to address fact-checking needs in Slovakia. East Africa's Pesa Check likewise isn't suited to undertake such work in Germany—but they *can* learn from each other's successes and failures. They *can* benefit from data collection tools that funders, research organizations, and governments have developed. They *can* do a better job when they have strong, steady access to and partnership with companies such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Reddit, or a seat at the table when organizations at the UN, OSCE, or national bodies meet to regulate the information space. An Eastern European organization's successes could help fuel innovation in West Africa. A tactic that upended Russian trolls in Latin America might be effective in India.

This vision of a global network of counter-disinformation organizations that adapt together, act quickly, and enjoy sustained success is ambitious. These essays represent early steps that can get this nascent but growing community closer toward fulfilling that vision. Of course, more work remains. Many organizations need standards to ensure high-quality work and training to get them there.[12] Funders need greater coordination to avoid duplication in mission sets or overwhelming recipient organizations.[13] Venues for cross-disciplinary and multi-regional learning need to be consistent. Civil society groups, many of which are small and modestly resourced, need to be incentivized and supported to learn and adapt in a meaningful way. These organizations need data, staffing, and access.

As local responses around the world evolve to keep pace with unfolding threats to the integrity of the information space, civil society must take up the charge to innovate in order to meet the challenge. In fact, in any number of ways, they already are doing it.

Kevin Sheives serves as the Associate Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy. He spent nearly fifteen years in various China-focused positions at the State Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Trade Representative's Office, and the House of Representatives as a Brookings fellow. Most recently, he oversaw the State Department's diplomatic, analytical, and strategic planning activities in response to China's global outreach and served as an advisor on PRC information operations at the Global Engagement Center. Follow him on Twitter *@KSheives*.

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Safeguarding New Social Media Platforms:

A WhatsApp Newspaper that Meets Readers Where They Are

By Sipho Kings,
Editorial Director,
The Continent

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

Journalism is a bulwark against disinformation's dangerous impact and other threats to the integrity of the information space. Direct messaging apps can create trusted relationships with readers by providing easily accessible, quality journalism that is insulated from media regulations and local pressures. "The Continent" is one example of an Africa- and WhatsApp-based newspaper that provides its readers with trusted information and allows them to question manipulation as well as engage in the democratic process of their country.

Last year, the World Health Organization warned of an "infodemic;" referring to an excessive amount of disinformation that "spreads faster and more easily than the virus" on social media platforms.[1] At the same time, direct messaging platforms like WhatsApp, WeChat, Signal, and Telegram continued to grow. With hard lockdowns around the world, these applications became the primary outlets through which people accessed and shared information. But these new platforms are not immune to manipulation. Civil society organizations must work to protect them from misuse.

The Continent, where I serve as editorial director, is an Africa-based newspaper published on encrypted messaging platforms that provides accessible, quality journalism for people to read and share freely. Established in the early Spring of 2020, its 15,000 subscribers in 105 countries have a free, alternative source of news that meets them where they are: online and on social media channels.[2] The goal is to provide readers with truthful reporting to share—instead of mis- and disinformation—in a short and digestible format.

Eschewing traditional print or online models, *The Continent* uses encrypted chat platforms, primarily WhatsApp, to disseminate its content. Thanks to Facebook's "free basics" program, an initiative that allowed people with select cellular data providers to access the company's apps for free, WhatsApp is ubiquitous across sub-Saharan Africa[3] and is the principal means by which readers access the internet.[4] People may also subscribe to *The Continent* by email and on Signal or Telegram. The newspaper can be shared easily, as each edition of *The Continent* is a small (five megabyte) PDF file formatted specifically for smartphones.

This choice of distribution model is new, but it is one that media outlets are adopting more regularly. Though major print journalism outlets have developed their online presence with websites and dedicated news apps, they have tended to only publish their online content on major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and not devote their formats to these or emerging platforms exclusively. Television broadcasters have enjoyed more success in doing so, thanks to their more visual nature—the Brazilian *Jornal da Record's* TikTok account being one successful example.[5]

The goal is to provide readers with truthful reporting to share— instead of mis- and disinformation— in a short and digestible format.

News is increasingly disseminated through online channels and newsroom apps in messaging apps where readers can access content through a curated news aggregator that pulls content from multiple different sources, rather than individuals going to specific news sites.[6]

This model is growing in popularity, given WhatsApp, WeChat, and other chat applications' popularity around the world. At present, WeChat dominates this space among global users, because of its China-heavy user base. Models that allow readers to interact with a chatbot to access information, especially on messaging platforms, offers a promising alternative for those who only possess limited internet or data access. Loading a website or social media feed that many other platforms require ultimately uses a great deal of data. Due to high data costs,[7] many readers prefer sharing links and news on WhatsApp or other chat platforms on their phones. Bot-based models are oriented toward this preference.

People tend to share and receive information from people they know, and they tend to value that information more when they know the source.

For example, Kenya's Standard Group, which has been selected to participate in this year's Google News Initiative, plans to employ company-run bot accounts for both distribution and subscription management efforts. On a subscription basis, users can receive more heavily curated news content via Standard Group's WhatsApp bot.[8]

But basing your business on someone else's algorithm and building a product that is formatted for their platform, leaves it vulnerable to system tweaks or undue influence that can undermine the dissemination of information and make it difficult to access.[9]

Building Trusting Relationships with Readers

The Continent overcomes this challenge by sending newspapers to people individually, instead of en masse or through bots. Then, subscribers manually forward news items to other readers in PDFs that can be read on any platform. This distribution model nurtures a more personal and responsive environment. It also establishes a closer, more trusting relationship between readers and *The Continent's* staff.

That relationship is key to the distribution model. People tend to share and receive information from people they know, and they tend to value that information more when they know the source. Information that is disseminated among a trusted community or network grants it a psychological stamp of pre-approval, even when that information is wrong.

The Continent engenders a similar community of trust among its readers, but with unbiased, fact-based reporting instead. Along with providing quality journalism free of charge, *The Continent* maintains direct links to its consumers.

The immediate relationship between readers and *Continent* staff underscores their close, shared relationship and it gives readers the sense that they are included in the publication's operations. Readers use these close-knit social channels to debate issues such as the paper's weekly quiz. A letters page has been added to the newspaper to carry some audience responses to articles. *The Continent* is also quick to acknowledge any editorial failings or necessary corrections publicly. Building trust in each relationship is critical.

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with Mail&Guardian

The Continent

Facebook is fanning the flames in Ethiopia

...and we have the documents to prove it

Illustration: Roland Polman

> The Continent—by virtue of its format and platform for delivery--is easily shareable and able to debunk disinformation and provide independent voices in closed messaging systems like WhatsApp.

Readers are also actively involved in the business future of the newspaper. In an August 2021 survey, *The Continent* asked its consumers directly what they thought about a large bank taking out advertisements in the newspaper to help fund its operations. Many gave thoughtful, nuanced responses,[10] and over 80% of respondents supported the proposal, encouraging the newsroom to proceed with this plan.

Through the cultivation of this relationship between readers and the publication, *The Continent's* readership community becomes invested in the outlet's success. Crucially, it also gives people more incentive to share each edition.

The newspaper's staff encourages readers to share each PDF edition widely to ensure that the focus remains on people who want to read, rather than on large readership numbers.

A December 2020 reader survey showed that a third of readers didn't share news content; a third shared it on occasion; and a third shared it frequently—up to nine times and often with larger groups. This information sharing occurs across numerous apps. Some forward it on WhatsApp; others download the PDF; and some post it on intra-company Slack channels. In this manner, *The Continent* encourages the formation of an information network open to anyone who wishes to access its reporting.

Becoming a Counterweight to Disinformation

By tapping into the same social dynamics that make disinformation so difficult to dislodge, *The Continent* is able to amplify its message and reporting. As a result, it becomes a strong counterweight to "viral" disinformation.

Other outlets in Africa have used this model successfully. For example, Zimbabwe's 263 Chat, a publication that inspired *The Continent*, has a daily PDF publication that it sends to its over fifty-thousand subscribers, and it supports itself by selling advertising. In this case, digital media outlets' low publication costs provide them a great advantage over their print peers. Journalism across Africa is dominated, like in the rest of the world, by only a few major media firms. This system triggers a vicious cycle of decreasing circulation and readership among competitors. The subsequent loss of profit causes staffing cuts and lower quality journalism, stifling smaller, independent media.[11] The economic impact of COVID-19 further worsened this trend.[12]

The Continent is fortunate in that it can provide journalism at no cost to its readers because its business model is based on funding from numerous sources. Yet funding for independent news media is fraught with challenges and it, too, must be vigilant. It is critical that funders are not in a position to skew journalistic priorities or exert undue influence.

The Continent has received funding from several external grant-making organizations, including the MOTT Foundation, Internews, and the National Endowment for Democracy. *The Continent* is also developing other income streams to better insulate itself from the current, challenging information environment. These funding agreements show that there is commercial value placed on the audience that *The Continent* attracts. There are also options being explored for readers to support the publication's journalism, without charging for access.

Protections from Media Restrictions and Local Pressures

Potential government action against chat platform encryption may present another challenge for independent media. WhatsApp's encryption means neither government agencies nor other external entities can intercept or block the release of any edition.

Publications like *The Continent* also face challenges from government legislation that restricts media freedoms—especially in the context of COVID-19.[13] The International Press Institute warned at the onset of the pandemic that governments were "already using the crisis as a blank check to establish methods of silencing independent media that harm the flow of badly needed information now and that may outlive the pandemic."[14]

Furthermore, potential government action against chat platform encryption—in name of law enforcement or security—may present another challenge for independent media. WhatsApp's encryption means neither government agencies nor other external entities can intercept or block the release of any edition.

Thus, *The Continent* is well insulated from local political changes and pressures. A potentially controversial investigation on COVID-19 in Tanzania, translated into kiSwahili (the most widely spoken language in that country), revealed the extent to which the government peddled misinformation about the pandemic.[15] Opposition leader Zitto Kabwe told *The Continent* that its coverage changed the terms of the debate and encouraged the government to change course.

Thanks in part to this kind of journalism, *The Continent* has attracted funders who support the mission of providing quality journalism in a format that people want to read. Approximately 200 journalists and writers from across Africa have been paid for their contributions, and *The Continent's* business model allows them to work from their home countries.

Though funding is important to support its operations, remuneration alone doesn't enable *The Continent* to provide free, quality journalism. It also leans on its relationships—with readers, grantees, and other regional outlets—to fulfil its mission.

As *The Continent's* experience suggests, people want quality journalism, and readers want to share it. They especially want to share it in the encrypted social platforms where most newspapers are not present.

Journalism is a bulwark against disinformation's dangerous impact and other threats to the integrity of the information space. Empowering news consumers with trusted information allows them to question manipulation and engage in the democratic process of a country. *The Continent* and its peers are examples that media can meet readers where they are and give them something other than disinformation to share.

KEY POINTS:

- Outlets should format media content for direct messaging apps like WhatsApp and WeChat, among others—especially in developing democracies where internet or data access is limited.

- It is vital to engage readers directly and personably to encourage trust among readership and meet popular demand for truthful and accessible sources of news and information.

- Strong editorial processes are critical in countering disinformation and building trust with audiences.

- Emerging media platforms should diversify their funding sources to best balance donor preferences and maintain sustainability for low-profit models.

Sipho Kings is the Editorial Director of *The Continent*. His focus is on creating spaces for journalists to do journalism. Prior to co-founding the weekly newspaper, he was acting editor-in-chief of the South African *Mail & Guardian*. He also spent a stint as its news editor. Most of his career has been spent as an environment and climate reporter. He has won a dozen awards for reporting and spent a year with the Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard University. Follow him on Twitter *@siphokings*.

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Photo credit: The Continent/November 13, 2021 Issue.

Understanding the Context Around Content:
Looking behind Misinformation Narratives

By Laura Livingston,
Regional Director Europe,
Over Zero

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

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

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

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

Misinformation does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it taps into, reinforces, and supercharges offline dynamics: worldviews, intergroup tensions, and longstanding grievances.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KEY POINTS:

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

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

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

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

Laura Livingston is Regional Director, Europe with Over Zero, an organization that merges research and practice to create societal resilience to political and identity-based violence. She received her J.D. from the Georgetown University Law Center.

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Investigative Journalism:
A Lynchpin for Understanding Disinformation

By Casey Michel,
Independent Author and Analyst

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

Investigative journalism is a key tool in the fight against disinformation and influence operations. Investigative journalists are one of democracies' competitive advantages against authoritarian and illiberal governments, serving as the "white blood cells" within the democratic body politic that hunt disinformation networks and counter their negative impact. While a free press alone is not enough to stop the spread of disinformation, investigative journalists' ability to recognize and publicly identify disinformation networks is vital to disrupting influence operations.

To best address a complex challenge, it is first necessary to understand it. With the rapid explosion of disinformation that has adversely impacted societies globally, investigative journalism has proven vital in revealing the nature and extent of disinformation operations. It also has identified the actors responsible for these efforts and those who stand to gain from such activity. With a firmer grasp of modern disinformation campaigns, investigative journalism can also help provide governmental and civil society actors with the necessary tools to counter disinformation operations successfully.

The tools investigative journalists use to report on other criminal investigations are equally crucial in the fight against disinformation. First, the skill with which they conduct basic investigative work is central to uncovering information operations and networks. Second, their expertise in fielding tips and interviewing key actors grants them invaluable insight into the inner workings of these information networks. Finally, investigative journalists' healthy skepticism regarding subject material is integral to their efforts as it drives them to find original or corroborative evidence about any networks they examine or uncover.

Investigative journalism puts critical information about disinformation into the public domain that can be used and interpreted across borders.

In recent years, investigative journalists have harnessed these skills and exposed disinformation networks[1] around the world. From details of Russia's social media influence operations,[2] to China's so-called "50 Cent Army,"[3] to campaigns launched by both state-linked and non-state actors, we now have a greater understanding of the breadth of disinformation campaigns—and their intersection with a swelling number of social media platforms—than at any point prior.

Investigative journalism puts critical information about disinformation into the public domain that can be used and interpreted across borders. For example, investigations into Russia's disinformation campaigns in the wake of a contentious U.S. presidential campaign in 2016 revealed the extent of Moscow's disinformation operations in the U.S., Russia, and elsewhere. One primary prong of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign centered on false Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. While authorities at Facebook and Twitter led efforts to remove a number of accounts in September 2017, they only did so following journalistic investigations[4] into these Kremlin-linked disinformation efforts. From tracking down the troll operators to those duped by fake accounts—including Americans (or others) who

abetted Russian disinformation operations—investigative journalists unearthed much of what is now known about these networks' operations, as well as their broader context and their success.

American journalists were hardly alone in pursuing these investigative efforts. For instance, in the Philippines, the online outlet Rappler has consistently broken stories[5] regarding disinformation campaigns linked to President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, including identifying coordinated social media campaigns that attacked the independent Filipino press. Collaborations among multiple outlets in numerous countries have also unearthed disinformation campaigns. Indeed, a 2020 joint investigation from Russia's The Insider and Bellingcat, discovered[6] that Russian authorities organized disinformation campaigns relating to the downing of a passenger plane over Ukraine.

Investigative journalism does not merely identify fake social media accounts and their impact. Investigative journalists expose these complex disinformation activities in an entirely different, sometimes more evocative or personal manner.

Investigative journalism does not merely identify fake social media accounts and their impact. Big data-based mapping projects do an incredible job tracking and analyzing these networks, especially on social media platforms.[7] However, investigative journalists expose these complex disinformation activities in an entirely different, sometimes more evocative or personal manner. Shortly after Russia's social media disinformation campaigns were discovered (and in many cases thwarted successfully), investigations probed deeper into these campaigns and uncovered another strand of Kremlin-linked disinformation efforts. According to CNN reports,[8] a new series of highly popular news outlets targeting American young adults maintained direct links to Moscow. Though nominally independent, journalists discovered that these outlets were overseen by a company called Maffick Media, whose majority stakeholder is a subsidiary of the Kremlin-controlled RT. These outlets promoted divisive, slanted, or malign material regularly, similar to other traditional disinformation channels. They also managed to gain millions of followers on social media accounts, magnitudes more than previous Kremlin-backed disinformation operations had accrued.

In response to these findings, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter began exploring ways to force these outlets to reveal their governmental ties for each platform's user base. However, shortly thereafter, investigative journalists dissected Maffick Media's network further and found that it had attempted to work around disclosure requirements by re-registering as a Delaware (USA) LLC. This action didn't require any information about the company's actual owners and allowed Maffick's accounts to dodge[9] new counter-disinformation transparency requirements. Social media companies appeared unaware that Maffick employed such a tactic. According to the head of Facebook's security policy, neither the RT subsidiary nor any of the related accounts informed the social media firm that they were changing ownership structure, allowing Maffick to work around Facebook's narrow disclosure requirements. It was only when journalists exposed the company's new ownership structures and alerted social media platforms of Maffick's actions that Facebook and Twitter began formulating new, more stringent disclosure policies that labelled the outlets as "state-controlled media."[10] While labeling is hardly a panacea,[11] it is nonetheless a step toward the kind of transparency required to combat this threat. Furthermore, simply mapping these disinformation networks online—without understanding the financial and multi-level backing of those networks—might not have had the same impact and response by outlets.

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These examples evince the vital roles investigative journalists play in discovering these disinformation networks.[12] These investigations have outed supposed "grassroots" media,[13] identified those behind nominally independent outlets,[14] uncovered disinformation efforts on secondary social media platforms like Tumblr[15] or Medium,[16] and tracked paid disinformation influencers to hidden pockets around the world.[17] These efforts have not slowed. Recently, BBC reporters[18] uncovered new China-linked campaigns to circumvent disclosure requirements on YouTube, pressuring YouTube influencers nominally independent from the CCP to whitewash Beijing's crimes. It is suspected that these "vloggers" are remunerated for their work; however, they deny these charges. Moreover, investigative journalists at OpenSecrets analyzed how "dark money" networks continue to back outlets pumping out disinformation[19] for unwitting audiences.

If disinformation campaigns are aimed at the democratic body politic, investigative journalists are akin to white blood cells, hunting and identifying malign disinformation campaigns that threaten the health of the democratic polity.

These recent investigations underscore journalism's place at the tip of the counter-disinformation spear. To use another metaphor, if disinformation campaigns are aimed at the democratic body politic, investigative journalists are akin to white blood cells, hunting and identifying malign disinformation campaigns that threaten the health of the democratic polity. They are part of democracies' competitive advantage over autocratic or illiberal governments elsewhere. There is no stronger defense against disinformation than transparency. However, a free and transparent press is not the only solution. The U.S., for instance, has seen disinformation campaigns continue to spread despite the country's free and fair press. Still, providing and protecting space for investigative journalists to uncover such networks remains vital to disrupting these campaigns.

In addition, there have been new developments and strategies in recent years among investigative journalists—especially in terms of collaboration—that further cement its importance in countering disinformation. Transnational organizations like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) allow investigative journalists to work with colleagues elsewhere far more easily, resulting in remarkable, unprecedented investigations. Indeed, more international, collaborative approaches are crucial to combatting novel disinformation operations. After all, these disinformation networks rarely confine themselves to a single jurisdiction.

Investigative journalism is well positioned to uncover disinformation networks, and their work and tactics should be continued and emulated. However, investigative journalism still has limitations, from funding concerns to growing legal threats and physical intimidation—even within developed democracies. Yet even with these pressures, investigative journalists are rarely cowed.[20] Civil society and other actors should step into the breach to help in this global effort in the following ways:

CSOs and NGOs should consider strengthening independent funding for investigative journalists. Journalists around the world face financial pressures; this support would help eliminate some these concerns and allow journalists to focus on their work instead.

Likewise, civil society should help continue to construct cross-border bridges. These trans-national relationships have proven key to successful journalistic collaboration, and already exist in civil society; there's no reason they shouldn't be expanded.

Few investigative journalists exhibit the doggedness and fearlessness of those in the profession than Maria Ressa—seen here on trial for Libel in the Philippines—as her recent Nobel Prize award illustrates.

Finally, civil society should continue to highlight the importance of investigative journalism (especially as it pertains to untangling disinformation networks) wherever possible. Not only will doing so highlight a relationship that often goes overlooked, but it will help draw more audiences to these outlets along the way.

Without continued support, investigative journalism will struggle to uncover disinformation, and our democracies will be the worse for it.

KEY POINTS:

- Investigative journalists counter disinformation efforts by exposing operations and enabling deeper and more thorough investigations.

- Transnational organizations of journalists support robust investigations and cross-national collaboration, responding to the transnational nature of disinformation networks and operations.

- Despite playing a vital role in revealing disinformation networks and holding those who operate these networks to public account, it is important for civil society organizations and other nongovernmental actors to strengthen cross-border and sectoral ties and support for investigative journalists.

Casey Michel is a writer, analyst, and investigative journalist focused primarily on kleptocracy, offshoring, and illicit finance. He is the author of the book American Kleptocracy, on America's transformation into the world's greatest offshore haven. His analyses have appeared in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Atlantic, Vox, the New Republic, Politico, the Washington Post, the American Interest, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, open Democracy, the Guardian, and many others. Follow him on Twitter *@cjcmichel*.

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Photo credit: Philippine Journalist Maria Ressa Face Libel Verdict," Ezra Acayan/Getty Images.

Building Comprehensive Approaches to Combating Disinformation in Illiberal Settings:
Insights from the Philippines

By Jonathan Corpus Ong,
Associate Professor,
University of Massachusetts-Amherst

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

Citizens and civil society organizations in illiberal or, more perilously, authoritarian settings face distinct and particularly serious challenges in addressing disinformation and online harassment. Research on civil society groups in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte suggests that assistance in these contexts should address local challenges faced by activists under threat of repression, build resilience, and facilitate cross-sector collaboration in civil society.

In recent years, illiberal and authoritarian leaders across the globe have attacked democratic institutions, intensified censorship laws, and demonized foreign aid and philanthropic activities. The Philippines offers an interesting case study given the Duterte regime's flagrant human rights violations and combative stance toward free press and regional activism.[1] Representatives of local civil society organizations (CSOs) often find themselves personally bearing the brunt of the Duterte regime's repressive tactics. These developments have made the everyday work of Filipino journalists, academics, and human rights advocates progressively more dangerous and challenging. Now, cyberattacks are among the many weapons in authoritarians' trusted arsenal of legal intimidation and forced disappearances against activists.[2]

Though continued efforts to target increased platform accountability are important,[3] local civil society activists and researchers also need to address the historical and structural factors that make disinformation possible and profitable in their own, domestic contexts. To combat disinformation successfully in the Philippines—and around the world—regional and in-country contexts must be better understood; collaboration and local resilience need to be nurtured; and inclusive coalition-building for interdisciplinary exchange should be fostered in favor of siloed interventions and technological determinist advocacies.

Understanding context and local dynamics in illiberal settings.

To cultivate more collaborative and comprehensive approaches to tackling disinformation and hate speech, it is vital to understand the contexts within which CSOs work. Much can be gleaned from the experiences of civil society actors who face challenges in overcoming tensions within their communities while facing a common, authoritarian threat.

My recent collaborative research project with thirty human rights organizations in the Philippines[4] revealed solidarity across CSOs wasn't a given, even when colleagues were under constant threat from the Duterte regime. In this environment, human rights organizations are compelled to weigh the costs of expressing public support for human rights defenders involved in high-publicity legal battles, while managing foreign funder requests carefully to minimize media attention that could lead to direct conflict with Duterte's repressive regime.

To cultivate more collaborative and comprehensive approaches to tackling disinformation and hate speech, it is vital to understand the contexts within which CSOs work.

Consequently, Filipino activists and organizations that work to counter disinformation are concerned primarily with survival—as is the case in settings where foreign assistance is equated with foreign interference. Thus, disappointment and frustration are common among frontline organizations that seek to confront the government about its abuses of the information space. Targeted CSOs often report feeling abandoned by their colleagues who choose to avoid publicity and government attention.

In such a fractured landscape, calls for comprehensive efforts to fight the mix of disinformation, harassment, and censorship are difficult to implement. Making matters worse, some major nongovernmental organizations based outside of the Philippines[5] have oversimplified these local challenges, leaning on tried-and-tested—and usually more exportable—fact-checking initiatives to combat disinformation without understanding local dynamics appropriately. International nongovernmental organizations that employ such methods must consider this reality more carefully; otherwise, they risk undermining the work of activists seeking reform on the ground.[6]

Building Sustainable Organizational Infrastructure.

In the Philippines and other illiberal settings, investing resources to build sustainable communication infrastructures and empower communication personnel is foundational to local CSOs' ability to combat disinformation. Notably, almost half (46%) of the human organizations we surveyed in our project have secured funds to invest in their communication infrastructure.[7]

Programs that support civil society and pro-democracy initiatives should encourage CSOs to build in-house capacities to withstand both systemic challenges and digital harassment. Funders should find ways to promote coalition-building as well as support worker justice and wellness in the face of activist burnout.

Fostering such capacities will distribute the risk these organizations face in their operations among a broader swath of civil society actors, thereby reducing vulnerabilities if one organization ceases operations. It may also nurture greater awareness of operations among peer CSOs.

Supporting Comprehensive Approaches to Countering Disinformation.

Comprehensive, cross-sectional approaches that empower local CSOs and foster regional expertise are vital to countering disinformation, although success in this regard has been elusive. Considering the challenging environment in which Filipino CSOs operate and the limited success of purely regulatory fixes, funders can better incentivize interdisciplinary research and interventions to promote learning and expertise across sectors and organizations as part of comprehensive efforts that involve all layers of civil society and international organizations.

Supporting citizen deliberation forums, which gather counter-disinformation organizations and citizens for focused conversations, are an effective tool at encouraging local and cross-sectoral buy-in, as well as gaining a clearer understanding of local information environments. Indeed, it allows us to identify what diverse groups of people think about disinformation when they can become better informed, consider expert evidence, listen to opposing

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views, and reflect on their own perspectives. In these fora, we learned that popular perceptions of disinformation in the Philippines extended beyond questions of "fact or fiction," to broader, less clear-cut themes of dishonesty and unfairness within the political system.[8] Such insight is invaluable when establishing strategies and networks to tackle disinformation at its source.

Popular perceptions of disinformation in the Philippines extended beyond questions of "fact or fiction," to broader, less clear-cut themes of dishonesty and unfairness within the political system.

Building on existing knowledge of the region and acknowledging local CSO experiences are equally important in promoting local interest but doing so has proven difficult in practice. Initiatives to develop regional centers for expertise[9] that allow platforms to better tailor their reform policies are a step in the right direction, but models that resemble the Shorenstein Center's collaboration with journalists and tech policy experts in Silicon Valley to solve urgent social problems have been harder to find and sustain in the Philippines.

Code for Africa is one successful example. Funded by NED and other international donors, this organization convenes and empowers local networks of journalists to promote independent media and protect digital information spaces.[10]

The absence of comprehensive approaches undermines CSO efforts to combat disinformation, both in the Philippines and elsewhere. Yet with local buy-in, a clear understanding of the local information environment, and a recognition of the threats to their safety that many activists face, comprehensive approaches can lay a foundation to support CSO efforts to combat disinformation, even in illiberal and authoritarian settings.

KEY POINTS:

- Comprehensive and collaborative approaches are vital to combatting disinformation networks in local and regional contexts. Encouraging diverse groups and cross-sectional cooperation among civil society activists, international organizations, and other grassroots initiatives is crucial to the success of these efforts.

- Counter-disinformation initiatives must take local contexts into account, be they political, social, or economic—particularly so in repressive societies. Paying greater attention to regional dynamics is equally vital.

- Organizations and citizens simultaneously seized with safety and information integrity concerns encounter different challenges than those in stable, democratically advanced societies. Thus, building sustainable organizational structures and resilience to sociopolitical pressures is also critical.

Jonathan Corpus Ong is Associate Professor of Global Digital Media in the University of Massachusetts - Amherst and Research Fellow at the Shorenstein Center of Harvard Kennedy School. He is currently Co-Principal Investigator on a National Science Foundation Accelerator Grant (2021-2022) entitled *"FACT Champ"*, which investigates racially targeted misinformation against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. In his disinformation studies research, he uses ethnography to uncover the social identities and financial motivations of disinformation workers and producers such as in "*Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines*." Follow him on Twitter: *@jonathan_c_ong*.

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About the Authors

Kevin Sheives serves as the Associate Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy. He spent nearly fifteen years in various China-focused positions at the State Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Trade Representative's Office, and the House of Representatives as a Brookings fellow. Most recently, he oversaw the State Department's diplomatic, analytical, and strategic planning activities in response to China's global outreach and served as an advisor on PRC information operations at the Global Engagement Center. Follow him on Twitter *@KSheives*.

Sipho Kings is the Editorial Director of *The Continent*. His focus is on creating spaces for journalists to do journalism. Prior to co-founding the weekly newspaper, he was acting editor-in-chief of the South African *Mail & Guardian*. He also spent a stint as its news editor. Most of his career has been spent as an environment and climate reporter. He has won a dozen awards for reporting and spent a year on the Nieman Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard University. Follow him on Twitter *@siphokings*.

Laura Livingston is Regional Director, Europe with Over Zero, an organization that merges research and practice to create societal resilience to political and identity-based violence. She received her J.D. from the Georgetown University Law Center.

Casey Michel is a writer, analyst, and investigative journalist focused primarily on kleptocracy, offshoring, and illicit finance. He is the author of the book American Kleptocracy, on America's transformation into the world's greatest offshore haven. His analyses have appeared in Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Atlantic, Vox, the New Republic, Politico, the Washington Post, the American Interest, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, open Democracy, the Guardian, and many others. Follow him on Twitter *@cjcmichel*.

Jonathan Corpus Ong is Associate Professor of Global Digital Media in the University of Massachusetts - Amherst and Research Fellow at the Shorenstein Center of Harvard Kennedy School. He is currently Co-Principal Investigator on a National Science Foundation Accelerator Grant (2021-2022) entitled *"FACT Champ"*, which investigates racially targeted misinformation against Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. In his disinformation studies research, he uses ethnography to uncover the social identities and financial motivations of disinformation workers and producers such as in *"Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines."* Follow him on Twitter: *@jonathan_c_ong*.

About the Coeditors

John Engelken is the editorial coordinator at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, a center for research and analysis at the National Endowment for Democracy. During his time at NED, he has drawn from his professional background and expertise to shepherd, edit, and contribute to the Forum's publications—including Global Insights, Power 3.0 blog, and other working papers. He holds an MA in international relations from Georgetown University and a BA in political science from the George Washington University, both located in Washington, DC.

Kevin Sheives serves as the Associate Director of the International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy. He spent nearly fifteen years in various China-focused positions at the State Department, Office of the Secretary of Defense, U.S. Trade Representative's Office, and the House of Representatives as a Brookings fellow. Most recently, he oversaw the State Department's diplomatic, analytical, and strategic planning activities in response to China's global outreach and served as an advisor on PRC information operations at the Global Engagement Center. Follow him on Twitter *@KSheives*.

Acknowledgments

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