

MEDIATION



Biannual
publication
of Fondation
Hirondelle

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

Why journalistic rigor matters more than ever

Fondation Hirondelle was founded 30 years ago in the wake of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, during which those responsible for the violence used certain media outlets to spread lies and incite hatred. In 2025, disinformation has become a widespread phenomenon with consequences that could prove to be lasting. The main threat associated with this dynamic, whose effectiveness is boosted by digitalisation and the rise of generative AI, is to social cohesion. The least-connected populations and those speaking neglected languages are being left behind in the production and sharing of fact-checked knowledge; a growing segment of the population is being taken in by fake news; and polarisation is increasing as our ability to dialogue is eroded.

The news media have a fundamental role to play in addressing disinformation as the guarantors of journalistic content that adheres to ethical rules and professional standards such as truthfulness, balance, transparency and a sense of proportion. These media must function as a compass pointing the way in the turbulent sea of information. As for media and information literacy, it has become an essential and complementary addition to the work of journalists. However, the media alone cannot shoulder the entire burden. Countering disinformation demands greater collaboration with key actors in the public and private sectors, civil society, think tanks, education and research.

Caroline Vuillemin, General Director

Journalist Dandjes Luyila records a video for social media in the studios of Studio Hirondelle RDC, in Kinshasa. © Gwenn Dubourthoumieu / Fondation Hirondelle

RELIABLE INFORMATION: A REMEDY FOR DISINFORMATION

In a media environment dominated by social media, disinformation has found fertile ground in which to grow over the last ten years. A preventive approach is required to counter this phenomenon and its negative effect on social cohesion.

In the online media environment of 2025, disinformation has become a widespread, effective and lucrative phenomenon. More than 17% of global internet traffic is fake, generated by bots and dishonest or malicious users. More than half of the global population has admitted to having been taken in by a fake news item over the past year. More than 2.6 billion US\$ of advertising is purchased on disinformation websites. 87% of the global population states that disinformation has had a significant impact on politics in their country.

The history of the 20th century clearly illustrates that mass disinformation is not a new phenomenon. It has long been a tool of authoritarian regimes that employ propaganda to achieve their ends, while democratic governments favour a pluralist media that guarantees freedom of expression and the control of powerful elements by an informed public. However, over the past ten years, the

dominant role of social media in the global media landscape has allowed disinformation to spread and to take on multiple forms: fake news designed to raise concerns among targeted psychological profiles (Cambridge Analytica); information chaos instigated by media-military actors to cover up their activities (the late Yevgeny Prigozhin's Concord Group); an AI-driven deep fake industry used to run foreign political influence campaigns (DoppelGänger), etc. In each case, these campaigns were facilitated by users conditioned by algorithms and prompts to share this type of worrying content with multitudes of similar-minded contacts.

Tried and tested remedies are failing in the face of this powder keg of disinformation. Fact checking, though still useful, is always a few steps behind. We have yet to see the development of a preventive approach, comprising three levels of responsibility: that of the media, which must produce and broadcast more quality information; that of governments, which must boost the spread of reliable information by supporting journalism and regulating platforms in order to give it more visibility; and that of the publics, who are responsible for choosing what to read and for developing critical thinking in order to avoid being taken in. This issue of Mediation focuses on Fondation Hirondelle experiences to provide an overview of some initiatives to develop such an approach, firmly anchored in the conviction that a better-informed society is better prepared to address major issues in an inclusive and concerted manner. ■

Interview

MONITORING
PLATFORMS
AND REDUCING
DIGITAL DIVIDES

© DR

Since 2021, **Ourveena Geereesha Topsy-Sonoo** has been the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). She describes the origins of a legal framework for countering online disinformation on a continent where, for a long time, information was a rare commodity.

Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted in 1981 at a time when there were not a lot of media outlets in Africa, defends the right to receive information. To what degree has this right been secured today throughout the continent?

Ourveena Geereesha Topsy-Sonoo: There was not much progress until 2013, the year that the African Union (AU) enacted a Model Law on access to information. This Model Law revealed



Fake News awareness billboard on the side of a road in Abidjan, January 2025. © Sia Kambou / AFP

certain characteristics common to all African countries, such as "the poor record keeping culture and pervasive culture of secrecy within the public service in Africa, high levels of illiteracy and poverty, as well as limitations in respect of access to justice." This led to a lack of access to information, which, as the Model Law states, deprived "citizens of their right to participate in the decision-making process and hold elected representatives accountable." To meet these challenges, the Model Law enacted multiple obligations for public and private administrations, including the creation, filing and archiving of information; proactive communication; and providing an active response to citizens' requests for information in a language that they understand.

At the time, 32 years after the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights enacted the right of access to information, only 11 countries in the AU had a national law on this subject. Today, thanks to this Model Law, 29 countries¹ have national legislation guaranteeing the right to information. This reveals the progress made, even though much remains to be done in the 55-country African Union.

In 2017, an African soft law assigned ethical obligations to the media and digital platforms

At a time when Africa's media is becoming increasingly digital, what are the contributions of the texts the ACHPR adopted following the Model Law: the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections (2017) and the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information (2019)? More recently, what elements of the AU's Continental AI Strategy (adopted in July 2024) specifically concern the media?

The first two texts that you mention are soft law instruments intended, on the one hand, to remind governments of the benefit of enacting a national law on access to information; and on the other, to encourage them to address issues that are still major challenges in Africa: ensuring that everyone, even marginalised people or those living in rural areas, can access the internet and has the tools necessary to seek, receive and share information. Restating the fact that "the right of access to information [...] is an invaluable component of democracy," the 2017 Guidelines focus on elections. They remind governments of the obligations enshrined in the Model Law and, for the first time, assign obligations to the media and online platforms: the publication of editorial charters and ethical codes; pluralism; the prohibition of verbal abuse and conflicts of interest, etc. The 2019 Declaration of Principles is much more detailed and represents a solid

(1) South Africa, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Sudan, South Sudan, Togo, Tanzania, Tunisia, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

first draft of African regulations for the media sector. For example, it promotes “universal, equitable, affordable and meaningful access to the internet”; it obliges governments to “facilitate the establishment of community media”; and it provides clear directions to all internet intermediaries to enable “access to all internet traffic equally without discrimination”, without interfering with “the free flow of information by blocking or giving preference to particular internet traffic.”

The challenges posed by AI to the integrity of information may have a negative impact on African social cohesion

I welcomed the Continental AI Strategy of July 2024, and in particular its seventh area of action, which “focuses on information integrity, media and information literacy.” Among other things, this area of action proposes to

“regulate digital platforms and protect African people from misuse of emerging technologies.” It also aims to “develop strategies to address challenges posed by AI to the integrity of online information [...] that may negatively affect the cohesion of African society and the wellbeing of its people.”

In a resolution passed in March 2025, the ACHPR instructs you to “develop guidelines [...] to enable States Parties to effectively monitor the platforms’ performance” and “to

advance information integrity online.” What is your thinking with regard to this?

The ACHPR’s Resolution 630 effectively instructs me to help governments regulate tech enterprises in order to maintain independent fact-checking, which many of them overlook. Together with the African NGOs Media Monitoring Africa and African Fact Checking Network, I am working on developing guidelines. The recent work done by UNESCO on World Press Freedom Day on May 3rd will help us make progress. Their work resulted in a joint declaration with the UN General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, and Human Rights Council on “the vital impact that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has on freedom of expression [and] freedom of the media.” During the debates held that day, I emphasised the growing digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world. AI technology thrives on high powered computer chips, data centres, strong research capacity and financing. These currently do not exist in Africa. As most AI models are developed outside Africa, they are not adapted to African languages, skin tones or other specificities. With this in mind, we must be attentive to the recommendations of the joint declaration, which states that it is vital to “reduce digital divides” and “to promote media and information education” in order to achieve “secure and trustworthy AI systems that are inclusive, equitable and beneficial to all.” ■

Le Digital Services Act (DSA) at a glance



3 investigations opened by the European Commission into DSA violations



6 % of global turnover Highest possible fine for violation of the DSA



700 million € Total fines faced by Apple and Meta under the Digital Markets Act (DMA)

Source: European Commission.

The Digital Services Act: the European Union’s tool for countering disinformation

Since the Digital Services Act (DSA) was implemented on 25th August 2023, the European Union has had a legal tool at its disposal in the fight against online disinformation. Initially, DSA regulations applied to very large digital platforms and search engines (those with more than 45 million users) operating in the EU, obliging them to remove content identified as illegal (child pornography, hate speech, etc.) or seeking to manipulate public opinion. Their content-moderation policies and algorithms also had to be rendered transparent. Those found to be in violation of the Act can be hit with heavy fines reaching as much as 6% of their global turnover.

In the years leading up to the adoption of the DSA, online disinformation was having a major political impact in Europe. The spread of health rumours slowed efforts to control the Covid pandemic, and the massive sharing of fake news on social media influenced the results of even such crucial votes as the Brexit referendum. “The internet should no longer be a Wild West,” remarked Thierry Breton in 2020. Breton, the former CEO of major French telecommunications and digital services firms and European Commissioner for Internal Market at the time, began by regulating 19 of the major actors (mostly American firms) in the digital economy. Then, in February 2024, the DSA extended its reach to include all internet intermediaries in the EU, whatever their size. Since January

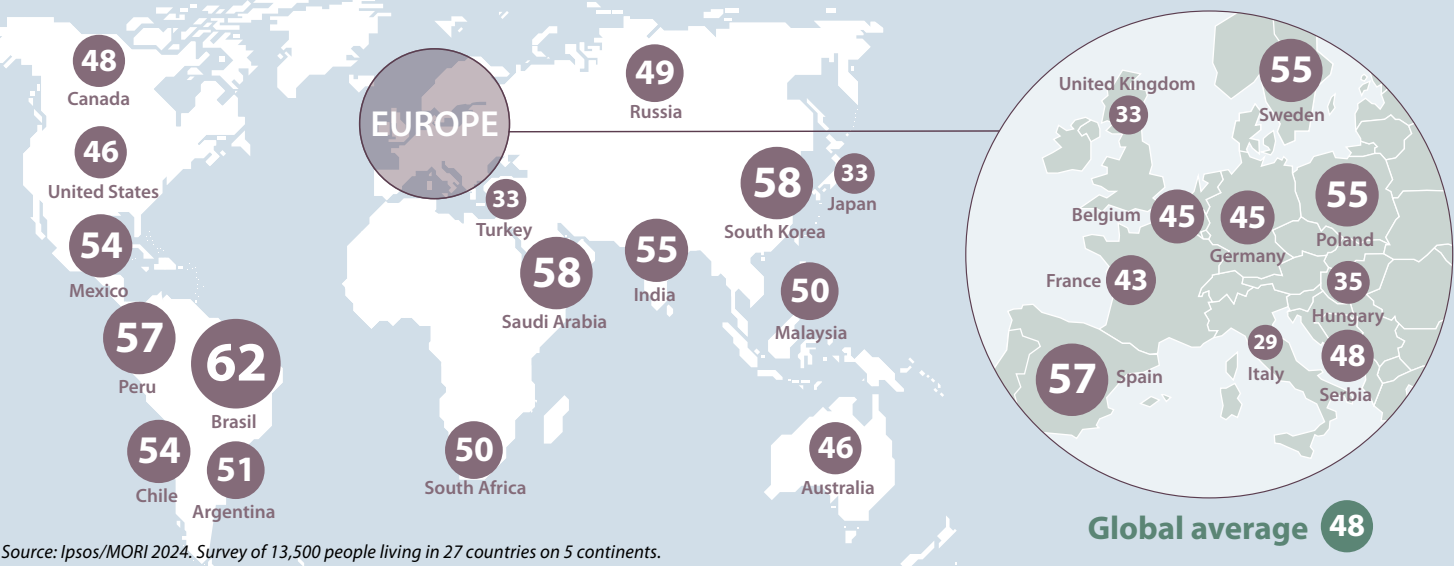
2025, two voluntary codes of conduct have been added to the DSA in an effort to counter hate speech and disinformation.

To date, three investigations have been launched by the European Commission under the auspices of the DSA. The first was opened in December 2023 into the social media platform X, accused of using dark patterns and manipulating its algorithms to boost the visibility of far-right content. The second investigation was opened in April 2024 into the Meta platforms Facebook and Instagram, suspected of failing to adequately protect young users against the risks of addiction to and dependence on these networks. A third investigation was launched into TikTok in December 2024. The platform is suspected of failing to react to foreign users who led a massive disinformation campaign in favour of a particular candidate in the Romanian presidential elections scheduled for that same month, which resulted in the elections being called off a few days later. Though these investigations have not yet reached their conclusion, they could lead to enormous penalties. On 23rd April 2025, the European Commission imposed fines of 500 million and 200 million euros on Apple and Meta respectively for violations of the Digital Markets Act (DMA). This European regulation governing online business, intended to regulate the activity of Big Tech, was adopted at the same time as the DSA.

Big Data

Disinformation: widespread, lucrative and effective

Percentage of people who state that they were been taken in by at least one fake news item last year (%)



Source: Ipsos/MORI 2024. Survey of 13,500 people living in 27 countries on 5 continents.

17,9 %



Percentage of fake internet traffic (bot-driven or malicious) worldwide

10,4 %



Percentage of fake traffic (bot-driven or malicious) in the online news media

50 %



Percentage of people in OECD countries who have difficulty distinguishing between AI-generated and human-generated information

Source: The State of Fake Traffic 2024, CHEQ, 2024.

Source: OECD 2023.

2,6 billion US\$



Yearly advertising revenue earned by disinformation websites worldwide

Source: NewsGuard.


87 %



Percentage of the global population who say that disinformation has had a significant impact on politics in their country


Source: Ipsos/MORI 2023. Survey of 8,000 people living in 16 countries on 4 continents.

Disinformation: a worrying phenomenon boosted by social media




76 %

Percentage of the global population who feel that disinformation is a threat to global security




85 %

Percentage of the global population who are worried about the effect of disinformation on their fellow citizens




87 %

Percentage of the global population who say that disinformation will have a significant impact on future elections in their country



68 %

Percentage of the global population who feel that disinformation is mostly spread on social media



56 %

Percentage of the global population who list social media as one of their two main sources of information

Source: Ipsos. Survey of 22,989 people living in 30 countries on 5 continents.

Source: Ipsos/MORI 2023. Survey of 8,000 people living in 16 countries on 4 continents.

Our experience

STRENGTHENING THE OFFER AND DEMAND FOR QUALITY INFORMATION



*Lallé Tangara, reporter for Studio Tamani, interviews a young resident of the Bamako Coura neighborhood in Bamako, the capital of Mali.
© Harandane Dicko / Fondation Hironnelle*

a chaos of information in which reliable and balanced information is losing visibility.

As a result, societies are suffering from three major predicaments: firstly, a growing segment of the population is taken in by fake news; secondly, people holding opposite viewpoints are losing the ability to dialogue; and lastly, populations with the least digital access and speaking languages neglected by the digital space are being left behind in terms of knowledge sharing. This situation represents a major challenge for the news media which, like the media supported by Fondation Hironnelle, work to address the majority and contribute to social cohesion.

Local media are the best qualified to respond to the need for reliable and accessible information

raising the bar for journalistic ethics; and increasing the number of journalists in the field, especially in the most marginalised areas where news vacuums are rapidly filled by rumour. It is also based on strengthening the quality of the demand for information and our audiences' capacity for critical thinking; making the news production process more transparent; and efforts to improve news literacy or media and information education.

Your policy paper advises a global approach to counter disinformation. Who are your main partners in taking this approach?

Public and private funding organisations are essential partners who must increase their support for the news media in the unfavourable climate they currently face. With other actors in the media and development sectors, we must also carry out advocacy work with the tech giants, pushing them to stop boosting organisations who spread disinformation that negatively impacts the visibility of reliable information. However, it seems less and less likely that we can count on the goodwill of Big Tech. Information integrity must be promoted by governments who recognise its importance, such as Switzerland, which in July 2025 will host the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20) and the AI for Good Global Summit. Lastly, we address media consumers, who are often at liberty to choose which information they wish to consume and to decide which media actors to support. ■

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Faced with the new forms of disinformation proliferating online, Fondation Hironnelle has published a policy paper¹ renewing its approach to this fast-changing phenomenon. Head of Research and Policy Sacha Meuter summarises its main points.

Why did Fondation Hironnelle feel the need to update its position on disinformation?

Sacha Meuter: In its 2024 report on global risks, the World Economic Forum ranked disinformation as the greatest short-term global threat. For a few years now, several negative factors have been reinforcing one another and are clearly amplifying this threat. Technological factors: AI and social media are combining to facilitate the production and massive spread of disinformation. Political factors: democracy and civic spaces are shrinking worldwide. Economic factors: the news media has lost much of its advertising revenue to the tech giants. Lastly, behavioural factors linked to the spread of echo chambers that reinforce beliefs. This combination of negative factors is leading to

What is Fondation Hironnelle's response to the spread of disinformation?

We have observed that approaches based on fact-checking and debunking are not enough, as they focus on the details of the disinformation or come too late, reacting to disinformation that has already been passed on and amplified. Fondation Hironnelle emphasises a preventive, inclusive approach that favours information integrity. This approach is based on strengthening both the quantity and quality of journalism: supporting local media, the best qualified to respond to the need for reliable and accessible information;

(1) Read the full policy paper at hironnelle.org.

Eyewitness

HELPING ALL PEOPLE NAVIGATE THE INFORMATION DISORDER

Faculty members at the Saskatchewan Polytechnic (Canada), **Nina Verishagen** and **Diane Zerr** have published in 2022 *Disinformation: Dealing with the Disaster*. This open handbook online is dedicated to all audiences, providing them with tools to develop their critical thinking and navigate the online environment.

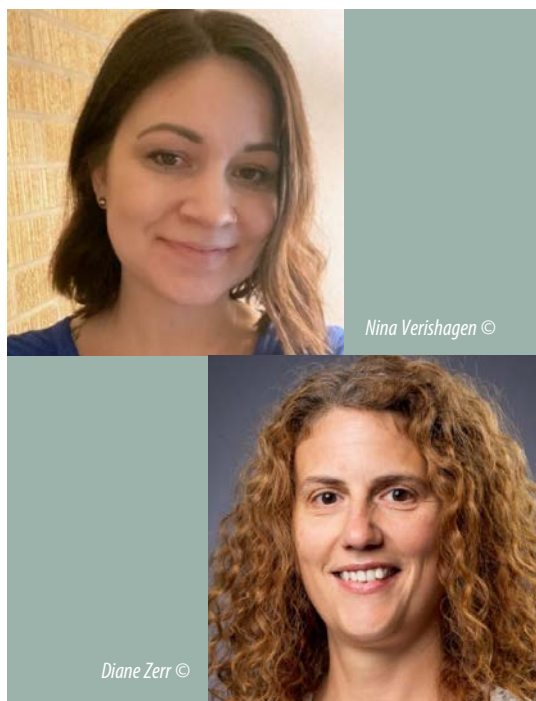
How came the idea of publishing a handbook to deal with disinformation?

Nina Verishagen and Diane Zerr: A decade ago, as librarians in a post-secondary environment in Canada, we provided classes to college students on how to find reliable information. Over time, as the web became more sophisticated, the amount of false information online began to increase rapidly, while people's ability to spot it deteriorated. As the situation worsened in our communities, we realized there were many more people who needed to hear about how to critically evaluate information online. There was a moment, during the pandemic lockdown, that really put us into motion. While we were teaching on Zoom, a student confidently shared that he only read comment sections on articles because he believed the banter within those sections to be the most reliable information. It was at that moment that we decided to write *Disinformation: Dealing with the Disaster*, in an open format, using plain language, hoping to expand on our work and reach more audiences.

Which kinds of disinformation did you identify? Has the situation evolved since the book was published in 2022?

We discuss all the types of false information online using the umbrella term 'information disorder' under which falls the various types of false information including misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, deformation and propaganda. All of these are very common in the North American landscape.

Information disorder has changed since we published the book. Both malinformation and deformation are more prevalent due to changing technologies. Malinformation, which can be circumstances in which information is slightly altered or misinterpreted to cause harm to a specific entity, has become extremely common. This is because people are quick to share headlines on social media and place their



own interpretation onto them. These are often, in turn, viewed by others who take them and carry them forward, especially when they are posted from celebrity or influencer accounts. Deformation is also becoming more common. This is when someone shares a part of a story, out of context, and focuses on a specific aspect of it to prove a point they are trying to make or to distort the actual facts. Deformation is progressing due to AI and exacerbated by clickbait – even traditional journalism is guilty of using emotionally charged titles for their articles.

In your last chapter, you insist that whatever the regulation of media by the States, citizens have a lot to do by themselves to counter disinformation?

Citizens can choose what sources they use to access information, and they can pick ones that have standards. They can ask questions about what they are seeing and reading. They can pick the social media they use, and they can decide how they want to engage on these platforms. They can choose to pause if they get emotional and they can take the time to think about the information they share. All people need to use their critical thinking ability to navigate the online environment. Even the most highly educated citizens cannot effectively spot reliable information every time. But those of us who have the knowledge and tools that can help with identifying disinformation, have a duty to educate and to explain how it works. ■

Those of us who have the knowledge and tools that can help with identifying disinformation, have a duty to educate and to explain how it works



Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organisation working to ensure that people facing crises have access to reliable, local, independent information. It has been supporting local media and journalists in fragile contexts for over 30 years (since 1995). With a global remit and local roots, it creates spaces for dialogue, to strengthen social cohesion in fragmented societies.

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