6 Public communication responses to the challenges of mis- and disinformation

This chapter provides a brief overview of the rapidly evolving phenomenon of mis- and disinformation and analyses how governments' public communication function can contribute to responding to it. Informed by OECD survey data, the chapter first reviews countries' efforts to institutionalise their response to these challenges, notably through the creation of official guidance and strategic documents, training and evaluation, and the role of intra- and inter-governmental co-operation. It then explores specific communication practices and opportunities to engage with private sector and civil society stakeholders to support a holistic response to the mis- and disinformation challenge.

Introduction

As discussed earlier in this report, governments, as well as the private sector, civil society and individuals, are contending with both the opportunities and challenges of an increasingly interconnected world. Significant changes to media and information ecosystems,[1] and in particular the ability for the instantaneous and global spread of mis- and disinformation via social media platforms, are challenging the shared understanding of issues and evidence needed for effective government communication and citizens' participation in policy making. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and intensified these challenges, notably in the context of anti-vaccination campaigns.

As a vehicle for transparent, factual, and accurate information, as well as a facilitator of two-way interaction between institutions and citizens, public communication plays an especially important role in this context.[2] By facilitating citizens' access to official information as developed or transmitted by public institutions, public communication can help governments serve as authoritative resources and help citizens differentiate facts from opinions, which is essential for healthy democracies. The wider context in which the public's trust in government has generally been decreasing is also important to consider, and identifying ways countries can use the function to respond to these challenges moving forward will continue to be an important element of analysis.

As disinformation tactics have become more sophisticated, so too has the theoretical understanding of what was once referred to simply as 'fake news'. Researchers and organisations have broadly accepted the typology where misinformation describes situations where false or misleading information is shared but no harm is intended—indeed, the sharer may not even be aware the information is false. By contrast, disinformation concerns falsehoods or misleading content knowingly shared with the intention of causing harm (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017[1]).

Understanding how public communication can respond to mis- and disinformation requires analysing three interlinked areas. The first one looks at the institutional, legal and policy frameworks that can be put in place to ensure that the public communication function is organised efficiently and co-ordinated effectively. This section of the chapter will also discuss the public officials' capacities necessary for these frameworks to be properly designed and implemented and will be based largely on the findings of the OECD Public Communication Survey. Secondly, a selection of communication practices will be presented that have proved successful in preventing and combating mis- and disinformation. Finally, the chapter will review a range of government efforts to support an ecosystem where accurate information and data can be created and disseminated in a timely and effective manner. The OECD *Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation* (OECD, forthcoming[2]) provides additional insight.

Several respondents to the OECD Public Communication Survey have noted that proactive, timely, and transparent communication is a primary means of preventing the spread of mis- and disinformation, all while accomplishing other policy objectives (OECD, 2020[3]). Focusing on prevention is especially important, as avoiding a falsehood spreading in the first place is more efficient than correcting it once it has taken root. Such efforts require anticipating potential misunderstandings or disinformation attacks, which means listening to and engaging with the audience to identify their concerns and to fill potential gaps. Furthermore, studies have shown that if people are warned about efforts to sow doubt, they are more resistant to being swayed by misleading content (Blastland et al., 2020[4]). A wide range of communication practices are well anchored in this space and should be applied. Among others, these include tailoring content to various groups in line with their risks of and vulnerability to exposure, including factors related to news avoidance and low trust in government; monitoring trends and understanding audience needs; filling information and data gaps proactively; tracking problematic content in real time; and ensuring communications, including about uncertainty, remain honest, open and trustworthy.

These practices, however, and the institutional elements to be discussed below, are inextricable from efforts to foster an enabling information ecosystem. This is the space where public communication is received by citizens and stakeholders, as well as where misinformation spreads. Its features, and the actors within it, can help determine how prominent and widespread problematic content can become, as well as how authoritative sources and facts will be received by the public. The strength of a country's civic space; regulatory considerations regarding transparency and oversight of social media platforms; the ability of citizens to recognise and dismiss false and misleading information; and the diversity, independence and quality of the media all contribute to an enabling environment where communication-based responses can be more impactful. As these factors are outside the direct purview of public communicators, Centres of Government (CoGs) and other agencies, public agencies and ministries should therefore also consider policies to support a resilient media and information ecosystem, such as through building transparent and constructive relationships with internet and social media platforms; supporting media and digital literacy efforts; promoting public participation and fact-based journalism; and conducting research on challenges and opportunities.

By largely focusing on the institutionalisation of public communication responses to mis- and disinformation, furthermore, this chapter will help governments ground their efforts in this area and utilise the function to facilitate rapid, strategic and proactive responses. The OECD Public Communication Survey data, which focuses on the policies and strategies, co-ordination efforts, and prioritisation of the relevant responses to mis- and disinformation, will serve as the basis of the chapter's analysis. It will first examine the current environment, how it has changed in recent years and how its continual evolution poses a challenge to those aiming to counter mis- and disinformation. The chapter will then turn to in-depth analysis of data from the OECD's survey, with particular attention to guiding documents, structures and co-ordination. Finally, the report will consider where the field should look to improve responses to the relevant challenges and opportunities going forward.

An overview of the rapidly evolving mis- and disinformation landscape

Rapidly evolving technologies, including the rise of social media and the ubiquity of mobile communications and messaging, have dramatically altered the media and information ecosystem, disrupting traditional models of communication and circumventing previously established methods of verifying and sharing news and data. On the one hand, this shift has empowered people and enabled more effective collaboration within and between governments and stakeholders. On the other hand, it has multiplied opportunities for problematic content to spread. To date, however, governments have met these changes largely through ad hoc and isolated approaches.

While the existence of falsehoods is not new, its ability for global amplification via online platforms poses a new threat to democracies. The media ecosystem once adhered to a one-to-many or mass communication model, where governments and other institutions largely shared information with the public through gatekeepers at select news outlets. Today, it increasingly operates on a many-to-many or networked communication model (see Table 6.1). In this context, actors in the media ecosystem are both producers and consumers of news, and by interacting on social media platforms and private messaging networks, they can share information published on an increasing number of news aggregation and opinion dissemination websites that may not adhere to journalistic standards (Plasilova et al., 2020[5]; Jensen and Helles, 2016[6]). The increasing digitalisation of one-to-one engagement via text messages and other means has increased the potential for disinformation to spread through interpersonal communication, as well.

Table 6.1. Typologies of communication

Typology	Examples
One-to-one, interpersonal communication	email, text message, voice, instant message
One-to-many, mass communication	book, newspaper, audio and video recording, web 1.0/webpage, download, broadcast radio and television
Many-to-many, networked communication	web 2.0/wiki, blog, social network site, online chatroom

Source: author's own work, adapted from (Jensen and Helles, 2016[6]).

Shifts in the media ecosystem have not only affected where and how individuals access information, but also how they feel about it. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021[7]), only 35% of respondents claim to trust what they see on social media. Confidence in traditional media remains higher, at 53%, but that number is at a 10-year low and declined by eight percentage points between 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1. Trust in all information sources at record lows
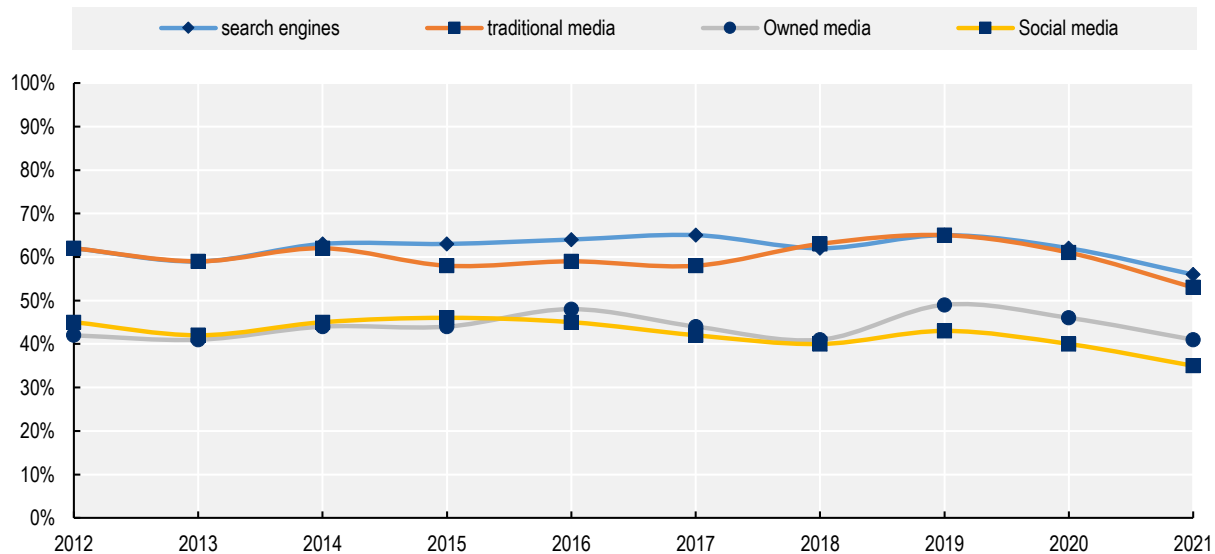
Note: Percent trust in each source for general news and information.
Source: Edelman (2021[7]), Edelman Trust Barometer 2021, https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2021-03/2021%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer.pdf.

These findings point to a shortfall in society's trust in all news sources. According to the same report, 57% of those surveyed believe that government leaders are 'purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations'; 59% of respondents believed the same of journalists and reporters. In addition, 59% agreed that 'most news organisations are more concerned with supporting an ideology or political position than with informing the public' (Edelman, 2021[7]). This declining trust in media is accompanied by deep concern about combatting mis- and disinformation. The survey found that 60% of respondents indicated that 'finding ways to combat fake news' has become more important over the previous year, while only 10% think it has become less important.

Beyond posing a challenge to public communicators' efforts to convey accurate information, declining trust in both the government and the media has consequences for the public's willingness to participate in democratic life. Research has shown, for example, that declining trust in formerly respected sources of

information and the resulting disagreement about basic facts can cause or aggravate the erosion of public conversation, contributing to political paralysis, increasing disengagement among societal groups, and policy uncertainty (Kavanagh and Rich, 2018[8]). Declining trust is a complicated and worrying trend, and the challenges posed to governments' ability to work toward policy solutions to COVID-19, climate change, and other complex issues are especially concerning.

Through providing timely and accurate information, public communication can play an important role in helping governments respond to these novels and evolving challenges. More broadly, as a strategic lever for supporting the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, it facilitates the relationship between governments and the public. While governments cannot single-handedly combat these challenges, institutionalising robust responses can help create a healthy information and communication environment.

Data from the OECD survey of Centres of Governments and Ministries of Health provided a snapshot of the progress toward institutionalising responses to mis- and disinformation and pointed to areas for further research and development. Identifying what works regarding countries' efforts to institutionalise their responses will be a key focus of collaboration within and across countries moving forward.

The institutionalisation of public communication responses to mis- and disinformation

Many governments have been grappling with the threat of mis- and disinformation and designing strategies to counter it for some time. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the immediacy of the real-world dangers posed by the spread of false and misleading content and the necessity of swift responses to it. Mis- and disinformation about the pandemic has harmed individuals, for example when the spread of such messages has reduced propensity to follow public health advice or reduced vaccine confidence (Roozenbeek et al., 2020[9]). Real world impacts have also appeared in attacks on critical infrastructure, where cell phone towers were damaged following spurious reports that there was a link between 5G and COVID-19 (Satariano and Alba, 2020[10]). The increasing evidence of the link between online and offline threats posed by the spread of misinformation has further clarified governments' need to respond to these challenges. In examining the strategies in place, therefore, this chapter aims to work toward a better understanding of effective practices as well as to identify areas for additional research.

Established good practices in risk communication have shown to be very useful when dealing with and overcoming mis-disinformation (OECD, 2016[11]). Nevertheless, not all pre-existing crisis communication structures have been equally successful in dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, measures destined to build trust and increase transparency have been more effective, and continue to be essential for the success of the recovery efforts seeking to foster compliance with changes to health protection measures (OECD, 2020[12]).

### *Providing official guidance on responding to mis- and disinformation*

Accurately defining mis- and disinformation is essential to fully understanding the challenges it poses and the potential responses (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020[13]). While many governments may have a working understanding of mis- and disinformation, and may have even taken steps to combat its spread, the codification of these definitions and practices remains unfinished.

Of countries surveyed by the OECD, just over half (54%) of centres of government had developed or adopted a definition of at least one of the terms "disinformation", "misinformation", or "malinformation".[3] For example, the Republic of Korea utilised the definitions set out by the Korea Press Foundation, which is a public institution with the mission of supporting the country's media and information ecosystem.[4] Three of the countries that had not defined these specific terms had developed definitions of related terms, such

as "information attack" (Estonia), "rumour" (Jordan), and *informations erronées*" ("incorrect information", Morocco). Respondents noted that identifying and classifying common frameworks and language helps communicators frame challenges and opportunities accurately, collaborate more effectively and identify a common path forward.

Respondents also noted that codified strategies that are well implemented internally can be particularly useful in situations where rapid and sometimes decentralised responses to the spread of mis- and disinformation may be required. In this way, policy frameworks and implementation guidelines may complement the use of official definitions in helping to clarify the challenges and systematise responses. Such guidelines empower autonomous action while ensuring initiatives are aligned with institution-wide messages. Nevertheless, in 2019, only 38% of CoG and 21% of MH respondents had a strategy in place to govern the response to mis- and disinformation (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. Availability of guiding documents for governments' responses to disinformation
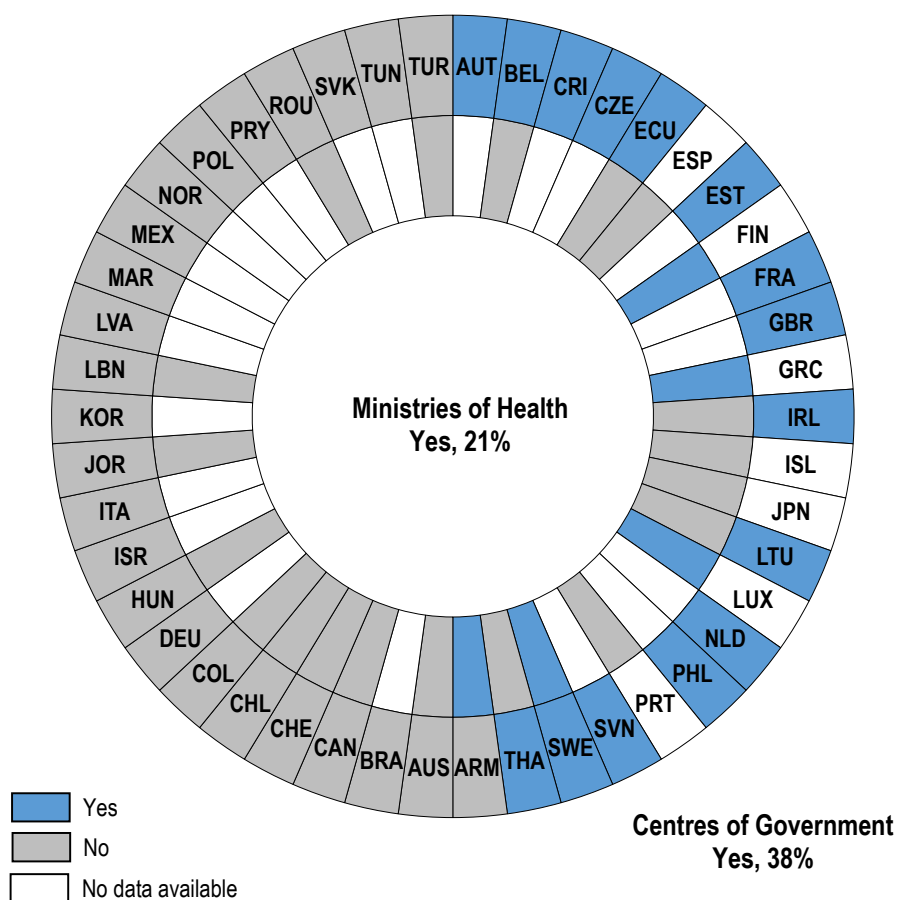
Note: N= 39 CoGs and 24 MHs. Ecuador's guidelines are in the process of being developed. Nine CoGs claimed to have a government-wide strategy, plan, toolkit or guidance document in this regard, including BEL, CRI, CZE, EST, FRA, GBR, IRL, LTU and NLD. Two CoGs, namely GBR and SVN, claimed to have a ministry-specific strategy, plan, toolkit or guidance document.
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding public communication".

Of countries that have developed strategies, there are some commonalities in the objectives pursued. Among the 15 countries that reported having a defined strategy at the CoG level to counter disinformation, the top three goals included "increasing societal resistance to disinformation," "helping civil servants understand the threat posed by disinformation," and "helping civil servants respond to disinformation."[5]

The high ranking of both internal (i.e. supporting civil servants) and external (i.e. increasing societal resistance) objectives for counter-disinformation strategies indicates that governments conceptualise these guidelines as tools for helping to respond to big-picture societal issues, as well as for supporting day-to-day initiatives and services.

Less emphasised in survey responses was the potential for strategies to carve out resources for evaluation and investigation that could bolster the understanding of and resilience to mis- and disinformation. Only 2 countries reported that "helping civil servants monitor the impact of government responses to disinformation" was a top-three priority, and none selected "to help identify areas for future research". Moving forward, there may be scope to support further investigation into the root causes and sources of the information disorder with a view to helping countries develop a more anticipatory and forward-looking approach.

The relatively low proportion of governments that have developed strategies or documents to guide interventions on countering disinformation does not necessarily mean that they have not engaged with the issue. On the contrary, evidence abounds of actions and initiatives implemented on a more ad hoc basis, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020[3]). Such findings suggest that public institutions may have been inadequately prepared to face the wave of health misinformation that accompanied COVID-19. The absence of strategic guidance may have contributed to the hesitancy in many OECD and partner countries to communicate clearly about the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and decisively about relevant emergency measures to contain the virus. This left room for misleading rumours about how the virus is spread and the effectiveness of measures to curtail its contagion, which had offline consequences on opposition to social distancing guidelines, vaccine resistance and even property damage, as noted above (Seitz, 2020[14]) (Satariano and Alba, 2020[10]).

Efforts to harmonise and strengthen the public communication response can improve the speed, coherence and transparency of public messages, as well as provide guidance and a framework for public officials to track and respond to mis- and disinformation. By explicitly outlining the purpose, methods and principles of efforts to tackle relevant challenges, governments can help ensure that public communication initiatives maximise impact and are pursued in a manner aligned with broader government goals. While creating a strategy is an important first step toward countering mis- and disinformation, internal communication about the strategy and training individuals on how to apply it are essential to its effective implementation. Ultimately, much of the value of guidance documents is in their ability to consolidate and rationalise otherwise scattered initiatives.

Institutional support for responding to mis- and disinformation – structures, training and evaluation

Along with the development of definitions and strategies, governments have also established organisational structures to help counter mis- and disinformation. Of those surveyed, 64% indicated there were specific structures, teams, or individuals responsible for the communications element of countering disinformation. The analysis shows that many of these teams are structured around monitoring online conversations and disseminating accurate information using online platforms. Continuing to analyse the relevance of the priority focus areas of these teams, their value and effectiveness will be central to ongoing work in this space.

In the United Kingdom, for example, the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) is a team of analyst-editors, data scientists, media and digital experts located at the CoG that monitors online conversations to identify emerging issues, alert government departments to emerging stories and assess the effectiveness of communications. The RRU takes a tailored approach, working closely with departments across the government to ensure users see search results and social media content with accurate information (Aiken, 2018[15]). The Unit's role as a co-ordinator of departments and agencies also includes providing daily,

weekly and commissioned online news reports and tailored social media insight products to press officers and media specialists across government (see Box 6.1).

One of the key benefits of establishing a structure is the opportunity it provides for a consistent and strategic focus on building capacity and sharing lessons. Only eight survey respondents, however, had teams tasked with developing and implementing training on countering disinformation. Across surveyed governments, it is one of the competencies that has the least dedicated training.

Public communicators are well placed to track and combat the spread of misleading and false content. Identifying and sharing best practices and training materials could contribute to the professionalisation of communication as a discipline, as well as reinforce efforts to respond to mis- and disinformation in a transparent way that promotes democratic engagement.

Box 6.1. The United Kingdom's institutionalised response to mis- and disinformation

The UK government has developed a number of structures and guidelines to respond to mis- and disinformation, including the Rapid Response Unit (RRU), RESIST framework, and a training course on Understanding Disinformation.

Rapid Response Unit – As part of its public communication response, the UK Government established the RRU to concentrate monitoring and response efforts across the administration. The RRU is located at the centre of government and responsible for co-ordinating with and supporting all departments in tracking and devising responses to misinformation in their issue areas.

RESIST Counter-disinformation toolkit – The UK Government Communication Service (GCS) developed the RESIST toolkit to help public sector communications professionals, policy officers, senior managers, and special advisers develop responses to disinformation. RESIST stands for:

- **R**ecognise disinformation
- **E**arly warning
- **S**ituational insight
- **I**mpact analysis
- **S**trategic communication
- **T**rack outcomes

The toolkit arms departments with best practices to monitor, assess, and counter disinformation. The full toolkit is available publicly online at https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit/.

Understanding disinformation – Government Communication Service International (GCSI) delivers a training programme on how to "recognise and respond to disinformation as a government communicator". The course is available to all GCS employees. The six modules of the course are released weekly, with participants able to complete lessons on their own time.

Source: Author's own work, based on: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/courses/understanding-disinformation-in-partnership-with-gcsi/.

Tackling these challenges requires a diverse mix of skills and competencies, and building them into relevant departments can be part of a wider effort to strengthen the function. As Figure 6.3 illustrates, the top two competencies for which respondents have a structure, individual or team in charge of training – communicating during a crisis and supporting digital communication – play a key role in supporting a robust response to mis- and disinformation. On the other hand, only 40% of respondents noted the same for "countering disinformation," suggesting an opportunity to expand professionalisation efforts in this area.

The modules developed by UK GCSI to help employees recognise and respond to disinformation serve as a useful model.

Figure 6.3. Competency areas where training is developed and implemented by CoGs
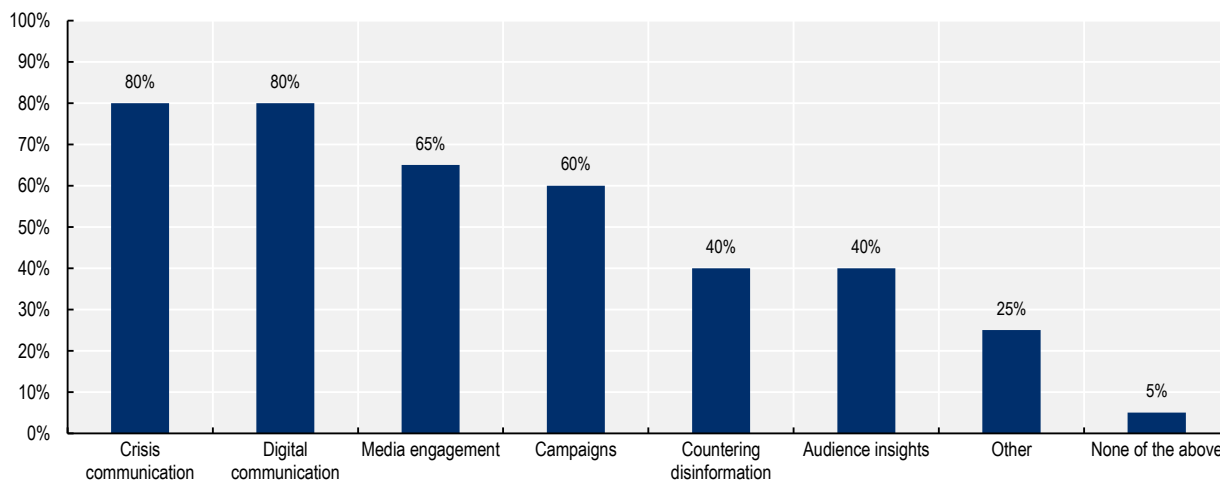
Note: N= 20 CoGs that claimed to have a structure/individual/team in charge of training.
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding public communication".

In addition to training, evaluation is a key tool for public communicators as they work to counter mis- and disinformation. Evaluation helps ensure that communicators successfully dispel falsehoods, helps identify challenges in countering disinformation, and provides lessons in overcoming them.[6] Understanding the impact of government responses is a priority for many OECD and partner economies, with 28 of responding CoGs reporting that they conducted evaluation of counter-disinformation activities. Nevertheless, there is scope to expand and solidify these efforts. For example, only seven surveyed countries reported evaluating responses to disinformation on a regular (rather than ad hoc) basis, while only 5 of 24 MHs surveyed indicated doing so on a regular basis. Through the regular evaluation of these activities, as conducted, for example, by the Netherlands' National Cyber Security Centre, governments can systematically build evidence of what works and what does not in their national context.

Notably, evaluating responses to disinformation has not been as widely implemented as evaluation of other topics as detailed in Chapter 4. Twenty-three CoGs reported having dedicated teams to evaluate media engagement, 21 for crisis communications and campaigns, and 17 for strategies and internal communication. In addition, only two countries selected 'to help civil servants monitor the impact of government responses to disinformation' as a priority in their programmes to counter disinformation, indicating it is a line of work that may benefit from more focus. While the data provided initial insight into the evaluation of government communication, more work needs to be done to understand how it is conducted and how insights gathered are integrated into responses to disinformation.

Intra- and inter-governmental co-ordination

The threats posed by mis- and disinformation are complex, with local, national and international implications. Effective co-ordination mechanisms are therefore required to help governments combat false information on many fronts at once. Co-ordination can take place across ministries within a country; internationally across countries; and between governments and domestic stakeholders such as civil society groups, social media companies and individuals.

First, intra-government co-ordination is widespread across surveyed countries, with 34 out of 39 of CoGs indicating co-ordination with other ministries, agencies, or departments on the issue of mis- and disinformation. Seventeen CoGs co-ordinated such activities via other issues, such as broader communication topics or security. Ten established thematic sub-groups or committees, and nine did so through ad hoc sub-groups (see Figure 6.4). Other methods included emails and WhatsApp groups to bring together officials from across the government.

Figure 6.4. Mechanisms used by CoGs to co-ordinate disinformation activities with other entities
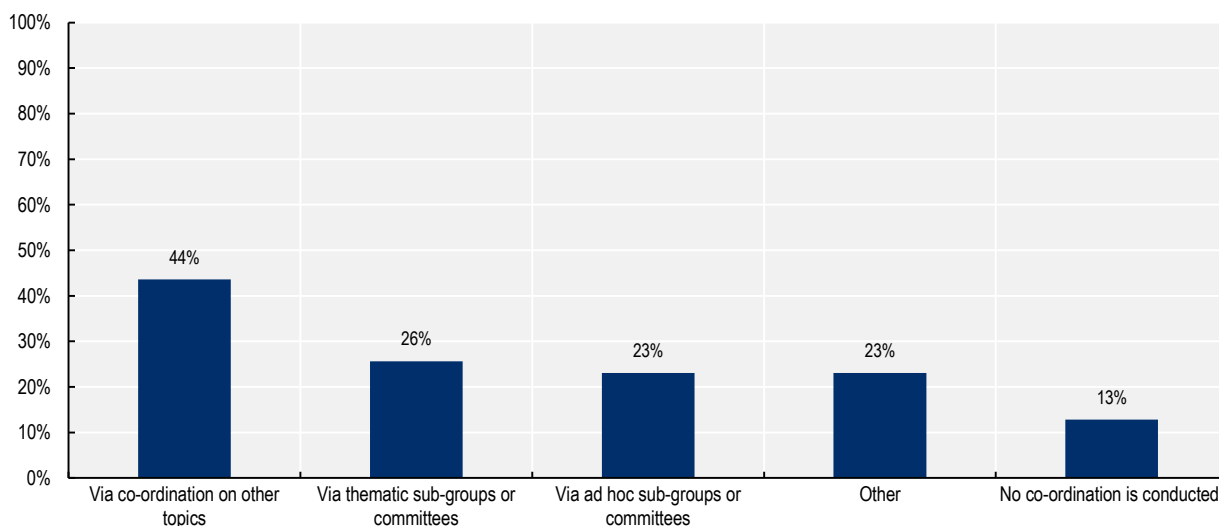
Note: N= 39 CoGs. Countries under "no co-ordination is conducted" include those that do not co-ordinate with other entities and those who do not conduct activities on disinformation.
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding public communication".

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated efforts to increase intra-governmental co-ordination in this context. Mis- and disinformation about health issues in particular have long plagued the medical community (Trethewey, 2020[16]). The outbreak and escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fast-spreading myths about the causes of the virus, erroneous cures, and vaccine conspiracies, have brought new urgency to efforts to work across government to counter such narratives. In Italy, for example, a taskforce was set up in April 2020 to facilitate collaboration on responses to COVID-19-related disinformation between CoG, the Civil Protection Department, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Italian Communications Regulator (AGCOM). Additional instruments, such as weekly newsletters, can help raise awareness of issues and threats and serve as a basis for additional co-ordination mechanisms. In France, the SIG sends a weekly newsletter to promote cross-government understanding of recent trends related to mis- and disinformation and contribute to co-ordinated response across the government.

Moving forward, countries may look to identify successes and lessons from the creation of structures initially established to counter misinformation about COVID-19. While 87% of CoGs surveyed indicated they co-ordinate across government on disinformation responses, just over half that did so (44%; 17 respondents) indicated at least some of their co-ordination occurs through work on other topics, rather than specifically on disinformation. Survey responses did not indicate whether developing new dedicated co-ordination mechanisms on disinformation may be advantageous compared to integrating it in existing practices. However, governments that have set up more advanced counter-disinformation interventions appear to have centralised capacity, with an eye to directly supporting all parts of government, as in the case of the RRU example above. This approach focuses on effective co-ordination as a key to the success of its initiatives and an important aspect to investigate further. Such centralised capacity can also be useful

in producing resources that can be easily adapted and used by agencies and ministries at the national level, as well as by sub-national governments and community groups.

While national-level public communicators play a key role in limiting the harm caused by the spread of mis- and disinformation, the challenge is also a global one that requires international co-operation, particularly in the face of co-ordinated efforts to spread mis- and disinformation by state and non-state actors. Notably, in 2018, a high-level group of experts tasked by the European Union with assessing the state of disinformation and proposing solutions concluded that the "problems can be handled most effectively, and in manner that is fully compliant with freedom of expression, free press and pluralism, only if all major stakeholders collaborate" (European Commission, 2018[17]). To fulfil its brief to develop a platform for sharing good practices between countries, the EU created the Rapid Alert System, which established an EU-wide network of strategic communication professionals to flag, share, and respond to disinformation (European Commission, 2018[18]). See Box 6.2 for additional examples of intra-governmental and international co-ordination.

Box 6.2. Co-ordination in practice

Intra-governmental co-ordination

The Government of Canada's Safeguarding Elections plan

In January 2019, the Canadian Ministers of Democratic Institutions, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, and National Defence announced the Plan to safeguard that year's General Election. The first pillar of the plan, Enhancing Citizen Preparedness, presented a robust public communication plan, which included a clear and impartial process for informing the public of an incident that threatens Canada's ability to have a free and fair election (the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol), a programme to build citizen resilience against online disinformation (the Digital Citizen Initiative), increased resources for an existing cyber security awareness campaign (Get Cyber Safe), and a public report on cyber threats to Canada's democratic process from the country's cyber security agency. The Critical Election Incident Public Protocol was administered by a panel of senior public servants from across government, which included the Clerk of the Privy Council, the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General, the Deputy Minister of Public Safety, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Following the 2019 election, elements of the Plan underwent internal and/or independent assessments, which confirmed the Plan's utility and relevance. In order to safeguard future Canadian elections, key measures were improved and renewed for 2021 and beyond.

International co-ordination

EU Action Plan against Disinformation

In preparing for European elections, the European Commission called for the development of a co-ordinated response to disinformation in June and October 2018. The Action Plan Against Disinformation was adopted in December 2018 with the aim of building capabilities and strengthening co-operation between EU Member States and EU institutions. The Action Plan sets out a whole-of-society approach to countering disinformation that is grounded in European values, including freedom of speech. The four pillars of the plan are:

- improving detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation
- strengthening co-operation and joint responses to disinformation
- mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation

> • raising awareness and improving societal resilience.
>
> With the Action Plan in place, the European Union was better able to quickly mobilise an effort to counter disinformation about COVID-19.
>
> Source: Author's own work, based on: https://www.canada.ca/en/democratic-institutions/news/2019/01/safeguarding-elections.html; https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/action-plan-disinformation-commission-contribution-european-council-13-14-december-2018_en

The field of mis- and disinformation is evolving rapidly, and governments are still in the process of understanding the phenomenon. Public communicators have quickly scaled up efforts to combat the spread of false and misleading content, particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and taking stock of progress to date provides helpful insight into the state of the field and next steps. Further institutionalising responses to mis- and disinformation through adopting specific definitions, designing communication strategies, and leveraging new and existing resources for targeted training, evaluation and co-ordination will help streamline and systematise best practices.

Path forward: Identifying targeted public communication practices and engaging in a whole-of-society response

Ultimately, responding effectively to the challenges and opportunities that the communication landscape presents will require a holistic approach. In addition to the measures governments can take to strengthen the institutionalisation of their responses – via guidelines and definitions, structures, capacity building, evaluation and co-ordination of responses – they should also continue to focus on both their specific communication practices, as well as the means to work with outside partners, including social media platforms, to improve the environment in which communications occur. The relationship between the three elements – enabling institutions, practices, and enabling ecosystems – is underlined in the OECD *Good Practice Principles on public communication responses to help counter mis- and disinformation* (see Box 6.3).

> **Box 6.3. OECD Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation**
>
> The draft OECD Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation have been developed as part of the larger effort to ensure communicators can tackle emerging challenges and build confidence in the information environment. The ten principles are:
>
> **1. Transparency**
>
> Governments strive to communicate in an honest, clear and open manner, with institutions comprehensively disclosing information, decisions, processes and data within the limitations of relevant legislation and regulation. Transparency, including about assumptions and uncertainty, can reduce the scope for rumours and falsehoods to take root, as well as enable public scrutiny of official information and open government data.
>
> **2. Inclusiveness**
>
> Interventions are designed and diversified to reach all groups in society. Official information strives to be relevant and easily understood, with messages tailored for diverse publics. Channels and messages are appropriate for intended audiences, and communication initiatives are conducted with respect for cultural and linguistic differences and with attention paid to reaching disengaged, vulnerable, underrepresented or marginalised groups.

3. Responsiveness

Governments develop interventions and communications around the needs and concerns of citizens. Adequate resources and efforts are dedicated to understanding and listening to their questions and expectations to develop informed and tailored messages. Responsive approaches facilitate two-way dialogue, including with vulnerable, underrepresented and marginalised groups, and enable an avenue for public participation in policy decisions.

4. Whole-of-society

Government efforts to counteract information disorders are integrated within a whole-of-society approach, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including the media, private sector, civil society, academia and individuals. Governments broadly promote the public's resilience to mis- and disinformation, as well as an environment conducive to accessing, sharing and facilitating constructive public engagement around information and data. Where relevant, public institutions co-ordinate and engage with non-governmental partners with the aim of building trust across society and all parts of the country.

5. Public interest-driven

Public communication should strive to be independent from politicisation in implementing interventions to counteract mis- and disinformation. Public communication is conducted as separate and distinct from partisan and electoral communication, with the introduction of measures to ensure clear authorship, impartiality, accountability, and objectivity.

6. Institutionalisation

Governments consolidate interventions into coherent approaches guided by official communication and data policies, standards and guidelines. Public communication offices benefit from adequate human and financial resources, a well-co-ordinated cross-government approach at national and sub-national levels, and dedicated, trained and professional staff.

7. Evidence-based

Government interventions are designed and informed by trustworthy and reliable data, testing, behavioural insights, and build on the monitoring and evaluation of relevant activities. Research, analysis and learnings are continuously gathered and feed into improved approaches and practices. Governments focus on recognising emerging narratives, behaviours, and characteristics to understand the context in which they are communicating and responding.

8. Timeliness

Public institutions develop mechanisms to act in a timely manner by identifying and responding to emerging narratives, recognising the speed at which false information can travel. Communicators work to build preparedness and rapid responses by establishing co-ordination and approval mechanisms to intervene quickly with accurate, relevant and compelling content.

9. Prevention

Government interventions are designed to pre-empt rumours, falsehoods and conspiracies to stop potentially harmful information from gaining traction and to build resilience to mis- and disinformation. A focus on prevention requires governments to monitor and track problematic content and its sources; recognise information gaps; understand and anticipate common disinformation tactics, vulnerabilities and risks; and identify appropriate responses, such as "pre-bunking".

10. Future-proof

Public institutions invest in innovative research and use strategic foresight to anticipate the evolution of technology and information ecosystems and prepare for likely threats. Counter-misinformation interventions are designed to be open, adaptable and matched with efforts to build civil servants' capacity to respond to evolving challenges.

The principles are intended to:

- Compile evidence on public communication and related government interventions aimed at tackling mis- and disinformation and addressing underlying issues and sources of mistrust in information.
- Stimulate a multi-disciplinary discussion on what has worked in addressing low public confidence toward information from official and mainstream sources.
- Help guide government interventions to build information ecosystems that promote openness, transparency and inclusion, ultimately increasing trust in public institutions and strengthening democracies.
- Provide practical guidance for international efforts to promote confidence in COVID-19 vaccines as an essential step to overcoming the pandemic.

Source: OECD (forthcoming[2]), *Principles of Good Practice for Public Communication Responses to Help Counter Mis- and Disinformation*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

The institutionalisation elements discussed throughout this chapter can support the development of specific practices by contributing to the professionalisation of communications as a discipline and can support policies that allow the broader information ecosystem to flourish. The following sections will in turn discuss some of the specific communication practices that underpin responses to disinformation and explore how governments can engage in a whole-of-society effort to tackle relevant challenges and promote democratic discussion, as well as indicate areas for further research.

Communication practices to provide accurate and timely information and reach all segments of society

The daily practices of public communicators are essential to counteracting mis- and disinformation. Transparent and regular communication can proactively prevent falsehoods from spreading and increase trust in the government as a source of accurate, reliable and timely information. Openness, relevance and responsiveness are critical, and, as discussed below, are also particularly useful for countering false narratives.

One of the most straightforward practices to countering mis- and disinformation is through fact checking and debunking false stories. In debunking a piece of false information, research has shown that it is crucial to first state the correct information, then explain clearly what is false and why, and finally re-emphasise the correction (Chan et al., 2017[19]). Effectiveness also requires that disinformation be caught early, which also highlights the importance of having media, and social media, monitoring procedures in place. Additionally, given limited time and resources, it is impossible for any public communicator to counter every piece of misinformation. Indeed, on occasion debunking can even be counterproductive if it draws attention to a rumour. Establishing and regularly reviewing thresholds for responding to a particular falsehood – for instance, a given level of engagement or spread – can simplify decision-making processes and make debunking more effective (Lewandowsky at al., 2020[20]).

Even once a falsehood has been debunked, however, the false information may remain relevant for those who have seen it. Getting ahead of disinformation – or, in effect, inoculating individuals through "pre-

bunking" – may therefore prove to be a more effective strategy. For example, individuals are less likely to be swayed by disinformation if they have been exposed to a weak version of the falsehood (Roozenbeek and van der Linden, 2021[21]). The "Go Viral!" and "Bad News" games developed at the University of Cambridge are examples of efforts to conduct pre-bunking (see Box 6.4 for examples of government efforts to support debunking and pre-bunking).

Box 6.4. Examples of debunking and pre-bunking

Debunking false and misleading claims is one approach used by public communicators to help promote fact-based public conversation and information environments. Doing so effectively requires speed, accuracy and a careful consideration of context. Debunking should be applied strategically and guided by the prevention of harm, and considering where in the "life-cycle" of media manipulation the misinformation falls will be important to target responses appropriately. To that end, establishing and updating guidance for debunking can facilitate decision making.

Journalists, fact-checking organisations, social media companies and individuals alike can play active roles in debunking misleading and incorrect content. While governments cannot – and should not – serve as "arbiters of truth," there are a number of examples where governments have established efforts to respond to potentially damaging and misleading content.

For its part, pre-bunking focuses on forewarning people and providing potential counterarguments regarding manipulative misinformation. The following examples of how governments have conducted or supported related efforts help illustrate a path forward:

US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)

In the run up to the 2020 national election, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) published a [Rumor Control site](#) that responds to common election-related mis- and disinformation. This website provides an example of a government-led effort to counteract misleading information around a specific topic, in this case elections. It addresses common misunderstandings and rumours related to election security by describing processes, security measures, and legal requirements designed to protect against or detect security issues related to election infrastructure and processes. It also provides definitions, resources and links to additional information.

EUvsDisinfo

Established in 2015 in response to external "ongoing disinformation campaigns", EUvsDisinfo is the flagship programme of the European External Action Service's (EEAS) East StratCom Task Force. The project is staffed by full-time staff with backgrounds in communications, journalism and social sciences and relevant language skills who are seconded by EU Member States or recruited by EU institutions. They identify, compile, expose and debunk disinformation and collect the cases they detect in an open-source, searchable database.

"Go Viral!" and "Bad News" pre-bunking games

The Go Viral! game was developed by the University of Cambridge in partnership the UK Cabinet Office. It builds on research that found that by exposing people to the techniques used to spread misinformation online, they can better identify and disregard false and misleading content. Through the game, players are exposed to the thinking behind false news stories and memes to help them detect such content in the real world. The *Go Viral!* game is based on a pre-COVID version of the game, *Bad News*, which has been played more than a million times since its launch in 2018. Research found that playing the game once reduced a player's perception that misinformation was reliable by an average of 21%.

Source: Author's own work, based on: Donovan, Joan (2020) *"The Life Cycle of Media Manipulation,"* The Verification Handbook 3, 2020. https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/verification-3/investigating-disinformation-and-media-manipulation/the-lifecycle-of-media-manipulation; Donovan, Joan; Friedberg, Brian; Lim, Gabrielle; Leaver, Nicole; Nilsen, Jennifer; and Dreyfuss, Emily, (2021), *Mitigating Medical Misinformation: A Whole-of-Society Approach to Countering Spam, Scams, and Hoaxes*, https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Mitigating-Medical-Misinformation-March-29-2021_0.pdf; https://euvsdisinfo.eu/; Roozenbeek J. and van der Linden, S. (2021), "Don't Just Debunk, Prebunk: Inoculate Yourself Against Digital Misinformation", Character & Context Blog, Society for Personality and Social Psychology (https://www.spsp.org/news-center/blog/roozenbeek-van-der-linden-resisting-digital-misinformation; Roozenbeek, J. and S. van der Linden (2019), "Fake news game confers psychological resistance against online misinformation", Palgrave Communications, Vol. 5/1, http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0279-9; https://www.cisa.gov/rumorcontrol.

Clear and open communication, particularly in the face of uncertainty, is also important to combatting disinformation, and recent research indicates that such honesty can boost confidence in messages (van der Bles et al., 2020[22]). In fact, as noted in the United Kingdom's Uncertainty Toolkit for Analysts in Government (Home Office, n.d.[23]), failing to accurately convey the degree of uncertainty in predicted outcomes can undermine trust in the long run when real-world events contradict government messages. The Toolkit contains good practices for communicating uncertainty, including understanding the audience, using plain language and using data to illustrate the message rather than often-misunderstood descriptors such as "low risk" or "very likely".

Diversifying the messengers and platforms promoting verified information is another important component to the success of efforts to correct falsehoods. Government platforms on their own are limited in their reach, particularly to segments of the public who have lower trust in institutions – a critical audience for counter-disinformation narratives. Leveraging the voices and platforms of individuals and groups who enjoy high levels of trust across society can help amplify government messages and increase their perceived reliability among difficult-to-reach populations.

An initiative implemented by Finland at the beginning of the pandemic illustrates how external voices can be key to quickly mobilising effective messages. The government drew on the National Emergency Supply Agency – an established network of authorities, business and industry to be activated in response to security concerns – to reach the public with accurate information about the pandemic through encouraging influencers to amplify messages. In collaboration with private sector partners, the government distributed a weekly email to influential voices in Finnish society with facts about coronavirus and ready-made content for social media channels. The campaign was well received, and a survey of people who followed participating social media accounts found that 97% found information about the virus shared by influencers to be reliable, and nearly half said they changed their behaviour during the pandemic because of messages (PING Helsinki, 2020[24]).

As seen in the case of Finland, using social media influencers to amplify government messages can be an effective tool, provided it is conducted in a transparent and public-interest-driven manner. In Belgium, scientists rather than politicians delivered the government's daily COVID-19 briefing, and they are accompanied by a rapid response team pulled from relevant civil service departments. This has allowed the daily briefings to effectively counter misinformation, depoliticise and reinforce the measures taken to curb the spread of the virus and emphasise the importance of paying attention to knock-on impacts of the virus, such as the toll on mental health (Brunsden and Khan, 2020[25]).

Beyond the government's role as an information provider, facilitating two-way communication can help ensure the public's concerns, beliefs and behaviours are more widely understood and appreciated. Two-way communication helps increase participation and engagement with a wider variety of stakeholders, and helps governments share messages more effectively. For example, as described in greater detail in Chapter 7, at the beginning of the pandemic, Slovenia enlisted the assistance of doctors and medical students to help clarify information about COVID-19 and more clearly understand the public's questions and concerns. The hotline that was established answered more than 135 000 calls concerning the rules

on crossing the border, movement and gatherings, testing, and other health concerns. The initiative also helped the government track citizens' knowledge of and concerns about the pandemic. Initial questions about the symptoms and prevention of COVID-19 gave way to clarification questions about government measures in response to the virus as the pandemic progressed.

Additionally, public communicators should consider the role of shifting digital contexts on how individuals receive and react to messages. How people consume information and engage with digital tools are constantly evolving. To that end, behavioural insights (or BI) are particularly important to understanding the mechanics of how people interact with content and how misinformation can spread, as well as the potential effectiveness of different approaches. Cognitive and psychological factors such as information overload, confirmation bias and a tendency to believe repeated messages can undermine factual messages and challenge public communicators' ability to disseminate accurate information[7]. Indeed, the same cognitive and behavioural factors are and can be exploited by ill-motivated actors behind sophisticated disinformation campaigns that play on people's vulnerabilities and fears. Accounting for human psychology can help communicators develop more effective responses to mis- and disinformation and predict how their audiences will receive them.

Behavioural insights can help governments combat misinformation by recognising who is most vulnerable and why; designing behaviourally informed solutions; and evaluating solutions empirically. Psychological mechanisms such as illusory truth effect[8] and locus of control[9] are among the mechanisms that motivate people to believe and share mis- and disinformation. Behavioural insights can help uncover these and allow public communicators to combat the root cause of information disorder. Through designing behavioural prompts, such as 'nudges' to think about accuracy before sharing a link, public communicators and BI experts can work together to prevent disinformation-spreading behaviour rather than try to contradict false messages once they have already taken hold. Through rigorous tests such as randomised control trials, BI experts can also help provide empirical foundations for communication efforts. As also identified by the OECD, however, government have faced difficulties integrating BI approaches into their regulatory policy-making processes, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges have included clarifying roles and expectations, financial and human resources, and communicating outputs and outcomes (OECD, 2020[26]), echoing the challenges faced by public communicators.

While this is not an exhaustive list of communication practices that can help counter the challenges faced, it provides an initial insight into how countries are putting into practice their efforts to respond to misleading and false content. Continuing to collect, analyse and share how these practices are being put into effective use and how they might be shared and applied more widely will be the focus of ongoing work in this field.

A whole-of-society approach to supporting public communication and the information ecosystem

Beyond implementing good communications practices and institutionalising responses to mis- and disinformation, the threats posed are at least in part a symptom of larger societal issues. In this regard, governments should attempt to engage in a whole-of-society effort that includes working with and benefiting from civil society, the private sector and individuals to support the timely and effective sharing of information and data and to promote democratic discussion.

Indeed, as noted by the European Commission, "the best responses are likely to be those driven by multi-stakeholder collaborations" (European Commission, 2018[18]). To facilitate a holistic approach, governments can engage with stakeholders from across civil society, the private sector and the public. To that end, of countries surveyed, 72% already consulted with actors outside of government on topics related to disinformation. Academic and research organisations were the most commonly involved, with 85% of CoGs (22 out of 26) that engaged with non-governmental organisations listing them as partners. Ministries of Health were less likely to co-ordinate with external stakeholders, with only 54% indicating they did so. Among those that did co-ordinate, media and civil society organisations (7 out of 13 respectively) were the

most consulted (see Figure 6.5). Organisational structures permitting, there may therefore be an opportunity for MHs to increase their engagement with external stakeholders, or benefit from engagement conducted by the CoG, to bolster their expertise in responding to disinformation.

Figure 6.5. Stakeholders consulted by CoGs and MHs on the issue of countering disinformation
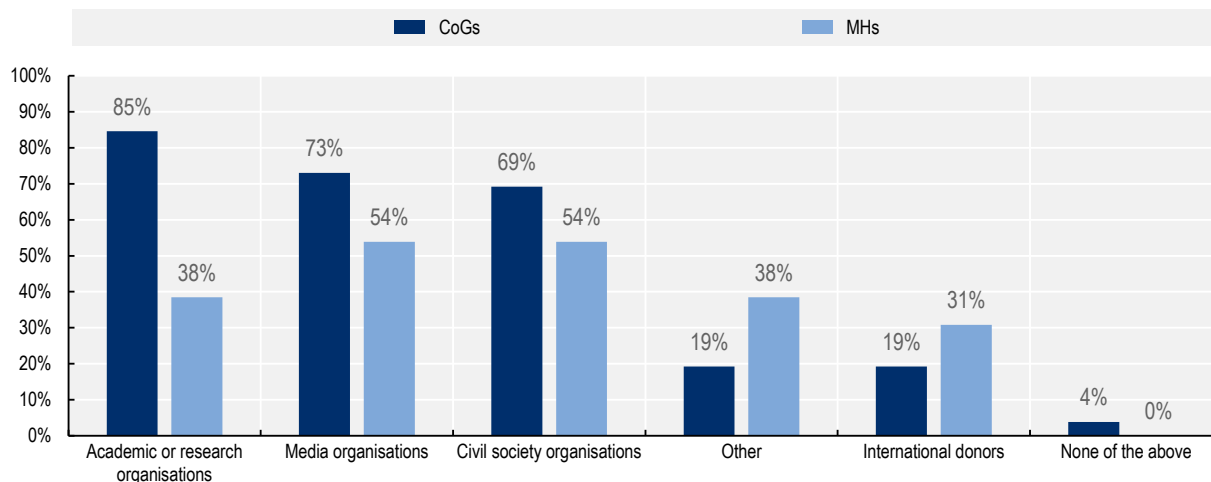
Note: N CoGs= 26; Australia, Germany and the Netherlands did not provide data for this question. A total of 10 CoGs indicated in question 53 that the government has never consulted with external actors. N MHs= 13; A total of 11 MHs indicated they never consulted with external actors.
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding public communication".

It should be noted, however, that the majority (65%) of CoGs that co-ordinated with non-governmental actors to counter disinformation did so on an ad-hoc basis. As such, there may be scope to continue to formalise and regularise engagement with non-government actors. For instance, as identified in the OECD data collection process, the 2018 Report of the Belgian Expert Group on False Information and Disinformation contains a recommendation to create a permanent consultation forum between the government and universities, media, NGOs, and social media and search platforms. As designed, the forum would have three primary functions: to foster dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and co-ordination; to centralise relevant information and activities in Belgium; and to facilitate co-operative projects between different actors. Through the centralisation of research, the provision of tools for citizens and journalists, support for quality journalism (including financial support), and bolstering media literacy efforts, the platform would take a four-pronged approach to stemming the tide of disinformation. Beyond its concrete aims, the creation of the platform would intentionally send the signal that the responsibility for keeping societal debate balanced and factual lies with all actors. Similarly, the EU report "Tackling Online Disinformation: A European Approach" (European Commission, 2018[17]), lays out the EU's approach to responding to disinformation, including the creation of the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation, support for quality journalism to foster a pluralistic media environment, and acknowledgement of the role for educational initiatives and awareness campaigns to improve media literacy.

One avenue for collaboration is in empowering citizens to detect and discard false information via media literacy initiatives. Such efforts can help stem its spread as well as create incentives within media markets to refrain from promoting misleading or incorrect information. For instance, the 'Media for Citizens-Citizens for the Media: Strengthening the Capacity of NGOs for the Development of Media and Information Literacy in the Western Balkans' initiative brought together seven media literacy organisations in the Western Balkans in an EU-funded project to improve media literacy. The project aims to understand and improve the state of media literacy in the region through mapping the current state of policies and practices; hosting summits where practitioners, experts, and activists can create coalitions; and ultimately funding online

campaigns, programmes to bring journalists into high school classrooms, and 40 civil society-led information literacy initiatives (CIMUSEE, 2018[27]; Greene et al., 2021[28]).

A diverse media ecosystem that supports strong, independent, fact-based outlets is an additional critical element to underpinning the flow of accurate information. However, these media models are the ones most threatened in the digital age. According to the 2020 Reuters Digital News Report, the COVID-19 pandemic has particularly exacerbated the impact of digital disruption on local media, even as it has underlined the importance of these outlets in keeping citizens informed about the prevalence of the virus in their area, highlighting local measures to stop the spread, as well as holding local politicians to account (Newman et al., 2020[29]). Identifying efforts to support a thriving, diverse media landscape can help forestall the spread of false information and improve the space for public engagement and dialogue.

Furthermore, involving citizens in the process of designing interventions through civic dialogues and deliberative processes can help to hone messages for audiences susceptible to disinformation as well as improve citizens' trust in government. The French government initiated such a process to counteract COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among citizens. Faced with a low rate of intended vaccine uptake, where only 57% of citizens initially said they intended to get vaccinated, the French government assembled a randomly selected, demographically representative 35-member citizens' vaccine panel to consult on the strategy for rolling out the vaccine (Casassus, 2021[30]). The panel was tasked with considering proposals related to questions, fears and ethical considerations related to the COVID-19 vaccine, in particular around communication with the general public, dialogue with health professionals and access to vaccination in some geographical regions and segments of the population. After three days of consideration, the panel recommended, among others, that "positive communication" be adapted for specific audiences (Desmoulières, 2021[31]).

Finally, the threat posed by the spread of mis- and disinformation will continue to evolve, and responses to it will need to evolve as well. To that end, supporting academic and scientific research and maintaining open channels between experts and practitioners, both in government and in the private sector, will be crucial to robust, holistic approaches going forward. Innovations like the pre-bunking games *Bad News* and *Go Viral!*, which first emerged out of a collaboration between the UK government, Cambridge University and a media agency in the private sector (the technology think tank Debunk EU facilitated the game's introduction in the Baltic States), would not have been possible without the perspectives and expertise of each party. Moving forward, governments can continue to identify not just the most effective public communication responses, but the interplay of those efforts with a broader set of initiatives to support the media and information ecosystem more widely.

Such responses are broader than public communication responses. At the same time, however, there is a range of potential regulatory or legislative responses that are the purview of independent bodies or Parliaments, such as those concerning the diversity and independence of the media; the strength of a country's civic space; content moderation, transparency requirements and business models of social media platforms; etc. While these issues also play an important role, the scope of the practices discussed here focus more narrowly on those that directly involve constructive engagement focused on strengthening the information space.

Key Findings and way forward

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new urgency to the challenges posed by the spread of mis- and disinformation. Notably, only 38% of CoG and 21% of MH respondents had a strategy in place to govern the response to mis- and disinformation at the outset of the crisis. This relative lack of institutional focus does not necessarily mean that governments have ignored the issue, but it does indicate they may have been inadequately prepared to face the wave of health misinformation that accompanied COVID-19. Ad hoc and crisis responses, especially during the pandemic, were activated quickly, suggesting that systematising responses can help governments anticipate future and evolving challenges and thereby be more effective. Moving forward, additional research will help illustrate specific benefits to the creation and application of strategies, how they can be applied most effectively, and lessons for countries that are seeking to develop a more consistent institutional focus to responding to this challenge. Strengthening communicators' understanding of how to counter mis- and disinformation and establishing consistent practices can also help facilitate collaboration, identify a common path forward and stay ahead of emerging trends. Identifying successes and lessons from responses initially established to counter misinformation about COVID-19 will also be a useful approach.

- OECD data suggests that there is scope to strengthen the evaluation of governments' responses to disinformation. Through the regular evaluation of counter-disinformation activities, governments can build evidence of what works and what does not. Measuring the public's understanding and receptiveness to messages can indicate the success of campaigns, further clarify messages, and inform the design of training materials and activities. Increasing the focus on identifying what works and providing training to public communicators on responses to misinformation are important avenues for future activities.

- The complex and widespread challenges posed by mis- and disinformation also highlight the importance of co-ordination across and between governments, as well as with external stakeholders. Overall, co-ordination was widespread across surveyed countries, with 86% reporting co-ordination between CoG and ministries, agencies, or departments, and 72% of countries surveyed engaged with actors outside of government on topics related to disinformation. Nevertheless, given that the majority of countries that co-ordinated externally did so on an ad-hoc basis, there may be scope to continue to formalise and regularise such engagement. The presence of domestic and international actors intent on sowing harm or confusion highlights the essential role of co-ordination between all relevant actors to tackle the spread of mis- and disinformation. With external stakeholders, such engagement could take the form of public communication practices that enable honest, timely and relevant messages that utilise two-way dialogue and a broad range of trusted channels and spokespersons. External engagement can also facilitate the exchange of good practices, as well as help strengthen the context in which information is shared through support for media literacy, quality fact-based journalism, deliberative democracy initiatives, etc.

- Governments should also view the public communication function as part of a wider response to the challenges represented by mis- and disinformation. Developing a forward-looking approach, informed by innovative and inclusive communication practices, will complement institutionalisation efforts. Additionally, efforts to strengthen the media and information ecosystem through media literacy, regulatory responses, efforts to strengthen independent, local and fact-based journalism, and additional research on what works regarding specific interventions, among others, will help ensure public communication can play an effective role in governments' holistic responses to these challenges.

- Moving forward, governments can continue to explore how efforts to build resilient information environments can be seen within the wider context of rebuilding and maintaining trust and reinforcing democracy. More fully understanding of the causes and sources of the challenges presented by the spread of mis- and disinformation will in turn help develop forward-looking approaches to

communication responses to ongoing and complex issues, such as the COVID-19 recovery, climate change, etc. Continuing to collect, analyse and share good practices will serve an important role in providing useful and practical guidance.

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Notes

[1] This is understood as the combination of communication and media governance frameworks (i.e. institutional, legal, policy and regulatory) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies and citizen journalists).

[2] For more discussion on role of public communication in responding to the challenges posed by the spread of mis- and disinformation, as well as a broader range of potential governance responses, see Matasick, C., C. Alfonsi and A. Bellantoni (2020[13]), "Governance responses to disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 39, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d6237c85-en; and OECD (2020[12]), "Transparency, communication and trust: The role of public communication in responding to the wave of disinformation about the new Coronavirus", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19),* OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/bef7ad6e-en.

[3] Malinformation, as defined by Wardle and Derakshan (2017[1]), describes 'when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.' The focus in this report is primarily on mis- and disinformation.

[4] The Korea Press Foundation was founded by the Korean government in 2010 as a public institution to support media. The body combines three previously existing institutions: Korea Press Foundation, Newspaper Commission for the Press, and Korean Newspaper Circulation Service. Their mission is to manage challenges facing journalism and media industries in Korea and to help Korean media industries adapt to new media and information technologies (https://www.kpf.or.kr/eng/user/engmain.do).

[5] The author identified the most important objectives in question 51 based on CoGs that claimed to have a strategy or guiding document to combat misinformation in question 50.

[6] The role evaluation plays in communication is covered in chapter 4 of this report. This chapter examines how evaluation can support responses to mis- and disinformation.

[7] Related literature and evidence is summarised in Shane (2020[32]), "The psychology of misinformation: Why we're vulnerable", First Draft, 30 June 2020 https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/the-psychology-of-misinformation-why-were-vulnerable/.

[8] The illusory truth effect is the tendency for people to believe information they have seen before, even if it is not true.

[9] Locus of control refers to an individual's belief about the extent of control they have over what happens to them, versus outside actors or events determining outcomes.