

# Synthesis

KOFF Roundtable, September 2021

## “Overcoming Mis/Disinformation”

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### Summary

Swiss Platform for Peacebuilding KOFF hosted the roundtable on “Overcoming Mis/Disinformation” with panelists from four areas of peacebuilding who discussed the challenges of mis/disinformation and ways forward.

The importance of digital technologies in peacebuilding is increasing, and with this, the urgency to understand better the opportunities and challenges they bring. Mis/disinformation, which is the un- or in-tentional spread of false information, is not a new phenomenon and it is not isolated to digital channels, but social media and messaging apps do accelerate the spread of information. This can lead to infodemics, encourage conspiracies, and erode trust in journalism, democracy, and peace processes. Consequently, mis/disinformation exacerbate tensions, fuel conflict, and further marginalize vulnerable groups. Against this backdrop, the roundtable experts explored the widespread effects of mis/disinformation and their implications for peacebuilding.

### Speakers

- **Caroline Vuillemin:** General Director, [Fondation Hironnelle](#)
- **Owen Frazer:** Senior Advisor Conflict Transformation & **Indraka Ubeysekara:** Project Manager, [Helvetas](#)
- **Chris Lunch:** Co-Founder & Director, [InsightShare](#)
- **Dr. David Lanz:** Co-Head Mediation Program, [swisspeace](#)
- Moderator: **Emma Baumhofer:** Digital Peacebuilding Advisor, [swisspeace](#)

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- KOFF: **Anna Leissing**: Head of Policy & Platform, [swisspeace](#) and Head of [Platform KOFF](#)

## Questions discussed

- What are the biggest hurdles we currently face regarding mis/disinformation and what partnerships, or tools would help get past them?
- While digital channels accelerate the spread of mis/disinformation, it is also widely spread offline and through word of mouth. What are the challenges and opportunities for the multiple channels of communication?
- What impact can digital technologies make in promoting peacemaking and preventing conflict?

## Key points

Emma Baumhofer, Digital Peacebuilding Advisor at swisspeace, who organized and moderated the roundtable, opened the event by highlighting the importance of understanding mis/disinformation for peacebuilding and of gathering interdisciplinary perspectives to combat it. Her remarks were followed by an introduction to Platform KOFF by the head of the platform, Anna Leissing.

As the first presenter, Caroline Vuillemin of Fondation Hironnelle underscored the importance of trust in media to overcome mis/disinformation. As a non-profit that provides information to people in crises, their approach includes verifying news (but this takes time), staying impartial, relying on a variety of sources, and strictly distinguishing between facts and commentary. One way that Fondation Hironnelle builds trust in the media is through inclusive and participatory journalism programs. Caroline highlighted the need of social media platforms to work in local languages, the limitations of digital communication in low connectivity environments and amidst internet shutdowns, and the perseverance of mis/disinformation in offline channels.

Owen Frazer and Indraka Ubeysekara of Helvetas then presented their work on a project called “Alter Hate” in Sri Lanka. Owen pointed to globalization and digitalization as two factors exacerbating mis/disinformation. Indraka showed how mis/disinformation on social media intensify ethnic tensions, stoke fears, and lead directly to offline violence, which is often perpetrated by youth. He shared several translated examples of false claims that went viral online. Helvetas counters hate speech and mis/disinformation by disseminating counter-narratives, educating communities about hate speech, promoting responsible online behavior, and amplifying better role models for youth. For Owen and Indraka, promoting social cohesion is fundamental to addressing mis/disinformation.

The following panelist, Chris Lunch of InsightShare, presented how his organization uses participatory video to counter rumors. With this approach, engaging and creative content that is created directly by community members, helps to devalue false rumors. This type of community led content is a compelling source of information and it provides a space to address divisive topics that easily develop into hate speech and mis/disinformation. Creation of participatory videos also sparks important conversations on complex topics, one example given was the question, is Facebook a trusted source?

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Finally, Dr. David Lanz of swisspeace spoke about mis/disinformation in relation to peace mediation. Although most mediation processes take place behind closed doors, public facing disinformation campaigns are an increasing burden to negotiators and mediators. They can erode trust in peace talks and individuals participating in them, while making it challenging to maintain confidential spaces. Online attacks are often targeting women negotiators. Referring to a recent report authored by UNDPPA and swisspeace (see resources below), David enumerated three broad strategies in responding to disinformation targeting peace talks. Firstly, to not respond or engage; secondly, to work with local actors and allies to disseminate counter narratives; and thirdly, to collaborate with social media platforms in removing particularly egregious disinformation fueling conflict.

## Discussion and takeaways

Following the presentations, the panelists posed questions to each other, and the floor was also opened to the audience. The method of combatting mis/information with counternarratives was discussed in more detail, as this approach differs fundamentally from that of journalists, who remain impartial. Understanding the information ecosystem in each context, which includes, knowing who are trusted sources, communication channels, and the economics of local media, were agreed as commonalities.

The topic of censorship and moderation bias came up during the discussion. While it can seem straightforward to remove false information and hate speech, these decisions are in fact, nuanced and can easily lead to one-sided narratives. Peacebuilders have an obligation to listen to all conflict parties and to try to be impartial mediators. However, in the case of disinformation, this is dissemination of false messages with the explicit intent to cause harm, often coming from coordinated networks and governments as a purposeful tactic of conflict. Disinformation and hate speech are not narratives that deserve a space at the table.

KOFF thanks each of the roundtable speakers for sharing their work on mis/disinformation from the perspectives of journalism, youth work and capacity building, participatory media, and mediation, and for participating in a fruitful discussion. Hearing about the topic from four distinct perspectives, including different approaches to combatting the problem, was an enriching aspect of the event. We also thank our audience for their attendance and participation. The topic is clearly relevant to peacebuilders from many disciplines and an interdisciplinary approach may be one of the strongest against mis/disinformation. It is our objective that this roundtable is one step toward future collaborations on this theme.

## Resources

### Fondation Hirondelle

- [Fondation Hirondelle report on disinformation](#)
- [Hirondelle's newsletter: Informing in the era of social media](#)
- Three relevant videos from Hirondelle's Masterclass series:
  - [Maria Ressa - The Threat of Social Media \(Philippines\)](#)
  - [Mort Rosenblum - Lies and Disinformation](#)
  - [Guillaume Daudin - The Handling of Sources](#)

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- [Unesco guidebook on journalism and disinformation](#)

## InsightShare

- Fellowship case study focus on Amadiba
  - [In this article, Balungile \(Amadiba hub fellow\) reflects on what Covid-19 means in her rural community](#)
  - [Meet the hub Amadiba](#)
  - [Sinogugu's message](#)
- Focus on NEN hub (NE India, Nagaland)
  - [This video is part of the "COVID-19: Indigenous Insights" playlist. The playlist contains 6 videos from India, the Philippines and South Africa produced by InsightShare Network international hubs during the coronavirus pandemic.](#)
- Focus on UNICEF Sierra Leone
  - [Article by Soledad Muniz, with links to the Sierra Leone film \(3mins\) and to CDAC's toolkit, "Rumour has it: A practice guide to working with rumours"](#)
  - [The Sierra Leone film](#)
  - [About Insightshare work with Unicef](#)
- General
  - [Breakthrough online/offline training programme, overcoming COVID-19 constraints](#)
  - [A short example of a participatory video training](#)
  - [Open source toolkits and resources](#)
  - [TedX talk about our work with marginalised and vulnerable communities \(including in NE India\) using Participatory Video](#)

## swisspeace

- [Report on social media in peace mediation: a framework](#) - Co-authored by swisspeace and UNDP

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