



Addressing the Impact of Mis-/Disinformation on Civilians PERSPECTIVES FROM PEACEKEEPING AND HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONERS

PoC Week Side Event to UN Security Council Open Debate on PoC
Thursday, 25 May 2023
14:30 – 16:30 EDT | 20:30 – 22:30 CEST
Hybrid | Expert-level

*Location: Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations
871 United Nations Plaza*

The spread of online mis- and disinformation and hate speech aggravates and fuels civilian harm in the context of armed conflict. Although they have long existed offline, the increased digitalization of the information space contributes to disinformation and malicious content being shared faster and wider than ever before. In fact, such information tends to be shared at a greater scale and speed than legitimate and verified news.¹ This online phenomenon poses a direct threat to civilian safety and security as it influences and takes root in vulnerable communities, with hate speech, orchestrated smear campaigns, and incitement to violence of particular concern.² Mis- and disinformation likewise erode public trust,³ putting civilians, peacekeepers, and humanitarians at heightened risk of harm and undermining protection efforts.

Mis- and disinformation can impact a country's protective environment in myriad ways, including by heightening insecurity, normalizing violence, polarizing communities, targeting marginalized groups or minorities, stigmatizing the displaced, affecting social coherence, and silencing civil society voices such as those of human rights defenders, journalists, and traditional and religious leaders. Communities in conflict settings are disproportionately affected by information gaps that undermine their ability to prevent and stop the spread of false or manipulative content. Such content can interfere with civilian access to credible news, distort information used by third parties to assess civilian needs, and serve to conceal or fabricate information about human rights abuses or conflicts in country. Furthermore, social media platforms currently lack the appropriate safeguards to prevent the distribution of this harmful content.

The propagation of false and/or harmful narratives about the United Nations also poses grave threats to the safety and security of UN personnel, impairs the credibility and legitimacy of peacekeeping missions, and obstructs mandate implementation, including the protection of civilians. Effectively addressing and

¹ Peter Dizikes, "Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 8 March 2018.

² United Nations, Department of Peace Operations, "Protection of Civilians Newsletter: Mis/Disinformation and the Protection of Civilians," 2022, Fourth Issue Brief.

³ United Nations, Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict," S/2022/381 (10 May 2022), para. 57.

preventing the harms of mis- and disinformation on civilians requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines monitoring of the information environment; analyzing the political and security context; and developing preventive and proactive measures, such as through strategic communications, community outreach and political engagement.

Mis- and disinformation can also constrain humanitarian access and operations. False and manipulated information can weaken trust, undermine communities' acceptance of humanitarian organizations, and cause reputational damage. This can reduce operational capacities and restrict the space for humanitarian action, potentially leaving affected people's needs unattended. Mis- and disinformation can also lead to threats or attacks against humanitarian staff. Under such circumstances, information that harms humanitarian organizations would violate international humanitarian law.

On 25 May 2023, the Permanent Missions of Brazil, Germany, and Ghana to the United Nations, the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Stimson Center, and Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) will convene an expert-level event on "Addressing the Impact of Mis-/Disinformation on Civilians: Perspectives from Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Practitioners". This workshop will be organized in a hybrid format as part of the "PoC Week" on the margins of the annual UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

This event intends to inform emerging thought and practice on how to better protect civilians and increase their resiliency to online mis- and disinformation and hate speech. Continued dialogue and collaboration between peacekeeping, humanitarians, researchers, and affected communities are essential to effectively understanding and tackling these phenomena. This discussion aims to bring these expert communities together to exchange experiences, with the shared goal of preventing mis- and disinformation and hate speech both online and offline.

Registration

If you are interested in participating in this event, please RSVP to pol-s2-vn@newy.auswaertiges-amt.de by **Tuesday 23 May**. In-person attendance is subject to confirmation by the organizers due to limited capacity at the German House.

Virtual participation through Zoom will also be possible. A link will be shared subsequently.

See following page for guiding discussion questions.

Guiding Questions

Risk to civilians

- What are the main consequences of online mis-/disinformation and hate speech on conflict dynamics? How are civilians directly and indirectly impacted? How do we evaluate these consequences?
- How do mis-/disinformation and hate speech exacerbate the risks and vulnerabilities faced by communities in complex emergencies?

Addressing mis-/disinformation

- What outstanding gaps in knowledge exist around how mis-/disinformation and hate speech are spread in conflict settings?
- What are the main challenges experienced by peacekeeping and humanitarian actors in addressing online mis-/disinformation and hate speech?
- What practices are being piloted to combat and prevent these phenomena, as well as to strengthen the resiliency of communities? What are some of the existing policy and guidance gaps?

Looking ahead

- What is the possible trajectory of mis-/disinformation and hate speech into the future? How can we ensure that affected people's genuine questions and legitimate concerns are not sidelined or dismissed?
- How can peacekeeping and humanitarian actors learn from each other to further support the resiliency of communities to mis- and disinformation and hate speech? What approaches, such as outreach, engagement, and strategic communications (online and offline), should be further utilized?
- What partnerships (e.g., with the private sector, fact-checking organizations, and trusted local intermediaries) could strengthen these efforts? What measures can be taken to avoid the misuse of social media platforms for spreading mis-/disinformation and hate speech, while upholding freedom of expression guarantees online?

See following page for the event agenda.

Agenda

14:30	<p><u>Opening Remarks</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• H.E. Ambassador Antje Leendertse, Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations• H.E. Ambassador Ronaldo Costa Filho, Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations
14:40	<p><u>Panel Discussion</u></p> <p>Moderation by Ms. Lisa Sharland, Senior Fellow and Director of the Protecting Civilians and Human Security Program, Stimson Center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Civil society intervention(s) Ms. Lauren Spink, Senior Advisor on Research, Center for Civilians in Conflict• Ms. Naomi Miyashita, Senior Programme Officer on Mis-/Disinformation, United Nations Department of Peace Operations• Ms. Gisella Lomax, Senior Advisor on Information Integrity (Mis-/Disinformation and Hate Speech), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees• Ms. Mevan Babakar, Misinformation expert and former refugee• Mr. Philippe Stoll, Senior Techplomacy Delegate, International Committee of the Red Cross
15:45	<p><u>Discussion and Q&A</u></p> <p>Moderation by Ms. Lisa Sharland, Senior Fellow and Director of the Protecting Civilians and Human Security Program, Stimson Center</p>
16:20	<p><u>Closing Remarks</u></p> <p>H.E. Ambassador Harold Adlai Agyeman, Permanent Representative of Ghana to the United Nations</p>