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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN event – RAN YOUNG Platform

7-8 December 2020

Hosted online

Galvanising youth in combatting online disinformation

Key outcomes

On 7-8 December 2020, RAN YOUNG held an online meeting for 17 young activists to discuss the consequences of disinformation online and brainstorm innovative new responses that utilise the very technologies that make digital disinformation so potent and dangerous. In preparation for this meeting, the participants combed through their social media channels to find examples of disinformation.

Despite differences in nationality, language and context, there were striking similarities in examples the participants found. Regarding the topics for example, a lot of the disinformation in their feeds intersected with local and international politics, promoted nationalist and xenophobic narratives and demonised refugees. A great deal of this content related to the Covid-19 pandemic and seemingly capitalised on the crisis to undermine faith in institutions and fracture social cohesion. Regarding the way that disinformation is presented, they also found that it is not always straight forward; it comes in many forms and utilises different mediums, techniques and strategies to create credibility and distort an audience's understanding of important issues. An effect of this is that disinformation can be difficult to spot even for the most critical consumer.

This meeting also gave the young activists an opportunity to brainstorm about innovative solutions to disinformation online. Young people tend to be more prolific social media users and as such they understand how to use the myriad of tools (stories, games, chatbots, sharing, hashtags, polls, livestreaming, etc.) each platform has to offer in order to transcend one-way transmission and create meaningful opportunities for an audience to engage with a campaign's content.

The following conclusion paper presents the outcomes of this meeting. The challenges and experiences of young people, as well as the young people's perspectives on opportunities and strategies to counter disinformation, can be found under 'Highlights of the discussion'. The second part of this paper offers actionable recommendations for practitioners who want to engage young people in strategies for combatting disinformation online.

Introduction

Disinformation is one of the greatest threats of our time. It actively undermines democracy, fractures social cohesion and has redefined our very concept of truth. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon; however, as communication has become quicker and the world more interconnected, it has taken on new dimensions with serious consequences spanning all parts of society. Social media has stimulated this evolution and exacerbated its consequences. Users are divided into echo chambers ⁽¹⁾ through self-selection and sophisticated algorithms where exposure to dissenting or opinion and nuance is greatly diminished and phenomenon like illusory truth effect ⁽²⁾ and confirmation bias ⁽³⁾ can thrive.

Young people are on the front lines of this struggle. Young Europeans spend a lot of time online, and particularly on social media.ⁱ They rely heavily on the internet to find their news and are more likely than older generations to find news on social networking sites.ⁱⁱ Older users are significantly more likely to share misinformationⁱⁱⁱ; however, because young people are on social media more and have integrated these platforms into their lives, they are often more exposed. They are also better placed to respond: Young people are a critical ally in the struggle against disinformation and more must be done to empower young activists, upskill young users and involve young people meaningfully across sectors.

Key terms

- **Disinformation** is false information that is created *deliberately to deceive*. Disinformation is curated by a range of actors and spread for a variety of purposes, but all with the explicit intent to mislead.
- **Misinformation**, on the other hand, does not necessarily have the same strategically malicious intent. It is false information that is spread *unintentionally* by someone who believes that what they are sharing is true.
- **“Coordinated inauthentic behaviour”** refers to deceptive activities on Facebook across multiple accounts – often involving fake accounts – that are performed “in concert”, often to some strategic end.¹
- **Biased content** has a foundation in truth but presents facts in a way that serves a particular agenda.
- **Sensationalised content** uses hyperbole to amplify certain elements of a story. Often seen in headlines as “click bait”, it can permeate coverage to stir up excitement, anger and fear in readers.
- **Opinion** presents an interpretation of facts that reflects the writer’s personally held beliefs.
- **Parody or satire** is intentionally misleading content that is created for entertainment or amusement and is *usually* labelled as false.
- **Deepfake** uses artificial intelligence, or AI, to modify videos and images and replace a person’s likeness with that of another, creating nearly imperceptible fakes.

Highlights of the discussion

Challenges in detecting disinformation

On the first day, participants learned about disinformation from Kelsey Bjornsgaard, Senior Manager at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue for Civic Action Campaigns and Capacity Building. Participants discussed the methods and nuances that can make disinformation so difficult to detect and the properties of the internet that make it so prolific and dangerous. They also compared examples of disinformation they found on their own social media feeds.

⁽¹⁾ A closed space inhabited by like-minded people in which shared beliefs are amplified, sequestered from dissenting views.

⁽²⁾ Believing information is true based on repeated exposure.

⁽³⁾ Selecting and believing information that confirms or supports one’s world view or what they already believe is correct.

- Disinformation can be difficult to detect, even for someone who actively practices critical consumption. Disinformation is rarely a matter of unequivocally true or untrue; even the most blatant conspiracy theories connect with real events. And, as one participant noted, identifying disinformation becomes more difficult as something is shared and reshared online, losing its context and connection to the original source.
- Satirical content and parody articles are a challenging grey area in the disinformation debate. They are intentionally false, but not maliciously so. However, it can be just as harmful when people do not realise it is satire. The participants noted this is particularly difficult when articles are shared on social media since users tend to read headlines without checking the full article, or when content comes from satirical sites that are not well known.
- Memes are similarly challenging to place within the disinformation ecosystem. Participants pointed out that without knowing the posters intent, it is hard to know if the meme is serious or merely “meta-commentary” meant to be ironic. And if there is so much space for interpretation, is it acceptable to share a meme they think is critiquing an issue if there is a risk that it actually furthers a harmful narrative?
- A lot of the disinformation young people encounter on a daily basis comes from family and peers. While this information is not shared maliciously, it can pose a serious threat if the recipient trusts the person who shared it. Furthermore, most of the participants did not feel they were equipped to challenge people in their immediate social circles when they share misinformation.
- Media manipulation including video and photo doctoring is particularly worrying. One participant referenced a common practice in which a photo is used out of context as evidence in an unrelated assertion. In this case, a photo of birds that were killed in a storm accompanied a Romanian article that described why 5G was dangerous for wildlife — a claim that has been repeatedly disproven.

Trends in how young people experience disinformation across Europe

- There is a remarkable overlap in the narratives and methods of disinformation in different European countries. Many participants described strikingly similar anti-migrant and anti-refugee content and noted that these narratives had been co-opted for the pandemic, blaming migrants for the illness and its spread.
- Political actors play a dangerous role in creating, disseminating and legitimising disinformation. Many participants noted that they had observed political parties — often those that are in opposition or outside of traditional mainstream politics — sharing or supporting disinformation that undermined trust in the ruling government and cast doubt on its policies.
- Celebrities and influencers exacerbate the disinformation crisis. Participants noticed online and in their own social circles that people they knew were often persuaded by celebrities and other influencers.
- Some purveyors of disinformation build up their credibility by using technical language and references that they know the average reader will not be familiar with or take the time to research. For example, one participant showed an anti-migrant video from Greece that cited legal statutes to back up their claims, but did so incorrectly. Many readers might take the legal framing as proof that the content of the video must be true.
- Disinformation is tailored for different audiences and older users are still falling for old tricks. Several of the participants described posts on Facebook that closely resembled chain emails that were popular in the early 2000s. Many of the posts urge the user to share the message in order to stop something bad from happening. For many younger users, this kind of disinformation is harmless and even entertaining; however, it points to a serious vulnerability amongst older users and a need to target interventions carefully by demographic.
- In addition to localised disinformation, many participants observed a great deal of disinformation related to global conspiracies and international politics. Many participants noted that they found more examples of disinformation related to international politics — primarily United States politics — or global conspiracies than they did examples that were specific to their own context. Despite its global focus, this content could be found in local languages and presented with some connection to local events or concerns.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated the disinformation crisis and created new opportunities for extremists. The uncertainty and the vacuum of information surrounding the virus have opened up opportunities for floods of disinformation that threaten both physical health and the health of our societies. Every participant could cite examples of COVID-19-related disinformation that furthered extremist objectives and many saw such examples on a daily basis.

Opportunities to counter disinformation online

While the first day had been focused on understanding disinformation and the challenge it poses, the second day was dedicated to developing innovative solutions. Each group was given a distinct target audience, a set of objectives and a list of key considerations for addressing each audience ⁽⁴⁾. These strategies and key considerations highlight the innovative approach that young people take and offer some valuable considerations for creating engaging content for young audiences.

- **Social media platforms offer a myriad of ways to not only share content but also connect with an audience and immerse them in the campaign.**
 - Each of the youth groups suggested ways to capitalise on these tools — through stories, chat features, polls, live streaming, hashtags, games and more — to reach and engage their proposed audience.
 - One group offered a truly innovative use of these tools, proposing an automated chat programme on Facebook that turned the user into the subject of disinformation. The programme would challenge the user to try and “win” against the bot in a circular and unwinnable argument, distorting their inputs and helping them understand how disinformation works by experiencing it first-hand.
- **“Gamifying” content offers a way to engage more young people, especially those who are uninterested in the topic.** Gamified campaigns can help introduce and reinforce information through an enjoyable and interactive experience.
- **The medium of the campaign should be popular in a given location.** While video is usually a universal medium, for things like podcasts and vlogs, videocasts and others, make sure the medium is popular amongst your target audience. And as one participant stressed, it is not just a difference between youth in different countries; preferences may vary between urban and rural youth within countries. Research your audience’s preferences before you create.
- **Communication materials should not drown an audience in information.** Campaigns that seek to raise awareness or educate an audience have to think carefully about how they provide and deliver information so that they can inform, without overwhelming a viewer.
 - One group devised an informative campaign that sought to educate social media users with limited experience and limited interest. In order to keep the campaign approachable, they proposed an initiative comprised of several smaller “campaigns” — unique sets of content that could stand independently united into a coherent whole by a consistent message and clear calls to action.
 - This method of leveraging smaller campaigns may help bridge the challenge of awareness raising campaigns by offering the flexibility to draw in a wider audience while still benefiting from targeted content. It would also provide an opportunity to test different approaches and media with different audiences.
- **A call for action in an online campaign should not ask too much of an audience.** It is important to move an audience to take action or change a behaviour; however, that action should not be too onerous. Ask too little, and there may be no impact, but ask too much and fewer people are likely to take part or do so long enough to make the action a habit.
 - One group took an innovative approach to this conundrum by devising a series of regular weekly challenges that an audience could easily integrate into their daily lives. Each challenge was small and approachable, but it could have real impact if done on a larger scale by many followers or could result in real behavioural change should a person choose to participate in all the challenges and build them into new habits.

⁽⁴⁾ See Appendix 1 for the list of audiences used in this exercise.

- Campaigns should show young people that they are not alone. The term disinformation and its divisive synonyms like “fake news” have entered into the popular discourse globally, causing frustration, anxiety and confusion. In addition to educating and mobilising young people, campaigns can help them know that they are not alone in their concern. All the young participants paid special attention to strategies that could help unite activists, create safe spaces for youth who are frustrated or afraid, or show less experienced young users that it is okay to be confused by these issues and seek guidance.

Recommendations for practitioners

Young people can be an ally in the struggle against disinformation, especially on social media. While young people are typically more resilient to instances of disinformation, the nature of their social media usage makes them particularly vulnerable and particularly well-placed to help confront this pressing challenge. Disinformation will require a multidimensional and cross-sectoral response, and young people should be a key partner at every stage. This section offers some actionable recommendations for how young people can be better integrated into disinformation responses, as well as some key considerations for how to best empower them as partners and leaders.

- **Young people can inject new innovation into campaign strategies.** Young users tend to have a better understanding of how the platforms work and can capitalise on all the features of social media channels. Rather than relying on traditional static content like infographics and videos, young people can help transcend one-way messaging and develop campaigns that are truly engaging. Youth are also more aware of the *content, trends and language* that will appeal to young users and can help design engaging content that captures wider audiences and promotes behavioural change.
- **Young activists could contribute during every stage of the campaign,** from brainstorming and development to testing and delivery. Young people can contribute so much more than new ideas; treat them as partners, rather than research subjects, and create opportunities for them to contribute meaningfully throughout the entire process.
- **Young people can lead their own projects and create their own content.** If young people own their campaigns, then they have the chance to truly harness their creative freedom. Furthermore, if they are responsible for dissemination, it allows for campaigns to permeate different online spaces more organically, which could help enhance both reach and impact. Much of the disinformation found online is working to discredit governments, institutions and even organisations. The distrust and stigma generated by this content can hinder campaigns from connecting with the most vulnerable. Youth-led campaigns that are managed independently may bypass these obstacles.
- **There are many ways of mobilising young people in large numbers.** Create opportunities, such as micro-grant schemes, content competitions or hackathon events, for a large number of young people to contribute original content and participate in disinformation campaigning. This will generate more ideas and mobilise a powerful network of messengers.
- **To reach the right target audience, it can be useful to work with young influencers who already have an audience.** In addition to working with dedicated social activists, engage with *social media influencers* who already have a following. Offer training, resources and simple ways that they can help educate and mobilise their followers to be more responsible social media users.
- **To make young people an ally in combatting disinformation, it can help to train young people in how to respond to disinformation online and in their own lives without escalation or triggering a “boomerang” effect.** Confronting someone who shares misinformation is difficult, especially if it is a family member or peer. Help equip young people to respond to disinformation and help educate those who share it.
- **Less experienced youth can contribute in the testing phase of campaigns.** Experienced activists, content creators and influencers are powerful allies; however, this effort cannot overlook the majority of young people who are more likely to make up a campaign’s audience. This group is critical for preparatory research and testing narratives and content, but also create opportunities for them to contribute actively throughout the campaign process. This can help keep a campaign accessible, can guide dissemination into new or closed online spaces, and will upskill a new group of potential activists.

Follow-up

In the beginning of 2021, RAN will organise a workshop for local authorities where participants will dive deeper into different methods of youth engagement.

Further reading

- European Commission. (2018). *A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation. Report of the independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Humprecht, E., Esser, F., & Van Aelst, P. (2020). *Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research*. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 493-516.
- Jeangène Vilmer, J.-B., Escorcía, A., Guillaume, M., & Herrera, J. (2018). *Information manipulation. A challenge for our democracies*. A report by the Policy Planning Staff (CAPS) of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces. Paris, August.
- Keijzer, F., & Woltman, P. (2018). *Youth participation in the city of Leicester*, Ex Post Paper. Leicester, United Kingdom: RAN Centre of Excellence, 5-6 June.
- Radicalisation Awareness Network. (2020). *Harmful conspiracy myths and effective P/CVE countermeasures*, Conclusion Paper.
- Sterkenburg, N., Smit, A., & Meines, M. (2019). *Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and Islamist extremism*, EX Post Paper. Stockholm, Sweden: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 4-5 May.

Appendix 1: Audience types for campaign exercise

This sheet gives more information about the different types of young audiences that are active on online platforms (which should be taken into account when creating a disinformation campaign). This could also be used as an exercise for practitioners to start the discussion.

1. **The Apathetic Misinformer:** This social media user couldn't care less about the truth, as long as the video they just shared gets a laugh. It isn't that they want to cause harm — in fact, they have no agenda at all — they just don't think about it. The apathetic misinformer comes in many varieties. Some may be totally unaware of the issue — they might actively avoid the news or anything even seemingly political. And the heated debates about disinformation can feel really political to someone who has no interest. Some may be aware, but they don't fully comprehend the consequences or don't see why it has anything to do with them. Why take extra time to fact-check? That sounds like work. Some might even think they know what's real without checking. Regardless, they are a serious part of the problem and you need to make them part of the solution!

Some considerations:

- While this audience needs knowledge most of all, because they are not interested they are unlikely to respond to overtly educational content. You have to make it interesting to get their attention.
 - Keep it simple and make anything you ask them to do fairly easy.
 - Emphasise the consequences on a personal level and consider what is most important to them (including social standing).
 - Be careful not to make them defensive or feel stupid — it could backfire!
2. **The Righteous Misinformer:** From either side of the political spectrum, this outspoken ideologue is sounding the alarm and alerting the “sheeple” of the world to what truth really is. While they aren't creating any disinformation themselves, they share it with gusto! Jumping down rabbit hole after rabbit hole, they have been swept up into multiple conspiracy theories that now inform most of their world view. They believe every click, but even if some disinformation were to get mixed up in their quest for the truth, it would be worth it to reach their higher goal.

Some considerations:

- They have built their entire world view around their information consumption; proceed with caution. If you negate this world view outright, they will disengage and insult you for your trouble.
 - They are likely afraid and acting on insecurities in their own lives. They are searching for answers, comfort or maybe something else.
 - They are drawn to particular types of headlines and content — understand that and you may reach them.
 - Remember, they think they are the critical thinkers — don't pander to them or try and educate outright.
3. **The Ally:** This social media savvy user is making their list and checking it twice — their list of reliable news sources, that is! Not to be taken in by fishy facts, the ally is well aware of the disinformation dilemma we are facing and is perfectly placed to help. They might be an activist, doing their part already to face down fake news. Perhaps they are a concerned bystander, looking for the chance to help if only someone would show them how. Or maybe they are so overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge they have all but given up. Regardless, this is the majority you need to mobilise — the ideal allies to help you clean up and protect this common space.

Some considerations:

- This audience likely has some basic knowledge already — make sure you are speaking to their level.
- Get the right tone: many people who are aware and concerned about this issue are frustrated and might not respond well to something that appears overly optimistic. It could feel out of touch.
- Make it actionable! You don't need to raise their awareness; you need to give them something specific to do and show it will make a difference.
- Let them know they aren't alone and show them their responsibility.

ⁱ See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/39761.pdf>

ⁱⁱ See: <https://www.journalism.org/2018/10/30/younger-europeans-are-far-more-likely-to-get-news-from-social-media/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See: <https://advances.sciencemaq.org/content/5/1/eaau4586>