
10th UNAOC Global Forum, Cascais, 25-27 November 2024

Thematic Panel 5:

“An antidote to disinformation/misinformation: Strengthening information integrity and exploring the role of media providers in restoring trust”

27 November 2024, 11:30–13:00, Estoril Convention Centre

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The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped how information is shared and consumed, revolutionizing communication and media consumption worldwide. Social media platforms have opened up new avenues for people to connect and exchange information in real-time across vast geographic distances. This digital evolution has also decentralized the flow of information. Today, anyone with internet access can become a “content creator” and instantly share opinions, news, and ideas with a global audience—a phenomenon so unimaginable just a few decades ago. This shift has led to an influx of user-generated content, empowering “citizen journalists” to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and offer immediate, unfiltered coverage of events that might otherwise receive delayed or filtered attention from traditional outlets.

However, this democratization of information comes with significant risks. The same tools that empower individuals have also been misused and exploited to spread falsehoods and incite hate. The dark forces of the digital world—including misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech—once relegated to the fringes of digital spaces, have now permeated the mainstream discourse. Their consequences are profound, ranging from the erosion of public trust to the weakening of democratic institutions and the exacerbation of existing divisions. They also pose direct threats to fundamental human rights, as targeted campaigns may seek to manipulate public opinion and, in some cases, incite violence. The rapid advancement of technology, especially generative artificial intelligence (AI), has only magnified these dangers. A plethora of AI-powered tools can create “deep fakes” and spread false narratives that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from reality.

Recognizing the scale of these challenges, the United Nations Secretary-General, in “Our Common Agenda”, has identified large-scale disinformation as “*an existential risk to humanity*” (A/75/982)¹. He called for the creation of a code of conduct to promote integrity in public information. Building on this, at the recently concluded Summit of the Future, Member States collectively committed to addressing “*the challenge of misinformation and disinformation and hate speech online and mitigate the risks of information manipulation in a manner consistent with international law*” through the adoption of the “Pact for the Future”².

¹United Nations, Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General, 2021. Available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n21/217/01/pdf/n2121701.pdf>

² United Nations, Pact for the Future, 2024. Available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/softf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf

At the heart of this issue lies the crucial balance between curbing harmful content and protecting free speech. The right to freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic societies, enabling open debate, dissent, and the exchange of diverse viewpoints. As highlighted in the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech,³ efforts to combat disinformation and hate speech must not infringe upon this fundamental right. In an increasingly interconnected world, the freedom of expression ensures transparency and holds governments and institutions accountable. However, the misuse of free speech to spread hate and falsehoods poses a complex challenge, requiring solutions that protect individuals from harm while upholding the values of open dialogue and free expression.

In the UNAOC Action Plan 2024–2026,⁴ UNAOC committed to further developing media-related activities focusing on the importance of critical media literacy, including equipping individuals with the skills required to navigate the overwhelming speed and volume of information. The Report of the UNAOC High-level Group, one of the Alliance’s core guiding documents upon its inception, emphasized the importance of media literacy education: “Evaluating information sources requires skills and critical thinking and is an educational responsibility the importance of which is often underestimated. Separating fact from opinion, evaluating text and image for bias, and constructing and deconstructing a text based on principles of logic are teachable skills.” It is on this basis that UNAOC continues to integrate media literacy in its capacity-building activities across its projects and initiatives.

Overall, addressing the spread of disinformation and misinformation is a complex task that requires the coordinated efforts of multiple stakeholders. In response to this challenge, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) is convening a panel of experts from international organizations, governments, media entities, civil society, and the private sector to explore practical solutions for combating false narratives and restoring trust in public information. This discussion will provide a platform for key voices to address these challenges from both a global and multi-sectoral perspective, exploring not only regulatory frameworks but also grassroots initiatives that can strengthen information integrity.

The panel will also explore the role of digital media platforms in curbing the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and in promoting accurate and factual reporting. As digital platforms play a central role in shaping public discourse, there is a growing demand for transparency in their operations, including how algorithms prioritize content, how content moderation policies are applied, and how user data is protected. The key question for the global community is: how can we hold media platforms accountable while preserving the freedom and openness of the internet?

Lastly, by fostering collaboration and a shared sense of responsibility, this discussion aims to build a unified multi-stakeholder commitment to maintaining information integrity in the digital age. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the broader goals of promoting peace, security, and the protection

³ United Nations, UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

⁴ United Nations, UNAOC Action Plan (2024–2026), 2024. Available at: <https://www.unaoc.org/resource/unaoc-action-plan-2024-2026/>

of human rights — ensuring that digital spaces support, rather than undermine, these critical objectives.

The speakers will address the following guiding questions:

- How can the United Nations strengthen its role in promoting information integrity while respecting freedom of speech on a global scale?
- In what ways can media organizations and journalists better combat disinformation and misinformation without compromising journalistic integrity and freedom of the press?
- How can grassroots organizations engage communities in fighting disinformation and misinformation, while improving public understanding of key global issues?
- What are the responsibilities of social media and digital platforms in curbing disinformation and misinformation, and how can they work with governments and civil society to create a more transparent digital space?
- How can governments and civil society collaborate to effectively combat hate speech without infringing on fundamental human rights, particularly in relation to freedom of expression?