

DISINFORMATION

What is Disinformation?²³⁶

In recent years, international NGOs and civil society have been under attack as adversaries exploit vulnerabilities of the Internet and social media to perpetuate online attacks and campaigns that spread false information. Disinformation, or false information intended to mislead an audience, has the potential to change public opinion, amplify an issue and change the outcome of political events. These disinformation attacks are designed to intentionally sow division and confusion, disparage targeted organizations and their leaders, and promote inaccurate views about the communities they support. From Muslim-based foundations in the U.S. to humanitarian assistance organizations assisting refugees in Europe, disinformation campaigns have visibly burdened the operation of NGOs and put beneficiary communities in harm's way.

The Impact of Disinformation Campaigns

The impact disinformation campaigns have on civil society and international NGOs is stark. In politics, candidates and parties have suffered from large-scale disinformation attacks. There is clear evidence that false pages and ads promoting politically divisive content on Facebook, for example, affected public attitudes around the 2016 U.S. elections.

State and nonstate actors use disinformation to disparage international organizations working in their countries and to assert claims against these organizations without substantial evidence.

DISINFORMATION EXAMPLE: THE WHITE HELMETS

While the volunteer first responders known as the White Helmets have gained international attention for their search and rescue operations in the Syrian civil war, they have become the target of a heavy disinformation campaign intending to sow confusion about the conflict in Syria. Disinformation agents leveraged a network of news sites such as RT and Sputnik News, and published several articles characterizing the White Helmets as a terrorist organization with access to chemical weapons. The claims were amplified on social media, with RT-affiliated reporters sharing the fake news content with their followers, who in turn shared the content throughout their networks. This fueled doubts in people's minds about the motivations of the White Helmets. Russia-backed disinformation campaigns against the White Helmets not only distracted attention away from the aftermath of airstrikes, they also worked to justify Russia's role in backing President Assad in the conflict. Nearly 300 White Helmets left Syria in 2018 due to the safety and security risk that was created, in part, by the disinformation campaign against them.

Combatting Disinformation

Developing and deploying strategies for anticipating disinformation strategies and techniques used by states and nonstate actors is an evolving area of practice. The U.S. government and international NGOs will need to support their staff to develop dynamic ways to identify and respond to disinformation and move from ad hoc response systems to more streamlined workflows around handling disinformation. These strategies include identifying your risk to disinformation and creating plans to mitigate disinformation risk.

Resources for Congressional Staff

Disinformation Toolkit. *InterAction, 2018.* The toolkit captures insights from on-the-ground experience responding to disinformation attacks and provides practical tips for how organization leaders, as well as communications and security experts, can increase their preparedness.



Photo by Jennifer Morgan