



STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

# Information Integrity: Forging a pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust





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ENVISIONING COMPREHENSIVE AND EFFECTIVE  
RESPONSES TO INFORMATION POLLUTION

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# Foreword

Access to reliable information is a necessary condition for well-governed and peaceful societies. We now live in a world where huge volumes of information spread quickly without checks or controls. A world where information is ranked based on its ability to grab attention, rather than its truth or accuracy. A world where it is easy to deceive and hard to know what information to trust. Information pollution has emerged as a deeply worrisome and hard-to-fix side effect of this new reality.

We agree wholeheartedly with the UN Secretary General's conclusion that information pollution is an "existential risk to humanity". This is a global problem. It impedes our ability to address the immense global challenges now facing us: violent conflict, democratic backsliding, the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, to name a few.

Across the world, we have seen information pollution wreak all kinds of havoc on political and social norms and values. It undermines the social contract and erodes trust in democratic processes and institutions. It is a potent catalyst of conflict and division, sometimes to explosive effect. It prevents informed decision-making and collective agreement on truth and fact.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is deeply concerned about the impact of information pollution on the 2030 Agenda. When our collective development efforts are being undermined by the spread of false and misleading information, we are obliged to respond. Under UNDP's 2022-25 Strategic Plan, we will redouble our efforts to protect and promote access to reliable information on issues of public concern. This includes countering information pollution in all its forms.

We commend our UNDP colleagues and partners in all parts of the world who are already using creative approaches to tackle information pollution. UNDP is committed to ensure that these efforts are benefiting from new thinking, digital innovation and strategic partnerships.

This *Strategic Guidance on Information Integrity* is an important resource to guide our efforts. It provides an analytic framework to help unpack the complexities of information pollution in different contexts. It also offers guiding principles and programmatic options. Our hope is that it can assist UNDP teams and partners to better understand the challenges faced and to develop innovative and impactful responses.

Our thanks to those who have contributed to its development through various consultations. We encourage you to read and incorporate the guidance into your work and share with partners. The reality is that we will be dealing with information pollution for the foreseeable future. With the help of this strategic guidance paper, we can reduce its impacts and help build an open and conducive public sphere that enables inclusive, just and peaceful societies.



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# I. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose

Information integrity and associated concepts are relatively new to UNDP's lexicon. It is therefore important to develop internal clarity as to what this area of work entails, why it is important to UNDP and how it can translate into programming. This strategic guidance is intended to provide coherence both strategically and programmatically.

At the strategic level, the document explores information integrity as it relates to UNDP's mandate and thematic areas of interest and provides a conceptual framework of terminology and definitions.

At the programmatic level, it provides practical guidance for context analysis and programme design. The aim is to support UNDP country, regional and thematic teams, and their partners, to develop effective responses to information pollution. It offers guiding principles, an analytical framework and a set of proposed programmatic outcomes and outputs.

As the challenge of information pollution is evolving at a rapid pace, this document will undergo periodic revision.

## 1.2 Context

Access to information is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social cohesion. Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup> recognises the critical role of accurate and accessible information for effective governance and sustainable development. It enables people to make informed decisions, participate in democratic processes, and contribute to the building of inclusive, peaceful and just societies. Open and transparent information flows form the foundation of the social contract between people and their governments, building accountability, transparency and, ultimately, trust. Equal access to accurate information is a necessary condition for bridging social and political divides, fostering tolerance and collaboration, reducing stereotypes and prejudices and strengthening a sense of shared identity and social cohesion.

The internet has fundamentally changed the way in which information is created, distributed, and consumed. This creates incredible opportunities for increased access to information, freedom of expression and public participation. However, it also presents a new set of challenges for information ecosystems around the world. Much online content is channelled via internet platforms that earn most of their revenue through advertising services.<sup>2</sup> Information is automatically ranked to keep users engaged and connected, a model that favours sensationalist, emotive or divisive content over accuracy or editorial integrity. Anyone, including state, political and commercial actors, can exploit this business model to spread disinformation for financial, political, or ideological gain. Aided by engagement-driven algorithms, influencers, bots, and an emerging disinformation-for-hire sector<sup>3</sup>, information pollution spreads far faster and farther than information from trustworthy and credible sources.<sup>4</sup> As a result, people are increasingly exposed to false, misleading, or manipulated information. Traditional news media and state institutions, the customary gatekeepers of information, are struggling to compete and to maintain public trust in this new information economy.<sup>5</sup> The combination of an overabundance of information and a high incidence of low-quality information reduces public ability to find and trust information. As more emerging digital societies join the online world, it can be assumed that this situation will only worsen.

## 1.3 Problem Analysis

Understanding and quantifying the individual and societal impacts of information pollution is challenging. However, there is growing evidence that information pollution can cause real harm, including democratic backsliding, human rights violations, violence and resistance to public policy.<sup>6</sup> It is detrimental to the functioning of democratic, inclusive, and peaceful societies.<sup>7</sup> This is true even in advanced digital societies with robust democratic institutions. The impact of information pollution on conflict-prone or fragile countries is less studied, yet potentially more alarming. Unsurprisingly, public concern about the impacts of information pollution

1 <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>.

2 [How do the biggest internet companies make money?](#), Mozilla Internet Health Report, 2019.

3 [Disinformation For Hire: How A New Breed Of PR Firms Is Selling Lies Online](#), BuzzFeed, Jan 6, 2020.

4 Dizikes, P, [Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories](#), MIT News Office, March 8, 2018.

5 [2021 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), Edelman, 2021.

6 Kahn, Irene, [Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), April 13, 2021, p. 2.

7 Colomina, Carme et al, [The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world](#), European Parliament, 2021.

is also growing,<sup>8</sup> while the United Nations Secretary General has labelled it “an existential risk to humanity.”<sup>9</sup> A global online consultation co-hosted by UNDP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) collected perspectives from diverse contexts. It identified three common areas of concern:<sup>10</sup>

### GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

**Information pollution is eroding public trust** in state institutions, mainstream news media, and political actors and undermining government accountability. In contexts where levels of public trust in those institutions is already low, **vulnerability to information pollution** appears to be higher. The use of disinformation tactics by state actors themselves further contributes to delegitimising governments and their institutions in the eyes of the public. These tactics can also lead to unwarranted trust in leadership and government.

The quantity and virality of information pollution often increase during **political processes** such as elections, formation of government or high-profile parliamentary debates. This curtails public access to accurate information and thus informed decision-making. As a result, the **legitimacy of democratic processes is undermined, and public participation impacted**. Political actors can be both the victims and perpetrators of electoral disinformation campaigns.

Gendered disinformation, often fuelled by a gender equality backlash, targets female candidates, activists, elected officials and members of government. It has a **detrimental impact on women’s rights to democratic participation, representation and leadership**, threatening gender equality gains and weakening democratic representation.<sup>11</sup>

More broadly, information pollution **degrades public discourse**. It impacts both the quality of the debate, through divisive discourse, and the issues being discussed, as fringe concerns and polarised views are amplified through disinformation.

forces polarising rhetoric and can turn public opinion against legitimate protest and civil society actors.

Information pollution can result in **the further stigmatisation** of already marginalised groups. Even in relatively stable societies, there are fears of civil unrest or targeted attacks driven by disinformation. Groups which have historically faced discrimination are particularly vulnerable to this, as disinformation reinforces or amplifies existing prejudices.

### FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The confusion and suspicion created by a polluted information landscape **curtails access to accurate, trustworthy and understandable information** by reducing public capacity to decipher fact from fiction. Heavy-handed regulatory responses can also have an impact on **freedom of expression and opinion** and can serve to **further reduce civic space** by targeting activists, journalists and critics and human rights-focused civil society actors.<sup>12</sup> Rights of minority groups and women’s rights to participation in public life can also be infringed.

#### 1.4 A Hard Problem to Solve

Most stakeholders would agree that addressing disinformation is a daunting task. It is difficult to know where to start and how. Below are some of the factors which contribute to that complexity, and which are useful to consider when assessing the feasibility of interventions.

##### *Lack of international framework*

There is currently no United Nations framework to guide UN action in this field and to communicate in a unified way to stakeholders, including internet companies and member states.<sup>13</sup> Unlike hate speech, there is no international law which governs issues related to information pollution.

##### *Transparency and data*

Accessing the data needed to measure the scale and scope of disinformation remains challenging. Internet com-

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[https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5\\_11380](https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_11380)

