



Social Listening

Taking the pulse of public opinion and responding to rumours

Introduction

People are easily misled. In times of uncertainty, we seek out information.

Our feelings of familiarity and truth are inherently linked, which means we are more likely to believe something we have heard many times before than information we are hearing for the first time.

Therefore, the more you encounter a rumour that is not challenged, the more the rumour seems true. This allows rumours to influence our decisions and behaviours, leading to potentially dangerous consequences.

This tool aims to introduce you to the key concepts and activities necessary to tackle the spread of harmful

misinformation and disinformation, by listening, understanding and engaging with communities, both online and offline.

Evidence shows that rumours can cause real harm to health, public trust, equality and social cohesion.

Misinformation not only affects those with internet access but vulnerable, un-networked populations as well (e.g., by lowering vaccine uptake intentions, decreasing willingness to comply with evidence-based health regulations, increasing support for violence, or influencing voting behaviour).

To effectively counter the spread of harmful misinformation and disinformation, we need to systematically and continuously capture local insights through Social Listening.

Key definitions

Social Listening describes the process of tracking, analysing and synthesizing community inputs and conversations, both online and offline, in order to identify the conversations circulating in a society. Combining offline and online social listening mechanisms triangulates the information so that you can develop an accurate and comprehensive understanding of community perspectives and decide the best course of action.

Misinformation is false information, regardless of intent to mislead. A mother may genuinely be confused about who is managing birth registration systems or a father may have legitimate concerns about vaccine safety, which could lead them to unknowingly share misinformation.

Disinformation is false information created for profit or political influence, or to intentionally confuse or cause harm.

False information can be used to refer to the combination of misinformation and disinformation.

Infodemics describe situations in which an overwhelming amount of both true and false information circulates both online and offline during a disease outbreak.

Rumours are unverified information, shared online or offline, which may contribute to infodemics, along with misinformation and disinformation.

Benefits

Listening to, understanding and acting upon people's needs is key to the success and long-term sustainability of any programme.

Some of the behavioural objectives that can benefit from Social Listening and responding to rumours include:

- Preventing the negative impacts of mis/disinformation on behaviour
- Correcting false beliefs that could lead to harmful behaviours

- Informing behavioural interventions to better respond to a community's specific needs
- Focusing on the right topics by understanding information gaps and needs
- Strengthening the capacity of organizations to communicate accurate information and counter misinformation

Implementation steps



UNICEF's Vaccine Misinformation Management Guide outlines four key phases of implementation:

1. Prepare

Develop a tailored strategy and an information ecosystem assessment. Build the right team.

2. Listen

Aggregate and visualize relevant data sources, which may include traditional media, social media, novel digital channels or offline sources.

3. Understand

Analyse signals in the noise, keep track of misinformation with a rumour log, verify and assess rumours, and develop real-time situational insights.

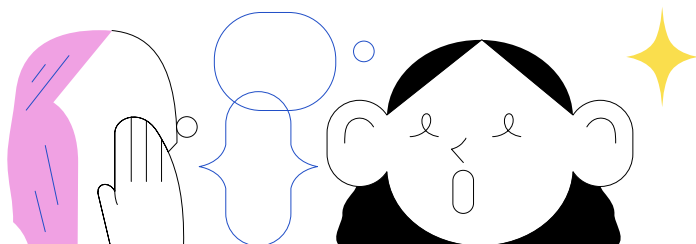
4. Engage

Develop and disseminate content, create inoculation messages, measure impact, and refine.

1. Prepare

Conducting an information ecosystem analysis is an essential first step in understanding false information already circulating within communities, how information and mis/disinformation is spread and how it affects online and offline behaviour in different populations. Information flows behave differently depending on the kind of network in which they circulate.

Research methodologies for an information ecosystem analysis include:



- **In-depth interviews:** These should be conducted with representative samples of the community in order to understand the dominant misinformation in circulation. Find out details on the misinformation, and map how the community heard about it. Figure out what information people are seeking and what they are unable to find answers to, to uncover data deficits. Develop an understanding of key influencers in the system and where trust lies in the community.
- **Key Informant Interviews:** These interviews should be conducted with key community experts, stakeholders and influencers who have a good understanding of the topic of focus. For example, for vaccine misinformation, interview doctors and front-line workers as experts and community and religious leaders as influencers. Interviews with Ministries of Communications or Telecommunications may be able to provide data on the number of television viewers, mobile phones and internet connections at urban and rural level. The availability of this data depends on the country and does not replace community-level data collection. However, it can provide some insights in the absence of primary research.

→ *One outcome of the preparation phase is identifying a need for further in-depth research. See this tool on [collecting social and behavioural evidence for more information on research methods](#).*

2. Listen

In this phase, Social Listening methods can be used to monitor and capture people's questions, concerns and feedback, in addition to any rumours circulating among individuals, communities and societies, both online and offline.

This requires multidisciplinary approaches, methods and tools to understand context and track information flows, sentiment and patterns. The Social Listening methods you choose will depend on the time, capacity and investment available.

High capacity and investment

Online

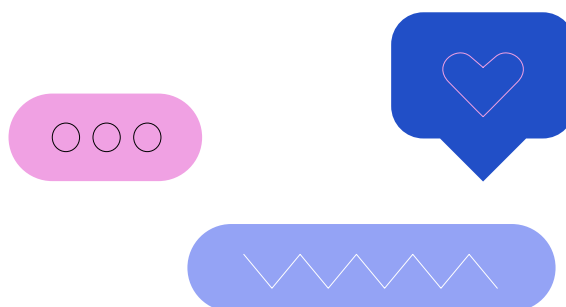
Engage with a data analytics company to apply artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML) and natural language processing to track information across different social media platforms, assess trends in misinformation and disinformation and disseminate the insights among decision-makers and stakeholders (including communities, to close the data for action loop).

Machine learning can provide insights into users' emotions. Language analytics can go beyond the typical 'positive, neutral, negative' sentiment analysis. It can

be used to identify data deficits (i.e., information gaps) where users are conducting searches but not getting responses.

→ *For example, to curb the COVID-19 misinformation infodemic, the WHO looked at 1.6 million pieces of information on various social media platforms, then used machine learning to categorize the information into four topics, based on a newly developed public health taxonomy: cause, illness, interventions and treatment. This helped the WHO track public health topics that were gaining popularity and develop and tailor health messages in a timely manner.*

Current evidence suggests that ML and AI for sentiment analysis focus primarily on English and still provide inconsistent results. These technologies do not provide accurate data for other languages or for contexts beyond the Global North. Until this technology is proven and reliable, using automated sentiment analysis for decision-making is discouraged. The current best option is to collect data using tools such as Talkwalker, Meltwater and CrowdTangle and have in-country analysts assess the data to identify positive and/or negative narratives.



Offline

Establish community feedback mechanisms by leveraging offline channels (e.g., hotlines, helpdesks, suggestion boxes, etc.) and social networks (e.g., community volunteers, mobilizers, religious groups, etc.). Train partners and networks to collect and log offline rumours circulating at the community level through door-to-door surveys, media monitoring and joining closed chat groups. Although this requires a significant investment in time and resources, having a system to collect, monitor and analyse community rumours is a powerful tool.

This will allow you to see where online and offline environments align in their concerns and track how rumours 'stick' at the community level. Information shared and processed online can look very different in person. The way someone engages with information digitally can be entirely different from the way they engage with information offline.

For offline data collection, the use of ODK or KOBO forms dramatically improves data access and quality.

With easy-to-use forms on basic smartphones, data can be collected in areas without internet access and uploaded to a central database once internet connection becomes available. Multiple UNICEF offices and the WHO AFRO are already using this technology to great effect.

Media monitoring agencies, where available, are a great asset for catching early signs of emerging community narratives. Where these are unavailable or cost-prohibitive, partnerships with Ministries of Information or Communication can be useful. In most countries, ministries are required to monitor local media.

→ *For example, the [Social Sciences Analytics Cell \(CASS\) in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) is an operational team that provides rapid studies and real-time evidence to inform decision-making, strategies and interventions for public health emergencies. The CASS brings together multiple data sources in order to fully understand the underlying factors influencing an outbreak to support partners in their decision-making.*

Lower capacity and investment

Online

Assemble data analysts and researchers to conduct social listening activities that monitor online sources and dominant social media channels, download data and conduct thematic analyses. UNICEF has a global long-term agreement (LTA) with Talkwalker to produce weekly and monthly social listening reports on relevant topics. These are extremely useful when local infrastructure is unavailable. There are free and paid monitoring tools for tracking social and traditional media. The search queries should be informed by your research questions and specific to the focus community or geographic location.

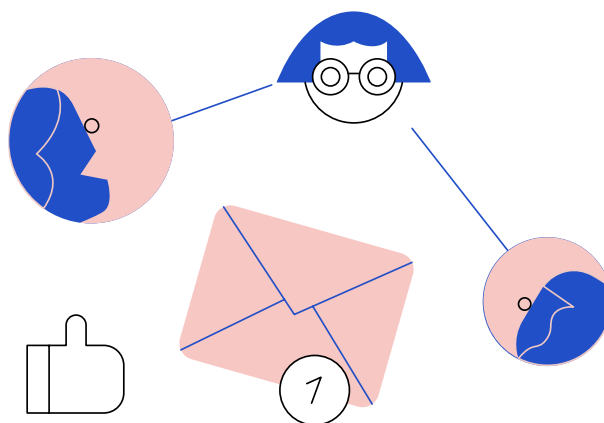
A dedicated team member should gather social listening data at regularly scheduled times, like once a day. Tools include Google Alerts, Hootsuite Insights, CrowdTangle, TweetDeck, Social Mention, Talkwalker, Meltwater, Cision, Awario and TVEyes. For more information, refer to this [guide](#) produced by ESARO.

Offline

Establish a system for people to send feedback, ask questions, express concerns and report rumours they have been exposed to offline (e.g., text-message reporting, helplines, U-Report, or IoGT).

3. Understand

At this stage, any false information detected needs to be further analysed to develop an effective response. The collected data needs to be organized in such a way that accurate, timely and actionable responses can be made.



For each piece of misinformation, you should seek to understand the:

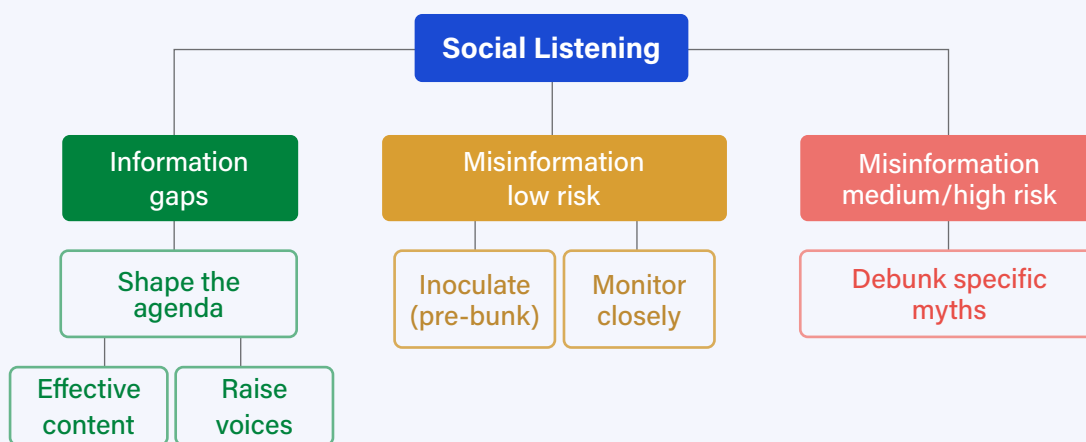
1. **Provenance:** Is this the original content? Has it been modified or repurposed?
2. **Source:** Who created the content, account or post?
3. **Date:** When was it created? Has it been in circulation for a while? Is it new, or old and resurfacing? Why?
4. **Location:** Where was the account established or content created?
5. **Motivation:** What do we know about the motivation of the account, website or content creator?

- *The aim is to understand who is starting the rumour and have some sense of why they are spreading it.*
- *Remember that not all misinformation is intentionally seeking to mislead or provide incorrect information. The response will depend on an assessment of the misinformations' potential damage to your programme.*

Consider the following questions:

- How widespread and influential is the rumour?
- Is it likely to spread further and escalate the situation?
- What is your capacity to respond?
- What happens if you do nothing?
- Will a response make things worse?
- Do you need additional expertise to make the assessment?

How to tackle rumors, deciding when to engage



Consideration of these factors helps you to convert Social Listening data into actionable recommendations. It is important to arrive at an objective definition for high-, medium- and low-risk rumours based on the questions above, to ensure an effective response can be implemented as soon as a rumour is categorized.

4. Engage

Always start with prevention. As with much of our work, prevention before a crisis can mitigate future challenges with misinformation management. Rumours thrive in an information vacuum. First, ensure there are trustworthy, reliable and correct information sources available for the curious and motivated to find.

Recruit trusted partners to build, maintain and connect these repositories and actively participate in online and offline conversations on the topic. This can build lasting relationships, familiarity and trust, which will contribute to a more effective rumour response strategy down the line.

Increasing media literacy and preparing people for potential rumours are proactive ways to minimise the impact of future misinformation and disinformation efforts. This can be achieved through the use of a central online hub, ideally hosted on a government website, such as that of the Ministry of Health, that provides verified information in a way that is easy to understand.

Eventually, this hub can become the primary resource for accurate information and provide additional confidence to the general public and journalists about the accuracy of shared information. This intervention requires considerable time and effort but can be a highly effective resource for misinformation prevention and response.

Categorizing the response

UNICEF's Vaccine Misinformation Management Guide gives three broad response categories to choose from based on your Social Listening findings:

1. To fill **information gaps**, classify the information and shape the narrative.
2. To address **low-risk misinformation**, begin careful monitoring or develop an inoculation strategy.
3. To address **high- and medium-risk misinformation**, directly debunk rumours.

With any response, carefully consider who is best placed to carry it out. The answer may not always be UNICEF, the government or international partners.

Credible and factual information and messengers may not be enough to overcome the public's concerns or their mistrust of official authorities. Build relationships with community leaders and social and traditional media influencers to better understand the rumours and their impact. You can also engage these players in developing an effective response.

Common responses to rumours and misinformation

- **Fill information gaps** by creating simple, understandable content. Information gaps occur when there is high demand for information about a specific topic and an inadequate supply of credible information. Where such data deficits exist, rumours,

speculation and misinformation are more likely to spread. Creating factual, verified and accessible content ensures that the need for information is met by facts.

- **Pre-bunk rumours.** The process of inoculation or 'pre-bunking' follows the biomedical analogy. Just as vaccination exposes recipients to a severely weakened dose of the virus, pre-bunking exposes audiences to a mild version of the techniques used in misinformation. By preemptively refuting rumours and misinformation, audiences can cultivate cognitive antibodies to detect and call out misinformation in the future.
- **Build media and data literacy skills.** Simply encouraging people to critically evaluate information can reduce their likelihood of consuming and sharing inaccurate information. Training or media campaigns can build skills to reduce the negative impacts of rumours.
- **Correct false, potentially harmful beliefs by debunking rumours.** While corrections may reduce one's belief in false information, a rumour can continue to influence people's thinking long after it has been refuted. On its own, a simple correction is unlikely to fully counteract the effects of misinformation.

The example framework below suggests that debunking is more likely to succeed when it includes four specific components¹:

Fact	Lead with the fact if it's clear, pithy, and sticky—make it simple, concrete, and plausible. It must "fit" with the story.
Warn about the myth	Warn beforehand that a myth is coming... mention it once only.
Explain fallacy	Explain how the myth misleads.
Fact	Finish by reinforcing the fact—multiple times if possible. Make sure it provides an alternative casual explanation.

→ *When debunking a rumour, be mindful not to single out a community or individual or bluntly refute a deeply held cultural or religious belief. Ignoring these sensitivities could vilify a community or put the trusted voices delivering these messages at risk. Effective misinformation response messaging reiterates facts without emotion and provides rationale for why the misinformation is incorrect in a way that is easy to understand.*

Measurement

QUANTITATIVE:

Use the tracking system created for Social Listening to track the patterns of rumours in the community after the intervention has been rolled out. You could also conduct a quantitative survey with a representative population (n=3,000 minimum) to assess opinions and rumours in the community before and after the intervention. A key indicator for misinformation management is the number of times and locations the same rumour has been identified. This core indicator must be part of every misinformation response activity. The same indicator can be used to measure the effectiveness of your response.

QUALITATIVE:

Conduct focus group discussions (n=6 groups of 5 participants each, at a minimum) to understand the rumours and the efficacy of the intervention in terms of increasing factual understanding and reducing the spread of the rumours.

Partnerships

Consider the following international partnerships:

- Data analytics or Social Listening tools such as Talkwalker or CrowdTangle. View [sample TORs](#) and complete the [AGORA course](#) to familiarise yourself with the platform
- Media companies, journalists, fact-checking companies and networks
- Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)
- Alliances like the [African Infodemic Response Alliance \(AIRA\)](#), a group of local, regional and international partners, community leaders, volunteers, UN agencies, humanitarian organizations, civil society groups and media outlets. [Viral Facts](#) is the public-facing publishing arm of AIRA, working to translate fact-checking and misinformation literacy content into engaging and shareable social content backed by research and testing.
- A Misinformation Management Taskforce at the national level should be established in the context of a national Risk Communication and Community Engagement Working group. A dedicated taskforce is essential to respond to misinformation in an effective and timely manner. Ideally, this body brings together key partners, for example, from the national government (Ministries of Health, Information, Broadcasting, etc.), UNICEF and the WHO.
- Local partners including community networks and trusted community influencers and leaders

¹ The Debunking Handbook 2020

Case studies and examples

- **GLOBAL:** Stop The Spread is a global campaign to raise awareness about the risks of COVID-19 misinformation.
- **US:** Evidence suggests that part of the reason why people share false claims about COVID-19 is because they fail to think about whether the content is accurate or not. To address this, an intervention that nudges people to think about accuracy has been developed to improve choices about sharing on social media.
- **US AND INDIA:** A media literacy intervention improved discernment of false news headlines in the US by 26.5% and in India by 17.5%.
- **GLOBAL:** An inoculation intervention for climate change misinformation was effective in neutralizing adverse effects of misinformation.
- **GLOBAL:** Debunking reduces the effect of fair trade misinformation.
- **NETHERLANDS:** Using debunking in media campaigns, in conjunction with vaccine information and social norm modelling, is an effective way to combat the misinformation and distrust around vaccination in the elderly.
- **US AND INDIA:** A digital literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news.
- **AFRICA:** The African Infodemic Response Alliance/Viral Facts Africa is fighting health misinformation and information gaps by connecting a network of independent African fact-checkers with health experts to debunk myths, share fact checks and create engaging content that helps people spot and respond to health misinformation.
- **JORDAN:** Social Listening played an important role in countering the effects of the infodemic that came with the COVID-19 outbreak.
- **LIBERIA:** UNICEF worked with partners to conduct a multichannel response to combat widespread polio vaccine misinformation.

Key resources

- WHO: Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: call for action
- CDC's Rapid Community Assessment Tool and Social Listening and Monitoring Tools
- How behavioural sciences can promote truth, autonomy and democratic discourse online
- UNICEF's Misinformation Management Guide
- **Internews' Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context Rumour Tracking Methodology:**
 - a. Part I: Context
 - b. Part II: Case Study
 - c. Part III: How-to Guide
- First Draft's Learning Courses
- Breakthrough ACTION's Creating a Real-Time Rumour Management System for COVID-19 and COVID-19 Rumours and Misinformation
- The Debunking Handbook 2020
- NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence's Inoculation Theory and Misinformation
- CDAC Network's Rumour Has It: A Practical Guide to Working with Rumours
- HealthEnabled's Finding the Signal through the Noise landscape review and framework
- Public Data Lab's A Field Guide to Fake News and Other Information Disorders
- **Social Listening Reports**
 - a. UNICEF Social Listening report on COVID-19 Vaccines in MENA
 - b. UNICEF Social Listening report in ESA: COVID-19 and its impacts
 - c. UNICEF COVID-19 vaccine digital conversation in ESA
 - d. AIRA: COVID-19 infodemic trends in Africa

- Social Listening in Eastern and Southern Africa, a UNICEF Risk Communication and Community Engagement Strategy to address the COVID-19 infodemic
- Social Science in Humanitarian Action (SHAP): online information, mis- and disinformation in the context of COVID-19

