Disinformation against UN Peacekeeping Operations

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Executive Summary

Over the past few years, a growing barrage of disinformation has targeted UN peacekeeping operations, particularly the missions in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), Mali (MINUSMA), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). This includes false allegations that UN peacekeepers are trafficking weapons to armed groups, supporting terrorists, and exploiting natural resources. This disinformation makes it harder for peacekeeping operations to implement their mandates and has put the safety of peacekeepers at risk.

While the dynamics of these disinformation campaigns differ from country to country, they have been enabled by several common factors. In all three countries, a lack of information in the face of uncertainty makes people more likely to turn to untrustworthy sources. Disinformation in all three countries taps into widespread frustration and anger with the perceived failure of decades of foreign intervention. Disinformation against the UN also feeds into and off of misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. And in all three countries, as elsewhere, social media and messaging applications have facilitated the rapid spread of disinformation both online and offline.

Both at headquarters and on the ground, UN personnel are attempting to ramp up their efforts to address disinformation against the UN. At headquarters, the UN Department of Peace Operations is implementing a work stream focused specifically on addressing misinformation and disinformation. In the field, MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO are all mandated to address or report on disinformation.

But considering how quickly this challenge has grown in scale, missions are still playing catch-up. They need greater capacity and coordination to monitor and analyze disinformation both online and offline. They need more streamlined approval processes that allow them to respond to disinformation more quickly. In the longer term, they also need to shift toward preventive approaches, including by proactively reshaping narratives about the UN and contributing to a healthier information environment through support to local journalists.

Ultimately, disinformation is a symptom of broader challenges facing UN peacekeeping operations, including international and regional geopolitics and often-tense relationships with host-state governments and populations. Addressing disinformation is thus not solely a task for missions' strategic communications sections; effectively tackling disinformation requires situating it in the broader political context and understanding its drivers—a task that falls to a broad array of actors within and outside of the UN.

Introduction

UN peacekeeping operations are facing a growing barrage of disinformation. This includes false allegations that UN peacekeepers are trafficking weapons to armed groups, supporting terrorists, and exploiting natural resources. False information about UN peacekeepers is nothing new; rumors have long flourished in host communities deeply frustrated with ongoing insecurity despite years of foreign intervention. What is new is the scale at which false information is being manufactured and the speed at which it spreads, aided by social media. By feeding off of long-standing public frustration and genuine instances of UN missteps or misconduct, this raft of anti-UN disinformation makes it harder for peacekeeping operations to implement their mandates and has put the safety of peacekeepers at risk.

As anti-UN disinformation has escalated, it has increasingly become a priority for the UN. Between 2019 and 2022, the UN Security Council introduced language on disinformation into the mandates of all four of the largest peacekeeping operations (see Annex), and in July, the council issued a statement expressing "great concern" about this growing challenge.[1] The UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) launched a project to address misinformation and disinformation in early 2022. On the ground, peacekeepers have tried to ramp up their efforts to monitor and debunk falsehoods. Nonetheless, the scale of the problem still far exceeds the UN's ability to respond.

This paper provides an overview of the recent rise in disinformation against the UN peacekeeping operations in the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).[2] It also examines how these three peacekeeping operations (MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO) have been addressing disinformation and the challenges they have faced. While these initial efforts have tended to focus on strategic communications, disinformation is not only a strategic communications issue; it affects all mission components, and effectively tackling it requires situating it in the broader political context and understanding its drivers.[3]

Box 1. Untangling the terminology: Disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information

There is no universally agreed definition of "disinformation," and it is often used interchangeably with "misinformation."[4] Differences in definition partly come down to whether one is looking at content (i.e., whether the information is false) or behavior (i.e., whether the disseminator of the information is seeking to deceive or cause harm). On this basis, UNESCO and others have pointed to three distinct phenomena:

- **Misinformation**: information that is "false but not created with the intention of causing harm" (e.g., a false rumor about the UN that someone shares with their social network for benign reasons);
- **Disinformation**: information that is "false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country" (e.g., a false rumor that someone generates or spreads to harm the UN); and
- **Mal-information**: information that is "based on reality [and] used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country" (e.g., propaganda that instrumentalizes true information to harm the UN).[5]

While this paper focuses on disinformation, the boundaries between these categories are fluid. What starts out as disinformation tends to turns into misinformation as it gains traction and spreads, as most people do not share false information with malicious intent. Similarly, mal-information can blur into disinformation when ostensibly true information is stripped of nuance or context.

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1   UN Security Council, *Statement by the President of the Security Council,* UN Doc. S/PRST/2022/5, July 12, 2022.

2   This paper does not cover the other major multidimensional peacekeeping operation, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). While UNMISS has been targeted by disinformation, this disinformation has not yet reached the scale and level of coordination seen in CAR, Mali, and the DRC.

3   This paper is based on a review of relevant literature and more than twenty interviews with personnel in UN peacekeeping operations, representatives of international media-development NGOs, local fact-checkers, and disinformation experts and researchers.

4   UN Human Rights Council, *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, Irene Khan*, UN Doc. A/HRC/47/25, April 13, 2021.

5   UNESCO, "Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training," 2018. See also: Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making," Council of Europe, September 2017.

The Dynamics of Disinformation in Peace-keeping Contexts

Over the past five years, researchers and policy-makers around the world have been devoting more attention to misinformation and disinformation. This attention, however, has focused disproportionately on the US and Europe. As a result, conceptual understandings of misinformation and disinformation have been framed by "Western concerns, contexts, user patterns, and theories."[6] It is therefore important to unpack the distinct dynamics driving and enabling disinformation against UN peacekeepers.

The Rise of Disinformation against UN Peacekeepers

Peacekeepers in many UN missions have long been subject to disinformation.[7] Over the past few years, however, online disinformation against peacekeepers in CAR, Mali, and the DRC has rapidly increased. While the dynamics and origins differ—particularly between CAR and Mali, on the one hand, and the DRC, on the other—online disinformation campaigns in all three countries have invoked similar themes to attack the UN. These disinformation operations against peacekeepers have also come alongside recent increases in physical attacks against peacekeepers, who are now regularly seen as parties to the conflict.

In both CAR and Mali, the rise in disinformation against UN peacekeepers coincided with the deployment of Russian mercenaries from the

> False information about UN peace-keepers is nothing new; what is new is the scale at which false information is being manufactured and the speed at which it spreads.

Wagner Group in 2018 and 2021, respectively. While it is difficult to identify the origins of this disinformation, researchers have traced much of it to local civil society organizations or media outlets with financial ties to Russia.[8] It also feeds upon and feeds into anticolonial messaging from "influencers" across francophone Africa.[9] The defining feature of these operations is their pro-government, pro-Russian, and anti-French messaging. After being pioneered in CAR, this model of Russian-backed disinformation has reached new heights in Mali since mid-2021.

Disinformation against UN peacekeepers has been a consistent component of broader disinformation campaigns in both countries. The most common false claims include that MINUSCA and MINUSMA are pillaging natural resources and colluding with armed groups or jihadists. Sometimes this disinformation has targeted the mission as a whole, and sometimes it has targeted specific staff members. In one prominent case in CAR in 2020, for example, an online disinformation campaign falsely accused four MINUSCA staff members of trafficking weapons to armed groups, referring to them as "genocidal mercenaries" and calling for violence against the mission.[10] This disinformation has taken various forms, including fake letters from mission leaders and photos or videos mislabeled to purportedly show UN peacekeepers engaging in nefarious behavior.

Despite these similarities in form and narrative, there are differences in the disinformation campaigns against MINUSCA and MINUSMA. For example, Facebook posts on MINUSCA have

6   Admire Mare, Hayes Mawindi Mabweazara, and Dumisani Moyo, "'Fake News' and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda," *African Journalism Studies* 40, no. 4 (2019), p. 7.

7   In 1994, for example, a report on the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia noted that "UNPROFOR, like other United Nations peace-keeping operations, has become conscious of… the harmful effects of propaganda and disinformation about its role." UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Resolution 908 (1994)*, UN Doc. S/1994/1067 (September 17, 1994), para. 30.

8   Stanford Internet Observatory, "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa," October 30, 2019; Jean Le Roux, "Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests," Digital Forensic Research Lab, February 17, 2022; Maxime Audinet, "Le lion, l'ours et les hyènes: acteurs, pratiques et récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone," Institut de recherche stratégique de l'école militaire, July 2021; and Fatoumata Diallo and Bokar Sangaré, "Russie-Mali: qui sont les relais du soft-power de Moscou à Bamako?" *Jeune Afrique,* November 22, 2021. In addition to Russia, France has also been implicated in backing disinformation campaigns in CAR and Mali, sometimes going head-to-head with and mimicking the tactics of Russian-backed operations. However, only Russian-backed disinformation has targeted the UN. See: Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory, "More-Troll Kombat: French and Russian Influence Operations Go Head to Head Targeting Audiences in Africa," December 2020.

9   "Russie-Afrique: de Kemi Seba à Nathalie Yamb, les 'influenceurs' pro-Poutine du continent," *Jeune Afrique*, March 31, 2022.

10 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2507 (2020)*, UN Doc. S/2020/662, July 8, 2020.

tended to feature deliberately false claims about the mission, while posts on MINUSMA have tended more toward propaganda than outright lies.[11] At the same time, while disinformation against MINUSCA has reportedly decreased in 2022, disinformation against MINUSMA has continued to escalate both in scale and intensity, including false accusations that the mission itself is attacking civilians.[12] This increase in disinformation against MINUSMA coincides with both the growing involvement of Russian mercenaries in Mali and the withdrawal of French forces, which may be leading disinformation campaigns to pivot from anti-French to anti-UN messaging.[13]

In both CAR and Mali, government officials have been implicated in disinformation campaigns against UN peacekeepers. Much of the disinformation is pro-government, and many of the individuals and groups spreading disinformation have ties to government figures. In CAR, for example, an adviser to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs played a role in coordinating the 2020 disinformation campaign against four MINUSCA staff members, and government officials lent the campaign legitimacy by meeting with several of its leaders.[14] In Mali, the government itself has become a major purveyor of disinformation, including against MINUSMA.[15]

The DRC has also seen an uptick in disinformation against the UN in recent years, though the origin and dynamics are different than in CAR and Mali. Disinformation in the DRC is less pro-Russian, because Russia is not backing major disinformation operations in the country. It is anti-Rwandan rather than anti-French, reflecting the DRC's differing history of foreign intervention. Because it comes from across the political spectrum, it is less consistently pro-government. And compared to CAR and Mali, more of the disinformation in the

DRC seems to come from people with direct political or economic interests in the areas where UN peacekeepers operate.[16]

Despite these differences, disinformation against UN peacekeepers in the DRC is spread using similar tactics and touches on similar themes as in CAR and Mali. These include false claims that MONUSCO is exploiting the country's natural resources, selling weapons to armed groups, and supporting foreign troops (in this case, Rwandan). Several recent events, including the killing of the Italian ambassador to the DRC in 2021 and the downing of a UN helicopter in May 2022, have seen particular upticks in disinformation against the mission.[17] Most recently, the resurgence of the M23 rebel group has been followed by a surge in disinformation against the mission. To some UN officials, the sophistication of much of the disinformation targeting MONUSCO suggests that it is coordinated and increasingly coming from outside the country, though there is less concrete evidence on who is behind it than in CAR and Mali.[18]

Factors Enabling the Spread of Disinformation

While disinformation may originate with domestic or foreign actors with a political agenda, it is only effective if it spreads among the general public. Most people sharing false information do not do so with malicious intent. On the contrary, recent studies in sub-Saharan Africa have found that most people share false information out of a sense of civic duty, as a form of social currency, or for fun.[19] In essence, manufactured falsehoods (disinformation) gain a second life as false rumors (misinformation; see Box 1). The specific dynamics differ from country to country, but several common factors have enabled disinformation against UN peace-

11 Interview 21, UN officials, September 2022.

12 UN Security Council, *Central African Republic—Report of the Secretary-General,* UN Doc. S/2022/762, October 13, 2022, para. 91; Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, June 2022; Interview 10, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

13 Interview 6, embassy official, July 2022.

14 UN Doc. S/2020/662.

15 Interview 6, embassy official, July 2022; Interview 19, former civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

16 Interview 11, representative of international NGO, August 2022; Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

17 Insecurity Insight, "Social Media Monitoring—Insight: Disinformation Targeting the United Nations Presence in the DRC," March 2021; Insecurity Insight, "Social Media Monitoring—DRC: Downing of a UN Helicopter," May 6, 2022.

18 Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022; Written correspondence with UN officials, October 2022.

19 Dani Madrid-Morales et al., "Motivations for Sharing Misinformation: A Comparative Study in Six Sub-Saharan African Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021); Santanu Chakrabarti, "Duty, Identity, Credibility: Fake News and the Ordinary Citizen in Kenya and Nigeria—A Comparative Study," BBC, 2018.

keepers to gain traction in CAR, Mali, and the DRC.

First, a lack of information in the face of uncertainty helps disinformation spread in all three countries. While misinformation in the Global North often grows out of the confusion resulting from too much information, in sub-Saharan Africa it more often grows out of an information vacuum.[20] Especially in conflict-affected areas, many people have little access to news media.[21] At the same time, it is all the more important for people in these areas to obtain information about security threats and humanitarian assistance.[22] As a result, many turn to untrustworthy sources. In the eastern DRC, for example, one study found that people continued listening to radio stations even when they did not trust them because they were looking for "orientation in the context of uncertainty related to the conflict."[23] It follows that misinformation tends to spike in periods of heightened uncertainty such as CAR's contested 2020–2021 elections, Mali's successive coups in 2020 and 2021, and the resurgence of the M23 rebel group in the eastern DRC in 2022.

Second, frustration and anger with the perceived failure of decades of foreign intervention create fertile ground for disinformation against UN peacekeepers. This anger was on display in the deadly anti-UN protests in the eastern DRC in July. The primary cause of these protests was not disinformation but widespread anger at MONUSCO for

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failing to protect civilians—an anger further stoked when peacekeepers opened fire at a border post, killing two Congolese.[24] This eroding support for the UN presence has contributed to a "crisis of legitimacy" or "crisis of consent" facing UN peacekeeping operations.[25] This crisis is further fueled by instances of misconduct by UN peacekeepers, including sexual exploitation and abuse of local populations and smuggling of natural resources, which make false allegations of misconduct more credible. Relatedly, the perception that peacekeepers are parties to the conflict rather than impartial actors can lend credence to allegations that they are collaborating with other armed actors.

Third, misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has further fueled distrust of the UN in all three countries. This has particularly been the case in the eastern DRC, where misinformation surrounding COVID-19 has come on top of misinformation and disinformation surrounding the region's repeated Ebola outbreaks. False rumors that outside actors such as the US, France, or the World Health Organization intentionally introduced both Ebola and COVID-19 to kill or exploit Africans are pervasive.[26] On occasion, these rumors have fueled violence against UN personnel and property, including the looting of a MONUSCO office in 2019.[27] Ultimately, this epidemic-related misinformation feeds into and off of both genuine anticolonial sentiment and anticolonial (and anti-UN) disinformation.

20 Araba Sey et al., "Sub-Saharan Africa," in "Meeting the Challenges of Information Disorder in the Global South," Herman Wasserman, ed., University of Cape Town, Research ICT Africa, InternetLab, LIRNEasia, and Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism, 2022.

21 In Mali, for example, one 2018 survey found that 63 percent of women and 56 percent of men in Mopti in central Mali had no access to any media; the same was true of only 16 percent of women and 7 percent of men in Bamako. Institut national de la statistique, "Enquête démographique et de santé 2018," August 2019.

22 UN General Assembly, *Disinformation and Freedom of Opinion and Expression during Armed Conflicts—Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression*, UN Doc. A/77/288, August 12, 2022.

23 Marie-Soleil Frère and Anke Fielder, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths: Perception and Evaluation of the Local and Global News Coverage of Conflicts in the DRC," in *Media in War and Armed Conflict: The Dynamics of Conflict News Production and Dissemination*, Romy Fröhlich, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 280.

24 Stanis Bujakera, "U.N. Brigade in Congo Opened Fire at Border Post, Killing Two," Reuters, July 31, 2022. See also: Sam Kniknie, "'A Playground for Colonial Forces': Unpacking the Anti-UN Protests in DR Congo," *New Humanitarian*, August 23, 2022; Claude Sengenya, "Why We're Protesting against UN Peacekeepers in DR Congo," *New Humanitarian*, August 18, 2022. While not the primary cause, anti-UN disinformation may have helped fuel the protests, as highlighted by the UN secretary-general. "RDC: António Guterres condamne l'attaque meurtrière contre des Casques bleus de la MONUSCO," July 27, 2022.

25 Jenna Russo, "Protests against UN in Eastern Congo Highlight Peace Mission's Crisis of Legitimacy," *The Conversation*, July 31, 2022; Anjali Dayal, "A Crisis of Consent in UN Peace Operations," *IPI Global Observatory*, August 2, 2022.

26 For more on these rumors, see Insecurity Insight's regular Social Media Monitoring Bulletins on the DRC, available at https://insecurityinsight.org/projects/aid-in-danger/social-media-monitoring . One study found that more than 85 percent of survey respondents in North Kivu had heard rumors that Ebola was fabricated for financial gain or to destabilize the region, and around one-third believed these rumors. Fondation Hirondelle, Demos, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, and Institut congolais de recherche en développement et études stratégiques, "Influencers and Influencing for Better Accountability in the DRC," July 2019.

27 UN Security Council, *United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. S/2020/214, March 18, 2020, para. 69.

Finally, as elsewhere, social media and messaging applications have facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation in CAR, Mali, and the DRC. While social media penetration is low—though rising rapidly—in all three countries, WhatsApp and Facebook are widely cited as the main channels for the spread of misinformation.[28] One reason is that the small segment of the population that does use social media includes many of the most powerful and influential people, making it an effective tool for reaching them.[29] There are also fewer resources devoted to monitoring and responding to misinformation on social media in Africa than in the Global North.[30]

Moreover, misinformation quickly spreads between online and offline spaces, including traditional media (especially radio, which remains the main source of news in all three countries) and the "radio trottoir" (or word of mouth). When it passes from online to offline, misinformation can become even more potent, as people receiving information from trusted sources like family members or religious or community leaders are less inclined or able to verify it.[31] It follows that women and people living in rural areas, who are more likely to receive information by word of mouth, are often the most vulnerable to misinformation.[32]

UN Efforts to Address Disinformation

Both at headquarters and on the ground, UN personnel are attempting to ramp up their efforts to address disinformation against the UN, but they are still playing catch-up. The UN has long recognized disinformation as a challenge for peacekeeping operations, but it has only recently emerged as a priority.[33] DPO's current Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy, last updated in 2016, does not even mention misinformation or disinformation, though an updated policy is in the works.[34] This issue's subsequent rise in priority is reflected in more recent documents, including the 2020 handbook on the protection of civilians, which includes a subsection on "countering misinformation and disinformation."[35] In early 2022, DPO began implementing a work stream focused specifically on addressing misinformation and disinformation (see Box 2). Misinformation and disinformation also featured prominently in the Security Council's open debate on strategic communications in July 2022.

Similarly, while MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO (as well as the UN Mission in South Sudan) are all now mandated to address or report on disinformation, this language was added recently—as recently as June 2022, in the case of MINUSMA (see Annex). These mandates should promote more strategic thinking about how to monitor disinformation and address falsehoods and to include related resources in budgetary requests. To date, however, missions' efforts to address disinformation have primarily focused on disinformation against the UN rather than disinformation more broadly. They have also centered on strategic communications activities, even though disinformation affects all mission compo-

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28 As of January 2022, social media penetration stood at around 10 percent in Mali, 5 percent in the DRC, and 3 percent in CAR. DataReportal, available at https://datareportal.com/library .

29 On this phenomenon in CAR, see: Elise Thomas, "Russian Trolls Are Staging a Takeover in Africa—With Help from Mercenaries," *Daily Beast*, March 23, 2019; and Saber Jendoubi, "Les reseaux sociaux centrafricains à l'aube des élections: symptôme avancé d'une crise politique à venir," Institut français des relations internationales, March 2021.

30 Social media companies have been accused of failing to prioritize misinformation in the Global South, especially in local languages. See, for example: Jason Burke, "Facebook Struggles as Russia Steps Up Presence in Unstable West Africa," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2022; Torinmo Salau, "How Twitter Failed Africa," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022; UN Doc. A/HRC/47/25, para. 76; and Kpénahi Traoré, "Who Fact Checks Online Disinformation in West Africa's Bambara Language?" *Global Voices*, June 4, 2020.

31 Elena Gadjanova, Gabrielle Lynch, and Ghadafi Saibu, "Misinformation Across Digital Divides: Theory And Evidence From Northern Ghana," *African Affairs* 121, no. 483 (2022); Internews, "Find the Link: Information Dynamics of Displaced Communities in Mali during COVID-19," March 2021.

32 On this demographic divide in information access in Africa, see: Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Joseph Koné, "Promise and Peril: In Changing Media Landscape, Africans Are Concerned about Social Media but Opposed to Restricting Access," Afrobarometer, February 2022. In addition to women being more vulnerable to misinformation, disinformation often has a gendered dimension. For example, one recent study in North Kivu in the DRC found that 72 percent of women and 28 percent of men reported hearing of "rumors related to women." Sentinel Project, "Gendering Misinformation Management: Preliminary Results from Our Baseline Surveys in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda," May 2021. Moreover, one global survey found that 90 percent of African women reported being targeted by online violence. Economist Intelligence Unit, "Measuring the Prevalence of Online Violence against Women," 2021. However, gender does not seem to play a central role in the anti-UN disinformation campaigns in CAR, Mali, and the DRC.

33 For example, the 2000 Brahimi Report, 2003 Handbook on United Nations Multidimensional Peacekeeping Operations, and 2008 Capstone Doctrine all mention the importance of using effective communications to counter disinformation.

34 UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), Department of Field Support (DFS), and Department of Public Information (DPI), "Strategic Communications and Public Information Policy," Ref. 2016.11, January 2017.

35 UN DPO, "The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook," 2020.

Box 2. DPO work stream on responding to misinformation and disinformation[36]

DPO's 2022–2023 work stream on responding to misinformation and disinformation is being spearheaded by the department's Policy, Evaluation and Training Division (DPET) and Strategic Communications Section. Implementation of the project began in 2022 but has been hampered by a lack of human and financial resources, with personnel having to undertake this work on top of their existing duties; however, DPO recently received extrabudgetary funding for this work stream. DPO has asked missions to appoint focal points on misinformation and disinformation and to establish multidisciplinary working groups to address this issue, though the latter recommendation has yet to be implemented in any meaningful way in most missions.[37]

Under this work stream, DPO has made progress on several activities and deliverables across four objectives:

1. **Understanding the scope and nature of the challenge**: In early 2022, DPO conducted a survey of peacekeepers across all missions to assess the impact of misinformation and disinformation.[38] DPO has also organized discussions with mission personnel and representatives of the media, technology companies, and fact-checking organizations to better understand this growing threat and possible responses.
2. **Establishing an informal community of practice across missions**: DPO has created an online community of practice, which more than 450 personnel have joined, to share experiences and expertise across missions and provide access to external information resources. Moving forward, DPO is aiming to facilitate more discussion on lessons learned among mission personnel and to develop partnerships with subject-matter experts to strengthen learning and practice.
3. **Creating products that support field missions in addressing misinformation and disinformation**: DPO is prioritizing the development of a "light guidance" document, which will be followed by a more detailed policy and training module. DPO is also procuring new technological tools to monitor and analyze disinformation.
4. **Supporting outreach and engagement with technology platforms to address harmful messaging**: DPO has had conversations with Meta (the parent company of Facebook), Twitter, and Microsoft to encourage them to address harmful content, though these have been ad hoc. DPO is planning to collaborate with other UN entities on future engagement with technology companies.

nents. This section provides an overview of how missions have been responding to disinformation and the challenges they have faced in doing so.

Monitoring Disinformation

UN peacekeeping operations monitor disinformation as part of their broader efforts to monitor the political and security environment. Missions' strategic communications sections monitor disinformation in traditional media and on social media, including with Talkwalker, an application that can provide daily reports on content mentioning the mission or other issues relevant to the mission mandate. Public information officers in field offices monitor disinformation on the ground, including by engaging with communities and joining local WhatsApp groups. Missions' uniformed components, including military intelligence and information operations sections, monitor disinformation among the communities they interact with and on social media. Joint mission analysis centers not only monitor disinformation on social media but can also help missions understand who is behind it. Political affairs

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36   UN internal document; Interview 21, UN officials, September 2022; Written correspondence with UN official, October 2022.

37   This may be starting to change. For example, MONUSCO is organizing a "war room" within the mission to bring together the military, police, and civilian components to coordinate on monitoring, analyzing, and producing content in response to disinformation. Written correspondence with UN official, October 2022.

38   Of the respondents, 43 percent said misinformation and disinformation against peacekeepers were very common or common (compared to 26 percent who said it was rare or very rare); 41 percent said misinformation and disinformation critically or severely impeded mandate implementation, and 45 percent said it critically or severely impacted the safety of peacekeepers (in comparison to 29 percent and 25 percent, respectively, who said the impact was minor or nonexistent). United Nations, "Action for Peacekeeping + (A4P+) Results Report—Reporting Period: 1 Nov 2021–30 Apr 2022," July 2022, p. 10.

divisions are also involved in monitoring disinformation, while human rights teams monitor hate speech (see Box 3 on hate speech).

One limitation of these efforts is that most monitoring focuses on social media. Monitoring messaging platforms like WhatsApp is much more difficult and largely depends on local staff members being members of WhatsApp groups where misinformation is spreading. Monitoring local-language community radio stations is largely beyond the capacity of missions.[39] And monitoring misinformation that spreads by word of mouth requires substantial community engagement—an area where missions sometimes fall short.

To overcome these challenges, missions could collaborate with the growing number of practitioners and researchers with expertise on monitoring and analyzing disinformation, as well as networks of local journalists who have an ear to the ground around the country. For example, MINUSCA discusses misinformation during monthly meeting with journalists and fact-checkers.[40] However, researchers and fact-checkers face many of the same limitations as missions in monitoring misinformation and may only have the capacity to monitor social media.[41]

Even when it comes to monitoring social media, the UN has limited capacity. At headquarters, DPO's Strategic Communications Section largely relies on interns or temporary staff supported by extrabudgetary funding for media monitoring. Similarly, in missions, strategic communications sections have limited capacity to use tools like Talkwalker or to analyze disinformation due to lack of staff and training.[42] While other mission sections might have more capacity to analyze disinforma-

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tion, their reporting does not always reach other parts of the mission.[43] As a result, mission leaders may receive regular quantitative reports on the number of posts targeting the mission on social media but little qualitative analysis on who is making these posts and why they are targeting the mission.[44] This challenge is even greater among military public information officers based in remote areas, who often lack an Internet connection outside of the office and are blocked from using social media on their office computers. This makes consistent monitoring impossible.[45]

Another challenge with monitoring is the lack of a common understanding of what constitutes disinformation. While some UN personnel are careful to distinguish between disinformation and genuine expressions of opinion, others describe any negative sentiments about the UN as disinformation.[46] If those monitoring misinformation and disinformation do not make this distinction, responses could risk infringing on people's freedom of expression.

Addressing Disinformation

UN peacekeeping operations cannot—and should not—respond to every piece of disinformation. Mission personnel thus identified several factors that play into their decision on whether or not to respond. One factor is virality: missions only respond to a falsehood if it has spread widely. A second is the egregiousness of the falsehood, though this factor can cut both ways. On the one hand, missions are more likely to respond to a distorted truth than an egregious lie in order to avoid amplifying the lie.[47] On the other hand, missions are more likely to respond to blatantly false rumors that the UN is doing bad things than

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39 One tool that could help monitor community radio is "radio mining," which MINUSMA recently piloted, though this requires careful consideration of data privacy and protection. See: Stefan Lemm, "Data Privacy and Protection Assessments in Radio Mining," UN Office of Information and Communications Technology, April 12, 2021.

40 Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022.

41 Interview 18, local journalist, August 2022.

42 Interview 19, former civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022; Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

43 Written correspondence with UN officials, October 2022.

44 Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022.

45 Interview 8, military peacekeeping official, July 2022.

46 Interview 21, UN officials, September 2022.

47 Interview 8, military peacekeeping official, July 2022.

Box 3. Building on efforts to address hate speech

While hate speech can overlap with misinformation and disinformation, it is a distinct phenomenon, and most disinformation against UN peacekeepers does not qualify as hate speech.[48] Nonetheless, efforts to address disinformation could build on efforts to address hate speech. The UN launched a Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech in 2019 and released detailed guidance on implementation for UN field presences in 2020.[49] The UN has also developed country-level and regional strategies on hate speech.[50] These strategies could provide a starting point for similar strategies on misinformation and disinformation. For example, the UN-wide strategy on hate speech outlines three tiers of hate speech and a six-part test for "calibrating responses according to the level of severity."[51] A similar approach could be applied to misinformation and disinformation.

There may also be opportunities to more closely link action on disinformation and hate speech. Missions' work on these issues is often separated, with the strategic communications section addressing misinformation and disinformation and the human rights section addressing hate speech. This separation could make it harder to understand how these phenomena relate to each other and how disinformation could undermine human rights and drive violence.[52]

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generic complaints that the UN is doing nothing. As one UN official described it, "People are allowed to think the mission is incompetent and express that…. But if you tell me I'm trafficking [arms] or helping armed groups, that's where a strong response is needed."[53]

If a piece of disinformation has already gone viral at the national level, missions tend to respond through their full array of communication channels. For example, a UN official might correct the falsehood on a UN radio program such as MINUSMA's weekly program "Le vrai du faux" ("True from False"), which was started in 2020 with the specific goal of addressing misinformation.[54] Missions might then share snippets of this video or audio on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Eventually, they might issue a press release denouncing the disinformation. In other cases, missions might respond in a more targeted way. For example, if a falsehood is only circulating in certain WhatsApp groups, they might issue a correction only in those groups but not on other platforms to avoid spreading it further.[55]

As with monitoring, one of the biggest challenges to addressing disinformation is the lack of adequate capacity and capabilities. At headquarters, DPO has no standing capacity to address disinformation in a holistic manner.[56] In missions, multimedia teams often lack the personnel, skills, and equipment they need to produce high-quality digital content.[57] Military public information officers often have no background in communications.[58] This lack of capacity is not limited to communications. For example, in-person community engagement

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48 The UN defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or group on the basis of who they are." United Nations, "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech," June 2019. On the intersection between hate speech and disinformation, see: Lisa Reppell and Erica Shein, "Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions," International Foundation for Electoral Systems, April 2019.

49 United Nations, "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech: Detailed Guidance on Implementation for United Nations Field Presences," September 2020.

50 See, for example: MINUSCA and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "L'incitation à la haine et à la violence en République centrafricaine (2017–2020)," December 2020; UN Regional Office for Central Africa, Economic Community of Central Africa States, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, UNESCO, MINUSCA, and MONUSCO, "Projet de stratégie régionale et de plan d'action pour la prévention et la lutte contre les discours de haine en Afrique centrale," June 2022.

51 United Nations, "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech."

52 Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, June 2022; Interview 7, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022.

53 Interview 1, civilian peacekeeping official, June 2022.

54 For more on this program, see: UN DPO, "Mikado FM: A Peace Radio in the Age of the Coronavirus," April 17, 2020.

55 Interview 1, civilian peacekeeping official, June 2022; Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

56 DPO only has one relatively junior digital post funded through the support account. The rest of the digital team, comprising two temporary professional-level staff, a UN volunteer, and an independent contractor, is funded by extra-budgetary contributions. Written communication with UN officials, October 2022.

57 Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

58 Interview 8, military peacekeeping official, July 2022.

can be an effective way to dispel rumors but is resource-intensive and time-consuming. Overall, a 2021 UN survey found that almost half of senior mission leaders felt they did not have the tools needed to respond to misinformation and disinformation.[59] As a result, missions have little bandwidth to go beyond countering individual falsehoods. As one researcher described it, countering individual falsehoods without tackling the broader anti-UN narrative amounts to cutting just one strand of a rope while the rope itself remains intact.[60]

Another challenge is the mindset of mission leaders, some of whom do not prioritize disinformation—though this may be starting to change as the scale of the problem grows. Some UN officials feel that mission leaders do not always take disinformation seriously, dismissing false rumors as "nonsense" and thinking it best just to "let them talk."[61] This critique of missions' under-responsiveness is supported by recent research showing that the risks of not responding to misinformation often outweigh the risks of responding.[62] Moreover, when missions do respond, they usually take too long. Messages have to go through several layers of approval, and by the time they finally get out, the misinformation is already out of control.[63] While in some missions the delay has reportedly decreased from several days to several hours, this is still too long in today's fast-paced information environment. As a result, missions "leave the space empty, and [other] people take up that space; the conversation is about [the mission], but [the mission] is not involved."[64]

> Messages have to go through several layers of approval, and by the time they finally get out, the misinformation is already out of control.

However, missions may not always be the most credible messengers to correct anti-UN disinformation. For example, one study found that missions' election-education campaigns were only effective in countering disinformation in areas where the mission was "perceived to be an impartial arbiter."[65] Yet missions are often not seen as impartial. UN radio stations can offer a more effective platform for addressing disinformation, as they are widely seen as credible news sources, and their journalistic mandate makes them one of the most impartial parts of a mission, but even they are sometimes seen as too pro-UN.[66]

In recognition of this limitation, MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO all provide funding or training to local fact-checking organizations or are in the process of forming such partnerships. Missions also work with local journalists to encourage them to dispel disinformation through their reporting, including by bringing them on patrols (e.g., to show them that the UN is delivering weapons to peacekeepers, not armed groups).[67] Nonetheless, UN support to local journalists and fact-checkers remains limited. One local fact-checker lamented that his organization needs more support from the UN—not only funding but also equipment, transportation, security, and information-sharing—though such partnerships could also present a conflict of interest.[68]

At least in theory, government officials can also be useful messengers for pushing back against false-

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59   Annika S. Hansen and Naomi Miyashita, "UN Peacekeeping Embraces the Digital World," Center for International Peace Operations, September 21, 2021.

60   Interview 18, researcher on disinformation in Africa, August 2022. Studies have found that the most effective way of debunking a falsehood is not simply to correct it but to explain why it is incorrect and replace it with an alternative correct explanation. See: Stephan Lewandowsky et al., "The Debunking Handbook 2020." See also: Nathan Walter and Sheila T. Murphy, "How to Unring the Bell: A Meta-analytic Approach to Correction of Misinformation," *Communications Monographs* 85, no. 3 (2018); and Man-pui Sally Chan et al., "Debunking: A Meta-analysis of the Psychological Efficacy of Messages Countering Misinformation," *Psychological Science* 28, no. 11 (2017).

61   Interview 1, civilian peacekeeping official, June 2022; Interview 10, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

62   Lewandowsky et al., "The Debunking Handbook 2020."

63   The special representative of the secretary-general may even be involved in the approval process. See, for example: Adam Sandor, "The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions: MINUSMA's Management of Mali's Rumour Mill," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020), p. 927.

64   Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

65   Hannah Smidt, "Mitigating Election Violence Locally: UN Peacekeepers' Election-Education Campaigns in Côte d'Ivoire," *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 1 (2020).

66   Frère and Fiedler, "Balancing Plausible Lies and False Truths"; Interview 5, representative of international NGO, July 2022; Interview 12, representative of international NGO, August 2022.

67   Interview 8, military peacekeeping official, July 2022.

68   Interview 15, local journalist, August 2022.

hoods about peacekeepers, as the Congolese government has sometimes done.[69] In CAR and Mali, however, most government officials no longer play this role. In CAR, regular joint press conferences with UN and government officials used to provide an opportunity to address misinformation, but these have not happened since 2021. Since then, the government spokesperson has never publicly condemned disinformation against the mission. Nonetheless, MINUSCA has found a constructive partner in the High Communication Council *(Haut conseil de la communication)*, which is less politicized than other parts of the government and has worked with the mission to organize trainings for journalists.[70]

MINUSMA has an even more contentious relationship with the Malian government. In theory, the current Malian government could be particularly helpful in dispelling disinformation considering its high level of public support.[71] Instead, it fans the flames of disinformation and uses the mission as a scapegoat.[72] In this tense environment, MINUSMA's radio station no longer airs overt criticism of the government and does not try to debunk disinformation from government officials.[73]

> While fact-checking and other efforts to address disinformation are useful, they are inherently reactive, especially because missions tend to respond to falsehoods that have already gone viral.

Preventing Disinformation

While fact-checking and other efforts to address disinformation are useful, they are inherently reactive, especially because missions tend to respond to falsehoods that have already gone viral. To complement these efforts, UN missions can also help prevent disinformation from gaining traction by contributing to a healthier information environment. These preventive efforts can mitigate not only disinformation against the UN itself but also misinformation and disinformation more broadly, including in the context of political and peacebuilding processes that missions are mandated to support.

One way missions can improve the information environment is by proactively spreading authoritative information, especially considering that in CAR, Mali, and the DRC, disinformation often arises out of an information vacuum. One of the goals of the UN's 2020 Global Communications Strategy is to "use authoritative information to spread knowledge and inoculate against misinformation."[74] In particular, UN radio stations, which are among the most widespread news sources in all three countries, can be used as a tool not only for spreading good information but also for "prebunking" common rumors.[75] However, some have criticized UN radio stations for weakening the media ecosystem in the long run by poaching journalists and audiences from local media outlets.[76]

Supporting high-quality, factual reporting by local journalists is thus also critical. In addition to supporting local fact-checkers, MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO are providing more general capacity-building support to local journalists and community radio stations, though some see this support as insufficient.[77] Missions could

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69 See, for example: Patient Ligodi, "Manifestations anti-Monusco en RDC: Félix Tshisekedi dénonce une campagne de désinformation," RFI, July 30, 2022.

70 Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022; Interview 7, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022.

71 Chris Olaoluwa Ògúnmọ́dẹ̀dé, "Mali's Military Junta Is Winning the Battle of Public Opinion—for Now," *World Politics Review*, January 25, 2022; Interview 10, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

72 Interview 3, military peacekeeping official, June 2022.

73 Interview 6, embassy official, July 2022; Interview 19, former civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022. All missions face the dilemma of how critical to be of the host-state government: "If a UN outlet shies away from denouncing the national authorities where it is warranted, the mission's credibility will suffer. Yet if it goes too far in its criticism, it can lead to a breakdown in the relations with the host government." Kseniya Oksamytna, "Public Information and Strategic Communications in Peace Operations," in *Handbook on Peacekeeping and International Relations*, Han Dorussen, ed. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022).

74 UN Department of Global Communications, "Global Communications Strategy 2020," 2020.

75 "Prebunking" typically involves warning people that they may be misinformed and then preemptively refuting that misinformation. See: Stephan Lewandowsky and Sander van der Linden, "Countering Misinformation and Fake News through Inoculation and Prebunking," *European Review of Social Psychology* 32, no. 7 (2021).

76 See: Michelle Betz and Helene Papper, "UN Peacekeeping Radio: The Way Forward," in *Communications and Peace: Mapping an Emerging Field*, Julia Hoffmann and Virgil Hawkins, eds. (London: Routledge, 2015); and Prue Clarke and Rodney Sieh, "How the U.N. Silenced Liberia's Press," *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2016. At the same time, UN radio stations have also been found to play a critical role in developing local media. Bill Orme, "Broadcasting in UN Blue: The Unexamined Past and Uncertain Future of Peacekeeping Radio," Center for International Media Assistance, February 2010.

77 Interview 5, representative of international NGO, July 2022; Interview 11, representative of international NGO, August 2022; Interview 12, representative of international NGO, August 2022.

also consider how they might support efforts to improve the public's media literacy, which can be another effective way to prevent disinformation.[78] These are areas in which missions could collaborate with UN agencies, funds, and programs, including UNESCO.

Working with local journalists is not without challenges. It is hard for journalists in all three countries to operate, especially in Mali, where the civic space has rapidly shrunk since the 2021 coup and local journalists have been victims of hacking and other security threats.[79] Ironically, laws and regulations intended to mitigate misinformation and disinformation can contribute to this shrinking of civic space by undermining freedom of the press.[80] On top of this, local journalists who collaborate with the UN risk being accused of collaborating with "the enemy."[81] When working with local journalists, missions thus have an obligation to ensure they are not inadvertently putting those journalists at risk.

Because most disinformation against UN peacekeepers originates on social media, working with social media companies to stop it at its source can prevent it from spreading offline, where it is more difficult to address. One of the four main objectives of DPO's misinformation and disinformation work stream is thus to "support outreach and engagement with technology platforms to address harmful messaging" (see Box 2). This outreach has focused on Meta, the parent company of Facebook, which is the most widely used social media platform in CAR, Mali, and the DRC. Personnel from

MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO have all met with regionally based Meta staff. These conversations have opened channels for missions to share information on disinformation with Meta and understand the types of actions Meta might take in response.[82] However, conversations between Meta and missions remain ad hoc, and some UN officials have found them frustrating. While Meta has provided some training to mission personnel on tools they could use to monitor information on Facebook, some UN officials feel that the company minimizes its own responsibility and places the burden of identifying misinformation and disinformation on them.[83]

Another challenge is that disinformation is a complex, ill-defined phenomenon (see Box 1), and not all forms of disinformation are prohibited by Meta's "community standards." There are two main ways that disinformation against UN peacekeepers might violate these standards. First, Meta prohibits "coordinated inauthentic behavior," which has led it to suspend accounts associated with covert influence operations—including Russian- and French-backed operations in CAR and Mali.[84] Second, Meta prohibits certain types of misinformation—though this prohibition is less straightforward.[85] Recently, Meta has developed misinformation policies specifically for Mali/the Sahel and the DRC that identify context-specific categories of repeated false claims that could contribute to imminent physical harm. Meta consulted with MINUSMA when developing the policy for Mali/the Sahel but did not consult with MONUSCO when developing the policy for the

78 See: UNESCO, "Media and Information Literacy," available at https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/media-information-literacy ; and Peter Cunliffe-Jones et al., "The State of Media Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa 2020 and a Theory of Misinformation Literacy," in *Misinformation Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy*, Peter Cunliffe-Jones et al., eds. (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021).

79 Interview 15, local journalist, August 2022.

80 UN General Assembly, *Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms—Report of the Secretary-General,* UN Doc. A/77/287 (August 12, 2022); Peter Cunliffe-Jones et al., "Bad Law: Legal and Regulatory Responses to Misinformation in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2016–2020," in *Misinformation Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy*, Peter Cunliffe-Jones et al., eds. (London: University of Westminster Press, 2021).

81 Interview 2, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022; Interview 11, representative of international NGO, August 2022; Interview 19, former civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

82 Interview 3, military peacekeeping official, June 2022; Interview 7, civilian peacekeeping official, July 2022; Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

83 Interview 20, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022; Interview 21, UN officials, September 2022

84 Coordinated inauthentic behavior involves the coordinated use of fake accounts to mislead people. For the full definition, see: Meta, "Inauthentic Behavior," available at https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/inauthentic-behavior/ . See, for example: Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Russia," Meta, October 30, 2019; Nathaniel Gleicher and David Agranovich, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia," Meta, December 15, 2020; Meta, "April 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report," May 6, 2021.

85 This prohibition requires assessing content rather than behavior, which requires knowledge of the context and local languages. For this reason, Meta outsources it to a global network of fact-checking organizations that reportedly covers CAR, the DRC, and Mali. Interview 17, social media company official, August 2022. The misinformation policy prohibits misinformation that "is likely to directly contribute to the risk of imminent physical harm" or "interference with the functioning of political processes," as well as "certain highly deceptive manipulated media." See: Meta, "Misinformation," available at https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/misinformation/ . Meta also prohibits hate speech, which is also based on content and thus raises similar challenges.

DRC, ostensibly because past instances of misconduct by mission personnel make it harder to assume that accusations against the mission are false.[86] However, this policy framework does not cover many kinds of disinformation, including disinformation that does not incite violence and is not from fake accounts, thereby excluding most disinformation from government officials.[87]

Conclusion

Disinformation is not a challenge specific to the UN or to CAR, Mali, and the DRC; it is a global challenge that even the most well-resourced governments have struggled to tackle. It is also a symptom of many other challenges that are outside of missions' control, including international and regional geopolitics and the growth of social media. In this context, disinformation against UN peacekeepers is likely to get worse before it gets better.

> Disinformation is not just a strategic communications issue; it requires a mission-wide approach.

Within peacekeeping operations, some of the challenges to addressing disinformation could be mitigated by building missions' strategic communications capacity. Missions need more strategic communications personnel with the skills to monitor and respond to disinformation, particularly in times of crisis. More broadly, they also need to continue shifting toward proactive, two-way communications tailored to specific audiences across all communications platforms.[88] The forthcoming strategic review of strategic communications in UN peacekeeping operations presents an opportunity to lay out the steps needed to realize this shift.[89]

However, disinformation is not just a strategic communications issue; it requires a mission-wide approach. Addressing disinformation requires missions not only to improve how they communicate but also to reconsider how they gather and analyze information, plan their operations and activities, deal with "spoilers," partner with host-state governments, engage with communities, support and protect local journalists, and engage with technology companies. This requires the involvement of all mission components, including the political affairs division, civil affairs section, human rights division, joint operations center, joint mission analysis center, police and military components, and mission leadership.

More broadly, addressing disinformation requires a system-wide approach across the entire UN. To this end, some have called for a dedicated cell within the UN Secretariat to monitor and coordinate efforts to tackle disinformation across the UN system.[90] This cell could work closely with focal points in missions to connect local-level monitoring with a mapping of regional and global narratives and actors. Any such efforts could build on recent UN efforts to develop a system-wide approach to hate speech (see Box 3).

Within UN peacekeeping, the UN Department of Peace Operations and individual missions could consider the following questions as they develop policies, guidelines, structures, and activities to address disinformation:

- **How can missions develop a cross-cutting, strategic approach to disinformation?** Disinformation is more than a technical or tactical issue; it is a political and strategic issue that requires the proactive attention of mission leaders. The recent inclusion of language on disinformation in the mandates of MINUSCA, MINUSMA, and MONUSCO should be an impetus for these missions to develop mission-wide strategies to address disinformation while acknowledging the legitimate grievances of local populations, respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, promoting coherence across the UN system, and fostering collaboration with host-state governments, independent

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86 Interview 17, social media company official, August 2022.

87 Interview 9, researcher on disinformation in Africa, July 2022.

88 On this topic, see: Jake Sherman and Albert Trithart, "Strategic Communications in UN Peace Operations: From an Afterthought to an Operational Necessity," International Peace Institute, August 2021.

89 This strategic review was mandated in a July 2022 statement by the president of the Security Council. See: UN Doc. S/PRST/2022/5, p. 4.

90 See: International Crisis Group, "Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021–2022," September 13, 2021. The UN itself has also proposed creating a "multidisciplinary, integrated capacity or mechanism at Headquarters… to support the detection, analysis and response to potential disinformation and hate speech." UN DPO, "Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping," September 2021.

media, and other national stakeholders. These strategies will also have to address the role of missions in addressing disinformation that does not directly target missions but impacts their mandated activities.

- **How can missions better monitor and analyze disinformation both online and offline?** Monitoring disinformation is critical not only so missions can address it, but also because of its intrinsic value. By tracking rumors, missions can better listen to and understand the sentiments of local populations. This, in turn, can inform their strategic communications, community engagement, and political engagement by revealing areas where there are gaps in expectations or a lack of trust. Toward this end, missions could use rumor-tracking methodologies that would allow them to link monitoring on social media to offline monitoring by various mission components, including through community engagement.[91]

- **How can missions respond to disinformation more quickly?** For many UN personnel, the slowness of the UN response is one of the biggest challenges inhibiting their efforts to address disinformation. To respond more quickly, missions and headquarters will have to streamline their processes for determining whether and how to respond to disinformation.

- **How can missions reshape anti-UN narra-**tives? Anti-UN disinformation is woven into a broader anti-UN (and anticolonial) narrative that is grounded in both great-power politics and legitimate public grievances. In countering individual falsehoods, missions should consider whether and how they could also respond to this broader narrative.

- **How can missions contribute to a healthier information environment?** From the perspective of civil society, the most important shift the UN can make would be to focus more on supporting local journalists and less on its own communications. Relatedly, to maintain their credibility and respond to the public's information needs, UN radio stations could focus more on providing high-quality information and less on promoting the UN.

- **Does the scale of the problem call for a more decisive shift in approach?** Some UN officials believe that tackling disinformation requires doctrinal change that would allow missions to wage information operations.[92] Others strongly disagree, however, and it is unclear whether missions would be able to conduct such operations effectively. Regardless, missions should under no circumstances respond to disinformation with disinformation of their own, which would not only violate UN principles but would also likely be ineffective, undermine their credibility, and make the problem worse.[93]

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91 See, for example: Jon Bugge, "Rumour Has It: A Practice Guide to Working with Rumours," CDAC Network, 2017; Internews, "Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context: Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology," 2019.

92 Interview 10, civilian peacekeeping official, August 2022.

93 Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory, "More-Troll Kombat."

Annex: Mandates to Address Misinformation and Disinformation in Multidimensional UN Peacekeeping Operations

UN Peacekeeping Operation	Mandated Activities	Mandated Reporting	Year Added
MONUSCO Resolution 2612 (December 20, 2021)	As part of its protection of civilians mandate, the mission is mandated "to prevent disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining the mission's credibility and hindering its performance, and by ensuring mobility of the mission."		2019
MINUSCA Resolution 2605 (November 12, 2021)		The secretary-general is requested to report on "incitement to hatred and violence and disinformation campaigns against MINUSCA."	2021
MINUSMA Resolution 2640 (June 29, 2022)	The secretary-general is requested "to strengthen its capacities to monitor and to counter disinformation and misinformation that might hinder the mission's ability to implement its mandate or threaten the safety and security of peacekeepers."	The secretary-general is requested to report on "provocations and incitement to hatred and violence and disinformation and misinformation campaigns against MINUSMA, and efforts to hold perpetrators of such actions accountable, if applicable" and on "measures to improve external communication of the mission and to counter disinformation and misinformation."	2022
UNMISS Resolution 2625 (March 15, 2022)	Encourages "the use of confidence-building, facilitation, mediation, community engagement, and strategic communications to support implementation of the mission's mandate and the mission's protection, information gathering, and situational awareness activities, and to counter disinformation and misinformation that might hinder the mission's ability to implement its mandate."		2022

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