

The Challenges of Evaluating Countering Disinformation Programs: A Working Paper

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Problem Statement

Disinformation is a key threat to democratic institutions and is disruptive to deliberative democracy and to the role that democratic civil society and independent media can play. As a contemporary challenge, which has largely become central to democracy promotion work over the past five years, businesses, governments, researchers, civil society, and media alike have struggled to keep up with the fast-growing field of disinformation studies.

Evidence that disinformation harms societies ranges from organized social media manipulation of electoral campaigns in least 70 countries, up from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017¹, to the financial havoc on the global economy², to public health and safety risks which can result in mistrust in government responses, misinformation about the epidemiological nature of disease, and violence against government response facilities or healthcare personnel³, as well as to perpetuating violence as we have seen happen in Myanmar and several other countries.⁴

Often described as a wicked problem, that is a problem which is unstable, socially complex, and difficult to clearly define, disinformation has multiple interdependencies and multiple causes. As of now, a path to countering disinformation is not clear as efforts to counter disinformation often create unforeseen consequences, such as social non-acceptance of true facts and unnecessary attention to false narratives. Efforts to counter disinformation involve behavioral change and calls to action by many different actors within and outside government. That leaves a string of failed policy attempts to solve any wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In short, ways to countering disinformation have eluded many of those whose work is focused on strengthening the civil society and independent media.

As noted in a recent Brookings policy brief, “Policymakers have largely failed at ‘solving’ wicked problems because they are not, in fact, solvable. The key to developing effective policy interventions for wicked problems is recognizing that there is no one solution. Instead, wicked problems require a shift in vocabulary and mindset to focus on ‘managing,’ ‘limiting,’ or ‘minimizing’ the problem” (Montgomery, 2020, p. 5). For the purpose of addressing disinformation, we are not going to talk about solving or eradicating disinformation. Instead, we will use the language of minimizing disinformation or, to put it another way, to build resilience among individuals and communities who face disinformation. Resilient individuals and communities can metabolize disinformation. Democracies are a marketplace for both good information and bad information -- or disinformation. In democracies, political and economic systems are set up to internalize and deal with disinformation. Those systems, to the extent they are resilient, can make the right choices and thrive despite the high levels of disinformation.

¹ Oxford Internet Institute's COMPROM

² A study done by Preveny, found that disinformation costs the global economy \$78 billion per year

³ According to Rose Bernard, et al, disinformation and misinformation campaigns during an epidemic can be significant, including the perpetuation and persistence of transmission, mistrust in government responses, misinformation about the epidemiological nature of the disease, and violence against government response facilities or healthcare personnel.

⁴ See: Misinformation is inciting violence around the world. And tech platforms don't seem to have a plan to stop it, Poynter, Daniel Funke and Susan Benkelman, April 4, 2019.

Whether or not our current systems are more or less resilient to disinformation, evidence abounds that our societies systemically fail to address the problem of disinformation.

According to experts working in the disinformation studies space, “disinformation (i.e. verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public) distorts public debate, undermines citizens' trust in societal institutions and the media, and even destabilizes democratic processes such as elections.”⁵ Thus, any efforts to counter disinformation should seek to measure any changes (positive or negative) around these three areas: effectiveness of the public debate, trust in societal institutions and the media, and stability of democratic processes.

Furthermore, the case for the relationship between disinformation and democratic backsliding is one that currently attracts a great deal of inquiry. One disinformation expert elaborated: “Disinformation campaigns targeted against democracies have two main goals. First, they seek to further divide and polarize democracies along ideological lines; Secondly, they attempt to undermine trust in the institutions that sustain a strong democracy. Media, government ministries, academia, and the electoral process are all regular targets of disinformation campaigns.”⁶ (Kremidas-Courtney, 2020)

The dimensions of disinformation are contextual and undermine democracy. As summarized by Ukrainian NGO StopFake, disinformation⁷:

- Is not linear or easily predictable
- Incorporates deep audience insights (disinformers have a highly developed Knowledge of audiences)
- Uses targeted tactical aims
- Deploys targeted messages
- Diffuses through many different channels
- Is often built around an “element of truth”
- Targets more than elections or referenda.

For evaluators who look to assess the effectiveness or relevance of disinformation programming, these dimensions are incredibly important as they lead to questions pertaining to what the disinformation is about, who (or what) is spreading it, how and why the information is considered “bad” information, and what were the motivations (or intentions) of those seeking to spread it. The questions of who, what, where, when, why, how are all intrinsic to answer. Equally important, however, is the overarching intention of the program designed to counter

⁵ See EU's EEAS (diplomatic service understanding):

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/59411/Countering%20disinformation

⁶ From Chris Kremidas-Courtney, Multilateral Cooperative Engagement Coordinator for U.S. European Command. His previous positions include serving as the Acting Director of Training and Exercises for the Hybrid COE, Political Advisor to the Commander, NATO Training Mission – Iraq and Assistant Political Advisor to Commander, Joint Forces Command Naples.

<https://strategyinternational.org/countering-disinformation-feeling-is-believing/>

⁷ [The strategy and tactics of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign | StopFake](#)

disinformation, and what changes it is meant to bring at the individual level, community level, institution, or at the level of the society as a whole.

At first blush, as many evaluators and perhaps donors can confirm, one of the key questions that motivates evaluations related to countering disinformation programming is: What has changed? Change means different things to different people, but commonly, when it comes to assessing change in an evaluation, the following inquiries are common: has disinformation gone down; have audiences “switched channels” or sought out better, higher quality information; are participants of media and information literacy programs more equipped with critical thinking skills; and how has programming contributed to disinformation’s corrosive effects on democracy? Simply put, evaluations related to countering disinformation need to answer the question of whether programming is making a difference, and, if so, how and why.

Approaches to Countering Disinformation

As noted earlier, disinformation is a wicked problem and one that we know we cannot solve outright; however, we can minimize and build resilience against it.

In this regard, the term disinformation resilience as outlined in a study done by Disinformation Resilience Index to assess disinformation resilience in Central and Eastern Europe is most helpful. ‘Disinformation resilience’ is defined as “the adaptability of states, societies, and individuals to political, economic, and societal intentional pressure and falsehood spread in various formats of media, including TV, radio, print and online media, (and) social media, to influence political and economic decisions, including thought-targeting particular vulnerable groups.”⁸

Furthermore, in seeking the best approaches to minimize the harmful effects of disinformation and to help contribute to resilience, it is important to recognize the complicated nature of the disinformation landscape and sources that contribute to various aspects of overall distrust in the media, including media non-transparency and distrust in media overall. These contextual aspects of information ecosystems need to be factored into both the program design as well as monitoring and evaluation approaches.

Programmatic efforts from the media development or civil society strengthening perspectives, insofar focusing on resilience and minimization of disinformation largely fall into two categories:

- 1) Programming that has an audience-centered approach;
- 2) Programming that has a regulatory approach.

Thus, for evaluation purposes, systemically, we could consider whether the approaches put the responsibility to counter disinformation on the audience, on the government, or the regulatory framework that governs the media – either through government-imposed regulation, a form of co-regulation, or self-regulation. In the first, media literacy and education programs have

⁸ See: Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, available at: https://www.stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

dominated. In the second, advocacy and media self-regulation initiatives recently have taken the lead.

Additionally, in terms of thinking about programmatic outcomes that evaluators may assess, it might be helpful to think of whether approaches to counter disinformation are best captured as minimization approaches or resilience approaches. Building on the thematic grouping of GFMD's breakout groups for this workshop, a typology of approaches to countering disinformation programs could be broken down as follows:

- Approach #1: Content means supporting professional journalism that counter false narratives and report on misinformation and disinformation.
- Approach #2: Production processes are newsroom and production processes to address disinformation, fact-checking, moderation, content curation, and ethical standards.
- Approach #3: Audience-centered approaches include media literacy and newsroom literacy, fact checking, algorithms and computational propaganda defense, strategic communication, and online games that promote the inoculation idea.
- Approach #4: Advocacy and policy reform include support for public interest media, standard setting, improved business models, approaches to support an improved legal, and the regulatory enabling environment that supports countering disinformation goals and still upholds high standards of freedom of expression.
- Approach #5 Research includes efforts that seek to understand and map complex social networks, utilize machine learning, make use of data- and text-mining methods in misinformation detection, utilize sentiment analysis, and agent-based models of misinformation.

Lessons from Resilience Studies

An emerging area of research uses a disinformation resilience framework. This framework is very promising for media development programs, especially because this approach can yield a deeper analysis of how capable audiences are in evaluating and understanding as well as in making use of information in their environments in a healthy way.

Promising Research on Disinformation Resilience:

- HYPERLINK "<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1940161219900126>" Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research – by Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser, Peter Van Aelst

- 'Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe' by the DRI - Disinformation Resilience Index

Authors of the two recent publications (shown in the box above) have developed methodologies and approaches that allow us to move to the level of analysis, in which we can use the political, social and rights-based indices to ascertain how well a society is internalizing information (or disinformation). Proposed frameworks offer ways to document the macro-level indicators, which can be part of an evaluative framework for countering disinformation efforts. In the Humprecht, et al. study on Resilience to Online Disinformation, the authors draw on Benkler et al⁹ (2018) to focus on structural factors to ascertain media systems and their resilience. These factors are:

- 1) characterized by a low degree of polarization and fragmentation;
- 2) a low level of distrust in truth-seeking institutions that operate on reason and evidence (science, law, professionalism);
- 3) a public health approach toward media regulation; and
- 4) public health approach toward media regulation; and public funding for reliable truth-seeking media and an educated public. (Humprecht et al., 2020).

The methodology draws on the Digital News Report, the Varieties of Democracy Project, data on populist parties from the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, the Global Populism Database, the data on the strength of public service broadcasting and World Bank Data on the size of population, and a number of online users (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Studies like these are very helpful to understanding the wider, sectoral significance of disinformation resilience. Expanding on these types of studies to additional regions and information environments would be tremendously valuable.

How do we know we are making a difference?

Countering disinformation programming is increasingly central to support many donors seek to provide. Measuring the success and evaluating the impact of such programming can be quite complicated. As the number of programs to counter disinformation grows, so does the complexity of M&E efforts. However, complicated does not always mean effective. Today, an increasing number of programs to counter disinformation look to identify a great number of indicators and are sought to develop comprehensive evaluation assessments. But in the end, a simple answer to the question “What makes a difference?” is at the heart of this quest.

As evaluators, we are often asked which approaches are most relevant, effective, sustainable, and impactful. In conducting an evaluation, we might seek to examine to what extent donor-funded countering disinformation programs have lessened the impact of disinformation. Or, perhaps, we could probe whether and how individuals and groups, or society as a whole,

⁹ Benkler, Y., R. Faris, and H. Roberts. 2018, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

are better able to withstand the threats to disinformation, that is to metabolize disinformation and to make it benign. Then, from a programmatic perspective, there are two-factor criteria to keep in mind for evaluation:

- 1) Is the approach successful in minimizing disinformation, and
- 2) Is the approach effective at building societies that are resilient in the face of disinformation?

These two factors could, in theory, provide a good basis for how we could measure programs that seek to counter disinformation. However, it has been our experience, so far, that on the first factor – is the approach successful in minimizing disinformation – program indicators are either non-existent or the data needed to form the insight around such insight is hard, if not impossible to come by. On the second factor – is the approach effective at building societies that are resilient in the face of disinformation – from an evaluator’s perspective, there is a richer set of indicators, data and research that can support the type of evidence base that helps lend support to ‘disinformation resilience’. Taking a collaborative approach to develop a set of indicators that help understand how and why programs designed to counter disinformation minimize disinformation and help support resilient societies is essential. Without a shared set of indicators, we may end up in a situation where we have too many silos so that individual efforts cannot be assessed in comparative or collective terms. Non-exchange of evaluation information makes it hard to determine what’s working and what’s not.

For each of these factors, we need to take into consideration a variety of stakeholders, including: participants, beneficiaries, and other target groups of countering disinformation programs. In this regard, we need to account for many actors, such as: government institutions, media outlets, youth (including primary, secondary and university students), civil society organizations, marketing and advertising companies, social media platforms, and other business enterprises, as well as specific segments of the population, including marginalized groups, and senior citizens.

We can think of two levels of analysis here: micro and macro. The micro-level, or the level of target communities, in which donors are interested, can be the smallest unit of analysis. The macro-level is a societal level, in which we can consider how disinformation is impacting society at a whole. Thus, every evaluation effort can look at these two levels: the level of individual or small group resilience within a particular community (which can be measured directly) as well as the level of societal resilience (which might call for indirect indicators).

For any programmatic evaluation, we can start by considering the availability of monitoring and evaluation data. Consider the following categories in terms of whether they are minimizing disinformation in specific communities (micro-level) or contributing to ‘disinformation resilience’ in the society at large (marco-level):

1. Attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge.

Are they changing in positive or negative directions? Within target communities, we can design evaluation instruments that measure how people are impacted by and evaluate the information they receive. At the societal level, we can monitor levels of trust toward the media, freedom of information in society, and other large-scale changes.

2. Media literacy, critical thinking skills, ability to analyze accuracy of information.

In target communities, we can assess whether people have acquired and make use of core media literacy skills. In society as a whole, we can monitor the extent to which disinformation influences¹⁰ political and economic developments.

3. Ability and contributions of civil society to create safe and constructive spaces for dialogue.

We need to remember that disinformation flourishes not solely and not exclusively in the domain of formal media outlets, traditional or online. Any civil society creates spaces for open deliberative debates, which, in turn, create opportunities to challenge powerful mainstream narratives. As evaluators, we can look for evidence how debates in target communities and within the society as a whole strengthen or weaken (if disinformation efforts overtake civic deliberations) the very fabric of civil society.

Other possible pathways to look for evidence that civil society and media programs are countering disinformation include:

1. Improving access information;
2. Understanding of comprehensive whole-of government approaches to countering disinformation and media manipulation; and
3. The extent to which the legal enabling environment offers pathways and remedies for addressing regulatory aspects of disinformation.

All of this gives guidance about where to look, but, when we actually face measuring and evaluating countering disinformation programs, the task can often seem daunting and the challenges of measurement hard to overcome.

Five key challenges of measuring and evaluating countering disinformation programs

A program evaluation often starts with the question: Was the change, which was supposed to happen in the world, a result of this program? Or, to put it a slightly different way, would the world be any different if a particular program did not exist or happen? What has a program done to contribute something new, and what changes have happened as a result? It is the evaluator's job to help shed light on these questions and to offer insights, evidence,

¹⁰ This one can be tricky: for instance, in some countries, a lot of internal government channels discuss "disinformation as a fact" that comes from the West. Also, malign actors are very skillful in utilizing part-truth and part-lie to create narratives so that this is not exactly disinformation all the way, but rather, a partial stacked cards fallacy way to present facts.

recommendations, and lessons learned to help donors and program implementers adapt, iterate, and modify their approaches for the future.

Countering disinformation programming has picked up in steam over the past five years. Like countering violent extremism and conflict prevention programming before it, countering disinformation programs are exceedingly difficult to measure.

The key challenge is putting together an evidence base to know whether a program intervention is making a difference or not. As there is no shared monitoring & evaluation framework for countering disinformation programs, we offer a list of five challenges to consider as we evaluate countering disinformation programming. Our hope is that by sharing our experiences we can work together, as a community of practice, to develop an M&E framework for evaluating countering disinformation efforts. Our willingness to share the knowledge will contribute to establishing a learning community to create safe spaces for research and further understanding of what's working and what's not in countering disinformation programming.

Here are our five key challenges to evaluating countering disinformation programs:

1) Disinformation is a big, all-encompassing concept.

Disinformation is not a monolithic thing, so it makes sense that efforts aimed at mitigating the problems that disinformation causes are varied, widespread, and take on many different formats, address different audiences. Efforts also have different expectations in terms of their short-term, medium-term, or long-term effects. However, from an evaluator's perspective, one of the challenges is knowing what to measure – are we measuring changes to the level of disinformation? Which disinformation is it that we are seeking to counter? From an evaluation perspective, we want to know what has changed as a result of the programs being implemented. So what is a unit of analysis? What or who is supposed to change? Is it an individual person or an institution? What has to happen at the societal level? The “disinformation” that's meant to be countered is often lost in the course of program implementation. So, when the time comes to conduct an evaluation, it is not very clear whether or not evaluation efforts even focused on disinformation itself or on the set of skills and activities that were aimed to counter disinformation.

2) What is a program's overall theory of change?

Despite the progress we have made around improving our practice around theories of change, when it comes to countering disinformation programming, theories of change are largely underdeveloped, especially when it comes to civil society and media development programming. A clear articulation of the change that is supposed to happen as a result of specific inputs is essential.

A good theory of change will help us understand how the change will happen. If so, one possible theory of change could be:

If we (1) support better journalism and reporting on disinformation, (2) improve newsroom and social media production processes including fact checking and moderation, and (3) train audiences to be literate in assessing media, then we can give the public better tools to interpret and reject disinformation.

In turn, these efforts will help to reduce the impact of disinformation (e.g., on particular topics which were the program's focus) and to strengthen disinformation resilience among individuals and communities, a characteristic vital to any democracy.

Part of the difficulty is that today we do not have clarity over theories of change. Additionally, almost every country today has some toxic media or specific generators of disinformation. Media's ability to counter disinformation is handicapped at present by business models around ratings and entertainment. One particular problem, media non-transparency, is discussed next.

3) Media transparency

All the hidden influences that happen in the media can lead to distrust and make it hard to get honest feedback.

Media transparency is a building block for professional media development based on trust between the media and the audience (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). Honesty, independence of opinion, fair judgment, and traditional news values are the main factors that define journalistic principles and define media credibility. If one or several of these principles are violated, the audience has a right to know what influenced journalistic decisions (Craig, 2008). The absence of any direct and indirect influence on the end news product is essential for media transparency. Lack of disclosure of influences and constraints placed on journalists, editors, and the media in which articles or programs appear is often referred to as non-transparency (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009). Publishing news in exchange for a payment or a favor compromises a traditional function of mass media in society and undermines media's roles as gatekeepers (Craig, 2006).

Non-transparent practices can be found worldwide (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). Media non-transparency has also been known as cash for news coverage (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2017), media bribery (Tsetsura, 2005), envelope journalism (Shafer, 1990), or paid news (Tsetsura, 2015), and media opacity (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). Many practitioners around the world also use slang words to refer to this phenomenon: zakazukha in Russia (Holmes, 2001, March 5), jinsa in Ukraine (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009), mermelada in Peru (Ristow, 2010), and pay-for-play in the USA (Tsetsura & Aziz, 2018).

A long history of media non-transparency practice of journalists and editors worldwide has contributed to losing trust in the media as a social institution in many societies. That, in turn, contributed to the need to look for alternative sources of information that are deemed more credible and channels that are not connected to the institution of the traditional legacy media.

4) Trust and truth are hard to measure

An increasing amount of disinformation is constructed by malign actors to shape global narratives, the information environment contributes to the overall societal distrust (Pomerantsev, 2015). Increased emphasis on the individual is seen in the fragmentation of media and of opinions and in the polarization of politics. Additionally, authoritarian regimes work to create enabling environments for consumption of government-sponsored media that contribute to contesting the concept of truth. One of the main challenges that disinformation poses to any democratic society is coercing the very principle of the free flow, exchange, and deliberation of ideas to achieve a more functional civil society. Spreading disinformation with the intent spread mistrust, create chaos, and encourage dysfunctional deliberation is an act of exploitation of Bessette's deliberative democracy (Sancho, 2003) and Habermas' idea of political discourse (Bohman & Rehg, 1996). Increasingly, countering disinformation is challenging in societies with the fragmented concept of truth, in which polarization and fragmentation as well as purposely destructive deliberation perpetuate the fabric of civic discourse.

The notion of truth is increasingly contested, and, as a result, the levels of societal and institutional trust are at the all-time low (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2021). Trust can be defined as "a bet about the future contingent upon actions of others" (Sztompka, 2000, p. 25). Countries with high levels of generalized trust can better enable the ecosystem to thrive (Fukuyama 1995; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998). People who trust each other are more likely to show a greater level of support for democracy and civic leadership and community engagement (Rossteutscher, 2008). As Western societies of trust increasingly transition into societies of distrust (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017), the individual, institutional, and societal trusts break down in a realm of increasingly complex culture of individualization, fragmentation, and disinformation. The increased inflow of information has created confusion between opinion, journalistic, commercial, and politically loaded content.

Trust thus becomes central to any evaluation of countering disinformation efforts. To what extent can one trust a researcher, an evaluator, a program implementer in the society of distrust? How can malign actors utilize the distrust culture to their advantage and turn countering disinformation efforts on its head by diminishing the very nature of societal trust?

Growing non-transparency of the media industry around the globe contributes to distrust toward the media, both legacy (traditional) and online. Traditional media no longer is a public sphere for different players in the ecosystem to connect or to express their opinions. That place is taken by uber-fragmented social media networks. And in the transitional environments, such as post-Soviet countries, where the main premise of the media business operation in a distrust society is that everything can be bought and every media message is paid for (Tsetsura, 2005;

Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2015), countering disinformation by primarily supporting independent media initiatives becomes increasingly complicated, if not counter productive.

5) Making space for non-Western approaches

Finally, disinformation cannot be viewed through the prism of democratic vs. autocratic governments. Democracies have many of the same problems as non-democracies when it comes to concerns about closing civic spaces for democratic media, including shrinking access to local news and information, toxic speech found on social media, and compromised business models that seem to only invite more disinformation.

The next two questions are:

- 1) What is the extent of our knowledge about countering disinformation in non-western societies?
- 2) Who has the right to identify what counts as disinformation and what are the “appropriate ways” to counter disinformation efforts?

The prevalence of disinformation studies primarily is written in English and focuses on the U.S.A., the U.K., and Europe. Many of the studies draw on the Trump election and administration and their influence on the decline of democracy in the United States or they focus on Brexit and the role disinformation played in campaigns for the UK to leave the EU. To service the need for research and for learning how the media and civil society programs operate in the non-Western world, we need to do more to incorporate the expertise of scholars and researchers from the countries where these programs are taking place.

There is also the not-so-minor problem of, unless we can fix the media in our own countries, how do we fix the media in other countries? This last point is not lost on most journalists and media actors who work with media development funders and implementers. Media development is not just a problem of the global south, so to speak. It is everyone’s problem.

If we are set to develop a possible theory of change to evaluate the effectiveness of countering disinformation programming, we also need to remember that traditionally many theories of change focus on the outcomes that would make sense as the Western values – but might not be necessarily indigenous to or desired by the non-Westerners. For example, who decides how the future of a non-Western civil society or its deliberative public sphere should look like? What does it mean to have better media, better journalism, and better access in the non-Western world? Perhaps, one of the past failures is a strong Western desire to bring the non-Western world to the same frame of reference and to measure up its progress and its success with the West. But now, building on the appreciation and recognition of the knowledge possessed by the indigenous communities and on the years of progress in de-Westernizing our thinking in the 21st century, we as evaluators can help others start asking several important questions. First, what

does a change look like from a non-Western perspective? Second, how does a non-Western deliberative debate look like? And, finally, how are the functions and expectations bestowed upon societal institutions, such as the media, by non-Western societies, different from the ones in the West?

Other key challenges to keep in mind

Among other challenges that evaluators need to keep in mind are access to beneficiaries and recipients of countering disinformation; data and digital security; and, issues that will be familiar to those working on media, civil society and democratization programs – attribution and causation and correlation.

What is the way forward?

As we look toward the future, we postulate that all evaluators need to know answers to four fundamental questions: 1) does the program have an appropriate theory of change that can be tested and understood through the lens of an evaluation? 2) What are the core evaluation questions that donors or program implementers want to know? 3) What are the program's indicators of change – most importantly at both the output and outcome levels? and 4) What data exist that the evaluation team can draw on to augment or support the evaluation?

One final missing element is the democratization of evaluation. Evaluations are opportunities to learn and in and of themselves offer insights about ways to understand various aspects of countering disinformation on the ground. Grassroots or community-level organizations need to be part of the feedback loop around the evaluation so that evaluation efforts can be more participatory overall. The lessons learned should be shared and must be useful to all involved.

What we have come to learn is that we are building together a way of understanding and addressing the challenge of disinformation. We can be an enormous help to each other if we see the evaluation process as a collective enterprise. The following suggestions focus on what we can do together.

- 1) The most important thing is that we build a community of practice around countering disinformation. We need to have a shared vision of what constitutes change. As we work toward this community of practice, we should:
 - a. Set up an open collaborative collective of disinformation researchers and link them with media development M&E experts and program staff at the NGOs and donors who work on these issues.
 - b. Develop a shared lexicon of disinformation terminology. We need to work with similar definitions and have a shared understanding of the terminology.
 - c. Create shared indicator banks. We do not have good outcome-level indicators yet as many of our evaluation efforts are still at the output level. Developing banks of standardized indicators and evaluation frameworks could be a promising cross-sector initiative.

- d. Craft common theories of change for countering disinformation programs.
- 2) Impact evaluation/ study – At this juncture, it would be helpful to the media and civil society sector writ large to carry out a comparative, impact study that looks at a variety of countering disinformation efforts to see what has been done thus far and what has been achieved. Such a study needs to be commissioned and paid for a donor, and not by the program implementers themselves, as it needs to be external and the study design, research and data collected and overall process impartial. Enough time has passed to look at programs set up in the past several years to see what type of individual programmatic impact has been achieved as well as what type of collective impact has been made. The outcome of such a study will contribute to our shared understanding of how-to better approach monitoring and evaluation of countering disinformation programs, based on the programs being evaluated, and could be useful in setting baselines for future programs. As countering disinformation is a fast-moving field, such an impact evaluation/ study would be instructive, and beneficial to the whole sector.
- 3) Produce a diagnostic tool that can be used by the wider community of practice seeking to design civil society and independent media-led countering disinformation programs. Similarly, based on the past five years of experience, and the combined understanding of scholars, researchers, and practitioners working on different approaches to countering disinformation, now is a good time to leverage this collective wisdom and understanding of what to look for in terms of pressure points, contextual factors, key indicators of concern, and other factors that need to be considered when carrying out assessments used to develop and design approach programs. The key contribution of such a diagnostic would showcase a clear and standardized approach to ascertaining the various factors to think about when you are looking at information environments and making decisions about what is feasible, what to prioritize, and where to best allocate resources.

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