

Tackling Misinformation – Working together to build global vaccine confidence and support an inclusive recovery

10 February 2021

Event summary

Overview

The *Tackling Misinformation* event, organised by the OECD and the UK Government, served as a platform to learn how public communicators and other government officials are rising to the challenge of responding to misinformation. Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this event explored how misinformation is undermining public support for vaccines and provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the development of OECD good practice principles in governments' communication response to misinformation. These principles will guide a holistic, evidence-based and effective global response and underpin related activities delivered through the G7 Global Vaccine Confidence Campaign.

The event also served as the occasion for hosting the 2nd OECD Experts Group on Public Communication and was attended by over 300 representatives from 46 countries and key partner organisations. Participants included President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia; Elsa Pilichowski, Director of the OECD's Public Governance Directorate; Nadhim Zahawi, Minister for COVID Vaccine Deployment, UK; Melissa Fleming, Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications, UN; as well as public communication leaders, government representatives and leading academics from a wide range of relevant disciplines.

Participants discussed the challenges posed by misinformation, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 response and vaccine confidence, as well as shared experiences and public communication good practices in counteracting misinformation. Breakout sessions provided an opportunity for active participation around key elements for the development of good practice principles on government communication responses to misinformation.

During the event, the OECD Secretariat presented the initiative to develop a set of good practice principles on how public communication can be used to respond to the challenges that misinformation is posing to democracy. This work will initially take place during the UK's 2021 G7 Presidency, during which the OECD and the G7 countries will draft the first version of the document that will then be presented to OECD members and relevant bodies for comments and eventual endorsement. The OECD will move forward with this process in parallel to the publication of the international report *Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward* (summer 2021).

As this closed event was held under Chatham House Rule, the following summary is anonymised.

Key themes

The focus of the event was on how **public communication can be used to combat misinformation while engendering confidence in information and supporting good government**. Consistent themes that arose throughout included the importance of **proactive and transparent** public communication; **collaboration** within and across governments; and pursuing a **whole-of-society approach** to the challenges of mis- and disinformation. Participants stressed the need to **build societal resilience** against misinformation and to use public **communication as a tool to listen to and understand** the public's needs and expectations.

Overall, participants noted that communication is effective when governments are **open and transparent**, and when the fact-based information they share is clear and useful to its audiences. Some stressed that the timeliness of communication is key to preventing and halting the spread of false narratives and rumours. The publication of open government data also served to ensure a reliable, integrated and accessible source of information for the public.



Providing updated data and information promptly on these portals is essential to mitigate misinformation. Speakers also stressed the importance of providing reliable information and highlighting quality sources.

In their interventions, leaders and practitioners alike stressed that governments have been playing 'catch-up'. They urged communicators to be **more proactive in tackling misinformation** and to focus on preventing rather than reacting, for example by "pre-bunking" misinformation and using pre-emptive tactics help to combat fear-mongering and trolling online. Efforts to clearly define roles and responsibilities and harmonise measures across sectors and levels of government will also be useful in improving the availability and accessibility of data and information.

Well-targeted communications, **based on data, insights and behavioural science**, were also highlighted as a powerful tool. Experts pointed to the value of testing and evaluating to learn what works and what does not. For example, evidence has shown that being honest about uncertainty does not discourage people from getting vaccinated. Others highlighted the benefits of "humanising" scientific and official content. Another speaker also shared how its government had to better co-ordinate and standardise data and information management efforts to allay initial public confusion and stop malicious actors from generating false information. It proved important to align the communication campaigns with most recent announcements.

The importance of **cooperation and coordination** underpinned much of the discussions throughout the event and were closely linked with another core theme across the interventions discussed by participants: a focus on a **whole-of society approach**. This implies looking beyond single responses to misinformation but rather integrating interventions that address different aspects of the problem. Making these efforts inclusive is similarly crucial: one speaker pointed to deep-seated, historical distrust among marginalised groups that have been long alienated by governments. In this respect, speakers highlighted the need to find long-term solutions to restore public confidence and trustworthiness of governments, as these are deemed to be the underlying causes for the wide reach of misinformation.

While multiple examples of successful endeavours were shared, some speakers drew attention to the need for the need to **engage with a wider range of non-government stakeholders** to develop and disseminate communication, as well as to learn from and understand the public. Governments play a key role in bringing stakeholders together and creating safe spaces for exchange and experimentation. For instance, allowing civil society, institutions and citizens to participate in the identification of mis- and disinformation, or to contribute to the availability, sharing of and access to open data, including those generated by non-governmental actors, have helped strengthen public trust in government efforts in public communication. Private sector stakeholders similarly stressed their openness to collaborate with government regulators to fight misinformation.

The importance of **media literacy** and working with citizens and influencers as part of a proactive and whole-of-society approach to tackling misinformation was also highlighted. For example, communicators may provide material and guidance to stakeholders and partners to contribute to counteracting misinformation, without imposing or mandating specific actions. Other examples included efforts to identify and collaborate with trusted messengers at the community-level to expand communicators' reach.

Finally, participants highlighted the need for continued and expanded **international cooperation** between governments, and with private and civil society organisations. This will support individual efforts to address challenges and identify how government communication can promote trust and confidence in vaccines and counteract misinformation beyond the pandemic. Participants similarly highlighted the value of OECD data and evidence gathering and its efforts to bring countries together to learn from one another. This was also reflected as participants welcomed the initiative to develop good practice principles that consolidate this multilateral exchange and learning.