The Impact of Words: Disinformation and the Protection of Civilians in Conflict

08.11.2023 – 15:00 CET

Background

From fabrications to justify violence against specific groups to deliberate obfuscation, misinformation and disinformation have long been used in war; yet "in modern warfare it is often targeted at civilians".[1] And with social media and technology, the spread of 'fake news' has become much faster with doubled impacts, with insufficient safeguard to prevent the distribution of harmful content. **Disinformation in armed conflict may pose several distinctive forms of harm to civilians: exposure to retaliatory violence, distortion of information vital to securing human needs, and severe mental suffering.[2]**

Mis- and disinformation can also constrain humanitarian access and operations. False and manipulated information can weaken trust, undermine communities' acceptance of humanitarian organizations, and cause reputational damage, and more so can lead to threats or attacks against humanitarian staff.[3]

- What is the impact of mis/disinformation on civilian protection?
- How can different actors reduce this impact and prevent the spread of harmful disinformation?
- What are some of the practical recommendations and tools for humanitarian organizations to promote civilian protection in local and global information ecosystems?

During the webinar, the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) will present the main findings of their recently published research in Ukraine and explain how disinformation endangered civilian life. Internews will share feedback from their experience working on the information ecosystem and how organizations can adopt a 'protection approach' in that context.

CIVIC

In the face of Russia's full-scale invasion since February 2022, the expansive disinformation campaigns led by Russian and affiliated actors have critically impacted Ukraine, as explicated in CIVIC's report, **"When Words Become Weapons: The Unprecedented Risks to Civilians from the Spread of Disinformation in Ukraine."** The report delineates how disinformation, mainly aimed at civilians, has manipulated their responses to the crisis, often endangering lives. Fabricated narratives concerning military actions and evacuation plans have instilled fear, undermined decision-making, and potentially sowed discord among different linguistic communities within Ukraine. CIVIC's comprehensive analysis, encompassing literature reviews, surveys, key stakeholder interviews, and social media analysis, shed light on the disinformation crisis amid the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, providing a crucial foundation for addressing the information warfare and its ramifications on civilian life and societal harmony.

---

[1] Brew & Spink, "Disinformation harms civilians in conflict in more ways than you thought". Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), 2022.

[2] Katz, Eian "Liar's war: Protecting civilians from disinformation during armed conflict". International Review of the Red Cross, 2021.

[3] "Addressing the impact of mis/disinformation on civilians", PoC week side event, May 2023.

Disinformation dissemination has been notably rampant on social media, the very platforms Ukrainian civilians increasingly depend on for real-time updates on the unfolding situation. Unfortunately, the popular platforms in Ukraine lack robust measures to curb this menace. The Ukrainian government and civil society have mobilized a formidable response to Russia's information onslaught, focusing on tackling widespread disinformation. However, the hyper-local narratives posing significant risks to civilians remain a challenge to counter.

The report accentuates the necessity for military and governmental bodies to devise strategies understanding the implications of information operations on civilians, extending beyond the military ambit. It underscores the vital role of media literacy initiatives by the government and civil society, urging non-governmental organizations to monitor local disinformation hazards effectively. Furthermore, it calls upon social media corporations to enhance content moderation and allocate resources judiciously for identifying harmful disinformation, especially in crisis-stricken and conflict-ridden settings.

Internews

Internews has worked in the area of misinformation in crisis context for years, developing robust methodologies for community engagement, accountability and misinformation management. It is crucial that responders in humanitarian crisis both understand what misinformation is circulating and how to respond to it. Internews' work focuses on strengthening the local information ecosystem to ensure that people have access to the relevant, reliable and timely information they need to make decisions in crisis – and that these are viable alternatives to any misinformation people encounter. One tool that can support humanitarians in this work is Internews' [Trust Framework](), which aims to understand not simply *if* information sources are trusted, but why, and how greater trust might be built over time.

In the past two years, Internews leveraged such methodologies to examine the impact of lack of access to information and mis- and disinformation have on protection risks. Working with key local partners, and with ongoing feedback from donor and NGO stakeholders, Internews' developed *Information and Risks: A Protection Approach to Information Ecosystems.* These Guidelines include analytical tools to understand the denial of access to information and disinformation as protection risks, and to develop strategies to counter them. It also aims to strengthen the understanding of how these risks can lead to the exacerbation of other protection risks, limit civilians' access to life-saving services and lead to even more damaging misinformation and rumors.

Aim

This webinar aims at increasing awareness around the impact of mis/disinformation on the protection of civilians and providing participants with practical recommendations and tools that would help prevent or reduce this impact.

Date and Time

8 November 3 pm CET

Reference Documents

https://frontline-negotiations.org/blog-interview-battling-misinformation-ukraine/
https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/protecting-civilians-from-disinformation-during-armed-conflict-914#footnote7_dgbxpah

Global Protection Cluster

https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman-files/working-papers/Protecting%20the%20Global%20information%20space%20in%20times%20of%20armed%20conflict.pdf