Transparency, communication and trust: The role of public communication in responding to the wave of disinformation about the new coronavirus

3 July 2020

The global spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been accompanied by a wave of disinformation that is undermining policy responses and amplifying distrust and concern among citizens. Around the world, governments are leveraging public communication to counteract disinformation and support policy. The efficacy of these actions will depend on grounding them in open government principles, chiefly transparency, to build trust in public institutions. This policy brief provides an overview of this new wave of disinformation and notes some emerging examples of OECD member countries' responses to it through public communication initiatives specifically. It also offers preliminary guidelines on engaging with citizens during the crisis to help address this challenge.

The reflections presented here are based on non-exhaustive evidence gathered through ongoing OECD data collection activities with member and partner countries, as part of the OECD Open and Innovative Government Division's ongoing analysis on the role of public communication and media ecosystems to promote the open government principles of transparency, accountability, integrity and citizen participation.

This brief complements a related analysis on *Combating Covid-19 disinformation on online platforms* developed by the OECD Directorate on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI), as well as an upcoming Working Paper that takes a more comprehensive look at *Governance Responses To Disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options*. Together, these publications form part of an emerging holistic framework on the role of public communication for good governance. The country examples included in this brief are intended to illustrate current practices.

Understanding the challenge of disinformation in the global pandemic response

Disinformation is affecting countries' responses to the global pandemic by undermining trust, amplifying fears, and sometimes leading to harmful behaviours. At a time when citizen trust and compliance with measures from lockdowns to hygiene guidelines is of utmost importance, a surge in disinformation is undermining government responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and putting people's health at risk. Unproven medical treatments, prevention techniques and other information are flooding the Internet and being disseminated by users whose concerns are reinforced by the overwhelming volume of conflicting information. The fight against the "infodemic" (WHO, 2020[1]) is one of the priority frontlines of managing the Coronavirus pandemic. **The types of problematic information circulating around the virus are becoming more complex.** Unlike previous episodes of widespread disinformation, less of the current content is completely made-up. Instead, facts are often manipulated and yet-to-be-proved theories are touted as ground-breaking discoveries, exploiting existing scientific uncertainties. According to a Reuters Institute analysis on a sample of false content on Covid-19, as much as 59% is based to a degree on true information that has been manipulated, whereas 38% is entirely fabricated (Brennen et al., 2020[2]).

Although "disinformation" is the more common term to refer to false, harmful and misleading content in media and information ecosystems[1] (and the one used in this paper), the debate on this issue revolves around three main concepts to capture the nuances underlying it, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Definitions of the main types of problematic content spreading online

Misinformation
when false information is shared, but no harm is meant

Disinformation
when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm

Malinformation
when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving what was designed to stay private into the public sphere

Source: Adapted from Wardle C., Derakshan H. (2017), Information Disorder: Towards an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making, Council of Europe report, DGI(2017)09.

Social media is the source of 88% of the misinformation in the Reuters Institute sample. Mis- and disinformation are also increasingly transmitted via messaging services such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger that are closed to external observers and content moderators, and are therefore less visible and easy to counteract at their origin (Newman et al., 2019[4]). These findings highlight the central role that Internet and social media companies continue to have in tackling the problem, as per the OECD policy

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[1] This is understood as the combination of communication and media governance frameworks (i.e. institutional, legal, policy, regulatory) and principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies, citizen journalists).

brief on *Combating Covid-19 Disinformation on Online Platforms* (OECD, 2020[4]). The true reach of disinformation is also difficult to estimate, as some research suggests people are likelier to share misinformation than they are to believe it (Pennycook et al., 2020[5]).

Covid-19 misinformation challenges official public health advice and can be difficult to identify. Some of this unfounded medical advice is provided by individuals posing as medical experts or falsely attributing such information to health and research institutions, making it harder to discern its validity (NHS England, 2020[6]). Conversely, rumours casting into doubt the efficacy of social distancing or misleading "information" about how contagion occurs have convinced some to continue their activities in defiance of official guidance (Seitz, 2020[7]).

In many countries, an initial hesitancy by governments to communicate decisively, even about the uncertainty and unknowns surrounding the pandemic has left space for misinformation to proliferate as people searched for answers. Instead, being clear about uncertainty is important to convey scientific advice that is subject to change with emerging evidence (OECD, 2020[8]). The situation is aggravated by "gaps in the public's background [health] knowledge that […] should alert public health officials to the ongoing need for effective communication of needed information long before a crisis," according to a study (Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020[8]). These gaps may help explain the public's propensity to mistake the health properties of substances such as vitamin C and disinfectant. By contrast, those known preventative measures that governments and the health community actively communicated about early on, such as hand-washing and social distancing, are deeper-rooted in the public consciousness (Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020[8]). These findings carry important implications not only for better communication but also for investing in greater health literacy (Moreira, 2018[9]).

The adverse consequences of misinformation are seen offline, in cases like that of a fatality caused by the consumption of substances included in exploratory treatments (Waldrop, Aslup and McLaughlin, 2020[9]), or when 5G towers were damaged following the spread of unfounded theories connecting the network to the virus (Satariano and Alba, 2020[10]). Disinformation is also expected to be used by the anti-vaccination movement once a vaccine for COVID-19 becomes available, which could potentially undermine its effectiveness (Johnson et al., 2020[11]).

Disinformation spread by foreign state-sponsored campaigns specifically seeks to undermine trust in public institutions in OECD countries, which has recovered to 45% after falling to even lower levels of trust following the 2008 global financial crisis (OECD, 2019[12]) and has also enjoyed a small boost during the pandemic (Edelman, 2020[13]). These disinformation campaigns often rely heavily on made-up facts and incite conspiracies, which can more easily thrive by exploiting already low levels of confidence among citizens in targeted countries. An Edelman survey of ten countries found that only 48% trusted their governments as sources of information about the virus (Edelman, 2020[14]).

False claims about the actions, statistics or policies of public authorities, including government and international organisations, are the single largest category (39%) of disinformation identified by the Reuters Institute study, which suggests that "governments have not always succeeded in providing clear, useful, and trusted information to address pressing public questions" (Brennen et al., 2020[2]). Meanwhile, claims and guidance may also be falsely attributed to official sources, amplifying this problem.

From a behavioural and cognitive standpoint, the wave of disinformation contributes to an information overload that can crowd out important information (City University of London, 2020[15]). Citizens are confronted with large volumes of increasingly conflicting information, which demand a greater effort to navigate and compete for audiences' finite attention span. The implication for public policy is that increasing the volume of official and truthful information will not necessarily be more effective unless this content is made more compelling and is delivered to various audiences through their preferred channels,
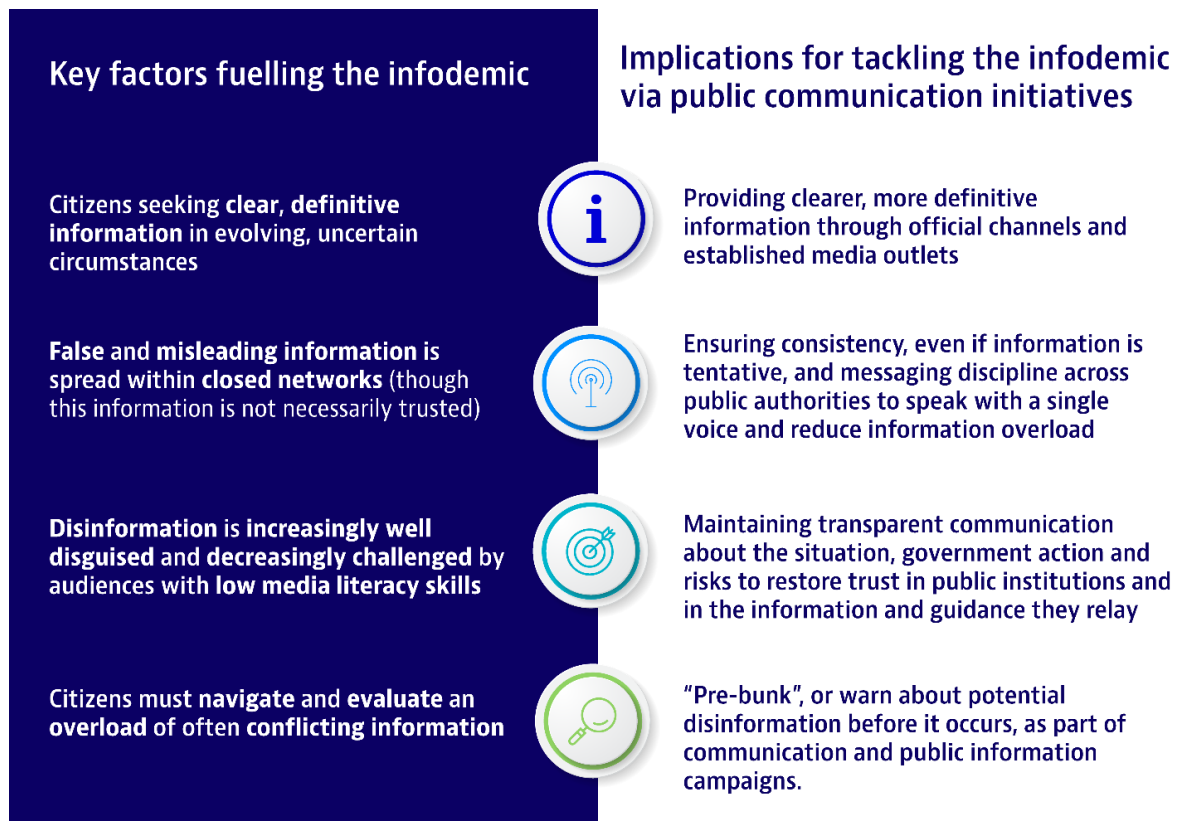
and with an understanding of behavioural and psychological biases. This is especially important for young audiences, who tend to access news predominantly via social media (OECD, 2020[18]).

For instance, with regards to the use of preferred channels, a study in the Misinformation Review recommended that public health officials seek actively to disseminate messages in what the authors class as "conservative media," noting its audiences are less trusting and more at risk from both misinformation and, as an older group, the Coronavirus (Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020[8]). Such an approach is important to ensure key factual messages reach all audiences. It also effectively leverages the channel through which they are relayed, since different groups are likelier to trust media outlets that align with their views.

In sum, disinformation threatens the efficacy of and compliance with the emergency measures being enacted against the Coronavirus. It additionally poses challenges to the economic and social recovery down the road. The polarisation and distrust that derive from it have long-lasting negative implications for government action, democracy and inclusive growth.

Figure 2. Key takeaways and implications of the "infodemic" for public communication

Key factors fuelling the infodemic

Implications for tackling the infodemic via public communication initiatives

Citizens seeking **clear, definitive information** in evolving, uncertain circumstances

Providing clearer, more definitive information through official channels and established media outlets

False and **misleading information is** spread within **closed networks** (though this information is not necessarily trusted)

Ensuring consistency, even if information is tentative, and messaging discipline across public authorities to speak with a single voice and reduce information overload

Disinformation is **increasingly well disguised** and **decreasingly challenged** by audiences with **low media literacy skills**

Maintaining transparent communication about the situation, government action and risks to restore trust in public institutions and in the information and guidance they relay

Citizens must **navigate** and **evaluate** an **overload** of often **conflicting information**

"Pre-bunk", or warn about potential disinformation before it occurs, as part of communication and public information campaigns.

Source: Author's own work.

Fighting the "infodemic": initial public communication responses

A successful response to the pandemic requires a co-ordinated multi-stakeholder effort to tackle the disinformation around it, with clear public leadership (see Figure 5). **Strategic and transparent**
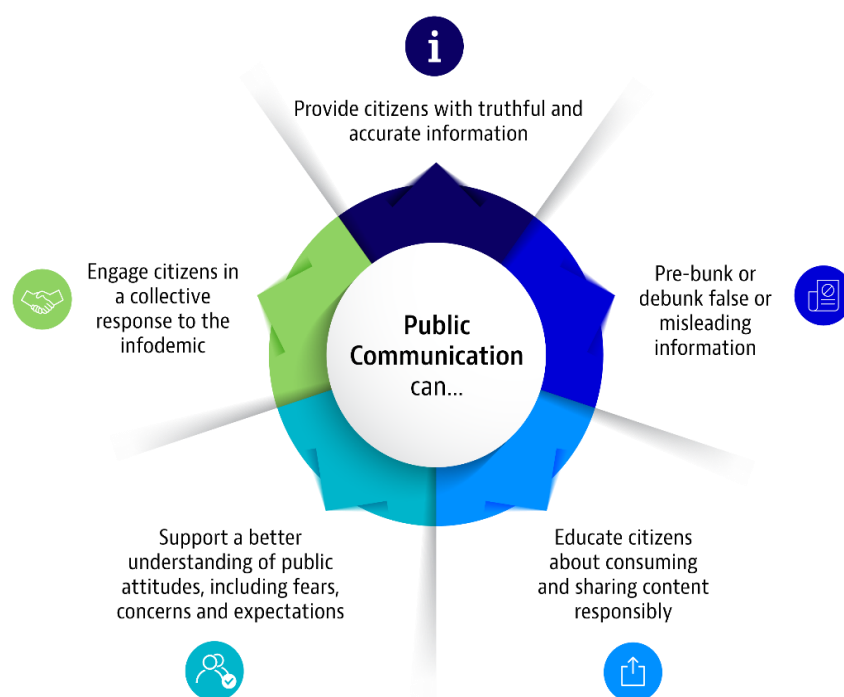
communication[2] should be among the first lines of action for public institutions at all levels. It can be leveraged for several objectives linked to disinformation, such as those presented in Figure 3.

In practice, public communication entails providing information for the public interest that is factual, transparent and separate from political communication. The latter feature is especially relevant to the present context of high political polarisation and fragmentation in many countries, whereby some groups may be more likely to turn away from official information if they perceive it to be politicised. In Italy, for instance, a dedicated law requires that institutions can sustain the distinction between public and political communication (ForumPA, 2020[18]). The statements, guidance, and commitments made as part of public communication are also what citizens can hold their governments accountable for in the aftermath of the pandemic.

In the context of the Coronavirus, this type of intervention presents the dual advantage of supporting the effective implementation of emergency measures and satisfying the need for clear and definitive information. Public communication can also be deployed rapidly since virtually all governments have press offices and digital channels in place. These structures are especially important in contexts where pre-existing mechanisms or regulations against disinformation are absent or weak. In order to be effective and foster public trust in government, any activities conducted in this respect must be guided by the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability, and stakeholder participation, set out in the *OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (OECD, 2017. See also Figure 6).

Figure 3. Ways that public communication can support policy and fight disinformation

Provide citizens with truthful and accurate information

Pre-bunk or debunk false or misleading information

Engage citizens in a collective response to the infodemic

Public Communication can…

Support a better understanding of public attitudes, including fears, concerns and expectations

Educate citizens about consuming and sharing content responsibly

Source: Author's own work.

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[2] Public communication is understood as any communication activity or initiative led by public institutions for the public good. It is different from political communication, which is linked to the political debate, elections, or individual political figures and parties. Public communication activities can include the provision of information, as well as consultation and dialogue with stakeholders.

Setting a strong mandate for public communication is key to its effectiveness for combating disinformation and gaining public trust. Across OECD countries, public communication is demonstrating its value as a government lever, and as a tool for crisis management and policy delivery. In addition, responses to an OECD survey[3] indicate that governments increasingly rely on disseminating accurate and timely information to counteract mis- and disinformation. As such, it is important that this role be formalised and matched with appropriate resources. For instance, according to the Spanish government, becoming "a source of verified, transparent, continuous, and rapid information" through official channels is crucial to combating this problem. Likewise, it stressed that any gaps in such official information are vulnerable to being filled by false narratives.[4]

To be successful, these efforts can rely on established approaches for strategy, co-ordination, evidence, and transparency, as well as recommended OECD practices for critical risk situations (OECD, 2014[18]). By contrast, misguided or inconsistent communications risk eroding trust and being counterproductive. However, governments and institutions can do greater damage and amplify the effects of disinformation by not communicating sufficiently and withholding information. Below is an overview of selected practices guiding these responses in the context of Covid-19 and the related "infodemic":

Communicating with timeliness and consistency

Through public communication, government can reduce the likelihood of disinformation taking hold by disseminating information promptly when it becomes available. During this period, most governments are holding daily briefings to keep citizens updated, with some such as Korea holding these briefings even twice per day. At the same time, debunking misinformation requires continuous monitoring and assessment of emerging content to guide an understanding of which information poses sufficient risks to be refuted. Finally, this activity can be supported by reinforcing official narratives consistently and by getting government and institutions to speak with one voice.

Making communication participatory

Responding to the infodemic requires a whole-of-society effort to sustain a healthy information ecosystem. Involving the medical and scientific community in efforts to inform citizens and dissuade them from unverified and false claims has been a prominent feature in OECD countries' responses. Similarly, working with media and academia to formulate interventions against disinformation has been part of Italy's response through a multi-stakeholder task force in the centre of government.

Finally, communication can allow for a two-way dialogue with citizens that responds more directly to needs and offers governments better insights. This is increasingly happening on messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, or dedicated channels and chatbots being set up in France, Italy, Australia, and Latvia, among other countries, but also though traditional channels, such as telephone info lines staffed with civil servants to assist the public in countries including Greece and Finland. The US state of Kansas is gathering citizens' accounts of their experiences and impact from the pandemic through an online story bank to inform responses. Open government data on the pandemic, such as that disseminated via an online platform in Korea, and on Canada's open government portal, is also making it possible for citizens to contribute to visualizing and disseminating factual information.

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[3] Observations are based on answers to the OECD STIP Covid-19 Watch Survey on the STI policy responses to Covid-19 (hereafter STIP Covid-19 Watch), question "Do you have dedicated arrangements in place for communicating science advice and for refuting misleading information to the public on Covid-19?" https://stiplab.github.io/Covid19/Q2.html

[4] Written comments submitted by the State Secretariat for Communication of the Presidency of the Government of Spain to the OECD on 22 May 2020.

Pre-empting and correcting disinformation

Emerging research also suggests that "pre-bunking", or pre-emptively exposing the public to small doses of misinformation in a way that highlights their flawed reasoning, can inoculate audiences from false content when they subsequently become exposed to it (*Roozenbeek et al., 2020*). Spain is one of the countries that is adopting a similar approach in its communications, where it informs the public on "scientific advances and possible hoaxes and rumours that may arise," based on advice from its COVID-19 Scientific Analysis Group and other experts. By contrast, the effectiveness of countering individual rumours, or debunking, is increasingly thrown into question by findings that it might attract further attention to the rumours themselves. Accordingly, it may be more appropriate in cases where a piece of misinformation is sufficiently widespread and poses a significant risk, if it has reached over 10% of the population according to one estimate (*Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020*).

Basing interventions on evidence

Strategic communication is built on a strong understanding of the information challenges, of audiences' attitudes and their information consumption, and on evaluation of activities. For instance, public attitudes towards messengers carry implications for communicating on the virus: 85% of survey respondents in 10 countries claimed to prefer hearing from scientists rather than from politicians (Edelman, 2020). This indicates that evidence is equally important to the content of public messages. In Belgium and Portugal, among other countries, public briefings on the pandemic are delivered by scientific experts. An international call for open access to scholarly publications on Covid-19* is an equally important initiative to grant relevant stakeholders the evidence to combat health disinformation.

Communicating transparently

During crises, disclosing uncertainty about the nature of the problem and the big decisions to be taken is paramount. The spread of disinformation demonstrates that withholding information or not being open about what is known and what is not fuels suspicion and distrust, which are equally dangerous to public order and the efficacy of emergency measures.

Maintaining transparency and proactively informing citizens is increasingly recognised as one of the most effective ways to support policy implementation and restore trust, while debunking rumours and false narratives. Besides counteracting disinformation, it also provides appropriate means for government accountability over their handling of the pandemic. The Mexican state of Nuevo León, for instance, has communicated its 2020 budget via a microsite to disclose how spending has been revised in light of the pandemic.
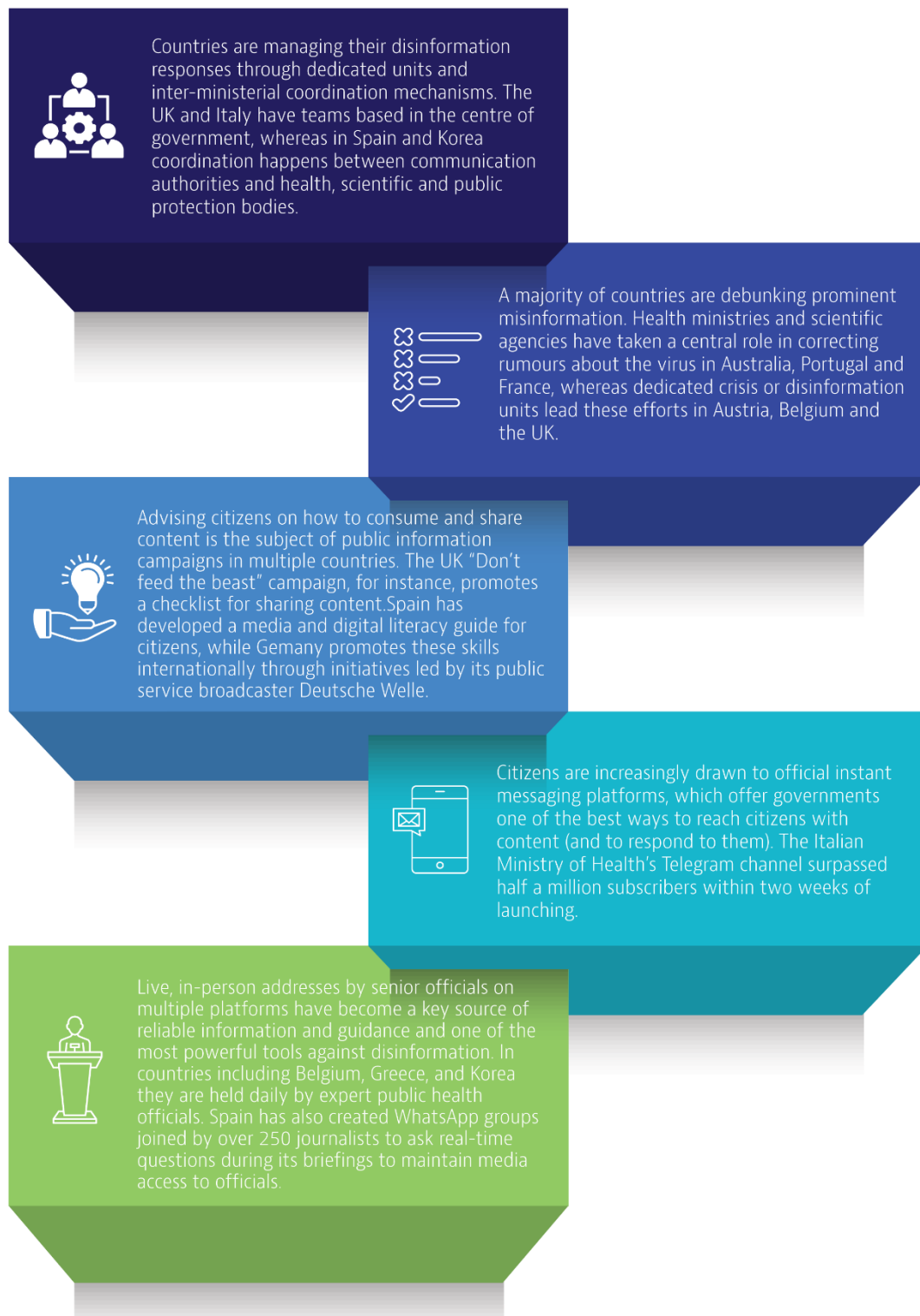
Adopting a strategic approach to communication

A strategic approach entails aligning the objectives and approach of these activities with the ultimate goal of combating disinformation. It also involves establishing appropriate structures and dedicating human and financial resources to ensure an effective and coordinated response, with the ability to make adjustments given the evolving disinformation landscape. In the UK, a Rapid Response Unit has been set up to co-ordinate action in this area across government departments and functions, whereas Colombia's STI Ministry has introduced a dedicated Public Communication of Science and Public Outreach Strategy. In Canada, the government has expanded public communication and is supporting this increased capacity with $50 million to fund its Public Health Agency's communications and public education efforts. Close co-ordination on messaging with the security and intelligence communities countering foreign influence campaigns, as well as the civil protection agencies leading crisis responses, is equally important.

* The Call to Open Access is supported by the EU and 15 countries, more at: https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/063.nsf/eng/h_98016.html

Figure 4. Emerging examples of public communication and counter-disinformation practices from OECD countries' responses to the "infodemic"

Countries are managing their disinformation responses through dedicated units and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms. The UK and Italy have teams based in the centre of government, whereas in Spain and Korea coordination happens between communication authorities and health, scientific and public protection bodies.

A majority of countries are debunking prominent misinformation. Health ministries and scientific agencies have taken a central role in correcting rumours about the virus in Australia, Portugal and France, whereas dedicated crisis or disinformation units lead these efforts in Austria, Belgium and the UK.

Advising citizens on how to consume and share content is the subject of public information campaigns in multiple countries. The UK "Don't feed the beast" campaign, for instance, promotes a checklist for sharing content.Spain has developed a media and digital literacy guide for citizens, while Gemany promotes these skills internationally through initiatives led by its public service broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

Citizens are increasingly drawn to official instant messaging platforms, which offer governments one of the best ways to reach citizens with content (and to respond to them). The Italian Ministry of Health's Telegram channel surpassed half a million subscribers within two weeks of launching.

Live, in-person addresses by senior officials on multiple platforms have become a key source of reliable information and guidance and one of the most powerful tools against disinformation. In countries including Belgium, Greece, and Korea they are held daily by expert public health officials. Spain has also created WhatsApp groups joined by over 250 journalists to ask real-time questions during its briefings to maintain media access to officials.

Source: OECD STIP Covid-19 Watch, (https://stip.oecd.org/Covid.html); Written comments submitted by the Governments of Spain and Germany to the OECD in May 2020

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Public communication is only one of a wide range of responses that can be deployed against disinformation, but it is an essential one and a key element of an open government agenda. Tackling this issue also depends on the digital platforms and media markets through which information is framed and delivered, and on the final consumers of such information. This ecosystem can be improved through several interventions, as per the OECD working paper *Governance Responses To Disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options* (upcoming in 2020, see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Range of governance responses to disinformation
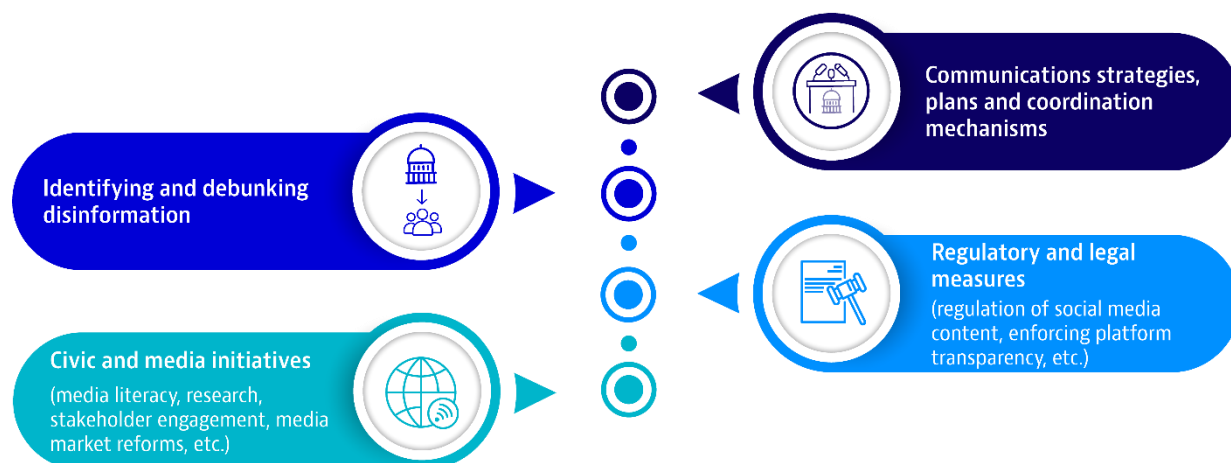
Source: Author's own work.

Figure 6. Public communication as an integral component of Open Government: provisions of the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government relating to communication

Source: Author's own work.

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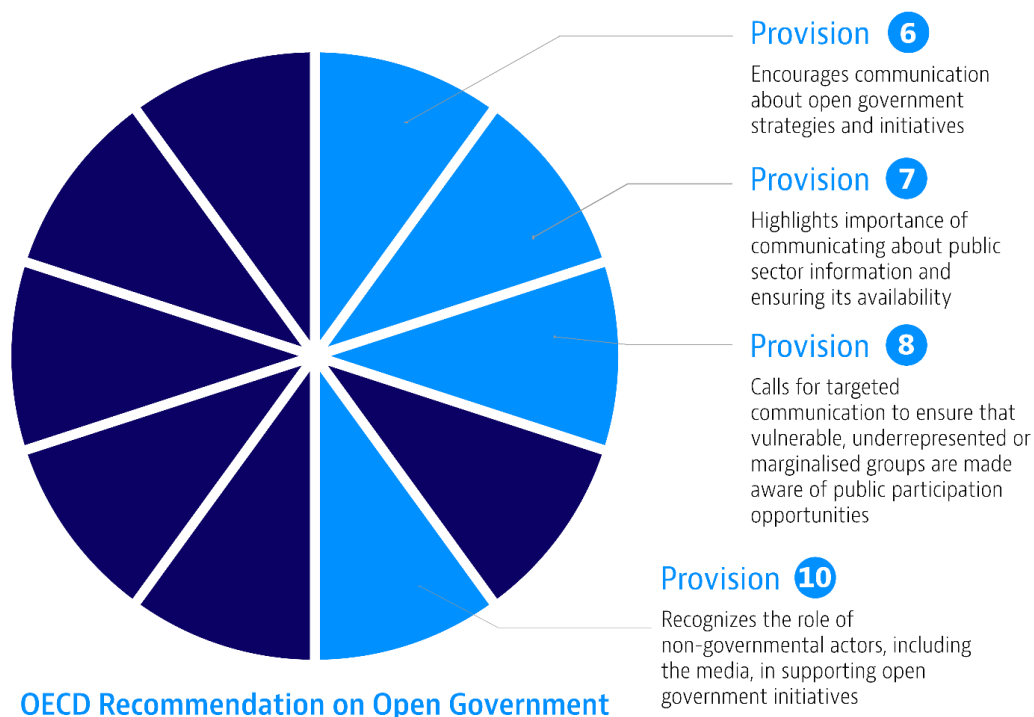
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Contact

The OECD Open Government Unit, in collaboration with the OECD's Working Party on Open Government is expanding its work in the area of public communication and media to support their contribution to the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation as well as to better policymaking. If you are interested in being part of an informal experts group and contributing insights to this area of work please get in touch.

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