



Chapter 4

From context to consequence: Humanitarian sector voices on the impact of harmful information





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Introduction: Harmful information and operational realities

We are living through a moment in history as consequential as the invention of the printing press: one that is fundamentally altering how information is produced, distributed and trusted. As with the printing revolution, today's digital technologies are redistributing power, accelerating the spread of ideas and challenging traditional gatekeepers of knowledge. They have also enabled the rapid proliferation of harmful information and narratives. The sheer volume and velocity of contemporary information flows, combined with unprecedented levels of internet access and connectivity, are having profound societal impacts. Information has become simultaneously a commodity, an asset and a risk.

This transformation directly affects humanitarian action, both the sector itself and the populations it serves. The widespread adoption of digital tools and platforms, unfolding at a pace and scale unimaginable just a decade ago, is reshaping how humanitarians operate and how communities experience and interpret information in crises settings.

In this new landscape, an urgent question arises: has information itself become an impediment to humanitarian response? This chapter draws on the perspectives of humanitarian practitioners to offer critical insights into how harmful information manifests in operational contexts – shaping decisions, straining relationships with communities and exposing challenges and risks that increasingly undermine humanitarian action.

◆ A connected world, a complicated reality

By 2024, around 5.5 billion people (68% of the global population) were online, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). The number of websites has now surpassed 1.2 billion¹ and globally over 5.24 billion people are using social media,² a rise largely driven by increased mobile broadband access in emerging economies and developing countries.

This shift is reflected in platform demographics: Facebook, once concentrated in high-income countries, now counts nine of its ten largest user bases in middle-income countries. Among the top 20 user bases, 14 are in middle-income countries, including 9 in lower-middle-income ones. This geographical and socioeconomic transition has not only expanded access to information, but also its flow and character.

TikTok exemplifies this evolution. As of 2025, the platform has around 1.6 billion monthly active users.³ Its rise, also fuelled by mobile access, follows a similar pattern: nine of its top ten user bases are in middle-income countries. The platform is especially popular among younger audiences, with around 40% of users aged 18–24 years. TikTok, like other social media platforms, began as a space for creative entertainment, but has now evolved into a powerful arena for shaping narratives, mobilizing opinion and spreading harmful information.

Despite these sweeping changes, the digital divide remains a stark global reality. According to the ITU, 2.6 billion people – disproportionately women, older adults and

people living in the least developed countries – remain offline. This gap continues to reinforce global inequalities in access to information, services and opportunities.

Since the advent of the mobile phone, the gap between humanitarian responders and crisis-affected communities has steadily narrowed. Technological innovations over the last two decades have also revealed shortcomings in how humanitarian organizations listen, gather information and ensure accountability to affected populations – including through genuine feedback loops. Today, humanitarian actors can no longer choose whether to engage with communities, only how to do so. Yet in the digital age, a fundamental challenge lies in determining who is actually voicing their opinions. In digital spaces where identity, authenticity and influence are increasingly blurred, it is often unclear whose voices are being heard. Those affected by a crisis encompass a broad array of constituents from local communities to diaspora populations and distant individuals or networks with vested interests – all shaping the narrative.

At the same time the information ecosystem has become polluted, at times deeply toxic. Everyone now has a platform, including those with little understanding of the context or with deliberate intent to mislead or harm. This pollution may be organic or orchestrated, raising urgent questions about credibility, accountability and voice in the digital humanitarian environment. In today's noisy and fragmented information environment, it is harder than ever to determine whether humanitarian actors are truly listening to – and able to hear – the people they aim to serve. The risks of misreading the information landscape have never been higher and the consequences of getting it wrong more severe.



It's not just AI-generated images – they also reused old background photos from the Nepal earthquake. Some people hadn't been to the disaster site at all, but with today's traffic model, online views equal money. Many people are profit-driven, so they take old photos, feed them into GPT, add some current text and produce fake images."

Community member, China

Local, national and international institutions – especially those operating in fragile contexts or in politically unstable environments – are increasingly vulnerable to false allegations and harmful narratives. Humanitarian organizations, in particular, have faced a rising tide of harmful information flows in recent years, mirroring broader global trends. Such dynamics threaten not only the credibility and safety of humanitarian workers, but also the legitimacy of institutions, the trust of communities and ultimately the effectiveness of humanitarian action. On social media, inaccurate or misleading content circulates, often without verification, context or oversight, creating fertile ground for harm. In fragile institutional settings where trust may already be weak, such narratives and immediacy can deepen internal divisions and exacerbate polarization.

A recent example involved the creation of Facebook pages with names suggesting affiliation with a component of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Managed anonymously, these pages regularly published content purporting to reveal insider information, including allegations of corruption, leadership dysfunction or internal conflict. While appearing to serve as whistleblowing platforms, their posts

were often based on partial or decontextualized information or documents. By using the Red Cross or Red Crescent emblem and adopting language that echoed humanitarian values, these pages cultivated an image of credibility and legitimacy – misleading both the public and members of the National Society and ultimately damaging the National Society’s reputation.

Such content – particularly video – is significantly more likely to mislead and go viral than text or images, amplifying their impact and reach. A notable example is the so-called ‘cash-in-trunks’ video,⁴ which has resurfaced repeatedly since 2011 in various contexts, despite consistent and unequivocal statements from the ICRC refuting its authenticity.

Humanitarian actors themselves have become both targets and, at times, inadvertent vectors of harmful information. Staff and volunteers may unknowingly share unverified content through informal networks, contributing to a climate of suspicion and discontent. Meanwhile, individuals or groups operating through unofficial channels may misuse or exploit the Red Cross and Red Crescent emblems, as well as the principled language of humanitarianism to pose as credible voices, misleading audiences and extending the reach of harmful narratives.

Contributor Insight 4.1

Role of the National Observatory and strategies to address misuse of the emblem

To monitor, map and address misuse of the Red Cross emblem across Italy, the Italian Red Cross established a National Observatory on the Protection of the Emblem in 2018. This body is responsible for carrying out advocacy efforts and corrective actions for cases of misuse that have national impact, as well as coordinating the responses of local branches. Italian Red Cross staff and volunteers, as well as any concerned citizen, can report cases of emblem misuse through a dedicated app.

In today’s social media age, the Observatory has seen an increasing number of reports of emblem misuse in social media content. These online misuses – often highly visible – pose a risk of spreading false information about the regulated use of the emblems. This not only undermines trust in Red Cross personnel and volunteers wearing the emblem in humanitarian service, but may weaken the emblem’s protective power in times of armed conflict.

In response, beginning in 2025, the Observatory prepared an ‘advocacy message’ to be sent from the Italian Red Cross social media accounts to users who have posted content involving emblem misuse. The message provides clear, accessible information on the correct use of the emblem, the importance of respecting it, and the humanitarian implications of misuse. The aim is to encourage users to remove the content and to raise

awareness – helping to reduce the spread of potentially harmful or misleading information related to the emblem.

Tommaso Natoli

Head of Humanitarian Diplomacy
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4.1 Narratives of harm

Humanitarian action is fundamentally local. Yet today, the narratives that shape perceptions of humanitarian action are increasingly influenced – and in some cases deliberately manipulated – by sophisticated, well-resourced actors, including private ‘disinformation-for-hire’ firms, state and non-state actors and proxy groups. Their reach and influence extend far beyond the traditional use of propaganda in times of peace or armed conflict. In today’s crises and armed conflicts, shaping the information space has become a strategic element, one that extends well beyond the context or battlefield. The goals to deflect, deceive, denigrate, distract, dismay and divide mark a profound transformation in the information environment of humanitarian action.

No longer confined to isolated local rumours or misperceptions, harmful narratives are now part of a dynamic, global and participatory information ecosystem, where content is produced, shaped and manipulated in real time. As humanitarian scholar Hugo Slim observes, individuals across the world are not merely witnesses to conflict, but are often actively engaging in shaping and/or amplifying narratives – sometimes without fully grasping the consequences. “Millions of people are using their social media accounts to visualize war, record its events, describe their experience and campaign around it. Many observers of war in countries far away have now become real-time spectators who encounter war as remote consumers and partisan camp followers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok... Watching war and entering its information space by forwarding, liking and commenting on war is now routine.”⁵

Efforts to safeguard humanitarian space in the digital era must also consider emerging legal and policy guidance. For example, the Tallinn Manual *on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations*⁶ explores how existing international law applies to cyber activities. While the manual is not legally binding, it is widely regarded as an authoritative interpretation of how international legal norms govern state and non-state conduct in cyberspace, including during armed conflict. It affirms that international humanitarian law continues to apply in the digital domain, including protection for humanitarian personnel (Rule 69); that states must not interfere with impartial humanitarian assistance to civilians in an armed conflict, whether through cyber means or other methods (Rule 131), nor misuse protected emblems (Rule 70); and that the principle of distinction between civilians and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives remains applicable (Rule 32).

In June 2021, a group of international legal experts released the *Oxford Statement on International Law Protections in Cyberspace: The Regulation of Information Operations and Activities*.⁷ The statement provides an interpretation of how existing international law applies to the conduct of information operations by state and non-state actors,

including those involving disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and other harmful speech acts. It affirms that states remain bound by existing obligations which continue to govern conduct in the digital information space, such as sovereignty, non-intervention, human rights and international humanitarian law.

4.2 Harms and impacts of harmful information on humanitarian action

Harmful information is not an abstract threat: it has direct, tangible consequences for humanitarian operations, often in ways that undermine trust, disrupt access and endanger both staff and affected communities. From false accusations to targeted campaigns, humanitarian actors across the globe are increasingly confronted with the operational fallout of distorted narratives. These impacts are being felt in armed conflicts, during public health emergencies, in disaster responses and in the everyday functioning of humanitarian organizations, whether local or international. The following cases and examples, drawn from a range of humanitarian organizations, illustrate how harmful information has strained community relationships, exacerbated institutional fragility, hindered access to vulnerable populations and even put responses and lives at risk.

Contributor Insight 4.2



How misinformation and disinformation affect the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, with testimony from recent interviews

Patterns of misinformation and disinformation on social media have significantly affected displaced people from Myanmar hosted in camps in Bangladesh (especially in Cox's Bazar) in multiple ways. The content of this harmful information has ranged from severe online hate speech (that played a central role in the persecution and violence against the Muslim ethnic minority group), to rumours about aid cuts and prejudicial accusations about people taking opportunities away from host community Bangladeshi people living in the Cox's Bazar District.

In early 2025, BBC Media Action interviewed eight young men between the ages of 18 and 34 living in a cross-section of different camps in Ukha, Cox's Bazar. Some of the reported ways that harmful, false or misleading information affects the displaced people are noted below. These refer not only to harmful information on social media, but discriminatory, prejudicial and damaging information in local and national media in Bangladesh.

Examples cited by those interviewed include:

- **Recycled or miscaptioned footage** used to stoke anger or false narratives: videos of campfires in Cox’s Bazar being reposted as if showing communal attacks elsewhere (e.g., Tripura, India); and video clips of overcrowded boats framed as “Rohingya boats heading to Indonesia,” despite actually being footage of domestic ferries in Bangladesh.
- **Health misinformation:** persistent COVID-19 and vaccine rumours inside the camps, e.g., “vaccines are deadly/make you infertile,” “COVID is a hoax,” and information about misleading cures, often spread on Facebook, WhatsApp or by word-of-mouth, compounded by the 2019–2020 internet restrictions.
- **Hate speech and scapegoating:** posts dehumanizing or branding them as criminals, “ungrateful” and disease carriers thought to have spread into regional networks, shaping attitudes towards the displaced in Bangladesh.
- **Exaggerated security and militancy claims:** Social media posts that inflate or distort reports of crime or militancy, portraying the camps as controlled by armed groups and fuelling fear and hostility among host communities.
- **Rumours around high-profile events:** Disinformation spikes around incidents – fires, aid cuts, evacuations or repatriation announcements, such as viral claims about “foreign troops” in Cox’s Bazar that local fact-checkers later debunked.

Misinformation and disinformation travel in and around the camps through commonly used platforms: Facebook, WhatsApp/IMO app, YouTube/TikTok, as well as offline phone-to-phone sharing (Bluetooth/SHAREit). Despite humanitarian organizations’ efforts to set up rumour-tracking initiatives in Cox’s Bazar to counter these dynamics, these have been deprioritized in successive funding cuts since 2021.

Melissa Everleigh

Senior Advisor

BBC Media Action

Contributor Insight 4.3



New Zealand Red Cross: Observations from the 2022 North Island severe weather response

In 2022 and 2023, Aotearoa New Zealand was significantly impacted by severe weather events, including Cyclone Gabrielle, which left widespread devastation across many North Island communities. A national state of emergency was declared and New Zealand Red Cross provided support alongside many other organizations. This included mobilizing

specialist teams across the country and launching the New Zealand Disaster Fund, enabling generous Kiwis to support those impacted.

In the initial months of the response, the New Zealand Red Cross became the target of a significant volume of misinformation and disinformation, including false accusations of fraud, fund misuse and failure to deliver critical services. Most of this was spread via social media and in some cases was inflamed by elements of the mainstream media and other not-for-profit entities. Attacks were often directed at both the organization and individual leaders – something we were neither expecting nor fully prepared for.

In response, a communication and engagement plan was formulated, underpinned by calm, nuanced, consistent messaging to share the facts. Multiple trusted communication channels were used over an extended time period. Choosing not to enter into ill-informed 'arguments and reactive debates' was important for the New Zealand Red Cross. It was hard and painful work, requiring time, effort and patience – but it was worth it. Although public sentiment was initially negatively impacted, today positive public sentiment towards the National Society is even stronger than it was prior to 2022. Key lessons are:

- **Education is key:** Don't wait for an emergency, help people understand what you do and why in advance.
- **Form alliances:** Collaborate with others, including media, to amplify accurate and corrective messaging.
- **Engage with communities:** Foster trust through regular engagement before, during and after emergencies. Connected followers are more likely to question or report false information.
- **Correct calmly:** Respond with professionalism and fact-based information, citing verifiable sources. Avoid inflammatory or reactive language.
- **Consider the individual:** Misinformation and disinformation can hurt. Ensure your internal communications are as strong as your external communications, providing support and reassurance to your teams.

In an age where a single viral post can undo years of goodwill, digital integrity must be treated as mission-critical. This is our new normal. By prioritizing transparency, community engagement and strategic communication, an organization can safeguard both its people and reputation – while contributing to a healthier, more informed information environment.

Shane Chisholm

General Manager, Engagement and Enterprise

New Zealand Red Cross

Sarah Stuart-Black

Secretary General

New Zealand Red Cross

Contributor Insight 4.4

Maintaining trust through crises and harmful information

The Canadian Red Cross has built a strong baseline understanding of trust through annual, comprehensive survey-based research. Using this framework, pulse surveys (a short, frequent questionnaire) can be deployed following significant emergency responses or reputational challenges to assess positive or negative impacts on organizational trust. Comparing results to the baseline provides evidence-based insights into what truly impacts organizational trust. Pulse surveys can also include targeted questions to measure the impact of harmful information – assessing both belief in false narratives and their influence on behaviour and outcomes.



Jasper wildfires, 2024

In 2024, wildfires devastated the small mountain town of Jasper, Alberta, forcing a full evacuation of the entire community and destroying approximately 30% of homes. The Canadian Red Cross responded immediately, providing emergency shelter, financial assistance and a range of personal support services to evacuees.

An emergency appeal for donations was launched, with provincial and national governments pledging to match donations. Operational and communications strategies focused on strong community presence, visible engagement and rapid use of public donations for relief operations.

During the response, a coordinated disinformation campaign emerged, falsely claiming that the Canadian Red Cross was absent locally and that funds would not benefit the community in an effort to diminish public support. The Canadian Red Cross challenged and corrected the disinformation in real time and highlighted its successful emergency relief operation and the impact on the community. Following the successful transition from relief to recovery, pulse surveys measured trust levels and the impact of the disinformation campaign.

Results showed increased levels of trust in the Canadian Red Cross throughout the area, which was consistent with previous responses where visibility and effective delivery of assistance drove higher trust.

However, belief in the core claims of the disinformation narrative remained significant, underscoring the need for proactive strategies to address harmful narratives even when overall trust remains strong.



Hurricane Fiona, 2022

Hurricane Fiona made landfall in eastern Canada in 2022 with devastating impact across four provinces, becoming one of the costliest disasters in Canadian history. Each province managed its own emergency response, with the Canadian Red Cross enlisted to support emergency relief operations and administer local government-funded financial aid programmes – each with different eligibility criteria and levels of support.

The lack of coordinated public communications between local governments created significant confusion and frustration for communities seeking aid. This was exacerbated by operational challenges within the Canadian Red Cross in scaling programmes rapidly, with much of the resulting criticism and false perceptions directed at the National Society as the most visible ‘face’ of the relief efforts.

In response, the Canadian Red Cross adopted a proactive public communication approach: making leadership available to media, coordinating messages that took responsibility for improving access and engaging extensively on digital platforms to correct misinformation and guide people toward trusted sources of information and practical ways to access support.

Following the relief operations, pulse surveys assessed both organizational trust and perceived effectiveness, with tailored questions to gauge the impact of the misinformation. Findings showed that many people viewed the overall response of the Canadian Red Cross as slow or mismanaged – perceptions closely aligned with the misinformation narratives directed at the organization during the response. However, the same respondents also believed that assistance ultimately reached people in need. Overall, trust levels in the Canadian Red Cross increased across the region, highlighting the resilience of trust when transparency, accountability and follow-through are maintained, despite harmful information.

Nathan Huculak

Head of Communications

Canadian Red Cross

Contributor Insight 4.5



Kenya, 2024 Gen Z protests

During the 2024 protests against the Finance Bill, a single tweet from a Kenyan influencer falsely alleged that Kenya Red Cross Society vehicles were being used to transport politicians. This misinformation directly endangered aid workers and vehicles, leading to attacks that disrupted life-saving first aid operations.

The Kenya Red Cross Society responded swiftly and strategically, issuing a series of public messages across social media to mitigate the impact of the false claims.

This included:

- firmly refuting the allegations, clarifying that its vehicles were not being used for political purposes
- condemning the attacks on humanitarian personnel and assets, underscoring the need to respect humanitarian space
- reaffirming our commitment to the fundamental principles, particularly neutrality
- launching a public awareness campaign using hashtags such as #NotATarget, reinforcing the message that humanitarian workers must be protected and respected in all circumstances.

The Secretary General of the Kenya Red Cross Society, Dr Ahmed Idris, emphasized: “Humanitarian action depends on trust. When harmful information circulates, it puts lives at risk and undermines the neutrality that allows us to reach people in crisis. Combating misinformation is not optional, it is a priority for protecting communities and ensuring they get the help they deserve.”

Safia Verjee

Executive Director, International Center for Humanitarian Affairs

Kenya Red Cross Society

Contributor Insight 4.6



Negative reactions to a campaign

At the very beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, the Bulgarian Red Cross faced a wave of harmful information circulating on social media. The negative reactions were triggered by the organization’s policy to accept only new items during its public donation campaign for people affected by the conflict arriving in Bulgaria. Criticism focused on why used goods were not accepted, and risked undermining public trust. The Bulgarian Red Cross monitored the situation closely and used every opportunity to explain its approach – emphasizing the urgent needs of the people affected, the importance of preserving their dignity and the operational reasons for accepting only new items or financial donations. While the response helped to manage the situation, the experience revealed crisis communications as an area for further improvement.

This incident occurred in the broader context of a positive perception survey and market study undertaken by the Bulgarian Red Cross to strengthen domestic fundraising and National Society capacity development, with a view to long-term sustainability. The results showed strong public and business support, with the highest scores for “Helps on the most significant topics”, “Makes a visible contribution to its cause” and “Operates transparently, with good accountability.” The Bulgarian Red Cross’ causes and campaigns enjoy high visibility and recognition, along with strong trust among large businesses and it holds

a dominant position over other charitable organizations nationally – an advantage that should be preserved.

Dr Sofia Stoimenova
Secretary in Chief
Bulgarian Red Cross

Contributor Insight 4.7



Turkish Red Crescent's national blood supply system: Ensuring safety, transparency and sustainability

Türkiye's national blood supply system – built entirely on voluntary, non-remunerated and regular blood donations – is managed by the Turkish Red Crescent under the authorization and supervision of the Ministry of Health. Each day, blood donations are collected at approximately 300 locations, supported by 18 regional blood centres, 69 blood donation centres as well as mobile teams.

All donated blood is tested in accordance with the highest national and international standards, screened for infectious diseases, separated into components and stored appropriately. This system is designed not only to meet immediate hospital needs but also to anticipate predictable demand through a carefully planned stock management model. This ensures timely supply to hospitals nationwide, including during emergencies, with delivery based solely on official requests.

Blood donation in Türkiye is strictly voluntary. The costs of processing and preparing blood components are fully covered by the Social Security Institution (*Sosyal Güvenlik Kurumu*). In Türkiye, as in other countries across Europe blood and blood products cannot be traded commercially and requesting payment from patients is illegal. The Turkish Red Crescent has never regarded blood as a commodity, and any violations should be promptly reported to health authorities.

Despite this transparent, ethical and humanitarian-based system, misleading and false claims such as “donated blood is being sold” occasionally circulate online. Such disinformation undermines donors' trust, discourages participation and jeopardizes the sustainability of safe blood supply. These harmful narratives often spread more rapidly and reach broader audiences than official clarifications, particularly when amplified by incomplete information on social media or sensationalist reporting. Addressing misinformation is therefore essential to preserving blood donor confidence and ensuring system sustainability.

To counter this, the Turkish Red Crescent shares timely, verified updates via its [blood services website](#), [Kanver](#) and social media channels. Its communication strategy is firmly grounded in transparency, traceability and accountability, ensuring that the public remains accurately informed and meaningfully engaged.

Safeguarding public trust extends beyond the technical accuracy of information – it is the very foundation of a voluntary blood system and of humanitarian action. By reinforcing this trust, the Turkish Red Crescent guarantees a safe, reliable blood supply, while reinforcing the spirit of social solidarity.

Dr Selami Kılıç

General Director of Blood Services

Turkish Red Crescent

Harmful information has tangible consequences, both online and offline. These impacts can be direct or indirect, depending on how clearly the harm can be linked to a specific incident. The severity of harm is shaped by the scope, scale, duration and magnitude of the incident – to borrow language from cybersecurity – as well as the resilience of the targeted individual or group affected. Often, the harms are multiple, compounding and interconnected. Drawing on the examples and materials gathered for this report, a framing of harms can support more effective response strategies and inform policy-making.

4.3 ***Do no harm in a harmful information age***

The notion of ‘do no harm’⁸ remains a critical ethical lens for humanitarian actors, ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently contribute to suffering or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In today’s information-saturated environment, do no harm extends beyond physical interventions or material assistance to include how information is collected, managed, communicated and used. In the digital age, it requires treating information with the same level of care and responsibility as any other aspect of humanitarian programming. It means anticipating risks, minimizing unintended consequences and prioritizing the dignity, safety and agency of affected people in every communication or information-related decision. Building **information resilience** within humanitarian action involves several key commitments:

- Assessing the unintended consequences of how information is produced, shared and communicated.
- Evaluating how messaging and data practices interact with local political, social and cultural dynamics.
- Designing proactive risk mitigation strategies to reduce exposure to harmful information and misuse of data.
- Embedding digital and data responsibility at all stages of humanitarian planning and response.

To operationalize this, humanitarian actors must strengthen their understanding of six interrelated concepts:

- 1 Navigating information responsibly:** Ensuring that organizational communications do not mislead, inflame tensions or stigmatize individuals or communities. Avoiding the amplification of unverified or emotionally charged content that could incite fear, mistrust or violence.
- 2 Protecting digital identities:** Safeguarding personal data, location details and digital traces of vulnerable populations. Recognizing the risks of surveillance, digital profiling and exploitation.
- 3 Countering harmful narratives:** Proactively addressing harmful information that delegitimizes humanitarian action or endangers affected populations and humanitarian actors. Engaging in context-sensitive strategic communication that builds trust without oversimplifying or sensationalizing complex crises.
- 4 Understanding the information ecosystem:** Assessing who creates, controls and consumes information and who is excluded. Recognizing power dynamics within local and global information landscapes and their impact on perceptions and trust.
- 5 Ensuring digital inclusion:** Acknowledging the digital divide, particularly in terms of who is represented, heard and visible online and who is not. Avoiding assumptions based solely on digital visibility while ensuring that the voices of groups that are offline or marginalized are not neglected.
- 6 Strengthening information resilience:** Supporting communities and partners to navigate, verify and produce reliable information. Fostering information literacy not just as a defensive tool, but as a participatory one that empowers individuals to shape their own narrative.

Incorporating these concepts into humanitarian practice is essential to uphold ethical standards and ensure that information is managed in line with the humanitarian imperative: to protect and assist without causing further harm.

Contributor Insight 4.8



Human–human contact in the age of misinformation

In the digital age, the production and spread of misinformation, malinformation and disinformation pose significant threats to the effectiveness of humanitarian response,⁹ particularly in the realm of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). While digital platforms dominate the information landscape due to their reach and immediacy, they often lack the relational depth required to build trust – an essential foundation for effective MHPSS.¹⁰

Human-to-human information sharing, especially through in-person outreach, remains critical in disaster contexts. The Albanian Red Cross response to the 2019 earthquake exemplifies this approach: volunteers rapidly mobilized to go door to door in hard-to-reach areas, providing accurate information and psychosocial support.¹¹ This relational approach not only ensured timely and trusted information delivery but also fostered emotional reassurance and community cohesion¹² – key protective factors for mental health.¹³

Such examples highlight the unique value of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement model of volunteerism, in which local actors – neighbours, family members and friends – serve as embedded, trusted messengers within their communities.¹⁴ In an era where digital misinformation erodes public trust and exacerbates psychological distress, the relational credibility of local volunteers is indispensable.

To safeguard the integrity and accessibility of MHPSS services, humanitarian actors must invest in hybrid communication strategies that combine digital tools with relational, community-based outreach. Research underlines that trust, cultural relevance and interpersonal connection are foundational to effective MHPSS – qualities that cannot be replicated by algorithms alone.¹⁵

Yasin Duman

Research Specialist

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Red Cross Red Crescent Movement MHPSS Hub

4.4 Vulnerabilities and amplifiers

“

Why do you think some people refuse to evacuate or secure their homes? People refuse to move because they are afraid their belongings will be stolen, then also because of a lack of trust in the news they hear, fearing it is all lies, and especially because they do not listen to what others say.”

Community member, Madagascar

Across humanitarian contexts, harmful information does not emerge in a vacuum. Practitioners consistently point to a combination of structural vulnerabilities and systemic gaps that amplify the risk and impact of harmful information – both for affected populations and for humanitarian responders themselves.

A commonly cited vulnerability is low digital literacy, particularly among groups that are marginalized. Many people lack the skills or resources to critically assess the trustworthiness of the information they receive, especially on social media and messaging apps, which are often their primary sources of news. This is compounded by weak or absent independent local media, leaving a vacuum easily filled by politically motivated or misleading narratives.

Poorly coordinated information management within and across agencies is also highlighted. In rapidly evolving crises, inconsistent or delayed communication from trusted

actors can create confusion and leave space for rumours to flourish. The political exploitation of humanitarian narratives – where disinformation is intentionally used to discredit aid actors or manipulate perceptions of aid delivery – is a growing threat.

Many sector voices are also candid about what is missing in the humanitarian information ecosystem. There is currently no shared protocol or framework to manage rumours and counter disinformation that spans across organizations. Training on digital threats, media literacy and narrative analysis remains insufficient, particularly for frontline staff and volunteers. Furthermore, engagement with technology platforms, local media outlets and academic institutions is limited and often ad hoc, despite the critical role these actors play in shaping information environments.

4.5 From fragmentation to focus: Avoiding overwhelm and building humanitarian capacity

In the face of an unprecedented flood of information – fragmented, fast-moving and often harmful – humanitarian actors are finding ways to cut through the noise, avoid overwhelm and focus on building the capacity, trust and resilience needed to navigate an increasingly volatile information environment.

Contributor Insight 4.9



Building resilience from within

The Slovak Red Cross views the threat of harmful information as both urgent and deeply relevant, particularly in our region, where recent disinformation campaigns have significantly contributed to societal polarization. In response, we chose to begin by strengthening resilience to harmful information within our own organization – focusing on employees and volunteers who are often on the front lines of this challenge. To support this goal, we developed an educational e-book that combines theoretical insights, clear definitions of key terms and practical guidance for responding to specific situations. It includes advice on when and where to seek help, as well as strategies for managing disinformation-related stress. Written in accessible, plain language, the publication is designed for a wide range of age groups and educational backgrounds and pays particular attention to the regional context.

Prior to this initiative, we conducted an online survey among 450 volunteers across Slovakia, with one quarter responding. The results were striking: 55% reported being frequently or occasionally targeted by strangers with accusations rooted in disinformation. Of these incidents, 40% were directed specifically at the Slovak Red Cross. Additionally,

74% of respondents expressed a strong interest in receiving training on this topic from the Slovak Red Cross headquarters.

Harmful information is an omnipresent and often invisible threat – both online and offline. Its danger lies not only in its capacity to erode public trust in our organization and undermine our humanitarian mission, but also in its personal toll. It can affect mental health, reduce motivation to continue humanitarian work and even increase vulnerability to conspiracy theories.

We collaborated with a Slovak expert in critical thinking to develop appropriate responses to common disinformation-related scenarios encountered by our staff and volunteers in the field. A communications specialist from the Slovak Red Cross ensured that the messaging aligned with our organizational voice and values, and helped define the necessary theoretical scope. The e-book includes links to relevant Slovak-language resources, such as websites focused on navigating harmful information in the regional context. It also provides contacts for mental health support and legal advice, indicating when individuals should seek professional assistance. Thanks to its practical structure and modular content, the resource can be easily adapted to other regional or national contexts.

Zuzana Vongrejová

Communications Specialist

Slovak Red Cross

Contributor Insight 4.10

Crisis communication preparedness at South Sudan Red Cross

Contingency planning

The South Sudan Red Cross has established a Crisis Communication Plan to anticipate and respond to the spread of harmful information during emergencies. This plan sets out clear objectives, key messages, target audiences and communication channels to be used in a crisis. To operationalize the plan, the National Society formed a Crisis Communication Committee comprising the Secretary-General, Communications Manager, Safety and Field Coordinator, Partnerships Coordinator and representatives from the Emergency Operations Centre. The Communications Manager conducts regular environmental scanning to detect any mention of South Sudan Red Cross in public discourse and flags negative narratives for immediate action. The Safety and Field Coordinator monitors the safety and security of staff and volunteers, while the Partnerships Coordinator ensures effective coordination with partners. The Emergency Operations Centre includes departmental managers and three regional coordinators who facilitate two-way communication between headquarters and branches.



Crisis communications in practice

When harmful narratives target the South Sudan Red Cross, the Crisis Communication Committee convenes immediately. Roles are activated and a clear internal communication line is established to ensure coordinated messaging.

The National Society has faced several such challenges. Recently, a commander of a militia group affiliated with the government wore a South Sudan Red Cross jacket bearing the National Society logo and in a recorded video described their operations in the Upper Nile region. The video went viral, generating strong reactions. A few years earlier, the South Sudan Red Cross office in Torit was attacked by armed youth accusing the National Society of employing foreigners; several staff members were beaten and injured. In both cases, it acted swiftly. An emergency meeting of the crisis communication teams was convened, roles were assigned and internal communication lines were established to ensure communication was well-coordinated and channelled to the affected branch. The Communications Manager prepared reactive and defensive media lines, which the Secretary-General used when speaking with the media. Staff and volunteers received a briefing from the Head of Branch.

In the emblem misuse case, the South Sudan Red Cross chose not to engage with the media, as the post had not attracted significant media attention. Instead, internal communication and partner engagement were prioritized to manage reputational risk and maintain trust proactively.

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South Sudan Red Cross

The IFRC's community-based surveillance (CBS) system plays an important role in improving how humanitarian actors listen to and engage with communities. By enabling trained volunteers and local health actors to report unusual health events or concerns directly from within communities, CBS provides real-time insights – often before such signals are visible through formal health systems. Crucially, CBS captures both clinical and non-clinical signals, including community fears, resistance to health interventions and circulating rumours. These early signals help identify emerging misinformation, mistrust or behavioural shifts that could undermine humanitarian efforts. Because CBS is rooted in local engagement and implemented by trusted community members, it does more than enhance surveillance: it also fosters credibility and trust while reinforcing social cohesion. This participatory approach supports two-way communication between communities and humanitarian actors and enables adaptive responses based on community feedback. By feeding directly into risk communication and community engagement strategies, CBS helps close the loop between listening and action. In so doing, it demonstrates that meaningful participation can both strengthen operational effectiveness and build trust in humanitarian interventions.



Bridging the gap: Using technology to help community volunteers counter misinformation, build trust and reduce disease outbreaks

Disease outbreaks often spread fear and misinformation faster than the illness itself. When trust in, or access to, health information is low, people delay seeking help – sometimes with fatal consequences. In Fiji and Comoros, trained Red Cross and Red Crescent community volunteers using the Nyss® platform are changing that.

In Fiji, leptospirosis – a bacterial disease – is endemic. Limited access to health information and widespread misinformation have left communities complacent, with some people dying at home without even seeking treatment, which further fuels fear among communities. The Fiji Red Cross Society trained volunteers in community-based surveillance (CBS), using the Nyss® digital platform (developed by the Norwegian Red Cross and partners) to report suspected leptospirosis cases via SMS. In return, the volunteers receive accurate Ministry of Health-approved health information to share locally with community members, countering rumours, promoting prevention and encouraging timely care seeking. Health workers report increased care seeking at health centres, more recoveries, fewer severe cases and greater community trust.

“The Nyss® reply messages share the correct information to the community: they understand after that.” (Team Leader, Fiji Red Cross Society, Ba District, Fiji.)

In Comoros, cholera reappeared in early 2024 after 17 years. With limited local experience in managing cholera, rumours spread quickly. The IFRC supported the Comoros Red Crescent by deploying a Public Health Emergency Response Unit, training 200 volunteers and 10 supervisors in CBS across 79 villages in Anjouan, the outbreak’s epicentre. Comoros Red Crescent volunteers sent nearly 2,900 alerts via Nyss®, receiving tailored Ministry of Health-approved messages in French, helping communities act quickly and get patients to treatment centres earlier.

In both countries, CBS has been crucial – empowering local volunteers to connect communities to health systems, counter misinformation, stop diseases spreading, build trust and save lives.

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4.6 When viruses go viral: Building resilience against harmful information in a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created a perfect storm for harmful information to thrive. Two key factors contributed to this: widespread fear, uncertainty and doubt; and the unprecedented ability for information – alongside misinformation and disinformation – to be rapidly created and spread via the internet, mobile networks and social media platforms. The World Health Organization (WHO) observed that, alongside the spread of the COVID-19 virus itself, the world was experiencing an ‘infodemic’ – an overabundance of information, both accurate and inaccurate, circulating in digital and physical spaces during an epidemic or pandemic.¹⁶ This flood of information confused audiences, undermined trust in credible sources and made it more difficult for people to adopt protective behaviours.

To respond, WHO launched several initiatives. The Early AI-Supported Response with Social Listening (EARS) platform provided real-time insights into online discussions about COVID-19, enabling health authorities to better understand public concerns and deliver accurate, timely information. The WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) helped make scientific information more accessible and offered online training to support health workers and communities.¹⁷ WHO also worked to amplify evidence-based public health messaging and guide users toward trustworthy sources. It encouraged the public to report misinformation and collaborated with major social media platforms to prioritize science-based COVID-19 content in search results.

The UN’s Pause campaign (‘PledgetoPause’)¹⁸ encouraged people to take a moment to verify the accuracy of any information before sharing it. A study¹⁹ conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the UK and the US found that this simple act of pausing to reflect on the origin, credibility, relevance and accuracy of content before sharing it on phones, computers or social media significantly reduced the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Participants exposed to the campaign were notably less likely to share false headlines. The campaign was based on a powerful premise: that interrupting, even for a few seconds, the impulse to share something – an urge often driven by emotions such as excitement, anger, sadness, elation or even altruism – can create space for more critical thinking, better judgement and less amplification of false or misleading claims.

The 2021 UN Open-ended Working Group on Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) noted that “the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the risks and consequences of malicious activities that seek to exploit vulnerabilities in times when societies are under enormous strain”.²⁰ In doing so, the group drew a clear connection between the COVID-19 infodemic and the malicious use of ICTs. This underscores how pandemics can create fertile ground for both cyber threats and harmful information. This same report also highlighted that: “While agreeing on the need to safeguard all critical infrastructure and critical information infrastructure supporting essential services to the public, along with endeavouring to ensure the general availability and integrity of the Internet, States further concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic had accentuated the importance of protecting healthcare infrastructure including medical services and

facilities through the norms addressing critical infrastructure, such as those affirmed by consensus through UN General Assembly resolution 70/237.”²¹

The global response to the COVID-19 infodemic set an important precedent. It demonstrated what is possible when there is a concerted, coordinated high-level effort to counter harmful information and underscored the critical importance of international solidarity in doing so. The May 2025 WHO Pandemic Agreement acknowledges “the importance of building trust and ensuring the timely sharing of information to prevent misinformation, disinformation and stigmatization”, and explicitly affirms the importance of effective communication and public awareness efforts. It emphasizes the importance of strengthening pandemic literacy and science- and evidence-based information, risk communication and community-level engagement.²² Notably, the Pandemic Agreement itself became the target of systematic disinformation. Its negotiation process was complicated by false claims related to national sovereignty, pandemic countermeasures, intellectual property rights and freedom of speech²³ – demonstrating how international frameworks can become entangled in harmful narratives.

Concluding remarks: Navigating a hostile information landscape

Virtual spaces are not neutral arenas for dialogue. Digital platforms have become battlegrounds where trust and truth are deliberately undermined and where individuals, communities and even nations are subjected to harmful information attacks. In this dense, volatile space, the boundaries between truth and falsehood blur. Humanitarian narratives must contend with an overwhelming flood of emotional, politicized and sometimes instrumentalized content.

A decade ago, there was a sense that the “information flows cannot be controlled nor do they need to be”.²⁴ This perspective reflected an earlier digital era, when social media platforms were emerging and user-generated content largely reflected the goodwill of individuals, rather than the calculated harmful intent of malicious actors. At the time, it was a progressive call for greater participation, transparency and accountability. But today’s landscape is profoundly different. The question is no longer whether information should be regulated, but what should be addressed, how, by whom and with what safeguards – particularly in terms of protecting fundamental rights and freedoms. Striking this balance has become one of the central challenges of the current era.

At its core, humanitarian action is about meeting the needs of people in crises, not securing visibility or reputation of the organizations delivering it. Yet, when the spotlight shifts from communities and onto organizations – through unmerited criticism or targeted harmful information – their safety and ability to operate effectively is under threat. Increasingly, harmful narratives shape public and societal perceptions of humanitarian action, constrain access, erode trust and shrink the operational space for principled humanitarian action. While legitimate scrutiny is vital for accountability and improvement, it must be distinguished from deliberate distortion or harmful information designed to delegitimize and obstruct humanitarian efforts. The consequences, as highlighted throughout this report, are stark: diminished access, reputational damage,

emotional strain and heightened security threats to staff and volunteers, operational delays and loss of public trust.

These dynamics underscore the urgent need for more coordinated and systemic responses. Addressing harmful information requires sector-wide collaboration and investment, and proactive engagement with those who shape and influence the information environment – not least governments and technology companies (see [Chapter 5, on page 167](#) for a detailed examination of their role).

Above all, this landscape raises urgent questions that no single organization can resolve alone; the challenges transcend the mandate or influence of any individual organization. The dilemmas demand collective reflection and shared approaches:

- 1 **Neutrality versus harmful narratives:** When dehumanizing or discriminatory narratives spread – sometimes by state or political actors – should humanitarians remain silent to preserve neutrality and access, or speak out to prevent harm?
- 2 **Debunking versus risking access:** Should falsehoods be publicly challenged, even if doing so risks undermining neutrality or operational access? How can humanitarian actors respond without being drawn into politicized or polarized debates?
- 3 **Integrity versus polarization:** In fragmented and hostile information environments, how can humanitarian actors protect the integrity of their messaging and maintain trust without being co-opted, misrepresented or silenced?
- 4 **Collective action versus fragmented responses:** What partnerships, mechanisms and international norms are needed to protect humanitarian organizations from information attacks? Should the sector advocate collectively for stronger platform policies and governance frameworks to safeguard humanitarian space?
- 5 **Speak out versus silence:** When harmful narratives systematically target groups in vulnerable situations – such as migrants – and are driven by state or political interests, what space remains for humanitarians to respond? How can they challenge such narratives without compromising neutrality? At what point is silence perceived as tacit approval of discriminatory or dehumanizing narratives, and when does silence risk becoming complicity?

Together, these dilemmas underscore the urgent need for the humanitarian sector to find collective strategies that preserve principled humanitarian action while protecting at-risk groups and safeguarding trust in an increasingly hostile information environment.

Asks, aims and recommendations

Asks

Treat harmful information as an operational risk by embedding preparedness, accountability and transparency into all phases of humanitarian action, from early warning to recovery – and measure its human, social and operational harms as rigorously as physical impacts.

Aims

Safeguard humanitarian access and action by recognizing harmful information as a systemic risk.

Protect operations, staff and community trust: Integrate harmful information analysis and response into all phases of humanitarian action.

Build resilience by resourcing responses and systematically measuring harms to inform evidence-based action.

Recommendations

States and policy-makers

- Build societal resilience through public information literacy and awareness initiatives.
- Integrate harmful information risks into disaster management and crisis response frameworks.
- Support mechanisms to identify and address harmful information incidents that endanger civilians or disrupt humanitarian operations, ensuring the mandates of principled humanitarian actors are respected.
- Support international cooperation and uphold cyber norms to protect humanitarian action and critical services.
- Establish flexible funding lines for harmful information response, with priority for building local resilience and community-led rumour tracking.

Technology platforms

- Adapt or “cool” algorithms during humanitarian crises to reduce amplification of harmful narratives.
- Implement crisis protocols that temporarily re-weight algorithms in favour of safety and reliability over optimizing engagement.
- Prioritize authoritative information from trusted humanitarian, health and local actors for the delivery of timely and life-saving guidance.
- Collaborate with principled humanitarian actors to design context-specific, transparent interventions on platforms

that respect users' human rights and protect the safety of crisis-affected populations.

- Ensure independent oversight to balance freedom of expression with the need to prevent harm to civilians, humanitarian actors and operations.

Humanitarian actors

- Integrate harmful information monitoring into programmes, assessments and early warning systems.
- Document, analyse and share actionable insights and lessons learned from harmful information incidents and their operational impacts to inform real-time adaptation and long-term resilience, without impeding principled humanitarian action.
- Strengthen staff and volunteer capacity to identify, document and respond safely to harmful narratives. Strengthen internal communication systems to ensure staff and volunteers are

informed, coordinated and able to respond safely and consistently to harmful narratives while upholding humanitarian principles.

- Invest in multilingual monitoring, two-way communication, rapid verification systems and partnerships with trusted local moderators.
- Facilitate regional research hubs to strengthen monitoring, measurement and evidence-based assessment of harms.
- Strengthen collaboration and training for humanitarian staff and volunteers on digital threats, information and media literacy, and narrative analysis.

Community and local leaders

- Co-create rumour-tracking and feedback systems to detect harmful information early.
- Verify and amplify accurate information through trusted local channels.

- Document harmful information incidents that affect safety, services or access.
- Foster dialogue and peer-to-peer engagement that reduces stigma, fear and division.

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