

IFEX Submission to UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression report

Monday 11 July 2022

[IFEX](#), the global network of over 100 member organisations working to promote and defend freedom of expression and information worldwide, is pleased to present this submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression in response to the call for submissions on the ‘challenges to freedom of opinion and expression in times of conflicts and disturbances’.

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the report, which we have circulated to the IFEX network with some members making submissions directly. We also provide the following brief contributions below provided by IFEX member organisations for this submission.

Overview

Hate speech, disinformation, misinformation and propaganda have become tools for instigating and aggravating situations of violence, instability and conflict. This is evidenced from the rapid [spread of misinformation and disinformation](#) around the conflict in Ukraine following the invasion by Russia, leading to uncertainty and doubt about information coming out of the conflict. Russia’s attempts to control the narrative through censorship laws have also [led to instability](#) in Russia with protests erupting and leading to thousands of arrests, as well as an exodus of Russians leaving the country. Since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, [almost half of media outlets](#) in the country have shut down. With a narrow space for press freedom and weakened integrity of information, this has led to a [breeding ground](#) for misinformation and disinformation with harmful consequences, such as doubt over ongoing human rights violations while also obscuring the situation on the ground. Social media platforms also play a role in contributing to instability; for example, the spread of anti-Rohingya rhetoric and incitement to violence through Facebook in Myanmar [exacerbated attacks](#) against the Rohingya. More recently, hate speech, incitement, and the spread of political disinformation on TikTok in Kenya has given rise to [concerns about exacerbating tensions](#) ahead of the country’s elections in August 2022. This is similarly the case in Brazil which is seeing [disinformation campaigns](#) on social media ahead of the upcoming elections in October 2022. Such examples are only a small representation of the challenges to freedom of opinion and expression in situations of conflict and tension.

1. a) Please describe specific situations where disinformation, misinformation or propaganda have been used or restrictions have been placed on the media or access to the Internet in order to instigate, aggravate or sustain hatred, violence or conflict. What means and methods are used to manipulate information in such situations?

IFEX member 7amleh's submission highlights how the silencing and censoring of Palestinian voices on social media has led to [false narratives](#) about the reality of conflict and violence between Palestine and Israel, while the proliferation of [hate speech](#) online influences and is influenced by conflict and disturbances offline. Content moderation practices on social media [manipulate information](#) about the conflict by concealing or erasing documentation of human rights violations on the ground. Fellow IFEX member SMEX (Social Media Exchange) also [documents](#) how Palestinian activists have had their social media posts and accounts restricted, and incitement campaigns on messaging platforms like WhatsApp have led to activists being defamed, arrested, and detained which feeds into and sustains anti-Palestinian sentiments and hatred. They emphasise the [complicity](#) of companies like Facebook and Google who continue to give a platform to campaigns that incite hatred and violence while censoring Palestinian narratives.

IFEX member SEENPM (South East European Network for Professionalization of Media) have conducted regional research on [hate narratives](#) and [hate and propaganda models of communication](#) in the Western Balkans and Turkey in 2020 and 2021, and since then the situation remains broadly unchanged. Although hate speech and disinformation in the Western Balkans and Turkey aren't specifically designed to instigate violence, the narratives of polarisation, mistrust, and conflict and violence are more often than not the main currencies for those spreading hate and disinformation in the region. Rather than calling explicitly for immediate violent acts, actors will use hate and disinformation in an organised fashion to control the level of tension in society, thereby making such societies easier to control altogether. This conditions societies for possible future violence, with the likely targets of physical violence being virtually vilified and dehumanised. Regarding user-generated content, there are plenty of outright calls to violence on social networks and user comments on the pages of some of the media outlets, although they don't generally tend to translate into real world violence.

In Kyrgyzstan, independent media has [come under fire](#) for reporting on conflict situations. Kaktus.media shared an article [alleging](#) Kyrgyz soldiers initiated an attack at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border and were subsequently [charged](#) with disseminating war propaganda with the aim of "causing aggression of one country against another or unleashing a military conflict." Next TV's director, Taalai Duishenbiev, was arrested and charged with inciting ethnic hatred after Next TV's Facebook and Telegram accounts [reported](#) Kyrgyzstan would provide Russia with military assistance in the invasion of Ukraine - a broadcast that was later [ruled](#) as "extremist". These cases were highlighted in a [statement](#) published by IFEX in support of the local members, MPI (Media Policy Institute) and PAJ (Public Association of Journalists). MPI's submission to the Special Rapporteur highlights how the attack on independent media is being sustained through the spread of false information by authorities, including public defamation of character and misrepresentation of journalists as "foreign agents" or "provocateurs". This is aggravated by the use of social media troll farms, increasing harassment of journalists and attacks on press freedom in the country more widely.



In addition to the highlighted country situations and to further support the Special Rapporteur's upcoming report, the following reports published by IFEX members may be helpful in providing more information on the issue:

- [Disinformation in Kenya's Political Sphere: Actors, Pathways and Effects](#) by CIPESA (Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa)
- [Disinformation Pathways and Effects on Democracy and Human Rights in Africa](#) by CIPESA (summary available [here](#))
- [Content Moderation and Freedom of Expression: Bridging the Gap between Social Media and Local Civil Society](#) by Article 19 (country reports available here: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kenya](#))
- [Policy Papers: Perspectives on Gendered Disinformation](#) by Digital Rights Foundation (DRF)

