

# HOW TO...

## detoxify our media and information ecosystem



by Dennis Reineck, Lead Author of the Paper “Detoxing Information Ecosystems” at Deutsche Welle Akademie

**In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), the cost of producing and disseminating disinformation is becoming negligible. How can we curb the tide of misleading content on social media?**

**A holistic approach to our media and information ecosystem is essential. This article takes a closer look at the problem, explains how disinformation works, and suggests a proactive, comprehensive strategy for detoxifying our ecosystem.**

One day in August of 2023, a colleague shared a picture with me. It showed an article claiming that the pilot of the ill-fated flight that crashed with oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin on board had suffered a heart stroke because of Covid-19 medication. The article had the “RT” logo displayed above it. “Oh, it’s obvious that Russia Today would be spreading this kind of disinformation”, I thought. As it turned out, the article itself had been tampered with. The original article did not contain any such claim. I had fallen for a “fake fake”.



Fake



Original

### THE POWER OF TECHNOLOGY IN SPREADING DISINFORMATION

Creating disinformation today is easy. A simple picture-editing programme will do, and social-media platforms lower the cost of distributing fake news, hate speech and other forms of malicious content. Their algorithms promote such content, and AI is set to lower the cost of high-quality deepfakes. Already, social media are flooded with AI images, most of which are relatively harmless like “Shrimp Jesus”. But it does not take a very imaginative mind to predict that more sinister things are around the corner once bad actors manage to fully harness its capabilities. This will constitute yet another downward spiral in what Claire Wardle, former head of the NGO “First Draft”, has termed the “information disorder” of our age. Indeed, Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, has compared what is happening to our information ecosystem to an “invisible atom bomb”.

»An invisible atom bomb exploded in our information ecosystem, and the world must act as it did after Hiroshima.«

Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

### HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY AND INFORMATION DISORDER

Technology is only one part of the equation. Psychology plays a crucial role as well. One reason I fell for the “fake fake” is “confirmation bias”, where people believe information that aligns with their preconceptions and shy away from things that do not align with their beliefs, something Leon Festinger called “cognitive dissonance”. Often, falling for disinformation has less to do with rational reasons (being factually convinced), but more with emotions and feelings of belonging. Because I identify as a member of a different faction, I did not trust the source (RT), and I expected the article to be real. Partisanship is a major driver of people sharing and believing false claims.

### THE COMPLEXITY OF INFORMATION DISORDER

Addressing information disorder requires acknowledging its complexity. It is a problem with no simple solution, and piecemeal efforts can sometimes worsen it. For example, fact-checking can alert users to circulating disinformation, but it can also contribute to spreading that fake news if audiences distrust fact-checkers. And media-literacy initiatives can help people develop a critical attitude towards disinformation, but that attitude might cause them not to trust any information anymore. This in turn would enable bad actors to sow the seeds of distrust in public institutions. This effect is known as the “liar’s dividend”.

### A HOLISTIC, PROACTIVE APPROACH

Our best bet for making a meaningful contribution to combatting information disorder is to take a holistic approach, tackling the issue at production, dissemination, and consumption points. But it is also key that societies do not take a reactive, short-term, “whack-a-mole” approach. The most effective antidote to information disorder is ensuring information integrity—providing safe, transparent, reliable, and accurate information. In other words, offering engaging, high-quality content is just as important as eradicating malicious content.

# 8 PRINCIPLES

## FOR EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AGAINST INFORMATION DISORDER

**1. Human rights-based approach:** Safeguard freedom of expression and access to information.

**2. Consider consumers and local context:** Understand the psychology and local drivers of disinformation.

**3. Conflict sensitivity:** Ensure interventions do not exacerbate existing conflicts.

**4. Political sensitivity:** Be aware of the potential misuse of disinformation regulation.

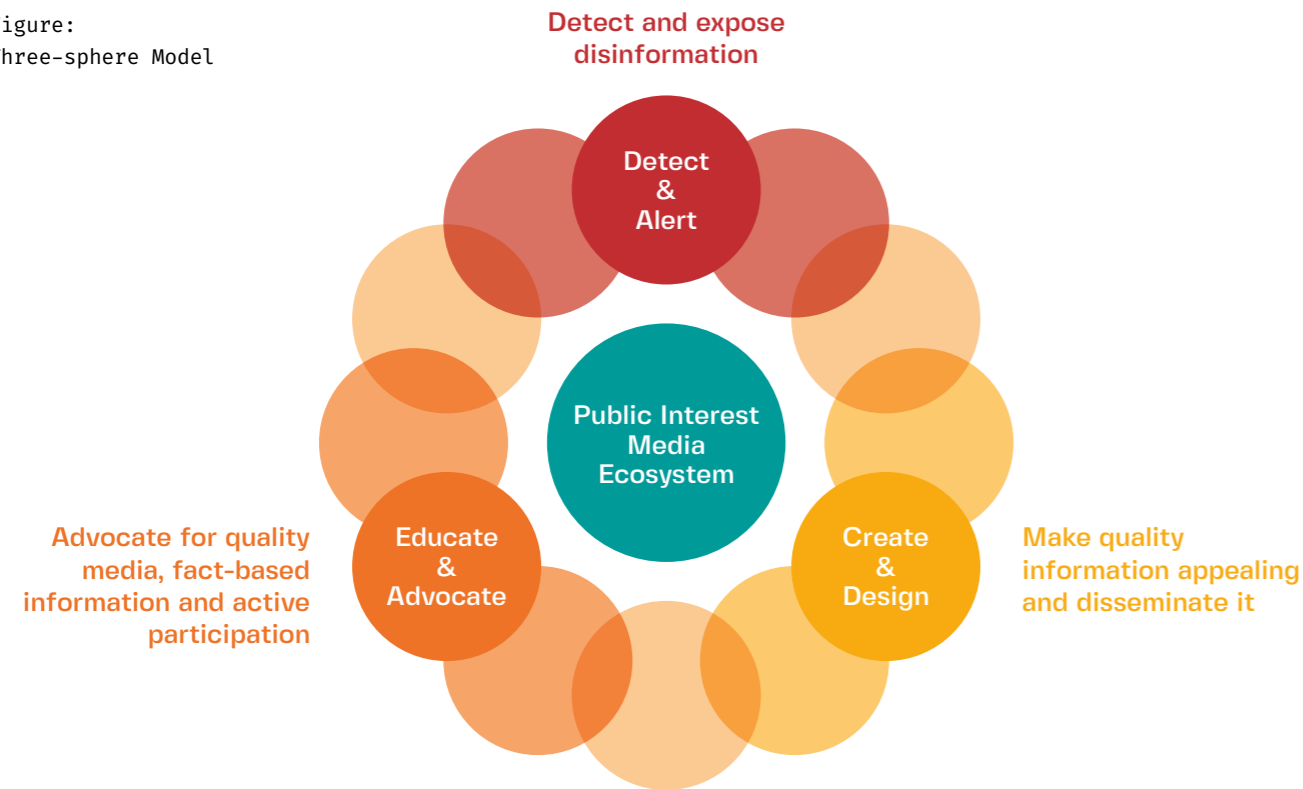
**5. Transparency and independence:** Make intentions clear and avoid stakeholder capture.

**6. Do no harm:** Mitigate risks to those involved, like ensuring fact-checkers’ safety.

**7. Tech-sensitivity:** Consider the impact of technological solutions on democracy and media.

**8. Open source and digital security:** Use open-source tools that ensure digital safety and data protection.

Figure:  
Three-sphere Model



We need to adopt a holistic and proactive strategy to 1. detect disinformation and alert society, governments and platforms to take action; 2. create and design engaging public-interest media to act as a counterbalance; and 3. educate citizens and advocate information integrity, and, in doing so, (re-)establish trust in the institutions we depend upon for our well-being. Only if we manage to reduce the pollution of our information ecosystems, safeguard diversity and freedom of expression, and provide the fertile ground on which relevant and reliable information can prosper, will citizens be empowered to make informed choices and play an active role in transforming their societies toward an equitable future.

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→ Discussion paper "Detoxing Information Ecosystems: A proactive strategy for tackling disinformation"



→ Tackling Disinformation: A Learning Guide

## DW AKADEMIE'S THREE-SPHERE MODEL

**Detection and alerts:** The first sphere focuses on detecting malicious content and alerting institutions and audiences. Fact-checking and prebunking are essential, alongside investigative journalism that exposes disinformation funders and leads to them being deplatformed.

**Creation and impact:** The second sphere supports high-quality information, enhancing innovation in content production and distribution. Approaches aim at winning back the attention and trust of audiences and include explainer journalism, gamification, data journalism, and generative AI.

**Advocacy and education:** The third sphere emphasises raising awareness of the importance of reliable information and advocating for a legal environment that supports free information flow. Community-driven journalism, media literacy, and advocacy for free media are key approaches here.

## TAKING ACTION

Effective action is needed to regain information integrity. Technology is not the biggest threat to democracy; powerful people spreading deceptive narratives are, as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen of the Reuters Institute stresses:

»Misinformation often comes from the top; elite cues are more consequential than more misinformation added to what is already a vast ocean of content.«

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen,  
Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

