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BEYOND MESSAGING AND DEBUNKING: INFORMATION INTEGRITY STARTS WITH LOCAL JOURNALISM

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preventive role ahead of conflicts. Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organization working to ensure that people facing crises have access to reliable, local, independent information. It has been supporting local media and journalists in fragile contexts for over 30 years (since 1995).

In 2025, for the second consecutive year, the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report identified mis- and disinformation as the greatest short-term global threat. Although this framing focuses on short-term consequences and expressions such as 'infodemic' or 'perfect storm' are frequently used, harmful information is not a passing phenomenon. It reflects a deep-rooted transformation with potentially lasting effects.

These effects are particularly severe in crisis contexts. As noted by Sarah W. Spencer in an opinion piece for *The New Humanitarian*, generative AI's growing accessibility may make it the new 'AK-47' of information warfare, with the potential to change how wars are waged.

AN EPISTEMIC RUPTURE

Fondation Hironnelle has worked for 30 years in environments heavily affected by harmful information. In our view, the most accurate way to describe the risk we face is as an epistemic rupture.

Although the term may sound abstract, the idea is straightforward. 'Epistemic' refers to the knowledge foundations of a social group. Without shared facts, shared understanding becomes impossible; without shared understanding, societies struggle to come together and respond to common challenges. Maria Ressa expressed this clearly in her Nobel Peace Prize lecture: "*Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with our world's existential problems.*"

We see the risk of epistemic rupture emerging along three major fault lines:

1. A growing share of the population is drawn into counterfactual narratives

requires maintaining a culture of truth, providing verified facts that meet everyday needs, creating a more equitable communication dynamic between decision-makers and communities, and addressing structural drivers of tension.

2. The capacity for dialogue between those with opposing views is eroding, fueling polarisation

Polarisation has always been an effective driver of engagement. Digital platforms—now central to shaping public opinion—are engineered to promote polarising, sensational, or misleading content over balanced reporting. Meanwhile, as civic space shrinks, insecurity grows, and independent journalism comes under pressure, it is becoming harder to create safe spaces for pluralistic dialogue¹. [i] Yet this remains essential. Regular audience surveys we commission in challenging contexts such as the Sahel and the Central African region show that when constructive, fact-based and respectful dialogue is made possible, audiences respond positively. In these regions, Fondation Hironnelle strengthens the capacity of local media to produce and broadcast inclusive dialogue and debate programmes—offering an alternative to the ‘barking matches’ dominating social media and the monotony of partisan outlets.

3. Under-resourced, less-connected populations and speakers of marginalised languages are excluded from producing and accessing information.

The digital divide increasingly stems from affordability rather than infrastructure. In CAR, for example, a 2024 national survey found that only 26% of respondents owned a smartphone, while 86% had access to radio. Hybrid media—accessible both online and through traditional FM—remains essential to ensure no one is left behind.

AI, largely trained on dominant languages, is not yet closing this gap. Where AI excludes, underperforms, or misrepresents less dominant languages and cultural contexts, it risks deepening existing inequalities. This makes the role of local media in producing reliable information in multiple national languages even more critical.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN A CURE

provide accessible, reliable, and relevant information, which is why strengthening local journalism is key.

Local journalists, rooted in their communities, are best placed to listen, understand daily concerns and produce inclusive, trustworthy content in multiple languages and formats, grounded in ethics, proximity, and inclusivity. Fondation Hironnelle's experience in the Sahel and Central Africa demonstrates that such preventive investment—complemented by media and information literacy—helps restore trust, reduce the impact of rumours and strengthen information integrity².

WHAT HUMANITARIAN ACTORS CAN DO

- Avoid purely reactive approaches focused on debunking each new falsehood. Instead, prioritise long-term, trust-building strategies that strengthen information integrity.
- Understand the local media and information ecosystem (**media development organisations can help!**). Identify trusted local media and respected voices—such as community and religious leaders—and build long-term relationships with them.
- Collaborate with local media – not merely as vehicles for public relations, but above all as partners who can share life-saving, practical information, and build public trust. Involve technical specialists (e.g., WASH, food security, shelter) in media interventions—they often hold the most relevant information; equip them to share it effectively.
- Move beyond 'messaging,' which is often ineffective, as shown during the Ebola response. Promote dialogue and interactivity by encouraging communities to ask questions and express concerns. This helps build trust.
- Respect the editorial independence of media, as attempts to steer coverage can erode trust and compromise journalistic integrity.
- During interactions with communities, raise awareness of disinformation risks and promote critical thinking reflexes.

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Jacqueline Dalton is Head of Editorial Content at Fondation Hironnelle. Her role is to guarantee the editorial quality and ethical standards of Fondation Hironnelle's media programming. She supports the Foundation's newsrooms in the field and helps to develop ideas, formats and approaches for new and existing projects. She also oversees editorial capacity strengthening activities for the organisation's in-country teams and partners.

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1. In 2025, the global state of press freedom is classified as a "difficult situation" for the first time in the history of the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, cf. [link ↩](#)
 2. This objective acknowledges that citizens must have access to trustworthy, balanced and comprehensive information about current affairs, the actions of decision-makers, and other factors relevant to their personal decisions. It underscores the need for proactive engagement and holistic strategies that address the multiple factors required to maintain a healthy information ecosystem, cf. UNDP, *Information Integrity: Forging a Pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust*, 2020; see also Fondation Hironnelle's approach towards mis- and disinformation through the promotion of information integrity [here](#).
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FONDATION HIRONDELLE

Fondation Hironnelle is a Swiss non-profit organization working to ensure that people facing crises have access to reliable, local, independent information. It has been supporting local media and journalists in fragile contexts for over 30 years (since 1995). With a global remit and local roots, it creates spaces for dialogue, to strengthen social cohesion in fragmented societies.

USEFUL LINKS

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