

Thomson *Talks*: Lessons from Fragile Contexts on Responding to Disinformation

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On Friday 10th April, as part of the Cambridge Disinformation Summit, Thomson Foundation convened a 90-minute Thomson Talks session exploring a critical question: what can we learn from fragile contexts about responding to disinformation, and how might these lessons apply to what we think of as more stable environments?

Bringing together practitioners working on the frontlines of information crises, the session combined short provocations with an open discussion under Chatham House Rules. While the contexts discussed, principally the current conflict in Sudan, represent some of the most extreme manifestations of information disorder, the insights shared were widely recognised as increasingly relevant globally.

Drawing on both the initial provocations and the open discussion that followed, several themes emerged. While rooted in experiences from fragile and conflict-affected contexts, these insights resonate far beyond them, highlighting common challenges in how disinformation operates, and pointing toward more effective, coordinated responses.

1. Disinformation as a material and immediate threat

“In these countries, this can be a matter of life and death... what direction do I go in for aid? Where are the roadblocks?”

A central theme emerging from the discussion was the stark impact of disinformation in fragile and conflict-affected environments, where it has direct, life-threatening consequences. In contexts of forced displacement, for example, communities rely on information to make critical decisions about movement, safety, and access to aid. When that information is manipulated, through false claims about safe routes, aid distribution, or conflict dynamics, the consequences can be severe, shaping exposure to violence and access to life-saving resources.

In places like Sudan where access to reliable information is itself a form of protection, countering disinformation is a critical humanitarian challenge.



2. Information vacuums and the collapse of trusted media

“Professional journalism in Sudan didn’t just come under pressure, it collapsed almost overnight.”

Participants highlighted how conflict and instability often lead to the collapse of professional journalism, creating an information vacuum. In Sudan, the destruction of media infrastructure and displacement of journalists has meant that much of the population now relies on social media platforms for information.

However, these platforms are not neutral. They can amplify harmful content, enable coordinated manipulation, and spread emotionally charged misinformation faster than verified reporting. In such environments, journalists are often forced to verify events remotely, piecing together fragmented evidence under conditions of extreme uncertainty.

The result is a dual challenge; both the spread of disinformation and the erosion of trust in all information sources, including legitimate reporting.



3. The importance of trusted, local and low-tech solutions

“Proximity is where trust is built, through local journalism, community leaders, and trusted sources.”

Despite the dominance of digital platforms, the session underscored the continued importance of trusted, local, and often low-tech communication channels.

Examples included the use of shortwave radio to reach populations in areas with limited connectivity, as well as reliance on community networks and local language broadcasting. These approaches offer several advantages; they are more resilient to disruption, less dependent on external platforms, and often more trusted by local audiences.

More broadly, participants emphasised that trust is built through proximity, through local journalists, community leaders, and culturally relevant communication. Effective responses to disinformation must therefore be grounded in local contexts and relationships, rather than relying solely on global or technological solutions.

4. Fragmented responses to a systemic challenge

“Disinformation actors are coordinated... but responses remain siloed... We hear lots of talk of radical collaboration... but crickets in the aftermath.”

A recurring concern was the mismatch between the systemic nature of disinformation and the fragmented nature of current responses.

While disinformation actors often operate in coordinated, adaptive, and well-resourced ways, responses remain siloed, divided across organisations, sectors, and geographies. This fragmentation is compounded by resource constraints, particularly in the current funding environment, where competition for limited resources can inhibit collaboration.

Participants called for a more coordinated, whole-systems approach, bringing together media, civil society, technology platforms, governments, and researchers. However, there was also recognition that achieving such coordination remains a significant challenge in practice.

5. The need for a shared framework of outcomes

“Most projects have limitations of scope, scale, and time... it's very difficult to show that you've reduced disinformation harms. If we can't demonstrate impact in a credible way... that funding starts to disappear.”

A contribution to the discussion was the identification of a structural gap in how impact is understood and measured in this field.

Many interventions aimed at countering disinformation operate within constraints of limited scope, scale, and time. As a result, it is often difficult to demonstrate their contribution to broader outcomes such as reduced disinformation harms.

Participants highlighted the need for a shared, validated framework of intermediate outcomes, defining what “good” looks like across different areas (e.g. media capacity, audience literacy, information ecosystems). Such a framework would enable more consistent measurement, facilitate comparison across projects and contexts, and strengthen the case for continued investment.

Without this, there is a risk that valuable work remains under-evidenced, particularly in an increasingly competitive funding landscape.



6. Platforms as both enablers and constraint

“We are dependent on platforms that we do not control.”

The discussion also addressed the complex role of digital platforms. On the one hand, platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are essential channels for communication, particularly in low-connectivity environments. On the other hand, they present significant challenges, including inconsistent moderation, limited contextual understanding, and a lack of responsiveness to local actors.

Participants noted that commercial incentives and uneven regulatory environments often shape platform behaviour in ways that do not align with public interest. At the same time, there is often limited capacity among regulators to fully understand and respond to these dynamics.

This creates a situation in which many actors are heavily dependent on platforms that they neither control nor fully trust.

7. Building long-term resilience: beyond short-term fixes

“We are fighting the symptoms... as opposed to vaccinating our next generation of citizens.”

Finally, the discussion turned to longer-term solutions. While immediate responses to disinformation are necessary, there was strong consensus that sustainable impact requires a focus on building resilience.

This includes strengthening public education and media literacy, although participants noted that evidence on effectiveness is mixed and context-dependent. More broadly, it involves addressing underlying vulnerabilities, such as lack of access to basic services, weak institutions, and low trust, which can make communities more susceptible to manipulation.

In this sense, disinformation cannot be addressed in isolation. It is deeply connected to wider social, political, and economic dynamics.

Conclusion: from fragile contexts to global relevance

The session highlighted that while fragile contexts may represent the most acute impact of disinformation, they also offer valuable insights into how it operates, and how it can be addressed.

Key lessons include the importance of trusted local actors, diversified communication channels, coordinated responses, and clear frameworks for measuring impact. At the same time, the discussion underscored the complexity of the challenge and the absence of simple solutions.

As disinformation continues to evolve and spread across contexts, the experiences of those working in the most challenging environments provide not only a warning, but a foundation for more effective and informed responses globally.

