

DISARMING DISINFORMATION IN THE MEDIA: WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN'T AND WHY

THOMSON TALKS
w/Madhav Chinnappa

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Location: Cambridge, UK

Hosted by: Thomson Foundation, in partnership with University of Cambridge Judge Business School.

About the event

At a time when disinformation poses a growing threat to democratic processes and social cohesion, leading media executives, academics, technologists, and public policy experts convened at the Cambridge Disinformation Summit 2025 for the Thomson Talks session, "Disarming Disinformation in the Media: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why." The discussion focused on diagnosing the complex challenges underpinning the spread of disinformation, highlighting approaches that show real promise, and setting a forward-looking agenda for future action. This short report presents the key points made during the discussions and comply with the Chatham House Rule, under which Thomson Talks are held. We have organised these around the three areas where challenges were identified, where effective action should be scaled, and where potential future action should focus. These are: 1) the news media; 2) the public and communities as consumers of information; 3) regulation of social media platforms.

Finally, there is the challenge of defining what we are aiming for, what success would look like, and how we track progress towards it. All of this provides an outline of a future agenda for policy, media, civil society organisations (CSOs), programmes and interventions, and the funders of these.



To watch a summary video of the event, [please click here](#).

1. News media

Problem summary: *Traditional journalism is ill-equipped to counter today's disinformation landscape, which demands proactive strategies rather than relying on reactive debunking.*



Actions that are helping, or could help, these challenges:

1a) Adopt systematic pre-bunking. *"It would be better if the media actually went out before misinformation spreads. ... Every news organisation needs to be doing this."* Journalists should routinely publish explainer pieces that expose disinformation "playbooks"—who's behind them, their incentives, and their tactics—so audiences are "immunised" before falsehoods go viral.

1b) Treat disinformation as a business to be investigated. *"We treat disinformation as a business. ... we need to investigate them and expose them and make them be held accountable for it."* Rather than only fact-checking, newsrooms ought to allocate resources to digging into the actors, funding streams, and commercial incentives that drive disinformation campaigns.

1c) "Show your work" to build trust. *"Show audiences how you reach your conclusions ... explain how disinformation works, what the incentive is, and why people do this."* Reporters should link to source documents, annotate their verification steps, and transparently correct errors—inviting audiences behind the scenes of their reporting.

1d) Report with empathy and context. *"How do you reach out as a journalist to people who are less inclined to listen? ... by showing the audiences how you reach your conclusions... and by reporting with empathy."* Coverage must engage skeptical or marginalized groups by acknowledging their concerns, explaining the "why" behind stories, and avoiding a purely confrontational tone.

1e) Leverage OSINT and collaborative investigation. *"The online... OSINT community right now is really alive and kicking. ... they are speeding up the work that one person can do."* Newsrooms should partner with open-source intelligence communities and civil-society researchers to scale investigations and surface bad actors more quickly.

1f) Refocus on core journalism - "Speaking Truth to Power". *"Our job is to fact check and to tell extraordinary stories ... to speak truth to power and to be absolutely at the forefront of outing people who are doing... the wrong things."* Despite all new tools, the foundational role of journalism remains exposing wrongdoing and holding power to account; all other tactics must support that mission.

2. Public and communities as consumers of media

Problem summary: *News consumption is fragmented, shaped by fleeting attention, audience fatigue, and varying trust criteria across demographics. As users rely on familiar sources or personal networks—often without cross-verification—trust in journalism hinges on perceived credibility markers and culturally relevant delivery.*

Actions that are helping, or could help, these challenges:

2a) Education systems: Develop a 'national curriculum' on media literacy and disinformation tactics—"inoculating" students annually against propaganda techniques from primary school onward. *"We need a national curriculum... whether it's pre-bunking inoculation, debunking, fact checking, I think [we] need a National Educational Curriculum where students are immunised against the techniques of propaganda every year throughout their education".*

2b) Community based and cultural approaches: *"Marginalised communities need to be included in the conversation. They need to be included as collaborators in order to support that offline-online continuum and the relational component of actually getting people who are tough to reach to change their mind."*

2c) Collaboration and accountability: Foster online/offline coalitions, linking CSOs, journalists, educators, tech firms, and grassroots movements, to co-create localized, culturally resonant responses and rapid-response networks. *"It requires collaboration from literally all parts of society and the audiences themselves to make this information overload that we live in more manageable."*

3. Regulation of social media platforms - self v external regulation

Problem Summary: *The spread of disinformation is driven by opaque algorithms, misaligned commercial incentives, and fragmented oversight. Platform ranking systems prioritize engagement over accuracy, and ad-tech lacks transparency, enabling harmful content to be monetized and amplified without accountability. Voluntary self-regulation by platforms has proven insufficient and global standards are fragmented and tech platforms in particular face a patchwork of local regulations, allowing disinformation providers to exploit jurisdictional gaps.*

Actions that are helping, or could help, these challenges:

3a) Mandatory pre-bunking on platforms: Require platforms to deploy pre-bunking tools, and penalize non-compliance without infringing free speech. *"Social media companies need to do something to empower their users... So we're gonna need regulators to give people the right incentives and to comply with legislation..."*

3b) Digital platforms ("nudges"): Scale prompts that warn users before sharing unverified or abusive content, proven to reduce harmful posts without censorship. *"We found that between 15 and 35% of people who saw a nudge responded to it. And again, this is a non-censorship intervention..."*

3c) Ad-tech & revenue reforms: Reform the online ad auction system to increase funding for independent journalism (e.g., ring-fencing part of ad revenues for certified news outlets) and mandate transparency on ad placement. *"Online ad auctions globally are controlled by one company... That one company has created a mechanism where advertisers don't have transparency of where their ads are placed... This is partly—actually let's say entirely—how disinformation is getting monetized... We have to go to the source of this ecosystem."*



3d) Algorithmic accountability: Some speakers highlighted the need for top-down enforcement on platform algorithms, e.g. regulating feed ranking to curb reward-driven spread of outrage and falsehood, rather than leaving it to industry self-regulation. *“But the free for all is totally incompatible with what the psychology and neuroscience research suggests we should be doing. And I think that can be addressed with regulation just on the algorithm side”.*

3e) Digital Services & Online Safety Acts: Speakers pointed to existing laws (EU Digital Services Act, UK Online Safety Act) as models, urging that regulators mandate “inoculation” features and require social platforms to empower users against manipulation. *“Independent regulators need to be empowered by government, whether it’s a Digital Services Act or the Online Safety Act, to actually put pressure on the companies that control the media environment to do something about this problem”.*

3f) Regulatory mandates & oversight: Empower independent regulators to enforce algorithmic transparency, require platforms to deploy pre-bunking tools, and penalize non-compliance without infringing free speech. *“I think that can be addressed with regulation on the algorithm side... letting that science inform the regulation, I think is really critical.”*



Looking ahead: Towards a framework for action and accountability

As the information environment becomes more complex and contested, there is a growing need for a shared framework to assess gaps in policy and practice to successfully counter disinformation. This would enable media, policymakers, civil society, and funders to identify where focus is needed across countries and regions.

In parallel, there is the need to define clear objectives of what a healthier information space looks like, and common metrics to track progress against this.

*What is the goal? Our digital information space, writ large, going forward?
What is the goal of where disinformation, misinformation sits within that?
How do we protect freedom of expression at the same time that we fight against the disinformation? If the goal is to get rid of the things I don't like, that's not a very good goal".*

Without this, it is difficult to know whether interventions are making a difference and should be scaled, and which are less effective. Progress will depend on sustained cross-sector collaboration.

The challenge of disinformation is too complex for isolated efforts. As this dialogue has shown, meaningful progress demands sustained coordinated action across media, education, regulation and technology. We invite media professionals, policymakers, civil society, educators, and funders to use this event as a springboard to further collaboration, test what works, share learning, and commit to building a more transparent, informed, and resilient information ecosystem.

If you have any questions about this (or other Thomson Talks), are interested in furthering this discussion or adding more to it, please get in touch at CaroK@thomsonfoundation.org

