CHAPTER

8

DISINFORMATION ABOUT MIGRATION: AN AGE-OLD ISSUE WITH NEW TECH DIMENSIONS

Key Findings

- Disinformation is deepening polarization and division around the world. Migration is a flashpoint for disinformation, with far-right actors advancing xenophobic agendas on social media, and some mainstream news media and politicians facilitating the spread of disinformation through negative stories and the promotion of misleading narratives.

- COVID-19 has intensified the problem, with migrants often incorrectly blamed for introducing or spreading the virus and becoming scapegoats for frustrations about public health services. COVID-19 has also fuelled social polarization and declining trust in media and government, exacerbating the conditions in which disinformation and extremism thrive.

- Disinformation about migrants can also result in hate speech and xenophobia in offline spaces and hostility and discrimination towards migrants, which in turn leads to the legitimization of anti-migrant policy by government authorities. These links between disinformation and policy are however frequently overlooked and unmeasured.

- Migrants themselves are also susceptible to disinformation, with many lacking reliable and/or accessible information on their migration choices and instead turning to social media networks rife with false claims. A lack of trust in government and international organizations fuels this cycle of disinformation among migrants.

- Understanding the motives for sharing disinformation is key because this offers windows into changing behaviours. For example, people may share false content out of fear for the security of themselves and their community, and this civic desire to inform can be harnessed to encourage positive practices at a local level where trust is strong.

- Audience-focused countermeasures have a significant impact. These include correcting disinformation following a "truth sandwich" approach, which provides facts and avoids repeating falsehoods. Pre-bunking can also prove effective, in which disinformation is anticipated (for example, ahead of elections) and countered by public awareness campaigns.

- Challenges to countering disinformation include a lack of research and investment into the phenomenon in less developed countries. There is also a need to ensure that the battle against disinformation does not stifle debate and critical thinking about migration in society today.

- Disinformation about migration is a complex problem with many facets, and therefore requires a coordinated effort to counter it. Building resilience in society is a long-term commitment, and government, policymakers, social media platforms, civil society and the media must work together to understand and counter these harmful campaigns.

Takeaway for Policy

Disinformation about migration is allowed to drive policy in a way that we do not see happening in any other field. It is time for governments to strengthen regulatory frameworks on disinformation, and lead coordinated efforts to ensure that actors work together to combat this polarizing phenomenon, which has very real human consequences.

The full chapter is available at https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022-chapter-8.

The WMR interactive platform can be accessed at https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/.