

ICC Programme annual coordinators' meeting

Braga and Vila Verde, Portugal, 15 November 2024

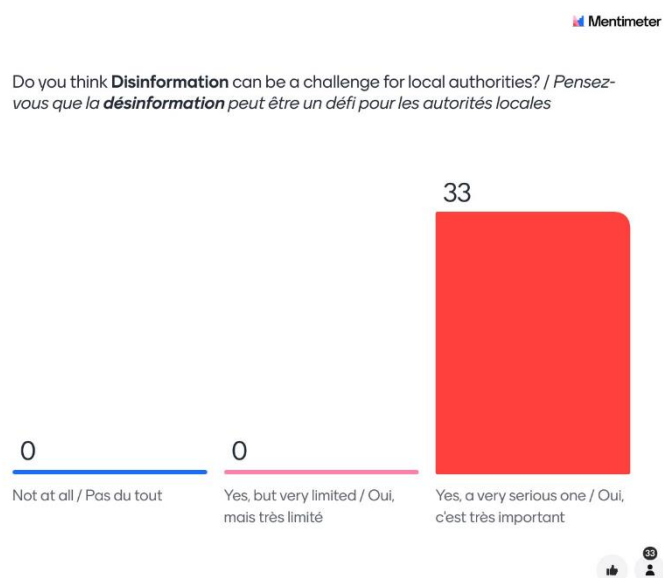
Workshop: Disinformation and positive narratives in intercultural cities

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Summary Report

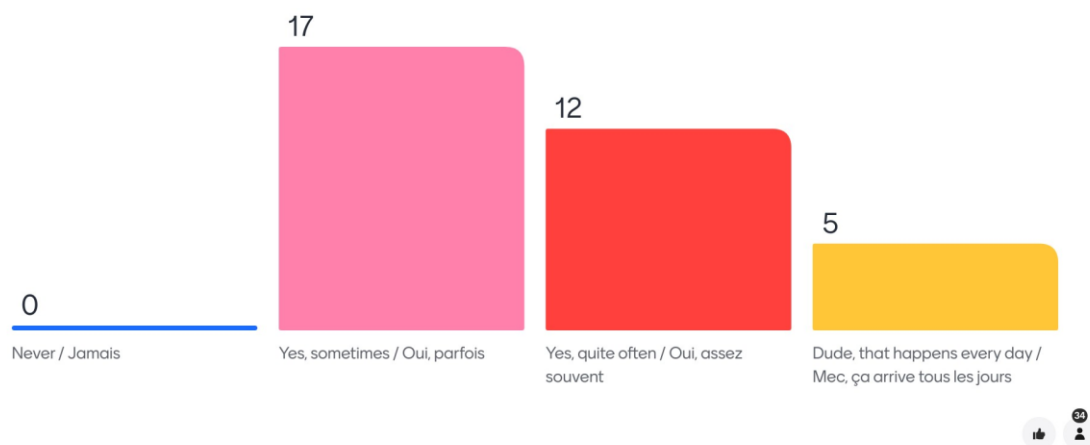
1. Combating disinformation: participants' experience, attitude and knowledge of the topic

At the very beginning of the workshop, ICC members unanimously confirmed that **disinformation is a relevant problem**:

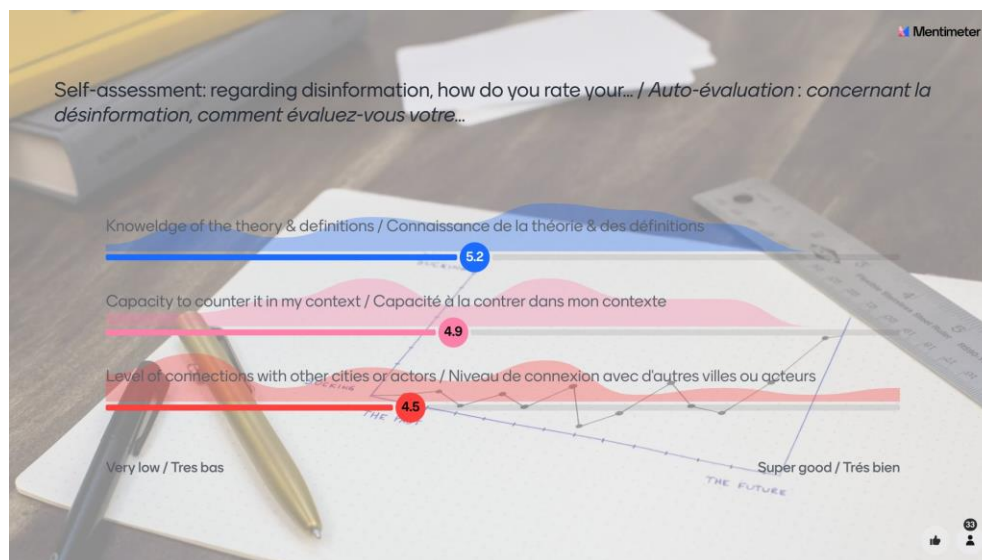


that half of them deal with it **often or on a daily basis**.

Are you confronted with **Disinformation** and its effects in your work? / Êtes-vous confronté à la **désinformation** et à ses effets dans votre travail ?



Moreover, ICC members feel that their knowledge, skills and network capacity is **insufficient compared to the task**:



2. Disinformation: definition, examples, and tools

Disinformation is false information deliberately created to harm, mislead or evoke an emotional response in a target audience. It is a phenomenon that only partially overlaps with **misinformation**, i.e. inaccurate information that is spread without deliberately intending to cause harm or manipulate (such as [rumours](#)).

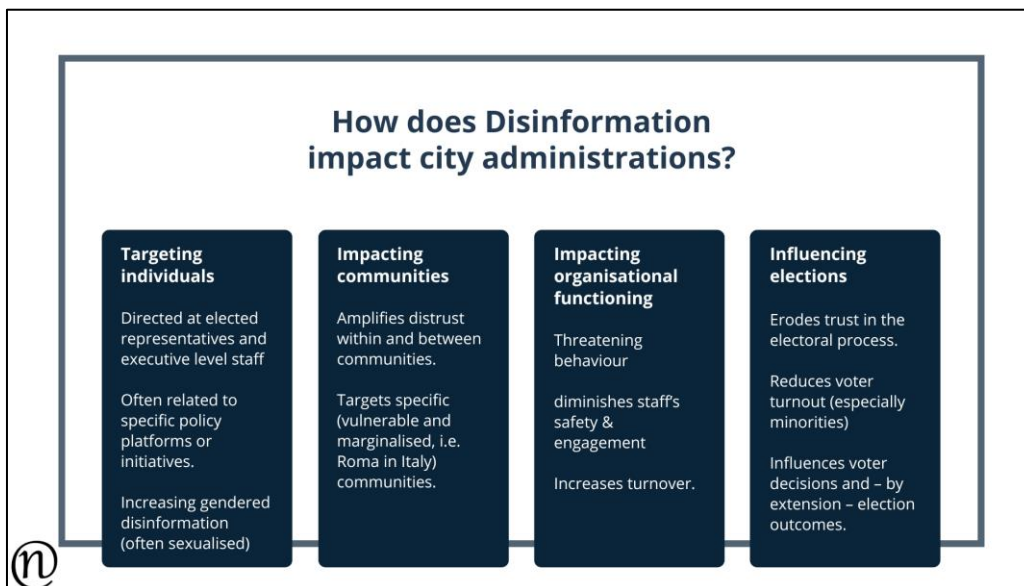
Disinformation and misinformation are nothing new in political communication, yet they both gained pathological characteristics in recent years due to three mutually reinforcing dynamics:

1. the internet and the social networks have allowed for a faster, cheaper and wider **spreading** of news,
2. and have created the conditions for **monetising** the dissemination of false but emotionally impactful news through revenue systems (i.e. 'page views') combined with aggressive strategies (such as click-baiting).
3. Disinformation and misinformation, moreover, leverage on, and contribute to reinforce, **high levels of distrust** towards institutions that characterise many modern societies.

In the last years, the dissemination of false information prompted several institutions to take action: for instance, the European Union has set up [different tools](#) to tackle the phenomenon, in particular in view of the EU24 elections. Yet, despite the fact that disinformation is usually reported when interfering with national (or supranational) elections, hurtful and meaningful impacts can be observed also, and especially, at the local level.

Examples of disruptive effects of disinformation on city governments are to be found everywhere. For example, as a consequence of the US24 electoral debate where then-candidate Mr Donald Trump repeated a debunked claim about Haitian migrants in Springfield (OH), the City Hall [was closed following a bomb threat](#) and the Springfield City School District evacuated two elementary schools following an email threat, not to mention the suffering caused to the Haitian community living in the city.

The example shows how disinformation is often targeting marginalised or vulnerable groups and individuals, expanding social rifts and increasing tension among communities: disinformation **reduces trust both in institutions and among different groups**; and it can **erode social cohesion**, as specific groups are overrepresented in targeted disinformation campaigns (migrants & ethnic minorities, religious minorities, LGBTI+ people, women).



In order to effectively counter disinformation, municipal civil servants, officers and elected policy makers need to be **trained, supported, and connected**.

In order to achieve these goals, the German Marshall Fund of the United States and Melbourne Center for Cities of the University of Melbourne recently published a [Playbook](#) outlining a strategy for cities to respond to disinformation. It is **not about deciding which information is right**, or which channels are allowed to inform (and which ones are censored): as the Playbook states, “*disinformation response must be non-partisan to be effective*”.

Rather than focusing on deciding which news shall or shall not be shared, the Playbook insists on the ways cities can **prevent**, **react** or **recover** from disinformation outbreaks by **building trust**; **building community**; **building communication**; and **building collaboration**.



3. Intercultural response to disinformation: group work on case studies

Participants were divided into five groups and each group received a case study of disinformation.

The cases were real, but taken out of their specific context to allow for a more general discussion:

1. In the peak of the first wave of COVID infections, rumours are spread in the Islamic communities that vaccinations are prepared with animal components, i.e. are forbidden by the religion, and many Muslim believers are postponing or cancelling their shots. Furthermore, news of Muslim believers has spread, increasing tensions among communities in a very delicate time.
2. A group of boys attending the local high school produced deep-faked (AI-generated, fake) nude images of their female schoolmates. The contents went viral, causing enormous harm to the victims and tensions among families and in the community [this group worked in French].
3. A young woman denounced to be victim of sexual assault. While police are still investigating the perpetrators, news starts to spread that the perpetrators are two young boys from the nearby Roma camp. Far-right parties have called for a demonstration to be held tonight “for everyone’s safety and security” which could very easily escalate.
4. An American clickbait newsletter shared the news that last night a mob of young Nigerian boys raided the center of your city, breaking windows and assaulting women. While no local newspaper reported it, online influencers and outlets are already sharing the news. Social network groups are buzzing and angry citizens are calling the city’s line services.
5. A few days before the celebration of a major Islamic religious festivity, several city officers and elected representatives received threats accusing them of “helping terrorists” that are “preparing an attack”. The mayor is considering canceling the celebrations because they cannot ensure a safe environment for either the city’s employees nor for those attending the event.

Each group had 20 minutes to agree upon 3-4 actions to address the case from an intercultural perspective.

The following table sums up the actions highlighted by the groups:

<p>Building trust / collaboration</p>	<p>Create platforms with other relevant stakeholders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - other institutions (police, health agencies, schools, ...), - local CSOs, - migrant and religious leaders/communities, - cultural spaces (libraries, museums, music halls, ...), - local news outlets, - academia, - other aggregation venues (pubs, sport clubs, ...) <p>Be clear with potential victims that they will be protected and with potential perpetrators that they will be prosecuted.</p>
<p>Building community</p>	<p>Improve media literacy and critical thinking, with a specific focus on AI.</p> <p>Map existing social and economic cleavages and vulnerable communities, groups, and spaces.</p> <p>Build counter- and community narratives.</p>
<p>Building communication</p>	<p>Improve and maintain communication channels</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - both online (municipality website and social network accounts) - and offline (regular meetings with stakeholders, public assemblies)



4. Conclusions and inputs for a potential follow-up

Despite their efforts, **cities alone cannot realistically face the challenges ahead**. Municipalities, especially the small and medium-sized ones, need to be part of a strong network that supports them.

Following the current international best practices and the reflections that emerged during the Braga workshop, three streams of actions can be identified that the Intercultural Cities (ICC) Programme could pursue to help cities counter racism- and xenophobia-based disinformation:

1. First of all, it is important to **frame the fight against disinformation in a broader intercultural policy**, highlighting existing synergies with other methodologies such as the Intercultural approach, the Anti-rumours Strategy, the Narrative theory, and others.
2. Second, ICC could organise **online and offline training opportunities** as well as **study visits** to support the sharing of knowledge and the networking of city officials.
 - a. Sharing of knowledge could foster the set-up of a **Community of Practices**,
 - b. while the networking might result in the creation of **international partnerships of cities** to compete in national and international financing opportunities, i.e. European grants.
3. Finally, ICC has the authority and the role to **map and liaise with other international networks or supranational actors** working on or interested in the topics, in order to enhance a two-ways exchange beyond ICC border to enrich the current debate with the most up-to-date methodologies and experiences.