

Roundtable 1: Research and Civil-Journalistic Activism in Combating Disinformation: Challenges and Opportunities

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Moderator: Lt. Col. (res.) David Siman-Tov, Senior Researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)

Focus: Sharing best practices and ethics in research, and civil-journalistic activism in building disinformation resilience in Israel.

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Participants and Discussion Contributors:

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Key Challenges and Issues Discussed on Research and Civil-Journalistic Activism in Combating Disinformation:

- **Civil Society Challenges:** There is limited capacity and resources available to civil society groups actively fighting disinformation in Israel, compounded by technological and regulatory limitations. Additionally, internal societal polarization reduces the effectiveness of efforts to unify responses against disinformation campaigns. Civil society organizations face further difficulties due to mistrust from governmental bodies and the general public, alongside ongoing challenges related to legitimization and effective collaboration.
- **Lack of a clear shared objective:** The practical questions—how to counter foreign influence, how to remove bot accounts, etc.—are not the most difficult or important. Rather, the key issue is first to define the shared purpose behind these efforts—the "why" that should guide and align collective action.
- **Social polarization and divergent perceptions among audiences:** Polarization in Israel both drives and is driven by disinformation. Different audiences interpret the issue differently and require tailored messaging—especially as right-wing media often frames foreign influence as tied to local political opponents. Fact-checking and counter-disinformation efforts are frequently seen as politically biased, making it difficult to address the issue without being labeled. Activists noted the tension between being seen as partisan versus being criticized for political neutrality.
- **Gap between media priorities and civil society needs:** Foreign influence campaigns are often dismissed by the public as low-quality or irrelevant, especially compared to local issues. This limits media interest and public engagement. Still, some argued that interest in the topic does exist and that broader outreach beyond the research community is essential.
- **Vulnerability of Arab society in Israel:** Most of the Israeli public, including the research and practitioner community, is not sufficiently aware of the impact of disinformation, particularly local disinformation, on Arab society in Israel, which often lacks the tools and resources to adequately respond to the problem.
- **Barriers to information access and lack of suitable technological tools:** Participants raised the issue of limited access to information, particularly from Iranian sources, unlike Russian sources, due to restrictions imposed by the state. In addition, there was broad agreement that removing malicious content and dismantling bot networks is important, as it reduces amplification by real users who spread disinformation. However, these efforts are not always feasible or effective without an adequate technological infrastructure.

- **Multifaceted Foreign and Domestic Influence:** Israeli society is increasingly confronted with sophisticated influence campaigns characterized by blurred distinctions between foreign (FIMI) and domestic (DIMI) actors. These campaigns exploit sensitive societal rifts, including political polarization, religious and ethnic tensions, and divergent attitudes towards national security issues. A major challenge is accurately identifying and attributing these complex, coordinated activities, requiring advanced analytic capabilities and nuanced public policy responses tailored specifically to Israel's unique societal and security environment.

Messages from the Roundtable:

- **Strengthening Interdisciplinary and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration**

Effective response requires enhanced cooperation across sectors—civil society, academia, media, and governmental bodies—leveraging diverse expertise in digital investigation, fact-checking, policy advocacy, and public education. A stronger collaborative ecosystem can better address the unique blend of foreign threats and internal socio-political dynamics prevalent in Israel.

- **Ethical Responsibility and Accountability**

Participants emphasized the ethical responsibility inherent in disinformation research and activism. Ethical research and public engagement demand transparency in methods, rigorous adherence to fact-based approaches, and sensitivity to democratic values. The credibility of civil research on disinformation in Israel depends significantly on maintaining public trust through open, accountable, and ethically sound practices.

- **Identifying a Broad Common Ground for Action**

A clear and agreed-upon starting point for cooperation between different actors is the shared challenge of addressing foreign influence. This area is perceived as less politically charged compared to dealing with domestic influence, and can therefore serve as a basis for initial trust-building and collaboration, even among actors with divergent views on internal Israeli issues.

- **Establishing a Professional Community and Shared Knowledge Base**

A clear need was raised for the creation of a professional community composed of researchers, journalists, and activists, focused on sharing knowledge and tools, and laying the groundwork for effective cooperation. This community could be a platform for disseminating content, such as ethics-focused webinars. A key emphasis was placed on establishing a shared knowledge base to centralize information, practical insights, and field-based operational models, enabling coordination in identifying and responding to influence campaigns, detecting recurring patterns, and facilitating learning across organizations.

- **Harnessing Technological Tools**

There is a clear need for access to advanced technological tools that would enable research, monitoring, and an effective response to harmful content. The state can contribute by providing the tools themselves, without intervening in content, while ensuring the civil society sector maintains independence in how it addresses the problem.

- **Academization of the Field**

There is a growing need to address the issue in an organized way and promote its integration into academic institutions and training frameworks. This includes offering lectures and content as part of university courses, professional training, workshops, and webinars. To do so, collaboration should be fostered with universities, the security establishment, and the education system, which can provide platforms for content delivery.

- **Ethical and Regulatory Complexity**

Israel's unique political, security, and technological landscape raises critical ethical and regulatory dilemmas in the fight against disinformation. Ethical challenges include balancing freedom of expression and privacy rights against the increasing surveillance and monitoring measures. The regulatory challenge encompasses defining clear, actionable guidelines on disinformation without compromising democratic norms, particularly given the high sensitivity and politicization of information control in the Israeli context.

Resources Recommended for Further Research and Policy Development in Israel:

[ההשפעה רוסית בישראל במהלך מלחמת חרבות ברזל](#) (2024)

ורה מיכלין-שפיר, אופיר בראל, מילאן צ'רני

[התערבות זרה והשפעה איראנית ברשתות החברתיות בישראל](#) (2024)

ענבל אורפז ודודי סימן טוב

Microsoft Threat Intelligence, [Iran surges cyber-enabled influence operations in support of Hamas](#) (2024)