



U.S. AGENCY FOR
GLOBAL MEDIA

ADDRESSING DISINFORMATION: INSIGHTS AND BEST PRACTICES



PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA

The U.S. Agency for Global Media is an independent federal agency overseeing public service media networks that provide unbiased news and information in countries where the press is restricted.

Our mission is to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy.

This report created by:

Yelena Osipova-Stocker and Nick Shchetko
Office of Policy and Research

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Executive Summary

In mid-2010s, “disinformation” emerged as the term of choice to describe the distortion of information and perception management for political ends. Disinformation aims to create confusion, sow general distrust and demoralize a public. While often used broadly and interchangeably with propaganda, fake news or misinformation, disinformation works more subtly and aims to achieve different objectives, which is why it needs to be differentiated from the other concepts.

USAGM and its networks are proactively addressing the threat of disinformation around the world through the practice of independent reporting and strong journalism ethics. Where appropriate, they are pointing out falsehoods and challenging false narratives, as well as fighting to maintain the audience’s access to truthful and factual reporting. USAGM has also established a number of partnerships and collaborations to promote media literacy and help build civic resilience in vulnerable markets.

The paper highlights several examples of disinformation from around the world to provide a general overview of the myriad ways in which USAGM is addressing this threat. It also provides a set of recommendations to public service media organizations on how to approach the issue, based on extensive review of the literature and over 25 interviews with USAGM journalists and experts:

1. INCREASE PRODUCTION OF UNBIASED, UNIQUE AND COMPELLING

CONTENT. Invest more in live streaming of major events, in-depth backgrounder and analytical pieces, and solutions-oriented journalism. Fully empower verified user-generated content and focus on important local stories, even if small, where appropriate.

2. DISTRIBUTE CONTENT EFFICIENTLY, KEEPING IN MIND PLATFORMS

AND AUDIENCES. To capture the audiences’ attention and trust in the current environment of media and information overload, it is important to enhance credibility, promote media literacy, and keep up with the latest technological developments and content delivery mechanisms. Be aware

of audience preferences and media use patterns and, when possible, create content specifically for each social media network, aggregator or device.

3. ENHANCE AND EXPAND COOPERATION WITH OTHER JOURNALISTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS to build civic resilience, help boost credibility and lower costs. Vetting potential partners is essential to ensure that they have independent editorial policies and missions that align with those of the public service media.

4. EXPAND FACT-CHECKING, WHERE APPROPRIATE. Despite the lack of a clear consensus, reporters and experts agree that it is important to maintain a baseline against which rumors and disinformation can be judged. However, media outlets should be careful about potential problems such as providing further exposure to otherwise obscure falsehoods, which might increase audience confusion or misunderstanding.

5. EXPOSE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS. While many defer this to government agencies, public service news networks are trusted institutions and have a unique role in exposing and reporting on large-scale, well-organized campaigns to deceive and mislead a public.

6. PROMOTE CODE OF ETHICS AND HIGH JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS. Many of the public media organizations already follow industry-leading journalistic standards and should prioritize helping local media adopt them as well through training and collaboration. They should also prioritize contributing to international efforts to set universal journalistic standards to help enhance the quality and credibility of reporting around the world, such as The Journalism Trust Initiative.¹

7. CONTINUE INVESTING IN CIRCUMVENTION AND PRIVACY TOOLS, AND ENSURE THEIR AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY. As governments increasingly tighten their control over internet access, these societies become more prone to disinformation. The Open Technology Fund (OTF), USAGM's fourth grantee, builds a wide variety of tools for unrestricted access on such markets and around the world. Further developing these

¹ The Journalism Trust Initiative. jti-rsf.org/en/

technologies and making them available to those who need them the most will help combat censorship and counter disinformation.

These recommendations, reviewed in detail below, are most directly applicable to large public broadcasters; however, smaller regional and local media outlets may also find them useful.

Introduction

For much of recorded history, propaganda has been a key part of the political toolbox used in the conduct of domestic and foreign affairs.² In the 21st century, new technologies are expanding the ways in which information influences the course of political events. By 2016, “disinformation” emerged as the term of choice to describe the distortion of information and perception management for political ends. Now, disinformation and manipulation — particularly by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian actors — have emerged as major drivers behind the global democratic recession of the past several years, becoming a significant national security threat to the U.S. and its international partners.³ In this environment, the U.S. Agency for Global Media is often called upon to expose and counter the disinformation assault by state and nonstate actors. This paper positions disinformation in relation to other relevant concepts, explores the various approaches to it, and provides an overview of the discrete ways in which USAGM and its networks address this threat. The paper includes a set of case studies, based on extensive interviews with reporters and editors, highlighting compelling examples and outlining recommendations for global public service media organizations.

² Andrew Trabulsi, “A Brief History of Propaganda.” Stratfor worldview.stratfor.com/horizons/fellows/andrew-trabulsi/01122017-brief-history-propaganda

³ “Freedom in the World 2020.” Freedom House, February 2020 freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf; Eric Tucker, “FBI director warns of ongoing Russian ‘information warfare.’” The Associated Press, February 2, 2020 apnews.com/e57864ade7bb75dfccf1d42033c82bb9

Definitions

What Disinformation Is and What it Isn't

DISINFORMATION — derived from *dezinformatsiya* in Russian — refers to strategic campaigns spreading deliberately fabricated or manipulated information intended to deceive or mislead an audience and advance political goals.⁴ To specify disinformation further and to more clearly differentiate it from *propaganda* — the systematic effort to manipulate public opinion for political ends⁵— some analysts add that disinformation works to create confusion, general distrust, cynicism and paranoia among the public in order to overwhelm, paralyze and disincentivize citizen engagement in social and political processes.⁶

Disinformation is different from misinformation in that the latter constitutes inaccurate and wrong information that is a result of an unintentional mistake.⁷ *Malinformation* is also different as it relies on genuine and fact-based information to cause deliberate harm to

4 See: Hossein Derakhshan, “Disinfo Wars: a taxonomy of information warfare.” Truth, Trust and Technology Commission, LSE Media Policy Project blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2019/09/27/disinfo-wars-a-taxonomy-of-information-warfare; Dean Jackson, “Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and ‘Fake News.’” National Endowment for Democracy ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/; Judit Bayer et al. “Disinformation and propaganda — impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States.” Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament [europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608864_EN.pdf](https://europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf)

5 “Propaganda.” Encyclopedia Britannica [britannica.com/topic/propaganda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda); Also see *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo Eds., Oxford (2013) for a detailed discussion of propaganda and its various aspects.

6 Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, “The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money.” *The Interpreter* [interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf](https://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf); Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It.” RAND Corporation [rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html); “Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and ‘Fake News.’” ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/

7 Hossein Derakhshan, “Disinfo Wars: a taxonomy of information warfare.” Truth, Trust and Technology Commission, LSE Media Policy Project blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2019/09/27/disinfo-wars-a-taxonomy-of-information-warfare

an individual, organization or institution.⁸ While malinformation is grounded in truth, facts are often presented or contextualized partially, and are shared with harmful intent.⁹

What is more, disinformation is not necessarily *fake news* in that the latter can refer to isolated incidents of falsehoods or confusion and does not have to advance political goals.¹⁰ Some scholars also define fake news on the basis of its virality and spreadability — that is, not just in terms of its form or content, but in terms of the infrastructures, platforms and participatory cultures that facilitate its circulation.¹¹ In short, fake news can be a particular example of disinformation, but disinformation is a broader, systematic effort with an explicit political agenda.

8 “Fake News’: Disinformation, Misinformation and Mal-Information.” Ethical Journalism Network. ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/tag/fake-news/page/3

9 Cheryl Inreton and Julie Posetti, *Journalism, fake news & disinformation: Handbook for journalism education and training*, Paris : UNESCO, 2008, p. 46

10 Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions.” *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33 (2), 122-139

11 Liliana Bounegru et al., *A Field Guide to ‘Fake News’ and Other Information Disorders*. Public Data Lab (2018) ssrn.com/abstract=3097666

TABLE 1: TYPES OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Propaganda	<p>Systematic effort to deceive and manipulate public opinion for political ends.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Russian claims alleging the U.S. unleashed the novel coronavirus as a biological attack against economic/military rivals.</p>
Disinformation	<p>Intentional and strategic campaigns spreading fabricated/deliberately manipulated information to deceive or mislead the public in order to advance political goals.</p> <p>Objective: Create confusion, sow general distrust, demoralize.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> China's messages suggesting it is helping the European countries in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the E.U. and prosperous European countries are refusing to send aid.</p>
Fake News	<p>Isolated incidents of falsehoods or confusion. Does not have to advance political goals. Viral and spreads easily — enabled by new technology (mobile communication, the internet, social media, etc.).</p> <p><i>Example:</i> The COVID-19 pandemic is related to 5G technologies.</p>
Malinformation	<p>Information that is true, or partially true, used deliberately to inflict harm on a person, organization, or a country.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Releasing the name/contact information of people infected by the coronavirus in Russia to blame them for the local outbreak and shame them for traveling.</p>
Misinformation	<p>Inaccurate or wrong information that is the result of an unintentional mistake.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Eating fresh garlic can prevent a coronavirus infection.</p>
Public Diplomacy	<p>Communication of an international actor's culture, values and policies to foreign publics.</p> <p>Objective: Inform, establish trust, empower.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> USAID funding to help build hospitals and train medical staff in Africa or Latin America to prepare them for disasters and health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>
Soft Power	<p>Getting others to want the outcomes you want through attraction, persuasion and legitimacy.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Civil society organizations in authoritarian countries referring to condemnation by U.S. officials/human rights organizations to resist their governments' suppression of free speech in response to the pandemic.</p>

Public diplomacy and *soft power* also merit a mention here, since they are sometimes used interchangeably or in conjunction with *propaganda* and *disinformation*, particularly by actors that are hostile to the United States. Public diplomacy refers to a political actor's management of its image and the related international environment through communication of culture, values and policies to foreign publics.¹² Most international affairs and public diplomacy scholars categorize international broadcasting that adheres to proper journalistic standards as a type of public diplomacy.¹³ Soft power, on the other hand, refers to "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" through attraction, persuasion and perceived legitimacy.¹⁴ Public diplomacy is the primary mechanism through which soft power resources and tools are mobilized and put into action. Put another way, soft power refers to the capacity to exert influence over ideas, whereas public diplomacy is one way it is operationalized. While public diplomacy and soft power work to establish trust, inform and empower, disinformation works to disempower, demoralize and confuse.

12 This definition is based on the composite of definitions provided by Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past," CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy (2009); Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, PublicAffairs (2004); and James Pamment, *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: A Comparative Study of Policy and Practice*, Routledge (2013).

13 See Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past." Monroe Price, *Media and Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and Its Challenge to State Power*, The MIT Press (2002); Gary D. Rawnsley, "Introduction to 'International Broadcasting and Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century'" *Media and Communication* 4(2), 42-45; Shawn Powers and Tan Samuel-Azran, "A microeconomic approach to international broadcasting." *The Journal of International Communication* 21 (1), 58-77.

14 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power*.

Taxonomy of Disinformation

Disinformation relies on manipulated content. However, this content does not need to be inaccurate. Disinformation can start out as true or accurate information (though it certainly does not have to be), which is selectively edited, misrepresented, decontextualized, or reframed to appear as something completely different. This manipulation can be subtle or very blunt. Another type of disinformation is censorship that aims to control the narrative through the suppression of speech and media.

We propose the following taxonomy for the major types of disinformation.¹⁵

- 1. FABRICATED CONTENT:** Information that is entirely false and made up.
- 2. MANIPULATED CONTENT:** Genuine information or imagery altered to deceive the audience.
- 3. MISLEADING CONTENT:** Selective or partial use of genuine information to create a false impression of the truth.
- 4. FALSE CONNECTIONS:** Headlines or visuals that do not support the content and mislead the audience by capturing their attention first.
- 5. FALSE CONTEXT:** Genuine content shared with fabricated background information or framed in a way that misrepresents the truth.
- 6. “IMPOSTER” CONTENT:** Impersonation of genuine sources to manage the audience’s perceptions.
- 7. CENSORSHIP:** Attempt to restrict the free flow of accurate and genuine information in order to replace it with distortions or fabrications shaping false narratives.

¹⁵ This taxonomy is partially based on “10 Types of Mis And Disinformation” infographic by Tacstrat, available at groundviews.org/2018/05/12/infographic-10-types-of-mis-and-disinformation/

Addressing Disinformation

Disinformation can interfere directly with political processes by dominating and distorting the public discourse and undermining policy-making.¹⁶ The most significant achievement of disinformation over the past decade is what RAND Corporation calls “Truth Decay” — the diminishing role of facts, data and analysis in civil discourse and the policymaking process. Truth Decay is characterized by four trends:

1. Increasing disagreement about facts and data;
2. Blurring of the line between opinion and fact;
3. Increasing relative volume of opinion compared to fact; and
4. Declining trust in institutions that used to be looked to as authoritative sources of factual information.¹⁷

Truth Decay, in turn, enables more disinformation by producing an environment rife with opportunity to create and successfully disseminate untrue or manipulated content.

Disinformation, therefore, poses a direct threat to the mission of international news media by undermining their effort to inform audiences and foster citizen engagement in their respective markets. However, given the sophisticated methods and technologies involved in the production, dissemination and consumption of disinformation, there are no easy solutions to addressing this threat. What is more, any response to disinformation has to take into consideration possible unintended consequences, some of which might compound the problem by, for instance, confusing audiences further.

¹⁶ “Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States.” [europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU\(2019\)608864_EN.pdf](http://europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/608864/IPOL_STU(2019)608864_EN.pdf)

¹⁷ “Fighting Disinformation Online: A Database of Web Tools.” RAND Corporation rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation.html

USAGM and Disinformation

Over the years, as its operational environment changed and the nature of national security threats evolved, the U.S. Agency for Global Media has itself evolved to improve its ability to address the new and not-so-new challenges its networks encounter around the world. Nevertheless, the core objective behind USAGM’s mission remains unchanged — providing access to accurate and balanced information in support of freedom and democracy around the world. With five networks, 61 broadcast languages and a weekly audience of over 350 million¹⁸—most of whom reside in markets rife with disinformation — USAGM is one of the primary global actors in addressing the threats of intentionally manipulated information, whether on the global or the local scale.

The effort is often described in defensive terms, such as countering fabrications and responding to harmful narratives.¹⁹ While part of USAGM’s work does explicitly counter falsehoods, the organization is also operating proactively, focusing on efforts that help prevent disinformation campaigns and diminish their effectiveness in the first place. As we discuss throughout the paper and illustrate with case studies, USAGM addresses the threat of disinformation by providing high quality fact-based reporting to the public, following exemplary journalistic standards, helping build societal resilience, promoting media literacy and supporting internet freedom worldwide. In short, by serving its mission, USAGM is being proactive — and not simply reactive — in addressing this issue.

What is more, because of its role in promoting and enabling free and unbiased media, USAGM’s networks, language services and reporters often become targets of smear campaigns and other disinformation attacks, intended to undercut their credibility, and make it difficult—and sometimes, outright dangerous — for them to report or distribute their

18 “FY 2019 Performance and Accountability Report.” U.S. Agency for Global Media, November 2019 [usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/USAGM-FY2019-PAR.pdf](https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/USAGM-FY2019-PAR.pdf)

19 “United States Efforts to Counter Russian Disinformation and Malign Influence.” Hearing of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, July 10, 2019 [appropriations.house.gov/events/hearings/united-states-efforts-to-counter-russian-disinformation-and-malign-influence](https://www.appropriations.house.gov/events/hearings/united-states-efforts-to-counter-russian-disinformation-and-malign-influence)

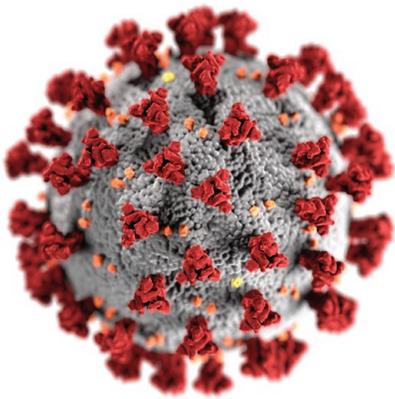
content. By fending off such campaigns and by continuing their timely and quality coverage, USAGM and its networks are working hard to address disinformation of all types around the world.

What follows is a brief sampling of disinformation examples compiled through over 25 interviews with USAGM current and former staff and reporters.²⁰ The discussion in the “Impact” sections is based on the rubric laid out by USAGM’s Impact Model, used to measure the agency’s ability to inform, engage and connect with its audiences.²¹ Several of these examples are covered in greater detail in case studies in the Appendix. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations most directly applicable to public service media organizations, based on expert interviews and a review of relevant academic and policy literature.²² The appendix includes five case studies featuring in-depth analyses of the ways in which USAGM networks and language services address disinformation campaigns and related attacks against their staff and their work.

20 Please note that in the following sections, we use the term disinformation as broadly defined, encompassing propaganda as well as fake news, following the implied conceptualizations provided by many of our interviewees.

21 To learn more about USAGM’s Impact Model, please see “Impact and Results,” U.S. Agency for Global Media usagm.gov/our-work/impact-and-results

22 Daniel Fried and Alina Polyakova, “Democratic Defense Against Disinformation.” Atlantic Council (Washington, DC) atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/democratic-defense-against-disinformation; Marcus Kolga, “Stemming the VIRUS: Understanding and responding to the threat of Russian disinformation.” Macdonald-Laurier Institute (Ottawa) thecrri.ca/research-paper/stemming-the-virus-understanding-and-responding-to-the-threat-of-russian-disinformation; Sophia Ignatidou, “EU-US Cooperation on Tackling Disinformation.” Chatham House (London) chathamhouse.org/publication/eu-us-cooperation-tackling-disinformation; Alexandre Alaphilippe et al., “Automated Tackling of Disinformation.” European Parliament (Brussels) [europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/624278/EPRS_STU\(2019\)624278_EN.pdf](https://europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2019/624278/EPRS_STU(2019)624278_EN.pdf); Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer et al. “Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies.” Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (Paris)



Recent Examples of USAGM Activities to Address Disinformation

COVID-19

Global

Disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic focuses on issues such as: its dubious origins (bioweapon, bananas); actors involved (United States, George Soros, Bill Gates, Lugar Lab in Georgia); alleged connection to Chinese ethnicity (Sinophobia); the extent of the outbreak (as governments try to hide true numbers of infected); the inflation of response effectiveness (China trying to “whitewash” its response to the pandemic); and alleged cures and prevention methods (vodka, saunas, tea, etc.).

ACTION: All networks covered the pandemic extensively, providing up to date, factual and evidence-based information. VOA’s Polygraph.info created a daily fact-checking and debunking feature, also highlighting credible information sources. In Russia, several RFE/RL services fact-checked and debunked a misleading TV report that aired on a top government-affiliated channel and continue featuring content that helps build media literacy.

In China, RFA is covering Beijing’s attempts to shift the narrative away from its faulty handling of the crisis to promoting confusion and conspiracy theories blaming the U.S. In Iran, RFE/RL’s Radio Farda has been providing more accurate estimates of the extent of the outbreak in the country, while fact-checking statements and numbers from government officials.

TYPES: Fabrications | Manipulated and misleading content | False connections and context | Imposter content | Censorship

IMPACT: This is an ongoing and evolving story. The full impact of USAGM coverage will likely be visible only in hindsight.

Driving the news agenda

Coverage by USAGM networks has been picked up by local outlets and garnered record-levels of interest and engagement on digital and

social media platforms. In Russia and Iran, RFE/RL's reports debunked government's falsehoods about the crisis. In Cuba, OCB has used its platform to amplify independent voices and promote solutions reporting on the island.

Digital traffic/video views increase

USAGM networks saw a record-breaking increase in their digital traffic since the beginning of the pandemic, which can be attributed to their COVID-19 coverage. VOA's coronavirus content, for example, has garnered over 200 million video views across the four main social platforms, while on March 18, VOA websites experienced one of their highest volumes of traffic.

VENEZUELAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Venezuela/Latin America

In an attempt to cover up Venezuela's dire economic situation, the Maduro government misrepresents the extent of the Venezuelan refugee crisis and blames the U.S.

ACTION: USAGM added staff to expand audio, video, and digital coverage of the region. VOA launched "Venezuela 360," a 30-minute weekly multimedia current affairs program, to address this crisis and related issues. VOA's Spanish Service provides extensive coverage of the issue and, where possible, of the plight of the refugees leaving Venezuela and trying to make a living in neighboring countries. The service also dedicated resources to explanatory and solutions journalism, discussing with experts ways to cope with the crisis as well as potential solutions to its underlying causes.

TYPES: Fabricated content | Misleading content | False context

IMPACT:

Digital traffic increase/Growing the affiliate network

Digital traffic for Venezuela alone went up by 62% in fiscal year 2019. Sixty-four affiliates broadcast VOA content in Venezuela and close to 800 stations do so across the entire Latin American region.



Venezuela 360 hosts Carolina Valladares and Nathaly Salas Guaithero.



“Prisoners in Their Own Homeland”
illustration by RFA’s Rebel Pepper.

UYGHUR DETENTION CAMPS

Global; especially prominent in Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia

China hides evidence and its objectives of internment camps holding over a million Uyghurs and other Muslims. Beijing tries to silence all coverage of the issue, and when it cannot prevent coverage, the CCP presents the internment as a necessary step to prevent extremism and provide vocational training to a vulnerable population.

ACTION: Radio Free Asia was the first to report on the existence of and conditions in the camps. Extensive partnership between RFA, RFE/RL, MBN and VOA helped share content for their respective markets and ensure continued attention to the subject, particularly in countries where it receives little to no attention from the local and national media.

TYPES: Censorship | Manipulated content | False context

IMPACT:

Driving the news agenda/Unique coverage of important events relevant to USAGM mission

RFA’s pioneering coverage and spotlight on the issue has resulted in the story being picked up by leading media and major governments in the West. In MENA and Central Asia, where China has successfully censored most coverage or mentions of the issue, USAGM networks are often among the very few breaking the silence and providing firsthand, original reporting on it.

TIBETAN CENSORSHIP

Tibet/China/Nepal

China has imposed a complete national blackout on all reporting of Tibetan issues, and attempts to do the same in other countries within its influence. Instead, Beijing promotes an alternative view of reality, where Tibetans are happy and thriving as part of China. In May 2019, several reporters from Nepal's national news agency translated an AP report on Dalai Lama's recovery after hospitalization. In response to Chinese pressure, the Nepalese government started a probe against these journalists.

ACTION: VOA Tibetan is one of the very few media outlets not controlled by Beijing that provides coverage of Tibet and Tibetan issues in the Tibetan language. The service provides much-needed independent reporting for an audience that has little to no access to it and fills the information void that Beijing tries to create and exploit. VOA Tibetan covered the case of Nepalese censorship by interviewing one of the reporters involved in the case and a representative of the Nepal Journalists Association.

TYPES: Censorship

IMPACT:

Driving the news agenda/Unique coverage of important events relevant to USAGM mission

China is using its economic and political influence in Nepal and other neighboring countries to silence all reporting on Tibet. However, there is a large Tibetan community in Nepal, and VOA Tibetan's reporting helps overcome this information blackout for such diasporan communities as well as for those still in Tibet itself. By providing constant coverage of the region, the service prevents Beijing from successfully exploiting the information void to fill it with its own narratives.



མ་རིའི་ཚོས་དང་རང་མོས་སྐྱེན་མའི་འཁོད་དོན་དང་བྱེད་ལས།

A VOA Tibetan service video news broadcast.



Women hold their identity cards as they queue to cast their votes in the presidential election, in Giheta, Gitega province, Burundi Wednesday, May 20, 2020. (AP Photo/Berthier Mugiraneza)



Ethiopia prime minister Abiy Ahmed. (AP Photo/Themba Hadebe)

BURUNDI U.S. VISA FAKES

Burundi

Rumors and false information spread claiming that the U.S. Embassy in Bujumbura was giving out visas to anyone wishing to visit the United States in order to confuse the local public about American visa requirements and procedures.

ACTION: VOA Central Africa (Kirundi/Kinyarwanda) Service reached out to the Embassy and sources in Washington, D.C. to verify this information. VOA produced a story clarifying the visa procedures and refuting these rumors.

TYPES: Fabricated content

IMPACT:

Increased understanding of US foreign policy and current events

Helped clarify the visa procedures for the public.

Increased understanding of current events

Contributed to general awareness about fake news.

ETHIOPIAN ELECTIONS

Ethiopia

In late 2019, false information spread online reporting the Ethiopian election board had postponed the national elections, causing an uproar among democratic activists and the public.

ACTION: VOA Amharic contacted officials and activists in the country to clarify the timeline and to confirm that there was no such decision made. Discussed the case on one of the very first episodes of the weekly “Gabina Fact-Checking” show, featuring a panel of experts who clarified the facts and debunked the false information.

TYPES: Fabricated content

IMPACT:**Increased understanding of current events**

Helped establish the basic facts on the issue, contributed to the launch of the weekly “Gabina Fact-Checking” segment that helps enhance media literacy, political awareness, and overall civic resilience in Ethiopia.

AL-SHABAB IN SOMALIA

Somalia/East Africa

In February 2020, the Islamist militant group al-Shabab released false and misleading information justifying a recent attack in Kenya by blaming the government for an unrelated historical incident. Other media uncritically spread this extremist message further.

ACTION: VOA Somali reports on al-Shabab, but never repeats their speeches, as they are highly inflammatory. In this case, the service covered the incident and its human cost. While it reported on al-Shabab’s statement, the service also contextualized it to explain the bigger picture and the way in which the group is distorting and manipulating facts to create its desired effect. This reporting demonstrated the techniques the group is trying to use for recruitment and incitement to further violence.

TYPES: Fabricated content | Manipulated content | Misleading content | False connections | False context

IMPACT:**Impact on People/Increased understanding of current events**

Too early to demonstrate the outcome of this particular story, but in the past, VOA Somali reporting has been credited for increasing defections from al-Shabab’s ranks. What is more, once former fighters defect, VOA Somali’s Harun Maruf is the first reporter to whom many of them want to talk.



A member of Kenya’s security forces walks past a damaged police post after an attack by al-Shabab extremists in the settlement of Kamuthe in Garissa county, Kenya Monday, Jan. 13, 2020. The militants from neighboring Somalia attacked the settlement killing three teachers, setting fire to a police post, and destroying a telecommunications mast, police said in a report seen by The Associated Press. (AP Photo)

Recommendations

1. Focus resources on unique, unbiased and compelling content.

One way to counter truth decay is to increase access to factual information. In the operational context of public service broadcasters that means increased investment in unique, vetted, fact-based content for populations that are vulnerable to disinformation in order to prevent, to the extent possible, the reach and success of potential disinformation campaigns. Where disinformation campaigns are already under way, fact-based and compelling reporting can help clarify points of confusion, debunk falsehoods and displace adversary narratives. This recommendation was by far the most frequent suggestion offered by the reporters in our interviews.

Several other suggestions for creating and increasing the production of compelling news included the following:

LIVE STREAMING OF EVENTS provides the audience with direct and unfiltered access to current events and leaves little room for manipulation or distortion of information.

In other cases, in-depth background, contextual explanation, and analysis on certain stories provides the great value added for the audience.

EXPLANATORY AND SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM are proven approaches to empowerment and building civic resilience, not only because they help increase contextual awareness of issues but also provide clear and concrete suggestions for what the audience can do to improve their status quo.

AMPLE INTEGRATION OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC), with appropriate authentication and contextualization, makes coverage more engaging for and more directly relevant to the audience.

Where appropriate, **DEVELOP A NICHE BY REPORTING ON SMALL, LOCAL STORIES** that matter most directly to the audience.

Clever production and creation of timely, **SHAREABLE CONTENT**.

2. Distribute content efficiently, keeping in mind platforms and audiences.

Prioritizing the creation of compelling content does not, in itself, address the issue of disinformation. More importantly, the intended audience needs to consume that content, making effective distribution critical.

The key considerations in enhancing content distribution include:

OVERCOMING INFORMATION OVERLOAD AND ATTENTION DEFICIT:

The sheer volume of available information can create a situation where public media content simply gets lost in all the noise. Vying for audiences' attention presents an even bigger challenge as media consumption increasingly moves to digital spaces, where it is much more crowded and competitive and where algorithms, self-selection, or government interference often create isolated echo chambers. To cut through all the noise and circumvent censorship, public service media need to remain in step with the latest technological developments and trends, while ensuring that they are delivering content at a time and in a format most appropriate for each of the various target segments among their audiences. This is particularly important when the audience is international.

MAINTAINING TRUST AND CREDIBILITY: One way to remain relevant and to maintain and further increase audience reach despite information overload is through the continued cultivation of trust and credibility. Despite its editorial independence, the branded nature of much of USAGM's content means it is often associated with the United States. This is true for other international public service media, as well. Depending on the context, audiences can perceive this as a positive or a negative factor, which then enhances or diminishes the credibility of the media organization itself. These media can sustain and further enhance their credibility by continuing to maintain the highest journalistic standards to deliver the most accurate, unbiased, engaging and compelling reporting to audiences worldwide. Among other solutions, the media organizations can also increase their responsiveness to audience feedback, enhance their engagement and collaboration with their audiences and increase

the transparency of their editorial processes, such as explaining certain reporting choices or editorial decisions as part of the story.²³

PROMOTING MEDIA LITERACY: Media literacy is an essential step in building civic resilience and inoculating the public against disinformation. To this end, USAGM launched special media literacy programming, such as “Footage vs. Footage” (Current Time TV) or “Gabina Fact-Checking” (VOA Amharic). Premiered in 2015, the weekly “Footage vs. Footage” TV show dissects numerous fakes and examples of manipulations and biases, helping improve the media literacy of Current Time TV’s audiences so they can more easily recognize mis- and disinformation. VOA Amharic’s “Gabina Fact-Checking” offers a different approach, featuring a fact-checking and correcting segment as part of the youth-focused Gabina radio show. Introducing and expanding such programming can serve as a medium-term step in building civic resilience among the audience. Another promising measure is establishing or expanding collaboration and joint projects with local reporters or organizations that might be working in this area already.

PLATFORM AWARENESS: It is critical to be mindful of the dominant platforms popular among the target audience, whether it is radio or TikTok. As digital avenues for content distribution expand and both platforms and audiences become more sophisticated, it will increasingly be essential to create content specifically for each individual social network, aggregator, or device, rather than repackaging existing TV or radio news. The mix of distribution platforms that each language service can employ will vary dramatically, depending on the size of the service and the sophistication of the markets they serve. Some larger services should diversify and expand into emerging or regional platforms, while smaller teams might need to narrow their focus to just one or two platforms already dominant in their particular region. If resources allow, however, services might benefit from exploring new and emerging

23 For more on building trust and credibility, see the Trusting News Project, trustingnews.org/start-earning-trust/ and Craig Silverman, “The best ways for publishers to build credibility through transparency.” American Press Institute Strategy Studies series, September 24, 2014 americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/strategy-studies/transparency-credibility/single-page/

platforms to expand their reach.²⁴ As private companies control most platforms, their own rules may undermine media outlets' ability to gain distribution there. Unlike democratic governments, distribution companies are not transparent in their standards or algorithms. Moreover, it is not uncommon for countries to restrict access to specific platforms. In that sense, the ability to quickly diversify and readjust the content for platforms that are still available is key to reaching audiences in countries where governments have strong control over the internet. Public service media should continuously train their staff to improve their journalistic agility — the ability to quickly learn the ins and outs of new distribution platforms and have the skills required to produce compelling content on each of them.

3. Enhance and expand cooperation with other broadcasters, reporters and civil society organizations.

Perhaps the single most common message from existing research was the emphasis on disinformation as a whole-of-society problem. As such, organizations involved in combatting disinformation must cooperate and coordinate within and across their professional sectors, whether formally or informally. At the international level, USAGM has been working closely with its partners from DG7, comprising publicly funded international media organizations from seven democratic countries. The agency has also worked out successful models of close collaboration with local independent media in markets affected by disinformation. Examples of such partnerships include USAGM networks' collaboration with KLOOP media in Kyrgyzstan and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, as well as DG7 collaborations such as "Project Origin" and "TrulyMedia" shared digital content verification and fact-checking portals²⁵ Such partnerships can enhance public service broadcasters' efforts to promote free media and media literacy around the world, as well as further boost

²⁴ "Future of Distribution." Office of Policy and Research, U.S. Agency for Global Media, June 2020 usagm.gov/2020/06/02/an-analysis-of-the-future-of-distribution-the-next-frontier-in-delivering-publicly-funded-global-media/

²⁵ "DG7 international public service media organizations launch project against disinformation." U.S. Agency for Global Media, December 5, 2019 usagm.gov/2019/12/05/dg7-international-public-service-media-organizations-launch-project-against-disinformation/

their credibility by demonstrating local engagement and empowerment of local reporters. More importantly, such collaboration can help offset costs for public broadcasters already operating under tight budgetary constraints. At the same time, it is essential to vet any potential partners thoroughly, making sure they are reputable organizations with independent editorial policies, or, ideally, are completely independent bodies with missions closely aligned to those of public service media.

More broadly, one way USAGM has built a strong relationship with local media around the world is by establishing an extensive network of local partners and affiliates that rebroadcast and help distribute its content. Building and expanding such networks is crucial for ensuring the public's access to independent content as well as for supporting local reporters and media organizations, particularly in hostile environments. Another important step by USAGM's Office of Business Development was to establish no-cost partnerships with media NGOs in the U.S. and abroad — such as IREX or Digital Communication Network — and offer trainings on investigative reporting, fact checking and verification tools. Offering such training opportunities to partner NGOs and affiliate organizations can have a large multiplier effect across all markets, particularly when these trainings incorporate the use of circumvention, security and privacy tools, like the ones developed by OTF, to ensure that organizations and reporters most in need of this technology have access and know how to use it.

4. Expand fact-checking, where appropriate.

While there is no consensus among the reporters themselves, researchers are nearly unanimous in emphasizing the need for fact-checking, whether conducted by official agencies or civil society entities. Fact-checking operations identify and correct inaccuracies and inconsistencies in specific events as well as broader disinformation campaigns. They also serve to educate the public and help improve media literacy by raising awareness about the various ways in which disinformation spreads and about the methods and tools available to identify and debunk it. In recent years, in response to growing disinformation threats, there has been a proliferation of fact-checking initiatives and organizations run by

reporters and major media organizations, as well as nonprofits.²⁶ Most of these efforts — despite some being funded by big tech companies — operate in isolation. The challenge now is to develop a plan for scalability, especially across languages, while also improving the quality of automated tools.²⁷

USAGM’s various services have, for years, worked to fact-check and debunk inaccurate information circulating in their various markets. More recently, USAGM created Polygraph.info and Factograph.info — stand-alone fact-checking services focusing mostly on Russia and the greater Eurasia region. VOA and RFE/RL journalists research and analyze quotes, stories and reports distributed by government officials, government-sponsored media and other high-profile individuals. The reporters separate fact from fiction, add context and debunk falsehoods. This area offers another opportunity for collaboration with other media and civic organizations as it can help save costs and expand the effort further to additional markets. A good example of such collaboration at USAGM is the partnership with the U.S. Embassy in Chisinau to organize a residential fellowship at the Polygraph office in Washington, D.C. for several Moldovan reporters.

CHALLENGES: There has been much debate in the academic, expert and journalist community about the effectiveness of fact-checking. Some argue that fact-checking each and every minor falsehood diffuses resources and can help bring exposure and credibility to otherwise obscure reports. This would make fact-checking counter-productive, as it would attract more attention to the inaccurate information, disseminating it further and causing even more confusion.²⁸ Others point out the futility of the effort, arguing that the corrected/checked information will only reach those who are already predisposed to

26 “Fighting Disinformation Online.” rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation.html; Emily Bell, “The Fact-Check Industry.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Fall 2019 cjr.org/special_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php

27 Emily Bell. “The Fact-Check Industry.” cjr.org/special_report/fact-check-industry-twitter.php

28 *A Field Guide to ‘Fake News’ and Other Information Disorders* ssrn.com/abstract=3097666

accepting the correction. Disinformation and fake news tend to circulate in closed information loops that are resistant to information from outside, particularly if that information counters the narratives and beliefs already established within that “community,” rendering the correction futile, if not counter-productive.²⁹

Another major concern is the “backfire effect,” which some researchers found made matters worse: corrections challenge the deeply held beliefs and views of the intended audiences, who then hold on to those views even stronger and ultimately experience greater misperceptions about the topic.³⁰ Yet, other research has demonstrated that people often refrain from actively using analytic thinking when consuming information, which makes them more susceptible to disinformation while also providing an opportunity to change their mind when exposed to a correction.³¹

While these concerns merit attention, most researchers and experts tend to agree on the importance of establishing some sort of factual reference point or baseline with regards to rumors and disinformation.³² In many markets, USAGM and its international public service media partners serve as this verification baseline, as audiences check official communication from their governments against coverage by international public broadcasters, whom they trust. International public broadcasters are

29 For an extensive discussion, see Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies.” *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8 (2015), 327–333; and “Post-Truth Populism: The French Anti-Gender Theory Movement and Cross-Cultural Similarities.” *Communication Culture & Critique*, 11 (2018), 35–52.

30 Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions.” *Political Behavior*, (2010) 32, 303–330

31 Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, “Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning.” *Cognition*, Vol. 188, July 2019, 39–50; Thomas Wood and Ethan Porter, “The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes’ Steadfast Factual Adherence.” *Political Behavior* (2019) 41, 135–163

32 For examples of this discussion see Alan Greenblatt, “The Future of Fact-Checking: Moving ahead in political accountability journalism.” American Press Institute Strategy Studies series, April 4, 2017 americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/white-papers/future-of-fact-checking/single-page; Lucas Graves, “A smarter conversation about how (and why) fact-checking matters.” Predictions for Journalism 2020, Nieman Lab, December 2019 niemanlab.org/2019/12/a-smarter-conversation-about-how-and-why-fact-checking-matters/; Richard W. Stevenson, “How We Fact-Check in an Age of Misinformation.” Understanding the Times, *The New York Times*, July 30, 2019 nytimes.com/2019/07/30/reader-center/fact-checking-politics-presidential-election.html.

well positioned to play a significant role in maintaining this baseline and expanding it to markets where they might not yet enjoy that status.

5. Expose disinformation campaigns.

While fact-checking refers to confirming or debunking specific statements or stories, exposing disinformation campaigns refers to shedding light on broader, organized and systematized efforts by certain political actors to confuse, demoralize and mislead a public. Although some attribute this task to government agencies, independent media have an important role in exposing disinformation campaigns and bringing them to public attention. Investigative reporting and collaboration with a variety of organizations around the world can help uncover specific campaigns and important background, while international public broadcasters' dissemination infrastructure can help spread the word about them, educate publics about ongoing disinformation campaigns and their perpetrators, and help improve overall media literacy.

6. Promote code of ethics and standards for journalists.

USAGM networks already follow the highest journalistic standards in their reporting and the agency has stringent controls in place, including its firewall and extensive training, to ensure independence and adherence to ethical conduct within the organization. International public media should promote codes of ethics in local markets with weak or no traditions of such codes and help train local reporters on these matters. They can also support international efforts, such as the “Journalism Trust Initiative” — led by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) in partnership with the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the Global Editors Network (GEN) and Agence France Presse (AFP) — which aims to set benchmarking standards for self-assessment and voluntary disclosure of media outlets according to the guidelines of the European Committee for Standardization.³³ Such standards can help limit the spread of mis- and disinformation while also building trust and credibility among the audience.

³³ “Standard setting as an open, inclusive, tested and scalable approach.” Journalism Trust Initiative jti-rsf.org/en/#!the-process; “CEN Workshop Agreement: Journalism Trust Initiative.” European Committee for Standardization cen.eu/News/Workshops/Pages/WS-2019-018.aspx

7. Fight access interruptions and web censorship.

Censorship and internet access restrictions are becoming more and more widespread around the world, it is important for media to prepare response strategies and circumvention tools in advance, while educating their staff and audience about the availability of these tools and how to use them.

China alone spends billions of dollars each year to maintain its complex censorship and surveillance apparatus, while Russia and Iran are each investing hundreds of millions of dollars to build what are fundamentally “national intranets.” More importantly, many regimes have recently demonstrated that they are not concerned about the cost of internet shutdowns for their GDPs, which the Open Technology Fund estimates to average about \$20 million per day. They have also proven their ability to enact selective shutdowns, essentially cutting off access to everything but their own information outlets, thus ensuring that their own message and disinformation gets to their intended audiences.³⁴ While technology can help fight increasingly sophisticated censorship and surveillance techniques by repressive regimes, there is no silver bullet: it is important to prepare several tools and options for response before a government pulls their switch.

The Open Technology Fund, which is a USAGM grantee, provides a sizeable set of tools to address such challenges. OTF works to deliver uncensored access to the internet to individuals living in information-restrictive countries and protecting journalists, sources and audiences from repressive surveillance and digital attacks so they can safely create and consume USAGM and other independent content.

The tools include:

- VPNs, such as Psiphon, to circumvent internet blocks and deliver information via encrypted internet channels;

³⁴ See the presentation by Libby Liu, then-CEO of the Open Technology Fund, at the USAGM Board of Governors meeting on March 12, 2020: usagm.gov/2020/03/12/meeting-of-the-board-of-governors/

- Secure document storage and sharing systems;
- Emerging tools to circumvent “the Great Chinese Firewall”, based on research, supplemented by machine learning techniques;
- Detectors of mobile subscriber surveillance technology (IMSI-catchers) operations. These help repressive regimes during political protests to identify, track and intercept the communications of protestors, journalists and opposition groups to target, censor and/or arrest them;
- Open sourced peer-to-peer tools such as Briar and Ouinet, to facilitate information access even during internet shutdowns.

It is important to ensure continued investment in the development of such tools to be able to address the ever-evolving sophistication of internet censorship and access interruptions. Additionally, public service media organizations can help ensure availability of and access to such tools through partnerships as well as training initiatives for independent media organizations, reporters and free media activists around the world.

Appendix – Case Studies

Case Study 1: The coronavirus infodemic³⁵

The first human cases of the virus called SARS-CoV-2 — or “coronavirus” — which causes COVID-19 were reported in Wuhan, China in late 2019. The outbreak of the disease spawned a number of disinformation campaigns around the world, leading the World Health Organization to characterize it as an “infodemic.”³⁶ While these campaigns are quite different and seem to originate in different places, several major themes and approaches have emerged across all markets. The challenge for USAGM networks and language services was to address these false narratives, conspiracies and often downright dangerous health advice without amplifying these falsehoods or creating further confusion among the public.

REGIONS AFFECTED: Global

PERPETRATORS: Wide variety, ranging from state (Iran, China, Cuba) or government-affiliated actors (Russian TV and bot nets), to unknown groups and individuals (global).

METHODS: Various, ranging from prime time TV reports on major channels to rumors spreading via social media and private messengers.

TIME FRAME: Late December 2019–present

DETAILS:

Early on, in December 2019, major social networks in China started blocking virus-related keywords such as “Unknown Wuhan Pneumonia” and “Wuhan Seafood Market.” The moderation rules blocking this content

³⁵ This case study is based on contributions from and interviews with Andrey Cherkasov (Current Time TV), Niusha Boghrati (RFE/RL's Radio Farda), Taras Ilkiv (RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service), Bruce Jacobs (RFE/RL), Zac Kidwell (RFA), Deirdre Kline (MBN), Ivan Lopez (OCB), Ia Meurmishvili (VOA Georgian), Barry Newhouse (VOA New Center), Alisher Sidikov (RFE/RL's Uzbek Service), and Tolkun Umaraliev (Current Time TV).

³⁶ “WHO says fake coronavirus claims causing ‘infodemic.’” BBC News, February 13, 2020 [bbc.com/news/technology-51497800](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51497800)

were broad and could have restricted important messages related to disease information and prevention as well, a study by The Citizen Lab suggests.³⁷

Disinformation and conspiracy themes surrounding the virus include the following:

- The virus was artificially manufactured, developed and deployed by the U.S. as a biological weapon against China, its primary competitor.³⁸ Another version of this theory suggests that the virus was being developed at an American lab in China and got out accidentally. Additional claims related to these conspiracies feature Bill Gates or George Soros being involved in this nefarious plan.
- In the early days of the epidemic, one conspiracy theory floating in Russian-speaking markets suggested bananas could be spreading the virus. Some markets (very prominently in Uzbekistan) reported banana prices going down as demand plummeted.
- Governments tried to dismiss the threat and hide the true extent of the spread and the risks involved — as in China and Iran.
- Once the epidemic was evident in China, the government tried to exaggerate the extent and effectiveness of its response.
- The State Department linked one disinformation campaign about COVID-19 to thousands of social media accounts operating in different languages, traceable to Russia.³⁹ A Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative called the allegations “deliberate falsehoods,” while the

37 Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “Censored Contagion: How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media.” The Citizen Lab, March 3, 2020 citizenlab.ca/2020/03/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-is-managed-on-chinese-social-media/

38 “Coronavirus Is Used against Russia and China.” EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 7, 2020 euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-is-used-against-russia-and-china

39 “U.S. Officials Link COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign To Russian Proxy Accounts.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 22, 2020. rferl.org/a/u-s-officials-link-covid-19-disinformation-campaign-to-russian-proxy-accounts/30448927.html

country’s president Vladimir Putin said that false rumors about the coronavirus in Russia mainly originated abroad.⁴⁰

- In Russia, the government and state-run media promoted a narrative praising the country’s success in containing the pandemic and contrasting that success with the situation in the West, particularly the United States. To support this narrative, the government and the media maintained Russian doctors and other medical workers, as well as their medical facilities, were well prepared and had all the necessary equipment to address the unexpected challenges of the pandemic. They also offered distorted statistics that many independent experts said underestimated the actual number of COVID-19 cases and specifically undercounted the death rate in the country.⁴¹
- In Georgia, “Lugar Research Center,” a joint US-Georgian lab conducting biological and public health research was accused, yet again, of being involved in the origin and spread of the virus.⁴²
- Some authoritarian countries, such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and North Korea claimed they were “coronavirus-free”, registering no official COVID-19 cases and actively trying to cover up or distort any evidence of an outbreak within their borders. Turkmenistan and North Korea maintained this position as late as in July 2020, despite having taken strict measures presumably to contain the pandemic.

IMPACT: The infodemic fueled panic and distrust and stoked xenophobic, Sinophobic, as well as anti-American sentiments. In some cases, it may have contributed to the spread of the virus (as in China or Iran, due to censorship and secrecy) and unrelated deaths due to bad health

40 “Putin Says Fake Coronavirus Rumors ‘Organized From Abroad.’” *The Moscow Times*, March 4, 2020. themoscowtimes.com/2020/03/04/putin-says-fake-coronavirus-rumors-organized-from-abroad-a69522

41 “A Coronavirus Mystery Explained: Moscow Has 1,700 Extra Deaths.” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2020 nytimes.com/2020/05/11/world/europe/coronavirus-deaths-moscow.html; “Russia Is Boasting About Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving.” *The Moscow Times*, May 14, 2020 themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/08/russia-is-boasting-about-low-coronavirus-deaths-the-numbers-are-deceiving-a70220

42 “A US-funded lab in Tbilisi, Georgia fights COVID-19 — and Russian disinformation.” *Coda Story*, March 18, 2020 codastory.com/waronscience/lab-georgia-coronavirus/

advice (as in Iran, where several dozen died of alcohol poisoning).⁴³ The disinformation affected demand for some products (bananas and Chinese food) and might have contributed to inter-ethnic violence (as in the case of violence against the Dungans in Kazakhstan).⁴⁴

USAGM RESPONSE: USAGM networks’ response varied, depending on service and region. All networks ramped up their coverage of the latest developments surrounding the pandemic, as well as providing a sustained stream of fact-based information and reliable public health advice, featuring experts and representatives from key public health organizations. In some cases, language services opted to call out and debunk false and misleading information. Some highlights of USAGM coverage include the following:

- As early as in December 2019, the RFA Chinese Service started reporting on the “unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan.” Soon after, the service put together a hub page for all related stories as well as a map tracking the spread of the disease. RFA language services extensively covered the response to the virus (and earlier — the lack thereof) by officials in the region, as well as how the epidemic affected various populations in the region, including prisoners and the Uyghurs. The deadly coronavirus dominated coverage of all RFA’s nine language services in February and March 2020. Later in March, as the blame-game between China and the U.S. escalated, RFA was among the first to report on Beijing’s attempts to improve its international image by shifting the narrative away from the failures of its response to promoting conspiracy theories claiming that the outbreak might not have originated in Wuhan and blaming the U.S. for it.
- Many of the language services have featured long explainers on conspiracy theories, breaking down what they are, how they work, why they are so successful and how to detect them. Most of these

43 “At Least 44 Dead from Drinking Toxic Alcohol in Iran after Coronavirus Cure Rumor.” *USA TODAY*, March 10, 2020. [usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/10/44-dead-iran-drinking-toxic-alcohol-fake-coronavirus-cure/5009761002/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/10/44-dead-iran-drinking-toxic-alcohol-fake-coronavirus-cure/5009761002/)

44 “Violence in Kazakhstan Turns Deadly for Dungans.” *The Diplomat*, February 11, 2020. thediplomat.com/2020/02/violence-in-kazakhstan-turns-deadly-for-dungans/

pieces mention current conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic and its origins only in passing and focus more on explanation and detection techniques, thus shifting the emphasis away from amplification to media literacy.

- VOA has devoted extensive time and attention to the issue on all continents. VOA Mandarin provided extensive coverage of the situation, featuring user-generated content (UGC) and first-hand accounts from the epicenter and other affected areas in the region and beyond. The network delivered much needed facts and information to publics with no access due to censorship, covered how governments in the region and beyond tried to manage the situation, and provided a glimpse of the international experiences of many Chinese and other nationals stranded elsewhere because of the epidemic.
- Polygraph.info — USAGM’s English-language fact-checking project — highlighted some of the most egregious fakes and falsehoods about the COVID-19 pandemic on a daily basis.⁴⁵ The project is highlighted on Polygraph.info’s home page as well as on VOA’s dedicated coronavirus landing page.⁴⁶ It features a “Daily Debunk,” addressing a major falsehood in the news and another item specifically from social media (“Social Media Disinfo”), corrects them (stating whether these are “False” or “Misleading”), and links to articles by authoritative sources discussing why these pieces of information are untrue and providing the correct or complete picture.⁴⁷ The daily update also highlights several recent fact-based news stories on the COVID-19 pandemic from other credible news organizations, a list of “myth-busting” projects from other major sources, such as Snopes, AP and the Washington Post, and a list of credible sources providing “Reliable Coronavirus Information,” such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or Johns Hopkins University.

45 Polygraph.Info—Disinformation News & Analysis.” Polygraph.info polygraph.info/p/6906.html

46 See voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak and polygraph.info/

47 For an example, see polygraph.info/a/infodemic-covid-19/30508905.html

- On its dedicated Coronavirus page, VOA also features a “Get the Facts” column that includes highlights and corrections from Polygraph info, as well as other pieces on disinformation and misinformation as reported by VOA and wire agencies.
- RFE/RL provided consistent and accurate coverage of the pandemic, highlighting untold stories and underreported aspects of the crisis from Russia and the region. In Russia, RFE/RL consistently reported on the challenges facing doctors and other medical staff, as the country’s healthcare system began to crumble, particularly in the regions. The Russian Service also kept raising questions about the country’s official statistics, providing explainers on how and where the data might be manipulated.⁴⁸ In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, even as governments denied having any COVID-19 cases in the country, the local RFE/RL were among the first to report on the rising numbers of sick and dead, sometimes having to resort to creative approaches to reporting – such as visiting cemeteries to count the number of bodies being buried in plastic bags.⁴⁹
- Since January, Current Time TV’s “Footage vs. Footage” weekly show had been touching upon the cover-ups and spin by Beijing, the various conspiracy theories surrounding the coronavirus and the concerted effort by Russian state and state-affiliated media to promote openly false information and conspiracy theories about the pandemic to the public in Russia and beyond. The show dedicated most of its airtime in March and April to the coronavirus and focused more specifically on the Russian and Chinese governments’ global disinformation and image management efforts.

48 For examples, see “All The Hospitals Are Full’: Russia’s Health-Care System Scrambles As COVID-19 Cases Rise.” RFE/RL, April 19, 2020 [rferl.org/a/all-the-hospitals-are-full-russia-s-health-care-system-scrambles-as-covid-19-cases-rise/30563990.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/all-the-hospitals-are-full-russia-s-health-care-system-scrambles-as-covid-19-cases-rise/30563990.html); “Mysterious Pneumonia Soaring To ‘A Terrifying Level’ In Russian City Of Ufa.” RFE/RL, July 21, 2020 [rferl.org/a/mysterious-pneumonia-soaring-to-a-terrifying-level-in-russian-city-of-ufa/30739736.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/mysterious-pneumonia-soaring-to-a-terrifying-level-in-russian-city-of-ufa/30739736.html); “Why Is Russia’s Coronavirus Death Toll So Low?” RFE/RL, April 30, 2020 [rferl.org/a/why-is-russia-coronavirus-death-toll-so-low/30585706.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/why-is-russia-coronavirus-death-toll-so-low/30585706.html); “Survey: 1 In 3 Russian Doctors Told To ‘Adjust’ COVID-19 Stats.” RFE/RL, May 22, 2020 [rferl.org/a/one-in-three-russian-doctors-told-to-adjust-covid-19-stats/30629315.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/one-in-three-russian-doctors-told-to-adjust-covid-19-stats/30629315.html)

49 For example, see “At least 45 new graves in one Dushanbe cemetery alone.” (“На камтар аз 45 ғури нав фақат дар як оромгоҳи Душанбе.”) Radio Ozodi, May 15, 2020 [shorturl.at/kuvF2](https://www.shorturl.at/kuvF2)

- “Footage vs. Footage” produced a social media video analyzing the conspiracy theories aired on Russian state and government-affiliated TV networks.⁵⁰ The video inspired RFE/RL’s multimedia team to come up with a step-by-step breakdown and analysis of one of the dubious reports that aired on state-run Channel One Russia. The news report mixed conspiracy theories, unfounded allegations and fabrications with purported facts. RFE/RL’s analysis in English was translated into several other languages and shared by the network’s respective language services.⁵¹
- RFE/RL’s Persian Service, Radio Farda, covered the psychological impact of the outbreak, the country’s response to the news and the lack of transparency from the government. It challenged the disinformation campaign by top Iranian officials — most notably, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — claiming that the outbreak is the result of biological warfare conducted by the U.S. Farda aired numerous programs and interviews to debunk the regime’s conspiracy theory — explaining how it has no basis in scientific fact and why the regime is resorting to such excuses. The service also launched its own investigation to challenge false reporting of numbers by the Iranian regime and prepared an interactive map of Iran documenting COVID-19 cases province by province.
- In Cuba, OCB used commentary from Cuban independent journalists to debunk claims in official media that the virus is a bioweapon developed and deployed by the U.S.
- In Ukraine, RFE/RL’s Ukrainian Service reported on a violent rally staged by residents of the Novi Sanzhary village against the quarantining of Ukrainian coronavirus evacuees from Wuhan, China — the initial epicenter of the outbreak. Ukraine’s Security Service said that a fake email about the coronavirus and the overall lack of

50 “What are the Federal TV channels saying about the coronavirus?” (“Что говорят о коронавирусе на федеральных каналах?”) Current Time TV, February 6, 2020 [facebook.com/1543950879153281/videos/790863761322962/](https://www.facebook.com/1543950879153281/videos/790863761322962/)

51 “Russian State TV Spreads Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories.” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, February 7, 2020. [rferl.org/a/russian-state-tv-spreads-baseless-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories/30422879.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-state-tv-spreads-baseless-coronavirus-conspiracy-theories/30422879.html)

information and transparency about the situation contributed to the tumult. RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service then directed extra resources for increased coverage of the topic and for the production of COVID-19-related explainers for multiple platforms.

- In March, MBN's Radio Sawa-Iraq, during an episode of its call-in show "What's Your Opinion," asked listeners how they are dealing with the rumors and misinformation surrounding COVID-19. Many of the callers were upset that rumors of home remedies on social media were driving up the prices of garlic and other goods, while others said that political parties were exploiting the situation to serve their agendas. The show used it as an opportunity to promote media literacy, helping listeners better understand how to tell fact from fiction.

USAGM IMPACT: As the pandemic is still raging worldwide, the infodemic is still present as well, making it difficult to assess the full impact of USAGM's coverage. However, preliminary social and digital media metrics demonstrate very high reach and engagement online for COVID-19 coverage by most language services and networks, indicating a high demand for accurate, informative, and independent reporting on this crisis around the world.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: Fact-checking and debunking falsehoods and conspiracy theories, particularly at a time of a pandemic, might not necessarily be productive, as it might lead to further confusion and disorientation. This approach might work only in some cases, where reporters can provide compelling counter-arguments on the spot — and even then, they have to do this very carefully and ensure that the contrasts and explainers are sharp, short and to the point. A more effective approach, adopted by most of the networks and language services, is to provide extensive coverage of the facts and expert analysis to help the public understand the situation better and contribute to the prevention of contagion. The latter approach is especially important in contexts of censorship and secrecy. Extensive backgrounders and explainers that help enhance media literacy — such as pieces on conspiracy theories in general and how to identify them — help empower the audience and make them more astute consumers of news and information.

Case Study 2: Silence and distortion surrounding the internment of Uyghurs⁵²

Uyghurs are a Muslim, Turkic people of about 12 million, living in the East Turkestan area of Central Asia, mainly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The Uyghurs accuse the Chinese Government of ethnic-based repression, including forced assimilation and attacks on the Uyghur culture and religion, as well as widespread and arbitrary violations of their basic human rights.⁵³ In spring 2017, USAGM’s Radio Free Asia (RFA) broke the story of vast detention camps in the region, holding up to 1.8 million people. Around that same time, Beijing cut off all communication between the Uyghurs in China and abroad — all international calls and chat applications were blocked, and many of the Uyghur individuals’ accounts on social media, such as WeChat, were deleted. Initially, Beijing dismissed the story as untrue, but as other reporters and major media organizations started covering the camps, the government changed its narrative to portray these centers as entirely volunteer, vocational training centers, meant to assist the Uyghurs with language education and cultural integration, while discouraging religious “radicalization.”⁵⁴ Beijing denies any human rights violations and portrays Uyghurs as a population vulnerable to extremist and terrorist ideology, justifying the internment as a way to provide them with skills and training for greater employment opportunities. Inside China and beyond, Beijing tries to stifle any and all discussion of the Uyghur issue. Abroad, where it does not have the influence to censor this coverage, China promotes its spun, counter-extremism narrative.

REGIONS AFFECTED: Primarily China. Also worldwide, especially in authoritarian countries that are China’s close partners, such as those in the Middle East, Central Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia.

52 This case study is based on an extensive interview with Alim Seytoff, Director of the Uyghur Service at RFA.

53 World Uyghur Congress Website. uyghurcongress.org/en

54 “Uyghur Survivor of Xinjiang Camps Escapes Suspicious Fire Set at Home in Kazakhstan.” Radio Free Asia, February 21, 2020. [.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/fire-02212020162343.html](http://rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/fire-02212020162343.html)

PERPETRATORS: Chinese regional and central government/Chinese Communist Party and its various bodies.

METHODS: Complete censorship. Where censorship fails, promotion of a spun narrative, justifying the internment as a measure to promote opportunities and root out extremism.

TIME FRAME: Since April 2017

DETAILS:

- China is a major investor and economic partner of many Muslim and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and Asia, and Beijing has used that influence with these governments to impose a complete media blackout in these regions about the plight of the Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang.
- Beijing is also using its existing media and affiliates infrastructure in those countries to push its own narrative on the issue, when and where necessary. In recent years, China has created a robust network of international media outlets, such as the Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN) or the Xinhua news agency, that operate in numerous languages around the world and are run directly by Beijing.⁵⁵ Additionally, China has been buying existing news outlets and investing in media-related infrastructure (satellites and satellite receivers, equipment for analog-to-digital TV transitions, etc.) abroad as well as promoting popular social media platforms of its own, gaining control over extensive information distribution channels in a wide range of countries.⁵⁶
- China’s narrative includes justifications like preemptive counter-extremism measures, employment opportunities for minorities, as well as blaming the West — and particularly the United States — for promoting a deliberate smear campaign and disinformation about China.

⁵⁵ For more information see cgtn.com and xinhuanet.com/english

⁵⁶ “Beijing’s Global Megaphone.” Freedom House. freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/beijings-global-megaphone

For example in Egypt, due to its large investments in the country and its broad influence with the government, China has successfully achieved complete silence on the issue. However, when high-ranking officials recently visited the country, Cairo put out statements praising Beijing for its response to “extremism” in Xinjiang.

- Similarly, when the head of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman visited China in February 2019, he praised Beijing’s approach and defended China’s right to take “anti-terrorist” measures.⁵⁷
- In Central Asia, too, the plight of ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs in the same internment camps receives very little coverage or attention in local media, primarily because of the Chinese prominence and economic and political influence in those countries.⁵⁸

IMPACT: In many of the Muslim-majority markets, especially where access to free and independent press is limited, this “silent disinformation” campaign is particularly effective and the plight of the Muslims in China is never discussed. Many governments turn a blind eye on the issue in favor of good relations with China, while some even praise its actions, in an attempt to curry favor with Beijing.

USAGM RESPONSE:

- USAGM’s Radio Free Asia was the first to break the story and its Uyghur Service maintains consistent coverage of the issue, relying on first-hand survivor accounts and open-source material, such as satellite images. RFA’s other services provide coverage of the issue in their respective languages as well, where appropriate.

For example, in a recent interview, an ethnic Uyghur woman who published an account last year of torture and other abuses at an

57 “Saudi Crown Prince Defends China’s Right to Fight ‘Terrorism.’” Al Jazeera, February 23, 2019. [aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/saudi-crown-prince-defends-china-fight-terrorism-190223104647149.html](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/saudi-crown-prince-defends-china-fight-terrorism-190223104647149.html)

58 Gene A. Bunin, “Central Asia Struggles With Fallout From China’s Internment of Minorities.” *Foreign Policy*, August 15, 2018: foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/15/central-asia-struggles-with-fallout-from-chinas-internment-of-minorities/

internment camp spoke to RFA after she escaped an apparent attack when a shed connected to her home in Kazakhstan was set on fire.⁵⁹ RFA reports that a Kazakh human rights activist, whose organization had published her account, also faced intimidation and pressure from Kazakh authorities.

- In the Middle East, MBN’s Alhurra and Sawa are among the very few Arabic-language media that report on the humanitarian crisis of the Uyghurs and other Muslims in China through their television, radio and online outlets. In fact, MBN has made a consistent effort to cover the issue from every angle. The networks are also working on maintain constant attention to the story, to ensure its continuous presence in the region’s information sphere.

For example, at this year’s U.S. State of the Union Address, Uyghur human rights activist Rushan Abbas was a guest of Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL). As part of its news coverage, Alhurra hosted a guest who could discuss the plight of the Uyghurs and explain why Abbas was there. The network has also procured and is airing two documentaries on the Uyghurs, ensuring its audiences’ exposure to in-depth exploration of the way Beijing is treating its Muslim minorities.

- In Kyrgyzstan, RFE/RL’s Azattyk remains the only major local media to report on the situation in Xinjiang, as other outlets tend to stay away, dreading their own governments’ response because of pressure from Beijing.
- More recently, all USAGM outlets have started to collaborate more closely, sharing sources and material, and thus ensuring coverage of the issue in their respective markets as possible. RFE/RL and RFA have partnered to create a joint project, “Locked up in China: The Plight of Xinjiang’s Muslims,” providing separate landing pages in multiple languages with links to all relevant stories.⁶⁰ Many of these stories are translated into other languages and cross-posted, accordingly.

59 “Uyghur Survivor of Xinjiang Camps Escapes Suspicious Fire Set at Home in Kazakhstan.” Radio Free Asia, February 21, 2020. [rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/fire-02212020162343.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/fire-02212020162343.html)

60 “Locked Up In China.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. [rferl.org/XinjiangUyghursMuslims](https://www.rferl.org/XinjiangUyghursMuslims)

However, not all of this content is available in most regional languages and some of the landing pages are not updated regularly.

USAGM IMPACT: After RFA broke the story of the internment camps and enhanced surveillance of the Muslims in Xinjiang, the issue gained rapid prominence among major international media and human rights organizations. It even forced China to acknowledge the presence of these camps and to shift its narrative from denial to justification. As a result of this multiplier effect, the issue has gained the attention of the U.S. government, which raises it with China on a regular basis, as well as in major platforms such as the United Nations. In many markets, ranging from the Middle East to North Africa and the former Soviet Union, as well as in Asia and the Pacific, USAGM networks are among the very few media outlets breaking the silence on the plight of the Muslims in China and bringing original reporting and first-hand accounts to their audiences.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: In situations like this, it is crucial to maintain continuous coverage and attention, providing detailed and accurate reporting on the issue. A good solution is to approach the issue from all possible angles, covering it on different platforms and in a variety of formats, featuring investigative reports, comments from officials, interviews with activists and survivors, and more. The RFA Uyghur Service called for closer collaboration and coordination among the various USAGM networks and language services, ensuring that the various reports are translated into a larger number of local as well as international and regional languages, such as Spanish, Russian and Turkish. Once translated, this multi-lingual content should be cross-linked across various networks and language services and easily accessible for all, regardless of the platform they are using.

Case Study 3: Venezuela’s humanitarian crisis⁶¹

Since the mid-2010s, following a series of political and economic crises, Venezuela experienced skyrocketing levels of crime and violence, as well as great shortages of food and other critical supplies.⁶² The deteriorating situation prompted millions of Venezuelans to flee the country.⁶³

While Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro dismissed the matter as insignificant and accused foreign media of exaggerating the crisis, experts and refugee organizations say that the flow of people fleeing the country might be the largest in the history of Latin America, with some estimates suggesting that the numbers total over 4.6 million — nearly 16 percent of the population.⁶⁴ In February 2020, a report by the U.N. World Food Program found that every one in three Venezuelans is facing hunger.⁶⁵ Experts say that Maduro’s Government is using its own media to portray a situation that does not reflect reality in the country — the rejection and distortion of the humanitarian crisis is part of that broader effort. The Government is trying to censor and silence independent media and reporters covering the true extent of the crisis, while using state-owned media and that of its allies abroad to push its own narrative that blames Washington for all the troubles.

REGIONS AFFECTED: Venezuela, Latin America

PERPETRATORS: Venezuelan state media and government officials, as well as state-owned media in allied countries, like Russia and China.

METHODS: Censorship and attempted silencing of all independent coverage of the humanitarian crisis by domestic and international

61 This case study is based on an extensive interview with Clara Dominguez, VOA Latin America Division Chief.

62 “Venezuela Situation.” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. [unhcr.org/venezuela-emergency.html](https://www.unhcr.org/venezuela-emergency.html)

63 “Situation Response for Venezuelans.” R4V, Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela. r4v.info/en/situations/platform

64 “UN: \$1.35B Needed for Venezuela Refugee, Migrant Crisis | Voice of America – English.” Voice of America, November 13, 2019. [voanews.com/americas/un-135b-needed-venezuela-refugee-migrant-crisis](https://www.voanews.com/americas/un-135b-needed-venezuela-refugee-migrant-crisis)

65 “One in Three Venezuelans Not Getting Enough to Eat, UN Study Finds.” UN News, February 25, 2020. news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1058051

reporters. Distorting reality through owned and allied media and portraying the independent reporting as deliberate and false attacks against the Maduro Government. Imposter content.

TIME FRAME: 2014–present.

DETAILS:

- In September 2018, Nicolás Maduro claimed that there was no migration crisis in Venezuela. He stated that “only thousands” had fled the country. At that time, the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR estimated the number of refugees and migrants at about 3 million.⁶⁶ In June 2019, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees placed the number of Venezuelan refugees at four million.⁶⁷ On June 10, 2019, Venezuela’s Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza stated that this number was fake and part of a broader American campaign of aggression against Venezuela.⁶⁸
- Venezuela’s government-owned media, meanwhile, were portraying a different picture of the situation, attempting to demonstrate that everything is under control and, where possible, blaming U.S. foreign policy and sanctions for the crisis.⁶⁹
- In April 2019, the VOA Spanish Service discovered a fake news site “Voz de America” that copied VOA branding and focused on Venezuelan news. The site had associated social media operations as well, mirroring VOA’s operation, but with a particular focus on Venezuela, suggesting that the perpetrators behind it were likely associated with the Venezuelan Government.⁷⁰

66 “Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela Top 4 Million: UNHCR and IOM.” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 7, 2019. [unhcr.org/news/press/2019/6/5cfa2a4a4/refugees-migrants-venezuela-top-4-million-unhcr-iom.html](https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/6/5cfa2a4a4/refugees-migrants-venezuela-top-4-million-unhcr-iom.html)

67 Ibid.

68 “Venezuela: Fact Sheet. June 2019.” UNHCR. refworld.org/es/pdfid/5d3782bf4.pdf

69 For example, see telesurenglish.net/analysis/Venezuela-Farmers-Resist-Economic-Blockade-by-Increasing-Food-Production--20200210-0024.html

70 For an archived image of the website see web.archive.org/web/20191112174102/https://vozdeamerica.org/

- In one report, Russian state TV attempted to whitewash the Venezuelan refugee crisis, claiming the crowds were merely crossing into bordering Colombia to buy supplies before returning to Venezuela.⁷¹ That report was based on footage from a single border checkpoint and gave no authoritative counts of people entering Colombia or returning to Venezuela. While obviously many Venezuelans return back home after shopping trips to neighboring countries, necessitated by sweeping shortages of the most basic supplies, UN figures demonstrate that a large number of them do not actually return.⁷²

IMPACT: A part of the Venezuelan population remains supportive of Maduro and continues to believe that U.S. sanctions were the true cause of the humanitarian crisis. A part of the Russian, Chinese and Cuban audience might hold similar beliefs as that is the narrative their government-owned and affiliated media is promoting as well.

USAGM RESPONSE:

- Voice of America’s Spanish Service has reported on the situation in Venezuela from day one and maintains consistent coverage of the crisis and its effects on Venezuela and neighboring countries.
- While there is quite a sizeable contingent of independent media and citizen reporters in Venezuela, they are usually limited in terms of resources and scope of coverage. For that reason, VOA is focusing primarily on transnational coverage of the issue and the effect that the Venezuelan crisis is having on its neighboring countries, while amplifying the reporting by independent media and citizen journalists.

71 “Russian TV Tries to Whitewash Venezuelan Refugee Crisis.” Polygraph.info, February 10, 2019. polygraph.info/a/venezuela-refugees-russian-tv-fact-check/29759862.html

72 “UN: \$1.35B Needed for Venezuela Refugee, Migrant Crisis | Voice of America – English.” Voice of America, November 13, 2019. voanews.com/americas/un-135b-needed-venezuela-refugee-migrant-crisis

- USAGM added staff to expand audio, video and digital coverage of the region.⁷³ VOA's Spanish Service also launched "Venezuela 360," a 30-minute weekly multi-media current affairs program, to provide broader, 360-degree coverage of the crisis and issues related to it.⁷⁴
- VOA Spanish also covers issues and topics that receive no attention from state media — such as the healthcare crisis — helping make up for the absence of complete and factual information.
- VOA provides extensive explanation of U.S. foreign policy and the reasons behind the sanctions imposed by Washington and allies. Additionally, VOA puts special emphasis on solutions journalism, not only describing the numerous problems facing the Venezuelan society at the moment, but also suggesting concrete and viable solutions on how to address them.
- To address the imposter Voz de America website and social media accounts, VOA adopted a multi-pronged approach. Working with Facebook and Twitter, VOA managed to disable Voz de America's social media operation and launched an awareness and brand recognition campaign to alert the public to the existence of this imposter content. Removing the website proved to be more difficult, though the URL no longer works and it no longer appears in search results.

USAGM IMPACT: Through its consistent focus on Venezuela, regional reporting and broadcasts on about 800 affiliate stations across Latin America, VOA Spanish has succeeded in raising awareness about the true scale and regional impact of the Venezuelan crisis.⁷⁵ Its explanatory coverage of U.S. foreign policy provides the much-needed background for the public to understand the reasons behind U.S. actions and be better prepared for the propaganda from the Maduro Government, while the solutions journalism helps empower and boost the morale

73 "FY2021 Congressional Budget Justification." U.S. Agency for Global Media. [usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-USAGM-FY-2021-Congressional-Budget-Justification_2_9_2020.pdf](https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-USAGM-FY-2021-Congressional-Budget-Justification_2_9_2020.pdf)

74 "FY2019 Performance and Accountability Report." U.S. Agency for Global Media, November 2019 [usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/USAGM-FY2019-PAR.pdf](https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/USAGM-FY2019-PAR.pdf)

75 "FY2018 Performance and Accountability Report." U.S. Agency for Global Media. [usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/USAGM-FY-2018-PAR-FINAL.pdf](https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/USAGM-FY-2018-PAR-FINAL.pdf)

of a disheartened public. In fiscal year 2019, digital traffic for Venezuela alone went up by 62%, indicating that the service's overall approach as well as its digital first strategy are extremely effective.⁷⁶ Perhaps an additional indicator of VOA's success in the region are the angry responses by the Maduro Government to some of its reports.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: VOA management sees its consistent and unbiased coverage of the situation in Venezuela and the neighboring countries as more effective than engaging in narrative battles with the government. Explanatory and solutions journalism help add value for the audiences, particularly in situations of crisis and desperation. VOA also mobilized its regional network of reporters and resources to provide a more holistic picture of the humanitarian crisis facing the Venezuelan people.

⁷⁶ "FY2021 Congressional Budget Justification." U.S. Agency for Global Media. [usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-USAGM-FY-2021-Congressional-Budget-Justification_2_9_2020.pdf](https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-USAGM-FY-2021-Congressional-Budget-Justification_2_9_2020.pdf)

Case Study 4: Al-Shabab's incitement to violence⁷⁷

Al-Shabab — “the Youth” — is an Islamist insurgent group based in Somalia, affiliated with al-Qaeda and fighting to establish an Islamic state in the country.⁷⁸ In 2008, the U.S. State Department designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.⁷⁹ During their numerous operations around the region, al-Shabab looted studio equipment and transmitters, enabling a robust media operation that spans several radio stations as well as online and social media efforts. This network promotes extremist narratives and violence, as well as justifications of their attacks and calls for further violence. Voice of America Somali Service faces the challenge of not only covering the horrendous violence perpetrated by these extremists but also exposing their information activities, without amplifying their message.

REGIONS AFFECTED: Somalia/East Africa

PERPETRATORS: Al-Shabab and affiliated media/actors; non-affiliated media and individuals, who intentionally or inadvertently engage with this content or share it further.

METHODS: Justification of and incitement to further violence through distortions, exaggerations and fabrications; promotion of their own spin/narrative through owned, affiliated and third-party channels on radio and online.

TIME FRAME: 2008–present

DETAILS:

- While al-Shabab has several radio stations and websites that openly identify as belonging to the group, there is a much greater number of stations, websites and accounts that do not openly identify themselves as such, for the fear of being removed or blocked.

⁷⁷ This case study is based on an extensive interview with Harun Maruf, VOA Somali.

⁷⁸ “Al-Shabab.” Council on Foreign Relations. [cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabab](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabab)

⁷⁹ “Amendments to the Terrorist Designations of Al-Shabaab.” United States Department of State. [state.gov/amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-al-shabaab/](https://www.state.gov/amendments-to-the-terrorist-designations-of-al-shabaab/)

- Instead, they pose as independent or “affiliate media,” “freelance reporters,” or citizen journalists covering “global Jihad.” This tactic not only helps them circumvent Somali and international efforts to counter extremist discourse online but also creates a network that amplifies its message throughout the country and beyond.
- Some of those accounts have been extremely successful in gaining thousands of followers and becoming major influencers in the country. In fact, one of the undercover al-Shabab accounts gathered over 100,000 followers on Twitter and was so successful that even U.S. AFRICOM mistakenly included it in one of its outreach efforts, tagging the account in a tweet hoping for a retweet.⁸⁰
- On other occasions, local reporters and media take the content from these accounts and republish it, without recognizing or acknowledging its true origin. This radio and digital media operation distributes and amplifies al-Shabab’s message.
- Al-Shabab’s message intends to incite violence and recruit new followers, as well as justify their attacks and present their own spun narrative on domestic and international events.

IMPACT: Many local and international media and government actors have fallen prey to al-Shabab’s shadow media and digital network, inadvertently amplifying the group’s message of extremism and violence further. This can create fear, confusion and desperation among the public in Somalia and the broader region, provide an impression of a just cause and inspire some to join the ranks of the terrorist organization.

USAGM RESPONSE:

- VOA Somali is very aware of how easy it is to fall for disinformation from al-Shabab’s shadow network. Its reporters have already identified numerous websites and social media accounts that constantly repost and reshare al-Shabab messages and continue to monitor them

⁸⁰ See “Morad News” in the tagged accounts. Per VOA Somali’s Harun Maruf, this is an unofficial al-Shabab account: twitter.com/USAfricaCommand/status/1217768024943595522

closely. VOA Somali also relies on a range of sources in the country and beyond to alert them to new accounts and outlets that may appear in this space.

- However, the service never responds to or “debunks” the fabrications and distortions coming from this network for the fear of promoting or amplifying them further.
- Instead, VOA Somali provides extensive coverage of the horrific acts of violence perpetrated by al-Shabab, as well as of the extremely challenging conditions of life in the areas controlled by the group. Where possible, they invite scholars and experts on the group to provide commentary and extensive explainers to better contextualize al-Shabab’s actions and demonstrate the full extent of their violence and destruction.
- VOA has also covered the defections from the group, featuring interviews with defectors and former fighters who provide first-hand accounts of the violence they had perpetrated and reasons for disillusionment.
- This way, without necessarily countering al-Shabab’s narrative directly, VOA Somali provides an entirely different picture and narrative for the group’s target audience, presenting the full extent of what it represents and how their “rule” manifests on the ground. This approach by VOA also helps hinder al-Shabab’s recruitment campaigns.

USAGM IMPACT: As a credible and trusted news source, VOA Somali serves as a premiere source of information on all things al-Shabab, both for the public as well as for the government and the international coalition fighting the group. Equipment and property surrendered by al-Shabab fighters after government forces liberate areas from their control often contain clandestine copies of VOA Somali reports, indicating that al-Shabab fighters consume this content. Most prominently, a number of high-profile defectors from al-Shabab have credited VOA Somali reporting for their ultimate decision to leave the group and have requested their first media interviews be with VOA, for maximum effect not only in the country but among al-Shabab’s ranks, too.

MAIN TAKEAWAY: It is extremely important to remain vigilant and hyper-aware of the shadow malign networks and disinformation campaigns that might exist in a particular market. It is also necessary to recognize that openly countering certain narratives might only feed and amplify them further. Providing extensive and fact-based reporting on the reality on the ground, featuring experts and in-depth explanatory pieces tend to be more effective in correcting those narratives and helping build resilience among the public. What is more, maintaining the highest journalistic standards and credibility is paramount, as that kind of reporting can help reach new audiences, some even in the ranks of al-Shabab itself.

Case Study 5: Disinformation attacks targeting USAGM

The mission of USAGM is to inform, engage and connect people around the world in support of freedom and democracy. In pursuing this mission, many USAGM reporters experience intimidation, pressure and threats, as well as smear campaigns put in place by ever more sophisticated disinformation networks and arsenals developed by countries and nonstate actors in the recent years. Intimidation and attacks of journalists of US international media have also become much more frequent and pervasive worldwide, whether in Russia, Iran, or Cambodia. Here are a few recent examples on what tactics entities and journalists use to respond and protect their work.

KYRGYZSTAN⁸¹

In May 2019, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service Azattyk, in collaboration with local and international investigative reporters, published the first part of an in-depth investigative report exposing alleged corruption and other illegal practices by powerful individuals and families with links to the government. Immediately after that, Azattyk and its director experienced a coordinated smear campaign — online, on social media as well as on TV — including from some government-affiliated outlets. One of the families also sued the outlets that had published the report for defamation, but ended up withdrawing the lawsuit later.⁸² One of the ways this smear campaign worked to discredit these media organizations was by labeling them as Western or Western-affiliated agents.⁸³

Azattyk decided not to address these attacks in their own coverage and instead, continued to report, fully and impartially, on all issues in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. The service relied on their reputation and strong ethics to weather the situation, including being transparent about their own families and property on their personal social media pages

81 This section is based on an interview with Venera Djumataeva, director of RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service

82 "After Exposing Corruption, Media Under Pressure in Kyrgyzstan." *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2019. thediplomat.com/2019/12/after-exposing-corruption-media-under-pressure-in-kyrgyzstan

83 "Kyrgyz Authorities Pressure Civil Society and Media Following Corruption Reports," *Civil Rights Defenders*, December 20, 2019. crd.org/2019/12/20/kyrgyz-authorities-pressure-civil-society-and-media-following-corruption-reports

and elsewhere. This approach further cemented Azattyk’s position as a leading independent and impartial media outlet in the country and led to major discussions and large protests among the Kyrgyz public.⁸⁴ What is more, Radio Azattyk and its partners won the 2019 Tom Renner Special Award for covering organized crime or other criminal acts awarded by Investigative Reporters and Editors recognizing the significance and the impact of their work.⁸⁵

RUSSIA⁸⁶

Since 2014, following Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the resulting Western sanctions, the Kremlin has been openly targeting USAGM broadcasts and reporters in the country in attempts to smear and discredit them. In 2017, after Russian involvement in the 2016 presidential election and Washington’s requirement that Russian international broadcasters register as foreign agents in the United States, Moscow retaliated by labeling all USAGM outlets as foreign agents. However, while the U.S. requirements do not restrict RT’s reporting or broadcasting in the country — they merely require them to identify themselves as Russian — the Kremlin’s retaliatory measures put heavy restrictions on all USAGM operations in Russia, making it extremely difficult for them to reach their audiences via traditional channels. In 2019, Moscow expanded its foreign agent law to include private persons, establishing potential punishment for those reporting or freelancing for, cooperating with, or even disseminating material created by USAGM. Officials as well as Kremlin and affiliated media regularly accuse USAGM reporters of being “Western propagandists” working to destabilize the country, disparage Russia’s great historical and more recent achievements, and push their own agendas, such as “separatism” and LGBT rights. Beyond mere retaliation and censorship, the Kremlin is using fabricated

84 “Kyrgyz Authorities Pressure Civil Society and Media Following Corruption Reports,” Civil Rights Defenders, December 20, 2019. [crd.org/2019/12/20/kyrgyz-authorities-pressure-civil-society-and-media-following-corruption-reports](https://www.crd.org/2019/12/20/kyrgyz-authorities-pressure-civil-society-and-media-following-corruption-reports)

85 “2019 IRE Award winners and finalists.” ire.org/2019IREAwards

86 This section is based on interviews with Andrey Shary, Director of RFE/RL’s Russian Service, Rim Gilfanov, Director of RFE/RL’s Tatar-Bashkir Service, Tolkun Umaraliev, Managing Editor of Current Time Digital, and Andrey Cherkasov, Founder and Host of Current Time TV’s “Footage vs. Footage” show.

and misleading content as well as false context to discredit USAGM reporting, confuse the audience and create an image of the “enemy” for its narrative battles.

In addressing these kinds of attacks and disinformation, USAGM reporters and editors emphasize that it is important not to get entangled in these narrative battles — which is exactly what the Kremlin wants. Instead, they focus on enhancing and fine-tuning their reporting, building their audience by covering topics that often get ignored by state and state-affiliated media, finding innovative ways to distribute their content and growing their engagement online. Swiftly developing and implementing a strategy to protect people on the ground is paramount, as is following the strongest journalism ethics. In fact, RFE/RL plans to ramp up operations in Russia, its then-President Jamie Fly said when visiting Moscow in late January 2020. “We are not going to be intimidated by this latest attempt to silence independent journalism in Russia. We are going to expand our activities in Russia,” he said.⁸⁷

GEORGIA⁸⁸

In 2018, a troll account on Facebook posted a doctored video of Ia Meurmishvili, a VOA Georgian senior editor and TV anchor. The video was cut to highlight only a part of a report she had done back in 2016 featuring various perspectives in the U.S. on Georgia’s potential NATO membership.

The video was selectively edited down to include only her interview with John Mearsheimer, a renowned academic who advocates against U.S. international involvement and NATO expansion, making the report seem extremely biased and incomplete. That video was then posted on Facebook and went viral within Georgian online media. Meurmishvili received a slew of negative comments and personal threats, while many in the independent media and civil society expressed outrage at VOA’s angle. The doctored video distorted the truth and provided false context, discrediting the reporter and the agency as a whole. The response to it

87 “RFE/RL Seeks To Expand In Russia, Despite ‘Foreign Agent’ Law.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 3, 2020. pressroom.rferl.org/a/rferl-seeks-to-expand-in-russia-despite-foreign-agent-law/30415320.html

88 This section is based on an extensive interview with Ia Meurmishvili, VOA Georgian.

by other media, reporters and activists served as a vehicle to spread this disinformation further. The multiplier effect was significant.

In response, VOA quickly put out a statement by then-Director Amanda Bennett, stating that the report was selectively edited and reiterating faith in the integrity of VOA reporters and their work.⁸⁹ It also linked to the complete, longer report, which could be found on the VOA website.⁹⁰ The statement was disseminated to the local Georgian media, after which some of them issued public apologies for having fallen for this manipulation. This episode was widely covered by the local media, raising awareness about such disinformation techniques and potentially contributing to media literacy in the country.

While the event initially succeeded in raising questions about VOA's and Meurmishvili's credibility, through its swift and timely response and ability to point to the complete picture, the network managed to turn it into a teachable moment for the broader Georgian audience as well as other reporters working in the country.

IRAN⁹¹

While there are no Radio Farda (RFE/RL's Persian Service) reporters on the ground in Iran, the Islamic Republic keeps deploying increasingly more sophisticated smear and intimidation campaigns against RFE/RL reporters, as well as threats against their sources and relatives, regardless of where they might be. Through its broad network of owned and affiliated media — in Iran and abroad — as well as its secret service operatives and armies of trolls and bots, Tehran is promoting its own narratives, while also trying to discredit and silence all independent reporting about the country. Radio Farda is a frequent target of such attacks and campaigns. Niusha Boghrati, Radio Farda's Editor-in-Chief, was himself targeted multiple times, with state-affiliated media

89 "Video Manipulation of VOA's Story on Facebook | Myth Detector." Myth Detector. mythdetector.ge/en/myth/video-manipulation-voas-story-facebook-0

90 ნატოს მომავალი და საქართველო [The future of NATO and Georgia]. Voice of America Georgian. June 13, 2016. amerikiskhma.com/a/future-of-nato/3373534.html

91 This section is based on an extensive interview with Niusha Boghrati, Editor-in-Chief of RFE/RL's Radio Farda.

spreading rumors about him, such as alleging that he was transgender, impersonating him and his work online, freezing his assets in Iran, or reporting on his move from one house to another in Prague, where he works and lives. What is more, the regime also threatens citizen reporters and sources that openly talk to USAGM entities with severe consequences, such as detention, intimidation, refusal to let them leave the country and even jail time.

Radio Farda's response to such threats is persistence in reporting, despite these challenges. The service, as well as its reporters and sources, have to be extra vigilant in maintaining their personal and online security and, where appropriate, anonymity. The service devotes a lot of time, resources and attention to investigative reporting, ensuring the accuracy of its content, and invests in creative and innovative ways to distribute that reporting and solicit user-generated content.

PAKISTAN⁹²

In mid-2019, VOA Urdu published an interview with a civil rights activist who was critical of the Pakistani government and the civil rights situation in the country. Following its publication, government-affiliated media in Pakistan ran a coordinated campaign to discredit VOA Urdu, accusing it of deliberately smearing Pakistan and its government. This campaign featured fabricated and misleading content, attacking VOA Urdu's work and misrepresenting its mission.

VOA's Urdu Service decided not to respond directly to the attacks it experienced. Instead, the service collaborated with the VOA News Center to put out a broader story on press freedom in Pakistan, featuring comments from leading reporters and editors in the country, without focusing specifically on the campaign directed against VOA Urdu.⁹³ While this approach provided a response to the disinformation campaign directed against the service, it also shifted the focus away from itself to the greater issue at the heart of this incident — media freedom in the country.

⁹² This section is based on an extensive interview with Kokab Farshori, Chief of VOA Urdu Service.

⁹³ "Redlining the News in Pakistan." VOA News, September 22, 2019. [voanews.com/press-freedom/redlining-news-pakistan](https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/redlining-news-pakistan)

This way, the service demonstrated its commitment to its audiences, its mission and independent reporting, instead of further feeding the narrative and the smear campaign against it.

CAMBODIA⁹⁴

RFA's Khmer Service and its reporters have long been targets of disinformation and smear attacks by Cambodian officials. For example, in 2018, RFA Khmer's current Service Chief Vuthy Khin Huot (his real name is Chun Chanboth), tried to interview Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen as part of his coverage of the ASEAN-Australia summit in Sydney. The prime minister's son was acting as a press liaison for his father so Huot communicated with him to arrange the interview. However, this communication went sour when Sen's son conditioned the interview on Huot providing his questions in advance and limiting the interview to those questions — unacceptable requirements from a journalistic standpoint. He also required that Huot conduct the interview prior to an anti-Sen rally that the Cambodian-Australian community was planning to hold. Huot said that in the past, Sen had tried to “buy him off,” in an effort to prevent his coverage of such rallies, which is why he refused to meet him early this time. As a result, the interview never took place.

However, during that visit to Australia, Hun Sen attended a different rally organized by his supporters and announced that Huot was, in fact, “his spy” who had now asked for protection from the CIA. As evidence, he showed texts that Huot and his son had exchanged as they tried to arrange the interview. Sen also claimed to know the real name of the reporter — since Huot is his pen name — but mispronounced it, which indicated to Huot's audience that Sen's claim was untrue. Government media's coverage of this alleged revelation and the smear attacks and threats against Huot went on for months, in an attempt to silence and discredit him and his work.

⁹⁴ This section is based on an extensive interview with Vuthy Khin Huot, Deputy Director of RFA's Khmer Service.

Despite the persecution and all the threats, Huot and his colleagues continue their coverage of the most important issues in the country. Even though most of them cannot enter the country anymore — as they fear being arrested — they rely on their extensive network of sources in Cambodia and worldwide to report on extrajudicial killings, land grabs, forced evictions, arbitrary detentions and other human rights violations in the country. Their persistence, defiance of the regime’s attempts to silence them and adherence to the strictest journalism standards — fact-based, balanced and transparent reporting — has only enhanced their credibility and trust among the audience.

Cover photos clockwise from top left:

An elderly ethnic Uyghur man walks in an alley way in the Kashgar bazaar. The Xinjiang province is located in the northwestern part of China, and is the largest province in China. Recently the Chinese government has enforced a massive security crackdown in Xinjiang, where more than 1 million ethnic Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities are believed to be held in a network of internment camps that Beijing describes as “vocational education centres” aimed at steering people away from religious extremism. (Photo by Geovien So / SOPA Images/Sipa USA)(Sipa via AP Images);

Pedestrians cross an intersection in northern Tehran, Iran, on Monday, Sept. 16, 2019 (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi);

Children look at a damaged telecommunications mast after an attack by al-Shabab extremists in the settlement of Kamuthe in Garissa county, Kenya, on Monday, Jan. 13, 2020. The militants from neighboring Somalia attacked the settlement killing three teachers, setting fire to a police post, and destroying a telecommunications mast. (AP Photo);

A Venezuelan mother and her child receives some food from a local charity in the makeshift migrant camp along the highway leaving Bogota, Colombia on June 8, 2020. Many bugs are present at the camp which is the reason why the child in the image has bug bites all over her face. Around 600 people are here waiting for government to help them get them back to Venezuela. Without electricity, water or sanitary system, they are waiting for any type of help. (Photo by Keoma Zec/NurPhoto via AP).

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