



Using social media in CBP - Chapter 6

Rumors and Misinformation

Introduction

This chapter focuses on how to use Social Media to identify, debunk and stop rumors and misinformation that can adversely affect PoCs and their hosts and deprive them of their rights. It suggests steps to create a sustainable workflow to address rumors and misinformation online.

Definitions

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information, spread accidentally.

Disinformation is deliberate and includes propaganda and malicious content, such as hoaxes and phishing.⁹⁸

Misinformation and disinformation are elements of “fake news”, defined by scholars as “[fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.](#)”⁹⁹

Remember, the main difference between misinformation and disinformation is that the former is accidental while the latter comes with ill intent, but both are dangerous.¹⁰⁰

Misinformation is inaccurate and shown to be so; it has previously been disproved. By contrast, a **Rumor** is a statement whose veracity is not quickly or ever confirmed.

A rumor is unverified information passed from person to person.¹⁰¹ It has negative connotations, often being dismissed as idle talk or gossip. But rumors are neither good nor bad. They can be true or false, or partly true.

Persons of concern come across different types of misinformation, disinformation and rumors, both on Social Media and offline. They include official information that is inadequate or presented inadequately, outdated information, misinformation via gatekeepers and other mediators, information giving false hope, distorted information and rumors.

98 [Woolley, Samuel C., Howard, Philip N., Political Communication, Computational Propaganda, and Autonomous Agents, International Journal of Communication, 2016](#)

99 [Lazer, David M. J., Baum, Matthew A., Benkler, Yochai, et al., The Science of Fake News, Science, 2018](#)

100 [My T. Thai, Weili Wu, Hui Xiong \(edited by\), Big Data in Complex and Social Networks, 2016](#)

101 [Di Fonzo, N. and Bordia, P., Rumor Psychology: Social and Organizational Approaches, 2007](#)



Resources

- [CDAC Network, “Rumour has it: A practice guide to working with rumours.” June 2017](#)
- [Internews, “Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context - Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology”, 2020](#)

Humanitarians know that to deliver appropriate and sustainable solutions, we must listen to affected people, respond to what they tell us and include them in every part of our response. We can’t just be listening when they tell us things we agree with. Information is relative. One person’s ‘rumor’ may seem like a ‘fact’ to another or completely ridiculous to a third. It’s all about perspective, and that is going to be influenced by how much information you have access to and how much you trust it.¹⁰²

Rumors can be misinformation or disinformation depending on the intent behind them:

- Misinformation is incorrect information spread by people not meaning to deceive;
- Disinformation is incorrect information spread deliberately to deceive or manipulate.

A rumor can switch between these categories as it spreads through a community. For example, a human trafficker can spread a rumor among PoCs about how easy life is in Europe with the intent to deceive (disinformation). A PoC then passes this rumor to their friends and family, not meaning to deceive (misinformation). While motives may vary, the impact is the same – people are unable to make informed choices about their future and the consequences can be devastating.

In the last five years, more and more organizations have started to implement and manage so-called “Rumor Tracking Mechanisms”. Rumors cannot be ignored. They threaten lives and cause suffering for the people we are trying to help, undermining our humanitarian mission.



Resource

Find more information on how to deal with verbal harassment and the spread of rumors in the [“UNHCR Manual on Security of People of Concern”](#), section 1.13

¹⁰² [Internews, Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context - Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology, 2020](#)

1. Types of Rumor Tracking Mechanisms

Misinformation and rumors are the price we pay for being able to share information across borders on Social Media. UNHCR has an obligation to counter rumors that can be detrimental to the protection of PoCs. But we cannot cover the entire internet with a mantle of safety. For this reason, it is important to define the boundaries of your rumor tracking mechanisms in advance.

Tackling rumors doesn't mean you necessarily have to set up a dedicated system or tracking mechanism. You can embed rumor tracking into existing communication systems, like a feedback mechanism or community Social Media page. No matter how you do it, the required steps to detect and debunk rumors are the same.

For rumor tracking to be done properly and be sustainable, it can only be implemented with a Community-Based Approach, one that necessarily involves a variety of stakeholders from UNHCR, partners and PoCs and hosts to government authorities (as appropriate).

Here are some different types of rumor tracking systems:



Integrated systems: Normally these are the most sustainable to set up. They use multiple systems, offline and online, to gather and debunk rumors. An example might be a Facebook page that counters rumors with verified information. Or it could be a community structure on the ground that collects rumors doing the rounds locally and shares accurate information; or an email newsletter, shared with local media so they can deal with rumors along with the humanitarian community;



Stand-alone systems: Rumor tracking can also be done using one tool at a time. For example, you could create a mechanism just for WhatsApp. Such systems can be set up quicker than integrated systems but are limited in their reach. Stand-alone rumor tracking normally relies on a network of trusted people who have influence in the community. The system reinforces and supports existing information nodes;



Rumor tracking as a by-product of existing mechanisms: You can make a rumor tracking mechanism part of an existing mechanism. For example, call centers used to collect and follow up on feedback and complaints from PoCs would be ideal for rumor tracking too. Depending on the questions coming in and the things people say they have heard, rumors can be collected and debunked, and the results shared with everyone in the humanitarian community to make them aware of the risks.

Rumors can be caught and collected actively or passively. This depends on the magnitude of the problem in a given context and the resources you have to combat it. For example, you can monitor your Social Media page to detect rumors or misinformation posted by PoCs and respond to them. Or you can ask people specifically to report rumors and work together to debunk them.

! Important

If you ask people to report rumors, make sure they do this privately to avoid the rumors spreading even further. The same applies to debunking a rumor. While debunking it, avoid giving it life by repeating it. For example, if the rumor is “White people have brought Ebola to Liberia to kill us”, the response should be information that explains the origins of Ebola and the role of organizations in the country fighting it.



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2. Detect and Respond to Rumors

[CDAC Network](#) and [Internews](#) have both published manuals on how to deal with rumors in humanitarian settings. While using slightly different classifications, both guides suggest the following steps:



Step 1: Know your community

UNHCR offices wanting to set up stand-alone rumor tracking systems should conduct a Social Media Information Needs Assessment.¹⁰³ This will identify the sources of rumors believed by the community; the information channels through which they spread; reliable sources who can counter with verified information in preferred languages and links between rumors online and events on the ground. If possible, it should be paired with offline conversations to fill in the gaps of the online assessment and involve the community in the design of the rumor tracking mechanism. Always try to involve the community at the start of the project to identify problems and jointly find solutions.



Step 2: Establish and use Community-Based Networks

Build your rumor tracking project with the community. When possible, UNHCR should ask members of the online community to report the rumors they hear. Establishing a community network can work well because individuals are already trusted and understand the social, political, cultural and religious context. With a new online network, the focus might be solely on catching rumors. A two-way channel would help you communicate the outcome of your verification efforts.

Make sure to pick people who represent diverse groups. Then you will be able to develop a network that reaches deep into the community. Consider existing Facebook groups or WhatsApp Trees, women's or youth groups, traditional community structures and local NGOs and CSOs. Members of the network should have credibility; you want people to trust them. It takes time to build relationships but together you can stop the spread of rumors.



Step 3: Design and set up of the system infrastructure

Rumor tracking mechanisms work to a schedule, which means your workflows and systems need to be set up, tested and possibly adjusted over time, especially at the beginning of the project.

Firstly, you have to build your team: choose your “rumor monitors” and trusted sources on the ground. The more existing organizations and local structures you can involve in your mechanism, the better (see below). Remember, the best people to detect rumors and understand how likely they are to be believed are community members themselves. This also applies when it comes to managing the system.

¹⁰³ See [Chapter 1](#) for more on Information Needs Assessment.

Secondly, you must identify the data management channels for your tracking mechanism and set up systems that will allow you to verify, respond and act on rumors received. This will include SOPs for urgent information, including SEA; log books to standardize the recording and classification of rumours and thereby facilitate data analysis; and decision matrices for verifying the rumours.



Tip

While it is important to decide early on how exactly you might collect information about rumors, the actual collection should not begin until you have all processes in place. Without clearly defined ways to respond to the information collected, share it efficiently or ensure the rumour tracking system works, your project will very quickly lose the trust of the community. A workflow for rumor tracking should be a continuous cycle, centered round the community.

However you choose to listen, it is essential to log rumors as part of the reporting process. Good practice is to note them down in a log book, register or electronic spreadsheet. Record the details and classify them, keeping a note of any actions taken:

- Keeping a rumor log will enable you to analyze trends, patterns and recurring issues, as well as share information with other organizations in the community;
- UNHCR offices that already have a mechanism to deal with feedback should try to embed the rumor tracking system within the one for feedback, or at least make the two systems inter-operable.



Resource

[Internews, “Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context - Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology”, 2020, Part 3. See annexes for templates of logbooks and ways to collect feedback.](#)

To allow for fast and efficient data management, you can categorize rumors by type and by the likelihood they will be believed and the harm they could do – and establish hierarchies of urgency based on that. Later, you can prioritize your rumor verification process.

Do a thorough analysis of the recorded rumours, looking for recurring types, themes and sub-themes. What rumors are most likely to jeopardize the community and humanitarian organizations working there? Be on alert for rumors that could make the community distrust or abandon services, or worse provoke violence or chaos.

 **Important**

Rumors differ from feedback. The fact that many people report them does not make them any more relevant. A rumor spread by the wrong influencer, at the wrong time, can do more damage than one that is widely believed but relatively harmless. When the majority of the population reports the same rumor, we are too late. Rumors should be stopped before they spread.


 **Step 4: Collect rumors**

The Internews and CDAC guides go into detail about the different ways you can collect rumors. There are two categories:

1. Passive collection;
2. Active collection.

Passive collection includes all the systems that allow you to “monitor” online content for rumors. Examples of passive rumor tracking systems are:

- Social Media monitoring teams that scan PoCs’ most used Facebook groups and pages and scrutinize the posts and comments for rumors and misinformation;
- Analysis of the questions and comments made to UNHCR official pages and accounts, or UNHCR feedback systems like call-centers

 **Tips**

Try not to use questionnaires or polls to collect rumors online but rely on the local network as your ears on the ground. When collecting rumors, it is important to manage expectations. You will never have all the answers, so it is essential to let the community know this. Make clear that while you will share their information with relevant organizations, this will not guarantee their needs are met. But staff working on rumor tracking can at least read up on the facts and services the community might be interested in. The team collecting rumors should be abreast of answers to Frequently Asked Questions and have relevant referral contacts to hand.

Active collection mobilizes the community to collect rumors. Examples of this are:

- Crowd sourcing projects where you can, for example, create a Facebook group or WhatsApp channel entirely dedicated to identifying and debunking rumors. On these pages, Persons of Concern are invited to say what they have heard in the community;
- Closed networks, where you rely on trusted people on the ground to collect rumors for you via their own online channels.



Factsheet

See [Factsheet 4](#) to learn more about different types of misinformation.




Step 5: Verify and share

Rumors are often half truths or the product of misunderstanding or lack of information. Check the facts behind them with reliable sources. These could be written sources, e.g. laws, rules, policies, reports, or factsheets; or they could be people with first-hand experience and/or in-depth knowledge of the subject. Choose sources the local population will believe. For example, if the rumor stems from mistrust towards the government, verify with a non-government source.

When you have verified the information, report back to the community, using open or closed channels, as appropriate. Since both government and humanitarian organizations often use impenetrable jargon, ‘translate’ the information accurately into something applicable and to the point. Then it can be shared through your various channels in comprehensible styles and formats.

Where possible, use multimedia to create content that will attract an audience. Your community networks will soon show if your message has got through or is causing further confusion.

To speed up the process create a Rumors Library, where you can collect responses to recurring rumors for re-use. But avoid making this an automated system, with copy and paste responses. Rather, for the same rumor, have a range of responses in different formats, customized for specific audiences. Make sure your team knows how to use and adjust them, depending on the audience they are targeting.

 **Step 6: Learn and Adapt**

Understanding what set off a rumor gives you a chance to address the root causes. Something your organization has done or failed to explain might need to be addressed to kill the rumor. Or if a rumor has been spread by a group of influential individuals, working with them might solve the problem. Rumors illustrate the stresses and anxieties of people in a community. Reflecting on what the rumor tells you about them deepens your understanding of the issues they face.

Whatever analysis you do, make sure to share it with your monitors on the ground, the rest of the humanitarian community and local media and authorities, if relevant and as appropriate. Rumors travel fast and can affect humanitarian operations and communities locally, nationally and regionally.

**Tip**

Do not disregard rumors that sound “absurd”. Every rumor has its reason and sometimes this is not obvious. Rely on colleagues, partners and PoCs to understand where a rumor may have come from.

Example of rumor analysis that can support learning and adaptation in your operations:

- Understand the connection between rumors and specific UNHCR policies/systems/activities being implemented on the ground;
- Understand the impact of UNHCR information and communication campaigns, and adjust accordingly;
- Use rumors as an early warning system to support the protection response, e.g, as a way to monitor tension or animosity towards a certain issue or group of people;
- Analyze rumors over time to measure UNHCR’s success in informing PoC.



Messaging Apps

Rumors can spread rapidly on Messaging Apps, in part because information is usually shared in closed groups based on peer trust. This can pose a challenge to protection personnel.¹⁰⁴

But monitoring rumors and misinformation via Messaging Apps can help UNHCR and protection teams to direct their efforts more effectively. It helps in predicting trends, such as the forced displacement of large numbers of people in response to rumors or threats, and increases understanding of popular perceptions of protection activities.

A specific challenge when it comes to rumors transmitted via Messaging Apps is that you need a network with enough capillaries to detect them and report back via proxies or trusted sources inside the network.

You can see an example of such a project [here](#).



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¹⁰⁴ See more about closed networks using mobile phones on [Anahi Ayala, The Dichotomy of Technology in Conflict: Beauty and the Beast – in Vazquez Llorente R. and Wall, I. \(eds.\) \(2014\) Communications Technology and Humanitarian Delivery: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Risk Management, European Inter-agency Security Forum \(EISF\).](#)

Resourcing

Rumor tracking mechanisms are labor intensive and require medium to high investment in personnel, skills development and technical support.

The following recommendations will help you think through resource requirements:

- **Rely as much as possible on local networks:**

UNHCR Community-Based Protection relies on different groups, including women, youth, older persons and people with disabilities. Often, you can find these groups (or networks) on digital tools. (If you have done a good Digital Ecosystem Assessment (see Chapter 1), you should have that information). When it comes to debunking rumors, trust is fundamental, so turn to reliable and well used networks. Avoid creating something from scratch, especially if you do not know the level of trust towards UNHCR;

- **Integrate your Social Media channel into referral pathways:**

As you would do offline -- in phone calls, walk-ins or outreach interactions -- so with Social Media, refer and respond to rumors in the right way. Working out this modus operandi will help you determine roles, responsibilities and resources. This includes mapping and setting responsibilities at an inter-agency level. Bear in mind that coordinating across multiple communication channels can be a full time role. SOPs should make clear how information will flow, when and how, and who will respond;

- **Keep up to speed and be present:**

Rumors travel fast on Social Media. When considering resourcing, work out how you will maintain maximum time limits for replies (Recommendation: under four hours). Be ready to quash rumors with a high potential to endanger people. Your system may need to have preferential referral lines;

- **Only create a rumor tracking mechanism if you have resources for translation:**

Either within the same channel, or across multiple channels, the community may use various languages, e.g. when external links are shared. Translation resources must be available to ensure information is understood by all community members and colleagues. Translation may be done 'in house' among colleagues and/or volunteers (as per pre-agreed roles), or you may need to hire an external service;

- **Connect your online/offline interfaces:**

Not every community member has access to connectivity to take part in conversations via Social Media. Aside from considering how resources can help bridge this digital divide, try to ensure your offline outreach and information systems are connected to the rumor tracking. You want to know that given the same rumors, UNHCR's response will be uniform across sectors and staff.

This ensures rumors are addressed offline, even if they were identified online;



Factsheets

See [Chapter 8](#) to learn more about connecting offline and online activities. See also [Factsheet 7](#) to see how Social Media activities can support Protection Outcomes.

- **Invest in producing engaging and relevant multimedia content:**

If information has descended into rumor, the chances are the information was not very clear in the first place. Digital channels allow for conversations with a range of formats: audio, video, images, icons and emojis. To grab and hold public interest, consider how you will resource video, audio and photographic content. Content can be generated in-house or externally, depending on your budget. Where possible, co-create with communities. For example, you could have videos featuring young people or photographs from around the community;

- **Build capacity and learn from others:**

Managing and analyzing rumors and misinformation on Social Media is not an easy task, or one that UNHCR is used to. So we suggest UNHCR offices that want to create rumor tracking mechanisms collaborate with partners, other UN agencies or local NGOs to learn from each other. Develop on-going training for those managing the system, including training on how rumors relate to the "DO NO HARM" principle.



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Do's

DO ensure the people you hire have more than just technical skills. They need to understand the value of rumor tracking and the importance of putting the community at the centre of all we do.

DO ensure the safety of people sharing information with you and your staff, paying attention to online privacy and data security.

DO develop a simple referral pathway for internal complaints and ensure all staff know how to use it and are comfortable with it. Include an external referral pathway too. The protection team will be able to guide you on external referral.

DO collect as little personal data as possible. Only take names and contact details if essential.

DO use different channels to collect information. This ensures all the various groups in the community can communicate with you.

DO build partnerships with organizations that have 'boots on the ground', when UNHCR's operational presence is low. Probably their staff and/or volunteers are already talking to the community.



Don'ts

DO NOT assume that everyone in the team will define rumors in the same way or perceive their potential to cause harm in the same way. Train your staff often.

DO NOT try to debunk all rumors you receive but rather create a risk matrix to determine which rumors could have negative repercussions on the ground.

DO NOT try to rumor track alone. Even if UNHCR manages the project entirely, these efforts require a wide network across civil society and online communities.

DO NOT think of rumors only as deliberate misinformation. The reason people believe them usually has nothing to do with us but rather with their situation and emotions.

DO NOT spend too long assessing the motivations behind a rumor. Simply try to pin down what started it, so you can decide the best way to respond.

DO NOT assume people will necessarily want to talk to you. They may be reluctant to repeat rumors to outsiders. Build your ways of listening to rumors around existing, trusted relationships.



Check List

- Have you conducted a Situation Analysis to understand misinformation and disinformation in your context? Have you developed and discussed your findings with the community? (see Chapter 1)
- Have you identified and discussed with stakeholders existing local resources or actors working on online misinformation?
- Have you worked with stakeholders on a strategy to counter misinformation? What are its methods and resources?
- If you are building a rumor tracking system yourself, did you involve a diverse group from the affected community in its design?
- Do you have the minimum required staff for the intended activities? Have they undergone Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and gender equality training?
- When it comes to debunking rumors, are you or your partners always in a position to use the language of the affected community?
- Have you set up systems to check in regularly with the community so you can adjust the rumor tracking system over time?
- Do you have a network of trusted people who can share verified information in the community, both online and offline?
- Have you integrated your Social Media channels into referral pathways to better manage rumors?



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Case Studies

[Internews, Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context - Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology Part I-2 - Case Studies, 2020](#)

[Mercy Corps, The Weaponization of Social Media, How Social Media can spark violence and what can be done about it, 2019](#)

[Internews, Nepal Open Mic, Tracking Rumors in Post-Earthquake Nepal, 2016](#)

[USAID, Tracking Rumors to Contain Disease: The Case of DeySay in Liberia's Ebola Outbreak, 2016](#)

[Sommariva, Silvia & Vamos et al., Spreading the \(Fake\) News: Exploring Health Messages on Social Media, American Journal of Health Education. 49, 2018](#)