

A Review: Situation Report on Media literacy, disinformation and misinformation in the English and Dutch Speaking Caribbean and the Action Plan for Combatting Disinformation

Reseña: Informe de situación sobre alfabetización mediática y desinformación en el Caribe de habla inglesa y holandesa y el Plan de acción para combatir la desinformación

Uma revisão: Relatório da situação sobre alfabetização midiática e desinformação no Caribe de língua inglesa e holandesa e o Plano de Ação para Combater a Desinformação

Kiran Maharaj
Media Institute of the Caribbean
Trinidad & Tobago
kiran@clcommunications.com

Corinne Barnes
The University of the West Indies
Jamaica
corinnebarnes@gmail.com

Abstract: This article analyzes the "Situation Report on Media Literacy, Disinformation, and Misinformation in the Caribbean" and the proposed action plan to combat disinformation in the region. The report, supported by UNESCO and developed by the Media Institute of the Caribbean (MIC) and the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM), covers research conducted in eight Caribbean countries. The report highlights the region's challenges, the need for further research on media trust, and proposes collaborations between governments, media outlets, and civil organizations to promote media literacy. The action plan includes recommendations to improve journalism and strengthen public trust in the media.

Keywords:

Media Literacy, Disinformation, Caribbean Media, Media Trust, UNESCO, Action Plan

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el "Informe de situación sobre alfabetización mediática, desinformación y desinformación en el Caribe" y el plan de acción propuesto para combatir la desinformación en la región. El informe, respaldado por la UNESCO y elaborado por el Media Institute of the Caribbean (MIC) y la Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM), cubre investigaciones realizadas en ocho países caribeños. Se destacan los desafíos

de la región, la necesidad de más investigación sobre la confianza en los medios, y se proponen colaboraciones entre gobiernos, medios de comunicación y organizaciones civiles para promover la alfabetización mediática. El plan de acción incluye recomendaciones para mejorar el periodismo y fortalecer la confianza en los medios.

Palabras clave:

Alfabetización mediática, Desinformación, Medios caribeños, Confianza en los medios, UNESCO, Plan de acción

Resumo: Este artigo analisa o "Relatório de Situação sobre Alfabetização Midiática, Desinformação e Misinformação no Caribe" e o plano de ação proposto para combater a desinformação na região. O relatório, apoiado pela UNESCO e elaborado pelo Media Institute of the Caribbean (MIC) e pela Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM), abrange pesquisas realizadas em oito países caribenhos. O documento destaca os desafios da região, a necessidade de mais pesquisas sobre a confiança nos meios de comunicação e propõe colaborações entre governos, meios de comunicação e organizações civis para promover a alfabetização midiática. O plano de ação inclui recomendações para melhorar o jornalismo e fortalecer a confiança pública nos meios de comunicação.

Palavras-chave:

Alfabetização Midiática, Desinformação, Mídia Caribenha, Confiança na Mídia, UNESCO, Plano de ação

1. Introduction

In December 2022, the Public Media Alliance (PMA) published the “Situation Report on Media literacy, disinformation and misinformation in the Caribbean¹” with support from UNESCO’s International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and the UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean. The report was collated and spearheaded by the Media Institute of the Caribbean (MIC)² and the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM).

¹ “Situation Report on Media literacy, disinformation and misinformation in the Caribbean,” Public Media Alliance, December 2022

² www.mediainstituteofthecaribbean.com

This Situation Report analyses media and information literacy (MIL), disinformation, and trust in news across the Caribbean. It contains country reports from researchers covering eight Caribbean nations: The Bahamas, Barbados, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. In each country, research was undertaken over five months. The methods varied across the countries and included surveys, desk research, and expert interviews. Separately, research was undertaken to determine the feasibility of a regional trusted news network.

The executive summary captures the highlights of the situation report:

- **Unique challenges:** The report highlights the specific challenges of each country, as well as the similarities across borders.
- **Need for more regional research:** Notably, the situation report emphasizes that more analysis is needed across the region to tackle disinformation, media literacy, and trust in news media. Researchers faced difficulty procuring information on these issues, which are rarely explored formally in the region. This limitation was particularly experienced by those researching smaller countries; as a result, some research provided more insight than others. This limitation emphasizes the need for national or regional investments in research, particularly in Caribbean countries where existing research in the area is sparse and, in some instances, non-existent.
- **Barriers that remain:** Researchers found several barriers to achieving media literacy, particularly legislatively. Newsrooms are strapped for resources in an economically difficult environment (further exacerbated by the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic). They work in highly competitive landscapes, where there is real pressure to keep ahead of competitors. Other major impediments to improving the landscape identified included low-paying media-related jobs resulting in fewer outstanding journalists choosing to remain in mainstream media, poor media regulation, and competitive challenges in the multiplatform era (social media, big tech).
- **Opportunities:** The report also demonstrates achievable opportunities for regional media organizations and governments, such as greater investment in journalism training and the development of editorial policies, the development of collaborative networks for fact-checking, and the undertaking of assessments of the citizenry's needs in media literacy.

2. Major Findings

Nearly every researcher recommended a more widespread and systematic media and information literacy awareness program integrating media and information literacy into school curricula across all levels. “This will more firmly root media literacy and the value of scientific inquiry in society, and in turn, develop more critical consumers of information and media sources,” writes researcher Ava Turnquest of The Bahamas. Kiran Maharaj, a researcher for Trinidad and Tobago, recommended the reintroduction of ‘Critical Thinking’ as a subject; it was removed at the secondary school level over a decade ago. Maharaj wrote that critical thinking programs within the education system can implicitly impact improving media and information literacy levels.

It was further emphasized that developed curricula must be age-appropriate and endorsed by parents, and those in far-flung regions, such as Suriname’s hinterland, must be considered. The recommendations did not only include students as the target audience. Researchers also recommended educators and journalists as beneficiaries of media literacy curricula. For instance, researcher Dr Corinne Barnes said journalism schools in Jamaica should introduce media literacy as a part of their curriculum from year one.

Researchers explicitly recommended collaboration across the issues of disinformation, media literacy, and trust in news. The suggested collaborations took several forms: there were recommendations for governments and media companies to co-develop relevant media literacy strategies; calls for cooperation between government and an association targeting vulnerable groups, such as retired people; and suggestions for collaborations among media houses, government, the private sector, and civil society organizations to create disinformation awareness campaigns.

Notably, there were repeated calls for collaboration among journalists and media houses, whether locally or regionally, and for media houses to work more closely with established fact-checking organizations. The researchers foresaw collaboration leading to improved fact-checking, media professionalism, and ultimately, higher public trust in news media. Several researchers recommended the development of a fact-checking platform. “This platform will enable audiences to engage with journalists and researchers and host background information on journalists and prominent influencers to build transparency and credibility,” writes Esther Jones, a researcher in Barbados.

Several researchers noted that there are low barriers to entry into the media landscape. While, understandably, social media was a breeding ground for “citizen journalists” to share information with little or no qualifications, it was also pointed out that

established media houses (print, television, radio, and online sites) similarly struggled with recruiting qualified media workers. In Grenada, for example, researcher Linda Straker explained that it is not uncommon for those entering media careers locally to do so immediately following graduation from secondary school. Luckily, she added that a local community college offers an associate degree in media studies, and several newsroom staff at print media outlets have obtained this certification. However, it becomes more difficult to find broadcasters or announcers who have pursued associate degree-level certifications, and, as a result, many announcers or disc jockeys (DJs) are untrained before entering their professions.

Similarly, in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, researcher Colvin Harry found that on-air radio hosts serve as conduits for disinformation. Hence, with low barriers to entry, regulating formal media organizations was put forward by several researchers to curb the impact of irresponsible journalism, lower disinformation, promote media literacy and build trust in news. In their recommendations, researchers called for legislative changes, such as an update of the Utilities Regulation and Competition Authority (URCA) Code of Content and penal code in The Bahamas; amendments to access to information Acts, cybercrime, and broadcast laws in Guyana; and review of the Newspapers Act to include online publications in Grenada.

Recommended regulation was not limited to legislative changes. Some researchers also suggested improved regulation through media associations. For instance, Barbados researcher Esther Jones recommended creating a professional association that accredits journalists and disciplines “malpractice” by media workers. Meanwhile, there were calls for establishing such bodies in Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where there are no media workers’ associations. At the same time, in The Bahamas, it was recommended that the powers of the existing media association be expanded.

3. A Plan of Action

In addition to the Situation Report, journalists and media stakeholders from 11 Caribbean countries attended a two-day virtual workshop titled “Developing a Situation Report and Action Plan on Media and Information Literacy and Disinformation in the Caribbean”.

The workshop aimed to reinforce the capacities and skills of journalists and improve their ability to promote media and information literacy and combat disinformation. Under the theme “Media literacy in the age of disinformation,” the workshop also allowed participants

to network with their regional counterparts and examine their central roles in using improved fact-checking and verification to promote media and information literacy to thwart disinformation.

The participants contributed to developing an eight-point action plan³, a useful tool and resource for those working in Caribbean media, particularly as they navigate growing threats to media freedom, media literacy, and credible journalism. The plan incorporates the key points raised by regional media stakeholders as part of PMA's research and feedback. The plan not only benefited from consultations from media professionals, media owners, and managers, as well as from months-long research conducted in several Caribbean territories.

The eight-point action plan charts the course for more robust efforts to tackle misinformation and disinformation while committing to media literacy for all to rebuild trust in news media.

1. Develop a Caribbean Regional Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation.

Regional key workers must be guided by a code that supports their efforts in fighting disinformation and misinformation and keeps them accountable to the public by emphasizing the value of rigorous fact-checking and verification processes.

2. Launch a public awareness campaign on how to identify misinformation and disinformation, supported by key stakeholders.

Citizens are vital partners in fighting misinformation and disinformation but must be well-equipped. It is important that key stakeholders, including media organizations, governments, and educators, work together to support the citizenry.

3. Create a knowledge hub as an online resource center for regional media practitioners.

To fight misinformation and disinformation, regional media workers must have access to guides, research, forums, and the latest insights that keep them up to date on efforts across the Caribbean.

³ "Combatting misinformation and disinformation for Caribbean media workers." Public Media Alliance, October 2022.

4. Invest in the technology necessary to combat misinformation and disinformation.

As misinformation and disinformation evolve, it is important that media organizations also evolve by investing in technology, such as fact-checking and AI-powered technology.

5. Commit to training and development of the region's journalists.

Caribbean media workers' skills must be developed through training, whether through their media organizations or national or regional initiatives. Training must focus on the principles of good journalism, including accuracy, independence, and accountability.

6. Encourage media literacy via education in the school system.

Formally introducing media literacy into the education system will develop the next generation of media-literate citizens.

7. Increase and strengthen collaboration among journalists in the region, including media associations and media houses.

Collaboration is central to thwarting misinformation and disinformation regionally, and media professionals must work together by training collaboratively, developing guides, and sharing best practices.

8. Address the issue of 'Big Tech' and online misinformation and disinformation via an industry-wide approach.

Key stakeholders across the region must develop approaches that mitigate the existential threat to journalism and fact-based information posed by global big tech and online misinformation and disinformation. Stakeholders must advocate for regional initiatives that support regional journalism and hold big tech companies to account.

The Media Institute of the Caribbean (MIC) continues to partner with the Association of Caribbean Media Workers (ACM) and local media associations throughout the Caribbean to improve media and information literacy. The Public Media Alliance is a key partner and also has an ongoing collaboration with MIC and ACM to address MIL within the wider context of stakeholders in the education sector.