

A multitude of trends are converging to undermine the foundations of information integrity globally. AI-powered disinformation, weak laws and regulations and struggling news organisations are just a few of the factors making it ever harder for people to rely on the information they access.

Since the threats to information integrity are varied and complex, there isn't a single fix that will solve everything. What is needed is a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that reflects the complex and highly diverse nature of those threats: an approach based on collective and strategic action by local, regional and global actors with a shared interest in ensuring that everyone can make informed decisions based on access to trustworthy and timely information.

The IMS Information Integrity Solution Papers address a range of key threats to information integrity. The papers do not purport to be silver bullets, individually or together, nor do they claim to be exhaustive. Instead, they propose a variety of experience-based, workable solutions to mitigate some of the most prominent threats to information integrity and to the ability of people everywhere to access the kind of trustworthy and timely information they need in order to shape their own lives.

This paper addresses the significance of independent public interest journalism as a key tool in ensuring and promoting healthy information ecosystems.

Information integrity needs good journalism

THE PROBLEM

International human rights standards, development cooperation principles and policy declarations from the United Nations and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), amongst others, have consistently recognised that the public's access to accurate and reliable information in the form of public interest journalism is crucial to building better societies and economies.

Yet, over the past decade, there has been a fundamental shift in how people access and consume information and from where it is supplied. Dwindling public trust in mainstream media; institutional capture by political and economic interests; low-quality, sensationalist news; and hate speech targeting vulnerable groups are critical challenges to preserving and promoting information integrity. The problem is exacerbated by the emergence of local news deserts – regions where people have limited access to accurate and relevant local news and information. News deserts exist across the world, including in the most well-resourced societies. Communities in these areas are particularly vulnerable to manipulative influencers, who exploit fear and existing biases to undermine trust and open dialogue.

A COMPREHENSIVE AND STRATEGIC APPROACH

Press freedom and independent, diverse media landscapes remain key components in ensuring and promoting information integrity. In its 2024 report, *Countering Disinformation Effectively - An Evidence-Based Policy Guide*, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace highlighted that supporting local journalism is one of the most impactful measures to combat disinformation.

Public interest media's fact-based journalism can overcome public disengagement from civic affairs and help people make informed decisions. A vibrant and inclusive digital economy is also highly dependent on the quality and flow of information from a variety of reliable sources. In short, independent public interest media offering accurate, relevant and timely facts, insights and analyses are a crucial antidote to dis- and misinformation and key to preserving overall information integrity.

Local journalism adds perspectives that resonate with people's rights and day-to-day needs in a way that makes community challenges feel surmountable. Independent local media are needed to provide context and history, and to encourage participation in electoral processes and civic life. IMS partners have developed extensive expertise in reporting on complex issues: from the climate crisis to armed conflict to illicit financial flows. Public interest journalists have unique skills in explaining complex societal issues and dynamics in a manner that is legible for and relevant to local communities and in working with those communities to action potential solutions.

When a devastating earthquake hit Afghanistan in the summer of 2025, local journalists were among the first to reach the worst-affected region. Their first-person accounts of what they saw prompted local authorities and the global community to understand the scale of the devastation and mobilise aid and rescue efforts. In Gaza, local journalists have been providing lifesaving information to residents while keeping the outside world informed about the realities on the ground during a genocidal war.

Local journalism is a critical way to show empathy and connection and to provide social cohesion and stability. Local and hyperlocal journalism have emerged through a new generation of nimble, digitally-savvy media, who embed constructive approaches within their communities. Trusted and recognisable local journalists counter AI systems that spread and amplify harmful narratives. Local media understand local needs and are attuned to the specific challenges and opportunities in their contexts. They are well positioned to implement effective, demand-driven solutions as they have the networks to affect change on the ground.

Two EU-funded programmes – Local Media for Democracy (LM4D) and Pluralistic Media for Democracy (PM4D) – have helped revive pluralistic public interest journalism in news deserts within the European Union. By providing grants and technical support, local media innovated products critical to limiting polarisation and conflict in new geographical areas and played a key role in revitalising local economies and local livelihoods.

At least 20 of the 42 projects supported by LM4D included audience engagement activities to raise public awareness about local issues. MESSAGEM DE LISBOA opened pop-up newsrooms in three marginalised neighbourhoods and involved residents in content creation. Meanwhile, local Greek outlet KRONOS was able to connect with older readers, both in person (by organising community meetings) and online (via a Facebook group), resulting in audience growth and new business partnerships. These programmes of local, regional and investigative media outlets create a diverse network of media across Europe, allowing them to shape successful sustainable strategies and become effective drivers of innovation and dynamism within local economies.

- Governments, civil society and international organisations must fully recognise the critical role of independent local media in preserving information integrity and therefore in promoting peace, stability and prosperity.
- Donors and other funders should support the creation of shared service and product development that can catalyse and scale the effectiveness of journalism production, especially those aimed at underserved languages or marginalised groups.
- All actors concerned with preserving information integrity should help advance the considerable entrepreneurialism on display in local and community media to innovate approaches that contribute to local community cohesion and services.
- Governments, civil society and international organisations should push for algorithm transparency, ensuring that content in the public interest is distributed broadly so that audiences have access to reliable information and inclusive public debate that allow them to act, participate in public life and claim their rights.
- All actors concerned with preserving information integrity should work with local organisations to strengthen advocacy for transparent and equitable access to data and the research necessary to hold those in power to account.