BRIEF 3.2. COUNTERING RUMORS AND PROPAGANDA AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

State and local governments must be prepared to respond to sophisticated information operations designed to erode trust, create division, and undermine governance and democratic values. These campaigns exploit existing tensions, target vulnerable populations, and often overwhelm limited local resources. With preparedness and effective communication, local government can build trust, anticipate risks, and preserve information integrity.

1. The challenge to address: propaganda and foreign malign influence target local levels

Foreign actors and affiliated networks have increasingly targeted subnational governments and communities as part of broader propaganda campaigns. These efforts can impact local governments across issue areas such as:

- **Urban planning:** claims that "15-minute cities" is a concept aimed at authoritarian state control.
- **Sustainability:** conspiracism related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Public health:** propaganda eroding trust in science and institutions, fueling vaccine hesitancy in communities.
- **Migrant communities:** scapegoating migrant or diaspora communities as the cause of broader social and economic challenges.
- **Gender equity and diversity:** gender-based and misogynist propaganda is often used against women in positions of power.

This list of themes is non-exhaustive but understanding common targets and sources of propaganda can assist in anticipating threats and developing response strategies.

State and local governments must differentiate risks in their information environment between:

- Deliberately false or misleading content created and distributed with the intent to deceive or cause harm. For example, an individual sharing information they know is false to undermine a political opponent.

- False information shared without malicious intent, often through misunderstanding or error. For example, someone sharing inaccurate health information on social media without understanding it is false or misleading.

This distinction matters as false information can take hold in local communities through non-malicious sharing and amplification. Once spread widely, debunking false information can be very challenging.

The negative impacts of false information are tangible and can include:
- Political backlash disrupting essential services and policy implementation.
- Scapegoating vulnerable communities can lead to violence or harassment.
- Erosion of public trust in local institutions and democratic processes.
- Polarization among community members over manufactured controversies.
- Confusion about emergency services during crises.

Propaganda has complex sources and vulnerabilities complicate responses:
- Foreign actors seeking to destabilize democratic institutions. These may be state- and non-state-driven.
- Increasingly, domestic actors relay and amplify divisive narratives for electoral advantage.
- Algorithmic amplification through social media for engagement over accuracy.
- Declining trust in public institutions as messengers.
- Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies as a force multiplier for foreign information operations at scale.

2. Strategic guidance for preserving information integrity and building trust.

Effective responses to propaganda require building trust in institutions and within the community. Multisectoral and multilevel partnerships increase preparedness, especially as there is often limited coordination of responses to foreign propaganda and interference between the national and local levels. Community engagement and outreach are critical to understanding and mitigating the spread of propaganda. Local governments must invest in communication expertise to monitor social media, plan and craft straightforward, accessible and verified information and counter false narratives. Subnational diplomacy networks are valuable avenues to share best practice responses.

State and local governments can deploy counter measures at different stages:

Stage	Focus	Activities
Before	Pre-emption and early detection	**Improve media literacy and critical thinking** through investments in longer term public education campaigns and digital media literacy information. **Increase the frequency of communication and availability of verified information**, especially in anticipation of potential propaganda operations around key events such as major policy announcements and elections. **Establish regulatory frameworks for combatting propaganda**. This must be done in partnership with other levels of government that often have responsibilities for key areas of regulation such as media and technology. Local input is, however, critical to ensuring these frameworks attend and respond to city-level experiences.
During	Containment and debunking	**Fill the information vacuum**: as soon as a propaganda campaign becomes evident, prepare and deploy rapid response communications with targeted clear, comprehensive, and factual information.
After	Recovery and debunking	**Craft counter narratives**: corrective messaging involves the use of robust data and "sticky facts" combined with storytelling and personalized communication techniques. Understanding local communities and how and where propaganda is spread can help inform these communications strategies. **Support those affected**: provide psychologically safe places and support services for those impacted by propaganda.
At all stages	Local outreach and monitoring	**Community outreach programs** deepen understanding and (re)build trust across communities. Direct people-to-people engagement can help organizations understand when and how false information is spreading and respond through targeted outreach to impacted groups. For instance, the city of Leeds (United Kingdom) ran a series of local "Brave Space Café" (see case study below). **Social media analysis**: monitoring social media discourse related to local issues helps identify content and accounts linked to foreign propaganda on key topics and events. **Landscape mapping**: sources of propaganda often use repeat tactics and narratives. Identifying and mapping the landscape of repeated relays of propaganda within local communities can help understand the media they use to communicate and the groups they engage with.

Insights From the Field

Dortmund leverages international city networks and partnerships to tackle divisive rumors.[1]

For Dortmund, preserving information integrity is another important aspect when it comes to supporting democratic values. Since 2023, the International Relations team in Dortmund established a working group together with the Communication and Press Office as well as the Municipal Situation Center to tackle falsehoods, recognizing it as a threat to democracy and social cohesion. Dortmund is investing resources into capacity building and international exchanges on the topic of fabricated information through such networks as German Marshall Fund, Melbourne Centre for Cities, as well as through peer learnings from the partner cities, such as Leeds.

Community engagement in Leeds (United Kingdom) to address the roots of mistrust and build resilience against rumors.[2]

In 2024, Leeds City Council's International Relations team co-ordinated a partnership project between our Migration Team and Camden Council, to tackle the rumours and misunderstandings that can drive wedges between communities, and lead to hostility. The project was funded by the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities Programme.

During the course of the project, the UK experienced a summer of violent disorder, much of which stemmed from the types of rumour and falsehoods we were aiming to tackle. This was the backdrop in which we ran a series of local "Brave Space Café" sessions in communities and with communities to explore some of these issues and equip people with the confidence to address them.
For many people, opportunities to quietly contrast their ideas with those who think differently are shrinking. This has made our work feel even more important and urgent, not just within the UK but also in other countries where similar disorder has arisen.

We recognised from the start that we could only make this sort of project meaningful if we worked hand in hand with partners with deep roots within our local communities. In Leeds, these were Chapel FM and LS14 Trust and they helped recruit local people to participate.

This project has provided a test bed for regular honest and effective intercultural discussions. The sessions have been seen as a clear example of good practice in community engagement, and a model that can be reflected upon and learned from going forward. The sessions gave us an opportunity to dig deep into the roots of mistrust and rumours between communities. Participants welcomed the opportunity to have a range of 'elephant in the room conversations' which fostered a deeper understanding, empathy, and solidarity among participants.

The sessions have equipped participants with knowledge, resources, and a renewed sense of responsibility to advocate for and support marginalised individuals within their communities. The collaborative environment has strengthened community ties and created a network of allies committed to promoting inclusivity and equality.

We were grateful to benefit from the wealth of expertise within the Intercultural Cities Network, especially the Spanish city of Bilbao, who developed a network of anti-rumour community ambassadors, and produced the Intercultural Cities guidelines on tackling rumours, who joined us in a webinar to share their learning with us.

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[1] Contribution from Dortmund (Germany)
[2] Contribution from Leeds (United Kingdom)

About this Toolkit: Strategic guidance based on experiences from the field.

State and local leaders receive visiting foreign delegations, opportunities for international partnerships, and pressure to engage globally—but no clear guidance on how to do it right. This Toolkit provides that strategic guidance, building upon the insights and best practices from a group of innovative city, state, and regional government leaders from nine countries: Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States

The result is a practical guide organized around the core challenges local leaders face most often. It provides strategic guidance to:

• Build an international strategy that serves community's priorities while avoiding common pitfalls (Briefs 1.1, 1.2, 1.3)
• Manage relationships that create economic opportunities and jobs (Briefs 2.1, 2.2, 2.3)
• Navigate security threats and potential risks (Briefs 3.1, 3.2)
• Turn international connections into influence and resilience (Briefs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Each brief includes specific steps and real examples from local leaders, experts, and practitioners. If you're using this Toolkit to apply an innovation locally or have questions or suggestions, please fill out this short survey.