

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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EL SALVADOR

DISINFORMATION DURING THE PANDEMIC: OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY IN EL SALVADOR



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Introduction

The enormous amount of information produced constantly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has travelled both online and through traditional media, similar to a tsunami, with reliable information and disinformation mixed together. The World Health Organization baptised this phenomenon an “infodemic”.¹

To combat disinformation in the long term, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recommended that states invest in media and information literacy (MIL)² programmes so that citizens are able to search, select, evaluate, synthesise and share the information they encounter in a responsible way. In some regions, the involvement of large platforms like Facebook in MIL programmes is evident. However, in other latitudes there is not only state apathy, but private efforts, in most cases, are small initiatives that do not reach the general public, the main target of these efforts.

In El Salvador, there is no specific public policy that involves training or teaching MIL, beyond some references in official documents. In the context of the pandemic, efforts to combat disinformation were few and not necessarily focused on MIL.

Projects that have been deployed to combat the information disorder, such as fact-checking

initiatives, are the starting point for implementing MIL training and education on a larger scale, both in the public and private spheres.

However, it is worth reflecting, as a first step, on the real need to bet on MIL training and education as a solution to the circulation of disinformation and misinformation, the difficulties inherent in its implementation at scale, as well as the challenges in promoting MIL training in the Salvadoran context. This report aims to address these questions.

False information in El Salvador during the pandemic

One of the main problems in El Salvador is the absence of a public educational policy on MIL that serves as a transversal axis for other policies. A review of different official study programmes of the Ministry of Education yield few references to MIL – and when references are made they are unclear, and do not allow one to properly evaluate the intention behind the inclusion of MIL in the curriculum.

On the other hand, the government’s Digital Agenda El Salvador 2020-2030³ includes an MIL component, but there are no indications of specific long-term programmes to make it a reality and realise the goals of the agenda. In fact, in some media interviews, the Innovation Secretariat of the Presidency, responsible for developing the Digital Agenda, refers to MIL in extremely limited terms – more about improving “digital skills” and solving the problem of access to digital devices, than about promoting social practices facilitated by reading and writing.⁴

In this context, Salvadorans had to face the avalanche of information that the pandemic brought with it. Contrary to what happened in other countries, in which people returned to television as a trusted medium for reliable information,⁵ in El Salvador a recent study showed that social networks remained the main sources of news and information

1 The World Health Organization defines an infodemic as “an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” Pan American Health Organization. (2020). *Understanding the infodemic and misinformation in the fight against COVID-19*. https://iris.paho.org/bitstream/handle/10665.2/52052/Factsheet-infodemic_eng.pdf?sequence=16&isAllowed=y

2 According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), “Media and Information Literacy consists of the knowledge, the attitudes, and the sum of the skills needed to know when and what information is needed; where and how to obtain that information; how to evaluate it critically and organise it once it is found; and how to use it in an ethical way.” IFLA. (2011). *IFLA Media and Information Literacy Recommendations*. <https://www.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/assets/information-literacy/publications/media-info-lit-recommend-en.pdf>

3 <https://www.innovacion.gob.sv>

4 Parra, R. (2021, 10 July). El Salvador presenta avances de su Agenda Digital 2020-2030. *DPL News*. <https://dplnews.com/el-salvador-presenta-avances-de-su-agenda-digital-2020-2030>

5 Negrodo, S., et al. (2021). Spain. In N. Newman et al. (Eds.), *Digital News Report 2021*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/spain>

on the pandemic.⁶ Although this study indicates an increase in television consumption during the pandemic – mainly of news – it does not refer to whether this was due to the fact that Salvadorans trusted TV news more.

Salvadorans also had to face a specific distortion of information not found in many countries dealing with the circulation of false information: propaganda.⁷ It was this, mainly, that resulted in some digital media developing content where public information that could be accessed at the time was contrasted to the government's narrative on the pandemic. This exercise resulted in evidence of false, misleading or incomplete information provided by the government and circulating on social networks, generally in the form of advertising spots or posts on Twitter.

Currently, digital magazines such as *Factum*⁸ and *Gato Encerrado*⁹ continue to publish content contrasting the official discourse on different topics that range from politics to health. In addition, a new site¹⁰ has been set up dedicated exclusively to combating disinformation through fact checking, and it also checks government statements on the pandemic, among other issues.

Opportunities for MIL after the pandemic

Disinformation and misinformation are not new phenomena whose appearance can be attributed to the birth and growth of the internet. Their existence and dissemination are also associated with other media such as television, newspapers and radio. False information has also always travelled through communities by word-of-mouth, or through other means.

Studies on the skills that a reader must have to deal with disinformation suggest that they are not new either – although the extent of the information that needs to be processed online has increased, and there are technical tools and an understanding of how the internet works that are necessary to process the circulation of online information. Numerous studies have identified these skills as including choosing precise search terms, selecting relevant results, critically evaluating information, synthesising

information from multiple sources, and sharing what is learned in a responsible way.¹¹

UNESCO has recommended to states that they invest in MIL programmes to combat disinformation in a lasting way, a recommendation that is consistent with the available evidence¹² and with the recommendations of other organisations.¹³ There is, therefore, a preference for educational and training strategies over those that involve legislation that can restrict fundamental rights, such as the right to freedom of expression.

This call should be heeded, in the first instance, by states, which are responsible for ensuring that their citizens enjoy their rights fully, including those that are exercised in the digital environment. The private sector also has a role to play in this, even companies that have been blamed for the circulation of disinformation online. Cases such as Facebook, which has consolidated its MIL programme in Africa,¹⁴ or the DW Academy,¹⁵ which offers MIL programmes in Central America, are examples of how the private sector can become actively involved in this task.

However, improving the public's MIL cannot be done without foundations and only with a short-term goal in mind. Public policies are needed, including in education, that articulate the need for MIL in all areas of training, teaching and learning.

In El Salvador, a review of official educational documents, which include the curricula of different grades in different subjects, especially those related to the study of language and the study of computing, reveal a limited approach to the MIL concept.

6 Carballo, W., & Marroquín, A. (2020). *2020 D.C. Así dio vuelta el consumo mediático en El Salvador durante la COVID-19*. Escuela de Comunicación Mónica Herrera y Maestría en Gestión Estratégica de la Comunicación, UCA. <https://uca.edu.sv/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/investigacion-uca-asi-dio-vuelta-en-consumo-mediatico-en-el-salvador-durante-la-covid-19.pdf>

7 <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/learn>

8 <https://www.revistafactum.com>

9 <https://gatoencerrado.news>

10 <https://infodemia.com.sv>

11 Walraven, A., Brand-Gruwel, S., & Boshuizen, H. (2009). How students evaluate information and sources when searching the World Wide Web for information. *Computers & Education*, 52(3), 234-246. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2008.08.003>; Goldman, S. R., et al. (2012). Comprehending and Learning From Internet Sources: Processing Patterns of Better and Poorer Learners. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(4), 356-381; Leu, et al. (2013). The New Literacies of Online Research and Comprehension: Assessing and Preparing Students for the 21st Century With Common Core State Standards. In S. B. Neuman & L. B. Gambrell (Eds.), *Quality Reading Instruction in the Age of Common Core Standards*. International Reading Association.

12 Cunliffe-Jones, P., et al. (2021). The State of Media Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa 2020 and a Theory of Misinformation Literacy. In P. Cunliffe-Jones et al., *Misinformation Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa*. University of Westminster Press.

13 Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión de la CIDH. (2019). *Guía para garantizar la libertad de expresión frente a la desinformación deliberada en contextos electorales*. Organización de Estados Americanos. https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/expresion/publicaciones/Guia_Desinformacion_VF.pdf

14 Moyo, A. (2020, 17 June). Facebook consolidates digital literacy programmes in Africa. *ITWeb*. <https://www.itweb.co.za/content/kYbegMXDGKPMawPg>

15 Banos Ruiz, I., & Binder, S. (2021, 22 March). Campus AMI, competencias mediáticas en un viaje interactivo. *DW*. <https://www.dw.com/en/campus-ami-competencias-medi%C3%A1ticas-en-un-viaje-interactivo/a-56954102>

The same happens when reviewing the current government's commitment to digital transformation, in which, as mentioned, reference is made to the concept of digital literacy, but in practice there are few projects that will contribute towards realising this goal, and certainly not in line with a proper definition of MIL.

To develop an efficient and representative public policy, it is necessary to start with a diagnosis of the situation in which the largest number of stakeholders participate. From this a draft policy should be developed which is then sent out for public comment. It is only after this that a policy can be finalised.

In the initial diagnosis, as well as in later stages of execution, it is necessary to identify the difficulties in the implementation of this policy.

One of the main obstacles that can explain the absence of a public policy on MIL in El Salvador is the lack of political will. Without the convergence of different actors involved in the decision-making processes, it will not be possible to develop an effective policy. In this regard, there is little that gives us hope that MIL is being taken seriously in El Salvador, outside of merely discussing the topic.

If the same government uses propaganda as a tool to feed a triumphalist narrative, which does not hold up against journalistic scrutiny; and if access to public information has been limited to the point of putting locks on information in the form of criminal legislation¹⁶ to discourage the use of anonymous sources in journalistic reports critical of the government, it is not possible to remain optimistic.

It is true that the implementation of MIL curricula, whether for training or education, is not only the responsibility of the public sector, nor limited to the school environment. Instead, MIL training includes the collaboration of private entities and is an analytical skill that can be developed at home, work and in the community.

However, the effort of civil society organisations dedicated to strengthening education is essential to a successful MIL programme. Not only because of the financial resources that are necessary for this type of project, but also because of their experience in advocacy on a key issue of public concern, and their ability to forge alliances with other organisations or with companies interested in the implementation of MIL curricula.

Another obstacle is that there is very little academic research on this topic. Little is known about

the current MIL competencies of Salvadorans, and how this may differ according to age group, or economic and social circumstances. One of the pillars on which a public policy must rest is the scientific knowledge of the phenomenon in which it is intended to intervene.

A search for material related to the subject returned few results. However, this does not mean that there is no research that has been done, or that there are no professionals with knowledge of the subject or no institutions that are paying attention to the subject. For example, two institutions that are paying attention to MIL are the José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA) and the Mónica Herrera School of Communications. However, more is needed, and universities and organisations dedicated to social research should be encouraged to research the topic to produce the scientific evidence to back up any policy that is developed.

The efforts initiated by digital magazines in fact checking the statements of public officials is a first step – and illustrate the need to teach people how to consume, produce and share information in a responsible manner. Although the work is carried out by the journalists or fact checkers, as a short-term action, it is possible to take these initiatives as a starting point from which advocacy work can begin to establish alliances with the large internet platforms that have shown interest in combating disinformation.

Conclusion

The appearance of a new disease that later became a pandemic brought with it the problem of information overload, which exposed a large number of people around the world to the information disorder.

The need to counter disinformation led to a focus of attention on MIL as a long-term intervention that should be instituted by states as a public policy, but that does not exclude the collaboration of multiple stakeholders. Some large technology companies are already implementing MIL projects either through donations, collaborations with civil society organisations and states, as well as through the provision of curricula and other educational resources on the subject.

In El Salvador, a public policy that integrates MIL as a transversal axis to other policies is necessary, and this proposal should come from civil society. However, before this can be done, there is a need for more research on the matter in order to have a scientific basis that allows establishing priority areas for intervention. This work should be carried out by universities and social research centres that have the financial and human resources to carry out the work.

¹⁶ Rodríguez, M., & Alas, L. (2021, 9 December). Reformas a la Ley de Delitos Informáticos amenazan al periodismo. *elsalvador.com*. <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/asamblea-prensa/907913/2021>

On the other hand, the main obstacle to the implementation of a broad-based MIL programme in the country is the lack of political will, which manifests itself in actions that seek to limit access to information that would allow the development of a critical citizenry. This issue conflicts with the objectives of an MIL programme, which precisely seeks to provide citizens with tools that allow them to know, criticise and propose solutions to the problems of their daily life. The government has also shown itself to be an active participant in disinformation through propaganda.

This obstacle, however, should not be insurmountable. Human rights organisations should strengthen their advocacy strategies, which should include multisectoral alliances to implement long-term MIL projects in the country, even if they start with specific or limited research or training objectives.

The renewed interest in MIL in reaction to digital magazines beginning to fact check statements by public officials in El Salvador should be taken advantage of. This interest should become the starting point for efforts to promote and implement MIL programmes. The health crisis that produced other sub-crises, such as the so-called infodemic, must be used to strengthen the interest in developing the tools to consume and produce information in a responsible and ethical manner.

Actions steps

The following steps are proposed to strengthen MIL training and education in El Salvador in the immediate term:

- Increase research on MIL capacities among priority groups, such as rural and marginalised communities and women.
- Establish alliances with large platform intermediaries to secure financial support for the development of multidisciplinary MIL projects.
- Establish a roadmap for the development of a public policy that places MIL on a transversal axis in relation to other policies.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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2021-2022 Report
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