

The Effectiveness of

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Peacekeeping Operations

**The Impact and Response to Misinformation,
Disinformation, Malinformation and
Hate Speech in the Digital Era**

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**NOR
CAP**

PART OF NORWEGIAN
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EPON, NORCAP and TfP Report

The Effectiveness of UN Peacekeeping Operations

The Impact and Response to Misinformation, Disinformation,
Malinformation and Hate Speech in the Digital Era

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2. Executive Summary

Over the past decades, the use of misinformation, disinformation, malinformation and hate speech (MDMH) has contributed to the escalation of violence in environments where the United Nations deployed Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKOs), including in Rwanda and Yugoslavia.¹ In today’s mission contexts, the use of MDMH and the subsequent pollution of the information environment creates significant challenges for UN PKOs, posing risks to civilians, which the UN is deployed to protect, as well as the safety and security of UN peacekeepers by targeting them individually and as groups. The widespread utilisation of modern technology in UN PKO environments raises the magnitude of the MDMH threat. In some settings, MDMH places communities and peacekeepers at risk of harm, but more broadly, MDMH places UN PKOs in ever more challenging situations, which they are often incapable of responding to. Through the misrepresentation of efforts and the distortion of perceptions, MDMH can impact the mission’s (as a collective and within units/teams) ability to respond and adapt to the context, which undermines its ability to protect civilians.²

The availability of Internet access and frequent use of social media and other outlets has enabled an exponential and uncontrollable online explosion of MDMH. As a result, an evolving information disorder is mounting characterised by:

information pollution at a global scale; a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming these ‘polluted’ messages; a myriad of content types and techniques

1 UN. (n.d.). Hate Speech and Real Harm. <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/hate-speech-and-real-harm>

2 Vermeij, L., Bigwood, C., von Gienanth, T., Kumalo, L., Issa, S., Kone, F.R. et al. (2022). UN Peacekeeping Operations at a Crossroads: The Implementation of Protection Mandates in Contested and Congested Spaces. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. <https://effectivepeaceops.net/publication/un-peacekeeping-operations-at-crossroads>

for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers.³

This trend has created severe risks in terms of amplified tensions and divisions during times of emergency, crisis, key political moments and/or armed conflict and is directly impacting the work of UN PKOs.

The spread of information by actors as part of hearts and minds campaigns and other information strategies to bring populations on the ground on the missions' side is nothing new. Simultaneously, the diffusion of rumours and false information can contribute to the escalation of tensions between and within groups and communities and result in widespread violence. Historically, information was mainly spread through analogue means, including word-of-mouth. The use of MDMH in today's conflict settings has significantly evolved, particularly because now the focus has been not on actors or parties to the conflict, but on those trying to keep the peace. Current contexts and environments allow for a much wider and rapid spread of different types of information through new communication tools that are used online, offline, and in hybrid formats. All of these can support and contribute to the intensification and acceleration of MDMH, impacting the conflict dynamics and the use of indiscriminate violence. The online uptake of MDMH may further aggravate these dynamics. It can undermine the stability of mission environments, lead to local conflicts and indiscriminate use of violence by non-state and state actors, impact detrimentally on human rights, and jeopardise overall processes of achieving and sustaining peace and supporting its processes.⁴

Therefore, this highlights how the spread of MDMH can negatively affect the work of UN Peacekeeping missions. In this report, we find that the use of MDMH is a growing challenge for UN PKOs across the globe, especially in the cases covered by this report with armed rebel groups as well as the not-so-friendly host states to malign the peace operations. While freedom of expression must be protected at all costs, we do find that social media is not just weaponised within conflicts but that its use can also decisively influence how, when and whether conflicts manifest, when and where violence is manifest, and the people it targets. While the UN at different levels of operation is doing its best to tackle the challenge through working groups, support to missions through training and information and additional analysis, more support is needed from the member states through financial and resource-based means to support missions to fulfil their mandates. When the spread of mis- and disinformation threatens mission personnel's ability to deliver on their mandates, it places mission personnel at risk or triggers violence and hate with intent to harm. UN PKOs must have the capacity and the readiness to respond – without the risk of affecting information integrity on digital platforms. If nothing is done to support the UN PKOs long term in this area, the gap of understanding

3 Wardle, C., and Derakhshan, H. (2018). Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Council of Europe. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>

4 Khan, I. (2022). A/77/288: Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression during armed conflicts. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77288-disinformation-and-freedom-opinion-and-expression-during-armed>

between the UN PKO, its staff and local communities will create environments where distrust continues to fester, which, over a long period, will undermine the legitimacy of the field mission. As a result, missions already struggle with perception or legitimacy challenges due to past historical inabilities and will be faced with a mountain of questions over their abilities, especially when this interferes with delivering on protection mandates and contributing to long-term, sustainable peace and development. Finally, in the longer term, UN PKOs need to shift toward preventive approaches, including proactively reshaping narratives about the UN and contributing to a healthier information environment through support to local journalists. While work is underway by the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) Information Integrity Unit, the UN needs to widen the mandate of this unit, increase its resources, and provide support to the work it is doing. At the mission level, adopting a whole-of-mission approach across uniformed and civilian components to foster networked communication in the field will be beneficial. For this, military, police and civilian officers need further training before they are deployed to the mission and during deployments.

Annexure: Project Summaries

The Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON)

Peace operations are among the most important international mechanisms for contemporary conflict management. However, their effectiveness remains the subject of confusion and debate in both the policy and academic communities. Various international organizations conducting peace operations, including the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the European Union (EU), have come under increasing pressure to justify their effectiveness and impact. Although various initiatives are underway to improve the ability to assess the performance of peace operations, there remains a distinct lack of independent, research-based information about the effectiveness of such operations.

To address this gap, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), together with over 40 partners from across the globe, have established an international network to jointly undertake research into the effectiveness of peace operations. This network has developed a shared methodology to enable the members to undertake research on this topic. This will ensure coherence across cases and facilitate comparative research. The network produce a series of reports that are shared with stakeholders including the UN, AU, and EU, interested national government representatives, researchers, and the general public. All the EPON reports are available via <https://effectivepeaceops.net>. The network is coordinated by NUPI. Many of the partners fund their own participation. NUPI has also received funding from the Norwegian Research Council and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support the Network and

its research, including via the UN Peace Operations project (UNPOP) and the Training for Peace (TFP) programme.

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NORCAP

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- We provide targeted expertise to strengthen our partners' response.
- We collaborate with partners to develop solutions to un-met gaps and challenges.

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Over the past decades, the use of misinformation, malinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDMH) has contributed to the escalation of violence in environments where the United Nations deployed Peacekeeping Operations (UN PKO). The widespread utilisation of modern technology in UN PKO environments raises the magnitude of the MDMH threat. In some settings, MDMH places communities and peacekeepers at risk of harm, but more broadly, MDMH places UN PKOs in ever more challenging situations which they are often incapable of responding to. The spread of information by actors as part of hearts and minds campaigns and other information strategies to bring populations on the ground on their side is nothing new. Simultaneously, the diffusion of rumours and false information can contribute to the escalation of tensions between and within groups and communities and result in widespread violence. All of these can support and contribute to the intensification and acceleration of MDMH, impacting not only the conflict dynamics but also the use of indiscriminate violence. The online uptake of MDMH may further aggravate these dynamics. It can undermine the stability of mission environments, local conflicts, indiscriminate use of violence by non-state and state actors, impact detrimentally on human rights, and jeopardise overall processes of achieving and sustaining peace and supporting its processes.

The report draws on four UN PKOs as case studies and hinges further analysis on two UN PKOs to provide and understand context specific examples of the rising challenges that UN PKO face with MDMH. This report by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) in collaboration with NORCAP and Training for Peace sets out to explore some of these key developments and challenges questioning, what is the impact of MDMH on UN PKO's and their ability to effectively implement their mandates? What efforts have the selected UN PKO's taken to respond to MDMH? What are the lessons identified and recommendations for UNPKOs to address MDMH?



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