

WHY DO WE BELIEVE LIES?

Rethinking Peacebuilding
in the Digital Age



Tunisia, 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In an era where information flows faster than ever before, the digital sphere has become both a tool for connection and a weapon for division. This report examines how misinformation and disinformation have evolved into major global threats, shaping perceptions, influencing behaviors, and undermining the very foundations of peace and social trust. Through an interdisciplinary approach—combining insights from psychology, communication studies, and peacebuilding—the study explores how false narratives take root, spread, and impact societies, with a specific focus on the MENA region and Tunisia.

The findings reveal that misinformation is not simply a technological challenge, but a deeply human one. Cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, emotional contagion, and the framing effect drive people to believe and share misleading information. Digital platforms and algorithmic systems amplify these biases, favoring engagement over accuracy and creating echo chambers that polarize public discourse. In contexts where institutional trust is fragile—as in much of the MENA region—these dynamics become fertile ground for manipulation, eroding civic dialogue and weakening democratic resilience.

The report underscores the urgent need to integrate media literacy, critical thinking, and digital awareness into peacebuilding strategies. Combating misinformation requires more than content moderation or fact-checking; it demands empowering citizens—especially youth—to recognize manipulation, engage responsibly online, and reclaim digital spaces as instruments for dialogue and cohesion.

Understanding misinformation is not only about protecting truth; it is about safeguarding the conditions for peace. It requires moving beyond reaction to anticipation—building societies capable of questioning, verifying, and reflecting before division takes root. The next phase of this struggle will be defined by the rise of artificial intelligence, synthetic media, and deepfakes, which will test the very boundaries of perception. Yet these same tools can also be redirected to strengthen truth, transparency, and civic engagement—if governed with ethical intent and collective vigilance.

Introduction & Context

The digital revolution has not only transformed communication—it has redefined the very notion of truth in public life. As information moves through opaque algorithms and emotionally charged networks, distinguishing between credible and manipulative content has become increasingly difficult. This evolution has altered how citizens form opinions, trust institutions, and participate in civic life, making the information ecosystem itself a critical field of conflict.

In Tunisia and across the MENA region, these dynamics unfold within fragile social and political contexts marked by transitions, inequality, and declining public trust. Misinformation becomes both a symptom and a weapon: a tool for reinforcing polarization, silencing dissent, and weakening democratic accountability. Understanding how and why falsehoods spread is therefore not only a matter of media reform, but of peacebuilding, since the erosion of shared truth directly undermines social cohesion and the capacity for collective dialogue.

The sections that follow outline the key findings from this analysis, with particular attention to the Tunisian context, and conclude with strategic recommendations for integrating digital literacy and media monitoring into peacebuilding frameworks.

Key Findings

1. Cognitive and Psychological Aspects

Misinformation spreads not only because of technological systems but because of how the human mind processes information. The report highlights how cognitive shortcuts and emotional biases influence people's capacity to discern truth from falsehood.

Studies show that people tend to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs - a process known as confirmation bias - and reject data that challenges their worldview. This psychological mechanism is intensified by the framing effect, where the way information is presented (positive or negative, alarming or reassuring) strongly shapes perception and response.

For example, research demonstrates that negatively framed headlines are shared more often on social media due to the negativity bias, our innate tendency to focus on emotionally charged or threatening content. Emotions such as fear, anger, or disgust play a central role in this process. This dynamic transforms misinformation from a simple cognitive error into a deeply social and emotional phenomenon.

In this sense, misinformation is not primarily about ignorance-it is about identity. Beliefs become markers of belonging, and rejecting facts can serve as an act of group loyalty. Addressing misinformation therefore requires more than correction; it requires building emotional resilience and fostering spaces for reflection, where individuals can engage critically without perceiving disagreement as a personal threat.

2. Digital Ecosystem

The digital infrastructure that defines today's communication landscape amplifies and accelerates these cognitive vulnerabilities. Social media platforms and recommendation algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, not accuracy. As a result, content that evokes strong emotions-particularly outrage or fear-is prioritized in users' feeds, creating echo chambers where misinformation thrives.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning have further intensified this challenge. While AI can generate persuasive fake content (such as deepfakes), it also offers potential solutions for detection and moderation. Research by Pennycook and Rand (2021-2022) suggests that small cognitive nudges -such as prompting users to assess accuracy- can reduce misinformation sharing, while reflective AI tools can encourage users to question their own assumptions.

This duality highlights the urgent need to regulate and design AI systems ethically, ensuring they enhance critical thinking rather than exploit emotional reactivity.

The report also notes the rise of AI-generated deception in the MENA context. Deepfakes, manipulated videos, and fabricated documents circulate widely, sometimes being used to discredit public figures or institutions.

The January 2025 alert issued by the Conseil National de l'Ordre des Médecins (CNOM) in Tunisia regarding a deepfake video falsely attributed to Professor Moncef Hamdoun illustrates this growing risk.

The digital ecosystem, therefore, is both a battlefield and a potential instrument for peacebuilding: it can amplify division or promote informed dialogue, depending on how platforms are governed and how users are empowered.

3. Regional and National Dynamics

In the MENA region, disinformation is often instrumentalized to serve political, ideological, or sectarian agendas. Research by Frenkel (2021) and the Oxford Internet Institute (2021) indicates that state and non-state actors have used coordinated campaigns to shape public opinion, delegitimize opposition, or dehumanize entire groups. In such contexts, misinformation is not an accidental byproduct-it is a deliberate strategy of control.

Tunisia exemplifies many of these challenges. The report identifies a combination of low institutional trust, declining media independence, and limited media literacy as key vulnerabilities. According to the Arab Barometer (2021), trust in official media and government communication remains among the lowest in the region, creating fertile ground for rumors and manipulation.

The national information ecosystem reflects a broader regional pattern: polarized narratives, hate speech, politically motivated disinformation, and the absence of consistent fact-checking frameworks. However, Tunisia has also witnessed the emergence of resilient civil society initiatives, such as Falso (TunisiaVsDisinfo.com), which promote transparency and local-language fact-checking as tools for civic empowerment.

These dynamics underscore that the fight against misinformation in Tunisia is not merely about content verification-it is a broader struggle to rebuild trust between citizens, institutions, and the media. Without this trust, efforts at peacebuilding and democratic consolidation remain fragile.

However, the research also revealed major limitations in data availability and academic engagement. Quantitative and qualitative sources on misinformation in Tunisia remain scarce, fragmented, or outdated. Few public institutions or universities have developed sustained monitoring mechanisms, and access to platform data is restricted. This lack of research infrastructure and institutional interest constitutes a challenge in itself, making it difficult to measure the real impact of misinformation and design evidence-based interventions.

Implications for Peacebuilding

The impact of misinformation and disinformation goes far beyond the realm of communication-it strikes at the core of what makes peace possible. When citizens no longer share a common understanding of reality, social cohesion weakens, polarization deepens, and dialogue becomes nearly impossible. The manipulation of narratives can inflame identity-based tensions, justify violence and hate speech, and erode confidence in democratic institutions-all dynamics that undermine peacebuilding efforts at their foundation.

In fragile or transitional contexts like Tunisia, misinformation and disinformation operates as both a symptom and a driver of instability. It thrives where institutional trust is low and civic engagement is fragile, exploiting existing grievances and amplifying social divides. Peacebuilding, traditionally focused on mediation, governance, and conflict resolution, can no longer afford to ignore this digital

dimension. Addressing misinformation must become an integral pillar of peacebuilding strategies, not an afterthought.

Youth, in particular, stand at the center of this transformation. As the most active digital generation, they are both the primary targets of misinformation and the most powerful agents of change. Empowering them with knowledge, tools, and platforms for responsible digital engagement transforms them from passive consumers into peacebuilders in the digital sphere.

Ultimately, integrating the fight against misinformation into peacebuilding efforts is not only about protecting truth -it is about restoring the conditions for collective understanding and coexistence. By strengthening critical thinking, transparency, and empathy in digital spaces, societies can begin to rebuild the social trust on which any lasting peace depends.

Strategic Recommendations

The analysis points to one clear conclusion: addressing misinformation requires multidimensional approaches and structural responses that are as sophisticated as the problem itself. Rather than short-term awareness campaigns or reactive corrections, Tunisia and the broader MENA region need sustained frameworks that combine education, technology, and governance. Here are some specific recommendations:

- **Media literacy programs** that equip citizens -especially young people- to question sources, detect manipulation, and navigate digital spaces responsibly.
Integrate critical thinking and digital literacy into national education systems, from schools to universities. These programs should be developed in partnership with local journalists and psychologists to help students understand both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of misinformation. Short-term workshops are not enough; what is needed is an institutionalized curriculum that shapes the next generation of digital citizens.
- **Establish Cross-Sector Monitoring Hubs**
Create independent observatories that unite researchers, journalists, civil society, and fact-checkers to monitor emerging disinformation patterns. Tunisia's experience shows the need for permanent data collection and analysis rather than ad hoc reporting. Such hubs should have access to anonymized platform data to enable transparent, evidence-based responses to digital manipulation.
- **Digital awareness and resilience trainings** for civil society actors, journalists, and educators to recognize early signs of information warfare. Different concrete tools are detailed in the report.
- **Collaborative fact-checking initiatives that bring together media, academia, and civil society to build transparent information ecosystems.**
- **Encourage Ethical Design and Regulation of AI Systems and join regional and international efforts**

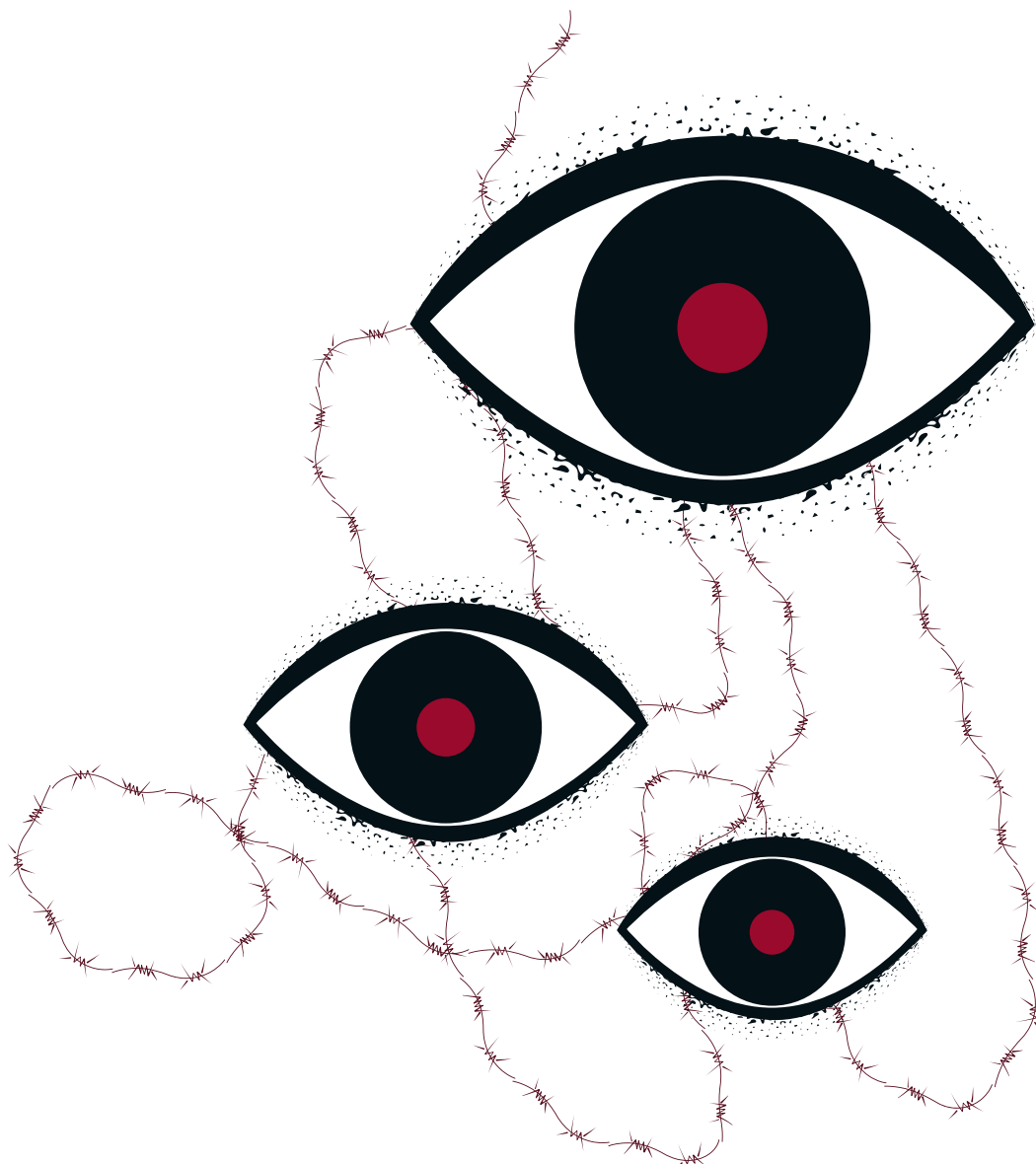
This includes ensuring algorithmic transparency, developing safeguards against deepfakes, and incentivizing tech companies to privilege credible content over engagement metrics.

- **Strengthen Regional and South-South Collaboration and exchange of methodologies, data, and rapid alerts.**

Coordinated platforms could significantly enhance regional resilience against politically motivated campaigns.

- **Empower Youth as Digital Peace Ambassadors**

Youth engagement should go beyond participation: young creators, journalists, and activists can play a leadership role in rebuilding trust online. Supporting youth-led media projects, digital watchdog collectives, and fact-checking startups would channel creativity and credibility where institutional communication often falls short.





The full report and sources are available on Novact website : <https://novact.org/en/publicacio/>

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