

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 how community-based coalitions of local media and civil society stakeholders can effectively outperform targeted disinformation operations.

Information integrity needs prebunking led by community-based coalitions

THE PROBLEM

Traditional approaches to countering disinformation typically address malign narratives that have already taken hold in public discourse. While such approaches remain crucial to any comprehensive strategy to preserve information integrity, where feasible, they should be supplemented by efforts designed to debunk disinformation before it captures significant public agendas – an effort known as prebunking.

A COMPREHENSIVE AND STRATEGIC APPROACH

In 2024 and 2025, Moldova – a small European nation bordering Ukraine – was facing several elections to determine whether it should strengthen the country's ongoing EU membership application processes or swerve towards Moscow.

To mitigate the prospect of a comprehensive Russian influencing operation, IMS media partners developed an innovative solution: sustained prebunking combined with locally-anchored journalism.

The underlying premise was straightforward: by saturating local information ecosystems with fact-based content before Russian-backed disinformation took hold, audiences would be informed in advance and thus better equipped to identify inaccurate and intentionally manipulative content.

But a critical question emerged: how could a meaningful level of saturation be achieved? A few fact-based stories would be insufficient to withstand a coordinated, multi-platform disinformation campaign. It became evident that in order to ensure that fact-based information would outperform disinformation, prebunking efforts had to be collective and sustained by multiple actors working closely together over an extended period of time.

Recognising this imperative, the partners developed coordination protocols designed to safeguard the editorial independence and operational flexibility of each participating organisation – from developing audience profiles to mentoring content production teams.

This holistic approach was essential as counter-disinformation narratives must not only be factually accurate but also compelling and engaging if they are to compete effectively with emotionally-charged disinformation campaigns.

The work was led by independent local public interest media outlets with established audiences, tried-and-tested distribution channels and, not least, the ability and capacity to create compelling content able to compete with and outperform a coordinated disinformation campaign.

In short, then, for any prebunking effort to be successful, it must detect and react to disinformation campaigns before they enter mainstream discourse and then focus on outpacing those campaigns.

Technological solutions are offering promising responses. Tech startups are developing platforms that continuously scrape content from websites and social media in real time. AI-driven tools can process vast volumes of content and analyse narratives, sentiments and patterns. When properly configured and trained, AI systems can identify atypical or suspicious online behaviour as it emerges, thus providing early warning of disinformation attacks.

Once an attack is detected, media coalitions must come together and strategise on response measures. They should receive expert guidance from data analysts and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) specialists, who understand the mechanics of disinformation operations and can project how situations may evolve.

Typically, there is a critical 36-hour window between the launch of a disinformation campaign and its peak impact – precisely the timeframe media organisations can leverage to develop and deploy fact-based counter-narratives. Once a coordinated disinformation attack is identified, media partners collaboratively determine their response strategy and then proceed to create and disseminate fact-based content in time for it to reach their audiences before they encounter the disinformation campaign in question.

This creates a competitive race for audience attention, in which speed and reach are paramount. Consequently, media partners typically prioritise social media content first, saturating the information space with fact-based content within the initial hours of an attack. More time-intensive formats follow: for example, TV outlets broadcast stories to reinforce and consolidate the dominance of accurate information during later stages of the counter-disinformation cycle. A successful prebunking effort suggests that the true story gets more traction in the end.

In July 2024, media outlets in Moldova piloted this prebunking model to deploy AI-based monitoring in partnership with LetsData, a Ukraine-based company that uses artificial intelligence to analyse hostile information operations. The setup required the participating outlets to engage in several months of training and to integrate the resulting learning into their editorial workflows.

The results were compelling: during the 2025 winter energy crisis in Moldova, the coalition's prebunking strategy successfully contained and displaced panic-inducing disinformation, thus significantly reducing its reach and resonance within the public sphere. And during the country's September 2025 elections, coordinated fact-based coverage countered manipulation attempts in real time. The monitoring system provided measurable data on media impact, showing precisely where interventions succeeded and where improvements are needed.

Fighting disinformation at scale demands both technological innovation and human collaboration. IMS' experience shows that when combined strategically, it's a winning combination.

To leverage the associated potential, we encourage donors and media organisations to support proactive measures – such as prebunking – which are designed to counter and outperform disinformation. As shown above, innovative technologies combined with coordinated collective action hold great promise in this respect. Concretely, we strongly encourage:

- Investment in AI-powered monitoring systems adapted to local contexts.
- Targeted support for media coalition building and coordination mechanisms.
- Investment in audience behaviour research and strategies to develop fact-based content that is compelling.
- Strategic investment into capacity development unlocking change-making potential in media.