

The Copenhagen Manual

Recognising and responding to information operations:
A media playbook for patterns, vulnerabilities, and
prebunking

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The Copenhagen Manual. Recognising and responding to information operations: A media playbook for patterns, vulnerabilities, and prebunking

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Recognising and responding to information operations

**A media playbook for patterns, vulnerabilities, and prebunking
- Copenhagen Information Integrity Charette (23–24 March 2026) -**

The Copenhagen Manual builds on the insights, discussions, and practical exercises conducted during the Copenhagen Information Integrity Charette (23–24 March 2026), convened by International Media Support (IMS). The Charette brought together media professionals and experts from across Europe and the wider region to examine how information operations unfold and how they can be addressed in real time. The Manual translates these collective experiences into a structured, operational resource, aligned with IMS’s broader efforts to strengthen media resilience, support independent journalism, and contribute to a safer and more reliable information environment in contexts exposed to coordinated manipulation and interference.

1. Understanding FIMI as a system-level threat

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) should not be approached as a problem of misleading content alone. It represents a structured effort to shape how reality is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon. For media professionals, this distinction is critical. The objective of hostile actors is rarely limited to convincing audiences of a specific falsehood. More often, this objective is to alter the broader informational environment in which citizens form opinions, assess institutions, and make decisions.

FIMI operates simultaneously across multiple layers: information flows, financial incentives, public expectations, and legitimacy structures. These layers interact to gradually erode trust, weaken institutional credibility, and distort democratic processes. As a result, the journalistic task cannot be reduced

to fact-checking individual claims. A narrow focus on “true versus false” risks missing the strategic intent behind coordinated narratives.

FIMI four interacting layers

LAYER 1	LAYER 2	LAYER 3	LAYER 4
Information flows	Financial incentives	Public expectations	Legitimacy structures

A more effective approach requires analysing who benefits from a narrative’s effects, why it is being promoted at a specific moment, how it is amplified, and what broader developments it is connected to. This includes recognising when seemingly minor signals (such as statements from marginal political actors) are deliberately designed to trigger amplification by credible media outlets. The Table Top Exercise (TTX) we have conducted during the Charette reinforced that early-stage signals are often crafted to provoke reaction rather than to inform, making

editorial restraint a strategic necessity.

FIMI should also be understood as operating through recurrent patterns of action, not isolated incidents. These patterns function as reusable frameworks that can be tested in one context and then adapted and deployed across multiple countries. The same operational logic (combining specific narratives, amplification tactics, and distribution channels) can be repurposed to support different themes, from elections to energy or security. For media professionals, recognising these patterns significantly reduces the analytical burden. Instead of assessing each piece of content from scratch, journalists can identify familiar structures in how narratives emerge, spread, and evolve. Developing internal mechanisms to detect such patterns enables earlier identification of coordinated campaigns and allows for faster, more confident editorial responses.

For the newsroom: FIMI targets how reality is interpreted, not just what is said. Focus on intent, timing, and amplification, not only factual accuracy. Recognising recurring patterns allows faster identification of coordinated campaigns.

2. Vulnerabilities as the entry point for influence

Information operations succeed not because they are sophisticated, but because they exploit existing weaknesses. These vulnerabilities can be cognitive, institutional, or structural. For media organisations, understanding these vulnerabilities is more important than tracking individual pieces of disinformation.

At the societal level, common vulnerabilities include limited awareness of manipulation tactics, insufficient understanding of how institutions function, and fragile trust relationships between citizens and public authorities. At the media level, vulnerabilities often stem from economic pressure, competition for speed, algorithm-driven visibility incentives, and uneven verification capacity.

The practical implication is that resilience cannot be built solely through reactive measures. Strengthening audience understanding, improving transparency in reporting, and maintaining editorial discipline are as important as identifying hostile narratives. During the TTX, participants repeatedly empha-



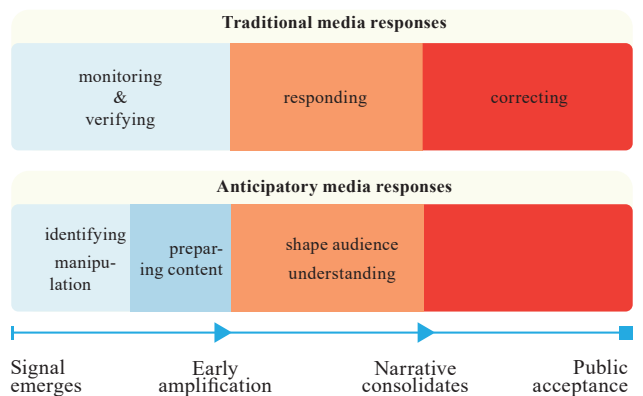
sised that misjudging the scale of a threat (either by underestimating it or by exaggerating it) can amplify its impact. In both cases, the vulnerability lies not in the content itself, but in how it is processed and communicated.

A vulnerability-centred approach therefore requires continuous assessment of where audiences are most exposed, what topics generate emotional reactions, and which institutional trust gaps are being targeted. This shifts the role of media from passive observer to active stabiliser of the information environment.

For the newsroom: FIMI exploits existing societal and media vulnerabilities. Assess how your reporting interacts with trust gaps and emotional triggers. Reducing vulnerability is as important as exposing false narratives.

3. From reaction to anticipation: Redefining media response

Traditional media responses tend to be reactive: monitoring what circulates, verifying it, and responding after narratives have already gained traction. This approach is increasingly insufficient in an environment where manipulation spreads rapidly and benefits from early amplification.



A more effective model is anticipatory. This involves identifying where manipulation is likely to emerge, preparing content in advance, and intervening early in the information cycle. The principle is simple: it is easier to shape audience understanding before a narrative consolidates than to correct it afterwards.

The TTX highlighted a recurring operational

dilemma. When confronted with emerging signals such as potential protests, alleged threats to media, or viral content, journalists must decide whether they are witnessing a real crisis or an artificially constructed escalation. Acting too slowly risks losing relevance; acting too quickly risks amplifying the very narrative that hostile actors seek to promote.

This requires a calibrated response. Ideally, the editorial teams need clear internal processes that separate monitoring, verification, and publication. Slowing down publication when necessary is not a weakness but a protective measure against manipulation. At the same time, once verification is achieved, communication must be rapid, consistent, and visible.

For the newsroom: Reactive reporting risks amplifying manipulation. Prioritise early assessment and intervene before narratives consolidate. Clear internal processes help balance speed with editorial control.

4. Cross-border patterns and the evolution of information operations

Information operations increasingly transcend national boundaries. Networks, narratives, and infrastructures developed in one context are reused and adapted in others, as is the already notorious case of Storm-1516 network of influence, used in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. At the same time, what appears as a local issue is often part of a broader pattern.

A key development is the persistence of actors and infrastructures. Campaigns are no longer isolated; they are iterative and cumulative. Narratives are tested, adjusted, and redeployed across different regions. Domestic actors, like politicians, influencers, or media outlets, often act as multipliers, giving externally generated narratives local legitimacy.

Technological developments have further accelerated this process. The use of AI-generated content has reduced costs and increased scalability. At the same time, “information laundering” (the reintroduction of manipulated content through seemingly credible intermediaries) makes attribution more difficult.

For media professionals, this means that iso-

lated analysis is insufficient. Understanding patterns requires cross-border awareness and, where possible, collaboration. The TTX discussions also pointed to the importance of recognising regional hubs that function as distribution nodes. Ignoring these connections risks treating systemic operations as unrelated local events.

For the newsroom: What appears local is often part of a broader operation. Track patterns of action across countries and actors, not isolated incidents. Collaboration strengthens detection and response capacity.

5. Narrative construction as the core battlefield for FIMI

Narratives are not simply stories; they are frameworks that shape how audiences interpret events. They combine emotional resonance with intellectual coherence and provide answers to fundamental questions: why something is happening, why it matters, and who is responsible.

For journalists, the key risk is not only repeating false narratives, but inadvertently reinforcing their underlying frames. Even critical coverage can contribute to amplification if it adopts the same structure or emotional triggers.

The notes from both the Charette and the TTX emphasise the importance of narrative discipline. Media organisations must actively define the frame within which events are presented. If they do not, that frame will be imposed externally.

This includes careful handling of sensitive topics such as protests, elections, or alleged threats. Coverage should distinguish clearly between legitimate developments and artificially amplified signals. For example, reporting on a protest requires not only documenting the event, but also verifying the authenticity of mobilisation calls and understanding who is driving them.

Narrative control does not mean shaping reality, but it means ensuring that reporting reflects verified facts, proportionality, and context, rather than reactive amplification of emotionally charged claims.

For the newsroom: Narratives shape how audiences understand events. Avoid reinforcing hostile frames, even indirectly. Define the context of your reporting before it is imposed externally.

6. Media practice under pressure: balancing speed, credibility, and responsibility

The TTX provided concrete insight into the operational pressures faced by media organisations during potential information incidents. A central challenge is balancing the need for timely reporting with the responsibility to avoid amplifying misleading or unverified narratives.

Publishing too early can have significant consequences. It can inflate the visibility of false or misleading information and grant legitimacy to narratives that would otherwise remain marginal. Once amplified by credible outlets, such narratives are difficult to contain.

This makes verification a critical bottleneck. Indicators of low credibility such as vague sourcing, uniform messaging across channels, inconsistent data, or poor linguistic quality, must trigger additional scrutiny. Requests for information via informal channels, disproportionate audience metrics for niche platforms, or unclear expert profiles should also be treated with caution.

At the same time, media organisations must maintain audience trust. This requires transparent communication, consistent tone, and a focus on practical value. Providing guidance, explaining what is known and unknown, and helping audiences navigate uncertainty are essential components of responsible reporting.

The TTX also highlighted the importance of internal resilience. Psychological support for journalists, basic security measures, and clear editorial coordination are not secondary considerations. They are necessary conditions for maintaining operational effectiveness under pressure.

For the newsroom: Publishing too early can legitimise weak or false narratives. Verification is a safeguard, not a delay. Consistency and transparency are essential to maintain trust under pressure.



7. *Institutions, trust, and democratic resilience*

Institutions remain both targets and safeguards in the context of information operations. Their role is to provide stability, predictability, and legitimacy. When trust in institutions declines, societies become more vulnerable to manipulation.

For media organisations, this creates a dual responsibility. On the one hand, journalism must hold institutions accountable. On the other hand, it must avoid contributing to indiscriminate delegitimisation that can be exploited by hostile actors.

This requires nuanced reporting. Investigations into wrongdoing should be rigorous and evidence-based, while systemic narratives that portray institutions as inherently illegitimate should be critically examined. The goal is not to protect institutions from scrutiny, but to ensure that criticism is grounded in fact rather than manipulation.

Independent media, civil society, and judicial systems form a network of checks and balances. Their resilience determines the overall resilience of the democratic system. Media organisations are therefore not only observers of this system, but active participants in maintaining its integrity.

For the newsroom: FIMI targets trust in institutions to weaken societies. Ensure accountability without amplifying blanket delegitimisation. Balanced reporting supports democratic resilience.

8. *Communication strategies: engagement, trust, and adaptation*

Effective communication in a contested information environment requires more than accuracy. It requires relevance, clarity, and connection with audiences.

Experience from Ukraine and other contexts shows that audiences respond more effectively to content that is relatable, accessible, and human-centred. Complex issues need to be explained in clear language, using formats that match audience habits. This includes live formats, visual storytelling, and content that connects abstract developments to everyday experiences.

At the same time, emotional dynamics must be managed carefully. Fear, outrage, and uncertainty can be exploited by hostile actors. Media organisations should aim to inform without amplifying panic. This involves maintaining a consistent tone, avoiding sensationalism, and providing actionable information.

Trust is built over time through consistency and transparency. It cannot be improvised during a crisis. Media organisations that maintain clear standards, avoid questionable funding sources, and communicate openly about their processes are better positioned to retain audience confidence.

For the newsroom: Effective communication requires clarity, relevance, and audience connection. Inform without amplifying fear or outrage. Trust is built through consistent and transparent reporting.

9. Prebunking as a core operational tool

Prebunking represents a shift from reactive to proactive communication. Instead of correcting false narratives after they spread, it aims to anticipate them and shape audience expectations in advance.

This approach is particularly effective in the early stages of an information cycle. There is a limited window during which audiences are forming initial interpretations. Intervening during this period can significantly reduce the impact of manipulation.

The TTX discussions highlighted the importance of timing. Alerts and responses must be issued early enough to influence the narrative trajectory. Waiting until a narrative peaks often means that correction efforts will have limited effect.

Prebunking also requires coordination. Sharing information, aligning messaging, and synchronising responses across media organisations can increase impact. However, this raises practical challenges related to trust, timing, and editorial independence, which need to be addressed through clear frameworks.

For the newsroom: Prebunking shapes narratives before they take hold. Sustained, factual coverage on key topics also builds resistance. Timing and coordination determine its effectiveness.

10. Cross-border cooperation and media coordination

FIMI information operations are coordinated across borders, therefore our response should be coordinated as well. However, media ecosystems often remain fragmented, with limited collaboration and strong competition for exclusivity.

This fragmentation reduces effectiveness. Isolated reporting may expose individual elements of a campaign, but it rarely achieves the scale necessary to counter coordinated operations.

The TTX highlighted both the potential and the challenges of such coordination. While there is recognition of the need for collaboration, practical

implementation remains uneven. Addressing this gap is essential for improving collective resilience.

For the newsroom: FIMI operates across borders, and responses should match that scale. Isolated reporting limits its impact, while coordination increases effectiveness. Build collaboration without compromising editorial independence.

11. Key takeaways for media practitioners

FIMI should be understood as a systemic phenomenon rather than a collection of isolated falsehoods. This matters because focusing only on individual pieces of content risks missing the broader strategy behind them, reducing the effectiveness of journalistic responses.

Vulnerabilities determine impact more than content itself. Media organisations need to identify and address these vulnerabilities, both within their audiences and within their own practices, to reduce exposure to manipulation.

Proactive resilience-building is more effective than reactive correction. Anticipating narratives and preparing responses in advance allows media to shape the information environment rather than chase it.

Narrative control influences political outcomes. How events are framed can affect public perception as much as the events themselves. Maintaining control over framing is therefore a core journalistic responsibility.

Institutions play a central role in resilience. Balanced reporting that combines accountability with contextual understanding helps maintain trust, which is essential for democratic stability.

Media resilience is constrained but critical. Financial, structural, and technological limitations affect the ability to respond, but strengthening internal processes can significantly improve effectiveness.

Trust remains the decisive factor. Audiences rely on media not only for information, but for orientation. Preserving trust requires consistency, transparency, and discipline.

Prebunking offers a strategic advantage. Early intervention can prevent narratives from taking hold, making it one of the most effective tools available to media organisations.

Cross-border coordination enhances impact. Collaboration allows media to address operations at the scale at which they are conducted, increasing the effectiveness of responses.

12. Strategic logic and prebunking.

Final considerations

A consistent logic underlies both the analytical discussions and the practical exercises. The primary risk is not the existence of manipulative content, but the way it is processed and amplified within the information ecosystem. Media reactions can either contain or accelerate the spread of harmful narratives.

Hostile actors aim to trigger amplification, create the perception of crisis, and undermine trust. Their success depends on the responses they provoke. This places media organisations in a pivotal position. Editorial decisions regarding timing, framing, and verification can determine whether a narrative gains traction or dissipates.

Prebunking emerges as a critical response mechanism within this framework. It requires early detection, rapid assessment, and timely communication. However, its effectiveness depends on clear operational thresholds. Media organisations need to define when an emerging signal justifies intervention and how to distinguish between prebunking and debunking. At the same time, prebunking should not be understood narrowly as a short-term reaction deployed one or two days before a campaign peaks. Sustained, consistent reporting on topics of strategic importance, such as EU integration, economic reforms, or security developments, also functions as prebunking. By building a solid background of factual, accessible, and trusted information, media organisations create a reference framework that makes audiences less susceptible to manipulation when hostile narratives are later introduced.

Coordination is another essential factor. Sharing alerts, aligning assessments, and synchronising responses can significantly increase impact. At the same time, mechanisms for measuring effectiveness remain underdeveloped. Understanding whether prebunking efforts influence audience behaviour is an ongoing challenge.

Finally, anticipation must extend beyond indi-

vidual incidents to broader patterns. Media organisations need to identify when isolated signals are likely to evolve into coordinated campaigns and prepare accordingly. This includes recognising high-risk periods, such as elections or major crises, when manipulation is more likely to intensify.

In this context, the role of media is not limited to reporting events. It involves actively shaping the information environment in a way that preserves clarity, stability, and trust.

A final element that strengthens this approach is the systematic assessment of disinformation narratives and FIMI campaigns through the lens of patterns of action. Rather than treating each incident as unique, media organisations benefit from identifying recurring combinations of tactics, behaviours, and amplification mechanisms that signal coordinated activity. This pattern-based logic allows journalists to move faster from detection to interpretation, reducing uncertainty and limiting the risk of reactive amplification. It also creates a bridge between day-to-day editorial decisions and a more structured understanding of how influence operations are designed and deployed.



