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# **Guidelines for Collaborating with Social Media Influencers**



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 833496

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# Introduction

The Guidelines for Collaborating with Social Media Influencers were designed for public actors, primarily for various government agencies as well as disaster management agencies, such as emergency and rescue services, law enforcement, and providers of psychosocial support and health care. However, anyone who participates in national, regional or international disaster management hopefully benefits from these guidelines.

Social media is undoubtedly one of the most important channels through which governments inform and communicate with their citizens. The role of social media as a source of information can even become more important before, during and after a crisis. As an integral part of social media with thousands or even millions of followers, social media influencers offer an important avenue for disseminating information and raising awareness. The aim of these guidelines was to create practical and user-friendly instructions that would inspire various actors to collaborate with social media influencers in risk and crisis communication in order to increase reach and effectiveness of communication.

The development of the Guidelines for Collaborating with Social Media Influencers started from interviewing eight social media experts in Sweden and Finland. The interviews were then analysed and the guidelines were drafted based on the interviews as well as previous research conducted as part of the BuildERS project. The guidelines were then peer-reviewed in a workshop on February 2022.

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## 1

## Why collaborate with social media influencers?

### The Power of Social Media Influencers

The rise of social media has changed the ways in which public actors communicate with and inform their citizens. Over the past 10 years, the consumption of information has undoubtedly shifted from traditional media outlets – tv, radio, and print – to social media. Although Millennials and Generation Z are still the main consumers of social media, also older and younger generations increasingly use social media to communicate and engage with the world through it. According to [a US survey](#), 42% of American 18–29 year olds get their news from social media. The same is true about European 18–29 year olds. In 2018, [a Pew Research Center study](#) found that 50% of them use social media for news daily.

A [2017 report by the International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) points out that social media platforms have even become the lifeline for millions of people affected by various crises as these platforms help maintain contact with relatives, give access to information and inform people where to go and what to do if a crisis strikes. According to the [report](#), communicating through social media can thus directly influence how people prepare for, respond and recover from various crises.

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Yodel and Twitter have not only changed the way we communicate but they have also given rise to people considered influential in some way. Social media influencers might be famous artists, athletes, activists, scientists, or they might be individuals who became popular specifically through social media. They might have built a following because their content entertains people, or their social media profiles are aesthetically beautiful travel blogs or lifestyle diaries of sorts, or they have become opinion

leaders and motivational speakers over time due to their charisma. Some influencers maintain a presence on the social media for fun, they do it for a hobby, for others influencing is a full time job. The way a person becomes influential varies and is an interesting social science question in and of itself. In social media however, influence becomes tangible through the follower count: the more followers, the more influence a person has. We will delve deeper into this later in these guidelines.

Influencers communicate messages and ideas to thousands or even millions of people across social media platforms who then disseminate information even further. They are undoubtedly an integral part of the fabric of social media and important messengers within it. Influencers often vastly outrank any public actor in terms of follower counts. Engaging them in risk and crisis communication efforts before, during and after a crisis can be effective and even necessary whether the goal is to reach a large number of people or target a very specific group fast. With their reach and/or follower commitment, influencers offer a great opportunity to target specific groups and disseminate information fast. They might also reach groups that TV, newspapers or radio would not reach.

Influencers can also be a great source of expertise in terms of content creation and strategizing. They tend to understand their follower base and know what kind of messaging works best specifically for their followers. Some influencers could be considered professional content creators with the extra benefit of having a



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following. Influencers can help public actors better understand what people are interested in or concerned about. Due to the authenticity attributed to them and the perceived personal relationship that influencers have with their followers, they have the potential to help change attitudes and mobilise people.

Collaboration with influencers is potentially a very efficient method of disseminating information. However, public actors should plan on including influencers in their organisations' risk and crisis communication strategies well before a crisis happens. Picking the right influencers to collaborate with, building relationships with them and expanding networks well before a crisis strikes is important in order to mobilise those networks immediately when needed and in a way that benefits both the your organisation and the influencer, as well as citizens.

Long-term relationships built with the influencer also mitigate the risk of miscommunication and ensure that both parties understand the campaign's goals, objectives and parameters. But before engaging with social media influencers it is important for any organisation to have a social media presence and have easily accessible sources online.

### The power of social media

[A US study by Bonnevie et al. \(2020\)](#)

found that a social media micro influencer campaign successfully increased positive beliefs about the flu vaccine and decreased negative community attitudes towards it in African American and Hispanic communities that have traditionally had lower vaccination rates.

### Case study:

**#faktaakoronasta campaign (“#factsaboutcorona”)**

A social media influencer company Ping Helsinki, Mediapooli, a public-private network of Finnish media companies and responsible social media influencers, together with the Finnish government wanted to ensure access to reliable information after COVID-19 hit in 2020 and misinformation started to circulate. The goal was to provide reliable information and show with their own actions how to follow the government's instructions and restrictions. Hundreds of social media influencers volunteered.

Some countries like Finland have defined social media influencers as critical operators during a crisis.



# 2

## How does social media influencing actually work?

In this age of information overload, people are often sceptical of information that comes from sources they are not familiar with. Instead, people have a tendency to listen to those they know and trust and make decisions based on that source's recommendation, opinion or advice. [People also often trust information that comes from people they consider influential or experts.](#) An influencer can be anyone a large number of people considers an expert in a specific field or someone they just admire because of their looks, wits, status or for their lifestyle.

So an influencer is someone who has a) followers, and thus b) authority to speak about a topic or subject, given to them by these followers. What about the relationship between an influencer and their followers? What is special about it? The idea with social media influencing is that a follower builds a bond with the influencer, one based on admiration and peer support, a sort of illusion of intimacy and familiarity.

The relationship also comes with huge marketing potential because often the follower is committed to the influencer's content and often trusts the products or behaviour the influencer promotes. This trust enables some influencers to monetize their social media accounts through marketing products or collaborating in other ways with private companies. The monetization of social media influencing is often referred to as influencer marketing. With the rise of social media marketing and the monetary potential that it offers more and more brands have tapped into the industry. The industry is growing fast. In 2022, the influencer marketing industry [is estimated to be worth \\$15 billion, up from \\$8 billion in 2019.](#) Not all influencers have monetized their accounts or get compensated by private companies and others have teamed up with NGOs or the UN and other international organisations as ambassadors.

Much like communication and marketing in the traditional media, communicating and promoting products and ideas through influencers is about persuasion. However, when influencers communicate ideas or promote goods, it is considered to be more of a word-of-mouth promotion where a recommendation feels like it is coming from a friend: a personal advice to do or buy something. Influencer communication is seemingly based on a strong sense of authenticity. Influencers tend to have a committed follower base susceptible to advice, recommendations and guidance. Although the follower base can in some cases be made up of fake accounts and bots as well.

Of course, not all influencing is merely marketing. Many influencers want to affect social change or promote activism, many are in the field for reasons beyond the marketing potential the industry provides. They may have started their accounts for entirely other reasons than money. However, as their follower base has kept growing, brands have likely asked for collaborations and the influencers have effectively entered the marketing realm of influencing. It is beneficial to think about the field consisting of more commercialized influencers, often even represented by agencies, as well as independent influencers, all with varying motives and goals. Influencers are all considered influential but their modus operandi and goals can vary and in fact be very different.

Influencers are often categorised into four categories based on their follower count: **mega**, **macro**, **micro** and **nano** influencers. The numerical ranges differ



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from country to country and there is no one set way of defining the ranges. However, it is important to understand the benefits and shortcomings of each category because it can guide the influencer selection process.

### 1. Mega influencers

These are usually globally or at least regionally famous movie stars, artists, professional athletes and models for example. Mega influencers have a follower count ranging from **one million to tens or even hundreds of millions**. This category of influencers provides a higher reach and exposure. However, they also cost more, and their audience is less committed. Due to their huge following, mega influencers' online presence is increasingly resembling traditional media in terms of marketing: they are often highly commercialized.

### 2. Macro influencers

These tend to have around **100 000 to 1 million followers** depending on the country. They might have gained their following through the internet by vlogging or by posting funny or inspiring content or they might be less famous artists, actors or others. Macro influencers have less reach than mega influencers but their followers can be easier to target because they tend to produce more focused content. Both mega and macro influencers can be useful if the goal is to disseminate information to a large number of people but collaborating with them will cost more.

### 3. Micro influencers

These have stronger relationships with their followers who also tend to be more committed. Their **following ranges from 10 000 to 100 000**. Micros are more focused on a specific area or topic and are seen as experts in a specific subject matter. Engaging micro influencers is often less costly and offers an easier access to a specific target audience than using macro or mega influencers.

### 4. Nano influencers

These have **a few hundred to ten thousand followers**. They also have the highest level of engagement among their followers due the strong sense of authenticity and approachability they are able to convey. Nano influencers often cater to a very specific niche market. In fact, some brands are moving away from bigger influencers and are focusing more on micro and nano influencers because customers see them as more reliable, relatable, and trustworthy. It is specifically the authenticity factor and access to a more focused audience that is making [brands refocus their influencer marketing strategies](#).





## 2. How does social media influencing actually work?

### A general rule

The larger the influencer's following (audience) the less focused the content and engaged the followers are, and the higher the cost to use that influencer is in a campaign.

#### The Future of Influencing

The future of influencing could become more fragmented as polarisation increases. Different bubbles will have different influencers especially when it comes to influencers with political ideas and opinions. Liberal and conservative sects of society risk becoming even more isolated from each other, the same could be true regarding the influencers they will follow. In a polarised world, finding influencers who have a diverse follower base could become even more important for public actors. There is also the risk of influencers becoming commercialised to the point where trust in them erodes and something new will replace them.

#### The Virtual Influencer

The rise of the virtual influencer is also shaping the influencer field globally. These are digital "humans", like [LaserBolt](#), who have thousands to hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers worldwide. Virtual influencers are characters whose personas and lives are created by a content creation company's team who tailors the influencer's personality to target certain groups and asserts control over the character's behaviour and life.

In the future, virtual influencers might become completely AI created and maintained but for now these characters have a team of human experts working behind them. The virtual influencer phenomenon will most likely transform rapidly with the emergence of Metaverse, AI and other technological developments. Although these virtual influencers might not yet be able to foster the trust of followers beyond curiosity, in the future this might change with

new generations as our world becomes increasingly digitalized pushing us to interact with the digital world and form parasocial relationships.

Because virtual influencers are controlled by a company, they might be less susceptible to unpredictable changes in opinions than human influencers. A human influencer might suddenly change their political views but with a virtual influencer that risk is arguably mitigated because it is controlled by a company. Although virtual influencers come with their own risks and uneasy ethical considerations. For example, the first virtual model [Shudu](#), a Black woman, was in fact created by a fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson, himself a white male. This raises questions about cultural appropriation and even authenticity, which is at the core of influencing.



# 3

## Getting Started

### 1. Strategise, strategise, strategise

Like all organisation's external communication, collaborating with influencers requires a clear strategy. You have to define what you want to achieve with the campaign and whether it is feasible. What is the purpose of the campaign and how much resources do you have? A good strategy will also shape the message and make the collaboration easier and mitigate risks to both parties: your organisation and the influencer.

Both parties will gain the most from a long-lasting relationship. This is especially important from the perspective of risk and crisis communication. If a crisis strikes you have to have built your relationships with influencers well beforehand and have your networks of influencers ready to collaborate on a campaign with you.

Equally important is to ensure that both parties have the same understanding of the campaign and its goals. The campaign has to be authentic, not a top-down approach. It is important to include the influencer in the planning phase of the campaign. All collaborations should also be mutually beneficial. As a public actor, you have to consider what possible risks your campaign might pose to the influencer and be ready to mitigate them as much as possible. A bad campaign might cause the influencer to lose followers and, in the worst case, their livelihood.

### 2. Who is your target audience and where do you find them?

Each social media platform has a different user profile, for example in terms of age. (Bullock 2017.) Twitter users for example have been dominantly better educated, better off, younger adult males. (Bullock 2017.) Understanding the dynamics of each platform is necessary in order to find the right influencer and design a campaign that best works on that specific platform. This means that you have to understand how the platform works, what is the tone of the platform and how users communicate on each platform.

Facebook and TikTok for example are two completely different worlds with a different user profile. What

works on one platform might not work on the other. Thankfully, there is a wealth of knowledge out there to help you better understand each platform's user profile and what people use the platform for the most. You can always rely on influencer agencies for consultation as well (more about this under the next point).



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#### 3. Which influencers to collaborate with and how to find them?

Social media is full of influencers but figuring out where to start can be difficult. Especially if you are trying to reach a very specific audience. Of course, you should not assume that for example people with disabilities only follow other people with disabilities. Cristiano Ronaldo's 425 million Instagram followers are undoubtedly a very diverse group united by their fascination and admiration of the footballer. However, if your target audience is for example very religious, maybe finding a local or global religious leader is a good place to start with. Remember that there is a trade-off between commitment and follower count: the higher the follower count the less committed the followers are on average. Take this into consideration when choosing an influencer to collaborate with. Do you want the target group to act – for example to go get vaccinated or vote – or is your goal to raise awareness on a specific topic among a specific target group?

##### How to find influencers?

Once you have mapped out influencers you would like to work with, continue your search online on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube for example. On which platforms can you find them? You can also use the snowball method and see who influencers, media organisations and journalists, activists, public actors, NGOs or international organisations are following. This way you might find people you had not even considered. In addition, after a while the algorithm on your social media app will start to suggest people to follow and show their posts which can be helpful as well. Once you find your influencer(s) study their posts well

and analyse whether they would like to collaborate. Are their posts in line with what your organisation represents? You usually can contact influencers directly by writing them a direct message on the social media platform or send them or their agent an email. Most of the time, the contact email can be found in the influencer's profile. Highlight the advantages of the collaboration for both parties. It is also a good idea to meet them for a coffee and get to know each other beforehand.

##### I think I need a professional's help

You might decide that mapping out and finding influencers is too much work for your team at the moment. Don't worry, there are various companies that can help you. Nowadays many communications and marketing companies have an influencer-marketing department or at least someone specialising in influencer collaborations. A quick Google search will give you a wealth of options. Using a "middleman" can be beneficial because these companies know the industry inside and out and can find the right influencers for your campaign.

As a public actor you will most likely be bound by certain rules about transparency. You might be required to put out tenders before establishing any new partnerships, which might limit your ability to approach influencers yourself. You can however put out tenders for influencer marketing companies who can then help you find influencers for your campaign. Take this into consideration when planning!

#### 4. Content, the role of the influencer and division of labor

All the details of the campaign don't have to be figured out immediately. The campaign will most likely be co-created with the influencer. After all, the content and tone have to be tailored to the influencer's followers. Framing a message is easier with an influencer who understands their followers. Be careful not to push for a top-down approach where the you create the content and the influencer only disseminates it. Such an approach takes away from what is at the core of influencing: seeming authentic.

However, you should think about the **basics of the campaign**: how many posts will the campaign include? How much freedom are you willing to give the influencer in terms of content creation? Maybe you decide that there has to be a balance between appealing to the target audience and maintaining a certain decorum that reflects your organisation. Or maybe that is exactly what you want to avoid and instead focus on more creative, relaxed and fun content. You can also always ask to see the content before publishing. You might



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also decide that you would like the influencer to merely guide their followers to the source of information like your webpage. **Discuss these issues together with the influencer.**

Whatever you decide, **it is important to ensure that you are on the same page** regarding the deliverables. As a public actor it is important that your campaigns are

accessible to as many people as possible. For example, use subtitles in your videos for those who cannot hear well or who do not speak the language used in the video. Think clearly about the role you would like to assign to the influencer. Do you envision them as a long-term ambassador for your organisation or could they be helpful with one specific campaign?

### 5. Campaign budget and your compensation policy

Any communications campaign that requires the help of communications and marketing professionals also requires a budget. This is true for influencer campaigns as well. Your budget is a good indicator of whether you can afford to get help from communications and influencer marketing companies. Your budget will also affect the length and nature of the entire campaign.

#### To compensate or not to compensate

**This is a topic that divide many experts.** Some believe that there is no difference between a traditional marketing campaign and an influencer campaign. If you are paying for ad space in the national newspaper then you should pay an influencer as well. If you compensate one influencer, you should compensate all other influencers you may collaborate with as well. Big media companies should not get treated differently from individuals. After all, it is a major achievement to have been able to establish a trustworthy relationship with an audience. Others believe that an approach based on the influencer's voluntarism is a better, less risky approach because it removes questions about how tax-payer money is used and whether you have compensated each influencer the same way. In any case, the message has to be important enough and worth spreading so that you can find an influencer to collaborate with.

The main message seems to be that whether or not to **compensate largely depends on the campaign itself.** In the face of an emergency, compensation could and even should be waived. It thus depends whether we are talking about risk or crisis communication and what

phase of a crisis are we. A pre-defined price list for influencers could increase transparency and fairness.

**Sometimes the influencer might be willing to collaborate on a pro bono basis.** This is especially true 1) if your values match, 2) the influencers care deeply about the issue at hand, or 3) there is a national or international crisis at hand. However, it is arguably morally questionable for a public actor to automatically expect pro bono work from the influencer whose livelihood depends on social media. Whatever you decide, it is important to be consistent. You cannot pay one influencer and not another. Voluntary basis or an ambassador model is one approach worth exploring. This could also persuade the influencer to long term commit to the cause.

#### How to compensate? How much does collaborations cost?

Private companies have a wider range of ways to compensate an influencer. Instead of money they can for example pay in products or services. A car makers can give the influencer a car to use for a year. Such arrangements however could be difficult to apply in a public sector campaign.

In general, prices depend on the influencer and the campaign itself. Nano influencers might cost as little as 50€ per social media post but mega influencers can cost thousands or tens of thousands. **We would advise reserving at least a few thousand euros for a campaign.**



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## 6. What laws and regulations govern social media influencing or restrict your ability to collaborate?

There is an increasing number of laws and rules regulating posts on social media. Many social media companies require the influencer to label any commercial collaboration in their posts. Make sure you are aware of your country or region specific laws as well as any rules imposed by social media companies.

Social media companies often have their own tools to mark collaborations but make sure that they suffice legally speaking. Any commercial collaboration where

money or goods are exchanged or a contract is made between you and the influencer has to be clearly stated. Usually this is done by indicating it at the top of the post or in the caption or in the video. The client's name has also to be visible. The rule is that if the influencer gains anything from the collaboration, it should be stated. As a public actor you should pay close attention to disclosing any partnerships in the most transparent way possible.

These [ethical guidelines](#) made by Ping Helsinki are a great tool you can use to learn more.

## 7. Measuring impact

Measuring the impact of a campaign is always challenging especially if you are interested in knowing whether your campaign changed attitudes or mobilised people. There is no trustworthy, all-encompassing ways to measure intangible effects, at least not yet.

The basic meters that are commonly used are numbers of likes, views, comments, shares, saves and the amount of clicks. You can also analyse users' comments in the comment section more closely and use word analysis. It is more difficult to see behind closed doors, for example what is being said in closed groups or in inboxes. One way to gain more insight is to conduct a brief before and after survey on social media. If for example the goal is to direct more traffic on your organisation's webpage or social media profile, you can conduct a quick poll on for example Instagram stories asking how people found their way to your

page. You can also ask people about their knowledge and attitudes before and after an awareness raising campaign.

Communications and marketing agencies have a larger repertoire of tools that they use to closely scrutinise how the campaign is performing. They often create specifically tailored indicators and meters in the beginning of the project to measure reach and effect. Tools like Google Analytics can also be helpful and reveal interesting information. Arguably, if and influencer is compensated, measuring impact becomes arguably even more important.



### 3. Getting Started

## 8. Ethical considerations and risks

Maintaining public trust, not alienating certain segments of society and ensuring that your campaign “Does No Harm” are of utmost importance. However, in today’s world where misinformation and disinformation are rampant and people’s opinions change fast, especially in a crisis situation, the need to communicate effectively and clearly is evermore important.

Partnering up with anyone, be it a person or organisation, comes with certain ethical considerations, risks and challenges that need to be taken into account before you begin looking for influencers. Understanding the various ethical considerations and risks is especially important for a public actor whose job is to enhance the lives of all of its citizens. Much like with all marketing and advertisement efforts, public actors should think carefully about the ethical dimensions of their actions when collaborating with influencers.

### Buying authenticity?

Because influencers are seen as a more authentic communication avenue, be careful that you are not trying to use influencers to bolster your own image. If you are experiencing low public trust and you attempt to fix it by collaborating with an influencer, you might not only be perceived as using taxpayer money for buying credibility but you might also harm the influencer’s livelihood. Public trust has to be built through trustworthy actions in the long run.

### Influencers are only humans

As with anything collaborating with influencers comes with its own risks. There is always a certain level of unpredictability that comes from working with an individual. You have no way of knowing what that person’s worldview will look like or what turn their life will take. A crisis situation increases unpredictability: people behave in unpredictable ways and their ideas and opinions can change rapidly. Same applies to influencers. It is good to acknowledge this.

Remember, collaborating with a public actor is never risk-free for an influencer either. They might lose followers due to the campaign, be labelled as a government’s minion or even be targeted with hate speech. Be sure to offer extra support if your campaign includes the influencer opening up about personal experiences. Also ensure that the type of content that you demand from the influencer does not put them at risk. For example asking to post from the scene in a scene of a crisis can endanger the influencer or by-passers.

### Social media is a tricky animal

Often times people follow influencers on social media who post about entertainment, lifestyle, wellness, design, fashion, technology and games. People don’t necessarily follow the influencer because of their socio-political opinions. Do not assume that there will be impact just because an influencer posts something political. It might gain less than normal engagement or even create backlash. That’s why there has to be a good co-created strategy for how the influencer will approach their followers. In today’s world of infotainment, it is good to be aware that communicating important information might lead to people becoming dismissive or numb to it. Striking a balance with informative but entertaining material especially in a prolonged crisis situation also remains challenging.



### 3. Getting Started

#### Each campaign is different

Think carefully about each campaign. If your campaign is focusing on awareness raising think about the nature of the issue itself. Define the themes you want to promote and think about how you can promote them in a way that is as honest, truthful, fair and transparent as possible. You have to define what is the most important issue for you and how to best communicate it.

#### Be transparent!

Don't forget to also be transparent about collaborating online and remember not only the laws and regulations controlling collaborations but also your transparency obligations as a public actor.

*Please see the publications below for further information:*

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*Torpan, S., Hansson, S. and Orru, K. (2019). Handling misinformation and social media use in crises - Estonian experiences. Country report on institutional aspects of resilience management in BuildERS project. University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia.*

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# 4

## Glossary

**Social media influencer** is a person who has gained a following online due to their expertise or because they were an early adopter or simply because there are inspirational and innovative. An influencer can be anyone a large number of people considers an expert in a specific field or someone they just admire because of their looks, wits, status or for their lifestyle.

They can be divided into four categories based on their follower account: nano, micro, macro and mega influencers. They share their opinions, ideas, recommendations and views on social media platforms.

**Target audience** is the group of individuals to whom it is important to communicate information about risks or a crisis.

**Risk communication** is exchanging or sharing risk-related data, information and knowledge between and among different groups. This includes raising awareness about risks and promoting preparedness for hazardous events among the general population.

**Crisis communication** is the collection and processing of information for crisis management along with the creation and sharing of crisis related messages with people.

**Social vulnerability** is the dynamic characteristic of being susceptible to harm or loss, and inability to access adequate resources and means of protection. Vulnerable people are less able to anticipate, cope with or recover from the impacts of natural or man-made hazards.

**Stakeholders** are organisations, communities and individuals who are the key partners in helping your organisation to communicate with and to ascertain the concerns of your target audience.

**Misinformation** is confusing, misleading or false information that was not created with the intention of hurting others. However, it can still be harmful or even dangerous.

**Disinformation** is deliberately shared false or misleading information. It can be harmful or shared with severely destructive intent.

**Malinformation** is genuine, but still harmful information making individuals' situations more vulnerable in crisis. An example is a situation in which an information leak encourages hate speech or harassment targeted against some disadvantaged groups.

**Resilience** refers to processes of adjustment, adaptation and change enacted in everyday life, but, in particular, in the face of risks, crises and disasters.

**Inclusivity** refers to practices and policies of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized.

