

### Role of centres of government and ministries of health in countering misinformation and disinformation

The flow of information between governments, citizens and stakeholders is a necessary part of open and inclusive societies. Yet, the public's ability to benefit from and share accurate information is undermined by a proliferation of false and misleading content, both online and offline. Governments must therefore be alert to the importance of public communication for promoting transparency and counteracting misinformation and disinformation.

Although the problem predates COVID-19, a wave of deceptive and untrue information from the start of the pandemic has undermined governments' policies and health measures by confusing and drowning out official messages, aggravating vaccine hesitancy, and challenging efforts to bring the pandemic under control. Rapid, transparent and proactive public communication is central to combatting misleading content. Governments use public communication to help enforce policy measures; in the context of COVID-19, efforts have often focused on compliance with health measures (e.g. handwashing, facemasks, lockdown provisions, social distancing). More broadly, public communication is also key to understanding, educating and engaging in dialogue with the public.

Despite widespread efforts to respond to misinformation, many countries may lack adequate institutional structures to deal with this issue. In 2019, only 11 out of 27 centres of government (CoGs) in OECD countries, plus Costa Rica, had adopted official documents to guide their responses to misinformation and disinformation (Figure 4.8). Two countries, Austria and Norway, were developing documents at the time of responding in 2020, partly due to the COVID-19 crisis. Relevant documents include government-wide or ministry-specific strategies, plans, toolkits or guidance. For example, Estonia produces annual inter-ministerial action plans to build resilience to information attacks, and the UK government developed the RESIST Toolkit to help communicators and relevant officials to identify and react to problematic content. Only 4 out of 18 ministries of health (MHs) had adopted similar documents or benefited from government-wide ones in 2019. This may have left them less prepared for the wave of health misinformation during the pandemic (Figure 4.8).

The complex challenges posed by mis- and disinformation require multi-disciplinary responses. To that end, 19 out of 24 CoGs (79%) in OECD countries, plus Costa Rica, have consulted with stakeholders such as media, civil society, academia, inter-governmental organisations and tech companies on countering disinformation. CoGs most frequently consult stakeholders in academic or research organisations. A smaller proportion of MHs (8 out of 17, or 47%) OECD countries, plus Romania, consulted with at least one of these stakeholders (Table 4.9).

#### Methodology and definitions

Data were collected from CoGs in 27 OECD countries, plus Brazil, Costa Rica and Romania, and from MHs in 18 OECD countries, plus Romania, through the OECD 2020 survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government, which covered the year 2019. Respondents were senior officials in charge of communication at the centre of government, i.e. the bodies that provide direct support and advice to heads of government and councils of ministers, and in ministries of health.

Public communication is understood as any communication activity led by public institutions for the public good. It is distinct from political communication, which refers to political parties, debates or elections.

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and/or sharing of false information with the intention to deceive and mislead the audience.

Misinformation refers to false information that is shared, but where no harm is meant; this could include unintended mistakes, typos, errors or satire taken seriously, but increasingly involves the sharing of unverified, misleading content linked to disinformation campaigns.

#### Further reading

Matasick, C., C. Alfonsi and A. Bellantoni (2020), "Governance responses to disinformation: How open government principles can inform policy options", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 39, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d6237c85-en>.

OECD (2020), "Transparency, communication and trust: The role of public communication in responding to the wave of disinformation about the new Coronavirus", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/bef7ad6e-en>.

Wardle, C. and H. Derakshan (2017), *Information Disorder: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, Council of Europe, DGI(2017)09.

#### Figure notes

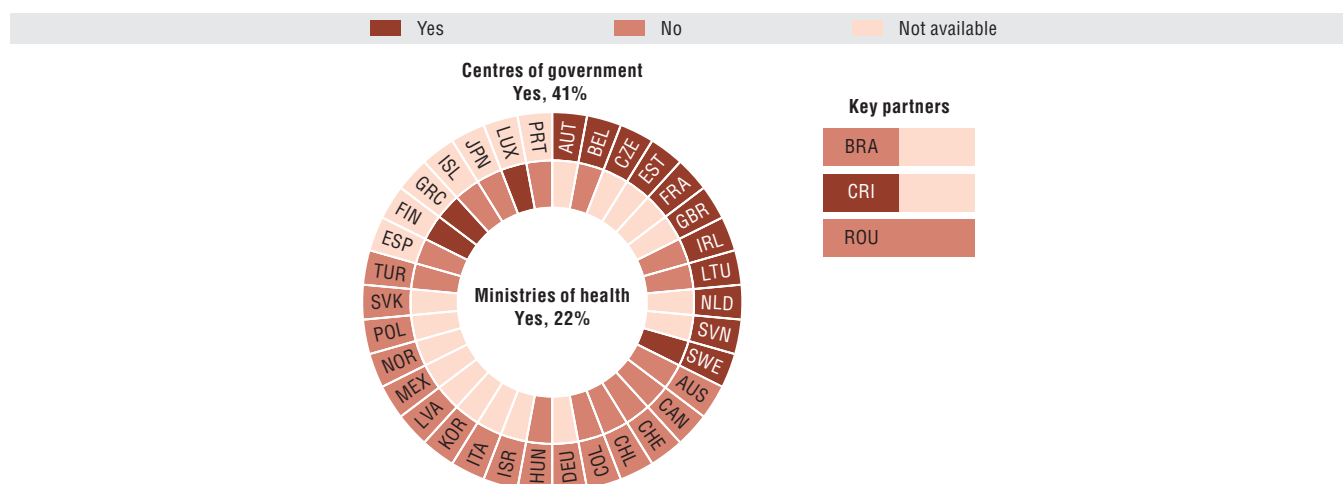
Finland, Greece, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain provided data for MHs but not CoGs. Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom provided data for CoGs but not MHs.

4.8. The outer ring shows the data for CoGs and the inner ring the data for MHs.

4.9. This question was not applicable to CoGs in Australia, Germany and the Netherlands or to the MH in Iceland. Other responses included international forums and social media companies.

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## 4.8. Availability of guiding documents for governments' responses to disinformation, 2019



Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government.

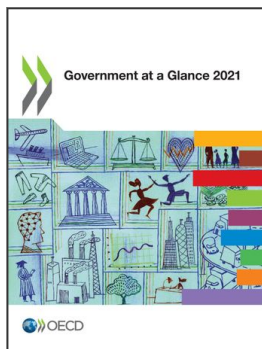
StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934257755>

## 4.9. Stakeholders consulted by centres of government and ministries of health on the issue of countering disinformation, 2019

Country	Academic or research organisations	International donors	Media organisations	Civil society organisations	Other	Does not engage with any of these actors
Australia					■	■
Austria	●		●	●		
Belgium	●		●		■	
Canada	● ■		● ■	●	● ■	
Chile	●	●		●		■
Colombia			●			■
Czech Republic	●			●		
Estonia	●	●	●	●		
Finland						■
France	●		●	●		
Greece	■					
Hungary	●					■
Ireland	●		●	●	● ■	
Israel	●		●	●		
Italy						●
Japan						■
Korea	●	●	●	●		
Latvia	●		●	●		
Lithuania	●		●	●	■	
Luxembourg						■
Mexico						●
Norway						●
Poland						●
Portugal	■		■	■		
Slovakia	●			●	●	
Slovenia	●					
Spain					■	
Sweden						● ■
Switzerland					●	■
Turkey	● ■	■	● ■	● ■		
United Kingdom	●		●	●		
<b>OECD Total</b>						
● Centres of Government	17	3	13	14	4	5
■ Ministries of Health	4	1	3	2	5	9
Brazil						●
Costa Rica	●		●		●	
Romania			■	■		●

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934257774>



From:  
**Government at a Glance 2021**

Access the complete publication at:  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2021), “Role of centres of government and ministries of health in countering misinformation and disinformation”, in *Government at a Glance 2021*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/f747c79c-en>

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