

Under-Secretary-General Melissa Fleming
Statement to the 43rd session of the Committee on Information
Monday 26 April 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let me be one of the first to congratulate you Ambassador Christian Espinosa and the new vice-chairs on your election. We look forward to working with you. Along with my team at the Department of Global Communications, I also look forward to working with all of you and benefiting from your guidance and solidarity.

I would like especially to give my heartfelt thanks to the outgoing bureau – the Chair, Ambassador Omar Hilale; thank you for your generous words just now and all along the way for being a champion to our department at a time of new direction. The Vice-Chair, Ambassador Amal Mudallali; and the Vice-Chair and Rapporteur Oleg Nikolenko, who has returned to his nation’s capital to continue his service there. You have been steadfast supporters of our Department and cause, and for that we are grateful.

Thank you, distinguished delegates, for allowing me to update you on the work of the Department of Global Communications in what has been a year of immense challenges, but also one with glimmers of hope and the promise of possibilities.

The toll left behind by the COVID-19 pandemic is immense, and it continues to create deep suffering worldwide. Yet the fact that we can gather again here today at UN Headquarters, albeit physically distanced, is a positive sign at least here and in many countries, probably too few countries though that the tide might soon turn on this period of upheaval and hardship.

Distinguished delegates,

A little over a year ago the world went into collective lockdown. As the pandemic unfolded, it soon became clear that we faced a concurrent “infodemic”. A contagion of misinformation and disinformation and a surge of hate speech came together to undermine public health worldwide – often with fatal consequences -- and to divide us from each other.

The infodemic also became an immediate test case for the UN Global Communications Strategy that the Department was just starting to roll out. That strategy represents an approach that can be applied to any issue and is based on the United Nations’ vision of a world where everyone thrives in peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet.

The approach is organized in the communications strategy around what I call the 3 Ws of cause communications: *What? Why care?* and *What now?* So, in DGC we ask ourselves those questions every time we face a communications challenge. We are not satisfied with an approach of merely conveying information and engaging in one-way communication with our audiences. Now our objective is for the United Nations to not just lead the narrative, but also to inspire people to care, and to mobilize them for action.

Regardless of the theme, we strive to reach audiences in the languages they speak and on the platforms they use with tailored content and outreach. That tailoring extends to audience segments – for example, we place great emphasis in targeting young people with our messaging. At the start of this month the annual ECOSOC Youth Forum, co-hosted by DGC, provided a virtual space for more than 10,000 young people to engage in discussions on the 2030 Agenda and how to recover better from the pandemic.

Distinguished delegates,

Using the Global Communications Strategy as our guide, the Department created an initiative called Verified in response to the pandemic and infodemic. Verified is a global, multilingual initiative to combat misinformation and ignorance by working with partners large and small – including individual members of the public – to share trusted, science-based information and stories of solidarity around COVID-19.

The results have been remarkable and a reminder of the depth of the appetite worldwide for clear facts and positive stories, and later today in our interactive session I will explore the impact of Verified and our plans for 2021 with you and look forward to that. This presentation will include the arm of our initiative called ‘Only Together’ and this is part of the initiative that is there to promote ~~global~~ vaccine equity. And we’ve received very thankfully a great amount of support from you member States. In fact, more than 60 Members States directly got involved in supporting the campaign. ~~direct social media support from representatives of more than 60 Member States.~~

We are honored that more than 180 Member States called for cooperation with Verified, as stated in the Political Declaration on Equitable Global Access to COVID-19 Vaccines launched last month. We also welcome the General Assembly resolution proclaiming a new Global Media and Information Literacy Week and recognizing our efforts through Verified to counter the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic. We hope to work more closely with you on these fronts as the situation of misinformation and disinformation continues to rage just as the pandemic is far from being conquered in many parts of the world.

Our interactive presentation will also highlight examples of how our global network of UN Information Centres, along with the Resident Coordinator offices with whom we work closely, are a critical instrument, creating original content across languages and then distributing that content in ways that connect with local audiences.

Beyond Verified, our broader COVID-19 communications have aimed to position the UN as the leading voice on the response to the pandemic. The coronavirus web portal in the six official languages, the extensive internal communications with staff, and the promotion of the Secretary-General's policy briefs on the various dimensions of the crisis are three examples of how we have worked to build credibility and trust by creating and distributing accurate and authoritative UN content.

Adopting the Global Communications Strategy means much more than simply re-thinking how we might talk about an issue such as the Sustainable Development Goals or human rights. It means adapting our structures and processes, too.

I will give you one example: DGC has created a dedicated climate communications team, supported by a so-called 'climate lab', to respond to an issue that is a top priority for the entire Organization, especially this year. The lab meets regularly and brings together staff from across the Department from Headquarters and from our UNICs, some working full-time on climate, others part-time, as well as representatives of key UN agencies dealing with climate, to ensure we are closely coordinating our efforts and having the maximum impact.

Our climate communications strategy is shaped around three main goals: advocating for ~~more~~ more ambitious national climate actions, showcasing solutions towards a more sustainable future, and mobilizing individual actions in support of a greener world.

Within that framework, we use key moments in the climate calendar between now and COP-26 in Glasgow in November to help harness media and public attention. Last week was a perfect example: the State of the World's Climate report, the launch of a global ocean assessment, the leaders' summit convened by the United States, and the celebration of Earth Day all came together over four days and it allowed us to make a coordinated communications surge, across multiple languages and platforms. I will go into a little more detail also in the interactive session on our climate communication strategy for the rest of 2021.

The Secretary-General wrote an op-ed article that appeared in more than 120 newspapers and websites; original web and social media content on climate action was created and posted across our platforms; and we filmed a virtual dialogue between the Secretary-General and youth climate activists from Madagascar and Brazil. I hope many of you saw

the SG Op-ed in some of your national newspapers and that is thanks to our UNICs who have become masterful at placing these articles in the national media.

We will deploy a similar integrated approach to our communications for the key UN summits and conferences this year, including the Food Systems Summit in September and the upcoming high-level events on biodiversity, oceans, energy and transport.

This approach applies equally across our communications efforts in the fields of peace and security and human rights, from our support of the UN strategy and action plan against hate speech to the third and last phase of 'Service and Sacrifice', I know you've all appreciated this highly successful multimedia campaign to promote for UN peacekeeping.

Peacekeeping and peacebuilding and the entire prevention agenda remain central to our communications. This year we collaborated closely with other departments to stand up the communications capacity of the new UN mission in Darfur, UNITAMS, and in June we will hold another round of communications training for senior field staff on the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse.

We are also applying our new approach by advancing a solutions-focused and empowering narrative in our coverage of Africa's economic, political and social issues and the promotion of sustainable development on the continent. Our strategy aims to reinforce and further expand our messages through digital communications and broader collaborations and partnerships.

Distinguished delegates,

One of the methods we use to inspire people to care both for the United Nations and the values it represents is the increased production of people-centered stories that also humanize the Organization's work and the individuals who carry it out.

This is exemplified by the award-winning *Awake at Night* podcast, which I have the privilege to host. *Awake at Night* started when I worked at UNHCR as we sought opportunities to tell the stories of our remarkable frontline colleagues in the field.

I took it with me to DGC and we began *Awake at Night's* third season in the middle of last year. It was a particularly fortuitous moment as so many people around the world were drawn to podcasts during lockdown. Nevertheless, the audience figures have far exceeded even our best expectations. There have been 2 million unique new downloads so far this season across the 25 episodes. So if you haven't already, I would encourage you to tune in. Our latest episode is with Paul Heslop, who has worked for the UN Mine

Action Service for nearly two decades. The personal and professional stories he tells are quite remarkable.

Distinguished delegates,

As the UN Secretary-General noted just last month, racism is a “pernicious evil” that exists across all regions and societies. The global anti-racism protests over the last year have led organizations to reflect on their own record. No one is immune, including the UN.

Last year the Secretary-General launched a task force to address racism and promote dignity for all. I am proud to say that the Department is at the forefront of this initiative, working closely with key offices to engage UN staff worldwide on how we can do better tackling this scourge.

Inclusion is a thread that runs throughout our work. DGC is working closely with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and the network of UN system focal points to develop what will be the first-ever UN disability-inclusive communications guidelines for sharing across the UN system. These internal guidelines will help steer UN personnel on how to create disability-inclusive communications and make UN information more accessible to all.

Similarly, gender equality is one of our communications priorities. It is particularly relevant given how the pandemic has had such a disproportionate impact on women, with higher rates of unemployment, domestic violence and care-giving responsibilities. Several analyses have shown that, despite these disparities, women – and women experts in particular – have been marginalized in the media coverage of COVID-19.

Last December I was pleased to moderate a discussion for UN global staff on the missing perspectives of women in COVID-19 news coverage, and what we can do as communicators to shift narratives and create a more gender-inclusive response and recovery. In this context, my Department strives to ensure that women’s voices and gender issues are strongly portrayed across our coverage and work, in all languages.

Mr. Chair,

I’m often asked by Member States how they can help support the work of the Department. One concrete way is by providing support to our efforts to preserve the United Nations’ print history. Currently locked in the basement of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, these records, publications and other documents are in dire condition due to a lack of proper environmental controls – and this means our collective memory will soon be lost forever if we do not digitize them.

Successive General Assembly resolutions have asked the Library to draft a preservation proposal, and we put forward such a plan in the 2020 and 2021 reports to this Committee. The need is becoming increasingly urgent. We are asking for \$10.5 million, which will cover a five-year workplan, and would be grateful for any support that you could offer. My colleagues Maher Nasser and Thanos Giannakopoulos, the Chief of the Library, are here today and with us this afternoon during the interactive session and can provide you with more specifics. Thank you so much in advance for your support.

Distinguished delegates,

I am proud of the many ways in which our Department adapted to the pandemic to ensure that we could still deliver on our mandates. Our Visitor Services operations in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, for example, switched quickly to online tours and virtual briefings last year. And the various levers of our news operations ensured that all Member State meetings were still covered and the content from them amplified in multiple languages.

Producing fresh and original multimedia content on a daily basis, we were able to deliver balanced and timely information. Our efforts were rewarded with incredible growth in our multilingual audiences across platforms. The number of users that viewed our UN News website soared in 2020 with some 41 million users and more than 70 million page-views across the nine languages, compared to the previous year's 10 million users and roughly 25 million page-views. So, a really big surge. Audiences to the wider UN website also surged in the past year – between just July and November 2020, for example, the site registered more than 102 million page-views. And in the 12 months to March 2021, UN social media accounts gained 70.1 million organic engagements, far surpassing our targets for the period.

In short, the data illustrates that more and more people turned to us to be informed about global issues, at a time when we are living through a global crisis that is affecting everyone, everywhere.

One lesson we collectively learned was that we can reach so many more people through virtual outreach activities. At the same time, we know that we still losing something when we cannot reproduce the intangible connections generated in an in-person event.

This has been the dilemma faced by our flagship outreach and education programmes, whether on the Holocaust; the transatlantic slave trade; the Rwanda genocide; or the question of Palestine. In each case we modified our plans to conduct virtual dialogues, discussions, debates and even screenings.

In the next two weeks DGC is co-organizing two virtual events to which you are all invited. At 10 a.m. this Wednesday we are co-hosting a panel discussion on how to prevent the pandemic from being a media extinction event, especially for public interest media organizations.

Then, next Monday, to mark World Press Freedom Day as the Chair also mentioned in his statement, we will hold the annual UN celebration, with messages or contributions from the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly and other key figures. Please follow both events via UN Webcast.

Mr. Chair,

In addition to our commitment to the United Nations, and to the cause of its global communications, there is something else we share – our education at Boston University. Allow me to close with a thought from one of the most respected figures in the history of its faculty, the writer Derek Walcott, who once said: “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole.”

As we try to strengthen our fractured world, the caring that will reassemble it will prove that thought true, a caring that my Department will help foster, through content that is verified, through misinformation that is paused and halted, and through the concert of response possible only together.

Thank you.
