

**Under-Secretary-General Melissa Fleming  
Statement to the 44<sup>th</sup> session of the Committee on Information  
Tuesday, 3 May 2022**

Thank you, Chair.

Allow me to start by expressing my appreciation to you, Ambassador Espinosa, as well as to the Vice-Chairs, for your leadership and continuous support to our Department.

It is a pleasure to speak to you today, while we are all seated in the same room, after two years of conducting the sessions of the Committee on Information in virtual and hybrid formats due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While a growing number of people in the world are expressing their desire to move on, we have to remember that the pandemic is not over. This is especially true for the one-third of the world's population that has not received a single dose of vaccine. And although things might start to seem normal at UN Headquarters – even though I think many of us recently have succumbed to the virus – my team and I continue to call attention to the many people around the world still suffering from the devastating health, economic and social impact of the pandemic.

In parallel to the dangers of the virus, we are also very concerned about the epidemic of mis- and dis-information that continues to threaten truth and knowledge. As the UN Secretary-General has noted, the ability to cause large-scale disinformation and undermine established facts, is an existential risk to humanity.

Since I last spoke to this Committee, we have also seen inequalities widening, the climate crisis worsening and other man-made catastrophes upending lives, plans and hopes. Most recently, the war in Ukraine is killing civilians, trapping them in terrible conditions, destroying towns and cities and driving 10 million people from their homes. Our 1,450 UN colleagues in Ukraine are working to ease the suffering. I was so pleased today to get confirmation of the evacuation of over 100 people from Mariupol, from the steel factory. And, our Secretary-General is working for peace and to save lives.

The war has also sent shockwaves around the world, sending food, energy and commodity prices to historical highs, fueling hunger and hopefully not, but possibly, also unrest. It has also put in the spotlight on the values of the UN Charter. These principles, which are at the heart of multilateral cooperation, are under the greatest strain since the founding of the United Nations.

We believe that all of us have a role to play, if we want to protect these values, and to deliver on our aspiration for peace, sustainable development and human rights for all. From our side, communicating these values is so important – and the Department of Global Communications is actively advocating for multilateralism. We are working for a communications response that is strategic, audience-based and impact-focused.

Much of what we have done over the past year was detailed in the Reports to this Committee. Therefore, today, I'll just focus on some key highlights and initiatives that are of particular note.

Distinguished delegates,

In times of crisis, the United Nations aims to become the leading voice in framing the narrative and outlining a sustainable way forward. This is one of the key objectives of our Global Communications Strategy that I presented to you a couple of years ago, and which is really the basis for our approach in all of our work.

To achieve this, we also need robust collaboration across the UN system. This is of seminal importance. To this end, the Department convenes the communicators of the UN – people like me, who are leading communications in different agencies and different parts of the UN system. We convene them and work together in so-called “cells”, where we discuss our strategy, we align our messaging and believe that we can better harness the power of the whole UN, speaking in one voice, and responding with agility and speed on issues ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic to the crisis in Ethiopia, from developments in Afghanistan, and now most recently to the war in Ukraine.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Department began working around the clock to cover the war and its repercussions, from New York, but also in Ukraine and in the region. And also around the world as the ripple effects of this war are being felt almost everywhere. This has resulted in a massive uptick in the media coverage of the UN. I am sure many of you have seen the throngs of journalists, once again roaming the hallways and at the various stakeout here. I am sure you have also followed the coverage. It has really resulted in a significant increase in the number of people visiting our platforms for authoritative and trustworthy content.

Our UN News features breaking news and human-centred stories as the numbers start to make people’s brain fog. So that’s why we are still doing human-centred stories of solidarity and compassion for those being affected by this war. It also reports on how UN teams are working to help affected Ukrainian people, in English, Russian and seven more languages. Since 20 February, visits to the English News website have increased by 35 percent. To the Russian News website, they have increased by 130 percent, compared to the same period in 2021.

During these critical months, through UN Web TV and the UN YouTube Channel, our team has been providing gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Security Council meetings, registering millions of views. For instance, a Security Council meeting on 17 March entitled “Humanitarian Situation in Ukraine” recorded more than 1.2 million views on YouTube alone.

Social media posts related to the war have also seen unprecedented levels of engagement – with a post on the adoption of a General Assembly resolution gaining 5.7 million views across platforms. Other related visual assets, such as highlighting that civilians should not become a target, have been among the top-performing content in the history of our accounts.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The latest science shows that climate disruption is wreaking havoc in every part of the world. The Secretary-General has sounded a “Code Red” for the planet, noting that small island nations, least developed countries, and poor and vulnerable people everywhere, are one shock away from doomsday. Our Department has responded with a two-pronged communications approach: highlighting the severity of the issue based on science, while also offering hope and concrete solutions.

In this framework, our Department extensively promoted two recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, with content that was significantly picked up by major news outlets, as well as by influencers on social media.

In the fall of 2021, we also deployed a dedicated team to COP26 in Glasgow, which delivered a wealth of multimedia material to different audiences. More than 8.2 million people visited UN News sites in nine languages during the Conference, while the podcast series “No Denying It” garnered well over 2 million interactions. On social media, COP26 content was among the top-performing content in 2021, with social media videos from Glasgow receiving hundreds of thousands of views and positive comments. The Secretary-General’s live conversation with UNICEF Youth Advocate Nicki Becker on 10 November 2021 was among the most popular posts across social media platforms.

Our team has also forged creative partnerships to bring the issue of the climate emergency closer to the people, closer to the public. Most recently, we partnered with Netflix to produce a virtual climate action conversation video related to the award-winning film *Don’t Look Up*. I don’t know if anyone has seen “Don’t Look Up”! It is very recommended, and it was really great to be able to work with them in the aftermath, to gain from the popularity of this film with the strong message, and to do a conversation featuring the Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on Climate Action, Selwin Hart – whom many of you know – and the director. This has received 400,000 views on the YouTube channels of the UN and Netflix. And these kinds of partnerships are really helping extend our messages to audiences that don’t usually come to UN website or YouTube channels, but definitely go to Netflix.

In parallel, in something we are very excited about, we teamed up with Google to ensure that factual and trustworthy content is available to people searching for anything related to climate change. So, if you have your computer, you can even do this exercise. If you search for “climate change” on Google, you will see United Nations content at the top of your results in 12 languages – including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai and Vietnamese. In addition to our official languages, which of course we would offer, it was Google who asked us to put this content in those languages, because they seem to have the most users in those languages and in those countries. But we hope to really expand as well. In addition to organic search results, Google is surfacing short and easy-to-understand information panels and visuals on the causes and effects of climate change, as well as on individual actions that people can take to help tackle the climate crisis.

Looking forward to COP27 in Egypt, our Department’s *Africa Renewal* platform is covering different types of climate action. And among others, it features an op-ed series written by African women experts, who write about climate-related issues on the continent. So, watch out for that, it’s coming soon.

Distinguished delegates,

The last two years have highlighted a simple but very crucial truth – that the slogan “leaving no one behind” is not an empty slogan. The pandemic and climate change have demonstrated [the truthfulness of] the slogan that we used a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic, that “no one is safe until we all are safe.” In this framework, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development remains a centerpiece of the Department’s work. As you have seen in the Secretary-General’s report *Our*

*Common Agenda*, all the activities of the UN have the Sustainable Development Goals at their center, as we aim to accelerate their achievement.

In an effort to diversify partnerships and strengthen outreach on the Goals, our Department engages with the global publishing industry through the SDG Publishers Compact, which currently has more than 200 members. These publishing entities commit to furthering the SDGs by implementing sustainable business practices and publishing related content. These partnerships are really key and this is just an example of them.

Also, young people across the world, as you know, have been very strong advocates of the SDGs and – recognizing their contribution – we work to elevate their voices. The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth has made significant contributions to this goal, through innovative activities. For example, the Office launched the first-of-a-kind data-driven advocacy tool, called the Youth SDG Dashboard. Ahead of COP26, it also supported a #Youth4Climate event in Milan, which engaged nearly 400 youth delegates from around the world.

Also, our UN information service in Geneva, partnering with the NGO dev.tv, Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS) and the Graduate Institute, hosted the 2021 Young Activist Summit focusing on empowering young change-makers. There, we highlighted the ground-breaking initiatives and innovation of six young leaders with a live participation of 7,000 young activists from 140 countries – an event that generated media coverage in 33 international, national, and local outlets. I had the pleasure of being there myself, and I have to say it was a truly inspiring event for me, but I think also for the youth around the world, recognizing their amazing power.

In parallel, the Department continued its decades-long tradition to organize and support Model UN programmes. These activities highlight the importance of the SDGs and, at the same time, simulate the work of the General Assembly, promoting a better understanding of its functioning to students.

Similarly, the UN Academic Impact network initiated a virtual capacity-building program entitled SDGs Workshops, to showcase how universities and colleges can tailor their teaching, research, and community engagement activities for the advancement of the Goals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you know, Verified has been the backbone of the Department's COVID-19 communication response efforts. The Verified initiative – which aims at delivering reliable, science- and fact-based information – is building confidence in health messaging and vaccination. To do this, it is generating viral content, expanding our global trusted messenger network and offering ways to spot and stop dis- and misinformation.

Since the initiative's inception, Verified messages have reached millions of people around the world. We have distribution partners in 60 languages, and have produced more than 2,000 pieces of content. This has attracted the collaboration of partners and [led to] the creation of thousands more piece of content – from low-fi memes to music videos.

Indicatively, in the framework of a Verified activation in South Africa, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and UNICEF, local artists produced murals to raise COVID-19 awareness across

six provinces as part of a nationwide campaign. This was promoted in 16 television and 32 radio public service announcements in five local languages.

Another example: in Brazil, our UN Information Center used special Instagram filters that customized traditional Carnival lyrics to promote vaccination against COVID-19. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, UNIC Jakarta worked with local radio stations to promote Verified, with a potential to reach over 14 million listeners, in rural and urban areas, as well as in indigenous communities.

As we have entered the third year of the pandemic, our Department's news and social media platforms continue to feature stories on COVID's impact on lives and livelihoods, highlighting the suffering of those most affected. Our coverage also demonstrates the UN action across the world to deliver and advocate for populations of concern – while our partners amplify UN messaging to their audiences.

At the same time, the Department continues to communicate with internal audiences. Specifically, the UN Intranet, iSeek, has been instrumental in keeping staff connected and informed on the Organization's policies and priorities in relation to COVID-19, through articles, frequently asked questions and live events.

Distinguished delegates,

When presenting to the General Assembly his priorities for 2022, the Secretary-General starkly warned that human rights and the rule of law are under assault. Populism, nativism, white supremacy and other forms of racism and extremism are poisoning social cohesion and institutions everywhere.

The Secretary-General pledged, "We will always push back – and push forward – to defend human rights." This is a guiding principle also in our communications efforts.

The promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms is one of our key priorities for 2022. Among others, as part of the broad communications initiative on hate speech, the Department launched last month a new portal dedicated to combating this phenomenon. In line with the Secretary-General's Strategy on Hate Speech, the website covers the Organization's long history of mobilizing the world against hatred of all kinds, details strategies for its prevention, and encourages visitors to take action.

Taking action is also the goal of a multilingual campaign that we will soon be launching, under the hashtag #NoToHate. This is particularly relevant ahead of the inaugural International Day to Counter Hate Speech, which will be observed on 18 June.

In relation to other observances, such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, while the UN Headquarters building remained closed to the public, the relevant Outreach programs successfully implemented their mandates through high-profile online events that reached thousands of people.

Equally successful was content on International Women's Day, which performed very strongly on the UN social media accounts – while an op-ed by the Secretary-General on sustainable feminist recovery was published in almost 80 media outlets, in 37 countries and in 12 languages.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In view of the multiple and multilayered challenges of our time, our Department tries to benefit from existing opportunities, while testing new technologies and activities, pushing boundaries and moving faster.

For example, on the activities side, the Department supported the UN participation at Expo 2020 in Dubai, which represented a unique occasion for direct engagement with the visiting public, media outlets, and representatives from 192 national pavilions. I know many of you, I think all of you, wererepresented there. The UN Hub at Expo 2020 received over 100,000 visitors, generated over 400,000 commitments in support of the SDG agenda and also climate action, and hosted 70 panel discussions and report launches.

As regards new technologies, a state-of-the-art TV studio was launched in 2021, thanks to a generous donation by the Netherlands, and has since been used for live and hybrid events focusing on the SDGs. A new system for the press to request or renew their accreditation was also implemented. And, a new “eye-level” camera was installed at the center of the Security Council Chamber, helping us deliver the proceedings from the room much more vividly.

Distinguished delegates,

Today, as we mark the opening day of this Committee, we also mark the annual World Press Freedom Day. Despite the progress made in ensuring press freedom, journalism still faces a multitude of threats, including an increasingly polluted information environment, where mis- and dis-information run wild.

We see a range of bad actors exploiting the sincere demand for information on issues such as COVID-19 or the climate emergency. They circulate false, misleading or distorted content to warp our understanding of events, and they are getting millions of views. Some of these mis- and disinformation actors aim to create confusion and a state of information paralysis. Others are just exploiting public sympathies for financial gain.

The problem is more severe in the digital realm, where social media platforms – as useful as they are, and can be – were not designed to keep us informed, but rather, to attract advertisers. They were designed to keep us engaged. Amplified by algorithms designed to grab attention, it is the most provocative and outlandish posts that rise to the top of our feeds – very often including false and misleading claims.

Yet, digital platforms can still serve humanity’s best interests for peace, dignity, and the rule of law. This is our vision. We want to work toward a digital public square that is inclusive and safe for all; and we wish that our digital commons are managed as a global public good.

To this goal, my team and I, as called for in the Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda Report, are working to develop a Code of Conduct for integrity in public information. We are just at the beginning of this process and we will turn to you, distinguished delegates, for consultations in the next few months.

To mark World Press Freedom Day, we will hold an annual celebration via the UN Webcast tomorrow, as mentioned by the Chair, with messages or contributions from the Secretary-General,

the President of the General Assembly, and other key figures, including the Chair of this Committee, Ambassador Espinosa. I encourage all delegates to take part in the conversation and to help us promote this cause.

Mr. Chair,

A worn-out proverb goes, “the first casualty of war is truth”. I believe many delegations here with me today can agree that this expression has never been more apt than today – which makes the mission of our Department, the Department of Global Communications, I believe, so crucial. We need to point out what is wrong with the world, but we also need to highlight what is going right, what is possible and how a strong United Nations can make a difference in our world.

With your support, dear Member States, our Department of Global Communications will continue to deliver our duties with compassion and solidarity, to protect the truth and to overcome indifference.

Thank you.

\*\*\*