

Under-Secretary-General Melissa Fleming
Statement to the 45th session of the Committee on Information
Monday, 24 April 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and also for that very meaningful statement. I would like to congratulate you and other newly elected members of the Bureau on your appointments this morning. Please count on my support, and that of our entire Department of Global Communications, to you and to the Committee on Information.

Before we proceed further, allow me to also express my deep appreciation to the outgoing Chair, Ambassador Cristian Espinosa from Ecuador, as well as to the Vice-Chairs, for your steady leadership and continued support of my Department's work. We depend on your counsel and generous assistance to help us achieve our mandates.

Distinguished delegates,

As we begin the Committee's 45th Session, there is no shortage of global crises on the agenda of the United Nations, as you very well know. The worsening climate emergency; the war in Ukraine; the rise in hate speech and xenophobia and disinformation; devastating disasters, as in the recent earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria; the massive displacement of people around the world; and, just in the past week, the deadly fighting in Sudan and its appalling humanitarian impact.

Such a high number of overlapping crises is unfortunately the new norm, and it poses real challenges for us as UN communicators. How do we prioritize our work when we have so much to cover? And how do we 'cut through' to inform the global public about what the Organization is doing and also, at the same time, to build support for our values? And how do we do all that while tackling the rampant mis- and disinformation and hate speech that you, Mr. Chair, also very much alluded to in your statement? How do we do this while tackling this phenomenon that is polluting our information ecosystems?

The Department's approach remains guided by the UN Global Communications Strategy, and this Strategy calls for a systematic but also data-driven method to do what we do. And that is a focus on audiences first and having impact. So, rather than communicating only to raise awareness, our communications strategy aims to capture people's imaginations and also to offer some hope and solutions to our biggest collective problems. We try to do so in languages people speak and on platforms people use.

We must communicate the facts, while also offering hope. Just take the Sustainable Development Goals. The COVID-19 pandemic and its long tail have exposed how progress has stalled – or, in certain cases, even regressed – on some of the key SDG targets. The stories that we have reported are of rising inequality, of growing hunger, of less education and of backsliding in women's rights, to name a few. And this is disheartening.

Yet we still have the blueprint to build a better world in the SDGs. Its rainbow wheel continues to inspire people all over the world. We're planning a renewed communications effort in the lead-up to the SDG Summit – which I'm going to go over a little bit in our interactive session – and we hope that this will put the spotlight back into the accelerated solutions needed to get back on track with Agenda 2030.

So, later this morning, after I speak, we will have our informal interactive segment, and there I will present our SDG and climate communications strategy for the rest of this year.

But I would just like to mention now a few examples of how, around the world, we are finding ever more creative ways to partner with Member States, with the media, and also with the private sector and civil society – in order to connect new audiences to the Goals.

One example – maybe you have seen it – last year we launched 'Football for the Goals', which is an initiative that aims to inspire the soccer community, or the football community, on and off the pitch, to take actions to achieve the SDGs. We have nearly 170 soccer-related entities – which included individual clubs and others – that have joined. And that far exceeded our projections. Obviously, through sports, you can reach a lot of people that we usually don't reach here in our New York City UN Headquarters position.

Sticking to sports, we marked the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace earlier this month with an in-person event here at UN Headquarters that drew 400 people, including many elite athletes, to discuss the role of sport in tackling climate change, promoting gender equality, and combating racism. Digital content from the event was shared by influencers and others and we estimate that we reached more than 30 million people with that content. So, positive content about the SDGs, getting people mobilized around them.

In February, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library worked with UNESCO and DESA to host the 3rd UN Open Science Conference – I participated myself; it was really, really interesting. It brought together policymakers, scholars and experts to discuss how we can make better use of science to achieve the Goals and communicating science has taken on new importance as it's become more and more distorted.

And at UN Information Centres, from Baku to Rabat and from Vienna to Windhoek, we have been working with local partners on the ground to organize teacher training sessions, to launch TV programmes and to host youth forums, all related to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The SDG Publishers Compact continues to grow. We have more than 300 members worldwide, as does the SDG Book Club for children. The UN Academic Impact initiative, which now comprises more than 1,600 universities and colleges in over 150 countries, conducted 18 online SDG training sessions for English- and Spanish-speaking audiences between January and March. Other training sessions are expected to follow in other languages.

UN communications around the SDGs includes a particular effort to target younger audiences. You'll observe first-hand this week when the annual ECOSOC Youth Forum takes place at UN Headquarters in a hybrid format after two years of virtual gatherings.

The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth has worked alongside UN partners to organize the Forum. This is going to bring together young people from around the world to discuss their ideas, concerns and actions, specifically around the Sustainable Development Goals, and discuss these with government representatives, policymakers, UN officials and other stakeholders.

In the coming months, the Department will continue to support the Secretary-General's efforts to implement the General Assembly's resolution on the establishment of the UN Youth Office, which will integrate the activities of the Office of the Envoy on Youth. This will be an important step forward in strengthening the partnership between the UN and young people and ensuring meaningful youth engagement in intergovernmental policymaking and decision-making.

Mr. Chair,

The same approach to partnerships, including with influencers, is applied to what we do in our climate communications. For the launch of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or IPCC, Synthesis Report, our social media content was amplified by 30 Goodwill Ambassadors, Messengers of Peace, SDG Advocates, and other high-profile UN influencers, reaching nearly 100 million followers. So, basically, we give our content to these 30 influencers and reach 100 million people, so it's a really good method of distribution.

To coincide with the release of the Synthesis Report, the Secretary-General also launched his LinkedIn account, and so far, in just a few weeks, he has 25,000 followers already. LinkedIn prominently is promoting his account and featured the Secretary-General's article on the report in a "Top Voices" account on the subject. At the same time, UNIC Tokyo used trusted weather presenters to amplify its "Promise of 1.5°C" campaign.

The Department's web and climate teams, meanwhile, have worked extensively over recent months on the UN Climate Action site, adding new segments and features. UN Video has reinforced its coverage, producing videos featuring students and activists in their own languages. UN News content on climate action continues to account for a significant number of visits to the platform in all languages.

We are also partnering with digital platforms and harnessing their enormous reach to ensure that audiences are more likely to see accurate information about the climate rather than further mis- and disinformation.

This past Saturday – as we all know, it was Earth Day – if you went to Google on Earth Day, there would be what's called a Google Doodle, which is the first thing you see at the top of the home page on a given day. And this Google Doodle pointed users to UN climate content, including links to our ActNow campaign of individual actions. If it's anything like it was last year, it will drive hopefully millions of people to UN content on climate change and climate action.

Similarly, TikTok is rolling out a feature that will direct people who search for climate change content to authoritative UN climate information – across 13 different languages. TikTok is also

introducing a new policy banning climate misinformation, such as content denying the existence of climate change.

Another illustration of the effectiveness of our updated, integrated approach to communications is the support we provided to last month's Water Conference. Given the significance of this intergovernmental gathering, DGC worked with the UN system to ensure there was a coordinated, strategic campaign in the lead-up, during and after.

Starting in mid-February, multilingual content about the Conference was posted more than 400 times on social media, generating at least 450,000 engagements. On the eve of the Conference, the Department organized global briefings on the World Water Development Report, including with our UN Information Centres, which also ensured extensive media coverage.

During the Conference itself, our Meetings Coverage Section, working in English and French, observed higher-than-average numbers of visitors, page views and time spent reading pages on many of its summaries. Our civil society team also helped facilitate the participation of numerous NGOs in the Water Conference.

Our overall campaign, which was primarily digital, we believe both lifted the visibility of the global water crisis and highlighted some of the innovative solutions that exist.

Distinguished delegates,

As I mentioned at the outset, dealing with crises has become a central feature of our work. It has forced us to reorient our approach to strategic planning and ensure we can better anticipate crises and respond more quickly when they start to unfold.

So, we as DGC take the lead in coordinating communications across the UN system when a crisis hits, and also for as long as the crisis goes on. We convene meetings of the relevant offices, so communications offices around the UN system; we also pull together, we draft and we distribute key messaging documents; we share content that we can all use for social media and other platforms; and we identify communications capacity gaps that we often see in the crisis countries, and strategize how can deliver more resources and best explain what the UN is doing to fend off or head off the crisis or to help people who are suffering from it.

In the past year, for example, the situations in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Haiti, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and now Sudan have required a carefully calibrated communications response as those conflicts or crises have peaked or they have waxed or waned, and as the communications imperatives have evolved.

The extremely fluid situation in Sudan right now has increased the complexity of explaining both our role as well as the UN perspective, especially when our staff on the ground face enormous security risks.

We are happy that many of them, if not all of them, or at least most of them, have been able to reach safety. But, of course, we're thinking of all those who are still working on the ground to

deliver humanitarian assistance on behalf of the UN family and the international community. We are working closely with key offices, including DPPA and DSS, to ensure that we are maximizing awareness of what the UN is doing right now and also without jeopardizing anyone's safety.

I would like to now turn to the Ukraine war, which has been a focus of our communications since this war began. As a Department we meet regularly, in this context of crisis communications, both internally as well as with other UN offices, and we adapt our communications regularly according to the changing circumstances. Of course, our coverage and media engagement focus on the humanitarian situation as well as the human rights consequences. But we also look at efforts to bring about peace and ameliorate the suffering.

Our UN News Ukraine focus page provides updates on all angles of the UN response and it continues to receive significant traffic. We also have a UN News-published explainer on the war and this has attracted so far more than two million page-views. People can come there and get what is an explainer content if they are just starting to try to understand how this war came about. A quarter of those two million come from Russian-speaking audiences.

UN Video's production marking the first anniversary of the war showcased the Organization's efforts on the political front, how we were delivering life-saving aid, and how we were also still undertaking development as well. The video was versioned in 11 languages.

Our Web Services team continues to update the website for the Black Sea Grain Initiative, and UN meetings, press conferences, and stakeouts concerning the war are brought to the global audience via UNTV and UN Web TV.

We also have a UNIC in Kyiv which is critical to our efforts to communicate locally, including in translating key content – such as statements by the Secretary-General – into Ukrainian and distributing it to local media.

Mr. Chair,

Less than a month ago, we hosted an informal meeting with you – and with non-members of the Committee – on information integrity on digital platforms. Let me reiterate my appreciation for your participation at that briefing, as well as for the follow-up emails, conversations and calls my team received from many delegates.

This shows I think how, for you, this issue of mis- and disinformation is also affecting your countries as well as all of us and the issues we are trying to work on here at the UN. I think it is crucial, as the Chair also noted, that we continue this dialogue, especially as we work to develop the Code of Conduct on Information Integrity on Digital Platforms. We need to keep hearing your feedback also on how this phenomenon is affecting everything that we are trying to achieve.

The Secretary-General's Policy Brief that is linked to the Code of Conduct will be presented to you on 18 May. We are very much looking forward to presenting that to you. I think it's really a good indication of how we see things, a good analysis, and where we will be going with the Code of Conduct.

Mis- and disinformation, along with hate speech, have become so ubiquitous that it is impossible to be a communications professional today and not have to deal with it. From climate change to COVID-19 vaccines, we have already observed the impacts of a concerted campaign of lies, denials and distortions. But increasingly, however, the United Nations is finding that it's not just our ability to fulfil our mandates that is at stake; it is our staff that are often under direct attack.

This is particularly true in the field, although we do get our share of hate online as UN staff members, including myself, but it's most concerning to our colleagues in the field. Our blue helmets, our humanitarian aid workers and our development staff are being deliberately targeted. I think I mentioned this at the informal briefing – in a survey last year of UN peacekeepers, 75% of them reported that mis- and disinformation were impacting their safety and security.

UN Resident Coordinators, peace envoys and peacekeeping missions are turning more and more to our Department and asking for our assistance, both to anticipate and also combat these online attacks. To that end, we are working with other key Secretariat departments to establish a standing capacity so we can better respond to this problem.

Our global UNIC network, which is skilled at understanding local audiences and languages, will be a key component of this capacity. We are going to be working to up-skill our colleagues. Many of them are already extensively engaging on this issue.

One example: UNIC Mexico City launched a video series to promote digital literacy. UNIC Ouagadougou organized an information session with Fasocheck, the leading fact-checking entity in Burkina Faso, for UN staff operating in that country. UNRIC Brussels created *Info ou Intox*, an online series featuring original content in French to fight mis- and disinformation on COVID-19, which attracted more than 120,000 views.

The Department's various multilingual platforms are stepping up their coverage too. We have developed a 'Countering Disinformation' website on un.org. It was launched in collaboration with OHCHR. UN Video has produced a series of interviews, social media clips, and explainers featuring prominent experts. UN News has posted infographics, feature stories and articles, all primarily aimed at a younger demographic.

In 2022, our flagship Verified initiative continued to pump fact-based content into the digital ecosystem, including guidance on how users can do their part to slow the spread of harmful information. We are now pivoting our Verified strategy to supercharge our climate action campaign and also to address climate disinformation.

Distinguished delegates,

The Organization's multi-faceted work in the peace and security pillar, from peacebuilding to peacekeeping, from landmine removal to counter-terrorism activities, represent a fundamental branch of our communications.

To that end, our highly successful ‘Service and Sacrifice’ campaign, which has covered 70 countries since it began in 2018, entered its fifth phase earlier this year. I note that at our interactive session, many of you complimented us on your perspective that this is a very successful campaign for many of your audiences from countries who supply our peacekeepers.

The results are really impressive. Social media content for the first three countries in this phase – Norway, Mexico and Bhutan – reached an estimated two million people and the number of engagements resulting from that content topped 103,000. This is in part due to the fact that the content is specifically tailored to each country, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of our UNICs and DPO colleagues to ensure that the content is also appropriate for local audiences.

‘Service and Sacrifice’ illustrates the value of partnering with Member States to achieve one’s communications objectives too. The campaign also demonstrates how meaningful, and necessary, it is to keep producing accurate, but also positive content about peacekeeping at a time of so much hate and mis- and disinformation.

Turning to another pillar, the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an opportunity to reinvigorate public understanding and engagement around human rights, and to remind us all that human rights are central to delivering the 2030 Agenda.

Given the significance of UDHR@75, which is what it is being called, the Department has reinforced its capacity in this area and is working very closely with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to create a continuous narrative throughout the year that pulls together key moments and milestones and highlights the importance of human rights.

Many of you will know that World Press Freedom Day always falls during the Committee’s annual session, and that this year marks 30 years since the General Assembly proclaimed that Day. This year, UNESCO, with the support of DGC, is organizing a day-long special event at UN Headquarters on freedom of expression, featuring the participation of renowned journalists, media advocates, human rights advocates as well as UN officials. It begins at 10 a.m. next Tuesday 2 May in the General Assembly Hall, and I encourage you all to attend.

Working with Member States and other stakeholders, the Department’s education programmes on the Holocaust, on the transatlantic Slave Trade, and on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda continue their year-round programme of exhibitions, teaching activities and other events.

The aim is not simply to commemorate but to inform about the legacies of these tragedies and what we need to learn today to avoid repeating them. In that vein, UN News and UN Video have profiled various survivors – with many, especially survivors of the Holocaust, reaching their late 80s, in some cases their 90s, it is really key and important for us to record their testimonies and remind us what “never again” means to them.

If you have not done so already, I would strongly encourage you to view the webcast of *Beyond Colonial Histories*. It was an event we held here at UN Headquarters on 30 March in conjunction with the Government of the Netherlands and the Rijksmuseum. The US lawyer, author and social justice advocate Bryan Stevenson delivered a compelling keynote lecture on the legacy of the

transatlantic slave trade – it’s really, really worth going to our YouTube channel to watch his statement. He is truly amazing.

Meanwhile, the Department has begun preparations to later this year stage the annual International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East and the annual Training Programme for Palestinian Broadcasters and Journalists, which since last year has been named after Shireen Abu Akleh, the Palestinian-American reporter who was killed in the Occupied Palestinian Territory last May.

Mr. Chair,

Multilingualism is the lifeblood of our work. Without it we would not be able to reach and engage audiences. The challenge, of course, as I have said here many times, is to find sufficient resources to make multilingualism a reality. Where possible we do use technology to serve us, but even in the age of artificial intelligence, it is not always possible to deliver.

So on this front, though, I am delighted to announce that – thanks to your generosity as Member States in providing additional staff resources in this year’s budget – UN Web TV recently launched its website in Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian, and Spanish, complementing the existing English-language version. This means that meetings of the General Assembly, Security Council and other key UN organs, are now available both live and on-demand in all six official languages. It’s nice to have some good news sometimes.

The Department also began a new Urdu-language newsletter. And, on International Mother Language Day in February, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library launched its publication *Multilingualism at the United Nations*. To support Model UN, the Department published English, French and Portuguese versions of *The United Nations Guide to Model UN*. We will continue to seek creative ways to expand our multilingual footprint.

Meanwhile, I am pleased to announce the launch of a new digital workflow at the Library, which provides comprehensive analysis and metadata creation capability for UN parliamentary and normative documents as well as UN publications. This innovation replaces a system the Library had been using since the late 1980s and it should make it much easier for researchers, policymakers, and citizens alike to tap into the rich online resources of the Organization.

This past year the Department continued to digitize, catalogue and selectively post items in the UN’s historic audiovisual collection. This project was made possible through a donation by the Government of Oman. So far, we have digitized 55,000 audio, video, and film items, which is about 80% of our initial target. Additionally, we are preparing a new edition of the popular guide, *Basic Facts about the United Nations*, which was last published six years ago.

Distinguished delegates,

Today is an especially auspicious day to kick off the annual session of the Committee on Information. In 2018 the General Assembly declared 24 April to be the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, in order to promote the values of the UN, “reaffirm the faith... in the purposes and principles enshrined in its Charter” and “the importance and relevance

of multilateralism and international law and to advance the common goal of lasting and sustained peace through diplomacy.”

This is a message that resonates for us at DGC. As we strive to achieve these lofty goals, alongside all of you, I look forward to hearing from you throughout this session, and beyond. Thank you.
