Counteracting Dangerous Narratives in Times of Uncertainty

A GUIDE BY OVER ZERO IN COLLABORATION WITH CALEB GICHUHI

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OVER ZERO

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I. Introduction & Why this Guide

Throughout history, periods of uncertainty and transition – including pandemics and other outbreaks of disease, economic downturns, and political events like elections – have triggered and accelerated division, hate, and violence.

How does this happen? Uncertainty, transition, or increased environmental threat often create a sense of scarcity or perceived need for protection, which, in turn, increase competition between groups. During pandemics, the threat of disease can intensify conflict dynamics, leading people to turn inward and "close ranks" around "their" group (for protection, to advocate for scarce resources, etc.), while viewing other groups as threats to their cultural, economic, or physical security.

Events like pandemics can feed core narratives that are commonly used to justify excluding or harming entire groups of people through policies and even violence. During pandemics, minorities and/or marginalized communities are often targeted or scapegoated as spreading the disease and responsible for related societal crises (e.g., medical shortages, economic downturns, etc.). This pandemic blame game serves to justify discriminatory policies, rights violations, violence, or other forms of harm.

Indications suggest the COVID-19 pandemic is playing out similarly. Globally – across the United States, Europe, South Asia, and Africa – we've seen an uptick in misinformation, rumors, and hateful rhetoric depicting vulnerable groups as responsible for the virus alongside violence and discriminatory policies targeting marginalized groups.

Currently, these narratives are gaining power as the space for supporting human rights is shrinking amidst broader trends of rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding. As central governments around the world consolidate power and limit the space for free speech, civil society, and democratic debate, they are intensifying their rhetorical, political, and financial attacks on minority groups and organizations and individuals working to protect these groups. In many places, these attacks have resulted in human rights work itself being targeted as political and anti-government. This weakens a major pillar of support for already vulnerable groups and creates opportunities for further marginalization.

COVID-19 has accelerated these trends, providing a "public safety" or "emergency" pretext for governments to further consolidate their power and target critics as interfering with public safety. This means that as group-targeted rhetoric and intergroup divisions are surging, so too are the risks for those working to defend human rights and prevent violence.

Amidst these challenges, there are still risk-sensitive approaches to address negative dynamics stemming from times of uncertainty, including the current COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout. With this in mind, this guide identifies avenues for individuals, civil society organizations, and local leaders to counteract risks for identity-based violence in their communities amidst periods of threat and uncertainty.

This guide specifically addresses:

- How pandemics and other times of threat and uncertainty heighten conflict dynamics;

- Narrative patterns that simultaneously scapegoat or target a "them" while mobilizing an "us" to participate in or support violence or discrimination; and

- Recommendations for counteracting these dynamics, including "do no harm" considerations.

Community leaders – whether formal, informal, or newly emerging – can play a critical role in developing and implementing these strategies. Why? Because communities look to their leaders for guidance in how to act and react, particularly in times of uncertainty. As such, leaders act as powerful norm-setters and can inspire positive action amongst their communities.

To ensure this guide is as practical as possible, we include checklists, worksheets, and examples that can be used throughout your own work. Our hope is that this resource will support you in taking action through your work and in your communities.

This guide is a close adaptation of Over Zero's May 2020 publication, "Counteracting Dangerous Communications in the time of COVID-19." The discussion borrows many phrases, concepts, and recommendations from that publication.

II. Identifying dangerous Narratives

Throughout history, certain patterns of speech have emerged in the leadup to and throughout violence that targets people based on their identity. These patterns increase people's acceptance of discriminatory policies or actions - even violence.

This speech has been referred to by a number of names – hate speech, dangerous speech, incitement. We provide a few of these definitions below:

Hate speech: Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of their perceived identity—whether their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.

Dangerous speech: Communication, including hate speech, that can influence people to accept, condone, and commit violence against members of another group. Rather than focusing on the intent behind or content of the speech alone, this concept focuses on the speech's impact on its audience by considering the audience itself, the surrounding social and political context, how the speech is disseminated, and the speaker's credibility and influence.

Such communication divides people into an "us" and a "them," portraying "them" as a threatening other, sometimes responsible for "our" misfortunes or past wrongs, and usually as essentially different or even not fully human. It can depict "us" as needing to protect our own group – to right wrongs or to build a better future. It can even mobilize us to participate in or support violence and harm while creating powerful pressures and incentives for those who might oppose such actions to remain silent.

a. Pandemics and dangerous narratives

Pandemics – and the feelings of threat and anxiety they generate – can cause people to "close ranks" around their group, ultimately increasing prejudicial feelings and actions toward other groups, particularly those depicted as responsible for their hardships. These intensified us/them divisions also strengthen the resonance of related rhetoric.

What does this rhetoric look like amidst a pandemic or disease?

1. Narratives that portray groups as to blame for current hardships or uncertainty, as an ongoing threat, and that dehumanize (e.g., through comparing people to pests, rodents, reptiles, or the disease itself);

2. Narratives that build an exclusive "us" in need of protection from the surrounding disease, those responsible for its spread, and its longer-term consequences. These narratives portray violence or harm as necessary (and even good) and depict other social or political solutions as infeasible.

We elaborate on these patterns below.[3]

b. Narrative patterns that create and target a "them"

- **Narratives that portray a group as "guilty" or to blame** for harms against the "ingroup," whether past or current violence, current violence, an economic downturn, disease, etc. This portrays an entire group of people as guilty for the (real or fabricated) crimes or wrongs of a few individual group members. This "collective blame" can be used to justify revenge against other members of that group.

   Today, we see these dynamics playing out via references to COVID-19 as "the Chinese virus" or the "Wuhan virus;" such references connote blame to an entire group of people, and have also been used to fuel narratives that people of Asian descent pose a threat.

- **Threat construction:** Narratives that depict an entire group as posing a threat to "our group" (the "ingroup"), thereby reframing violence as necessary self-defense. This can be a security, economic, or symbolic threat (e.g., a threat to values, way of life, or purity). Perceptions of threat can lead people to protect their in-group and, under certain circumstances, attack the "outgroup."

   Groups are viewed as a threat when there is the perceived *intent* and *capacity* to hurt – when the group is seen as *choosing and able* to perpetrate the harm. Narratives and stories, often untrue, can be used to fuel this claim. In Kenya, for instance, narratives have falsely depicted Somalis living in the country as intentionally spreading COVID as a form of terrorism, thereby depicting the entire Somali community as a threat to Kenyans' security.

- **De-Identification/dehumanization:** Narratives that portray a group as less than human or essentially different from "us." Such narratives often reference groups as diseased, or depict them as animals or insects, such as pests and vermin. **Consider the recent** cartoons circulating over WeChat and WhatsApp depicting African immigrants in China as "trash that needs to be sorted" because of baseless accusations that they have engaged in "irresponsible behavior" during the pandemic.

c. Narrative patterns that create and mobilize an "us"

In addition to messages that other groups or create a "them," dangerous narratives often incorporate messages that mobilize the speaker's in-group to participate in or condone violence. Messages about the "us" typically focus on why "our group" is justified in committing violence or other forms of harm. They also help set norms and expectations for behavior among in-group members and create "moral imperatives" to act. Common patterns in messages about the "us" include:

- **Valorization: Narratives that portray violence or other group-targeted harm (e.g. rights violations, discrimination) as necessary and even good.** In these narratives, violence is portrayed as necessary to protect oneself or the group at large, particularly "the vulnerable." Here, empathy is activated solely for the ingroup, mobilizing group members to "protect" themselves at the expense of—indeed, because of—the "other." In this narrative, people who engage in "protective, necessary" violence are seen as good group members. In some cases, these narratives are tied to ideas about masculinity and what it means to be "a good man." In South Africa for instance, anti-immigrant narratives often invoke the <u>need to protect citizens</u> in their calls for violence against immigrant communities.

- **Destruction of Alternatives: Narratives that depict** social or political solutions as unfeasible or ineffective, painting violence as the only possible course of action to protect one's group. Ultimately, this <u>removes moral agency and responsibility</u> for violence. Again, people who advocate for alternatives are painted as weak or even traitorous. Consider how, in response to a <u>false rumor</u> that Guinea was arresting all Chinese immigrants, an inflammatory video circulated throughout <u>Kenyan social media saying</u> that this was the only way Kenya could also address COVID-related threats, diplomacy simply would not work. (This example also demonstrates how misinformation interacts with and furthers these narratives, see below.)

- **Futurization: Playing on hope and aspiration, these messages** depict that a secure and beautiful future is only possible by targeting other ("threatening," "guilty," "non-human") groups. These narratives argue that, for "us" to survive or prosper, we have to harm "them." For instance, <u>this post</u> was seen online in the midst of the pandemic: Our future depends on stopping all 3rd world immigration and a repatriation program for all 3rd world immigrants. Anything less and we are doomed.

Additional considerations

These ideas and narratives can be fueled by false rumors - often referred to as mis- and dis-information, including conspiracy theories. Misinformation provides false support to arguments that a group is threatening, guilty, or not fully human. They spread quickly by invoking strong emotions like fear, surprise, and disgust. Mis- and dis-information can be "sticky" or difficult to correct, especially when it taps into emotions like fear or fill the need for certainty and clarity.

- Disinformation and misinformation both refer to false or misleading information. The key distinction between the two is that misinformation is unintentionally false, whereas disinformation is designed to mislead. Given that many false rumors are spread unintentionally—particularly in times of confusion and anxiety—this guide specifically focuses on a broad conception of misinformation. This definition encompasses false information that might have initially been spread to mislead but has since been spread for more innocent purposes (e.g., to inform or share rather than to mislead).

Finally, in understanding how communication unites, divides, or mobilizes societies for violence, it's critical to consider *how* such messages are being communicated. Who is spreading them? What channels (e.g. social media, text messages, meetings) are they using?

People are more likely to believe the information sources (whether other people or news outlets) they perceive as t**rustworthy, knowledgeable, and well-intentioned.** Access and availability are also key: people can't get (or act on) information they don't have access to. Channels and messengers define whether people access specific information and whether they will consider or trust it.

In India, right wing leaders spread a rumor that "hundreds of Muslims" had contracted COVID-19 and were infecting the Hindu majority, tapping into growing Islamaphobic sentiments in Italy and ultimately triggering violence between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the town of Telinipara. Islamophobic social media accounts circulated similar rumors, and "CoronaJihad" became the top trending hashtag on Twitter for days, appearing nearly 300,000 times in less than a week.

This means we need to think not only about the content of messages being spread, but also about the audiences that particular narratives are reaching. This is true at all times, but especially in moments of crisis and uncertainty when the credibility and availability of different information sources can change and evolve (for example, doctors, faith leaders, or local government officials may become credible messengers at specific moments or be vilified and become less credible for specific groups at other moments).

Being aware of how the information flows are shifting across different audiences is crucial for understanding how both harmful and positive messages are spreading and resonating.

To determine whether and how current dynamics—whether a pandemic, an economic downturn, a contested election—might be fueling these narratives in your community, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do existing narratives paint targeted groups as responsible for, or as carriers of, disease? As responsible for the economic crisis? As otherwise somehow 'disgusting,' 'contaminated' or posing a threat?

- Who has been spreading those narratives and to what end?

- Are they widespread or spread by a few loud voices?

By developing an understanding of the broader narratives targeting groups and how they are being fueled by a particular event or issue (whether a pandemic, economic downturn, election, etc.), you can prepare yourself to identify strategies for counteracting and reframing these narratives.

III. Considerations and Recommendations

By identifying and exploring known risks early on, organizations and communities will be better positioned to analyze and respond as the situation evolves.

With these risks in mind, there are several key strategies for response:

1. Building a broader version of "us" by using your platform to affirm overarching and cross-cutting identities, model mutual helping behaviors, and set positive norms of unity and inclusion;

2. Undercutting harmful narratives with messages that resonate;

3. Handling disinformation and misinformation with care;

4. Working with effective messengers and channels; and

5. Being strategic about the long game by building strong cross-cutting relationships.

a. BUT FIRST, Do No Harm:

There is always the risk that well-intentioned efforts could backfire and cause unintended harm. With this in mind, as you consider taking action, be sure to first conduct a thorough risk assessment.

Conducting a risk assessment is especially important amidst rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding happening globally. In many places, the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated these trends — providing a "public safety" pretext for intensifying political/legal and financial attacks on human rights NGOs and civil society, independent media, and democratic debate. With these restrictions, people face arrest and significant financial fines for any reporting or work that challenges government narratives. This means that as group-targeted rhetoric and intergroup divisions are surging, so too are the risks for counteracting these dynamics. Within these contexts, conducting a thorough and context-specific risk assessment plan is especially crucial.

With this in mind, there are several "do no harm" or risk analysis considerations that should inform whether and how you approach this work:

Risks to those involved:

- Will the strategy cause harm to the speaker or those implementing or involved in the initiative, including participating organizations? This includes getting doxxed or trolled.

- Relatedly, can the strategy be construed as violating emergency declarations or recent laws seeking to regulate information that might harm public safety?

Risks to targeted groups:

- Will the strategy increase the prevalence of divisive narratives? For instance, approaches may inadvertently call attention to the very rhetoric they seek to counteract.

- Will the strategy miss any key audiences?

Risks to the broader context:

- Will the strategy inadvertently activate or reinforce divisive identities?

- Will the strategy signal negative norms (e.g., depict the negative dynamics you are seeking to counter as more prevalent or normal than they are)?

b. Your audience will always come first

Before going into the strategies themselves, it's important to remember that your audience will always come first. Once you've selected a target audience, learn as much about them as possible—the individuals or channels they find credible and trustworthy, their views on particular issues, where and how they access information. By understanding the behaviors and incentives of your target audiences, you will be in a better position to develop relevant messaging that can reach and influence your audience.

NOTE: your target audience may contain diverse sub-groups. If this is the case, review the above considerations for each sub-group. You might consider developing separate messages for the different subsections of your audiences where needed.

c. Build a broader version of "us" or "we"

Defining an inclusive "we" and setting positive norms through communication and behavior is central to fostering positive behavior among wider segments of society. This type of communication and action can proactively undermine narrow and exclusive definitions of "we" or "us" and instead showcase norms of inclusion and cooperation.

Define a broad "we"

Promote a broad and inclusive "we" that cuts across lines of division and thus challenges existing us/them divides. You can do this by showing diverse groups coming together under common identities. Consider geographic identities (cities, towns, neighborhoods), family identities (being a parent, child or sibling), a specific industry, sports team supporters, those who share specific hobbies, etc. This strategy also keeps multiple parts of our identities active, instead of further pushing us into more singular and rigid identities.

> In South Africa for instance, the Ndlovu Youth Choir is promoting and creating an inclusive "we" through music. As a way to address COVID-related myths and misunderstandings throughout the country, the choir arranged the World Health Organization (WHO)-issued coronavirus advice into a <u>musical rendition</u> that featured various South African languages. This presented a broad "we" – united against the coronavirus and related misinformation – that cut across various linguistic divides.

Storytelling that demonstrates the inclusive "we"

How can we demonstrate the broad "we"? Consider stories and images, which can model the larger "we" and can undermine negative perceptions between groups.

Tell stories in ways that illustrate the community's **unity *and* diversity.** For example, you can elevate stories that show how people in a town or neighborhood virtually organize support for one another. Alternatively, you might highlight the variety of local organizations or community groups lending a hand to a local cause. Such narratives and images make it harder for people to activate identities in ways that are divisive or harmful.

> Eg.1: <u>For instance,</u> Denmark's Ministry of Health released fliers and educational videos in multiple languages, both supporting and showcasing its diverse refugee population.

Activate leaders across different communities under one overarching banner

Create networks or projects that bring communities together in ways that help them meet their common needs. Doing this builds trust and relationships between diverse communities or groups while also sending a message to the communities: "we are unified" and "we work together."

You can create these networks by first bringing together leaders representing diverse communities or groups. In doing this, remember that you will want to strengthen or forge relationships that did not previously exist. Further, since people are most influenced by respected leaders or members of their peer group (including informal leaders at a church, with a social movement, etc.), you can attempt to reach out to *informal* leaders within the community as well.

> For instance, in Nigeria, Christian and Muslim leaders are working together to combat COVID-19, including in preparing and distributing relief packages and sharing health guidelines. While the two communities have a history of tension and violence, one Nigerian priest noted that the pandemic has created the need to "put everything that divides us aside and come together to achieve a common goal, and I am happy that is what is presently happening."

Emphasize "who we are" instead of "who we are not"

Research shows that people gravitate towards leaders who can define "who we are" rather than leaders who focus on "who we are not," especially in times of uncertainty. Rather than spending valuable time pointing out the flaws of others, publicly define the "we," using your community's words and examples, in inclusive, positive ways. Themes that are likely to resonate in an unsettled time include: inclusivity, diversity, unity, agency, hope, an anchoring in good will, a focus on safety and security, competency and effectiveness.

Taking caution with themes that can have negative or harmful consequences.

Communication strategies should also be wary of accidentally communicating negative messages or signaling negative or harmful norms. More specifically:

- **Be cautious in how you assign blame.** People have a tendency to view groups as entities, and to blame entire groups of people for the (real or believed) actions of an individual. This kind of collective blame is not only inaccurate and unfair, it can lead to vicarious retribution (members of one group attacking members of another group for "revenge"). Consider how, around the world, narratives attributing the COVID outbreak to a Chinese wet market quickly evolved into blaming all Chinese for the virus. Recognize such tendencies or narratives in your community, and be cautious in how you depict blame and responsibility for the challenges your community is facing.

- **Design messages and share stories that make it clear most people DO NOT approve of or participate in rhetoric or actions that demonize groups of people as the cause of this virus.** These stories show that such behavior is neither normal nor approved of. As you craft these messages **be careful to not inadvertently signal negative norms,** as these can signal to people that it is acceptable and common to harbor and possibly even act on prejudice.

For instance, avoid saying "Prejudice against Chinese immigrants is higher than ever during COVID-19." Instead, bring attention to the problem while also highlighting a statistic, protest or story demonstrating a positive norm.

For instance, "research finds that 95% of community members reject prejudice against Chinese" or "community members reject the uptick in prejudice and are committed to partnering with Chinese immigrants in their community to counter such prejudice."

Note that these dynamics can change over time. There may be moments of unity in the face of a perceived outside threat, but over time groups can still be blamed or targeted. Pay attention to how this is changing. Remember that moments of unity provide an opportunity to instantiate inclusive frames, build and emphasize cross-cutting identities, etc., while moments of fracture may require intervention.

To build or strengthen an inclusive "we" in your community while undercutting divisive identities, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Which identities are most salient in this moment?**

- **Are there existing overarching identities that you can tap into and support (for example, under the umbrella of a neighborhood, a city, parents at a school)?**

- **Are there stories past instances of intergroup cooperation you can revive and amplify?**

- **Are competing identities being activated (e.g., partisan identities and community identities may be activated at the same time)?**

- **What are the power dynamics between the different identity groups?**

d. Develop messages that undercut harmful narratives

In addition to proactively setting norms and creating a broad "we," it's critical to undercut harmful narratives that do exist. Priorities for doing this include co-creation with your target communities, using metaphor wisely, using strategic messaging to increase empathy and engagement with targeted communities, undermining stereotypes, and handling mis- and dis-information with care.

Co-creation.

It might be helpful to co-create messaging with the communities you seek to engage. These communities are best positioned to identify narratives or messages that might inadvertently backfire or cause harm, as well as those that are most likely to positively impact views, actions, and cooperation within the community. You can do this through directly engaging communities through partnering with local or representative organizations, conducting focus groups, or bringing community members into the project itself. Engage representatives from diverse groups within your target audiences to ensure your strategy is effective among all target stakeholders.

> For instance, amidst the COVID-related rise of discrimination throughout Asia and the Pacific, diverse populations there coordinated to co-create a social media camapign to counter discrimination targeting those infected with COVID and HIV.

Using metaphors with care

Certain metaphors, particularly bio-military and criminality ones, are more likely to conflate groups of people with the disease itself. Why does this matter? Because when people are conflated with the disease itself, threat responses such as disgust, fear, and anger can be transferred from the disease to groups of people. The below table provides guidance on how to use metaphors with care.

Using Metaphors Wisely

What to be cautious about:

- **Bio-military metaphors** that use words such as "fight," "attack," or "invade" to frame disease as a war enemy.
- **Criminality or "disease as crime" metaphors** that use words such as "robs," "steals," "lurks" to equate disease with a good versus evil framework, in which a malicious disease (or an individual depicted as carrying disease) "preys upon" its victims. For instance: "In Italy, the coronavirus steals even the last farewell."

Why?

Bio-military and criminality metaphors fuel xenophobia and the targeting of groups by depicting the disease—and those portrayed as carrying it—as "the enemy."

What metaphors should I use instead?

- As a starting point, consider **reframing the problematic metaphors** so they do not lead to associations with fighting and crime. For instance, replace words like "attacks" with "addresses" or "responds to."

- **Metaphors that set a frame of agency without fearmongering,** for instance, metaphors that equate responding to COVID-related risks with managing driving risks: wearing a mask is just like buckling your seatbelt and stopping at stop signs.
  - This equates disease with something familiar that has an accepted level of risk.
  - This empowers the listener to take concrete steps to avoid harm.
  - This avoids ascribing any guilt to the virus or those depicted as virus carriers.
- **Metaphors that link positive actions to outcomes,** including those that demonstrate the benefits of following COVID precautions. For instance, "mask wearing throughout the community is a building block for an effective COVID-19 response."
  - This connects a simple action to a positive outcome, making an otherwise overwhelming situation feel more manageable while highlighting an individual's role in improving the situation.
  - This orients people toward cooperative attitudes and actions through demonstrating how people will themselves benefit from those actions.

Applying This in Your Context

1. Guilt and criminality metaphors that can be refamed: _____
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2. Frames of agency that can be set: _____
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3. Positive actions and outcomes that can be linked: _____
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4. Additional ideas: _____
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To consider how metaphors might be feeding harmful narratives in your community, ask yourself:

- **What metaphors are being used in discussions about the pandemic and its wider fallout?**

- **Do the metaphors portray targeted groups as a war enemy? As criminals or immoral? As responsible for a particular hardship and its fallout?**

- **What frames and emotions are the metaphors priming people with?**

- **Are there opportunities to instead share metaphors that emphasize individuals' agency? How small simple actions can make a big difference? Their capacity and the existing opportunities for cooperation?**

Increasing empathy and engagement with targeted communities

In an attempt to mobilize people to support targeted communities, one common instinct is to showcase communities' suffering. The idea is, "Once people feel empathy, they'll want to help." However, research suggests that experiencing and acting on empathy for "other groups" is complicated. And sometimes, showing only suffering can portray groups in a way that inadvertently feeds dehumanizing narratives. A strategic approach can mitigate these risks and help mobilize empathy for action.

The below table reviews how to mobilize empathy strategically.

Building Empathy	
Step 1	• Start by activating a common identity (e.g., a local community, or "moms"). • Next tell stories that activate empathy within the frame of that identity (for example, start with an identity of "moms uniting to face COVID-19"). • Why? We rfeel more empathy for groups we are a part of, so by first activating a common or overarching identity, you are making it more likely that someone will experience empathy across otherwise divided groups
Step 2	• Model empathy to make it a norm by publicly demonstrating empathy and compassion. • Show yourself, for example, watching a story or talking to someone about their experience and expressing your own compassionate emotions and actions. Even better, show a 2nd, 3rd and 4th person following your lead. • Be open and show people how they can navigate challenges to empathy: if there is a tension between empathy or compassion and individual fears and anxieties, acknowledge it and demonstrate or explain how you decided which impetus to follow. • Additional example: Show university students expressing compassion for those hard hit by an economic downturn and preparing meals for those communities. Then show other student groups or community members expressing similar emotions and taking related actions.

Across your communications:	• In all your communications, model how to relate and show empathy and compassion to others.
	
	• Showcase a process of **asking, listening, understanding, and acknowledging peoples' experiences.** In uncertain times, many people face economic and physical hardships in diverse ways. Be sure to treat each of these experiences with humanity.
	
	  ◦ **Asking:** How are you coping? How can I help?
	
	  ◦ **Listening:** Giving the time for them to answer your questions.
	
	  ◦ **Understanding:** Reserving judgment as much as possible while showcasing genuine empathy and compassion to the speaker.
	
	  ◦ **Acknowledging:** Recognizing what you are hearing through reframing their answer: "I hear you are worried."

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Applying This in Your Context

1. Common identities that can be activated: _____

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2. I can model empathy by: _____

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3. I can set a norm of empathy by: _____

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4. Additional ideas: _____

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To consider whether and how empathy might be activated for cooperation in your community, ask yourself:

- **What overarching identities can you activate and generate empathy toward?**

- **How can you showcase different instances of expressing this empathy to make it a norm?**

- **How can you model a process of asking, listening to, and learning about others?**

Undermining stereotypes

Stereotypes are over-generalizations about a particular group of people that are often rooted in half-truths and exaggerations about that group. Stereotypes are often deeply in-grained in our expectations of that group and may also influence our actions toward them. This means that negative stereotypes toward a group—however untrue—may influence our actions toward individual members of that group. Consider the below pointers to undermine stereotypes:

- Be careful to speak to both warmth and competence. When you tell stories about people or groups that are being targeted with hateful speech, make sure you showcase both their warmth (caring for others in and outside their groups) and competence (responsibility, complex emotions like concern or hope, etc.). Why? Because othering narratives often try to portray people without one or the other—warmth or competence. Someone who's competent but not warm may not care about you, or could want to hurt you; someone who is warm but not competent might be perceived as inconsequential or less valuable to society. One way to bolster a perception of a group being "warm" is to showcase members' positive intentions, or helpful/altruistic/caretaking actions towards the larger community. You can bolster "competence" perceptions by showcasing people solving problems.

- Avoid "exceptional" stories. When you're trying to push back on hate, it can be tempting to tell stories of exceptionalism. While stories of incredible people can be inspiring, they may also depict that only exceptional people are deserving of compassion or being included in the bigger "we." Instead, use stories to show normal people from all different groups who are... hurting, showing compassion to each other, interdependent, and part of the same "we."

- Avoid depicting disgust—particularly through showing already targeted groups amidst dirtiness or disease. Stay away from showing people in scenes or backgrounds that could make people feel disgust, as it may inadvertently create an association of that group with the emotion of disgust.

To consider how you might undermine negative stereotypes in your community, ask yourself:

- **Are there ways to bolster stories showcasing targeted groups exhibiting warmth and competence?**

- **Are there ways to showcase stories of ordinary group members taking positive actions or contributing to the broader "we"?**

Handling misinformation and disinformation

When correcting misinformation and disinformation it's important to address both the misinformation as well as the underlying narrative(s) it feeds into. It is particularly important to challenge narratives that portray targeted group(s) as threatening (to a way of life, to physical security, values, etc.) or as guilty of violating core moral values. If the narrative negatively targets a group of people, consider additional strategies for counteracting that narrative in the longer term (e.g., positive norm setting, emphasizing crosscutting identities, etc.)

The below table reviews some best practices for correcting pieces of misinformation.

Best practices for correcting misinformation	
Correct mis/disinformation as quickly as possible. The more that people hear or see misinformation, the more they are likely to believe it.	✔
Use positive framing For example, if John has been accused of being a thief, the best correction will re-focus attention on what John is (e.g. "John is an honest person who is always sharing") rather than what he is not (e.g., "John is NOT a thief.") Why? Repeating the original accusation can strengthen the very association you are trying to undercut (John and thief).	✔
Try not to repeat the misinformation, but if you have to, give a warning before you repeat it (not after!) As misinformation is repeated, it becomes more familiar and believable to people. By warning listeners in advance of repeating the association, you have activated their critical thinking skills to prevent the association from unknowingly taking hold.	✔
Make sure your correction comes from a trusted source This source can be an individual, institution, or news outlet that people find credible and that represents their interests and values.	✔
Prompt people to question sources of mis- and dis-information Encourage people to consider the motive of the source: why would someone spread false or misleading information (e.g., is it clickbait that would help them earn money)?	✔
If possible, provide an alternative explanation for the evidence underlying the incorrect claim. Misinformation is more influential when people infer a causal relationship from the evidence and subsequent event (e.g., between the presence of flammable materials and a subsequent fire). A correction that simply disputes that the materials caused the fire will be less effective than one that explains the fire resulted from arson.	✔

•	**Keep your corrections simple and easy to understand.**	✔
	If possible, use clear and simple visualizations	
•	**Consider the underlying narratives that the mis- or dis-information is tapping into**	✔
	Why would someone believe the misinformation? Are there pre-existing narratives /stereotypes that are weighing in on the mis/disinformation to make it believable?	

When considering the impact of misinformation and disinformation in your communities, ask yourself:

- **What emotions, identities, or experiences is the misinformation tapping into?**

- **How is the misinformation spreading? Over what channels and through which speakers?**

- **Are people pushing back on misinformation? If yes, are they credible messengers among the target audience?**

- **What is the audience's relationship with those sources/messengers? Are they trusted? Are they influential? Do they claim to speak for the audience's interests?**

e. Selecting credible messengers

Amidst a crisis, communicating through credible, influential messengers and channels is key. Even a perfectly crafted message may not resonate among its target audience if they do not trust and listen to the person spreading it.

The below table reviews considerations for selecting an effective messenger. Whether an individual is an effective messenger will vary according to both the surrounding context and the target audience you are seeking to reach and influence. For instance, while a student leader might be a credible messenger among a university community or youth group, they likely wouldn't be effective outside of that community. Similarly, while a local politician might be an effective messenger for their political supporters, they might hold little credibility among an opposition candidate's supporters and thus an ineffective messenger for reaching that group. Additional messengers might include social media influencers, moral and religious authorities, trusted current and former politicians, local business people, and other influential community figures among the group you are seeking to reach.

Selecting Credible Messengers in Your Communities

Key questions to consider in selecting a messenger:

Step 1	Is this messenger considered credible and influential or important by the majority of your audience? Credibility is key when trying to influence an audience that is angry. Is this someone your target audience looks to for information or for social cues on how to act? ☐ Yes ☐ No Notes: _____ _____ _____ _____
Step 2	Is the messenger from your target audience's social network? People are highly influenced by their own social networks and care about how others in their immediate circles view them and their actions. ☐ Yes ☐ No Notes: _____ _____ _____ _____
Step 3	Is the messenger multi-partisan or able to speak to multiple groups across conflict or dividing lines? Speakers who are able to speak to all sides of a conflict are likely to be more influential than groups of purely neutral speakers who express no conflict-related opinions (e.g., peace actors). ☐ Yes ☐ No Notes: _____ _____ _____ _____

Step 4	Can the messenger simplify a complicated or abstract message? Overly complicated information is prone to misinformation. Messages are effective when they are simple and easy to digest. ☐ Yes ☐ No Notes: _____ _____ _____ _____
Step 5	Is the messenger readily available or accessible? ☐ Yes ☐ No Notes: _____ _____ _____ _____

Once you've selected your messengers, work with them to ensure that they use language that unites rather than divides, and that they aren't inadvertently furthering narratives that promote hate. You can also find ways to connect them to one another. One way to build trust is by offering your own platform and expertise to support these messengers.

f. Selecting your channels

In order for your message and messenger to reach your audience, you must communicate through a channel that your audience regularly accesses and finds credible. The content and format of your message will also determine the channel you ultimately select. Remember: your audience may rely on different channels or mediums for different purposes (e.g., consider when someone communicates through a closed messaging group in WhatsApp rather than a Facebook post).

We review several considerations for selecting a channel below.

Selecting your Channels
Key questions to consider in selecting a channel

Step 1	**What kind of message am I communicating?** • Lengthy or brief? _____ • Formal or informal? _____ • General or specific? _____ • Urgent or not urgent? _____ • Requiring one-way or two-way engagement? _____ Additional considerations: _____ _____ _____ My message is (characterize your message here): _____ _____ _____
Step 2	**What kind of communication culture does my audience have?** • Do they prefer face-to-face communications to online or other digital communications? _____ • Are there particular times that they usually seek the news or other information? _____ • Is there a preferred language for communications (e.g., Swahili, English, Arabic, and so on)? _____ • Which channel does your audience mostly communicate through (e.g., SMS, calls, social media, radio, TV, face-to-face)? _____ • Does your audience usually respond in two-way communications? If so, how do they respond? _____ Additional considerations: _____ _____ _____ My audience's communication style is: _____ _____ _____

Step 3	Are there any challenges, downsides, or risks to communicating via the channels your audience most often uses? For instance, while Facebook can effectively and quickly reach large audiences, it is only available to those with internet access. • Are they unreliable? _____ • Are they costly? _____ • Do they have limited reach? _____ Additional considerations: _____ _____ _____
Step 4	If there are significant risks or downsides to using those channels, are there alternative or additional channels they use that you can incorporate into your strategy? This can also occur through using several channels side-by-side, for instance, Facebook along with face-to-face messaging. • SMS? _____ • Calls? _____ • Radio? _____ • Television? _____ • Face-to-face? _____ • Other? _____
*	Based on these considerations, the most effective channels I can use to reach my audience are: _____ _____ _____

To identify and work with effective messengers and channels in your community, ask yourself:

- Where do people get most of their information?

- Are people becoming more dependent on certain sources of information (e.g., their employer, the Mayor's Facebook feed, NextDoor)?

- Which speakers or messengers are considered reliable or credible sources?

- What messengers are becoming more credible and important in your community (e.g., healthcare workers, other essential workers, local elected officials)?

- Are there any messengers or channels your community finds particularly unreliable or untrustworthy? That are seen as having ulterior motives? Avoid these!

IV. Refresher:

To apply these recommendations, it's critical to analyze the relevant dynamics at play within your community. To do so, you can ask key questions about your specific context:

1. How do the current dynamics fuel wider narratives related to group-targeting and violence?

Ask yourself:

- Do existing narratives paint targeted groups as responsible for, or as carriers of, disease? As responsible for the economic crisis? As otherwise somehow 'disgusting,' 'contaminated' or posing a threat?

- Who has been spreading those narratives and to what end?

- Are they widespread or spread by a few loud voices?

By developing an understanding of the broader narratives targeting groups and how they are being fueled by a particular event or issue (whether a pandemic, economic downturn, election, etc.), you can prepare yourself to identify strategies for counteracting and reframing these narratives.

2. Which identities are being activated by the current dynamics? How can we build an inclusive 'we'?

Ask yourself:

- Which identities are most salient in this moment?

- Are there existing overarching identities that you can tap into and support (for example, under the umbrella of a neighborhood, a city, parents at a school)?

- Are there stories past instances of intergroup cooperation you can revive and amplify?

- Are competing identities being activated (e.g., partisan identities and community identities may be activated at the same time)?

- What are the power dynamics between the different identity groups?

Note that these dynamics can change over time. There may be moments of unity in the face of a perceived outside threat, but over time groups can still be blamed or targeted. Pay attention to how this is changing. Remember that moments of unity provide an opportunity to instantiate inclusive frames, build and emphasize cross-cutting identities, etc., while moments of fracture may require intervention.

3. How are metaphors and framing being used?
Ask yourself:

- What metaphors are being used in discussions about the pandemic and its wider fallout?

- Do the metaphors portray targeted groups as a war enemy? As criminals or immoral? As responsible for a particular hardship and its fallout?

- What frames and emotions are the metaphors priming people with?

- Are there opportunities to instead share metaphors that emphasize individuals' agency? How small simple actions can make a big difference? Their capacity and the existing opportunities for cooperation?

4. How is empathy being activated and for whom?

Ask yourself:

- What overarching identities can you activate and generate empathy toward?

- How can you showcase different instances of expressing this empathy to make it a norm?

- How can you model a process of asking, listening to, and learning about others?

5. How might you undermine negative stereotypes in your community?

Ask yourself:

- Are there ways to bolster stories showcasing targeted groups exhibiting warmth and competence?

- Are there ways to showcase stories of ordinary group members taking positive actions or contributing to the broader "we"?

6. Which narratives are rumors and misinformation tapping into?

Ask yourself:

- What emotions, identities, or experiences is the misinformation tapping into?

- How is the misinformation spreading? Over what channels and through which speakers?

- Are people pushing back on misinformation? If yes, are they credible messengers among the target audience?

- What is the audience's relationship with those sources/messengers? Are they trusted? Are they influential? Do they claim to speak for the audience's interests?

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