



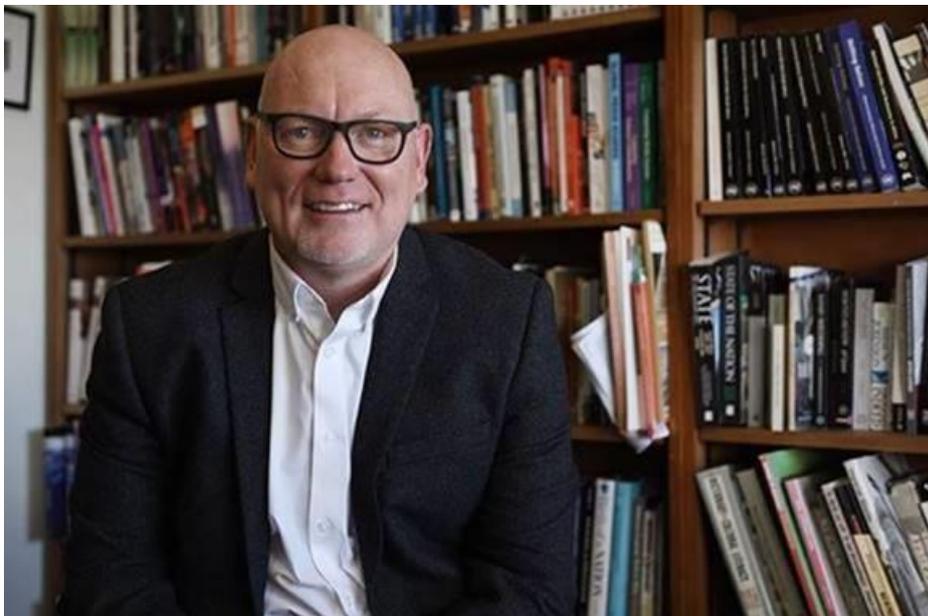
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## **UCT's Herman Wasserman leads global study on disinformation**



Prof Herman Wasserman

Photo: Robyn Walker

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Professor Herman Wasserman from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Centre for Film and Media Studies will embark on an international study on the information disorder in the Global South.

The scoping study aims to map the actors currently working in the counter-disinformation space and identify current frameworks upon which interventions are based; to learn from current approaches, tools and methods of countering disinformation; and to gain an overview of the research landscape and identify key issues and questions for further research. The work on the project begins immediately and will conclude in December this year.

Wasserman's task as principal investigator is to coordinate the project and oversee data gathering and analysis of the findings. The study will follow a collaborative, participatory approach, which will draw on the expertise of leading researchers and organisations in four

sub-regions of the Global South: Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa.

“The input of stakeholders in these regions will be crucial to the project, as they will provide the local expertise and insights drawing on their work in the area of misinformation,” said Wasserman.

Wasserman explained that despite disinformation being a widespread problem in countries in the Global South, the study thereof remains dominated by examples, case studies and models from the Global North. “Currently, knowledge about the various manifestations of disinformation, the range of responses and success rate of interventions to counter disinformation remains fragmented and partial,” he said.

Thus, to gain a better understanding of the knowledge gaps and areas where further research is required, as well as to identify opportunities for inter- and intraregional cooperation, a scoping study of counter-disinformation efforts in the Global South, such as this one, is needed.

“Globally, we can see a growing ‘information disorder’: the large-scale contamination of the public sphere with rumour, hate speech, dangerous and unfounded conspiracy theories, harmful misunderstandings, and orchestrated campaigns of deception,” said Wasserman.

The urgency to understand and research mis- and disinformation has been renewed by the COVID-19 pandemic, evident in conspiracy theories and rumours, such as miracle cures in Tanzania and Madagascar. This has added to the infodemic of mis- and disinformation around the virus.

“The rising tide of disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine is also a very worrying development,” Wasserman added.

Wasserman pointed out that this “contamination of the online public sphere” has happened in parallel with a financial and political crisis for traditional, quality and fact-checked news sources.

“The sustainability of ethical, independent and trustworthy news media is especially important in the Global South as a bulwark against state propaganda and attempts by authoritarian states to obstruct the free flow of information and critical journalism,” he said.

The pandemic has further eroded the revenue base of news outlets around the world. The effects include job losses and closures of news outlets, including many independent and community newspapers in regions in the Global South.

Wasserman added that along with these economic pressures, there is also a resurgence of censorship, control and repressive tactics by a range of political actors. “The result is a deluge of data and content online, and a dearth of quality, verifiable information that makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to discern facts from fantasies,” he said.

He commented: “The ‘information disorder’ is a global problem, but has specific characteristics in the Global South, which remains under-researched.”

***ENDS***

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