

upgrade
democracy



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Time to act: Countering disinformation for stronger democracies

10 ideas to minimise the disinformation challenge

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Time to act: Countering disinformation for stronger democracies

10 ideas to minimise the disinformation challenge

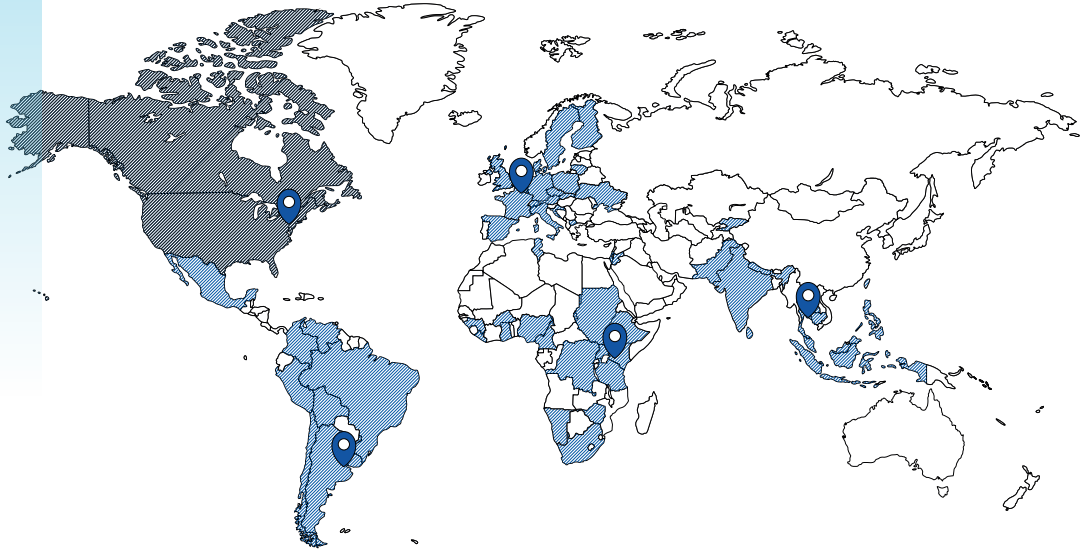
By Cathleen Berger and Kai Unzicker with thanks to the collective input by Charlotte Freihse, Dominik Hierlemann, Joachim Rother, Julia Tegeler and support from Jutta Pohl und Susen Schildmann-Knaak

In 2024, a super election year where more than half of the world's population has been or will be called to the polls – including in India, Indonesia, the European Union, and the United States – the spread of disinformation has reached new heights.^{1 2 3} And people are more aware about the issue than ever before. Many are uncertain about the truthfulness of information on the internet⁴ and view the spread of disinformation as a significant threat to democracy and social cohesion.⁵ While it remains unclear to what extent disinformation can truly influence the outcome of elections, evidence is mounting that it has a measurable negative effect on public health, political decisions, and democratic processes.⁶ Disinformation triggers insecurity and fuels polarisation.^{7 8}

Over the past two years, the Bertelsmann Stiftung has investigated the challenges and dynamics surrounding disinformation from various angles. In this 'food for thought' paper, we highlight our 10 key recommendations to increase resilience, curb disinformation, and strengthen democracy.

Upgrade Democracy

Launched at the end of 2022, we wanted to shed light on how disinformation endangers democracy; identify and support initiatives from around the world, who are effectively mitigating disinformation, and develop recommendations for increasing the resilience of democracies. Our representative surveys, policy impulses, insights from a strategic foresight process as well as international research engagements that included expert workshops in Kenya, Thailand, Argentina, the United States, and Belgium are available on upgradedemocracy.de



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1 Anchored in global dynamics: National counter-disinformation strategies must pay closer attention to international experiences

Democracy and public discourse are often viewed through a national lens – and for good reason. Similarly, counter-disinformation strategies tend to be shaped by national contexts and specific domestic conditions. However, disinformation increasingly spreads on social platforms and in messenger services that are privately owned and globally distributed. This facilitates reach and amplification for both, domestic and foreign malign interference and information manipulation. To protect democratic processes and curb attempts to manipulate public opinion, countermeasures cannot be adopted in isolation.

Authoritarian regimes not only intervene directly in Europe or North America to assert their interests but also push narratives in other regions of the world.⁹ Moreover, measures that may seem effective and reasonable in Europe are often adapted – and misused – in other regions, with the justification that what is legal in the EU cannot be wrong elsewhere. Additionally, when platforms are held accountable and regulatory standards are raised in one region, it can lead to the reallocation of resources. For example, content moderation might be intensified in Europe while scaled back in other parts of the world.

This illustrates that the fight against disinformation cannot and should not be viewed solely through a national (or even EU or OECD) lens. State strategies must necessarily take this global perspective into account, recognising the interdependencies and ensuring that actions are globally coordinated and ethically applied.

2 **Gaining clarity: Expand and coordinate independent research on digital platforms and online discourse**

Despite the intense debate around disinformation, online propaganda, and the deliberate manipulation of public discourse, the factual basis often remains unclear and anecdotal. A significant reason for this is the lack of comprehensive access to platform data for researchers, journalists, and NGOs, coupled with insufficient technical and human resources to conduct in-depth analyses. However, where investigations have shed light, there are clear signs of systematic, strategic, and large-scale attempts at malicious influence.

With the Digital Services Act (DSA), the groundwork has been laid – at least in Europe – for broader data access. However, this access is still limited to select groups, and outside of Europe, the situation remains challenging. It is essential to establish clear mandates for platform operators and develop the necessary technical infrastructure to enable thorough analysis. At the same time, we need a robust research infrastructure with the capacity to conduct ongoing, real-time analyses, and risk assessments.

This can only be achieved through a collaborative approach, both in terms of different linguistic regions and across various platforms. Efforts to network and collaborate are therefore of utmost importance. Additionally, a global learning process must be initiated to share methodologies and explore common themes.

3 Promoting quality information: Sustainable strategies for diverse and independent journalism

Disinformation thrives where professional journalism struggles. When journalists have the resources and opportunities to do their work well, adhere to quality standards, and reach the public, manipulating public opinion becomes much more difficult. However, journalism worldwide is undergoing a profound transformation and, in many places, is facing severe crises. Economic models that worked for decades are collapsing, social media and AI-driven platforms are introducing new competition, and in numerous countries, illiberal or authoritarian governments are curtailing press freedom.

Efforts are therefore needed to ensure the survival and diversity of journalism in the future. Be it independent public service journalism, privately-owned media, or community-oriented civil society initiatives, all can actively contribute to a healthy information ecosystem, productive political discourse, and stronger democracies. They do so by critically monitoring political actions, ensuring transparency, and reflecting a plurality of opinions. This must be a priority — for political decision-makers, the media, and citizens alike.

4 Future skills: Integrate and expand media and democracy literacy

A vibrant, liberal democracy depends on an equally dynamic and liberal public sphere, where citizens are informed, form opinions, engage in debates, and collectively advance society through discourse. Media literacy and political education — specifically, democracy literacy — are fundamentally intertwined and essential to this process.

Critical thinking, democratic values, and media literacy should be taught together and in an integrated manner, across all subjects in schools, all age groups, all work and learning environments, such as libraries, or associations. Established media, too, should continually seize opportunities to explain its role, its quality standards, and the principle of responsible media consumption. Not only can transparency build trust, it is crucial to navigate changing information landscapes.

Understanding how media functions and how to engage responsibly and critically with it is essential for everyone. Intertwining media and democracy literacy can empower individuals, help navigate ambiguity, and increase our resilience.

5 Acting instead of reacting: The muscle to shape the digital public can be trained

Pressure on democracies has been increasing. The plurality of global crises, such as the climate crisis, wars, pandemics, and economic shifts, challenge traditional domestic politics – and have led to short-term crisis management and, too often, fear-driven policymaking. This sort of policymaking is largely reactive. To shift gears and start acting -shaping- politics and policies again, we need to create dedicated spaces for discussing and envisioning the future. Be it through foresight, scenario, or other imaginative processes, policymakers must regularly engage in thought experiments. No one can see the future, but we can learn how to demystify tech trends, anticipate societal changes, and plan for long-term impacts.

Technologies don't just magically appear, they are imagined, researched, tested, piloted. And if we want to shape the digital transformation responsibly, it is paramount that we engage early and regularly: What could be dependencies? Digital technologies require resources, such as

rare earth materials or server capacities, that may trigger environmental or geopolitical considerations. If critical pieces of online infrastructure are in private hands, or even monopolies, this creates strongholds.

Imagining what could happen and mapping out potential pathways, opens up space to act smartly today.

6 Strengthen the alternatives: Decentralised, smaller platforms hold potential for more democratic public discourse

To a certain extent, social media platforms are global. The dominant players, such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, will have a presence and notable reach in almost all parts of the world. Yet, their usage patterns differ: In some places, WhatsApp reaches over 90% of the population, in others that goes for LINE, and in yet another various platforms are vying for the largest share of the market. All that is to say: while we are globally connected one way or another, there is no one global discourse.

Currently, privately-owned platforms dominate discussions and attempt to set global rules for content moderation – with the majority of their attention directed at markets that are most lucrative to their business' interests. This hardly aligns with democratic and empowering principles – and it doesn't account for the fact that there are still significant parts of the world's population that are not connected to the internet at all.

What is needed is more attention and investment into interoperable spaces for discourse and support for decentralised, smaller structures that are interlinked, but follow their own rules – and preferences for usage. We should explore alternatives that cater better to local needs

and customs but are technically designed to communicate with each other.

7 Artificial Intelligence and political advertising: Labels are the bare minimum

The rise of AI technologies, such as generative AI, has revolutionised political communication, enabling the rapid creation of content at unprecedented scale and sophistication. AI-generated texts, images, and videos – once easy to detect – now blur the line between real and manipulated information, posing significant risks to election integrity. While mandatory labelling of AI-generated content is an essential first step, it is far from sufficient.

To safeguard political discourse, we need clear, enforceable guidelines for the use of AI in campaigns, including transparency in the creation and dissemination of content. Platforms must not only label AI-generated material but also implement systems to verify authenticity, potentially using hardware-supported markers to track content alterations. Additionally, transparency around the training data and prompts used in AI tools is crucial.

International collaboration is key to addressing the global nature of AI-driven disinformation. Governments, tech companies, and civil society must work together to establish ethical standards, improve detection tools, and ensure that AI is used responsibly in political campaigns. Finally, public awareness is critical: Voters must be educated on AI's potential to manipulate, ensuring they remain vigilant against AI-generated disinformation.

8 The ends don't justify all means: State action against disinformation must have clear boundaries (checks and balances)

In many Western democracies, there is a strong public desire for the state to take a more active role in countering disinformation. Citizens expect that false information, along with hate speech, insults, and threats, be flagged or removed, the perpetrators punished, and social platforms more strictly regulated. Yet, no matter how significant the threat posed by disinformation – whether domestic or foreign – governments and state authorities must tread carefully when addressing it. How much freedom are we willing to sacrifice for our security? How powerful should the state's (technical) tools be? Who oversees their use? And what happens if non-democratic actors, who do not adhere to the rule of law, gain control over the digital public sphere?

Mitigating disinformation necessarily raises questions about freedom of speech and expression, core elements of any democracy. We also see that, in some parts of the world, it is governments or ruling parties themselves that use disinformation or the tools designed to combat it to suppress free press and stifle opposition. Therefore, state action in this area must be limited and transparent. Governments should allow users, platforms, and the media legal recourse and delegate as many responsibilities as possible to independent institutions that are subject to broad societal oversight.

State actors occupy ambiguous roles in this landscape: Some governments actively spread disinformation, others defend against foreign interference, and still others focus on raising public awareness. Depending on the region, the role of the state is often the subject of intense debate. To safeguard democratic values, every state must restrain itself, ensure transparency in its actions, and establish checks and balances to prevent overreach. The fight against disinformation should not become a pretext for restricting civil liberties or undermining democratic discourse.

9 Democracy is not just voting: Strengthen participatory models

The fight against disinformation is, at its core, a fight for a stable, resilient, and vibrant democracy. Democracy can only function if the debates and decisions within it are based on reliable facts. However, what is often overlooked is that a functioning democratic society also requires active citizens who are engaged and contribute to shaping it.

Many people still have a mechanistic view of democracy, in which information flows into a passive public, generates sentiments, and election results emerge on the other end. This understanding is flawed – both in theory and in practice. Public discourse and democracy are not passive processes. We need an active and diverse civil society that creates spaces for interaction, exchange, and even civilised disagreement.

It is crucial to provide formats and opportunities where citizens can influence policy, express their concerns, needs, and ideas. In societies that offer such possibilities, where politics and public administration are responsive to citizens and civil society, disinformation is less effective, and it becomes harder for propaganda to stir up public sentiments. This is precisely why authoritarian governments tend to limit civil society's space and dismantle deliberative forms of participation, replacing them with simplified direct democracy formats that merely serve to legitimise policies without fostering genuine civic empowerment or political engagement.

To counteract this trend, it is essential to implement new, innovative forms of citizen participation – discursive, open, and equal – across different levels of governance. These participatory models are key to fostering factual, transparent political discourse, particularly on controversial topics, and to ensuring that citizens feel empowered and involved in the democratic process.

Forum against Fakes

In an innovative and comprehensive citizen participation process, the Bertelsmann Stiftung combined deep, offline work of a citizens' council with a broad online consultation process that garnered over 1.5 million additional comments and votes. The 'Forum against Fakes' developed 28 proposals for how to deal with disinformation that were presented to the German Ministry of Interior Affairs and will feed into its anti-disinformation strategy process.

10 The magic is in the mix: We need a plurality of methods and ensure mutual learning

There is no silver bullet. Addressing the challenges posed by disinformation requires more than a single solution. A successful approach demands a blend of social, technical, legal, and economic strategies that work together to produce lasting results. All stakeholders – governments, media, civil society, and tech companies – should learn from one another and jointly work to foster a resilient and trustworthy information ecosystem, including across borders.

This means applying diverse methods at different stages within the “value chain” of disinformation. We need approaches that restrict the production and dissemination of disinformation, enable its identification, flagging, or removal, and empower users to better navigate disinformation themselves or become less susceptible to its influence.

The following strategies are non-exhaustive examples that can and should be considered beyond the ideas presented throughout this briefs:¹⁰

- **Promoting journalism:** Supporting quality journalism is essential in providing reliable information that counters disinformation.
- **Enhancing media and news literacy:** Educating the public to critically assess and interpret media content can reduce the impact of disinformation.
- **Content labelling:** Marking suspicious content, misinformation, or AI-generated material can help users recognise and navigate disinformation.
- **Strengthening cybersecurity:** Improved cybersecurity measures can protect against the manipulation and spread of false information.
- **Limiting the collection of private data and personalised advertising:** Reducing targeted advertising based on private data can diminish the financial incentives for spreading disinformation.

The Way Forward: Immediate, comprehensive action against disinformation

Political action is required. There is no one solution and no one player that can solve everything. Rather, a network of protagonists must work together against malign influence and for a democratic public. These cross-national, regional, and international networks must be established, maintained, and financially supported. To counter the disinformation industry, we need a resilient ecosystem that exemplifies and promotes democratic “controversy”. For governments and political decision-makers, this means that the debate about potential restrictions and the protection of freedom of expression must be conducted openly and honestly. International experiences are an important corrective here, as is a strong, well-connected civil society.

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