



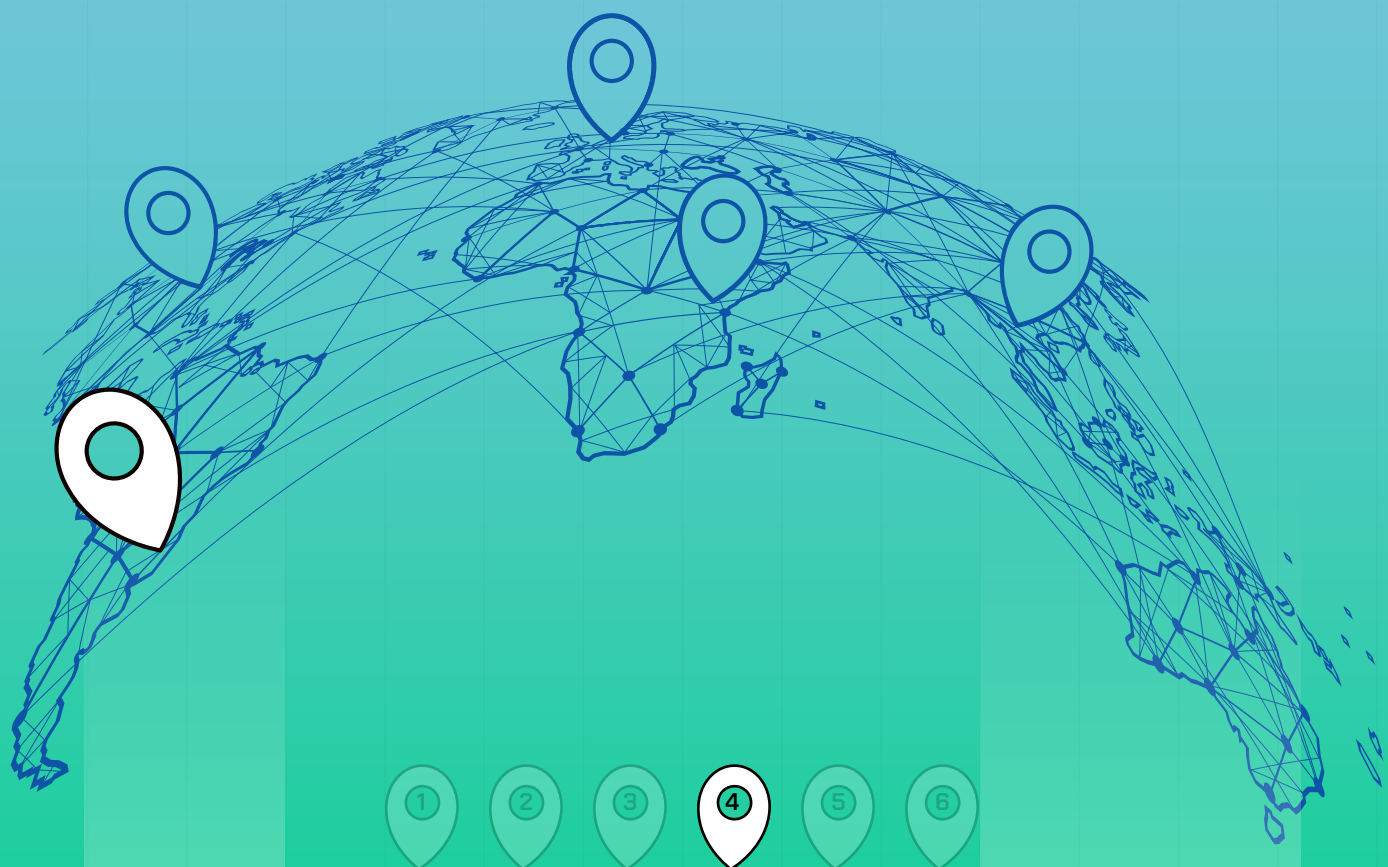
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Research Series: Reinhard Mohn Prize

Truth in turmoil

Countering disinformation in Latin America

Eduardo Ferreyra, Alejandro E. Segarra



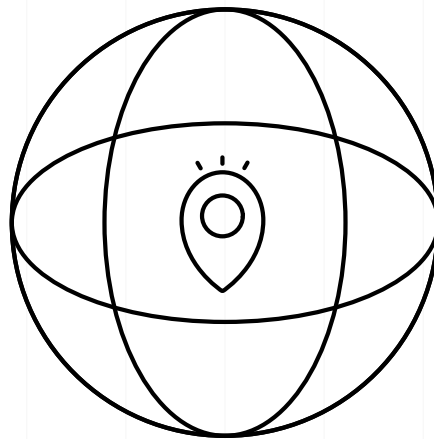
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This report is part of an international research series on
“Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation.”

Preface

Dear Reader,

In today's digital world, countering disinformation has emerged as an essential endeavour to uphold democratic values worldwide. While there is a shared understanding that concerted efforts from various stakeholders and at different levels are needed to address this issue, we still lack a comprehensive understanding of the strategies and initiatives in place, let alone their impact and how to accurately measure it.

As part of the **Reinhard Mohn Prize** – 'Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation', we sought to illuminate the way forward by identifying exemplary models and innovative approaches to countering disinformation around the world. Our goal was to gain insight into the where, how, and why of disinformation, and to respond accordingly. Across the globe, there are countless successful and impactful examples of individuals, initiatives, and organisations dedicated to countering disinformation. Our aim was to learn from them and empower us all to learn from each other.

This series of six reports covering Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, North and Latin America, and a global overview of government responses to disinformation, consolidates our findings in the hope of providing you not just with key insights, but also with actionable recommendations. These reports couldn't be clearer: We can all learn from each other. From the technology enhanced fact-checking approaches of **Chequeado** (Argentina) or **Aos Fatos** (Brazil), to the community-driven debunking of **JamiiCheck** (Tanzania) or the rapid response mechanism at **Real411** (South Africa), to the thought-provoking media literacy trainings by **Fact Shala** (India) and **Mafindo** (Indonesia) – there is so much knowledge out there that we could write entire books about it.

We invite you to explore, learn, and be inspired. Because there is hope for a healthier information ecosystem thanks to the efforts of everyone we encountered.

Finally, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the outstanding authors of these reports, as well as to all the experts who participated in our workshops in Nairobi, Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Washington D.C., and Brussels. It is your expertise and your dedication to strengthening democracy – regardless of the challenges faced – that have made this series so insightful and special.

Our warmest,



Cathleen Berger



Charlotte Freihse

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Executive summary

The social, political, and economic contexts across Latin America present a variety of challenges and opportunities in countering disinformation. Having a shared language facilitates communication and promotes collaboration, but may also create more vulnerability to disinformation, as it allows actors to launch coordinated disinformation operations that exploit shared cultural references.

The Inter-American human rights system is a comprehensive legal framework designed to protect and promote human rights across the Americas. It comprises a series of interrelated components, such as the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), the principal regional treaty on human rights, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR). This system aims to ensure the respect, protection, and fulfillment of fundamental rights at both regional and national levels. However, the depth of its impact depends on the genuine commitment of member states to adopt and implement these legal standards within their national contexts.

Addressing the digital divide in terms of access to digital technologies is crucial: Urban citizens are more susceptible to online disinformation due to high levels of digital connectivity, while rural communities face infrastructural challenges. Tailored strategies, including media literacy and initiatives to improve the communication infrastructure, are essential for both contexts.

Structural obstacles endanger the role of media as a trustworthy information source. Issues such as allocation of advertising by the state favoring pro-government media, and the poor working conditions faced by journalists compromise the independence of the media and the quality of journalism. Despite these challenges, civil society alliances show the transformative potential of collaborative action, mitigating the impact of powerful actors behind disinformation operations.

Strategic alliances between government agencies, civil society, academia, and the private sector will help Latin America distribute tasks, share best practices, and create innovative solutions. These partnerships have the potential to fast-track tech-driven tools and educational initiatives, which will enhance digital literacy and foster collaborative efforts to counter disinformation.

The report aims to delve into the challenges and dynamics of disinformation in Latin America. The introduction sets the stage, looking at region-specific challenges with internet access, digital platform use, election-related disinformation, and state regulation. The subsequent section sheds light on the role of civil society through four case studies from Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil. The report then identifies five key trends in the Latin American disinformation landscape, addressing aspects like networked operations and the influence of political consultants. The conclusion focuses on four main aspects for countering disinformation, emphasizing a common language, a shared human rights framework, addressing the digital divide, and strengthening traditional media.

Finally, the report provides recommendations tailored to diverse stakeholders involved in countering disinformation in Latin America. Civil society organizations are urged to enhance collaboration, drawing on their varied experiences and practices, especially in regions facing authoritarian rule. State actors are called upon to prioritize transparency, with data protection authorities and electoral bodies playing key roles in investigating the use of personal data and overseeing political campaigns. Fact-checking organizations are encouraged to adopt innovative strategies, including active debunking and targeted training programs, while forming strategic alliances with journalism and civil society colleagues. Social media platforms are advised to increase transparency in content moderation, collaborate with independent researchers, and refine content recommendation algorithms based on principles that prioritize relevance and counter disinformation.



Democratic backsliding and how disinformation taps into divisions in Latin America

Disinformation remains a serious challenge for any strong democracy. Targeted disinformation campaigns seek to polarize, agitate, and weaken liberal democracies, in particular their public institutions and democratic processes. The ultimate goal of such campaigns is to undermine individuals' trust in democracy as a whole. The rise of AI-generated technologies has exacerbated the complexity of the problem. The weaponization of synthetic media and the misuse of large language model-based chatbots foreshadow a near future where sophisticated disinformation operations can proliferate with ease and false information, audio and images become increasingly harder to detect. Finally, modern approaches acknowledge the limitations of a "true or false"-based perspective, as disinformation also can refer to misrepresentations and distortions that may be based on real facts.

Latin America faces this issue as part of a larger problem: Like many countries in the region, it is grappling with a process of democratic backsliding. Depending on the country, we observe two different worrying developments in connection with disinformation: 1) Authoritarian governments restricting civic space, or (2) weak governments proving unable to find successful measures to handle the threats to their democratic systems. To make matters worse, many countries are suffering a serious economic crisis, which is deepening social inequality and fostering the rise of extremist forces. Given this context, disinformation has the potential to produce even greater damage and contribute to destabilization in the region.

Against this backdrop, we felt the need to map the landscape of protagonists who are successfully countering disinformation in the region. This report looks at the context in which these initiatives are deployed and illustrates the different approaches adopted by these organizations.

Fortunately, Latin American stakeholders are already taking numerous measures to counter disinformation. Drawing on their experience as researchers, journalists, academics or activists, they are creating campaigns, developing toolkits and guidelines, fact-checking news, debunking false narratives, crafting cutting-edge research methodologies, or devising new ways to train people in digital literacy. These actions are usually conducted in coalitions with like-minded partners, sometimes engaging public authorities or private platforms. The richness of these initiatives deserves to be reported and amplified in order to show commonalities and differences in the way they are addressing disinformation in Latin America, and to identify what is still missing in these efforts.

This report first addresses the primary challenges related to disinformation in Latin America. These challenges include [\(1\) Internet access and use of digital platforms](#), [\(2\) Disinformation campaigns in the context of elections](#), and [\(3\) State regulation](#). Each of these challenges deserves in-depth exploration, as they are significant factors that determine the ecosystem in which disinformation campaigns operate.

However, our report does not aim to provide exhaustive analyses of each challenge. Instead, it seeks to highlight notable milestones, showcase the strategies employed by civil society in addressing these challenges, and make recommendations for the future.

While acknowledging the need for future research to expand upon the findings presented here, this report nonetheless offers sufficient context to understand the environment in which Latin American civil society carries out their daily work in the fight against disinformation.



1 Challenges specific to Latin America as a region

1.1 Internet access and use of digital platforms

Meaningful connectivity

The Inter-American Human Rights System is responsible for monitoring, promoting, and protecting human rights in the 35 independent countries of the Americas that are members of the Organization of American States (OAS). As part of its work, it has highlighted how inequalities in the access to internet across different parts of the population or the lack of pluralism in public media may affect the fight against disinformation. For instance, the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has established that “one of the basic conditions to fight against misinformation is to be able to access various sources of information to compare and check if the information received by people is credible.”¹ So the principle of universal access is essential to ensure that “citizens have access to all the possibilities offered by the Internet network.”²

In Latin America, a region comprising 20 countries and a population of around 650 million people, disinformation cannot be disentangled from the region’s social inequalities. The lack of Internet access for the lower-income strata means limited access to a wide range of diverse sources of information and content. This disadvantage is exacerbated in countries whose democratic institutions are faltering – e.g. **Venezuela** and **Nicaragua**, where the public media – sometimes the only source of access to information for many people in Latin America – are used in a partisan way, i.e. by authoritarian governments³ that (ab)use public media to transmit partisan content reflecting only a favorable view of the ruling party. Sometimes this behavior extends to the dissemination of disinformation aimed at damaging the opposition.⁴

There are specific patterns and challenges in Latin America that have developed (and stayed unaddressed) over years. Like the rest of the world, the region has enjoyed a swift increase in the adoption and use of digital technologies. However, this growth has been unequal both among the different countries of the region and within each of their populations. For instance, in **Chile**, **Uruguay** and **Argentina**, a high percentage of the population is connected to the Internet (around 90 %) while in **Haiti**, **Honduras** and **Guatemala** the percentage is very low

1 *Guide to guarantee freedom of expression regarding deliberate disinformation in electoral contexts* / [Prepared by the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation, and the Department of International Law of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States] Page 35. www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/publications/Guia_Desinformacion_VF%20ENG.pdf.

2 Ibid.

3 According to the BTI 2022 Index on Political Transformation, Venezuela and Nicaragua are considered hardline autocracies. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/regional-dashboard/LAC?&d=D&c=4&cb=00010>.

4 Ibid.

(around 45 %).⁵

A similar pattern emerges when we study the differences in internet access between urban dwellers and those living in rural areas. According to the study “*Rural Connectivity in Latin America and the Caribbean*,”⁶ the digital divide between urban and rural populations in Latin America and the Caribbean widened by 2 percentage points between 2020 and 2022. The report of the *Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture* determines that in 2022, 79 % of the urban population had meaningful services, such as reliable Internet access, sufficient data and adequate connection speeds – compared to only 43.4 % of rural populations, for a gap of 36 percentage points between the two. As a result, 72 million people living in rural areas of Latin America do not have access to meaningful connectivity.⁷

In an environment where rural communities have few sources of information, the Internet may help to foster diversity and pluralism of opinions, provided that people are equipped with digital literacy skills to identify what contents are reliable. Thus, overcoming the digital divide, which means access to information and communication technologies as well as the skills needed to take part in the information society, continues to be an essential condition for empowering people not to fall prey to disinformation. The magnitude of the challenge demands that governments take responsibility for investing in infrastructure in the most disadvantaged areas of their countries. The economic costs of public policies to expand connectivity to the entire population are certainly high. In this regard, recent developments are helping to overcome budgetary constraints.⁸ Initiatives such as the recently launched European Union-Latin America and Caribbean Digital Alliance may represent an opportunity for Latin American countries – with the support in this case of the European Union – to develop a resilient, secure accessible digital infrastructure for all.

Trust in traditional news media

However, accessibility is not solely a matter of connectivity. A population’s resilience to disinformation operations is also indicated by the quality of news consumption and people’s trust in the news media. In this regard, the region follows global trends but has particular features that deserve to be taken into account. The 2022 edition of the Reuters Institute Digital News Report shows an overall decline in the news trust index. On a global average, 42 percent of respondents trust the news. However, in Latin America, **Brazil** is the only country with an above-average score: 48 percent. **Argentines**, , on the other hand, have least trust in the media, at 35 percent. The other countries surveyed are also below the global news trust average: **Peru** (41 percent), **Chile** (38), **Colombia** (37) and **Mexico** (37).⁹

5 World Bank. *Individuals using the Internet (percent of population)*. Latin America & Caribbean. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ZJ&most_recent_value_desc=true.

6 Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura. *Rural connectivity in Latin America and the Caribbean. State of play, challenges and actions for digitalization and sustainable development*. <https://repositorio.iica.int/handle/11324/21350>.

7 Ibid.

8 European Union. *Global Gateway: EU, Latin America and Caribbean partners launch in Colombia the EU-LAC Digital Alliance*. March 14, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_1598.

9 Nic Newman. *Overview and key findings of the 2022 Digital News Report*. June 15th, 2022. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary>.

Use of social media platforms for news consumption

The 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report further indicates that mistrust of traditional media is accompanied by an intensive use of social networks to source news. In Latin America the study found a much higher proportion of people using social media for news, with different networks in play. While, for instance, in African countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, WhatsApp (55 %) and Telegram (18 %) combined are more important for finding, sharing, and discussing news than Facebook (59 %), Latin Americans tend to use a combination of all the main networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp). TikTok has become the fastest-growing network, reaching 40 % of 18 – 24s, with 15 % using the platform for news. Usage is much higher in parts of Latin America than it is in the United States or Northern Europe.¹⁰

Widespread zero-rating services across the region

The reliance on big platforms is bolstered by zero-rating initiatives across the region. Zero-rating is a practice whereby telecommunications companies (telcos) offer free data to cell phone users if they exclusively use certain services. Latin American countries have opted to foster zero-rating, even when they have legislation in favor of net neutrality. In fact, the organization **Tactical Tech** states that 15 countries in the region have offered some type of service in this format, of which 14 offered free access to WhatsApp or Facebook.¹¹

Organizations such as Tactical Tech emphasize that in analyzing disinformation campaigns, it is important to take into account factors such as zero-rating services and the lack of Internet access outside the most popular applications, as these are factors that contribute to the “echo chambers” through which false information is distributed and consumed. There are many voices in Latin America questioning this practice, mainly because in economic and cultural contexts where access to information is already scarce, such as in the low-income population, zero-rating services end up enabling disinformation campaigns – simply because people have no outside source to check or verify what they are reading.¹²

As the **OAS’ Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression** has pointed out, zero-rating agreements have been “*problematic in the face of disinformation campaigns: those who – for example – receive false information through social networks or almost exclusive private messaging services and cannot verify that information because they do not have access to the Internet in its entirety.*”¹³

However, it’s hard to envision how the expansion of zero-rating can be stopped. First, all flaws aside, it is an easy solution for low-income sectors that would otherwise be left without any

10 Ibid.

11 *WhatsApp: The Widespread Use of WhatsApp in Political Campaigning in the Global South*. Tactical Tech Collective. <https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/posts/whatsapp> referenced in Al Sur. *Desinformación en Internet en contextos electorales de América Latina y el Caribe*. www.alsur.lat/sites/default/files/2020-04/Consulta%20p%C3%BAblica%20Desinformaci%C3%B3n%20en%20contextos%20electorales_ContribucionRegional-ALSur.pdf.

12 Ibid.

13 *Guide to ensuring freedom of expression regarding deliberate disinformation in electoral contexts* / [Prepared by the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation, and the Department of International Law of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States] Page 44. https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/publications/Guia_Desinformacion_VF%20ENG.pdf.

Internet access at all. Second, it is a way for governments to disguise the absence of public policies to effectively address inequality in connectivity. Finally, there appear to be no serious attempts to enforce the prohibition of these practices [even] in countries where regulation emphasizes the principle of net neutrality.

Long-term, there is a need to challenge these practices and invest in public infrastructure to ensure “real” connectivity for all. In the short term, misinformation is rampant and easily spread within these flawed systems. This is the context and the landscape in which we have to design our countermeasures.

1.2 Disinformation campaigns in the context of elections

In studying the main sources and topics of disinformation in the region, it is worth taking a look at some relevant cases that took place in connection with a number of political contexts and elections in Latin American countries. These examples show, for instance, that the phenomenon does not necessarily involve only the citizens of a given country. On the contrary, it is common to see collaboration (either organic or organized) across countries. In addition, some of the cases reveal influence from countries outside the Latin American region in the strategies built for the purpose of disinformation, which shows that many more interests are at stake when it comes to political operations than we might think.

The ecosystem of disinformation in Latin America

The joint work of journalists has been essential to revealing the ecosystem of consultants and political communication experts operating in Latin America to promote disinformation. One relevant case was the “Digital Mercenaries” research coordinated by the **Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP)** an alliance of media from fourteen countries in the region and published in July 2023.¹⁴ The study identified the main consultants and agencies that – using tactics such creating anonymous accounts, exploiting personal data obtained through misleading applications, and exploiting social network algorithms – have carried out disinformation strategies designed to support the emergence of particular political parties in Latin America, mostly from the far right.

The study cites the rise of Fernando Cerimedo, an Argentine consultant, as a reference in digital communication for Latin American far-right politics, especially in **Argentina, Brazil and Chile**. In 2002, Cerimedo – via his company Numen – was allegedly behind a series of campaigns to influence people to vote “No” in a referendum to convene an assembly to draft a new Constitution for Chile. Numen disseminated a poll showing that ostensibly most of Chile’s population was opposed to the initiative to replace the current constitution. Numen’s poll was the only one to display these results and was evidently part of a strategy to bolster participation from the “rejector” sector aligned with conservative views. Ultimately, the referendum was “accepted” with 78% of the votes, exposing the misleading statements of Numen’s poll.¹⁵

14 Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP). *Mercenarios Digitales*. July 2023. www.elclip.org/mercenarios-digitales.

15 Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP). *El argentino que desinforma en Chile y su vínculo con uno de los árbitros de la constitución*. July 31, 2023. www.elclip.org/numen-cerimedo-chile-constituyente-garcia-arancibia.

Meanwhile in **Brazil**, in the middle of a contested second round of the 2022 presidential elections in Brazil, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro – son of then-president Jair Bolsonaro – took advantage of an official mission to Buenos Aires to meet with Cerimedo. Less than three weeks later, following the defeat of Jair Bolsonaro, Cerimedo posted a video on YouTube with false information about electronic voting machines, which helped inflame the post-election climate in Brazil. Cerimedo says he acted independently in collaborating with the campaign and received nothing for it. But Eduardo Bolsonaro allegedly paid an employee of one of Cerimedo’s companies to work on his re-election campaign in the same period.¹⁶ Finally, the research also exposes Cerimedo’s connection with rising alt-right Argentine groups by revealing his role as head of communications in the campaign for Javier Milei, a libertarian outsider who went on to win Argentina’s presidential election in 2023.¹⁷

The study also shows how an alliance of far-right politicians organized by the Disenso Foundation – created by Spain’s far-right Vox party – repeated a strategy to try to delegitimize the electoral results in several Latin American countries. According to the CLIP’s report, Disenso funds its activities mostly with public funds and is dedicated to the international dissemination of far-right ideas. Its main project is the “Iberosphere”, aimed at defending the “Westernness of Ibero-America” against what they consider attacks on Spanish influence in the region. Rafael López Aliaga, mayor of Lima and prolific **Peruvian** businessman, is one of the politicians connected to this network. Since his failed presidential bid in 2021, he has propagated false claims of electoral fraud without providing supporting evidence. This narrative is also promoted by other Latin American politicians linked to Vox and Disenso, such as **Colombian** Senator María Fernanda Cabal and **Chilean** presidential candidate José Antonio Kast. Journalistic investigations have revealed a coordinated operation to spread these fraudulent stories on social networks. While there is no direct evidence of Vox or Disenso’s involvement in these operations, the investigation states that their members are clearly linked to the spreading of lies that undermine confidence in democratic systems.¹⁸

The influence of foreign countries

Russia is reportedly another actor behind disinformation operations in Latin America. In November 2023, the U.S. Department of State issued a statement claiming that the Russian government is actively funding a sophisticated, well-financed disinformation campaign across Latin America.¹⁹ This campaign, orchestrated by the Social Design Agency (SDA), the Institute for Internet Development, and Structura, aims to manipulate information in the region by leveraging media contacts in multiple countries, including **Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay**. The U.S. government has affirmed that its overarching goal is to covertly exploit the openness of Latin America’s media landscape to spread propaganda that undermines support for Ukraine and

16 Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP). *Eduardo Bolsonaro utilizó misión oficial para reunirse con argentino que ha diseminado mentiras sobre las urnas en Brasil*. July 31, 2023. www.elclip.org/eduardo-bolsonaro-cerimedo-brasil-facebook-live.

17 Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP). *La opaca historia de Cerimedo, el consejero de la derecha trumpista sudamericana*. July 31, 2023. www.elclip.org/cerimedo-consultor-derecha-diario.

18 Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP). *Los aliados de Vox para difundir mentiras en América Latina*. August 7, 2023. www.elclip.org/vox-en-latinoamerica-mentiras-ultraderecha-fundacion-disenso.

19 US Department of State. *The Kremlin’s Efforts to Covertly Spread Disinformation in Latin America*. November 7, 2023. www.state.gov/the-kremlins-efforts-to-covertly-spread-disinformation-in-latin-america.

fosters anti-U.S. and anti-NATO sentiment. The actors behind this campaign, led by Ilya Gambashidze of the SDA, include individuals with technical expertise and a history of disseminating disinformation to further Russia's foreign influence objectives. The campaign involves cultivating editorial staff in a Latin American country, possibly **Chile**, who collaborate with a team in Russia to create and submit content for review, editing, and publication in local media. The process effectively launders pro-Kremlin content, making it appear organic to Latin American audiences.²⁰

These revelations show that disinformation campaigns in Latin America may sometimes be part of strategies on the part of foreign states or political parties. To counter this, Latin America requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond mere fact-checking. Strengthening media literacy, promoting ethical digital practices, and fostering a culture of critical thinking should be part of this strategy. Collaborative initiatives, such as the research conducted by CLIP, serve as vital tools in revealing the networks behind disinformation campaigns. By fostering transparency, accountability, and informed public debate, societies can become more resilient against manipulative actions and thereby ensure that accurate information prevails in Latin America countries.

1.3 State regulation

One particularity of the Latin America region lies in the importance attributed to the role of state regulation in the fight against disinformation. Agreement is far from unanimous, and controversies remain about how such regulation should take place. However, there seems to be greater consensus than in other parts of the world that legislation can help prevent the proliferation of disinformation. Regulation in Latin America varies between different models: the EU's data protection, the US' freedom of expression, and the regions' intent to exert more economic influence and the desire to draw upon their own traditions and legal standards.

Several Latin American civil society organizations focus their work on regulating content moderation by private platforms. It has been argued that big social networking companies and search engines exercise effective control over the content that circulates on the network based on the application of their internal policies. It is therefore necessary to ensure that private-sector policies respect and uphold fundamental rights. In July 2020, a group of ten organizations from the region and renowned academics – under the leadership of Latin American think tank **Observacom** – launched the “*Standards for the democratic regulation of big platforms to ensure freedom of expression online and an open and free Internet.*”²¹ The goal was to develop a “third-way” approach, somewhere between corporate self-regulation and authoritarian regulation and based on the international and inter Latin American human rights standards, to guide future regulation on the topic. The document contains recommendations on transparency, due process, right to appeal, and accountability for private-sector platforms. It proposes a model of co-regulation and public regulation whereby states can mandate and enforce such duties for

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Observacom. *Standards for the democratic regulation of big platforms to ensure freedom of expression online and an open and free Internet.* July 2020. www.observacom.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Standards-for-the-democratic-regulation-of-big-platforms-.pdf.

private companies. Although the proposal warns that *“it is not intended to provide a solution to all the challenges posed by online content governance, such as like disinformation,”* it does highlight that *“the set of standards proposed herein – regarding transparency, due process, limits to terms of service, etc. – will have a positive effect on these issues, by limiting the conditions that encourage the spreading of disinformation, clarifying the responsibilities of large corporations in public debate, and defining a regulatory environment able to meet such challenges in a way that aligns with the right to freedom of expression.”*²²

At the national level, the most serious attempts to address disinformation through regulation come from **Brazil**. The country was a pioneer in 2014 with the enactment of the Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (or MCI, the acronym for its Portuguese name), which was seen as a reference in Internet regulation worldwide for its progressive approach. However, there were subsequently several attempts to amend the law with the aim of combating “disinformation” on social networks and private messaging. In 2021, then President Jair Bolsonaro issued a provisional measure (No. 1068/2021), which amended the MCI and prohibited “social network providers” from adopting “moderation criteria or limiting the scope of disclosure of content involving censorship of a political, ideological, scientific, artistic or religious nature.” It also stated that social networks could only “delete, cancel or suspend, totally or partially, the services or user profiles” if there was “just cause,” and provided a list of such “just causes” along with sanctions for companies that did not comply. The provisional measure met with a great deal of criticism from civil society as it granted strong incentives to platforms to moderate their content in line with the government’s criteria, and was dismissed by the National Congress as unconstitutional.²³

In 2023, the Brazilian government – now with center-left president Lula in office – submitted another draft incorporating provisions similar to the European Union’s Digital Services Act (DSA). Among other things, the Brazilian bill imposes obligations of transparency on large platforms and obligates them to assess systemic risks arising from their design, use and operation, to adopt measures to mitigate such risks, and to act “with diligence and in a timely and sufficient timeframe to prevent and mitigate unlawful practices within the scope of their service.” The proposal appears less partisan than Bolsonaro’s draft, but it still sparked concerns in civil society due to its insistence on removing content that is lawful – albeit potentially harmful to people – and the ambiguity of the wording.²⁴

The profusion of proposals to regulate the work of the platforms has caused Brazil to be seen as a model to be emulated by other countries in the region. However, some experts have questioned whether this influence can be extended in Latin America. First of all, the other countries do not have a considerable market like Brazil’s that would give them the power to regulate large companies. Secondly, there are language barriers that constitute an obstacle to the adoption of Brazilian regulations in other countries. Finally, Brazil’s traditionally low influence on Latin American law is reflected in its limited relationship with the Inter-American

22 Ibid.

23 Nicolás Zara and Lina Paola Velásquez. Center for Studies on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information (CELE). *Regulation of platforms in Brazil: necessity, dangers and contradictions*. <https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/en/regulacion-de-plataformas-en-brasil-necesidad-peligros-y-contradicciones>.

24 Ibid.

human rights system.²⁵

In this connection, it is worth looking at the situation in **Chile**. In July 2023, the Chilean government created a Commission against Disinformation, with the aim of advising on the impact of disinformation on the quality of democracy and suggesting good practices and public policies to address the problem. The commission is made up of representatives from universities, civil society organizations and fact-checking organizations. In early December 2023, the Commission concluded its work with the publication of a document containing 72 recommendations to address disinformation.

Among the suggestions, the Commission advises the Chilean State to support fact-checking organizations, self-regulation in the media, information and digital literacy, and research on disinformation and pluralism. On the other hand, it advises granting powers to the body in charge of overseeing electoral and plebiscite processes in Chile, so that it can denounce disinformation campaigns contracted by actors who are not validly registered in electoral processes. Finally, it recommends platforms to supervise political ads, making public the measures taken when there are violations of community rules.²⁶

At the regional level, the role of regulation has also been recognized by the **Inter-American Human Rights System**. In the aforementioned “Guide to ensure freedom of expression in the face of deliberate disinformation in electoral contexts,” the Office of the Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression recommended that states adopt legislative measures. However, it advised avoiding the creation of regulatory frameworks that hold intermediaries responsible for content produced by third parties. Instead, it proposed strengthening privacy legislation, since the exploitation of personal data for advertising purposes by platforms and other players in the digital ecosystem is another element that, when used inappropriately, indirectly drives the phenomenon of disinformation.²⁷

Organizations working on human rights and technology also highlight the perils of the approach adopted in many of the proposals by governments in the region. According to the **Center for Studies on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information (CELE)** and the Regional Office for South America of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, attempts at regulation have focused on those actors that facilitate the distribution of disinformation. Actors are either criminalized, or platforms are obliged to take actions, which may affect freedom of expression. As an alternative approach, they suggest focusing on the originators of disinformation, and in particular the role played by public officials. In this sense, the case of false statements by public officials is not without consequences. There is a mandate and an expectation – explicit in some

25 See Ramiro Alvarez Ugarte. Center for Studies on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information (CELE). *Is leadership sterile? from Brazil*. <https://observatoriolegislativocele.com/en/el-liderazgo-esteril-de-brasil>.

26 Observacom. *Chile: Comisión asesora presentó informe con recomendaciones para enfrentar la desinformación*. December 6, 2023. www.observacom.org/amp/chile-comision-asesora-presento-informe-con-recomendaciones-para-enfrentar-la-desinformacion.

27 *Guide to guarantee freedom of expression regarding deliberate disinformation in electoral contexts* / [Prepared by the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation, and the Department of International Law of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States] Page 30. www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/publications/Guia_Desinformacion_VF%20ENG.pdf.

cases and implicit in others – for public officials to adhere to the truth, and to be more scrupulous about scrutiny and fact-checking than non-public officials before stating anything as fact. Failure to do so may under certain circumstances trigger consequences ranging from criminal to relevant ethical consequences. For instance, **Mexico** electoral law prohibits expressions that slander people in campaign messages ordering the immediate suspension and removal of this type of messages while **Argentina's** National Electoral Code states a prison sentence of 2 months to 2 years for those who deceive people into voting in a certain way or to refrain from doing so. Also, Latin American countries consider forgery by public officials as a very specific crime, and will punish public officials who in the exercise of their duties issue a public document that can serve as proof, expresses a falsehood, or completely or partially obscures true facts.²⁸

So far, attempts at legislative regulation – with the exception of **Cuba, Nicaragua and Costa Rica** which have passed laws to criminalize disinformation – have not gone beyond draft bills, or documents with recommendations prepared by government agencies. There is widespread consensus that the region, both regionally and at the national level, needs better regulation. However, what exactly “better” means continues to be debated. The influence of the European model can be seen in the legislative proposals in **Brazil** or the adoption of personal data protection laws in various countries in the region. However, this paradigm may contradict constitutional or rights standards in the region, which are more inspired by the United States’ concept of freedom of expression. The latter’s influence is a key factor in governments’ avoidance of resorting to normative instruments that would establish harsher rules for, e. g., platforms. Finally, there is the challenge of how to enforce such legislation, considering the region’s relatively weak economic and political position vis-à-vis the power of large global corporations.

28 CELE and the Regional Office for South America of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights for AI Sur. *Are public officials’ lies unsustainable or do they have far reaching effects?*. August 2021. www.alsur.lat/en/report/are-public-officials-lies-unsustainable-or-do-they-have-far-reaching-effects.

2 The role of civil society in countering disinformation: Four case studies

The work of civil society in the region in the fight against disinformation is very rich and varied. After an intensive mapping of initiatives and organizations around the region, **ADC** found that civil society's efforts to counter disinformation are diverse and adopt different perspectives. A first approach is mainly conducted by digital rights organizations dedicated to policy research and regulation analysis. They review government proposals (laws, bills or other legal provisions), ensuring they align with human rights standards, especially the right to freedom of expression. A second approach is led by fact-checking organizations, which nowadays not only verifies the accuracy of a specific piece of information but also are expanding their efforts into other activities like training individuals to detect disinformation (debunking), incorporating AI technology or addressing the big narratives of disinformation rather than check some concrete news. Finally, there are other organizations dedicated to producing analysis on public conversation in social media. They develop technical knowledge and analytical tools to map key actors, strategies, formats and narratives of the digital ecosystem with the goal of discovering the patterns and actors behind disinformation operations.

Based on this mapping, we identified four case studies as a way to illustrate the diversity of Latin American civil society on the subject, obtaining detailed information and learning first-hand how they work and how they see the problem of disinformation. To do this a series of interviews were conducted with representatives of the selected organizations. The purpose was to know their opinion on the situation of disinformation in the region, the comparison and contrasts with the rest of the world, the most relevant actors in disinformation issues, the effects of disinformation, the initiatives in which they currently are working and their future plans.

2.1 Colombia: Linterna Verde

Background

Linterna Verde²⁹ is a **Colombian** organization that emerged in 2018 with the mission to unravel the complexities of the online public debate. Rather than just being a fact-checking entity, Linterna Verde stands out as a digital research organization. Their primary focus is on discovering how public opinion is constructed in social networks. To do this, they analyze data from online publications and interactions to draw attention to specific risks faced by civil society organizations in these digital spaces. Linterna Verde shares that knowledge with civil society organizations, human rights defenders and newsrooms so that they can accurately diagnose the public conversation on social media and make strategic decisions based on evidence.

Focus of work and research

In November 2021, Linterna Verde launched the “**Circuito**” project to foster informed conversations that enrich the public debate around internet governance, the power of platforms, and online freedom of expression at a time when regulatory discussions are taking flight in Latin America.³⁰ The project includes the newsletter **Botando Corriente**,³¹ which delivers periodic information on current events, updates on the platforms’ community standards – which shape the digital public debate – and reviews of research or reports that expose tensions between technologies and human rights. In this way, they provide input for researchers, members of civil society, journalists, and people interested in technology and democracy in general. But their impact doesn’t stop there. Linterna Verde actively conducts workshops in collaboration with various Latin American organizations focused on freedom of expression. They address critical issues such as digital gender violence with feminist organizations and partner with foundations like the **Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa** (FLIP) for journalist-centric workshops, broadening their reach to diverse audiences.

In early 2023, the organization took center stage in UNESCO’s Social Media for Peace program, in which Linterna Verde was tasked with monitoring potentially harmful online content. What emerged from this endeavor was a deep-dive into hate speech narratives intertwined with elements of disinformation, each echoing Colombia’s historical and social context, particularly that of armed conflict.³²

Operating remotely, Linterna Verde’s toolkit includes social listening tools like Crowd Tangle and Meltwater, custom protocols for specific investigations, private servers and web screening tools, and a strategic use of artificial intelligence, including generative models for text and image support. As they adapt to the evolving landscape, Linterna Verde has witnessed a surge in disinformation narratives around health and electoral issues, further propelled by the spread of AI tools.

29 The information contained here is based on an interview with Alejandro Moreno, Linterna Verde’s coordinator on content moderation and platforms.

30 Circuito’s website can be accessed on <https://en.circuito.digital>.

31 See <https://circuito.substack.com>.

32 Linterna Verde’s monitoring report can be accessed on https://cms.flip.datasketch.co/uploads/Informe_final_Social_Media_4_Peace_Linterna_Verde_8c9a0a4fda.pdf.

Use cases: Disinformation campaigns during Colombia's 2022 presidential election

Two specific cases of disinformation were researched by Linterna Verde during Colombia's presidential elections in 2022. The first related to an alleged breach of the chain of custody of the votes. Shortly after the elections, inconsistencies between the provisional and the final vote count became evident, leading to requests to the electoral authority to do a definitive recount. Many politicians, including then presidential candidate Gustavo Petro (now president of Colombia) opposed the request due to unsupported claims that the votes' chain of custody had been broken, which render make a recount unreliable. Linterna Verde's research showed that most of the media helped to spread Preto's claims without verifying them and revealed how the disinformation not only moved across social media but also changed formats and purposes. Some posts replicated what relevant accounts said through screenshots, while others included photos and videos taken out of context that seemed to confirm the disinformation. New graphic memes were also created, and the topic was commented on in video form.³³

The second case was the spreading of false information accusing Petro of having a private meeting with representatives of the company that provided the software for counting the votes. In fact, Petro was participating in a public conference with more than 30 companies. In this case, Linterna Verde exposes how the disinformation was heavily spread by right-wing politicians – including former president Andrés Pastrana – and conservative public figures such as the columnist and influencer Jaime Arizabaleta.³⁴

USP: Enhancing the influence of civil society in online public discourse

Linterna Verde doesn't limit itself to addressing local challenges. They have observed the influence of global events, with disinformation narratives fueled by foreign actors seeping into Colombia's digital conversations. They also acknowledge the spreading of disinformation by public officials and journalists, especially during the pandemic when narratives quickly cut across regional and global frontiers. Since 2018, Linterna Verde's work has been marked by impactful initiatives: a resource portal on problematic information, election reports, and bulletins; special workshops focusing on pre-bunking in elections and election coverage in regions; and an ongoing commitment to content moderation.

Their regional efforts, such as meetings on pandemic-related moderation standards, reflect a proactive stance in countering misinformation patterns. Linterna Verde clarifies that their work is not mere advocacy but a concerted effort to support civil society and foster synergies with like-minded organizations and platforms, as evidenced by their participation in trusted partner programs and policy discussions with major players like Meta and Google.

Essentially, Linterna Verde is supporting civil society organizations with specialized knowledge and opinion research on social media to help the latter strengthen their influence, develop more effective narratives, and increase their capacity to respond to attacks on social media and internet platforms.

33 Linterna Verde. *Electoral disinformation: how has it affected confidence in the system and how can civil society address it?*. May 2022. <https://en.linternaverde.org/guias/desinformacion-electoral-como-ha-afectado-la-confianza-en-el-sistema-y-como-hacerle-frente-desde-la-sociedad-civil>.

34 Ibid.

2.2 Argentina: Contextual

Background

Contextual³⁵ was launched in May 2023, three months before the Argentine primary elections, as a project of the Institute for Digital Development of Latin America and the Caribbean. The initiative was born out of a concern for the rise in conservative and libertarian movements in **Argentina** using disinformation to spread their message.

Focus of work and research

Contextual work focuses on the propagators of disinformation and their behaviors, rather than on the content. Having observed that many initiatives in Latin America – usually fact-checking ones – were focusing on the contents, including how they go viral, what kind of reaction they generate, and so on, Contextual felt it was necessary to study the dynamics of disinformation based on the actors behind it. That is to say, reporting who they are, how they behave, how they organize themselves to spread their messages, and how they exploit the digital platform. This includes the sociological features of the people who use them, how they finance themselves, and where and how they acquire their capabilities and learn their skills.

Contextual has a team of seven people working on this, including lawyers, a data scientist, and a sociologist. They generate reports focusing on the behaviors of the actors and their *modus operandi*. These conclusions are presented to the platforms, which have a unique position to observe this topology and trends. These reports are sometimes published on their website³⁶ and occasionally by the media.³⁷

As for relations with the major platforms (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Google and TikTok), Contextual has met with them with the aim that their findings be taken into account in the platforms' policy decisions regarding content moderation. Such interaction is not always easy and not always smooth. Their objective is not to compensate for the platforms' inaction, but to point out systemic aspects, actors, and behaviors.

Use case: Methodology and results from research on Argentina's 2023 presidential elections

Contextual's research methodology begins with a manual qualitative analysis of platforms in general – who they are and how the various actors are connected, after which their data science consultant takes over with different kinds of Social Media Listening tools and other automated tools (Brandwatch, for example). Also, they conducted fieldwork with a Spanish sociologist, who made ethnographic notes of his experience at the closing ceremony for the campaign of La Libertad Avanza (Freedom Moves Forward), the libertarian party that ultimately won the presidential election in Argentina.

35 Contextual's website can be accessed on <https://contextual.la/>.

36 Contextual reports on the 2023 Argentine elections can be accessed on <https://contextual.la/category/informes/>.

37 Contextual. *Un informe de Contextual, citado en el Buenos Aires Herald*. November 4, 2023. <https://contextual.la/2023/11/04/un-informe-decontextual-citado-en-el-buenos-aires-herald/>. Contextual. *Contextual, citado por Perfil en un informe sobre el fantasma del fraude que agita el entorno de Milei*. November 4, 2023. <https://contextual.la/2023/11/04/contextual-citado-por-perfil-en-un-informe-sobre-el-fantasma-del-fraude-que-agita-el-entorno-de-milei/>.

Contextual found evidence that the vast majority of disinformation in these last elections was disseminated organically by self-organized activists. On the other hand, many relevant figures, who are expected to act more responsibly, are also spreading disinformation. The most obvious example are the narratives of electoral fraud circulated by members of the libertarian party La Libertad Avanza. Users of social networks, mostly linked to the La Libertad Avanza (LLA) party, led by then-candidate Javier Milei (now president of Argentina) denounced an alleged fraud in the general elections of October 22 without providing conclusive evidence. These claims were spread on platforms such as TikTok and X (formerly Twitter), with the aim of casting doubt on the electoral process and causing trending of phrases such as “Election Fraud.” Although these accusations were not backed by evidence, they were promulgated by key LLA figures, such as Eugenia Rolón – Javier Milei’s community manager – and consultant Fernando Cerimedo during an extensive stream session in the party’s bunker. Even after the results were known, spokespeople such as Liliana Lemoine (now national legislators) continued to spread the alleged fraud on social networks.³⁸

According to Contextual’s monitoring, most of the disinformation regarding the Argentine elections came from inside the country, specifically from national accounts that test the virality of certain posts and messages and refine the interaction, which produces a lower quantity but higher quality of falsehoods. When a falsehood is more convincing or more emotionally activating, people share it more, so the interaction doesn’t need to be forcibly increased so much.

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With respect to the changes in the disinformation landscape, Contextual considers that during Trump’s first election and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the main problem was the platforms’ negligence in not preventing segmentation, whereby they facilitated the circulation of targeted messages containing false information. In any case, the ability to produce disinformation was not within everyone’s reach, as it required a large amount of resources and technical capacity. The big change since that time is that nowadays people have more access to the knowledge and tools required to produce disinformation. As a result, there are many more companies and people that can generate disinformation on demand.

USP: Cooperation with journalists to amplify the impact of their findings

Contextual’s efforts to counter disinformation have been picked up by numerous media channels. The team has addressed a presidential candidate’s false videos on radio programs, tackled the narrative of electoral fraud as a form of disinformation in podcasts and newspapers, and discussed the anti-democratic discourse on social networks on TV programs. This widespread engagement across various media platforms highlights the impact of Contextual’s research on public discourse and challenging disinformation narratives. Furthermore, Contextual’s findings have played a key role in enhancing the knowledge of stakeholders dedicated to

38 Contextual. *Militantes de La Libertad Avanza denuncian fraude electoral en redes sin pruebas concluyentes*. October 22, 2023. <https://contextual.la/2023/10/22/la-libertad-avanza-deslegitimo-el-normal-desarrollo-de-las-elecciones-presidenciales>.

countering disinformation in Argentina. With a greater insight into the workings of disinformation operations, these organizations are now better equipped to critically review public policies and formulate strategic responses. Contextual has become an invaluable research resource, empowering civil society to address the challenges of disinformation with more insight.

2.3 Brazil: Aos Fatos

Background

Aos Fatos³⁹ was founded in **Brazil** in 2015, when disinformation was completely different from what it is today. At the time, disinformation often relied on misleading narratives and false information. Nowadays, the tactics used for spreading falsehoods have become more sophisticated: There is an increasing use of deepfake technology, AI-generated content, and more advanced manipulation techniques. Also, the level of polarization in online spaces has intensified. Communities with extreme ideologies, fueled by disinformation, have become more partisan, refusing to even consider arguments or ideas that contradict their vision. This scenario poses demanding challenges for fact-checkers and those countering disinformation. So while Aos Fatos started out as a fact checker, the complexity of disinformation has led them to widen their scope. In 2015, they were checking politicians' statements: by 2016 and 2017, they were beginning to identify and investigate patterns and links between digital disinformation and political movements in Brazil.

Focus of work and research

In response to this dynamic environment, Aos Fatos not merely adapted, but grew. What began as a fact-checking initiative has turned into an organization addressing disinformation from different angles. Today, with a team of 24, Aos Fatos focuses on many interconnected areas. In the editorial realm, they engage in comprehensive research, daily fact-checking, and dissemination of verified information. Meanwhile, the technologies and innovation department focuses on developing cutting-edge tools to counter the evolving tactics of disinformation. And the intelligence and consultancy team play a key role in training media teams, platforms, and companies. Aos Fatos not only counters disinformation on the frontlines, but also shares valuable insights and strategies to empower others in this ongoing struggle. Recognizing the need for innovative solutions, Aos Fatos created a technological solution called Fatima. Derived from "FactMa" or "FactMachine", this fact-checking chatbot helps users to travel the internet more safely by sending verified information. Launched in 2019 on Twitter, Fatima has since expanded its reach and is now available in GPT format on Telegram, WhatsApp, and Aos Fatos' institutional website. This expansion is not just a technical upgrade but a way to meet users where they already are, ensuring the dissemination of verified information across multiple platforms.⁴⁰

Use cases: Disinformation in the Brazilian context 2018 and 2019

As a Brazilian organization, an important moment for Aos Fatos occurred in the 2018 presidential elections, with a shift in political communication tactics that reached its peak in 2019, when far-right candidate Bolsonaro (who subsequently became president of the country) replicated Trump's approach in the Brazilian political arena. Aos Fatos partnered with Meta for fact-checking during this period. However, this collaboration exposed them to unprecedented vulnerabilities, as they became individually identifiable, leading to targeted harassment, doxing, and other forms of online attacks. These events not only shaped Aos Fatos' trajectory but also highlighted the complex and high-stakes nature of their mission in countering disinformation.

³⁹ Aos Fatos website can be accessed here www.aosfatos.org/.

⁴⁰ More information about Fatima can be found here www.aosfatos.org/fatima/.

Nowadays Aos Fatos focuses on shedding light on the greater narratives around highly sophisticated disinformation campaigns. These campaigns mix false content with conspiracy theories with actual facts, creating false connections between them. At the same time, the digital scenario is more fragmented than before, there are more and more platforms on the horizon, and more video content, a serious challenge for fact-checker due to the sheer volume of information being spread across the web.

Aos Fatos does not consider that there is a particular “brand” of disinformation in Brazil, although they noticed patterns of polarization in the country across different political groups. For example, they note that the political left and right each have their own types of disinformation ecosystems. While Aos Fatos has found that Brazil shares patterns of disinformation with the rest of the world, they also believe that the military’s engagement with the phenomenon is rather unique to the country. In addition, Brazil’s recent historical past, with a very long military dictatorship and without trial and punishment for crimes against humanity, enables a nostalgic movement in social media towards dictatorship that is plagued by both, misinformation and intentionally spread disinformation.

Another important factor when reviewing disinformation in Brazil is religion. Regarding the influence of the evangelical community in disinformation in Brazil, Aos Fatos noted that although it is impossible to know the number of people who consider themselves part of a religious community because the census was not carried out in 2020, the successive social and economic crises in Brazil have given rise to vast growth in the religious community over the past 20 years. Its influence became evident during the 2014 electoral campaign that brought Dilma Rousseff to the presidency. Rousseff’s favorable position on abortion was a polarizing issue and questioned by conservative and evangelical Christians. The polarization in Brazil has extended to affect other agendas, notably impacting the Afro-Brazilian and LGBTQI+ communities. This influence is attributed to the evangelical community, which is said to create, consume, and share such narratives.

USP: Leveraging technology to create innovative solutions

Going forward, Aos Fatos plans to focus their efforts on producing more video content. Most platforms are not friendly to the daily news format, and as they want to reach young audiences and have a presence on the most used platforms, this requires them to adopt the video format to communicate. Meanwhile, the tech team is working on ways to monitor social networks without having to access APIs, as well as how to improve engagement with the audiences they already have on WhatsApp and Telegram.

In 2024, Aos Fatos will cover the Brazilian elections, but as there are more than 5000 local and state jurisdictions, they are still developing their strategy. They will also continue to work on technologies for the community at large, e.g. growing and improving the use of “Escriba,” a tool that automatically transcribes audio to text. Available on a subscription basis, it facilitates live news coverage among other things.⁴¹ An AI project to create tools for people to be able to fact-check information themselves is also underway. Finally, Aos Fatos is looking for new ways of engaging with platforms that have reduced or eliminated their content moderation staff or trust and safety teams, since the discontinuity of projects on safety for journalists on the platforms is problematic and poses a risk to them.

41 More information on Escriba can be accessed on the project’s website <https://escriba.app/en/>.

Aos Fatos' impact relies on what distinguishes them from other initiatives in the region: their tech-savvy team. This dynamic team combines automation solutions with a creative approach, paving the way for groundbreaking and innovative methods to combat disinformation. From conversational bots and monitoring bots to engaging cartoons and a well-crafted use of social media, Aos Fatos employs a diverse toolkit to address disinformation in unique and effective ways. This has won them a number of kudos including the Gabo Awards (one of the most prestigious awards for Portuguese- and Spanish-language journalism) and a honorable mention from the Inter American Press Association, a group representing major media organizations in North America, South America, and the Caribbean.

2.4 Argentina: Chequeado

Background

In 2010, **Chequeado** was formed as a response to a critical period in **Argentina**, marked by a lack of fact-checking initiatives in the global south and growing public distrust fueled by suspicions of manipulated official statistics. Initially focused on scrutinizing statements from public figures, Chequeado adapted to the changing landscape by expanding its scope in 2014 to include the fact-checking of social media posts. Since then, Chequeado's mission has evolved beyond fact-checking alone. With a dedicated team of 40, the group has ventured into providing reliable sources of information, conducting training programs to combat disinformation, and leveraging digital technologies for more effective interventions. The team is organized into key areas, including media, education for teenagers and journalists, innovation to enhance anti-disinformation efforts, impact for regional outreach, as well as academic research aimed at understanding and countering disinformation.

Focus of work and research

Based on its extensive work over the years, Chequeado has come up with several insights into the way in which disinformation occurs in Latin America and the world in general. One of its central concerns was to identify the specific effects that disinformation generates on individuals. Although this is still a matter under discussion, Chequeado emphasizes the mistrust caused by false information and narratives. Due to the accelerating expansion of the phenomenon, access to information is impaired by the population's skepticism about its veracity. While it is good that people are concerned about whether information is real or not, this makes it more difficult for citizens to be informed and participate in public discourse, which in turn creates an unhealthy relationship between public and information. Chequeado states that there is no concrete evidence that people change their minds or their vote because of disinformation. However, the legitimacy of the electoral process suffers when its results are called into question. This produces a corrosive effect on political institutions, which is dangerous to the democratic concept.

In light of the increase in fact-checking organizations in Latin America, Chequeado feels it is fundamental to have more collaborative initiatives, since they provide wider perspectives and insights. Because the way disinformation is produced and spread is constantly changing, it is necessary to keep thinking of new ways to counter it. Chequeado has been recognized for the creation and leadership of several collaborative initiatives. In 2019, the Reverso initiative was born, in which more than 100 media and technology companies joined forces to tackle disinformation in Argentina's general elections that year. Under the coordination of Chequeado, the project consisted of immediate fact-checking activities that could be published by all the media members of the alliance and the implementation of training programs for journalists.⁴² This alliance was revived for the 2021 and 2023 Argentina elections.

42 Chequeado. *Proyecto Reverso*. July 18, 2021. <https://chequeado.com/proyecto/reverso>.

LatAm Chequea⁴³, is another pioneering initiative led by Chequeado that embodies the power of collective action and shared expertise. By bringing together fact-checkers, journalists, researchers, and technologists, LatAm Chequea empowers its members to share experiences and tools that help improve the quality of public debate and fosters collaboration processes among different media in the region to increase the impact of fact-checking and the fight against disinformation. The activities developed by the network include in-person events, the releasing of a series of research reports on the actors behind disinformation operations during the Covid-19 pandemic⁴⁴ and the creation of a website to display useful resources on how to check information and not share disinformation.⁴⁵

Education is also an essential part of Chequeado's strategy. In addition to the aforementioned training for journalists, another important target demographic is teenagers. The organization partners with high school teachers to reach them: Chequeado is responsible for producing resources and sharing innovative experiences so that teachers can share critical thinking skills in their classes. One of the highlights of this work was the launch in early 2022 of the Latin American Network of Fact-Checking Trainers, a regional training project that trained journalists and university professors from **Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru** in fact-checking so that they could go on to act as multipliers. The initiative wants educational institutions that offer degrees related to journalism and communication to include content related to disinformation as well as some tools and strategies to combat it, since the formal incorporation of this content is still at an incipient stage in the curricula of the region's universities. As a result of the implementation of the first stage of this project, there are now more than 20 educators at educational institutions in **Argentina, Colombia, Peru and Mexico** who will include the teaching of fact checking in their curricula.⁴⁶

USP: Leading the region when innovating to counter disinformation

Chequeado is concentrating on innovation in its efforts to develop digital technologies to combat disinformation. Chequeabot was developed in 2016 and is the organization's main AI tool. The functions it performs include identifying checkable phrases, detecting information that has already been fact-checked, flagging suspected cases of disinformation in social networks, media, or podcasts, and real-time transcription of videos to text, to facilitate fact-checking of live speeches, debates, and other relevant events.⁴⁷

Also, and in line with the need to expand the work beyond fact-checking, Chequeado has focused on uncovering the grand narratives behind the disinformation ecosystem in Argentina and revealing the actors behind them. The aim of this work is to disseminate journalistic and research resources that can be useful for researchers and the general public. In this connec-

43 LatamChequea is a network of 40 fact checkers organizations from Latin America, the United States, Spain and Portugal to share experiences and tools that contribute to improve the quality of public debate and foster collaboration processes between different media in the region to increase the impact of fact checking and the fight against disinformation in our continent. <https://chequeado.com/latamchequea>.

44 Chequeado-Latam Chequea. *Los Desinformantes*. <https://chequeado.com/desinformantes/>.

45 See Portal Check's website <https://portalcheck.org/>.

46 Chequeado. *Herramientas y estrategias para combatir la desinformación ingresan a las aulas de periodismo de la región*. August 22, 2023. <https://chequeado.com/herramientas-y-estrategias-para-combatir-la-desinformacion-ingresan-a-las-aulas-de-periodismo-de-la-region/>.

47 Chequeado. *Inteligencia Artificial*. <https://chequeado.com/inteligencia-artificial/>.

tion, one of its most recent publications is an analysis of the disinformation that circulated in Argentina about the war in Ukraine during the first months of the Russian war.⁴⁸

Chequeado has played a prominent role in countering disinformation across Latin America, and has had a lasting impact on various aspects. Its reach extends to more than 100 media outlets that work together to counter electoral disinformation, while Latam Chequea serves as a networking hub for more than 35 regional organizations. More than 60 universities now include fact-checking in their curricula thanks to Chequeado's educational efforts. Beyond media and academia, Chequeado has contributed to strengthening critical thinking in schools across Argentina. The organization's remarkable impact is further evidenced by the accolades it has received: 29 awards for outstanding contributions across a variety of areas. Finally, tech tools such as Chequeabot have empowered other organizations to streamline their operations by reducing the time and effort required to fact-check information.

48 Chequeado. *Ucrania: la desinformación alrededor de la guerra*. February 2023. <https://chequeado.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Informe-Ucrania-la-desinformacion-alrededor-de-la-guerra-FINAL.pdf>.

3 Five trends and commonalities in the Latin American disinformation landscape

Based on our analysis, which encompasses interviews, mapping, and in-depth research, we were able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the disinformation landscape in the region, shedding light on its evolving nature and the challenges confronting organizations committed to countering it. In summary, these challenges are:

3.1 Disinformation operations are increasingly sophisticated

One of the most salient observations is the escalating magnitude and sophistication of disinformation. This is not merely a quantitative surge but also a qualitative evolution. The complexity of disinformation campaigns is intensifying, fueled by advances in technology and the evolving strategies of the actors behind the campaigns. The best-known case is the last general elections in **Argentina**, where the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools to create various kinds of online content (videos, animated images, etc.) was evident in the campaigns of the main presidential candidates⁴⁹. In general, these tools were employed to create images and videos that sought to link the candidates with representations of strong figures (superheroes, kings, etc.).⁵⁰ As such, they did not seek to mislead the population or convey false information. So, leaving aside any reflections on how they impact the quality of democratic debate, it is difficult to characterize them as disinformation. There were also some cases of deep fakes aimed at spreading lies about one of the candidates,⁵¹ but as several experts noted, these attempts are still easily detected as they are crude and of poor technical quality.⁵² However, this will become more of a concern going forward, as Gen AI tools become both cheaper and more efficient, paving the way for more people to use them without restrictions.

3.2 Political consultants and agencies are becoming instigators

A survey of the actors implicated in disinformation reveals a diverse and expansive ecosystem. As mentioned above, some investigations have allegedly revealed a regional coordination between certain consultants – such as the case of Fernando Cerimedo – who run media, advertising, and

49 The New York Times. *Is Argentina the First A.I. Election?*. November 15, 2023. www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/world/americas/argentina-election-ai-milei-massa.html.

50 Noticias. *El peso de la Inteligencia Artificial en la campaña*. November 21, 2023. <https://noticias.perfil.com/noticias/tecnologia/el-peso-de-la-inteligencia-artificial-en-la-campana.phtml>.

51 Perfil. *Inteligencia artificial en la campaña: el falso video de Sergio Massa tomando cocaína disparó el debate*. November 13, 2023. www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/inteligencia-artificial-en-la-campana-el-falso-video-de-sergio-massa-tomando-cocaina-disparo-el-debate.phtml.

52 Ibid.

political marketing agencies.⁵³ Some of them have openly admitted that they deploy trolls and automated accounts on the platforms in order to confuse the algorithm and thus generate greater visibility for their candidate's posts.⁵⁴ Although these consultants deny resorting to these means to spread disinformation or attack political opponents, sometimes the accounts or channels of these people or their media have been suspended by judicial rulings stating that they had indeed been disseminating fake news.⁵⁵

3.3 Collaborative networks: Exploring multistakeholder partnerships in countering disinformation

Collaborative initiatives between organizations and digital platforms have yielded diverse outcomes, ranging from highly successful joint campaigns to dialogs that, although valuable, often lack concrete follow-up actions. One prominent and recurring theme within these discussions is the matter of content-moderation policies. Particularly noteworthy is the consensus about the necessity of employing moderators with a deep understanding of the region's cultural and linguistic contexts. **Brazilian** organizations are particularly interested in social media companies having more Portuguese-speaking moderators to avoid mistakes in the interpretation/translation of Portuguese-language content.

Also, fact-checking organizations play a fundamental role in these collaborations. They form partnerships so that they can keep innovating in response to the ever-evolving tactics employed by disinformation actors. Their responsibilities extend beyond a mere debunking of falsehoods, as these organizations are increasingly engaging with research on the ecosystem of disinformation. In doing so, they dive deep into the networks of motivations, actors, and causes that propel disinformation campaigns. This multi-pronged approach positions them as key protagonists in countering disinformation, who contribute not only to the dissemination of accurate information but also to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics behind these deception campaigns.

3.4 The digital divide and other inequalities

In Latin America, the lack of Internet access – especially in rural areas and low-income groups – not only perpetuates the digital divide, but also enables the spread of misinformation. This is deeply bound up with the historical social and economic inequality that characterize the region, which is one of the most unequal in the world. While urban areas may be seeing advances in connectivity, the most marginalized sectors continue to face significant obstacles to accessing online information. Moreover, governments tend to overlook the specific needs of rural areas as they focus their policies on urban areas, where they have more incentives to design

53 See Note 11.

54 La Nación. *Elecciones 2023: así funcionan las granjas de trolls que promueven a Javier Milei y atacan a sus críticos*. May 6, 2023. www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/elecciones-2023-asi-funcionan-las-granjas-de-trolls-que-promueven-a-javier-milei-y-atacan-a-sus-nid06052023.

55 La Nación. *Suspenden en Brasil un video de un consultor argentino por divulgar fake news sobre las elecciones*. November 5, 2022. www.lanacion.com.ar/el-mundo/suspenden-en-brasil-un-video-de-un-consultor-argentino-que-divulgo-fake-news-sobre-las-elecciones-nid05112022.

and implement public policies.

The internet is undeniably a major factor in the quick spread of disinformation. And so, an integrative approach to solving the problem of disinformation must go beyond simply providing Internet connectivity. It is essential to train people to develop skills in the population so that they can discern between truthful and false information. Promoting digital literacy and critical capacity are fundamental elements in empowering people, enabling them to not only access the network, but also to identify quality content and consider diverse perspectives when thinking or talking about a given topic.

3.5 The networked nature of disinformation is calling for coordinated regional responses

Electoral campaigns in Latin American countries have proven to be particularly fertile ground for disinformation strategies, characterized by polarization and the erosion of democratic values and institutions. The need for platforms to enlist expert moderators – especially during electoral periods – to mitigate the deleterious impact of disinformation on democratic processes, was highlighted repeatedly. Furthermore, regional investigations have revealed rapid transnational dissemination of specific misinforming narratives, exemplified by the disinformation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and allegations of electoral fraud orchestrated by right-wing parties in various countries. Such dissemination spotlights the networked nature of the disinformation ecosystem and the necessity for coordinated regional responses. One of these challenges is the dual role played by digital technologies. While these tools, including artificial intelligence, are increasingly being used to create and spread disinformation, they can by the same token empower civil society organizations to develop cutting-edge tools and strategies to combat and mitigate the impact of disinformation.

4 What we learned: Four main factors to focus on in countering disinformation in Latin America

The different social, political and economic contexts within Latin America countries show different challenges and opportunities when countering disinformation.

4.1 A common language

One of the most remarkable advantages in combating disinformation in Latin America is that almost everyone speaks Spanish and/or understands Portuguese. The widespread use of both languages helps to create a sense of regional identity among its citizens. Sharing a language can play a key role in developing a community of like-minded people, advancing the process of political integration, and facilitating communication. The capacity to connect effortlessly across countries can promote collaborations in the exchange of knowledge and experiences to counter disinformation, thereby strengthening regional cooperation.

However, we shouldn't overlook the fact that linguistic unity can also help disinformation operations to flourish. While the use of a single or two languages is useful for mutual understanding, it also creates vulnerabilities that can be exploited by actors with malicious intent. These actors may strategically exploit this linguistic bond to design coordinated disinformation campaigns that spread easily across borders. By leveraging shared cultural references, these actors can carry out regional campaigns, creating narratives that resonate deeply with the population, thereby amplifying the reach and impact of their deceptive messages.

4.2 A shared human rights framework

The existence of a robust human rights framework, enforced by institutions like the **Inter-American Court** (Court IDH) and **Commission on Human Rights** (CIDH), constitutes a significant pillar in the region's concerted effort to combat the proliferation of disinformation. These bodies have issued guidelines and standards to set the legal limits of governments when attempting to combat disinformation. They also set up an open and deliberative process to create an action plan to address the challenges posed by digital technologies, including disinformation. The articulation of such principles can drive a shared commitment among Latin American governments to develop and coordinate joint actions to fight the spreading of false narratives across their countries.

However, the real impact of these standards ultimately depends upon their implementation and enforcement at the national level. The different relationships that different Latin American countries have with the Inter-American Human Rights System highlight the difficulties inherent in translating overarching regional standards into actionable policies and practices at the national level. For instance, while countries like **Argentina** have a long tradition of following the standards set by the system, others like **Brazil** are less influenced by the system. These different attitudes not only reflect the complex interplay of national priorities, institutional capacities, and political dynamics, but also highlight the inherent tensions between regional cohesion and national sovereignty.

Also, the variation in the interpretation and enforcement of these guidelines across different countries stressed the need for a nuanced and context-sensitive approach to addressing disinformation. While regional frameworks provide valuable guidance and can promote collaboration, they must be complemented by national strategies that account for the unique challenges and opportunities inherent within each country. Therefore, while the presence of a well-established human rights framework offers a strong foundation for countering disinformation, the real challenge lies in adapting those standards to the context of each country, working out agreements among diverse stakeholders, and fostering a common approach that respects both regional principles and national nuances.

4.3 The digital divide

Many people in Latin American cities – especially in the middle and upper classes – are living at the forefront of the digital age, where information flows rapidly. In this fast-paced urban environment, the dissemination of misleading narratives and fabricated content poses a serious threat. These urban dwellers, with their high levels of digital connectivity and reliance on online platforms for information, are particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns that exploit the vulnerabilities of the digital realm. Consequently, strategies focusing on urban populations must be meticulously crafted to consider the nuanced tactics employed by the actors behind disinformation operations, by emphasizing the critical role of media literacy, advocating transparency in the platform's policies, exposing and unraveling the secret ecosystem of political consultants and communications agencies, and analyzing the real influence of foreign actors.

Meanwhile, rural populations represent a different yet equally pressing set of challenges. These communities usually face problems of an infrastructural nature, including limited access to reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and technological resources. The digital divide, aggravated by socio-economic inequality and geographical distances, makes these communities particularly vulnerable to the spread of disinformation. In such contexts, where traditional communication channels may still hold sway, strategies must aim to bridge the gap by ensuring access to accurate and reliable information. Initiatives aimed at providing communication infrastructure, improving the quality and independence of public media – sometimes the only media these communities can access to – and diversifying the sources of information can play a key role in empowering rural populations to be better equipped to detect and avoid the effects of disinformation.

The region's divergent socio-economic contexts create a need for targeted initiatives that address the specific challenges faced by Latin Americans in both urban and rural settings. By adopting a multi-pronged strategy aimed at promoting digital literacy programs in the population, advocating for independent journalism, and enhancing access to information, civil society organizations can effectively collaborate in those areas where they have more experience and expertise.

4.4 The traditional media ecosystem

Many structural obstacles endanger the role of legacy media as a trustworthy source of information. One of the most relevant issues is the arbitrary and often politically motivated allocation of state advertising. In a context where commercial media outlets face urgent financial pressures and an increasingly reduced revenue base, the allocation of state advertising is essential for their survival. However, the arbitrary assignment of these funds, often based on political expedience rather than merit or public interest, jeopardizes the media's independence and weakens its credibility.

Similarly, journalists, especially if they work outside major urban centers or cover sensitive issues, often face a whole host of challenges ranging from inadequate training and resources to intimidation and physical threats. The unstable conditions for practicing journalism, characterized by short-term contracts, low incomes, and long working hours, not only compromise their professional integrity but also create an environment of self-censorship and reluctance to investigate deeply.

Also, the partisanship or underfunding of public media may affect their image as a reliable protagonist against disinformation. State-owned media, entrusted with the responsibility of promoting democratic values, fostering informed public debate, and providing a platform for plurality of opinions, are often under-resourced. In addition, the loss of public broadcasting's impartiality through editorial interference, partisan appointments, or budgetary constraints imposed by the government, undermines its editorial independence and diminishes its credibility among the population.

But in midst the serious challenges that hamper the fight against disinformation in the region, there is an active civil society composed of a network of stakeholders committed to countering the spread of these operations. These organizations show that a coordinated approach can be taken to unite diverse voices and wide-ranging expertise to create a cohesive and concerted response to disinformation.

One example of collaborative partnership is **LatAm Chequea**, mentioned earlier in the **Chequeado** case study. Likewise, the regional consortium **AlSur** is working to strengthen human rights in Latin America's digital environment by sharing common experiences and technical and professional capabilities, reviewing public policies and international initiatives that may have a regional impact, and generating knowledge to share with different advocacy spaces.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Al Sur is a consortium of eleven civil society and academic organizations based in Latin America that jointly seek to strengthen human rights in the region's digital environment. www.alsur.lat/en.

Composed of many of the most relevant civil society organizations and academic centers on digital rights in Latin America, the consortium amplifies its member organizations' voice in forums such as the Inter-American Human Rights System⁵⁷ and enables them to produce reports that, based on the information gathered by each organization in its country of origin, provide a more accurate and detailed account of the regional situation.⁵⁸

The existence of networks such as LatAm Chequea and AISur highlights the transformative potential of collaborative action. By amalgamating expertise, encouraging partnerships and advocating for human rights-respecting policies, these joint initiatives help to mitigate the disparity of resources with the powerful actors behind disinformation operations.

The creation of strategic alliances between government agencies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and the private sector may help these protagonists to distribute tasks, share best practices, and co-create cutting-edge solutions. These partnerships can serve as an impulse for innovation, driving the development and deployment of tech-driven tools or educational initiatives to enhance digital literacy.

57 See R3D for AISur. *La moderación de contenidos desde una perspectiva interamericana. Contribución de Al Sur al Diálogo de las Américas sobre Libertad de Expresión en internet para recibir insumos para la elaboración de estándares en la materia, lanzado por la Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión (RELE) de la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH)*. March 2022. www.alsur.lat/en/report/content-moderation-interamerican-perspective.

58 See Note 21.

5 How to move forward: It takes everyone

Based on the context and analysis provided in this report, we propose the following recommendations, tailored to the specific roles the different stakeholders play in the fight against disinformation. These suggestions should be seen as a starting point for developing more detailed policies and strategies that must be updated constantly as the disinformation landscape changes over time.

Civil society organizations

Strengthening collaboration between organizations is essential to take advantage of the wealth of diverse activities, experiences and practices that exist in the region. Civil society living in countries with stable democracies can help facilitate the development and implementation of strategies to counteract disinformation in places subject to authoritarian rule. Conversely, organizations operating in countries with low levels of democracy can advise on methods for investigation or advocacy in an adversarial context. In view of recent experiences of democratic backsliding even in countries where such a situation would have been unimaginable, this is knowledge that can be useful for all protagonists. At the same time, if the actors involved in the dissemination of disinformation narratives act in a coordinated manner, a successful effort to counter their attempts requires at least a similar coordination. Disinformation operations involve states, political parties, companies, and other actors with large economic, human and technological resources. Faced with this unequal situation, collaboration between anti-disinformation organizations also serves as a means of distributing tasks, being more efficient with scarce resources and taking advantage of tools and technological developments created by colleagues.

Governments

Beyond the excellent journalistic and civil society initiatives to reveal the modus operandi of disinformation operations, states should increase their efforts to achieve greater transparency. In this regard, there are two authorities that can play a fundamental role in this task. First, data protection authorities should have the regulatory powers and sufficient economic and human resources to be able to conduct investigations into whether the way in which these actors use personal data complies with current legal standards. Secondly, the electoral authorities can – to the extent of their powers – collaborate by supervising political parties' contributions to and expenditures on electoral campaigns, especially on advertising to promote political candidates. Finally, states mustn't overlook the fact that disinformation sometimes originates from and is amplified by public officials. Public officials have a duty not to deliberately spread falsehoods and should be held accountable under the current legal framework in Latin American countries. When it comes to asserting respect for freedom of expression, addressing aspects such as data protection, fair play in political campaigns, and enforcing civility and decorum duties in public officials could be more effective than heavy-handed legislation aimed at regulating discourse.

Fact-checking organizations

Fact-checkers should continue adopting strategies that go beyond conventional fact-checking. Incorporating complementary approaches such as active debunking and training programs, especially ones targeted at vulnerable demographics such as youth, will strengthen the ability of these organizations to address misinformation from a variety of perspectives. Also, it is imperative that fact-checkers develop strategic partnerships with journalism and civil society organizations to thoroughly investigate the ecosystem behind disinformation operations. This involves identifying and analyzing the key players, e.g. the political consultants and communications and political marketing agencies that orchestrate these campaigns. Finally, fact-checkers must be alert to potential biases, limitations, and ethical risks associated with the use of automated tools, to avoid compromising the quality and integrity of the verification process.

Social media platforms

Platforms should intensify their efforts to make transparent the criteria and processes used in moderating, detecting, and prioritizing their content. This includes providing detailed information on technological solutions, algorithmic curation, and data that inform artificial intelligence. It is also crucial that the criteria used in making decisions related to content removal under community policies are clearly communicated to users. Likewise, it is essential that platforms collaborate closely with independent researchers, providing access to information that allows for a better understanding of the disinformation phenomenon. This collaboration can help develop more effective strategies to address disinformation and ensure due respect for users' privacy. Finally, platforms should review and adjust their content recommendation algorithms, making sure the criteria are not purely commercial. It is crucial to base these algorithms on principles that promote relevance and avoid the spread of misinformation. Increasing transparency about the criteria used will benefit users by providing them with more accurate and reliable information.

To achieve a meaningful transformation in countering disinformation, it is critical that Latin American stakeholders leverage the diversity of knowledge and perspectives within our community. We have to cooperate and implement targeted strategies that are finely attuned to our local contexts. This way, we can drive change by promoting civic participation to debunk false narratives, cultivating a culture of critical thinking, and fostering evidence-based solutions. By engaging in these collective actions, we have the power to build a more informed, resilient, and empowered community.

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Publishing credits & Legal notice

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Bertelsmann Stiftung

Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Upgrade Democracy

www.upgradedemocracy.de

Responsible for content

Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Argentina

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Citation note

Ferreyra, E.; Segarra, A. E. (2024): *Truth in turmoil. Countering disinformation in Latin America*. Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh. DOI 10.11586/2024061

DOI number

10.11586/2024061