

Forum: Human Rights Council (HRC)

Issue: Tackling Online Disinformation to Strengthen Election Integrity

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Introduction

Democratic elections are a competition. A series of parties and representatives participate in a multitude of debates and interviews in order to appeal to the citizens of their country and gain their support. Throughout the debate process in the months leading to an election, representatives and their party must promote their campaign. A large portion of this promotion is done online. There are a multitude of purposes for promoting a campaign online: it helps reach international audiences, panders to more demographics, provides easier and cheaper promotion, and more. The only issue is, it also allows more people to interact with disinformation.

Online disinformation is so threatening because it is so global and has access to so many types of people. Beyond being used for campaigning and advertisements, technology has also become a way for many people to vote. The spread of online disinformation impacting the integrity of elections is a global issue. Democracy isn't just used in a couple of countries or in just a few parts of the world, it is the most common form of government in the world. Some of the biggest countries in the world are democracies, the United States and India being notable examples. 32.58% of countries use electoral democracies, 17.98% use liberal democracies, and 32.58% use electoral autocracies. 50.56% of countries around the world use some form of governing system directly defined as a democracy. This means that 83.14% of countries are using at least a hybrid of democracy. Democracy being so important in global politics means that the integrity of it needs to be that much more secure. The results of elections in specific countries can have global repercussions. Political alliances between nations can shift, power

balances within countries can be altered, the economic priorities of a country can be changed. These are only a few of the many impacts elections can have globally.

The spread and production of disinformation isn't always deliberate. Disinformation creates a cycle in and of itself, through its promotion of false information it convinces the general public of its accuracy leading them to further spread it. This process repeats itself as the disinformation becomes more and more believed and eventually competes with the truth for public attention.

Voting rights are internationally recognized as human rights. Although disinformation isn't removing the right to vote from people, it is unfairly impacting how people use their right. Disinformation doesn't only unfairly impact candidates and political leaders, it impacts everyone, those who can and can not vote are also being directly impacted. The person voted to run a country directly affects every single citizen and disinformation can result in people voting on someone who might have been promoted based on false information.

The spread of disinformation has the potential to ruin peoples' careers. Disinformation can look like many things, sometimes it is just lies about another party in a news article, sometimes a post defaming an opposing candidate or accusing them of very heavy topics, and much more that often depends on the country, election, and candidates. Disinformation can have some heavy allegations, allegations that will not only result in societal backlash but sometimes potentially legal backlash. Disinformation can be life ruining and isn't an issue to take lightly.

Definition of Key Terms

Disinformation

Disinformation can have lots of purposes and be used in different ways but in relation to this topic it is information that is false or incorrect as a means of misleading and/or deceiving a person or people. It is most significant in elections as propaganda from parties to damage the reputation of opposing parties or gaining support for the self.

Election

An election is the way a leader, most often political, is chosen through a formal voting. Within the context of disinformation damaging elections, the elections being discussed are for political leadership of a country. Elections are especially used in democratic elections when deciding a leader.

Integrity

“the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles” (Oxford dictionary). Integrity in an election is the maintenance of the honesty and quality of all votes as well as the honesty behind propaganda and campaign advertisements. The maintenance of election integrity relies on each individual of a country getting an equal amount of votes as well as an equal opportunity to vote. It also relies on the promotion of certain campaigns to be fair with accurate information.

Democracy

A democracy is a governing system in which power is controlled by the public who vote for a set of a few representatives to maintain and use said power. Democracies are significant in regards to this context due to the fact that they are the most impacted form of government when it comes to the spread of disinformation during elections. Most other forms of government don't use a system so reliant on accurate voting information, if they rely on voting at all in the first place. Democracies are a form of electoral autocracy, there is one ruler in control of the nation but they are elected to that position. Not all democracies are autocratic, though; many have a larger team of leaders helping the main representative. The elective leader of a democracy is called a president.

Social media

Social media is any type of app or website that allows its users to engage with each other and create and share content with others around the world. Social media is an easy location for people to contact each other as well as information to be spread. Some forms of social media include: TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and a lot of others. Some forms of social media depend on the country, both due to restrictions within the country's and to social media companies limiting and banning the use of their websites in certain areas. China is a good example of internally set restrictions and Disney+ is a good example of location restrictions with a majority of Asia not having access to it without a VPN.

Campaign

“an organized course of action to achieve a goal” (Oxford dictionary). The process presidential candidates go through in attempting to be elected. It often consists of promoting and advertising themselves, public interviews, and debates with other candidates. The advertisements within campaigns are usually the factor most susceptible to disinformation but the debates and interviews during the campaign also can contain disinformation, they are just less relevant when discussing online disinformation.

Autocracy

“a system of government by one person with absolute power” (Oxford dictionary). Democracies are often to some extent autocratic and dictatorships are always autocratic. Democracies are not generally meant to be autocratic, and when they are, they often lean towards a hybrid governing system rather than just a democracy. Democracies are often supposed to have a collective group of representatives working together in an effort to manage the power of a country, autocratic democracies allow for very easy and quick corruption due to a lack of checks and balances placed on the president. Autocracies can take shape in a lot of governing types depending on the country and their use of said governing types.

Voting

Voting is the way a person formally makes a choice between a set amount of options, in an election it is between however many representatives are running and being decided between at the time. Voting is the way each person in a country contributes in the election of their official leader. Democracies are the most notable governing system that use public voting as the deciding factor in their leadership. Online disinformation is significant to voting because the disinformation can potentially sway the way in which a person plans on voting for.

Propaganda

Propaganda is biased information, usually with deliberate intent, used to mislead people and is often used to promote a political ideal or opinion. Propaganda is not necessarily always inaccurate or spread with the intention of deceiving people, but the term is commonly used to describe advertisements with disinformation. Propaganda is especially important when looking at online disinformation because oftentimes the disinformation being spread during elections, especially online, is propaganda meant to benefit one party and damage others.

Background Information

Overview of Online Disinformation and Election Integrity

The issue at hand centers around the global challenge of online disinformation and its profound implications for the integrity of elections and human rights. With the media being flooded with disinformation, disinformation is becoming a prominent method of cognitive warfare. Often referred to as the sixth domain of conflict, it works by manipulating public opinion and fostering discontent towards governments. This strategic manipulation of public opinion by opposing political parties and terrorists not only threatens the democratic processes inherent in elections but also poses a broader risk to international relations and fundamental human rights.

Importance of maintaining election integrity

The significance of preserving election integrity cannot be overlooked, as it forms the foundation of a functioning democracy. It serves as the pillar that ensures the voices of citizens are heard, acting as a safeguard for their freedoms. However, the integrity of elections faces constant threats from various obstacles, notably from the widespread use of disinformation tactics by political opponents and foreign actors. Disinformation campaigns aim to manipulate public opinion, swaying voter opinions and challenging the authenticity of the electoral process. By addressing these obstacles, the preservation of election integrity becomes a means to shield countries, both developed and undeveloped, and the democratic foundation against new and growing threats.

Forms of online disinformation

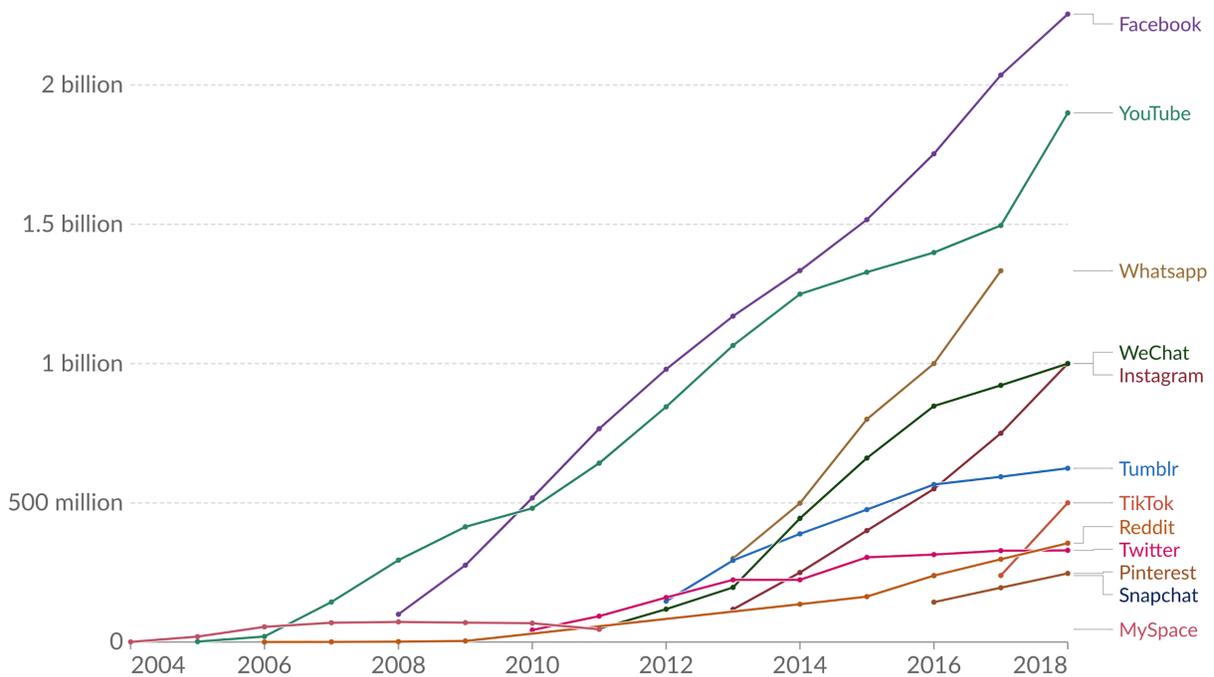
Disinformation comes in many forms, including: Fabricated Content, manipulated content, imposter content, misleading content, false context, satire and parody, false connections, sponsored content, propaganda, and errors. All these different forms influence opinions in different ways. Furthermore, with the rise in AI, new forms of misinformation and disinformation were formed. These can be identified as synthetic media. Synthetic media is especially concerning as it could amplify fake news, spread misinformation and distrust of reality. An example of synthetic media is the development of deepfakes, where a person's face or identity is replaced with another, usually for the purpose of mocking or degrading someone.

Impact of social media

The increasing influence of social media platforms, coupled with a lack of proper regulation, has given rise to a concerning trend where these platforms are weaponized by political opponents and groups who wish to destabilize or overthrow existing governments. This is concerning as the top five false election posts on Facebook had 560 to 960 thousand engagements, with thousands of posts shared daily. This extensive exposure to fake news, especially for those less educated or aware, poses significant dangers. The impact extends beyond misinformation, influencing public perceptions and decision-making. However, the influence of social media is not all negative, since platforms could also be used to spread information educating individuals and combating misinformation.

Number of people using social media platforms, 2004 to 2018

Estimates correspond to monthly active users (MAUs). Facebook, for example, measures MAUs as users that have logged in during the past 30 days. See source for more details.



Source: Statista and TNW (2019)

OurWorldInData.org/internet • CC BY

Caption #1: Graph of increasing social media use from 2004 to 2018

Fake News Is A Real Problem

Facebook engagement of the top five fake election stories*



Total Facebook engagement for top 20 election stories (August-election day)



* Engagement is measured as total number of shares, reactions and comments

@StatistaCharts Source: Buzzsumo via BuzzFeed

statista

Caption #2: Examples of election disinformation and the number of engagements

Challenges that will be faced when addressing the issue

With both advancements in technology and easier access to spreading information globally online, disinformation has become an increasingly challenging issue to tackle. In addition to challenges in solving the issue, there will be repercussions after solutions are implemented. Some possible examples of consequences to solutions are: political unrest from those who feel cheated (both those who did and didn't participate in the spread of disinformation), public unrest as discoveries of possibly unfair elections come out, potential trade agreements established by representatives who spread disinformation falling through, and many others depending on the severity of the issue prior to the solutions, the country itself, and the country's history.

Challenges in detecting and combating disinformation using technology

The relatively recent development of deep fakes and the popularity of social media has made the issues of disinformation consistently challenging to create solutions for. Most significantly with the spread of short form content, disinformation has become globally accessible. The fast spread of disinformation has made it easy for disinformation to quickly become interchangeable with the truth. As ideas spread and become popular, accurate information that could be used to fact check becomes harder to find as it is suppressed by the disinformation.

Along with the suppression of accurate information, deep fakes have become an issue. Although potentially easily detectable through simple code or AI, their quick spread makes it difficult to manage even once some are detected. Through this quick development of technology, the efforts to prevent its spread are rendered meaningless as the development of the disinformation outpaces that of the solutions. Although this doesn't mean that solutions to this issue are nonexistent or worthless, it does mean that it has become increasingly challenging to find and develop proper solutions to the spread of online disinformation during elections.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United States

The United States government is known to actively contribute insights and initiatives to combat online disinformation, emphasizing transparency and democratic values. They have a dedicated agency within the Bureau of Global Public Affairs, the Global Engagement Center, whose main purpose is to counter foreign propaganda and disinformation that is aimed at undermining political actions. Other agencies like the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), actively collaborate to protect the electoral process. There have also been past actions such as the Honest Ads Act, aimed to increase accountability for online political content, providing the public with more information about the sources of digital advertisements. However, there have also been concerns regarding the integrity of elections in the United States, with 57% of republicans believing that the current president was not legitimately elected.

Canada

Canada has established a framework consisting of four cornerstones aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity. The first is Elections Canada, A website that manages elections and actively contributes to the protection of electoral processes through comprehensive safeguards before, during, and after elections. The website also has a page dedicated to combating disinformation and foreign influence. Security agencies and partners collaborate to raise awareness about potential threats while also monitoring and investigating foreign interference. The Commissioner of Canada Elections plays a pivotal role in upholding accountability by investigating violations of the Canada Elections Act. Finally, the engagement of electors, political entities, and various organizations represent the society's commitment to ensuring a fair and transparent electoral system. On a national level, Canada has also established the Canada Elections Act which serves as the foundation, outlining the rights and responsibilities related to elections.

Japan

Japan emphasizes the global impact of online disinformation on human rights, actively participating in UN discussions. Currently the country is falling behind in dealing with the waves of disinformation threatening their democracy. Less than one fifth of the population is able to fact check news because of their lack of knowledge about technology and the internet, much lower than those in other Asian countries. In response, Japan is planning to utilize artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor and remove foreign disinformation from its servers. Additionally, the country is in the process of establishing dedicated information units within the Ground Self-Defense Force and the Maritime Self-Defense Force, incorporating cyber and communications capabilities, with both units expected to be operational within the next decade

Denmark

Denmark has also been a major force in combating disinformation and ensuring election integrity. Notably, the country established a task force dedicated to combating misinformation. In recent legislative amendments, Denmark made it illegal to influence public opinion while affiliated with a foreign government, aiming to mitigate the risks of foreign interference. Denmark has also partnered with other countries to address the issue. For example, The Danish government has been conducting media literacy campaigns with Sweden to educate their population on how to identify and avoid misinformation. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched an Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections as part of the Danish Government' Tech for Democracy initiative in May of 2022.

European Union (EU) Nations

The EU, as a regional organization, has formulated the EU Action Plan against Disinformation. The plan outlines a series of measures, including increased transparency in online platforms, supporting independent fact-checkers, and fostering international cooperation to counter disinformation. Through collaborative efforts, it aims to combat online disinformation, while sharing best practices and advocating for transparency in online platforms. In December 2020, The European Commission, an executive branch of the EU presented its European Democracy Action Plan which is deepened by The Defence of Democracy Package. Through regular discussions, the EU furthers their goal of maintaining transparent and honest elections in both more developed and developing countries.

Australia

Australia has taken significant steps to counter election integrity threats and disinformation. Australia has been combating election integrity and disinformation through the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) disinformation register which collects pieces of disinformation and compiles them, releasing them to the public. States like New South Wales (NSW) have followed suit by establishing their own registers to track and rebut prominent election-related disinformation. Notably, on February 22, 2021, the Digital Industry Group Inc. (DIGI) introduced The Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, that aimed to reduce the risk of online disinformation. This code was adopted by many major companies like Adobe, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Redbubble and TikTok. Australia, with various codes and guidelines on internet safety, emerges as a prominent player in the global effort to combat disinformation.

Georgia

The issue of misinformation and propaganda has historically been prominent in Georgia, reaching its peak in the 2005-2009 war with Russia. During this conflict, the country witnessed a surge in propaganda campaigns opposing NATO, the EU, and democratic principles. However, when internet use doubled in between 2013 and 2020, the problem escalated significantly with a surge in online platforms. Notably, there was an increase in defamation content targeting political candidates and instances of Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB). The government has actively engaged in international forums, sharing its challenges and experiences in countering disinformation.

Major tech companies (Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram)

Major tech companies like Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter/X play a significant role in addressing online disinformation. For example, since Facebook was the most prominent platform in Georgia, there were a significant number of anonymous pages that were created to discredit candidates, making it a key factor in the disinformation issue. Microsoft recently announced that they will take action towards protecting elections. This is after Meta allowed disinformation to spread on its platform during the 2020 elections and allowed content that questioned the 2022 Brazilian election. With AI changing the course of online disinformation, constant adaptation and collaboration among tech companies to mitigate its impact on the integrity of online platforms is required.

International Organizations (NGOs, IGOs)

International organizations and forums actively contribute to discussions. Reporters Without Borders is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to press freedom and protection of journalists and collaborates with the Human Rights Council to understand the effects of online disinformation on the world. Another example is the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a global organization that builds resilient democracies, a driving force in protecting election integrity. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) brings individuals from different stakeholder groups together to discuss digital public policy. These forums are hosted each year by the UN and result in national and global changes. These organizations conduct research, advocate for press freedom, and provide valuable insights into the fight for election integrity.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

The OSCE originally focused on monitoring elections however, it has evolved to become a key player in promoting democratic and transparent elections, through its OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. The OSCE plays a vital role in monitoring, observing elections, and addressing disinformation. It provides recommendations and guidelines for member states to strengthen election integrity. The organization is important because it forces the countries onto the negotiating table, making change possible. It also combats free speech through their Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFM), a watchdog on the media that discreetly combats hate speech projects.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
November 19th, 1991	A report of the Secretary General regarding United Nations electoral assistance is released. It states that periodic and genuine elections are a fundamental freedom(A/46/609).
June 15th, 2017	The European Parliament adopted a resolution on using legislative intervention to limit the proliferation of disinformation. Most notably, the resolution calls for social media platforms to strengthen measures to combat harmful online content and to provide tools for users to report false news.
April 19th, 2019	The official report titled 'Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election' confirmed Russian interference in the USA 2016 elections(Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election Volume I).
December 24th, 2021	The General Assembly adopts the resolution A/RES/76/227 on the subject of 'Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms'(United Nations).
August 12th, 2022	As a response to the request from the General Assembly, the Secretary-General released a report on countering disinformation(United Nations).
August 29th, 2023	Statista published the results of a global survey stating that a significant portion of adults use social media as a source for news consumption(Statista).

Relevant UN Resolutions and Treaties

- Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, 24 December 2021 (A/RES/76/227)
- The right to privacy in the digital age, 16 December 2020 (A/RES/75/176)
- Promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue and tolerance in countering hate speech (A/RES/75/309)

- Human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises (A/RES/17/4)
- Role of States in countering the negative impact of disinformation on the enjoyment and realization of human rights (A/HRC/49/L.31)
- Freedom of opinion and expression (A/HRC/44/L.18)
- The promotion and protection of human rights in the context of peaceful protests (A/HRC/44/L.11)

Possible Solutions

Supervision of elections. A process in which the United Nations will observe and review each step in a country's electoral process to measure its overall credibility. This method allows for direct UN involvement to observe and evaluate the election to find any significant usage of disinformation by any party. However, there are disagreements upon what actions to take when a party guilty of using disinformation is found. Additionally, such supervisions require more resources and a mandate from the General Assembly or the Security Council.

Technical assistance. A form of assistance where the UN provides legal, operational and logistic resources to a member state to improve electoral laws and institutions; it is also the most frequent form of UN electoral assistance. Providing technical assistance can help a government combat disinformation by giving credibility and endorsement to factual information during the election process but lacks any means to tackle the root causes of disinformation.

Teaching digital literacy. Encouraging the education of digital literacy is to teach individuals how to consume digital media analytically and to recognize false or misleading information. The process of educating the public can range from school curriculums to public service announcements (PSAs). While this does tackle the issue of disinformation at a fundamental level, it is not an immediate solution that can take effect in a short period of time.

Regulating social media platforms. Creating laws that regulate social medias and their algorithms in order to reduce the dissemination of disinformation. This can take the form of forcing social media companies to display verified news sources more often rather than displaying news that receives the most engagement on their platform. This method cuts down the means by which false information spreads but begins to fail when dealing with situations where the objective truth is unclear or when factual information is presented in a misleading manner.

Questions for Further Research

1. Do international alliances influence the incentives and spread of disinformation leading up to elections?
2. What roles do both internal and external funding play in the promotion of disinformation during your country's elections?
3. How will solutions to counteract any disinformation be received by both the public of your country and government representatives?
4. What regulations have been implemented in the past to regulate and monitor the information representatives and candidates have been promoting during elections?
5. Does the ruling party of your country significantly leverage misinformation for elections?
6. What laws does your country have on slander and libel?
7. What are some potential negative repercussions of attempting to limit the spread of disinformation within your country?
8. What are some of the economic impacts of the spread of online disinformation during elections within your country? Damage to trade agreements? Lack of support from large companies and/or the general public?
9. How has the general public within your country reacted to the spread of disinformation and/or political representatives who have been directly, and publicly, benefited by the spread of disinformation during their election process?

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