



Tech for Democracy



**PROMOTING
INFORMATION INTEGRITY
IN ELECTIONS:**
global reflections from
election stakeholders



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INTRODUCTION

Credible elections require space for exchange about competing perspectives and the often robust contest for votes. Stakeholders also need to inform, educate and persuade the public to exercise their right to vote – or be voted for – without manipulation, intimidation, and violence. **The spread of information pollution¹ has become a critical challenge in elections**, undermining trust in democratic processes, electoral management bodies, politicians, and the media.

Misinformation and disinformation disrupt the functioning of electoral processes in many ways, often accompanied by threats and online harassment of election officials, candidates, voters, the journalists who cover elections and the electoral observers and fact-checkers who monitor them.

Technology has revolutionized how candidates, electoral stakeholders and voters interact and engage with one another. It has the capacity to open pathways for political inclusion by providing virtual platforms of expression and information for often overlooked or unrepresented groups such as women or youth. Opposition parties have greater access to information about voters and the electoral process.

However, in recent years, **the optimism about the potential of social media to reinvigorate public engagement in elections has given way to an increased alarm about the risks that a largely unregulated information sphere poses to electoral integrity.**

Malicious actors increasingly have access to countless sophisticated tools to spread disinformation. With ‘deepfakes’ generated by artificial intelligence (AI) and programmed ‘bots’ manipulating content for political aims – along with hyper-targeted political messaging – disinformation is becoming increasingly difficult to counter as the pace of innovation accelerates.

These tactics are aimed to **influence electoral outcomes, foment discontent, target and marginalize certain groups, and delegitimize election processes.** By challenging the trust placed in electoral processes, manipulated information heightens the risk of disputed or rejected election results, sows political tension and can provoke social unrest and electoral violence.

1 Information Pollution is “verifiably false, misleading and manipulated content on and off-line, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause harm – namely the presence of disinformation, misinformation, [and] malinformation”. 2022 Strategic Guidance on Information Integrity, UNDP.

These **vulnerabilities are often exacerbated in less developed and more fragile contexts**, where societal resilience criteria such as media and digital literacy, an independent media, and strong, effective institutions may be lacking, or insufficiently nurtured.

Technology companies have embraced business models that amplify the appeal of malicious, emotive and sensational content. Faced with unsustainable business models, many traditional news outlets have adapted to remain viable. Independent news content has been diminished and, with it, a resultant disintegration of trust in news outlets that have previously been considered the gatekeepers of truth and accuracy. This **defunding and fragmentation of traditional media** has further enabled the spread of information pollution.

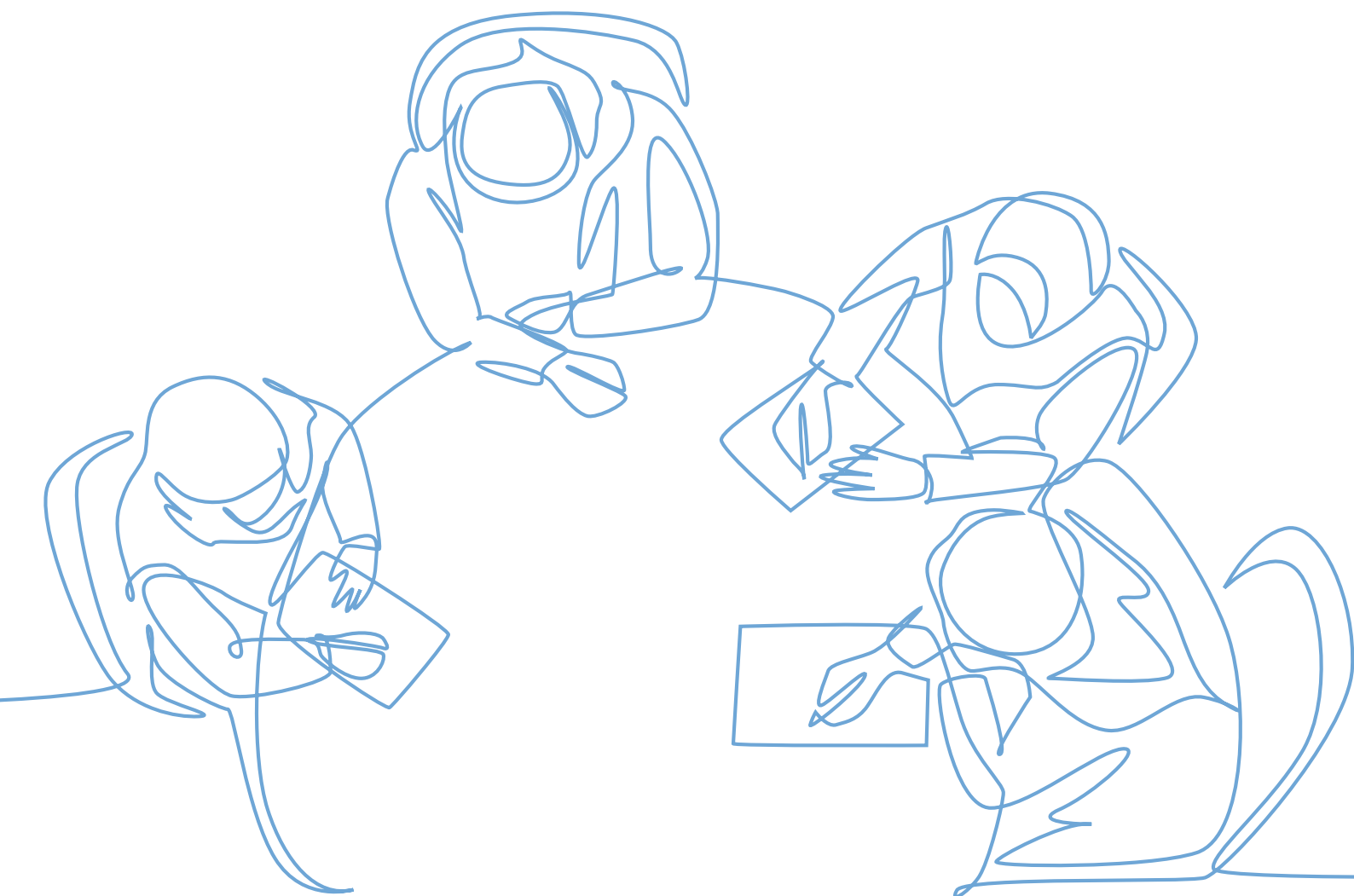
These fractured information ecosystems and the systems within them can be easily manipulated to undermine the authority of election management bodies (EMBs), promote polarization, distort public debate, manipulate voters and discourage participation in elections of certain underrepresented groups, especially women.²

When elections are credible, they can be a catalyst to bolster democratic governance, strengthen the role of the state and its institutions and uphold the rule of law. As such, **the smooth running of elections is dependent upon an open and inclusive information ecosystem**. This requires the circulation of trusted, impartial and accurate information from authorities, or from independent media, while allowing for debates and dialogue. However, it also requires online spaces that are free of opaque political manipulation.

2 Ingrid Bicu, 'Guidelines for Empowering Women in Elections Online. Case Study: Georgia', The Delian Project, 2022, https://www.delianproject.org/_files/ugd/f769a5_d5f5910c553a4281b372560cb4bada5d.pdf.

2. THE TECH FOR DEMOCRACY INITIATIVE

In November 2021, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Denmark launched the [Tech for Democracy Initiative](#), launching a year of action to promote multi-stakeholder dialogue focusing on the challenges at the intersection of technology, democracy and human rights, and to identify concrete actions and solutions in line with the [Copenhagen Pledge](#). The Tech for Democracy initiative has been working with governments, multilateral organizations, civil society organizations and the tech industry to make technology work for, not against, democracy and human rights, while upholding freedom of information and respecting individual privacy. Ten Action Coalitions focusing on intersecting issues were established to generate ideas and establish multi-disciplinary partnerships to transform visions into concrete actions and solutions. The Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections is one of these Action Coalitions, under the auspices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Denmark Tech for Democracy initiative.



3. ROLE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE ACTION COALITION

The Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections has convened key electoral assistance stakeholders, technology companies, government agencies, media and media development organizations, civil society organizations and academia, under the leadership of UNDP.

The Action Coalition is comprised of eight member organizations; **UNDP, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), PANOS Institute Southern Africa, Samir Kassir Foundation, Africa Freedom of Information Centre, Maharat Foundation, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and the Centre for Elections, Democracy, Accountability and Representation, University of Birmingham**, as well as participating experts. Action Coalition members, participating experts and invited guests contribute expertise and knowledge on effective responses to information pollution and hate speech in elections, including the role played by digital technologies.

The overarching aim of the Action Coalition is to produce actionable recommendations to optimize the positive potential of technologies, while minimizing harms; to strengthen the ability to assert democratic rights; and to enhance transparency and build trust in electoral processes.

The Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections set the following objectives:

- » To improve information sharing and coordination among key stakeholders who can contribute to electoral assistance and information integrity, including representatives from the technology sector.
- » To assess and understand the most concerning impacts of information pollution on electoral integrity through analysis of recently held elections.
- » To gather best practice, case studies and experience to contribute to the development of effective programmatic recommendations and guidance to support information integrity.
- » To critically assess how the integration of new information technology in electoral settings can best contribute to inclusive, participatory, transparent, and peaceful elections.

The Action Coalition convened from May to November 2022, holding a series of four online consultations and a four-week SparkBlue consultation, '[Promoting Information Integrity in Elections](#)'. Recent election case studies were also explored, specifically experiences in Lebanon, Brazil, Peru, Mexico and Kenya.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THESE FINDINGS

To provide effective recommendations, the Action Coalition has explored a range of programmatic options for promoting information integrity in future elections, with **the aim to inform and strengthen global, regional, and national level mechanisms for fostering information integrity in elections**. The findings and the recommendations are for a range of stakeholders working on electoral assistance and information integrity.

These findings also draw on additional data from across Coalition member programming and research initiatives in this field. The findings and recommendations are not exhaustive or prescriptive but aim to provide considerations for further discussion as this field continues to evolve. **While many of these recommendations are intended to be applicable across multiple contexts, it remains imperative to align any intervention to specific country needs, challenges and context.**

Despite extensive engagement from Action Coalition members, some limitations impacted the scope of these findings. Private sector participation was limited, particularly from tech companies or platforms such as Meta, TikTok and Google. In addition, the Action Coalition had limited time to engage, given the short timeframe of the current project.

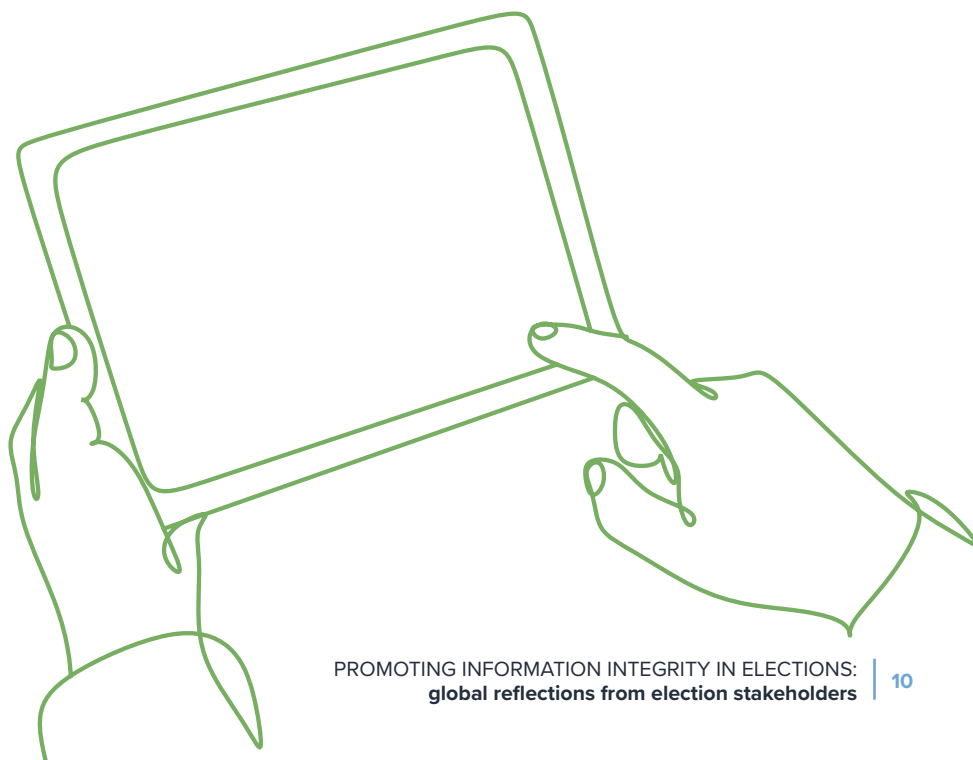


5. METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

These findings are the result of relevant research undertaken by UNDP and Action Coalition members and partners, Action Coalition online consultations, project documents, programme evaluations, academic research, key informant interviews and country case studies.

The following data sources have been utilized:

- i. Action Coalition online meetings/discussions
- ii. Contributions to the four-week SparkBlue consultation '[Promoting Information Integrity in Elections](#)'. This global online consultation explored key concerns and responses to elections-related information pollution in diverse contexts
- iii. Briefing documents for the massive online open course (MOOC) on [Information and Elections in the Digital Era](#)
- iv. Background documentation related to two of UNDP's digital tools, iVerify and eMonitor+ (see box below and in Section 5.3)
- v. UNDP's Sustaining Peace During Electoral Process (SELECT) Information Integrity Research Report (draft)
- vi. Key informant interviews with Action Coalition member and partner organizations, including civil society organizations, electoral support experts, media development actors and other interested stakeholders
- vii. A review of key resources focusing on information integrity and elections, including research and programming undertaken by Action Coalition members and partners.



6. KEY FINDINGS

The following findings were informed by online Action Coalition meetings, the SparkBlue online consultation and direct stakeholder engagement with both Action Coalition members and participating experts.³ Through this convening, discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of current interventions were discussed and thoughts on future innovations were proposed. This knowledge exchange served to elucidate the thematic areas presented below.

6.1. Existing and emerging challenges

New, affordable tactics available to anyone

State and non-state actors, international actors, PR companies, and others running disinformation campaigns are able to access increasingly advanced and affordable tools aimed at disrupting the information ecosystem. These **actors can target electoral processes from almost anywhere in the world.**

Political micro-targeted messaging

Tech companies' advertising and promotion services can be easily exploited to target specific groups with tailored messaging. **Political actors and their affiliates can now use micro-targeted advertising to sway the political views of precisely defined groups** based on a wide range of criteria such as political tendency, location, gender, and ethnicity. In this way, micro-targeting allows political actors to send different sets of messages to different groups. They can also aim to manipulate voters with misleading messages, including actively discouraging those who may oppose them from voting at all.⁴ The content of these micro-ads is generally poorly regulated.

Manipulation for hire: public relations, strategic communications and 'creative' agencies

The increasing demand for control over online narratives has created a burgeoning 'dark PR' industry seeking to gain profit by deploying manipulative practices and spreading information pollution through digital and mainstream media, often on behalf of political actors. These loosely titled 'creative' agencies or public relations companies are working as 'guns for hire', sowing discord and

3 Participating expert organizations include BBC Media Action, International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), UNESCO, experts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Denmark), and Microsoft.

4 The Civil Liberties Union for Europe, Solutions for Regulating Microtargeted Political Advertising, 2020, p.3, https://dq4n3btxmr8c9.cloudfront.net/files/fy69vA/Liberties_Online_Political_Advertising07Dec.pdf.

seeding false narratives. **These agencies can rapidly deploy online tactics to influence public opinion, harass individuals or push political agendas in both developed and developing countries.**⁵

This growing industry works with political actors, and national or foreign governments to further their aims, while providing sufficient distance from direct campaigning and allowing for plausible deniability of involvement. Once again, developing, conflict and post-conflict states, lacking capacity to effectively respond, are proving ready markets for those who seek to manipulate the information landscape in search of profit. The often-shadowy actions of these companies also increase the challenge for governments and EMBs to ensure transparency of political campaign financing.

Gendered disinformation

Gendered disinformation is actively discouraging participation of women in elections and in public life more broadly. **Online attacks, disinformation and harassment are disproportionately targeted towards women candidates, electoral officials and journalists.**⁶ Gender-focused attacks are part of a larger strategy to discredit elections but too often result in shutting down women's voices and democratic participation, especially online.

Underinvestment by social media companies

Social media and other large internet companies deprioritize non-strategic markets – often less developed countries – by investing far less in enforcing policies to counter harmful content and practices. This manifests in the lack of capacity to monitor local languages, a poor understanding of context and a general lack of response and oversight. Engaging with social media companies is challenging due to inaccessible and siloed structures, unclear or constantly evolving internal guidelines and a general lack of transparency regarding policies.⁷ More recently, public policy teams serving developing regions have been decimated by job losses and a reduction in departmental headcount.⁸ This has left many countries with little to no protection against the widespread production and dissemination of harmful content online.

5 Gur Megiddo and Omer Benjakob, "The people who kill the truth", Haaretz, 16 November 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2022-11-16/ty-article-static-ext/the-israelis-destabilizing-democracy-and-disrupting-elections-worldwide/00000186-461e-d80f-abff-6e9e08b10000>.

6 Ingrid Bicu and Hyowon Park, "Between sexual objectification and death threats: Electoral officials all over the world face unprecedented levels of disinformation, aggression and harassment," International IDEA, 24 November 2022, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/between-sexual-objectification-and-death-threats-electoral-officials-all-over-world>.

7 <https://www.ft.com/content/62805ce1-ac7d-4ef9-bf4b-99876960af08>

8 "Twitter lays off staff at its only Africa office in Ghana," 9 November 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63569525>.

The rise of messaging apps

The increased prevalence of private or semi-private messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Meta Messenger, Telegram, Line, Viber, Signal – many with encrypted end-to-end connectivity – poses new challenges for efforts to stem information pollution. **In these more private spaces, people are more likely to trust those sharing information as they have some connection to them.** As such, receivers of information pollution are more likely to believe the information and, therefore, share the content with their networks in real life and across platforms. **Organized influence campaigns increasingly use private and semi-private messaging platforms,** where oversight is limited and content moderation almost impossible.

Role of influencers

Online influencers are increasingly promoting narratives and messages in support of political actors. These individuals, with sometimes **massive online followings and significant influence,** can call into question the integrity of election mechanisms, or levy accusations of fraud or misfeasance about routine electoral processes (e.g., the trustworthiness of voting machines).⁹ Influencers can also work to persuade voters to distrust official sources of information and independent media while seeking to promote polarized information sources, effectively nudging voters to engage with parallel information networks.¹⁰

State responses that violate human rights

State legislative and non-legislative responses to disinformation are increasingly at odds with fundamental human rights. These include heavy-handed regulation, internet shutdowns, repressive cybercrime laws, and the surveillance of journalists, civil society organizations and human rights defenders can be used to **effectively silence critical voices and opposition candidates during electoral periods.** This muzzling of information and opinion infringes the right to freedom of expression and assembly and access to information.

Weakened legacy media

The importance of independent traditional media in elections remains a core consideration, especially in countries where television and radio particularly remain valued sources of information.

However, traditional media outlets face several interlinked challenges to their financial sustainability and credibility. The media industry has been greatly

9 “Parallel Public Spheres: Influence Operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections,” 4 November 2022, <https://internews.org/resource/parallel-public-spheres-influence-operations-in-the-2022-philippine-elections>.

10 Diane Jeantet, “Brazilian voters bombarded with misinformation before vote,” 25 October 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/jair-bolsonaro-caribbean-social-media-brazil-b75e51f515b0a708800198afa1b8601d>.

undermined in recent years, in large part due to the diversion of advertising revenue to online platforms. Local and community media are particularly vulnerable to these market forces, creating dangerous information gaps at the local level. This has resulted in a number of detrimental knock-on effects. Facing shrinking revenue, independent media can be forced to make drastic cuts to staffing and capacity or rely on the patronage of business and political elites. State-owned and public media remain poorly funded and therefore more susceptible to government and other pressure to skew electoral coverage. This is especially true of political reporting, which can be seen as a high risk undertaking in volatile contexts due to threats of harm as well as malicious legal action directed against journalists and media outlets.¹¹ Harassment, attacks and killings of journalists and subsequent impunity for these crimes have been increasing over the past several years and is particularly problematic during elections.¹²

These structural challenges are leading to lower salaries, diminished professional status, limited opportunities for advancement, and high personal risk for journalists. They have also resulted in **media intentionally or unintentionally amplifying information pollution, increased editorial bias, self-censorship and an erosion of core journalistic principles**. Thus, the ability to create in-depth, professional public-interest journalism has been curtailed, further eroding trust in traditional media as a reliable source of information. All of this can become even more pronounced in contentious political processes such as elections.

Capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs)

EMBs are often under-resourced, unprepared, and not sufficiently capacitated, and can lack the structures and mechanisms to meet the challenge of election-related information manipulation. This can leave EMBs ill-equipped to safeguard the integrity and transparency of elections, particularly when those processes are particularly contentious, strategic or politically complex. **Safeguarding information integrity in elections, in an increasingly complex information landscape requires appropriate capabilities, dedicated activities, and a commitment to resourcing**. EMBs are often obliged to redirect resources from other aspects of election organization to protect the integrity of the process and the EMB themselves from online political attacks.

11 Roberto Heycher Cardiel Soto, Executive Director of Electoral Training and Civic Education, National Electoral Institute, Mexico noted in Action Coalition meeting (3) that security of journalists is key for fact checking and countering disinformation. Threats to journalists in Mexico for example, led to a decrease of their capacity and willingness to operate as fact checkers during recent elections.

12 See Africa Freedom of Information Centre, <https://africafoicentre.org> and Committee to Project Journalists, https://cpj.org/data/killed/?status=Killed&motive=Confirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&motive=Unconfirmed%5B%5D=Unconfirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&type%5B%5D=Media%20Worker&start_year=1992&end_year=2022&group_by=year.

6.2. Programmatic considerations

The need for more pre-emptive and longer-term interventions

Attempts to counter malign practices in the information environment around elections are often deployed too late. Those intending to influence elections often begin those efforts many months in advance and well before most election funding streams are accessible. It is also increasingly evident that **electoral information pollution does not begin at the commencement of an election period, nor does it end at the announcement of results.** Polarization resulting from contested elections does not necessarily dissipate and can cause ongoing challenges to stability long after an election result has been declared.

Effective convening and partnerships

Strengthening electoral processes by recognizing and responding to malicious information operations that threaten the smooth running of elections requires a diverse range of organizations working together to form effective partnerships and collaborations. Convening key stakeholders serves an important function not only for coordinated responses to immediate threats but also for knowledge and best practice sharing, streamlining communications with internet platforms, identifying key areas for research or evaluation, and designing innovative interventions. **Bringing organizations working on electoral assistance together, including civil society organizations, international electoral support organizations, EMBs, the media, multilateral organizations, and other democratic actors can lead to new partnerships, research and technical cooperation.**

Risks of over-reliance on digital and online solutions

The rise of digital tools and online strategies in elections is not without reason. They offer a low-cost way to enhance strategic communication, data analytics, voter engagement, media monitoring and other critical tasks. Nonetheless, it is worth being cognisant of what new gaps and challenges they can create. In the case of strategic communication, for example, this investment can deflect resources away from more traditional engagement networks and strategies, potentially widening the digital divide and leaving certain communities underserved or isolated. It can also increase vulnerability to internet shutdowns, DDOS (distributed denial of service) attacks and other efforts to restrict or disrupt online access.¹³

13 During the Action Coalition (2) Vusumuzi Sifile from Panos Institute noted that in Zambia during the implementation of iVerify, opposition and civil society were prepared for internet shutdown, so it had minimal impact.

Digital tools are often typically designed as a one-solution-fits-all. Their usefulness in specific contexts requires careful analysis and deployment based on actual needs and objectives.¹⁴ **Coupling digital tools with strong coordination mechanisms, appropriate local partners, solid sustainability plans, and public outreach strategies can also enhance their impact.**

iVerify

iVerify is an automated fact-checking tool designed and implemented by UNDP in partnership with the European Union. iVerify combines artificial intelligence (AI) functionality with manual/editorial inputs and is used to identify false information in order to minimize and prevent its spread. In 2021, iVerify was piloted in Zambia and Honduras. In 2022, Kenya, in the run up to recent elections, became the third country to utilize the iVerify platform.

Noting the lack of robust evaluation of election-focused tools aimed at combating mis and disinformation, UNDP undertook an evaluation of iVerify in the 2022 election in Kenya. The evaluation focused on relevance, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of iVerify. Findings from the evaluation report in late 2022 assessed both positive contributions as well as areas for improvement and further innovation. While iVerify was seen as relevant and sustainable, the impact of the tool was hampered by the short implementation timeframe that resulted in lack of awareness and, therefore, buy-in by key stakeholders, specifically journalists and civil society organisations. The evaluation report noted that the iVerify platform “could be most beneficial if it is perceived as an independent verification tool which is available year-round, not only in general elections.”

Engagement with technology companies

Technology companies have a role and responsibility in ensuring that their platforms are not being used to threaten the integrity of democratic processes. Working towards minimizing these harms requires constructive engagement between technology companies and electoral stakeholders. This currently is extremely challenging, if not impossible, in many countries outside the U.S. and Europe. EMBs and government institutions in small or developing countries have reported their inability to even make initial contact with technology companies, let alone develop meaningful engagement processes.

14 During the Action Coalition meeting (1), Vusumuzi Sifile from Panos Institute noted that implementation of AI platforms must also account for the fact that many people are offline. Contextualizing the deployment of such platforms is critical if we do not want to further increase the digital divide.

Learning and evaluation

Information integrity in elections is an evolving space for research and programming. Understanding the complex dynamics at play requires further investigation. **Practical, programmable actions to address election-related information pollution are scattered and do not, as yet, benefit from a strong learning agenda.**

Developing interventions to promote information integrity in elections with more robust evaluation methods of this programming need to be undertaken to encourage innovation, cross-fertilization and improved programme design.

6.3. Analysis of current programmatic approaches

It can seem like the purveyors of disinformation are always ahead of the game vis-a-vis countering efforts. Programmes to tackle disinformation are increasingly being implemented, the design of new multi-pronged tools and partnerships are developing, and the innovation and evaluation of current tools will need to continue to evolve.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking initiatives have been used extensively to identify and counter false information. While valid concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness and impact of these programmes, fact-checking remains a primary corrective tool to counter information pollution, hold power to account, and hinder the impunity of political actors who perpetuate false narratives.

There are numerous considerations to be taken into account regarding fact-checking initiatives. For example, which organizations are best suited (media, civil society, academia, etc.). Not all organizations have the capacity to run fact-checking programmes. **Quality fact-checking tends to be resource- and time-intensive and requires a specific skillset. Independence and trustworthiness of fact-checking initiatives is critical to their success.** However, they can themselves become the target of disinformation seeking to discredit the organizations involved or sow confusion or mistrust. In some instances, political bias has established itself within fact-checking networks and fake fact-checking initiatives have been established, undermining the credibility and authority of the sector as a whole.

Poorly executed fact-checking initiatives can serve to discredit the approach. Too often, failed or faulty fact-checking programmes are repeated without an assessment or an evaluation of impact. An evidence-based assessment of different fact-checking models in diverse contexts is required. Fact-checking can also benefit greatly from AI and digital innovation to evolve beyond the labour-intensive, low-impact models that are often replicated.

Social listening

Fully or partly automated ‘social listening’,¹⁵ big data analysis and social media analysis has proved effective at identifying trends in information pollution, hate speech and topical narratives more broadly. Its use for the tracking of specific electoral violations (e.g., eMonitor+ in Lebanon (see box)) has been encouraging.¹⁶

However, there are limitations to automated online social listening. Quantitative data is open to distortion due to closed APIs,¹⁷ synthetic content generated by AI, language issues, savvy workarounds and the proliferation of audio and video content that evades many current tools. The move away from the open internet to closed site and encrypted messaging also raises questions about the relevance of the data available on the public-facing internet. Likewise, closed online spaces are generally not accessible to large-scale social listening techniques, yet significant and embryonic trends emerge from these spaces. Therefore, what constitutes a ‘trending’ topic online may not reflect wider public opinion, or even the full spectrum of discussion happening online.

Too much emphasis has been placed on quantitative data based on key word searches and hashtags (in multiple community languages), and these quantitative results need to be further enhanced with qualitative data sources. Social listening, however, is generally, a costly, complex undertaking with ethical considerations around individual privacy and therefore requires robust design and oversight.¹⁸

15 ‘Social listening’ is the monitoring of social media and other online discussion forums to identify trends on specific topics and issues.

16 Matt Bailey from IFES noted in Action Coalition meeting (4) that IFES had tested social listening in two projects in Kenya, working with vulnerable communities. In one project, the tool was used for “ethnographic work”. In the other they engaged with locally training AI to detect hate speech to inform risk mitigation. Both, focusing on talking with impacted communities, proved to be useful to gather qualitative insights from local communities and specific groups of society.

17 Platforms with closed APIs (application programming interfaces) restrict access to the data that can be analysed or utilized by third parties.

18 As pointed out by Harriet Dwyer in the UNDP SparkBlue consultation in October/November 2022.

eMonitor+

eMonitor+ is a suite of digital tools developed by UNDP's Regional Bureau of Arab States to monitor digital media platforms using artificial intelligence tools. eMonitor+ deploys fact checking and social listening in tandem, to scan and monitor digital media and flag issues such as electoral violations, hate speech, political polarization and online violence against women during elections. The platform is already being used by media and electoral commissions in Tunisia, Lebanon and Libya and by CSOs in Peru and currently works in five languages: Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

eMonitor+ leverages artificial intelligence (AI) to track and analyse content on digital media, including employing various algorithms to, for example, conduct sentiment analysis, topic modelling, hate speech analysis, bots scanning and reverse image verification of photographic and video sources. The platform also facilitates manual analysis of digital media, which is done by trained monitors in partner organizations. The results of the data analysis are then visualized on an online platform and dashboard, which are published on external and social media platforms to inform the public and guide the strategic and action plans of partner organizations.

Media capacity building

Public interest media is facing numerous challenges. While professional, ethical journalism is expensive and time-consuming to produce, information pollution requires none of the ethical standards expected of professional journalists. Safeguarding the role played by the media remains essential to hold power to account, disavow the impunity of public officials who seek to create, sponsor or disseminate information pollution and uphold the guiding tenets of freedom of expression. **As media continues to evolve, traditional media programming must also be maintained and invested in to ensure that these outlets are able to remain relevant.** This requires significant time and resources including staff capacity building.

Digital and media information literacy and civic education

Longer-term media and information literacy (MIL) interventions should be considered to strengthen voter and civic education and build resilience against information pollution. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that much MIL programming is also innovative and experimental and encompasses similar thematic/programmatic areas (i.e., education, media capacity building, strategic communications, etc.).¹⁹ The expected impact of MIL programmatic interventions

19 Matt Bailey from IFES noted in Action Coalition meeting (4) that there is a need for more human-centred design. There are different levels of social media literacy, language issues etc. and it is critical to include users in the very beginning of designing a product.

should therefore be carefully assessed. However, MIL offers an opportunity to provide pre-emptive programming before organised information pollution outfits are established, and disinformation campaigns have begun to take seed.

Prebunking

Prebunking is an extension of the broader field of digital and information literacy and is based on the theoretical idea of ‘inoculation’, by warning people about the types of information pollution they may be exposed to. This preventive measure is designed to expose people to the kind of false information they may encounter. The falsehood is, according to this model, ‘prebunked’ and, therefore, resilience to false or manipulated information is increased.²⁰ This relatively new programmatic area aims to build pre-emptive resilience rather than attempting to counter false information after it has gained traction (i.e., by fact-checking or debunking).

Prebunking is reliant upon a content-focused programmatic response.²¹ That is, the ‘prebunk’ takes the form of a video, graphic, game or radio/television fact-based show or drama. This content then has to be distributed widely enough to have an impact. Effective content creation is a challenging process and requires specific skills. In addition, distribution of the prebunking content also poses challenges, similar to the issues faced with the distribution of information and content from fact-checking initiatives.

Monitoring and evaluation

More effective programming requires extensive M&E to evaluate the implementation and results of electoral support information integrity programming. **Numerous interventions aimed at countering information pollution have been trialled at the local level but there are limited data, research or analysis regarding impact or possibilities for further innovation.²²** The nature of the fast-evolving information landscape means that programmatic interventions are often hastily deployed, and follow-up is not always robust. Opportunities for learning and innovation are being lost and new trends in information pollution are often slow to be identified.

20 Fred Lewsey, ‘Social media experiment reveals potential to ‘inoculate’ millions of users against misinformation’, University of Cambridge, 24 August 2022, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/inoculateexperiment>.

21 Anna Godfrey mentioned in Action Coalition meeting (3) that BBC Media Action is trialing whether video content on social media in North Africa can be used to effectively build up people’s resilience to some forms of misinformation.

22 Mark Belinsky from UNDP ExO digital Office noted in the SparkBlue consultation how innovation programming requires re-thinking and re-design of traditional M&E frameworks, in this instance, iVerify.

Election observation (domestic and international)

Election monitoring initiatives are well placed to incorporate the detection of electoral disinformation in their activities. For example, monitoring of online and traditional media, both by international and national election observers, can detect trends and narratives seeking to undermine electoral integrity. **Through effective coordination with other stakeholders, election observers can play an important role** in raising the alarm and advocating to tech companies and others for effective and rapid responses.²³

Building trust

Supplying accurate, trustworthy information that reaches people at scale is key to the response to information pollution. Improving trust in electoral systems and actors is a key, preventative measure to counter information pollution and enhance information integrity in elections.²⁴ More research is required to understand what drives people's trust and engagement with information sources.²⁵ Understanding what conditions are challenging or diminish trust in elections is also important.²⁶ Likewise, **continuously understanding which groups of people engage with information pollution and their underlying reasons and motivations can establish strong guidelines for response**, both to fortify trustworthy sources of information and build trust in institutions (e.g., media, EMBs) and for countering information pollution.

23 See 'Exposing disinformation through election monitoring', CEPPS Countering Disinformation project, <https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/monitoring/complete-document-election-monitoring>.

24 Australian Electoral Commission, Reputation Management Strategy, 2021, https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/files/electoral-integrity-reputation-management-strategy-2021.pdf.

25 J. Densley in the SparkBlue consultation noted that when trust is low (in government officials, police, media, politicians etc.), the public is more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation.

26 Therese Pierce Laanela and Peter Wolf, 'Pillars of Trust in Elections', International IDEA, 21 December 2022, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/pillars-trust-elections>.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS: A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER ACTION PLAN

7.1. Lessons learned: Cross-cutting recommendations

- » **Longer-term, more agile programmatic interventions:** Longer-term interventions such as effective media and information literacy (MIL) programming, media/journalism capacity building, effective convening and building the capacity of electoral management bodies are critical to building resilience against information pollution.
- » **Fact-checking:** Fact-checking remains a key tool to counter information pollution, but innovation is required to build effective partnerships and further integrate emerging technological tools.
- » **Convening:** More opportunities for collaboration, coordination, and the building of partnerships for knowledge sharing and the discussion of best practices would forge new initiatives and innovative approaches.
- » **Monitoring and evaluation (M&E):** More robust evaluation of programming is required to allow for innovation within programming areas for adaptive, sustainable and effective interventions to be undertaken. A thorough risk assessment should be carried out before fact-checking programmes are initiated.²⁷
- » **Engagement with technology companies:** There is a need for national level institutions and international support actors to foster the further engagement of technology companies with EMBs, civil society, fact-checking operations and electoral support organizations.

7.2. Governments and media regulatory authorities

- » Codes of conduct should be created for all organized content producers, including for bloggers, talk show hosts, social media programme producers and podcast producers to ensure all content producers are held to these ethical standards, while respecting freedom of expression.
- » Codes of conduct for political parties, candidates and supporters should be developed, including comprehensive guidelines on the ethical use of media and communications during elections, including social media. Codes can be voluntary, non-binding or mandatory, but should allow for a political party to take responsibility for any violations.

27 This was reiterated in the UNDP Kenya: Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Countering Disinformation: iVerify Platform Pilot Evaluation Report.

- » Campaign finance: In light of increased online campaign expenditures by political parties and candidates, governments and stakeholders are encouraged to consider measures to provide transparency, information sharing and oversight of online campaign finance to help reduce abuses, manipulation of voters and corruption.
- » Increased inter-governmental efforts to guide governments in adopting measures, in line with international human rights, to prevent abuse online will help hold political and economic elites and chief architects of information pollution accountable.
- » The legal frameworks supporting information integrity laws should be strengthened. The regulation of information such as content blocking or removal, defamation and hate speech, political finance regulation, and regulation of technology or social media companies must be weighed against fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech and access to information. Furthermore, any measures taken should ensure that they are not unjustly curtailed under the guise of censorship or other similar tactics.

7.3. Electoral management bodies

- » EMBs should build programmes and capacities to promote information integrity and to enhance their capacity to defend the credibility of the EMB and the electoral process from attacks to undermine trust in electoral processes or to suppress voting.²⁸ EMBs should support fact-checking initiatives, implement strategic communications initiatives, including voter education, undertake or support research to identify disinformation threats and undertake related strategic and crisis planning.
- » Relationships should be established with internet and technology companies early in the electoral cycle, and in coordination with media regulatory authorities, in order to plan effectively. EMBs should seek commitments from internet and social media companies to, for example, respond to and minimise inauthentic behaviour online, boost or promote official impartial information and work with civil society and fact-checking organizations as well as established, independent media.
- » EMBs should establish and maintain a professional, skilled workforce, including communications staff. Staff should be inclusive of the societies they serve, including women and, where relevant, diverse personnel including, where applicable, representatives from ethnic and religious groups, linguistic minorities, indigenous people, youth, women and people with disabilities. This will allow for greater ability to design interventions

28 For example, The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) recently published “[Electoral Integrity: Reputation Management Strategy](#)” aimed at maintaining trust in and the reputation of the (Australian) electoral process, which includes strategic communications framework and information integrity principles.

that adequately respond to the concerns of the community and, therefore, build trust in the work of the EMB.²⁹

7.4. International electoral support partners

- » There should be more pre-emptive, international assistance before organized information pollution efforts are mobilized and have begun to take seed.
- » The convening of stakeholders engaged in upholding election integrity, including EMBs, election monitors, media, representatives from technology companies, relevant government officials, security forces etc. should be organized and ready to respond to information pollution in proactive and collaborative ways. Response to threats should be timely, with policies and practices in place ahead of time. Increased support for coordination and convening is critical to address disinformation threats as they arise.
- » More applied research is needed to understand and analyse both the positive and negative impacts of technology and social media on elections and adapt to the various contexts, including the potential of AI to empower independent journalism, identify and remove harmful content and to deliver targeted voter education content.³⁰
- » More diverse sets of tools to mitigate harms and to support democratic processes are required including effective and adaptive monitoring and evaluation frameworks to evaluate the impact of new and innovative programmatic interventions.³¹
- » Multi-stakeholder monitoring and fact-checking partnerships strengthened (including media, technology companies, telecoms, academia, civil society,

29 Dr. Mwaffak Al Yaffi, member of Lebanese Supervisory Committee for Elections noted in Action Coalition meeting (2) that it was particularly important to include youth in the work of EMBs.

30 MOOC, "[Information and Elections in the Digital Era](#)," organized by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, UNESCO and UNDP, [2022](#).

31 The UNDP Kenya: Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Countering Disinformation: iVerify Platform Pilot Evaluation Report was undertaken to address the need to both design a framework for evaluating technology-based fact-checking tools as well as evaluating the iVerify implementation during the election in Kenya in 2022. In terms of the implementation in Kenya, the project was evaluated as relevant and sustainable, but its short timeframe and some deficiencies in implementation showed that more focus needs to be placed on partnerships and promoting buy-in from media and journalists.

religious organizations, etc.) should be created to increase broad-based local buy-in and extensive public awareness and engagement.³²

- » A robust assessment of existing local stakeholder capacity and coordination mechanisms for information integrity programmes should be undertaken.³³ Mapping the information landscape as part of any assessment of electoral conditions and needs is also an important pre-emptive step, including social listening, trend monitoring and mapping of stakeholders and their capacities. This would allow for an investigation of: What does information pollution look like at the local level? Who is creating it? Where is it taking hold? What flashpoints can be identified? What specific role does media, civil society, relevant government institutions play? What interventions would be likely to succeed (fact-checking/debunking, strategic communications, capacity building for key institutions, longer term interventions such as MIL, etc.). The ability to acquire skilled personnel or provide training for individuals and organizations to undertake these assessments is also key.
- » Provide additional support and identify innovative ways to support vulnerable individuals and groups, such as women and minority groups, that can be disproportionately affected by harassment and threats in various electoral roles, including candidates and election officials.
- » Technological innovations such as AI should be investigated to gain qualitative as well as quantitative insights at the local level, including scrutinizing emerging trends, synthetic media and the use of video-based platforms.
- » Increased efforts to implement social listening programming is required, taking into account:
 - Social listening should be deployed early in the election cycle to provide pre-emptive identification of existing harmful narratives as well as potential areas for escalation and manipulation.
 - Qualitative listening, utilizing local knowledge and communities, should be deployed (e.g., ethnographic interviews, focus group discussions) alongside quantitative social listening to provide nuance and context, and to test and validate the results of online monitoring.

32 In Action Coalition meeting (3), Iván Esquivá – Chief Technical Advisor, UNDP Honduras noted the need for fact-checking operations to be financially independent (from government) and display a high level of integrity/ lack of conflicts of interest or perceptions of such. Partnerships with academia for implementation of iVerify were deemed to be less politicized than those with other sectors. David Hidalgo, news director and co-founder of the investigative site Ojo Público, noted that eMonitor+ is implemented using volunteers, partly for reason of integrity and independence.

33 As highlighted in the UNDP Kenya: Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for Countering Disinformation: iVerify Platform Pilot Evaluation Report, “feasibility of the project research should continue to be done either independently or in close consultation with the local, regional, and national media representatives and communication professionals to ensure there is a clear need and benefit for iVerify implementation”.

7.5. Political actors

- » Candidates and other political leaders from across the spectrum should mutually agree on, or voluntarily commit to, standards of responsible leadership and behaviour during electoral processes, including with regard to online activities. Candidates and political parties should commit to the provisions laid out in the United Nations Secretary General report A/76/266 on strengthening elections.³⁴
- » Political stakeholders (as well as civil society actors and the media) should have access to training and information regarding the uses and potential misuse of digital platforms, to enhance transparency and accountability.

7.6. Internet and social media companies

- » Internet and technology companies should establish relationships with EMBs, electoral support organizations and civil society early in the electoral cycle, in order to plan effective partnerships.
- » Technology and social media companies need to work in close collaboration with the international electoral support community to mitigate online dangers, particularly in high-risk elections and especially in less developed countries, regardless of market size.
- » Technology companies should provide transparency on the use of technology for effective monitoring, especially when elections have been flagged by the international community as being high-risk.
- » Social media companies should contribute to robust, pre-emptive, participatory, conflict-sensitive analyses of local contexts and information landscapes in advance of elections.
- » Technology companies should provide react in a timely manner to inauthentic behaviour, in accordance with their policies, and take action against inauthentic accounts or groups of accounts that incite violence or spread information pollution.
- » Technology companies should work to counter limitations due to inability of platforms to monitor local languages, and/or partner with local, innovative, start-up solutions that can provide linguistic support.

34 “Strengthening the role of the United Nations in enhancing periodic and genuine elections and the promotion of democratization : report of the Secretary-General”, UNSG 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3937749?ln=en>.

7.7. Media and journalism:

- » Journalists and media organizations should produce accurate and impartial elections reporting, avoiding the use of inciteful language or audio/visual content.
- » Organizations representing journalists should provide a code of conduct for covering elections, including ethical principles such as sourcing, fact-checking and do no harm principles.
- » Organizations representing journalists should ensure that the media has the basic tools to cover elections responsibly, including knowledge of electoral processes and basic information regarding electoral regulations, laws, processes, etc.
- » Facilitate the pooling of resources during elections and the cross-posting of relevant editorial content on social media channels. Media organizations should lead or participate in multi-stakeholder mechanisms such as fact-checking initiatives, voter education, debunking, prebunking etc.



8. THE ACTION COALITION ON INFORMATION INTEGRITY IN ELECTIONS: CONTINUITY OF ENGAGEMENT AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Safe, fair and credible elections continue to face new and emerging challenges from information pollution. Tools available to malicious actors intent on disrupting the information ecosystem around elections continue to develop apace, and responses to counter these threats require ongoing, multisectoral collaboration.

The Action Coalition on Information Integrity in Elections continues to strive to play an important role as a collaborative knowledge exchange for research, innovations in programming and up-to-date thinking for electoral support partners globally.





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