Please see the full Summary Collection and related contents in The Communication Initiative and La Iniciativa de Comunicación and UNESCO websites.

SUMMARY

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Electoral management bodies and political party activists will find this summary of particular interest

Editors:
Kalina Bontcheva
& Julie Posetti

Contributing authors:
Kalina Bontcheva
Julie Posetti
Denis Teyssou
Trisha Meyer
Sam Gregory
Clara Hanot
Diana Maynard

Summary of the study:
Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression

Chapter on:

Electoral Responses to Disinformation

" *The scrutiny during election periods, through political advertising transparency and increased fact-checking, is considered an incentive for political candidates not to use disinformation as a communication strategy.* "

Excerpt from the original Report

BROADBAND COMMISSION
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Background:

This global study maps diverse international responses to disinformation, along with the impacts of counter-disinformation measures on the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Featuring case study examples from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was published in the context of the 10th anniversary of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, which was co-founded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Disinformation is a challenge to freedom of expression and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relevant to the Broadband Commission (specifically, SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, and SDG 16.10 on public access to information and fundamental freedoms).

The report introduces a typology of disinformation responses that are categorised by their aim of targeting particular aspects of the problem, rather than in terms of the actors behind them (e.g., internet companies).

This particular summary focuses on election responses:

 Electoral responses are designed specifically to detect, track, and counter disinformation that is spread during elections. This highlights the multi-dimensional approach required in order to combat election-related disinformation, with its specific potential to damage the institutions of democracy. It follows that this category of responses, due to its very nature, typically combines monitoring and fact-checking, legal, curatorial, technical, and other responses.

Regulatory interventions that seek to channel behaviours of political actors include election and political campaign advertising rules.This kind of paid content can be distributed as messages on social networks, within closed chat apps, and in the form of memes, videos, and images to persuade, mobilise, or suppress voters and votes. Such advertising is intended to affect people's political opinions and voter turnout or suppression. To that end, some responses to electoral disinformation aim at political actors (including political parties) themselves - by requiring them to meet new obligations for transparency in online political campaigning, such as the labelling of political advertising and/or by increasing fact-checking endeavours during election periods. Parties are sometimes requested to explicitly pledge that they will eschew disinformation.

Other responses consist of updating existing legislation in order to diminish abuses of free expression and to regulate elections in order to limit the impact

of disinformation on the ability of voters to make informed decisions. Additional initiatives focus on informing the general public about identified disinformation claims in an electoral context. Some debunking initiatives are actively set up for electoral periods, such as the website led by the Brazil Superior Electoral Court in the run-up to the 2018 general elections.

Further examples of specific types of electoral responses include Australia's Parliament Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters: Democracy and Disinformation, Ireland's Interdepartmental Group on 'Security of the Electoral Process and Disinformation', and the Organization of American States (OAS)' "Guide to Guarantee Freedom of Expression Regarding Deliberate Disinformation in Electoral Contexts" [PDF].

Responses have also enrolled citizens in helping them discover, report, and act upon electoral disinformation. One example is the real411.org portal created in cooperation with the Electoral Commission of South Africa. Another is the Italian government's "red button" portal, where citizens could report disinformation to a cyber police unit.

Journalistic actors have responded to election-related disinformation with investigative reporting and forensic analysis of the data, while fact-checking organisations have undertaken electoral-specific projects. The other major respondents to electoral disinformation are internet companies. For example, in 2020, debate erupted concerning divergent approaches of Twitter and Facebook to fact-checking and identifying disinformation associated with the then United States (US) President's claims about electoral processes.

Several electoral-specific responses around the world involve collaboration on the part of the media. For example, the Mexican Verificado, led by Animal Politico, Newsweek in Spanish, Pop Up Newsroom, and AJ+ Spanish, aimed to debunk "fake news" and verify the political discourse during the Mexican 2018 election campaign. It involved more than 60 media, civil society organisations, and universities together working to help citizens decide whom to vote for based on confirmed, accurate information.

There are multiple ongoing challenges surrounding election disinformation and voter targeting and manipulation. For instance, internet companies need to balance their dual responsibilities to uphold freedom of expression rights and to flag, curtail, and block disinformation and misinformation during election periods, while facing mounting pressure from powerful political actors to be treated as exceptions to the rules.
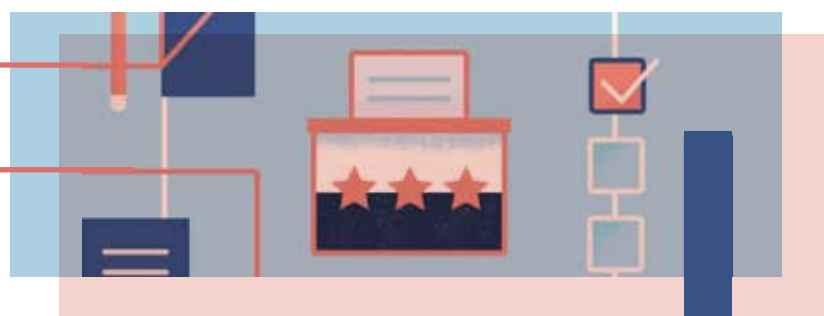
The Balancing Act offers recommendations for various actors countering electoral disinformation, including:

Governments and international organisations - Work with internet companies to ensure the responses that they initiate are transparent, measurable, and implemented on a truly global scale.

Internet companies - Collaborate on improving their ability to detect and curtail election disinformation, as cross-platform methods of manipulation are often practiced during elections.

Electoral regulatory bodies and national authorities - Improve transparency of all election advertising by political parties and candidates by requiring comprehensive and openly available advertising databases and disclosure of spending by political parties and support groups.

Media and independent fact-checking organisations - Consider expanding fact-checking during elections to live broadcasts and webcasts to enable greater reach and impact.

A concluding recommendation on electoral responses directed toward the Broadband Commission but also of wider relevance:

> **"** *Encourage member companies to consider swift and decisive responses to political and electoral disinformation, as has happened in the field of COVID-19 related disinformation, with due regard to the difference between these two subject fields.* **"**