



The stakes for democracy: Tackling disinformation and promoting electoral integrity

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Democracy depends on the free flow of information to empower the public to make choices, especially but not only in electoral periods. However, democratic processes and institutions come under pressure when the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information distorts public debate and casts doubt on facts and evidence. This exacerbates tensions and makes societal consensus on complex issues harder to achieve.

And the wider context is indeed complex. According to the latest [OECD survey on the drivers of trust in public institutions](#), conducted in October and November 2023 across 30 countries, **44% of respondents have low or no trust in their national government, outweighing the share of those with high or moderately high trust (39%)**. In addition, while the use of statistics, data and evidence is also shown to be a strong driver of trust, only **about a third of people find government statistics trustworthy and easy to find and to understand**.

This dissatisfaction, combined with other critical factors such as continued anxieties about economic insecurity, the corrosive effects of corruption, and geopolitical tensions, provide a fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation to flourish. This creates and perpetuates a vicious cycle of mistrust and social discontent. As recently highlighted by International IDEA, in their [Global State of Democracy 2024](#)

report, around the world fewer people turn out to vote, while, at the same time, electoral results are increasingly contested.

This new reality has acted as a catalyst for governments to look more closely at the constructive role they can play in strengthening the integrity of the information space - namely, how to support information environments in which evidence-based and pluralistic sources of information can flourish, enabling individuals to be exposed to a variety of ideas and make informed choices. **Appropriate policies are needed to address the negative effects of disinformation; at the same time, these policies must not lead to greater control of information in our democracies.** Our guiding compass should always be the reinforcement of the free flow of information.

In 2022, as part of the [Reinforcing Democracy Initiative](#), the OECD Information Integrity Hub faced this issue head on. Its mission is to assist governments in developing tailored policies and initiatives to safeguard and promote information integrity. Over this period, the OECD collaborated with a diverse group of stakeholders, including journalists, civil society, and academics, to piece together a full understanding of the issue. In November 2023, the OECD organised an [international conference](#) bringing together the voices of key actors in this space including Reporters Without Borders, BBC Media Action,

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Canal France International, the Forum on Information and Democracy, and many others. The OECD organised a session entitled "Investing in societal resilience", where they presented different perspectives from civil society organisations, such as Movilizadorio (Colombia), the International Fund for Public Interest Media, and Lie Detectors (Belgium), to illustrate the key role of civil society, which is actively involved in strengthening information integrity through various initiatives, ranging from supporting independent fact-checking and media outlets, to developing media and information literacy programmes adapted to local realities.

This collective effort culminated in a baseline report "Facts not fakes". This report presents an analytical framework focused on three complementary policy goals:

- 1) **strengthen societal resilience** by equipping individuals with the necessary skills to navigate the information space effectively and responsibly
- 2) **enhance transparency, accountability, and plurality of information sources**, including online platforms and traditional media
- 3) **upgrade governments' institutional architecture** – including administrative offices, national strategies, international co-operation, and capacity-building.

Regarding the first policy area, as society becomes increasingly exposed to multiple sources of information, from traditional media to social media platforms, individuals need to be equipped with the tools and skills to navigate this complex environment. Empowering individuals to cultivate critical thinking skills is therefore crucial, as is mobilising all sectors of society to participate in efforts to strengthen these skills. An interesting example of this multi-stakeholder approach can be seen in Ireland's "Be Media Smart" media literacy campaign. This initiative inspired people across Ireland to check the reliability of information, made possible through a dynamic alliance of public and private sectors, media outlets, and civil society organisations all working together.



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Regarding the upgrade of governments' institutional architecture, **OECD led evidence shows that OECD countries are putting in place cross-government mechanisms** dedicated to coordinate national efforts to address disinformation threats and/or to provide technical advice on policies related to this matter. These are generally established either as central units (such as offices or cells) that have an official mandate to co-ordinate responsibilities, and/or as formal task forces or working groups composed of public servants from across the government. These types of coordination mechanisms **are particularly important in a context of "information pollution" during electoral periods.** They allow for responsive interventions addressing disinformation related to the integrity of the electoral process and bodies (electoral fraud narratives...) as well as **preventing "information voids" that can be exploited by malign actors regarding voters rights and responsibilities** (polling station locations, valid voting documents, deadlines for postal voting...). Interesting examples include **Australia's Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce and Canada's Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force.** For instance, Australia's Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce provides consolidated and coordinated information and advice to the Australian Electoral Commissioner (AEC) on matters that may compromise the real or perceived integrity of a federal electoral event, which includes elections, by-elections and referendums. The work of this task force is also

complemented by AEC-led campaigns such as "Stop and Consider", encouraging voters to think critically about the sources of electoral information they see or hear, and the AEC Disinformation Register, focusing on harmful disinformation **related exclusively to the procedural aspects of conducting elections and referendums.**

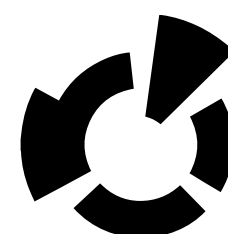
Finally, **collaborative solutions together with various civil society organisations are needed, as no government can solve this problem alone.** There is no silver bullet to solve the spread of false and misleading information, but by bringing together different perspectives and approaches, we can solve the disinformation puzzle and better inform public policy.



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