PROTECTING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS THROUGH SAFEGUARDING INFORMATION INTEGRITY

TOP 10 RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR PLATFORMS AND STATES

In 2024, more than four billion people will have the opportunity to cast ballots in democratic elections all around the world. Safeguarding the integrity of these elections will require, in part, the availability of reliable election-related information, confidence in credible journalism and access to a diversity of viewpoints.

Elections planned for 2024 are already facing new threats in a constantly evolving digital information ecosystem. Attempts to pollute the information environment can greatly distort public opinion and potentially impact election results. Coordinated efforts that push fringe narratives and spark social polarization employ diverse methods on social media to influence electoral campaigns and outcomes. One such method is the employment of highly segmented microtargeting based on sensitive data (such as voters' race, religion, gender or sexual orientation). Bad actors abuse artificial intelligence (AI), notably large language models and generative AI, to distort facts, develop deepfakes, create noise and microtarget audiences with hyper-segmented messages.

To combat these abuses, platforms and states must implement policy and regulatory safeguards to ensure the integrity of the information space; independent electoral management bodies[1] (EMBs) should play a role in ensuring access to reliable election-related content.

The following top 10 recommendations for platforms and states outline the most important measures that should be taken. They draw upon the principles of the Partnership for Information and Democracy, the policy frameworks of the Forum on Information and Democracy,[2] and the work of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and Democracy Reporting International. The recommendations are also inspired by other international recommendations, such as the *Principles and Guidelines for the Use of the Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa*, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's *Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms* and the *Global Declaration on Information Integrity Online*.

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[1] According to International IDEA, 'An independent EMB refers to the institution(s) that are normatively, structurally, and functionally separate from the government. It is established with legal and institutional safeguards to ensure decision making and behavioral autonomy, transparent governance structures, its own budget, and maintains the ability to perform its functions impartially' (Joseph, O., Independence in Electoral Management, Electoral Processes Primer 1 (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2021.103>.

[2] These include; How to End Infodemics (2020), A New Deal for Journalism (2021), Accountability Regimes for Social Networks and Their Users (2022) and Pluralism of News and Information in Curation and Indexation Algorithms (2023).

TOP 10 RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR **PLATFORMS** DURING ELECTIONS

To ensure trustworthiness and information plurality during elections:

1. Proactively promote and amplify authoritative electoral information from independent EMBs and public-interest journalistic content, such as those produced by media, certified by the Journalism Trust Initiative.

2. Liaise with EMBs in advance of election periods, giving them opportunities to inform platforms' policies, response mechanisms and mitigation strategies against election disinformation. EMBs should make available necessary resources to prebunk and debunk electoral disinformation activities and to promote media literacy. In order to engage with EMBs on substance, platforms must understand their mandates and capabilities and provide ample space for exchange and coordination throughout the electoral cycle.

3. Proactively ensure that recommender algorithms do not impede access to accurate electoral information or to diverse points of views within the democratic spectrum. Platforms should invest in reasonable efforts to improve the classifiers used in content moderation systems and implement policies against hate speech and harmful content, making sure that these systems and policies function well and are accessible in all languages relevant to the context. Platforms should also conduct systematic risk assessments of their recommender algorithms. These assessments should determine whether there is a pluralistic and fact-based information ecosystem around the electoral process; they should also assess the actors involved.

To diminish the reach and effects of dis- and misinformation:[3]

4. When content reaches a certain threshold, trigger an internal viral circuit breaker to temporarily prevent the algorithmic amplification of the content. When a piece of dis- or misinformation has been exposed to a large number of users, show every user exposed to that information a contextual analysis with diverse viewpoints conducted by independent fact checkers. The contextual analysis should also discuss any foreign intervention detected.

5. Adopt a targeted approach that integrates user feedback with a timely review and feedback loop, as well as machine learning algorithms to curb the virality of electoral disinformation. This approach should focus on promptly identifying and mitigating the spread of misleading or false election-related information. Furthermore, there should be an emphasis on cross-platform collaboration to prevent the propagation of electoral disinformation across different social networks.

6. Ensure that political advertising is clearly labelled, that the use of sensitive personal data to target political ads is banned and that disinformation is demonetized by implementing strategies to remove advertising revenue from websites that consistently disseminate disinformation.

To strengthen the accountability of highly influential actors:

7. Put special accountability regimes in place for journalists, influencers and highly influential actors in the election process, along with appropriate sanctions based on published, impartial rules or terms of service as well as fast-tracked appeal mechanisms.

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[3] For clarity, the terms 'disinformation' and 'misinformation' are used in this brief. The recommendations also apply to malinformation or any other tactics used to manipulate information and people.

8. Publish terms of service and policies, and provide regular reporting on recommender operations, content moderation systems and modalities for cooperation with trusted flaggers. This includes transparency about standard operating procedures and policies in place during elections, including in respect of data regarding moderation requests (from governments, civil society and users) and their decisions; turnaround time (including for civil society requests); the prevalence, treatment and reach of disinformation; inauthentic accounts and bots; and the activities of trusted flaggers. Make this data available to allow scrutiny by independent researchers and regulators. Platforms should provide access to enable researchers and members of civil society organizations to conduct research.

9. Ensure that the process of drafting, amending and applying terms-of-service agreements, community standards and content moderation policies is transparent, accountable and inclusive. These agreements, standards and policies ensure that interactions with civil society and human rights organizations, especially during elections, are transparent and non-discriminatory.

10. Disclose financial information relating to paid online advertisements. Establish a strict corporate policy limiting political advertising in line with political finance regulations in the respective country. Provide an easily accessible and searchable database that contains aggregate spending information for every political entity and information on the number of advertisements run by each of them, and make the application programming interface publicly available in an easy-to-use and understandable format.

10 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR **STATES**

To ensure the reliability and plurality of information:

1. Honour all domestic and international human rights obligations and commitments, and ensure compliance with treaties on freedom of opinion and expression; media freedom; the right to seek, receive and impart information, and the safety of journalists.

2. Enhance the plurality and sustainability of funding for media organizations, particularly for local journalism, and for the journalism serving underserved, underprivileged and marginalized communities, and put in place regulatory mechanisms to fairly compensate news providers for content shared on platforms in order to enable the media to fulfil their social function. Ensure that public service media are fully independent and funded through mechanisms that protect editorial independence and ensure full transparency of media ownership.

3. Encourage the voluntary adoption of open standards for content authenticity and provenance, and their implementation on platforms, and begin using these technologies when developing and sharing government-produced content online.

4. Take steps to address the political representation and participation of traditionally marginalized communities, such as women, LGBTIQA+ persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, persons belonging to minorities and persons in vulnerable situations, acknowledging that they can be specifically targeted and impacted by malicious online campaigns.

5. Refrain from using, supporting or financing actions (sometimes referred to as information operations) that jeopardize the integrity of the information environment during elections, both domestically and in foreign countries.

To diminish the reach and effects of dis- and misinformation:

6. Hold platforms accountable and ensure that sanctions and moderation decisions on platforms are made in accordance with international human rights norms and standards. Impose a transparency obligation on platforms, and require that they notify account holders when imposing sanctions on users.

7. Ensure that platforms put an appeal mechanism in place to enable account holders to expeditiously challenge platforms' decisions and provide effective remedies. Users should be able to request a review of said decisions by an independent judicial authority, and in an expedited manner during election periods.

8. Encourage platforms to cooperate with independent EMBs as a source of trustworthy information concerning the electoral process.

To enable independent scrutiny of efforts:

9. Make publicly available, on a regular basis, the number and nature of content restrictions as well as the categories of personal data requested from platforms. In addition, the reasons for and legal basis of said requests should be made publicly available alongside the responses from the platforms and the exact steps that were taken as a result of the requests as well as any agreements reached with the platforms.

10. Encourage inter-agency cooperation and establish a new, or strengthen an existing, independent administrative authority with a mandate to support users of digital services, oversee platforms, serve as a research hub, and advise on public policies and regulations, including during elections. In a collaborative effort with civil society and independent researchers, develop a real-time misinformation tracking system to enable the quick identification of and response to disinformation campaigns as they emerge.