

A new policy paradigm from the LSE Maryam Forum: 5. Treat disinformation as a systemic risk to democracy

Disinformation has polarised democratic societies and threatens to make common, evidence-based debate impossible. Peter Pomerantsev (LSE and Johns Hopkins), Piroska Nagy-Mohácsi (LSE), Ben Grazda (LSE) and the LSE Maryam Forum Democracy and Disinformation Working Group suggest how to turn the tide.

In the past, non-democracies were defined by censorship and control over media, while democracies guaranteed freedom of expression, pluralism, and promoted the free flow of information across borders. Although there has always been space for disinformation in a democracy, there was also an underlying belief that good information would eventually win out in the 'marketplace for ideas.'

Today all these assumptions have been turned upside down. Dictators, as well as political actors in democracies and 'hybrid' regimes, use freedom of speech as an excuse to spread massive amounts of disinformation at the click of a button, while employing online mobs and troll farms to drown out and intimidate critical voices and obscure truth. This constitutes a sort of censorship through noise, but one which does not contravene freedom of expression legislation. The ease with which this digital disinformation can be created, scaled and targeted also questions the validity of the concept of the idea marketplace.

As a result, we are seeing pluralism tip into polarisation and fracture so extreme that they risk making a common debate based on evidence and trust impossible. Societies where people live in separate realities are also more vulnerable to subversive campaigns from hostile states and extremist groups, who take advantage of the borderless information environment for malign ends.



'Stop the Steal' demonstrators gather in St Paul, Minnesota on 5 December 2020 to protest Joe Biden's election win. Photo: [Chad Davis](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Authoritarian powers like China and Russia are also rapidly defining their own versions of the online space. They have doctrines of 'sovereignty' founded on censorship, and are making technological advances and restricting the rights of their populations, even as they deliver effective online services for them.

In short, there is a systemic crisis going to the roots of democracy. The principles for a democratic information environment need to be reimagined for the digital age.

Recommendation 1: The public should be given the ability to evaluate the algorithms governing online platforms through government oversight, academic analysis and public interest reporting

A true democracy has public accountability for how our public sphere is shaped, and a say in its governance. The public should have the ability to evaluate the algorithms governing online platforms through government oversight, academic analysis and public interest reporting. The human right to information and unhindered communication should serve as the benchmark by which to judge these platforms. Greater transparency would also allow the public to understand whether online platforms are designed to uphold rights, whether they truly promote freedom of choice, and what they are doing to slow the spread of disinformation and malign campaigns.

The Forum on Information and Democracy proposes [250 specific recommendations](#) for states and platforms to radically change the way the internet is governed and bring it more in line with democratic norms. At the core of their philosophy is greater transparency: transparency over the algorithms and content moderation practices that shape online spaces; and transparency in how human rights are considered in the way online spaces are designed.

Specific tools from the practice of economic regulation with “carrots and sticks” (incentives and regulation/prohibition) can be also explored.

Recommendation 2: Democratic governments, tech companies and other stakeholders need to invest in public-interest funds to support media that counters disinformation

The ‘infodemic’ of disinformation and misinformation around the COVID crisis has again highlighted the vital importance of quality, trusted content – but such public-interest journalism is financially unsustainable in the digital era. Existing institutions and arrangements are not well suited to addressing this economic challenge. An unprecedented, ambitious and differently-organised response is needed. Democracies, technology companies and other stakeholders globally need to invest in public-interest funding that supports media that counters disinformation, while making societies more resilient to extremist propaganda and hostile state subversion. To this end [BBC Media Action](#), the charity arm of the BBC, is building a major new global fund to strengthen public interest reporting throughout the world, especially in low income countries. Business models were already failing before the COVID-19 pandemic but revenue losses, as well as increasing political pressures, have made independent media increasingly unsustainable despite increased public demand for trustworthy information in what the WHO calls an ‘infodemic’. International development agencies currently allocate just 0.3% to independent media support – a pittance, given the severity of the crisis. According to its leaders:

“The Fund would solve five problems: increasing resources to meet the financial needs of independent media; ensuring legitimacy by putting in place an independent, expert and credible governance structure to take decisions on how funding is allocated; reducing transaction costs to make funding media more straightforward for donors; understanding what works and does not work in supporting media by investing in learning; and formulating effective exit strategies by deploying financial, political and knowledge capital to bring different stakeholders together to shape long term system wide solutions to the business model challenge.”

Meanwhile the [Arena Initiative](#), based at the LSE and Johns Hopkins University, has been piloting projects in Ukraine, Italy and Hungary that combine sociology and journalism to design and pilot evidence-based approaches to overcome polarisation.

Recommendation 3: Democratic governments and other stakeholders in democracy should urgently build an alliance for information security

Tackling the crisis of disinformation will require democracies to unite behind common principles and a shared, positive vision for a democratic and secure information environment online. To this end The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, DEMOS, the German Marshall Fund and Arena are combining to create a new initiative – ‘[The Good Web](#).’ The Good Web will engage policy and opinion makers in democracies to articulate a shared vision defining the rights of the empowered citizen online, and, perhaps most urgently, what a democratic philosophy for ‘information security’ looks like.

The arrival of a new US administration intent on rebuilding alliances means there is an opportunity to build consensus among democracies on how to design an online space aligned with democratic values. This vision has to encompass new regulation, innovations in media and a common definition of security.

Information and its connection to democracy needs to become as central to the agenda of discussions for international meetings among democracies as topics like the environment or corruption.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.

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