

Disinformation in Democracies:

Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America



KEY FINDINGS

2018 saw political tides turn in three of Latin America’s largest democracies. These elections also saw deep polarization and distrust in institutions among Brazilians, Mexicans, and Colombians in an information environment ripe with disinformation. And while disinformation and misinformation are nothing new, the spread of false information at alarming rates is more effective and worrisome than ever. A year-long effort to identify, expose, and explain disinformation around elections in Latin America using open source methodologies yielded the following key findings:

BRAZIL



Disinformation in Brazil’s 2018 elections included organic disinformation spread through encrypted messaging platforms.

Hyperpolarization and a lack of trust in institutions—spanning government, media, and civil-society organizations—created an atmosphere in which disinformation spread quickly, with compounding effects.

Countering disinformation narratives, rather than instances of disinformation, may be more impactful in assuring that disinformation does not set the agenda for electoral debates and media coverage.

MEXICO



Disinformation in Mexico’s elections comprised primarily automation and artificial amplification, rather than organic disinformation.

The hiring of commercial bots for financial gain, the use of political bots for the spread of specific electoral messages, and disinformation about the electoral process at the state level stood out as the three most worrisome trends of disinformation around Mexico’s elections.

Verificado 2018, in uniting a network of journalists, civil society, and other organizations under a central hub and one single brand, generated significant impact in promoting transparency and accountability. The model should be replicated ahead of other elections.

COLOMBIA



Disinformation in Colombia’s elections largely comprised organic disinformation at times amplified by media outlets and political leaders.

In a polarized electoral environment, fact-checking organizations and the media must work to assure verifications reach the same audiences exposed to and affected by disinformation.

To assure disinformation does not readily set the agenda for electoral discussions and media coverage, fact-checkers and the media can focus on countering disinformation narratives, rather than each false article or misleading piece of information.