

Disinformation in Democracies:

Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America

Following a year-long effort to expose and explain disinformation in Latin America, the Atlantic Council's Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center and DFRLab propose the following recommendations for consideration by government, technology and social media companies, telecommunication companies, fact-checking organizations and the media, civil-society organizations and academic institutions, and international institutions. These suggestions aim at addressing the core, collective challenges posed by disinformation, misinformation, and automation in a rapidly changing information environment.

| CHALLENGE | PROPOSED SOLUTION | HOW |
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GOVERNMENT

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| Electoral authorities are at times unable to verify disinformation, misinformation, or automation around electoral processes in a timely manner. Some claims go completely unaddressed or are addressed only after the election has taken place. This can exacerbate distrust in the voting system. | Electoral authorities can provide faster responses to disinformation and misinformation and be more transparent about steps being taken to investigate and address vulnerabilities. | Electoral authorities can more frequently communicate with journalists and fact-checkers, streamline internal communication to allow for faster response time, and publish more details about steps being taken to debunk disinformation or misinformation and fix vulnerabilities during campaign periods. This can be done in partnership with the police, media, and digital influencers. |
| Law enforcement and prosecutors are, in some instances, the only actors who can verify claims that require an official investigation. | Law enforcement and prosecutors can be more transparent about ongoing investigations and their respective results, when doing so does not affect the legitimacy of said investigations. | Law enforcement and prosecutors can dedicate more resources to investigations that involve electoral disinformation and more clearly communicate findings to the public with the help of media organizations and local government officials. |
| Electoral laws in many countries prevent federal, state, and local governments from publishing some information during the electoral period. Media black-out laws also prohibit media from reporting on election-related issues. Such laws render people unable to reference an official source to verify information. | Government bodies, like Offices of the Attorney General in different countries, can establish more clear guidance about existing laws that prevent public institutions from publishing information in the days preceding an election and begin considering whether black-out laws could be restructured for a digital-first environment wherein voters increasingly rely on social media and the web for information during elections. | Government bodies, like Offices of the Attorney General in different countries, can better define and provide more clarity about which pieces of information can be published by state institutions during the electoral period. These clarifications can be published online and divulged to the public ahead of and during elections with the help of media organizations and local government officials. Media should be allowed to report on election-related disinformation up to the day of the election. |

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GOVERNMENT

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| <p>Electoral laws have not caught up to trends in digital information consumption. Prosecutors have a difficult time trying cases that involve digital forensics or do not have clearly outlined penalties for actors pushing disinformation or engaging in automation.</p> | <p>Electoral authorities, police, prosecutors, and the judiciary should examine potential updates to slander and libel laws that apply to a digitally connected world.</p> | <p>At the national and subnational level, governments can debate laws about transparency of ad spending online. When relevant, governments can also partner with technology and social media companies to publish reports holding political parties at all levels of government responsible for their media spending and buying, especially where it pertains to the hiring of marketing companies to send political advertisements through encrypted messaging platforms.</p> |
| <p>Disinformation and misinformation about the next cycle of local and municipal elections will soon begin to appear.</p> | <p>Electoral authorities can form an interdisciplinary group to discuss possible measures based on lessons learned from the national elections of 2018.</p> | <p>Electoral authorities can create multi-stakeholder task-forces to discuss disinformation in local elections and further train staff in cities and municipalities to recognize and verify false information in partnership with independent third parties, like civil-society organizations.</p> |

TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

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| <p>Barriers to entry exist on encrypted messaging platforms for journalists and researchers who wish to more effectively study and understand disinformation and how such platforms can serve as vectors for its spread during election cycles.</p> | <p>Encrypted messaging platforms can provide further information about how the platforms work and what actions are being taken, or could be taken, to deter the spread of disinformation.</p> | <p>Encrypted messaging platforms can consider sharing information that paints a picture of usage on the platform—for example, how many groups exist, how many have public links and the size of groups according to categories—to allow for the independent investigation of disinformation by fact-checkers and the media. Platforms can also consider communicating directly with its users about the threat of disinformation, for instance by providing public service announcement push notifications.</p> |
| <p>Some companies and platforms exhibit both features of one to one messaging and broadcasting. The encrypted nature of the platforms, along with broadcast features that enable messages to go viral, can open doors for the spread of disinformation that is both difficult to track and difficult to source.</p> | <p>Technology and social media companies, in understanding the implications for the spread of disinformation of point to point communications platforms vs. broadcast platforms, can work to adjust product features and functions to account for vulnerabilities of broadcast messages.</p> | <p>Encrypted messaging platforms, in better understanding the effects of the features they offer users, can adjust options to minimize broadcast features that increase the potential for disinformation to go viral with no pathways for fact-checkers and journalists to trace their spread.</p> |

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TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

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| <p>The guidelines that govern user behavior on some technology and social media platforms are not always clear to all users, leading some groups and individuals to at times claim they are unfairly censored by technology and social media on the respective platforms.</p> | <p>Technology and social media companies can provide clearer guidelines about the rules and terms of service that apply to user behavior on their platforms.</p> | <p>Technology and social media companies can streamline and better communicate clear guidelines about their terms of service and share more information about pages and accounts that are taken down with the public to increase understanding of what constitutes inauthentic behavior. The amount of information to be shared can be weighed to account for potential security risks and risks to privacy.</p> |
| <p>Technology and social media companies sometimes lack immediate and on-the-ground local knowledge about national or subnational political contexts and country-specific disinformation flows.</p> | <p>Technology and social media companies can establish more alliances with local institutions and civil-society organizations to better understand local challenges of disinformation.</p> | <p>Technology and social media companies can capitalize on channels of communication that were opened with third parties during the 2018 elections to deepen and expand their knowledge of on-the-ground political developments and information consumption. Companies can open or expand country offices in key markets to speed up the time it takes to address violations of terms of service.</p> |

TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES

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| <p>Telecommunications companies' zero-rating policies* have created incentives for social media users to remain in a closed online space within platforms, rendering it difficult for them to verify claims using external resources.</p> | <p>Telecommunications companies, along with technology and social media companies, can re-examine zero-rating policies through the lens of disinformation.</p> <p><small>*Zero rating policies enable Internet access without financial cost under certain conditions, such as by only permitting access to certain websites.</small></p> | <p>Telecommunication companies can work with technology and social media companies and fact-checkers to discuss the possibility of including links to fact-checking websites in zero-rating policies, so users can have access to more resources when engaging with information.</p> |
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FACT-CHECKING AGENCIES AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

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| <p>Fact-checkers have a difficult time reaching audiences most affected by disinformation or those that rely mostly on encrypted messaging platforms for news.</p> | <p>Fact-checking agencies and independent media can consider new content and formatting that better resonates with and better engages users most predisposed to disinformation on social media.</p> | <p>Media can experiment with new framing of content verifying disinformation to learn what is most clear and best resonates on social media. They can dedicate more time to measuring audience sentiment and reactions to these experiments to tailor messaging in the most effective way.</p> |
| <p>Fact-checking organizations and the media at times amplify disinformation in their attempts to address individual cases—this can magnify the problem and exacerbate distrust.</p> | <p>Fact-checkers can better verify narratives rather than only instances of disinformation, and better target verified articles to the audiences affected by disinformation.</p> | <p>Fact-checkers can improve their use of social listening and analytics tools for a more comprehensive understanding of disinformation consumption and groups that might find value in receiving fact-checked articles.</p> |

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FACT-CHECKING AGENCIES AND INDEPENDENT MEDIA

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| Not all fact-checking organizations and independent media are trusted by the public. | Both fact-checkers and the media can work to increase transparency in reporting and methodology to bolster credibility. Independent media can also continue to adhere to the highest standards of journalistic integrity. | Media can ensure that all relevant parts of a debate are portrayed in articles or coverage. Stories should continue to be thoroughly sourced and fact-checked. Mistakes should be corrected and publicized in a timely manner. |
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CIVIL-SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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| Academic findings about disinformation do not always reach or inform the public debate. | Academic researchers can improve their outreach to media and the broader public. | Academia can more frequently partner with the media to publicize results of their studies and maintain direct conversations with civil-society organizations and politicians. |
| Civil society and academia, in analyzing disinformation, are at times limited in their ability to target research at the digital spaces where information is consumed in different locations. | Civil society and academia can continuously target research and pursue or expand upon partnerships that enable them to study user behavior where information is being consumed. | Civil-society and academia, in continued partnership with technology and social media companies, including encrypted messaging platforms, can work to open new doors for analyzing the information environment in the digital spaces and platforms where users are most actively consuming information. |

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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| Disinformation is often transnational in nature and can be a threat to democracies—this type of threat is not constrained by physical borders. | International organizations can continue to include efforts to combat disinformation as part of election monitoring initiatives and continue funding local research, advocacy, educational and media projects aimed at combatting disinformation. | International organizations can better train election monitors to understand disinformation flows and dynamics and continue supporting cross-cutting projects to address the issue across regions. |
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