

Report



The Summit for Democracy Cohort on Information Integrity

The Purpose, The Work, The Outcomes

October 2023

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information integrity is fundamental for democracy. Access to reliable, accurate, and impartial information is essential for public trust and civic engagement, good and effective governance, healthy democratic discourse, and informed decision-making.

This report provides an overview of the purpose, work, and concrete outcomes of the cohort on Information Integrity, which was created as part of the Summit for Democracy's "Year of Action". Co-led by Canada, Latvia, and the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and bringing together a diverse group of experts, practitioners and stakeholders, the cohort was guided in its deliberations by a singular purpose: to highlight and amplify best practices on strengthening a healthy information ecosystem, while reinforcing democracy and respect for human rights.

Combining experiences and expertise across sectors and geographies, four dynamic Working Groups were set up, each delving into an issue of importance and timeliness in the effort towards strengthening and defending information integrity.

- The **Taxonomy Working Group** emphasized the need for citizen awareness and standardized terminology in this field, recommending the creation of a new infrastructure and funding structure to invest in relevant local civil society organizations, to find space for those groups to exchange ideas, and to link them with global conversations.
- The **Literacy Working Group** recognized the disruptive impact of information warfare and manipulation on democracies, stressing the significance of long-term media literacy promotion as a central defense against information manipulation, including disinformation.
- The **Working Group on International Cooperation on Resilience to Disinformation** highlighted the direct link between disinformation and democracy erosion, placing particular importance to the need for more consistent policy development in this domain, improved information sharing among all stakeholders, and increased coherence of work within and among the different international fora.
- The **Political Microtargeting Working Group** underlined the necessity for a unified international understanding of and approach to this rather underexplored practice, acknowledging the influence of the digital media environment, media literacy, and local political contexts and dynamics in this area.

Complementing this work, a **global mapping project** tracking more than 500 organizations and initiatives involved in information integrity activities was designed and delivered.

Collectively, the work that is presented in this report is aimed not simply to contribute to the momentum of change set by the Summit for Democracy process, but also to serve as a valuable resource for all those who want to make our information ecosystems stronger, healthier and more reinforcing of democracy across the world.

THE PURPOSE

THE PURPOSE

Information integrity is fundamental for democracy. The ability to have access to reliable, accurate, and impartial information enhances public trust, underpins good and effective governance, promotes transparency and accountability, and empowers citizens to make informed decisions, engage in political processes, and exercise their civic and political rights.

Yet, threats against the integrity of the information space have been steadily on the rise. Malign actors have increasingly turned to information manipulation campaigns to further their antidemocratic goals, aiming to distort the truth, sow and deepen divisions, and fuel polarization in our societies. Exploiting the growing expansion, adoption, and sophistication of new digital and communication technologies, these campaigns have over time become more professionalized in nature, refined in delivery, and industrial in scale.

It is now easier, faster, and more cost-effective to seed and spread false, misleading, manipulated and otherwise harmful information, perhaps more than ever before. This has resulted in an ever-expanding and increasingly harmful aperture of ways to attack information integrity as a means to undermine trust in our democracies.

The destructive and disruptive impact of these efforts on our societies demonstrates the need for democracies to dedicate their attention towards urgently addressing these threats and their harms, while increasing their efforts to foster information ecosystems with high levels of information integrity.

The Summit for Democracy Cohort on Information Integrity

Since its inception, the Summit for Democracy process has brought together government, civil society, and private sector leaders and actors, focusing on how to form and strengthen an agenda for democratic resilience and renewal at the global level.

During the “Year of Action” following the first Summit for Democracy in December 2021, the Summit’s organizers, spearheaded by the United States, encouraged the launch of multi-stakeholder platforms known as democracy cohorts, with a view to taking “concerted action toward commitment implementation in areas of common interest”.

Recognizing that information integrity lies at the heart of healthy democracies, the cohort on information integrity was created, bringing together nearly 40 government decision-makers, practitioners, policy experts from multilateral institutions, and civil society representatives deeply engaged and invested in this field from across the globe.

The cohort, which was co-led by Canada, Latvia, and the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (ASD at GMF), stood united in its strong belief that democracies should cultivate and strengthen information integrity at a global level to reinforce democracy, respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and rule of law.

The cohort's members were guided in their deliberations by a singular purpose: to highlight and amplify best practices on strengthening a healthy information ecosystem and information integrity, while reinforcing democracy and respect for human rights.

This report reflects and builds upon the deliverables that the cohort prepared for the Second Summit for Democracy, which was held on 29–30 March 2023. Its purpose is not simply to contribute to the momentum of change set by the Summit for Democracy process, but also to serve as a valuable resource for all those who want to make our information ecosystems stronger, healthier, and more reinforcing of democracy across the world.

THE WORK

THE WORK

Working together to help defend and strengthen information integrity, the cohort combined experiences and expertise across sectors and geographies, intent on analyzing the current landscape, fostering discussions, and learning and identifying actionable areas of convergence.

Throughout 2022 and in the run up to the second Summit for Democracy, the cohort met virtually several times, but also held an important in-person meeting in October 2022 in Rome, Italy.

During these convenings, participants came together to offer their observations, ideas, and effective practices on how to address this critical topic. The diversity of these insights testified to the cohort's truly multi-stakeholder nature, and the collective conviction that assuming a whole-of-society approach is a prerequisite for a healthy information environment.

The Cohort's Structure

The work of the cohort was structured around four priority areas, each reflecting an issue of importance and timeliness in the efforts towards strengthening and defending information integrity, as decided by the cohort's participants and co-leads.

These topical areas were explored in four Working Groups (WGs) that formed the backbone of the cohort's deliberations. These were:

- The **Taxonomy** WG, chaired by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- The **Literacy** WG, co-chaired by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission of Kenya and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy.
- The WG focusing on **International Cooperation on Resilience to Disinformation**, co-chaired by the Government of Romania and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- And the WG on **Political Microtargeting**, with a special focus on the Global South, which was chaired by the German Agency for International Cooperation.

Each of the four groups approached and organized their work, modalities, and frequency of deliberations differently, based on the preferences and specificities of their membership.

Under the stewardship of the cohort co-leads, however, each WG oriented its efforts towards feeding into the cohort's wider aim and expected outcomes. As such, groups were asked to develop initial findings relating to the complexity of the problem in their respective domains, reflect on existing key initiatives and resources, and present high-level policy recommendations that they assessed as critical for advancing information integrity against all existing and emergent challenges.

In parallel, as the only civil society organization co-leading the cohort, ASD at GMF complemented this work, by designing and developing a **global mapping project** tracking more than 500 organizations and initiatives working in the information integrity space.

The specifics of these 4+1 outcomes that will be presented in the following section vary to a degree, reflecting the diversity of people and modalities involved in producing them.

Nonetheless, collectively, they serve as a concrete and collaborative contribution to the important work of reinforcing information integrity that is integral to the pursuit of more resilient democracies.

THE OUTCOMES

THE 4+1 OUTCOMES

The following pages distill the major themes, insights, and deliverables that form the core of the work of the Summit for Democracy's Cohort on Information Integrity. They contain ideas and analyses, best practices, as well as helpful resources that are of use and relevance to all experts, practitioners, stakeholders, or members of the wider public, involved or interested in this field.

The 4+1 concrete outcomes of the cohort are:

- The targeted contributions of the cohort's four WGs, focusing on taxonomy, literacy, international cooperation on resilience to disinformation, and political microtargeting, respectively. All four groups dedicated their focus towards understanding the parameters of the problem in their individual domain, mapping existing key initiatives and resources of interest, and providing important policy recommendations.
- The [Information Integrity Organization Map and Resources](#) that was developed by ASD at GMF, with a view to complementing the more thematic lines of work organized by the four WGs by providing a comprehensive understanding of the key players and available resources within the information integrity space at a global level.

The specific findings and results of each of these streams of work are presented below.

1. Injecting More Definitional Clarity: The Taxonomy Working Group

Chaired by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The starting point in the deliberations of the Working Group on Taxonomy was the need for identifying and standardizing all definitions and terminology that is currently used under the rubric of “information integrity”. Throughout the three sessions that were held, the intention of the group was to avoid duplication vis-à-vis existing initiatives in this domain, and instead amplify these efforts, learn from other each other’s experiences, and share challenges and successes.

WG members agreed that democracies need to ensure that their citizens are aware of potential risks in the information environment, especially information manipulation and propaganda spread by authoritarian regimes and hostile anti-democratic non-state actors. Alongside focusing on threats and risks in the information space, however, democracies also must recognize the positive elements of an inclusive, democracy-forward information system based on accurate, trusted, and reliable information. As it was noted by certain members, the current focus on securitizing the information system can inspire fear and may inadvertently lead people to lose trust in traditional media and government communications.

In this regard, ongoing differences in terminology of what information integrity means and entails across democracies can distract from addressing their underlying causes. While useful tools exist to catalogue challenges in the information environment, it was noted that raising the conversation about interventions to the level of “information integrity” often helps shift from the current focus only on symptoms, for instance, referring to concepts such as dis-, mis-, and mal-information, ‘fake news’ or foreign interference. This, in turn, was recognized as an important factor in mitigating the impact of authoritarian-leaning regimes that use these terms to attack their critics, harass, and even criminalize civil society activities, while attempting to undermine multilateral efforts to come to consensus on protecting the information space.

The group highlighted that protecting the integrity of the information environment is broader than simply addressing manipulated, false, or information presented out of context. Instead, this common endeavor requires a whole-of-society approach that considers the role of all its key partners, including governments, industry, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Solutions targeting only one party are unlikely to achieve their desired goals. For example, several WG members observed that democratic governments need to be held to account for their role in influence operations while others noted the important function that tech companies need to play in creating an open, transparent, accountable, and equitable online information space. An additional benefit of this broader approach is that the term “information integrity” includes the broader information environment outside the digital sphere, including traditional media. While many in the Global North remain focused solely on the impact of social media, taking a more restrictive approach can ignore the role that traditional media can play, especially when controlled by authoritarian actors or infiltrated by their proxies.

A recurring theme among participants was the central part that civil society and the independent media have in this regard, both internationally and at the grassroots level. Despite the overall decline in democracy worldwide, the most recent Freedom on the Net [report](#) noted that the 26 countries that most improved their ranking took a collaborative approach, led by civil society, to improve legislation, develop media resilience, and ensure accountability. The risk that CSOs and independent media pose to authoritarian regimes is evident from the case studies presented by some colleagues in the cohort. Authoritarians or those pushing to restrict democracy at home have responded by using terminology designed to address malign interference, consistently referring to CSOs and independent media as foreign actors and using the resources of the state to criminalize their activities or render them powerless and disconnected. These strategies have especially targeted women and minority communities.

Overview of Existing Resources

In approaching these challenges, the WG recognized the good work that already exists in this space and flagged the importance of amplifying existing initiatives supporting information integrity, including those supporting democracies at risk.

The group highlighted a number of relevant current tools and initiatives, including:

- IREX's [Learn to Discern](#) program and its [Vibrant Information Barometer](#), which tracks how information is The National Democratic Institute's [Info/tegrity initiative](#), which spells out a way forward in this important area, and its [Democratic Principles for the Information Space](#), which articulates principles of transparency, privacy, accountability, openness and inclusivity.
- The DT Institute's work to [support independent media](#).
- The International Republican Institute's Beacon Project, and especially its practical [Media Monitoring Handbook](#).
- Demos' [Good Web Project](#).
- The Freedom Online Coalition's work to [advance internet freedom](#).
- The [Partnership for Information and Democracy](#) work.

At a definitional level, the WG referred to the fact that the term "information integrity" itself emerged from cyber security and that it applies across the broader information environment to address the information system rather than its component parts. A few partners noted that this broader term can make "scope" harder to discern, especially given the difficulties decoupling financially and politically driven influence operations. Nonetheless, considering the harm to individuals' trust and welfare is often the same regardless of the motivation, it was deemed better to include each element.

Two more useful definitional resources that were highlighted were:

- The Foreign Influence Operations and Disinformation webpage of the United States Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which offers a nice overview of the difference between [dis-](#), [mis-](#), and [mal-information](#).
- A Carnegie explainer on [influence operations](#)

Policy Recommendations

Exploring concrete pathways through which to meet the challenges at hand, the WG put forward two concrete recommendations:

1. Create a new infrastructure and funding structure that centers on local groups of CSOs focused on information integrity. As was noted, democracies need to focus on the information environment that they want to achieve, and on supporting the existing partners already working to deliver an open, inclusive, and safe online space, grassroots CSOs and local, independent media. To this end, the creation of this new infrastructure and funding structure will allow more investment to flow towards these organizations, but it will also give them a space to meet and share ideas, as well as link them with global conversations. Authoritarians are collaborating and sharing lessons learned globally; we need to empower grassroots CSOs to do the same.
2. Build stronger connections locally and regionally and enable organizations to tap more easily into international expertise. This would enable local CSOs to deliver community-driven, field-tested consultative tools developed around the world to engage citizens in both democratic and authoritarian-leaning countries. More importantly, it would develop and strengthen existing regional WGs already focused on information integrity, currently operating on shoestring budgets or with temporary support. Beyond simply providing funding, the goal would be to leverage existing global CSO architecture to create a network of networks in democracies worldwide to provide: practical lessons learned and advice on how they could be applied to meet local circumstances; partnerships among international, regional and local organizations to build mentorship opportunities and learning on both sides; connections with the international donor community, simplifying funding and reporting; ways to further recognize the risks facing women, LGBT and minority community organizations; opportunities to rise above day-to-day work to engage in strategic thinking and planning; and a space for these groups to solidify their community of practice, find common ground, and reduce isolation.

2. Improving and Promoting Literacy: The Literacy Working Group

Co-chaired by the National Cohesion and Integration Commission of Kenya and the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy

Delving into a critical area in our digital age, discussions in the Literacy Working Group revolved around the detrimental effects attacks on information integrity can have on societies and citizens' critical thinking, and the urgent need for comprehensive strategies for boosting media and digital literacy skills.

During their meetings, members of this group agreed with the wider cohort that information warfare and information manipulation efforts by authoritarian actors can have extremely negative impacts on our democracies. These malign efforts to disrupt and upend the integrity of our information ecosystems were found to serve three tightly interconnected goals. Firstly, to paint democratic governments as collections of inept adventurers and in parallel tarnish the image of democratically elected officials. Secondly, to exploit and exacerbate contradictions, fissures, and conflicts within our democratic societies. As group members noted, this often involves consistent efforts to spread the impression that democracies fail at crisis management or cannot deliver for the lives and livelihoods of their citizens, as was widely seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third goal is diversion and distraction: having democratic institutions chase down rumors and provide clarifications until they have little time and energy left for anything else. This has been especially true in our time, given how easy it is for malign actors to exploit the digital domain and the various platforms, and employ them instead as amplifiers for sowing uncertainty and division.

Concerns raised by the group in this vein related to the increasingly sophisticated nature of these campaigns against democracies. This worrying trend was discussed at length, with WG members highlighting several tactics, techniques, and procedures through which these malign actors try and succeed in manipulating information and peddling disinformation in our democracies. The group also emphasized that employing content creators by these actors to mask false or distorted content as genuine, local, and idiomatic is a particularly harmful technique, demonstrating the misuse of technological advancements.

Overview of Existing Resources

Despite the existing challenges and obstacles, the WG group welcomed the trend that many democracies have been investing more resources into promoting information literacy, motivated by their desire to create a transparent and healthy digital space. As it was stressed, it is now a must for democratic governments to set aside a specific budget dedicated to information literacy.

- The work of the [Ministry of Digital Affairs](#) of Taiwan was referenced as exemplary of these efforts to fight information manipulation, including disinformation, improve the pertinent literacy skills of the public, and therefore help citizens decipher the credibility of information on their own.

- Relatedly, given the difficulties of establishing attribution of information manipulation operations perpetrated by actors such as the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, or their proxies, Taiwan's National Information Security and Communication Security Taskforce was set up to gather evidence of information manipulation and conduct offensive and defensive cyber drills, using the evidence to revise plans for strengthening information literacy.

In addition to government resources, CSOs from democracies were also recognized as important links in the chain of the fight to improve media literacy.

Echoing suggestions offered in the meetings of other WGs, the Media Literacy WG also highlighted donor organizations such as:

- The National Endowment for Democracy
- The National Democratic Institute
- The International Republican Institute
- And the Taiwanese Foundation for Democracy

as concrete examples of organizations that provide funding for non-governmental organizations that aim to promote and further the variables of democratic resilience in areas such as information integrity.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing on their individual experiences, WG members expressed their strong belief that the goals of promotion and implementation of (media) literacy have to be seen as a long-term endeavor. As the first line of defense against disinformation, media literacy should be a continuous project, and its effects should be periodically checked.

Participants underscored that this aim demands a holistic, whole-of-society approach that in turn requires the dedication of all players within a democracy, ranging from elected officials and government agencies to civil society members and individual citizens. Given how high the stakes are, this should be at the epicenter of discussions by every democratic society.

Following its deliberations, the WG stressed in its policy prescriptions the necessity for actions to:

1. Educate the citizens on how to decipher the information they receive on a daily basis through diverse media platforms, beyond simply attempting to understand and analyze the sources of information manipulation. Pursuant to this, the working group recommended that governments reach out to different social, economic, and age groups within society so as to better capture the varied needs of each group on media literacy.
2. Add media literacy to the country's education system. This is a critical first step to assist citizens in identifying disinformation and the playbook of information warfare. Informed citizens in democracies are the first line of defense.
3. Empower citizens by holding peer-to-peer workshops in communities, advocating for social media awareness raising campaigns, and conducting trainings and 'train the trainers' programs led by CSOs.
4. Provide more comprehensive, expansive, and effective trainings of citizens in terms of all practical skills that are needed in this area, including fact checking and verification, as well as a broader awareness about the dynamics, developments, and vagaries of today's information environment.

5. Empower members of civil society and enable them to retain their independence and collaborate with the public sector to provide adequate support to educate citizens on the importance of media literacy. Governments and government agencies should be more proactive in reaching out to civil society for collaboration. A strong and vibrant civil society is one of the most important variables to combat information warfare and hate speech.
6. Provide support and promote the culture of participation. Cultivating practical skills for citizens of all ages to recognize, identify, and resist information manipulation, including disinformation, is a pivotal step in realizing media literacy and combating disinformation. In this regard, democratic governments should redouble their efforts towards enabling a secure digital and media environment, so individuals feel comfortable in identifying disinformation when it appears without fear of being bullied in real life or cyber space.
7. Catalogue and evaluate existing legislation on cybersecurity at national and international level, in order to assess its degree of support towards and alignment with freedom of expression.
8. Raise awareness at the government level through the organization of public hearings on a range of relevant issues, such as how digital threats are dealt with and the effectiveness of media literacy curricula. Certain participants also added that respective government agencies should retain these curricula for at least five years, before conducting analyses on their effectiveness.
9. Compare and contrast in a systematic fashion the differences between societies with media literacy education programs and those without such schemes or where these schemes are insufficiently implemented.

3. Fostering Global Synergies: The Working Group on International Cooperation on Resilience to Disinformation

Co-chaired by the Government of Romania and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The point of departure in this WG was the recognition of the tremendous importance of international collaboration in the fight against disinformation. In this regard, discussions very much aligned with the wider cohort's and all other WGs' view that global, cross-sectoral, and cross-level synergies are of paramount importance.

In operationalizing its work, this group chose to carry out a survey with a view to collecting opinions on the most important goals in international cooperation activities, challenges, recommendations, and priorities¹. The WG also held a workshop, where the results of the survey were discussed, and selected members presented cases of successful international cooperation on resilience to disinformation.

The survey results, which informed much of the deliberations and the overall focus of the WG, identified some of the key challenges inhibiting international cooperation efforts in this area. These included the fact that activities were prioritized based on project needs rather than systematically (65%); the lack of sustainable funding (41%); that activities were too focused on European/Western practices and issues (35%); that differences between national regulatory frameworks posed challenges to coordination (29%); and the lack of free tools/methods around which to build cooperation (23.5%). Other challenges that were identified were: the divergence that remains in terms of views/terminology surrounding disinformation, which very much echoed the findings of the taxonomy WG; the fact that participation in pertinent international networks does not always bring sufficient benefits; that civil society is often not fully involved in these processes; the lack of strong communities of practice; and finally the need to build coherence between international processes that address information manipulation, including disinformation, such as between the United Nations (UN), the OECD, and other multilateral initiatives.

On the basis of this process of deliberation and prioritization, the most important goals in international cooperation activities that were raised included: sharing best practices on identifying, reacting to, and monitoring responses to mis-, dis-, and mal-information, based on democratic and human rights' principles; promoting more consistent policy development (including regulatory approaches); and increasing coherence of work within and among the different fora, such as the G7, the OECD, NATO, the European Union (EU), and the UN.

¹ Of the 17 organizations that responded to the survey, almost half (47%) were non-governmental organizations, 29% were governmental, 17% came from international non-governmental organizations and the remaining 5% were from private companies.

Overview of Existing Resources

Several initiatives were mentioned as of particular importance in service of these aims.

In Europe, WG members noted:

- The policy efforts to increase international and regional cooperation at the EU level, as illustrated by the development of the [EU's Rapid Alert System](#) against disinformation and the [European Digital Media Observatory](#).
- The [EU Digital Services Act](#) and [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) that were adopted in 2022, with the first reports of implementation of the Code [published](#) in February 2023, as important regulatory steps forward.

At the international level, the WG highlighted:

- The work of the Canadian government and its international partners (for instance, the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and NATO) in fighting disinformation spread by Russia in its war of aggression against Ukraine.
- [The OECD DIS/MIS Resource Hub](#).
- The United States Agency for International Development's [Initiative on Advancing Women and Girls Civic and Political Leadership](#), which is currently under implementation.
- The media literacy workshop under the [Global Cooperation and Training Framework](#) (GCTF).
- The [World Movement for Democracy's Global Assembly with the National Endowment for Democracy](#).
- [The International Fact-checking Network](#) (IFCN).
- [Meta's third-party fact-checking program](#).
- The founding of [The Global Alliance Against Digital Hate and Extremism](#).
- The facilitation of a strong partnership between civil society and government in Taiwan and Kosovo by the [National Democratic Institute](#).
- The [OSCE AI and Disinformation SAIFE project](#).
- And IREX's [Learn to Discern Media Literacy Trainer's Manual](#).

Policy Recommendations

The WG noted the significance of sharing best practices among the international community and promoting consistent policy development and monitoring. During workshop discussions, participants drew direct links between disinformation and the erosion of democracy, suggesting a more agile framework, as well as better exchange of information between initiatives to reduce the risk for duplication. Other solutions identified included: developing a community of practice, portals and clearinghouses to compile available research, tools, and modules; establishing a "network-of-networks" to better coordinate international efforts; identifying more targeted policy approaches, bringing together government and private sector together to discuss information integrity, particularly around the inclusion of women and marginalized groups; creating a global fund for communities of practice/making available tools that can be used for free.

Beyond this, the group highlighted as important the need to:

1. Develop a coherent and targeted approach at the international level, informed by successful approaches from other areas (such as election observation, fighting financing of terrorism and money laundering) to develop methodologies, assessment and measurement frameworks, and international assistance priorities. Moving forward, actors must focus on how to ensure global comparability of what works and to identify funding for such initiatives.
2. Strengthen resource hubs/communities of practice around common issues, based on effective methodologies and successful approaches, targeting digital and traditional media. Clusters could be developed around: regulatory frameworks, engaging the platforms/service providers on content moderation/fact-checking and countering the supply of disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference. Cooperation efforts should be designed to ensure integrated and cross-sectoral communication between clusters. The WG found that there is a need to further define the parameters in this regard (such as what the optimum membership and managerial model, modus operandi, and funding basis is), as well as how this work connects and builds upon existing initiatives, such as the aforementioned OECD DIS/MIS Resource Hub, which focuses on governance responses. The diversity of existing actors and initiatives also suggests the opportunity to build sharing across countries and partners, including through the establishment of a “network-of-networks”.
3. Create a stronger focus of development assistance on producing a repository of tools/resources to enhance information integrity and build societal resilience. Better support to promoting information integrity via development assistance and wider international engagement can better target structural inequalities in the information space in all regions of the world and address structural development factors.

4. Understanding and Regulating Political Microtargeting – The Working Group on Political Microtargeting

Chaired by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)

With digitalization accelerating throughout the last decade and revolutionizing how political ads are delivered and consumed, the practice of political microtargeting (PMT) has risen as a type of advertising in which people's personal information and data on their online behavior are collected and analyzed to target them more efficiently with political ads. Over the past few years, the increased possibilities that campaigns have to target and tailor their messaging to specific audiences via PMT, based on personal characteristics, such as socio-demographics, location, political beliefs, or personal values, has raised serious concerns about the practice's harmful effects on democracy and information integrity.

As the latest group to be formed within the cohort on information integrity, this WG chose to center its focus on this rather underexplored topic of PMT, in a dedicated attempt to inform policymakers, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders about the risks of this practice, while providing an overview of possible protective measures.

Unlike the other three groups, the collaborative work within this WG, which started before the Second Summit for Democracy but continued throughout 2023, was structured around the production of a longer paper, aimed at examining a set of key facets of PMT and providing a series of targeted recommendations. While addressing an issue of global significance, the intention was for the paper to place emphasis on incorporating perspectives and examples from the Global South to help fill a respective gap in public discourse.

Following a rich iterative and consultative process, the WG delved into various terminological parameters of the PMT phenomenon, recognizing that it still lacks a common definition. Members also explored at length the various benefits and risks attached to PMT. Indeed, despite its promise of providing increased informational value of political communication through ad relevance and diversification of content, as well as increasing both the efficiency of campaign activity, and the ability to reach and activate specific population, PMT has been found to be associated with manifold risks. These include: voter manipulation and demobilization, lack of transparency, increased spread of disinformation, unfair competition between political actors, foreign influence into domestic affairs, privacy violations, impaired public scrutiny and counter speech, distortion of voter model and political mandates, discrimination, and political polarization. On an individual level, these risks may result in a violation of human autonomy and dignity. On the societal level, the use of PMT may pose a threat to social cohesion, national sovereignty, fair and informed public discourse, and the principle of free and fair elections, thus potentially undermining the foundations of democracy.

An area of particular focus in the WG's deliberations was that of regulation. As it was mentioned, different approaches to PMT regulation are possible (for instance, measures to ensure equal access to PMT, design and implement transparency obligations, promote user control/consent, or introduce provisions that legally restrict PMT). Globally, however, there is currently very little regulation focusing specifically on PMT, owing in large part to the very real sensitivities that exist around how to legally define "political advertisement". Despite how delicate this task is, the WG noted with interest steps that have been taken in this direction primarily in the European context. The General Data Protection Regulation and the Digital Services Act regulate PMT to some extent. There is also currently a proposal underway to specifically regulate political advertising across the EU.

In many of these discussions and in preparation of the longer paper, particular attention was given to the Global South, identifying it as an area where systematic analysis of PMT-related issues, impacts, and policies remains markedly insufficient compared of the Global North. Indeed, PMT has gained public awareness primarily through investigative journalism, much of which has focused on cases in the Global North, with the role of Cambridge Analytica relating to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and to US elections being an illustrative case of this. Nonetheless, PMT techniques are applied globally and have also been claimed to skew election outcomes and destabilize political systems across the Global South. The parent company of Cambridge Analytica, for instance, has been active in several African countries, including Nigeria, Gabon, Zambia, Mauritius, and Kenya. The effects of PMT also depend on context-specific conditions that need to be taken into consideration, particularly for developing countries and emerging economies (e.g., levels of media literacy and digital divide, capacity, and stability of democratic institutions, situation of marginalized groups, existence, implementation and enforcement of data protection laws, levels of corruption and so on). Shining a stronger Global South spotlight, the intention of the group was for the final paper to serve as a theoretical foundation to promote the development of policies and regulations to mitigate PMT risks, especially in this region.

Overview of Existing Resources

Motivated by these challenges, and with the ultimate goal of understanding and regulating PMT-related practices, the WG identified a number of valuable existing resources.

Of particular relevance, the group highlighted the work of [Tactical Tech](#):

- As part of their [Data and Politics Project](#), Tactical Tech has produced 14 studies to identify and examine key aspects and trends in the use of data and digital strategies in recent and/or upcoming elections or referendums in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Italy, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Spain – Catalonia, the United Kingdom and the United States.
- Through their [Influence Industry Project](#), Tactical Tech supports civil society to respond to the influence industry through: sharing research and case studies detailing how political influence takes place worldwide; a learning hub and workshops that provide a guided tour of research, frameworks and skills to build the capacity of professionals monitoring, regulating or otherwise working on political influence; and supporting the engagement of concerned citizens by developing resources on digital and political literacy.

The WG also pinpointed several resources that were useful in the preparation of their paper:

- Bayer, J. (2020). [Double harm to voters: data-driven micro-targeting and democratic public discourse](#)
- Feldman, B. (2018). [Whatever Cambridge Analytica Has Done to the U.S., It's Done Worse to Developing Countries](#)
- Jaurisch, J. (2020). [Rules for Fair Digital Campaigning](#)
- Kröger, J. K. (2021). [How Data Can Be Used Against People: A Classification of Personal Data Misuses](#)
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Policy Recommendations

Drawing on its deliberations, the WG stressed the importance of further understanding PMT and persuasive technologies. The need for a harmonized approach by countries was identified as key in this regard. As was the recognition that specific factors, such as their digital media landscape, the media literacy skills of political actors and private users, as well as local political contexts, can significantly influence the attention provided.

Key recommendations that were raised within the WG and are put forward in the longer paper, include the need to:

1. Make concrete efforts to regulate PMT. Given the growing presence of PMT in the media landscape, it is crucial that lawmakers around the world earnestly investigate PMT and ensure transparency and accountability of political advertising through appropriate regulatory action.
2. Oblige online platforms to allocate sufficient resources and personnel to content moderation. Social media platforms' tendency to shirk content moderation poses a challenge, which can be particularly prevalent in the Global South and in the context of minority languages. Even where content moderation is in place, the capabilities may not be sufficient and posts that violate the rules set by the platform have ended up being approved for instance in the context of the recent Kenyan election in both English and Swahili, as well as during the genocidal campaign against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar. Governments could require platforms to dedicate requisite resources towards content moderation.

3. Act collectively/collaborate with other countries in devising PMT regulation and other strategies to manage its harmful impacts. Social media platforms and the big tech companies behind them are powerful and impactful economic entities capable of repressing critical discourse and regulatory efforts. It is challenging for a single country to muster the legal and economic resources to develop regulatory action and the issue is compounded for poorer countries with even scarcer resources. In turn, governments could forge or turn to existing regional alliances or governance frameworks to build an understanding of PMT and to develop regulation that addresses the issues raised by PMT.
4. Refrain from spreading false or misleading information. Political actors should be mindful of the risks associated with PMT, as well as of the potential problems in using PMT within their campaigns, in order to avoid harming democracy and damaging their own credibility and reputation. Specifically, political actors should not disseminate false or otherwise misleading information, neither through PMT or other avenues.
5. Bolster the resilience of democratic institutions and processes to alleviate the ill effects of PMT on citizens and political systems.
6. Safeguard private users' privacy, to avoid them falling victim to surveillance, manipulation, and other abuses of the digital traces created by their online presence. To accomplish this, private users could employ privacy-enhancing tools (such as a browser extension intended to prevent tracking your activity); adjust their privacy settings across devices, apps, and services; and purposefully choose messaging apps, search engines, web-browsers, social platforms, an email provider's that focus on privacy. In addition, private users should adopt ad blocking tools. These tools can be used on search engines, web browsers, and social media platforms among other websites.
7. Advise private users to be critical of the information that they consume. In fact, individuals are recommended to develop strong skills and abilities to critically evaluate information, whether text-, image-, or audio-based. Similarly, users must stay informed about political issues and the views of the electorate, in order to meaningfully participate in the democratic processes and have the ability to know whether information about social, political, or election-related topics is true or misleading, one must stay informed about the key events as well as ideally have a sense of the values, beliefs, and attitudes held by other constituents or groups of citizens. Additionally, people are recommended to review their information diet and expose themselves to opposing views.
8. Support capacity-building for informed policymaking. Development actors should support their partner countries in the Global South by allocating funding for these countries to organize capacity-building efforts to devise evidence-based digital policy positions on data-driven and personalized political communications and on disinformation. Such capacity-building could involve training's tailored to policy makers and other political actors.
9. Strengthen the development of digital skills and critical media literacy. More specifically, development actors could support their partner countries in the Global South in terms of developing digital skills in the general population for them to use the digital media landscape to stay abreast of political issues. Development actors could also offer support towards improving general critical media literacy in order to enhance people's ability to critically evaluate political communication.

10. Encourage development actors to facilitate research into digital political communication and foster civil society activity around the topic. In doing so, they could allocate funding towards research institutions and initiatives that produce research investigating the impacts of persuasive technologies in the Global South. Furthermore, development actors should support representation and participation of Global South in relevant international networks, fora, and decision-making bodies. More specifically, countries in the Global South should participate in discussions more actively about efforts to regulate persuasive technologies and share their perspectives. The harmful impacts of persuasive technologies such as PMT are compounded in contexts with low digital skills and literacy, and international efforts to facilitate regulation of persuasive and other technologies and generate alternatives should include their perspectives. Development actors could also enable knowledge exchange and learning between sectoral stakeholders such as governments, academia, and those working with technology across countries.

5. Connecting the Dots Around the Globe: The Information Integrity Organization Map and Resources

Created by the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund

The fifth and final deliverable of the cohort on information integrity is the [Information Integrity Organization Map and Resources](#) webpage. This valuable resource was created with the intention of complementing the important discussions and insights put forward by the cohort and its four WGs and presenting the rich stakeholder landscape in this field. The overall aim has been to provide policymakers, policy experts, civil society, and the broader public with a more comprehensive understanding of the key players, organizations, and initiatives within the information integrity space.

The map includes more than 500 organizations working in 113 countries across four broad categories of activity: fact-checking and verification; media literacy and training; research and monitoring; and policy and standards. The map is interactive, allowing users to identify information integrity organizations by category or by the country in which they operate. ASD at GMF collected this data through open-source research, including by consulting existing lists of counter-disinformation organizations, such as the ones developed by the [Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening](#), [Rand](#), and [Duke University](#).

This webpage also includes a list of the organizations shown on the map, as well as a list of the information integrity resources these organizations provide. The list of organizations is organized by the country in which they operate, but it can also be sorted by the category of their work or alphabetically. Links are provided for each organization.

The additional list of resources functions in a similar way. It includes links to a range of items meant to counter mis-, dis-, and mal-information, including tools to investigate and expose information manipulation; programs designed to improve media literacy and fact checking; and lessons to train journalists, policymakers, political parties, and election workers on how to defend against these challenges. This collection of organizations and resources is not meant to be exhaustive but to display the large amount of work being done to improve the global information environment.

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