

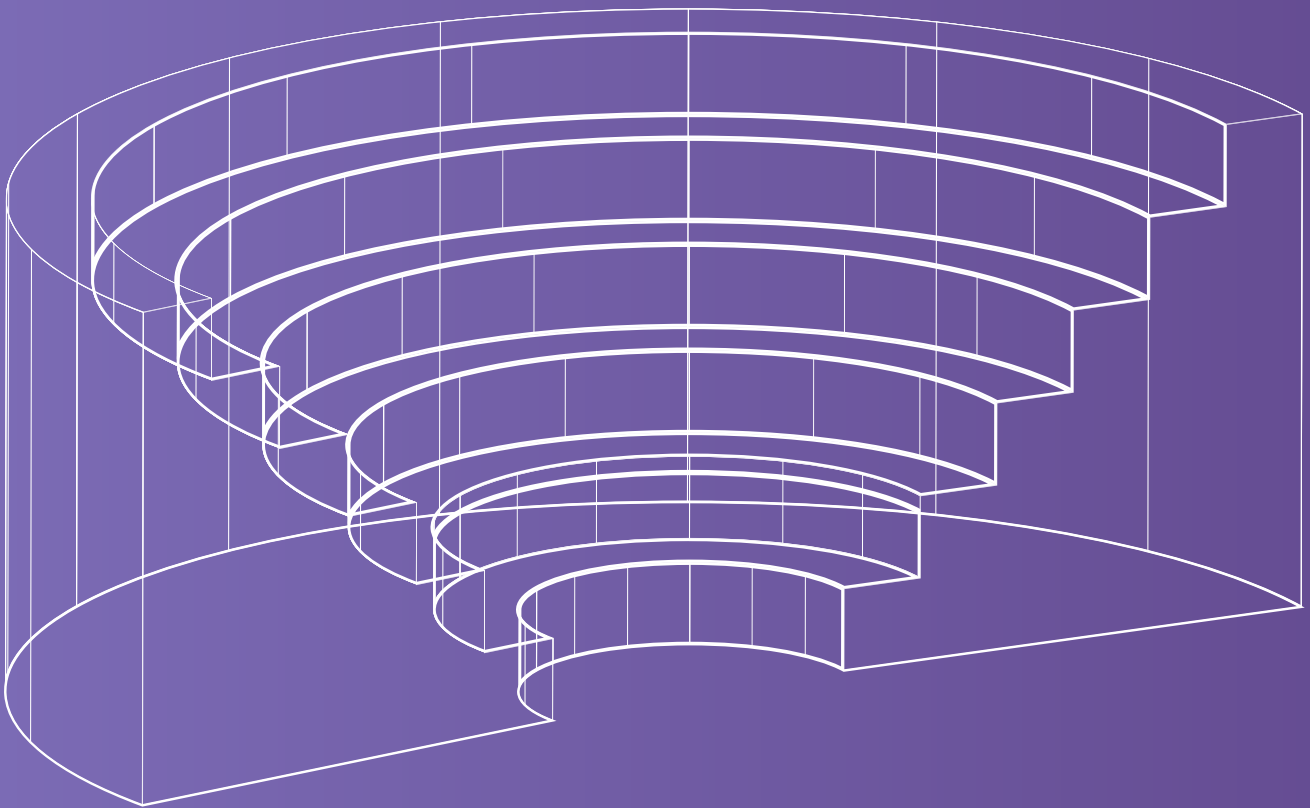


OBSERVATORY ON
INFORMATION AND
DEMOCRACY

GUIDANCE FOR POLICY MAKERS AND BIG TECH COMPANIES

INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS AND TROUBLED DEMOCRACY

A Global Synthesis of the State
of Knowledge on News Media,
AI and Data Governance



Guidance for Policy Makers and Big Tech Companies

Democracy is in trouble: there is no dispute about this. What is controversial is the role of information ecosystems in contributing to the fragility of democracy and to the viral spread of mis- and disinformation. *Information Ecosystems and Troubled Democracy* examines these issues in the social, cultural, political and economic settings in the Global North and Global Majority World. It treats harms associated with mis- and disinformation as symptoms of complex changes in society as well as important amplifiers of these changes. What guidance does research offer to policy makers and big tech companies about how to ‘promote diverse and resilient information ecosystems’ (United Nations *Global Digital Compact*, 2024)?

The **International Observatory on Information and Democracy’s** report critically analyzed state-of-the-art research across multiple disciplines (based on a total of 1,664 citations). The report’s focus was on **media, politics and trust; artificial intelligence, information ecosystems and democracy; and data governance and democracy** – with a cross-cutting theme of mis- and disinformation (see Executive Summary [here](#), full report [here](#); Appendix: Methodology [here](#); Future Research Priorities [here](#)). It should be noted that although this summary provides some guidance for policy makers and big tech companies, the research analysis was not undertaken to produce specific recommendations.

GUIDANCE FOR POLICY MAKERS

A key weakness in the policy debate on information ecosystems and harms linked to mis- and disinformation is an assumption that the uses of digital technologies are dictated by technological change, most recently by AI systems. This view is inconsistent with the reality of complex, interdependent relationships between the components of information ecosystems and the diverse ways in which these are experienced by individuals and groups. Responding to this complexity requires examining the power asymmetries that operate through market structures and political institutions in addition to mitigating the impacts of mis- and disinformation on children and adults.

It is important to acknowledge the limits of policy action in the face of corporate power, divided publics and current political institutional norms and practices, but policy makers *can* take steps to promote healthier information ecosystems by learning from the research evidence.

Tackling Power Asymmetries

- Unhealthy information ecosystems are clearly facilitated by big tech monopolistic business strategies that encourage commercial data monetization. A comprehensive systemic approach is needed if policy makers are to tackle what is widely seen as an ‘information crisis’, which is threatening democratic stability.
- Policy makers should deploy the full range of governance approaches available to them, including co-regulatory approaches and competition/anti-trust measures, to restrain big tech industry’s use of business models that lead to the amplification of mis- and disinformation and harms to children and adults.
- Evidence indicates that the challenges of governing foreign-owned big tech companies can be addressed by encouraging coalitions of country or regional stakeholders that work to counter the power of these companies.
- Policy must address the structural inequalities in digital services markets and political alignments, which foster the mis- and disinformation that destabilizes democracy, especially those that prevent news media independence and stand in the way of treating news media as a ‘public good’.

- Steps must also be taken to reimagine and foster alternative datafication models aligned with data justice principles. This means supporting initiatives to build alternative data governance frameworks, including local, community and municipal and decentralized national data frameworks, and incentivizing the work of civil society organizations that monitor big tech data harmful practices and work to reimagine alternatives.
- It is essential that policy makers preserve and promote the capacities of diverse communities to question dependencies on the products and services provided by big tech companies outside formal policy-making spaces as well as through participation in formal consultative processes.

Independently monitoring human rights infringements

- Investment in monitoring human rights infringements associated with information ecosystems is essential. Evidence indicating that the interests of big tech companies are being favored in policy decisions (even when legislation is in place) due to weak enforcement must lead to steps to put more effective governance in place.
- Policy makers must recognize that measures to combat mis- and disinformation risk suppressing voices that are critical of state authorities, and take steps to ensure that these risks are mitigated.
- Policy must address risks associated with the dominance of big tech companies in the AI systems development market to ensure that claims to 'responsible AI' development are not simply product marketing claims.
- Research demonstrates an urgent need for policy measures to secure the safety of journalists and to limit political pressure and other constraints on media freedom, especially when these pressures give rise to mis- and disinformation with severe offline impacts.
- Studies highlight the features of datafication strategies that place disproportionate burdens on marginalized populations, and these need to be addressed urgently.

Measures to combat mis- and disinformation

- Policy measures are needed to hold big tech companies accountable for the services and AI tools they release to the market. This means monitoring the growing use of personalization systems and AI tools, including generative AI tools.
- Evidence demonstrates that no single content moderation technique will be acceptable to every online participant. This means recognizing that multiple approaches are needed to combat mis- and disinformation, rather than relying disproportionately on AI tools.
- Policy measures are needed to address the financial instability of the news industry in many countries, to promote independent news media and to counter the dependence of news media organizations on digital platforms. This means addressing big tech company resistance to making ad tech revenues transparent and devising ways to ensure independent public service media and smaller local news outlets are financially viable, to protect media freedoms and a plural and diverse public sphere.
- Evidence shows that where trust is declining in news media (and public institutions), this cannot be addressed solely by promoting the use of AI systems and other technical measures or by promoting fact-checking. These measures need to be complemented by policies targeting the incentives created by big tech business models.
- It is essential to encourage investigations of the actors and institutions that generate mis- and disinformation and their motivations. These tend to be neglected in policy that favors efforts to mitigate individual harms, and a more balanced approach could help to counter the production of mis- and disinformation and its circulation.

Strengthening Transparency and Accountability

- Policy makers must ensure that big tech companies provide fully transparent reports, for example on content moderation processes (including personalization algorithms), known algorithmic biases, third-party data sharing agreements and data breaches. This is key to understanding whether these companies are being held to account. Enforcing AI systems transparency by ensuring regular independent audits is crucial.
- Research demonstrates that accountability and transparency measures applied to big tech companies can be weakened when barriers exist between state and regulatory institutions charged with implementing them. Policy makers should take steps to improve policy coordination, especially for policy aimed at countering mis- and disinformation.
- Evidence indicates that policy coordination is especially important to enforce measures aimed at governing political campaigning and political spending that fosters mis- and disinformation.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) and AI Literacy

- Media and information literacy (MIL) and AI literacy training for adults and children is a promising means of granting people greater control over their information environment. Policy makers can foster measures to encourage additions to education curricula, or encourage private sector and civil society coalitions to provide training and evaluate outcomes over time.
- Recognizing that these training programs are essential to enable children and adults to interpret and critically assess the information they are exposed to online is a crucial step.
- It is also essential to evaluate these initiatives over the long term, and to adequately resource them.
- MIL or AI literacy training should not be treated as the main solution to unhealthy information ecosystems and declining trust in news media. A systemic approach is needed to address the factors contributing to unhealthy ecosystems.

Influencing Research Priorities

- Frameworks need to be put in place to provide usable data for research purposes. This means implementing frameworks for researcher access to data, ensuring that these are respected, and monitoring concerns of the research community about their adequacy.
- Policy can encourage global cross-disciplinary, collaborative and comparative research through multinational research centers, including in the Global Majority World, to examine the incidence and multiple causes of mis- and disinformation.
- Policy can incentivize multidisciplinary research that joins up work on mis- and disinformation, political processes and market structures with research on cybersecurity and geopolitical tensions. This is essential to capture the interdependency of the components of information ecosystems and their outcomes for individuals and society.
- Policy can encourage research that moves beyond the laboratory to test AI systems-based methods of detecting and combating mis- and disinformation, employing a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods.
- Policy can help to sustain a public infrastructure for independent research, and ensure that research findings are not suppressed for political reasons.
- Policy makers should encourage the inclusion of more diverse types of research in the evidence base that is used to inform policy. This means including research on the socio-economic and political conditions in society that give rise to mis- and disinformation, and on the structural and power relations in the big tech industry as well as the impacts on individual attitudes and behaviors.

GUIDANCE FOR BIG TECH COMPANIES

Big tech companies make public commitments to promote safe and democratic online spaces. These require that companies:

- Change their business strategies and uses of technologies in view of the longer-term negative reputational effects of their data monetization models that harm individuals and groups and that are linked to democratic instability.
- Introduce strategies and practices that are fully aligned with international human rights commitments, including the rights of the child.
- Provide fully transparent reports voluntarily in countries where legislation is not in place, or in response to legislative requirements, for example on content moderation processes (including personalization algorithms), third-party data sharing agreements, data breaches and measures to address known algorithmic biases, and provide usable data for research purposes.
- Invest in inclusive mechanisms for consulting with individual users and collective organizations about their experiences of mis- and disinformation and their participation in the digitized public sphere, attending to responses that they find acceptable.
- Adequately resource content moderation processes, and ensure that the conditions for workers meet acceptable standards of pay, health insurance and care for mental health.
- Increase transparency by reporting lobbying expenditure and reporting on which topics – regulatory procedures and court cases – are the target of lobbying activities.

About the Observatory on Information and Democracy

The International Observatory on Information and Democracy is a core project of the Forum on Information and Democracy, the implementing civil society-led body of the Intergovernmental Partnership of the same name, gathering representatives from 53 democratic States. The Observatory aims to provide a common and shared understanding of information ecosystems and their impact on democracy by aggregating and synthesizing existing research and available data through a robust, inclusive, critical review process. In the form of biennial reports, it provides civil society leaders, researchers, academics and, importantly, policy makers, with a periodic global assessment of the information and communication space and its impact on democracy. By acting as a global research-to-policy interface in the field of Information and Democracy, the Observatory strives to become the equivalent of the IPCC for the communication space, and to foster a more evidence-based roadmap towards both governmental and corporate accountability, ultimately to emulate appropriate civic action in the field of safeguarding democracy.