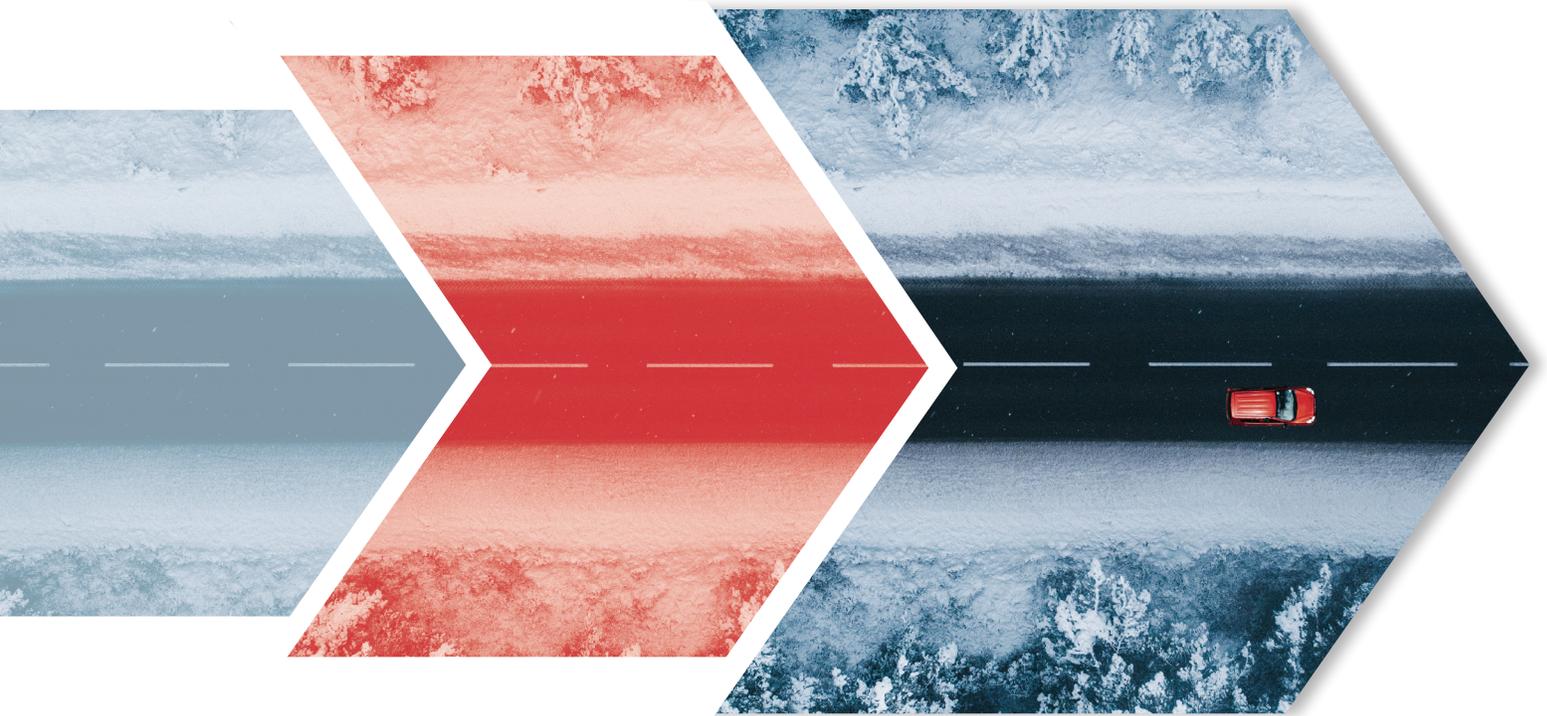


THE ROAD AHEAD

Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation

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**National Endowment
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a central role in addressing disinformation's growing impact on democracy. Given the vast scope of the global disinformation challenge, the landscape for CSOs working in this space has evolved rapidly in recent years. Established efforts to combat disinformation have incorporated the new challenges posed by social media into their agendas, while new initiatives have emerged to fill gaps in research, monitoring, and advocacy. The work of these organizations in the disinformation fight is critical for positively shaping policy making, improving platform responses, and enhancing citizen knowledge and engagement.

Yet, CSOs face ongoing challenges in this complex and fast-changing field. How has civil society grown in its understanding and response to the digital disinformation challenge and what should be done to further empower this work?

To acquire insights into these questions, this paper draws on two methods—a mapping exercise of civil society initiatives and a survey of leading CSOs working in this field. This approach reveals that CSOs bring a wide range of skill sets to the problem of digital disinformation. Some organizations focus on digital media literacy and education; others engage in advocacy and policy work. Another segment has developed expertise in fact-checking and verification. Other organizations have developed refined technical skills for extracting and analyzing data from social media platforms.

This research yielded several clear observations about the state of CSO responses to disinformation and, in turn, suggests several recommendations for paths forward.

- **Prioritize Skill Diffusion and Knowledge Transfer.** Civil society organizations seeking funding for counter-disinformation initiatives should emphasize the importance of skill diffusion and knowledge-transfer initiatives. The siloed nature of disinformation research points to a growing need to blend technical expertise with deep cultural and political knowledge.
- **CSO researchers lack sufficient access to social media data.** Survey respondents identified insufficient access to data as a challenge. Sometimes data are not made available to CSOs; in other instances, data are made available in formats that are not workable for meaningful research purposes. Unequal access to the data that private companies do provide can exacerbate regional inequities, and the nature of data sharing by social media platforms can unduly shape the space for inquiry by civil society and other researchers. Funders, platforms, and other key actors should develop approaches that provide more consistent, inclusive data access to CSOs.
- **Duplicative programming hampers innovation.** CSOs drawing on similar tools, approaches, and techniques to meet similar goals pointed to three main factors preventing more specialized, innovative initiatives: lack of coordina-

tion, lack of specific expertise, and lack of flexible funding. Community building and collaboration among relevant organizations deserve more investment, as do initiatives that partner larger, established organizations with smaller or growing ones, or pool efforts, skill sets, and expertise to encourage diverse research by design rather than by coincidence.

- **Relationships with tech platforms vary across regions.** Surveyed CSOs often held simultaneously skeptical and positive opinions about their relationships with social media companies. Some receive preferential access to data and even funding for their work (raising concerns about independence), while others report a lack of responsiveness from company representatives. In the Global South and Eastern Europe, many CSOs expressed concern that platforms failed to meaningfully engage with them on issues of critical concern.
- **More flexible funding and more diverse research are both necessary.** To encourage greater platform accountability across varied geographic contexts, CSOs and their funders should draw on the perspectives of specific, under-analyzed communities.
- **Regional divides in capacity influence the types of responses pursued by CSOs.** Technology-reliant and resource-intensive responses are more common in North America and, to a lesser extent, Europe, and CSO representatives in those regions are more likely to have backgrounds in technology, software engineering, or data analysis. By extension, they are less likely to have backgrounds in fields often traditionally associated with CSOs, such as human rights, law, or the social sciences. To bridge these gaps, funders should emphasize support that builds knowledge between technical experts, civil society, and journalism, with a particular emphasis on the Global South and smaller organizations working in underserved settings.

The sphere devoted to combating disinformation must continue to evolve. Critical to this evolution will be civil society access to data, funding, and skills necessary for the next generation of disinformation responses. The strength of these responses will be integral to shoring up democracy at a time when society is becoming increasingly digital.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns surrounding the coordinated spread of digital disinformation—purposefully misleading, deceptive, and manipulative information spread through online platforms and channels—prominently entered the international public agenda in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In both instances, Russian state actors and their proxies weaponized social media to deploy disinformation. Since then, a variety of actors have turned to the tools and techniques of “computational propaganda” to shape the outcome of elections and undermine democracy around the world.¹ At the same time, digital authoritarians have adopted trolling, online harassment, and disinformation to silence political dissent and undermine the expression of human rights in their own countries.² Populist political parties and candidates have used social media platforms to fuel nationalism and push fringe ideas and values into mainstream conversations, sometimes leading to violence against minority communities.³ Partisan fringe media, influencers, and high-profile personalities have used social media to deepen divides, amplifying conspiracy, hate, and distrust in the media. Similarly, conspiracy theorists have used social media to spread disinformation—such as false claims about a link between autism and vaccines, climate change denialism, or coronavirus conspiracies—that aims to galvanize support for policies and practices that reject science.⁴

DEFINING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation, often used interchangeably with *propaganda*, is a broad term usually referring to the purposeful use of non-rational argument to undermine a political ideal, inflame social division, or engender political cynicism. It may contain a blend of truth and falsehood, or purposefully exclude important context. *Propaganda* tends to refer to the use of non-rational argument to either undermine a political ideal or promote a preferred alternative.

This report deals primarily with **digital disinformation**, or disinformation spread using modern information communications networks.

Misinformation refers to the incidental, accidental spread of untrue or misleading information.

Computational propaganda refers to the use of computer software to spread and amplify disinformation and otherwise distort or manipulate public conversations through similar tactics, often relying on automation to produce and disseminate content at large scales.

Civic activists, journalists, and political dissidents are on the frontlines of the battle against disinformation. As crucial voices for holding governments and private companies accountable, civil society organizations (CSOs) have responded to growing concerns over

The landscape of CSOs working on disinformation is flourishing and has evolved rapidly since 2016. Established efforts have incorporated the new challenges posed by social media into their agendas while new efforts have emerged to fill gaps in research, monitoring, and advocacy.

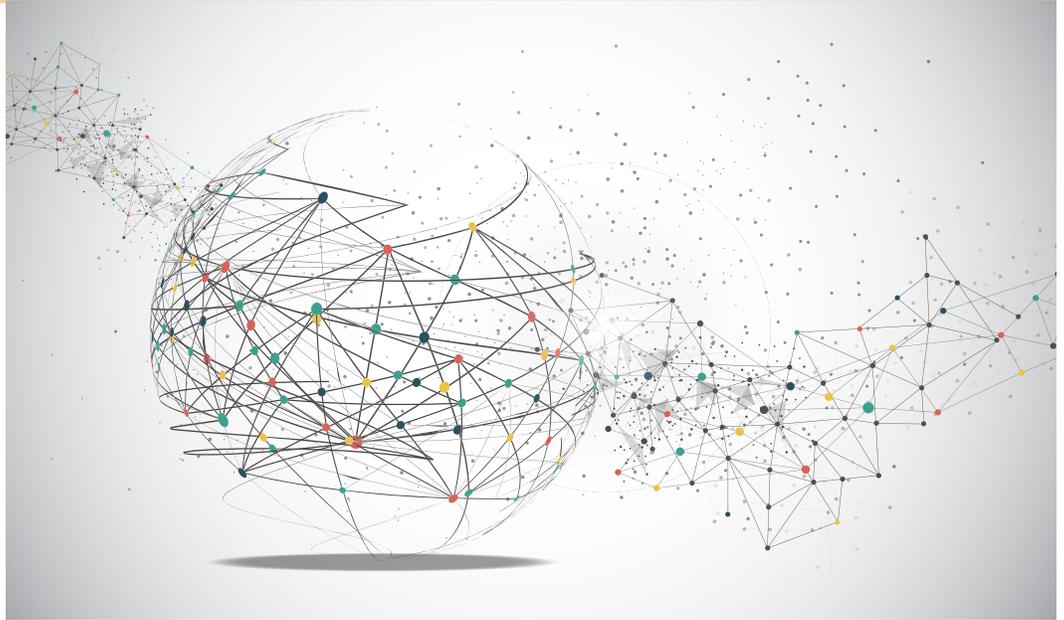
the impact of disinformation on democracy by developing strategic programming and providing independent scrutiny. Their efforts range from digital media literacy campaigns, open-access social media analytics tools, platform audits, and rigorous open-source research to informing policy making, lobbying, and civic engagement. As advocates of truth, trust, and civic interests, CSOs can represent the voiceless and champion digital rights and freedoms before policy makers and platforms. Through research, activism, and advocacy, they are uniquely positioned to draw attention to inequality, bias, injustice, and repression, promoting change and demanding accountability. But CSOs are also frequent targets of political hate speech, bot attacks, and malicious information operations, and do not always have adequate resources to effectively fight disinformation. As social media platforms continue to erect barriers to data access, they must increasingly rely on the benevolence of private companies to share data and collaborate in meaningful ways.

The landscape of CSOs working on disinformation is flourishing and has evolved rapidly since 2016. Established efforts have incorporated the unique challenges posed by social media into their agendas while new initiatives have emerged to fill gaps in research, monitoring, and advocacy. The collective work of these organizations has been remarkable and continues to positively shape policy making, platform responses, and citizen knowledge and engagement. Yet, CSOs face a number of challenges in this nascent field.

How has civil society grown in its understanding and response to the challenge of digital disinformation, and what should be done to further empower it in this work? This paper presents the findings of a research project that mapped out various civil society responses. It offers evidence about which responses work and why, and identifies gaps and challenges facing the community of CSOs engaged in this task.

To gain a deep and contextual understanding of this landscape, we mapped out 175 CSOs working against digital disinformation, identified through sources such as Credmap, Credco, RAND, Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network, and MediaWell. We also interviewed or surveyed nineteen experts and practitioners from seventeen CSOs from diverse regions. The respondents included researchers, managers, and policy and advocacy experts at the forefront of countering disinformation on private platforms, educating the public about platform harms, and engaging with policy makers and industry stakeholders.

The research identified some of the most pressing challenges that these organizations face and possible remedial measures. The following sections present and analyze the evidence for these challenges, and then offer recommendations that CSOs, their funders, and social media companies could pursue to overcome these obstacles and continue improving the democratic response to disinformation.



MAPPING CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

Many civil society organizations around the world work on issues at the intersection of disinformation, technology, and democracy. They have a wide range of programming strategies for global, regional, and country contexts. Some research organizations like Bellingcat, the Alliance for Security Democracy, and Debunk.eu use open-source and platform data to monitor information flows and detect malicious campaigns as they take place. Others, such as the Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa (CDD West Africa) or the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD), work alongside policy makers and the media to monitor pre-electoral media environments and limit the spread of political disinformation that could undermine the integrity of democratic processes. As they independently fact-check viral disinformation on social media, CSOs such as Verificado in Mexico and Correctiv in Germany collaborate with platforms to increase the health of information ecosystems. In countries where freedom of speech is limited through media control, CSOs such as Zašto Ne in Bosnia and Herzegovina have adopted innovative strategies to identify disinformation spread by governments and state-controlled media. These organizations work across a wide range of platforms and address several audiences including industry, media and journalism, citizens, and policy makers.

This study covers CSOs in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America whose primary mission is to combat disinformation through detection, verification, provision of tools, education, or advocacy efforts. Typically, CSOs include nonprofit entities that represent a wide range of interests and ties. Some organizations in the sample also received government, industry, or private funding like venture capital, but were included because they demonstrate rigorous and independent work.

The CSOs in the sample were categorized based on six different types of activities they implement: credibility initiatives; verification initiatives; education and media literacy programs; research and tool provision; developing norms, standards, and policy recommendations; and initiatives to support journalism (see Table 1). These categories are not mutually exclusive, but they are helpful for understanding the different approaches to combating disinformation.

Credibility Initiatives

This category refers to the use of indicators (sometimes detected using automated technological tools) for evaluating the credibility of a piece of information or domain. This may include creating credibility scores and indicator systems for rating the security and transparency of web content and underlying infrastructures. Credibility initiatives do not verify the veracity of information but instead signal transparency and quality issues.

Verification Initiatives

This category refers to evaluations of the veracity or trustworthiness of information. It can be thought of as an extension of the traditional fact-checking initiatives that have been developed to help users navigate an increasingly complex information ecosystem. Normally, the unit of analysis for verification initiatives is text, image, or video.

Education and Media Literacy

This category refers to the provision of curricula, activities, or training materials designed to improve citizens' ability to critically engage with news content and detect disinformation online.

Research and Tool Provision

This category refers to research organizations using and developing tools to help users, civil society, journalists, or interested publics detect disinformation, automated "bot accounts," or foreign influence operations. Sometimes they also conduct research and collect data on the state of disinformation and evaluate its impact on society and politics.

Norms, Standards, and Policy Recommendations

This category refers to initiatives that try to develop standards or norms around the production of information, such as health labels or codes of conduct for journalists. It also includes initiatives that promote or advocate policies to improve the digital information environment.

Journalism Support

This category refers to tools and programs supporting professionally produced, high-quality, and credible journalistic content through fact-checking, consulting multiple sources, verifying material, and making transparent the sources and processes of content production.

TABLE 1: CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

	Credibility	Verification	Education & Media Literacy	Research & Tool Provision	Norms, Standards, & Policy Recommendations	Journalism Support
Africa & the Middle East*	3	16	7	1	6	3
Asia	1	19	3	1	0	0
Europe	3	10	5	2	4	0
Latin America	1	23	8	6	3	0
North America	19	13	12	15	8	5
Regional or International	3	3	5	3	1	2

Source: Authors (2020). Based on data collected from mapping exercise. Note: Values do not add up to 175 because some organizations may be involved in multiple activities.

*These regions were combined as data collection yielded few initiatives in the Middle East and North Africa.

LESSONS LEARNED

Civil society responses to combating digital disinformation have burgeoned, with organizations around the world carrying out a wide variety of research, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, and educational programming. This diverse programming encompasses different regions and a wide variety of tech platforms, including Facebook, Google, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, and YouTube. CSOs have adapted their programming to address some of the unique concerns that arise from the contemporary information and communication landscape. While many CSOs based in Western Europe and North America focus on global or regional challenges, those based in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America tend to focus more on innovative responses at the country level.

CSOs working on digital disinformation use a wide range of skill sets. Some focus on digital media literacy and education, while others engage in advocacy and policy work. Several have developed expertise in fact-checking and verification, and a host of organizations have developed refined technical skills for extracting and analyzing data from social media platforms. CSOs cover a wide array of online spaces, from large public platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and YouTube to private, encrypted applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram to small, obscure, or specialized spaces such as Gab, Discord, or Parler, as well as content hosting and the open web.

All of the organizations surveyed reported developing successful projects and initiatives around some of the new challenges that technology, and especially social media platforms, raise for information consumption, digital media literacy, democracy, and human rights. For example, Jennifer 8. Lee from the Credibility Coalition and Hacks/Hackers pointed to developing standards for assessing information quality that have become widely adopted by CSOs, and Nick Monaco from the Institute for the Future emphasized “democratizing expertise” by providing technical and skills training to stakeholders in civil society and journalism.

But respondents also highlighted important hurdles to conducting meaningful research and advocacy work in this area related to access to platform data, a lack of coordination among CSOs, and insufficient funding. The following section identifies these persistent challenges and lessons to advance innovation and progress.

Insufficient Access to Data

Continuous access to meaningful and relevant data is one important concern. Every respondent raised issues about access to three main types of data, in particular from social media platforms: first, data in the public domain that consenting users share publicly and is accessible to anyone browsing the web, such as public posts, images, or videos shared; second, hidden information that does not reveal personally identifiable information about a user, such as metadata about link sharing through private messenger channels (for example, how often a link was shared over WhatsApp, irrespective of the user) or content takedown statistics; and third, private data that has been anonymized or pseudonymized to remove all identifying personal information, such as posts in private groups with all information about the user removed. None of the respondents said they



requested encrypted data or data containing identifying personal information that had not been shared publicly. At the moment, most platforms share data either through data-sharing research initiatives such as Facebook's Social Science One, which have been highly criticized due to the lack of research independence or transparency around them, or through highly restrictive application programming interfaces (APIs). Accessing social media through bespoke web-scraping tools is also increasingly difficult as platforms use proprietary systems to limit such activities and can threaten legal action when scraping is prohibited in their terms of service agreements.

While data access is incredibly important for conducting research about the effect of digital disinformation on politics and society, the use of social media data raises several privacy concerns. As advocates of digital rights and privacy, many respondents emphasized the importance of protecting user privacy by collecting and analyzing data only with the consent of individuals. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation covers this type of data use by platforms and researchers (or any type of data processor), and it has become widely applied by platforms that cannot assess whether their users are protected under European law.

Issues around insufficient access to data impact the CSOs surveyed in multiple ways. While some platforms are more open than others, Chloe Colliver, head of digital policy and strategy for ISD, said that transparent access to rigorous, large-scale data sets with clear instructions remains a hurdle for the organization's research, monitoring, and policy work. In order to perform statistical analysis with computer programs, data needs to be machine-readable. What is more, platforms need to provide context and documentation for the data they collect; for example, by which "rules" they decide to include or exclude certain data, the collection period, and method. Furthermore, large amounts of data are needed to conduct quantitative analysis that allows for statistical inferences.

Alexandre Alaphilippe, executive director and co-founder of the EU DisinfoLab, highlighted how important it is for platforms to not only make data more accessible, but also to make sure that data is relevant and actionable for civil society. He noted that platforms doing more to make data available will only be meaningful if it is structured in a way that civil society actors can work with, and if civil society actors are significantly empowered and funded to provide strong and independent assessments. For example, when platforms provided data about foreign interference on their networks to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Google supplied non-machine-readable PDFs of tabulated data on advertising and provided no context or documentation about this data. As a result, what Google submitted was not useful for statistical analysis.⁵ What is more, several companies share data when they detect an anomaly on their platforms, such as inauthentic behavior by fake accounts, which may be highly relevant to research, but do not give research organizations access to data on "normal activity." This makes it impossible to contextualize anomalous activity. As a result, the impact of these anomalies may be over- or understated.

Access to data from platforms is also highly volatile, especially in light of growing concerns over privacy implications and the misuse of data for commercial and political gain.

By failing to offer accessible and transparent information about what qualifies as disinformation and may thus be removed, flagged, or fact-checked, platforms have hindered the development of shared understandings and consensus around issues of disinformation.

Sam Jeffers from Who Targets Me? pointed out that data access is far from continuous as platforms tend to frequently change what they make available. Also, while multiple platforms have launched data access programs, these tools and datasets are not always equally available to all, which can discriminate against non-academic types of inquiry and researchers working in the Global South.⁶

Importantly, the CSOs surveyed rely on similar sources of data that are frequently collected with standard typologies. The Twitter API, the YouTube API, Facebook's Crowdtangle, Facebook's ad library, and, to a lesser extent, the Reddit API provide important nodes for access to data, whereas other platforms remain less accessible. As a result, data-driven research disproportionately focuses on a handful of platforms relying on limited access to select data inside "walled gardens," or sources of limited access to curated data provided and controlled by the relevant company. The limited access to data deeply shapes research questions and design, and it limits what type of insights CSOs and researchers can generate from the data. The sparsity of data may also promote duplication of research efforts when researchers rely on the same streams of data to tackle similar questions about platform disinformation.

Finally, the issue of limited access to data is connected to that of insufficient definitions and transparency around issues of digital disinformation. Jennifer 8. Lee said that many platforms have been reluctant "to take a firm stance on deliberate misinformation," including false claims coming from government officials and public authorities. However, she further noted that this tendency "shifted with misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, setting an important precedent." By failing to offer accessible and transparent information about what qualifies as disinformation and may thus be removed, flagged, or fact-checked, platforms hinder the development of shared understandings and consensus around issues of disinformation. This also allows social media companies to evade scrutiny on content moderation decisions, for instance by not offering replication data for content removal.

Duplicative Rather than Innovative Programming

Several CSOs surveyed use similar technological tools, manual approaches, or other techniques that aim to meet congruent sets of goals. This is especially apparent with regard to fact-checking and blockchain-based technologies for content verification, and for early-stage and more advanced organizations alike. Interviewees offered insights into the reasons and motivations behind obsolete or duplicative programming, pointing to three main drivers for this trend: lack of coordination between CSOs, lack of specific expertise, and lack of flexible funding opportunities.

With regard to the first driver, Chloe Colliver pointed to a pressing need for more formal and informal coordination between CSOs to avoid the duplication of efforts (for example, monitoring the same election on the same platform with the same API data and similar methods) and to allocate resources more efficiently. Rafael Goldzweig from Democracy Reporting International said that, while there is a strong community of CSOs and to a lesser extent academic research projects, the coordination of research efforts is still rare. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this: virtual meetings do not usually offer sufficient spaces for meaningful and quality exchange.

With regard to the second driver, Sam Jeffers observed that, as the field has grown to cover a variety of issue areas, most organizations have remained generalists rather than



specialists. Not all have developed the expertise and skill set necessary to ask further questions about the impact of technology on society and politics—for example, by developing new methods to access or analyze data, or to study small platforms or understudied events and countries or regions—or conduct more nuanced, in-depth analysis. In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the U.S. presidential election in 2016, broad conversations about the role of platforms, algorithms, and digital information literacy were still widely novel and relevant to policy makers and the public alike, providing a vast, but often unspecific agenda for CSO activity. However, as Jeffers pointed out, that discourse must now become more “fine-grained” and CSOs need a certain “narrowness of expertise and tight definitions” to bring research agendas together, identify overlap, and answer some of the harder questions about impact.

Regarding the third driver, in light of rapid technological innovation and volatile access to data, funding and grant opportunities need to evolve to accommodate uncertainty and change. Multiple CSOs said that they are often required to commit well in advance to studying specific events on specific networks using specific methodologies with a specific team when applying for funding. Chloe Colliver suggested more flexible and risk-tolerant approaches, whereby funders might commit to supporting an organization and a broad direction of research while allowing more flexibility in research design, programming, recruitment, and collaboration with other organizations. Mackenzie Nelson from AlgorithmWatch stressed that project-based funding (as compared to organization-based funding) could result in CSOs “chasing the latest trends in tech policy, rather than thinking about long-term impact.”

This challenge is also reflected in the views CSO experts express toward funders’ current strategies. Several respondents noted that funders often support large, established organizations with well-tested methods and toolkits over new ones studying non-mainstream networks, such as Gab or Parler, or using experimental methods, such as studying conversations in semi-private WhatsApp channels with user consent. This funding trend is especially worrisome as the sheer scale of disinformation across multiple digital platforms requires diverse and distributed research approaches, even as CSOs work to understand the “big picture” in the information space as a whole.

Regional Divides in Relationship Capital

Civil society organizations have developed meaningful relationships with industry stakeholders, policy makers, and other activist communities in the work they carry out. Respondents highlighted how important industry relationships are for the credibility of their organizations. But the challenge many noted is whether they are treated as true partners; that is, whether tech companies and governments see them as credible sources of expertise and evidence that can help advance products and policies—the role that many statements from platforms and governments say CSOs should hold.

Multiple CSOs said that they are often required to commit to studying specific events on specific networks using specific methodologies with a specific team well in advance when applying for funding.

Our research revealed a degree of ambivalence, with CSOs often simultaneously holding both skeptical and positive opinions about their relationships with social media companies. Multiple experts shared positive experiences about cooperation and other types of exchange with platforms. For example, several spoke about regularly sharing evidence of digital disinformation and interference with platforms. One expert acknowledged the important role of industry funding for CSO work and that some programming would not be possible without industry partnerships. However, this type of funding is often considered to be somewhat controversial, especially when CSOs conduct research on the platforms that are funding their work. This emphasizes the importance of platforms providing greater independent access to data and developing strategic partnerships with CSOs. Both of these measures might provide greater opportunities for CSOs to conduct research about the scale and scope of disinformation, bring issues to the attention of platforms, and make policy recommendations to improve governance.

Experts noted that governments have become more interested in issues surrounding disinformation and corresponding policy solutions, yet they were conflicted about the impact of their work on governance. Very few of the CSOs surveyed were able to point to examples of where their work had a direct impact on policy making.

Some experts noted a lack of responsiveness from the companies they work with when alerted about isolated instances of disinformation and persistent grievances on their networks. Frequent personnel changes are one potential cause behind this: Sam Jeffers pointed out that his organization has faced situations in which established points of contact at platforms had either left the company or were not responsive. This challenge could be resolved through changes in the organizational culture of platforms to ensure that individuals assuming new roles are introduced to all of the CSO partners in their portfolio, or by creating a new team or position within the company to liaise with civil society.

Experts from large, well-established Western European and North American organizations reported more positive experiences about their relationships with platforms than their colleagues in the Global South and Eastern Europe. This is mirrored in research on the underrepresentation of platform policy and content moderation staff in countries with a relatively small market share. Some respondents were critical of the engagement of social media companies with organizations based in the Global South and Eastern Europe. For example, Darko Brkan from Zašto Ne highlighted that the organization's Facebook ads debunking COVID-19 related disinformation were repeatedly blocked by the platform—possibly because they were repeating elements of false claims in order to debunk them—even though it has received Facebook funding for fact-checking COVID-19 related claims.

Similarly, Idayat Hassan from CDD West Africa said that platforms frequently fail to engage with civil society organizations in Nigeria in meaningful ways. She pointed out that networks merely “tick the boxes,” particularly during elections, rather than developing preemptive measures and implementing clear strategies, as they do in the Global North. These findings not only highlight the lesser bargaining power of small and non-Western CSOs but also demonstrate the importance of efforts to help companies develop cultural knowledge and sensitivities, even in smaller markets.

Several experts also emphasized the importance of a more integrated policy response to the large-scale, global policy problem that digital disinformation poses. For example, Rastó Kužel of Memo 98 described disinformation as a “multidimensional policy problem” requiring “coordinated stakeholder cooperation and shared understandings.” However, many experts shared similar ambivalent accounts of their engagement with policy makers and governments. Almost all had participated in a public or off-the-record policy briefing, except those researching disinformation in authoritarian countries where the

government is involved in social media manipulation and censorship. The experts noted that governments have become more interested in issues surrounding disinformation and corresponding policy solutions, yet they were conflicted about the impact of their work on governance. Very few of the CSOs surveyed were able to point to examples of where their work had a direct impact on policy making, and some pointed even to examples where policy makers had neglected their advice and evidence.

Regional Divides in Skill Sets and Capacity

Experts at civil society organizations combating digital disinformation often make use of diverse technical capacities and knowledge. This includes subject-matter expertise (for example, about disinformation, and its perpetrators, spread, and history) and analytical expertise (for example, in big-data analysis, machine learning, and collecting data from the internet). CSOs have engaged in diverse activities including the automated detection of disinformation, AI-driven credibility ranking, and media literacy and advocacy efforts. However, technology-reliant and resource-intensive techniques are common in North America and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, whereas non-automated fact-checking is prevalent in the Global South.

This divide in capacity could be the result of timing; that is, a function of when issues of digital disinformation first became relevant to funding portfolios. The majority of CSOs surveyed pointed to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, referring to foreign information operations and homegrown disinformation. Following this event, large investments were made in North American and European CSOs studying digital disinformation. However, organizations in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Africa referred to earlier events, often involving state-sponsored propaganda, such as cyber attacks from Russia on websites of Estonian institutions and organizations during the controversy over the relocation of a Soviet World War II memorial in Tallinn in 2007, or the downing of a Malaysian Airlines

plane by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine in 2014, or issues around ongoing corruption and media freedom.

To an extent, the regional capacity divide is also present in the professional backgrounds of civil society experts working on digital disinformation. Several North American and Western European respondents formerly worked in big tech, software engineering, or data analysis. Significantly fewer had a background in fields often associated with CSOs and other public-interest organizations, such as human rights, law, international relations, or political and social science. This suggests that CSOs responding to disinformation in North America and Europe possess specific technical knowledge more often than they do skill sets found in public interest groups.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The number and diversity of CSOs involved in combating digital disinformation has led to unique and innovative measures, but it has also introduced coordination problems.

Civil society organizations have adopted effective and innovative programs and toolkits to combat the spread of digital disinformation as well as to advocate for better government policies and platform accountability. From media literacy and education programs to developing norms and standards or conducting research and developing tools for disinformation detection, civil society is empowering citizens and equipping policy makers and platforms with evidence to counter platform deficiencies and to foster technology that supports democratic rights.

Civil society actors working in this space face several challenges, however. Access to meaningful data remains a problem, as companies increasingly restrict access to data on public social media activity (such as posts, comments, or images that are visible to all platform users) through their APIs and limit the availability of other types of data relevant to the spread of disinformation on their platforms. Although platforms have introduced ambitious initiatives to make large-scale datasets available to researchers and CSOs, these often lack transparency about application and evaluation processes or present only walled-garden access to selective data curated by platforms.

The number and diversity of CSOs involved in combating digital disinformation has led to unique and innovative measures, but it has also introduced coordination problems as organizations working on security issues, election monitoring, human rights advocacy, fact-checking, digital rights advocacy, and journalism come together with different definitions and approaches to the problem. And not all organizations are equipped with the digital skill set required to keep up with the evolving disinformation landscape as governments or other malicious actors continue to develop new technologies and methods for evading detection.

CSOs are doing important work to combat digital disinformation, but greater cooperation from platforms—like making public data more accessible—could empower them to do more. Interviewees also highlighted the important role of funders, and especially the need for flexible programming that could allow projects to adapt to the evolving disinformation landscape and the need to invest in programs that emphasize collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations:



Make data access more inclusive: Civil society organizations and researchers should push for public-interest access to data on platforms, asking that data be accessible to an internationally diverse set of organizations working on different aspects of digital disinformation. This particularly extends to data that is already in the public domain and shared by consenting users, such as public posts, comments, or images that are visible to all platform users. Nevertheless, this public data often remains inaccessible to systematic research, especially since some platforms have increasingly restricted access to aggregate-level data through their APIs. With greater API access to data in the public domain, civil society can help platforms protect user rights and limit privacy concerns while analysts conduct independent research about technology, society, and politics. Greater API access would also facilitate a more even playing field for large- and small-scale organizations that could not only carry out independent research but also study the impact of social media platforms on society in real time.



Support Diversity: Funders should revise their strategies to include minimum levels of investment in small organizations or short-term projects studying non-Western contexts and underrepresented and underprivileged groups in society. This would not only support diversity and research innovation but also provide a greater body of empirical work highlighting the unique perspectives of women, people of color or with disabilities, immigrants, or other minority communities experiencing digital disinformation. Without greater attention to these communities, civil society will not be equipped to make policy recommendations that enhance the well-being of all technology users.



Increase Funding Flexibility: Civil society should seek—and funders should devise mechanisms to provide—more flexibility when it comes to research contexts (for example, social media networks, emerging events) and methodologies. Frequently, funding—and, by extension, research—focuses on dominant platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, with less attention to smaller networks or platforms that operate in non-English-language contexts or are devoted to niche communities and topics. Flexible funding arrangements would allow CSOs to adapt their research to the evolving disinformation landscape, in which elections, civil unrest, or political developments can provide important insight into the impact of technology on society and politics.



Prioritize Skill Diffusion and Knowledge Transfer: Civil society organizations seeking funding for counter-disinformation programming should emphasize the importance of skill diffusion and knowledge-transfer initiatives. The siloed nature of disinformation research points to a growing need to blend technical expertise with deep cultural and political knowledge. Funding should emphasize programming that builds knowledge between technical experts, civil society, and journalism, with a particular emphasis on the Global South or smaller organizations working in understudied, under-represented, and non-English-language contexts. This could also involve running donor-supported “hackathons” around a particular issue or election, investing in developing detection tools for harassment and disinformation in non-English-language contexts, or investing in data science or open-source analysis training workshops or courses.



Improve Networking, Collaboration, and Interest Pooling: Civil society organizations have a wealth of experience and knowledge about digital disinformation’s impact on citizens, society, and democracy. While there are a growing number of initiatives that allow organizations and activists to share their knowledge and experience with one another, there is also a gap in meaningful and widely accessible networking events, workshops, and roundtables. This is, in part, due to the fact that questions at the intersection of

social media, disinformation, and society create space for a wide range of CSOs to participate, from digital rights communities to elections and oversight organizations, news and fact-checking organizations, national security think tanks, and human rights organizations. The diverse array of organizations involved in activism and advocacy is a strength that can bring together unique perspectives, but it also introduces challenges like project redundancy which can hamper coordination and collaboration. Some funders have begun to play a facilitating role in bringing diverse voices to the table, but more attention and investment could be paid to initiatives that emphasize community building and collaboration, that partner large established organizations with smaller or growing ones, and that pool individual interests, skill sets, and expertise to accommodate diverse research by design rather than by coincidence. For funders, this strategy may also be a way to manage risk when working with new organizations that have yet to develop a portfolio: fostering collaboration between new and more experienced organizations not only enables knowledge and skill transfer between them but may also empower funders to support more diverse organizations.

While this space will continue to evolve, ensuring civil society has access to the data, funding, and skills necessary to support the next generation of disinformation research can help improve civic engagement and democratic accountability as political communication becomes increasingly digital. Despite ongoing platform and policy efforts, digital disinformation—foreign or homegrown, by fringe dissident or mainstream political figures, profit-driven or politically motivated, propagated with malicious intent or shared by unknowing users—continues to pose an ongoing threat to the integrity of democracy and human rights around the globe. As part of the effort to overcome this information crisis, CSOs provide impactful research and advocacy work. Even more importantly, they represent the voice of the public in re-envisioning democratic discourse online.

APPENDIX A: CONSULTATIONS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY EXPERTS

Interviews

In order to access rich and contextualized evidence about the practices, experiences, and expertise of civil society actors working on issues of disinformation, we conducted in-depth interviews with experts.⁷ We used semi-structured interviews with individualized questions to reveal actor-specific knowledge and address diverse contexts and backgrounds. By opting for the “open, flexible, and interactive”⁸ semi-structured approach, we could draw upon interviewees’ perspectives, experiences, and interpretations.⁹ Interviewees were given the choice to remain anonymous, but most allowed us to disclose their name and affiliation. Interviews were not recorded, but we selectively transcribed notes while conducting the interviews and quotes were shared with the participants for their approval and adapted where required. To identify the interviewees, we drew from the civil society inventory we developed, in addition to drawing upon our personal and professional networks. We identified three target groups:

1. **Research practitioners.** These experts conduct research into various phenomena related to disinformation and social media manipulation. They develop and deploy research methodologies, and collect, verify, and analyze data from APIs and other data sources.
2. **Managers.** These experts lead the day-to-day business of organizations and make decisions on staffing, funding, and logistical aspects of research and outreach projects.
3. **Policy and advocacy specialists.** These experts convey the research and agendas of CSOs to the public, policy makers, regulators, and industry. They engage with diverse stakeholders, present findings, and undertake education and advocacy efforts.

These groups are not mutually exclusive. Experts frequently perform diverse tasks within their organization, regardless of its size.

We interviewed eleven experts from ten organizations based in different regions, including Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and North America. Four interviewees identified as female and seven as male. Each of the interviews lasted between thirty and forty minutes and was conducted over video conferencing software. Face-to-face interviews were not possible due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A detailed table of participant demographics and representative examples of our interview questions are provided in Appendices B and C.

Survey

Several experts we approached struggled to make time for an interview despite expressing credible willingness to contribute to this research. Frequently, subjects pointed to new care obligations and changing work routines arising in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Given the current working climate, we decided to use a survey as a supple-

mentary methodology drawing from the structure and questions of our interview design. The survey was designed to take respondents between ten to fifteen minutes to complete and respondents were able to take a break and return to the survey at a later point in time. We used Google Forms for the survey, which did not require a log-in or registration from participants. This survey design accommodated the busy schedules of participants and allowed us to obtain data from eight experts from seven organizations who otherwise would not have been able to contribute due to work and care commitments.

Our survey data highlighted emerging trends and overarching findings, lending additional depth to our interview data. While survey data usually falls short of offering the level of complexity that interviews can reveal, the survey complemented initial findings from the interviews by providing additional context and nuance. Representative examples of questions from the survey are available in Appendix D. Participants were asked to provide responses to questions relevant to their expertise and experience only.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW AND SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

INTERVIEWS					
Subject	Title	Organization	Date of Interview	Region	Gender
Sam Jeffers	CEO	Who Targets Me?	August 7, 2020	United Kingdom	Male
Nick Monaco	Director of the Digital Intelligence Lab	Institute for the Future	August 11, 2020	United States	Male
Rafael Goldzweig	Research Coordinator	Democracy Reporting International	August 13, 2020	Germany	Male
Darko Brkan	President	Zašto Ne	August 13, 2020	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Male
Alexandre Alaphilippe	Executive Director	EU DisinfoLab	August 14, 2020	Italy	Male
Chloe Colliver	Head of Digital Policy and Strategy	Institute for Strategic Dialogue	August 17, 2020	United Kingdom	Female
Idayat Hassan	Director	CDD West Africa	August 18, 2020	Nigeria	Female
Mackenzie Nelson	Project Manager for Governing Platforms	Algorithm Watch	September 9, 2020	Germany	Female

SURVEYS				
Subject	Title	Organization	Region	Gender
Ben Nimmo	Head of Investigations	Graphika	United States	Male
Jennifer 8. Lee	Co-founder at CredCo, Board Member at Hacks/Hackers	Credibility Coalition, Hacks/Hackers	United States	Female
Anonymous	Advocacy Coordinator	EU DisinfoLab	Europe	—
Ttcat	CEO	Doublethink Lab	Taiwan	Male
Claire Pershan	Responding in Personal Capacity	Formerly Internews, now EU DisinfoLab	Europe	Female
Rasto Kuzel	Executive Director	Memo 98	Slovakia	Male
Carlos Cortes	Co-founder	Linterna Verde	Colombia	Male

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

About the Subject/Background Questions

- Q.1** What is the gender of the subject (male, female, non-binary)?
- Q.2** Where is your organization based?
- Q.3** What is your current position and what organization do you work for?
- Q.4** How long have you worked in this role?
- Q.5** If you have taken on this role less than two years ago, which field or industry have you worked in before?
- Q.6** Do you work individually or as part of a team? How many people do you directly work with on issues related to disinformation and social media?
- Q.7** When did questions around disinformation, fake news, and social media manipulation become relevant to your work?
- Q.8** What areas and what social networks does your organization's work focus on?

Probing Questions for Subject

- Q.1a** From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges your organization sees with social media and disinformation?
- Q.1b** Of these challenges surrounding social media manipulation, which is the most pressing for civil society organizations to address (hate speech, the spread of political disinformation, social media advertising, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, other)?
- Q.2a** What current strategies does your organization pursue to combat disinformation?
- Q.2b** Of these strategies, which are your organization pursuing or considering (monitoring, automated detection, education, policy engagement, industry engagement)?
- Q.2c** Where do the current strategies fall short for addressing these issues?
- Q.3** Can you detail a successful project your organization has pursued in relation to disinformation on social media? What is your core product?
- Q.4a** Can you describe the decision-making process?
- Q.4b** Who are the key actors involved in decision making around these issues in your organization? Can you describe the industry and policy stakeholders your organization is targeting?
- Q.4c** Can you tell me more about the kinds of groups and audiences of disinformation you are targeting in your work?
- Q.4d** What kind of steps do you take to work with the tech companies when thinking

about possible countermeasures? What kind of steps do you take to work with governments when thinking about possible countermeasures?

- Q.4e** Do you find these kinds of partnerships between government and industry meaningful for your work, why or why not?
- Q.4f** Can you describe a successful partnership with industry on digital issues? Can you describe a negative partnership with industry on digital issues?
- Q.4g** Can you describe some of the challenges you faced when developing countermeasures?
- Q.5** Can you describe how you work with or learn from other civil society organizations who are working on these issues?

Impact Questions

- Q.1a** Broadly speaking, what are the goals of your interventions?
- Q.1b** In the short term, what are your main priorities for combating disinformation?
- Q.1c** In the long term, what are your main priorities for combating disinformation?
- Q.2** Can you describe how you think these options will affect freedom of speech or might become abused?
- Q.3** How are they related to existing laws around censorship and hate speech?
- Q.4** Whom do you seek to reach directly with your measures?
- Q.5** What is the regional focus of your measures? Can you describe why you are focusing on a specific region?
- Q.6** You have one million USD to spend on issues of disinformation and social media. What do you spend it on and where is funding most needed?

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Q.1** What is your name?
- Q.2** Which organization are you affiliated with and where is your organization based?
- Q.3** What is your current title and what does this role involve?
- Q.4** If you have taken on this role less than two years ago, which fields or industries have you worked in before?
- Q.5** When and why did questions around digital disinformation, fake news, and social media manipulation become relevant to your work?
- Q.6** What areas and what social network does your organization's work focus on?
- Q.7** From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges your organization sees with social media and disinformation?
- Q.8** What current strategies does your organization pursue to combat disinformation (e.g., developing tools, advocacy work, detection, fact-checking, etc.)?
- Q.9** What kind of steps do you take to work with the tech companies and policy makers when thinking about possible countermeasures?
- Q.10** Do you find these kinds of partnerships between government and industry meaningful for your work, why or why not? Can you describe a successful partnership?
- Q.11** Imagine you are a funder who can award a one million-dollar grant to a civil society organization. What projects do you fund and where is funding most needed?

APPENDIX E: CODED SPREADSHEET OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

To see the full spreadsheet of coded civil society organizations, please visit www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Coded-Spreadsheet-Civil-Society-Organizations-Neudert-Bradshaw-Jan-2021.xlsx.

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The International Forum for Democratic Studies at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a leading center for analysis and discussion of the theory and practice of democracy around the world. The Forum complements NED's core mission—assisting civil society groups abroad in their efforts to foster and strengthen democracy—by linking the academic community with activists from across the globe. Through its multifaceted activities, the Forum responds to challenges facing countries around the world by analyzing opportunities for democratic transition, reform, and consolidation. The Forum pursues its goals through several interrelated initiatives: publishing the *Journal of Democracy*, the world's leading publication on the theory and practice of democracy; hosting fellowship programs for international democracy activists, journalists, and scholars; coordinating a global network of think tanks; and undertaking a diverse range of analytical initiatives to explore critical themes relating to democratic development.

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