



## **Emerging Global Challenges to Democracy: Safeguarding Integrity of the Information Space**

New and emerging challenges to democracy have arisen in recent years that are driving political development in countries around the world. Amid global shifts in the information, financial, and technological landscapes, open societies face the erosion of familiar democratic guardrails, while autocrats have found ways to weaponize new digital capabilities and cross-border ties. Democracy's supporters must develop local responses to globally driven forces—including those associated with deep changes in the information environment—that are moving with extraordinary speed. To begin addressing the systemic drivers of change, democrats need to cultivate new forms of collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and innovation.

### The Challenge:

In recent years, the proliferation of digital media around the world has been one of the key drivers of deep, structural changes within the news industry, hobbling the production of fact-based news and leading to fragmentation and polarization. Such trends have been accelerated by digital systems with black-box algorithms, which direct the attention of a growing proportion of the global population toward individually tailored, emotionally charged content designed to capture attention.

In these new circumstances, globally ambitious authoritarian regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran have exploited trends in the information environment to accentuate their power at home and across borders. By muddying the information space, dividing people across political lines, and obscuring their own harmful actions, authoritarian powers seek to stifle free expression, create confusion, and disrupt democratic processes such as elections. Such efforts corrode the environment for democracy by marginalizing civil society voices, weakening democratic norms around reasoned and civil debate, and amplifying local voices who exploit divisive narratives for their own ends. Ultimately, authoritarian information manipulation efforts seek to undermine trust in democratic institutions and in democracy.

### State of Play:

Awareness of the challenge to democracy and to the integrity of the information space has grown in recent years, as authoritarian regimes have deployed new approaches with varying degrees of success. Relying on a campaign of information manipulation, Russia for instance has sought to deflect attention and evade responsibility for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While Ukraine is prevailing in the information battle across most of the transatlantic community, Russia's disinformation machine has achieved effect in regions such as Latin America and Africa.

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In recent years, China's foreign information operations have evolved to expand their reach. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has made “discourse power” a priority for the Chinese state media apparatus and its growing global footprint. At the same time, the techniques used to suppress negative coverage of China have expanded beyond outright censorship to include ideologically based journalism trainings and the suppression and exile of foreign journalists based in China. Iran's authorities continue to seek to stifle coverage of ongoing protests at home, and the rapid growth of [disinformation-for-hire tools](#) has enabled their use by authoritarian powers such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There is little evidence to suggest that the authoritarian powers will alter course in their heavy reliance on manipulation of the information environment, and therefore democratic actors must adapt to address the evolving challenge.

#### Key Principles for Response:

**Foster Transnational Cooperation to Reach Scale:** In an increasingly complex and rapidly evolving information space, civil society organizations must leverage common values and diverse skill sets to form cooperative networks that have the scale, sophistication, and speed necessary to stay ahead of malign actors' continual adaptations. Examples of such collaboration include new civil society networks which combine efforts of data scientists, fact checkers, narrative researchers, web-traffic analysts, sociologists, investigative journalists, and marketers and audience segmentation specialists. Many of these are non-traditional actors, often new to the democracy community.

**Deepen Understanding of Rapidly-Evolving Trends:** Research on rapidly evolving trends in disinformation is critical to informing better, practical responses. Innovative, collaborative research design allows researchers to quickly identify malign actors, their behaviors and strategies, and the content and narratives they disseminate in democratic information spaces. It also can provide an empirical basis for responses on the part of civil society and governments. Such approaches must take into account the sometimes-conflicting needs of researchers, activists, journalists, and other practitioners active in the information space.

**Leverage New Technologies:** Malign actors continue to pose a challenge to information space integrity by flooding platforms with a wide mix of frequently contradictory messages and voices, often designed more to confuse than to promote a particular narrative. Even the most well-staffed civil society organizations struggle to monitor the vast and emergent malign narratives across the global media ecosystem. However, AI and machine learning tools have empowered the response to identify new authoritarian narratives more quickly and to design effective responses before these narratives can cross channels, platforms, and outlets to reach larger audiences. In combination with long-term trust-building, media literacy, and institution-building efforts, such approaches enable proactive efforts to get ahead of malign narratives as on part of re-building integrity in the information space.

Additional Resources:

**Civil Society Innovations in Countering Kremlin Disinformation:** A February 2022 [report](#) describes how civil society has led the way in countering Moscow's efforts to degrade Ukrainian solidarity and attack the global network of support behind Ukraine's war effort.

**Demand for Deceit:** While modern technologies allow the dissemination of information at a vast scale, research suggests that the challenge is not only one of an increased supply. This Forum [report](#) focuses on the demand for disinformation and why some consumers seek out and believe sources of disinformation.

**Examining Global Authoritarian Influence around COVID-19:** Russian, Chinese, Iranian and other state-backed media outlets have amplified their efforts to spread disinformation about COVID-19, as well as other narratives which aim to harm democracy. [An essay](#) explores how regional civil society groups can collaborate to address these acute challenges, and a report [maps](#) how the landscape for those working in this space has evolved rapidly in recent years.