

Executive summary

In democratic societies, characterised by freedom of speech and open debates as a way of reaching consensus at all levels of society, the search for information integrity is key to the ability of societies to hold together. Access to diverse sources of information, multiple and independent news sources, and free and open discourse are all needed to enable informed democratic debate.

It is now widely acknowledged that the spread of false and misleading information, at times deliberately disseminated to deceive or mislead, blurs public debates and fuels polarisation, eroding the social fabric of open societies more widely. Experiences that have only accelerated in recent years show that disinformation campaigns, strategically orchestrated by domestic or foreign actors, can have far-reaching consequences in many policy areas ranging from public health to national security or addressing the climate crisis. They cast doubt on factual evidence and aggravate existing societal divisions, making it difficult to build the societal consensus essential to address complex policy challenges.

Disinformation is not new phenomenon, but digitalisation has fundamentally changed its reach and impact. Communication technologies now allow for anyone with an internet connection to produce and distribute content, but without the responsibility to adhere to journalistic or academic and scientific ethics and standards, long built to favour information integrity.

While this increased accessibility provides unprecedented access to knowledge, can foster citizen engagement and innovative news reporting, it also provides a fertile ground for the rapid spread of false and misleading information. The development of the use of generative Artificial Intelligence will magnify this challenge even further.

On the supply side, the economic incentives of virality and recommendation algorithms frequently prioritise the value of information as a commodity, rather than a public good. This comes at the expense of quality journalism, already facing increasing economic pressures and high-risk environments. On the demand side, these new technologies increasingly respond to the psychological and behavioural drivers that underpin how people search for, process, and consume information.

Many countries have started examining the adequacy of existing policies and institutions that are in place to effectively address current and future realities of a rapidly evolving information environment. Action is required to counteract the threat posed by rising disinformation; at the same time, this action must not lead to greater information control in our democracies.

This new reality has acted as a catalyst for governments to explore more closely the constructive roles they can play in reinforcing the integrity of the information space – namely, how to support information environments that are conducive to the availability of accurate, evidence-based, and plural information sources and that enable individuals to be exposed to a variety of ideas, make informed choices, and better exercise their rights. Upholding information integrity is essential to safeguarding freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.

Countries' growing appreciation for the need to act in this new information environment highlights the need to urgently take stock of the emerging policy priorities and set a path for action. This report is therefore a first baseline assessment that presents how governments are upgrading their governance measures and institutional architecture to support an enabling environment where reliable information can thrive,

while ensuring the vigilant protection of freedom of expression and human rights. It also examines the synergies between different policy dimensions to provide a better understanding of the conditions that contribute to information integrity. While the report outlines countries' policy priorities and actions, it also seeks to advance the discussion on policy recommendations moving forward.

Although country contexts are different, the report highlights common areas of concern and action. First, governments can continue to shift their focus from *ad hoc* policies to counter disinformation threats to a more systemic approach that strengthens information integrity more broadly, relying on all actors of society. Governments need to ensure that their policies are co-ordinated, evidence-based, and regularly evaluated to measure their effectiveness. In this sense, it will be important to identify timeframes for policy action and evaluation. For instance, policy actions, such as responding to immediate disinformation crises, especially during election periods, should be developed in parallel with other policy responses, such as investing in societal resilience, aimed to address the root causes of the issue at stake.

Finally, as information flows know no borders, governments cannot solve this problem alone. Peer learning can contribute to better policies across democratic countries facing similar issues. In addition, strengthening information integrity will also require all actors on the frontlines of information systems – namely the private sector, media, academia, and civil society – to shoulder their responsibilities and act together in support of information integrity.

This report presents an analytical framework to guide countries in the design of policies, looking at three complementary dimensions:

- **Implementing policies to enhance the transparency, accountability, and plurality of information sources:** This includes promoting policies that support a diverse, plural, and independent media sector, with a needed emphasis on local journalism. It also comprises policies that may be utilised to increase the degree of accountability and transparency of online platforms, so that their market power and commercial interests do not contribute to disproportionately vehicle disinformation.
- **Fostering societal resilience to disinformation:** This involves empowering individuals to develop critical thinking skills, recognise and combat disinformation, as well as mobilising all sectors of society to develop comprehensive and evidence-based policies in support of information integrity.
- **Upgrading governance measures and public institutions to uphold the integrity of the information space:** This involves the development and implementation of, as appropriate, regulatory capacities, co-ordination mechanisms, strategic frameworks, and capacity-building programmes that support a coherent vision and approach to strengthening information integrity within the public administration, while ensuring clear mandates and respect for fundamental freedoms. It also involves promoting peer-learning and international co-operation between democracies facing similar disinformation threats.

The aim of this emerging framework is to advance the conversation and develop common language for practical policy guidance. By building understanding of what successful policy responses look like, this framework can play a constructive role in informing policy design and implementation, as well as serve as a baseline for measuring progress in this area.



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