Disinformation and Electoral Integrity

A Guidance Document for NDI Elections Programs

Democratic elections rely on a competitive process, faith in electoral institutions and informed participation. The strategic deployment of false, exaggerated or contradictory information in the electoral environment has been a potent tool for undercutting these democratic principles in many places around world. Deliberately blurred lines between truth and fiction amplify voter confusion and devalue fact-based political debate. Rumors, hearsay, and online harassment are used to damage political reputations, exacerbate social divisions, mobilize supporters, marginalize women and minority groups, and undermine the impact of change-makers. Manipulation of voter and civic information dampens participation and degrades trust in election management bodies. Such conditions can destabilize political environments, exacerbate potentials for electoral-related violence, pervert the will of voters, entrench authoritarians, and undermine confidence in democratic systems more broadly.

Disinformation is the deliberate generation and dissemination of false information to manipulate public opinion and perceptions. Anti-democratic disinformation campaigns are not new. Nevertheless, modernized information technology and platforms by which citizens get their news - including online, and via social media - encourage information dissemination at speeds, distances, and volumes unprecedented in every electoral cycle preceding it. Though the Internet promotes more diverse and accessible information for citizens, its opacity and the ability of organizations and networks to exploit "big data" and hyper target - and intentionally mislead - voters presents an emerging threat to genuine democratic elections. Moreover, in many fragile democracies, strong democratic institutions that could help counter the impact of fake news and broader disinformation campaigns, such as a robust independent media, agile political parties and sophisticated civil society organizations, remain nascent.

Disinformation is when false information is shared to cause harm

Misinformation is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.

Malinformation is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

Many actors are already confronting digital disinformation from a security perspective, including more systematically monitoring and reporting on computational propaganda at its sources, and are increasing cyber security safeguards against hacking and/or disrupting electoral authorities, electoral competitors and election monitors. Academics have analyzed how fake news and social bots are radicalizing and intensifying anti-democratic sentiments. Digital forms of "electoral espionage" and propaganda warfare present clear threats to electoral integrity. Thus, efforts to assess, monitor and mitigate disinformation's impact on electoral integrity should be enhanced, with greater coordination and clearer strategies among those seeking to address these emerging threats.

International Election Standards and Disinformation
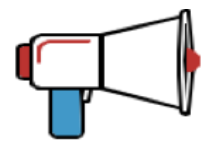
International and regional instruments require open, unfettered, and pluralistic election information environments that promote equal and full participation in elections by citizens and contestants alike. There are a number of pre-existing, globally-recognized standards for democratic elections that pertain to disinformation. In particular:

- **The right to seek, receive and impart information in order to make an informed choice on election day:** For a choice to be free it must be informed as well as devoid of intimidation. Voters have the right to seek, receive and impart accurate information that allows them to make informed choices regarding their future. Further, institutions should be transparent regarding electoral related information so that voters can be informed and data sources can be held accountable. These obligations are founded in the freedom of expression provisions contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), the American Convention on Human Rights, the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, and the OSCE's Copenhagen Document, among many others. Electoral related disinformation efforts subvert this right because they are designed to overwhelm fact-based dialogue by intentionally deceiving voters, creating confusion, exacerbating polarization, and undermining public confidence in the electoral process.

- **The right to a level playing field:** Universal and equal suffrage, in addition to voting rights, includes the right to seek to be elected to public office without discrimination. Governments' obligations to ensure level playing fields for

electoral contestants are derived from this norm. The UN Human Rights Committee provides guidance on this in its General Comment 25 to the ICCPR. The norm implies providing security, among other things, from defamatory attacks and other forms of false information aimed to harm a candidate's or a party's electoral fortunes. The obligations extend to government controlled media, and the norm applies trough professional ethics to journalists and private media. Fact-checking, other forms of verification, and traditional and social media monitoring relate to this norm as well as to voters' rights to receive accurate information upon which to make informed electoral choices.

- **Freedoms of opinion, expression, and the press:** The aforementioned commitments must be balanced by the freedoms of everyone to hold opinions and to express them, including the need to respect and protect a free press. One aspect of addressing disinformation campaigns is to develop proper legal and regulatory frameworks, including effective sanctions. However, that dimension should not be over-emphasized, and care is needed to not subvert freedom of expression while trying to protect the integrity of the information space in elections and beyond them

Challenges to Election Observation

Traditional media monitors have long contributed to election observation efforts by seeking to identify media bias, inaccuracies, and misuse of state media resources. However, with technological advances, disinformation efforts - particularly digital disinformation and computational amplification - present new and unique challenges to election observation. While there has been an increase in fact-checking organizations, the main focus of many has been on verifying official sources (i.e., political parties, traditional news bodies, and EMBs). However, there is an increase in content created by unofficial sources through online content, which suggests a need for more thorough 'source-checking' as well. Additionally, online sources of disinformation lack transparency, with content often spread via fake media houses, phony websites and social media accounts animated by "farms" of hired users and boosted by automated accounts or bots. Identifying the networks and connections around the creation, spread and amplification of disinformation in elections is particularly challenging. This is compounded by the fact that the uses and popularity of certain social media platforms and messaging applications--and access to their underlying data via APIs--can vary dramatically by country, while disinformation techniques and content are constantly evolving. Monitoring tools that may be effective in

one context therefore may not be relevant in another.

NDI's Electoral Programming Approach

NDI election programs seek to promote electoral integrity through enhanced participation, transparency and accountability, thus creating citizen empowerment and confidence in the democratic process. Election programs may address disinformation when examining: the ability of voters to access information about elections; gauging the extent to which electoral participants operate in genuinely competitive environments; assessing potential triggers for electoral violence; and monitoring how pre-election and post-election phases are manipulated. Below are some ways such NDI programs may be augmented to better address the rapidly increasing use of election-related disinformation on- and off-line.

Conduct a Preliminary Assessment of the Information Environment

The nature, vulnerabilities, mitigating factors, and opportunities around the electoral information environment, online and otherwise, vary significantly from country to country. Prior to designing a program, staff should conduct a preliminary assessment of the environment considering the following framework:

Overview

- From what medium(s) do most citizens in the country get their political and electoral related information? Person-to-person? Printed media? Radio? Television? Online?
- Who owns or controls them, and what are the political implications of this ownership?
- Which of the mediums is/are most influential? Are they domestic or foreign?
- How does this vary, if at all, for "opinion influencers" on the national and local scenes?
- What is the level of Internet penetration? If people receive election information online, what sources are influential? E.g., Social media? Blogs? Online news?
- What are the most common digital communications or information-sharing platforms? E.g., Facebook? Facebook groups? WhatsApp? Twitter? Are these popular just among one segment of the population or many? If one segment (e.g., youth), how influential is it in the electoral context?
- Does the legal framework have any regulations for online content or

communication? Is there a communications oversight or other body or bodies charged with monitoring adherence to the legal framework? If so, does the charge include enforcement powers, and are they properly used?

- Is there a history of disinformation in the country, particularly around politics or elections? If so, what modalities are used, and can you identify those responsible for it?

Risks and Vulnerabilities

- What are some of the major themes promoted by disinformation?
- Do disinformation campaigns clearly disadvantage certain issue campaigns, candidates, parties, demographic groups (ethnic minorities? women?), and/or individuals?
- Are disinformation campaigns focused around an electoral outcome? Will disinformation likely increase around elections?
- Are disinformation campaigns targeted at increasing social and other divisions, promoting hatred, misogyny and/or other forms of intolerance, that destabilize the political and governance environments, thus affecting electoral behavior?
- Which types of citizens are most likely to be targeted by disinformation campaigns? Which types of citizens are most vulnerable and likely to be persuaded by these campaigns?

Mitigating Environment

- To what extent do voters easily discern between credible and non-credible media sources? What is the level of media literacy of the population (i.e., ability to access, analyze and evaluate media)?
- Are there fact-checking groups active in dispelling deceptive information? If so, are they effective (e.g., timely, easily accessible and well known)?
- Are there independent, investigative media institutions? To what extent are traditional media groups, such as mainstream broadcasters, contributing to or mitigating disinformation?
- Are there press unions or journalists collectives involved in this issue? Is there a Code of Conduct that addresses this issue?
- Are local media and/or journalist associations working with international networks like FirstDraft News to address fact-checking, source-checking, debunking and other skills?
- Are there groups that are monitoring disinformation in the media and/or online from the perspective of its influence on electoral integrity? Are they in touch with and/or cooperating with election monitoring organizations?

- Are there any pre-existing groups that are using technology to promote truth and civic engagement, and/or dissuade the influence of fake news or disruptive bots?
- Are there academics inside and/or outside the country who are focused on disinformation in the country? Are they collaborating with each other and/or journalists and citizen groups focusing on information integrity in elections?

Programming Strategies: Addressing the Disinformation Threat

Based on this initial assessment, program teams have several options to address the specific threats that disinformation poses to electoral integrity in their country context.

Working with Citizen Election Monitors to Identify, Expose and Counter Disinformation

Citizen election monitors are well-equipped to investigate, expose, and help to mitigate the effects of information manipulation around elections. They can efficiently map how information spreads in their local context. They understand online vernacular and the significance of slang and other terms that are key to identifying disinformation and its connections to hate speech, incitement and other means of fanning social divisions, which can be helpful to international election observers and foreign researchers as well as to domestic disinformation monitoring efforts. Additionally, they are often viewed as trusted, nonpartisan voices, which is critical to effective debunking efforts as well to inoculating against disinformation. There are a number of methodologies for citizen election observers to consider and/or adopt related to disinformation:

- **Using tools and methods to track and analyze online content -** NDI can work with citizen election monitors to better capture disinformation through enhanced monitoring of the media and online content. In some cases, this may mean bolstering data literacy and technological capacity within the organization. For example: *Fact-a-lyzer Software*: The Elections team has developed tools that groups can use to capture and analyze data from Twitter and Facebook—two of the most used social media platforms. It was initially developed in response to demand in Ukraine, then piloted in Kenya's recent 2017 election and more comprehensively by citizen election monitors in Georgia during the 2018 presidential cycle, and can be refined for other contexts. The tool is being upgraded to include features which will allow organizations to better spot the 'influencers' in a network and to expand functionality to other social platforms. In

addition, NDI can provide guidance on the use of outside resources such as bot detection tools, social listening software, and data analytics firms that can also be used to give a broad overview of social media trends and narratives supported through coordinated digital campaigns.

- **Monitoring traditional media outlets -** NDI can work with groups to consider what, if any, traditional media sources could be contributing to the disinformation environment and how they can be monitored as well as the performance and transparency of appropriate communications regulatory bodies around the elections. Traditional outlets can either be a source of disinformation, or they may pick up disinformation generated elsewhere and amplify it. NDI's media monitoring partners may be operating in a country and could be linked to those addressing disinformation issues, or they could be assisted in enhancing their monitoring activities to address disinformation around elections.

- **Building relevant partnerships** – Disinformation can manifest in complex ways and may require a range of actors to address it. This reinforces the importance of building relationships among NDI partners and others who are concerned with disinformation in elections.
    - In cases where citizen observer groups lack the capacity, resources, or interest in disinformation monitoring themselves, NDI can still help them build stronger linkages with media monitoring groups, academics, tech advocates, journalist associations, women's rights organizations, minority rights groups, conflict prevention organizations, and other actors that may already be examining disinformation issues. As a result, citizen election observers can include relevant findings in their long-term analysis.
    - Observer groups should also consider collaborating with or learning from non-traditional partners (e.g., journalists, entertainers, advertisers) who exercise influence over the media landscape in their countries as they develop their assessments of the information environment. Those relationships could also be harnessed to help develop effective messaging techniques for civic and voter education purposes to inoculate against and/or counter electoral related disinformation.
    - Relationships with election management bodies (EMBs) also are important for addressing disinformation through voter education and for encouraging EMBs to enhance their abilities to rapidly respond to electoral disinformation.
    - Groups could also leverage partnerships to convene multi-stakeholder

roundtables about countering disinformation or consider expanding the agenda for pre-existing forums for sharing information around the elections to also discuss how parties, media, EMBs, observers, and others can all help one another to spread the information to the broader public.

- **Consulting public opinion research and civic education -** Groups could consider consulting or partnering with public opinion firms, or improving their own public opinion surveying skills, to better assess the impact of disinformation on the electoral environment. This and other kinds of research can reveal to what extent disinformation influences voter participation and could provide a better assessment of the impact on electoral integrity. Consulting such research can inform civic and voter education efforts and help make the electorate more aware of the challenges that disinformation presents to electoral integrity.

- **Enhancing data-driven communication skills** - Citizen election observers can also serve as a critical information point to debunk false narratives and bad data. NDI can work with organizations to increase their ability to promote positive and truthful content by improving external communications. Stronger digital communication techniques and more thoughtful messaging could help groups better influence the information environment at large. Depending on the context, citizen groups could develop anti-disinformation campaigns as part of their regular civic and voter education efforts, as noted above -- including regular reminders to fact check information on social media or providing information about verified sources of information on party platforms, current events, election regulations, official electoral results, and other important voter information. "Social good" bots can be created to raise awareness of disinformation and focus on bolstering, not denigrating, factual and constructive content.

Addressing Electoral Disinformation in International Election Observation

NDI international observation missions should analyze the information environment as part of their assessments, including addressing the role of disinformation wherever it is a significant factor – which is becoming increasingly important in most countries.

- **Election statements** - NDI pre-election, periodic bulletins on the election environment, election-day preliminary statements, and final reports should include observations and recommendations concerning the information environment, including disinformation where applicable.

- **Key informants and interlocutors** - This may involve expanding the pool of key informants and interlocutors from whom long- and short-term observers collect information, such as social media experts, academics, tech industry representatives, and media monitors, in the country or who conduct research on its information environment from outside.
- **Dedicated information analyst** - Where NDI is conducting full international election observation missions in countries experiencing disinformation campaigns, one of the long-term observers or analysts should concentrate on developing analysis of the dimensions of disinformation in the electoral context.
- **Skilled delegates** - If needed, observation missions may want to diversify the profiles of pre-election and election day delegates to include tech entrepreneurs, digital communications experts or others with a particular knowledge of digital manipulation techniques and, ideally, clout to influence social media firms, should serious disinformation challenges be revealed.

Opening Election Data to Deter Disinformation

NDI's Open Election Data Initiative is central to addressing electoral disinformation. Unless data concerning critical processes are readily available – including for example voting results from the polling station to the national level, voter registries and related population numbers, procurement processes, technology applications, complaints adjudication, and electoral-related crime information – then fact-based information and accurate analysis about those processes will not be accessible to the electorate. Public confidence in electoral processes and institutions will be vulnerable, and the environment will be ripe for disinformation and misinformation to impact it. It is important to raise these points with citizen groups, political parties, election management bodies (EMBs), and other governmental entities that have roles in elections, and to encourage them to both advocate for and act on open election data.

At the same time, making data open is not enough. Enhancing data literacy (how to access, preserve, and analyze data accurately and quickly) and upping public communications techniques is important to raise with NDI partners. The Open Electoral Data Initiative website provides nine open data principles to apply and training modules to follow. Trainings can be organized through the elections team.

NDI field offices and our partners can also highlight the importance of open electoral data with EMBs and other government entities. Transparent, accessible data can inoculate EMBs from conspiracy theories or misinformation while increasing citizens'

ability to fact-check information they may receive from third parties. In addition, constructive engagement on open election data may help highlight vulnerabilities in EMB data security. As noted below, NDI is engaging noted EMBs and their associations in dialogue with citizen election monitors and international observers around common commitments to electoral integrity. The connection between open election data and disinformation is on that agenda, and some EMB sources can be mobilized to speak to it if needed.

Advocacy: Building Norms and Standards to Counter Disinformation

Disinformation, including in the electoral context, presents a number of points for advocacy that NDI country offices and our partners should consider. Those behind disinformation campaigns can be political rivals, criminal organizations, violent extremists, geo-political adversaries, or others seeking to destabilize countries, undermine faith in democratic processes and/or capture elected offices. Forms of disinformation also vary and quickly evolve. Gender is almost always a factor in disinformation efforts, whether women political leaders are targets or curtailing women's electoral participation is a goal. Similarly, other vulnerable populations typically suffer in disinformation efforts, whether to suppress their electoral participation or to energize other population segments based on fear or other bases. These factors illustrate that advocacy by our partners and by NDI is needed both with domestic and international actors.

- **Governmental action -** Governments need to organize themselves, dedicate adequate resources, and identify electoral-related disinformation, those behind it and appropriate ways to counter it – while upholding democratic practices. Public policies concerning electoral disinformation and related resource allocation, legal framework development and its implementation are all subjects for inclusive civic discourse and advocacy focused on parliaments and the executive branch of government.
- **Party engagement -** In addition to EMBs and other governmental agencies noted above, political parties need to be encouraged to refrain from engaging in disinformation tactics and campaigns as well as to take steps to protect their vital roles in guaranteeing pluralist politics. This means being encouraged to engage in interparty dialogue and uphold codes of conduct, institute internal protocols and safeguards, and take appropriate legislative and parliamentary oversight actions to protect electoral integrity from disinformation efforts.
- **Private sector measures -** Private sector actors, including media houses, advertisers and social media platforms, may also be advocacy targets for

addressing electoral disinformation issues. These actors can be encouraged to adopt measures, respectively, to fact-check and verify information before publishing it, to avoid supporting outlets that spread disinformation, or maintaining accounts that spew it. Transparency in the operations of such private actors can also present important advocacy issues.

- **International support -** International assistance agencies also should be encouraged to support efforts to detect and address electoral-related disinformation, and the international community more generally should be encouraged to protect and further norms and standards in that area. This has implications for supporting country level governmental and nongovernmental activities and intergovernmental and nongovernmental activities regionally and globally.

NDI has been using its pre-existing election networks, such as GNDEM and the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation community, to elevate the issue of disinformation, build consensus around defining the challenges that it poses to electoral integrity, and apply global norms and standards to countering it. In such efforts and when engaging with social media companies, journalist associations, and election integrity networks, NDI raises the need to effectively counter disinformation through a variety of actions by numerous actors in long, medium and short term endeavors.

When supporting electoral integrity efforts, NDI and our partners should carefully safeguard freedom of expression, which is essential to fair competition and informed electorates, while we support adoption of legal restrictions against deliberate use of disinformation to gain electoral advantage and promote measures to limit its reach and effects. This includes upholding standards for promoting an open Internet. Striking the balance between the freedom of expression and safeguarding information integrity – a which are both required for genuine elections – is a major challenge. It is important not to allow autocrats and others who seek to close democratic space to exploit concerns about disinformation to advance their anti-democratic agendas.

The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.