

## Contesting Fake News in Digital Society: Safeguarding Election Integrity and Protection Democratic Principles

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Fake news has been a persistent issue throughout history. As Richard Gray has mentioned *lies, propaganda and fake news represent a significant challenge for our age*<sup>4</sup>. In today's digital society, AI-driven data has heightened the problem, leading to unprecedented levels of misinformation globally. The explosion of fake news causes a significant threat to democratic processes, especially with In 2024, elections are scheduled or have already occurred across 77 countries, encompassing 16 in Africa, 12 in the Americas, 17 in Asia, 28 in Europe (including the UK), and 4 in Oceania. These democratic processes face significant challenges, as emerging AI-driven techniques- such as deep fake manipulation and microtargeting- pose unprecedented risks to electoral integrity globally. These technologies have the capacity to shape public opinion and manufacture consensus, exacerbating division and diminishing democratic participation. The spread of fake news undermines the integrity of elections and damages public trust in democratic institutions.

Recent studies by Kim et al. (2024) highlight the severe economic and social consequences of false information, with societal costs reaching extraordinary levels annually. The spread of fake news undermines the integrity of elections and damages public trust in democratic institutions. In response to these challenges, there is a pressing need for regulatory action to address the risks created by AI to democracy. Policies must be implemented to safeguard election integrity and mitigate the dissemination of misinformation. Additionally, efforts to enhance digital literacy among voters and promote critical thinking skills among citizens are essential to combating fake news. Moreover, addressing key inquiries through digital news assessment, promoting transparency, developing reliable algorithm frameworks, and integrating ethical tools to enhance societal resilience against misinformation are crucial steps in combating the spread of fake news and preserving the integrity of democratic processes. Thus, a comprehensive approach involving governments, media outlets, tech companies, and civil society is necessary. By collaborating to combat fake news and misinformation, we can protect election integrity and ensure a more informed and resilient democracy for all. Together, we can support the integrity of democratic processes and build a more resilient and informed society for future generations.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170301-lies-propaganda-and-fake-news-a-grand-challenge-of-our-age>

## **The state we are in: Beyond government initiatives**

Various regulatory and policy measures have been endorsed by national governments, particularly in Europe, to tackle the explosion of fake news and disinformation. For example, the French government initiated the "On te manipule" campaign in 2017 to combat conspiracy theories and false information on social media. This campaign, highlighted on the official French government website, provides resources to educate citizens about the prevalence of false information and offers guidelines to protect themselves. Similarly, Spain's Guardia Civil and Policía Nacional launched the #stopbulos campaign to combat misinformation, focusing on debunking hoaxes spread via WhatsApp. Legal and social organizations in Spain, such as the Platform for the Defence of Freedom of Information (PDLI), also organize events to address fake news. In Germany, the Ministry of Justice proposed legislation targeting hate speech and illegal fake news on social media platforms, imposing obligations on providers to swiftly address user complaints and remove illegal content. Additionally, initiatives like the "Defense Center against Disinformation" were proposed ahead of the parliamentary elections. Italy introduced the "Gambaro Law" to regulate the online landscape and promote media literacy, while Luxembourg established the BEE SECURE platform to raise awareness about safer technology use and combat fake news. Sweden considers measures to counter misinformation, particularly concerning Russia's strategic aims in the Baltic region. The Czech Republic's Ministry of the Interior established the "Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats" to address misinformation campaigns, especially ahead of elections. At the EU level, the "East Stratcom Task Force" tackles misinformation, primarily in Eastern Europe, and proposes regulations for online privacy protection.

So, media outlets, public institutions, and organizations have been highly active in combatting fake news and misinformation/disinformation. For instance, in early 2017, Facebook expanded its tool for marking "fake news" in France, collaborating with eight French media outlets to verify content identified by users. A similar effort called "CrossCheck" was launched for the French presidential elections, involving Facebook, Google, and 17 French media outlets. In Germany, Bild appointed an Ombudsman for readers to report inaccuracies, while Facebook partnered with Corrective to tackle fake news. Similarly, El País in Spain launched the "Hechos" blog to involve readers in exposing fake news. During the UK's Brexit referendum, BBC established the "Reality Check" team to address misleading stories, now permanently investigating false content. Notably, the First Draft Partner Network involves major tech platforms and news organizations to verify social media content. Facebook's News Feed feature flags inaccurate stories and reduces the spread of debunked content. Facebook and Google jointly aim to halt advertisements on websites with false news. In the UK, Full Fact collaborates with media outlets and Google to develop a mobile fact-checking app. The rise of fact-checking organizations globally, with over 113 groups identified by the Reuters Institute, reflects

a broader international movement. Additionally, the International Fact-Checking Network under the Poynter Institute promotes transparent and rigorous fact-checking methods. Yet, the explosion of fake news has been experiencing a significant increase, with its detrimental effects spreading globally.

### **Effective or simply more Dangerous?**

There are concerns surrounding the adoption of controversial tactics in combating fake news, as they could potentially be misused to manipulate public opinion. Such "truth-checking" initiatives have raised fears of triggering a "witch hunt," which could undermine media quality and freedoms in Western democracies. Critics worry that government actions may turn into restriction and expression control under the guise of providing reliable information to citizens. There's skepticism regarding media self-regulation, especially concerning ownership and shareholder interests, as well as private companies in validating news and information. These concerns highlight the risks to freedom of expression and the spread of ideas, particularly in today's context marked by rising populism, the proliferation of far-right narratives, and the amplification of hate speech rhetoric. Overall, addressing fake news has sparked significant government concern, but there's ongoing debate about the appropriate level and type of intervention, given the potential threats to freedom of expression. The link between fake news and democratic processes like elections highlights the political nature of the issue and its impact on public decision-making. Additionally, the internet's dominance over traditional media complicates legal and technical efforts to tackle fake news effectively.

So, much more efforts are needed to address the escalating challenge of fake news and misinformation, exacerbated by advancements in AI and technology, particularly during electoral periods. Reviewing the prior analysis of governmental and private sector initiatives, several key conclusions emerge:

- Governmental legislative actions and the imposition of fines remain constrained, as administrations are wary of accusations resembling Orwellian "Ministry of Truth" scenarios. Even when legislation is pursued, it typically involves engagement with content providers. In cases such as France, an independent mediator approach is favored for overseeing "illegal" content, albeit lacking enforceable authority.
- Self-regulation emerges as the preferred approach, necessitating collaboration among all stakeholders: public and private entities, media outlets, social media platforms, and citizens. Self-regulation takes various forms, including ethical codes for websites, internal news evaluation by journalists, or voluntary tagging and removal of "fake" or "inaccurate" news from digital platforms. Government involvement typically revolves around incentivizing and supervising these processes.

- Governments and institutional bodies exhibit increased activity in labeling and exposing fake news affecting to them, disseminating accurate information through dedicated institutional websites, Twitter accounts, etc. (e.g., Czech Republic, Spain, European External Action Service).
- Delicate state engagement is observed in educating citizens, especially youth, about media operations, the political-economic interests behind content, online economic exploitation, and the evaluation of reliable sources. Given the rapid dissemination of internet information and the challenges in removing "illegal" content, media literacy education emerges as the most effective tool. This necessity aligns across all governmental initiatives.
- Reinforcing professional and investigative journalism through journalist education and ensuring media freedom and diversity serves as a counterbalance to fake news, bolstering the credibility of traditional media outlets.