

# Complete Document - Civil Society

---

<> [counteringdisinformation.org/topics/csos/complete-document-civil-society](https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/csos/complete-document-civil-society)

## **0. Overview - Civil Society**

---

*Written by Amy Studdart, Senior Advisor for Digital Democracy at the International Republican Institute*

### **Fact-checking**

Fact-checking initiatives attempt to identify and correct false or misleading information propagated either by political and economic elites or through peer-to-peer interactions on social media or messaging apps. Civic groups are uniquely placed to implement these programs for two related reasons: first, by acting as relatively objective, dispassionate sources, CSOs can be sources for corrections, especially given the highly politicized nature of disinformation campaigns. Second, CSOs tend to be less constrained, especially relative to journalists, in both methods and solutions.

### **Identifying Disinformation Narratives, Assets, and Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior**

CSOs, often in collaboration with academics or research organizations, have played a prominent role in uncovering information operations. Civic groups have identified ongoing information operations around elections, identified coordinated inauthentic behavior for platforms, and conducted media monitoring to identify key information narratives. CSOs are often particularly well-placed to support the uptake and utilization of outputs from sophisticated research approaches, ensuring that findings are quickly actionable for decisionmakers or targets of disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, as women and other marginalized groups are often early targets of emerging campaigns, civic groups that represent these interests are often best placed to identify the emergence of these tactics, and to advocate for effective responses.

### **Advocacy Toward Platforms**

In their role as a mediator between citizens and governments, CSOs have a natural function of advocacy. Specifically, CSOs are well placed to identify how disinformation campaigns target and harm marginalized groups, which might not otherwise be obvious to the platforms themselves, and subsequently to advocate for platform policy changes that respond to those specific issues. However, civic groups face several challenges in advocacy toward media outlets and digital platforms, including strong platform financial incentives, limited access to decisionmakers, and knowledge gaps within civic groups. Network and coalition-based

approaches to advocacy, particularly internationally, can help overcome these challenges by increasing leverage through collective action, including by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and linking their priorities to broader policy goals

### **Advocacy Toward Governments**

Civil society plays two critical roles vis-à-vis government responses to disinformation: (1) advocating for pro-democratic policies that protect and advance information integrity, including the equal value and equal rights of association for marginalized groups whose participation perpetrators of disinformation often seek to undermine, and (2) ensuring that responses to disinformation, information operations, and other information disorders do not clamp down on free speech, access to information, or participatory politics in ways that might harm democratic processes and principles, again with a focus on how restrictions on association and expression often disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Again, the perception of CSOs as relatively objective can increase their credibility with decisionmakers, and collective action between organizations can make advocacy campaigns more effective.

### **Public Awareness/Media Literacy Campaigns**

CSOs' connection to local communities and position as a relatively trusted source of information make them ideally placed to design and implement public awareness and media literacy programs. These interventions are implemented under the assumption that if audiences can utilize necessary critical thinking skills while consuming online and traditional media content, it will increase their ability to differentiate between factual and misleading or fake content. While the internet and social media platforms have improved access to media and information, as well as the plurality of news sources, they have nonetheless contributed to a decline in the quality of news and information. Improved media and digital literacy among audiences could play a significant role in helping reduce susceptibilities to disinformation overtime. Public awareness campaigns by civic groups can also help create perceptions of shared interests, particularly where they highlight how disinformation campaigns affect the democratic rights or engagement of women and other marginalized groups that might not otherwise be visible.

### **Highlight**

---

However, international collaboration, especially in terms of philanthropy and development assistance, should consider limitations imposed by small grants and short timelines. Responding to information disorders, or building resilience to them in the first place, may require infrastructure with high startup costs, and long-term ongoing support to ensure these initiatives are sustainable.

### **Building Trusted Networks for Accurate Information**

CSOs have been critical in serving as a trusted source of information, particularly in environments in which state media or the government are the main perpetrators of disinformation, and in which the active propagation of disinformation is accompanied by censorship. While “word of mouth” and other creative information distribution activities have always been present in closed societies, those channels have taken on greater formality and scale as digital technologies, and particularly encrypted group chat applications, have become widely accessible.

### **International Collaboration**

International cooperation is a critical factor behind civil society success. In addition to the leverage issue vis-à-vis companies discussed in this chapter, international cooperation allows civil society to share best practices in the rapidly evolving fields of digital forensics and counter-messaging, and to share information about emerging transnational threats and the proliferation of disinformation toolkits used by malign actors, both foreign and domestic.

### **Programmatic Recommendations**

Civic organizations play a key role in identifying and responding to information disorders, especially where they can establish reputations as relatively independent, objective actors. However, these advantages come with tradeoffs, especially if their constituencies tend to be relatively urban, highly educated, wealthier, or more internet-connected on average. Program designs should take care to target interventions to encourage uptake among underserved groups.

Network and coalition approaches to countering disinformation, including international collaboration, can identify comparative advantages, increase scale, and improve the diversity of programmatic approaches.

Relatedly, programs focused on civil society should incorporate an intentional focus on inclusion, and more specifically, the intersectionality of multiple marginalized identities, particularly in coalition and network approaches. Support for civic groups should incorporate a distinct analysis to identify unique challenges faced by individuals facing multiple forms of marginalization within a specific historical context, since perpetrators of disinformation campaigns may rely on the apathy or complicity of non-marginalized identity groups. Collective action is more likely when these groups and individuals that are not politically or socially marginalized understand that they have an interest in defending the rights of minority and marginalized groups.

Civic organizations may consider partnering with existing political or social institutions to scale programmatic responses to disinformation, especially if the organization itself has a small or narrow audience. One example might include partnering with school systems to implement media-literacy programs.

Programs working on advocacy, especially around internet or platform regulation, should consider the specific cultural context of debates surrounding tradeoffs between free expression and security.

Programs working with civic organizations to implement counter-disinformation programs should consider dedicated security training components, including cybersecurity, data protection, response plans for information attacks, and physical security from retaliation.

## **1. Introduction**

---

The role of civil society in fighting disinformation is multifaceted: fact-checking, digital forensics and research, advocacy to governments, advocacy to platforms, digital literacy campaigns, reconciliation, and international cooperation.

While definitions of civil society vary widely, and indeed there is significant debate about what does and does not constitute civil society, Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University, provides a conceptualization that corresponds closely to democracy, rights, and governance (DRG) practitioners understand the concept:

*“Civil society is...the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from “society” in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state, and hold state officials accountable. Civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. Thus, it excludes individual and family life, inward-looking group activity (e.g., for recreation, entertainment, or spirituality), the profit-making enterprise of individual business firms, and political efforts to take control of the state.”<sup>1</sup>*

Pointedly, civil society (as an ideal type) creates what political scientists call “cross-cutting cleavages” – overlapping identities that transcend narrow identities or interest groups based on gender, economic class, race or ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or political affiliation<sup>2</sup>. Association through civic groups creates familiarity and a sense of shared interests between members of disparate and narrow identity groups. With regard to responding to disinformation, relative to these other forms of social organization that Diamond identified, civil society actors benefit from a number of advantages: they are more able to rapidly innovate than governments, technology companies, or media organizations; they are closer to those most impacted by disinformation, more likely to understand its immediate impact, and better able to build trust with impacted communities; their grassroots, localized knowledge is critical to rebuking false narratives; and, unlike governments or political actors, many civil society groups are less likely to be perceived as having a vested interest in propagating or counteracting political disinformation. One important potential

strength of civic organizations for responding to disinformation is their capacity to generate shared interests and goals between disparate identity groups. As disinformation often disproportionately (and often earlier) targets women and historically marginalized groups within specific contexts, CSOs or coalitions are often best placed to identify emerging campaigns early, and to generate awareness, mobilize opposition, or advocate responses broadly. By creating this sense of solidarity and shared interest, civic organizations are well placed not only to defend vulnerable groups from specific harms, but to increase the resilience to disinformation of society broadly, including members of groups who have not been historically vulnerable or marginalized. For all these reasons, civil society plays a critical role in the broader ecosystem for countering disinformation.

This chapter runs through a number of those interventions, details civil society's advantages and disadvantages as it relates to each intervention and concludes with recommendations – many of which are pulled from those indicated throughout the chapter – as to how to support and strengthen civil society's contributions to addressing disinformation.

## **2. Fact-Checking**

---

Many of the most successful and reliable fact-checking initiatives have been driven and staffed by independent media or trained journalists. Those actors are best placed to understand how to thoroughly investigate misleading content, reliable sourcing, and communicating in a dispassionate way about how and why a piece of content or a particular narrative is misleading. However, this is also a space in which civil society organizations have played a critical role.

First, CSOs often complement fact-checking initiatives by acting as sources of information. Where journalists do not have firsthand knowledge of an issue, community, or geographical area subject to disinformation, civil society plays an essential role in either helping journalists debunk a claim through sharing their expertise, or in identifying the ways in which disinformation is impacting, for instance, marginalized communities. Given that disinformation disproportionately targets wedge issues in society, this second role is particularly important.

### **Highlight**

---

In India, after hate speech and disinformation on WhatsApp led to real-world violence and loss of life, Facebook – WhatsApp's parent company – limited group sizes and message forwarding. Multiple governments have shut down encrypted messaging platforms at various points. And even advanced democracies have started to demand – and even legislate – to create encryption backdoors for law enforcement.

Secondly, because civil society is less constrained than journalists in terms of methodology and available solutions, they have a wider surface area on which to innovate. For instance, the spread of disinformation on encrypted private messaging apps was an issue that caused so much consternation that many argued for the end of encryption altogether.

## Featured Intervention

---

### Cofacts

---

A project of the g0v civic technology community in Taiwan, CoFacts is a fact checking bot for messaging groups. Messages can be forwarded to the CoFacts bot for fact checking by a team of volunteers; the CoFacts bot can also be added to private group

Similarly, in Ukraine, civic groups have led the development of fact-checking initiatives to counter both Russian propaganda and domestic disinformation.

## Featured Intervention

---

### StopFake

---

The flagship project of their organization “StopFake” is currently well known to media professionals all over the world. Not only does it identify cases of fake information about events in Ukraine, but also actually initiated an international

## Featured Intervention

---

### VoxCheck

---

Provides fact checking, explainers, and analytical articles, especially on issues of economic reform in Ukraine.

VoxUkraine is a non-profit digital media platform with a focus on economic issues. As part of its services, which also include research, analytical reports, explainer journalism, and economic education initiatives, its VoxCheck service uses a staff of experts to verify politicians’ public statements on economic issues. The non-profit, civic orientation of these outlets provides several advantages; these fact-checking initiatives are situated within larger initiatives that focus on advocacy, journalism, public education, and media literacy. Furthermore, as digital outlets, they are largely able to retain more editorial independence than television, radio, and print outlets. However, these advantages entail tradeoffs. Representatives of VoxCheck, for example, noted that while they had a large audience, it was situated primarily in the capital of Kyiv, and was composed of younger, wealthier, and more educated consumers, who may already be likely to agree with their reports.<sup>4</sup>

## Design Tip

---

Civic groups considering fact-checking initiatives should consider being intentional about identifying new audiences, particularly those that might not be otherwise inclined to engage social media.

Hundreds of civil society fact-checking initiatives have sprung up over the last five years around specific flashpoints, with the lessons learned and infrastructure built around those flashpoints then being applied to other issues that impact the same information ecosystem. Among the most systematic forums of international collaboration is the [International Fact-Checking Network \(IFCN\)](#)<sup>5</sup>, a program at the Poynter institute that brings together factcheckers, provides training, creates basic standards for fact-checking, and advocates for factcheckers worldwide. The group also facilitates informal, reactive collaboration: in May 2020, a group in France shared a story with the IFCN that alleged that the Italians had found a way to potentially cure COVID-19. Within an hour, other groups across Europe shared evidence of the same false story circulating in other countries, [and their own evidence debunking the story](#).

## Featured Intervention

---

### IFCN

---

The International Fact-Checking Network is a unit of the Poynter Institute dedicated to bringing together fact-checkers worldwide. The IFCN was launched in September 2015 to support a booming crop of fact-checking initiatives by promoting best

## Featured Intervention

---

### Animal Político

---

Animal Político is a digital native medium that brings together journalists, designers, programmers and video editors to create content with rigor, precision and thought to serve citizens.

During the 2018 Mexican general elections, a CSO-driven initiative, [Verificado 2018](#) partnered with [Pop-Up News](#), [Animal Político](#), and [AJ+ Español](#), along with [80 other partners](#) to fact-check and distribute election-related information, particularly among youth. Before the elections, Verificado was established as a youth civil society group, [Verificado19S](#), named in reference to the [September 19, 2017 Puebla earthquake](#) that caused much destruction in the Mexican states of Puebla and Morelos and the Greater Mexico City area, leading to hundreds of deaths. The fact-checking initiative reached more than 200,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter and over 10,000 WhatsApp subscribers. Verificado19S aimed

to gather and provide information regarding the earthquake from eyewitnesses through an [online questionnaire](#). Verificado 2018 then utilized the infrastructure and reputation built around the earthquake to replicate a similar initiative around the elections. The initiatives filled an information vacuum in the absence of government-led initiatives and other trusted, reliable sources of information. The initiative received a broad base of financial support from Facebook, Google News Initiative, Twitter, Open Society Foundation, Oxfam México, and Mexicanos contra la Corrupción y la Impunida, further expanding its reach and ensuring the real and perceived independence of the initiative.

Colombia has similarly developed strong fact-checking and research groups focused on the online space that integrate fact-checking. A network of journalists known as the "[Editorial Board](#)" (*Concejo de Redacción*) supports various journalistic initiatives including training and investigation support as well as fact-checking, and supports a group called ColombiaCheck that works to fact-check political statements. This work is inspired partly by the model of [Chegado](#), a group based in Argentina. [ColombiaCheck](#) began fact-checking information around the peace process negotiations between the government and the FARC rebel group in 2015, and has since continued to develop its methodology through subsequent elections and continuing political events<sup>6</sup>. [ColombiaCheck is certified by the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network and has worked to check content on Facebook as a third party fact-checker.](#)

## Featured Intervention

---

### **Colombia Check**

---

Colombiacheck is a project of the Editorial Board, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that brings together more than 100 associated journalists in Colombia to promote investigative journalism. The project consists of a digital, open and

Latin America as a whole has developed strong fact-checking initiatives, including in Brazil where Agência Lupa represents one of the first initiatives that began in 2015 and is now integrating with the Folha de São Paulo's UOL network, the second largest online media network in the country. In the 2018 national elections, various organizations including Agência Lupa, Aos Fatos and traditional media organizations worked to collaborate through [Comprova](#), a joint initiative supported by First Draft, which is a global project to combat mis- and disinformation that also provides the information disorder framework this guide is partly based on. This is based on the "CrossCheck" model where various media organizations "cross-check" facts and confirm them jointly across platforms, [which has been replicated in France, Germany, Nigeria, Spain, the UK and the US](#). There is no shortage of successful fact-checking initiatives around the world, ranging from [Africa Check](#), the [Cyber News Verification Lab](#) in Hong Kong, [BOOM](#) in India, [Checazap](#) in Brazil, the Centre for



Democracy and Development [Fact Check](#) archive in West Africa, and Meedan's [Check](#) initiative in Ukraine. As part of CEPPS, Internews has supported various initiatives globally ranging from [Ethiopia](#) to the Philippines and Turkey.

## Featured Intervention

---

### Agência Lupa

---

The Magnifier is the first news agency in Brazil to specialize in journalistic technique known worldwide as fact-checking and was founded on November 1, 2015. Its business plan began

### **3. Identifying Disinformation Narratives, Assets, and Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior**

---

While much of the work of uncovering information operations has been done by academia and private threat intelligence companies, international civil society has played a prominent role in uncovering information operations. Again, because of its role facilitating cooperation between members of potentially disparate groups, CSOs are often best placed to identify emerging campaigns that target vulnerable groups that might not otherwise be visible, and to mobilize responses.

### Highlight

---

In Ukraine, groups like StopFake have developed methods for digital exposure, reporting, and the public awareness-raising of campaigns, while groups such as [Texty](#) have [collaborated with NDI](#) to develop maps of networks, content, and critical trends within that context.

The DC-based Digital Forensics Lab (DFRLab), for instance, has identified a number of coordinated information operations, with many of those operations designed to discredit elections. Over a one-month period, DFRLab published work exposing various forms of information operations in [Ukraine](#), [Georgia](#), and [Nigeria](#). Past work on [Brazil](#), [Colombia](#), [Mexico](#), El Salvador, Ecuador, and Bolivia has advanced understanding of disinformation actors in Latin America. Those investigations are critical to informing election integrity work. Domestic groups also play a critical role. In Colombia, groups such as Silla Vacía, Linterna Verde and Liga Contra Silencio have worked to explore the online space in both open networks such as Facebook and Twitter and more closed ones such as [WhatsApp](#) during elections, the referendum on its peace process, and other political events. As a specific example of how civic groups can identify emerging harmful narratives and link them to the interests of citizens more broadly, Linterna Verde has focused on online discourse

focusing on female candidates online with the Liberty of the Press Foundation ([Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa or FLIP](#)) and how disinformation [about women spreads online in the context of the 2018 presidential election](#).

## Highlight

---

While the field is, by its nature, very accessible, many of the resources that digital forensics researchers rely on, including how-to guides for beginners, are often only available in English or a limited set of languages and are not widely known.

## Highlight

---

As a specific example of how civic groups can identify emerging harmful narratives and link them to the interests of citizens more broadly, Linterna Verde has focused on online discourse focusing on female candidates online with the Liberty of the Press Foundation ([Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa or FLIP](#)) and how disinformation [about women spreads online in the context of the 2018 presidential election](#).

Again, this early warning and response is important not only for protecting vulnerable groups that are the targets of these emerging campaigns, but to mobilizes responses in a way that maintains the integrity of the broader information ecosystem, including for members of groups that are not necessarily marginalized.

Digital forensics efforts are also being conducted by grassroots civil society organizations, and there is evidence of impact. For instance, days before the 2019 election in Moldova, [Facebook removed over 100 accounts and pages identified by the civil society group](#), Trolless, as engaging in inauthentic behavior. Internews has also developed methods to track rumors in contexts starting in Liberia in 2014, [which it has built into a detailed methodology](#) that is part of its learning collection of resources for training on disinformation and other media issues. However, a great deal of work needs to be done to ensure that local civil society groups have access to digital forensics expertise and the media monitoring tools that help researchers identify issues. NDI has developed the guide to [Data Analytics for Social Media Monitoring](#) and translated it into Arabic, Portuguese and Spanish, partly to address this gap in the research community. [More examples are available in the Intervention Database](#).

## **4. Advocacy Toward Platforms**

---

Civil society advocacy is critical to changing platform product, policy, and resource allocation. It is also absolutely essential for raising concerns with platforms in ways that force action. Again, as perpetrators of disinformation often target context-specific wedge issues, including

social and political cleavages, organizations that represent the interests of historically marginalized groups may be best placed to identify emerging issues that might otherwise not be obvious to platforms or ostensible regulators, and to advocate for reform.

In the U.S., a successful civil society advocacy effort led Reddit banned 2000 subreddits (forums dedicated to particular communities or interest areas), including r/The\_Donald, r/gendercritical, and R/ChapoTrapHouse. The decisions marked a major shift in policy. Previously, Reddit had functioned as an essentially libertarian space, with the rules of what was and was not allowed in each subreddit were set by moderators and creators of each subreddit rather than the platform itself. This led to some rather bizarre, sometimes delightful outcomes: in one popular subreddit, the only acceptable posts are pictures of cats standing up, and the only acceptable title or comment is “Cat.” The theory was that if a user disliked the content or community of a particular subreddit, they should simply find or establish another subreddit that they did like. However, as Reddit evolved from a niche place for absurd humor and shared interests into a major social media platform, disinformation, hate speech, and the affordances around community-building started to lead to real-world harms: the generation and popularization of conspiracy theories which would then platform jump and become viral, the abuse of the platform by malign actors, and coordination on the platform that led to offline criminal activity. Given that Reddit’s entire product is founded on the basis of community self-moderation, the ban marked a significant divergence in approach. While it is possible that the platform may have decided to take the step anyway, it is notable that Reddit’s decision to quarantine r/The\_Donald came two days after the US civil society group, Media Matters, launched a campaign to draw attention to how members of the subreddit were supporting attacks on police officers and public officials in Oregon.

## Highlight

---

Civic Groups, Early Warning and Platform Advocacy

Facebook has established structured pathways for advocacy and input from civil society through its Civic Integrity and Global Insights program<sup>7</sup>, an initiative designed to solicit actionable input from grassroots communities around the world. These inputs are inherently limited in scope and are unlikely to lead to a radical shift in approach, but it has created a mechanism through which civil society in select countries are able to work with an interdisciplinary team to either get out ahead of issues, or rapidly resolve evolving threats to information integrity. This program and example of a mechanism through which civic groups, especially those representing women or marginalized groups, can advocate for platform responses to emerging disinformation campaigns, both to protect members of the groups they represent, but also to develop broader resilience of the information ecosystem.

Despite these nascent steps in the right direction, civil society groups and organizations outside of the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe, are disadvantaged in their capacity to conduct effective advocacy vis-à-vis the platforms. Most successful attempts to change platform behavior – as in Myanmar, Kenya, or Taiwan – have been accompanied by pressure from the U.S. government, civil society, or media. There are certain limitations that grassroots CSOs outside of the US face:

- Financial incentive: the U.S. is, for most companies, the biggest market in terms of financial return (although not absolute users or growth). As such, advocacy efforts in the U.S. and the negative PR those efforts generate impact consumer behavior, which directly impacts a given company's bottom line.
- The specter of regulation: for U.S. platforms, regulation coming out of Washington is sufficiently concerning enough that companies will often try to get ahead of the issues that voters care about and are thus most likely to lead to the kinds of regulation that can be harmful to business interests or operations.
- Cultural affinity: U.S. platforms and their employees are more clearly aligned with U.S. civil society than they are with civil society groups globally, and so critiques will land with more felt emotional weight in a way that can impact employee morale, lead to internal uprisings, or even resonate more clearly with leadership in a way that balances other interests. For instance, hate speech directed at African Americans is a more easily understood harm to companies staffed by Americans than is hate speech directed at Dalit's in India. Debates around freedom of speech are rooted in a U.S. cultural context, while concerns that lead with a desire for social harmony may not resonate as easily.
- Access: in many countries, even those in which the majority of the population uses a platform, the companies have, at best, sales and policy staff on the ground. Policy staff's principal roles are as lobbyists: they are rewarded on the basis of their ability to shape the regulatory environment in a way that benefits the company. They are not hired or rewarded for their relationships with civil society, and often struggle to navigate the complex web of interests of a given technology platform. At best, these limited touch points result in inaction. Far worse are those instances in which the company policy team in-country has interests which actively run counter to or may endanger civil society groups (for instance, where a group is critical of the government). In the U.S., meanwhile, civil society has multiple touchpoints with company representation, across teams and levels of seniority. As such, civil society in smaller markets struggles to find the right point of leverage within a company, even where those companies have teams designed to cover the issue of concern.
- Knowledge gap: civil society groups, particularly those working on issues not directly related to digital issues or disinformation, often lack sufficient knowledge of how technology platforms operate, the tools and resources they have to address issues, or the tensions endemic in and potential negative externalities surrounding decisions about content moderation.

Efforts such as the [Design 4 Democracy \(D4D\) Coalition](#), which includes the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), and International IDEA, as well as a number of grassroots NGOs and the KeepItOn Coalition run by AccessNow, have started to address the challenge of leverage vis-à-vis the companies. By creating trusted avenues through which grassroots CSOs can work with higher capacity INGOs on advocacy efforts, the communication gap should theoretically become an easier one to bridge. However, a great deal of work needs to be done to ensure that companies further develop and invest in the teams they need to ensure that policy and product are responsive to the hyper-local information disorders that lead to negative outcomes.

## Highlight

---

Research Focus: The Regulation-Free Expression Dilemma

In the course of the research for this project, several respondents identified potential free speech tradeoffs from regulation of digital platforms as a key ongoing policy debate. In Ukraine, for example, armed conflict with Russian-backed separatists in the country's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk has created an acute need to balance free expression and national security. The government of Ukraine has banned Russian social media platforms and domestic television stations accused of disseminating pro-Russian propaganda, [earning rebukes](#) from international organizations and international nongovernmental organizations that advocate for free media. While there is no clear consensus on the issue of platform regulation, civic advocacy groups are important conduits for channeling arguments to decisionmakers.

Earlier in 2019, international pressure from several stakeholders, including society advocacy efforts, encouraged Facebook to increase oversight on political advertising, especially ahead of crucial elections in India, Nigeria, Ukraine, and the European Union. These efforts have led Facebook to "[extend some of its political advertising rules and tools for curbing election interference to India, Nigeria, Ukraine, and the European Union before significant votes.](#)" The web-based initiative [Media Matters for Pakistan](#) also highlights independent efforts to hold mainstream media accountable to higher standards of journalism. This watchdog youth group raises awareness about the ethical and ideological issues found in media content and advocates against increased restrictions by the Pakistani government against digital media and freedom of expression. Similarly, the [EU DisinfoLab](#) provides research and analysis on disinformation campaigns in the region, on traditional and online media platforms, to ensure that their advocacy efforts are "grounded in sound analyses." The initiatives mentioned above coupled with government actors to lead positive reforms to increase transparency. For more on platform engagement, [see the guide section on the subject](#), or continue reading the section on building civil society capacity to mitigate and counter disinformation.

## **5. Advocacy Toward Governments**

---

Civil society plays two critical roles vis-à-vis government responses to disinformation: (1) advocating for pro-democratic policies that protect and advance information integrity, especially the protection of free expression and free association for marginalized groups and (2) ensuring that responses to disinformation, information operations, and other information disorders do not clamp down on free speech, access to information, or participatory politics in ways that might harm democratic processes and principles, given that these responses themselves may ultimately be used disproportionately to undermine the democratic rights of marginalized groups.

### **Highlight**

---

The Poynter's Institute's guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world details a range of policy experts initiatives to address the growing threat of disinformation.

Government responses, can – in the worst instances – include social media or internet shutdowns, heavy-handed regulation of online speech, or criminalization of certain types of online activity, all of which can backfire by infringing on civil liberties or exacerbating political inequity. Civil society thus serves not only as a useful counteractive force to those potential outcomes, but also as a space in which policy, technical, or social interventions can be tested, socialized, and iterated before being subject to scale. Civil society is also unburdened with another challenge that governments have: given the often political nature of disinformation, and its utilization by political actors, incumbent governments often lack the real and perceived neutrality to ensure that responses are seen as fair, rather than as an attempt to undermine an opposition that may well be the principal beneficiary of disinformation.

Saudi Arabia threatened citizens and residents spreading rumors and fake news with five years jail sentence and hefty fines sending a strong signal following the brutal killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul. In the same year, Ugandan officials introduced a "social media tax" that requires users to pay 200 Ugandan shillings a day to access specific online and social media platforms to tackle online gossip. In Belarus, the parliament passed a law allowing the persecution of citizens who spread fake news. Organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and its partners have been the forefront of advocacy and policy reform efforts to support freedom of speech and to counter censorship efforts in places like South Africa and Bolivia where leaders use disinformation as an excuse to jail journalists amid fears over the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **6. Public Awareness/Media Literacy Campaigns**

---

Digital and media literacy interventions are implemented under the assumption that if audiences can utilize necessary critical thinking skills while consuming online and traditional media content, it will increase their ability to differentiate between factual and misleading or fake content. CSOs are particularly well placed to implement these programs because of the role of civil society in creating cross-cutting cleavages and shared interests. Beyond potential improvements in citizen capacity to identify false news, these programs can help raise awareness of how disinformation narratives disproportionately harm women and marginalized groups. Plausibly, this shared awareness could help civic groups build broader support for advocacy or responses, although the evidence for the effect of these programs on citizen attitudes toward marginalized groups is yet unclear. These types of interventions aim to help audiences exercise caution and avoid blind trust of media content and other information available on the internet. The interventions are deployed in response to audiences not only consuming disinformation but also assisting in spreading such content to a larger group of audiences without efforts to verify content accuracy. The increasing media shift into the digital environment has proved to be a double-edged sword. The internet and social media platforms have improved access to media and information, as well as the plurality of news sources, but have nonetheless contributed to a decline in the quality of news and information. Improved media and digital literacy among audiences could play a significant role in helping reduce susceptibilities to disinformation overtime.

As some implementers identified through their work, much of the digital and media literacy and associated critical thinking skills start can and should be taught from a young age, similar to other necessary education skills. International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) 's Learn to Discern (L2D) is one of the most successful media literacy initiatives that builds upon the point mentioned earlier. IREX has developed a media literacy curriculum that is taught in classrooms, libraries, and community centers in Ukraine, reaching over 62,000 individuals of all ages. The approach adopted by IREX aims to build communities' resilience to resist disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech that is widespread in traditional and online media in Ukraine. After gaining much traction and success in Ukraine, L2D has been implemented in Serbia, Tunisia, Jordan, Indonesia, and the United States. With an interactive curriculum that engages audiences on the topic through games and multimedia content, the L2D initiative was able to attract young adults and raise awareness among them on the impact of disinformation on the lives of average citizens.

## **Featured Intervention**

---

### **Learn to Discern**

---

IREX's Learn to Discern approach helps citizens recognize and resist disinformation, propaganda, and hate speech. Learn to Discern's unique methodology builds practical skills for citizens of all ages through interactive training,

A year and a half after the kick-off of the project in Ukraine, IREX conducted [an impact evaluation survey in 2017](#), which reflected that 28% of L2D beneficiaries are "more likely to demonstrate a sophisticated knowledge of the news media industry" and 25% are "more likely to self-report checking multiple news sources." After piloting L2D-enhanced curricula in 2018 for over 5,000 students in the 8th and 9th grades in 50 schools, IREX evaluated their beneficiaries through a [survey](#) that demonstrated that L2D students performed better than peers in a controlled group when "identifying facts and opinions, false stories, hate speech, and demonstrated a deeper knowledge of the news media sector." Since then, IREX has expanded the curricula to over 650 schools across Ukraine and collaborate with the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science to incorporate the curricula into the education system in Ukraine. IREX has received support from the Canadian government, the U.S. Embassy in Ukraine, and the U.K. Government's Department for International Development, and has partnered with the local organizations [Academy of Ukrainian Press](#) and [StopFake](#) to implement the L2D program since 2015.

Due to the increased attention on pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation, Ukraine and neighboring countries in Eastern Europe have served as the testing laboratory for a large number of countering disinformation initiatives. However, media and digital literacy initiatives have not been limited to Europe or to addressing Russian propaganda, and have taken many forms elsewhere around the world. The growing use of information and technology tools across Africa has brought about initiatives such as the [African Centre for Media and Information Literacy \(AFRICMIL\)](#) aiming to educate youth on the effective use of those tools. AFRICMIL kicked off the first [Africa Media Literacy Conference](#) in 2008 to further promote that goal. With support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), AFRICMIL has worked with the Nigerian youth to enhance their understanding of the impact of media and information consumption to increase their media literacy. The conference launched the [MIL University Network of Nigeria \(MILUNN\)](#) to engage youth in Nigeria to be more critically aware of the role of media and information in their communities and provide awareness on the topic. The contribution made by AFRICMIL to raising awareness among journalists on ICT tools and creating a dialogue between peers locally and regionally across the content has proved to be instrumental in ensuring the voices of young people are heard. Egyptian fact-checking organization [Matsda2sh](#) ("do not believe") has reached over 500 thousand followers on Facebook with awareness videos and photos highlighting the dangers of disinformation to the society with infographics and debunking statements with facts, including statements made by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

In Indonesia, the anti-hoax grassroots civil society organization [Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia \(MAFINDO\)](#) has led a [CekFacta](#), a content verification initiative site that promotes digital literacy among the public. [MAFINDO's Facebook page](#) has over 34,000 likes on their Facebook page through which it raises awareness on hoaxes and the dangers they pose to the community. MAFINDO has also worked on mapping out a popular hoax in 2018 and



2019 to enhance audiences' understanding of the malicious content that infiltrates their societies the most. The group has posted videos on their page that aim to highlight the dangers of hoaxes and false information; two of the videos uploaded on Facebook have reached over 32,000. However, despite the relatively large number of page followers and the traction that some of the group's content gets from audiences, recent posts have not received more than an average of a few hundred views and minimal likes and interaction from viewers. Moreover, another Indonesian group, [Turn Back Hoax](#), has more than 200,000 likes and followers on their [Facebook page](#) and receives regular engagement on posts from followers.

## Featured Intervention

---

### **CekFacta - Mafindo**

---

MAFINDO is an anti hoax CSO (civil society organization). We began as an online grassroots movement in 2015. Founded as an organization on 19th November 2016

### **Design Tip**

---

In order to effectively evaluate the integrity of information to understand the needs and tailor programmatic responses to specific contexts, digital and media literacy efforts should be coupled with the media monitoring and verification initiatives explored in the next section.

Open source global initiatives such as the [Mozilla Web Literacy Framework](#) and the [Facebook Digital Literacy Library](#), where users can access educational literacy materials that can be accessed at any time and anywhere, offer an opportunity for users to learn how to effectively navigate the virtual world. Interactive games such as the [Bad News DROG](#) supported by the [Dutch Journalism Fund](#) takes users on a journey where users are asked to prove their credibility. Such interactive software serves as an educational tool. It provides a more digestible context for the dangers of disinformation in the daily lives of citizens and to society in general. The [News Literacy Project's Checkology](#) initiative is built to support both students and educators and serves as an educational tool to provide comprehensive understanding to consumers of information. The project claims to have achieved significant results in the virtual classrooms as "more than two-thirds of students were able to identify the standards of quality journalism after completing Checkology lessons."

Digital and media literacy programs significantly helped with understanding audiences' consumption and in framing audiences' needs in order to build their resilience to false information, primarily targeted disinformation that aims to create divisions between citizens.

## **7. Building Trusted Networks for Accurate Information**

---

In information environments in which state media or the government are the main perpetrators of disinformation, and in which the active propagation of disinformation is accompanied by censorship, civil society has been absolutely critical in developing trusted networks and environments through which information can be shared. While “word of mouth” and other creative information distribution activities have always been present in closed societies, those channels have taken on greater formality and scale as digital technologies, and particularly encrypted group chat applications, have become widely accessible.

In Zimbabwe, where state media dominates the media space, digital media groups such as [263 Chat](#), established in 2012, capitalized on the increased use of digital platforms in the country to amplify the voices of citizens, increase their access, and encourage a dialogue among them. The group understood early on that with [WhatsApp use representing almost half of all internet traffic in Zimbabwe](#) they can utilize it to package news information in a more digestible way that addresses the spread of disinformation in the country. As a result, 263 Chat distributes their e-paper for free to [more than 35,000 subscribers](#) on WhatsApp. The founder of 263 Chat, [Nigel Mugamu](#), has more than 100 thousand followers on Twitter, and [263 Chat's Twitter account](#) has close to half a million followers, an impressive number for a platform now widely used in Zimbabwe.

## **Featured Intervention**

---

### **263Chat**

---

263Chat was launched on September 29 2012 as a way of encouraging and participating in progressive and national dialogue in Zimbabwe. The use of the internet and the numerous social media tools available play an integral role in this entire process.

A number of similar initiatives exist in Venezuela, a country in which the public information space is almost entirely dominated by government propaganda and censorship. A number of civil society groups and independent activists have created WhatsApp channels, sometimes consisting of several hundred members, through which verified, reliable, and trusted information is transmitted. Those channels have played an interesting role during the COVID-19 pandemic. While they were originally created to address specific issues of concern to given civil society groups, these networks have since been used as distribution channels for accurate health information, including statistics about the virus' spread, and public service announcement advice about how to avoid contracting the virus.

## **8. Civil Society As Targets of Disinformation**

---

Most of this chapter has explored civil society interventions that can address challenges to information integrity. Another important consideration, however, is how civil society organizations, their beneficiaries, and the issues they work on often become the targets of disinformation campaigns.

## Highlight

---

Research Focus: Retaliation Against Counter-Disinformation Initiatives

Beyond threats associated with disinformation campaigns targeting civic groups, perpetrators of disinformation also target organizations working to fact-check statements, identify narratives, and/or build public awareness of the issue of disinformation. Respondents to CEPPS interview research in Ukraine noted several instances of retaliation against civic groups working on disinformation, ranging from public rebuttals and rhetorical attacks to harassment, physical threats, and vandalism.

This has a number of potential impacts: it can undermine trust in the group or organization, reducing their impact, and undermining funding; can lead to attacks against the groups served by CSOs, particularly marginalized communities, often leading to political disempowerment and – in the worst cases – loss of life; and, finally, issue or group focused civil society groups often get caught up in disinformation campaigns designed to discredit or undermine their agendas, even if they are not attacked directly. As such, every civil society organization – regardless of its focus – is impacted by disinformation and has a role to play in combating it.

In addition to those civil society groups and interventions explicitly working on disinformation, the democracy assistance community must work with civil society writ large to ensure that they are prepared for information attacks designed to discredit an organization, its beneficiaries, or the issue area they work on.

That preparation should include:

- All civil society groups should be trained in basic data protection and information security to ensure that sensitive financial information, interior workings, and – most critically – membership databases or communications with vulnerable groups and individuals remain secure.
- Civil society groups should be encouraged to have a crisis response plan for information attacks. Who needs to be involved in response discussions? In what instances would the civil society group respond? How quickly will they respond? How will they ensure that a response reached the target audiences? Will beneficiaries or member groups be notified of information attacks or data breaches? How?

- Groups working on issues likely to be subject to disinformation should be trained in how to anticipate, identify, report, and counteract disinformation. Rapid response grants and capacity building initiatives should be put in place around specific issue areas.

## **9. International Collaboration**

---

International cooperation is a critical factor behind civil society success. In addition to the leverage issue vis-à-vis companies discussed earlier in the chapter, international cooperation allows civil society to share best practices in the rapidly evolving fields of digital forensics and counter-messaging, and to share information about emerging transnational threats and the proliferation of disinformation toolkits used by malign actors both foreign and domestic.

For instance, as COVID-19 took root, a coordinated Chinese Communist Party (CCP) information operation proliferated that was designed to sow misinformation about the origins of the virus, to undermine the successes of democratic actors in combatting the virus, and to amplify stories around CCP aid to countries struggling to contain and treat the virus. IRI convened a group of over a hundred representatives from civil society from every corner of the world to facilitate information-sharing about CCP tactics and narratives related to the virus, as well as best practices for countering that information operation. Such networks and information-sharing are absolutely critical to civil society as they attempt to stay ahead of information threats.

Regional collaboration has also helped to expose and counter coordinated cross-border information operations. Activists in countries impacted by Russian disinformation have collaborated to share information about Russian tactics and narratives that are repeated across their countries, or where the same assets (accounts, pages, groups, content farms, etc.) are used across borders. They have also collaborated in applying open source intelligence (OSINT) to expose Russian lies: the [InformNapalm](#) group is a volunteer effort comprised of individuals from across ten countries who expose “[evidence of Russian aggression to the world](#)”, including [publishing the names of Russian servicemen](#) who have fought in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria based on the social media activity of those individuals.

As mentioned, the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network provides a mechanism for the certification of fact-checking groups according to its [principles](#), and for coordinating fact-checking globally. [In addition, IFCN's system and members have been integrated into Facebook's online systems for reviewing and potentially downgrading content within it.](#) This has the potential for amplification both through the online tech platform and through the network of organizations sharing best practices and performing research and fact checks globally.

Some of the most successful civil society initiatives combatting disinformation are volunteer-run initiatives. This reflects a grassroots reaction to what is a relatively novel threat. However, online disinformation is not only here to stay, it is likely to metastasize and evolve

as platforms, actors, and tactics proliferate. Civil society thus needs a funding model that recognizes the requirement for long term, dedicated, expert staffing. Per Thomas Kent, “Grants often fall in the \$10,000-\$50,000 range—hardly enough to hire staff and get major projects underway. Real breakthrough projects might be big-ticket items like opening radio and television stations to compete with broadcasters controlled by authoritarian governments and corrupt financial interests. Projects of this scope are almost impossible given the way funding is handled now.”

## **10. Conclusion and Recommendations**

---

Civil society plays a critical and multifarious role in information integrity infrastructure, but most organizations operating in this space are under-resourced, low capacity, and otherwise nascent. Funders and implementers need to invest in the long-term development of expertise at the grassroots level, in international collaboration, and in local to global communication in order to ensure that future threats to information integrity are dealt with promptly, and to create a global environment in which disinformation becomes a less effective tactic for hybrid warfare, political competition, or malign interventions in civic discourse.

### **Recommendations**

Civic organizations play a key role in identifying and responding to information disorders, especially where they can establish reputations as relatively independent, objective actors. However, these advantages come with tradeoffs, especially if their constituencies tend to be relatively urban, highly educated, wealthier, or more internet-connected on average. Program designs should take care to target interventions to encourage uptake among underserved groups.

Network and coalition approaches to countering disinformation, including international collaboration, can identify comparative advantages, increase scale, and improve the diversity of programmatic approaches.

Relatedly, programs focused on civil society should incorporate an intentional focus on inclusion, and more specifically, intersectionality, particularly in coalition and network approaches. Support for civic groups should incorporate a distinct analysis to identify unique challenges faced by groups with intersectional identities within a specific historical context, since perpetrators of disinformation campaigns may rely on the apathy or complicity of non-marginalized identity groups. Collective action is more likely when these groups and individuals that are not politically marginalized understand that they have an interest in defending the rights of smaller and more vulnerable groups.

Civic organizations may consider partnering with existing political or social institutions to scale programmatic responses to disinformation, especially if the organization itself has a small or narrow audience. One example might include partnering with school systems to

implement media-literacy programs.

Programs working on advocacy, especially around internet or platform regulation should consider the specific cultural context of debates surrounding tradeoffs between free expression and security.

Programs working with civic organizations to implement counter-disinformation programs should consider dedicated security training components, including cybersecurity, data protection, response plans for information attacks, and physical security from retaliation.