



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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# Elections and media in digital times



## Preview

**T**he increasing digitalization of societies has led to unprecedented opportunities to seek, receive and impart political information and ideas, which are the lifeblood of elections. The internet has made it easier for politicians, political parties and the electorate to communicate with each other more directly and more quickly than at any point in history. The accuracy of information can be checked and corrected faster, more thoroughly and by a greater number of actors than ever before.

But there are also growing concerns about the effects on public debate arising from misuse of digital technologies and fragmentation in the communications environment. Political micro-targeting of individual voters is driven by aggregated personal data, which is not always obtained in lawful ways. Little effort is required to generate disinformation and for it to go viral.

New digitally-enabled tactics in political funding, campaigning and advertising, often lacking in transparency, reduce the transparency of information during elections. Meanwhile journalists, whose output can empower the electorate, are under increasing attack.

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*Preview of an In-Focus edition of the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development by Tarlach McGonagle, Maciek Bednarski, Mariana Francese Coutinho and Arthur Zimin. The full report is expected to be published later in 2019 at <https://en.unesco.org/world-media-trends-2019>*

# Three Trends Converge

New developments highlight the need to safeguard the integrity of electoral processes, as well as the role of the media during election periods:

- Disinformation and misinformation,
- Attacks on the safety of journalists and media actors,
- Disruption in election campaigning and communications.

## Journalists Under Fire

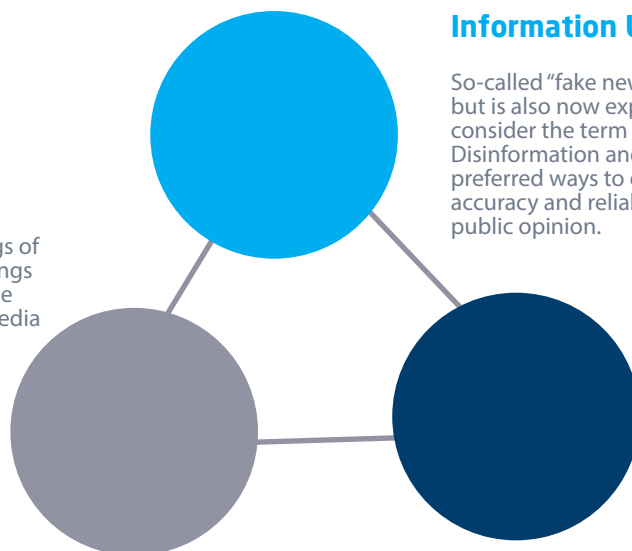
Threats and violence against journalists have continued and expanded in recent years. Killings of journalists and impunity for killings remain at shocking levels. Hostile rhetoric and online threats to media actors are a growing trend.

## Information Under Attack

So-called “fake news” has become a dominant term, but is also now experiencing push-back. Many analysts consider the term too vague a basis for policy-making. Disinformation and misinformation have emerged as preferred ways to describe content that undermines the accuracy and reliability of information that underpins public opinion.

## Election Integrity at Risk

Disruption of democratic processes today includes: circumvention of campaign financing rules; lack of transparency in political advertising and political micro-targeting; crackdowns on legitimate political content; and shutdowns of internet access and applications.



**“The free communication of information and ideas about public and political issues between citizens, candidates and elected representatives is essential. This implies a free press and other media able to comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion. The public also has a corresponding right.”<sup>1</sup>**

## International Standards

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

*“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures” - Article 21*

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” - Article 19*

These two rights – to elections and to expression - come together during polls. Voting is critically affected by media, social media and social messaging.

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34 on Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on freedom of expression and information, CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011, para. 13.

# Disinformation Distorts Democracy

## Main issues and trends:

- Politicization of the term “fake news” has resulted from actors misusing it as an accusation to dismiss critical journalism.
- Alternatives concepts like “disinformation” and “misinformation” have emerged.
- Disinformation refers to a range of types of expression, including: fraudulent facts; hoaxes; propaganda; clickbait; conspiracy theories; pseudo-science and historical revisionism.
- Much disinformation has been planned and orchestrated; its impact is to plant misinformation in people’s minds or to divert them from genuine information.
- This has often been combined with extreme opinion and incitement to hatred, violence and discrimination.
- Social media and social messaging are the main vectors, but news media outlets sometimes carry disinformation. This is either in disregard of professional standards of verification, or done unwittingly.

## Countering disinformation has involved:

- Different types of responses (regulatory, self-regulatory, non-regulatory/practical),
- Different actors (intergovernmental organisations, States, media actors, internet companies, civil society organisations),
- Different objectives (to prevent creation and/or dissemination of disinformation, to identify and monitor it, to contain or correct it, and to regulate it through legislative or self-regulatory structures).



## Main challenges - how to:

- Address the problems for society, and elections in particular, when these are complex and there is no single solution.
- Increase vigilance about online content during election times, including ‘deepfakes’ about election candidates
- Deal with Internet business models that drive attention through polarizing emotions.

## Looking ahead:

- Strengthen the range of responses from multiple actors: States, media, internet intermediaries, civil society – sometimes in co-operation.
- Ensure that any measures or initiatives taken are fully in compliance with the right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by international human rights law.

# Increasing Threats and Violence Against Journalists

## Main issues and trends:

- 182 journalists were killed in 2016-2017; in other words, a journalist was killed every four days. Many more suffered physical, psychological and digital attacks.
- Impunity for killings of journalists continues: only 11% of the 1010 killings of journalists recorded by UNESCO since 2006 have been followed by a judicial procedure leading to the conviction of perpetrators.
- Awareness is growing of the urgency of gender-related threats and violence.
- Intimidation and harassment of journalists has increased during election periods.

**“2018 saw a clear trend towards verbal abuse and public stigmatisation of the media and individual journalists in many member states, including by elected officials and especially in the run-up to elections. Such actions, which are frequently propagated over social media, brand media workers as potential targets, in some instances triggering hostility, hate and violent actions against them.”<sup>2</sup>**

## Main challenges - how to:

- Counter a climate of hostility and aggression towards journalists, including where political actors demonise journalists and the media.
- Ensure country-level follow-up to the “Outcome Document to strengthen the implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”.
- Reinforce efforts to eliminate the ‘double burden’ faced by female journalists.
- Collect and analyse disaggregated data about attacks on journalists and the media specifically in the context of their election reporting.

## Looking ahead:

- Revive initiatives such as the “South African Media Code of Conduct for Politicians”<sup>3</sup>
- Develop regional platforms similar to the Council of Europe’s Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists. The Platform’s 12 partners register alerts about the safety of journalists, and request responses by States. The partners reported 140 serious violations in 32 Council of Europe member states via the Platform in 2018.
- Promote campaigns such as by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to protect female journalists online (#SOFJO).

<sup>2</sup> Partner Organisations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, *Democracy at risk: threats and attacks against media freedom in Europe*, Annual Report 2019, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/rjr\\_no13/proactive.pdf](http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/rjr_no13/proactive.pdf).

# Elections Facing Disruption

## Main issues and trends:

- Debate in a common public space is being replaced by fragmentation, and reinforced by social media and social messaging.
- Increasingly, more campaign spending is taking place online, through channels other than traditional media.
- Regulation governing news media reporting during election periods does not always extend (adequately) to cover social media and messaging.
- Political micro-targeting is an increasingly-used practice for political advertising.
- Rules governing the funding of online political advertising and micro-targeting, including transparency rules, lag behind the actual practice.
- Below-the-radar (and often bot-driven) disinformation, hate speech and polarizing messages have inflamed election-related tensions.
- Censorship and access restrictions on internet are curbing legitimate electoral communications by news media and others, leaving electorates uninformed and unable to address rumours or expose abuses.

## Main challenges - how to:

- Modernize existing regulatory and policy frameworks governing elections, advertising and communications.
- Foster an enabling environment for journalism and the media with measures to guarantee their independence, pluralism and financial viability, all of which take on added importance in the context of elections.
- Avoid shutdowns of access to internet or applications, and adopt more proportionate responses to abuses.

## Looking ahead:

- Continue to develop the media and information literacy skills of citizens, and involve electoral management bodies.
- Ensure that international legal standards on privacy, data protection and freedom of expression are strictly adhered to in political advertising.
- Develop policies such as the Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa, adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.<sup>4</sup>
- Develop and implement forward-looking standards for transparency in political advertising online.
- Ensure the protection of journalists so that they can carry out their public watchdog role effectively during elections.

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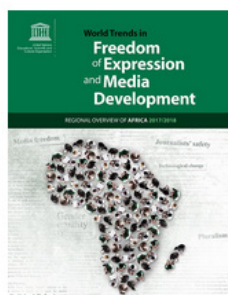
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.achpr.org/mechanisms/freedom-of-expression/Guidelines-Information-and-Elections-in-Africa>.  
[http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/rjr\\_no13/proactive.pdf](http://www.rjr.ru.ac.za/rjrpdf/rjr_no13/proactive.pdf)

# Download the Global and Regional Overviews of the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Report 2017/2018

## Full report



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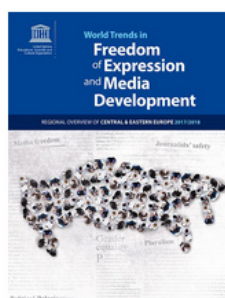
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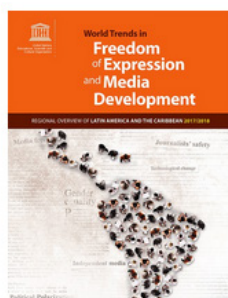
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