Research Assessment Panels
Observatory on Information and Democracy

Call for Contributions

I/ Introduction

The International Observatory on Information and Democracy is an initiative by the Forum on Information and Democracy, created by 11 organisations from civil society to expand the principles of the International Partnership on Information and Democracy and issue concrete recommendations for regulation and self-regulation.

The International Observatory on Information and Democracy is a multi-stakeholder entity whose mission is to evaluate the means, norms and architectures of the global information and communication space. The Observatory should provide decision-makers with a shared understanding of the challenges involved, so that they are encouraged to implement democratic principles and standards in this space at the international and national levels.

The main mission of the Observatory on Information and Democracy is to propose, in the form of a biennial report, a synthesis of the main knowledge resulting from research on the information and communication space. The report will provide an overview of the state-of-the-art of existing research, informing the questions raised in the framework of regulatory decisions. It will also provide an assessment of the gaps in research. This report will be addressed to governments, policymakers, regulatory bodies, NGOs, public information bodies, and tech corporations, to provide a shared understanding of the structure of the information and communication space and how it impacts democracy.

At their first meeting in September, the Steering Committee confirmed the Observatory roadmap and meta-analysis priority themes around which three Research Assessment Panels which include a wide network of researchers and academics. Led by a Scientific Director, expert rapporteurs and the Observatory's permanent staff, these Research Assessment Panels are working respectively on:

- Artificial Intelligence, Information ecosystems and democracy.
- Media, Politics and Trust.
- Data Governance and Democracy.
- Misinformation and Disinformation as a cross cutting issue.

Their production will constitute one chapter of the inaugural report of the Observatory that will be published in late 2024.

II/ Research Assessment Panels (RAPs) on Media, Politics and Trust

News media are central to the functioning of democracy, especially in holding the powerful to account. Mainstream commercial media are struggling financially with declining advertising revenues, and public service media are challenged to maintain their financial viability. With declining revenues, it is harder for journalists to report on local
news and to connect with wider audiences. This is especially problematic at a time when declining levels of trust in mainstream news organizations have damaged their legitimacy as a source of accurate and reliable information. In parallel, the rise of community and alternative media, as well as the use of technologies such as generative AI, are reconfiguring the place of news media in the consumption habits of citizens. In this context, the role of journalism is challenged as the profession adopts new practices with variations in the global North and South that are reconfiguring the public sphere.

This RAP addresses the pressures, adaptations and impacts on reporting local, national, regional and international news linked to new business models, declining trust in science, experts and the media in a ‘post-truth’ era, changing media consumption patterns of citizens, and the political implications of online mis/disinformation for democracy in the longer term.

III/ Contributions for each RAP

To address the questions of this panel, we invite contributors to answer the questions below. Contributions do not need to cover all aspects listed below, but can be focused on specific ones. This list is not exhaustive and contributions addressing related areas are welcome. Contributions can take the form of existing academic papers, reports or opinion pieces on the topics addressed by the Research Questions below. Please use the format provided below for your responses.

3.1 RAP on Media, trust and politics - Research Questions (RQ)

1. How are theories of news media effects and broader societal impacts being updated: what are the points of consensus and dissensus regarding the impacts of media on public opinion, political campaigns and voting behaviors, that is, the public sphere?

2. What individual factors predict levels of trust in mainstream and alternative news media outlets?

3. What individual factors predict levels and types of usage of mainstream and alternative media outlets for news and information, and especially of news avoidance?

4. What macro factors (media market structures, concentration) are associated with varying levels of trust in media and types of usage, and what policy solutions are being adopted or proposed to tackle these? How do these factors explain differences between countries with regard to trust in media?

5. What pressures on working practices do journalists and media organizations face from the rise of digital platforms and how do these impact on the quality of journalism? What alternatives to the current design of the media ecosystem have been proposed to enhance pluralism/diversity, and quality of media?

6. What are the points of consensus and dissensus regarding the definitions and consequences of mis/disinformation and the extent of its threat to democracy?
7. To what extent is mis/disinformation weaponized in politics, and with what consequences?

3.2 Format

We welcome your contributions to the questions above by submitting a comment or papers, reports or published opinion pieces. You may submit the contribution template directly to our email: observatory@informationdemocracy.org in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese by 7 January.

The call for contributions is open to any individual or institution working in any capacity on these issues. We will not attribute any individual comments to you by name. However, with your permission we will thank you for your contribution in the Acknowledgements section of the RAP’s final report. If you agree, please include your biography or description of the institution in your contribution.

IV/ Methodology

The Observatory will use meta-research, by aggregating and synthesizing existing evidence through literature reviews and thematic analysis, informed by expert consultations as appropriate.

V/ Deliverables and objectives

The first report of the Observatory will be published in December 2024.

IV/ Team

Scientific Director: Robin Mansell

Lead Rapporteur: Rob Procter

Media Rapporteurs: Flavia Durach, Théophile Lenoir