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.

III/ Cross-cutting issue: Misinformation, Disinformation and Democracy

Starting from the European Commission’s definitions of misinformation and disinformation, this cross cutting theme highlights the problems for democracy created by the production, circulation and consumption of information that qualifies under these definitions:
‘Misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful.’

‘Disinformation is false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm’

These definitions are conceptual and distinctions between them can be hard to isolate in practice. These definitions also may be contested in some of the literature and this will be noted as appropriate.

This cross cutting theme will elicit insight from the meta analyses in RAP1: AI, the Information Ecosystem and Democracy; RAP 2: Media, Politics and Trust; and RAP3: Data Governance and Democracy. It recognises that the deployment of AI (and generative AI) is reshaping the public sphere and processes and practices of democracy with implications for inclusive, equitable and fair participation in society in both the global North and South.

IV/ Contributions for each RAP

To address the questions on misinformation and disinformation, 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.

4.1 - Research Questions: Misinformation, Disinformation and Democracy

1. What is the role of mis/disinformation in shaping public opinion and political discourse?
2. Can distinct mis/disinformation strategies be identified and how have they evolved? Does this help inform strategies to counter mis/disinformation?
3. To what extent is mis/disinformation indicative not only of manipulation strategies but of support for certain political actors and actions?
4. What is the level of public understanding of the severity of the impact of mis/disinformation and the role of digital platforms in influencing freedom of expression?
5. What is the evidence on the public’s appetite for policy/regulatory intervention to curb online mis/disinformation?
6. What is the evidence on the level of policy makers’ understanding of threats of mis/disinformation to human rights and democracy?
7. What forms of AI enabled mis/disinformation are most prevalent; how can they be identified and mitigated to protect the democratic process?
8. What is the contribution of digital platforms to the proliferation of mis/disinformation and its impacts on society, including declining trust in news media, experts and political processes?
9. What financial incentives motivate those actors who engage in the production of mis/disinformation?
10. How effective (or efficient) are current and proposed governance (policy, regulatory) measures for mitigating the harmful effects of mis/disinformation?

11. What are the priorities for research on policy and regulation to address the harms of mis/disinformation and how do they differ across countries and regions?

4.2 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.

V/ 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.

VI/ Deliverables and objectives

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

VII/ Team

Scientific Director: Robin Mansell

Lead Rapporteur: Rob Procter

Rapporteurs: Matthias C. Kettemann, Immaculate Odwera, Flavia Durach, Théophile Lenoir, Gyan Tripathi, Emily Tucker