Research Assessment Panels
Observatory on Information and Democracy

Second Global 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/ Submit a contribution

A first call for contribution was launched in November 2023, gathering over 1500 sources from all regions of the world. We are now launching a second edition, focused on a few research questions, where additional sources are welcomed, particularly from the global south.
1. With a focus on the changes in the global information ecosystem, what are the impacts of existing normative approaches (both binding and self-regulatory) on the use of AI in content creation and content governance?

In particular, we’re interested in research on rules that shape how AI is used within the online information ecosystem. These rules can be private or public, binding or non-binding, part of regulatory process or a self-regulatory one. We are especially interested in experiences from the majority world.

2. With a focus on the changes in the global information ecosystem, what are the impacts of AI on internationally protected human rights and fundamental freedoms, including media freedom?

In particular, we’re interested in studies showing empirical evidence of the impact of the use of AI on the global information ecosystem with reference to privacy, democratic decision-making processes (right to democratic participation) and right to expression.

We are also interested in talking about how AI ethics and regulation face challenges due to the absence of a precise definition for AI harm and its broader implications on the public. The lack of a clear framework raises concerns about effectively addressing ethical issues and implementing regulations to safeguard against potential harm caused by artificial intelligence.

3. How is AI implemented in public administration, especially in the majority world, and what is the experience of these AI systems?

In particular, we’re interested in studies on the effectiveness of AI and the process that goes into deciding whether or not to use AI in the public sector, especially in the majority world. More evidence-based information on ethical issues and legal issues affecting use and application of AI in public administration will be of great help.

4. How is AI used by disinformation actors and how does the broader availability of AI tools contribute to strengthening mis/disinformation campaigns, with a focus on the dynamics of revenue generation?

In particular, we’re interested in studies on the use of AI by malicious actors and the trade-offs that platforms experience when banning the distribution of synthetic content.
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?

In particular, we're interested in:
- debates on the 'effects/role' of media in the public sphere;
- differences in the role of the media in different regions (i.e. how their role as 4th estate/5th estate questioned depending on media autonomy from state, etc.);
- challenges to traditional theories of the public sphere in contemporary media environments.

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

In particular, we're interested in:
- the factors predicting or explaining why trust varies in different media systems (mainstream/alternative media, traditional/digital/social media etc);
- differences across regions.

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?

In particular, we're interested in:
- individual factors predicting the use of new media formats such as blogs, social media and podcasts;
- individual factors predicting news avoidance;
- variations in traditional/online usage (across regions, across age groups, etc.).

Research Assessment Panel 3: Data Governance and democracy

1. What are the most crucial intervention points where “data governance” can have positive impacts on the information ecosystem? For example: (1) governance around modes of collection; (2) governance around collection of particular types of data; (3) governance around parties involved in data collection; (4) governance around storage, sharing, and selling of data; (5) governance around use and deployment of data-intensive products.

In particular, we're interested in concrete examples in any of these four categories where a particular policy, or particular characteristic of the local social economic or political framework, had a specific positive impact.

2. How can communities interested in resisting corporate-owned digital technology systems develop and deploy alternative products and services for the production, circulation and use of data (and information), including information commons
To what extent do alternative configurations of platforms, rooted in commons-based and community-driven frameworks, contribute to broader implications in the landscape of data dynamics?

In particular, we're interested in examples of communities that have built or adapted technologies or systems for information sharing, external to the dominant products and systems, in order to meet the specific needs of their community.

3. To what degree and through what mechanisms are data governance approaches and digital technology systems formulated by actors in the global North exported and confronted by actors in the global South?

In particular, we're interested in examples of how individuals and communities in the global South are encountering information sharing systems exported from the global North, and examples of how those individuals and communities have responded to, been affected by, or made use of those systems.

Cross cutting section: Misinformation, Disinformation and Democracy

The report has a cross-cutting section on mis/disinformation. We are especially in need of contributions from the global south on:

1. Impact of mis/disinformation on public opinion
2. Strategies to deal with misinformation – are they effective?
3. How ‘mis/disinformation’ sometimes supports certain political actors
4. How platforms influence freedom of expression
5. How well (or poorly) the public and policymakers understand mis/disinformation
6. How mis/disinformation impacts on trust in news
7. What motivates producers of mis/disinformation
8. What are the highest priorities for research in this area?

III/ Format

We welcome your contributions to the questions above by submitting a comment or papers, reports or published opinion pieces, authored by you or not.

You may submit the contribution template directly to our email: observatory@informationdemocracy.org in English, French, Spanish or Portuguese by 15 April.
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 Research Assessment Panel'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

**AI RAP co-rapporteurs:** Immaculate Odwera, Matthias C. Kettemann

**Media RAP co-rapporteurs:** Flavia Durach, Théophile Lenoir

**Data RAP co-rapporteurs:** Emily Tucker, Gyan P. Tripathi