



Online Harms and Disinformation

Addressing Disinformation

How can we ensure that mechanisms to stem disinformation aren't used to restrict press independence or free speech?

CNTI's Assessment

Publishers, platforms and policymakers share a responsibility to respond to growing concerns around disinformation. It is increasingly important to understand and navigate challenging trade-offs between curbing problematic content and protecting independent journalism and fundamental human rights. Efforts to stem misinformation must ensure that governments cannot determine the news and that the public receives or serve as arbitrators of truth or intent. Legislation should articulate high-level goals, understand that initiatives in one country or online context inherently impacts other contexts and delegate enforcement to independent bodies with clear structures for transparency and accountability.



The Issue

The spread of false and misleading information is not a [new problem](#) and appears in many forms: online and [offline](#), through public and private channels and across a variety of mediums. In a world with growing digital media platforms (where false and misleading information is rapidly spread and, at times, [amplified](#)), new technologies for digital [manipulation](#), political upheavals in the [Global North](#), coordinated [election disinformation](#) and [hostile propaganda campaigns](#), problematic [COVID-19 information](#), rampant [denial](#) of [climate science](#) and declining trust in [institutions](#) and [news](#), the credibility of information the public gets online has become a global concern.

Of particular importance, and the focus of this primer, is the impact of [disinformation](#) – [false](#) information created or spread with the intention to deceive or harm – on electoral processes, political violence and information systems around the world.

Among the many well-intended legislative proposals to address disinformation, one overarching concern is that the vagueness of what constitutes disinformation (especially the difficulty of interpreting actors' intent) can result in policy that controls the press and limits free expression. Even legislation aimed at supporting an informed citizenry can potentially lead to restrictions on both the news media and the [general public](#) within a country. Further, policies that target disinformation can easily serve as models for [authoritarian regimes](#) or [antidemocratic actors](#) to exploit. In these cases, the actual – and, at times, intended – effects are restriction of [media freedom](#), censorship of opposing voices and control of free expression.



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What Makes it Complex

- I. A core challenge in addressing [disinformation](#) with policy is a lack of [agreement](#) on the [definition](#) of disinformation and what kinds of content constitute it.
- II. Addressing disinformation is critical, but some regulative approaches can unintentionally put press freedom and human rights at great risk.
- III. Adopting [measures](#) such as blocks or bans to combat disinformation can allow state actors to exercise undue control over the flow of information and can isolate users from an open, global internet.
- IV. It may not be possible to develop disinformation interventions that suit all digital contexts.

State of Research

In recent years, as governments, platforms and funders turned their attention and investments toward [policy](#) and technical solutions to address mis- and disinformation (though this has started to [wane](#)), academic and media attention to the topic has dramatically increased. The research to date has produced helpful [insights](#), including putting the [scope](#) of mis- and disinformation [in context](#) with other online content. The research field also has several [shortcomings](#) that reveal the need for a deeper and more global approach.

Future work could provide more systematic global research needed to design more effective measures against mis- and disinformation. This includes studying the scale and impact of mis- and disinformation in countries outside of the U.S. and in comparative contexts. There is also a need for understanding the agents and infrastructures involved in the [spread](#) of mis- and disinformation online and offline, particularly when it comes to [video](#) and image-based content as well as [messaging applications](#).

Notable studies

[The perils of legally defining disinformation](#)

Internet Policy Review (2021)

CNTI's Takeaway: This offers a useful critique of existing transnational disinformation policy and clearly describes the harmful consequences of using vague language in legislative action.

State of Legislation

Legislators' treatment of disinformation has ranged from a desire to protect election integrity against domestic or foreign interference to obvious schemes to [stifle](#) political dissent. There has been a considerably greater effort to regulate what can be said and by whom in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 [pandemic](#). Efforts to respond to disinformation are critical, but policy must not set the stage for the dismantling of an independent press or an open internet.

In rule-of-law countries, there is a need for more political and public awareness that legislation may be weaponized by authoritarian regimes, worsening already restrictive situations for human rights groups, political opposition and independent news media.

Notable legislation



Türkiye:

In October 2022, Turkish parliament adopted legislation that allowed for jailing journalists and social media users for spreading "disinformation," significantly [threatening](#) press freedom and free speech in the country.



The Center for News, Technology & Innovation (CNTI), an independent global policy research center, seeks to encourage independent, sustainable media, maintain an open internet and foster informed public policy conversations.