

DEMOCRACY AND RESPECT SUMMIT

Briefing from Transparency International UK (TI-UK) – 15 April 2025

OVERVIEW

1. The First Minister (FM) is to be commended for grasping the nettle on the complex issue of the threats posed to democratic norms by distrust, disinformation, inequality, discrimination and the rise of populism and negative polarisation as a societal response. TI-UK agrees that addressing the issues identified in the summit agenda should be prioritised and that they are interlinked.
2. At TI-UK we share the FM's concern that distrust in politics is undermining democracy and democratic institutions. We agree that disinformation contributes to distrust. This includes but is not limited to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).
3. Restoring trust in politics is not a simple task, but the principles espoused by the Open Government Partnership (OGP) of transparency, accountability, participation and integrity are the foundations of a working democracy. We would suggest OGP is a useful available framework for taking forward any actions from the summit.
4. TI-UK is the UK chapter of the international anti-corruption movement. We champion integrity and argue for protections against corruption. We are not experts in media law, social media or mis/disinformation. We have undertaken research to understand the impact of disinformation on democracy, integrity in public life and fighting corruption.
5. The rise in mis/disinformation changes the landscape in which we all operate, especially those of us who seek to persuade through expert evidence and research and who rely on trust in independent media outlets.
6. The damage caused by disinformation threatens to destabilise society and government and weaken democratic institutions.
7. Regardless of the source, disinformation alters public perceptions and distorts issue salience.
8. Upholding information integrity is essential to safeguarding freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.
9. Governments should therefore seek both to provide accessible public communication distinct from political communication or government press releases and should protect civic space to ensure trusted organisations and media outlets can continue to offer impartial information.
10. Tackling disinformation therefore requires both limiting its prevalence and combatting its impact on public perceptions. In this briefing, TI-UK argues for action to strengthen the integrity of information spaces, measures to limit the reach of and material benefits accrued by disinformation, societal interventions including media literacy and support for fact-based journalism, application of anti-corruption measures to the information space and consideration of how policy choices allow disinformation to undermine democratic norms.

WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

The Global Disinformation Index¹ defines disinformation as deliberately misleading information, knowingly spread, or the omission of certain facts in service of a particular narrative. They name four characteristics of disinformation:

- The intent to mislead
- Financial or geopolitical motivations

- The aim to foster long-term social, political or economic conflict
- The risk of harm to at-risk individuals, groups or institutions.

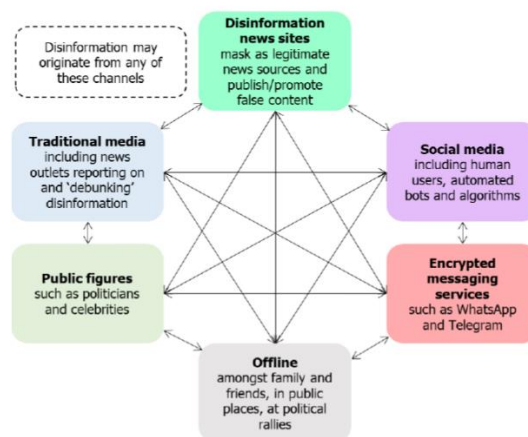
This is distinguished from misinformation, which refers to the inadvertent spread of such content.

The OECD report *Fact not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity* (2024), which states that “the rapid and global spread of mis- and disinformation presents a fundamental risk to the free and fact-based exchange of information underpinning democratic debate” distinguishes further:

While “misinformation” can be defined as false or inaccurate information that is shared unknowingly and is not disseminated with the intention of deceiving the public and “malinformation” can be described as accurate information shared to cause harm, for example by moving information from the private to the public sphere, “disinformation” is usually defined as false, inaccurate, or misleading information deliberately created, presented and disseminated to harm a person, social group, organisation or country (U.S. Department of State, 2023) (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017); (Leshner, Pawelec and Desai, 2022). Waves of false and misleading content can undermine societal cohesion, cast doubt on factual information, and undermine trust in public institutions (OECD, 2021).²

Disinformation spreads through a complex interaction of social media, online news sites, traditional media, but also offline spaces.

Figure 1. Examples of how mis/disinformation may spread.



Source: Adapted from First Draft News.⁶⁰

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Source: UK POSTnote 719⁴

The UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)note 719 (2024) found that

- People may intentionally share disinformation to further a political agenda or achieve social validation, rather than because they believe it. It is more common for people to unintentionally share misinformation.
- People may be more likely to believe disinformation if it aligns with pre-existing beliefs, provokes an emotional response, especially a negative response like anger or envy, if they are repeatedly exposed to it, or if it comes from a source they trust.
- Frequent exposure to mis/disinformation can hinder the ability to identify credible information. A consequence may be distrust of all information, including from sources traditionally considered reliable.
- Behavioural change stemming from disinformation is usually the result of multiple drivers, including pre-existing beliefs, cultural/religious values, education, and location.⁵

WHY IS DISINFORMATION A CONCERN?

Concrete impacts of disinformation include election interference; riots, violence and vandalism; public health effects through eg vaccine antipathy or targeted abuse of specific individuals or groups.

It also sows distrust in the pillars of a functioning democracy for example the media, judiciary and Parliament. Disinformation undermines those institutions as it exacerbates public distrust. Trust in both politics and information sources is vital to protect democracy and, of particular concern to Transparency International, prevent corruption.

But mis/disinformation also alters people's perceptions of how democracy is functioning. It calls into question the very knowability of information. This undermines democratic norms, seeds doubt in the system and in society and creates public distrust.

For example, Broda and Strömbäck (2024) found that overestimations of the share of households who receive welfare lead people to develop anti-welfare attitudes, overestimations of the share of immigrants within a population lead to anti-immigration attitudes, and overestimations of crime levels increase people's fear of crime and support for punitive policies. They conclude, "such findings underline that misperceptions threaten to warp mass opinion, undermine democratic debate, and distort public policy on issues ranging from climate change to vaccines."⁶

Conversely, research indicates that people who regularly consume independent, professionally produced journalism are more resilient to disinformation.⁷ This journalism is frequently behind a pay wall limiting access to those with the financial resources.

Specifically, disinformation presents a number of concerns for anti-corruption activists:⁸

- Anti-corruption activism relies strongly on trust in independent media outlets and the use of social media, and the impact of disinformation in undermining this trust is a real threat.
- Activists might find themselves targeted by disinformation campaigns, damaging their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public – this happened to TI Nigeria who were the subject of fake news reports accusing them of blackmail, falsification of evidence and bribery.⁹
- There have also been disinformation campaigns against anti-corruption activists themselves. In Ukraine, anti-corruption activists at NGOs and officials at anti-corruption bodies in the country have been targeted by fake news stories, with the apparent objective to diminish the public's faith in them.
- Disinformation has also been used in conjunction with 'dark' political advertising, obscuring the origin of campaign finances. Dark advertising, dirty money and hidden networks that actively seek to undermine democracies can be tackled by implementing anti-corruption tools such as restricting the ability of dark money to move through our financial systems, ensuring transparency of ownership of corporations, requiring publication of targeted political adverts and demanding due diligence on political donors and spending.

We posit that these concerns are not unique to anti-corruption activists but are shared by wider civic society.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO TACKLE DISINFORMATION

There is no one magic fix to end disinformation. The tools we can use include the following as gathered from organisations such as Full Fact, the OECD, academic research and our own analysis. They can be classed into five broad categories:

1. Spaces of disinformation.

- Limiting the spread of disinformation through fact checking or warnings of deception.¹⁰

- Demanding transparency about the way platforms that are used to share disinformation are owned and financed, including how viral content is monetized¹¹ and how algorithms prioritise content.¹²
 - Requiring platforms' compliance with independent standards for fact checking and related disclosures.¹³
2. Disinformation and the media.
 - Providing support for independent journalism and investigative journalists to ensure a strong, pluralistic and diverse media sector including through exploring financial support.
 - Protecting investigative journalists and corruption activists including by legislating to prevent Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).¹⁴
 3. Disinformation and education.
 - Encouraging media literacy and raising awareness of how disinformation seeks to manipulate users.¹⁵
 4. Disinformation and transparency.
 - Applying and extending anti-corruption policies to the information space to provide for transparency of ownership and sources of financing.
 - Further¹⁶ reform to political advertising, extending beyond imprint requirements to address targeting of 'dark' adverts.¹⁷
 5. State and civic spaces and information integrity.
 - Ensuring that government provides impartial and easily accessible information that can be used to disprove falsehoods.¹⁸
 - Promoting and protecting civic space to support its fundamental role in protecting information integrity and exposing deception.

Warnings of deception (which Meta's own research¹⁹ suggest leads 95% of people not to click on a post); understanding how disinformation is produced and shared; having information about algorithms, monetization of viral content, and ownership of publishing platforms and corporate media; plus ensuring support for independent investigative journalism at the national and local level and delivering media literacy education are suggested methods to allow for the exposure of disinformation and awareness of its impact.²⁰

Although disinformation by its nature wants to be seen, and corrupt actors go to great lengths to stay undetected, there are similarities. Much like corruption, disinformation thrives in hiding its true nature, obfuscating its origins, and cares little about the extent of the harm it causes.²¹ This means the strengthening of anti-corruption tools would also help to disrupt disinformation. For example, by bolstering the transparency of ownership of companies, greater publication of material that seeks to influence, and safeguarding trusted media outlets to expose wrongdoing.

Finally, we must acknowledge that disinformation succeeds in its intent to mislead, create conflict and division and sow distrust because our political system allows unpopular practices to continue.²² Public perceptions of politics are damaged by impressions of undue influence on decision makers from donors with deep pockets and those whose access is prioritised. These contributors to distrust must also be tackled alongside the actions to combat disinformation.

WHO WE ARE

Transparency International UK is the UK-based chapter of Transparency International, the world's leading non-governmental anti-corruption organisation. We raise awareness about corruption; advocate legal and regulatory reform at national and international levels; design practical tools for, individuals and companies wishing to combat corruption; and act as a leading centre of anti-corruption expertise. We base our advocacy on robust research, and, as a registered charity, are independent and non-political. We support the Open

Government Partnership and the principles it espouses and are a member of the Open Government Partnership Multi Stakeholder Forum and co-chair the Scotland Steering Group.

CONTACT

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¹ <https://www.disinformationindex.org/> [accessed 14 April 2025]

² Ibid

³ OECD (2024), *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d909ff7a-en>. [accessed 14 April 2025]

⁴ The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) POSTnote 719 April 2024 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0719/POST-PN-0719.pdf> [accessed 14 April 2025]

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Broda, E., & Strömbäck, J. (2024). Misinformation, disinformation, and fake news: lessons from an interdisciplinary, systematic literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 48(2), 139–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2024.2323736> [accessed 14 April 2025]

⁷ The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) POSTnote 719 April 2024 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0719/POST-PN-0719.pdf> [accessed 14 April 2025]

⁸ <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/fighting-corruption-in-the-age-of-fake-news> [accessed 14 April 2025] and Transparency International Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer: Fake news and anti-corruption Author(s): Niklas Kossow Reviewer(s): Christoph Abels, Hertie School of Governance. Matthew Jenkins, Transparency International Secretariat Date: 06 September 2018 [accessed 14 April 2025]

⁹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/ti-condemns-fake-news-campaign-in-nigeria> [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹⁰ For instance as recommended by Full Fact in their 2023 report: Informed citizens: Addressing bad information in a healthy democracy <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/full-fact-report-2023.pdf> [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹¹ “The proliferation of deceptive content online has led to the recognition that some actors in the digital media ecosystem profit from disinformation’s rapid spread. The reason is that a market designed to monetize engagement with fringe audiences encourages actors to create content that can go viral, hence creating financial incentives to circulate controversial claims, adversarial narratives, and deceptive content.” Diaz Ruiz, C. (2023). *Disinformation on digital media platforms: A market-shaping approach*. *New Media & Society*, 27(4), 2188–2211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231207644%20> (Original work published 2025) [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹² The OECD report ‘*Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity*’ states, “the economic incentives of virality and recommendation algorithms frequently prioritise the value of information as a commodity, rather than a public good.” OECD (2024), *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d909ff7a-en>. [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹³ See section 2.2 of *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity* for examples of international state-led policies that move beyond self-regulation https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/facts-not-fakes-tackling-disinformation-strengthening-information-integrity_d909ff7a-en/full-report/component-5.html#section-d1e1545-d3c95cbc71 [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹⁴ The Scottish Government is currently consulting on legislation to address SLAPPs <https://consult.gov.scot/justice/strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation/> [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹⁵ See section 3.2 of *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity* for international examples of media literacy efforts https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/facts-not-fakes-tackling-disinformation-strengthening-information-integrity_d909ff7a-en/full-report/component-6.html#section-d1e6844-0f21507fbc [accessed 14 April 2025]

¹⁶ As suggested by the Electoral Commission, this could include information on spending on advertising, including online adverts <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media-centre/new-law-shows-voters-who-behind-political-ads> [accessed 15 May 2025]

¹⁷ For example, this 2024 EU regulation requires targeting information to be included in political adverts and places restrictions on foreign sponsorship of ads <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/03/11/eu-introduces-new-rules-on-transparency-and-targeting-of-political-advertising/> [accessed 15 April 2025]

¹⁸ For more information see section 3.3 of *Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity* https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/facts-not-fakes-tackling-disinformation-strengthening-information-integrity_d909ff7a-en/full-report/component-6.html#section-d1e8029-0f21507fbc and the OECD (2021), *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en> [accessed 15 April 2025] The OECD’s report reiterates that public communication can support improved policy outcomes, and better and more democratic governance but it requires transitioning away from a traditional understanding of communication as a press office function and leveraging it strategically for the public good.

¹⁹ “When a fact-checked label is placed on a post, 95% of people don’t click through to view it.” How Meta Is Preparing for the EU’s 2024 Parliament Elections (25 February 2024) <https://about.fb.com/news/2024/02/how-meta-is-preparing-for-the-eus-2024-parliament-elections/> [accessed 17 April 2025]

²⁰ The work of the Carnegie UK Scotland’s Digital Ethics People’s Panel suggests that the public would support such measures with disinformation perceived as one of the three biggest risks and potential harms to wider society from online interactions by 56% of members; the transparency and accountability of the institutions providing platforms, and who was policing them prioritised as a key issue for focus by over half of the Members; and 70% of Members broadly in favour of a degree of platform design intervention that would seek to actively remove intentionally produced and distributed disinformation from the internet. <https://carnegieuk.org/publication/national-digital-ethics-public-panel-insight-report/> [accessed 14 April 2025]

²¹ For example, anti-Rohingya content in Myanmar was allowed to proliferate by Meta and exacerbated the atrocities <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebooks-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/> [accessed 15 April 2025]

²² For example, despite public unpopularity there is a lack of progress in political financing reform <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2025/jan/25/nearly-two-thirds-of-britons-say-very-rich-have-too-much-influence-on-politics> [accessed 15 April 2025] and <https://www.transparency.org.uk/news/big-moneys-tightening-grip-british-politics> [accessed 15 April 2025]