

Joint Statement on Information Integrity Online and Elections

Freedom Online Coalition - March 2024

The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) is a group of countries deeply committed to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms as first proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). We believe that the human rights that individuals have offline must also be protected online, including the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas.

The FOC underscores that democracies depend on open, free, and inclusive public debate and free and fair elections that help hold governments accountable and responsive to their citizens. The FOC also recognizes the complexity – and imperative – of building and sustaining information integrity online, particularly around elections. ‘Information integrity’ is defined in this statement as an open and accessible information ecosystem that produces accurate, trustworthy, and reliable information, meaning that people can rely on the accuracy of the information they access while being exposed to a variety of ideas.

2024 is a historic election year, with billions of people going to the polls. Digital technologies available in this day and age create new possibilities for democratic engagement through the broad and rapid sharing of information and can be an important asset for political mobilization, specifically during electoral periods, and can support the enjoyment of human rights. However, significant concerns have been raised about the increased possibility of greater election-related misinformation and disinformation, including through digital technologies. This includes the spread of online hate speech and disinformation campaigns by state and non-state actors.

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence has further lowered the cost and increased the ease with which synthetic misleading and false content, including audio, images, and videos (such as deepfakes), can be generated and disseminated. Of particular concern is the malicious use of AI tools by state and non-state actors for the creation of such content to intentionally sow distrust in the information ecosystem, to diminish trust in democratic institutions, to polarize societies, and to impede on the efforts of, among others, journalists, researchers, human rights defenders, independent media, judiciaries, and election management bodies, all of which undermines the integrity of elections. The effects of the disturbance, manipulation and interference in the information ecosystem are particularly profound for women and girls, persons belonging to minorities, persons in vulnerable situations, and marginalized groups.

Efforts to address and mitigate these challenges by strengthening the online information ecosystem should promote a pro-democratic vision and values, such as respect for pluralism and diversity; inclusion, safety, and security; access and agency of users and citizens; and the accuracy, trustworthiness, and reliability of information. In order to ensure effective political participation during electoral periods, individuals must be able to engage in open discourse, share information,

and form opinions. Access to diverse, accurate, trustworthy, and reliable information is essential for this and thereby a cornerstone for informed voting and decision-making throughout the whole electoral cycle, and thus for democracy itself.

The Freedom Online Coalition calls on States to:

- Promote and protect information integrity online in a manner that supports the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information online, in line with States' international human rights obligations and commitments;
- Respect the work of journalists, media workers, and others to safeguard documenting and monitoring elections to support accountability and transparency;
- Refrain from restricting the Internet and digital communications platforms throughout the electoral cycle in line with our 2023 Joint Statement on Internet Shutdowns and Elections;
- Abstain from conducting and sponsoring disinformation campaigns, domestically or transnationally, that willfully spread inaccurate information with the intent and effect of undermining the course of justice or democratic processes, and to condemn any such acts;
- Ensure that any measures taken to address disinformation are in accordance with international law, including international human rights law, in line with our 2020 Joint Statement on the Spread of Disinformation Online;
- Ensure that measures to regulate AI-generated disinformation are in accordance with civil liberties and international law, including international human rights law, and refrain from discrediting criticism and stifling freedom of expression in general, nor under the guise of countering AI-generated disinformation.

We urge online platforms and the broader tech industry to:

- Respect democracy, human rights online and the rule of law and to combat malicious efforts to undermine democratic systems and human rights;
- Assess the human rights impacts of their products and services in continued and close collaboration with all relevant stakeholders, including civil society, researchers and governments in order to ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies;
- Take timely, appropriate, and necessary measures based on respect for human rights, to ensure the trustworthiness of their services and products, including AI-powered tools;
- Promote information integrity by prioritizing accuracy, trustworthiness, reliability, and plurality of information on their platforms, in line with our 2020 Joint Statement on the Spread of Disinformation Online;
- Provide more transparency and access to data in order to better understand how misinformation and disinformation is polluting the information ecosystem.