

Prioritizing Funding for Information Integrity in the EU and Beyond

Between 2024 and early 2025, Europe's democratic systems have shown increasing vulnerabilities. Autocratic discourse and power has increased, with disinformation making it harder to discern electoral facts. At the same time, independent journalism and civil society organizations are facing increased financial strain.

This sharp rise in authoritarian discourse, propaganda and disinformation isn't just a European problem; but a global issue, significantly worsened by advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI). This global surge in disinformation fuels conflicts, jeopardizes democratic processes and human rights worldwide, and undermines crucial efforts in public health and climate action. At the same time, in the context of suppression of funding towards human rights support, Europe emerges as a possibility to preserve and sustain mechanisms in the public funding sector. While the EU has emerged as a significant driving force in reshaping the global information ecosystem through its laws, legislation, and frameworks, a failure to act decisively and properly will have a cascade effect and collateral damage, especially in global-majority countries.

RNW Media is an international media development organization based in Haarlem, the Netherlands, dedicated to harness the power of independent digital media to uphold human rights and advance the public good. This joint statement frames RNW Media's 75+ years of experience in consultancy with its global network of journalists and media practitioners to offer recommendations and a path forward for fostering healthy information ecosystems.

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The Urgent Need for a Proactive Approach

Addressing the complex issues of information disorder requires multifaceted, proactive strategies that go beyond reactive measures. As the author and journalist Tom Rosentiel observed, disinformation is not a problem to be fixed once, but a social condition requiring constant monitoring and adjustment. This necessitates a shift from solely focusing on fact-checking or media and information literacy initiatives to a collective, cross-sector effort to reform the narrative and restore the information ecosystem. More than that, it requires structural agency that allows civil participation from the bottom-up.

The urgency of this shift is underscored by recent insights from a survey with journalists who are part of RNW Media's community, The Vine. Based across the globe, mostly in Global South countries, a significant majority expressed deep concern about the potential of AI to generate and disseminate disinformation that could specifically undermine civil society's ability to access reliable information and organize effectively. Furthermore, when asked about the greatest ethical challenge posed by AI, "AI-generated content that could be used to target and manipulate specific civil society groups" was overwhelmingly identified as the top concern, far surpassing other issues like AI-powered identification tools. This palpable anxiety from those on the frontlines showcases the immediate and pressing need to adopt a proactive, preventative approach to safeguarding our information environment.



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WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The integrity of our information environment is not merely an abstract concept; it is fundamental to the stability of our economies, the sustainability of national and international level security, and the cohesion of our civic societies. The many faces of its impacts in society have been largely mapped by academia and civil society, from the micro, individual level, to the macro, national and international levels. Crucially, the proliferation of disinformation actively destabilizes civic discourse. It can be weaponized to suppress voter turnout, sow discord between social groups,

incite violence, and undermine public trust in democratic institutions. Journalists and other civil society actors, vital against these threats, face intimidation and often lack the necessary tools, knowledge, and support mechanisms to effectively combat disinformation. The Vine’s survey highlights the pervasive nature of these threats, identifying “Political parties or politicians” alongside “State-sponsored actors” as major sources of disinformation campaigns in their countries, often using of their public office mandate to obscure the lines of manipulation in their own benefit. This complex web of origins underscores the necessity of a comprehensive, security-focused framework that moves beyond simply reacting to case-by-case instances, and supporting independent and plural journalism.

Independent media organizations and journalists, equally vulnerable to online intimidation and disinformation campaigns, must be robust, capable of withstanding pressures, acting autonomously, and delivering trustworthy news to the public. Elevating the standards of information circulating online is crucial for public discourse that enables social change. Promoting accuracy, credibility, and responsible sharing of news is also key to the integrity of elections and democratic processes, ensuring transparency, fairness, and trust.

CURRENT GAPS IN EU FUNDING AND OTHER FUNDING FRAMEWORKS AT NATIONAL LEVELS

Despite the clear and present danger posed by disinformation, current EU and national funding mechanisms do not adequately prioritize or strategically allocate resources to counter this threat. Existing frameworks, such as the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and initiatives like Global Gateway, while important, often lack dedicated, scaled-up provisions for comprehensive information integrity programs. While efforts like the European Democracy Shield are a step in the right direction, they need substantial financial backing to translate into tangible impact across the continent and beyond. Together with groups such as the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), RNW Media submitted inputs into public consultations regarding the MFF and Democracy Shield. Yet, information integrity is a cross-cutting issue that, as observed above, is worth valuing and including across funding initiatives at the EU and national levels.

To effectively counter the escalating threat of disinformation and strengthen democratic resilience, we call upon the European Union and national governments to adopt a proactive, security-focused approach by taking the following steps:



1. **Significantly Increase and Dedicate Funding:**

Allocate specific funding within the next MFF and national budgets to initiatives focused on information integrity, independent journalism, and civil society organizations actively countering disinformation.

This includes dedicated financial support for:

- Shifting from reactive initiatives that have short-term impact, to proactive strategies like pre-bunking and critical thinking education, including digital and media literacy, with an emphasis in Artificial Intelligence literacy, for different demographics.
- Providing sustained support for training, tools, and resources that empower journalists and civil society actors to identify, analyze, and counter disinformation effectively.
- Investing in programs that empower young people as active participants in safeguarding information integrity and promoting agency over the information ecosystem.
- Escaping techno-solutionism that pushes for new technologies as solutions for the disinformation crisis and invest in safeguarding adequate rulings for labor and initiatives that promote plural, diverse, and human-centered, perspectives.
- Supporting the development and adoption of provenance and transparency that enhance content authenticity, especially given concerns around AI-generated content.



2. **Integrate Disinformation Countermeasures Across All Policy Areas:**

Recognize that disinformation impacts all policy domains – from climate action to public health, and crucially, economic and societal stability – and integrate robust countermeasures and funding streams into relevant sectoral strategies and programs.



3. Foster Cross-Sectoral, Multistakeholder Collaboration and Innovation:

Expand the promotion and fund collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, media organizations, academia, and technology companies to develop innovative solutions and share best practices in combating disinformation.

- The EU shall support ethical content moderation and recommendations initiatives/standardization on alternative platforms, as well as continue to strengthen the existing EU Market Act/Digital Services Act and other laws to ensure a more inclusive and effective trust partners mechanism and escalation channels for public interest media to hold tech platforms accountable.
- Prioritize cybersecurity and data protection, ensuring trustworthy and safe information ecosystems by developing and implementing robust cyber safety and security solutions.



4. Strengthen Global Partnerships:

Support initiatives that extend beyond EU borders, recognizing that disinformation is a global challenge. Leverage frameworks like Global Gateway to bolster information integrity in partner countries, particularly in global-majority regions, recognizing the interconnectedness of global information environments.



5. Ensure Flexibility and Responsiveness in Funding:

Create funding mechanisms that are agile enough to respond to the rapidly evolving landscape of disinformation, including the emergence of new AI-driven threats identified by journalists as a major concern. This requires a dynamic approach to resource allocation that can adapt to emerging threats to market stability, public discourse, and civic cohesion.

Signed by:

ORGANISATIONS:

Silat Wassel

Benbereverif

Right Here Right Now Nepal

EducommuniK

Umuzi News

All Women

Akhbar Elyoum

Radio Nigeria

Raseef22

Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation

Center for Advocacy and Sustainable Empowerment

WOS Media

TCDC

CHOICE For Youth and Sexuality

CDS Egypt

Young Women Initiative for Development (Ywide)

KirkukNow

Tech4Peace

Sunugox

Umuzi News

Benbere

Al-Youm

Terhalk.com, association of Cinema Egypt

CDS-PARK

Heritage Consortium Foundation

IMPAKT

HalTek

Média

Sport Salon

Malath Platform

Association des Blogueur du Bénin (AB-BENIN)

Royal health awareness society (RHAS)

Voice of Wusum Radio

Solid 100.9FM Radio Station

The Zimbabwe Independent

Dare to be Grey

AlQatiba

Ghana Broadcasting Corporation

Rwanda Journalists Association (ARJ)

Federal Radio Corporation Of Nigeria (Harmony FM)

Media Wire Express

INDIVIDUALS:

Mohamed al Hani, independent

Dhirendra Sinal, independent journalist

Ngomo Valentin, independent communicator

Vithika Yadav, human rights professional

Joy Jaiyesimi, independent journalist

Mohamed Abozeid, independent communicator

Abu Bakarr Kargbo, independent journalist

If you or your organisation would like to sign the joint statement, please e-mail our Advocacy Manager at giovana.fleck@rnw.org



RNW Media

Koepelplein 1C
2031 WL Haarlem
The Netherlands

www.rnw.media