Building Resilience to Manipulative Information During Elections:

LEARN TO DISCERN AND ELECTIONS FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Acknowledgements

About This Guide

This facilitator's guide is intended to provide practical lessons, activities, and resources to support interventions, trainings, and classroom learning aimed at building resilience to manipulative information before, during, and after elections in countries worldwide. IREX country teams, civil society organizations, educators, and other stakeholders can adapt and apply the lessons and activities for citizen audiences in different contexts.

The lessons and activities included in this guide are based on IREX's Learn to Discern (L2D) approach and training materials, which have been customized to address an elections context. L2D is a human-centered media and information literacy approach to building resilience to manipulative information through supporting individuals, communities, and organizations to develop critical thinking skills and healthy habits for engaging with media and information -- and other citizens -- safely, purposefully, and respectfully. The L2D curriculum and training materials are constantly being adapted to respond to the changing dynamics of the media and information environment, and this guide focuses on responding to the information challenges and threats surrounding elections.

The guide is designed to support voters of all ages, aiming to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and strategies to navigate the unique and complex media and information landscape that develops throughout the elections cycle. With a focus on empowerment, the guide endeavors to help educators, media and civil society trainers, and other facilitators enhance voters' media and information literacy, providing them with an elections-focused lens to critically evaluate to and responsibly engage with the deluge of elections-related information they encounter. By equipping voters with the necessary tools to build resilience to manipulative information, the guide aims to foster a more informed and engaged electorate, ultimately strengthening information integrity and democratic processes around the world.

The guide is not tailored to any specific country but adopts a more general approach by featuring examples from different global contexts. Its format enables trainers and programs to readily customize materials by aligning them with the electoral cycle, processes, and environments of their respective contexts, replacing examples as needed.

Relevant Resource:

Learn more about the electoral cycle from the ACE Project.

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How To Use This Guide

Who Is It For

This guide is for educators and trainers who seek to equip citizens with the tools and strategies to recognize and resist election information manipulation. It's designed to be used throughout the election cycle and adapted for your learners and your context. The guide was designed for youth and adult voters as learners, but it could also be adapted to train elections officials and observers, media professionals, and other educators by selecting appropriate and relevant lessons and activities to include in your training.

The lessons and activities in this guide, and in the accompanying *L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package*, are designed for in-person facilitation but can also be adapted for fully online learning or blended learning, mixing in-person and online learning.

It is our hope that the guide provides educators and learners with the relevant context, resources, and exercises to develop the knowledge, skills, and strategies that build resilience to manipulative information and contribute to nurturing a more informed and discerning electorate, thus fostering a healthier media and information environment before, during, and after elections.

Building Resilience Before, During, and After Elections

The L2D approach is designed to provide individuals, communities, and organizations with the tools to mitigate the effects of information overload and to minimize the influence of manipulative information, which contributes to polarized communities, diminished trust in democratic institutions, threats to election integrity, and can lead to conflict, extremization, and radicalization. Building resilience to manipulative information requires individuals, communities, and organizations that are aware of the threat posed by manipulative information, can identify it, take active steps to resist its pull and influence, and learn from their experience to develop proactive measures to prevent future harm to themselves and others. All of us contribute to creating and maintaining a healthy, strong, and vibrant media and information environment.

The L2D approach to building resilience to manipulative information is guided by the following resilience competencies:

1. **Understanding how my brain works:** Individual awareness and abilities (emotions, cognition, biases)
2. **Understanding how the information space works:** Knowledge of information space infrastructure, algorithms, business models, ownership, etc.
3. **Knowing how to stay balanced in the overwhelming information space:** Ability to safeguard attention, decision-making, and personal information
4. **Having specific tools to navigate the information space and not be manipulated:** Skills and tools to engage with the information space
5. **Understanding how to interact constructively with others:** Prosocial behaviors in the information space

While it is important to develop media and information literacy knowledge and skills, and ultimately the strategies and habits to recognize and resist manipulative information, we believe that developing self-awareness of our own cognitive distortions, biases, and emotional reactions is foundational to the other competencies and to building resilience. After all, we are all susceptible to manipulative information, especially during elections. We also believe that building resilience to manipulative information is not a journey with an end, but a lifelong pursuit which requires constant practice and self-reflection as the media and information environment is always changing and new threats emerge every day. Thus, each lesson in this guide is mapped to one or more of the resilience competencies so that you can choose the best way to structure your learning experience (*see the Choosing Wisely section below*).

The following graphics ([adapted from the ACE Project](#)) show the electoral cycle as a continuous process, with no fixed beginning or ending, and composed of many integrated activities and stakeholders. Similarly, responding to elections through resilience building interventions is a continuous process in which the application of our competencies should be integrated through each elections period: the pre-electoral period, the electoral period and the post-electoral period.
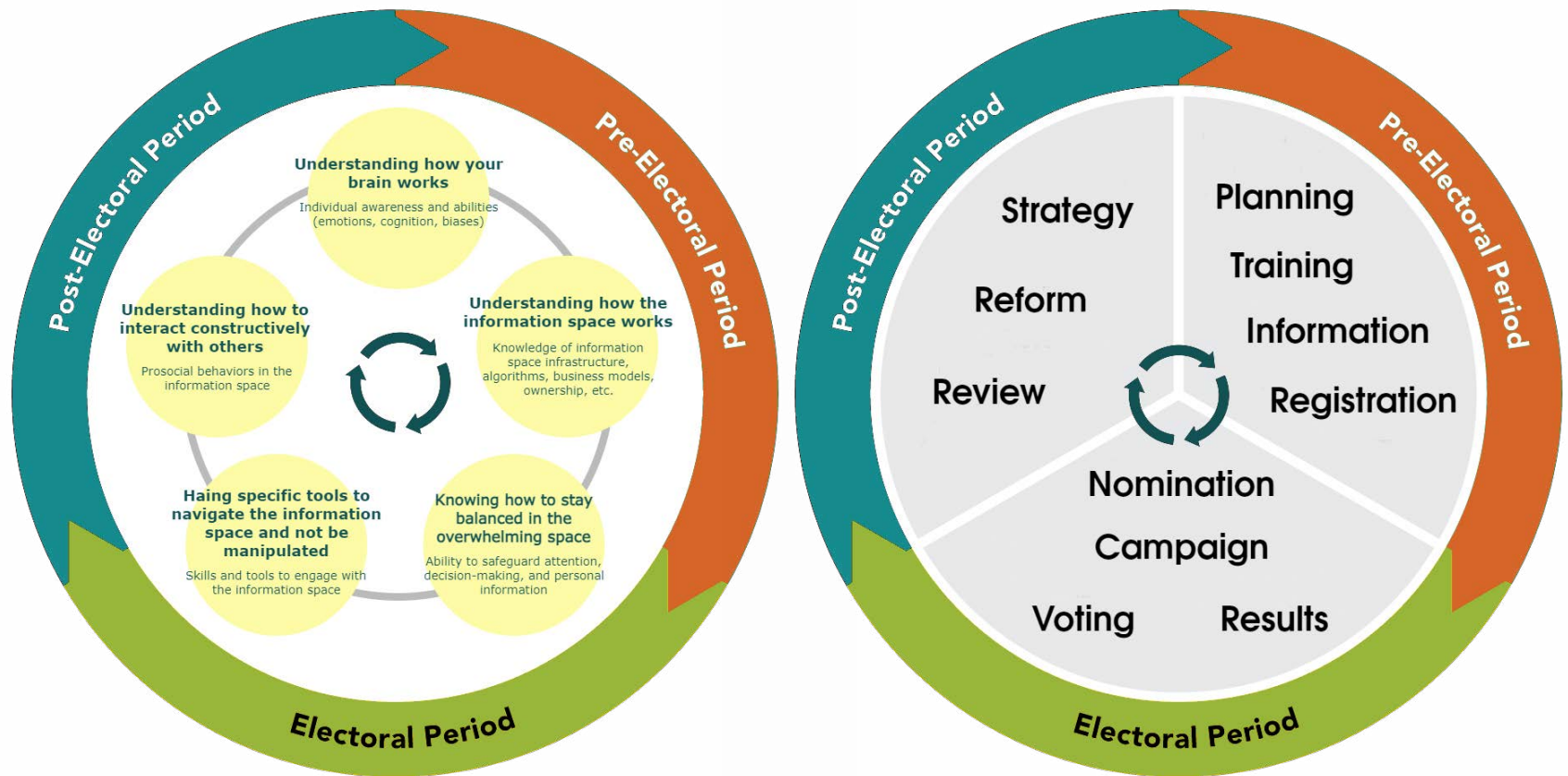
Find Common Ground

Considering the sensitivity around elections, it is critical that facilitators nurture a learning environment conducive to participants finding common ground. During training, facilitators should refrain from criticizing or prescribing "good" or "bad" labels to information sources, particularly news media, or to specific candidates. Instead, facilitators should focus on empowering voters with the tools to critically evaluate information and candidates themselves and to recognize and resist information manipulation during the election cycle.

It's imperative to acknowledge and respect the diversity of perspectives among participants, setting aside personal political affiliations. While political discussions may naturally arise, the primary focus should remain on bolstering the ability of learners to discern credible information and trustworthy sources. Fostering a collaborative and respectful learning environment dedicated to building resilience to manipulative information amongst individuals and communities should be the goal -- advocating personal political viewpoints may create further division and distrust.

Create A Brave Space

Trainers should always remember to value everyone's ideas and inputs without judgement. All of us have biases and stereotypes and we all need to reflect individually on these and try to better understand how our biases and preferences may create blind spots. People need to feel ready to learn – and they can't learn in Fight or Flight mode.

Relevant Resource:

Review and implement Six Pillars of a Brave Space facilitation.

Choose Wisely

There's a lot of material in the guide so it might not be possible to teach it from beginning to end! Instead, choose lessons and activities that will work best for your audience and the amount of time you have. And make sure to use the examples and resources provided in the guide as appropriate or find more relevant examples for your audience and context.

You are the designer of your training! With your understanding of your participants, you can tailor the content to best suit their interests and needs. To construct your training, refer to the Table of Contents (each Lesson is linked for easy access) and the resources below, including a

reference table mapping lessons to the resilience competencies and quick recommendations for constructing trainings from one to six hours. Also, you may consider covering some parts of suggested sections while skipping others. You will also need to utilize the accompanying *L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package* which includes additional activities for the topics covered in this guide, as noted within each lesson. Remember, always keep your audience's needs in mind.

Resilience Competencies Map	Unit 1: Evolving Information Landscape and Elections	Unit 2: The Role of Media in Elections	Unit 3: Information and Decision-Making in Elections	Unit 4: Information Manipulation Before, During, and After Elections	Unit 5: Elevated Threats During Elections
Understanding how my brain works	1.2	2.2	3.1 3.2	4.2	5.1
Understanding how the information space works	1.1 1.2 1.3	2.1 2.2 2.3	3.2 3.3	4.1 4.2 4.4 4.5 4.6	5.1 5.2 5.3
Knowing how to stay balanced in the overwhelming information space	1.2	2.3	3.2 3.3	4.3 4.4 4.7	5.3 5.4
Having specific tools to navigate the information space and not be manipulated	1.2 1.3	2.1 2.2	3.3	4.1 4.5 4.6 4.7	5.1 5.4
Understanding how to interact constructively with others	1.3	2.4	3.3	4.4 4.7	5.1 5.2 5.4

The agendas below are merely suggestions. Feel free to pick and choose the sections you believe will most engage your participants.

If You Have 1 Hour

1.1 Understanding Today's Information Space
3.1 Cognitive Biases and Distortions
4.1 What Should You Expect as Elections Approach

If You Have 2 Hours

The 1 Hour agenda, plus:
1.2 Information and The Battle for Human Attention and Information Overload
4.2 Types of Manipulative Information

If You Have 3 Hours

The 2 Hour agenda, plus:
1.3 Information and the Machines: Algorithms and the Digital Environment
2.1 Media in Elections: The Double-Edged Sword

If You Have 4 Hours

The 3 Hour agenda, plus:
2.2 Agenda Setting in Politics and Elections
4.5 Manipulation with Headlines

If You Have 4 Hours (Alternative)

The 3 Hour agenda, plus:
3.3 Elections Filter Bubbles
5.1 Harmful Stereotypes

If You Have 5 Hours

The 4 Hour agenda, plus:
2.3 Digital Media in Politics and Elections
3.2 How Cognitive Biases Affect Our Electoral Behaviors
4.3 Who is a Target?
5.1 Harmful Stereotypes

If You Have 5 Hours (Alternative)

The 4 Hour Alternative agenda, plus:
4.3 Who is a Target?
4.4 Who are the Manipulators?
5.2 The Gender Dimension
5.4 Persevering in the Digital Space

If You Have 6 Hours

Either of the 5 Hour agendas, plus:
2.4 Freedom of the Press
4.6 Photos, Videos, and AI Content Manipulation
4.7 How to Navigate the Information Disorder
5.2 Hate Speech

Unit 1.
Evolving Information Landscape And Elections

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Understanding Today's Information Space

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Introduction

The volume of available information today is enormous: Every day approximately 328.77 million terabytes of data are generated. Citizens now have greater access to valuable and credible information than ever before, but **manipulative information** also proliferates in this environment. Indeed, manipulative information spreads faster and further online than accurate information. Everyone and everything that creates, uses, or spreads content in different formats -- such as text, audio, video -- are part of this vast, expanding information environment, in which the traditional lines separating the producers and consumers of information have shifted, as anyone with an internet connection has the tools to create and spread information to a mass audience.

In this fluid environment, citizens serve a critical role, as both consumers and producers of information, and most importantly, as voters. An informed citizenry is the foundation of a thriving democracy, and the integrity of elections and voting relies not only on voters' access to quality and credible information, but also on the ability of citizens to critically evaluate the credibility of information, recognize and resist information manipulation and bias, be aware of their own cognitive distortions, and to engage in the information environment purposefully, responsibly, and with empathy. Collectively we refer to these competencies as **media and information literacy**, and they foster attitudes, habits, and practices that build resilience to manipulative information and contribute to healthy democratic societies.

Relevant Resource:

For more information, check out Elections Matter and Europe Lagging Behind on Digital Skills Development

Activity:

Exploring Information Sources in Electoral Processes

Objectives

Participants will:

- Reflect on their information sources related to electoral processes and candidates

- Consider the reliability and influence of these sources

Instructions

- Begin by sharing Domo's Data Never Sleeps infographic, emphasizing the vast amount of information available online.

- Ask: Is there anything in the infographic that surprises you? Where do you spend most of your time online?

- Prompt participants to reflect individually on their information sources related to elections and candidates, considering both online and offline sources they rely on for electoral information.

- After individual reflection, divide participants into small groups and allocate 15 minutes for group discussion. *Encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly within their groups and to be respectful and open to other's perspectives and sources of information*.

- Reconvene as a larger group and allow each group to share key insights and observations from their discussions.

- Facilitate a brief reflective discussion, summarizing key takeaways and encouraging participants to reflect on their own behaviors regarding information consumption during election, and how sharing sources of election-related information with each other may have introduced new ideas and broadened our information sources.

- Conclude by encouraging participants to continue reflecting on and evaluating their information sources in various contexts, emphasizing the value of quality, credible information and the importance of critical thinking in navigating the abundance of available information during elections.

Individual Reflection and Group Discussion Questions

- What sources of information do you access to learn more about elections and candidates?

- What do you like about these sources?

- What information and/or perspectives might be missing from these sources?

Talking Points

- Emphasize the importance of critically evaluating information sources in electoral contexts to ensure informed decision-making.

- Encourage participants to consider the reliability and influence of both online and offline sources in shaping their perspectives on elections and candidates.

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- Reinforce the idea that evaluating the quality and credibility of our information sources is an ongoing process that requires continuous self-reflection and critical thinking.

Further Context

Unsurprisingly, citizens are increasingly reliant on social media for sharing personal content, communicating with friends, or reading the news. According to Domo in each minute of 2023, over 66 thousand photos were uploaded on Instagram and over 1.7 million pieces of content were shared on Facebook every day. However, very little of that information has been checked by experts or edited by a professional. Information produced by reputable news publications that meets journalistic standards is readily available on social media, but this information competes for our attention with content generated by influencers, politicians, friends, and family who often present opinions as facts or spread manipulative information.

During election periods, social media provides crucial information about major electoral developments or candidates. Yet social media content circulates without much regulation or control. The lack of clear regulation over social media content becomes especially challenging during elections since political competitors use a wide range of social media platforms to disseminate political advertising to convince voters to support them. Such content can also undermine the overall integrity of election campaigns since it becomes difficult to verify trustworthy sources of information.

When citizens are caught up in their **filter bubbles** of political discourse, they might not always check the reliability of the information they receive before sharing it further. This creates opportunities for the spread of manipulative information, which can have significant influence on citizens' decisions at the polls.

The use of social media as a daily source of information has rapidly grown over the past 15 years. According to a survey conducted by UNESCO and Ipsos in 2023, 56% of internet users in the 16 countries surveyed use social media as their primary source of news, surpassing television at 44%. The significance of this data point is even more crucial during elections given that citizens believe manipulative information proliferates during these periods: The same survey indicated that 87% of respondents expressed concern about the impact of manipulative information on upcoming elections in their country, with 47% being "very concerned."

Relevant Resource:

For more information, check out How online misinformation exploits 'information voids' — and what to do about it and Elections in Digital Times

For the "My Media Landscape" activity, refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package.

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Evolving Information Landscape And Elections

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1.2

Information and The Battle for Attention and Information Overload

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Introduction

In our dynamic information environment, there's a constant battle for your attention. This is the realm of the **attention economy**, where capturing and retaining voter attention is key, a step beyond the traditional information economy. As the amount of accessible information grows exponentially, your attention becomes a precious, limited resource. During elections, the attention economy is crucial in shaping how political information reaches you and influences your decisions. Political parties, candidates, advocacy groups, journalists, and other electoral stakeholders also work to influence public opinion and voters' choices. Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) often struggle to keep pace in this competitive environment, mostly because they must play by the rules.

How do political campaigns grab and keep your attention? They do this by creating compelling, memorable, even sensationalized content, often utilizing targeted advertising and viral marketing to extend their reach and engagement. Political campaigns use a wide range of social media platforms to connect with voters, often employing advanced data analytics to customize messages and to micro target specific groups.

Media coverage of elections is also affected by the attention economy. News stories might be chosen or presented in ways designed to attract more viewers or readers, sometimes leading to sensationalized coverage or favouring entertainment over careful analysis. Additionally, provocative or misleading content tends to attract more attention and spreads faster. The race for attention often prioritizes catchy soundbites and emotional appeals over reasoned debate and fact-based information. Our brains "enjoy" absorbing emotional and shocking information, and media outlets have caught on to the content that is most likely to draw viewers' attention.

With so much information available, voters might experience **information overload**, making it tough to discern what is reliable information. Today, people spend an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes on social media each day, in addition to other sources of offline or online information, and the start of the electoral cycle increases information overload as we immerse ourselves in a news stream saturated with political messages, online debates, voter information about the electoral process, political forecasts, and polls. During elections, we tend to jump from one piece of news to another, watching political debates while answering messages, or commenting on social media posts while listening to a podcast. When we try to process too much information our cognitive abilities become overburdened and as a result, we are more susceptible to manipulative information.

Checking whether information drives an emotional response is the first step to understanding whether you are being manipulated. Not all media content using emotional language is untrue, of course. There is no lack of truly tragic events in the world. But it's one of the signs that something could be wrong – the use of highly emotional and graphic images often signals an attempt to manipulate. It means that you should

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learn to pause, identify the emotion you are having (to name it), and then you can learn to control the emotion (to tame it) and make more considered and less emotional decisions. This technique is called **Name It to Tame It!**

STRATEGY: Name It to Tame It

Name It to Tame It is a three-step method for regulating your emotional reactions to political content:

1. **Pause:** Turn your head away from the screen or paper.

2. **Ask:** What am I feeling?

3. **Say:** The name of the feeling to yourself.

For "Name It to Tame It" activities, refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package.

Relevant Resources:

For more information, watch It's not you. Phones are designed to be addicting and check out Information Environment Around Elections. You can also view and utilize recent and historical political campaign ads through the Internet Archive's Political Ads collection.

Unit 1.
Evolving Information Landscape And Elections

Information and the Machines: Algorithms and the Digital Environment

Introduction

In addition to the vast amounts of media and information available today, the evolution of online **algorithms** means that information is now seeking out citizens as much, if not more, as citizens are seeking out information. Applying this trend to elections, voters are increasingly encountering targeted political content and campaign messages tailored to their preferences, beliefs, and browsing history. It's more important than ever for citizens to be aware of this personalized filtering and actively seek diverse sources of information to make well-informed decisions.

Our social media feeds are not entirely within our control, rather they are filtered and curated by algorithms. To better understand our preferences, social media platforms collect our personal data, and based on our "likes," the links we click, the locations we tag, and the affiliations we choose, algorithms then personalize and prioritize the content in our feeds. Although social media platforms curate the content that might interest users most, opposing political messages and viewpoints may be downplayed or omitted, trapping users inside a filter bubble.

Instagram, for example, prioritizes posts you would most likely be interested in based on previous interactions with content you like or comment on. YouTube's stated goal is to "help viewers find the videos they want to watch and maximize long-term viewer engagement." So, if you watched a recent interview with a politician you're inclined to support in future elections, YouTube will likely use your viewing history to offer you similar politically oriented content.

When using social media as a source of election news or for collecting information about political candidates, be on guard for various forms of algorithm-driven manipulative information. You may not always be in control of the information in your feeds, but it's important to understand the technology that drives this content and resist the urge to share the content without critically examining the sources.

In the end, it's up to you to decide how to interact with the information you see online. One way to protect yourself and others against manipulative information is to **Care Before You Share**.

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STRATEGY: Care Before You Share

Care Before You Share is a four-step method for responsible digital citizenship:

1. Name It to Tame It!

2. Take responsibility. Know that YOU are the information gatekeeper.

3. Acknowledge what you may not know.

4. If you have time, check it out! - do what you can to verify information *(see Unit 4 for more guidance on this step)*

5. If you're still not sure it's true, don't share it.

Relevant Resources:

For more information watch Hidden Code: Algorithms in Social Networks and check out Information Integrity to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes

Refer to the L2D Elections Training Curriculum Activity Package for more activities related to this topic, including "Split Screen: How Different Are Americans' Facebook Feeds?" and "Understanding and Escaping Your Filter Bubble." There are also worksheets that will help you to train your most used social media algorithm to show you information about the impact of foreign interference and information manipulation on elections.

Unit 2.
The Role Of Media In Elections

2.1

Media in Elections: The Double-Edged Sword

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Introduction

The role of media in electoral contexts is a double-edged sword, filled with both opportunities and pitfalls. Understanding these roles empowers voters to navigate the media and information landscape effectively and to make informed choices that shape the future of democracies. To fully grasp the impact of media in the democratic process, it's essential to delve into the positive and negative roles it plays.

Media, particularly news media, are a powerful tool in the democratic toolkit. Media serve as a vital link connecting voters to the heart of democracy. Media disseminate information about candidates, their policies, and the electoral process with incredible speed. As a result, voters gain enhanced accessibility to the information necessary for making well-informed decisions. Media platforms are like the grand stage for political discussions, debates, and interviews. They create an arena where a multitude of voices, opinions, and perspectives from all corners of society come together for a vibrant exchange of ideas. By shining a spotlight on political matters and elections, the media stirs the pot of public interest. Media can serve to motivate citizens to become active participants in the democratic process, injecting new energy into our shared political landscape.

Media have considerable influence in shaping our overall worldview and our perspectives on political and electoral developments. They have the capacity to sway our thinking, set societal agendas for debate, define our social priorities, and even exert the power to shape or manipulate our political convictions and electoral choices. As elections approach, news media become increasingly powerful in the information environment. Traditional media, including newspapers, TV, and radio, as well as their online counterparts continue to play a crucial role in elections by serving as sources of information for many voters. Media can profile candidates, facilitate political debates, shape public opinion, and host campaign advertising.

When you tune in to the news on TV or read a news article, you might expect to receive unbiased information about local or global events, free from any hidden agenda. During elections, the media should inform and educate the public about the electoral process and procedures to help voters make informed decisions.

Yet media outlets aren't always the unbiased observers we hope them to be. Sometimes, they lean toward certain candidates or parties, inadvertently influencing public opinion and potentially tilting the fairness of the electoral process. Behind the scenes, the interests of media owners and advertisers can exert an undue influence on media content. This influence may lead to biased or skewed reporting, altering the way information is presented to you.

Media ownership significantly influences a media outlet's approach to election coverage and political reporting. The ACE Project outlines the characteristics and differences between various kinds of news media that operate within any given context, including:

- **Publicly owned and state media**, which may operate independently and serve the public interest or as a mouthpiece of the government in power.

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- **Privately owned and corporate media**, which are independently owned and typically operate for-profit through advertising sales and can range in size from international conglomerates to local outlets.
- **Community media**, which are generally locally owned and focused on local issues and may operate as for-profit or non-profit.
- **Party-owned media**, which are run by and for the interests of political parties or politicians.

Additionally, factors such as economics, societal and institutional trust, and historical context further shape the dynamics of media ownership and the way it impacts the information environment around elections. Promoting diversity and balance within the media ownership landscape is crucial for nurturing democratic processes, including fair and free elections.

STRATEGY: How to Find Out Who Owns a Media Outlet

This is a five-step guide for discovering who owns a media outlet:

1. Look for the about section on the website of the media outlet. The information about the owners should be listed if the outlet is reliable.
2. Conduct a search (Google or your preferred online search tool) of the tile of the outlet and add "owner".
3. If it seems like the owner is hidden, look for articles by journalists and investigative journalists.
4. Check the websites of national media regulators for mentions of the outlet.
5. Check reports about national media.

Relevant Resources:

For more information watch [What would a world without independent media look like?](#), learn more about [media ownership in the context of elections from the ACE Project](#), and dive into a [research study of media ownership in Indonesia](#).

Refer to the [L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package](#) for the "Unveiling Media Ownership" and "Why Journalism Matters During the Election Cycle" and "Understanding Journalistic Standards During Elections" activities.

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The Role Of Media In Elections

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2.2

Agenda-Setting in Politics and Elections

Introduction

With countless events unfolding globally, there are always more potential news stories than media outlets have the resources to cover. Information needs to be filtered to present relevant information to voters. There are many complex factors that contribute to the selection and framing of news stories and election-related content, shaping the narratives that capture our attention.

Media coverage choices play a pivotal role in influencing how we perceive and prioritize global events or political developments. This influence was termed the **agenda-setting function** of the media by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972. McCombs and Shaw found that there was a relationship between which issues voters considered important and which issues their media sources reported on and how frequently.

> "In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In refelcting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues– that is, the media may set the "agenda" of the campaign"
>
> - MAXWELL E. McCOMBS, DONALD L. SHAW

As an example of agenda setting, the media might decide to report about a celebrity joining politics, but not about a new bill in the parliament. In this case, it decides on voters' behalf which issue is more important. If a media organization is driven by the wrong motives, it can release biased information and misuse its power to influence public opinion. This is where the question of media ownership plays a key role.

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Pennsylvania Election 2022

Candidates for governor, U.S. Senate, and more will appear on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Register to vote · Check your registration status · Find your polling place

Request a mail ballot · Contact your county election office

CASE STUDY: Revolve Around the Voter

Many newsrooms covering the 2022 U.S. midterm elections reevaluated traditional horse race election coverage, which tends to focus on "us vs. them" campaign dynamics and polling results rather than policy issues. Members of the INN Network, for example, including Spotlight PA, Injustice Watch, and The 19th, adopted a voter-centric approach called "Revolve Around the Voter."

Christopher Baxter, executive director and editor in chief of Spotlight PA, expressed the organization's commitment to rethinking the traditional election playbook: "Part of what we are always emphasizing as an organization is: How are we different? How are we providing unique value to people? What sets us apart?"

"Before we write any election story," Baxter explained, "we really ask ourselves, 'how does this help a voter make an informed choice?'"

Spotlight PA's Election Center prioritized content that helps voters make informed choices, featuring guides on candidate research, becoming poll workers, and voting. The newsroom also launched a special election series, "One Vote, Two Pennsylvanias," providing policy-based insights into candidates for Pennsylvania governor, aiming to offer unique and impactful election coverage.

Further Context

To understand how stories about elections are developed, citizens should understand **how newsrooms are structured** and how they function during busy election seasons. Newsrooms usually have several different departments, and some of those departments have "firewalls"

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between them. A firewall is an invisible barrier that keeps two sides separate from each other. For example, the influence of a news outlet's owners and the marketing department should be kept separate from its editorial board. Journalists and editors should be able to make decisions on what to publish freely and independently from the interests of the advertising department and owners.

Departments at a media outlet often include:

- Reporters who cover different "beats" (or topics), such as national politics, foreign affairs, economy, news, and elections
- Editors and producers who direct the tone and content of the outlet's publications
- Design
- Social media and media outlet self-promotion
- Advertising
- Management and administration

Ultimately, **editors are responsible for selecting the stories** that their outlet covers and publishes. There are many complex and intersecting factors that contribute to how journalists and news outlets decide what news to cover and how to cover it. Understanding this can help citizens be more aware of what we see and why.

While balancing expectations, civic duty, and voters' preferences, the editors serve as a filter and watchdog to shield the public from individuals and groups who want control their image in the media (like politicians). Editors decide what to include in the media's agenda and what is left out, and according to Harcup & O'Neill (2016) stories must generally satisfy one or more of the following requirements:

- **Exclusivity:** Stories generated by, or available first to, the news organization as a result of interviews, letters, investigations, surveys, polls, and so on.
- **Bad news:** Stories with particularly negative overtones such as death, injury, defeat and loss (of a job, for example).
- **Conflict:** Stories concerning conflict such as controversies, arguments, splits, strikes, fights, insurrections and warfare.
- **Surprise:** Stories that have an element of surprise, contrast and/or the unusual about them.
- **Audio-visuals:** Stories that have arresting photographs, video, audio and/or which can be illustrated with infographics.
- **Shareability:** Stories that are thought likely to generate sharing and comments via Face-book, Twitter and other forms of social media.

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- **Entertainment:** Soft stories concerning sex, showbusiness, sport, lighter human interest, animals, or offering opportunities for humorous treatment, witty headlines or lists.

- **Drama:** Stories concerning an unfolding drama such as escapes, accidents, searches, sieges, rescues, battles or court cases.

- **Follow-up:** Stories about subjects already in the news.

- **The power elite:** Stories concerning powerful individuals, organizations, institutions or corporations.

- **Relevance:** Stories about groups or nations perceived to be influential with, or culturally or historically familiar to, the audience.

- **Magnitude:** Stories perceived as sufficiently significant in the large numbers of people involved or in potential impact or involving a degree of extreme behavior or extreme occurrence.

- **Celebrity**: Stories concerning people who are already famous.

- **Good news:** Stories with particularly positive overtones such as recoveries, breakthroughs, cures, wins and celebrations.

- **News organization's agenda:** Stories that set or fit the news organization's own agenda, whether ideological, commercial or as part of a specific campaign (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016, 1482)

Finally, the stories we read, watch, and hear are not just the result of editors' choices. **Each of us is responsible for the news we consume**. We choose what to read and spend time on. The more we click on political or election news stories, the more likely it is we will see it on our social media feeds in the future. If we read and share quality journalism, we will also see more of it.

As election season unfolds, newsrooms face the complexities of a shifting media landscape since election coverage is characterized by a unique mix of regulations, predictability, and unexpected twists. With audiences seeking dynamic, instant, and evidence-based reporting, traditional approaches like static articles and hourly updates become insufficient. **During elections, news organizations must navigate the demand for immediacy and immersive content**, incorporating both concise updates and in-depth articles. Achieving this balance proves challenging for conventional journalism models.

Relevant Resources:

For more information on agenda setting watch Max McCombs on Agenda-Setting Theory and read about Live Center's approach to live elections reporting.

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The Role Of Media In Elections

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2.3

Digital Media in Politics and Elections

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Introduction

As the Internet becomes an increasingly popular source for information, particularly around politics and elections, online media, especially social media, have emerged as key platforms for political communication. This shift highlights the necessity for voters to be well-informed and media literate in this new landscape.

Much of the information we come across online is manipulated, distorted, or intentionally misleading, making it even more difficult to access and discern credible information, particularly around elections. The process of sorting through all this information online can be exhausting! And since manipulative information spreads faster and farther than verifiable information online, we need to understand how to deal with manipulated content before it's amplified through the affordances and algorithms of social media platforms. With over 4 billion individuals of legal voting age around the world and approximately 5.3 billion internet users in 2024, the role of online media in shaping political opinions and electoral outcomes globally is crucial. Voters must be equipped with knowledge, skills, and habits to discern credible information from manipulated information, to understand the strategies, tools, and means of digital political campaigns, and to engage responsibly in online political discourse.

New media technologies have transformed audiences from passive consumers into active producers and disseminators of media and information. Those same technologies are also used to exploit our active online participation and to influence, manipulate, and monetize our behaviors. One outcome of this exchange is that our personal information is being collected and used to display microtargeted content tailored to our preferences.

Microtargeting is one of the most powerful tools in political campaigning, enabled by the structural biases of social media platforms. Political campaigns frequently invest in social media platforms to promote their messaging directly to voters, with content fitted to voters' profiles, preferences, and group affiliations.

CASE STUDY 1: Barack Obama, the First Social Media U.S. President

The impact of social media platforms on elections became evident during the 2000s. In his first U.S. presidential campaign, Barack Obama effectively utilized social media platforms to mobilize a significant voter base, which helped him secure victory in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 74% of U.S. internet users actively sought election news online during Obama's 2008 campaign. This accounted for 55% of the entire adult population at that time, highlighting the substantial role that social media played in shaping electoral dynamics.

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However, as indicated by a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center that examined political perceptions among American citizens in 2016 and revisited the subject in 2020:

- Approximately 55% of social media users in the U.S. expressed feeling "worn out" by the proliferation of political posts on these platforms, marking an increase of nearly 16% since the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
- Nearly 70% of respondents mentioned that engaging in political discussions on social media with individuals holding opposing views was often "stressful and frustrating," increasing significantly from 56% in 2016.

Relevant Resources:

For more context, watch President Obama kicked off a first of its kind Internet era town hall meeting at the White House

CASE STUDY 2: Cambridge Analytica

In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica adeptly gathered and traded social media user information to sway voters through targeted advertisements. How did they achieve this? By amassing extensive demographic data readily accessible on social media platforms on a grand scale. Subsequently, the firm employed expansive modeling techniques to perform election analyses and generate statistically calculated predictions regarding the types of advertisements that could potentially resonate most with individuals from various groups.

In response to the Cambridge Analytica backlash, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, announced a policy change: Starting in January 2022, Meta no longer permits advertisers to purchase targeted ads based on sensitive user data, including political affiliation.

Relevant Resources:

For more context, watch What is the Cambridge Analytica scandal?, and for a perspective on German elections, watch Political Social Media Campaigns: A Threat to Democracy?

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2.4

Freedom of the Press

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Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Freedom of the press is the right of newspapers, magazines, and other media to report news without being controlled by the government." An unbiased and independent press, particularly during election periods, is a pillar of democratic societies. When news media are weak and/or under government control, governments are free to act with impunity and undermine a level-playing field, while corrupt or incompetent politicians can remain in power.

Journalism is a dangerous endeavor in many countries, especially in conflict or war contexts. For example, in 2021 Belarus forced a commercial plane traveling from Greece to Lithuania to land to arrest dissident journalist, Roman Protasevich, leaving his colleagues in fear for their lives. In Russia, several news outlets have recently been declared foreign agents and have seen their journalists' homes raided by security agents, forcing some of them to flee the country. The situation became especially dire during Russia's war against Ukraine. Several media outlets had to relocate their offices to neighboring countries.

The safety of news media workers is crucial for safeguarding democratic processes. Attacks on journalists and news outlets have far-reaching consequences, impacting the entire media landscape and silencing different voices. These attacks tend to intensify around electoral periods and take various forms, including censorship through license withdrawal, publishing bans, threats, and imprisonment. Journalists may self-censor or face dismissal for political reasons. Violence against journalists involves arrests, beatings, rape, and murder, and can extend to their families and news organizations, and female journalists face higher risks of sexual violence. Journalists also face threats of unintentional information exposure through cyberattacks, surveillance, and malware, with AI exacerbating such risks.

Each of us can support free and independent news media by raising awareness about its importance, advocating for press freedom through our networks, and engaging in discussions about it with our friends, family and colleagues. It is important to become critical consumers of media, to fact-check information, and to avoid sources that are known to spread false or misleading information. By increasing our demand for quality journalism, we can support independent media, ensure integrity of election process, and uphold democratic principles.

Activity:

Freedom of the Press

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Objectives

Participants will:

- Understand the concept of freedom of the press during elections

- Analyze the global freedom of the press index and compare different countries

- Discuss challenges in their country and explore ways to improve press freedom

Resource Needed

- The link to the Freedom of the Press Index: https://rsf.org/en/ranking

Instructions

- Start the activity by reviewing the concept of freedom of the press and its importance during elections processes.

- Share the link to the Freedom of the Press Index and explain its purpose.

Individual Work

- Instruct participants to individually explore the Freedom of the Press Index link.

- Encourage them to review the countries ranked lowest and highest in terms of press freedom and reflect on the reasons for the positions these countries hold on the list.

Group Work

- Divide participants into pairs or small groups of 3-4 individuals. Ask participants to designate a presenter within each group to share the group's key observations and insights with the larger group.

- Ask groups to discuss their observations on why the highest-ranked countries are rated highly and why the lowest-ranked countries face challenges in press freedom. Give them following discussion questions:

  - What factors contribute to high-ranking in-press freedom?

  - What specific examples can you think of that illustrate these factors?

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- What are some interesting similarities or differences you observe when comparing press freedom in your country to others?
- Then, ask them to compare ranking and press freedom situation during elections of their country with the countries they discussed.
- Facilitate a dynamic sharing session where each group presents their observations to the larger group.
- After all groups have presented, facilitate a reflective discussion, encouraging participants to explore common themes that emerged and to think about how press freedoms could be improved in their country.

Conclusion

- Summarize the main points and key takeaways from the discussions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of journalistic standards and freedom of the press in maintaining a responsible and credible media landscape during elections.
- Encourage participants to reflect on how they can contribute to promoting press freedom and supporting ethical journalism.

Relevant Resource:

Watch The Economist explain why and how the freedom of the press should be protected.

Further Context

The Parliamentary Assembly Resolution #2254 on "Media freedom as a condition for democratic elections" recalls that "… free elections are a pillar of every democratic society. The electorate cannot be said to have genuine freedom of choice if that choice is not a well-informed one; consequently, the right to freedom of information and media freedom are essential preconditions of the right to free elections. The media must be free to inform the public, without being subject to any political, economic or other pressure, and with due regard for professional ethics."

Each year, Reporters Without Borders publishes the Press Freedom Index, documenting attacks on media worldwide. In the 2011/2012 report, Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea had the worst index ratings. Eritrea suppresses media freedom through routine arrests and journalist fatalities. As of August 2012, at least 32 journalists remained imprisoned, with some serving sentences for over a decade without charges or trials. Countries like Iran, China, Vietnam, Sudan, Burma, and Belarus closely follow in the index. Instances of violence against news media and journalists are often linked to movements advocating for democratic change and free and fair elections, such as the Arab Spring uprisings.

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Journalists worldwide often face significant restrictions and are subject to reputational and physical attacks. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a record number of journalists were jailed worldwide in 2020, and from 2016 to 2020, UNESCO has recorded 400 killings of journalists.

Another example deals with British journalist and filmmaker Sean McAllister who in 2011 encountered a 25-year-old dissident and computer expert in Damascus known as "Kardokh." According to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Kardokh had consented to an on-camera interview with the understanding that McAllister would blur his face in the published footage. However, in October 2011, Syrian security agents detained McAllister, confiscating his laptop, cell phone, camera, and documentary footage, which included images and contact details of activists. This information could be used to identify those interviewed. Upon learning of McAllister's arrest, Kardokh swiftly left for Lebanon, noting that some of the activists he had connected with McAllister had been arrested, and at least one had disappeared.

During elections, attacks on journalists range from subtle and concealed -- as perpetrators fear losing public support -- to extreme violence. One of the most egregious election-related attacks on news media occurred in 2009 in the Southern Philippines, where 57 individuals, including 32 journalists, were slaughtered. The victims were part of a convoy supporting a local politician seeking candidacy for provincial councils. Gunmen aligned with a local rival attacked the convoy, and the bodies were disposed of in mass graves. Impunity persists, instilling fear among journalists and the local population, as surviving witnesses are targeted during the trial's proceedings.

Journalists are not only direct targets but also victims of general election violence, such as riots or proximity to attacks on voting sites or transportation of sensitive voting materials. In early 2012, approximately 100 Indian journalists were caught up in riots by around 4,000 voters angered by election results. The journalists locked themselves in a school for several hours until the threat of violence diminished.

Ahead of the Polish general election on October 15, 2023, Reporters Without Borders issued 15 recommendations to enhance press freedom in the country. Developed in collaboration with Polish experts and news media representatives, these recommendations are directed toward prospective members of government and aim to end the polarization sustained by the incumbent government.

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3.1

Cognitive Biases and Distortions

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Introduction

Since we face a high volume of conflicting information every day, we can fall victim to:

- **Cognitive distortions:** Irrational thought patterns that arise from shortcuts our brains take, or

- **Cognitive biases:** Systematic patterns of deviation from norms or rational judgment, leading to misinterpretation of information.

These cognitive features are generally a result of the brain's attempt to simplify information processing, which is useful for processing an overwhelming amount of information, but which can also lead to flawed decisions and beliefs. Understanding cognitive distortions and biases is crucial for maintaining a balanced viewpoint and making informed decisions during hotly contested elections. People can be particularly susceptible to manipulation around election periods due to a number of factors, including:

- **Emotional Response:** Elections often evoke strong emotions. Fear, hope, and anger can be powerful motivators that override rational thought and make individuals more susceptible to emotionally charged messages or manipulation. The perceived high stakes and urgency around making the 'right' choice in an election can lead to quick, emotion-driven decisions rather than deliberate and rational thinking fueled by thorough analysis of multiple, diverse sources.

- **Confirmation Bias:** A strong feeling of support or belonging to or identification with a particular political platform, party or candidate can lead to confirmation bias, where individuals uncritically accept information that supports their preferred side and dismiss opposing viewpoints. Also, the desire to conform to the views and behaviors of one's social group can be particularly strong during elections, as political identity becomes more salient.

- **Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles:** Social media apps and personalized news feeds can create environments such as echo chambers and filter bubbles, where one is exposed primarily to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, further confirming these beliefs and making one more receptive to manipulation that aligns with these views.

- **Issue Amplification:** Elections are prime times for the increased spread of false or misleading information designed to deceive voters, damage the reputations of candidates, seed distrust in electoral processes, electoral management or affiliated organizations and individuals, and manipulate public opinion.

- **Issue Complexity:** Elections often involve complex issues that can be difficult for the average voter to fully understand or analyze, making simplistic, manipulative narratives more appealing.

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- **Microtargeting:** Political campaigns frequently employ advanced data analytics to microtarget voters with personalized messages, exploiting individual vulnerabilities, biases, or beliefs. Malign actors may exploit these same techniques to manipulate voters' perceptions and ultimately influence electoral behaviors.

Activity:
Cognitive Reflection Test

Objectives

Participants will:

- Complete a Cognitive Reflection Test

- Reflect on their own cognitive distortions

- Consider their susceptibility and others' susceptibility to manipulative information

Instructions

- Have participants take a Cognitive Reflection Test on political spin, adapted from The Washington Post, before the session. Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Package for the full test.

Discussion

Begin the session with the Introduction and then a small group or whole group Reflection Discussion:

- How did you score on the test?

- What surprised you?

- How susceptible do you believe you are to manipulative information?

- How susceptible do you believe others are to manipulative information? More or less than you?

Conclusion and Talking Points

Ahead of each electoral period, many citizens follow their news feeds in near real time to stay informed about the latest political developments. However, the quest for facts is often hindered by our cognitive biases. External entities, such as the media or politicians, can exploit these biases to shape our perspectives. By capitalizing on our inclination to rely on stereotypes and providing superficial information, they embed lasting generalizations in our minds.

When consistently applied to a wide audience, these strategies can significantly influence public opinion. To navigate these mental pitfalls, this infographic from World Economic Forum/PredictIt highlights prevalent cognitive biases that impact the political landscape, starting with the "Big Cs" – Confirmation bias, Coverage bias, and Concision bias:

- *Confirmation bias* means favoring or seeking information that affirms your pre-existing beliefs.
- *Coverage bias is* the extent to which different issues are reported on and discussed.
- Concision bias implies selective focus on certain information while losing nuance.
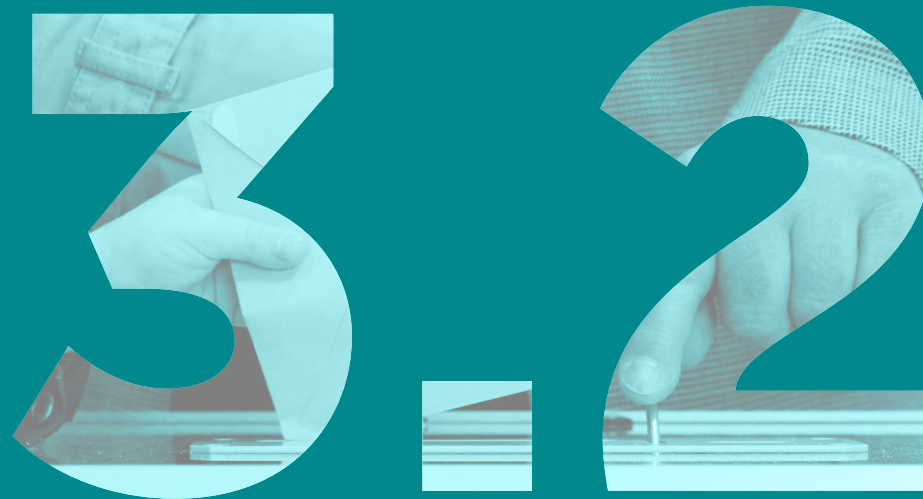
Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package for a quiz to explore one's own thought patterns and potential biases.

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3.2

How Cognitive Biases Affect Our Electoral Behaviors

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Introduction

In an electoral context, cognitive distortions can manifest as irrational beliefs about political figures or electoral processes, leading to skewed perceptions of political and electoral reality. For example, the **Halo Effect** is a cognitive bias where the perception of a positive trait of an individual (e.g., charisma) leads to the biased judgment of that individual's other traits (e.g., competence, integrity). Voters might perceive a political candidate as highly charismatic and personable during public appearances and televised debates. This positive perception could then lead voters to irrationally believe that the candidate is also more competent, honest, and better suited for leadership than their competitors, despite a lack of concrete evidence to support this conclusion.

Conversely, **The Horns Effect** in elections refers to the cognitive bias where a negative impression of a political candidate influences voters to perceive nearly all aspects of that candidate negatively, regardless of their actual qualifications or policies. This effect can significantly impact the electoral process and candidates' chances of success. For example, if a candidate makes a public gaffe or is involved in a minor scandal, voters might focus on this negative aspect and allow it to color their perception of the candidate's entire platform and character. Consequently, even if the candidate has a strong track record, viable policy proposals, and the skills necessary for the position, the initial negative impression can lead voters to view all information about the candidate through a negative lens.

Both effects demonstrate how our judgments and perceptions can be skewed by our initial impressions, leading to biased decision-making. In the context of elections, these biases can influence voter behavior, campaign strategies, and ultimately, the quality of elected officials. Recognizing and mitigating the influence of these effects requires critical thinking, a conscious effort to assess individuals and their qualifications objectively, and an awareness of the impact of cognitive biases.

The idea that something negative has more impact on cognition and behavior than something positive is called **negativity bias**. Bad news or disclosed wrongdoings of a certain candidate tend to lead people to dwell on the bad information more than something positive. Another mental shortcut is the **familiarity bias**, which means that we are more likely to trust or believe something we recognize or have seen or heard before. Familiarity bias, in the context of elections, refers to voters' preference for candidates or political parties that they are familiar with, rather than the qualifications, policies, or competence of these politicians or parties. Incumbent politicians frequently benefit from familiarity bias.

Here's another example -- individuals actively seek information that aligns with their existing beliefs, leading to a rigid adherence to their political opinions, even in the face of conflicting evidence. This is called **confirmation bias**. Confirmation bias arises when we refuse to acknowledge that our positions might be wrong, or our opinions invalid. No one likes to be mistaken! So, remember, if a piece of information

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seems to confirm everything that you suspected, you should scrutinize it even more closely. Otherwise, you might fall into a trap your own brain has created for you. *(see below under Further Context for an expanded list of cognitive biases)*

Overcoming election-related cognitive biases involves deliberate efforts to promote balanced thinking and informed decision-making during electoral processes. Consciously exposing oneself to a variety of news sources and political opinions can help counteract the effects of echo chambers and ensure a better understanding of different perspectives. Additionally, you should:

- Scrutinize the information you receive, question underlying assumptions, and be wary of overly simplistic narratives or sensationalized news. Consider the source, check for credibility, and reflect on the potential biases of the information presented. Ask the following questions: *How does my own experience or worldview affect my acceptance of this assumption? What evidence supports this assumption? Are there alternative explanations or viewpoints to consider? Are there any logical fallacies or inconsistencies in this assumption?*

- Be aware of how political campaigns and media can use emotional appeals to sway opinions. Try to separate emotional responses from factual analysis when evaluating political information.

- Practice evaluating emotional content by using the **Name It to Tame It** method.

- Engage in discussions with individuals who have different political views. This can broaden your perspective, challenge your preconceptions, and reduce the polarization that often accompanies political discourse.

- Acknowledge and reflect on your own biases. Understanding that you are susceptible to biases like confirmation bias or the bandwagon effect can help you compensate for them.

- Evaluate candidates based on their policies, actions, and competence rather than their public persona or charisma. This helps in making more rational, policy-based electoral decisions.

- Being mindful about your thought processes can help you recognize when you're falling into biased thinking patterns, allowing you to reassess your judgments and decisions.

- Understand the electoral process, the issues at stake, and the platforms of all candidates, not just those you initially support. A well-informed voter is less likely to be swayed by biased or misleading information.

Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package for the following activities "Understanding Emotional Responses to Social Media Content" and "Bias and Selective Engagement in Information Consumption" activities.

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Reflection Activity 1:
Reflect on How You Engage with Media

Read the scenario below and follow the Self-Reflection Guidelines:

> *During an election period, you come across an article providing evidence that a polity proposed by a candidate you support is based on inaccurate data. This contradicts your belief in the candidate's platform, which you have supported due to its promise of positive change.*

Self- Reflection Guidelines

1. Start by describing your initial emotional response to conflicting information. *Did you feel skeptical, dismissing the article as biased, or did you immediately embrace it as supporting your preconceived notions?* Reflect on whether you sought out additional sources to confirm or refute the article's claims or if you dismissed it outright in favor of information that supports your preferred narrative.

2. Think about how this selective engagement with information can create an echo chamber effect, where you surround yourself only with viewpoints that reinforce your own beliefs limiting your exposure to a broader range of perspectives and potentially skewing your understanding of the candidate's policies. Reflect on how this limited exposure to diverse perspectives could distort your understanding of the candidate's policies and the broader political landscape.

3. Take a moment to identify any cognitive biases that may have influenced your initial reaction to the conflicting information. *Were you subject to confirmation bias, seeking out evidence that confirms your existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory information? Or did you fall prey to the bandwagon effect, adopting the prevailing opinion without critical evaluation?*

4. Finally, think about strategies you can implement to ensure a more balanced information diet in the future. Consider diversifying your sources of news and opinion, actively seeking out viewpoints that challenge your assumptions, and approaching information with a critical and open-minded mindset. By cultivating a habit of thoughtful reflection and intellectual curiosity, you can mitigate the impact of cognitive biases and develop a more nuanced understanding of complex issues.

Refletion Activity 2:
Political Debate and Media Engagement

Engage in critical self-reflection with the following three steps:

1. Recall a recent instance when you engaged in a political debate or argument on an election-related topic, either online or in person. Answer the following questions:
    a. Did you actively seek out information that supported your point of view while dismissing contradictory evidence?
    b. How did this approach impact the discussion and your understanding of the topic?

2. Think of a controversial political topic discussed in the news recently. Recall a recent news article or headline related to that topic. Analyze your political content consumption habits by answering the following questions:
    a. Did you mostly click on and read articles that aligned with your existing beliefs?
    b. Did confirmation bias play a role in your choice of news?

3. Reflect on your past engagement habits and re-evaluate the process in a more critical and balanced approach. Now, write down five sources you would consult to provide different viewpoints on the same topic.

Further Context

Other examples of cognitive biases that can influence perceptions and behaviors during elections include:

*   **Anchoring bias:** This refers to the human tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information consulted (the "anchor") when making decisions. For example, voters could rely on the first piece of information they encounter (in which they are microtargeted) about a candidate, which then shapes their subsequent decisions about that candidate. Early poll results or election predictions can also serve as an anchor for voters and media alike. If a candidate is initially shown to be leading in the polls, that information can anchor voters' perceptions, leading them to view that candidate as the frontrunner throughout the campaign, even if subsequent data might suggest a shift in voter preference.

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- **Hindsight bias:** This refers to the inclination to see events as predictable after they have already occurred. After an election, people may perceive the results as inevitable or predetermined by certain factors (such as a false perception of fraud) regardless of the actual uncertainty leading up to the election and the transparency of the electoral process.

- **Authority bias:** Voters are more inclined to trust and be influenced by ideas that come from authoritative politicians or public opinion leaders.

- **Declinism:** In certain cases, we tend to romanticize the past and believe that society and institutions are in decline. This tendency is mostly observed among elderly voters who believe that they lived in a better and more well-off society in their early years.

- **Framing effect:** We draw different conclusions based on how an idea is presented to us. For example, "tax relief" is a term often used to refer to "tax cuts." By framing taxes in this way, politicians emphasize their burdensome qualities, while downplaying any potential benefits, such as social programs. The popularization of the term has made it more difficult for opponents of tax cuts to get their argument across. "Tax cuts" is an emotionally neutral term, while "tax relief" is emotionally charged. It evokes the image of an oppressor burdening people with heavy taxes. Even though both terms mean the same thing, it is far more difficult to oppose "tax relief." In general, framing helps politicians communicate their ideas by highlighting some parts of an issue while ignoring parts that are not complementary.

- **False consensus:** This refers to overestimating the proportion of people who agree with an idea. For example, "I think the majority of people agree that this policy makes sense. Everyone I know thinks so."

- **Availability heuristic:** This refers to overestimating the importance of information that is readily available or memorable. Voters might overestimate the importance or frequency of political events or issues related to elections that they can easily recall, often those that are sensationalized or receive extensive media coverage.

- **Representativeness heuristic:** This is the tendency to judge the probability or likelihood of an event by how much it resembles an existing prototype in one's mind.

- **Status quo bias:** This refers to the preference for the current state of affairs, and general resistance to change. Voters can prefer to maintain the current political situation by re-electing incumbent politicians, even if there are new or compelling alternatives.

- **Self-serving bias:** This is the tendency to attribute positive events to one's own character but attribute negative events to external factors. Voters may attribute the success or failure of political entities to factors that align with their own interests or beliefs, rather than objective analysis.

- **Dunning-Kruger effect:** This cognitive bias refers to when people with poor skills or abilities overestimate their own abilities. Voters with limited political knowledge or understanding might overestimate their expertise and the validity of their political beliefs.

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- **Bandwagon effect or Groupthink:** These biases refer to the tendency to do or believe things because many other people do or believe the same. Individuals may support a candidate or cause simply because it seems popular or is gaining support within their social circles. For example, "I don't like the person running for Congress, but I can't really vote for the other party. My family would disown me."

- **Optimism/pessimism bias:** This bias includes overestimating the likelihood of positive/negative outcomes. Voters might irrationally overestimate the likelihood of positive or negative outcomes based on their preferred candidate winning or losing.
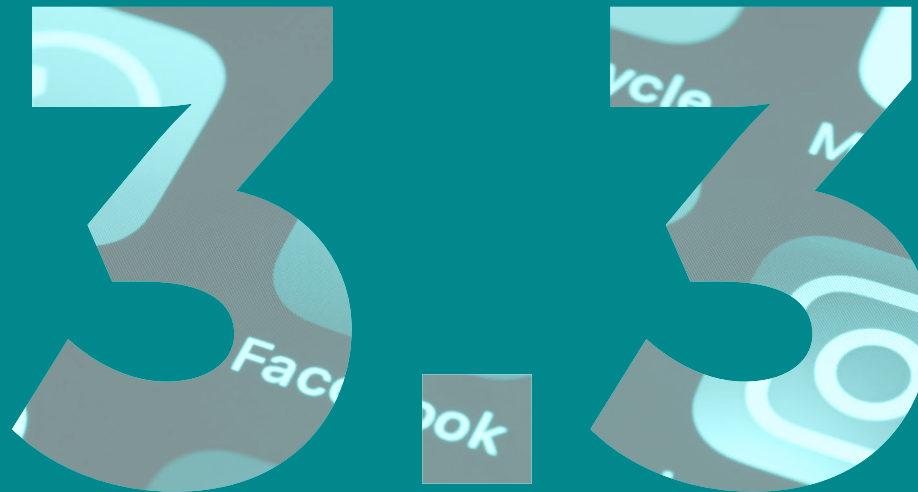
There are many more human biases that influence our decision-making and attitudes daily. To view the full range of biases, check out this interactive infographic.

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3.3

Elections Filter Bubbles

Introduction

Technology companies aim to focus your attention on their platforms as long as possible, so they try to ensure you see only the type of content you want to see and not what you don't. Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, and Alphabet, which owns Google and YouTube, have mastered the art of showing you just what you want to see based on past browsing or viewing habits. For example, if you have conducted an online search related to elections, your newsfeed might become full of posts, articles, and videos from certain candidates or political parties, political experts, and analysts.

Social media platforms apply algorithms that track what you search for, what you click on, what you "like" or "dislike," what you comment on, and where you are. Then these platforms "decide" what is relevant for you. Search results, links, advertisements, and posts on Facebook all become tailored to your previous online behavior. Everything that contradicts your beliefs is filtered out, placing you in a **filter bubble**. This term was coined by internet activist Eli Pariser who wrote a book about this phenomenon.

Being inside a filter bubble means that you are in intellectual isolation, which seems surprising when you are thinking about the Internet. It's not completely clear to what extent divisive content on social media translates to more polarized societies in the real world, but social media and search engines can isolate you from online content that contains alternative views or different information. As a result, this can limit your awareness about the diversity of opinions and perspectives on certain political events, trends, and problems that are happening in the world around you.

Due to filter bubbles, you may start to think that almost everyone thinks the way you do. This is rarely the case. You are likely just shielded from other points of view because they're outside of your filter bubble. Over time, this can lead to greater political polarization of society, and to people developing more extreme political views.

What should you do to break free from your elections filter bubble?

During elections, breaking free from your filter bubble is crucial for maintaining a balanced perspective and making informed voting decisions. Here's how you can adapt general strategies to confront the specific challenges of navigating the media and information landscape during election periods:

- **Cultivate critical thinking:** Stay open to different political viewpoints. However, critically assess the reliability and credibility of the information you encounter. This is particularly important in an electoral context where misinformation can be rampant.

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- **Diversify your information diet:** Acknowledge that algorithms tailor content based on your past interactions. Deliberately seek out and engage with content that covers a wide range of political opinions and perspectives. This will help to create a more balanced and diverse information feed.

- **Limit tracking mechanisms:** Use incognito modes when browsing election-related information. Regularly clear your search history and delete cookies. This reduces the likelihood that algorithms will present you with biased information based on your past online behaviors.

- **Control your viewing experience:** Adjust settings on video platforms to prevent auto-play from guiding you down a content rabbit hole that may be skewed towards a particular political perspective or ideology.

- **Reduce social media influence:** When researching political information or candidates, try to do so without being logged into social media platforms. This helps minimize the influence of personalized social media algorithms on the information you receive.

- **Scrutinize the source:** Always question the credibility of the source of political information. Don't pass on the opportunity to evaluate a source's trustworthiness, especially if it aligns with your existing beliefs.

- **Be aware of localized and personalized search results:** Recognize that search engines may present election-related information tailored to your location and search history which may not always represent the most credible or comprehensive view. Consider using search tools that do not track user history to find more neutral results.

Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package for the following activities "Understanding and Escaping Your Filter Bubble" and "Split Screen" activities.

Relevant Resources:
The following resources contributed to Unit 3 and are worth exploring separately:

- [Why Facts Don't Change our Minds](#)
- [11 Cognitive Biases That Influence Politics](#)
- [How to elect the right leader by getting rid of our cognitive biases](#)
- [Cognitive Biases in Governing: Technology Preferences in Election Administration](#)

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- [Why we fall for political spin](#)
- [Cognitive bias codex](#)
- [What Is Cognitive Bias?](#)
- [AllSides Media Bias Chart](#)
- [The Rise of Opinionated News Sources: How Confirmation Bias is Affecting How We Vote](#)
- [Confirmation Bias in the Era of Mobile News Consumption](#)

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4.1

What Should You Expect as Elections Approach

Introduction

As elections approach, the media and information landscape become supercharged. Debates on pressing and often sensitive issues can polarize public views and divide communities. This escalation can occur organically as politicians promote their platforms, or it can be artificially induced. Understanding how to distinguish between normal, legal, and ethical content and conduct around elections, as opposed to problematic or harmful behaviors, is very important for making informed decisions and sanctioning harmful behaviors during elections.

Ideally, content that promotes healthy democratic practices includes:

- Campaign communications and political publicity from political parties and candidates, including policy platforms, campaign promises, and calls to action. This content is designed to inform voters about candidates' positions and how they intend to address issues.
- Political advertisements, including paid content on various media platforms aimed at promoting candidates or political parties. When ads are properly disclosed, they are a normal part of election campaigning. Here's an example from the U.S. context.
- Debates, interviews, and press conferences provide voters with opportunities to hear directly from candidates, understand their positions, and assess their suitability for office.
- Public support declarations for candidates from individuals, organizations, or media outlets, usually aimed at influencing voter opinions or highlighting alignments with certain values or policies.
- Voter information and educational content from electoral commissions or non-partisan organizations detailing how, where, and when to vote. This information is essential for ensuring that all eligible citizens can participate in the electoral process.

Media and independent organizations often increase their fact-checking efforts during elections to verify claims made by candidates and to counter manipulative information.

Here's a list of elections-oriented fact-checking organizations around the world:

Country	URL
Albania	https://faktoje.al/
Albania	https://www.reporter.al/

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Argentina	https://chequeado.com/
Argentina	https://reversoar.com/
Australia	https://www.rmit.edu.au/about/schools-colleges/media-and-communication/industry/factlab/debunking-misinformation
Australia	https://www.abc.net.au/news/factcheck/
Australia	https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/
Bosnia and Herzegovina	https://raskrinkavanje.ba/
Brasil	https://meedan.com/programs/elections
Chile	https://decodificador.cl/
Chile	https://www.malaespinacheck.cl/
Chile	https://www.fastcheck.cl/
Colombia	https://colombiacheck.com/chequeos
Costa Rica	https://www.nacion.com/no-coma-cuento/
Costa Rica	https://www.doblecheck.cr/
Croatia	https://faktograf.hr/
Ethiopia	https://addiszeybe.com/haqcheck/en
Ethiopia	https://ethiopiacheck.org/
Ethiopia	https://pesacheck.org/tagged/ethiopia
Ethiopia	https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-ethiopia
France	https://factuel.afp.com
France	https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/
France	https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/
France	https://defacto-observatoire.fr/Main/#
France	https://www.lessurligneurs.eu/a-propos/
France	https://www.francetvinfo.fr/vrai-ou-fake/

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Georgia	https://mythdetector.ge/en/about-us/
Georgia	https://www.isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi
Georgia	https://factcheck.ge/en
Germany	https://www.dw.com/en/disarming-disinformation/s-61364119
Germany	https://www.dpa.com/de/unternehmen/faktencheck/#faktencheck-bei-dpa
Germany	https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/
Ghana	https://ghanafact.com/
Ghana	https://ghana.dubawa.org/
Ghana	https://www.fact-checkghana.com/
Ghana	https://www.ghanaweb.com/
Ghana	https://www.afawigh.org/covid-19-fact-check
Greece	https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-greece-0
Greece	https://www.ellinikahoaxes.gr/
Honduras	https://iverifyhonduras.com/
Hungary	https://www.lakmusz.hu/
Hungary	https://tenykerdes.afp.com/list
India	https://www.altnews.in/
India	https://www.boomlive.in/fact-check
India	https://digiteye.in
India	https://www.factchecker.in
India	https://www.factcrescendo.com
India	https://factly.in
India	https://www.indiatoday.in/fact-check
India	https://www.newschecker.in

India	https://newsmeter.in/
India	https://newsmobile.in
India	https://www.thelallantop.com
India	https://thelogicalindian.com/fact-check
India	https://www.thequint.com/international
India	https://www.vishvasnews.com/english/
India	https://youturn.in/
Indonesia	https://turnbackhoax.id/, https://twitter.com/turnbackhoax
Indonesia	https://cekfakta.tempo.co
Indonesia	https://cekfakta.kompas.com, https://www.kompas.com/cekfakta
Indonesia	https://www.liputan6.com/cek-fakta
Indonesia	https://www.suara.com/cekfakta
Indonesia	https://tirto.id/q/periksa-fakta-gnQ
Iraq	https://insm-iq.org/en/
Iraq	https://www.facebook.com/Tech4Peace/
Iraq	https://pasewan.com/
Iraq	https://dmc-iq.com/
Iraq	https://checker.news/
Kenya	https://africacheck.org
Kenya	https://pesacheck.org
Kosovo	https://kallxo.com/krypometer/
Kosovo	https://hibrid.info/
Lebanon	https://chat.whatsapp.com/CZP2XmG8iENLoFLN2eJMMG

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Lebanon	https://factchecklebanon.nna-leb.gov.lb/
Lebanon	https://maharatfoundation.org/
Liberia	https://dubawa.org/category/liberia/
Liberia	https://thestagemedia.com/
Mexico	https://verificado.com.mx/
Mexico	https://www.animalpolitico.com/sabueso/?seccion=discurso
Moldova	https://stopfals.md/ro/
Moldova	https://www.veridica.ro/
Mongolia	http://mfcc.mn/index.html
Montenegro	https://www.raskrinkavanje.me
Nigeria	https://factcheck.afp.com/afp-nigeria
Nigeria	https://dubawa.org/
Nigeria	https://factcheckhub.com/
Nigeria	https://africacheck.org/geofocus/nigeria
Nigeria	https://www.thecable.ng/category/fact-check
Nigeria	https://peoplescheck.org/
Nigeria	https://cddfactcheck.org/
Nigeria	https://newsverifier.africa/
Nigeria	https://businessday.ng/
Nigeria	https://www.icirnigeria.org/category/factcheck/
Nigeria	https://humanglemedia.com/category/fact-check/
Panamá	https://factual.afp.com/?fbclid=IwAR2Sv82654PN8CQw4PxTwBRTb6G8mrG4B5kajyTtGMuvXabtGBvVW44-e08
Perú	https://perucheck.pe/
Perú	https://ojo-publico.com/autor/red.amallulla

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Perú	https://larepublica.pe/verificador
Perú	https://convoca.pe/verifica/#/home
Philippines	https://verafiles.org/
Philippines	https://www.rappler.com/
Poland	OKO.press - Fundacja Ośrodek Kontroli Obywatelskiej OKO
Poland	AFP Poland | Fact Check
Poland	Wyborcza.pl - Najświeższe wiadomości od Gazety Wyborczej
Poland	Konkret24 – weryfikacja fake news, fact-checking, analiza informacji z sieci (tvn24.pl)
Romania	https://www.factual.ro/
Romania	https://www.antifake.ro/
Romania	https://truestoryproject.ro/menajeria-fake-news/
Romania	https://newsletter.misreport.ro/
Romania	https://www.sri.ro/assets/files/publicatii/awareness-fake-news.pdf
Romania	https://www.veridica.ro/
Romania	http://tvr1.tvr.ro/emisiuni/breaking-fake-news_28102.html
Senegal	http://ouestaf.com
Senegal	https://africacheck.org/fr
Senegal	https://factuel.afp.com
Serbia	https://www.istinomer.rs/
Serbia	https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/
Serbia	https://fakenews.rs/
Sierra-Leone	https://dubawa.org/category/sierra-leone/
Slovenia	www.razkrinkavanje.si
Slovenia	https://neja.sta.si/

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Slovenia	https://www.24ur.com/novice/dejstva
Slovenia	https://www.rtvslo.si/tv/info/ekstravisor/
Slovenia	https://podcrto.si/
South Africa	https://africacheck.org/who-we-are
South Africa	https://factcheck.afp.com/about-us
Taiwan	https://www.mygopen.com
Taiwan	https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/about/oganization
Tanzania	https://nukta.co.tz/
Tanzania	https://jamii.news/
The Gambia	https://factcheckgambia.org/
The Gambia	https://crpgm.org/
The Gambia	https://malagen.gm/
Tunisia	http://www.mourakiboun.org/
Tunisia	https://www.iwatch.tn/ar/
Tunisia	https://icheck.tn/
Tunisia	http://tunifact.org/
Tunisia	http://www.falso.tn/
Tunisia	https://trustnews.tn/
Tunisia	https://tunisiachecknews.com/
Tunisia	https://factchecking.haica.tn/
Tunisia	https://factuel.afp.com/search?keyword=tunisie
Tunisia	https://web.archive.org/web/20191009201109/http://factchecking.watania1.tn/
Turkey	https://www.dogrulukpayi.com/
Turkey	https://teyit.org/

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Ukraine	https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/
Ukraine	https://ms.detector.media/
Ukraine	https://texty.org.ua/
Ukraine	https://euvsdisinfo.eu/
Ukraine	https://ukraineworld.org/
Ukraine	https://voxukraine.org/en/voxcheck/
Ukraine	https://euromaidanpress.com/
Ukraine	https://cpd.gov.ua/
Uruguay	http://uycheck.com/
Uruguay	https://verificado.uy/

Source: Compiled by the authors

Refer to the <u>*L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package*</u> *for the "Election Fact-Checking Analysis" activity.*

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4.2

Types of Manipulative Information

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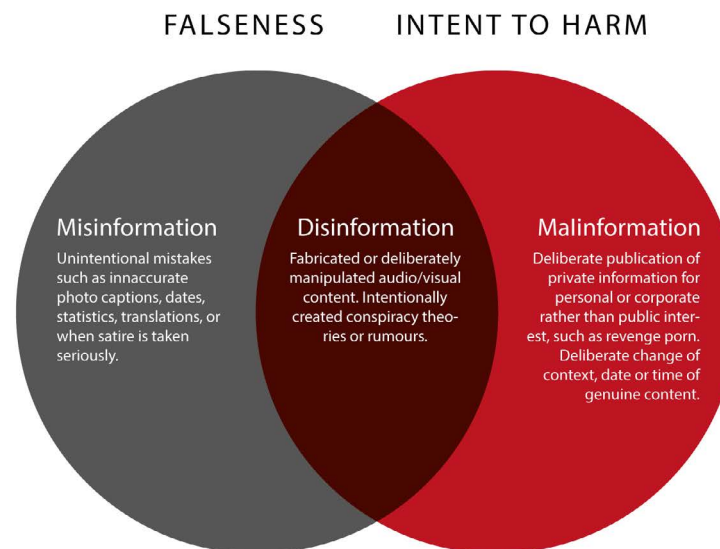| UNIT 1 | UNIT 2 | UNIT 3 | UNIT 4 | UNIT 5 |

Introduction

There is a wide spectrum of media and information that is deliberately crafted and disseminated to deceive, manipulate, or distort facts. In the context of elections, it is important to understand the different types of manipulative content and how such content can undermine the electoral process and democratic norms and manipulate electoral outcomes.

Disinformation related to elections encompasses false or misleading content that is deliberately generated and spread to influence audiences. The primary intent behind disinformation is to deceive and manipulate, whether it targets election processes, organizations, or individuals involved in the electoral process. While disinformation is intentionally misleading, **misinformation** refers to false information spread without malicious intent. Yet the intent can often be difficult to assess. As disinformation spreads, it can transform into misinformation when shared by individuals who believe it to be true. Conversely, malinformation involves the deliberate spread of accurate information with the intent to harm. This can include the release of sensitive information to damage reputations (e.g., doxing) or influence electoral outcomes negatively. Both misinformation and malinformation, despite their differences in intent and accuracy, can be equally damaging to democratic processes. First Draft has created an information disorder venn diagram:

TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER

FALSENESS   INTENT TO HARM

Misinformation
Unintentional mistakes such as innaccurate photo captions, dates, statistics, translations, or when satire is taken seriously.

Disinformation
Fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio/visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours.

Malinformation
Deliberate publication of private information for personal or corporate rather than public interest, such as revenge porn. Deliberate change of context, date or time of genuine content.

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We can also expect to see material that is intentionally designed to be offensive, abusive, defamatory, obscene, threatening, or violent but is disguised to evade detection by moderation algorithms and fact-checkers. Such content can spread disinformation, incite hatred or violence, or damage reputations under the guise of innocuous or unrelated material, thus complicating efforts to identify and mitigate its spread.

Voters should be weary of content, including digital material like photos and videos, that automatically disappear after a set period. This type of content poses unique challenges for content moderation. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat feature "Stories" or "Live Videos" that are temporary and can be customized with various features. The fleeting nature of such "ephemeral content" makes it an attractive vehicle for spreading harmful material. Such content may not be subject to the same level of scrutiny or fact-checking as permanent posts, allowing it to evade detection and negatively influence audiences.

Due to the broader decline in democracy, countries worldwide are facing growing attempts to undermine trust in elections by exploiting political, economic, or social divisions. These efforts aim to influence public perceptions and undermine trust in crucial democratic institutions like electoral management bodies (EMBs). In 2022-2023, International IDEA carried out global research that examined malign practices in the information environment surrounding elections and the adverse impact of such practices on election management and outcomes.

Relevant Resources:

Learn more about how political information manipulation may adversely affect elections and undermine trust in democratic processes in Election 2020: Misinformation Has Never Been More of a Threat, and learn more about manipulated elections content in Germany, in the United Kingdom, in the U.S., in Canada, in Kenya, and in Brazil.

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4.3

Who is a Target?

Introduction

Anyone involved or perceived to be involved in elections can become a target of harmful content and conduct. This includes candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, activists, voters, journalists or commentators covering the election. The likelihood of becoming a target often depends on your visibility, the nature of your involvement in the election, and the positions you take on various issues.

Manipulative information campaigns against electoral management entities, along with various forms of aggression and harassment can target individuals in different roles across the electoral cycle. Online platforms play a crucial role, providing a space where nefarious actors exploit features like anonymity, microtargeting, and inauthentic behavior to engage users in confrontations.

Candidates
Naturally, those running for office or holding political positions are primary targets for smear campaigns, disinformation, and other forms of malicious content aimed at undermining their credibility or electoral prospects. Consider these examples:

- Learn about the challenges faced by election candidates in the United States: PBS News Hour, How 2020 candidates are grappling with online disinformation

- Dr. Jonathan Ong, a Disinformation Researcher at the University of Massachusetts, analyzes the various social media strategies employed by presidential candidates in the Philippines during their political campaigns: ANC, Ads, attack messaging, memes: Analyzing social media strategies in political campaigns

Voters
Voters who are supporters of candidates or political or social causes, particularly voters who are active on social media and in public forums, can become targets of harassment and efforts to discredit the causes they advocate for. Additionally, these voters can be targeted by actors aiming to seed distrust in the process and discourage them from casting their votes. This can directly impact voter turnout and the results. Consider these examples:

- Learn about the exceptional amount of manipulative information that targeted Black and Latino voters during the 2020 election, aiming to create confusion and deter their turnout at the polls: MSNBC, Black, Latino voters targeted with disinformation as election day approaches

- FT technology reporter Hannah Murphy runs through what to look out for to avoid falling prey to manipulated information: FT, US election: how to avoid being manipulated by fake news

Journalists

Reporters and commentators covering the elections, especially those investigating sensitive issues or misconduct, may face attempts to discredit their work, harassment, or even threats. In some cases, online threats can lead to real life violence. Consider these examples:

- This video explores the complexities surrounding impunity for crimes against journalists and highlights the broader societal implications of such actions: UNESCO, How to stop impunity for crimes against journalists

- This video covers the attacks on journalists ahead of elections in Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe Elections, Three journalists attacked in Bulawayo

- This video delves into the challenges faced by journalists in the line of duty, spotlighting two women covering Afghanistan's election. Canadian journalist Kathy Gannon survived a shooting incident, while photojournalist Anja Niedringhaus tragically lost her life: Journalists attacked in Afghanistan

- This video covers the harassment, detention, and attacks on journalists that occurred during elections in Nigeria: We recorded 14 cases of harassment, detention or attacks on Journalists during the election – Rosen

Electoral Officials

Individuals involved in election administration, from high-level officials to local volunteers at polling stations, are targets of disinformation and various forms of aggression and harassment campaigns. These attacks can have significant consequences for both the individuals targeted and the overall democratic environment. Consider these examples:

- To gain further insight into the unprecedented levels of disinformation, aggression, and harassment encountered by electoral officials worldwide, read the following article: Between Sexual Objectification and Death Threats: Electoral Officials Worldwide Face Unprecedented Levels of Disinformation, Aggression, and Harassment

- In the aftermath of the 2020 elections in the United States, election professionals at state and local levels found themselves shouldering increased responsibilities aimed at rebuilding trust in the electoral system: CBS News, U.S. election officials face security threats amid misinformation on 2020 vote

- This video highlights the alarming reality of election officials across the United States coming under attack since 2020: PBS News Hour, Election workers face violent threats and harassment amid dangerous political rhetoric

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Who are the Manipulators?

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Introduction

The dynamic in the media and information environment around elections enables a situation where the victims can easily become aggressors. Emotional reactions and the highly charged atmosphere of political discourse many times blurs the lines between being a victim of information manipulation and inadvertently becoming a participant in spreading it. Additionally, the urge to respond to or counteract false information or smear campaigns can lead voters to engage in similar tactics, often without realizing the broader implications of their actions. This cycle is fueled by the polarized nature of online spaces, where echo chambers reinforce existing beliefs and create an "us vs. them" mentality. Social media platforms, with their algorithms designed to prioritize emotionally charged content, can inadvertently promote sensational or misleading information, further complicating the elections-related media and information environment.

These aspects are many times exploited by **internal and external actors** as part of their strategies to increase polarization, generate confusion and achieve nondemocratic political objectives.

To understand how domestic actors employ information manipulation tactics, watch How Homegrown Disinformation Could Disrupt This U.S. Election.

To understand how foreign actors employ information manipulation tactics, consider the following examples:

- Watch this VOA video to delve into Russia's attempts to influence the outcome of the presidential election in Ukraine: VoA, Analysts: Russia Using Disinformation to Try to Disrupt Ukraine Election
- Watch the following video: Global News, US election misinformation: How foreign meddling, voter fraud conspiracies could affect the polls
- Watch the ABC News reporting on Russian disinformation campaign: ABC News, Officials: Sophisticated Russian disinformation campaign targeted U.S. election

Scenario
(For Role-Playing or Reflection Activity)

Let's imagine a scenario involving Alex, a regular voter, during an election season, to illustrate how disinformation turns into misinformation, and how the cycle of harm perpetuates in the highly charged atmosphere of political discourse.

Alex comes across a post on social media claiming that a candidate, Terry, plans to close all public schools if elected. The post includes a quote and seems to have a lot of shares and comments expressing outrage. In reality, this false story was created by a group intending to harm Terry's reputation (disinformation).

Worried and upset by this news, Alex shares the post with friends and family, adding, "Can you believe Terry wants to close our schools? Vote wisely!" Alex doesn't know the story is false and believes sharing it is helping others make an informed decision. At this point, Alex, originally a victim of disinformation, has unintentionally spread misinformation—false information shared without malicious intent.

Some of Alex's social media contacts, trusting Alex, share the post further, spreading the false claim widely. This results in a community increasingly fearful and angry about a policy that doesn't exist. The candidate, Terry, and Terry's supporters find themselves on the defensive, combating a lie rather than discussing real issues.

Feeling attacked by Terry's supporters who are trying to correct the false information, and now deeply mistrusting Terry due to the emotional impact of the initial post, Alex and some friends start actively looking for and sharing any negative stories about Terry, without checking their accuracy. Moreover, they even start harassing Terry and Terry's supporters on social media. They feel justified in their actions because they believe they're defending their community's interests. Now, Alex is not just a victim but an active participant in spreading disinformation. In turn, Terry's supporters start threatening and Alex and Alex's online community.

The social media platform where Alex saw the original post uses algorithms that prioritize content generating strong reactions. As a result, the false post about Terry, as well as the abusive and threatening narratives between the parties get promoted more than neutral or positive content, ensuring that the lie reaches even more people and fueling the aggressive online exchange. This feeds the cycle of harm and amplifies it both in terms of reach and violence.

Breaking this cycle requires critical thinking and verification before sharing information. If Alex had taken a moment to check the claim from multiple reliable sources or official statements from Terry, Alex might have discovered the information was false. This example illustrates the dynamic and harmful cycle in the information space around elections, where emotional reactions and the polarized nature of online discourse can quickly turn victims of disinformation into aggressors, perpetuating false information, aggression, and eroding trust in the democratic process.

IREX

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4.5

Manipulation with Headlines

Introduction

The headline is often the first thing we see in a news story about elections: Its job is to catch our eye, spark our curiosity, and get us to engage — whether that means clicking on an article link online, picking up a newspaper, or even paying to get past a paywall. Given how important it is to grab audience attention, some media outlets might go for headlines that are a bit over the top. They might even use edited photos or videos to make a story feel more dramatic, aiming to pull us in even more.

Understanding how to spot sensationalist headlines, recognizing when emotions are being used as a hook, and identifying when images have been altered is key. Headlines play a big role in drawing readers in, which is why you'll often find them loaded with drama and excitement. This is especially true when it comes to election news, where every bit of information can seem urgent or groundbreaking.

Social media is an ideal breeding ground for manipulation through headlines. Social media users are very likely to scroll through their timelines and only read headlines, never knowing what other information the articles contain. This phenomenon is perhaps best demonstrated by *The Science Post*, a satirical news outlet, that published an article titled, Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting: the first paragraph of this article is written in English, but the rest of it is filled with placeholder text with no meaning. The story has been shared more than 122,000 times.

This shows that a headline can make or break a story. A catchier headline could mean more clicks on an article, which would bring more traffic and thus more revenue to a news outlet. Many media outlets add words like "breaking news" or "shocking," even when the news story is not that urgent. This is called **click-baiting**. It is done to get your attention, make you click on a link, or share a story.

A large part of the media's revenue comes from advertising. During elections, politicians are particularly interested in placing their campaign advertising or delivering statements to their voters. The more traffic news sites attract or the more viewers a television channel has, the more politicians will want to place their campaign ads or deliver a speech there. More visitors also means that outlets can charge more for ad placements. Thus, such "breaking news" tactics are used by outlets to gain more traffic for their news content. However, overusing or misusing these terms can cause their significance to fade in voters' minds, so that when a piece of news is actually that important, they may ignore it. This can prove detrimental to both the media and the voters. It can lead to a loss of trust in media, and to voters missing crucial information despite the news being out there.

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Activity:

Analyzing Elections News Headlines

Objective

Participants will:

- Improve critical thinking skills by analyzing news headlines for potential bias, manipulation, and sensationalism

NOTE: The trainer can choose to conduct this activity either as individual work or as a small group activity, depending on the preference and dynamics of the participants.

Instructions

Select News Outlets
Participants should choose several news outlets they typically follow or are aware of – as a shortcut, have participants access the newsfeeds on their smartphones (additionally, you can have participants compare different newsfeeds to assess the similarities and differences). Encourage them to select sources with diverse political leanings to ensure a broad perspective.

- Choose several news outlets that you typically follow, ensuring a mix of sources with different political leanings.

- Include both traditional and online news sources to gain a diverse perspective.

Examine Headlines
- Look for recent news articles related to elections across the selected news outlets.

- Pay close attention to headlines that evoke strong emotional reactions or seem designed to sway opinions.

Identify Manipulative Headlines
Participants should jot down the headlines they find potentially manipulative, along with their initial impressions and any observations about the language used:

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- Note down headlines that appear potentially manipulative.

- Consider why each headline might be designed in a certain way by evaluating factors such as sensational language, exaggerated promises, or implicit judgments.

Analyze Associated Articles

Participants should read the full article(s) associated with the headlines they've noted. They should analyze the content for balance, factual accuracy, evidence supporting statements, and the provision of necessary context (a worksheet may be necessary):

- Analyze the content to determine if it presents facts in a balanced manner or leans towards a particular perspective.

- Identify statements of fact versus opinion and assess whether facts are supported by evidence.

- Evaluate if the article provides all necessary context for understanding the issue or if important information is omitted.

Compare Initial Impressions

After reading the articles, participants should compare their initial impressions based on the headlines to their understanding after reading the full content. They should reflect on how the headline influenced their expectations and whether the article's content aligned with those expectations or was misleading:

- Compare your initial impression based on the headline to your understanding after reading the full article.

- Reflect on how the headline influenced your expectations and whether the article's content aligned with or contradicted those expectations.

Reflect on the Exercise

Encourage participants to reflect on the exercise as a whole. Did they notice any patterns in how headlines are used to manipulate understanding or emotions? How might this awareness affect their consumption of news in the future?

- Reflect on any patterns observed in how headlines are used to manipulate understanding or emotions.

- Consider how this awareness might affect your consumption of news in the future, including strategies for critically evaluating headlines and seeking out balanced perspectives.

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Discussion Points

- Share a few more examples of manipulative headlines and discuss the techniques used to grab attention or sway opinions.

- Reflect on how biases and agendas might influence the framing of news stories and headlines.

- Discuss the importance of seeking out diverse sources and perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues.

- Explore strategies for critically evaluating news headlines, such as fact-checking, cross-referencing sources, and reading beyond the headline.

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4.6

Photos, Videos, and AI Content Manipulation

Introduction

You may have heard the saying that "a picture is worth a thousand words." As media consumers, our attention is often drawn to photos and videos. A photo might make us think that we are seeing undeniable evidence of something, but this is not always the case. Photos and videos, like other information, can be manipulated. Such manipulated images and video content pose a serious threat to election integrity.
To avoid falling for fake photos or videos, you should think about what the photo really depicts. Ask yourself questions such as:

- Are there any visual clues that give hints about when and where this picture was captured?

- Does the images' framing or angle conceal any facts or change the context of the image?

- *Pro TIp*: Don't automatically accept captions on social media as evidence. As you can see from this Ukraine example, people often write what they feel in their captions, rather than the facts.

So, when it comes to photos and videos, don't just glance, always scrutinize! Keep an especially close watch for emotionally charged information. Fake and altered images and videos are widely spread online to amplify political messages and undermine opponents during elections.

Relevant Resources:

Watch The Washington Post video, Why you should expect altered images of politicians to keep going viral in 2020, to better understand how doctored images have become a fact of life for political campaigns, and the NPR toolkit, AI-generated images are everywhere. Here's how to spot them, explains how to spot AI-generated images.

Types of Photo Manipulation and Quick Tips

A real photo of a person or a place presented as an image of an entirely different person or place. Similarly, videos can be decontextualized and reused for social media manipulation.

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Doctored photos are altered in a graphics editor (like Photoshop) to add or remove some elements. A series of fake photos that went viral claimed to depict the arrest of President Donald Trump: In these images, the hands appeared peculiar, and faces in the background were oddly blurred.

Cropped photos show part of an image just out of context. World Wildlife Fund – Pakistan published an image on Instagram supposedly comparing deforestation in Malaysian rainforests ten years apart. As fact-checkers from AFP revealed, both photos were actually from the same image taken in 2018.

Deepfakes and Cheapfakes: As technology continues to evolve, manipulations are becoming more and more sophisticated. One example of this is the use of **deepfakes**, or videos in which a person's face is replaced by a different, computer-generated face using artificial intelligence. When done well, most people are unable to tell that it is fake. Deepfakes and advanced **synthetic media** -- media created by artificial intelligence -- pose more threats during election campaigns, namely, deceptive campaign advertisements, information manipulation campaigns, voter suppression efforts, and targeted attacks on election workers. Watch "Deepfake audio of Sir Keir Starmer released on first day of Labour conference" to understand the threat posed by deepfake technology and AI in UK politics. Another recent example of audio deepfake is the "synthetically generated" voice resembling US President Joe Biden that used robocalls to urge voters not to participate in New Hampshire's presidential primary.

Sometimes simpler methods are used to manipulate a video, like changing the speed or selectively removing parts of the footage -- videos like these are called **cheapfakes**. Since these manipulations are cheap and simple, they are common on social media. Perhaps the most well-known example is a video of US politician Nancy Pelosi that surfaced on TikTok during the 2020 presidential election. Some thought that she appeared drunk, but the video was slowed down just enough to create the appearance of intoxication without the video appearing unnatural or manipulated.

Detecting deepfakes and cheapfakes takes some skill and practice. When investigating a deepfake or cheapfake, ask the following questions:

• Does the person's speech sound unnatural?

• Are there weird pauses and cuts that make the audio or video seem like it was edited?

• If so, try to look for the original.

This can be very time-consuming, but that's what manipulators online hope for – that no one will take the time to unmask them. Detecting deepfakes is particularly challenging because, if the video is entirely fabricated, there may be no original footage available for comparison.

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AI-generated visual content: We now find ourselves in a completely new reality where AI-enabled technology can create images, voices, and videos that seem incredibly realistic, and these technologies are increasingly becoming more accessible than ever. Additionally, the pace at which this technology is advancing is very rapid. However, the images created by generative AI are not yet perfect and if we follow some rules, we will save ourselves from AI manipulation:

1. First, you should always look closely – don't just glance but scrutinize! Look at fingers, faces and positions of the eyes. AI struggles with creating realistic hands.

2. Look at the background – there might be distorted parts in the background that you can identify only through careful examination.

3. Next, conduct a reverse image search which is always the first thing to do when verifying images. You can use Google Reverse Image Search or TinEye to see if this image has been already used somewhere else or has been identified as Fake.

4. Verify the source – is the source that posted the photo trustworthy? Does the profile look realistic belonging to a real person?

5. Verify the event – if you find a photo depicting an event, check out if other sources are also talking about it - go to the source.

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This screenshot displays a post on the social media platform X by Erwin Aksa, deputy leader of Indonesia's Golkar party, along with a deepfake video he shared on January 6, 2024, featuring an AI-generated likeness of the late Indonesian dictator Suharto. Read more about this case in the following article: "Fake Suharto video fuels debate on AI use in Indonesian election campaign" by Benar News.

Relevant Resources:

If you want to learn more about detecting deepfakes, read the Detect DeepFakes: How to Counteract Misinformation Created by AI and test your skills with a Spot the Deepfake quiz, then explore the potential impact of deepfakes on the 2024 elections, and gain a better understanding of the use of deepfakes in an electoral context by listening to a BBC podcast on how a mayor in Mexico became embroiled in a deepfake audio scandal.

Further Context

Review the following examples:

- This video explains how AI is adding a new dimension to the electoral space: CNBC AI misinformation in elections is the leading risk for 2024

- To explore the use of deepfakes during the election period, watch this video: BBC AI: Deepfakes May Advance Misinformation in Upcoming Elections

- This SkyNews article provides a few examples of how fake images keep going viral. Amidst riots in France, a viral image circulated depicting Emmanuel Macron seated in a street with burning debris in the background. Full Fact reported that the picture garnered widespread sharing, with one post amassing over 55,000 views and eliciting comments implying media negligence on the story.

- This manipulated video, for instance, attempts to sway viewers to believe something biased about American's opinions on the war in Ukraine. This fact check will help you understand how this video has been manipulated.

The tool Logically.ai aims to address the negative impacts of misinformation and disinformation, in collaboration with Logically Facts, one of the world's largest commercial fact-checking organizations. The electoral interference observed by Logically is often more intricate than occasional deepfakes. They have identified more conventional methods in action, as demonstrated in recent elections in Argentina and Taiwan.

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Intel is using its AI knowledge to combat deepfakes by creating algorithms designed to identify and counter manipulated content. Using machine learning and advanced analytics, Intel aims to offer tools for verifying the authenticity of media through biometrics. They introduced a real-time Deepfake Detector, the world's first of its kind. This detection platform employs the FakeCatcher algorithm, which examines 'blood flow' in video pixels, delivering results with 96% accuracy rate.

Microsoft has established an "Election Communications Hub" to assist global democratic governments in developing secure and resilient election processes. This hub grants election authorities access to Microsoft security and support teams during the critical periods leading up to their elections, ensuring prompt assistance in addressing significant security challenges.

In response to the rise of AI-generated misleading content, biggest tech companies have introduced fact-checking tools. For example, Meta has declared the mandatory disclosure of AI-generated content in political ads on its platforms, and Google has created SynthID, a tool that seamlessly embeds a digital watermark into the pixels of an image.

Watch the WRAL North Carolina video, Can you spot the AI fake? AI-generated political attacks ramp up as elections near, on AI-generated political attacks as elections near to learn more about spotting the AI fakes.

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4.7

How to Navigate the Information Disorder

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Introduction

By the end of 2024, billions of people will have participated in major elections that will have a significant impact on the geopolitical agenda in the entire world. However, false narratives, conspiracy theories, and baseless claims of election fraud pose a global threat, eroding trust in democracy. Foreign influence campaigns exploit domestic issues, and the use of artificial intelligence intensifies information manipulation. Meanwhile, major social media companies have reduced safeguards and election-related teams, contributing to the challenges posed by manipulative information.

Activity:

Role-Play: Addressing Information Manipulation in Elections

Objectives

Participants will:

- Simulate real-world scenarios of information manipulation during elections
- Be able to recognize, fact-check, and counter such manipulation effectively

Instructions

- Assign the following roles to participants and divide them into groups according to the assigned roles:
  - Voter
  - Candidate
  - Election Official
  - Journalist

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- Provide each participant with a scenario involving information manipulation during the election process. For example:
  - A voter receives a misleading social media post about a candidate's stance on a controversial issue.
  - A candidate discovers false rumors being spread about their personal life by an opposing campaign.
  - An election official receives reports of misinformation being disseminated about the voting process.
  - A journalist encounters fake news articles being circulated to sway public opinion.

- In their assigned roles, participants should role-play how they would react, fact-check, and counter the manipulation in their respective scenarios.

- After the role-play, ask participants to identify the electoral phase when the manipulation was initiated, who the initiators were, and what the main narratives were.

- Have each group present their findings, including the signs of information manipulation they identified during the role-play.

- Facilitate a discussion where participants share their insights and perspectives on how such manipulation could influence public opinion or the electoral process. Encourage critical thinking about the importance of media literacy and fact-checking in combating misinformation during elections.

Discussion Points

- What challenges did participants face in identifying and countering information manipulation in their roles?

- How can voters, candidates, election officials, and journalists collaborate to address information manipulation effectively?

- What strategies can be implemented to prevent or minimize the impact of misinformation on the electoral process?

- How does the role of social media and online platforms contribute to the spread of misinformation during elections?

- What measures can be taken to enhance media literacy and critical thinking skills among the electorate?

Conclusion

- Reflect on the role-play exercise and discuss key takeaways regarding the importance of vigilance, collaboration, and informed decision-making in combating information manipulation during elections.

- Consider how participants can apply these insights in real-world scenarios to safeguard the integrity of electoral processes.

Refer to the <u>*L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package*</u> *for the "Analyzing Political Drops and Counteracting Information Manipulation" and "Analyzing Information Manipulation Targeting Election Workers" activities.*

Relevant Resources:

- [Fake News explained: How disinformation spreads](#)

- [Swedish Psychological Defense Agency's toolkit](#) for verifying information sources and preventing the dissemination of manipulative information

- Elections Canada's [ElectoFacts online disinformation tool](#)

- [Checklist for electoral officials and organizations](#) to combat malign influence operations

- [What are social media companies doing to prevent confusion, chaos on election night?](#)

- [Election workers face violent threats and harassment amid dangerous political rhetoric](#)

- Reuters has [uncovered over 100 instances of death threats or violence](#) directed at U.S. election workers and officials

- Listen to the [Just Security Podcast](#) on disinformation and threats ahead of the 2024 U.S. Elections

- [Latinos targeted by post-election disinformation campaign](#)

- Check out [IRI's Playbook on Combating Information Manipulation during Elections and Beyond](#)

- [Bellingcat's Online Investigation Toolkit (Resource List)](#)

- [Data Journalism's Verification Handbook for Disinformation and Media Manipulation (Guide)](#)

- [The Beacon Project's Media Monitoring Handbook (Guide)](#)

- [CrowdTangle (Tool)](#)

- Check out the [Global Cyber Troops](#) tool that offers insights into information manipulation across countries

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5.1

Harmful Stereotypes

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Introduction

The brain's inclination to stereotype is rooted in its fundamental need to efficiently process and organize the vast amount of information it encounters, which in turn enables quicker decision making. Additionally, humans are inclined to recognize patterns in their environment as a survival mechanism. Stereotyping is an extension of this pattern recognition, enabling individuals to anticipate behaviors or traits based on previous experiences or knowledge.

The brain's tendency to rely on stereotypes plays a significant role in the context of elections, influencing both the behaviors of voters and the strategies of political campaigns. This cognitive function, while having practical origins, can often lead to oversimplifications and superficial, collective judgments based on preexisting biases.

Stereotypes related to elections can manifest in various ways, often targeting certain groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or political affiliation. Some might see a man who runs for office as a much stronger candidate as compared to a woman simply because the political landscape has historically been dominated by men. A common stereotype prevails that women tend to or should prioritize family over career, which may lead to attacks on their commitment to public service.

Another example is when a candidate who belongs to a certain racial or ethnic group is being superficially assessed by the electorate based on these features -- this phenomenon can be understood within the broader framework of racial stereotyping and bias, and it suggests that while overt expressions of racism may have declined, subtler forms of racial bias persist in the ways people interpret the actions, capacities, and decisions of others. Watch "Racial double standard: Racial reductionist stereotype among whites" for a better understanding of the racial stereotyping in the context of 2008 and 2012 US elections.

In countries like Nigeria, where religion plays a significant role in society, elections can become flashpoints for religious tensions. The impact of religious stereotypes on Nigeria's 2023 general election and their role in fostering societal divisions are showcased in "Nigeria's 2023 General Elections: The Role Of Religion."

Activity:

Breaking Stereotypes in Political Decision-Making

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Objectives

Participants will:

- Examine the impact of stereotypes on voter perceptions and the fairness of elections

- Practice critical analysis and gather comprehensive information to make informed decisions beyond stereotypes in political contexts

Instructions

Introduce the scenario of a local mayoral election with two primary candidates:

- **Candidate A**, a young woman with a background in environmental activism

- **Candidate B**, an older man with experience in business

Public discourse and media coverage have introduced specific stereotypes about the candidates:

- **Candidate A** is labelled as "inexperienced and idealistic" due to her age and activist background.

- **Candidate B** is considered "a seasoned leader" reflecting his age and long tenure in traditional roles.

Group Work

- Divide participants into small groups.

- Ask each group to identify the stereotypes associated with Candidate A and Candidate B based on the provided descriptions. Encourage participants to consider age, gender, professional background, and any other relevant factors.

- Groups should then analyze how these stereotypes could influence voters' perceptions and the fairness of the election.

- Questions for groups to consider:

  - Where could you gather more detailed information about both candidates if they had to do research?

  - What would they be looking for and where?

- Groups then reflect on how stereotypes might initially influence voters' perceptions of the candidates, and how additional research and information could change or reinforce those views.

- Have each group present their discussion results.

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Conclusion

- Summarize key insights from the groups.

- Emphasize the importance of critically analyzing stereotypes and seeking comprehensive information in political decision-making.

- Encourage participants to apply these skills to real-world scenarios and promote fairness and inclusivity in electoral processes.

Further Context

Political campaigns often exploit stereotypes to appeal to certain voter demographics, using messaging that reinforces positive stereotypes about their candidate or negative stereotypes about opponents or even electoral managers. This can involve emphasizing aspects of a person's background, personality, or policy positions that align with stereotypical beliefs held by targeted voter groups.

Stereotypes can also be used in strategies aimed at mobilizing certain groups to vote or demobilizing others. For instance, spreading stereotypes that question the legitimacy or importance of voting among specific demographic groups can discourage participation, while appealing to group identity stereotypes can motivate others to turn out.

Media coverage of elections often relies on stereotypes, which can influence public perception. Candidates might be framed in ways that play into existing stereotypes, affecting how voters see them. For example, media might emphasize a candidate's youth as a sign of inexperience or portray candidates from minority backgrounds in a manner that highlights perceived differences or otherness.

Stereotypes contribute to the polarization of voter groups, as people may be more likely to trust and support candidates who belong to their own social, racial, or religious groups. This can deepen divisions and reduce the willingness of voters to consider candidates from outside their own group.

Social media platforms amplify stereotypes, as users share content that reinforces their own beliefs and biases. This creates echo chambers where stereotypes go unchallenged and become more entrenched, further influencing voters' perceptions and decisions.

Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package for the "Exploring Gender Bias in Election Leadership" activity.

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5.2

Hate Speech

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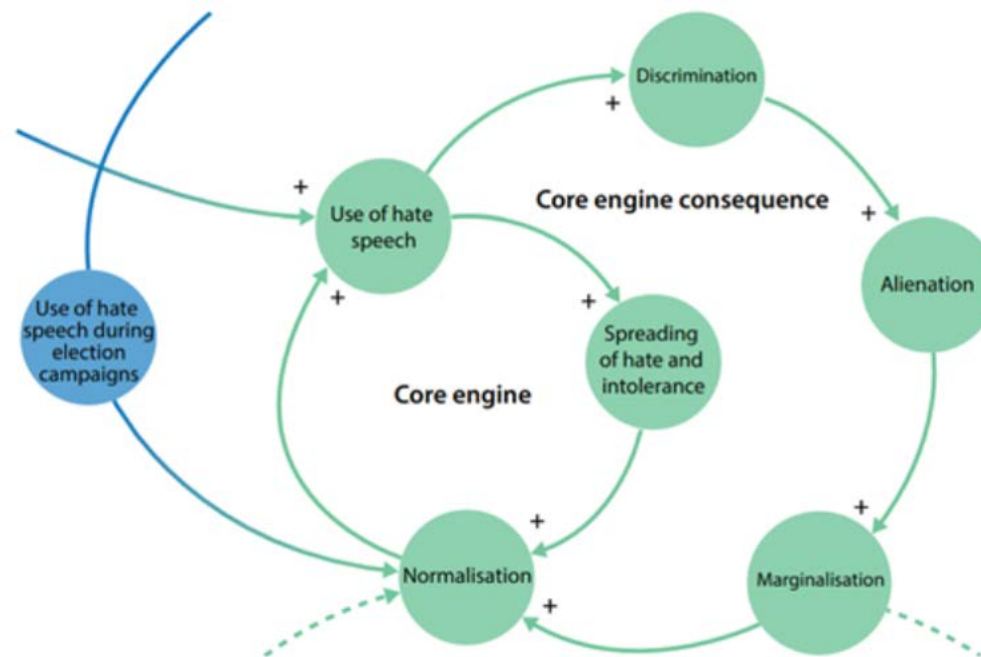## Introduction

International law protects the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive, and impart all kinds of ideas. In other words, we have the right to disagree with others, and this right is crucial to any democracy. But where is the boundary between freedom of speech and hate speech? How is stereotyping connected to hate speech?

The European Court of Human Rights refers to hate speech as "all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on intolerance." Hate speech, rooted in biased attitudes that deem one person or group superior to others, fosters discrimination. Those targeted by hate speech are treated unequally, facing discrimination that alienates and marginalizes them. The impact extends to undermining personal dignity, particularly affecting those who are already vulnerable in various aspects of their lives.

This graph illustrates the core engine of hate speech during electoral campaigns (from the Council of Europe's report on the mapping of responses to hate speech in the Republic of Moldova, 2020).

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When it manages to influence behaviors, hate speech can escalate into violence against individuals and groups. This violence may include physical attacks, threats, and can even lead to terrorist acts or murder.

The Council of Europe's toolkit on combating hate speech during electoral processes offers some good practices on how to protect freedom of speech and prevent hate speech online, including:

- There should be a nationwide discussion about hate speech on the internet.

- Legislation should provide consistent guidance on what qualifies as hate speech in general and specifically on the internet, and what is not.

- Internet platforms should be regulated. Legislation should stipulate which content is allowed, and which content is to be restricted.

- Internet platforms should be required to apply appropriate levels of transparency about the algorithms they use to detect and delete hate speech.

- Producers of hate speech content should be penalised; their hate speech content should be removed/deleted with immediate effect.

- Monitors should use existing technologies (e.g. search engines) to identify hate speech content online, document their findings, make their conclusions public and lobby for the implementation of their recommendations.

In addition to government and technology protections against hate speech, media and information literacy education is essential to ensure that every citizen is continually educated on accessing, critically evaluating, and responsibly creating and sharing media content. Building a thoughtful and resilient society involves empowering individuals to identify, oppose, and actively take countermeasures against hate speech.

Refer to the L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package for the "Hate Speech in Political Discourse" activity.

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5.3

The Gender Dimension

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While we acknowledge the diversity of gender identities, the gender disaggregation in this document is limited to men and women due to the availability of data and information. This limitation is recognized as a constraint on our analysis.

Introduction

Imagine you are a young woman, in a deeply patriarchal context, wanting to make a positive impact on the social life of your community. This was the case for Susanna Madora Salter, the first woman mayor in the world, in 1887. While she was elected with an important majority, she didn't even know her name was on the ballot paper: A group opposed to women's participation had put her name on the ballot paper with the intent to humiliate her, undermine the causes she supported, and discourage women from running for office or engaging in political activities. Counter to their intent, Ms. Madora Salter proceeded to win the election.

Since then, there has been significant progress globally, and women in many places are now legally entitled to engage in various, often overlapping, roles throughout the electoral cycle. Despite these advancements, the meaningful participation of women in politics is still impeded in practice by persistent barriers, including deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, misogynistic beliefs, and gender biases. In addition, the current media and information landscape has shifted enormously since Susana's time – today, online spaces and social media are a primary medium for public, political, and civic participation. While increased access to technology has improved the electoral process in many ways (e.g., elevated the voices of previously unheard people, allowing the greater spread of information) it has also created unique threats for many who engage online, especially women.

Disinformation, harassment, and violence have become a well-documented and pernicious threat to electoral systems in almost every country today. It is important to note, however, that these information threats disproportionately affect women and girls. Indeed, the level of violence against women in public life often prevents and discourages them from acceding to or maintaining public roles. The aggression has reached unprecedented levels, exacerbated by the global nature of communication today, especially on online platforms. According to one study, women and girls are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men. Globally, 85% of women have witnessed online violence against other women, and nearly 40% of women have experienced online violence themselves, based on a 2020 study by The Economist Intelligence Unit.

Attacks against women in leadership positions or just aiming to engage politically now encompass a broad array of tactics, ranging from disinformation, (exacerbated by the utilization of generative AI) and hate speech, to doxing and trolling, and extend to deeply traumatizing psychological pressure through threats of extreme, frequently sexual, violence, including offline. These threats can also target their children and loved ones. This multifaceted approach not only aims to intimidate and silence women but also to undermine their credibility and

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authority in the public eye. The result is a "chilling effect" whereby women's civic and political participation is drastically reduced, imperiling democracy, pluralism, and human rights.

Furthermore, advanced AI technologies will further exacerbate these threats, through the creation and spread of deepfakes, which are often used to create non-consensual explicit images or videos of women, leading to severe emotional and psychological distress. AI will also accelerate threats like increased doxing, the development of fake news sites, coordinated attacks on female candidates, and more. The anonymity and scalability provided by AI technologies enable harassers to automate attacks, making it challenging for women to find safe spaces online.

Relevant Resource:

Watch [Pornographic Deepfakes Target Women Across the Country](#) to learn more about the danger of AI deepfake photos and how the impact individuals.

Activity:

Exploring Gender Bias in Political Discourse on Social Media

Objectives

Participants will:

- Critically analyze gender bias in social media interactions with political candidates
- Reflect on the implications of gender bias for political participation and representation

Instructions

- Working individually or in small groups, have participants select **a female political candidate and a male political candidate** running for office in your country.
- Participants should access the social media profiles of both candidates.

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- Then, participants review the comments on the most recent 10 posts of each candidate and take notes on their observations, focusing on the following aspects:

  - Tone and language used in the comments towards each candidate.

  - Common narratives or themes emerging in the comments for each candidate.

  - Any patterns or trends in the engagement, such as the frequency of positive versus negative comments.

  - Attempts at inauthentic behavior, such as bot-like or coordinated commenting.

- Individual or group reflection follows (see questions below) then share out their observations and reflections.

Reflection Questions

- What did you notice when reviewing the comments on the social media walls of the female and male candidates?

- How do the tone and language used in the comments towards the female candidate differ from those towards the male candidate?

- Reflect on the common narratives or themes present in the comments for each candidate. Are there any noticeable differences based on gender?

- Did you observe any patterns or trends in the engagement with the candidates' social media posts? How do these patterns contribute to or challenge gender bias?

- Explore the presence of inauthentic behavior in the comments. Were there any indications of suspicious activity, and how might this impact perceptions of the candidates?

Conclusion

- Summarize key observations and reflections.

- Consider the broader implications of gender bias in political discourse on social media.

- Identify potential actions you can take to challenge gender bias and promote more inclusive political engagement online.

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Further Context

Women in public policy and leadership are especially targeted given their high visibility and public-facing role. Research shows that **technology facilitated gender-based violence** (TFGBV) is often perpetrated with full impunity, causing many women to step out of public life to protect themselves from the many risks to their emotional, physical, social, and economic well-being in addition to those of their families, as threats are often extended to the target's children, siblings, and other relations. Indeed, it's not uncommon for online violence to lead to offline harm — a report by UNESCO found that 20% of the women journalists they surveyed had received offline abuse related to instances of online violence.

Women with intersecting identities are even more likely to be targeted. LGBTQI+ individuals, persons with disabilities, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) face higher risk for TFGBV, and the attacks often target their gender in conjunction with additional identities. For example, Amnesty International found when mapping online abuse on Twitter (now known as X) that women of color were 34% more likely to receive abuse than white women. Gendered abuse often relies on race-based narratives, which specifically threaten women of color, and a lack of "intersectional expertise" in content moderation decreases the amount of hate speech or harassment targeting women of color and other marginalized identities that are flagged and removed.

This online aggression many times leads to offline violence against women in elections and politics, as reflected by the Addressing Gendered Disinformation Review and Analysis, conducted by IREX. Despite the growing impact and sophistication of this threat, TFGBV remains an understudied and insufficiently documented challenge.

Factors such as anonymity, a perception of impunity, the absence or ineffectiveness of regulation and moderation by social media platforms, and business models that prioritize engagement and employ multiplication algorithms, all contribute significantly to an increasingly violent digital space. This environment is particularly hostile toward women who aspire to meaningful positions in the political sphere.

The reasons and objectives also vary from genuine, although deeply harmful, manifestations of ideological beliefs, sometimes correlated with discontent with the performance of the political class, to concerted strategies by domestic and foreign malign actors with different agendas. For example, manipulative information spread about women in public and political life often portrays them as weak, devious, immoral, overtly sexual, and above all incapable of fulfilling their duties. These attacks are frequently tied to societal stereotypes and misogyny, casting women's public and political participation as somehow counter to traditional family values. Conversely, attacks on men tend to focus more on their professional aspects rather than personal or moral characteristics. Other common narratives include creating myths and lies about gender equality, fabricating information about contentious gender issues, and diverting the conversation from substance to appearance and status.

Additionally, despite their roles and contributions, women are underrepresented in news coverage compared to their male counterparts. When covered, the focus many times leans towards their traditional roles as spouses or mothers, rather than as experts and professionals. These manifestations significantly impact electoral outcomes and the overall democratic process.

In addition to its damaging impact on those who already inhabit public and political roles, gendered disinformation and violence discourages future generations of leaders from civic participation. For example, after witnessing or experiencing online hate speech or abuse, 51% of young women and 42% of young men in the EU hesitated to engage in social media debates, out of fear of experiencing abuse, hate speech or threats.

Relevant Resources:

For a closer examination of the abuse aimed at female politicians watch How women in politics are targets of online abuse, and watch Disinformation Across the Electoral Cycle for a better understanding on how attacks against electoral officials unfold, and then learn more about online violence against women journalists.

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Persevering in the Digital Space

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Introduction

Have you ever considered commenting on an electoral or political post on social media, only to change your mind? Why did you decide against it? If you went ahead with it, what was the outcome?

Ideally, this is an excellent opportunity to engage thoughtfully and participate in constructive political debate in the digital space. However, in many instances, what should appear as a genuine democratic exercise often degenerates into a battleground of hostility and negativity.

For women and other marginalized groups in politics and elections, navigating the current digital space safely while maximizing its potential requires a strategic and informed approach. Consider the following measures:

- Utilize strong, unique passwords for all accounts and enable two-factor authentication to protect against unauthorized access. Be mindful of the security settings on social media platforms and regularly review them to control who can see and interact with your content.
- Be deliberate about your online presence. Consider what personal information you share publicly. Use privacy settings to manage the visibility of your personal information and posts.
- Be cautious when engaging with unknown entities or in heated online discussions. Report trolls and abuse; in some instances, disengagement with toxic comments is the best strategy (i.e., don't feed the trolls).
- Build solidarity and community with other digital leaders, allies, and mentors who can offer advice, share experiences, and provide emotional support. There is strength in numbers, and a supportive community can offer practical assistance in times of need.
- Explore available reporting channels to flag abusive content. Make use of platform tools to report harassment and abuse. Documenting instances of abuse can be helpful for taking further action, whether through the platforms themselves or legal channels if necessary.
- Consult with legal professionals to understand your options for protection and recourse under the law. Knowing your rights can empower you to take decisive action when necessary.

The psychological impact of online harassment can be significant, so be mindful of trauma and utilize resources to help manage stress and prevent burnout. Prioritize your mental and emotional well-being by seeking professional support when needed, and ensuring you have time away from digital spaces to recharge.

Building Resilience to Manipulative Information During Elections: Learn to Discern and Elections Facilitator's Guide

UNIT 1	UNIT 2	UNIT 3	UNIT 4	UNIT 5

Relevant Resource:

Watch [Addressing Online Misogyny and Gendered Disinformation: A How to Guide](#)*, and explore Spark's* [Women's Digital Resource Catalogue](#) *for women experiencing TFGBV.*

Refer to the [L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package](#) *for the "Securing Social Media Accounts" activity.*

Key Takeaways and Recommendations

Through practical lessons, activities, and resources, this guide is designed to support interventions, trainings, and classroom learning aimed at building resilience to manipulative information before, during, and after elections in countries worldwide.

Throughout the electoral cycle the volume and spread of manipulative information increases, and as this guide makes clear, how we engage with manipulative information can have a serious impact on electoral processes and voter behavior around the world, including:

- **Misleading or False Information:** Manipulative information often involves spreading falsehoods or misleading content about candidates, policies, and election procedures to sway public opinion or discredit opponents.

- **Exploitation of Emotions:** Manipulative content frequently exploits emotional triggers to provoke fear, anger, or enthusiasm among voters. This can be used to polarize communities, galvanize support, or discourage participation in the electoral process.

- **Amplification of Polarization:** By feeding and amplifying existing societal divisions, manipulative information can deepen polarization, making it more difficult for democratic societies to reach consensus or engage in constructive political discourse.

- **Erosion of Trust:** Persistent exposure to manipulative information can erode trust in electoral and democratic institutions, leading to cynicism and disengagement among voters, and potentially decreasing voter turnout.

- **Targeting Specific Groups:** Manipulative information often targets specific demographic groups with tailored content that exploits particular fears or prejudices, or that resonates with their existing beliefs and values.

- **Creation of Echo Chambers:** Through the strategic use of social media algorithms and personalized content delivery, manipulative information can create echo chambers where voters are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs, further isolating them from broader, diverse perspectives.

- **Influence on Decision-Making:** By distorting perceptions and providing skewed information, manipulative content can influence voter decisions, often leading to outcomes that do not reflect an informed and unbiased choice by the electorate.

Building resilience to manipulative information before, during, and after elections fosters informed, discerning, and civically engaged voters, a cornerstone of healthy democratic societies, and this guide can be used to support voters, communities, and organizations to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies across several key outcomes, including:

- **Preservation of Democratic Processes:** By equipping citizens with the skills to recognize and resist manipulative information, the integrity of elections can be maintained, promoting fair and transparent democratic processes.

- **Prevention of Polarization:** Building resilience helps prevent and repair political divisions and fosters a more cohesive community discourse during elections.

- **Enhanced Voter Decision-Making:** When voters are better able to discern credible information from manipulative information, they make more informed decisions.

- **Reduction of Conflict and Radicalization:** Resilient communities are less likely to be swayed by manipulative content, reducing the risk of escalation during sensitive electoral periods.

- **Lifelong Skills:** The skills and knowledge acquired through media and information literacy are not just useful during elections but are essential lifelong skills that enhance an individual's ability to navigate and engage with the media and information environment safely, purposefully, and responsibly.

This facilitation guide and the accompanying *L2D Elections Curriculum Activity Package* include a lot of information, resources, lessons, and activities, so it's important to focus on the needs of your learners and the specific elections-related challenges in your context. When designing your own training or classroom experience, consider the following takeaways and recommendations:

Key Takeaways

- **Media and Information Literacy:** The guide emphasizes the importance of equipping voters with critical thinking skills and media and information literacy to navigate the complex information environment during elections.

- **Adaptable Curriculum:** The lessons and activities are adaptable for various global contexts and can be tailored to the specific electoral and media landscapes of different countries.

- **Empowerment through Education:** Each unit aims to support voters by encouraging constant self-reflection, enhancing their ability to critically assess information, and by (re)gaining control over their information engagement, thereby fostering a more informed and resilient electorate.

- **Comprehensive Approach:** The guide covers a broad range of topics including the evolving information landscape, the role of media in elections, cognitive biases, manipulation techniques, and strategies to identify and combat misinformation.

Recommendations

- **Customize Learning Experience:** Trainers are encouraged to customize the lessons and activities based on the needs of their audience and the specific elections challenges in their country.

- **Focus on Practical Skills:** Emphasize practical skills and strategies that help individuals and communities recognize and resist manipulative information effectively.

- **Encourage Critical and Responsible Engagement:** Foster environments that encourage critical engagement with media, promoting discussions that are free from political biases and that respect diverse viewpoints.

- **Ongoing Learning:** Recognize that building resilience to manipulative information is an ongoing process, requiring continuous adaptation, learning, and self-reflection.

IREX is a global development and education organization. We strive for a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world—where individuals reach their full potential, governments serve their people, and communities thrive. We work with partners in more than 100 countries in four areas essential to progress: cultivating leaders, empowering youth, strengthening institutions, and increasing access to quality education and information.