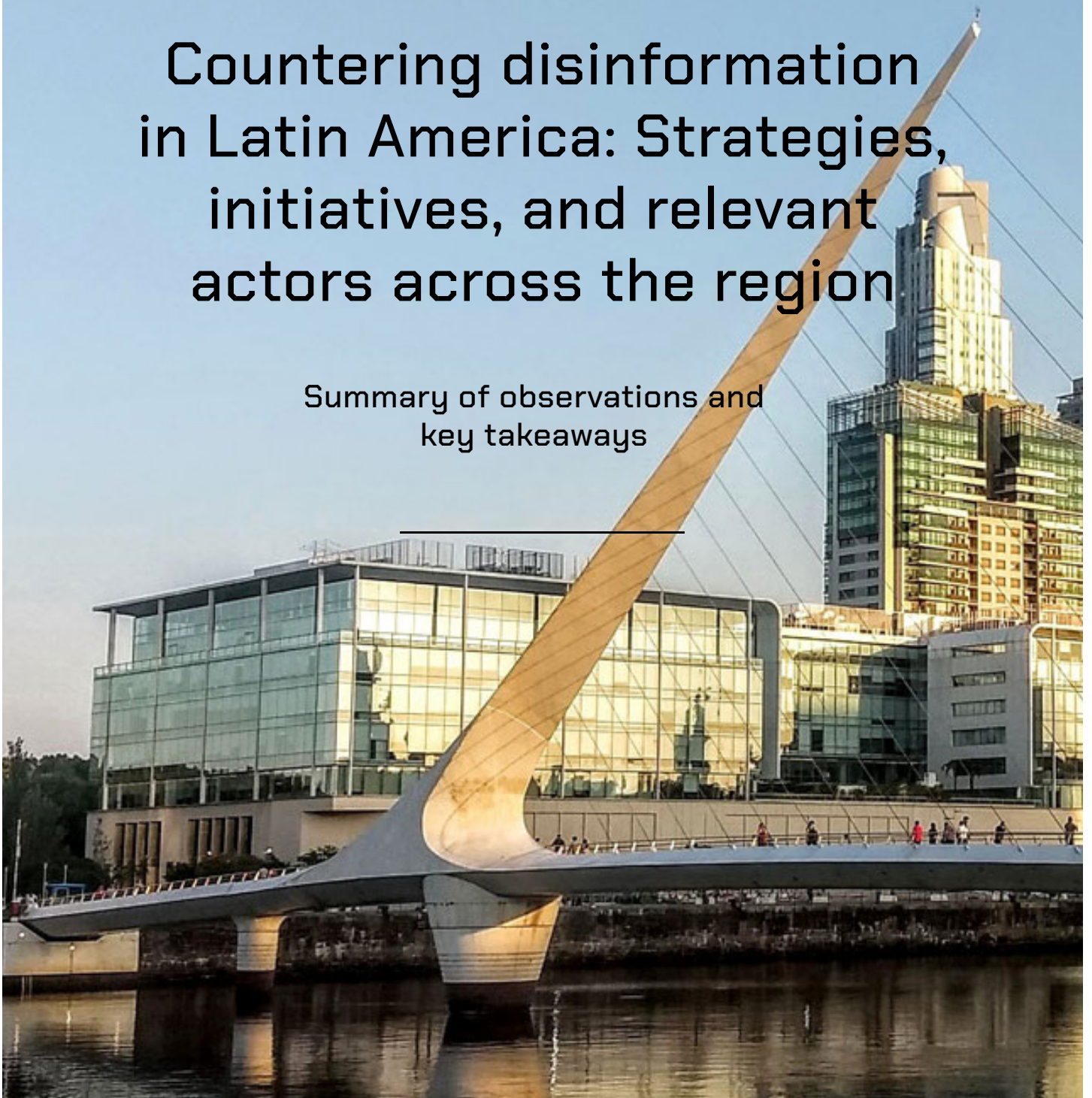**upgrade
democracy**

27th – 28th November, 2023

Regional Experts' Workshop in Buenos Aires, Argentina

Countering disinformation in Latin America: Strategies, initiatives, and relevant actors across the region

Summary of observations and key takeaways

ADC
por los Derechos Civiles

Bertelsmann**Stiftung**

Background and rationale

The **Reinhard Mohn Prize 2024 – Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation** is investigating good practices and innovative approaches to countering disinformation worldwide. Digital disinformation is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. It is critical that we understand what is happening, where, and how– and that we tackle digital disinformation accordingly.

There are countless, successful, and impactful initiatives and organisations that are countering disinformation and building democratic resilience every day and in every corner of the world. We aim to uplift their voices and share their perspectives.

Our international good-practice research is supported and enriched by regional research engagements, consisting of workshops and bilateral discussions with decision-makers, experts, and relevant stakeholders, who we are bringing together in one comparatively central location in each region. The goal of these research trips is to create a space for exchange amongst experts and mutual learning of each other's contexts to jointly explore the landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, pro-democracy mobilisations efforts, and highlight particularly promising examples and good practices. In addition, networking with and among the respective actors aims to foster strong collaborations, alliances, and knowledge transfer, including assessing ideas for their potential to successfully strengthen counter-disinformation efforts in Europe and Germany.

In a partnership with Asociación por los Derechos Civiles (ADC), Upgrade Democracy's third research engagement took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The mission: to explore strategies and initiatives countering disinformation in the Latin American context with 30 stakeholders from 10 countries from the region. The two-day workshop brought together fact-checkers, journalists, academics, lawyers, government officials, and representatives of civil society groups, to identify major challenges for a unified approach and build common ground for future collaborative actions.

Observations and key takeaways

Perspectives on regulation

There is widespread support for stronger social media regulation, however how, at what level, and to what effect varies widely across countries. Brazil appears to be at the forefront of both, data protection and social media regulation, though here too, enforcement is lacking. Many countries seem to favour and/or adopt a combination of EU-inspired regulation and the U.S. free market approach.

Perspectives on the role of governments

Worries and concerns about changing governments and authoritarian tendencies are widespread, notably in Mexico and Venezuela but also in others. During Brazilian, Peruvian, and Argentinian elections, disinformation campaigns around alleged fraud were perpetrated by political candidates and their teams. This is reflected in the dominant call that platforms must be co-regulated, including voices from civil society and corporate sector.

Perspectives on research and data access

Reliable, long-term data access for monitoring online discourse for research purposes is acutely needed. While there are several skilled organisations in the region, their access is often hampered by the platforms – either because API access is lacking or because their Terms of Services change so frequently that it is impossible to develop long-term research designs.

Perspectives on platforms

Social media platforms are hugely important in the region, Meta, TikTok, YouTube, X all play critical roles – though the most used apps are often WhatsApp, Threads, and TikTok. Their uncontested power raises many concerns, and calls for regulation are common – though often paired with cynicism over the lack of enforcement power by national governments. Civil society organisations use the wide spread of the platforms for their purposes and educate communities on media literacy via TikTok and WhatsApp.

Perspectives on media

The national media systems partially contribute to the spread of disinformation. In many countries, the media houses are under economic pressure and the plurality of the media is shrinking. In Venezuela and Mexico, the governments use this to influence the discourse in their favour. Journalists work under precarious conditions; their lack of time and resources adds to the spread of disinformation. In Venezuela, Colombia and Peru ethnic and social minorities lack representation in traditional media, which results in their exclusion from public discourse and a higher susceptibility to disinformation.

Day 1

Setting the scene: Disinformation in Latin America—its spread and impact

To set the stage, the research team from ADC provided an overview of their preliminary findings on counter-disinformation efforts in various Latin American countries. The complete research report will be released in early 2024. The session's discussion revolved around identifying commonalities and differences in the spread of disinformation across countries, regulatory initiatives, and the general role of AI, particularly in the Argentine election process. While participants contested the assertion that Argentina conducted the first "AI Elections" as reported by the New York Times, there was consensus that AI tools were utilised by all political parties to manipulate and create videos and images. Though these manipulations were characterised as "cheap fakes", they were still potent enough to yield impact.

Despite variation in country-specific contexts across the continent, five key challenges stood out during the open exchange among participants:

1. Despite regulatory efforts in many countries, persistent challenges require further discussion. Pressure on major social media platforms is limited to the national level.
2. WhatsApp, notably in Brazil, is a major source of disinformation. Monitoring and countering efforts are hindered by the platform's closed nature.
3. Unequal access to information is fuelled by factors like zero-rating practices and inadequate support for linguistic and cultural needs, particularly for indigenous communities.
4. Established media outlets face increased targeted disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by their respective governments.
5. While fact-checking remains crucial, organisations express concerns about the growing technical sophistication of disinformation campaigns and the challenges in verifying AI-generated content, particularly in audio files.

Disinformation in the digital era. An overview of the phenomenon around democratic elections.

David Hidalgo Vega from **Ojo Público** in Peru presented findings from two cases of digital disinformation used as a political strategy, focusing on the theme of "imminent fraud" during Peru's 2021 elections. The strategies involved coordinated messaging, mutual amplification, and the instrumentalisation of trolls and bots. Notably, political candidates, including the Mayor of Lima, played a role in disseminating these concerning narratives.

What stood out was the identified ecosystem of disinformation, extending its influence across local, regional, and global levels. This emphasises the need for holistic and comprehensive approaches, involving different actors at various levels. Maria José de Icaza from **Artículo 19 Mexico and Central America** shared her organisation's efforts in monitoring a series of regulations aimed at controlling emerging technologies. However, a significant concern arises as these regulations were crafted without a profound understanding of the internet's infrastructure. Consequently, these measures are perceived as arbitrary restrictions on free speech, emphasizing the crucial need for informed and context-aware policymaking in the rapidly evolving landscape of technology. The significance

of WhatsApp was underscored during the discussion, prompting the question: What are the implications of monitoring the platform in terms of freedom of speech? This inquiry highlights the necessity of striking a balance between technological monitoring efforts and preserving individuals' rights to express themselves freely in digital spaces.

Three key takeaways stood out in an open discussion:

1. **Cognitive resilience, the psychological dimension of the issue, can no longer be overlooked.** Strengthening resilience against information bias and (foreign) information manipulation is crucial.
2. Malign actors across the content appear to very connected and equipped, using and applying strategies proven to be successful in other contexts in their own.
3. TikTok operates with a distinctive approach to handling disinformation and content removal in the region. There is a prevailing lack of trust in relying on algorithms for disinformation detection, primarily due to the heightened sensitivity and consideration surrounding speech and concerns about potential censorship activities.

Identifying relevant actors behind disinformation in political contexts.

The aim of this session was to reach a clear understanding of the way in which the disinformation ecosystems emerge and develop. The first impulse giver, **Raisa Urribarri (UCLA, Venezuela, and CIEPS, Panama, investigator)**, shared insights of her research on Venezuela: She highlighted a concerning surge in disinformation, emphasising narratives gradually embedded over time. Misuse of telecommunication laws for influence operations, involvement of artificially created characters, and an AI-generated TV account spreading pro-government content were noted. Governments were identified as key spreaders of misinformation. The paradox of trust, standing at 50 %, in a media landscape primarily reliant on TV was highlighted. The lack of media diversity was recognised as a factor contributing to growing distrust, as seen in ongoing research in Panama. The second impulse giver, **Luciana Veiga (Fundación Getúlio Vargas, Brazil)** shared findings from her study focusing on the intersection of COVID-19 and Twitter, particularly in the context of the 2022 Brazil elections. Key points from the research included:

Trust and credibility must be considered as to distinct concepts and political preferences influence the dissemination patterns of disinformation. According to the study 31 % of Brazilians admitted to sharing misinformation, while 54 % claimed they never did. The remaining respondents were uncertain about how to respond to the survey questions.

Two key takeaways crystallised in the discussion:

1. **Recurrent examples** of disinformation revolve around the topics **Covid-19 and elections** across countries in the region.
2. Actors associated with the **far-right** could be identified as **malign actors** across all countries – very well connected and impactful.

Regional initiatives to counter disinformation. Case study 1: Linterna Verde (Colombia)

Established in Colombia in 2018, Linterna Verde focuses on empowering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in digital media through monitoring social media, providing inputs for civil society through reports and workshops, and community regulation of platforms via their project "CIRCUI-TO." They actively engage with content moderation, attention economy, and platform regulation by curating community articles and posts on their site. During the 2022 presidential elections in Colombia, the organisation released bi-weekly bulletins to gauge the "temperature" of digital discourse, collaborating with the Foundation of Press Freedom. In addition, they have partnered with the election integrity project in the USA, addressing patterns such as disinformation, interference, violence and intimidation, delegitimisation, and electoral fraud across platforms like Meta, X, You-Tube, and TikTok. One noteworthy challenge they encountered involved the tagging of posts on platforms after fact-checking. Challenging tags was almost impossible directly on the platforms, requiring intervention through the fact-checking agency, which significantly slowed down the process.

Three key takeaways stood out in the open discussion with participants:
1. We need an **intersectional approach to both automated and human content moderation,** advocating for ethical frameworks and increased resources to handle cultural contexts and multi-lingual content.
2. Looking at the actor who hold the power over **digital infrastructure** and digital spaces dictate the health and resilience of digital discourses.
3. **Research access** to platform data faces prohibitive charges, particularly with X API. While alternatives like social listening and user surveys exist, they come with inherent limitations. Recent changes in X, turning it into a walled garden with fewer external links, no previews, and no media headlines, not only affect user interaction but also impede the formation of public opinion.

Day 2

Regional Initiatives to counter disinformation. Case study 2: Contextual (Argentina) and Chequeado (Argentina)

First, Matias de Santi introduced participants to the work **Chequeado** has been doing since 2010. The organisation is highly regarded in Argentina as well as many other countries in the region. With 43 staff and 4 different income streams, Chequeado has expanded their work from political fact-checking to increasingly technical and AI-powered tools. Their portfolio spans monitoring activities, chatbots for automated verification of community-submitted snippets, auto-transcriptions of political speeches and AI models trained on these speeches to automate fact-checking. Secondly, Javier Pallero presented **Contextual**, an initiative launched in March 2023 to monitor and analyse the Argentinian elections, notably with a view to far-right narratives. Their analyses investigate the role of performance and emotional hooks that serve to mobilise political following. Provocation and incitement were concerningly widespread.

Three key takeaways stood out in an open discussion:
1. Tech-supported fact-checking works. When fact-checks are supported by smart tools, the work can scale – not beyond limits but to the degree that people start to pause for just a second before amplifying misleading content.
2. There is a growing economy of content creators, who monetise false narratives, including for political manipulation and incitement.
3. There was a sense that the importance of fact-checking increases when there is a lack of plurality and lower quality of the media.

Regional initiatives to counter disinformation. Case Study 3: Aos Fatos (Brazil)

In an engaging introduction, Alexandre Aragão introduced participant to **Aos Fatos**, a 30 staff fact-checking organisation founded in 2015 in Brazil that is firmly committed to ensuring regional and intergenerational diversity in their team. Their work combines fact-checking with monitoring online discourse across platforms, including some 40.000 groups on Brazilian politics on WhatsApp. They've developed a series of tech tools to automate repeated tasks and increase their own efficiency, some of which are now publicly available and generating new income streams for them, such as their transcription tool Escriba. The tool that garnered the most interest among participants is called FatimaGPT, which supports people with fact-checks on WhatsApp and Telegram and is built on their own framework of LLM – designed to fall risk to "hallucinations".

Key takeaway:
1. Data access for research purposes is volatile and monitoring online discourse to detect disinformation is subject to continuous changes of Terms of Services that are arbitrarily defined by social media platforms. More insight into the workings of platforms such as WhatsApp is critically important, albeit data protection concerns must be closely observed.

The role of government regulation in the countering of disinformation

Two short inputs set the scene for an open exchange about the importance of social media regulation, one by Patricia Reyes (**Fundación Múltiples, Chile**) and one by Lucía Camacho (**Derechos Digitales, Latinoamérica**). There was wide consensus that any such regulation must be human rights-based and carefully balance people's right to information as well as their right to privacy. In addition, people emphasised the limits of regulation, notably where social structures and emotional reactions come into play. During the discussion, several participants supported co-regulation approaches, where civil society and corporate actors are part of the legislative processes to avoid governmental abuse and/or censorship.

Two key takeaways crystallised in the discussion:
1. Regulatory initiatives in the region take inspiration and often balance approaches of the EU and the U.S. – though given the lack of regional coordination and enforcement, platforms continue to hold unabated power.
2. Collaboration among civil society actors to develop joint recommendations for platform governance is needed, but not yet successfully implemented.

Lessons, current challenges, and further steps for an effective approach

Arturo Daen (**El Sabueso/Animal Político, Mexico**) and Iná Jost (**InternetLab, Brazil**) opened this lively discussion by sharing their insights on the state and sustainability of journalism. The short version: Rather dire in Mexico, where journalism is under threat from all directions, and mixed in Brazil, where there are challenges and opportunities on both, the financial and the economic side. Participants added many illustrative examples around the pressures and challenges that journalists face across the region, including intimidation, harassment, corruption, centralisation of interests, and vastly common: precarious income.

1. The sustainability of journalism is a pressing concern across the region. Independence and public support are key, though there are concerns about a concentration of the media and dominant interests.
2. Journalism and digital rights are increasingly interlinked. We should support and explore this further to ensure quality journalism persists in democracies.