**upgrade
democracy**

4th – 6th March, 2024

Regional Experts' Workshop: Washington DC, USA

Searching for Solutions in a Volatile World

Summary of observations
and key takeaways

BertelsmannStiftung

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 research endeavour 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 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.

> **On March 4th to 6th, 2024, a research trip focusing on the US situation took place in Washington DC.** Alongside our sister organization, the Bertelsmann Foundation North America (BFNA), we conducted a one-day workshop with experts from various fields. Below is a report on the core findings of this workshop as well as additional bilateral discussions.

Observations and key takeaways

Perspectives on prevention and prebunking

- Prebunking and community-based approaches show significant effect. However, it is essential to scale and sustain these efforts. Ensuring sustainability is crucial as research indicates that effects tend to diminish over time. To address this, establishing a "National Center for Prevention" as a permanent institutional measure could provide a solution.

- The significance of prevention measures implemented by politicians to mitigate radicalization and extremism has been underscored. While security measures ('boots on the ground') frequently yield striking visuals and highlight political action, prevention measures are comparatively less conspicuous and require a longer duration to demonstrate their efficacy. A shift in perspective is necessary here.

Percpectives on election integrity

- Particularly in situations of close or complex election outcomes, the losing party tends to criticize the election, the electoral system, or the conduct of the election itself, thereby challenging its legitimacy. To counter this, it is essential to widely and neutrally communicate facts about the election beforehand. Additionally, candidates and parties should actively support the electoral system.

- Election authorities and other institutions involved in elections are faced with growing mistrust and disinformation. They need to be empowered to protect themselves against both legal and violent attacks.

Percpectives on tech developments

- While completely suppressing disinformation or manipulated content through technological means may be challenging, it might be possible—with some effort—to secure reliable information technically. In this context, the use of watermarks and trust labels represents a crucial initial step.

- While designing platforms and refining algorithms, as well as labeling reliable information, is crucial, there's a fundamental need for greater media literacy and information literacy among the population.

- The role of a functioning media system and quality journalism cannot be underestimated in maintaining the stability of democracy. If either experiences harm, the consequences are significant.

Introduction

With the support of our U.S. sister organization, the Bertelsmann Foundation North America (BFNA), Upgrade Democracy's fourth research engagement took place in Washington DC. For the first time, the focus was not on an entire world region, but rather on a clear country-specific approach to the United States. During the week of the "Super Tuesday," the upcoming US presidential elections in November 2024 were omnipresent and shaped the discussions during the workshop and bilateral conversations. The outcome of the fall elections as well as the developments in American society and politics in the coming years will have a significant impact on the global political landscape, dealings with authoritarian regimes, and security in Europe. Therefore, a closer examination is warranted. The one-day workshop organized by BFNA was centered around three main themes: prevention of radicalization, electoral integrity and technical solutions to counter the spread of disinformation. The participants included high-profile experts from academia, civil society, and the business sector. In the subsequent two days, further bilateral discussions were organized with experts from universities, think tanks, and the political realm.

Workshop day

Extreme Politics – Online Radicalization without Boundaries

The United States finds itself in a state of political and social polarization unlike almost any other democracy. Democrats and Republicans stand irreconcilably opposed in a fierce election campaign. The media debate is heated, and the population is divided into political factions. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump has announced a radical agenda in the event of his victory. The workshop, held in the BFNA's premises just a few minutes' walk from the White House, took place one day before the "Super Tuesday," during which primary elections were conducted in 15 states for the November presidential elections. The workshop discussions, eight months ahead of the polls, were thus heavily influenced by this significant political event. Not only does it represent a crucial turning point for democracy and society within the United States, but it will also have far-reaching implications for the entire world.

The first session underscored the pivotal role of online communication as the primary battleground for radicalization and polarization. Misinformation, disinformation as well as hate speech have increased significantly and continue to exacerbate societal divisions. Traditional countermeasures against radical groups and individual actors have reached their limits: While monitoring and infiltrating radical groups were the primary focus in the past, it is individuals who self-radicalize online and subsequently take action today.

Furthermore, protective measures against serious harm, such as behavioral training during hostage situations or active shooter incidents, address only the consequences but not the root causes. The political narrative – being that violence can be prevented, but nothing can be done about ideology and attitudes, is found ineffective. Research indicates a correlation between various extremist attitudes (anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, sexism, right-wing extremism) and the possibility of proactively influencing these mindset patterns before they lead to further radicalization and violence. To achieve this, an approach inspired by public health strategies was suggested. A central element of such is "pre-bunking," based on the inoculation theory. For instance, short videos developed by Google as part of their Jigsaw initiative are considered effective by many effective.

In the discussion, it became evident that loneliness and isolation significantly increase susceptibility to radical content. Therefore, "on-the-ground-work" within communities, paired with prebunking, holds particular importance. As an example, reference was made to the Mobile Counseling Teams, which have been active in Germany for many years and serve as a model for implementation in the United States as well.

Securing Elections – Protecting the Vote and the Voter

The second session focused entirely on the topic of elections. The legitimacy of the 2020 election is still being questioned by radical supporters of Donald Trump in the United States. There are also concerns that rumors and misinformation could be spread during the upcoming US presidential election to undermine trust in the electoral process and its outcome.

Despite the complexity of the US electoral system, it can now be clearly stated that the 2020 presidential elections were both the most secure and had the highest voter turnout. However, both voter registration and the voting process have become simpler over time, contrary to such accusations. At the same time, there has been increased pressure on election institutions, including legal accusations and direct threats of violence.

During the discussion, it became evident that public debates about a supposedly flawed electoral system primarily serve to foster mistrust and dissatisfaction. The goal is to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election results, especially in the event of defeat. Therefore, it is crucial to provide accurate information about the process before elections. For example, citizens should be aware that the counting of absentee ballot occurs at the end of the process, and that there are differences in the political preferences of absentee voters compared to in-person voters. This awareness helps preemptively address changes in the tallying process ("prebunking"), reducing doubts and mistrust.

However, assessing elections and electoral processes has long ceased to be solely about factual knowledge; rather, it now revolves around trust and emotions. It is therefore crucial that political actors, in addition to independent institutions and authorities, reinforce the reliability of the electoral system through their communications.

In this context, it was also noted that random conspiracy narratives and disinformation can emerge, forming complex thought structures from individual jokes and memes, often gaining harmful momentum (such as QAnon and Kek the Frog).

Alleviation or Amplification: Tech and Two Sides of the Same Coin

The digitalized public sphere and communication platforms were repeatedly highlighted as central players in the discussions during the first two sessions. The third and final workshop session now shifted its focus to the technological aspects of disseminating and restricting disinformation. The initial presentation examined the role of platforms and their algorithmic influence, considering it to be the root of the problem: platforms optimize for engagement and information exchange, but not necessarily for content quality or truthfulness. On the contrary – engagement is often achieved through problematic (emotionalized, sensational, exaggerated) content. However, it is technically feasible – and some companies have already demonstrated this in the past, to prioritize quality and relevance more prominently.

Specifically helpful measures could include:
- Opt-in recommendation algorithms for content and profiles, ensuring that users default to seeing only content they consciously selected.
- Thoroughly testing algorithm changes to understand their long-term effects.

Ultimately, transparency regarding platform practices and their impact drives change. The EU's Digital Services Act could serve as an interesting example in this context.

In a second presentation, the fundamental concept behind the Content Authenticity Initiative, spearheaded by Adobe and other major technology companies, was introduced. The core idea is to establish comprehensive metadata for photo and video content, both hardware- and software-based, ensuring that the origin and modification history of files can be transparently traced.

During the discussion, it became clear that the goal is not to universally watermark and tag all content or even identify all manipulated files. Instead, the aim is to ensure the continued existence of reliable and trustworthy files. These files would necessarily be graded in different levels, akin to a digital "nutrition label." This grading would indicate the degree of authenticity of a specific photo or video and highlight any manipulations (justifiable or problematic) carried out to it. Problematic files would be those lacking the relevant metadata and labels.

Furthermore, it was evident that beyond the purely technical provision, the social and psychological aspects of such labels and metadata must also be considered: Who actually will realistically take such information into account? How do people practically engage with it? And what potential for misuse exists within these methods?

On-site bilateral Meetings

In the two days following the workshop, there was engagement with various experts from the Atlantic Council, the American-German Institute, and the German Embassy in Washington. During these discussions, the differences between the situations in Germany and the United States were explored in greater depth. For instance, emphasis was placed on the significant changes that have occurred in the American media landscape over the past decades, which have contributed to political polarization. This underscores the importance of establishing a diverse media system grounded in quality standards to ensure the stability of democracy and effectively combat disinformation.

Simultaneously, the conversations highlighted that the immediate impact of disinformation (in terms of falsified and heavily manipulated content) on the general public opinion is likely less pronounced than commonly assumed. However, the influence of malinformation – such as leaks of confidential information or true information taken out of context – is often underestimated. There is suspicion that these factors will once again play a significant role in the upcoming US elections, reminiscent of the situations in 2016 and 2020.