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Governance responses  
to disinformation: How open  
government principles can  
inform policy options

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# **Governance responses to disinformation**

How open government principles can inform policy options

# Abstract

This paper provides a holistic policy approach to the challenge of disinformation by exploring a range of governance responses that rest on the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation. It offers an analysis of the significant changes that are affecting media and information ecosystems, chief among them the growth of digital platforms. Drawing on the implications of this changing landscape, the paper focuses on four policy areas of intervention: public communication for a better dialogue between government and citizens; direct responses to identify and combat disinformation; legal and regulatory policy; and media and civic responses that support better information ecosystems. The paper concludes with proposed steps the OECD can take to build evidence and support policy in this space.

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# Introduction

New and rapidly changing information and communication technologies (ICTs), in particular social media platforms, offer opportunities for governments to communicate and interact with the public. At the same time, evolutions in media and information ecosystems<sup>1</sup> have altered how people consume, transmit and share information, which affects who and what they trust. By changing distribution models from a “one-to-many” approach to a “many-to-many” approach, new technologies have facilitated sharing and interacting and have significantly increased opportunities for engagement (Jensen and Helles, 2017; Pfister, 2011).

These technological advances, however, have also facilitated the spread of what has become known as disinformation.<sup>2</sup> While disinformation is not a new phenomenon, technological advancements and social media platforms have facilitated its spread, as well as enhanced and reshaped the ability to create and perpetuate content that can intensify political polarisation. In particular, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics have enabled the large-scale gathering of user insights and micro-targeting of users with specific content. These innovations have been game-changers in the recent waves of disinformation, and have amplified its damaging impact to unprecedented levels. In particular, the surge in disinformation around the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has demonstrated the extent of its negative effects on policy implementation as well as society’s trust and cohesion (OECD, 2020). These recently observed effects build on documented interference with electoral processes across the world in recent years.

For the past two years, the Edelman Trust Barometer found that nearly seven in ten people worry about false information (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019). For example, in the United States, 63% of Americans view disinformation as a “major problem in society, on par with gun violence (63%) and terrorism (66%)” (Institute for Public Relations, 2019). Ultimately, these phenomena are having a detrimental impact on democratic systems, eroding the trust in institutions and fostering misperceptions about key policy issues. Disinformation can have more tangible deadly consequences off line, as well, as seen in the spread of anti-vaxxer content and unproven testing and treatment around the new coronavirus.

These technological and communication changes have developed in parallel with expanding global threats to civic space and democratic principles. In 2019, the average global democracy score fell to its worst level since the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index was first produced in 2006, due to reductions related to electoral processes and pluralism, the functioning of government, political culture, civil liberties (including free speech) and diminishing media freedoms. It is particularly notable that over the past decade, no scores in the Democracy Index have deteriorated as much as those related to freedom of expression and media freedom (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

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1. This is understood as the combination of communication and media governance frameworks (i.e. institutional, legal, policy and regulatory) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies and citizen journalists).
  2. The “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission, 2018a).

Importantly, the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation can help protect and expand space for information sharing, dialogue and engagement between governments and citizens. These principles address the underlying problem of increasing social fragmentation, and the broader erosion of trust in institutions and experts, which if not addressed, will continue to serve as fuel for disinformation. To counteract these trends, over the past decade, OECD member countries and non-member economies have pursued initiatives that have moved them toward more responsive, transparent and inclusive societies. The 2017 OECD Recommendation on Open Government,<sup>3</sup> the first international legal instrument on the topic, synthesised the lessons of that process. It has helped encourage countries to move away from top-down assumptions about citizen and business needs by promoting engagement in the design and implementation of policy. Governments can rely on these same principles in their efforts to mitigate the downsides from changing media ecosystems and rising disinformation. By fostering more open and resilient societies, these principles can help ensure that new technologies support knowledge and progress over distrust and polarisation.

Building on the OECD's previous and ongoing work, this paper provides an overview of the policy responses that countries can pursue to respond to this evolving global context. This paper aims to identify how open government principles can inform policies that build democratic governance and trust across public institutions, as well as respond to the challenges posed by disinformation and changing media ecosystems. The policy options discussed here aim to encourage a more holistic understanding of the implications that changes in media and information ecosystems have on governance, and how to respond. Highlighting and sharing key challenges and opportunities will also serve to lay the foundation for additional research and data collection efforts and help countries navigate rapidly evolving communication and media realities. As a kind of public good, citizen trust is a primary focus of the OECD across multiple areas of policy. This paper, therefore, concludes with an overview of the role the Organisation can have in leading evidence-gathering and standard-setting around media and information ecosystems and their links to governance and trust.

The paper will first provide an overview of the changing state of the media and information ecosystems, as well as a conceptual understanding of the threats posed by disinformation, which have the potential to undermine the trust that connects institutions and stakeholders. Drawing on these implications, it will then classify the range of governance responses by OECD member and partner countries. Such measures range from more direct and narrow interventions that contribute to better information within these ecosystems, to broader, more systemic approaches that seek to address the challenges by improving the ecosystems themselves. They include:

- the role of public communication in improving transparency and participation through the provision of timely and accurate information and dialogue with citizens
- efforts by governments to identify and counteract disinformation, such as debunking or halting the spread of potentially harmful false narratives
- regulatory and legal responses, including supporting freedom of speech, promoting innovative ways for regulators to develop policy and collaborate, regulating platform transparency and content
- policies that improve the media and information ecosystem more broadly through efforts to promote access to information, build digital and civic literacy, fund and identify research, utilise deliberative democracy initiatives and multi-stakeholder platforms, and support the wider media market.

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3. The OECD defines “open government” as a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth.



# Key policy messages

- **Governments would benefit from exploring a more holistic approach** to the challenge of disinformation, combining a number of direct and indirect governance interventions for ensuring that truthful and reliable information is accessible and the spread of dangerous content is reduced.
- **The open government principles can guide governments** in designing policy responses that strengthen media and information ecosystems, working simultaneously to combat disinformation and to safeguard the role of these ecosystems as pillars of democratic societies.
- Examples from several OECD members and partners demonstrate that governments are expanding the range of responses to disinformation. **The OECD, its members and partners could have a role to play in building a global evidence base** on this evolving challenge and the relative efficacy of the responses being proposed and adopted around the world. Building on this evidence, the **OECD could advise countries in defining policy approaches and help establish international standards on the governance of media and information ecosystems.**
- Public communication can contribute to mitigating the spread of disinformation and supporting healthy media and information ecosystems while bringing governments closer to their citizens. Exploring a stronger link between communication and open government reforms could help governments achieve this outcome. To this end, they may wish to **prioritise thinking about how to move from public communication approaches centred primarily on disseminating official information to more strategic ones that focus on increasing transparency and participation, promoting better policy making and improving service design and delivery.**

# 1 Context: Changing media and information ecosystems

## The state of the media

Effective media and information ecosystems (meaning the combination of communication and media governance frameworks and its principal actors) play an essential role in helping guarantee inclusive, transparent and accountable governance. Such ecosystems are an essential part of functioning democratic systems. The complex interplay between the stakeholders generating, consuming, and reacting to information, with shared expectations around the standards and values that govern these interactions, generates a public good of critical importance for democracy.

Conversely, limitations on the ability of journalists and citizens to obtain information and hold governments to account diminishes informed debate, civic space and responsive institutions. This capacity is increasingly threatened as global media freedom scores<sup>4</sup> are at their lowest level in a decade (ARTICLE 19, 2019). Indeed, “the muzzling of journalists and independent news is at its worst point in 13 years, and per the Committee to Protect Journalists, the number of journalists jailed for their work is at the highest level since the 1990s” (*The Economist*, 2018). The weakening of media freedom and the health of this market, which has been affected by the rise of web-based advertising more broadly amplifies the challenge posed by the surge in disinformation of recent years.

During the global pandemic, media freedom and access to information have suffered further, at a time when fact-based journalism was of utmost importance to counterbalance a spike in disinformation and public concern (Council of Europe, 2020). At this time, 45% of respondents to an Edelman survey in ten countries claimed that “it has been difficult [...] to find reliable and trustworthy information about the virus and its effects” (Edelman, 2020).

### ***Altered landscapes and changing media markets***

In addition to these global threats, the advent of digital communications is profoundly altering media markets, where radio, television, and above all, print have struggled to maintain prominence. Broadly, “print, the mainstay of the newspaper business, is in decline, broadcasting has been transformed by the

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4. Typically, media freedom scores evaluate the legal environment for the media, political influences, economic factors, journalist imprisonment, etc.

growth of multi-channel television, and digital media provide new ways for accessing, finding and sharing content that challenge the inherited business models” (Nielsen, 2015).

One of the most drastic transformations to the media and information ecosystem is the declining market for traditional sources of news, which have been hit by budget cuts and revenue shortages from sales and advertising – except for a few outlets, such as *The New York Times* or the *Financial Times*, which have a global and elite readership. Whereas the public generally sees traditional news providers as more trustworthy than their digital competitors, this is not in itself a guarantee of a successful business model or strong market position. A survey of mostly mature democracies shows that paid news consumption is a weekly habit for only 50% of the adult population; the other half of the population is “disengaged” and consume news less than weekly (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

Revenue challenges, both for printed and digital media, also stem from the arrival of big tech companies such as Facebook and Google, who together account for more than 50% of all digital advertisement sales (Shaw, 2018). Such market dominance is particularly relevant for local newspapers, who have lost advertising income to online competitors and who are not able to make up the revenue via digital operations and subscriptions (Nielsen, 2015).

Cuts in newsroom employment have been a steady trend over the last decade: in the United States, newsroom employment declined by 23% between 2008 and 2017. In 2008, about 114 000 newsroom employees – reporters, editors, photographers and videographers – worked in newspaper, radio, broadcast television, cable and “other information services” (such as digital-native news publishers). By 2017, that number declined to about 88 000, a decline led mostly by newspapers (Grieco, 2018). In Canada, coverage of civic affairs nationally fell by 36% between 2008 and 2017, and articles related to local politics declined by 38% over the same period (Public Policy Forum, 2018). In the United Kingdom, more than 200 local papers have closed since 2005, and the number of regional journalists has halved (Hutton, 2018). Critically, national and public service broadcasters are often not able to replace the local providers, while alternative, citizen, and community media often face resource constraints that limit their reach and impact in the context of a relative information glut (Nielsen, 2015).

These changes have a political impact. As local newspapers disappear, citizens rely more on national sources of news and political information, which tend to emphasise political competition and conflict, in contrast to local news providers, which “more often serve as a source of shared information. Indeed, readers of local newspapers feel more attached to their communities” (Hitt et al., 2019). The weakening of local journalism has implications for democracy, as these organisations serve as watchdogs for transparency and accountability of subnational governments.

### ***The rise of social media and messaging apps***

Online platforms, such as news aggregators, social media and messaging apps, which have done so much to facilitate people’s access to information, are playing increasingly prominent roles. While the trend of accessing news through some social media platforms has started to plateau after years of steady growth, analysis in the Reuters Institute’s *2019 Digital News Report* illustrates the growing relevance of messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, as well as newer social networks like Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok for distributing news. To some extent, this “social media reverse represents a readjustment after the social media frenzy around the Trump inauguration, though these patterns also exist elsewhere” (Newman et al., 2018).

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5. Survey participants were 18 or older. The surveyed countries were: Argentina; Australia; Brazil; Canada; China; Colombia; France; Germany; Hong Kong, China; India; Indonesia; Ireland; Italy; Japan; Korea; Malaysia; Mexico; the Netherlands; Poland; the Russian Federation; Singapore; South Africa; Spain; Sweden; Turkey; the United Arab Emirates; the United Kingdom; and the United States.

The impact of the trend toward using messaging apps for news is unclear. On the one hand, the use of these services may encourage users to take a less confrontational approach within the context of a private communication space. Conversely, such spaces could encourage the sharing and expressing of politically charged and highly polarised views, which are harder, if not impossible, to monitor given their encrypted and private nature.

Ultimately, the technology behind both social media and messaging apps tends to favour the fragmentation and polarisation of public opinion. When consuming news on these platforms, user information is channelled to algorithms designed to promote similar content to these users' feeds, content that as such tends to reinforce their existing perceptions rather than challenge them (Smith, 2019). Similarly, messaging apps facilitate sharing within homogenous belief groups whose views are reinforced through virtual echo chambers. Overall, these changes highlight the speed with which technology and media markets are evolving, and the subsequent difficulty this poses to the public, media companies and policy makers in navigating potential downsides and utilising the new communication spaces to increase transparency and engagement.

When discussing the impact of social networks and digital platforms, it is also relevant to examine the level of trust in the different channels, as this may feed into decisions of where and from whom the public receives information. Once again, the data portray a complex and constantly evolving situation. The 2018 Poynter Media Trust Survey found that 76% of Americans across the political spectrum have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in their local television news, and 73% have confidence in local newspapers. That contrasts with much lower numbers for national network news, national newspapers and online-only news outlets (more conservative respondents had lower levels of trust more generally) (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler, 2018).

According to the 2018 findings of the Eurobarometer Survey on fake news and disinformation on line, “the majority of respondents totally trust or tend to trust news and information they receive through radio (70%), television (66%) and printed media (63%). However, less than half (47%) trust online newspapers and magazines, and lower proportions trust video hosting websites and podcasts (27%) and online social networks and messaging apps (26%)” (European Commission, 2018b). These findings are consistent with those from the Reuters Institute’s *2019 Digital News Report*, which shows, despite differences between countries and even within countries year to year, that people generally trust mainstream journalism more than news found via social media. Data disaggregated by geography and education levels might provide further information about the social characteristics of trust in the media. Furthermore, only 42% of respondents to the Reuters survey think that the “news media does a good job in its watchdog role – scrutinizing powerful people and holding them to account” (Newman et al., 2019). This suggests that, while the extent to which social media news content is trusted is low, there is an overall shortfall in society’s trust in all primary sources of information.

The increasingly complex relationship between citizens and sources of news, combined with the fundamental shifts in media markets and phenomena such as polarisation and fragmentation, suggest that the role of media and information ecosystems in influencing democratic governance will remain in flux. For their part, governments will need to consider how they can more fully appreciate citizens’ diverse experiences and interactions with media and online communication platforms, as well as how those platforms can support the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and participation.

## Disinformation

Recent technological innovations that have increased the speed with which information spreads and the ability to instantaneously connect have changed the way news is created and distributed. They have also provided fertile ground for so-called “fake news”. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. History is filled

with examples of political propaganda, distortions, hoaxes<sup>6</sup> and lies, with many instances of history being rewritten by the victor. That being said, traditional news providers, who mostly sought to maximise readership – valuing impartiality and objectivity – often served as the “mechanism that held disinformation in check”.

The new media environment has both disrupted this business model and weakened this role (Standage, 2017). Digital platforms’ distribution and business models create incentives for high volumes of low-quality content, or “clickbait”, that costs very little to produce compared to quality journalism. This content competes for the same audiences’ attention span, which evidence increasingly suggests is drawn to sensationalist and scandalous information over objective and impartial content.

### **“Information disorder” and other definitions**

Comprehending the changes underway requires a clear understanding of the language being used around how the public consumes, communicates and shares information, as well as how these changes can affect participation in public life, and ultimately democracy. “Fake news” has become a familiar term used to attack and discredit both traditional media and political opponents. The phrase has “morphed from a description of a social media phenomenon into a journalistic cliché and an angry political slur” (Wendling, 2018).

As noted by the European Commission’s Independent High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, an in-depth analysis of the challenges should start “from a shared understanding of disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term ‘fake news’. This term has been appropriated and used misleadingly by powerful actors to dismiss coverage that is simply found disagreeable [...] [instead], disinformation includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission, 2018a). The UK Government, in fact, has banned the term “fake news”, meaning the term will no longer be used in policy documents or official papers (Murphy, 2018).

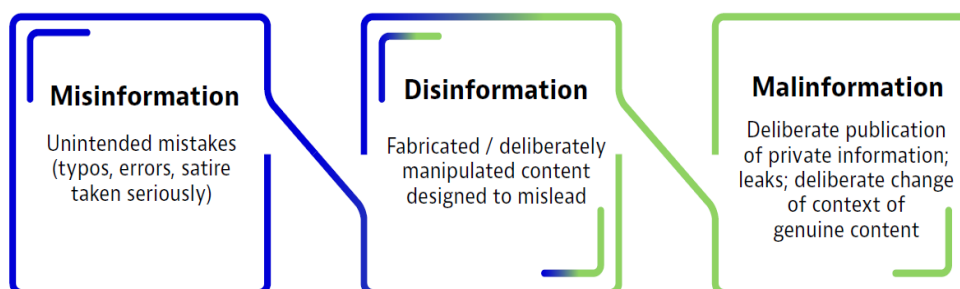
The rejection of the use of the phrase “fake news” is not merely a matter of academic debate. Accurately describing the phenomenon is essential to fully understanding the challenges it poses and the potential responses, for example, redefining the problem as one of “**information disorder**”. Recent work has framed the issue around three clusters:

- **Misinformation:** “when false information is shared, but no harm is meant”.
- **Disinformation:** “when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm”.
- **Malinformation:** “when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving what was designed to stay private into the public sphere” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017) (see Figure 1.1. ).

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6. There are noteworthy examples of large-scale hoaxes and “fake news” throughout history, including the 1835 “Great Moon Hoax” where the *New York Sun* ran a series of articles about the alleged discovery of life on the moon.

Figure 1.1. Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation



Source: Adapted from Wardle, C. and H. Derakshan (2017), *Information Disorder: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, Council of Europe, DGI(2017)09.

In addition, it is important to consider the “elements” that contribute to the creation and diffusion of information disorder: namely, the **agent** spreading the message, the **message** itself, and how it is **interpreted**. These elements are particularly important when considering how to address the impact information disorder can have on engagement, trust and participation in public life, particularly related to topics and areas that trigger or fuel strong emotional or polarised responses (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017).

### ***How technological advancements and user behaviours affect the spread of disinformation***

The modern information and communication environment has added several disrupting factors that can serve to enhance and aggravate the phenomenon described above – including the speed with which news can be shared, the use of algorithms that play a role in deciding what people see, and the decrease in traditional media. These technological advances have shifted communication and distribution approaches from “one-to-many” (typical of traditional mass media such as newspapers, television and radio), to “many-to-many” (how news and information are exchanged in the digital world) (Jensen and Helles, 2017; Pfister, 2011).

The ease with which users can create content that does not need to be verified or approved before being launched globally, combined with the speed at which this information can be shared, has connected communities and empowered citizen journalists. These technological advancements have also, however, increased the risks related to the creation and distribution of misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and hoaxes. For example, the Oxford Internet Institute found that “25% of content shared on Twitter ahead of the US (2018) mid-term elections came from “junk news” sites – that is polarizing, misleading or conspiratorial sources that try to pass as professional news – up from 20% in 2016” (Marchal et al., 2018).

Investigation into state-sponsored disinformation campaigns has made it increasingly clear that the spread of disinformation is not exclusively an unfortunate side effect of the rise of social media, or the work of independent, disconnected actors (though those play a role). Many of the actors spreading disinformation “are professional, state-employed cyber warriors [...] pursuing very well-defined objectives with military precision and specialised tools” (DiResta, 2018). However, their endeavours are made possible by the content-sharing models and large audiences that social media platforms provide them with.

For example, as outlined by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Russian operatives associated with the [...] Internet Research Agency (IRA) used social media to conduct an information warfare campaign designed to spread disinformation and societal division in the United States [...] at the behest of the Kremlin” (Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, 2019). More widely, researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute have found evidence of “organised social media manipulation

campaigns [...] in 70 countries, up from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017. In each country, there is at least one political party or government agency using social media to shape public attitudes domestically [...] [Furthermore], Facebook and Twitter attributed foreign influence operations to seven countries (People's Republic of China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela) who have used these platforms to influence global audiences" (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019).

The threat posed by these disinformation campaigns is magnified by a context where many governments have yet to develop holistic strategies to respond to influence operations while facing the simultaneous challenge of eroded trust in the media and political leadership (DiResta, 2018). There are notable exceptions, such as initiatives carried out by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and the UK Government Communication Service's *RESIST: Counter-disinformation toolkit* (as discussed in *Where do we go from here?*). However, there remains much to explore about what works and why.

Globally, there is a growing awareness and acknowledgement that the shift in information production and distribution raises questions regarding the maintenance of a healthy and thriving public discourse. Behavioural science sheds light on how platform and algorithm designs interact with online audiences' attitudes to amplify the problem of disinformation. Specifically, the creation and proliferation of echo chambers and confirmation bias mechanisms that segregate the news and information people see and interact with on line can facilitate the spread of disinformation and enhance polarisation and are the negative corollary to the ability for easy and rapid engagement and communication. Information overload, attention span and cognitive biases play into these trends, for instance, with the success of clickbait. A particular challenge is that people tend to spread falsehoods "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth"; this is particularly the case for false political news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The relatively rapid spread of disinformation cannot be blamed overwhelmingly on automated accounts (or bots), the implication being that false news "spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it" (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Notably, recent research indicates that people are likely to share content about the new coronavirus (COVID-19) without considering its accuracy, even if they can often recognise it as false when nudged (Pennycook et al., 2020).

Given the massive amounts of unfiltered information currently accessible, people rely increasingly on their expectations and opinions to select and filter the data they find relevant to inform their decision-making processes. Results of surveys since 2012 of 100 000 people in 40 different countries illustrate how echo chambers and biases exacerbate the role that individual perceptions and expectations play in distorting data and facts, and how such delusions affect people's outlooks – especially in politics (Duffy, 2018). Echo chambers – homogeneous and polarised clusters of users that can contribute to the viral spread of disinformation – "can lead people to believe in falsehoods, and it may be difficult or impossible to correct them" (Sunstein, 2017).

Furthermore, while transparency and information provision are essential means and goals of both a functioning media ecosystem and of an open government, information overload is an additional challenge of the digital era. In the era of non-stop news presented on multiple devices, an "explosion of knowledge and information" accelerated by digital technologies can serve to limit people's ability to prioritise and contextualise that which is most important or relevant (Innerarity, 2013). The decline in barriers to publishing on line and through social media platforms in particular have led to a situation where "it is no longer speech itself that is scarce, but the attention of listeners [...] [in fact], speech may be used to attack, harass and silence as much as it is used to illuminate or debate" (Wu, 2017).

Disinformation is a complex issue that can affect policy making and government interactions with citizens. How disinformation is created and spread is also constantly changing; in the future, it may rely more on domestic groups or new technologies (such as altered video and voice recordings), just as the response may need to take a more transnational turn. Moving forward, governments will need to focus on how to both respond to these challenges, as well as leverage new technologies in ways that advance open government principles.

## 2 Policy options

Proliferating online communication technologies and social media platforms have the potential to remove barriers to engagement and increase the speed and ability for people to access information. However, government responses to changing media ecosystems have been limited and mostly ad hoc. Countries are increasingly coming to terms with the need to engage on these issues systematically. The near-ubiquitous reach of new technologies globally points to the tensions faced by national governments in their efforts to respond. Whose role it is across the public sector to address these challenges is not straightforward; most likely, there is a need for multiple government actors to take co-ordinated action on different dimensions of the problem. There is also a need to fully understand the implications of private ownership, in what are often, effectively, public spaces for news dissemination and debate. The role of private actors and of corporate social responsibility is also increasingly evident.

To date, many of the discussions around this new environment have focused on the role of media outlets and technology companies. This makes sense, since they are the primary producers and distributors of content, and their efforts – including seemingly minor adjustments in their algorithms – can have immediate and meaningful effects on what people see and share. Indeed, the pressure put on social media platforms has resulted in a rapid succession of attempts to limit disinformation and increase trusted sources.

Nevertheless, sustained and long-term responses will require governments' active engagement, as governments are increasingly aware. Previous OECD publications have noted that the “impact of changing media and communication landscapes on governance outcomes is increasing, and the way in which the media is conceptualised in relationship to governance needs a rethink and policy needs to find better ways of prioritising it” (Deane, 2015).

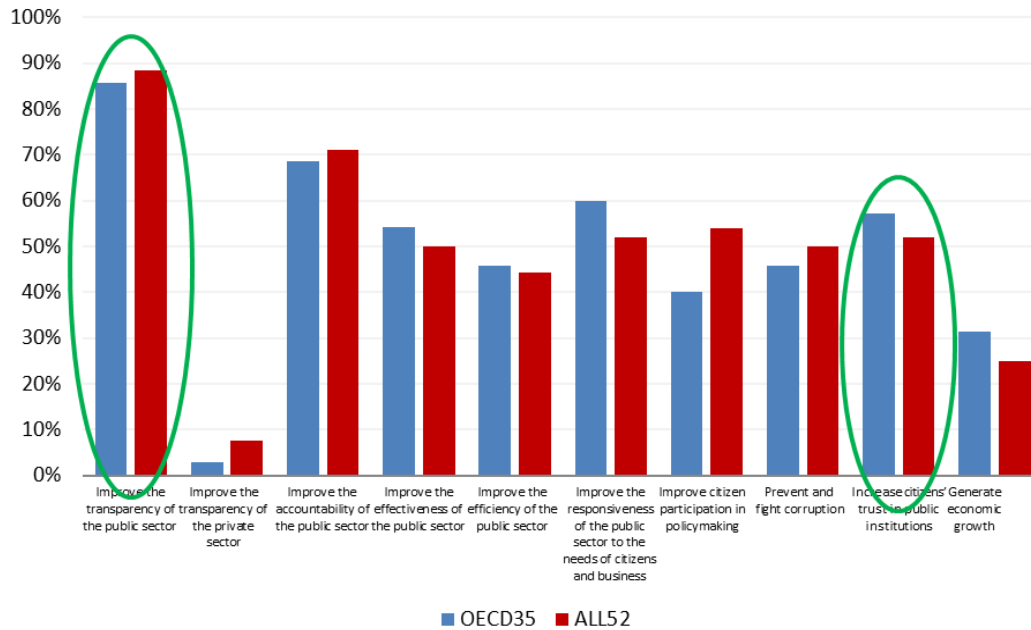
Many Internet and social media companies are themselves concluding that more government intervention is necessary. For example, immediately after the 2016 US presidential election, Mark Zuckerberg said the notion that “fake news on Facebook [...] influenced the election in any way is a pretty crazy idea” (Mannes, 2016). Just over two years later, however, he called for a “more active role for governments and regulators” to tackle issues related to harmful content, election integrity and privacy (Zuckerberg, 2019). This is not a departure from previous policy, as there is a long tradition of intervention in media markets in many OECD countries. When guided by the transparency and respect for freedoms of speech and information, these actions have also fostered informal institutions and norms that led to the current standards that prevail in media and journalism.

Governance responses, however, are not always clear cut, given countries' parallel obligations to uphold freedom of speech and the press, and to avoid being seen as arbiters of truth. In the United States, the public seems to appreciate the conflicting pressures facing the government of needing to act, but do not necessarily trust their capacity to do so. A recent study found “70% of respondents [...] cited the government as most responsible for combatting disinformation, though only 33% of respondents felt it was doing at least ‘somewhat’ well in those efforts” (Institute for Public Relations, 2019).

The OECD has found that open government principles provide a basis for developing policy options to gain citizen trust in governments' abilities to promote transparency, engagement and freedom of expression in a unique and rapidly changing communication environment. Increasing trust and transparency, as well as providing a space for inclusive dialogue, are very much in line with the objectives of countries' open government reforms (see Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1. Objectives of countries' open government strategies



Source: OECD (2015), "2015 OECD Survey on Open Government Co-ordination and Citizen Participation in the Policy Cycle", OECD, Paris.

For its part, the OECD Recommendation on Open Government deals with issues related to the importance of communication, transparency, ensuring the public is informed and promoting innovative mechanisms to engage with stakeholders, among others. Additionally, Pillar 1 of the OECD Recommendation on Digital Government Strategies (OECD, 2014b) encourages countries to use digital technologies to promote greater openness, inclusiveness and public engagement in policy making and implementation to achieve better social and economic outcomes.

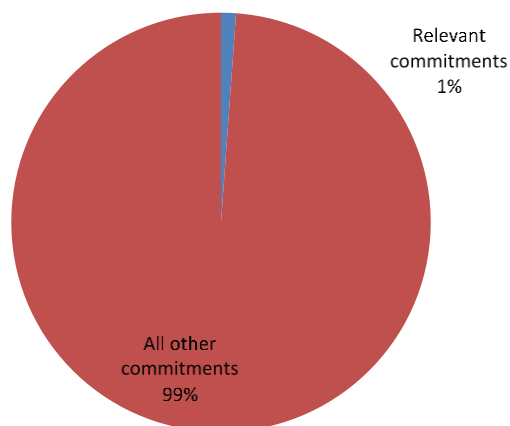
That being said, an examination of Open Government Partnership (OGP) National Action Plans (NAPs)<sup>7</sup> highlights how countries are underutilising the link between open government reform efforts and the disinformation challenge to pursue initiatives related to media freedom and public communication. As a global platform composed of nearly 80 countries and 20 subnational governments, the OGP provides a valuable platform for bringing together public officials and civil society organisations (CSOs) to promote open government principles. As such, the initiatives pursued via OGP member countries can serve as useful indicators of open government priorities internationally.

Notably, as of July 2019 and as shown in Figure 2.2, only 1% of OGP commitments have focused exclusively on increasing use of social media to improve communication, ensure freedom of the press and improve press laws. Only a handful explicitly link their OGP commitments with responding to the challenges of disinformation or misinformation.

7. National Action Plans are biennial policy commitments drawn up by each OGP member in line with their open government agendas.

## Figure 2.2. Relevant commitments in all Open Government Partnership National Action Plans

Commitments that have focused exclusively on the increasing use of social media to improve communication, ensure freedom of the press and improve press laws



Source: Author's own work, based on data collected from the OGP Explorer in 2019 at <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/explorer/>.

Communication by governments and public institutions, as discussed below, is a central element in support of open government principles. Including communication objectives and activities in OGP National Action Plans, and linking those to government-wide communication strategies, can, therefore, help to take advantage of the links between government transparency, the media and citizen participation in policy processes (OECD, 2016, 2018a) (see Box 2.1 for an example from Lithuania). Taking these links into consideration, governments may also give more thought to how they include media organisations and related non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the design and communication of open government reform processes themselves. Overall, making a more explicit connection between open government, media ecosystems and disinformation will serve common policy goals.

### Box 2.1. Promoting openness by developing and implementing measures for publicising information about government activities and civic participation: An example from Lithuania

The Government of Lithuania used its 2016-18 OGP National Action Plan to promote a far-reaching effort to improve public communication and civic participation. Specifically, the National Action Plan pointed to the lack of both common standards for publicising information about government activities and consistent, high-quality communication as barriers to ensuring uniform delivery of information and motivating public engagement. The government noted that effective communication requires the active generation of interesting content and high-quality presentation, and that information about its activities should be easily accessible and presented in a clear and understandable format. At the same time, the public must have access to information on public governance processes and participation possibilities.

The commitments made under the National Action Plan therefore seek to promote the systematic publication of information, as well as to assist institutions in strengthening their communication capacities. Lithuania, led by the Office of the Government, will develop guidelines for the publication of activities by creating common standards that promote interaction and accessibility. The plan also calls for the creation of an electronic newsletter on government activities and the creation of templates for publicising them via social media. This example also highlights the opportunity to link institutional communication efforts to mutually reinforcing cross-sectoral initiatives, such as the OGP.

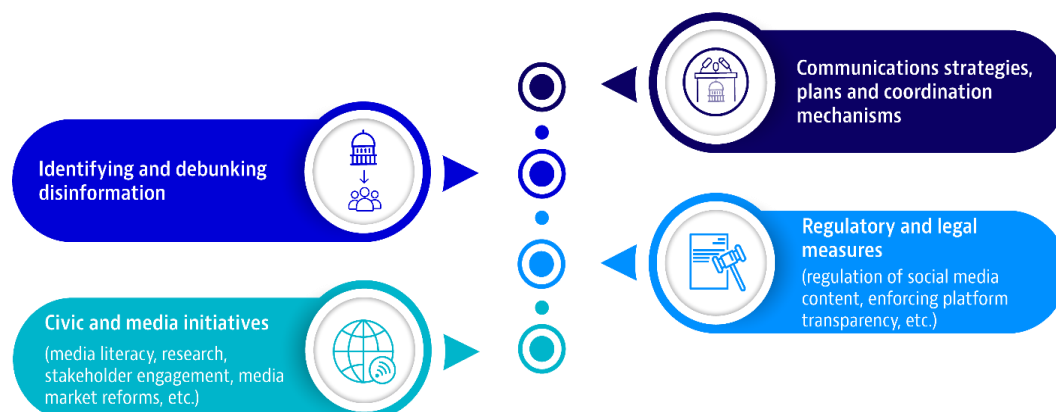
Source: The Government of Lithuania (2016), *Lithuania 2016-2018 Open Government Partnership National Action Plan*, [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/AVP\\_planas\\_2016-2018\\_en%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/AVP_planas_2016-2018_en%20%281%29.pdf) (accessed on 11 October 2018).

## A framework for creating policy responses to combat disinformation

This section aims to establish a framework through which policy options can begin to be identified that are connected to countries' ongoing open government reform efforts and beyond. It will review a range of actions focused around four broad areas, from more direct interventions to combat disinformation with facts and citizen engagement, to approaches that address systemic issues and aim to generate an environment that promotes transparent and open debates grounded in truthful information (also see Figure 2.3):

- **public communication efforts** (including the strategies, co-ordination mechanisms and competencies involved in enhancing governments' abilities to share information and engage in dialogue with citizens)
- **direct responses** to disinformation (such as targeted efforts to identify disinformation, create counter-narratives and measure the effectiveness of such initiatives)
- **regulatory and legal responses** (such as identifying innovative ways to develop regulation, promote freedom of speech, and require more transparency of media company ownership/sources of advertising funding; tackling media or advertising market concentration; and specific regulation directed at online speech)
- **media and civic policy responses** (such as facilitating access to government information; supporting public-service broadcasters, citizen journalism and other outlets that expand voice; implementing media and digital literacy campaigns; funding research; and developing multi-stakeholder platforms to craft policy).

Figure 2.3. Range of policy options to respond to the global information environment



Source: Author's own work

## The role of public communication

Public communication has an essential role to play in combating disinformation; it serves as a vehicle for transparent, truthful and accurate information and allows governments to understand and interact with citizens. Especially in a context where ambiguous and conflicting narratives are challenging policies and official data, reaching citizens on the channels and platforms where they receive information is a growing priority. Indeed, the Government of Spain recognises that a key way of combating disinformation is to become, through official channels, a source of verified, transparent, continuous and rapid information, and that any areas not covered with such official information are vulnerable to being filled by false narratives.

Separate from political communication, public communication establishes the necessary mechanisms for citizens to be informed and to consult the government. When delivered strategically, public communication can move beyond simply serving to disseminate information. It can support better policy making and service delivery, as it raises awareness on reforms and helps change behaviour (see Box 2.2).

### Box 2.2. Public communication and the potential to improve policy making and service delivery

Governments are increasingly recognising the potential of communication activities to improve policy making and service delivery, and are implementing a wide variety of innovative approaches to communicate with their audiences. For example:

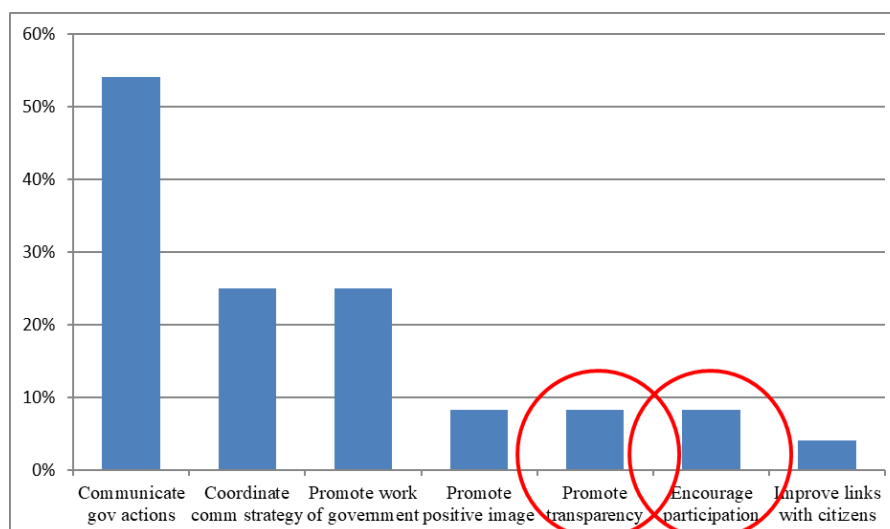
- The US Children’s Bureau ran the AdoptUSKids campaign aiming to increase the number of child adoptions. According to response numbers and follow-up surveys, the Ad Council estimates that the initiative has helped spur more than 24 000 adoptions of children from foster care.
- The “Food is GREAT” campaign led by the Department of Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) of the United Kingdom, as part of the government-wide “GREAT Britain” campaign. The campaign has helped boost British trade in food and drink exports from GBP 20.1 billion in 2016 to more than GBP 22 billion in 2017-18. The campaign is on its way to achieving its 2020 target for exports of GBP 29 billion.

Source: Owen, J. (2018), “Case study: Food is GREAT Campaign”, <https://www.prweek.com/article/1489784/case-study-food-great-campaign-celebrates-surge-exports>; Government Communication Service (n.d.) “Case studies”, UK Government, <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/campaigns/case-studies/>; WPP and The Government and Public Sector Practice (2016), *The Leaders’ Report*, <https://sites.wpp.com/govtpractice/insights/leaders-report/>.

Public communication may also serve as a lever for countries to engage in two-way conversations and create opportunities to participate. Strategic use of communication tools provides administrations with the opportunity to engage with a wider variety of stakeholders, including those from traditionally under-represented segments of the population to develop more responsive public services. As such, these initiatives can act as a key pillar of open government reforms and a means for closer collaboration and engagement with citizens and stakeholders. In turn, they can contribute to a higher reach for truthful and transparent public content and strengthen trust in institutions as sources of information.

While the 2017 OECD Centre of Government (CoG) Survey shows that CoGs consider public communication as one of their top four priority tasks (OECD, 2017a), data also show that public communication can be linked more closely to open government principles. In fact, fewer than 10% of governments surveyed list promoting transparency and stakeholder participation as one of the key objectives of their communication strategies (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4. Main objectives of centre of governments' communication strategies, 2017



Source: OECD (2017a), *Organisation and functions at the centre of government: Centre Stage II*, OECD, Paris.

The OECD has identified a number of limitations on governments' abilities to use communication in a way that best supports broader open government reform efforts. These include the need to build public sector skills, particularly to support two-way communication and reinforce participation; to enhance co-ordination; and to respond more effectively to the rapid spread of disinformation and language that can increase the risk of violence. Technological advances and the increasing use of digital technologies and social media are introducing new possibilities for government-citizen interaction and are allowing administrations to reach a wider audience in more rapid and cost-effective ways. In parallel, they are shifting citizens' expectations with regard to how they should be engaged in dialogues on policy issues. However, the speed at which online interactions take place has made it difficult for governments to engage. A broader assessment of countries' capacities to communicate strategically is essential to ensure an effective contribution of public communication to open government efforts and to move away from ad hoc and reactive approaches.

### ***The governance of public communications: Strategies, plans and co-ordination mechanisms***

One key opportunity to promote public communication activities is for governments to develop guidance documents, such as strategies, plans, guidelines and codes of conduct, with the goal of harmonising and strengthening the coherence of public messages in a transparent way. These documents would allow for the consolidation and rationalisation of scattered initiatives, as well as provide guidance and a framework for public officials to carry out communication activities. By ensuring that initiatives are carried out in a co-ordinated and consistent manner, strategies, plans and guidelines would help enhance the impact of the relevant initiatives. Finally, developing strategies via an inclusive process can help clarify broader transparency and citizen engagement objectives (see Box 2.3 **Error! Reference source not found.** for an example of the UK 2018/19 Communication Plan).

### Box 2.3. The UK Annual Government Communication Plan

The UK Annual Government Communication Plan outlines what communication professionals will collectively deliver to support the UK Government's achievement of its priority outcomes. The plan focuses on the following eight issues:

1. Enhance two-way communications using active listening to build trust and to better all major government campaigns.
2. Build a rapid response social media capability to deal quickly with disinformation and reclaim a fact-based public debate with a new team to lead this work in the Cabinet Office.
3. Raise standards by ending opaque digital marketing with a focus on value, safety and transparency, creating greater accountability for the government.
4. Maximise the role of government communications in challenging declining trust in institutions through honest, relevant and responsive campaigns.
5. Demonstrate the role of communication as a valuable strategic tool that can deliver cost-effective public policy solutions.
6. Work harder to master the techniques of behavioural science and start considering audiences by personality as well as demographic – a new guide on this topic [was] published [at] the end of 2018.
7. Create engaging content that will be shared and owned by audiences – pictures, videos and facts.
8. Transform the mass of data we have about audiences into actionable insight, which will be used to improve government campaigns.

Source: Government Communication Service (2018), *Government Communication Plan 2018/19*, UK Government, <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/communications-plan/>.

These guidance documents are most effective when they are not overly prescriptive and when they are designed to create a framework around which officials can share information transparently and engage with citizens constructively. Codes of behaviour may mandate, for example, that professionals be truthful, accurate and accountable to the public; that they should not have conflicting interests; and that they are stewards of the public's trust (CIMA, 2014). By explicitly outlining the purpose, methods and principles, administrations can help ensure that public communication initiatives are pursued in a manner aligned with broader open government goals.

Enacting the strategic objectives of public communication offices also involves effective co-ordination and clear governance structures. In many countries, communication structures are decentralised and uncoordinated, and there is often “uneven capacity to communicate and a lack of collaboration”; co-ordinating messages across ministries can have a “disciplining impact” on policy by ensuring the government is providing consistent information (George Washington University, 2009).

For example, the UK Government Communication Service (GCS) is the professional body for public service communication professionals working in central government departments and other public agencies. The purpose of the GCS is to deliver public service communications that support government priorities, enable the efficient and effective operation of public services and improve people's lives. For its part, the work of GCS International (GCSI) and staff in overseas posts promotes the United Kingdom abroad and helps boost economic interactions and work with foreign governments to build communications capability overseas (Government Communication Service, n.d.). In France, the Service d'information du

Gouvernement (Government Information Office, or SIG) is responsible for stimulating, co-ordinating and implementing communication initiatives. The office designs and carries out inter-ministerial campaigns; co-ordinates communication initiatives by the ministries and the main public institutions; and oversees and benchmarks communication initiatives and trends (Service d'information du Gouvernement, 2020).

### ***Governments' use of social media to increase transparency and engagement***

The rise of online and social platforms has made the reliance on traditional communication methods, such as press releases, newspaper advertisements or press conferences, insufficient to reach all segments of the population. Given the spread and fragmentation of channels, governments need to develop approaches that are responsive to citizens' consumption habits. While emerging communication technologies do not replace traditional tools, the opportunity for citizens and public officials to interact directly and immediately is a fundamental shift. The increasing use of social media will also help governments obtain information to understand citizen needs more fully and develop policies in response (see Box 2.4 for an example of how the Italian public administration has developed its capacity to use social media strategically).

#### **Box 2.4. Italy's e-book for social media use by public officials**

The Italian Ministry of Public Administration works in close co-operation with PA Social, a network of public communicators, journalists and civil society organisations, to promote the government's efforts to use social media platforms as part of their day-to-day activities. The aim is to use online tools to promote co-operative dialogue with citizens, as well as to ensure greater transparency and engagement.

To that end, the Ministry of Public Administration has developed an e-book for public officials to capture the best practices of using social media tools. The e-book is updated every six months, and it aims to increase the capacities of public officials to allow them to work with journalists and citizens. The compilation and exchange of best practices have been the result of joint discussions with PA Social, which bring together journalists, representatives from local and national governments, and social media companies. As a result, the group has jointly set forth principles to help the government meet citizens where they are, including Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.

*Source:* PA Social (2017), A presentation given on 20 October.

While OECD data suggest that many countries consider social media primarily as an additional tool to improve existing communication activities, only a few try to genuinely leverage the platforms to involve citizens in public policy processes or to transform and re-design public service delivery (OECD, 2015a). Governments may, therefore, consider embedding the use of the tools in efforts to interact with citizens and businesses, and thereby include citizens in decision-making processes and allow them to inform public services, policies, and processes (OECD, 2018a). Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that these new channels influence decision-making processes and that the initiatives and tools are targeted and purpose-oriented (Mickoleit, 2014).

Despite the opportunities presented by social media to improve public communication and enhance citizen engagement, governments will need to grapple with a number of specific challenges. For example, policy makers' use of social media as an official public policy platform can introduce ambiguity as to whether a public servant is stating an official policy or a personal opinion. It is all the more important since there have been several episodes of public officials and political figures intentionally or mistakenly sharing false or misleading content. This can cause confusion, lead to erratic responses and undermine trust in institutions.



Governments also face questions about how to create meaningful dialogue with counterparts on social media while ignoring spoilers and those acting in bad faith (bots, trolls, etc.), particularly since it is not always possible to tell who is engaging. In response to these challenges, ministries, municipalities and regions may have their own guidelines and policies, which can also be a source of confusion, particularly regarding storing information, banning malicious actors, etc.

Ultimately, “the willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness and ability to listen to them (and to) incorporate their needs and preferences into the policy process” (George Washington University, 2009). Improving two-way communication and translating it into authentic engagement will be particularly important as administrations invest in working with the public to strengthen transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation.

## Government efforts to directly counteract disinformation

Direct efforts to respond to disinformation are similar in nature to public communication, where governments engage directly with the public. Such direct efforts can focus on commissioning studies and facilitating co-ordination (domestically or internationally); defining disinformation; training civil servants in counteracting campaigns; developing plans and guidelines to identify disinformation; developing targeted responses; and measuring the effectiveness of their efforts.

### **Government-led analysis of the issues**

Encouragingly, there are progressively more examples of governments making target efforts to understand the impact of changing media and information ecosystems, as well as potential policy responses designed to build democratic governance. For example, in 2016, the Italian President of the Chamber of Deputies, Laura Boldrini, convened a group of experts in fact checking, debunking and disinformation to launch an appeal for joint action against so-called “fake news”. Out of this appeal stemmed the national campaign #bastabufale (“stop hoaxes”, or “stop fake news”). In 2018, France commissioned a report<sup>8</sup> that outlined potential responses to the challenges of disinformation by a range of actors, including the government, international organisations, CSOs and the private sector. The French administration conducted the review based explicitly on the “awareness of the existential danger that information manipulation poses to our democracies” (Jeangène Vilmer et al., 2018). These are but a few examples of interventions, with many prominent ones also originating from Nordic countries and beyond. For its part, the European Commission’s High-Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation (HLEG) convened in 2018 to “advise the Commission on all issues arising in the context of false information spread across traditional and social media and on possible ways to cope with its social and political consequences.”

Taking an even more expansive approach, the UK Government commissioned an independent report, the *Cairncross Review: A sustainable future for journalism*, which “examined the current and future market environment facing the press and high-quality journalism in the United Kingdom.” The report made a number of recommendations related to the role of regulators, media literacy, funding models for local publishers and support for public service broadcasting (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). The United Kingdom also published a white paper and launched an open consultation on “Online Harms,” which sought to frame the debate around the scope of the challenges and potential solutions to keep the public safe on line. Such national-level reports can play an important role in identifying risks, challenges and opportunities, as well as provide direction for regulators, legislators and researchers in responding to national priorities.

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8. The report was drafted jointly by the Policy Planning Staff of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) of the Ministry for the Armed Forces.

### ***Collaborating and co-ordinating at national and international levels***

A key area for potential activity is the facilitation of collaboration across and within governments. This can be pursued multilaterally, as illustrated by the Christchurch Call,<sup>9</sup> an effort to prevent the spread of terrorism and violence on social media platforms. In Europe, the European Commission's Action Plan against Disinformation promotes a co-ordinated response to the challenges of disinformation across Europe and focuses on how to deal with disinformation both within the European Union and its surrounding areas. It also seeks to "strengthen co-ordinated and joint responses to disinformation, mobilise the private sector to make sure that it delivers on its commitments and to improve the resilience of society to the challenges of disinformation" (European Commission, 2018c).

Putting the call for co-ordination into action, the European Union's Rapid Alert System (RAS) is an example of EU institutions and member states working together to facilitate sharing information on disinformation campaigns and co-ordinating responses. The RAS draws on insights from academia, fact checkers, online platforms and international partners, and is designed to increase public awareness of the threats posed by disinformation, flag serious cases to online platforms and empower researchers, fact checkers and civil society to carry out co-ordinated responses (EEAS, 2019). However, this platform is only allowed to act on websites or publishers external to the European Union, which limits its ability to react to home-grown threats. Other examples of European collaboration on responses to disinformation include the East StratCom Task Force, established in 2015 to counteract disinformation and strengthen the media environment<sup>10</sup> and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.<sup>11</sup>

Co-ordination is also important at the national level. Even if oversight is split between agencies, governments should focus on ensuring efforts are coherent and co-ordinated. For example, the US State Department's Global Engagement Centre responds to foreign disinformation threats, whereas other agencies cover domestic concerns, including a prominent role for the country's intelligence services. Governments can improve how they share the information they collect via intelligence agencies with social media companies. Ultimately, the solution to these challenges requires "collective responsibility among military, intelligence, law enforcement, researchers, educators, and platforms" (DiResta, 2018).

### ***Raising awareness and capacity to counteract disinformation***

Initiatives may also include the development of plans, toolkits and training materials focused on identifying and responding to disinformation campaigns. Often, these efforts take place in the run-up to elections. Before the 2018 Swedish elections, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency developed an assessment of the Swedish media landscape, a fact sheet about influence operations and a handbook on crisis communication. The Government of Sweden also worked with the police, election authorities and other agencies on detecting, reporting, countering and providing public information on the threats posed by disinformation (la Cour, 2018). In Costa Rica, the government developed a verification platform (Gobierno Aclara, or the "Government Clarifies") to counter anonymous content on social media (though they do not verify information produced by the media or journalists). In Colombia, the Electoral Registry of Colombia developed the #VerdadElecciones2019 strategy with media, universities and political parties to counteract disinformation (Berghella, 2019). In Australia, the Electoral Commission set up a cybersecurity task force and worked with social media companies to tackle misinformation prior to the 2019 general election (McGuirk, 2019). Electoral commissions may also consider extending support for political campaigns in their efforts to develop cybersecurity capacities and track disinformation.

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9. See: <https://www.christchurchcall.com/> for additional information.

10. See [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en) for additional information.

11. See <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/what-is-hybridcoe/> for additional information.

In 2019, the UK GCS developed a comprehensive approach to training civil servants on issues related to disinformation via the publication, *RESIST: Counter-disinformation toolkit*. The toolkit was designed to build resilience to threats by helping public communicators recognise disinformation, using media monitoring more effectively, carrying out impact analysis and delivering strategic communication to counter disinformation and track outcomes (GCS, 2019). In a different approach, during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Government of Spain introduced a mechanism to point users to official public health accounts following any search relating to the virus on Twitter.<sup>12</sup> Together, these examples represent an essential step forward in ensuring public administrations counteract disinformation more rapidly, strategically and effectively.

Emerging research also suggests that “pre-bunking” can inoculate audiences from false content when they subsequently become exposed to it. This approach entails pre-emptively exposing the public to small doses of misinformation within a context where related accurate information is being presented in a way that highlights their flawed reasoning (Roozenbeek, Van Der Linden and Nygren, 2020). This approach can be integrated with efforts by governments to communicate and to build counter-narratives to disinformation. By contrast, the effectiveness of countering or debunking individual rumours has been thrown into question by findings that it might attract further attention to the rumours themselves. According to some estimates, debunking may be more appropriate in cases where a piece of misinformation is already sufficiently widespread (over 10% of the population) and carries substantial risks (Jamieson and Albarracin, 2020).

## Regulatory responses

Another area of potential government intervention covers a range of regulatory responses. This is a broad area facing new questions in the changing technological and communication environment. Regulators need to consider both *how* and *when* to regulate – recognising that regulatory responses are not always clear, particularly when covering new markets and technologies. The rate of change in the media and communication sector is often faster than the rate at which regulation can adapt. Governments may need to develop new mechanisms by which they design, roll out, and enforce regulations, all while being conscious of the risks of stifling innovation before technologies mature or their effects become clear. To this end, they may also consider ensuring that the principles of open government apply to the realm of regulatory agencies.

An additional factor is the blurring lines between various regulated activities and emerging technological capabilities. For instance, most regulatory structures treat different media, such as radio, television and newspapers, separately. That system does not transfer easily to the new context, however, where technology can allow platforms to provide all of those services – plus others – at once (Ash, 2016). Finally, national regulatory responses are not necessarily able to match the global scope and reach of the online platforms.

In his blog post from March 2019 calling for a more active role for regulators, Mark Zuckerberg highlighted the need to focus regulation on harmful content, election integrity, privacy and data portability (Zuckerberg, 2019). There is a range of regulatory responses that are relevant for today’s environment. In addition to defending the freedom of expression, regulations can include (see also Figure 2.5):

- **using existing regulatory tools to promote effective media markets** (e.g. media ownership)
- **promoting collaboration between regulators** (e.g. regarding electoral issues and markets) **and new ways of working** (e.g. regulatory sandboxes, which provide

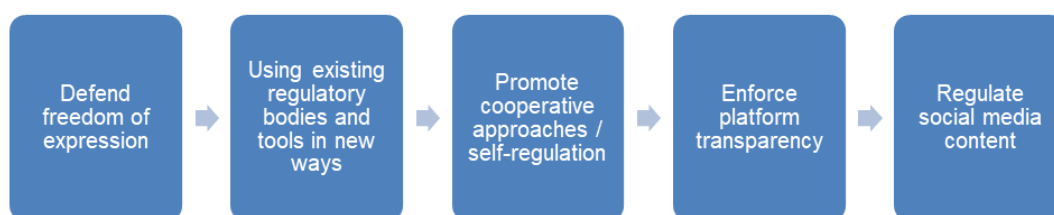
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12. Written comments submitted by the State Secretariat for Communication of the Presidency of the Government of Spain to the OECD on 22 May 2020.

space for regulators and businesses to work together to develop new regulatory models in rapidly changing industries)

- **promoting co-operative regulation and self-regulation**
- **expanding the transparency of social media platforms**
- **providing content-specific responses.**

**Figure 2.5. Range of relevant regulatory responses to combat disinformation**



Source: Author's own work.

As a baseline, effective governance and the rule of law requires that news media companies “operate within a legal framework that defends freedom of expression” (Nelson, 2017). Though protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the first amendment of the United States Constitution (among others), there is work to be done on this front, notably in OECD countries. For example, 9 European countries retain laws that criminalise insulting the “honour” of the head of state; 13 countries criminalise saying offensive things about government bodies; 14 countries have laws against blasphemy; and 16 countries retain laws prohibiting insults to state symbols such as flags (*The Economist*, 2016). The threats posed by the spread of disinformation raise questions about how to create a regulatory framework that mitigates the downsides to emerging technologies while upholding individual rights to speech and expression and ensuring citizens can benefit from the opportunities they present.

### ***Building on existing regulatory tools***

Though emerging technologies present regulatory challenges, governments have at their disposal a suite of tools and agencies to use in new and expanded ways. Ultimately, governments have a responsibility to foster healthy media markets within their countries that promote media independence, plurality and diversity. Regulating media markets is different from other sectors. Notably, “media markets should not only provide low prices, but also diversified and plural information. These two objectives can sometimes be conflicting. For instance, in order to attract advertisement, a newspaper might wish to please mainstream audiences at the expenses of minorities” (Pires, 2017). Identifying these trade-offs is the responsibility of country-level regulators and must be balanced carefully. Given political and governance implications, it is vital to ensure the independence of regulators.

Regarding new communication technologies, the historian Ann Applebaum (2019) notes:

*The question now is to find the equivalent of licensing and public broadcasting in the world of social media [...] This is not an argument in favour of censorship. It's an argument in favour of applying to the online world the same kinds of regulations that have been used in other spheres, to set rules on transparency, privacy, data and competition.*

To that end, governments can think about how to expand or link regulatory oversight from other areas to respond to the threats posed by disinformation. For example, efforts to prevent voter suppression, a common goal of disinformation campaigns, can be mitigated through preventing micro-targeting of political advertisements. Taking a holistic approach may be particularly relevant as countries seek to respond to the new challenges that cross commercial and technological boundaries that were previously clear.

### **Co-operative approaches**

Another approach is to identify new and co-operative ways to design regulations that are more responsive, relevant and effective. One avenue is to increase reliance on self-regulation and codes of ethics or practice (see Box 2.5 for the example of the European Union’s Code of Practice Against Disinformation). This can have the advantage of reducing information asymmetries between industry and the government; increasing the speed and flexibility of creating and updating regulations; and increasing compliance and reducing costs (OECD, 2015b). At the same time, the effectiveness of the self-regulation approach relies on a willingness of interested companies to compromise some of the advantages of an unregulated market in favour of effectively and fairly addressing the problem. Social media companies are suffering from lingering scepticism around their calls for regulation, having originally resisted any form of it.

#### **Box 2.5. The European Union’s Code of Practice Against Disinformation**

The European Union’s executive body has signed up technology platforms and ad industry players to a voluntary Code of Practice Against Disinformation. Several important technology players, including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mozilla, members of the European Digital Media Association (EDiMA) trade association and several advertising groups have committed to the proposed set of self-regulatory standards.

The code of practice encourages technology platforms to take voluntary action in the following areas:

- disrupting advertising revenues of certain accounts and websites that spread disinformation
- making political advertising and issue-based advertising more transparent
- addressing the issue of fake accounts and online bots
- empowering consumers to report disinformation and access different news sources, while improving the visibility and findability of authoritative content
- empowering the research community to monitor online disinformation through privacy-compliant access to the platforms’ data.

While the code of practice remains voluntary, this initiative highlights the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach and involving industry partners in efforts to combat online disinformation.

Source: European Commission (2019), “Code of Practice against disinformation”, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/code-practice-against-disinformation-2019-jan-29\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/code-practice-against-disinformation-2019-jan-29_en); Lomas, N. (2018), “Tech and ad giants sign up to Europe’s first weak bite at ‘fake news’”, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/09/26/tech-and-ad-giants-sign-up-to-europes-first-weak-bite-at-fake-news/> (accessed on 11 October 2018).

For example, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) developed a Code of Principles designed “for organizations that regularly publish nonpartisan reports on the accuracy of statements by public figures, major institutions and other widely circulated claims of interest to society.”<sup>13</sup> Developing codes of

13. See <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/> for additional information. At the time of writing, there were 48 verified signatories of the code as well as 14 expired ones.

conduct could also create opportunities to discuss programming and media issues related to non-partisanship, youth programming, crises, or elections (Sunstein, 2017). The newly launched Journalism Trust Initiative, spearheaded by Reporters sans Frontières, is a proposed certification system that would promote rigorous and reliable journalism through standards covering transparency and trust issues such as ownership, independence, revenue sources, journalistic methods and compliance with ethical norms.

Regulatory sandboxes and testbeds are co-creation processes “designed to help governments better understand a new technology and its regulatory implications, while at the same time giving industry an opportunity to test new technology and business models in a live environment” (OECD, 2018b). Notably, the French government and Facebook collaborated to allow the government to gain a better idea of how the social network monitors content (Marchal, 2018). Such “co-operative regulation” may become increasingly important given the complexity and critical democratic role social media platforms play. Importantly, this collaborative approach to developing regulation and intervention should draw in a range of stakeholders that include civil society, fact-checking entities, media and academic organisations (Koulolias et al., 2018).

### ***Regulating social media platforms***

Regulating social media platforms themselves can cover a wide set of approaches. Regulations may look to promote competition and remove barriers between online services and social media companies by requiring, for example, that users can transfer personal data between services (a concept known as “data portability” and a core element of the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR). Regulation may also seek to promote greater understanding of how sites work and how disinformation spreads. Examples include mandating that platforms share more information on how algorithms promote posts and advertisements, and about sources of funding for advertisements (such as the proposed Honest Ads Act currently being debated in the United States). Informing users about who pays for advertisements and whom the ads target can help detect outside influence. While these responses will not prevent co-ordinated disinformation campaigns on social media, mandating increased transparency can help shed light on the challenges and actors. Transparency can also increase regulators’ understanding of the platforms’ functioning and increase efficacy of measures.

Better defining and unifying the regulatory frameworks that apply to these new platforms is an important step in designing these interventions. In many countries, telecom regulators are the primary entities responsible for addressing disinformation on line, whereas media regulators have provisions on content that are increasingly relevant for social media companies. Overcoming fragmentation and better accounting for the hybrid nature of these platforms will be important to develop regulation that also protects the broader media and information ecosystem while responding to disinformation.

Due to the speed and extent of damage that bots can cause in spreading disinformation and distorting conversations on their own, governments may also wish to explore how social media companies can do more to curb anonymity and to ensure humans operate accounts. This can be done by promoting increased use of human verification systems, requiring bots to be labelled.<sup>14</sup>

Regulation may also seek to limit the harms and risks related to online targeting<sup>15</sup> (e.g. amplifying harmful content, promoting fragmentation and jeopardising data privacy) while reinforcing the benefits (e.g.

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14. See the European Parliamentary Research Service Panel for the Future of Science and Technology 2019 paper, “A governance framework for algorithmic accountability and transparency” for additional discussion of social media regulation.
  15. Defined as “a range of practices used to analyse information about people and then customise their online experience [...] which shapes what people see and do on line” (CDEI, 2020).

increased relevance of information, reach and participation in online conversations) (CDEI, 2020). Regulations may, for instance, seek to increase transparency around, or even limit, micro-targeting of political advertisements, as such approaches can increase polarisation and limit political discourse.

In its 2020 report, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, an independent advisory body of the UK Government, established a set of recommendations focused on promoting accountability, transparency and user empowerment with regard to online targeting. For example, the report suggested that regulators should develop a code of practice to set standards; require online platforms to assess and explain the impacts of their systems; require platforms to give independent researchers access to their data when necessary; and encourage platforms to provide citizens with more information and control over their data (CDEI, 2020). These types of approaches would likewise favour the adoption of open data in the context of disinformation and broaden the scope for non-government actors to open their data for the public interest, particularly social media companies. They would similarly codify central rules and values on how the right to information and freedom of expression should be upheld.

### ***Direct regulation of platform content***

**Finally, governments are increasingly seeking to regulate what can be said on social media platforms themselves. A number of OECD countries – including Canada, France, Germany and Italy – have recently proposed or passed laws that seek to outlaw disinformation or hate speech.<sup>16</sup> Given the complexity of implementing such policies with the right balance, governments should take note of these important efforts to identify what works and does not.**

**As highlighted by the** Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation set up by the European Commission, most policy responses to disinformation should be non-regulatory, as responses focused on content regulation present a range of problems that have implications for freedom of speech and the control of information. Regarding disinformation, UN human rights bodies “have made it clear that criminalising disinformation is inconsistent with the right to freedom of expression” (OSCE, 2019).

Furthermore, research suggests these laws may encourage platforms to remove too much information, which raises the threat that they may silence speech rather than risking liability by keeping potentially offending language on line (Keller, 2017). This risk is magnified by the role of privately owned social media companies performing a public service by serving as a venue for conversation and debate among citizens. Moving responsibility to private companies to decide what information is shared also “eliminates key legal protections for Internet users [...] Governments that outsource speech control to private companies can effectively achieve censorship by proxy” (Keller, 2017). **To fully understand any potential negative legal consequences for civic and media policy options, it will be valuable to compare laws that rely on the judiciary with regulatory bodies that rely primarily on self-regulation.**

### **Policy options for civic and media issues**

More widely, countries will also need to think carefully about how to ensure that the broader context – the media and information ecosystem – is conducive to promoting open government principles. Together, these efforts seek to ensure that citizens are informed, that their needs are represented and that they can hold government to account. An ecosystem that allows citizens to “come together (even virtually) to share information and discuss issues is critical for good governance” (OECD, 2014a); such an ecosystem supports democracy and good governance precisely because of its role in facilitating informed and engaged citizens.

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16. Helpful in this regard is the Poynter Institute’s **guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world**, available at <https://www.poynter.org/news/guide-anti-misinformation-actions-around-world>.

The public service function of media and information ecosystems is critical to supporting a country's "rational discourse". Habermas (1992) notes it should be "public and inclusive, to grant equal communication rights for participants, to require sincerity and to diffuse any kind of force other than the forceless force of the better argument." Effective media and information ecosystems must also represent and include all groups in society. The obstacles to this function might include restrictions on press freedom, insufficient response to market failures or lack of support for public access to the media, the inability of civil society to respond to facts brought to light by journalists and limitations in media literacy (Norris and Odugbemi, 2010).

To that end, the European Commission's Expert Group encourages most government actions in this field to focus on initiatives that strengthen "media and information literacy, digital citizenship, stronger independent news media and digital debate free from interference from public authorities and powerful private actors" (European Commission, 2018a). Above all, the recommendation is to take a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach focused on making society more resilient to disinformation. A range of responses that help establish environments conducive to transparency and participation are discussed below.

### ***Promoting transparency, access to information and open data***

The ability to access information and data is a key principle of open government. While this right serves as a foundation for efforts to increase transparency and enable understanding of public functions, it is also critical for enhancing citizen voice by supporting the other open government principles of integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation. Transparency allows the public and journalists alike to act as watchdogs by flagging problems and scrutinising actions and decisions. Transparency also facilitates stakeholder participation by helping to inform the public about issues that affect them. Overall, the ability of citizens as stakeholders to know and understand the actions and processes of their government is a fundamental element of democracy.

The benefits that access to information (ATI) can provide lie in "both the willingness of government to be transparent, as well as the ability of citizens to demand and use information" (Mcloughlin and Scott, 2010). A key stakeholder in this regard is the media. Specifically related to the role of the media, economist Joseph Stiglitz noted that journalists play a critical role in overcoming the "systematic distortions" between incentives for governments to withhold information as a source of power or to avoid embarrassment, and the incentives of the public to access information (Stiglitz, 2008). Public information is a good that can benefit society; however, to do so the public must be able to collect it, and the press should be free to publish it to increase transparency and hold governments to account (Stiglitz, 2008).

On a practical level, effective ATI systems allow journalists to pursue stories independently and provide an avenue by which to improve the quality of news coverage (see Box 2.6). Journalists most often use ATI laws when they "cannot obtain documents by other means [...] when they are interested in obtaining 'raw' or unprocessed information, or when they aim to reveal corruption cases or scandals in the political sphere" (Bertoni, 2012). Information gathered by journalists via ATI laws most often concerns the government's use of public resources, including social spending, travel expenses and environmental and health issues (Bertoni, 2012). Though ATI laws may not serve as the primary source of data for all journalists, due to the time it takes to submit a request, wait for a reply and process appeals, the existence of a robust ATI framework helps journalists to play their role effectively. Promoting proactive disclosure, by simplifying and speeding up the process, can, therefore, be particularly beneficial to journalists. It also democratises and expands the use of any disclosed information, which further benefits transparency.



### Box 2.6. Journalists' use of proactive information disclosure: EU farm subsidy case study

An example of the use of proactive disclosure of information on a large scale is the initiative to make EU subsidies transparent. A group of journalists filed access to information requests on the distribution of the European Union's EUR 55 billion annual budget for agricultural subsidies. This information was published on Farmsubsidy.org after its disclosure by several EU countries, including Denmark and the United Kingdom. Several stories were subsequently published that pressured other EU countries to share data despite their initial reluctance. The European Union eventually adopted a directive that made all information on subsidy allocation publicly available, making it possible to trace small and major recipients.

Source: Darbyshire, Helen (2010), "Proactive Transparency: The future of the right to information? A review of standards, challenges, and opportunities", *Governance Working Paper Series*, World Bank Institute, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/213798-1259011531325/6598384-1268250334206/Darbyshire\\_Proactive\\_Transparency.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/WBI/Resources/213798-1259011531325/6598384-1268250334206/Darbyshire_Proactive_Transparency.pdf).

Governments also need to consider how to promote transparency in a way that facilitates trust; merely increasing access to information will not improve governance on its own. The quality of the information and the way it is generated matters. Maintaining the independence of public data and research and promoting the expertise of statistics offices are additional key components in building trust in government and increasing the ability of the public to participate in the policy-making process, as noted in the OECD Recommendation of the Council on Good Statistical Practice (OECD, 2015<sup>[1]</sup>).

How information is shared, used, and its impact on the public will ultimately demonstrate the utility of being transparent about government decisions, programmes and services. Governments must also consider how to provide it in a way that makes it useful not only to citizens and media organisations but also for machines. The proactive publication of public sector information as open government data (OGD) can facilitate its analysis and application. Addressing social and policy challenges in the digital era requires that governments and other actors access, share and apply digital technologies and data as a means to address specific social challenges in a more agile fashion. For instance, Canada's open government portal has featured open data on the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to help evidence-based and factual information be disseminated at a time of rapidly spreading health misinformation.<sup>17</sup>

The World Bank noted that improving the targeting and timing of information provision can support greater accountability and responsiveness (World Bank, 2017). Citizens often have difficulty understanding – and journalists may have difficulty presenting – what they find. In part, this is a technical challenge, as journalists do not always know how to best to interpret data or how to apply visualisation techniques, nor do they always have the resources to do this. Journalists may also have difficulties translating raw data and technical information into content that is relevant and connected to their audiences' realities.

Solutions could include governments making an effort to build relationships with a diverse range of journalists, civil society organisations and academics so that all actors are aware of the types of information available and can explore ways to publish it in a relevant and accessible manner. Similarly, this relates to a need for reaching and engaging data journalists and relevant civic actors with OGD and providing an enabling environment for their work (OECD, 2017<sup>[2]</sup>). By contrast, the 2018 *OECD Open Government Data Report* suggests that in 18 out of 33 OECD countries, neither civil society organisations nor journalists were seen as priority stakeholders for outreach on OGD initiatives (OECD, 2018<sup>[3]</sup>). There is indeed a need to balance greater transparency with proactively ensuring that information is used and can be impactful.

17. Written comments submitted by the Government of Canada to the OECD on 25 May 2020. Portal available at <https://open.canada.ca/en/coronavirus>.

Such conversations would help ensure the right actors are engaged and that both public officials and journalists know their target audiences. Governments could also consider consultations with diverse news outlets (for instance broadening beyond the most prominent media organisations that typically account for the bulk of interactions and relationships) to facilitate understanding of what information would be of value and in what form.

### ***Support for media that expands voice***

Another range of policies seeks to ensure the transparent operation of the broader market in which news and social media platforms operate. Despite the increasing opportunities for the public to engage with news and information, many traditional media markets are shrinking rapidly, and only a few Internet and social media companies dominate their sector.

Over the last decade, countering media capture and “preserving an independent, diverse, and quality news media is a challenge even for the most committed democratic societies,” and is one that will require government responses to address (Nelson, 2017). As noted, local newspaper circulation in the United States has been declining steadily. In 2017, the audience for every media sector fell (except radio), and the circulation for US daily newspapers fell by 11% (Barthel, 2018). At the same time, Alphabet, Inc. (parent of Google and YouTube) and Facebook, Inc. together account for more than 50% of all digital advertisement sales in the United States, while the amount of money going to print advertising is projected to continue to decrease (Shaw, 2018). While not addressing this particular dynamic, competition policies being drawn up in different countries, and notably by the European Union, seek to mitigate the dominance of technology giants.

This bifurcation – between reduced market share and revenue for many traditional media outlets on the one hand and increasing dominance of news aggregators and social media platforms on the other – is a particular concern given the role media pluralism plays in supporting well-functioning democracy, good governance and reduced corruption. Indeed, “the media provides news and information, brings issues to the public agenda and facilitates debate and discussion [...] (and) serves as a watchdog for the public interest and holds state and non-state actors accountable” (OECD, 2014a). Media pluralism equally concerns the ownership of outlets, which is seeing some concentration and can sometimes be linked to entities that do not uphold the journalistic independence of their outlets.

Indeed, greater penetration of newspapers, radio and TV is associated with lower corruption (Bandyopadhyay, 2009), and a recent study showed that after a local newspaper closes, local governments face higher borrowing costs, independent of economic conditions. This is likely driven by increased waste, as local administrations face less oversight and can engage in less efficient financing arrangements without local newspapers holding them to account (Gao et al., 2018). Other evidence suggests countries that score well on the Press Freedom World Wide Index or that have high newspaper circulation also score better on international corruption indices (Stapenhurst, 2000; Brunetti and Weder, 2003; Bandyopadhyay, 2009).

In addition to ensuring the market is structured so that information can provide the most public good, governments can also consider how to support high-quality news provision, given its public benefit. For example, governments could offer support for Internet or local journalism through administrative simplification efforts or financial subsidies. Promoting a media ecosystem that supports the broader open government goals of transparency and accountability is not just a matter of considering the role of private media outlets and journalism. Ensuring that the media provides public benefits also requires models including not-for-profit foundations (such as Pro Publica) and public service media (such as the BBC) (Ashe, 2016). Notably, public broadcasters tend to have the highest trust scores, at least in countries where their independence is not in doubt (Newman et al., 2018). As such, public service broadcasters can contribute to good governance by providing information to the public, increasing voice for all segments of the population and promoting alternative views (McCloughlin and Scott, 2010).

Finally, governments can think more carefully about how to foster citizen participation in news production through citizen and community journalism, which can give voice to a wider variety of stakeholders. This phenomenon is already gradually evolving, enabled and accelerated by the ubiquity of digital platforms and an upward trend towards civic activism. Governments could support initiatives, both domestically and via international development support, that provide training to citizen journalists and to traditional outlets on how to manage engagement, or even provide grants to citizen journalism outlets. Ultimately, the goal is to identify ways to support new platforms and outlets to help ensure the media can play its fundamental role in supporting democracy (see Box 2.7 for relevant examples).

### Box 2.7. Examples of measures to support the media

As recent technological developments have had a profound impact on news competition, established business models and media consumption patterns, governments are re-thinking ways in which the media can be supported. Several countries have taken concrete measures to promote a more diverse media ecosystem, including:

- The French Government has introduced several measures to support the press, which include a year's free state-subsidised newspaper subscription for all teenagers from their 18th birthday, direct and indirect state aid, as well as subsidies to newspapers in the form of tax breaks (Chrisafis, 2009).
- In Sweden, the government supports provincial newspapers to ensure a diversity of voices in the media market (Nord, 2013).
- Austria has developed a set of guidelines under which the government assigns subsidies to newspapers that provide political, economic and cultural information (Greenwell, 2017).
- The Government of Norway is updating its subsidy plans and exploring a minimum set price for newspapers (Schiffrin, 2017).
- Canada's 2019 budget introduced a five-year tax package of CAD 595 million to counteract the increasing loss of jobs in news media. These measures would allow media outlets that are recognised as a "Qualified Canadian Journalism Organizations" (QCJO) to receive a 25% refundable tax credit on newsroom salaries and would also offer a personal income tax credit to Canadians who buy digital subscriptions (Pinkerton, 2019).

Source: Chrisafis, A. (2009), "Sarkozy pledges €600m to newspapers", <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/jan/23/sarkozy-pledges-state-aid-to-newspapers> (accessed on 10 October 2018); Nord, Lars W. (2013), "Newspaper competition and content diversity: A comparison of regional media markets in Sweden", <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/PADE/article/viewFile/42800/40659>; Greenwell, T. (2017), "Journalism is in peril. Can government help?", <https://insidestory.org.au/journalism-is-in-peril-can-government-help/>; Schiffrin, A. (2017), "How Europe fights fake news", <https://www.cjr.org/watchdog/europe-fights-fake-news-facebook-twitter-google.php> (accessed on 12 October 2018); Pinkerton, C. (2019), "Budget 2019: Budget reveals details of government's news media fund", <https://ipolitics.ca/2019/03/19/budget-2019-budget-reveals-details-of-governments-news-media-fund/>.

### **Media and digital literacy**

Notwithstanding the efforts made by governments, social media platforms and others to identify and prevent the spread of disinformation, users and consumers of news are ultimately responsible for differentiating between truth and fiction. Promoting media and digital literacy is, therefore, a key policy response to tackle the challenges posed by disinformation and inflammatory language, and fosters the benefits to online and social platforms. Beyond these goals, media and digital literacy are also essential enablers of citizen participation and informed engagement.

Media literacy refers to citizens' abilities to analyse, evaluate and create content. Ultimately, "the media can only be an effective accountability mechanism if citizens are able to use them. This includes access to media products and infrastructure as well as the ability to make sense of information" (OECD, 2014a). Media literacy efforts therefore seek to empower the public to become critical consumers of news to help ensure the media can fulfil its potential role to improve democratic governance (McLoughlin and Scott, 2010). Digital literacy, on the other hand, refers to the same abilities with regard to content in digital formats, as well as a basic use and understanding of common digital technologies. By empowering citizens to access and evaluate information and express their voice, media literacy – which can include digital and civic literacy more broadly – supports citizen engagement and knowledge, and ultimately open government principles.

A wide range of actors undertakes media and digital literacy initiatives. For example, governments can leverage work being done by international organisations (such as the publication, *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*<sup>18</sup> by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO]), NGOs, research institutions and other public interest groups to provide media literacy initiatives, or benefit from work developed by private companies (such as Google's Be Internet Awesome<sup>19</sup> curriculum). Other examples include the News Literacy Project and the Community Media Association in the United Kingdom, which is a representative body for the sector committed to promoting access to media for communities. Additionally, the Government of Spain has developed a guide for citizens in collaboration with its National Cryptology Centre.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, news organisations themselves, in particular public service broadcasters, are sources for education materials, activities and trainings. In Europe between 2010 and 2016, the European Audiovisual Observatory counted 547 media literacy projects implemented in EU member states, 40% of which were implemented jointly by more than one partner (government, CSO, media regulator, academia, etc.) (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2016). However, when it comes to digital literacy, actors including academia, journalists and social entrepreneurs would themselves benefit from promoting more widespread proficiency among their professions in the digital skills necessary for open science and research, data-driven journalism and civic tech (OECD, 2018<sub>[3]</sub>). Governments often directly provide relevant initiatives by introducing the topic into the education system or by establishing offices, campaigns or programmes to develop relevant skills to people of all ages. The European Commission High-Level Panel noted in its report that "for media and information literacy to be effective, it should be implemented on a massive scale in school and university curricula and in teacher training curricula, with clear methods of evaluation and cross-country comparison" (European Commission, 2018a). Such efforts, such as those by France's Ministère de la Culture, Belgium's High Council of Media Literacy (Conseil Supérieur d'Éducation aux Médias) and others generally seek to provide tools, training courses and engagement opportunities between students and journalists to increase resilience to disinformation. In Finland, the government has long been conducting initiatives to educate its citizens and pushing positive narratives to counter potentially dangerous narratives emerging from the Russian Federation long before the recent wave of disinformation (Standish, 2017<sub>[4]</sub>). Moving forward, the goal will be to expand on ongoing activities, as well as to identify what works and share good practices.

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18. See <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552> for additional information.

19. See <https://techcrunch.com/2019/06/24/googles-new-media-literacy-program-teaches-kids-how-to-spot-disinformation-and-fake-news/> for additional information.

20. Written comments submitted by the State Secretariat for Communication of the Presidency of the Government of Spain to the OECD on 22 May 2020. Guide available at <https://www.ccn-cert.cni.es/informes/informes-de-buenas-practicas-bp/3549-ccn-cert-bp-13-desinformacion-en-el-ciberespacio/file.html>.

### ***Multi-stakeholder participation platforms***

The lack of clarity on problems and solutions, combined with the complex, global and rapidly evolving nature of the problems faced, calls for a more conscious effort to facilitate collaboration between various actors. As noted by the European Commission, “the best responses are likely to be those driven by multi-stakeholder collaborations” (European Commission, 2018a). One role of multi-stakeholder platforms is to serve as a space for dialogue and engagement, to bring together governments, regulators, journalists and civil society to discuss and design relevant policies. For example, in Uruguay, broad-based civil society coalitions “leveraged the technical expertise of their members and focused on specific media issues such as freedom of expression or community radio. The strategic outreach to members of the national general assembly [...] allowed media reform bills to be authored, introduced, and advocated for” – and ultimately passed – with the feedback and backing of relevant civil society organisations (Rothman, 2014).

Similarly, deliberative democracy initiatives, such as citizen juries and assemblies, have the potential to encourage calmer, more evidence-based discussion (Suiter, 2019), as well as provide a pool of informed citizens who can effectively advocate and represent informed positions on divisive topics. Moving forward, countries could also ensure that offices and civil society partners focused on the open government agenda participate in identifying key reforms to promote openness and participation.

Because these challenges most often require responses that involve a mix of governments, CSOs, the public, and private companies, initiatives that bring together a wide range of actors can play a critical role in raising awareness, sharing knowledge and information and collecting data. The role of multi-stakeholder platforms is particularly relevant regarding identifying research needs. Topics to investigate include: understanding how information moves and is shared; how disinformation is created and spread, why and by whom; which responses are most effective; and what lessons can be drawn from previous technological changes. In addition to the value of increased direct funding for research, ensuring academia, regulatory bodies and other relevant agencies are engaged in conversations about research needs is a crucial step in promoting coherent and effective responses; one that would allow governments to ensure the creation of suitable policies.

Finally, one important group of organisations that seeks to directly counter disinformation and correct the public record are fact-checking organisations, and sometimes media outlets themselves. According to Duke University’s Reporter’s Lab, these organisations tripled between 2014 and 2017 (Stencel and Griffin, 2018). The International Fact-Checking Network, a unit of Poynter Institute specifically dedicated to bringing together and co-ordinating fact checkers worldwide, was launched in 2015 to support the increasing number of global initiatives, and at the same time to monitor trends and promote best practices and standards (IFCN, 2019). While there are not many direct roles governments can play in engaging with fact checkers, providing them regulatory space and leveraging their information and expertise, e.g. crises response, health care, or elections, can be useful.

# 3 Where do we go from here?

The rapid changes to ICTs and the scope of their impacts require governments to work with civil society organisations and technology companies to understand both the potential and the limits of governance responses to disinformation. The pace of change, however, implies that the suitability of solutions, whether pursued by social media companies, news organisations or governments, will be short lived. Even as policy makers, journalists and the public are coming to terms with the rise and omnipresence of online platforms, newer technologies, such as the growing application of artificial intelligence and more elaborate digital hoaxes that allow content creators to expand and hide their origins, will continue to be developed. Furthermore, images are increasingly being used in spreading disinformation, as are messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, both of which pose new regulatory challenges. This is why, above all, fostering and sustaining such a resilient and transparent media and information ecosystem is an essential part of combatting disinformation long term.

The changes to how people collect information, communicate and engage with each other and with governments brought about by the technological shifts are not short term or isolated and will present both new opportunities and new challenges. Therefore, governments should approach identifying policy responses as they do in other structural and cross-cutting areas: by identifying overarching goals and pursuing initiatives that help them move in the right direction. Countries' ongoing open government reforms and initiatives can play an important role in helping guide efforts to build trust across public institutions, as well as to respond to the challenges posed by disinformation and changing media ecosystems. To that end, the OECD has identified two key priority areas where its ongoing work promoting open government reforms can continue to be applied.

## Priority 1: Focus on the link between public communication initiatives and open government reform

As described under the first pillar of the OECD framework, one key set of responses consists of linking public communication initiatives more clearly to open government reforms. Public administrations should prioritise thinking strategically about how to move from classic public communication approaches to more strategic ones that focus on communicating in ways that increase transparency and participation, promote better policy making, and improve service design and delivery. Efforts could include developing strategies, policies, or guidelines for communication, especially ones that entail clear boundaries between public and political communication. This is in addition to ensuring appropriate management structures, funding and co-ordination mechanisms to support communication efforts that are grounded in principle and practice within an open government policy agenda. Working through existing open reform efforts, such as the OGP National Action Plans, is an important avenue to address reform.

## Priority 2: Continue to develop a greater understanding of the challenges, opportunities and range of policy options

Governments and international actors must also develop a more complete understanding of the range of regulatory, civic and media policy responses that can build resilience to disinformation. As noted by a leading researcher on the topic, "We have to move away from treating this as a problem of giving people

better facts, or stopping some bots, and move toward thinking about it as an ongoing battle for the integrity of our information infrastructure – easily as critical as the integrity of our financial markets” (DiResta, 2018).

To that end, governments will need to develop a better understanding of how technology and media companies are run, how disinformation is shared and its impact on the relationship between citizens and governments, how levels of trust in the key institutions of public life are changing and the effectiveness of various responses. Developing toolkits and guidelines specifically designed to identify and counteract disinformation is a promising approach that warrants additional examination. Equally important are efforts to share information on threats within and across national borders. The new media and information environment will demand collaborative, innovative and holistic approaches to policy making. Ultimately, governments should aim to take advantage of technological trends and to support media and communication ecosystems in an effort to increase transparency, engagement, integrity and trust.

## Key questions

In addition to the analysis above, the OECD has identified the following big picture questions to guide future research and work in this field, including:

- What kinds of problems – maintaining public safety, defending the freedom of speech, expanding access to information, etc. – are best suited for policy intervention in this area? What risks would be associated with intervening, or not intervening?
- How can governments best evaluate their policy responses; what would success in counteracting the threats posed by disinformation look like?
- What effect would other initiatives to expand civic space and citizen participation, e.g. deliberative democracy, have on pushing people to engage with diverse viewpoints, promoting participation in public life and building resilience to disinformation?

## The role of the OECD from an open government perspective

For its part, the OECD can serve as a space for experts from both the public and private sectors to share experiences and identify good practices. This is critical, as these pressing media and governance topics are international in scope. By facilitating dialogue between all relevant actors, the OECD hopes to identify effective approaches to tackling international media challenges. Acting in this role, the OECD can help link ongoing open government work promoting transparency and inclusiveness with the conversation around disinformation and managing new media and technologies through a multidisciplinary approach. Specifically, the OECD could undertake the following activities:

- **Build a global evidence base of challenges, opportunities and policy options.** The lack of globally comparative data on these topics limits the ability for governments to formulate theories of change or trend analysis. The OECD can provide evidence-based analysis of public communication practices and initiatives, as well as the related challenges of responding to disinformation. By using surveys and global data collection efforts, the OECD will be able to identify trends, successes and lessons learned across OECD countries and beyond. The goal would be to bridge the evidence gap on the contribution of public communication and media ecosystems for democracy and inclusive growth.
- **Conduct country-level reviews of how governments promote public communication and support media ecosystems.** Building on its analytical framework, the OECD is in a position to draft national-level reviews to assess the contribution of public communication and media and information ecosystems to transparency and participation. These provide analysis and recommendations based on cross-country learning and assessments from peers in other OECD

governments that bring perspectives from diverse contexts. The reviews may also examine the role of other relevant policy responses, including: ATI, government efforts to counteract disinformation directly and media literacy initiatives. Based on OECD good practices, the reports would provide policy recommendations to be discussed and implemented by national governments.

- **Offer a multi-stakeholder platform.** The interlinked and global nature of this topic highlights the need to include voices from across multiple sectors in discussing potential solutions. The OECD, as part of its Open Government Programme, is well placed to host a multi-stakeholder platform to bring together representatives from governments, regulators, media organisations, the private sector and civil society organisations. Together this diverse group could develop analysis, promote collaborative approaches and identify government policies and initiatives to foster the open government principles of transparency, responsiveness and accountability. Topics could include sharing media and digital literacy curricula, identifying research opportunities and analysing various regulatory solutions. Individual countries are not capable of tackling these cross-border challenges on their own; however, the OECD can play an important role in providing tools, data and analysis at a transnational level, and helping the international community shape its response with a long-term strategy that involves all relevant stakeholders. Such a multi-dimensional approach would highlight the role that governments and institutions play not only as regulatory bodies but also as both information disseminators and key actors in the process of rebuilding trust in authorities and institutions.



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