



World Forum
for
Democracy

World Forum for Democracy 2019

Is democracy in danger in the information age?

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We all have our harps to play. And it's up to you to know with which ear you'll listen.'
Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

Information is changing. The volume, the content, the platforms: each of these has evolved beyond recognition in a short period of time. This evolution continues. Twenty-five years ago, most of our information came from print publications, television and radio. Today, these are complemented, rivalled and often eclipsed by websites, blogs and social media. Well-known outlets have been joined by a plethora of new sources – including millions of individuals – that spread news with the click of a share button.

The questions we must address in 2019 are to what extent the information is reliable, whether this helps or hinders citizens in taking part in democratic processes, and what lessons we should learn for ensuring the free flow of information in the future.

As E. Rosenbach and K. Mansted of Harvard University point out: "*Democracy is built on the crucial compact that citizens will have access to reliable information and can use that information to participate in government, civic, and corporate decision-making.*"

1. Democracy Dies in Darkness: are we getting the information we need?

Freedom of expression and safety of journalists are essential to any functional democracy. As the number of attacks on journalists reaches unprecedented levels, states must effectively combat impunity for crimes committed against journalists. To what extent are our opinions and choices – including how we vote – really being shaped for us by the manipulation or fabrication of facts? In the Twitter era, can we still even distinguish between fact and opinion? A growing number of citizens, aware of being increasingly exposed to disinformation, fake news or propaganda, are worried about the authenticity of information in the digital age.

This new environment represents a challenge to the traditional media. How do they still defend the values that represent their profession: independence, the protection of sources, and the prioritisation of

investigative and field reporting for example? Or are the need to compete, the decline of fact-checking and economic pressure on their business model compounding the decline of quality journalism?

But perhaps this is all overblown. Is today's disinformation so different from the rumours and false facts that have always been circulated by other means? Is the internet simply a new platform for an old problem with the added novelty of content spreading easily and at lightning speed?

As much as fake news can propagate quickly on social networks, its rebuttal or verification can be triggered just as fast. The debate today is immediate, livelier and more reactive. Have modern times perhaps opened our eyes to different perspectives and healthy debate?

2. Information and the Future: lost in space or masters of our own fate?

Clarifying our thoughts on these issues is not just important for the here and now: it gives us a basis on which to interpret, shape or regulate information in the future.

Policies have been designed by civil society and governments around the world to stop the spread of false information, while safeguarding the right to freedom of expression and access to information. If technology spreads disinformation, it should be tamed. The new media and tech giants should be held to account, based on the need for transparency, responsibility and neutrality. Is it therefore justified, or even feasible, to mandate them with upholding specific standards of information – and who would decide on them anyway?

The global information and communication commons is a shared public good of significant democratic value requiring special protection. In the name of sovereignty should governments step in and regulate their own space? Or should the ideal of a common global information space prevail?

The fast development of algorithms and artificial intelligence adds to the complexity of the issue. At the optimistic end of the spectrum, can AI “clean” the information we receive and ensure neutrality? Maybe technology cannot be harnessed and trying to do so is a fool's errand. Perhaps we would be better off asking how individuals can better separate fact from fiction for themselves through education and awareness-raising.

Or could we shore up “reliable” sources of information as the best foil against the new media market? Would increased political or financial support for journalism at the local, national and even international levels give media professionals the confidence and resources to ensure that the facts cut through the noise?

By bringing together a diverse range of people and experiences the World Forum for Democracy can shed greater light on these challenges and build the shared understanding from which action grows. The relation between information and democracy is one of the great concerns of our time. Together, we can find ways to address it.