Combating misinformation and disinformation during elections

ONTARIO NONPROFIT NETWORK

One of the ways nonprofits can meaningfully engage in snap elections is to lead the way in tackling misinformation and disinformation, leveraging their role as trusted intermediaries in communities. More and more democratic processes around the world, including elections, are being influenced by misinformation and disinformation as people are relying heavily on information circulated online for their knowledge about the world.

Extreme views built on a global ecosystem of misinformation and disinformation are seeding divisiveness, distrust of institutions, and democratic apathy. In 2023, 59 per cent of Canadians said they were very or extremely concerned about any type of misinformation online, and 43 per cent felt it was getting harder to decipher online truth from fiction compared with three years earlier. Fighting misinformation and disinformation is increasingly important for protecting and activating a healthy democracy.

During a snap election, misinformation and/or disinformation may be floating around even more given the quick and unexpected arrival of an election and the short amount of time for people to learn about their candidates and political parties' stance on key issues.

Key definitions

- Misinformation: Inaccurate or misleading information spread without malicious intent.
- Disinformation: Deliberately false information intended to deceive.

Generally speaking, misinformation and disinformation fall under one, or more, of the following categories:
- Satire or parody
- Error
- False context
- False connections
- Misleading content
- Imposter content
- Manipulated content
- Fabricated content
- Sponsored content
- Propaganda

Why should nonprofits care about misinformation and disinformation?

- In an era where news and information are no longer exclusively communicated through traditional outlets, people are easily susceptible to misinformation and disinformation from uncredited sources.
- During elections, people tend to have more discussions about issues impacting them, such as housing affordability, cost of living, transportation, immigration, education, and more. At the same time, there can be a lot of voices competing for attention on podcasts, social media, online, and traditional news, making it even harder to get to the truth of what's really going on.
- Algorithms feed a lot of the content people see online and give people a lot of content they want to see - not necessarily showing the whole picture or multiple perspectives. This ends up creating echo chambers that reinforce existing values and perspectives, adding to an increase in polarization online with potential to spread misinformation and/or disinformation.
- The rise of artificial intelligence and its ability to rapidly spread misinformation and disinformation is becoming increasingly concerning during election campaigns. Social media and AI can be used to spread false or misleading information about voting procedures, ballot counting, candidacy withdrawals, and voter privacy. For example, in 2021, social media posts impersonated Elections Alberta during that province's municipal elections.

Nonprofits can combat misinformation and disinformation by

- Creating tools and resources to help voters understand and recognize misinformation and disinformation, and educate them on how to find good sources of information, how to fact check, and how to identify bots.
- Actively debunking misinformation and/or disinformation. When doing so, combine data and empathy: the facts provide evidence to support your case and the story connects to your audience. Disinformation often gets the facts wrong, but the feelings right. This might mean refreshing existing briefing notes, blogs, and factsheets you already have.
- Provide accurate information in multiple languages, when possible. For example, the nonprofit Refugee 613 operates an online info bank that provides a wide variety of resources in multiple languages. The language used to communicate information matters - sometimes it can make people consume the information or completely ignore it.

Additional resources

- ['Growing Mistrust': An Immigration Expert on Misinformation and How Our System Needs to Change](#) (TVO)
- [How Charities Can Tackle Misinformation](#) (The National Council for Voluntary Organisations)
- [Online Misinformation Is Adding to the Administrative Burden of Community Organizations - What Can They Do About It?](#) (Future of Good. Note: email address required to access.)

About ONN

ONN is the independent nonprofit network for the 58,000 nonprofits in Ontario, focused on policy, advocacy and services to strengthen the sector as a key pillar of our society and economy. We work to create a public policy environment that allows nonprofits to thrive. We engage our network of diverse nonprofit organizations across Ontario to work together on issues affecting the sector and channel the voices of our network to government, funders and other stakeholders.

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