



RESEARCH IN BRIEF

*How election
observers can
combat fake
news and
disinformation*



This research brief summarises new and existing research on the impact of fake news and disinformation on election observation. It was prepared by Daniel Munday, PhD Candidate at the University of Birmingham's International Development Department.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Fake news is a significant and growing challenge for election observers across the globe.
- To combat this phenomenon, election observers need robust definitions of fake news, as well as dedicated teams trained to identify fake news and its purported targets.
- Election observers and their international supporters should support local civil society groups and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to tackle online disinformation and fake news on election practices and outcomes.
- Election observers should ensure that the evidence that informs their reports and recommendations is accessible and visible to increase public trust and protect the legitimacy of observer missions.
- This new research is based on interviews with election observers and other experts worldwide, and detailed case studies of fake news in elections.



COVER

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Media interview Special Co-ordinator Sereine Mauborgne and OSCE PA Head of Delegation Reinhold Lopatka.

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Media and public at observer press conference, North Macedonia.

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The Commonwealth observation mission makes its interim statement in Mozambique, 2014.

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RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

Fake news is nothing new; those in power have long sought to shape electoral outcomes through state-run print and television media, for example. However, the advent of digital disinformation and the ability to produce, reproduce, and disseminate fake news online have emboldened those who are already predisposed to use underhand tactics in elections. This has led to a surge in attempts to mislead voters and to discredit election observers and their findings when they report poor electoral practices. The research summarised in this brief investigates the challenges that fake news creates for election observers, how they can respond to it more effectively, and its wider implications for electoral outcomes.

Patrick Merloe shows that fake news has become a dangerous tool designed to obscure the reports of election observers, drowning out their calls for action amidst a flood of false rumours and baseless conspiracy theories. Merloe argues for greater domestic and international cooperation with election observation missions to provide a stronger, more coherent, and unified approach to the dissemination of observer findings that challenge fake news and disinformation.

Ben Wagner explores the difficulty in regulating fake news online. He argues that election observer groups often tackle disinformation and fake news using outdated approaches that rely on the use of traditional media and on legal challenges through the courts. Such approaches fail to tackle the proliferation of online fake news, its rapid spread on social media and the difficulties in regulating such content.

Finally, a report by the Kofi Annan Foundation provides a systematic overview of how electoral integrity can be protected against digital disinformation. Exploring cases across the non-Western world, the Foundation argues that local actors, including civil society groups and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) need international backing and assistance in identifying and tackling fake news. Observer groups can also share best practice with each other on how best to address disinformation and publicise their findings to counter fake news and conspiracy theories.



METHOD

Merloe and Wagner both support their research by drawing on existing data, including documentation that outlines current approaches by election observers to tackle disinformation. The data are complemented by interviews with observers operating in countries that face pervasive disinformation and fake news. Interviews by Merloe highlight the tactics used to undermine the work of election observers, including controlling social media and internet space to prevent the reporting of election observer missions, and the funding and operation of 'zombie monitors' – organisations that legitimise fraudulent election practices on behalf of regimes and contest the evidence-based narratives of democratic observer missions. Wagner's interviews also illustrate these tactics, and highlight the challenges and stresses that observers face as a result of the spread of online disinformation and the alternative narratives generated by zombie monitors and fake news around fraudulent election practices.

Interviews by the Kofi Annan Foundation with election observers and international experts, alongside in-depth case studies from across the non-Western world, reveal the challenges of maintaining electoral integrity amidst fake news and disinformation. Recommendations are built upon prior best practices learnt from interviews with observers, EMBs, and civil society activists, as well as prior research from scholars who have explored the impact of fake news on electoral outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS

The research summarised in this brief highlights the serious challenges confronting election observers as a result of fake news and digital forms of disinformation. Interviews with observers find that they are often ill-equipped to mount an effective challenge to fake news seen online, whether this aims to cast doubt on the electoral process itself or delegitimise the work of observer missions. Official guidance for observers has failed to account for the sheer scale and reach of fake news online, which creates real difficulties for observers who are expected to present a clear assessment of electoral processes and outcomes.

For authoritarian leaders, fake news has become part of a coordinated process designed specifically to undermine trust in the work of election observers. Fake news also makes it increasingly difficult for citizens to gauge the truth about the electoral process, and whether the vote is free and fair. Merloe describes the widespread use of fake news as a 'fog' being placed over voters, where the lines between truth and fiction are increasingly blurred. It is becoming more difficult for the public to know which source to trust in reporting electoral outcomes, with the authority of election observer missions undermined by the spread of misleading rumours.

The impact of fake news is not new. However, the Kofi Annan Foundation stresses that while political polarisation is not in itself a result of fake news, that polarisation is exacerbated by the spread of disinformation, with countries that already have highly polarised societies or weak electoral integrity particularly susceptible to its damaging effects.

The creation and distribution of fake news online has become an increasingly attractive option for both incumbents and challengers in elections as it is a cheap and simple approach to shaping electoral results. It also does not entail the high political costs of more traditional forms of rigging, such as ballot-box stuffing or restrictions on polling stations.

Finally, it is important to note that those who create fake news – and who therefore delegitimise the work of election observers – do not always have a specific political goal in mind. For some, the production of fake news can be financially lucrative, particularly when such news is attached to important political events and elections.





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IMPLICATIONS FOR OBSERVERS

This research stresses that while election observers cannot stop the flood of fake on their own, they can help to counter its effects during electoral periods and protect the legitimacy of their findings. A more stringent approach needs to be taken by election observers and international actors to classify fake news, and produce robust responses. Fake news can never be stopped entirely, but better recognition – and stronger, more transparent, and evidence-based responses to counter it – have a key role to play.

First, international election observer groups should formally classify what constitutes fake news material, and clearly identify those who frequently produce such material. Countries that are susceptible to fake news, given their heightened levels of political polarisation or weak democratic credentials, should be identified by observer groups as being at a higher risk of pervasive and damaging fake news during election cycles.

Second, the development of a clear system of accountability and rapid response to such material is an effective way to discredit fake news and challenge its narrative at an early stage. Observer groups should develop international and dedicated teams to track and immediately challenge fake news as it is produced and disseminated. While some observers already use systems of accountability to combat fake news narratives, this process should be scaled up and adopted more consistently and more often during electoral cycles. The routine use of such a rapid response mechanism by election observers to combat fake news narratives during elections would not only alert them to the stories in circulation, but would also show countries that wilfully engage in such practices that the international community is serious about tackling online disinformation.

Third, it is crucial to engage and support local civil society groups and EMBs to identify and challenge fake news, with observer groups providing training for local groups to help them better identify fake news. Observers who have had experience in countering fake news in other settings should disseminate their findings and the best practices they have used to counter misleading information online. With a more technical approach to countering fake news online, observers, local civil society groups, and EMBs can demonstrate their legitimacy, rigour, and accuracy in observing and reporting on election processes.

Finally, while fake news can be pervasive and convincing, it often lacks any detailed background or evidence of the claims being made by its creators and purveyors. In contrast, election observers often have a clear paper trail of accountability and – very importantly—of transparency that provides evidence for their conclusions and recommendations during electoral cycles.

Election observers can be proactive in using their extensive and accurate documentation of electoral malpractice to discredit misleading narratives and disinformation. Observer evidence should, however, be produced in a clear and timely manner, and made more readily accessible to the general public to counter fake news narratives. While the easy availability of fake news for public consumption is a major issue, the legitimacy of observers can be protected, and the polarising impact of disinformation can be countered, by making observer evidence more transparent and accessible.



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CITATIONS

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ELECTOR is the Election Observation Research Network, based at the University of Birmingham. ELECTOR aims to foster a constructive and mutually supportive relationship between civil society groups, election experts, and international and domestic observers, enabling those working at the coal face of election observation to shape the direction of new academic research. ELECTOR is funded by the Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI). More information about ELECTOR is available on the website: www.elector.network



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