Article

The Global Majority Has its Own Counter-Disinformation Agenda

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Donald Trump's reelection is bound to reshape the global landscape for counter-disinformation. Almost certain changes to foreign aid budgets and priorities will mean a contraction in funding. Even beyond the borders of the United States, the 2024 US election will reshape the relationship between the tech sector and governments worldwide. Meta's [decision](#) to end its third-party fact-checking program is an early herald: it can be read as a sign of an emerging alliance between Silicon Valley and Washington against technology regulation and tech justice activism at home and abroad. Either interpretation diminishes the appeal and feasibility of the consumer-facing and techno-legalist solutions which have dominated the field for eight years. Against this backdrop, civil society in the Global Majority offers compelling alternatives.

[A new report](#) from the Global Technology for Social Justice Lab (GloTech) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst describes this alternative agenda, how it differs from previous approaches, and how Global North partners can best support Global Majority civil society organizations (CSOs) as they pursue it. Drawing on exchanges with 93 individuals in the field, it finds that Majority World civil society activists sometimes feel they are treated like digital dystopias or petri dishes for case studies by Global North researchers. Instead, they are ready to play the role of creative entrepreneurs, designing and pursuing locally sourced strategies in true partnership with international collaborators.

A Majority World agenda differs from that pursued by Global North governments and funders in several key ways. First, it eschews top-down techno-legal solutions that empower governments to impose legal controls on social media content. Activists around the world [warn against](#) relying on state power to mitigate disinformation, because in many contexts, courts, regulators, and legislators are adversarial to democratic institutions. Consider the rash of "[fake news](#)" laws in Asia and Africa restricting press freedom.

Framing disinformation as primarily a tech problem also has drawbacks. By portraying technology as [all powerful](#), it downplays citizen agency and promotes classist and anti-poor tropes about easily manipulated "uneducated" voters. These tropes ultimately alienate activists, journalists, and policymakers from the very public they are trying to serve. Big

Tech contributes to the disinformation problem, but it cannot be focused on to the exclusion of other factors. This observation extends easily to emerging concerns about artificial intelligence; the sooner stakeholders internalize it, the better. Platform-determinist frames also encourage donor investment in the counter-disinformation strategies often preferred by Big Tech itself, like fact-checking and media literacy. These approaches shift responsibility onto individual voters, who are then blamed for their media consumption habits.

Instead, a Global Majority-driven agenda focuses on resilience at the community, rather than at the individual level. Activists in the Global Majority say they would like to do more community-focused work than Global North donors currently support, and are too often shoehorned into strategies that use the same approach, for overlapping audiences, to diminishing returns. They call instead for more relational- and dialogue-driven approaches targeting communities outside the metropolitan areas where civil society is usually most densely clustered.

This agenda also takes aim at the economy in which disinformation is produced and considers how actors in that economy can be held accountable. This includes some level of accountability for big tech, but rather than focus solely on content moderation it also includes more scrutiny of illiberal political actors' digital advertising practices, strategic litigation against those who target and harass journalists and activists, exposure of the relationships between politicians and shady PR firms, and labor activism to reduce the draw of the exploitative digital jobs on which the disinformation economy thrives.

Finally, the Global Majority's counter-disinformation agenda is led by civil society, not governments. The structure of civil society coalitions matters: donor-led coalitions pursuing a single, mandated strategy are less desirable than multiple "big tent" coalitions, each of which draws on the diverse skill sets and constituencies of its members. In Brazil's 2022 elections, civil society coalitions were able to better influence the media agenda, encouraging journalists to tackle political disinformation more directly. Their coordination also allowed them to leverage strategic partnerships with powerful actors like the Supreme Electoral Court, which acted decisively to limit the spread of election disinformation. (This is, of course, not a relationship which civil society in every country can count on; context matters, too.)

Over the course of our research, civil society in the Global Majority expressed their gratitude for the support of partners in the Global North. But those partnerships could be better. A starting point would be to fund civil society coalitions on their own terms, rather than dictating approaches to them. They can also offer support consistently between election cycles: many participants in our research noted that even successful projects often face layoffs after election season passes. And funders and research institutions should

support more opportunities for exchange between practitioners and researchers within and between Global Majority countries, helping to fill an oft-noted gap.

The agenda described above is not a "second best" approach for countries where the state is adversarial or regulatory power is weak. If anything, Donald Trump's reelection should demonstrate the shortcomings of techno-legal approaches to disinformation, illiberal populism, and democratic backsliding. Such approaches can backfire if they give too much power to government agencies or neglect the broader social, economic, and political context that allows disinformation to thrive. It is precisely the Global Majority's aversion to techno-legal fixes that gives rise to the creativity of its civil society. The world should take note.