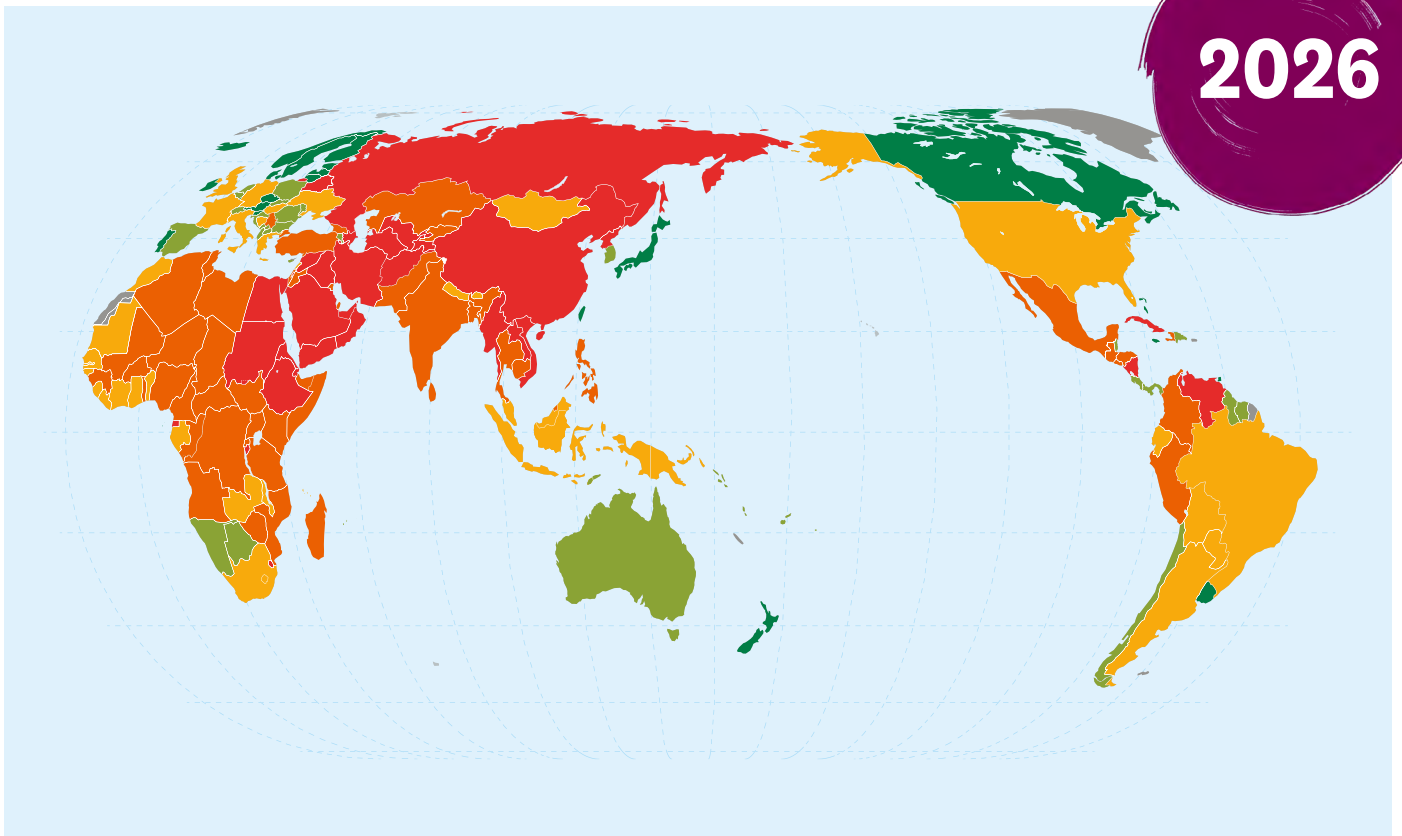


Analysis from the Atlas of **Civil Society**

2026



Focus Disinformation

How it Affects Civil Society Space

Imprint

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Preface



The space for civil society is shrinking — in some countries this is taking place gradually, in others, with brutal force. This is shown in the Analysis from the Atlas of Civil Society 2026 you have in your hands. Worldwide, we are witnessing governments tightening laws, vilifying organisations, cutting funding and intimidating people who defend democratic values. Shrinking space is no longer an abstract concept, but the lived reality for millions who are dedicated to human rights, social justice and democracy.

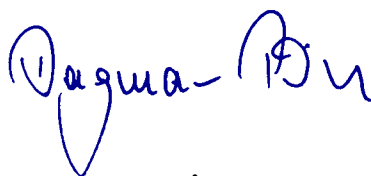
A key part of this trend is disinformation. Disinformation undermines trust, divides societies and frequently portrays civic engagement as being elitist, controlled by foreign actors or even subversive. Deliberately disseminated misinformation discredits non-governmental organisations (NGOs), criminalises protest and justifies repressive measures. Where lies prevail, freedom of expression, assembly and association come under pressure. The digital space, once a beacon of hope for networking and participation, is increasingly becoming an arena for orchestrated campaigns against open society.

Our partner organisations in the Global South are feeling the consequences of this on a daily basis. Disinformation is having an impact here in Germany, however: for example, when development cooperation work is deliberately and falsely discredited by specific interest groups as wasteful or ideologically motivated.

Despite current developments, activists and human rights defenders the world over are resisting this narrowing of the public sphere with courage, creativity and solidarity. They are documenting human rights violations, exposing disinformation networks and creating safe spaces — both online and offline. They are also strengthening media literacy, supporting fact-based debates and building international alliances to highlight the attacks and raise public awareness. At the same time, they are embracing new technology. Artificial intelligence is being used to identify misinformation more quickly, analyse bot networks and expose manipulated images or videos. In this way, technology can be a tool for enlightenment — rather than oppression.

In Germany, too, people are campaigning to protect spaces for civil society: through educational work, political advocacy, international partnerships and public solidarity with organisations that are being threatened. They are countering disinformation, strengthening the culture of democracy and standing with those whose voices are being silenced.

An active civil society strengthens confidence in both institutions and democracy, and contributes to sustainable development. That is why it is so essential for it to be sustained — both here in Germany and worldwide.



Dr. Dagmar Pruin
President of Brot für die Welt



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Disinformation is eroding civil society space world-wide — and thereby undermining democracy and sustainable development. Governmental and non-governmental actors are using fake news and false narratives to attack, vilify and silence civil society. But those affected are fighting back.

Our political demands page 36

Governments and parliaments world wide must ensure an enabling environment for civil society and guarantee civil liberties as well as a resilient information society — both at home and abroad. They ensure robust democratic structures, regulate online platforms responsibly and uphold media literacy and a free press.

An authoritarian offensive is changing the fabric of the world — and targeting everything that democratic civil society stands for.

Part 1 — The global situation

Attacks from centres of power



A Serbian citizen at a demonstration in Novi Sad on 5 September 2025, protesting against the government of President Aleksandar Vučić and police violence. Over a period of several months, protesters have been calling for media freedom and transparency, accountability from those in power and fair elections.

Authoritarian front

Universal human rights as a global project are under threat worldwide — and the same applies to the people standing up for them. This is due to the fact that in many countries, an authoritarian front has formed which has succeeded in penetrating the centres of political, military and economic power.

These autocratic actors, including a number of governments, are now vehemently opposing everything that large sections of democratic civil society worldwide stand for: redistribution and anti-discrimination, equal opportunities, ecology and climate protection, employment rights, press freedom, aid for refugees and land rights. Where autocrats were once on the defensive, it is now liberal democracies, progressive civil society and human rights defenders that are under pressure.

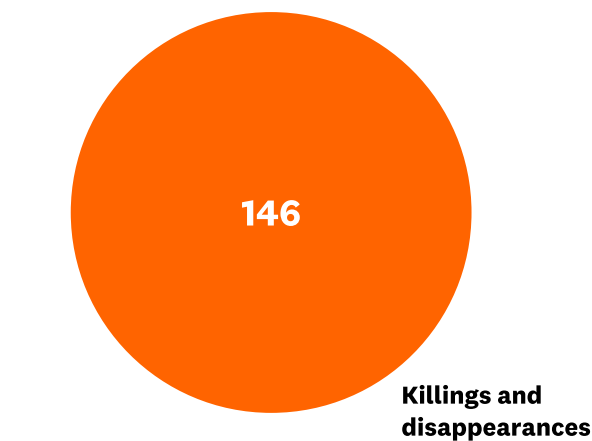
The situation is particularly dangerous for those defending human rights and land rights, campaigning for the pro-

tection of the environment or taking action against illegal mining or deforestation (see chart 10). Institutions which are supposed to protect the vulnerable and control the powerful are losing their ability to enforce the law. Repression continues to increase.

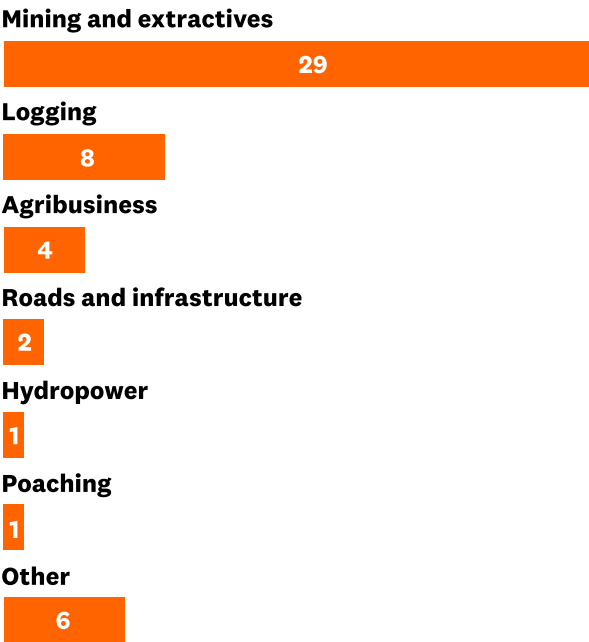
The rise of autocracy in the Global North

This rise of autocracy has now reached the Global North as well. Since President Donald Trump's second term in office began, the US has been at the forefront of this trend. With posts on X such as "He who saves his Country does not violate any Law", Trump made it clear that he doesn't feel bound by any legislation. He has been responsible for the terrorising of migrants by the paramilitary-style ICE — and explicitly exempted the agency from any accountability. Trump's administration has attacked universities, civil servants, NGOs and the media. For the latter, the White House

Killings of land and environmental defenders in 2024



Killings and enforced disappearances by sector
51 documented cases* in total



Where did the murders occur and how many were there?

Columbia 48	Liberia 3
Guatemala 20	Russia 1
Mexico 19	India 1
Brazil 12	Venezuela 1
Philippines 8	Argentina 1
Honduras 6	Chile 1
Indonesia 5	Madagascar 1
Nicaragua 4	Turkey 1
Peru 4	Cameroon 1
Democratic Republic of Congo 4	Cambodia 1
Ecuador 3	Dominican Republic 1

*95 of 146 cases have not been resolved
Source: Global Witness, Roots of Resistance, September 2025

even has a special page on its own website where it names and shames journalists as “Media Offenders”.

This process has been accelerated by the merging of political, economic and media power — worldwide. Opinion-shaping social media organisations such as Meta and X are following Trump’s lead. In doing so, they are reinforcing the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation (see the “Focus” chapter from page 12) as drivers of authoritarian restructuring.

A crisis of international cooperation

The US is withdrawing from international cooperation. After taking office, President Trump suspended cooperation with the UN Human Rights Council and imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC). He had judges and prosecutors at the ICC subjected to “digital erasure” and barred from using cloud and payment services because they were investigating US soldiers in Afghanistan and members of the Israeli government. In January 2026, the US withdrew from 66 UN organisations.

The sweeping cuts to foreign aid and the dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) are affecting programmes on health and gender equality, as well as projects that support democracy, human rights and good governance worldwide — including many partner organisations of Brot für die Welt. US diplomats working on these issues have been sacked and US human rights reports rewritten to protect allies and condemn opponents.

A country that once took pride in its democratic principles is setting an increasingly negative example. Trump is accelerating the erosion of global standards of human rights and the multilateral architecture designed to uphold them. He is fueling authoritarianism, geopolitical rivalries, wars and humanitarian crises. Authoritarian regimes are feeling emboldened to reshape the international human rights system to suit their own ends or to starve it of financial and political support.

Huge cuts to foreign aid

The cuts in funding for human rights, peacekeeping and environmental and developmental NGOs — which have been exacerbated by President Trump — are just as grave. These organisations require long-term, reliable funding. Yet according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, based in Washington DC, the US alone cut its aid for international programmes in the areas of the rule of law and human rights by 75 per cent from 2024 to 2025. For the same period, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recorded a 23 percent decline in official development assistance (ODA).

Germany, one of the last major donors of development aid, has also decided to make further cuts to development cooperation and humanitarian aid in 2026. In 2024, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States all cut their public funding for development cooperation for the first time in almost 30 years.

Organisations working towards gender equality have been hit hard. According to UN Women, in April 2025, some 90 percent of women’s rights organisations were struggling with financial shortfalls, and support services for victims of gender-based violence were being scaled back. Half of the organisations feared they would soon have to cease their work (see page 22).

23%

less money for development cooperation

In Colombia, for example, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) was forced to dismiss almost half its staff, according to Human Rights Watch. NGOs suspended projects and withdrew from conflict-affected regions; government agencies were also affected by cuts. Colombia is home to approximately 7 million internally displaced people and 2.8 million refugees.

The rise of the far right

Prior to the corruption trial of Marine Le Pen in France in January 2026, emissaries of US President Trump personally put pressure on the presiding judge. Globally, support from sympathetic governments is giving far-right movements and parties a boost. As a result, their attacks on ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities are on the rise. These groups remain the target of online hate, false claims and defamation (see Focus from page 12), calls for violence, doxxing, as well as physical violence and murder. This is also affecting civil society organisations working to support the rights of marginalised groups — and strengthening the extreme fringes of society. Extremist propaganda is radicalising individuals and groups, who are increasingly committing violent crimes, including terrorist attacks.

“Progress in the fight against poverty and achieving food security is being jeopardised by global cuts in funding.”

Dr. Dagmar Pruin, President of Brot für die Welt



Maria Elena Belmonte Cruz of the Mexican NGO Consorcio Oaxaca on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, 25 November 2025.

Gender-based hatred as ideological glue

Anti-feminism and anti-queer sentiment are among the key building blocks of an authoritarian agenda everywhere. In Ghana and Uganda, for example, anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, enacted partly with the influence of churches and Muslim religious leaders, are clear statements against so-called Western values. In Russia, hostility towards queer people is an expression of nationalism. In Brazil, the “Bolsonaro effect” continues: anti-gender campaigns are bringing together radical Catholics, white members of the upper class and other groups. This shows how governmental and non-governmental actors are working against fundamental freedoms and a progressive civil society. In other words: not only governmental actors are responsible for restrictions and violence against activists and human rights defenders.

Laws targeting civil society

Existing legislation which stands in the way of the authoritarian agenda is increasingly being flouted. Even worse, governments in many countries are enacting new laws targeting NGOs. In 2025, this was particularly evident in Latin America. Excessively strict regulations are increasingly being passed that are designed to control NGOs’ finances and restrict their activities. This is often taking place under the pretext of controlling foreign influence by combating alleged “agents” (see page 17).

In Ecuador, for example, the “Organic Law on the Control of Irregular Capital Flows”, which came into force in August 2025, broadly links NGOs to terrorism. The legisla-



On 21 September 2025, environmental activists took to the streets of Bandung, Indonesia, to protest against the climate crisis, environmental destruction and social inequality. The protests were also directed at the policies of President Prabowo Subianto, which are perceived as increasingly authoritarian.

“Argentine civil society is very strong! I firmly believe this to be the case, even though Milei’s authoritarian tendencies are undoing much of what has been achieved.”

Paula Litvachky, Director of the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), Buenos Aires, Argentina

tion empowers the government to seize assets and dissolve NGOs. Legal measures designed to harass and undermine NGOs have also come into force in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. Similar trends can be seen in Indonesia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Angola.

Terrorism as the excuse

Following the 2024 Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, Georgia introduced two further laws in 2025 which made it more difficult for NGOs funded by other countries to operate. Under the amended “Law on Grants”, the government has since been able to decide on projects. Only once it has approved a project is the NGO permitted to accept funds from foreign donors. If the organisation ignores this and accepts the money anyway, according to the Georgia Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), it faces a fine totalling twice the amount of the grant. The “Foreign Agents Registration Act” requires NGOs to register as “foreign agents” if they receive funding from foreign countries. They must also submit any publication to the Anti-Corruption Bureau within 48 hours.

With the stated aim of combating terrorism, many countries are increasing the powers of the police and the secret services. The concept of terrorism is often being interpreted very broadly or defined inaccurately. Surveillance and house searches have been made easier, whilst peaceful protests

and opposition activities can be criminalised. Organisations defending human rights, democracy and minority groups have been labelled as “terrorists” or “extremists” in order to delegitimise or ban them.

In India, human rights defenders have sometimes been held in detention for years without trial. The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act has been systematically abused in order to charge them with alleged support for extremist groups.

In Russia, hundreds of cases alleging support for terrorism are pending against journalists, LGBTQIA+ individuals and returnees from exile. Torture is being used as a tool of repression, with its victims being denied medical treatment.

The power of the judiciary is also being exploited far beyond the scope of anti-terrorism legislation: Zimbabwe’s new Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Act, for example, prohibits NGOs from “supporting” or “opposing” a political party. In June 2025, the trial of journalist Blessed Mhlanga got underway: he was accused of “inciting violence” after granting airtime to a dissident to make statements critical of the regime.

In Cambodia, at the end of April 2025, the Supreme Court rejected a request for release on bail from five imprisoned activists from the “Mother Nature” organisation. They had previously been sentenced to between six and eight years in prison in July 2024 on baseless charges. Five other convicted members of the NGO are currently living in exile.

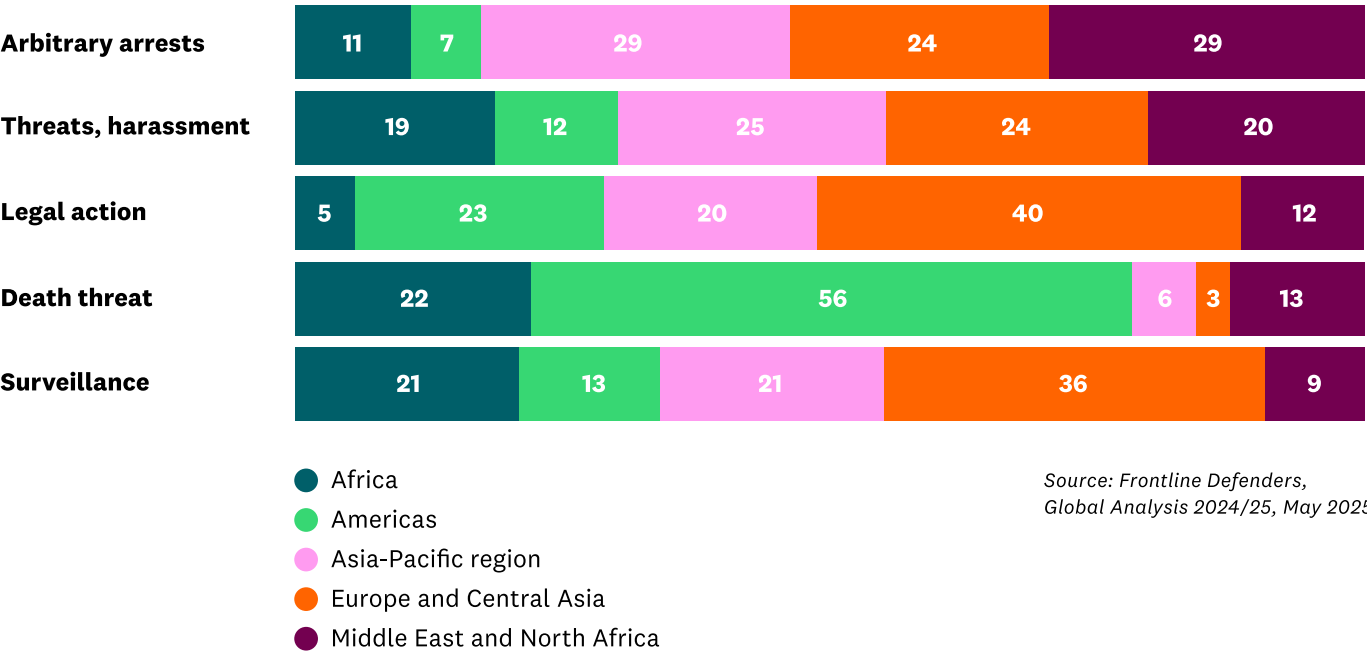
In this climate, the degree of physical repression against activists and human rights defenders is also increasing. Front Line Defenders also documented widespread repression in 2024 (see infographic below). In 2025, police in

Mexico, Serbia, Peru, the Philippines, Paraguay, Kenya, Indonesia, Georgia and Argentina, among other countries, used excessive force and violence against protesters.

Exile offers no protection

Repression is increasingly affecting those already in exile. Since 2023, Nicaragua has stripped more than 450 opposition figures of their citizenship, and over 400,000 people have fled the country. In June 2025, the exiled government critic Roberto Samcam was shot dead in Costa Rica. In January 2025, unknown assailants murdered Lim Kimya, a former MP of the banned Cambodian opposition party CNRP, in Bangkok. Kenyan activist Mwabili Magodi was the victim of forced disappearance in Tanzania on 23 July 2025. On 8 October 2025, armed men abducted Kenyan activists Bob Njagi and Nicholas Oyooals in Kampala. These and many other cases show that sometimes even fleeing one’s home country fails to offer protection.

Human rights violations against human rights defenders according to world region in 2024, as a percentage



Source: Frontline Defenders, Global Analysis 2024/25, May 2025

Part 2

Focus on disinformation

Lies fuel anger and hatred, and in the worst case, cost lives. Disinformation threatens democracy and acts as a catalyst for other crises. Civil society is seeking ways to protect itself.

Faster, further, more devastating

Lies and propaganda didn't start with the invention of the world wide web. However, their destructive power is greater today than ever before: in a globally connected world with social media and easy-to-use artificial intelligence (AI) tools, the motto when it comes to fakes, lies and disinformation appears to be "more, faster and further". Fakes are cheap and quick to create and require little technical expertise; their dissemination is even facilitated by the algorithms of the leading social media platforms. Moreover, due to the rapid development of AI, they are becoming increasingly difficult to expose.

Fakes, allegations of fake news and disinformation are now playing a role in almost every crisis and every war. This became clear to the whole world during the coronavirus pandemic; disinformation is also being put to targeted use in the conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and Sudan.

Autocrats, extremists and populists routinely attack reports by critical media outlets or academic studies as being "fake news" — and cast doubt on reports from civil society organisations. There are plenty of examples of this: Venezuela's former dictator Nicolás Maduro, Russia's ruler Vladimir Putin and the ousted Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad have used — or continue to use — accusations of "fake news". Leaders of democratic countries such as American President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Hungary's former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Poland's former President Andrzej Duda are also among those who have launched similar attacks.

Those who spread disinformation — and this not only includes governments but also non-governmental actors, companies, civil war factions and "uncivil society" (see box on page 15) — are very active and often well-connected. They benefit from the fact that emotional, polarising content often receives more attention online than carefully verified information. Thus, disinformation is gradually shifting public discourse: away from facts, and towards outrage and distrust and a sense of paralysis in civil society.

The World Economic Forum in Davos publishes a Global Risks Report every year. The report surveys more than 1,300 experts from the worlds of academia, business, government, international organisations and civil society. Its 2025 report identified the dissemination of organised lies through disinformation and misinformation as posing the greatest short-term risk to the global economy.

Devastating consequences

The impact of disinformation on civil society is devastating — and as varied as its many different forms. Fake news reports give rise to fear and panic. They fuel resentment and hatred towards social groups. The result is insults, threats and violence. This often affects people who are already being discriminated against and persecuted.

Civil society organisations are frequently targeted by disinformation precisely because they campaign for democracy, climate protection and human rights, and in doing so often challenge the existing balance of power. This makes them many enemies (see page 16). Partner organisations of Brot für die Welt also report that disinformation has been making their work more difficult and, in some places, virtually impossible.

In the long term, disinformation systematically undermines democratic processes, institutions and structures. It also prevents a democratic consensus from being reached on global challenges such as the climate crisis, gender inequality and migration — and thus stands in the way of viable solutions (see page 40 et seq.). Disinformation erodes trust in scientific facts, the media and civil society. It fuels polarisation and radicalisation.

This, in turn, makes it more difficult for civil society to operate on the basis of substantiated facts, to inform the public and to formulate policy demands. Organisations and activists are finding that their studies, data and demands are being given less attention — and that they are losing support among both the general public and decision-makers.

Disinformation

"Fake news" has become a buzzword for attacks on press freedom, rumours and lies. A more appropriate distinction is as follows:

- Disinformation refers to the deliberate dissemination of fake news and lies — with the clear intention of deceiving people.
- Misinformation, false information or inaccurate information refer to the unintentional dissemination of false claims.

Lies jeopardise SDGs

In the field of development cooperation, too, disinformation is shifting the discourse and influencing political decisions. In Germany, for example, targeted political attacks appear to have permanently altered the narrative — leading to simplistic misrepresentations and populist exaggerations. This has undoubtedly played a role in the drastic cuts to development cooperation funding in both Germany and several other countries such as the US.

According to an analysis published in March 2026 by the Centre for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS), conspiracy-theory-driven, pro-Russian and far-right groups have been playing a significant role in discrediting development cooperation. For more than ten years, official bodies, state-run media and other actors from Russia have frequently defamed Western development cooperation — often using messaging services such as Telegram — with the aim of eroding trust in state institutions.

CeMAS has found that development cooperation is being “portrayed as corrupt and wasteful, including through sweeping, unsubstantiated claims”, and linked to issues “that far-right actors are using to mobilise their supporters: migration, Islam, climate change and gender”.

And the CeMAS study also shows that development cooperation isn’t “only” being discredited in the donor countries of the Global North, but also in the Global South. In 2025, for example, the Brazilian neo-fascist organisation

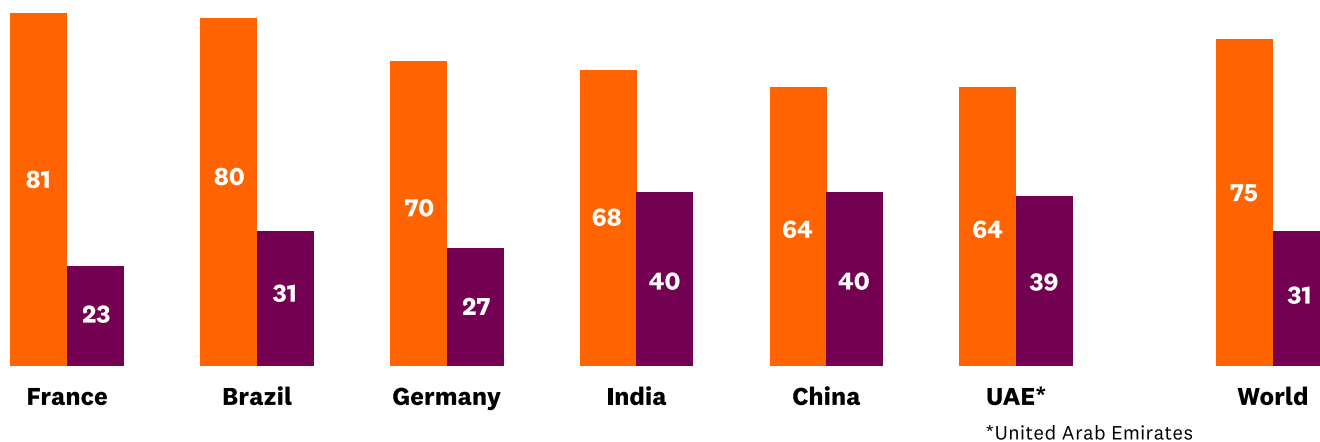
Nova Resistência claimed on its website that Germany was funding the construction of a stadium in Brazil to the tune of 1.4 billion euros — which was, of course, entirely untrue.

Disinformation is ultimately contributing to the world’s failure to achieve the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is clearly illustrated by the example of USAID: shortly after taking office, to justify the dissolution of the US Agency for International Development, the Trump administration claimed that it had been responsible for the large-scale misuse of taxpayers’ money.

A study published in July 2025 in the medical journal “The Lancet” estimates that the cut in US funding for development cooperation could lead to more than 14 million preventable deaths worldwide by 2030. Hundreds of thousands of people are said to have died in the first few months following the end of USAID alone.

Considerable distrust, little scrutiny

75 percent of internet users worldwide are worried that results of AI programs could be wrong. Yet only one in three checks them. A survey by country, in percentages.



- Respondents are worried that AI generates false information (such as deepfakes).
- Respondents check AI results to ensure that they are accurate and reliable.

Source: Ernst & Young, EY AI Sentiment Index 2025

“It just gets forgotten in a culture of hatred”

Jeyra Marie Morallo from our partner organisation, IDEALS



Ms. Morallo, the government of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte waged a “war on drugs” which lasted several years and cost many lives. To what extent is the process of coming to terms with human rights violations such as these being hampered by disinformation?

JMM: We support many people who were the victims of Duterte’s persecution and who continue to suffer. This work is made more difficult by the fact that, to this day, there appears to be no collective memory of the “war on drugs”. Every time we publish a story about the victims, we receive numerous comments from users who simply don’t believe what happened to the families or who continue to harass them, accusing them of lying and saying that they deserved to die. Behind these posts are people who are staunch supporters of Duterte’s brutal government. In short, we are witnessing a widespread, systematic distortion of events. Duterte’s presidency shaped how people perceive what happened between 2016 and 2022. This remains the case to this day.

Has anything changed with the new government?

JMM: Little has changed. Considerable disinformation continues to circulate surrounding the forthcoming proceedings against Duterte at the International Criminal Court. It is claimed that Duterte will return home, that he will be acquitted and that the ICC isn’t legitimate. Narratives of this kind remain very prevalent. On top of this, the

current government isn’t really making any effort to repair the damage that has been done to our political culture and our collective memory, or to change the Philippines’ view of human rights.

Where else is disinformation playing a role in the Philippines?

JMM: In elections. Elections have been heavily affected by disinformation. Duterte’s daughter and other politicians are already preparing for the 2028 elections; they have, in effect, already launched their campaigns. In the run-up to the 2022 elections, a large number of AI-generated videos circulated and many people believed them.

How is disinformation affecting civil society in your country?

JMM: Civil society organisations in the Philippines have limited financial resources, no significant infrastructure and no real power base. We all work within the few remaining spaces for human rights in a culture which is generally characterised by impunity. Many of us rely on international funding, but resources have become scarcer. We will only succeed in countering the disinformation machine if we have sufficient resources, though.

How have you experienced disinformation at IDEALS?

JMM: In a culture of hatred on social media, and this applies to Facebook in particular, our stories are simply drowned out. This hits those directly affected by Duterte’s human rights abuses and the survivors of it the hardest. They are the real victims of disinformation.

How are you dealing with the disinformation? Has IDEALS developed any strategies to counter these attacks?

JMM: We try to counter the dominant narratives with our own stories and make a point of focusing on the experiences of the victims and survivors. We also hold media literacy workshops in which we train young people, community members and aspiring journalists on how to report on human rights. Last year, our scholarship holders made more than 100 documentaries as part of the “Mulat Youth Human Rights Storytelling Programme”. It is these young storytellers who are telling the truth and countering disinformation within their own communities.

Jeyra Marie Morallo, Media And Communications Officer at Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS), Philippines (<https://ideals.org.ph>)

Disinformation as a lethal weapon

Autocratic governments are making intentional use of disinformation to silence civil society and to justify acts of violence against critics.

In many countries, disinformation campaigns are being used to intimidate and silence democratic civil society. These disinformation campaigns are designed to cause lasting damage to its credibility. They are being orchestrated by internationally networked groups and think tanks, as well as political parties, government bodies and corporations.

The consequences are as varied as they are dramatic. Some organisations have found themselves forced to self-censor. They have been threatened with financial sanctions or bans on their activities. Warding off attacks and putting the necessary security measures in place takes up time and resources. Employees struggle with the psychological impact and often fear for their lives.

State-orchestrated disinformation is a daily occurrence, especially in countries with autocratic regimes. In El Salvador, for example, President Nayib Bukele has made systematic use of disinformation to manipulate public opinion. He has also launched regular attacks on the media and civil society, accusing them of spreading disinformation without providing any evidence. He makes use of paid trolls and influencers who pose as loyal Bukele supporters and attack critics of his government.

The same toolkit has also been used in Bukele's approach to organised crime. Time and again, the head of state has boasted of having significantly improved security in the country. The president has accused journalists from the country's largest online newspaper, El Faro, who had been investigating Bukele's links to criminal gangs, of money laundering. He has failed to provide any evidence of wrongdoing. This was followed by tax audits of the media organisation. As discovered by the Canadian organisation The Citizen Lab and the NGO Access Now, the employees of El Faro have been barred from press conferences, denied access to information and some even monitored with the use of Pegasus spyware.

In 2023, El Faro relocated part of its editorial team to Costa Rica to escape the repression. More journalists from the outlet fled El Salvador in 2025. In Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, El Salvador has slipped 82 places in just six years — to 143rd place.

For civil society in a repressive country, journalists in exile remain an important independent source of information. Furthermore, through the contacts they often maintain in their home country, exiled journalists ensure that reliable information can still escape from closed dictatorships and be made available to the world.

Critics as “foreign agents”

With the “Foreign Agents Law” that was passed in May 2025, the Bukele government has created additional tools which aim to control and suppress critical voices. This law subjects civil society organisations to repression and financial sanctions. And as influencers and social media channels close to Bukele have branded members of the press or NGO employees as being supporters of criminal gangs or corrupt, he has been able to portray his repressive regulatory legislation as constituting necessary security measures.

With the Foreign Agents Law, El Salvador is following the example of other autocracies, first and foremost Russia, which passed a similar “foreign agents act” as long ago as 2012 and uses it as a tool of intimidation and repression to harass civil society and the media (see the infographic below). With laws of this kind, governments and parliaments vilify civil society organisations as being agents of foreign powers who are allegedly working against national interests.

In its report “Tearing up the Social Fabric” from March 2026, human rights organisation Amnesty International reported that since 2024, in Central and South America, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela have “rapidly put in place restrictive legal frameworks to control, weaken and dismantle NGOs”. These laws have been preceded by smear campaigns in which human rights defenders

and NGOs are discredited as being “unpatriotic” or “enemies from within”.

In Zimbabwe, a law was passed in 2023 that enables far-reaching measures to be taken against civil society actors. The “Patriotic Bill” allows governments to punish any form of criticism directed at them, or any cooperation with international organisations or embassies, as constituting a violation of the country’s sovereignty and national interests. As well as the threat of criminal prosecution, the bill has also laid down a basis for smear campaigns.

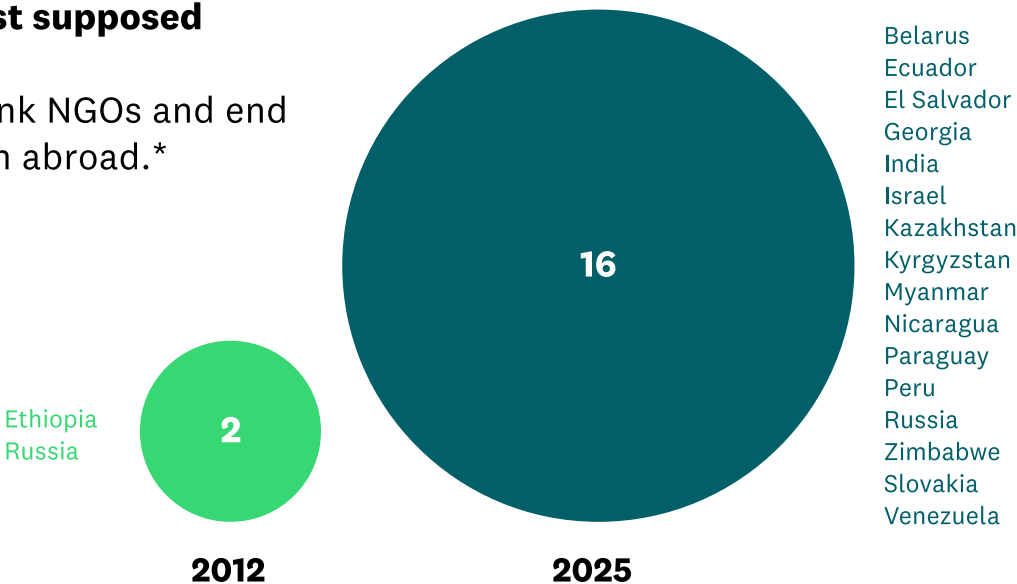
This is illustrated, for example, by the case of the media organisation CITE, a partner organisation of Brot für die Welt (see interview on page 19). In 2025, a lie was spread via social media that the organisation had received 300,000 US dollars from the US Embassy to obstruct initiatives by the Zimbabwean government. CITE had previously criticised the government’s lax handling of a massacre carried out by government troops in the 1980s. In addition, fabricated quotes from CITE’s director, Zenzele Ndebele, were circulated and fake accounts were created. Ndebele also highlighted that CITE had been placed under surveillance. Employees from various security agencies and intelligence services are said to have paid a visit to the CITE office to intimidate the organisation.

The threat of “red tagging”

A Facebook post shows photos of six young students, along with their names and the name of the university they attend. They are smiling; two of them are raising their arms defiantly in the air. Beneath the photos is the caption: “Killed”. And above it, in capital letters: “Scholars turned NPA”. NPA stands for New People’s Army. The NPA is the enemy of the Philippine government.

More laws against supposed “foreign agents”

The goal: to debunk NGOs and end their funding from abroad.*



*Only a few countries refer to laws that restrict foreign funding for NGOs through registration and monitoring as “Foreign Agents Laws”. The list does not include laws that do not target civil society.
Source: Research by Brot für die Welt

The post was made by the Philippine *National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict* (NTF-ELCAC). This authority, known as the nerve centre for state-orchestrated disinformation campaigns, claims that the young people depicted were fighters for the communist organisation NPA — and had been killed between 2017 and 2024.

However, Amnesty International and Greenpeace dispute the authority's claim that the students were ever members of the organisation. They also dispute the authority's account in the case of the teacher Chad Booc. Booc fought for the rights of indigenous people. Time and again, the NTF-ELCAC referred to Booc in Facebook posts as a "rebel" who was recruiting school pupils for terrorist purposes. Booc was killed in 2022 by the Philippine armed forces, along with six other teachers, social workers and drivers.

The governmental authority that is the NTF-ELCAC applies a strategy of disinformation known as "red tagging": it labels activists, teachers and journalists as being "communist rebels" or "terrorists". In doing so, it justifies their criminalisation and in some cases their murder. In 2018, for example, the government published a "terror" list, with the names of more than 600 activists, academics and journalists.

This list also included Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, then UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples and a partner of Brot für die Welt. In 2024, the Supreme Court of the Philippines ruled that "red tagging" puts freedom, human life and security at risk. Yet to this day, government bodies continue to defame civil society organisations, including partner organisations of Brot für die Welt — such as IDEALS. The NGO provides legal representation for human rights defenders; its reports have been dismissed by government authorities as political propaganda (see interview on page 15).

Red tagging is also affecting Filipino journalists. According to a study by the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), three out of five cases of red tagging investigated against media representatives could be traced back to government bodies. The journalist Leonardo Vicente "Cong" Corrales has also been attacked online and repeatedly slandered as a terrorist on anonymous Facebook pages. Fearing for his safety, he decided to temporarily leave his hometown. Access to Meta's data, secured through legal

action by the Movement Against Disinformation (MAD), revealed that the origin of these pages included a government institution in his local area.

The rise in hostility in Germany

Germany, too, has been the scene of smear campaigns and disinformation. For example, together with like-minded media activists and groups, the AfD is deliberately targeting civil society. This was highlighted by the Maecenata Foundation in its latest analysis, "The Anti-NGO Discourse". Disinformation and smear campaigns targeting individual organisations are a regular occurrence, including posts branding civil society actors as "thugs" or "terrorists" — again, without any evidence.

Occasionally, however, other political parties have also targeted civil society groups and their funding — as was the case in February 2025, for example, when the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German federal parliament, or Bundestag, submitted an interpellation consisting of 551 individual questions to the ruling coalition government. In the wake of the 551 questions, the above-mentioned study by the Maecenata Foundation documented a significant increase in derogatory portrayals of and hostility towards NGOs on social media.

Platform failures with fatal consequences

In the Global South in particular, the problems of disinformation and coordinated attacks on civil society groups have been exacerbated by inadequate content moderation on social media platforms. This moderation is not high on the platforms' list of priorities (see interview on page 31) — and often focuses on English-language content and countries such as the US and the EU member states.

SAFEnet, a partner organisation of Brot für die Welt, also criticises the platforms' handling of reports of problematic content — when fake accounts claim to be run by civil society organisations, for example. SAFEnet campaigns for freedom of expression and digital rights in Indonesia and is a "trusted partner" of platform operators such as Meta. This means that reports from SAFEnet are given priority. Unfortunately, as found by the NGO, the platforms fail to respond to all the reports — and those from private individuals are often ignored entirely.

"Red tagging [...] suppresses legitimate activism, journalism, debate and criticism."

Irene Khan, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression.

“Anyone who highlights malpractice is attacked”

Zenzele Ndebele from our partner organisation CITE



Mr. Ndebele, in the 1980s, Robert Mugabe’s government in Zimbabwe had some 20,000 members of the Ndebele ethnic minority murdered; countless others were beaten or raped. You are working very hard on coming to terms with the massacre, which is also known as “Gukurahundi” and classified as genocide by many experts in international law. What role has disinformation played in this respect?

ZN: “Gukurahundi” was based on a targeted disinformation campaign from the beginning: at the time, a narrative was deliberately spread that the people of the Matabeleland — in particular supporters of the then ZAPU party and the ZIPRA guerrillas — were backing “dissidents”, that they sought to overthrow the Mugabe government and that they were fundamentally hostile to the state. These stories were partly simply untrue and partly grossly exaggerated. However, they served to legitimise the genocide. The government launched a series of disinformation campaigns to justify the deployment of the military. The apartheid regime in South Africa also exerted influence. At the time, there was only one state-run radio station and one state-run television channel; there was no internet and no social media.

What is the current situation?

ZN: Many of these false narratives are more than 40 years old yet they still have an impact to this day. Unfortunately, the younger generation continues to believe and spread the lies

because they have been passed down from generation to generation. They say that “Gukurahundi” was “justified” because a political party was allegedly planning a coup and had stockpiled weapons. It was much more complex than that, though. There are many layers of misinformation, exaggeration and dramatisation that continue to shape perceptions to this day.

How would you describe the current situation regarding disinformation in Zimbabwe in general?

ZN: Disinformation is being directed against political opponents, civil society organisations, journalists and individuals. Anyone who highlights abuses is attacked and discredited. There are also troll factories and people who are paid to defend the government, for example.

How is this affecting civil society actors?

ZN: They feel increasingly threatened. Many have scaled back their activities significantly as they fear being banned or targeted if they speak out. This has weakened the very people who would normally denounce human rights vio-

lations, corruption or abuses of power. When these voices fall silent or are silenced, everyday people also become afraid: if this is happening to civil society, what will happen to me as an everyday citizen?

Have you or your colleagues ever been victims of disinformation campaigns?

ZN: Yes, many times in the past few years. When you work in sensitive areas, as we do, you’re always under attack. The most recent campaign concerned my work on Russia and its allies recruiting Zimbabweans to fight in Ukraine. I’ve spoken a lot about this and warned Zimbabweans about it. Afterwards, a video was circulated in which they labelled me as being an “American spy” and a “traitor”. Content like this then spreads via social media and WhatsApp.

What role does social media play?

ZN: Social media can help combat disinformation. However, it also poses a challenge, as it spreads disinformation very easily and very quickly as well. To make things worse, the platforms aren’t doing everything that they could to tackle it. Then there’s the fact that we aren’t a market that Facebook cares much about. There are only 13 million of us. The tech giants don’t see any economic benefit in taking the required action.

Zenzele Ndebele, Director of the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE), Zimbabwe (<https://cite.org.zw>)

Fakes torpedo development

Through disinformation, migrants and their supporters are being criminalised, women and people identifying as queer pushed out of politics, and climate protection laws blocked. Three examples and a summary.

The United Nations is sounding the alarm: reliable information is essential for development — and all 17 Sustainable Development Goals are under huge threat from disinformation and misinformation. Both disinformation and misinformation serve to jeopardise the fight against poverty and hunger and restrict access to education, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

The impact on global health is particularly severe: whilst governments and private aid organisations are cutting funding for immunisation programmes, global disinformation campaigns are fuelling fears about the supposed negative effects of vaccinations. The result: vaccination rates against diseases such as polio, yellow fever, measles and meningitis are falling — and diseases that had long seemed preventable are breaking out again.

There is a striking north-south asymmetry when it comes to the research: there has been a lack of studies on the topic of disinformation and its impact in the Global South. Some 80 percent of the existing research on disinformation has so far been carried out in the Global North, even though more than 80 percent of the world's population lives in the Global South. A similar imbalance exists when it comes to proposed solutions: most strategies originate in the Global North, relate to the narratives and phenomena prevalent there, and are tested for their effectiveness in that context.

Disinformation isn't just causing a crisis of confidence, it is also severely undermining social consensus — thereby making it more difficult to address long-term challenges in key development areas such as gender equality, migration and climate change.

1. Gender equality

Different social groups are affected by disinformation in very different ways. Young and unmarried women and LGBTQIA+ people are among those hardest hit — particularly when they are in the public eye. Women who have survived sexual violence and fight back against it through legal or public channels are often subjected to a barrage of lies, frequently as an attempt to downplay the violence that they have experienced.

A study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a global association of national parliaments, showed that 60 percent of the female parliamentarians and staff surveyed in 33 countries across Asia and the Pacific had experienced hate speech, disinformation, image-based violence (see page 33) or doxxing — which means the unauthorised publication of personal data.

The perpetrators are often religious fundamentalist groups such as self-proclaimed “family protectors”, right-wing populist and far-right parties, figures from the “manosphere”, and actors from the realm of “uncivil society”. They run a digital network of anti-feminist blogs, forums and social media channels that promote toxic ideals of masculinity, misogyny and strict gender-based roles. What unites them all is that they attack reproductive rights, sex education, LGBTQIA+ rights and the Istanbul Convention, the international treaty on preventing violence against women. They are also connected globally, through the International Organisation for the Family, for example.

They fabricate scenarios of threat to the “traditional family” posed by a supposed “gender lobby”. Or they deliberately spread sexist stereotypes and misogyny to publicly vilify women and LGBTQIA+ people and marginalise them from the world of politics, social discourse and economic participation. In doing so, these groups undermine human

At particular risk: women

Attacks on women human rights defenders
in Central America*, 2012 to 2024

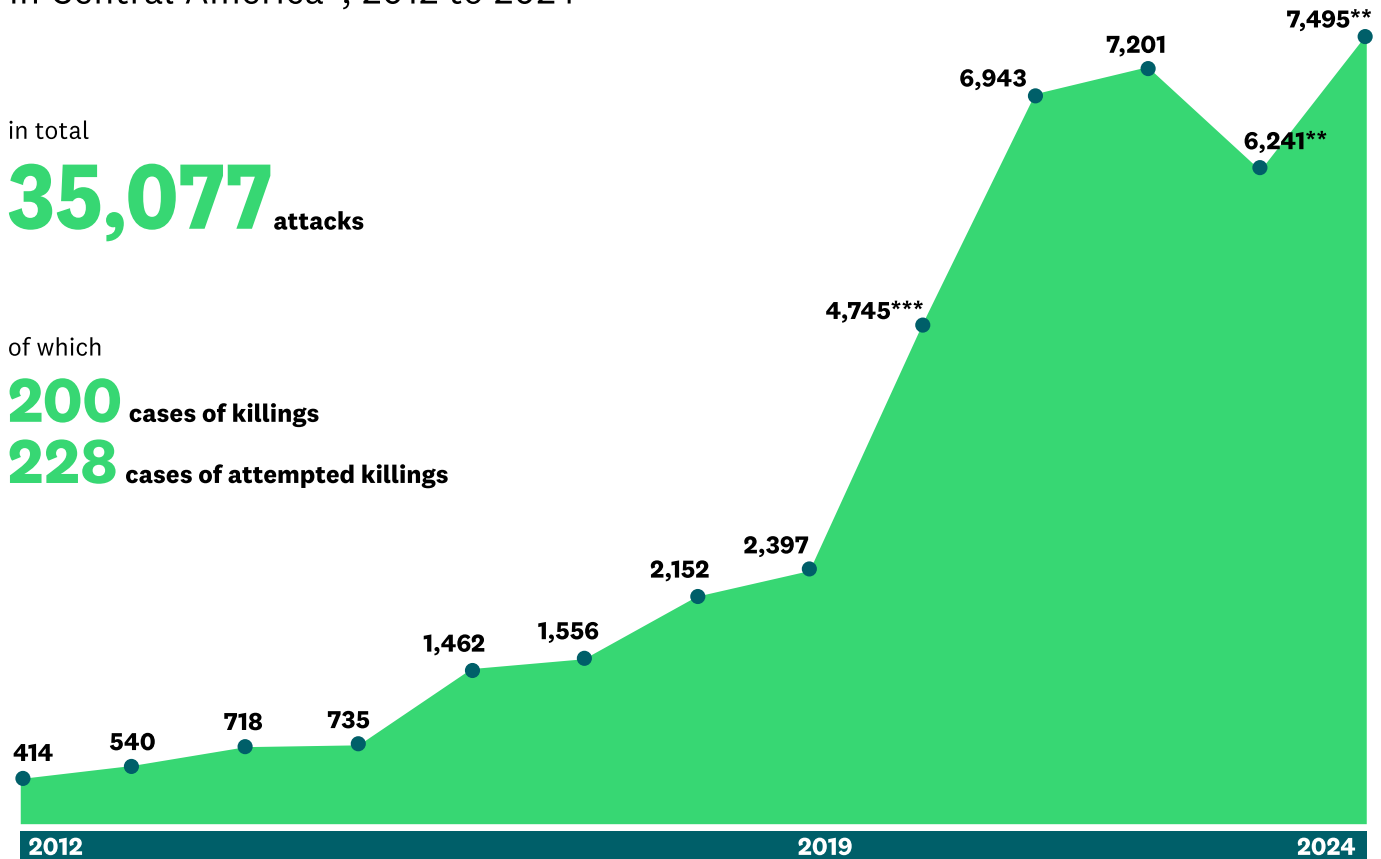
in total

35,077 attacks

of which

200 cases of killings

228 cases of attempted killings



* El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua,

** not including Guatemala, *** Increase during the pandemic

Source: IM-Defensoras

rights and democracy. In Latin America in particular, this misogyny has manifested itself in physical violence against and the murder of women (see infographic above).

These attacks serve to hinder gender equality — and therefore the sustainable development of societies. “Empowering women and girls and ensuring their participation has a catalytic effect on economic growth and development; it is therefore not only a matter of justice, but is also essential from both an economic and a social perspective”, writes UN Women, a United Nations agency, on its website.

Disinformation takes the form of targeted campaigns designed to discredit and intimidate women. In 2017, shortly after Diane Shima Rwigara announced that she intended to stand as a presidential candidate in Rwanda, fake nude images of her were circulated. Four years later, during the German federal election campaign, similar fakes were also circulated of candidate for chancellor Annalena Baerbock.

Another example concerns lawyer and politician Bochra Belhaj Hmida from Tunisia, a prominent voice for women’s and LGBTQIA+ rights. Time and again, her attackers spread false allegations about supposed cases of corruption and treason. This was followed by death threats and a call for her to be stoned in public. This culminated in the Tunisian government taking action against her: in a show trial, she

was sentenced in absentia to 33 years’ imprisonment. She is now living in exile.

The case of the Indian MP and women’s rights activist Priyanka Chaturvedi also shows that disinformation targeting women is repeatedly associated with gender-based violence. Chaturvedi was falsely accused of making a statement in which she claimed that Muslim men felt they had the right to rape women. As a result, she received rape threats, some of which were also directed at her daughter, who was 10 years old at the time.

Gender-specific disinformation exploits and reinforces existing gender stereotypes. Disinformation is also a means of choice for convincing young men that feminism and gender equality are the root cause of all social ills. The narrative: young men have been deprived of something to which they are apparently entitled. Misogyny and anti-queer sentiment are finding increasing reflection in legislation: a study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2025 concluded that, between 2010 and 2025, 38 governments passed laws and policies that led to a deterioration in this area, with gender studies, sex education and healthcare programmes for women having been curtailed, legal protections to prevent gender-based violence having been weakened, state institutions helping women having been

closed or dismantled, and LGBTQIA+ people having been criminalised.

A recent example in this respect is the tightened “Global Gag Rule”. It came into force in the US on 26 February 2026, and prohibits US-funded organisations from working on diversity, gender equality and sexual and reproductive rights. Numerous women’s and human rights organisations will have to severely curtail their work, and many of their target groups will lose their protection and support. UN Women and UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, are also affected. Two of its key areas of responsibility are reproductive health and population development.

There is a great deal of money behind the actors who have triggered this backlash: according to independent media platform Open Democracy, between 2007 and 2020, US-based Christian right-wing organisations invested more than 50 million US dollars in the fight against queer rights, sex education, contraception and abortion on the African continent. Some of this money has been channelled into lobbying for anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation in Uganda. Among other things, this legislation provides for the death penalty for homosexuals.

Reliable sources of information are also being suppressed. In December 2025, it emerged that Meta had restricted posts and pages from more than 50 organisations providing information on reproductive health and queer issues on its platforms Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The organisations affected warned that blocking information of this kind could be life-threatening, as it could cause women to turn to dangerous sources of information. TikTok has also suppressed queer content in the past, including in countries such as Bosnia, Jordan and Russia.

2. Migration

Migration is one of the topics most frequently exploited in the context of disinformation. Right-wing populists and far-right extremists, in particular, portray refugees and migrants as a threat and a financial burden. They have stoked fear, anger and envy towards those seeking asylum and other migrants by portraying them as violent or claiming that they receive preferential treatment from government institutions.

Such narratives ignore the fact that many countries have a responsibility to protect refugees according to international legal obligations. They deny that migration is part of social normality and a lived reality — and they ignore the fact that countries such as Germany rely very heavily on migration to keep their economy and social security system running.

A popular myth in right-wing discourse is the claim that immigration from other cultures is part of a plan for a “great replacement” of the population. This narrative has been promoted by the AfD in Germany. In a public speech in 2023, Tunisian President Kais Saied also accused migrants from sub-Saharan Africa of planning a “great replacement” in Tunisia. In the wake of this speech, attacks on Black people in Tunisia increased dramatically, and state security forces began forcibly relocating migrants to desert regions. Since then, NGOs and activists supporting migrants in Tunisia have been accused of engaging in subversive activities. Many activists have been charged with alleged plots against the state.

In Latin America, anti-migration campaigners have deliberately spread fake reports on social media about caravans of refugees attempting to travel on foot from Central America through Mexico towards the USA. At times, the refugees have been portrayed as allegedly being ungrateful and spurning donated clothing; at other times, they have been accused of acts of violence. This disinformation has also contributed to hatred and violence. Partner organisations of Brot für die Welt which support migrants along the routes of entry into the US have also experienced the effects of this violence. In March 2026, for example, the office of the Centro Fray Matías de Córdova in Tapachula (southern Mexico) was repeatedly attacked, with computers, documents and telephones being stolen.

Humanitarian aid organisations, lifeboat crews and human rights defenders working on behalf of refugees are also being targeted by disinformation, hostility and criminalisation. Opponents of asylum have branded lifeboat crews as people smugglers, and refugee aid organisations as the “asylum industry”. These organisations also face violence: in 2024, the office of KISA, an organisation in Cyprus, was destroyed by an explosive device.

Several members of the Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), a partner organisation of Brot für die Welt which campaigns for the rights of refugees in the Balkans, have been the victims of smear campaigns in recent years. Politicians and the media in Croatia, for example, have slandered them as being smugglers, holding them responsible for the presence of migrants in the country. As a result of this, the offices and car of a Croatian member organisation of the BVMN were targeted by acts of vandalism on several occasions.

When aid workers and human rights defenders are vilified as criminal people-smugglers and traffickers, it can also pave the way for legal regulations: the proposed “EU Directive on preventing the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence” (“Facilitation Directive”) defines “the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence” as a criminal offence and sets out minimum penalties.

Human rights organisations such as the BVMN warn that the directive currently under discussion threatens to lead to the systematic criminal prosecution and repression of persons seeking asylum and humanitarian aid workers, especially in countries where right-wing or far-right parties are part of the government. The directive is based on a vague, very broad definition of the criminal offence of aiding and abetting. According to the BVMN, it would result in defenders of migration and human rights being criminalised even further.

3. Climate protection

Climate change is a recurring theme in disinformation campaigns. Far-right and libertarian politicians and governments in particular routinely deny its existence and its consequences. They use disinformation to discredit, restrict or completely halt measures to combat climate change and the use of renewable energy.

An entire network of disinformation disseminators worldwide can be seen to be working towards this goal: political actors, lobbyists for the fossil fuel industry, and organisations operating internationally, such as the American Heartland Institute. This key player in the movement maintains close worldwide contacts with like-minded organisations and parties, including the former Brazilian government under Jair Bolsonaro and the climate-change-denying organisation EIKE (European Institute for Climate & Energy). The global Atlas Network also brings together and connects figures from the climate change denial movement and supports ultra-libertarian Argentine President Javier Milei, for example, who denies human-induced climate change, and views climate action simply as a means of raising funds “to finance lazy socialists who write fourth-rate papers”.

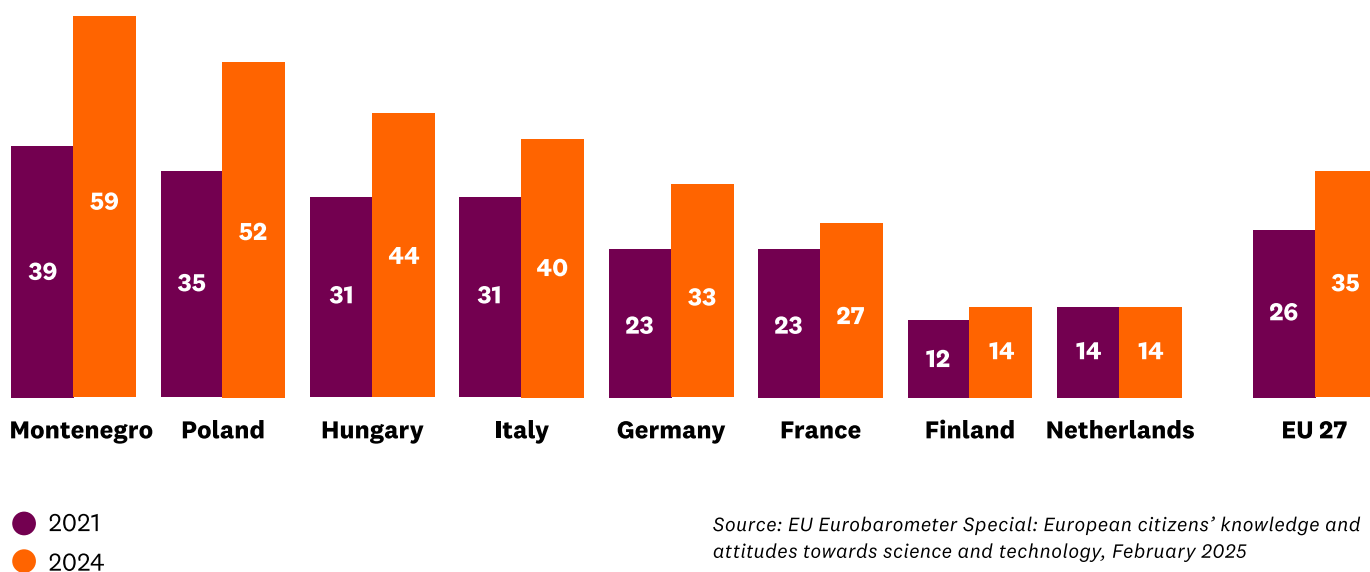
It is also clear that fossil fuel corporations, climate change deniers, organisations and pseudoscientists — the sources of climate-related disinformation — are primarily based in the Global North — yet their disinformation spreads globally. Above all else, President Donald Trump is one of the most influential deniers of human-induced climate change. Not only has he ensured that the US has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the IPCC, he has also cut research funding in this area, halting more than 100 planned studies. He has also had important research findings by climate scientists deleted.

It has long been established that human-induced climate change is in full swing — with catastrophic consequences. Nevertheless, the disinformation spread by climate change deniers and those who downplay its severity is proving effective. In recent years, for example, the proportion of EU citizens who mistakenly attribute climate change to natural cycles rather than human activity has risen significantly (see infographic below).

Disinformation is thus contributing to climate change not being adequately mitigated and to the Paris Agreement’s target of limiting the rise in global average temperature to 1.5 degrees no longer being achievable. According to the NiKE study, an interdisciplinary climate risk assessment commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office in 2025, as a result of this, with an expected global temperature rise of 2.7 degrees by the end of the century, entire regions will become uninhabitable for up to 39 percent of the world’s population. Disinformation is therefore undermining the key goals of sustainable development — which are also the aims of Brot für die Welt: combating hunger, poverty, and conflicts over increasingly scarce resources.

Disinformation on climate change is increasingly believed

Percentage of EU citizens who believe that climate change is caused by natural cycles rather than human activity.



The business of lying

Political parties, governments and companies are hiring agencies to attack civil society through disinformation, and they are paying a lot of money to do so.

Disinformation is a lucrative source of income. This not only applies to false promises made by “miracle healers”, but also to profits that can be made from politically charged lies. And that is Team Jorge’s line of business. “You bring the money and a candidate. We’ll do the fighting”, says the head of the Israeli company, which, by its own admission, interferes in politics and elections through disinformation, hacking and manipulation.

Its activities were exposed in 2023 by undercover journalists posing as potential clients. To conceal its clients, Team Jorge works with dummy companies and intermediaries in various countries and accepts payments in cryptocurrencies.

The impact of these companies’ campaigns and operations can be hard to measure. Their services are by no means cheap: Team Jorge charges up to 15 million US dollars to manipulate elections. According to its own statements, the company claims to have been involved in 33 elections, including in Nigeria and Kenya.

Cambridge Analytica was just the start

The now defunct Cambridge Analytica, based in the US, was also active in both countries. The company, for which Team Jorge worked as a subcontractor, made headlines worldwide in 2018 when, according to sources such as the New York Times, its former managing director Alexander Nix claimed that the company had created personal profiles of millions of US Facebook users and made them available to Donald Trump for his 2016 election campaign, playing a “decisive role” in his surprise victory.

Cambridge Analytica was also active in the 2013 and 2017 elections in Kenya. Hired by the then-ruling Jubilee Party, it managed their election campaign and used fake accounts and fake websites to exert influence on Kenyan voters. The right-wing US advertising agency Harris Media also intervened in the Kenyan election campaign in 2017 on behalf of the Jubilee Party. In a video entitled “The Real Raila”, it painted an apocalyptic picture of the future — displacement, famine, terror — if opposition candidate Raila Odinga were to be elected. In the same year, Harris Media assisted the AfD in its smear campaign against Angela Merkel ahead of the German federal elections.

Disinformation on order

Team Jorge, Cambridge Analytica and Harris Media are just three examples of many. Political parties, governments and companies are increasingly hiring agencies and entrepreneurs to gain political advantage through disinformation, to attack political opponents and civil society, to sow confusion and to polarise public opinion. According to Correctiv, a non-profit news organisation based in Berlin, the contractors also include “troll farms” from Russia, with innocuous names such as the “Social Design Agency” or the “Internet Research Agency”. The latter has been officially dissolved. These companies are active in both Russia and internationally.

According to surveys by the University of Oxford, the number of countries worldwide in which private companies are offering disinformation on demand has increased significantly. For 2017, the researchers identified nine countries in which these businesses were active. By 2020, that figure had risen to 48.

Pro-government trolls have been active in Bahrain since 2011 with the aim of delegitimising the opposition and civil society. In 2020, the “Bahrain Electronic Army” first came into being, and has deliberately spread disinformation about human rights defenders, vilifying them as being Iranian agents, for example. Activists suspect the Bahraini government of being the power behind this self-proclaimed online army.

In Kenya, influencers have been paid between 10 and 15 US dollars a day to take part in campaigns supporting the government. They have been hired by anonymous clients to spread disinformation about civil society, the media and judges. And they have achieved measurable success: eight of the eleven campaigns examined by researchers at the Mozilla Foundation achieved “trending” status on Kenyan Twitter, making them among the most discussed topics on the respective days.

The big tech firms in particular benefit from emotive and polarising content, including disinformation, clickbait and fraudulent adverts. It is almost impossible to determine exactly what percentage of the billions of profits of Meta, Google and their peers this revenue represents. According to internal documents from Meta, the company is said to earn around 7 billion US dollars a year from fraudulent adverts alone.

“He’s stopped making hateful posts”

Stefanie Kreher from our partner organisation OBSUR



Ms. Kreher, you work with pastors and young people on a variety of social issues. Which issues have been prone to the largest number of lies in Uruguay?

SK: I would say the topics of gender equality and coming to terms with our military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985. These two issues polarise the country the most, and far more than migration or poverty. Conservative nationalist movements, in particular, deny the crimes committed by the military and hold firm to the belief that there are only two genders. As the organisation Observatorio del Sur (OBSUR), we campaign for gender equality and coming to terms with the past, along with other causes, and we take a clear stand against these things.

Have you been vilified because of this?

SK: Yes, and two examples come to mind: in our project to help the homeless, our employees and participants were photographed by local neighbours, and the photos were posted online. These posts criticised the homeless and the poor — and spread lies about our work. Similar things have happened following the events and film screenings we have held on the topic of social justice. Because of our stance on the alleviation of poverty and on reproductive rights — that is, the right to make free choices about sexuality, family planning, pregnancy and childbirth — we have been labelled online as being “bad Christians” or, pejoratively, as “*abortistas*”, a term of abuse in Latin America. And

things like this haven’t just happened in the digital sphere. The walls of our church have also been vandalised with graffiti.

Who is responsible for the misinformation and lies?

SK: Above all, the Christian right. These self-proclaimed “holy warriors” are well-connected; they firmly believe in a divine order of creation and in a hierarchy of ethnic groups and genders within the family. They oppose anyone who disputes this narrative. This group’s beliefs are closely linked to the systematic denial of historical and social realities. They deny the existence of indigenous communities in Uruguay, for example. We, however, work closely with young *Charruas*, focusing on the cultural reappraisal of their history and culture.

Has the significant influence of these right-wing groups hindered your work?

SK: Yes, it has become more difficult. The narrative of the Christian right is characterised by fatalism and destruction. It sees the empowerment of women as leading to the collapse of the family. This worldview clashes with fundamental approaches to social development. The UN’s global Sustainable Development Goals, which OBSUR supports, are a thorn in the side for these groups. They think they amount to a loss of sovereignty and the end of the world as they know it. In this way, right-wing fundamentalist groups are exploiting religion for political ends. Through these narratives, they are also

reaching new target groups in the more moderate Christian community.

What action is OBSUR taking to prevent disinformation?

SK: In our work, we take care to avoid being polarising or oversimplifying things unnecessarily. Whilst right-wing actors attempt to attach negative connotations to terms such as “human rights”, we focus on what they actually stand for: identity, dignity and justice. We also prioritise education. At our workshops, participants learn how to recognise misinformation, how to respond to it, and how to become more resilient in the face of it. We counter the fake information spread about the military dictatorship with proven facts. We also make these facts public via social media.

Has your approach achieved success?

SK: Yes, I think so. We make a point of focusing on dialogue, partly to break down prejudices and counter disinformation. Fortunately, Uruguay has a strong culture of democracy. Dialogue has, for example, helped us defuse the situation with our neighbour, who was constantly filming and photographing us until a group of young people approached him to talk. He still makes posts saying that the situation annoys him, particularly the homeless people who visit us. But he’s stopped making hateful posts and posts that aren’t true.

Stefanie Kreher, Coordinator of the “Fé en la Resistencia” programme at OBSUR (Observatorio del Sur), Montevideo, Uruguay (www.obsur.org.uy)

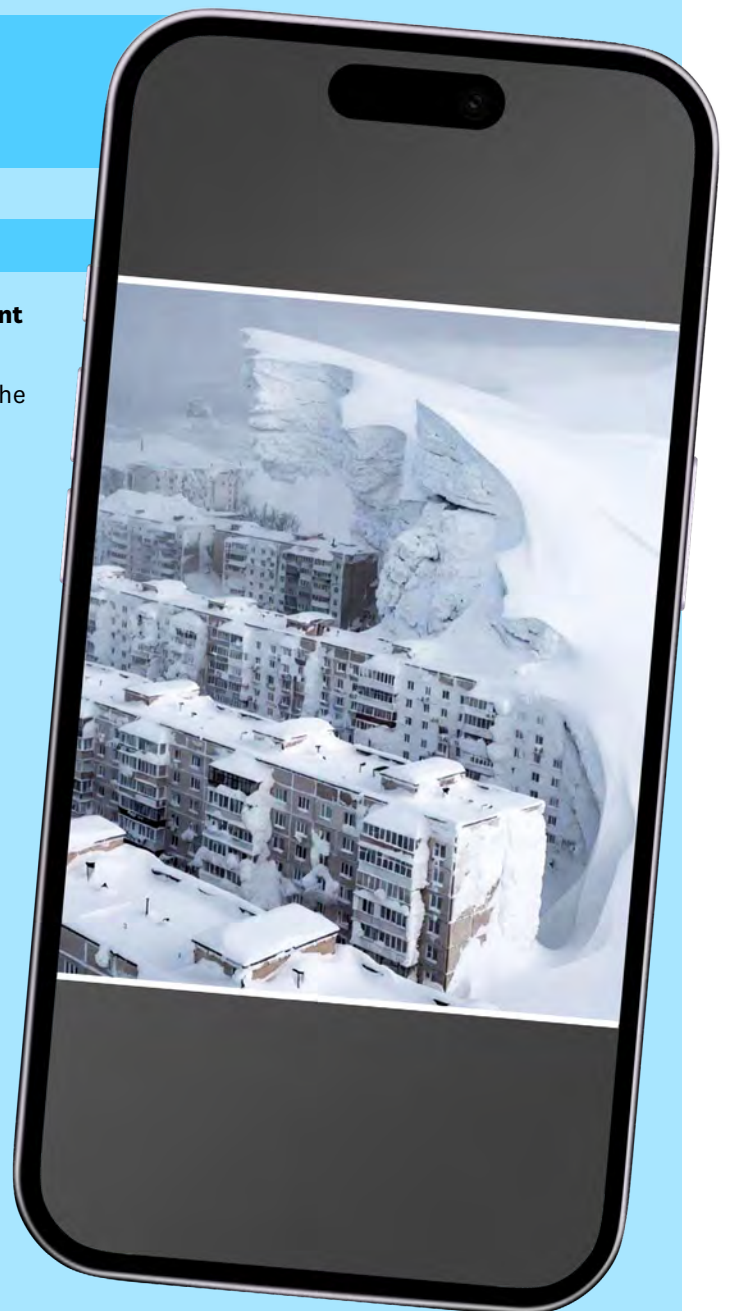
How to identify fake news and AI images

Social media posts — real or fake?

What to look out for:

Social media posts checklist:

- **Who is posting** the text or images? **What other content** does the account post?
- Look at the **comments** — some may warn others that the post is a fake.
- Bots and trolls often have very few **followers** but post very frequently — in some cases, 24/7.
- Does the content include references to **independent sources**?
- Is there a **watermark** showing that the content is in fact AI?
- Can the content also be found in the traditional media with a **search engine**?
- **Data forensics:** Variations in pixel density within an image may indicate that it has been manipulated.
- Is the heading or title **sensationalist**? Does it match the content?
- Does the content stir things up, **incite**, insult and manipulate? Is it designed to make people angry, anxious or outraged?
- Is the photography old or new? Is it out of **context**?
- Where did the image appear first? **Do a reverse image search** with TinEye, Google Lens, Yandex or browser plugins.
- Are the location and date of the photo correct, as claimed **in the post**?
- Do the weather, vegetation and **time of year** match the content?
- Check the streets and surroundings via **geo-localisation** with Google Maps, Street View, Google Earth, Google Lens.



A fake image that went viral in winter 2025/2026.

49 percent of all social media users get most of their news updates from TikTok, X, etc. — , making it high time to check information online.

AI-generated images and videos

AI-generated images are getting better every day — and therefore becoming increasingly difficult to spot as fakes. Check:

AI images checklist:

- Who is behind the **profile**?
- Does the image contain a reference to AI?
Remember that **watermarks** can also be removed with the use of tools.
- Does the **light and shade** look right?
- Are any lines broken or **misplaced**, such as road bollards?
- Do the scene and the background **match up**?
- Do **parts of people's bodies** or objects vanish?

AI videos checklist:

- Do the person's facial expressions, tone of voice and speech match their **lip movements**?
- Do they **blink** and are they looking in the right direction?
- Does their voice sound **artificial** or monotone?
- Is the person moving stiffly, **jerkily**, too quickly or too slowly?
- Do people or things suddenly **disappear**?
- **Do their** hair, teeth, edges flicker? Are they the wrong shape?
- Do clothes, glasses and jewellery look **distorted**?

Faked websites

Posts often feature fake versions of websites belonging to traditional news magazines, daily newspapers or reputable organisations.

To detect these things, doing the following can help:

- comparison with the original page
- checking the URL and the ending after the dot
- checking the legal notice and spelling

Leading fact-checking pages:

- Snopes
- FactCheck.org
- PolitiFact
- Reuters Fact Check
- AFP Fact Check
- BBC Verify

Please note! AI is developing at a rapid pace! The content reflects the situation at the time of this publication.

Battleground internet

In a war, disinformation becomes a weapon; in natural disasters, it often costs lives — and sometimes the two coincide.

“The first casualty of war is the truth” — this phrase, attributed to US Senator Hiram Johnson (1866–1945), is often invoked in the context of armed conflicts. It goes without saying that ever since humans have waged war, fake news reports, rumours and propaganda have been used as weapons, often to great effect. The aim is to influence the domestic population and win them over to the cause of war, to unsettle and demoralise the enemy, or to justify a new war of aggression. Deception and lies are designed to undermine — or drum up — international support. Sometimes, from this fog of untruths, they succeed in creating an imaginary threat that doesn’t even exist.

Rwanda is a harrowing example of how lies and simmering tensions can escalate into open violence. For years, deliberate misinformation and propaganda paved the way for the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis. Radio stations, in particular Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines — also known as “Hate Radio” — played a key role in the campaign of lies. With the advent of digitalisation, modern propaganda has been taken to a new level, as the following examples show.

War mongering with AI-generated fakes

In a war, the warring parties and their sympathisers repeatedly circulate videos that are entirely out of context. During the wars in Syria, Ukraine and Iran, clips from video games have been and continue to be circulated that claim to show real acts of war. During the war in Sudan, which has been raging since 2023, sympathisers of the parties to the conflict have routinely circulated videos purporting to illustrate violence and killings. These frequently include clips that are AI-generated or, in reality, show something completely different to what is claimed.

In the war in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, too, disinformation has had dangerous, and in some cases, fatal consequences. Partner organisations of Brot für die Welt report that aid workers were killed following rumours of collaboration with armed groups. Employees of the Congolese NGO Mercy Corps were attacked after false rumours that the organisation was responsible for deaths in the conflict.

Disinformation has also played a major role in the armed conflict between the Israeli army and Hamas: shortly after Hamas’s terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October, social media users quickly began circulating fake images with the message that people hadn’t been killed by Hamas, but by the Israeli military. Supporters of Hamas and social media users in various countries around the world denied that civilians had been killed, and claimed that no sexual violence had

taken place during the attack. On the other side, according to the Tagesschau news programme and the news channel Deutsche Welle, the subsequent war in Gaza was accompanied by false claims — some of which were disseminated by Israeli government bodies — aimed at downplaying and denying the hunger and suffering of Gaza’s civilian population.

Information vacuum due to internet shutdowns

Research shows that, particularly in times of war, the governments involved resort to internet shutdowns — often justifying them by claiming that they want to protect citizens against disinformation from the enemy or to prevent violence. “We have seen the opposite occurring”, says Anita Gohdes, Professor of International Cybersecurity at the Hertie School of Governance. “Internet shutdowns only fuel violence, because regimes feel less restrained in this digital darkness.”

Internet shutdowns create gaps in information. State actors are able to fill this vacuum with propaganda, thereby spreading fake news reports on an unhampered and unchallenged basis. People are at the mercy of state-orchestrated disinformation. After all, when the internet is shut down, reputable independent media outlets, news portals and NGOs can neither verify news stories nor publicly refute falsehoods. Internet shutdowns also prevent activists from sharing ideas, networking or organising online protests. Without the internet, human rights violations can be concealed because evidence such as videos, photos and witness statements isn’t able to reach the public.

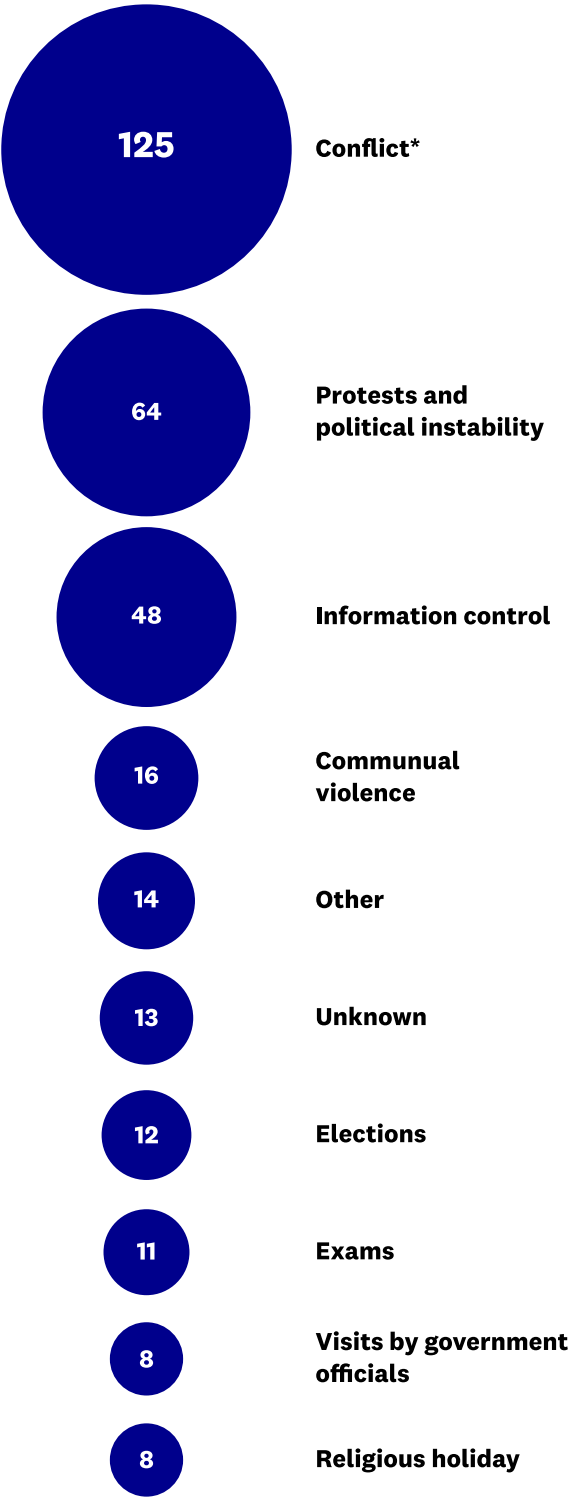
The regime in Iran blocked domestic access to the internet at the start of the war at the end of February 2026. A weeks-long internet shutdown had previously been imposed during the nationwide protests in early January, when security forces killed thousands of people. According to the NGO Access Now, internet shutdowns during armed conflicts were imposed in 13 other countries in 2025, including India, Myanmar and Russia (see infographic on right).

Even after wars and conflicts have ended, the struggle for control over the narrative often continues — and in many places prevents reconciliation as well as any recognition of the victims. Even more than 80 years after the end of the Second World War, and despite numerous documents and reports, people continue to deny and trivialise the Holocaust. In Argentina, the Milei government is attempting to rewrite history and downplay the human rights abuses committed by the military during the country’s dictatorship. And over 100 years later, the Turkish government still denies the genocide of the Armenians.

Early disinformation, delayed help

Disinformation not only costs lives in wartime, but also in the case of natural disasters. During floods, earthquakes or severe weather events, the search for reliable information is often a race against time. It sometimes takes hours or days before verified reports become available. Meanwhile, the hunger for information among those affected and their relatives grows: Where are the dangers? Which escape and evacuation routes are safe? Where is help available? The two media researchers danah boyd and Michael Golebiewski describe phenomena such as these as “data voids” — gaps in data that arise when there is a need for information but

Internet shutdowns prevent facts from being checked
Key triggers for internet shutdowns in 52 countries in 2025



* Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Yemen, Cambodia, India, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Russia, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine
Source: Access Now, Rising Repression Meets Global Resistance: Internet Shutdowns in 2025, March 2026

reliable details are hard to come by. These data voids are often filled by rumours and disinformation.

On the occasion of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in the early hours of 6 February 2023, it didn't take long for the first images and videos of the destruction to circulate online. As is often the case in such situations, these included videos and images that had nothing to do with the situation on the ground. Videos of a supposed tsunami and a supposed nuclear explosion, both allegedly caused by the earthquake, began circulating on social media.

The videos showed neither a tsunami nor a nuclear explosion, but a tidal wave in Durban, South Africa, dating from 2017 and the explosion in the port of Beirut that occurred in 2020. Shortly after the earthquake, the Turkish government blocked access to Twitter (now X) for several hours — saying it had done so to curb disinformation. However, this step hampered the coordination of the rescue efforts and blocked an important source of information that rescuers could otherwise have used to identify people in need.

In Germany, too, following the 2021 floods in the Ahr Valley, lies were deliberately disseminated, largely via Telegram and Twitter. False warnings of other alleged breaches of dams went viral. Far-right groups and the anarchist “Querdenker” movement attempted to exploit the disaster so as to discredit the regional government and promote their own narrative of national failure. Their aims: to stoke fear, drum up anger against “the political establishment”, and hinder the reconstruction efforts. In Bad Neuenahr-Ahrweiler, for example, a loudspeaker announcement from a vehicle that resembled a police car but in fact wasn't one claimed that the number of rescue workers was being reduced. Fraudsters launched fundraising appeals and published images of those affected — without their knowledge.

Panic and rumours often spread faster than facts

Fake information spreads after every natural disaster. It can cause panic amongst people in the affected areas or lull them into a false sense of security. Fake news reports hinder the rescue and relief efforts and waste or tie up resources.

“In crisis contexts, trust is a prerequisite for humanitarian access, protection and funding. Disinformation destroys this trust.”

Max Freundlieb, Advocacy Advisor at German aid organisation Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe

Yet aid organisations require reliable information to be able to help as many affected people as possible. Fake news and disinformation pose a high risk to aid workers, often putting their lives in danger. They make it harder for them to access disaster zones and sow seeds of mistrust towards aid organisations. They can also have tangible effects on infrastructure: in Lancaster, England, train services on some routes were suspended in December 2025 because, following an earth tremor, an AI-generated image of a supposedly badly damaged bridge was circulated.

During disasters, disinformation can also fuel hatred and violence against marginalised groups and minorities. After Hurricane Katrina left a trail of devastation in New Orleans in 2005, aid efforts on the ground were delayed because African-American survivors were widely accused of looting and violence. We now know that many of these reports were greatly exaggerated or completely fabricated. Yet the rumours and misinformation led to chaos and brutal police action against people who were searching for relatives and food. After Hurricane Dorian ravaged the Bahamas in 2019, Haitians were targeted and accused of looting.

Scientists, too, are affected by the consequences of disinformation following natural disasters. In the autumn of 2024, Hurricanes Helene and Milton raged across the US, followed by disinformation and conspiracy theories about alleged weather manipulation that was said to have caused the storms. Meteorologists and employees at the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) subsequently reported having received death threats.

Twice as vulnerable

When armed conflicts and natural disasters coincide — and this is the case in many places — the affected population becomes even more vulnerable. This is because, in order to survive, they require reliable early-warning systems to alert them to extreme weather events or earthquakes. And they also need reliable information on where hostilities are taking place.

Take Sudan, for example, where a civil war has been raging for several years. According to the UN, more than 13 million people have been displaced and 30 million are reliant on humanitarian aid. The country also suffers regularly from floods, dam breaches and landslides, alternating with severe periods of drought. In this crisis, the lies spread by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese army gain traction all too easily — with grave consequences: when humanitarian aid is obstructed and politicised, rumours and fake news reports fuelled by the dire circumstances succeed in upsetting, unsettling and manipulating people even more rapidly. As a result of this, they flee or are forced to join an armed group to survive — which further fuels the war.

“The dominance of Google and co. is overwhelming”

Sven Hilbig, Digitalisation Officer at Brot für die Welt



Mr. Hilbig, can disinformation be curbed right now with legislation?

SH: Only partially. In the European Union, social media platforms such as Meta have been obliged to remove misinformation that breaks the law since 2022: in cases of hate speech, death threats and incitement to hatred, for example. However, they don't always comply with this requirement. Additionally, the state isn't able to prevent fake content or falsified claims masquerading as factual from being deliberately disseminated. Vilifying others was already a criminal offence in the analogue world — yet it still happened.

Given the rise of radicalisation on the internet, shouldn't the state regulate more strictly and crack down harder on fake news to save our democracy?

SH: Whether current regulations need to be tightened is a matter of debate between digital policymakers. Some feel that the new EU directives, such as the Digital Services Act, fail to go far enough. In their view, large digital companies should be compelled not only to remove unlawful statements but also, amongst other things, content denying climate change and other scientifically unproven content from their platforms. Others, however, believe such demands go far too far. They take the view that removing disinformation should only be a last resort. They argue that regulation is tantamount to censorship and stifles freedom of expression. Rather than imposing stricter regulation on content, they argue that government authorities should en-

courage media literacy among their citizens and require social media platforms to be more transparent.

Tech companies are also quick to make accusations of censorship ...

SH: Yes, it's interesting to see how contradictory the actions of Mark Zuckerberg and other tech tycoons are: in the US and Europe, they are among the most vocal advocates of freedom of expression. They are quick to level accusations of censorship whenever a new law or a court ruling affects their business interests. In many countries in the Global South, however, they turn a blind eye whenever autocratic or dictatorial governments severely restrict the internet and social media, as is the case in Indonesia or Vietnam, for example — or when the police and security agencies use the tech companies' digital tools to spy on opposition figures and human rights activists. In Egypt or Saudi Arabia, content creators and bloggers often spend years in jail.

What do you think about this?

SH: For Brot für die Welt, civil liberties are of the utmost importance. Restrictions on freedom of expression should therefore remain the exception. And they should only be imposed if they are proportionate in a specific case.

What makes a regulation difficult?

SH: The fundamental and human rights developed for the analogue world apply equally to cyberspace — but ensuring they are upheld there can sometimes be difficult. This is because digital actors operate globally and often remain anonymous. In most cases, legislators can only respond after the event, as is currently evident on a huge scale when it comes to AI. However, the fact that government regulation lags behind technological progress isn't a new phenomenon. The world of aviation, too, was largely unregulated in its early days.

How much influence does the EU have over the digital world?

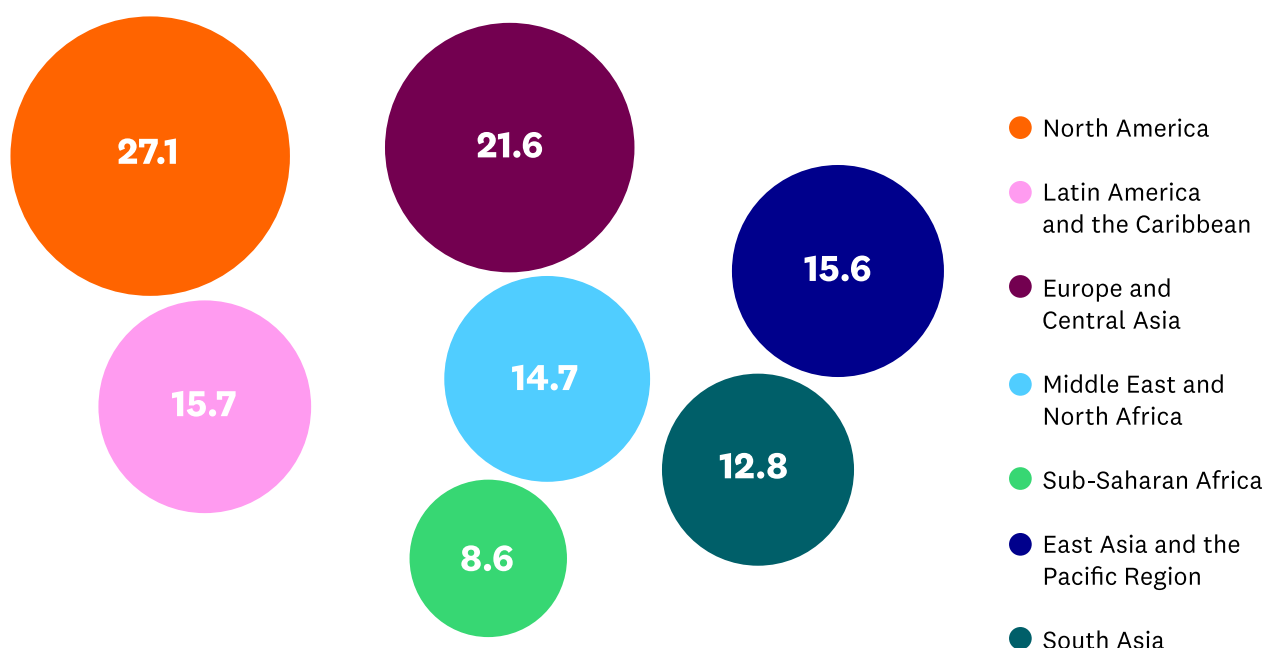
SH: In terms of the EU, there is a mixed picture. On the one hand, the EU has pioneered the regulation of major tech companies and strengthened the rights of users in Europe — non-European countries are keen to follow this example. On the other hand, the dominance of Google and the like in apps, browsers, search engines and social media is now pretty overwhelming. European companies have so far failed to offer any real alternatives to the digital infrastructure provided by the leading digital companies. In brief: the EU urgently needs to take the next step and work with democratic countries in the Global South to build their own digital infrastructure and jointly advocate for effective regulation at a global level.

From prompt to propaganda

Chatbots and image generators have long since become part of many people's everyday lives. AI-generated disinformation is mass-produced.

A wide gap

Regional comparison of AI user share



Source: Microsoft AI for Good Lab, Measuring AI Diffusion, November 2025

A well-known Ethiopian pastor calls on rebels to overthrow the government. A young soldier shouts at a British police officer, accusing him of protecting migrant criminals. Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan is made to kiss the Turkish President's knee. All these scenes have one thing in common: they are AI-generated and have never actually happened. They are deepfakes — videos showing real people in fabricated situations.

Generative AI has long been an integral part of the political disinformation toolkit. The technology allows for the production and dissemination of manipulative content: its creators falsify images, videos and audio files, automatically create social media profiles and populate them with content — and use them to spread the disinformation that they have created. A phenomenon known as “targeting” is also part of the toolkit. AI makes it possible to define very small target groups and tailor messages precisely to them. In this way, polarising and emotionally charged disinformation can be specifically tailored to users and their feeds on a huge scale.

In recent years, AI-generated disinformation has also been used in the run-up to elections in numerous countries. A study by the expert consortium the *International Panel on the Information Environment* revealed that AI-generated or AI-driven disinformation was used in 40 out of 50 national elections in 2024. The perpetrators were only identified in about half of all cases: in a quarter of the cases, national candidates and parties were responsible, whilst in 20 percent of cases, foreign actors — from Russia, China or Iran — were behind the disinformation.

In Bangladesh, social media users shared a deepfake video in which the independent candidate Abdullah Nahid Nigar announced her withdrawal from the election. In Taiwan, pro-Chinese users posted videos falsely accusing William Lai, the candidate of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party, of womanising and fathering children out of wedlock. And in Namibia, AI-generated videos were circulated in which Joe Biden was shown supporting candidates for election, while Donald Trump was depicted as announcing plans to blow up Namibia's uranium reserves.

Dedicated civil society activists are also becoming targets of deepfakes. Take Jennie Dador, for example, former executive director of the National Human Rights Coordination Committee (CNDDHH) in Peru, a partner organisation of Brot für die Welt. In 2024, an influential member of a far-right group shared an AI-generated image on Facebook showing Dador with her face covered in blood. The post accompanying this image accused Dador of being paid by foreign actors and of having helped organise the violent protests in Peru. Although the authors of the post had previously engaged in digital and physical violence, Meta didn't initially recognise this as a threat and failed to remove the image.

Deepfakes to intimidate women

Deepfakes are being used against women with increasing frequency — and have been for years, all over the world. According to a survey by UN Women, a United Nations agency, out of 640 women from 119 differing countries — primarily human rights defenders, activists and journalists — 24 percent had previously experienced AI-enabled digital violence (also see page 20).

Indian journalist Rana Ayyub was the target of a deepfake campaign as long ago as 2018. In response to Ayyub's campaigning for justice in a rape case, a doctored video was circulated in which her face had been superimposed onto pornographic footage. The video circulated in WhatsApp groups of members of the governing BJP party, and was viewed millions of times.

As a result, Ayyub received harassing and threatening messages; her home address and telephone number were also published. “From the day the video was published, I have not been the same person”, Ayyub later wrote in an article for the Huffington Post. She said she had subsequently censored herself and had been admitted to hospital suffering from heart palpitations and anxiety attacks.

Similar cases have occurred in numerous countries, including Pakistan, Kenya, Senegal, Brazil and Mexico. Argentina's ultra-libertarian President Javier Milei joined a campaign against a journalist in which deepfakes were used to spread lies about an alleged sexual relationship she had with her brother.

The rise in disinformation and vilification via deepfakes is also due to the fact that the technology is now readily available. Although Google and Apple's app stores have repeatedly removed individual “nudify” apps in the past, the range on offer remains extensive. In an analysis of adverts on Meta's platforms — Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp — journalist Alexios Mantzarlis identified more than 4,400 adverts for apps of this kind between early December 2025 and mid-January 2026 alone, even though they breach Meta's rules.

On X (formerly Twitter), an option was recently available for editing images with the AI bot Grok. From 25 December 2025 up to and including 1 January 2026, thousands of users used this bot to generate semi-nude and sexualised depictions of women and children. An analysis by the organisation AI Forensics revealed that around half of the more than 20,000 images generated by Grok contained such depictions, and that in more than 80 percent of cases, the images showed women.

Grok was temporarily blocked in several countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Other countries have launched investigations, including the EU under the Digital Services Act (DAS). In Germany, there is a legal loophole regarding sexualised offences online. This is set to be closed by an amendment to the German Criminal Code: if the law passes, it would be a criminal offence to create or share sexualised images and AI deepfakes without the consent of the persons depicted.

Fighting AI fakes with AI

Civil society isn't powerless against disinformation. This is something that has been demonstrated by several partner organisations of Brot für die Welt.

The media can help combat disinformation — “provided that they build trust, operate transparently and empower people to evaluate information critically”, says Siruan Hossein. In 2013, Hossein founded the radio station Arta FM in northern Syria, a partner of Brot für die Welt.

The station's journalists report in Kurdish, Arabic, Aramaic and Armenian. This multilingual approach helps counteract and prevent disinformation, which is usually circulated in Arabic in Syria, explains Hossein: “By addressing our listeners in their mother tongue and everyday language, we are more likely to get through to them when we expose fake news and set the record straight on air.” Hossein is convinced of one thing: “Where trustworthy media channels exist and are recognised, disinformation quickly reaches its limits.”

His station also focuses on dialogue. “We talk to each other, not about each other.” If a piece of fake news is circulating that vilifies an NGO or a local politician, for example, “we set to work, check the facts and, through interviews, clarify what is a lie and what isn't.” Ultimately, says Hossein, “the basics of journalism are the best tool for combating disinformation.”

Immunisation against fakes

Journalism can play a crucial role in reducing polarisation — particularly in areas where disinformation is especially effective. This is where Nouneh Sarkissian and her organisation come in: the Media Initiatives Centre in Armenia, also a partner of Brot für die Welt, provides journalists with training in conflict-sensitive reporting, and is committed to the integration of Armenian journalists from Nagorno-Karabakh who were displaced following Azerbaijan's attack on the enclave.

A key element in the fight against disinformation is strengthening media and information literacy, by providing training to journalists, teachers and active members of civil society, for example. Many of the partner organisations of Brot für die Welt focus on this area, and thereby empower local actors from a variety of sectors. These include IDEALS in the Philippines (see interview on page 15) and CARACON in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. CARACON supports several radio stations in broadcasting accurate information and raising awareness about prejudice. The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) also organises webinars in collaboration with the World Council of Churches. In these webinars, church representatives from around the world are informed about how they themselves can avoid spreading disinformation — and how they can counter it.

There are limits to this, though, says Zenzele Ndebele: “You can teach people to distinguish between information that's true or false — but you have to be aware that fake news is sometimes more appealing than the plain truth”, says the director of the Centre for Innovation and Technology (CITE; see interview on page 19), a partner of Brot für die Welt based in Zimbabwe. “Many people simply want to believe what they want to believe.” It is “a battle that will take a long time”.

Fact checking and AI

Fact-checking is another important tool in the fight against disinformation and misinformation. This work is often done by non-profit media organisations. However, fact-checking teams are coming under increasing attack by political parties, governments and extremist actors. Their funding is under threat, with Meta, for example, having terminated its fact-checking partnerships, and donors such as USAID having withdrawn their support. Despite this, many fact-checking organisations have developed innovative formats and approaches in recent years. Take JamiiCheck from Tanzania, for example. On the social network JamiiForums, users work alongside professional fact-checkers to identify potential fake news reports.

Dubawa in Nigeria is using artificial intelligence for this purpose. The organisation has developed an AI-powered platform which transcribes radio broadcasts and analyses them for verifiable statements. This helps to carry out fact-checks where they are most needed. Dubawa also runs a WhatsApp bot that people in Nigeria are able to contact with questions or reports of suspected misinformation.

Fact-checking tools are particularly important in countries where WhatsApp, Telegram and other messaging apps are the only sources of information for large parts of the population. On these platforms, disinformation often spreads within closed groups, meaning fact-checkers are unable to identify potential fakes. In 2025, an international research project based on case studies in India, Indonesia and Colombia showed that disinformation and misinformation on WhatsApp are a significant problem in all three countries — and that fake news reports circulating on WhatsApp are rarely debunked by other users. As a result, many fake news reports were shared despite fact-checking having been available. Projects such as Dubawa’s bot help to identify and refute these fakes.

The Brazilian fact-checking organisation Aos Fatos uses automated processes to continuously identify potential falsehoods on social media platforms and in Portuguese-language media. This enables it to publish fact-checks as quickly as possible. The challenge: because they are emotionally charged, fake news reports spread at breakneck speed on social media and messaging apps. Fact-checkers, on the other hand, have to start by identifying the relevant content and then need to carry out extensive research. Artificial intelligence can help speed this process up. In recent years, various initiatives have also been set up to combat disinformation on a collective basis.

One of the first was the alliance Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD). Today, 120 organisations within this alliance work together to analyse climate-related disinformation and develop strategies to curb it. CAAD was in constant action in 2025, as a campaign against climate protection had rapidly gained momentum in the run-up to the COP in Brazil (see infographic below). The campaign primarily targeted scientists and climate journalists.

There is no one solution

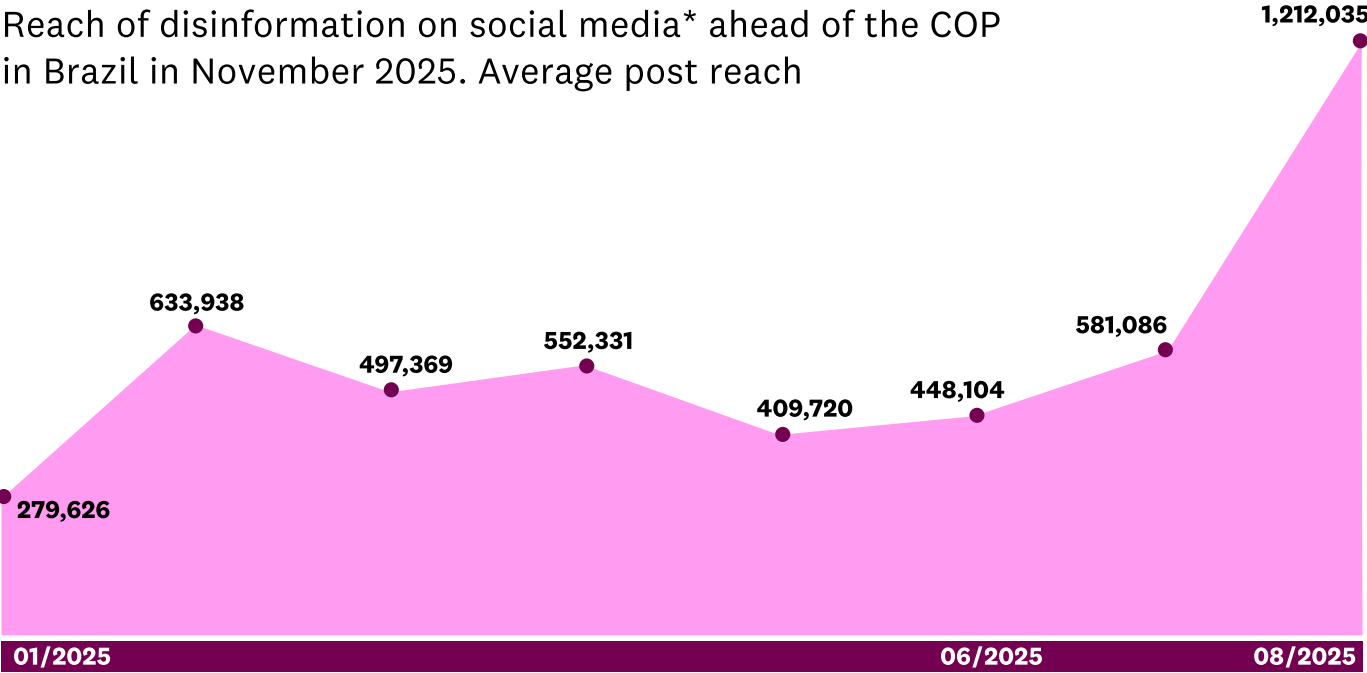
Artificial intelligence and chatbots cannot replace fact-checkers. The technology is prone to “hallucinations”: it sometimes invents quotes or studies.

Nor is there a single solution to disinformation and misinformation that works in every situation. To combat these phenomena effectively, a wide range of approaches is needed that are capable of having an impact in both the short and long term. This includes the regulation of platforms (see interview on page 31) as well as strong societal resilience — by strengthening democratic institutions and professional media, for instance.

Civil society has a crucial role to play here: through fact-checking, media literacy training, but also through public-interest journalism which holds governments and other actors to account when they spread disinformation. However, work of this kind requires long-term funding — and the respective organisations need to operate in safety.

More lies surrounding climate change than ever before

Reach of disinformation on social media* ahead of the COP in Brazil in November 2025. Average post reach



*X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit and LinkedIn were observed
Source: Observatory of Information Integrity in partnership — Climate and Environment/
Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), based on Brandwatch data



Budget cuts to development cooperation work have a boomerang effect:

Staff from Brot für die Welt at the campaign of the same name on 10 November 2025 in front of the Paul-Löbe-Haus at the Bundestag in Berlin.

Our demands

A resilient information society

... is a society that is able to maintain reliable information, democratic debate and public guidance in the face of crises, disinformation and digital disruptions. This requires stable democratic structures, a free press, responsibly regulated platforms and an informed, media-literate general population.

Everyone in the world has the right to express their views, to engage in politics, and to help shape the development of their country and key global issues. To this end, nation states must protect civil liberties, encourage participation, and make a firm commitment to the goal of a resilient information society.

Strong democracies rely on their civil society, with its actors providing information, raising awareness, setting agendas, championing the rights of the underprivileged, rallying public support and holding governments to account. Civil society is the driving force behind fair and sustainable development. This is only possible if civil liberties are guaranteed and — where necessary — can be enforced by the courts. Brot für die Welt is a member of civil society. Alongside our partners in approximately 90 countries, we are dedicated to upholding human rights — as the basis for a fairer world.

**For a resilient information society,
we demand from governments and
parliaments worldwide:**

- Counter disinformation in public discussions and on social media while ensuring that freedom of expression is not unduly limited
- Foster media literacy worldwide and provide financial support for the relevant programmes
- Strengthen independent and critical journalism and media diversity world-wide through funding programmes for local and investigative media organisations
- Consistently implement existing regulations and legislation, such as the EU Digital Services Act, impose sanctions on the systematic dissemination of disinformation and advocate for better oversight and greater transparency in platforms' algorithms
- Promote the development and use of non-commercial digital social infrastructures as an alternative to existing platforms
- Refrain from implementing network blocks, upload filters or other regulatory measures that could be misused as censorship infrastructure
- Establish legal specifications to ensure that platforms provide interfaces and data for independent research and monitoring

**For civil society worldwide,
we demand governments and
parliaments:**

- Safeguard the fundamental freedoms of an active and independent civil society
- Defend activists, media professionals and associations that come under attack
- Use development cooperation to provide sustainable and flexible financial support to civil society organisations working to promote democracy and development
- Ensure that laws governing non-profit organisations provide an enabling environment for civil society organisations and ensure the freedom of association
- Use government negotiations and bilateral or multilateral political dialogue to address oppression in the respective countries
- Work to ensure that vulnerable groups in particular are involved in decision-making processes at national and international levels which are relevant to them
- Apply mandatory risk analyses to ensure that foreign trade, migration and security policy decisions do not violate human rights

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What civil society can do

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In many countries in 2025, the situation for people trying to express their opinions or advocate for their rights has worsened, with individuals facing persecution, discrimination, arrest and even death.

Brot für die Welt releases the Atlas of Civil Society in Germany every year, drawing on both its own research activities and data from CIVICUS, a global network dedicated to citizen participation. The Analysis from the Atlas of Civil Society reproduces the main parts of the Atlas' analysis in English. The focus of this year's edition is how disinformation is posing a threat to democracy — with consequences for civil society that are often far-reaching.

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