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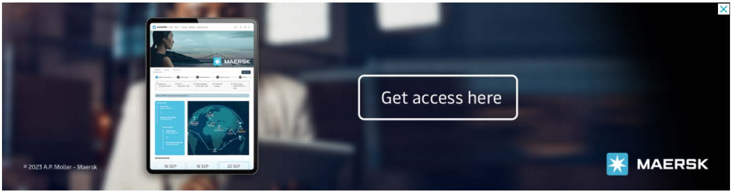

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COMMENTARY

Paige Alexander and Kristin Lord: 2024 is the year of elections. Let's act now to protect them.

By Paige Alexander and Kristin Lord
Chicago Tribune • Published: Jan 19, 2024 at 5:00 am

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Lisa Hultgren, the Derry, N.H. town moderator, center, unloads ballots from a vote counting machine while testing the machines before the New Hampshire primary, at the Derry Municipal Center, Jan. 16, 2024. (Charles Krupa/AP)

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As we look ahead this year, voters in more than 50 countries, including the United States, will go to the polls.

The elections will take place during a period of global democratic backsliding and in rapidly changing social media environments characterized by new threats from generative artificial intelligence and tech platforms' reductions in trust and safety protections. The challenges to election integrity and public confidence are daunting and require all levels of society — individuals, communities and institutions — to act.

Three times as many countries are moving toward autocracy as toward democracy. The quality of elections has worsened in at least 30 countries over the past decade — a period marked by increasing attacks on the media and freedom of expression, as well as diminishing levels of citizen trust in democratic institutions. At the same time, some major social media companies are signaling that election integrity is not a priority, in effect opening the door wider to abuse by state and nonstate actors. In the past year, Big Tech layoffs have decimated trust and safety teams responsible for combating election misinformation and malign interference around the world.

[*Jim Warren and McKenzie Sadeghi: AI-generated websites spell trouble for upcoming elections*]

Amid the content people are inundated with, including text, audio, video and photo, comes a wide range of manipulative content, such as deliberately misleading information about vaccines or hateful language that could incite individuals to violence. The challenge is that our brains are wired to generate strong reactions to emotional content and to share it with others. Manipulative information also takes advantage of cognitive shortcuts our brains developed to make sense of the world quickly. Traits that were self-protective hundreds or thousands of years ago now make us more susceptible to manipulation in an era of social media.

Fortunately, people can learn skills to help sort fact from fiction and recognize and manage reactions to emotional content. By understanding how social media algorithms cater to our biases and drive emotional responses, we can exert greater control over our own reactions. Taking control of these very human vulnerabilities to manipulative information can help citizens vote based on reasoned decisions about what is best for our communities, not reactions to content generated by others trying to manipulate us for their own purposes.

Given the sheer number of elections around the world this year, stronger steps to protect citizens from manipulative information are needed. This would be a mammoth challenge for tech platforms even with fully staffed trust and safety teams, let alone their shrinking departments. The situation is especially concerning when factoring in the unknown threat posed by generative AI.

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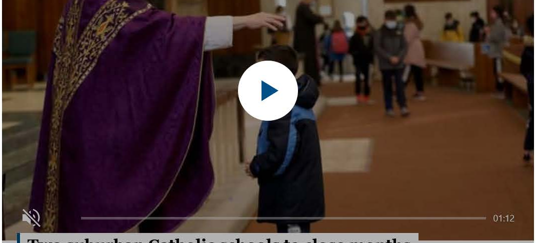

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Social media platforms are now even more susceptible to weaponization by bad actors than in 2020 when misinformation peddlers coordinated to create and spread false narratives about election fraud faster than they could be moderated. Protections that were introduced after the spread of hateful narratives on social media led to the ethnic cleansing of Myanmar's Rohingya population in 2017, have since been rolled back.

While it's impossible to fully prevent the spread of election misinformation, there are actions we can take to mitigate adverse impacts.

First, we can build resilience to manipulative information. The public must be equipped with knowledge and skills to critically evaluate sources of information, discern what's credible information and what's false and misleading information, recognize manipulative content and refrain from unwittingly spreading misinformation. A 2021 United Nations report cited low levels of "digital and media literacy" worldwide and called on countries to support digital literacy.

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We can support independent media reporting accurately and fairly on elections, candidates and their policies. As the counterpoint to manipulative information, such high-quality media content can help people make informed decisions and hold those in power accountable.

We can help educate the public on election technologies. Black box technology, a system producing information without revealing its sources, is ripe for false narratives. Educating the public on how voting and counting technologies work and the steps that impartial officials take to verify election results could address the information vacuum in which misleading or manipulative content thrives. This could include expanding voter education beyond when and how to

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vote and emphasizing information about vote counting, processes for verifying results and safeguards to fair elections.

And we need independent evaluations of elections. This means a commitment to supporting nonpartisan election observation to assess the quality of the election process and outcomes. Public reports issued by credible observation missions provide independent and systematic assessments that can counter misinformation narratives and help promote public confidence. As election processes are increasingly intermediated by technology, election observers must continuously adapt their methodologies to integrate assessments of the online information space and the technology used to record and tabulate votes.

With heightened threats to public confidence in democracy and elections, international donors should prioritize funding focused on information integrity, media literacy and new challenges in digital technology — in as many countries as possible.

With Big Tech abdicating its responsibility amid a spate of high-stakes elections in 2024, the time to act is now.

Paige Alexander is CEO of The Carter Center, a not-for-profit organization with a mission of advancing peace and health worldwide. Kristin Lord is president and CEO of IREX, a nonprofit dedicated to building a more just world by empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information.

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