

Countering Online Election Mis/Disinformation in 2024

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About me 🙌

Diane S. Chang

- Founder of Invisible Fabric, a consultancy on technology and social impact
- Entrepreneur-in-Residence, Brown Center for Media Innovation, Columbia Journalism School
- Led Meta civic integrity product teams, 2021-2023
- 15+ years of experience in technology product development & journalism
- Master in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School



Definitions

- **Disinformation:** Intentional attempts to use false information to affect the participation of voters in elections, or to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.
- **Misinformation:** False information shared without an intent to harm any person, group, or organization.
- **Deepfake:** Deceptively authentic audio, video, and images produced using generative AI technology.

Mis/disinformation in the 2020 election

- DOJ & DHS: “No Evidence Found that a Foreign Government Manipulated Any Election Results” ([DOJ](#)) but foreign & domestic actors **used misleading information to sow division**.
- Russian government-backed disinformation **targeted both the left and right**, pretending to be real Americans or mimicking real candidates & community groups, making **same-side candidate attacks to break up coalitions**. ([Brennan Center for Justice](#))
- **Fake news outlets & typosquatting** were common tactics by foreign influence campaigns. ([Brookings Institute](#))
- Disinformation on social media platforms and messaging apps like WhatsApp, often in different languages, **targeted communities of color**. Experts are already warning this will be even more widespread in 2024. ([Associated Press](#))

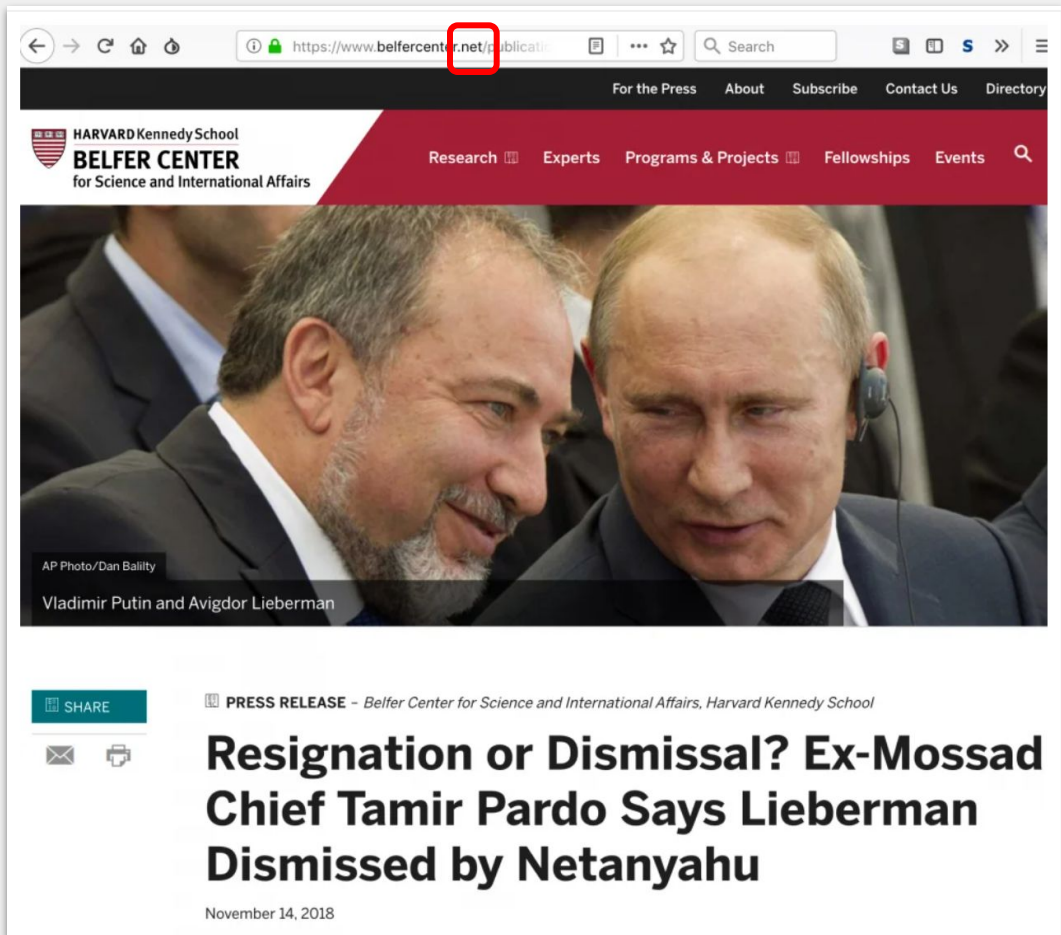
“It takes advantage of their very real fear and trauma from their experiences in their home countries.”

Typosquatting

A 2019 investigation by [Citizen Lab](#) uncovered an Iran-aligned network of inauthentic websites and online personas used to spread false and divisive information primarily targeting Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel.

This example shows a realistic-looking article from an academic research center, hosted on a suspicious URL (.net instead of .org).

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A screenshot of a web browser displaying a typosquatted website. The address bar shows the URL 'https://www.belfercenter.net/publications', with the '.net' domain highlighted by a red square. The website header features the Harvard Kennedy School logo and 'BELFER CENTER for Science and International Affairs'. Navigation links include 'For the Press', 'About', 'Subscribe', 'Contact Us', and 'Directory'. A secondary navigation bar contains 'Research', 'Experts', 'Programs & Projects', 'Fellowships', and 'Events'. The main content area shows a photograph of Vladimir Putin and Avigdor Lieberman, with a caption 'AP Photo/Dan Balilty' and 'Vladimir Putin and Avigdor Lieberman'. Below the photo is a 'SHARE' button and social media icons. The article title is 'Resignation or Dismissal? Ex-Mossad Chief Tamir Pardo Says Lieberman Dismissed by Netanyahu', dated November 14, 2018. The text 'PRESS RELEASE - Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School' is visible above the title.

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AP Photo/Dan Balilty
Vladimir Putin and Avigdor Lieberman

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📄 **PRESS RELEASE** – Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School

Resignation or Dismissal? Ex-Mossad Chief Tamir Pardo Says Lieberman Dismissed by Netanyahu

November 14, 2018

Spreading The Big Lie

The unseen machine pushing Trump's social media megaphone into overdrive

Researchers say the online feedback loop between Trump, high-profile influencers and rank-and-file followers is more dangerous than Russian disinformation.

[The Washington Post](#), Oct. 2020

PEER REVIEWED

Twitter flagged Donald Trump's tweets with election misinformation: They continued to spread both on and off the platform

[Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review](#), Aug. 2021

Trump's election lies were among his most popular tweets

[CNBC](#), Jan. 2021

'You Better Run': After Trump's False Attacks, Election Workers Faced Threats

[NPR](#), Feb. 2021

Election denialism & disinfo since 2020

- A **core set of false narratives** around voting machines, mail voting, and voter fraud cropped up online again during 2022 Midterm elections. ([Brennan Center for Justice](#))
- In 2022, **spread of election lies and falsehoods clustered in networks** around several online communities & influencers. Major nodes are election deniers in different states. ([Brennan Center for Justice](#))
- Election deniers and a cottage industry **have financially profited** off election disinformation by selling ads and through fundraising. ([Common Cause](#))
- Major **social media platforms** stopped taking down false claims in posts & ads denying the 2020 election results. ([Associated Press](#), [The Guardian](#))

Likely forces in the 2024 elections

1. X (formerly known as Twitter) has rolled back much of its protections against election disinformation.
2. Facebook and Instagram no longer recommend political content from sources that you aren't connected with.
3. Trump is not (yet) actively posting on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
4. Encrypted messaging apps have grown more popular (eg. iMessage, WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal).
5. New artificial intelligence technologies & tools are widely available.

How will generative AI impact elections?

Generative AI systems and tools have the potential to...

1. More quickly and cheaply generate lots of mis/disinformation content.
2. More easily generate realistic-looking deepfakes in images, video, audio.
3. Create many versions of a disinformation message, tailored to different communities, making them more compelling.

How will AI change things in 2024?

What's New...

Anyone can access AI tools to generate content pretty easily.

We're less experienced in distinguishing some times of synthetic media, such as audio.

What Hasn't Changed...

The threat of AI-generated disinformation comes from how it's *distributed*.

Fortunately, we've learned quite a few things about countering disinformation on social media since 2020!

How has AI been used in elections so far?

- **New Hampshire Primary, Jan. '24:** Voters received robocalls with the AI-generated voice of Joe Biden. ([AP](#))
- **Taiwan election, Jan. '24:** Videos on social media showed AI newscaster avatars reading false claims about the president, believed to be part of a Chinese Communist Party information operation.
- **Pakistan election, Feb. '24:** Jailed ex-prime minister Imran Khan's party used AI to create videos of him giving campaign speeches.
- **Indonesia election, Feb. '24:** Prabowo Subianto campaign used AI-generated cartoon likenesses of him as a "cuddly grandpa" to soften the alleged human rights abuser and former general's image. He's now president-elect.
- **Türkyie election March '24:** Early reports suggest that the AKP political party is producing deepfake videos for campaign ads in Türkyie's legislative election.

What are effective techniques to counter mis/disinformation?

1. **Inoculation** (also known as “**prebunking**”) and **debunking can reduce belief in misinformation**. Effects are strongest in the short term measured only among people who are exposed to the debunking or inoculation
2. **Social norms interventions have potential to reduce both misinformed beliefs and sharing intentions**. One U.S. study showed that corrective messages were more effective when they came from fellow party members compared to the opinion of general users. But more research is needed.
3. **Media literacy training can help people identify false stories and unreliable news sources**. However, overall effectiveness is mixed due to the range of approaches. The most successful approaches empower motivated individuals to take control of their media consumption and seek out high-quality information. However, these trainings are challenging to target quickly and at scale.

Sources: [USAID](#), [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

How to prebunk

Prebunking is a technique for pre-empting manipulation from misinformation by helping people identify and resist it. It entails 3 steps:

1. **Emotional warning:** Alert people of impending attempts to manipulate them.
2. **Microdose:** Give people a small “dose” example of manipulative messaging.
3. **Refutation:** Provide people with counter-arguments to the manipulative messaging so that they are equipped to refute it.

For further details on how to prebunk: prebunking.withgoogle.com

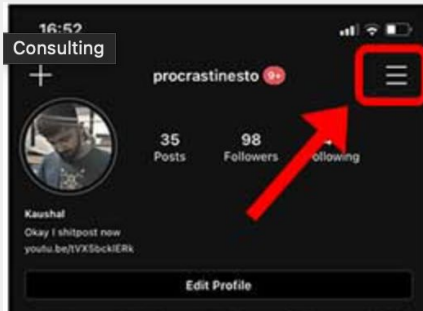
What can you do to elevate trustworthy information?

1. Build relationships with your **state & local election authorities** and amplify their efforts. ✓
2. Elevate election officials as the **authoritative & trustworthy sources of election information**. ✓
3. Form relationships with **reliable regional, local, & ethnic media** before the election, to partner on **debunking** misinformation that arises.
4. **Help “prebunk”** the common misinformation themes related to elections, such as election security safeguards and the trustworthiness of mail ballots.
5. Be prepared to **report** misleading or incorrect content that you see online. ✓
6. If someone in your life seems to be too steeped in online activity & conspiracies, encourage them to take a break, **spend time together offline**.

Instagram is limiting political content. Now what?

1. Political content by sources you follow should still show up in your feeds. **You have influence over your networks and relationships.**
2. Follow accounts from trustworthy sources, such as your election authorities' official accounts and pages, regional public media outlets, and share their posts.
3. Partner with other trusted community leaders to post and boost reliable information.
4. You can opt in to political content by changing your Instagram settings.
5. On Facebook, you can choose "show more" or "show less" to personalize the posts shown in your feed.
6. Consider other ways to share authoritative election information, such as email, messaging, and in person.

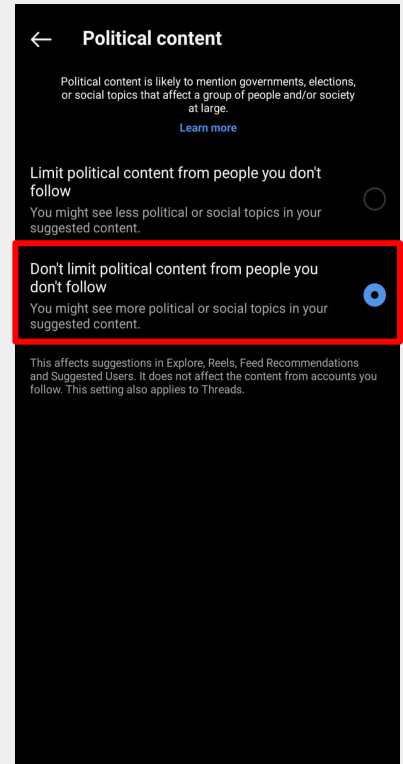
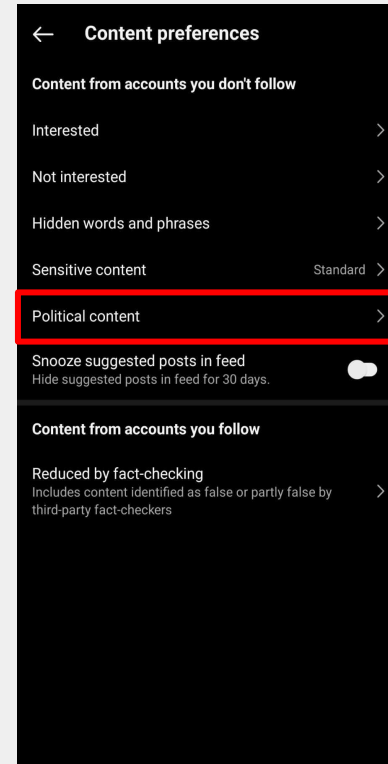
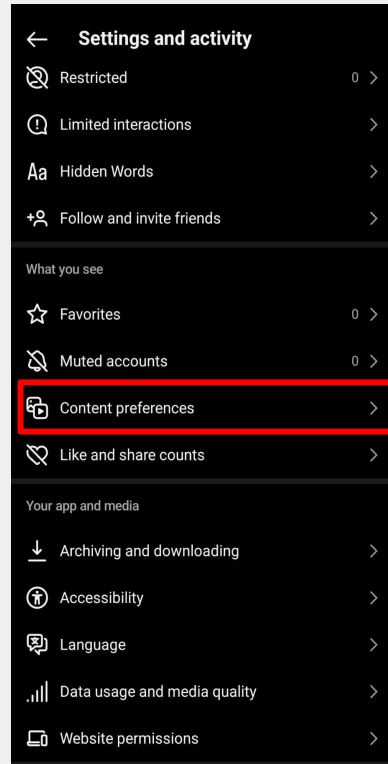
Changing settings for political content



1. Open up the app on your smartphone. Then tap the three-dash menu at the top right.
2. Navigate to “settings and privacy,” then choose “content preferences,” then open the “Political content” menu.
3. Find and turn on the “Don’t limit” option.

Source: [Associated Press](#)

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Resources & References

- [Digital Risks to the 2024 Elections: Safeguarding Democracy in the Era of Disinformation](#), NYU Center for Business and Human Rights, Feb. 2024.
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- [Interventions To Counter Misinformation: Lessons From The Global North And Applications To The Global South](#), U.S. Agency for International Development, July 2023.
- “[How to Prebunk](https://prebunking.withgoogle.com),” Google Jigsaw, <https://prebunking.withgoogle.com>.
- [A Practical Guide to Prebunking Misinformation](#), University of Cambridge, BBC Media Action, and Google Jigsaw, 2022.



Thank You