

Concept Note for UNESCO-GNI Colloquium

“Improving the communications and information ecosystem to protect the integrity of elections”

Executive summary

This concept note sets out the context, aims and structure for a colloquium to be held at UNESCO on 8 February 2018, 09.00 – 13.00

Partners and context

Among the UN family, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promotes freedom of expression, press freedom and freedom of information. This includes work to support free, independent and pluralistic media, online and offline, so as to strengthen the integrity of electoral processes in the field of media and communication.

The Global Network Initiative (GNI) is a multi-stakeholder organization of information and communication technology companies, civil society organizations, academics, and socially responsible investors, working collaboratively to promote and protect freedom of expression and privacy on the Internet.

The two organisations are partnering in a colloquium, having noted in recent years that social media has been affecting political communication. Political parties and candidates are using it to reach out to constituents, mobilize supporters and raise funds. Voters use social media to talk to candidates and to each other about election-related issues, and to get involved in campaigns. Civil society groups and citizens are using social media to monitor elections.

All this informational and communicational activity strengthens the integrity and transparency of electoral processes and enriches democracy. However, there is also the potential of malicious actors to abuse the digital dimensions of elections and alter, or undermine confidence in their outcome.

Various actors have undertaken individual and collective steps to reduce the risks of such abuse. Multistakeholder cooperation can help maximize effectiveness and mitigate unintended consequences.

To advance such approaches and to share good practices, UNESCO and the Global Network Initiative see this colloquium as an opportunity to bring together a variety of stakeholders, representing civil society, electoral agencies, ICT companies, UN agencies, journalists, and academics.

UNESCO also envisages that the meeting will help assist UN electoral assistance providers with ideas on how to improve their electoral programs and activities. We also intend to invite representatives of regional organizations that undertake election observation missions upon the request of their Member States, and thus will benefit discussing new digital challenges to electoral processes and systems.

This colloquium follows one organized by UNESCO in 2017,¹ which discussed issues of ‘fake news’, identity politics, and computer-mediated disinformation, and these issues will not be the focus of this 2018 event.

PROGRAMME

Duration: 3 hours

Opening Remarks (10 minutes)

Keynote (15 minutes)

PANEL 1: *Network availability, security and integrity around elections* (50 minutes)

The integrity of the democratic process and political campaigns relies on a free flow of information and uninterrupted communications. This points to the need for communications to be unhindered by arbitrary filtering, blockage or network disruptions. In addition, it requires that election-related communications, the platforms and networks that carry them, and the servers and devices which store relevant data, need to be resilient to breaches and unauthorized intrusions.

Challenges that arise include:

- (i) What are the impacts of “network disruptions” on elections, including on key electoral actors such as political parties, electoral commissions, law enforcement, and election monitors?
- (ii) How should human rights principles such as the criteria of necessity, proportionality and legitimate purpose for any limitations on freedom of expression guide policy about digital connectivity and free flow of information during the context of elections?
- (iii) What good practice guidelines can be developed by both states and non-governmental actors for prevention, disclosure and response to attempts at compromising data security and integrity and thus undermining democratic institutions and processes, including elections?

Speakers: Representatives of telecommunications companies, academics, election lawyers/observers, civil society, etc.

Discussion – 20 minutes

¹ See “Journalism under Fire”, organized 23 March 2017 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (more: <http://en.unesco.org/journalism-under-fire>).

PANEL 2: *Enhancing the quality of information around elections:* (50 minutes)

Elections are periods when disinformation is often presented various forms, thereby posing challenges to free, fair and transparent political contest. However, relevant actors often struggle to address this challenge without impinging on legitimate expression and circulation of information for political debate.

This panel will explore efforts to thread this needle, including what principles can guide those efforts, what works, and what the unintended consequences may be. Discussion will focus around:

- (i) regulation related to transparency around election-related activities and expenditures (including on advertising) by political parties, candidates, and other actors, as well as non-discrimination in terms of advertising by election contenders;
- (ii) voluntary, self-regulatory or co-regulatory efforts to counter election-related abuse of Internet platforms, as well as efforts to provide users with tools enabling users to more effectively engage with and interpret relevant information; and
- (iii) voter education and media and information literacy initiatives. Speakers: Representatives of social media companies, academics, civil society, election regulators, electoral bodies, etc.

Discussion – 20 minutes

Concluding remarks – 5 minutes

OUTCOME: Event Report drafted together with GNI