Israel Public Policy Institute
HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG TEL AVIV
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany Tel Aviv

Policy Paper

Fostering Israel's Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age

The Case for a Designated Hub to Address the Challenge of Disinformation in Israel

Noa Barak

Facing up to the Infodemic: Promoting a Fact-Based Public Discourse in Times of Crisis

Policy Paper Series by the Israel Public Policy Institute (IPPI)

Fostering Israel's Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age

The Case for a Designated Hub to Address the Challenge of Disinformation in Israel

Author

Noa Barak

About this Paper

This policy paper is part of the paper series "Facing up to the Infodemic: Promoting a Fact-Based Public Discourse in Times of Crisis."

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, this paper series explores some of the key challenges facing democratic societies as a result of misinformation in the digital public sphere. It features a unique mosaic of perspectives and insights by experts from Israel and Germany that shed light on different facets of the phenomenon of online misinformation, with the aim of invigorating a societal debate on the issue as well as offering concrete ideas about how to address it.

The series "Facing up to the Infodemic: Promoting a Fact-Based Public Discourse in Times of Crisis" was generously supported by the German Embassy in Tel Aviv. The content and opinions expressed in the papers are solely of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the German government and/or the Israel Public Policy Institute.

About the Project

This paper series is part of the broader project "Fostering Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age," conceptualized and executed by the Israel Public Policy Institute (IPPI) in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tel Aviv.

The objective of the project is to promote dialogue, exchange of knowledge and collaboration between researchers and practitioners from Israel and abroad to enhance democratic resilience in the context of the changing media and information landscape in the digital age.

Please cite as follows:

Barak, N. (2021). Fostering Israel's Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age: The Case for a Designated Hub to Address the Challenge of Disinformation in Israel. Policy Paper Series by the Israel Public Policy Institute: "Facing up to the Infodemic: Promoting a Fact-Based Public Discourse in Times of Crisis."

Contents

Executive Summary 4

01 Introduction 5

1.1 Limited Understanding of Mis- and Disinformation in the Public and Political Discourse 5

1.2 Scattered Resources and Knowledge, and Lack of Connectedness between the Various Actors in the Field 6

1.3 The Problem: Incoherent Picture and Inaccessible Knowledge – Leads to Incoherent Movement and Difficulty in Catalyzing Change 7

02 Overview of Alternatives and Approaches to Action 8

2.1 Cross-Sector Coalitions and Collaborations 9

03 The Way Forward: A Designated "Disinfo Hub" to Advance a Whole-of-Society Approach to Tackle Disinformation in Israel 10

04 Next Steps towards Implementation 12

4.1 First Stage: Mapping the Arena 12

4.2 Second Stage: Creating a Space of Action and Body of Knowledge 12

4.3 Action Framework 12

05 Concluding Remarks 13

Endnotes 14

Executive Summary

In recent years, disinformation has become such a widespread phenomenon that it may be impossible to describe it with a single overarching and agreed-upon definition. Until recently, what attracted the most public attention was the dissemination of "fake news." But that is just one manifestation of a much broader phenomenon. Disinformation in the digital age is increasingly understood as an all-encompassing phenomenon that takes place at multiple levels of mechanisms of production, consumption and dissemination of information, and whose influence infiltrates every realm of life in human society. It undermines the stability of political, economic and ecological systems the world over, invades the mechanisms of essential inter-disciplinary decision-making in realms such as health, security and environment, and fans the flames of ideological and cultural tensions that threaten to disintegrate the social fabric and the democratic system. The COVID-19 pandemic, which from the outset was accompanied by what has become dubbed as the "Infodemic," i.e. viral spread of misinformation, greatly increased public recognition of the burning need to create protective mechanisms against this combined attack, in Israel and throughout the world.

One of the main channels today being advanced in various countries around the world is in the realm of legislation and regulation. Indeed, legislation regarding the dissemination of disinformation, regulation of the information and data market, and oversight of how information is collected, processed and circulated by tech companies are essential steps. Nevertheless, they are not enough. Such a holistic problem, with so many manifestations and abstract ramifications, also requires a holistic response. Therefore, alongside legislation and regulation from above, there is a need for civic infrastructure to deal with the effects of disinformation on the ground, to help protect the democratic frameworks and build social digital resilience.

In Israel, which had been undergoing an ongoing political crisis prior to the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19, a non-governmental civil infrastructure for dealing with disinformation is particularly essential. The political crisis, which itself constitutes particularly fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation, also paralyzes government bodies and prevents the advancement of any orderly policy in this realm. And yet, in order to harness the power of civil society in Israel for this mission without government involvement, a different approach must be adopted from that taken until now.

At the battlefront in the struggle against disinformation in Israel is the obstacle of scattered resources and knowledge that are not being properly harnessed. Actors who deal with the various aspects of disinformation are focused on day-to-day operations within their professional fields, and therefore, they rarely come into contact with one another and lack the ability to tackle the challenge in a systemic and coordinated manner.

Due to the lack of information exchange and of collaboration between actors specializing in content and disinformation distribution networks, those dealing with the technological aspects of the phenomenon, and the ones tackling its social, economic and political aspects, the understanding of the phenomenon of disinformation in Israel, including its characteristics and effects, remains

fragmentary and lacking, as does the ability to address it effectively.

The present paper is intended to forge a path for establishing and strengthening a non-governmental, civil path for dealing with disinformation in Israel through the creation of a designated hub that will harness the power of activists in the field.

- **Recommendation 1: Establish a designated civil "Disinfo Hub" to tackle disinformation in Israel**
  The ongoing extreme political polarization and crisis in Israel, deepened by the COVID-19 crisis, is severely impinging on the ability to advance government policy in the area of disinformation. Without significant and coherent action on the part of civil society forces, the Israeli digital public sphere will remain exposed and vulnerable to disinformation, thus continuing to intensify and deepen the political crisis in the country.

- **Recommendation 2: Combine courses of action to advance a "whole-of-society approach"**
  The challenges posed by disinformation and the scope and complexity of the global phenomenon have given rise to an acute need for joint action of different forces in society. In Israel, as elsewhere, tackling the multifaceted challenge of disinformation requires the creation and sharing of knowledge and insights, the promotion of cross-sector collaboration and the advancement of public engagement and policy advocacy.

1. Introduction

1.1. Limited Understanding of Mis- and Disinformation in the Public and Political Discourse

Like most of the world, Israel has been dealing in recent years with a surge in the scope of online disinformation[1] and with an ongoing increased efficiency in the mechanisms of its dissemination, leading to negative influence on the political system and social relations in the country. Election campaigns, as has been proven in recent years, even in the world's most stable democracies, provide especially fertile ground for the creation and methodic dissemination of disinformation, which has become an inseparable part of the global political reality. In Israel, three consecutive elections have been held over the last two years, combined with a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly intensified the political and social instability and turned the stream of disinformation into a veritable tsunami. These events, which have not yet come to a head, undoubtedly raised public awareness in Israel of the phenomenon of disinformation. The media "buzz" and public discussion of "fake news" recently reached a new zenith when some of the main media channels in Israel for the first time performed a fact-check during the live broadcast of a speech by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, inspired by similar moves made by American media channels during the presidential campaigns there.[2]

However, despite the strong presence of disinformation in Israeli political and public life, it is understood only very narrowly. The public discussion of disinformation in Israel focuses mainly on content-factual aspects of the phenomenon, that is, the false information that is disseminated – the

"fake news" – and the debate is often utilized by rival political camps to serve their own interests. A public discussion of broader aspects of disinformation – technological, economic, sociological and psychological, and of its ramifications on the life fabric and the democratic framework is almost non-existent beyond the relatively limited circles of experts, interest groups and interested individuals. In other words, most of the public discussion of disinformation in Israel focuses on the question of "who is lying and why," and less on the questions of "how does this happen" and "what is it doing to us." This narrow engagement takes expression in the fact that the question of how to address the societal challenge of disinformation has not yet become a burning political issue in Israel, in contrast to the trend in many European countries and in the U.S., where this issue already occupies the heart of public discourse and political debate.

The question of how to address the societal challenge of disinformation has not yet become a burning political issue in Israel, in contrast to the trend in many European countries and in the U.S., where this issue already occupies the heart of public discourse and political debate.

1.2. Scattered Resources and Knowledge, and Lack of Connectedness between the Various Actors in the Field

The partial and "fake-news" focused picture in public discourse is reflected to a great extent inter alia in the structure of the various forces that act in the arena of disinformation in Israel. A general mapping of this arena reveals that it is fragmented and lacks inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral connectedness between the different actors, leading to appalling omissions in terms of knowledge and resources, as well as sorely ineffective activity.

Content and Monitoring Actors

At the forefront of public awareness are the actors who deal with the aspects of content and dissemination of disinformation and provide a reactive response: organizations and media that deal with guarding against false information spread on the Internet, fact-checking and making reliable information accessible to the public.[3]

A great deal of time and energy is invested in redundant tasks of guarding and checking similar content by different bodies that rarely share knowledge, tools and channels of dissemination at their disposal.

Operating alongside them are additional actors whose work is gaining resonance among the public, who focus on mechanisms of disinformation dissemination, i.e. web activists who deal with the identification, tracking and exposure of profiles, networks and campaigns promoting disinformation. In this realm, a great deal of time and energy is invested in redundant tasks of guarding and checking similar content by different bodies that rarely share knowledge, tools and channels of dissemination at their disposal, whether due to a lack of initiative or a lack of awareness of one another, or due to competition between them. This means that the range of coverage of these organizations, almost all of which lack resources, remains relatively narrow, and they provide the public with a limited scope of similar, i.e. redundant content, while much disinformation that is disseminated over the Web slips through their nets.

Technological Actors

At the same time, there are actors in Israel, less visible to the public eye, who deal with the development of technological tools to guard against and identify disinformation and its dissemination outlets. Such tools can advance and greatly improve the ability of content and monitoring bodies to respond more quickly and broadly to the disinformation disseminated over the Internet. However, collaboration between these two types of actors is virtually non-existent in Israel. One key reason is that it is difficult for media organizations and independent bodies to make financial investments in such technological tools, most of which are developed by commercial companies.[4] The producers of these technologies also lose out from this lack of collaboration. The loss is not merely unrealized commercial gain, but also missed opportunity to receive access to knowledge of those who are in daily contact with the field of disinformation, who keep current with its dynamics and developments and can be of invaluable assistance to their task of developing efficient tools to keep pace with changes on the ground.

Academic Research

A third leg is the actors from the realm of research – researchers, academic institutions and research institutes that deal with the generation, importing and processing of scientific-research knowledge regarding the broad effects of disinformation from the composite aspects: political, economic, social, environmental, psychological, cognitive and others. The knowledge that exists in this category is without a doubt the most extensive and critical basis for bringing about a change in the understanding of the phenomenon of disinformation and the ability to deal with it, but it is to a great extent obscure and inaccessible, certainly to most of the public, but also to the other actors in the arena. Various research bodies in Israel that have in recent years been occupied with the topic of disinformation work to make the knowledge that they create accessible, and the various actors frequently convene during conferences and study days devoted to the topic.[5] However, no significant steps have been taken to create fixed mechanisms for the exchange of knowledge or applied integration of any kind between the actors and the various realms of activity.[6]

> **No significant steps have been taken to create fixed mechanisms for the exchange of knowledge or applied integration of any kind between the actors and the various realms of activity.**

1.3. The Problem: Incoherent Picture and Inaccessible Knowledge – Leads to Incoherent Movement and Difficulty in Catalyzing Change

The scattered activities, resources and knowledge in the arena of action, alongside the narrow involvement in the public discourse, take expression in the fact that the understanding of the phenomenon of disinformation in Israel remains partial and lacking, and as a result, the response to it is gravely insufficient.

Too much remains unknown regarding the various manifestations of disinformation. There is no systematic and comprehensive collection of information on the nature and scope of disinformation disseminated in Israel and the nature and source of the campaigns and networks that disseminate it. Moreover, the partial knowledge that is accumulated remains scattered

in the hands of a few organizations that deal with this topic. In addition, there is no broad and orderly picture of the effects of disinformation on society, the establishment and individual Israelis, its unique local characteristics, and the segments of society that are especially exposed and vulnerable to it. Furthermore, most of the knowledge is either technical or academic and is not made accessible to actors from outside the field of disinformation, thus leaving the public and the policy community uninvolved. A more complete and coherent understanding of the characteristics and ramifications of disinformation, based on a pooling of resources and the sharing, processing and generation of knowledge and shared goals, is necessary in order to improve the ability of actors in the field as well as other stakeholders to understand it, and to collaborate in pursuing a clear and overarching public policy to deal with disinformation in Israel.

> **A more coherent understanding of the characteristics and ramifications of disinformation for Israeli society is necessary to improve the ability of actors in the field to understand it, and to collaborate in promoting relevant pathways to effectively tackle it.**

2. Overview of Alternatives and Approaches to Action

One of the main ways in which various countries around the world are attempting to respond to the negative effects of disinformation is through legislative steps against its dissemination and imposition of regulations on the activity of the technology giants and the information and data market.[7] Regulation and legislation of this kind are indeed vital, also in Israel, and must constitute a central objective as part of the advancement of policy for dealing with the phenomenon of disinformation and building social digital resilience. But they alone are not enough.

> **Various studies and analyses from the past years, which examined the ways of defending against the influences of disinformation in democratic societies, pointed to the need, alongside regulation, for the action of civil society forces combined with inter-sectoral forces in order to best deal with the various aspects of the phenomenon.**

As an all-encompassing phenomenon, disinformation in the digital age requires in parallel a comprehensive, varied and combined civil and social response that can provide recourse to the many challenges that it poses. Various studies and analyses from the past years, which examined ways of defending against the influences of disinformation in democratic societies, pointed to the need, alongside regulation, for the action of civil society forces combined with inter-sectoral forces, in order to best deal with the various aspects of the phenomenon.[8] Researchers in Israel have also reached similar conclusions.[9]

The 2018 recommendations document of the Atlantic Council for protection against disinformation emphasized the critical importance of combined and inter-sectoral activity in the struggle of democracies against disinformation: "Winning the new information war will require a whole-of-society approach. Top-down will not work: Governments are likely to lack the technological sophistication of social-media companies and the operational skill of civil-society bot/troll hunters."[10]

2.1. Cross-Sector Coalitions and Collaborations

One of the main recommendations of the Atlantic Council document is the establishment of a Counter-Disinformation Coalition, comprising government and non-governmental stakeholder actors, in order to jointly develop practices for protection against disinformation. While the document focuses on a multi-pronged international-policy approach, the understanding that coalitional collaboration between various actors in the arena and between different sectors is a key means to the ability of democratic societies to respond effectively to effects of disinformation is steadily growing. In recent years many coalitions have been established for this purpose in various forms. Some bring together similar organizations, but most are inter-sectoral; some are based on international collaboration and some are local; some have a narrow or specific joint mission, while others have broad and long-term objectives.

An example of such a coalition of similar organizations is the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN), a professional guild of sorts that promotes the exchange of knowledge and the formulation of professional standards in the field, as well as collaboration between fact-checking organizations and research bodies, web platforms and other stakeholders.[11] In addition, there are initiatives such as TNI (Trusted News Initiative), which joins together a number of large news organizations in the world together with web platforms and technology giants for a joint struggle against particularly pernicious disinformation (for example, regarding COVID-19).[12] The establishment of an inter-sectoral collaboration intended to deal with disinformation crises was recently declared by the British fact-checking organization Full Fact, whose partners include media outlets, research bodies, and web platforms, as well as the British government.[13] Another prominent inter-sectoral coalition that set itself more expansive goals is the international network First Draft, which brings together leading news and media outlets, universities, web platforms and civil society organizations to generate knowledge, understanding and tools needed to empower society in its battle against disinformation and to advance overarching policies.[14] The EU Disinfo Lab, an independent NGO focused on tackling disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and the nation states, sets another knowledge-based collaborative model. Integrating between four pillars of action – continuous research on disinformation; sharing knowledge, resources and tools with experts and collaborators; policy advocacy; and advancement of collaborations and multi-stakeholder action – it sets the infrastructure for a whole-of-society engagement in building resilience against disinformation.[15]

Coalitions and collaborations for dealing with disinformation also operate at the local level. Election Integrity Partnership, recently established in the US, is an interesting example of a local ad hoc initiative established for the purpose of focused activity to prevent the dissemination of disinformation during elections through knowledge exchanges in real time between the research community, government bodies, the platforms and civil society.[16] In Norway, there is a unique model of a local coalition: the six largest competing news organizations, including the Norwegian Public Broadcasting Association, banded together as partners in operating and financing Faktisk, a local independent fact-checking organization.[17] The most comprehensive local model is in Finland, where it is the state that is leading the efforts to deal with disinformation, based on a perception of the phenomenon as an actual security threat. The Finnish model does not focus on legislation, but rather on education and training in schools and among the public to identify false information and promote

information literacy. It relies on collaboration with research and civil society organizations, and in recent years has attracted considerable international attention, warranting its status as an inspiring model for effective democratic struggle against disinformation.[18]

> In face of the challenges posed by the phenomenon of disinformation in the digital age, coalitions apparently are not merely an auxiliary force, but a real necessity.

Coalitions of bodies with shared interests for advancing their goals is not a new idea. It is one of the accepted practices in civil society in the world and in Israel. Coalitions are created based on a shared understanding of the limited ability of a single organization to advance a significant change, and they serve not only as a tool for pooling resources and knowledge, but also as an auxiliary force for achieving a broader and more coherent representation of the shared goal vis-à-vis the public in social struggles, in the recruitment of partners from other sectors, and vis-à-vis government bodies in processes of policy advancement.[19] Indeed, in face of the challenges posed by the phenomenon of disinformation in the digital age, coalitions apparently are not merely an auxiliary force, but a real necessity. The scope and complexity of the phenomenon, its endlessly changing nature, its global characteristics alongside the local distinctiveness, and mainly, the powerful forces behind it, have given rise to an acute need for joint action, both at the international and local levels, by the best forces in society standing united in order to block it.

3. The Way Forward: A Designated "Disinfo Hub" to Advance a Whole-of-Society Approach to Tackle Disinformation in Israel

In Israel, civil society and inter-sectoral collaboration in the realm of disinformation is essential, especially now. The ongoing extreme political polarization and crisis in the country, together with the health and financial crises, are steadily deepening the public's lack of faith in the political establishment, a situation that provides particularly fertile ground for the flourishing of disinformation. At the same time, the political crisis and the rapid rate of overturn in government offices are also severely impinging on the ability to advance government policy in the area of disinformation. Moreover, disinformation often operates in the service of elements in the political systems itself, which might seek to thwart such policy.

> Disinformation often operates in the service of elements in the political systems itself, which might seek to thwart such policy. Therefore, it is highly doubtful that government-led policy or legislation in the area will ripen in the short term.

Therefore, it is highly doubtful that government-led policy or legislation in the area will ripen in the short term. It is often civil society rather than governmental forces in Israel that play the significant role of catalyzing social changes, and the pioneering force that leads the political and public systems to introduce policy changes. At this time, when faith in the political establishment

is at an all-time low, forces in civil society have not only a responsibility to act in the vacuum created, but also possess a greater ability than the establishment to win public support and trust.

> **The recommendation of this paper is to establish a designated "Disinfo Hub" to advance a whole-of-society approach to tackle the multifaceted challenge of disinformation in Israel by promoting collaboration between actors in this realm, advancing cross-sector actions and public engagement, and developing the tools, knowledge and policy recommendations needed to bring about the necessary change.**

Without significant and coherent action on the part of additional civil – and not governmental – bodies, the arena of disinformation in Israel will remain vulnerable and improperly addressed, and will continue to intensify and deepen the crisis in the country. Therefore, the recommendation of this paper is to establish a designated "Disinfo Hub" to advance a whole-of-society approach to tackle the multifaceted challenge of disinformation in Israel by promoting collaboration between actors in this realm, advancing cross-sector actions and public engagement, and developing the tools, knowledge and policy recommendations needed to bring about the necessary change. Drawing on the models of some of the organizations mentioned above, this knowledge-based local hub will combine complementary courses of action:

- **Creation and Sharing of Knowledge:** The hub will conduct independent research to generate new insights on the phenomenon of disinformation and approaches to dealing with it, while also synthesizing knowledge that has been accumulated by relevant actors in Israel and other countries. This knowledge base will be made accessible to the relevant stakeholders in the Israeli eco-system and advance the understanding of the topic, while also providing a clearer picture of its unique characteristics in Israel, thereby improving local actors' ability to tackle it effectively.

- **Promotion of Collaborations:** The hub will provide an infrastructure for the advancement of collaborations and joint action between actors in the fields of disinformation. It will serve as a basis for the exchange of expertise, resources, tools and professional knowledge, and advancement of joint projects and combined action in crisis events, and creation of shared channels for enhancing the effect of their work. In addition, the hub will promote cross-sector collaboration to advance broader action by multi-stakeholders and to increase public engagement and knowledge in areas such as educational programs for dealing with disinformation and promotion of information literacy in the population-at-large.

- **Advancement of Policy:** Drawing on its body of research and applied knowledge, and on its experience and familiarity with the local actors as well as the unique needs and challenges of Israeli society and the political sphere, the hub will also act to advance policy recommendations to lead the way for conducive multi-sector engagement in the joint effort of tackling the challenge of disinformation.

4. Next Steps towards Implementation

4.1. First Stage: Mapping the Arena

In the first stage, a process of development is necessary that will include an analysis of the arena of disinformation in Israel and a mapping of the various actors in the different sectors that work therein, i.e. from civil society, tech companies, academia and the media, as well as their areas of activity. In this process, the objectives and courses of action of each of these actors, their needs and limitations, the added value they can gain from the hub, their potential contribution, factors that may deter them from collaborating with it, are clarified. Based on this analysis, it will be possible to identify the actors with the greatest potential to be in the first circle of partners and collaborators, while designing the operative framework in a manner that will dovetail with their needs and goals. In parallel, a process of researching various collaborations and coalitions around the world that deal with disinformation will be carried out, while examining possible courses of action and learning from optimal and less optimal experiences.

4.2. Second Stage: Creating a Space of Action and Body of Knowledge

After the development stage, the stage of recruiting the first circle of partners and jointly defining the action framework and objectives of the hub, it will be possible to begin building channels of joint action. The first goals will be creating mechanisms for sharing knowledge, resources and tools for streamlining the activity of the various bodies and unifying conceptual gaps in the area, formulating shared projects sponsored by the hub and generating public resonance.

The first goals will be creating mechanisms for sharing knowledge, resources and tools for streamlining the activity of the various bodies and unifying conceptual gaps in the area, formulating shared projects sponsored by the hub and generating public resonance.

At the same time, and as an integral part of carrying out these missions, a process will also begin of gathering and processing applied and research knowledge from the partners and other local sources, which, together with knowledge from around the world and new research initiated by the hub, will be put to the service of various needs. At the stage when the hub is already fulfilling its preliminary goals in an ongoing manner, it will then be possible to expand its reach and collaboration with additional partners and stakeholders and develop further the courses of public engagement and policy advocacy.

4.3. Action Framework

For purposes of the ongoing activity, a dedicated small and high-powered staff will be necessary to deal full time with the management of the hub's multiple courses of action. Initially, this staff will lead the process of development, and subsequently it will coordinate the ongoing activity of the hub. The lion's share of its work will focus on the construction and operation of its knowledge base, including: the collection and processing of data, information and research, as well as writing, translation and publication of findings and rendering them suitable for various readerships and formats, and initiation of new research in collaboration with local and international experts and researchers.

This staff will not overlap with the representatives of any of the partners, but will engage exclusively with the hub's activity. It will begin with one or two people at the developing stages, and is likely to grow subsequently, in keeping with the scope of activity.

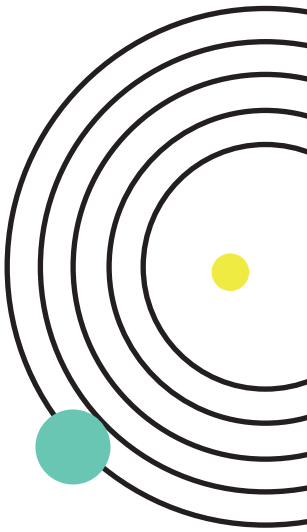
Executing such a framework for action requires organizational backing and financing, since, at least in the first stages, there are no obvious channels via which the hub can generate revenues. Collecting membership payments from partner organizations can constitute a partial source of financing, but this is not a preferred option. Many of the potential initial partners have meager resources, and the demand for monetary participation is likely to deter them from taking part in hub activities. In addition to financing, there is a need for an organizational infrastructure in whose framework the hub's overall activity can develop. The preferred and desired framework for sponsoring such a hub is an independent body, such as IPPI[20], which has relevant experience and tools both in facilitating collaboration between different bodies and in research activity, and that is clear of financial, commercial or political interests and is a partner in the commitment to advance democracy in Israel.

5. Concluding Remarks

Today, it is clear to all that the phenomenon of disinformation is one of the greatest global challenges of our time, and that it is not going anywhere. As a holistic and all-encompassing phenomenon, there cannot be a single solution or factor that can address it. This understanding means that today, there is an urgent need to generate knowledge and actionable insights, bridge the gaps between the technological, academic and policy communities and form effective coalitions and collaborations to effectively tackle the challenge of disinformation.

While the discussion in Israel lags far behind relative to other Western democracies, in this lack lies the advantage, since now, a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise lies before us on which we can rely and from which we can derive lessons.

The political and social situation in Israel requires intensive involvement, particularly of civic, non-governmental forces, in the challenges of dealing with disinformation. Those in the front lines of this activity in Israel have long known that the time is ripe to take broader steps, and to leverage the power of the important activity taking place in the field and the knowledge that has been accumulated in the realm globally, in an efficient and effective manner. At present, it appears that there is also suitable public momentum in Israel, with fact-checking having penetrated mainstream media and the growing discussion on disinformation. While the discussion in Israel lags far behind relative to other Western democracies, in this lack lies the advantage, since now, a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise lies before us on which we can rely and from which we can derive lessons. The hub proposed in this paper will act to harness this knowledge for local needs, and will also enrich it in turn.



Endnotes

[1] In this paper I will refer to the challenges using the general term "disinformation," but will also include misinformation, mal-information and all other forms of false, wrong or misleading information.

[2] Stern, I. (2020, December 3). A rare sight on Israeli TV: Network live fact-checks Netanyahu's misleading speech. Haaretz. https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/a-rare-sight-on-israeli-tv-network-live-fact-checks-netanyahu-s-misleading-speech-1.9345419

[3] Prominent organizations in this category include the NGO "Mi-Daat", and the Davidson Institute, which focus on advancing facts and scientific and medical information Mi-Daat: http://midaat.org.il/ ; Davidson Institute http://davidson.weizmann.ac.il/, accessed 9 December 2020. Ha-Mashroqit Bediqat Uvdot (The Whistleblower – Fact Checking) section of the Globes newspaper, and the program "Me-ha-tzad Ha-Sheni," (From the Other Side) with Gai Zohar, on the Kan website that does fact-checking, mainly on the political discourse: HaMashroqit https://thewhistle.globes.co.il/feed., Me-ha-tzad Ha-Sheni https://www.kan.org.il/program/?catid=1416, accessed 9 December 2020; and the independent site "Ha'Ayin Ha-Shevi'it," (The Seventh Eye), which deals, among other things, with the correction of erroneous and false information in the press and social media: "Ha-'Ayin Ha-Shevi'it," http://www.the7eye.org.il/, accessed 9 December 2020.

[4] Orpaz, I. (2019, August 22). "Technologies against Fake News: Marketing Failure or Missed Opportunity?" [Heb]. Institute for National Security Studies. Retrieved 4 December 2020. , https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/טכנולוגיות-נגד-פייק-ניוז-כשל-שוק-או-הזד/

[5] Outstanding among them is the dedicated research program on the topic of disinformation of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), which produces many publications, conferences and study days on the topic.: "Lipkin-Shahak Program," [Heb.] Institute for National Security Studies, https://www.inss.org.il/he/research/the-lipkin-shahak-program/, accessed 9 December 2020; See also, conference conducted by the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliyah on the topic of fake news on election night, April 2019: "Moment before the Elections – IDC Holds Conference on Fake News," [Heb.] IDC, Herzliyah, https://www.idc.ac.il:443/he/whatsup/Pages/fake-news-conference.aspx, accessed 9 December 2020.

[6] A step in this direction was taken in an experts' workshop initiated by the Israeli Public Policy Institute (IPPI) and the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation Tel Aviv at the end of 2019, which brought together researchers from Israel and the world who deal with various aspects of disinformation, together with fact-checkers and journalists, representatives of civil society and Israeli policy makers, with the goal of discussing shared venues for dealing with the phenomenon and creating a network for the exchange of information. In this workshop, the preliminary idea for the proposal suggested in this document began to take shape: "Disinformation in the Digital Public Sphere." IPPI, https://www.ippi.org.il/program/liberal-democracy-disinformation/, accessed 8 December 2020.

[7] The Poynter Institute monitors regulation and legislation against disinformation in the world: :"A Guide to Anti-Misinformation Actions around the World." Poynter, https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/. Accessed 7 December 2020.

[8] See, for example, Raina Davis, Bo Julie Crowley, And Casey Corcoran, "Civil Society: A Key Player in the Global Fight Against Misinformation." Kennedy School Review, 7 Feb. 2020, https://ksr.hkspublications.org/2020/02/07/civil-society-a-key-player-in-the-global-fight-against-misinformation/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020; Joan Donovan. "How Civil Society Can Combat Misinformation and Hate Speech Without Making It Worse." Medium, 7 Oct. 2020, https://medium.com/

political-pandemonium-2020/how-civil-society-can-combat-misinformation-and-hate-speech-without-making-it-worse-887a16b8b9b6. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

9 See, for example, Noam Alon, "The Role of Civil Society in the Digital-Consciousness System in the Context of the Cambridge Analytica Affair," [Heb.] Institute for National Security Studies, https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/תפקיד-החברה-האזרחית-במערכת-התודעתית-ד/ , accessed 7 December 2020.

10 "Democratic Defense against Disinformation". Atlantic Council, 2018. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Democratic_Defense_Against_Disinformation_FINAL.pdf Accessed 7 December 2020, p. 12.

11 "International Fact-Checking Network." Poynter, https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/. Accessed 7 December 2020.

12 "Trusted News Initiative (TNI) Steps up Global Fight against Disinformation with New Focus on US Presidential Election". bbc.com/mediacentre//latestnews/2020/trusted-news-initiative/. Accessed 7 December 2020.

13 "Bringing Together the UK Government, Facebook, and Others to Combat Misinformation Crises." Full Fact, https://fullfact.org/blog/2020/nov/framework-combat-misinformation/. Accessed 7 December 2020.

14 First Draft, https://firstdraftnews.org:443/. Accessed 7 December 2020.

15 EU DisinfoLab, https://www.disinfo.eu/. Accessed 4 Jan. 2021.

16 Election Integrity Partnership, https://www.eipartnership.net. Accessed 8 December 2020.

17 "Faktisk: Norway's Fact-Checking Cooperative." Magazines Canada, https://magazinescanada.ca/pdf/faktisk-norways-fact-checking-cooperative/. Accessed 8 December 2020.

18 Globes, 5 June 2019. See, for example: Assaf Oni, "This is How to Win a Decisive Victory over Russia in the Battle over Fake News," https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001292364, accessed 8 December 2020. Jon Henley, "How Finland Starts Its Fight against Fake News in Primary Schools," The Guardian, 29 January 2020, www.theguardian.com, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/fact-from-fiction-finlands-new-lessons-in-combating-fake-news, accessed 8 December 2020.

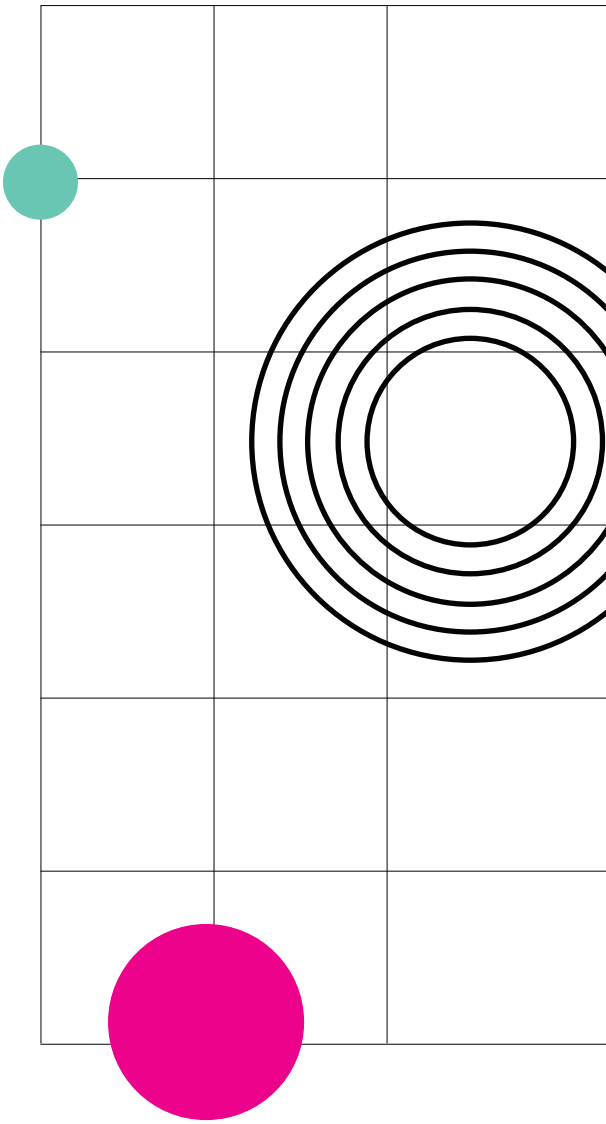
19 Inbal Aviv, "Coalition to Change Social Policy – Literature Review," [Heb.], Izi Shapiro House, 2012, accessed 7 December 2020. https://www.beitissie.org.il/kb/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/————————————————.pdf

20 In this context, it is worthwhile mentioning that as of 2020, IPPI has been working on laying the foundations for such a professional hub, and that the idea for this paper was born as a result of consultations between the author and IPPI in the framework of this effort.

About the Author

Noa Barak is a researcher, editor and co-founder of The Whistle, Israel's first and only fact-checking organization, founded in 2016 (integrated into Globes daily business newspaper since 2019). She led the development of The Whistle's format, professional practices and ethical code and is currently serving as Director of Development. She holds a BA in Middle Eastern studies and Humanities and is currently pursuing her Master's in history, researching the policies of the Israel State Archive and its influence on the formation of historical knowledge in Israel.

In her many years in the frontlines of disinformation in Israel daily confronting its ever-growing challenges, and as a member of the global fact-checking community, Noa understands firsthand the pressing need for different actors and stakeholders across society to join hands in the battle against disinformation.



Project Partners: Fostering Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age

The paper series is published as part of the broader project “Fostering Democratic Resilience in the Digital Age”, conceptualized and executed by the Israel Public Policy Institute (IPPI) in collaboration with the Heinrich Böll Foundation Tel Aviv.

Israel Public Policy Institute

Israel Public Policy Institute (IPPI)

The Israel Public Policy Institute (IPPI) is an independent policy think-and-do-tank and a multi-stakeholder dialog platform at the intersection of society, technology and the environment. Through its research activities, knowledge sharing, networking and public outreach, IPPI contributes to the innovation of public policy with the goal of understanding, guiding, and advancing the transformation process of our societies towards a sustainable and democratic future. IPPI works with a global network of actors from government, academia, civil society, and the private sector to foster international and interdisciplinary cross-pollination of ideas and experiences.

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG TEL AVIV

Heinrich Böll Foundation Tel Aviv

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is an independent global think-and-do-tank for green visions. With its international network of 33 international offices, the foundation works with well over 100 project partners in more than 60 countries. The foundation’s work in Israel focuses on fostering democracy, promoting environmental sustainability, advancing gender equality, and promoting dialog and exchange of knowledge between public policy experts and institutions from Israel and Germany.

גרמני ישראלי DIALOG

German-Israeli Dialog Program of the Heinrich Böll Foundation

The German-Israeli Dialog Program of the Heinrich Böll Foundation was established to foster cooperation and exchange of knowledge between public policy communities from Germany and Israel with the aim of generating new actionable insights in support of democratic values and sustainable development. The program is home for a range of projects and activities that provide unique collaborative spaces for researchers and practitioners from government, academia, tech and civil society to meet, debate and formulate innovative policy-oriented solutions to societal questions and challenges shared by both countries.

Israel Public Policy Institute

→ office.israel@ippi.org.il
→ www.ippi.org.il

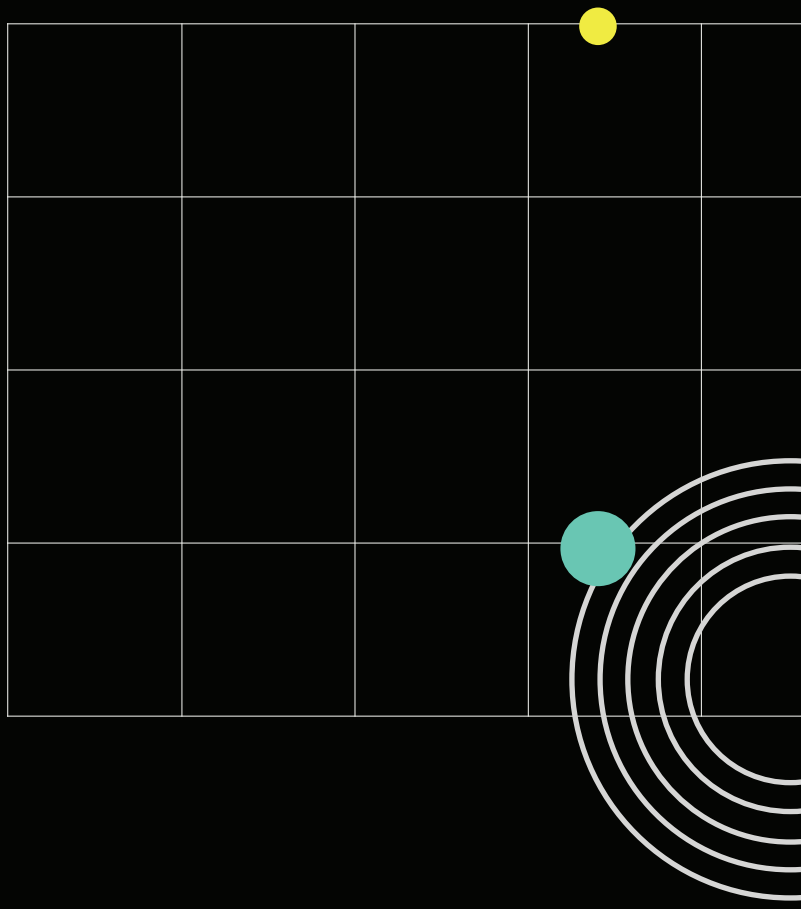
Heinrich Böll Foundation Tel-Aviv

→ info@il.boell.org
→ www.il.boell.org

German Embassy Tel Aviv

→ pr-s1@tela.diplo.de
→ tel-aviv.diplo.de/il-de

Release date: February 2021



Published under a Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the German government, the Israel Public Policy Institute and/or of the Heinrich Böll Foundation Tel Aviv.

Israel
Public Policy
Institute

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
TEL AVIV

Embassy
of the Federal Republic of Germany
Tel Aviv