

Freedom of Expression, Artificial Intelligence and Elections

Key Observations

AI has transformed how people create, seek, receive, and share information. In the modern era, this has been seen primarily through the evolution of social media platforms and their algorithmic mediation of content.

By drastically diminishing the cost of accessing, producing and disseminating information, generative AI has created exciting and new ways for people to innovate in the information space.

Freedom of expression, which includes the right to seek, receive, and share information, is fundamental to credible elections. AI systems can continue to empower individuals and enhance the progression of human rights and attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Within the context of elections, AI has already transformed the way political campaigns operate, voters engage with candidates and media produce and disseminate information. AI systems can further aid civic discourse, electoral participation, and information access.

At the same time, challenges to information integrity which have always prevailed during political contests like elections, have increased in speed, sophistication and possibly scale, due to the capacities that AI has recently introduced.

Examples include the dissemination of disinformation, the generation of deep fakes and the amplification of societal biases. These can disrupt political campaigns, impact the broader public trust and discourage electoral participation and representation, particularly affecting women.

Publication Overview

This Issue Brief provides an overview of how Artificial Intelligence (AI) influences freedom of expression in elections, offering approaches for practitioners and partners in navigating a fast-evolving context. There is no single route to harnessing the benefits of AI for the information ecosystem during elections, nor avoiding negative consequences.

It is vital to ensure that a digital ecosystem with AI is designed to be safe, secure, and trustworthy, conducive to respecting freedom of expression and human rights considerations more broadly. Similarly, capacities to use AI with a human right centered approach are crucial for its success, for example, through comprehensive media and information literacy among citizens. Multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches can also help analyze and report on the complexities of AI systems, as well as their impact on freedom of expression in electoral processes.

Freedom of Expression as Fundamental to Elections

Freedom of expression is a core human right and foundational to democratic governance, including elections. Electoral processes involve mass deliberation, where citizens decide the direction of their country or locality. Among the prerequisites for genuine elections, which are credible, inclusive, and transparent, is that all citizens have assured the right to speak freely, to impart ideas, and access information.

Freedom of expression is both vitalized and challenged by the emergence of new communication technologies. The widespread availability of the internet, personal computing, and social media have fundamentally changed how humans communicate, coordinate and behave, thus revolutionizing political discourse. These technologies have contributed to democratizing the public sphere, allowing people to be innovative creators of information, establishing channels for swift and broad distribution without traditional gatekeepers, making available a wealth of accessible information, and supporting the formation of new communities and societal movements.

AI has and can continue to empower individuals and enhance the progression of human rights, such as freedom of expression. To further this progress, various inequality gaps should be closed, in particular digital divides between those with and without access and capabilities to use technologies¹. At the same time, challenges to information integrity, which have always prevailed in political contests like elections, have increased in speed, in sophistication and possibly in scale, due to the capacities that AI introduces. Examples include the dissemination of disinformation, the generation of deep fakes and the amplification of societal biases. These can disrupt political campaigns, impact the broader public trust and discourage electoral participation and representation, in particular of women. Further developments of AI may exacerbate and complicate this situation.

Disinformation:

False information disseminated with the intent to cause harm.

Misinformation:

Information that is false but disseminated without the intention of causing harm.

Hate speech:

An umbrella term for speech that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, descent, gender, or other identity factor.