

Custom Built / *Feito Sob Medida*: Strategy Blueprint for Global Majority Election Coalitions

[workshop draft version]

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Executive Summary

This report centers the identities, experiences, and vulnerabilities of Global Majority election integrity coalition leaders in its call for a more globally minded and community-driven tech and democracy space. Drawing from comparative and ethnographic work in Brazil and the Philippines, and in conversation with civil society groups in India, Indonesia, South Africa, and the United States, this collaborative study develops a strategy blueprint for addressing illicit influence operations in a year of pivotal global elections.

Our main argument: For countries to develop **custom built / feito sob medida** solutions addressing shared and specific digital harms and threats to information environments, **we need fair, inclusive, and just global governance structures that can truly support the development of bottom-up and targeted interventions.** While there is ostensibly a larger number of international panels and national coalitions monitoring the global information environment, most of these groups promote a narrow set of techno-legal solutions designed from the Global North and apply them to the Global Majority. At the country level, the extension of this unjust and exclusive global governance structure in the tech and democracy space causes coalition groupthink, reinforces disciplinary divisions, and excludes minoritized voices from regions outside of geographic and social centers. **At the international level, this illusion of inclusion in the tech and democracy space co-opts indigenous tech activism and justifies extractive systems of knowledge creation.**

This report synthesizes diverse perspectives from “successful” and self-reflexive Left activists and election coalition organizers in Brazil and resourceful yet burnt-out civil society leaders in the Philippines, who picked up the pieces after a “landslide” electoral defeat of the political opposition. We discuss their experiences and retell their soul-searching after heated national elections in 2022, which served as referenda for the populist leadership and their publics’ embrace of authoritarian nostalgia.

SIX KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Addressing threats to the information environment during elections is like **“a war being fought on multiple fronts”**. Brazilian election coalitions stacked heavy hitters along a wider range of activities—from policymaking to defunding disinformers to original and investigative research. In contrast, the Philippines’ election coalitions organized truly diverse civil society groups to apply the same techniques and tools of debunking. Election coalitions around the world should find ways to leverage their members’ unique skills and specific constituencies rather than flatten them out.

2. Brazil's Supreme Electoral Court is a rare entity in the global tech and democracy space as **it represents an in-country institutional accelerant for holding both Big Tech and "disinformers at the top" accountable.** The Court's move to deplatform the high-level political allies of Jair Bolsonaro from Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) is unprecedented especially in Global Majority countries where government overreach to social media content almost-always favors the political incumbent. The Global Majority participants of our South-to-South Knowledge Exchange Workshops celebrated their Brazilian colleagues' multi-stakeholder collaborations with the Court, but they also cautioned against the risk of total state capture of online speech.
3. Global Majority tech and democracy coalitions echo Global North advocacy frames that attribute the problem of disinformation to people stigmatized as "uneducated and social media-brainwashed." **The easy and misleading explanatory device of all-powerful tech controlling "dumb voters" perpetuates anti-poor sentiments and narrows the potential audiences of media and voter literacy campaigns.** Brazil has avoided "dumb voter" tropes with a sharper strategy of punching up to political elites rather than blaming low-income voters for their political choices.
4. Since 2016, the global tech and democracy space has massively grown as public funding, private philanthropy, and military intelligence have invested in a variety of international expert panels, whole-of-society collaborations, and multi-stakeholder coalitions. Despite being massively funded, on the ground these coalitions are rarely perceived as fair, inclusive, and just. Policy frameworks and intervention designs facilitate North-to-South flows and overlook significant moments when Global Majority tech activism diverges from the Global North agenda. Specifically, we will elaborate on **the case of the #PushbackUNESCO campaign** by Southeast Asian civil society organizations.
5. **We need to reimagine unjust global governance structures and redirect the financial incentive frameworks** stemming from our Global North-centric tech and democracy space. Global Majority election coalition leaders have spoken out against knowledge extractivism in this space, where intellectuals, policymakers, and funders from the Global North engage the Global Majority as a testing ground for their techno-legal interventions. During election cycles, Global Majority coalition leaders expressed frustration about the "parachute researchers" who poach local staff and take energy away from meaningful interventions to produce case studies aimed at foreign audiences.
6. **Custom built / feito sob medida tech and democracy solutions begin with building sustainable, empowering, and just spaces for South-to-South trust network-building and knowledge co-creation.** Such spaces integrate critical research to inform practice and support healing and solidarity initiatives at the grassroots, national, and international levels. South-to-South knowledge exchange spaces resist the co-option of work toward a militarization agenda that stokes social and geopolitical conflict. Such spaces tend to the vulnerabilities of minoritized communities and foster just and healthy collaborations that facilitate South-to-North flows of ideas and solutions.

Below, we offer a strategy blueprint for advocates, activists, and donors to design more custom built / *feito sob medida* interventions that are (1) more directly meaningful to affected communities (2) sufficiently grounded in local groups’ creativity in the face of political and economic precarity and (3) outcomes of just, sustainable, and non-extractive collaborations.

CUSTOM BUILT / FEITO SOB MEDIDA STRATEGY BLUEPRINT	
Toward Just Global Governance Structures	Global Majority researchers and civil society should be consistently supported with tech and democracy programs in and out of election cycles. Programs during election cycles can emphasize disinformation mitigation and narrative strategy, while programs outside election cycles can focus on trust network-building and community-level healing programs.
	Global North funders and policy experts should be cautioned about the inadvertent outcomes of their “parachute” research programs, experiments, and last-minute disinformation mitigation efforts, especially during election seasons. International collaborators should implement ethics protocols, reduce power distance, and follow a duty of care when engaging with local partners.
	Global North allyship means championing Global Majority collaborators’ advocacies and projects. Global storytelling of bottom-up innovations developed in the Global Majority interrupts stereotypical depictions of the Global Majority as a site of digital dystopia.
	Global Majority researchers and civil society should have leadership roles in international coalitions where they can shape both campaigns and programs.
Toward Sustainable Collaborations	Election coalitions should avoid a tools- and tech-first mindset in favor of a truly bottom-up approach. Civil society organizations’ existing skill sets and connections with diverse constituencies should be leveraged and celebrated rather than made to fit narrow frameworks.

	<p>Coalitions must be mindful of power inequalities in terms of class, race, caste, gender, sexuality, and geography. Representational politics in coalitions are important insofar as minoritized voices can be empowered to call in coalition leaders to address any blind spots.</p>
	<p>Coalitions should come together with a readiness to communicate. It's important to surface disagreements in coalitions at the beginning of a collaboration and develop plans for particular scenarios. For example, Brazil's "articulation rooms" collaborated on shared advocacies while individual organizations applied different creative executions.</p>
	<p>Election coalitions should go beyond performative "show-of-force" assemblies while continuing to work in their silos. Funders can incentivize collaborators of diverse backgrounds to co-design new interventions.</p>
<p>Toward Strategic Interventions</p>	<p>Experienced researchers and civil society advocates should spread across multiple fronts when fighting disinformation in elections. Program "buckets" of media literacy, debunking, strategic litigation, and defunding disinformation economies should be equally stacked with "heavy hitters".</p>
	<p>Coalitions should strike a good balance between short- and long-term focused interventions. Short-term interventions are those that can target disinformers at a time of peak crisis and compel platforms to address urgent digital harms. Long-term interventions dedicated to citizen empowerment, voter literacy, and transparency initiatives are important in and out of election cycles.</p>
	<p>Civil society actors should foster ways of working that automatically build off of each other's outputs and successes. Movements should embed researchers and civil society organizers in each other's practice to enable truly collaborative interventions and cross-pollination of ideas.</p>

I. Introduction: Lessons from South-to-South Knowledge Exchange vs Disinformation

The global tech and democracy space has embraced the term “whole-of-society” in organizing a larger number of stakeholders across sectors, disciplines, and regions to combat information disorders that undermine democratic processes around the world. Originally posed as a critique of multilateral agencies’ crisis response against COVID-19, the “whole-of-society” frame compellingly argued that social scientists and librarians have significant roles to play in a *global* public health crisis ([Donovan & Wardle, 2020](#)). Since then, international expert panels ([Oxford Martin School, 2023](#)), regional digital media observatories ([Hadju, 2020](#)), national security working groups ([Department of State, 2023](#)), private industry commissions ([Aspen Digital, 2021](#)), and national election coalitions have been seemingly inspired by this call to fold in diverse and high-profile advocates and celebrity spokespeople under the tech and democracy umbrella.

These apparent shifts create illusions of inclusion. Further, they mask the difficulties of implementing and sustaining interventions on the ground. This is even more so for at-risk and minoritized communities, particularly in the Global Majority. Especially pronounced during election cycles, civil society organizations are financially incentivized to fit projects within narrowly defined, pre-existing frameworks of what counts as a tech and democracy intervention. For instance, Silicon Valley's journalistic and academic partners have been known to shy away from “big P politics” when implementing interventions ([Lelo, 2022a](#)), occasionally criticized as public relations exercises ([Arun, 2021](#)).

Other sources of finance, such as from philanthropies and international agencies, however well intentioned, undercut on-the-ground community engagement due to their seasonality and project-based focus. Moreover, new organizations participating in tech and democracy coalitions are unprepared to mitigate cybersecurity risks or protect junior workers who are often on short-term contracts and pressured to deliver on particular donor metrics ([Ong, Tintiangko & Fallorina, 2021](#)).

Crucially, Global Majority advocates are doubly burdened by the hard work of protecting their communities from digital harms while fighting for their organizations’ survival under extractive systems of knowledge creation entrenched by the global aid industrial complex. Local and indigenous tech activism are all too vulnerable to misrepresentation or co-optation by Global North campaigners and advocates ([Lehuede, 2024](#)) and Global North tech policy experts overlook the occasions where their advocacy frames end up rubber-stamping the legislative overreach and opportunism of Global Majority governments ([#PushbackUNESCO, 2023](#)).

Meanwhile the “enlightened activist” testimonies of white and privileged tech whistleblowers continue to drive policy momentum for global tech accountability efforts ([Knorr, Wolter, & Pentzold, 2024](#)). The traumas of the global digital precariat in race-to-the-bottom work conditions draw audiences’ pity via global media’s storytelling, confirming stereotypical divides between Global Majority regions of digital dystopia and Global North regions of democratic innovations that

can bestow benevolent foreign aid. It is no surprise then that the loudest voices of Global Majority tech activism ventriloquize Global North advocacy frames—including platform determinist explanatory devices and techno-legal solutions originating in Brussels or Washington, DC—trapped in a loop of colonial dependencies.

ORIGINS OF OUR SOUTH-TO-SOUTH EXCHANGE

This study was organized in 2022 under the banner of a “South-to-South Knowledge Exchange Space vs Disinformation” for the DigiLabour website ([Ong & Grohmann, 2023](#)). Our original aim was to apply a comparative framework to identify social trends, institutional vulnerabilities, and shared advocacies that can support Brazilian and Filipino researchers and civil society leaders. Filipino researchers JM and Jonathan have been keen on connecting with Brazilian researchers Camilla, Marcelo, Rafael, and Raquel to learn “what Brazil did right” in preventing the reelection of populist leader Jair Bolsonaro. The Philippines and Brazil, after all, share histories of dictatorship, and the recent presidencies of Bolsonaro in Brazil and Duterte and eventually Marcos Jr. in the Philippines suggested that both countries shared an “authoritarian nostalgia” for strongmen leaders who could address populist grievances ([Gonçalves & Lasco, 2023](#)).

Three motivating principles organized our small group collaboration and the closed-door workshops in our South-to-South Knowledge Exchange project:

- 1) We aimed to build new relationships with other disinformation studies scholars whose research and community partnerships are in the Global South. The “safe space” we created for each other, our community partners, and workshop participants was dedicated to frank conversations about how institutions “really work” in our countries, how we survive in the hypercompetitive tech and democracy space, and how advocates manage to juggle multiple hats of a researcher, teacher, mentor, community organizer, etc.
- 2) We developed our project frameworks and categories slowly and iteratively. While we shared a vision for direct comparison, we discovered that certain categories were less relevant to dwell on for our individual reports (see [Alves et al., 2023](#); [Ong et al., 2022](#)).
- 3) We were curious about each country’s ways of working and politics of collaboration in academia generally and within tech and democracy more specifically. We were curious about sectoral power hierarchies, sources of core and project funding, and the perspectives of precarious frontline workers. Rafael and Jonathan’s prior research also share commonality in their advocacy for digital worker justice in the Global South.

Our South-to-South Knowledge Exchange is inspired by conceptual and methodological frameworks in global studies and the decolonial turn in critical digital studies. We embrace the idea of *Global South*—which we use interchangeably with *Global Majority*—as a strategic “conversation starter” that can spark “exchanges about colonial legacies, oppression and marginalization” ([Medrado & Verdegem, 2024: 2](#)). As a political solidarity project, the terms *Global South* and *Global Majority* can bring into relation diverse regions, cultures, and generations to

engage with particular and shared histories of colonialism and imperialism—and their tentacles in the present day.¹

In decolonial digital studies, we are inspired by the work of Payal Arora whose analysis forcibly surfaces the Global South as sites of “everyday creative insurgencies” ([Arora, 2019: 718](#)) that disrupt Global North normative frameworks. For example, she has spoken against the “deep political interests” and neocolonial ideologies behind European data privacy laws hailed as a universal standard benefiting all citizens. Sebastian Lehuède’s ([2024](#)) two-fold framework attuning to the *data* and *knowledge* extractivism afflicting indigenous tech activists in Latin America is useful in developing sharper analytics toward the questions: What does tech and democracy advocacy “from the South” really mean and what does that sound like? How can we as researchers—including those of us scholars in Global North institutions doing community-engaged work in the Global Majority—center programs that can benefit the most minoritized and at-risk communities?

In journalism studies, Thales Lelo’s ([2022b](#)) breakdown of the financial incentives in Big Tech platforms’ engagements with Global Majority civil society partners powerfully illustrates how funding nudges the interventions we see. It also begs the question whether Big Tech platforms follow the same neocolonial terms of engagement with local “beneficiaries” as the aid industrial complex. Monika Krause’s ([2014](#)) incisive critique of humanitarian agencies who treat beneficiaries as treated as a “means to an end” offers a framework for reviewing the extractivism in tools- and tech-first interventions that seemingly collect and curate “local” expressions of hate with indirect benefits to targeted communities. Our interests and experiences in worker justice research and advocacy ([Grohmann, 2023](#); [Ong & Combinido, 2017](#)) also motivated us in our methodology to consult a variety of election integrity coalition members situated at various levels in the organizational hierarchy.

In disinformation studies, we have been inspired by the agenda of **critical disinformation studies** that establish clear normative commitments to equality and justice and engage the difficult questions of power, identity, and oppression ([Marwick et al., 2021](#)). In practical terms, this means keeping energies focused on calling out “disinformation from the top” rather than being swept up by cycles of technological moral panics ([Nielsen, 2024](#)). Globally minded and community-driven disinformation interventions are those that make space for “healing justice” projects bridging particular communities’ racial, generational, caste, and gender divides ([Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022](#)), support precarious workers caught in exploitative transnational labor arrangements ([Udupa, Maronikolakis & Wisiorek, 2021](#)), and invest in ordinary

¹ Rosemary Campbell-Stephens ([2020](#)) explains in inspiring personal and scholarly detail how “Global Majority” is empowering self-ascription for people to define themselves outside of “relation to whiteness” and beyond “geographic place of birth”. “Global Majority” is a collective term that first and foremost speaks to and encourages those so-called to think of themselves as belonging to the global majority. It refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, indigenous to the global south, and or have been racialised as ‘ethnic minorities’” ([Campbell-Stephens, 2020](#)).

citizens' agentic capacities for political deliberation and ethical communication ([Global Citizens' Assembly Network, 2024](#)).

METHODS

These guiding principles and theoretical inspirations informed our team's ethnographically inspired research to track different disinformation trends, platform accountability tools, civil society responses, and tech policy frameworks in Brazil and the Philippines. We also conducted 15 semi-structured expert interviews with Brazil and Philippines civil society members to supplement ethnographic insights from our own observation and participation in policy debates and community engagement activities in our respective countries. Our interviews probed civil society organizations' institutional resources, funding arrangements, access to tools, not to mention our respondents' experiences of collaborating with local and foreign partners.

As part of our ethos for knowledge co-creation, we also conducted workshops that functioned as focus group discussions where participants could validate, contest, and nuance our initial analyses. In April 2023, we conducted a virtual workshop over Zoom with 30 Brazilian and Filipino journalists and civil society leaders discussing findings of our earlier report entitled "Post-Elections Narratives in Brazil and the Philippines" ([Lanuza et al., 2023](#)). In November 2023, we convened a second workshop with 60 scholars and community leaders from Brazil, India, Indonesia, Moldova, Myanmar, the Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States at the Pontifical Catholic University de Rio de Janeiro to discuss the major findings of studies on the Brazilian Elections ([Alves et al., 2023](#)), in conversation with the Philippines election ([Ong et al., 2022](#)). This opened broader conversations about Global Majority tech activism, tools development, and our experiences with various "whole-of-society" coalitions that we now pick up with this study and the South-to-South Knowledge Exchange Workshops, catalyzing more community conversations around our proposed custom built / *feito sob medida* strategy blueprint.

Authors are busy working on the full report and will be released May 2024 at www.glotechlab.net.

Got questions and comments? Email jcong@umass.edu.

Appendix I.

Country Comparison of Election Integrity Responses

Technology, Regulatory, & Legal Approaches

Tool	Brazil	Philippines	Recommendations
Tech Advocacy	<p>The tech policy debate is informed by reports and advocacy from coalitions of dozens of CSOs, including the <i>Disinformation Articulation Room</i> and the <i>Coalition Rights on the Network</i>.</p> <p>Tech regulation is subject to debates between the left and right about censorship, as well as active anti-regulation PR and lobbying by tech companies.</p>	<p>CSOs report exhaustion from reporting content to platforms without response. More strategic campaigns for technology regulation are dwarfed by mainstream discourses overestimating the fault of platforms. Technopanics on social media platforms still abound.</p>	

<p>State Institutions</p>	<p>The Superior Electoral Court (TSE) played a central role in demanding platforms remove election rumors. Major platforms signed on to TSE's Program for Fighting Disinformation, which included pledges to remove and demote disinformation and efforts to provide capacity-building and training for platform staff on Brazilian electoral procedures.</p> <p>Despite this, "responses of digital platforms to widespread electoral disinformation were found to be delayed and ineffectual." On January 8, policy gaps allowed dangerous content to contribute to the riots.</p> <p>The TSE's authority has not been uncontroversial, even among advocates focused on influence operations. Its actions during and after the election have raised concerns about whether or not the state has too much power to regulate free expression, and how to avoid awarding it too much power even if its current role is permissible.</p>	<p>Actors within the Philippine government are perpetrators of influence operations. The state is not a reliable actor that can be trusted with regulatory power over the digital public square. Fake news legislations, for instance, do more to harm activists and journalists than hold accountable those behind influence operations. Legal opportunism is a key concern whenever regulations are discussed.</p>	<p>Tread carefully when engaging the state in efforts to moderate online spaces. Local political dynamics should guide these decisions. One size does not fit all.</p> <p>Support needed interventions like strategic litigation to make CSO work more sustainable, secure, and impactful in illiberal contexts.</p> <p>Focus more on platform policy gaps and less on content.</p>
<p>Strategic Litigation</p>	<p>Democracy in Check pursued strategic litigation against "political violence and domestic threats."</p>	<p>The Movement Against Disinformation provides legal defense to journalists while filing lawsuits against government officials who willfully spread falsehoods.</p>	

CSO Coalition Efforts to Correct, Educate, & Communicate

Tool	Brazil	Philippines	Recommendations
Fact-Checking	<p>The Coalition for Checking, a network of nine fact-checkers, worked with TSE to identify and respond to election rumors.</p> <p>As of February 2024, Brazil has five organizations listed as signatories (either current, under renewal, or expired) to the International Fact-Checking Network—Estadão Verifica, Lupa, UOL Confere, Aos Fatos, and Agência Pública - Truco.</p>	<p>CSO coalitions in the Philippines focused heavily on fact-checking. Efforts were largely split across two leading coalitions: Tsek.ph and #FactsFirstPH.</p> <p>As of February 2024, the Philippines has five organizations listed as signatories (either current, under renewal, or expired) to the International Fact-Checking Network—MindaNews, PressOne.PH, Probe, Rappler, and Verafiles Inc.</p>	<p>Encourage diverse coalitions which can reach different audiences and support one another with different skill sets.</p> <p>Build coalitions through democratic, bottom-up approaches.</p> <p>Encourage and support dedicated forums for information-sharing and strategizing, untethered to project deliverables.</p> <p>Encourage CSOs to expand projects into other geographic regions, supported by research into the unique needs and characteristics of communities there.</p>
Media Literacy	<p>Media literacy was a component of the National Program against Disinformation.</p>	<p>International and domestic CSO efforts to improve media literacy continued during the 2022 elections, but practitioners feel there is a need to better tailor them to local contexts outside of Manila because media consumption habits differ across the country.</p>	<p>Provide consistent funding between election cycles to encourage continued cooperation. Develop coalitions from the bottom-up so members feel rules and processes are fair</p>

<p>Broad, Inclusive Coalitions</p>	<p>Broad coalitions, including with online influencers and legacy media, expanded the reach of CSO efforts.</p> <p>CSOs focused on LGBTQIA+ people, people of color, indigenous people, and the environment were included.</p> <p>Democracy in Check supported national voter registration and anti-Bolsonaro activism through partnerships with online influencers.</p> <p>Desinformante acted as both a media outlet covering influence operations and a CSO helping coordinate strategic response with peers.</p> <p>Some actors fought “fire with fire,” spreading false stories about Bolsonaro.</p>	<p>Narrower focus on fact-checking prevented coalitions from the breadth of reach that Brazilian counterparts achieved by including issue-focused CSOs.</p> <p>Some CSO projects include roundtables to share information and avoid duplication of effort, though interviews indicate these are smaller and less broad or inclusive than Brazilian counterparts.</p>	<p>and transparent, and created through consensus.</p> <p>Avoid “fighting fire with fire” by engaging in influence operations to <i>counter</i> influence operations, or “punching down” at segments of the public who “fall for” such operations. Focus on elite accountability instead.</p>
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Knowledge-Building for Civil Society in the Global Majority:

Tool	Brazil	Philippines	Recommendations
Academic Studies	<p>The Disinformation Articulation Room provided space for coalition members to discuss and study the digital environment.</p> <p>Democracy in Check worked with TSE, bringing together academics, activists, and advocates to study digital media.</p>	<p>There is a gap between research and practice, with civil society organizations unable to draw on academic insights to inform their work.</p> <p>Major coalitions Tsek.ph and #FactsFirstPH involved academics from history, journalism, law, and other disciplines, but ultimately these coalitions relied more on producing fact checks.</p> <p>Academics have independently published public reports on the state of disinformation in the Philippines, funded by international and philanthropic organizations.</p>	<p>Create a center for study of influence operations in the Global Majority world, or a series of regional centers.</p> <p>Promote iterative projects which unite research and practice as a loop, bringing academics and practitioners into constant contact.</p> <p>Promote accountability and understanding of influence operations in the Global Majority by supporting investigations into the economic drivers of “disinformation for hire.”</p>
Investigations	<p>The National Program against Disinformation included media monitoring efforts.</p>	<p>Rappler and other media outlets report widely on influence operations, and the Philippines is a poster child for the “disinformation for hire” industry and efforts to expose it.</p>	

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