Custom Built / *Feito Sob Medida:*

Reforming Tech & Democracy Programs for the Global Majority

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Executive Summary

Despite the proliferation of international coalitions and "expert panels" committing to safeguard the information environment and strengthen democracy, Global Majority civil society leaders remain peripheral in influencing global agenda and determining national programs. The global aid industrial complex reinforces patterns of "knowledge extractivism" (Lehuede, 2024) by often enlisting local civil society to replicate Global North program priorities and participate in unjust collaborative arrangements.

While Global Majority civil society leaders generally welcome donor support for tech accountability and disinformation debunking, they express frustration about how Global North funders and collaborators often constrain bottom-up knowledge and creative production, deepen inter-organizational competition, and fail to consider the legal, ethical, and security risks faced by frontline workers.

Drawing from a yearlong Global Majority Knowledge Exchange project consisting of workshops and interviews with 107 tech accountability advocates, journalists, and researchers representing 13 countries and several international nongovernmental organizations, this study discusses the roots and consequences of **"the illusion of inclusion" in the tech and democracy space.** While Global Majority civil society has implemented a high quantity of tech and democracy interventions in recent years, the qualities of these interventions are often top-down, tools-and-tech-first, and seasonal, while also disconnected from the needs of minoritized communities in these countries.

This study argues that designing a tech justice program agenda that would truly center the Global Majority should begin with the critique and reform of unjust spaces of global governance and collaborative practice. This report offers a strategy blueprint for advocates, researchers, and donors to design more just and empowering spaces for collaboration and more custom built, or, in Portuguese, *feito sob medida*, programs that can benefit the Global Majority.

TABLE 1.

An Illusion of Inclusion in the Tech and Democracy Space

SPACES	Global North-Centric: Current State of Affairs	Global Majority-Centric: Reforming Spaces and Programs
Power Relationships	**Top-down.** Advocacy frames and program agenda designed in the Global North to be implemented by aid beneficiaries around the world.	**Bottom-up.** Global Majority countries as sites of democratic innovation and knowledge production.
Knowledge Production	**Global North-to-Global Majority policy flows.** Little room for Global Majority innovation and priorities.	Support for Global Majority knowledge exchange and **contra-flows** of ideas and programs from Global Majority-to-Global North.
Coalition Representation	**Tools- and tech-first coalitions** flatten out programmatic diversity and local cultural expertise.	Coalitions supported to **fight "battles across multiple fronts"** responding to diverse forms of digital harms and addressing needs of diverse constituencies across class, race, caste, generation, and gender differences.
Timeframe	**Short-term** and project-based funding responding to crisis events or elections of authoritarian leaders.	**Long-term** support for democratic institution-building and grassroots community empowerment.

PROGRAMS		
Disinformation Mitigation	Disinformation mitigation focused on **content takedowns, rumor-busting, and fact-checking** of viral misinformation.	Equally focused on **"disinformation from the top"** and investigative work exposing the **industrial production** of disinformation via disinformation-for-hire firms, influencer marketing, and ad tech monetization.
Tech Accountability	Tech accountability focused on **securing standard tools** for Big Tech's partners across the Global North and Global Majority.	**Expansive agenda** includes 1) tech worker justice and support for their legal protections, security, and mental health; 2) engaged research of small platforms; and 3) strategic tech policy that anticipates risks of governments' securitized / militarized agenda.
Voter Literacy	Generic voter literacy programs overemphasize acquisition of technical skills of discerning "fake" social media content.	Targeted voter literacy programs address roots of communities' social and historical grievances. Avoids platform determinist frames that talk down on communities' "addictions" / "brainwashing" of the so-called vulnerable poor voters or gullible youth.

Five Key Lessons

1 Global North philanthropies contributed over US$1 billion in media, information, and technology to aid recipient countries between 2017 and 2021 (Ordoñez, 2024). This is not even counting the foreign aid extended by Global North governments to "advance technology for democracy" around the world. The outcome of this investment is a high quantity of top-down, tools-and-tech-first, and short-term projects that do not always support the diverse skill sets, cultural expertise, and movement-building goals of in-country civil society organizations.

2 The Global Majority is often represented as a "digital dystopia" in global media storytelling and the advocacy of Global North tech accountability spokespersons. While this popular frame triggers public indignation and mobilizes political action, it often reinforces inequalities of voice between Global North field leaders and Global Majority implementors of standardized programs or case study authors. For Global Majority civil society veterans, this power imbalance fosters activist burnout and disillusionment with tech and democracy programs as a mere "donor fad."

3 Global Majority civil society leaders seek a localization agenda in the tech and democracy space where research questions and program design could become more bottom-up and long-term, and coalitions could become more inclusive, just, and supportive of the younger and precarious frontline tech workers of civil society organizations (CSOs).

4 Global Majority civil society leaders report several underfunded programs and space-building opportunities, such as efforts to organize and protect the rights of tech workers, targeted voter literacy initiatives that facilitate community healing and deliberative agency, strategic litigation opportunities against local top-level disinformers, and collaborative spaces between researchers and practitioners within the Global Majority and across the Global North and Global Majority.

5 Global North donors and collaborators must be mindful that extractive modes of research and advocacy impose real setbacks to the goals of local coalitions. Respondents identified how "parachute" tech and democracy programs that only convene for elections or crisis events may disrupt long-term policy goals, divert organizational missions, flatten out methodological diversity, and even alienate local audiences and voters.
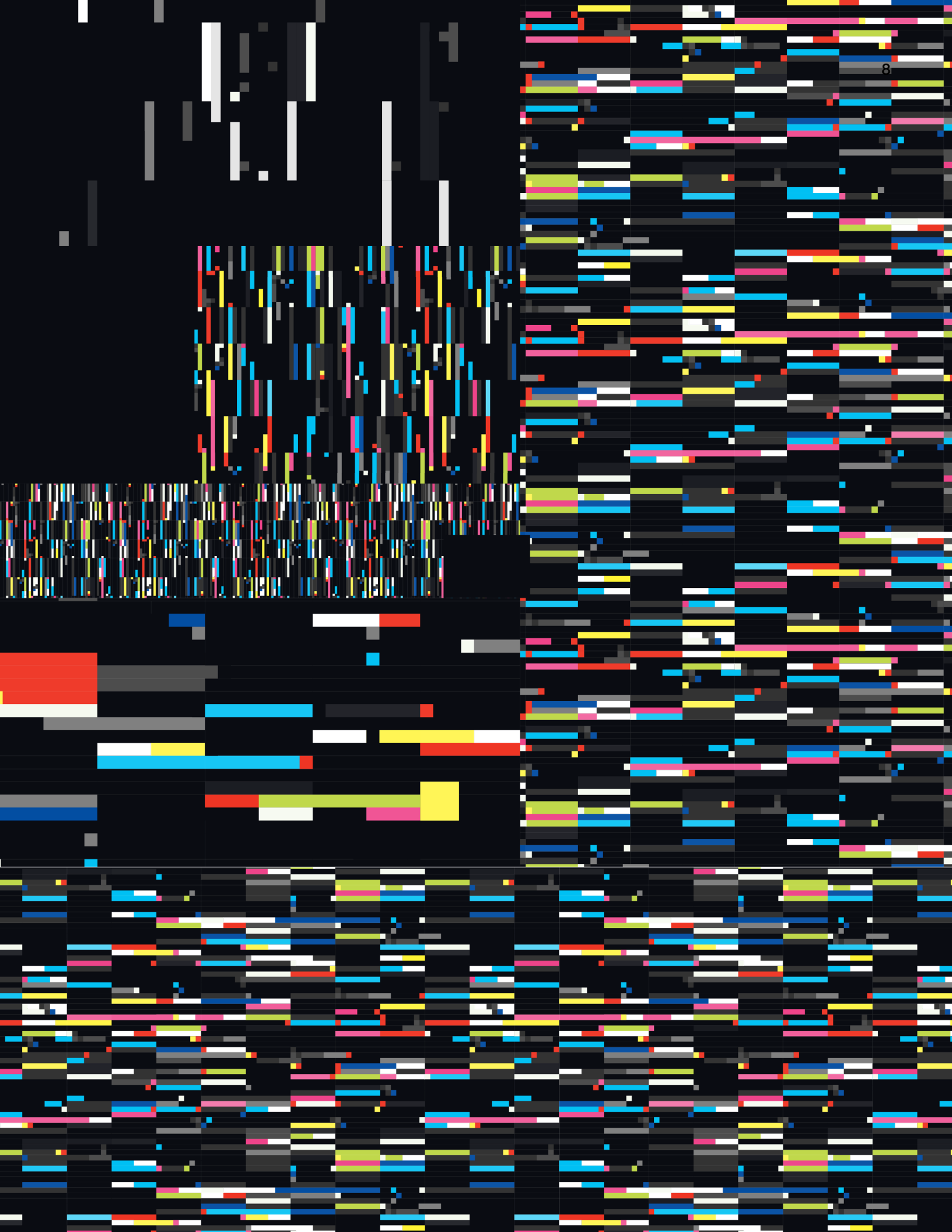
Chapter 1
Introduction

This report is an outcome of a yearlong Global Majority Knowledge Exchange project that brought together researchers, civil society leaders, and funders to discuss how we could reimagine the ways of working and programming in the tech and democracy space. Over three workshops and more than two dozen interviews with participants representing 13 countries, we spent considerable time discussing what doesn't work rather than hyping new tools, reflecting on conflict points rather than identifying universal norms, and celebrating the achievements of coalition work in the face of intersecting global and national crises.

Our knowledge exchange project embraced the idea of Global Majority, as it functions as a more "empowering frame" (contra "Global South" or "Third World") for minoritized communities "to define themselves outside of their relation to whiteness" (Campbell-Stephens, 2020). We affirmed the value of building cross-national solidarities to "find leverage" that can better secure material resources and accountability tools to benefit Global Majority countries. Indeed, while the Global Majority is where "the next billion users of technology" live, these users remain underserved by designers and researchers (Arora, 2019). Even in occasions when digital harms in the Global Majority are invoked in testimonies by "enlightened" whistleblowers, the purpose is to advance Global North policy agenda and personal branding rather than support local advocacies (Knorr et. al., 2024).

We too were inspired by the critical framework that "Global Majority" is a "conversation starter" to reflect on shared "colonial legacies, oppression and marginalization" (Medrado & Verdegem, 2024, p. 2). We reflected on how the tech and democracy space (as a "big tent" umbrella housing tech accountability, media freedom, digital rights, human rights, and media development programs) has created opportunities for transnational solidarity while still reinforcing power hierarchies between the Global North and Global Majority. Indeed, the central theme that emerged from our discussions is the double burden that Global Majority civil society workers face of having to respond to a perplexing array of borderless digital threats and national-level lawfare while being severely under-resourced and ill-equipped. The Global Majority is seemingly armed with blunt techno-legal tools that have been designed and legitimized by its Global North collaborators and as a result is mismatched with on-the-ground realities.

The central argument posed by this report is: **designing tech and democracy programs that meaningfully address the needs of the Global Majority should begin with reforming the spaces of global governance that have only fostered thus far an illusion of inclusion.** On one hand, Global Majority civil society leaders have welcomed innovative programs and collaborative opportunities supported by Global North-based philanthropic organizations, governments, and even Big Tech platforms themselves; on the other hand, they expressed frustration about the tools-and-tech-first coalition work that hinders program localization.

As a consequence, veteran Global Majority civil society workers with longer histories in grounded community service work tend to perceive tech and democracy programs as a passing "donor fad" that fails to address root causes of democratic backsliding. Meanwhile, younger civil society workers doing the frontline tech and comms work for their organizations tend to suffer from activist burnout as they respond to toxic online content while employed in precarious project-based work arrangements with a mismatched set of tools. This report outlines the kinds of just and inclusive spaces as well as custom built programs that can better support Global Majority civil society in addressing the urgent needs of their communities.

Origins of Our Global Majority Exchange

This project began as a two-country collaboration bridging Filipino and Brazilian researchers to explore the 2022 elections in Brazil and the Philippines as central case studies for South-to-South knowledge exchange (Ong & Grohmann, 2022). Drawing on the expertise of our research team, we explored shared histories of dictatorship and the recent presidencies of Bolsonaro in Brazil and Duterte and eventually Marcos Jr. in the Philippines (Gonçalves & Lasco, 2023) to explore themes of authoritarian nostalgia and digital expressions of populist sentiment. Our comparative work highlighted important differences: Brazil's judicial system is both more powerful and more independent than the Philippines', and its civil society coalitions worked in a more bottom-up fashion and were more programmatically diverse. This granular comparative analysis of threats in information environments and civil society

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responses across the two countries is discussed in Appendix A of this report.

Building off this comparison, our Global Majority Knowledge Exchange project |engaged key stakeholders in both countries, as well as researchers and civil society leaders in other Global Majority countries and several Global North countries, through a series of workshops, in-depth interviews, and network-building activities between April 2023 and July 2024. The broader questions that the research team, workshop participants, and network allies consistently engaged with are: What does a tech and democracy agenda from and for the Global Majority really look like? What are its best expressions in terms of space-building (i.e., international and national coalitions and governance bodies) and programs (i.e., interventions and projects implemented at transnational and national levels)?

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Addressing these questions, our team drew inspiration from conceptual and methodological frameworks in global studies and the decolonial turn in critical digital studies.

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, p. 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 Lehuede's (2024) two-fold framework attuning to the data and knowledge extractivism afflicting indigenous tech activists in Latin America is useful in thinking through ethics in collaborative arrangements between researchers and civil society and across the Global North and Global Majority.

In journalism studies, research by Thales Lelo (2022a) and Mathias-Felipe de-Lima-Santos (2024) illustrate how Big Tech's "philanthrocapitalism" has financially supported a narrow scope of short-term interventions in the Global Majority. This research on the politics of funding news agencies in the Global Majority, in conversation with **the broader literature on the sociology and anthropology of aid** (Krause, 2014), raises structural critique of how powerful donors and knowledge producers in the Global North have continued to engage their "beneficiaries" in often neocolonial, exploitative, and extractive ways.

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 exploring how advocates engage with proposals to call out "disinformation from the top" rather than be swept up by cycles of technological moral panics (Nielsen, 2024) or displace disinformation production and its circulation to low-income users or so-called "dumb voters" (Ong et al., 2022). We also explored how participants engage with the idea that the appeal of disinformation narratives is their resonance with deep historical trauma and social difference (Asian American Disinformation Table, 2022), and how they think through the importance of investing in ordinary citizens' capacity for political action and deliberative agency (GloCan, 2024).

Methods

These guiding principles and theoretical inspirations informed our team's ethnographically inspired and comparative research on disinformation trends, tech accountability tools, civil society responses, and tech policy frameworks in the Global Majority, first published on the DigiLabour site (Lanuza et al., 2023).

Three workshops functioned as focus group discussions where participants could present ideas, share experiences, and discuss and challenge our team's preliminary research and analyses. The first workshop was held in April 2023, as a knowledge exchange webinar over Zoom with 29 Brazilian and Filipino journalists and civil society leaders discussing comparative research and "lessons learned" between Brazil and the Philippines (Lanuza et al., 2023).

In November 2023, we convened a second workshop with 45 scholars and community leaders at the Pontifical Catholic University de Rio de Janeiro to discuss the major findings of studies on the 2022 Brazilian elections (Alves et al., 2023), in conversation with the 2022 Philippines election (Ong et al., 2022). This workshop, conducted in both English and Portuguese, included Brazilian government representatives and election coalition leaders who justified, in frank discussion, aggressive legal responses to electoral disinformation that other Global Majority participants found controversial (discussed in Box Text 1 in Chapter 3.3.). This event also convened smaller breakout panels that focused on tools-sharing and practical tips for researchers at risk.

We held another large workshop in Amherst, Massachusetts, on April 19, 2024, inviting 25 practitioners and researchers to provide feedback on an early draft of our study as well as broader network-building objectives of the new Global Technology for Social Justice Lab (GloTech). Representatives of Global North public and private funding agencies attended this event for frank conversations about the politics of the aid industrial complex and strategic opportunities to "build leverage" across countries

and sectors to secure more helpful resources for the Global Majority.

After the April 2024 workshop at UMass Amherst, we conducted an additional 17 in-depth interviews with civil society leaders in the Global Majority and released a post-workshop survey targeting specific respondents. We followed up with some workshop participants on specific points they raised in discussions, and we tracked down other respondents identified by our workshop participants as people who could fill in important data gaps. Our team's prior interests and experiences in worker justice research and advocacy (Grohmann, 2023; Ong & Combinido, 2018) motivated us in our interview methodology to consult civil society leaders situated at various levels in their organizational hierarchies to understand how tech and democracy spaces and programs pose various risks and opportunities to those working on digital frontlines and those responsible for policy in the headquarters.

TABLE 3.

Participant distribution by phase of our Global Majority Knowledge Exchange Project.

PARTICIPANTS BY METHOD	TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:
Workshop participants (Knowledge exchange webinar April 2023, Rio de Janeiro workshop November 2023, Amherst workshop April 2024)	93
In-depth interview respondents (May to June 2024)	17
Post-workshop survey respondents (June to July 2024)	25
Number of participants (Some participants attended more than one event. Participant count does not include research team)	**135 total participants** **106 unique participants**

TABLE 3.
Participant distribution by country.

COUNTRY	# OF UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS	% OF TOTAL
Philippines	27	25
Brazil	22	21
No represented country / International NGO member	19	18
United States of America	15	14
India	8	8
South Africa	4	4
United Kingdom	3	3
Indonesia	2	2
Kenya	1	1
Moldova	1	1
Myanmar	1	1
South Korea	1	1
Taiwan	1	1
Thailand	1	1
Total (13 countries & no represented country/INGO member)	**106**	**100%**

FIGURE 1.

Distribution of Participants' Countries in Percentage.

Legend:
- Philippines
- Brazil
- No represented country/ International NGO member
- United States of America
- India
- South Africa
- United Kingdom
- Indonesia
- Kenya
- Moldova
- Myanmar
- South Korea
- Taiwan
- Thailand
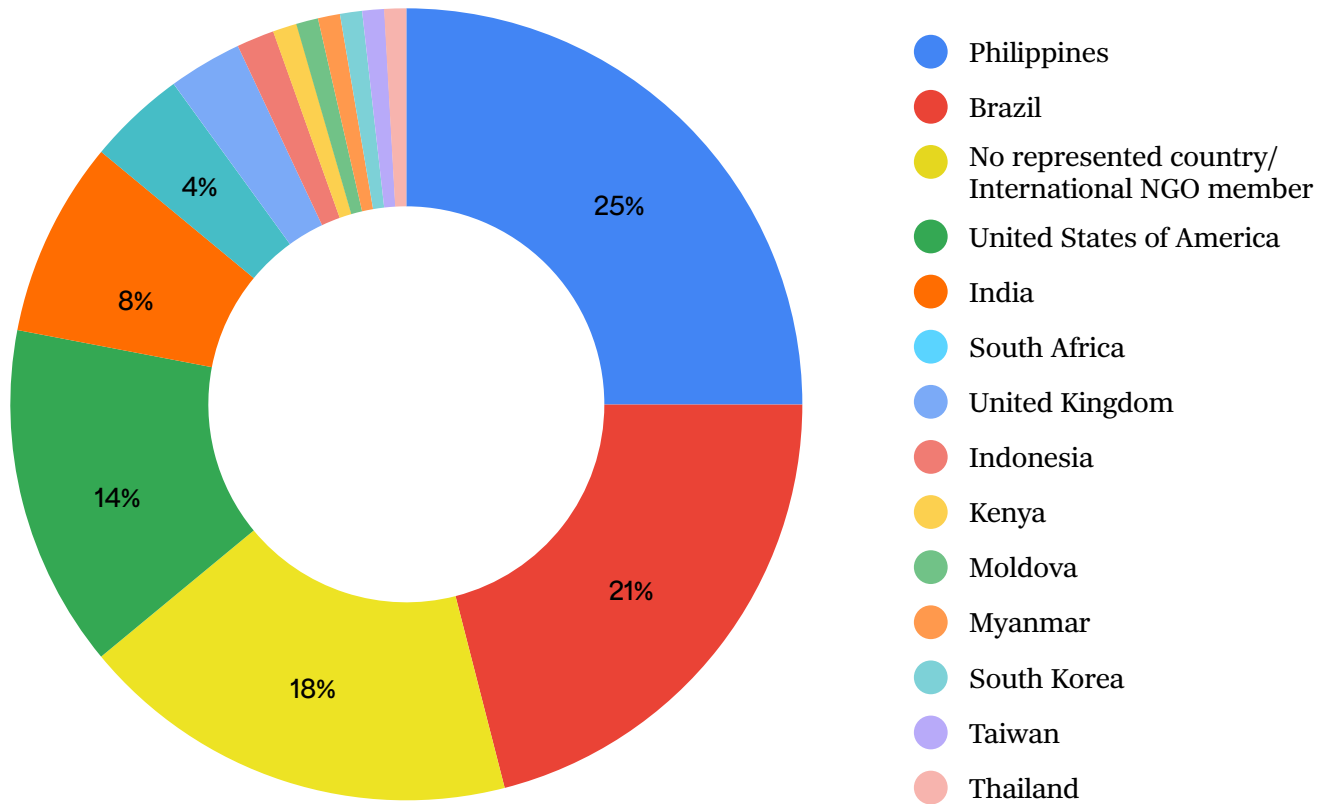
TABLE 4.

Unique Participants by Sector.

UNIQUE PARTICIPANTS BY SECTOR	
NGOs (human rights, digital rights, democracy, tech accountability)	43
Academe	29
Media, journalism, and fact-checking	17
Donor organizations (international philanthropies, government aid agencies)	13
Government agencies	4
Platforms	1
Total	**107**

Chapter 2
Reforming Spaces

The global tech and democracy space has embraced the term "whole-of-society" in organizing a large number of stakeholders across sectors, disciplines, and regions to combat information disorders and "advance technology for democracy" in global context (e.g., United States White House, 2023). For example, they have compellingly argued that social scientists and librarians have significant roles to play (Donovan & Wardle, 2020). Philanthropies, government agencies, and Big Tech platforms themselves have contributed billions of dollars for various "whole-of-society" international expert panels to gather evidence on various digital harms and for civil society coalitions to design interventions.

Global Majority civil society organizations have benefited a lot from this big-tent "whole-of-society" approach inclusive of both specialist media and technology-focused organizations with more generalist human rights and community service-oriented organizations. In some countries where domestic funders are either too politically squeamish or programmatically traditional to support tech and democracy programs, international lifelines have been essential to survival and innovation. For example, a veteran Philippines human rights coalition leader expressed, "It has been a struggle to convince traditional human rights organizations to invest in digital operations. For those in essential services work, disinformation may seem like a problem that 'does not hit you in the gut."

Given that our project timeline overlapped with strategic planning for "2024 as the year of pivotal global elections," most of our 107 knowledge exchange participants were current or former members of election integrity coalitions. A majority of the participants held senior or mid-career roles in their respective organizations and brought with them long histories of human rights advocacy, policy work, mainstream news reporting, and development work experiences. Our participants from more "traditional" development organizations held more mid-career and junior roles as the in-house "innovators" focused on tech and communication-related projects.

The rest of this chapter discusses participant experiences of securing funds and engaging with international and national coalitions dedicated to policy advocacy and strategic planning to "advance tech and democracy." Meanwhile, Chapter 3 captures their more particular assessment of programs and identifies several underfunded project areas they find most relevant to the Global Majority.

2.1. Spaces Overdetermined by Global North Funding

> Big philanthropic money going to civil society is flowing in the same direction as money coming out of Big Tech.
>
> **Journalist in Kenya**,
> on Big Tech funding shaping other donors' priorities

Big Tech "partnerships" and aid assistance from Global North governments and philanthropy are huge drivers of tech and democracy spaces and programs in the Global Majority. Civil society coalitions in Brazil and the Philippines have generally welcomed foreign philanthropy and international research collaborators to learn innovative methodologies and tools dedicated to monitoring information flows in social media platforms. However, a common theme that emerged in our knowledge exchange workshops is the mismatch between Global North funder priorities and in-country organizational strategies. Although participants were mindful not to generalize donors and celebrated genuinely collaborative partnerships, they found that top-down and unequal tech and democracy spaces and ways of working were common across funder categories. Whether accepting funding from Big Tech, private philanthropic agencies, or Global North government agencies, Global Majority civil society workers experience the same patterns of mismatched priorities and extractive collaborative arrangements.

Prior studies have found that Big Tech platforms are major funders of legacy news agencies and NGOs in the Global Majority, supporting them as third-party fact-checkers helping them with content monitoring or as recipients of digital literacy project funding (Lelo, 2022b). Critiques of Big Tech funding of fact-checking organizations have highlighted the ways in which their projects avoid overtly activist and community-driven initiatives in favor of more benign content monitoring of viral misinformation and descriptive research (Graves, 2023). There is growing evidence that Big Tech's "philanthrocapitalism" efforts in the Global Majority, particularly those that promote the uses of specific tools, start strong but are unsustainable for long-term use as they require technical expertise beyond the expertise of newsrooms (de-Lima-Santos, 2024).

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One participant, Odanga Madung, a Kenyan data journalist and fellow at the Mozilla Foundation, is more pointed in his critique of Big Tech's funding patterns. In an interview with our team, he cited an analysis he conducted (Madung & Open Source Research & Investigations, 2024), which showed that the three most common interventions announced by platforms ahead of elections are digital literacy, fact-checking, and content moderation policy updates. Madung worries that commitments made by Big Tech have shaped the response of other donors. "I do believe that there could be a hypothesis for examining how [the] philanthropic flow of money matches that of the flow of money that comes in from platforms towards civil society," he said in an interview for this study. "Big philanthropic money going to civil society is flowing in the same direction as money coming out of Big Tech." He did not mince words about the seriousness of this trend, calling platform commitments a public relations exercise, not an accountability measure. "The Gates Foundation wouldn't fund groups that take money from Big Sugar," he said, "and climate groups shouldn't take money from Big Oil."

An Indian activist we interviewed felt similarly. While they believed money from Big Tech had funded some good work in India, they "still would not" agree to accept it because it always entails accepting "at least some influence." They said while there are better and worse ways of working with money from the tech industry, too many groups which do so become compromised and "pull their punches."

Our workshop participants generally affirmed that the funding frameworks of Global North philanthropic organizations and government agencies come with similar challenges of being mismatched with local priorities. For example, a recent academic review (Blair et al., 2023) funded by USAID looked at 155 studies involving random control trials that measured the effectiveness of common counter-disinformation interventions; 80 percent of those studies focused on the Global North. Despite these acknowledged limitations, we learned through our workshops and interviews that influential donors have drawn on the findings of this review to design their program strategies in the Global Majority for the next several years. Of course, it must be noted that other research (Ababakirov et al., 2022) on and by the Global Majority exists, but has been excluded by the review's narrow scope and methodology. In at least one occasion when a US-based funder was presented with a more bottom-up approach to designing Global Majority programs, this proposal was rejected.

Participants of our workshops critiqued this top-down agenda-setting and Global

North-to-Global Majority flow of program design and advocacy framing. According to one of our interview respondents coming from the international development sector, the tech and democracy space is particularly notorious for being "10 years behind" commitments to the localization agenda of the international development space. He says that, unlike the humanitarian and development sectors that have made greater strides in operationalizing multi-stakeholderism and supporting local leadership, the media and technology fund programs of Global North governments tend to be "much more politicized" and "determined from the top." Recent reviews of USAID awards (a major source for Global Majority election integrity coalition funding) affirm that the agency is far from meeting its objective of 25 percent of awards going to local organizations (Fine, 2024; Sandefur, 2022).

It is no wonder, then, that international policy fora end up following the status quo of transposing concepts and interventions from the North for Global Majority use, both when they present a mismatch with local threats and priorities and even when they are grossly ill-suited to the political environment.

A strong example came in May 2023, when civil society organizations based in Southeast Asia mobilized under the hashtag #PushbackUNESCO to express alarm over UNESCO's Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (#PushBackUNESCO, 2023). They feared the guidelines would allow national governments to exert more control over social media platforms and would fail to account for activists' direct experience with censorship and "anti-fake news laws" (Lim & Bradshaw, 2023). The organizations drafted an open letter asserting that UNESCO's guidelines would justify domestic over-regulation, empower illiberal regulators, and fail to protect human rights activists and dissidents. UNESCO then denied receiving any pushback and portrayed the guidelines as a product of a global multi-stakeholder consensus, which a participant in one of our workshops described as disingenuous.

More worryingly, workshop participants raise alarm about the militarization agenda that is overtly or covertly embedded in Global North governments' foreign aid support under the tech and democracy umbrella.

For example, with the heightened geopolitical tensions in Europe and between United States' allies and China, tech and democracy coalitions are increasingly co-opted to a militarization and securitization agenda dedicated to hunting "foreign influence" of Chinese and Russian operatives in local information environments. One Filipina

Overreliance on conflict frames turns members of Global Majority societies into pawns on a geostrategic chessboard.

journalist at an international news agency expressed concern that Western scholars and funders would always encourage her to investigate Chinese fake accounts. Brazilian scholar Nina Santos (2024) recently criticized these efforts to secure "information integrity" as "a war that doesn't deal with our problems … If I were making a list of priorities, this would probably be 73rd on my list." Overreliance on these conflict frames has consequences. For one, it diverts resources and attention from more pressing domestic disinformation challenges in Global Majority countries. It can also lead to problematic outcomes for free expression, like the above-cited "fake news laws" or the US law attempting to ban TikTok (Allyn, 2024) that is also seeing its own copycat expressions in Global Majority countries (Saballa, 2024).

At its worst, overreliance on conflict frames turns members of Global Majority societies into pawns on a geostrategic chessboard. Revelations that the United States ran an anti-vaccine influence operation in the Philippines (Bing & Schectman, 2024), hoping to dampen Beijing's "vaccine diplomacy," show how disposable US military leaders considered Philippine lives to be in the scope of a wider competition with China. Shockingly, the lack of public indignation and follow-up research investigations—in the Global North as well as targeted countries in the Global Majority—suggest that significant chilling effects are at play. Indeed, it is hard for researchers and officials from US allied territories to call out US "hypocrisy" in the tech and democracy space when one has been historically positioned as being "obliged to be grateful" (Ong & Combinido, 2015) for their financial aid.

2.2. Tools-First Coalitions

> "It's harder to find funding for trust-building campaigns at the grassroots. Funders are obsessed with tools that are scalable. It's not sexy to do community dialogues."
>
> **Human rights advocate in the Philippines**

Following donor money forces resource-strapped civil society organizations to reinvent themselves and their strategies. This is to the detriment of civil society's overall effectiveness, and it is clear that Global Majority civil society leaders are heavily frustrated with what some described as the "tools- and tech-focused mindset" of funders who emphasize a narrow and predetermined set of deliverables such as databases and debunks. Some call the process "extractive," as it forces local CSOs to turn over various data, such as databases of local in-country disinformation posts, to

their Global North collaborators. Participants are uncertain how their collaborators could make sense of their data and how the data would be used for policymaking or tools development.

The emphasis on standardizing tools and strategies that should be shared across organizations within a coalition tends to flatten methodological diversity of local organizations. For example, in Brazil, a seasoned veteran of the tech policy space with deep roots in policy lobbying was shocked that funders were nudging them to do narrative change campaigns instead. A Philippine advocate also expressed frustration, saying, "It's harder to find funding for trust-building dialogues at the grassroots. Funders are obsessed with tools that are scalable. It's not sexy to do community dialogues."

Standardizing tools and data-sharing within large coalitions sometimes creates unnecessary conflict among organizations that have long since learned to coexist with their subtle ideological differences and methodological expertise. In the Philippines, an election integrity coalition that was supported by foreign funding struggled to come up with a "universal" data-sharing policy, as each organization understandably justified their own data-sharing and privacy policies. Indeed, the emphasis on "universal tools" often overlooks local context and subtle political divisions; the tendency to push organizations toward one approach reduces their ability to innovate and play to their strengths, and sometimes end up pitting them more directly against each other.

Donors also play a role in shaping the more granular details of programs implemented by civil society coalitions. The field of fact-checking is perhaps the best example of how "tools- and tech-first approaches" can displace locally led strategies. It, for instance, has grown explosively over the last decade: according to the Duke Reporters Lab (Ryan, 2024), the number of fact-checkers globally has risen from at least 186 in 2016, which Duke calls "the year when the Brexit vote and the U.S. presidential election elevated global concerns about the spread of inaccurate information," to 434 active fact-checkers today. Most of the growth in fact-checking has been in Global Majority countries.

This expansion is evident in both Brazil and the Philippines, especially in the lead-up to elections. In Brazil, formal investments committed to fact-checking politicians' claims and internet rumors have been in place since 2014. However, dedicated fact-checking outlets such as Aos Fatos emerged more recently (Lelo, 2022b).

In the Philippines, Tsek.Ph, the first formal fact-checking coalition covering elections, emerged in 2019 (Chua & Soriano, 2020). A second fact-checking coalition, #FactsFirstPH, emerged in the 2022 elections, folding in 120 groups under their umbrella, supported by a Google News Initiative grant (Fallorina et al., 2023).

This growth was fueled by donor strategies that created funding incentives for both

new and established community leaders to pivot their programming toward tech and democracy. This has been true across disciplines and areas of expertise: for example, the nascent organization Akademiya at *Bayan Kontra Disimpormasyon* (ABKD, lit. "Academics and Nation Against Disinformation") mobilized academic historians under fact-checking projects. And the established legal advocacy group Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), which was primarily a legal watchdog, diversified its operations to include producing media literacy knowledge products supported by both Meta and the Philippine Commission on Elections. Participants' opinions are mixed about the "mission creep" and redirection of organizational mandates to produce the same genre of outputs: on one hand, funding encourages traditionalist organizations to grapple with new threats posed by digital media. On the other hand, some think this is a waste of time and energy. As one Indian media professor says, "We all end up doing the same thing with diminishing returns."

A few of our participants also shared that they have been required by funders to use tools or software that are "distracting or not helpful" to their work. They mentioned that funder-provided tools are sometimes too difficult to use, and it is at times unclear how local data would be used for machine learning or entrepreneurial ambitions of their collaborators.

Challenges in the donor-recipient relationship contribute to worker burnout. Participants in this study bemoaned drafting recommendations that go unheeded and contributing to databases that they know do not benefit their communities. As one of our respondents said, "Why do we need to learn another database when once the project ends we all go back to Microsoft Excel?"

2.3. Short-term election-cycle-oriented programming versus long-term sustainability

In interviews for this study, a common refrain was that too many donors focus on short-term programming during election cycles, with fewer offering longer-term grants and operational support. Lack of consistent, ongoing, sustainable support between election cycles also costs coalitions precious momentum: too often, work stalls and partnerships end in the weeks after an election, only to have to be restarted next cycle. In the meantime, disinformation dynamics inevitably change and civil society organizations are robbed of opportunities for mutual learning and adaptation. In short, election-based funding cycles leave organizations in a permanent, reactive sprint.

While participants agreed that all donors cannot be painted with one brush, they said between-cycle funding is more scarce than in-cycle funding and that much of their work is project-based—a dynamic which leaves them little room (Goodwin &

Jackson, 2022) for sustainable growth or strategic planning. One Philippine interview participant said that funders should finance "strategically and courageously," with greater institutional support "for these actors to still exist … their existence is already resistance. Sometimes they just need to keep the lights on. Reduce the bureaucracy, it takes away from the work." Another Brazil participant said that while elections are important, "There are a lot of things that are going to continue irrespective of who is [elected] in leadership."

Interestingly, both Filipino and Brazilian participants share the perception that US philanthropy and foreign aid have become scarce after the 2022 elections that installed new presidents more directly aligned with US foreign policy. As one Brazil researcher shared, "It's a bizarre arrangement that we now need to fold up some projects and lay off staff after a 'successful' outcome in the elections."

Even though the Brazilian and Philippine coalitions described above included different types of civil society organizations, the two countries reflect opposite approaches to coalition work. Brazilian coalitions made use of a wide range of methods to address constituencies, while in the Philippines, coalitions brought together practitioners from different fields under the common umbrella of debunking and fact-checking.

The Brazilian tech and democracy space modeled itself after climate justice coalitions, who have transposed their leadership and experience in regional and global issues to collaborative work relations in tech and democracy projects. Brazil's coalitions were diverse, heterogeneous, and inclusive of sectoral organizations; coalitions used different tools to reach broader audiences and found ways to identify gaps in their programs. For example, Brazilian environmental groups Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund invested in counter-narrative strategies to combat climate disinformation. Some coalitions or members within coalitions focused on activities like lobbying and campaigning for transparency tools and regulations, while others focused on social media monitoring and publishing counter-narratives. Organizations like Aos Fatos developed innovations such as an information chatbot named Fátima, while Sleeping Giants Brazil (inspired by a US organization called Sleeping Giants) organized demonetization campaigns targeting high-profile disinformers. Research centers like NetLab at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and the Digital Humanities Lab at the Federal University of Bahia also contributed research that directly informed the strategies of both social movements and institutions like the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) (Alves et al., 2023).

In comparison, Philippine coalitions emphasized a homogenous "united front" despite the diversity of its membership. The country's two major fact-checking coalitions, Tsek. Ph and #FactsFirstPH, were narrowly focused on monitoring viral falsehoods, catching notorious influencers, and documenting historical revisionism (Fallorina et al., 2023). According to one researcher, coalitions framed disinformation as the central problem

with debunking as the primary solution; as a result, potential partners focused on solution sets like civic empowerment or depolarization may have felt like they had little to contribute.

There were exceptions: for instance, the Movement Against Disinformation led strategic litigation, mounting unprecedented lawsuits against influencers and government ministers who have propagated conspiracies about particular activists (Casilao, 2023). Another example is an original "disinformation whistleblowers podcast" which retold behind-the-scenes stories of illicit economies (Ong & Ventura, 2022–2023); it was a chart-topper in the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the elections. But by and large, the Philippines' response was lopsided toward fact-checking and contrasted with Brazilian coalitions that worked across diverse programming areas.

Members of Philippine coalitions did lend each other helping hands. For instance, veteran fact-checkers supported young organizations like ABKD by integrating their work into the established networks, providing the nascent groups greater access to partners and audiences. But the homogenization of organizational approaches also led to concerns about competition between organizations that were nominally allies.

2.4. Extractivism, parachute partnerships, and other challenges in international partnerships

Knowledge extractivism in international collaborations is also a persistent concern for Global Majority civil society leaders. One of our workshop participants who led a Myanmar election coalition bemoaned the practice of parachute researchers with large amounts of foreign funding hunting for case studies during elections. Her worst experience was how a foreign researcher poached her own staff member, who was implementing disinformation interventions, to assist for a research project whose intended readers are European policymakers. **The researcher exclaimed, "We are not your f*cking case study!"**

Such "poaching" can lead to further co-optation when it is done systematically by other sectors with vested interests, such as government or tech companies. Interviewees said that this has become a common concern in Brazil, where platforms hired many civil society actors away from their work during the 2022 election—forcing activists to confront their ex-colleagues when trying to hold platforms accountable.

Workshops hosted by foreign collaborators often expose participants to political and legal risks, especially in countries with historical divisions along religion and ethnicity.

Global Majority researchers can put themselves at great risk when engaging with foreign collaborators who have no knowledge of political and cultural sensitivities. One of our workshop participants recounted their experience with a Big Tech platform representative conducting focus groups with local activists and promising financial support to participants. For our respondent, workshops hosted by foreign collaborators often expose participants to political and legal risks, especially in countries with historical divisions along religion and ethnicity. Frustratingly, the platform representative went ahead and conducted the discussions anyway.

Chapter 3
"Custom Built" Programs for the Global Majority

One of the motivating questions for this study was how civil society coalitions in the Global Majority can come to be seen not as aid recipients, but as savvy, innovative, and entrepreneurial advocates with lessons to offer one another and the world. Global media storytelling about tech in the Global Majority often perpetuates disempowering narratives of digital dystopia that center the tech accountability solutions proposed by Global North advocates. Participants of our workshops shared many examples in which their own nuanced storytelling of on-the-ground realities and local efforts of community organizing is overlooked in Global North media narratives and tech accountability advocacies.

One activist said that Brazil has a "flourishing landscape and initiatives focused on critically analyzing influence operations that go beyond the traditional 'fact-based' approach dominant in the global fact-checking movement." A Filipino human rights worker referenced "the organic participation of different artists (e.g., cartoonists, influencers, theater actors) despite not being directly supported by funders."

When asked to tell us about civil society "wins" in their country, participants cited legal pressure on platforms to take disinformation more seriously, community dialogues and on-the-ground organizing of targeted communities, and direct confrontation with the "peddlers" of disinformation. In an interview, an Indian activist explained that former broadcast journalists had found success combatting government narratives on YouTube, a refuge of last resort after much of the mainstream legacy media was captured by the ruling party. Community outreach and deliberative dialogues were also seen as an essential way of engaging with local groups and minoritized publics to probe historical roots of divisive disinformation narratives.

The underreported success of such efforts demonstrates both the need for improved coverage from global media and the need for programmatic approaches and ways of working that are "custom built" for Global Majority contexts. No solution or toolkit will be appropriate in every country, but by fostering discussion and exchange it is possible to spot trends and produce guidelines for more bespoke, context-aware strategies that are developed for—and by—the societies where they unfold.

3.1. Seeking Leverage for Platform Accountability

"I wouldn't say we're copy-paste, but we're very much reactive. We could be challenging some of the popular concepts and proposing our own."

Nina Santos, a Brazilian researcher,
on local regulators depending on policy flows from the Global North

Most Global Majority respondents seek to develop research and programs that can hold social media platforms accountable for their negligence toward Global Majority countries. The theme here is "leverage"; civil society activists want to better document digital harms in the Global Majority and communicate their stories in such a way as to encourage corporate accountability.

A common means for pursuing this leverage is to audit social media platforms' tools and policy commitments, especially during momentous events such as elections. This involves comparisons of the Global North and Global Majority; consider the previously cited report by Kenyan researcher Odanga Madung, which compared the number of commitments made by Global North and Global Majority platforms in areas such as debunking initiatives, efforts to boost authoritative information, digital literacy programs, and improvements in content moderation.

This tallying of the resources and commitments that corporations allocate to the Global North shows how badly social media companies comparatively under-prioritize most of the world's internet users. However, it also meets platforms on their own terms, only holding them accountable for the tools and interventions they have been willing to provide. The irony here is that many of these interventions touted by platforms have little to do with addressing how platforms function or might be held accountable. It also too often overlooks platforms used predominantly in the Global Majority, such as Viber in the Philippines (Lam, 2023) and ShareChat and Chingari in India (Arora, 2024).

Many of these interventions touted by platforms have little to do with addressing how platforms function or might be held accountable.

Certainly, transnational solidarity movements among Global Majority researchers and between Global Majority and Global North allies are critical for building leverage. The proposal to convene researchers across countries in Central and Southeast Asia targeted by the Pentagon's disinformation campaign during Covid-19 is another example of international movement-building to secure leverage and account for digital harms across regions (Ong, 2024).

3.2. Tech Accountability without Platform Determinism

Workshop participants often raised caution when platform accountability initiatives slip into platform determinism: the idea that platforms are solely responsible for social ills and various electoral surprises pulled off by populist political leaders, and especially that they "brainwash" unsophisticated voters (see also Caplan et al., 2020). Global Majority researchers are particularly sensitive about the need to contextualize harmful effects of new technologies within longer histories of political conflict and minoritized communities' traumatic experiences of social exclusion that tech may have exacerbated, but not caused. Failing to consider identity-based cleavages leaves the historical causes of social division unaccounted for.

Participants with backgrounds in community service expressed that tech accountability advocacies with tech-centric and platform deterministic frames sound "tone-deaf" and may alienate ordinary citizens. Others mentioned that audiences feel "othered" by mainstream interventions that are hinged on Facebook "ruining democracy"; these audiences include both populist supporters and minoritized communities. In Brazil, some interview subjects and survey respondents emphasized the need for a greater focus on race issues. In the Philippines, the need to expand to parts of the country beyond Metro Manila was a recurring theme. They also noted the existence of "news deserts" and information voids for peoples living in regions outside of metropolitan centers that require both targeted responses and long-term local capacity-building.

Another concern about debunking and literacy programs is that they are inspired by, or reinforce, "dumb voter" tropes (e.g., *bobotante* in the Philippines, literally "dumb voter"): the belief that illiberal populists come to power on the shoulders of naive and social media-brainwashed low-income people. Rather than treat audiences like citizens to be engaged, this strategy treats them like inferiors to be educated.

Many of our participants shared the perspective that counter-disinformation

This misleading explanatory device of all-powerful Big Tech controlling "dumb voters" perpetuates anti-poor sentiments.

interventions too frequently rely on this frame. **This misleading explanatory device of all-powerful Big Tech controlling "dumb voters" perpetuates anti-poor sentiments and alienates news audiences and target constituencies of voter literacy campaigns.**

Gender was also cited as an important underlooked issue in both Brazilian and Philippine tech and democracy interventions. Many participants noted the greater frequency of online harassment and violence aimed at female journalists, politicians, and activists.

3.3. Localized Regulation

Despite the concerns expressed by #PushBackUNESCO discussed in Chapter 2, calls for regulatory reform in the Global Majority are strong. Unfortunately, platform accountability conversations in the Global Majority often take their lead from the Global North. Global Majority civil society leaders resent being treated as a case study that only affirms regulatory "magic bullets" spearheaded by Washington, DC or Europe. Nina Santos, a Brazilian researcher, lamented that Brazilian policymakers seemed to take cues from Europe and elsewhere instead of attempting to lead the discussion, which Brazil could and—as one of the world's most online populations—should. "I wouldn't say we're copy-paste," she explained, "but we're very much reactive. We could be challenging some of the popular concepts and proposing our own."

Unfortunately, Global North advocates often fail to engage their peers elsewhere. Consider the scandals generated by Frances Haugen's release of the "Facebook Files" (Wall Street Journal, 2021): even though many of the files concerned the Global Majority, researchers and journalists there were largely left out of the loop of the organized media campaign that followed her revelations. Real solidarity with Global Majority civil society requires Global North allies to unsettle traditional positions of savior and beneficiary or developed and developing world, and champion Global Majority leadership in international coalitions.

Real solidarity with Global Majority civil society requires Global North allies to unsettle traditional positions of savior and beneficiary or developed and developing world.

BOX TEXT 1.

Divergent Evaluations of the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court

In Brazil, coalitions and organizations employed a diverse menu of pressure tactics due to the leverage and legal standing afforded by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE). The TSE was an "activist court" during the election period, forcing platforms to relent to the demands of civil society watchdogs to hold politicians responsible for inciting hate and disinformation. For instance, Brazilian coalitions in the 2022 elections celebrated the TSE mandate to take down any online content that floated the narrative of electoral fraud in 2018. Other organizations like Sleeping Giants Brazil also benefited from institutional support, and were able to conduct campaigns that demonetized influence operations networks. In effect, the TSE had a vital role in reducing electoral disinformation in 2022 (Rubio & Monteiro, 2023).

Coalitions such as Sala de Articulação contra a Desinformação (SAD, translated as "Disinformation Articulation Room"), Democracia em Xeque (DX, or "Democracy at Stake"), and Coalizão Direitos na Rede (lit. "Coalition Rights on the Network") also actively shaped platform accountability investigations by publishing policy briefs that outlined concrete steps to ensure election integrity (Alves et al., 2023).

The TSE is a useful example of learning shared between Global Majority countries. Countries like South Africa (SA News, 2023) are seeking to replicate Brazil's success while adapting the approach to their own situation. But workshop participants recognized that this approach depends on a strong judicial institution exercising appropriate restraint. As such, it is not a proper fit for all Global Majority contexts, no matter how enticing Brazil's success may be. For some election coalitions, partnership with an institutional ally that can impose interventions against platforms and politicians is something to aspire toward. For others, institutions must be engaged cautiously: their reality is that such institutions are likely to be unconstrained and abusive.

This reality can shift over time. In India, for example, activists were wary of engaging the Election Commission because it had been co-opted by the executive branch of the government. But when the legislative landscape changed after the last election, interview participants became more open to the idea. The Commission is an especially tempting ally because it already has de jure power to regulate digital political advertising, a massive and growing Indian industry.

Speaking about Brazil's TSE, one Indian journalist ominously shared, "In five years' time, I'm not sure Brazil will be celebrating this as a success story. They should learn from us [in India]."

3.4. Tackling the Political Economy of Disinformation

Our research found that the Global Majority is keen to invest in more investigative research and interventions exposing disinformation as an industry. Our workshop participants advocated for strategies that directly address both labor and profit aspects of that industry.

Participants showed strong support for tackling disinformation as an economic issue by exposing the role of advertising revenue (e.g., Rio, 2024). Through the 2022 Brazilian elections, Sleeping Giants Brazil worked to defund sites producing and disseminating disinformation by appealing to companies not to place advertisements on those sites. According to one external analysis (Ribeiro et al., 2022), more than 80 percent of requests to companies succeeded (though audience engagement with those sites remained consistent). Researchers in India and the Philippines expressed interest to replicate the Sleeping Giants model, and to learn from other high-profile advocates such as Check My Ads in the US.

In India, activists submitted ads that violated platform hate speech policies to social media companies and monitored how disinformation peddlers monetized their accounts (Gilmore, 2024). When companies approved the ads anyway, activists were able to draw international attention (Elliott & Gilbert, 2024) to the issue. In an interview, the activists said that international media coverage focused on social media's complicity with bad actors' monetization of hate and disinformation is an important lever that effects real change. Their strategy has shown mild wins such as content takedowns, but has not yet led to full demonetization for some of the most notorious actors, though the public revelations rattled one of them enough that they launched a paid subscription service in response (Sharma, 2024).

3.5. Worker Power and Justice

> "...the narrow emphasis on debunking falsehoods takes energies away from the deep investigative work required to expose both the "disinformation-for-hire" firms and the individuals responsible for producing them..."
>
> **Civil society leader from Myanmar**

Our interviews and surveys also revealed support for keener focus on exploring a labor rights and justice frame within the tech and democracy space. On one hand,

participants were especially eager to expose local and transnational "disinformation-for-hire" firms that dwell in "grey" areas of industries of digital marketing and political consultancy (Grohmann & Ong, 2024). On the other hand, interview participants also resonated with the idea that corporate exploitation of tech workers is a core issue that afflicts digital industries at large. Worker justice movements that can support victims of race-to-the-bottom work arrangements in the platform economy are perceived as an essential long-term strategy.

In an interview, a Myanmar civil society leader argued that the narrow emphasis on debunking falsehoods takes energies away from the deep investigative work required to expose both the "disinformation-for-hire" firms and the individuals responsible for producing them in the first place. She emphasized that long-term investigations are harder to execute while debunks can inadvertently boost engagement metrics for online accounts motivated by financial, rather than political, incentives. Certainly, the research and creative interventions of two of this report's co-authors point to the importance of exposing the "commercial and political complicities" between disinformation-for-hire workers and the politicians who benefit from them (Grohmann & Ong, 2024). The genre of debunking also often overlooks the failure of industry regulatory safeguards and the broader issues of economic precarity and labor exploitation as all interconnected with the problem of disinformation production.

Workshop participants were hopeful about worker justice movements supporting unions and empowering digital workers to call out illicit firms or even Big Tech companies themselves. The recent lawsuit (Reuters, 2023) between former content moderators and Meta in Kenya opens the question of whether or not worker power should be a more widely used frame. In an interview, one participant with previous experience working for a prominent funder said that the worker power frame has not really been used. This frame may merit more exploration in the Global Majority as a means of documenting global tech firms' exploitation of Global Majority labor.

Kenyan journalist and researcher Odanga Madung cautioned this might require a long-term shift in how societies think about the rights of digital laborers. When writing on these issues, he said he received "a whole barrage of insults … because people are like, who are you to try and chase away jobs from this country? People need these jobs!" He compared the type of power-building necessary to the more "mature" labor rights movement in Western countries.

3.6. Strategic Litigation as a Programmatic Option Where Few Regulatory Levers Exist

In some countries, regulators and legislators are not reliable or trustworthy enough for civil society to pursue government policy change as a strategy. Sometimes, though,

the judiciary retains enough independence for civil society to make a case. In those contexts, strategic litigation is an option—and another alternative strategy endorsed by several participants across different country contexts.

This might involve strategic litigation against platforms, such as the lawsuit filed by Kenyan content moderators when Facebook laid them off in violation of their contract. But it can also mean litigation against officials who spread disinformation. Philippine attorney Grace Salonga from the Movement Against Disinformation told us in an interview that they use official codes of conduct and other rules to bring libel suits against individuals who smear and harass journalists and activists; they also provide legal support to journalists who are themselves sued for libel. Salonga said that this strategy is not always popular, given common freedom of expression concerns around libel law, and that they only pursue it when their client is comfortable. But in a country with few pathways for policy advocacy and where journalists are harassed online with startling regularity, Salonga sees litigation as a short-term solution.

Chapter 4
Recommendations

Global North institutions continue to shape knowledge of disinformation operations and curate countermeasures they deem as most effective. Instead of surveying Global North evidence to design interventions in the Global Majority (e.g., Blair et al., 2023), Global Majority participants seek bottom-up and just ways of working in the tech and democracy space by applying custom built / feito sob medida strategies they deem important and context-sensitive. They center the experiences of activists in Global Majority countries and are especially inclusive of minoritized groups.

The recommendations below form a general blueprint when challenging the illusion of inclusion in the tech and democracy space. We argue that just and inclusive spaces of governance and collaboration help facilitate the design of more targeted and relevant programs.

4.1. Just and Inclusive Spaces

Global Majority coalitions often bear the heavy weight of sectoral divisions, political repression, and intergenerational conflict along nuances of class, caste, race, generation, gender, and sexuality. Coalitions should nevertheless find ways to celebrate difference and work through disagreements. By aligning on shared advocacy and complementing organizational mandates, coalitions can be better prepared to absorb and mitigate risks as a collective, while celebrating the victories of specific communities.

RECOMMENDATION 1:
Take the localization to a new level by helping civil society organizations manage risk and build capacity.

Many civil society frontliners are precarious workers. They tire and, if not adequately supported, burn out. Their work can also be risky—legally, psychologically, and physically. Funders should recognize this reality and support local civil society partners appropriately, including with overhead support, support for mental health and risk mitigation, and by treating them as theorists, designers, and innovators rather than subcontractors or implementors.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

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 mitigation and narrative strategies against influence operations, while programs outside election cycles can focus on trust network-building and community-level healing programs. This ensures constant presence and operations for coalitions, which in turn foster reliability and legitimacy among community audiences of influence operations.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Global North funders and policy experts should be mindful about the inadvertent outcomes of "parachute" research programs, experiments, and last-minute disinformation mitigation efforts—especially during election season.

Platforms and international philanthropic organizations alike should take special care to conduct impact assessments, implement ethics protocols, reduce power distance between themselves and local collaborators, and follow a duty of care when engaging with local collaborators. Listening is a central component of this responsibility. Insights from collaborators that can inform bespoke and context-aware approaches should take priority over quantifiable outcomes and metrics intended to inspire approaches that are replicable and scalable.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Civil society coalitions should celebrate their members' unique contributions and diverse constituencies, not force them into a mold.

Civil society organizations' existing skill sets and connections with diverse constituencies should be leveraged and celebrated rather than made to fit narrow methodological frameworks. Funders should allow coalitions to explore locally defined, alternative pathways toward tech accountability, while also giving Global Majority leaders leeway to dedicate energies toward grassroots work that directly benefits communities addressing important issues in terms of class, race, caste, gender, sexuality, generation, and geography.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Civil society actors and researchers should build trust and find mutually beneficial opportunities to co-design interventions.

Tech and democracy spaces in the Global Majority should readily embed researchers and civil society organizers in each other's practice to enable truly collaborative interventions and cross-pollination of ideas. This means going beyond one-off or extractive consultations, and incentivizing mutually beneficial exchanges.

4.2. Targeted and Relevant Programs

Global Majority organizations often contort themselves to fit in tidy programmatic boxes created by Global North policy agendas. This forces diverse and creative actors to implement ill-fitting solutions they sometimes grow to resent. Program curation is a science and an art. The tech and democracy space would benefit from a more expansive tech accountability agenda that can fold in the work of librarians, artists, playwrights, anthropologists, and translators in developing targeted and relevant programs.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Global North allyship means championing Global Majority collaborators' research programs and creative projects.

Global North academics, media outlets, and civil society organizations should amplify the creativity of Global Majority organizations and researchers. Rather than impose funding frameworks and program agenda on Global Majority collaborators, allies should commission independent research that acknowledges local information ecosystems as well as the broader regulatory landscape and capacities of civil society. The Global North should avoid imposing conflict frames that divert or co-opt existing missions and mandates to serve Global North geopolitical agendas.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Fact-checking and media literacy are the beginning, but not the end.

We need demonetization campaigns targeting high-profile disinformers and industries complicit in disinformation production. We need investigative research analyzing campaign expenditures and following money trails. We need healing initiatives like family- and community-level conversation guides and political socialization, and depolarization programs such as deliberative mini-publics. We need librarians,

storytellers, translators to curate academic research, and journalists to investigate diverse genres appropriate for target audiences.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Acknowledge and program around disinformation as a commercial and labor issue.

Researchers and activists in the Global Majority emphasize the role of financial incentives in the production and dissemination of disinformation, and view the (precarious) workers behind both content moderation and disinformation-for-hire as central to both problems and solutions. Funders should support organizations and researchers who pursue this challenging program agenda that would combine deep investigative research with long-term worker power or justice movement-building.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Program portfolios 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, like strategic litigation. Long-term interventions dedicated to citizen empowerment, voter literacy, and transparency initiatives are important in and out of election cycles. Coalitions cannot solely focus on one or the other.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

## Programs should tackle race, gender, class, and other social divides and power hierarchies head on.

Such inequities and cleavages are the fault lines targeted by disinformation, and interventions that fail to take an intersectional approach risk missing key drivers of disinformation narratives, vulnerable populations who deserve greater attention, and potential responses to political division and illiberalism.

4.3. Recommendations Relevant to Country Context

Applying the recommendations to specific country contexts, we offer this strategy blueprint that poses important questions that stakeholders can keep in mind when determining country-level priorities.

RECOMMENDATIONS RELEVANT TO COUNTRY CONTEXT	
If the country context :	**... Consider :**
Has strong, independent institutions	Developing strategic partnerships with official institutions as "accelerants" for CSO work, e.g., the coalition with the TSE in Brazil.
Has institutions that are captured or weak	Exploring alternative strategies like strategic litigation, local community-focused interventions, and demonetization of disinformation outlets.
Has a healthy and independent media sector	Partnering with media outlets to challenge illiberal narratives and promote civil society's work to hold disinformation purveyors accountable.
Has a media sector that is captured	Supporting digital-first commentators and outlets who can build an audience via social media.
Has a robust, diverse, and collaborative civil society	Building coalitions that allow members to share knowledge, co-create strategies, and take advantage of each other's strengths.
Has a civil society that is fragmented	Investing in projects with explicit trust-building components.
Lacks trust between researchers and practitioners	Developing programs specifically designed to build mutual trust through collaboration, rather than extractivism.

We hope that this report inspires its reader to continue the hard work of propelling the tech and democracy space toward just and empowering arrangements that can support brave new faces in designing bold and relevant solutions. The strategy blueprint we provide is a starting point, not the destination of this work.
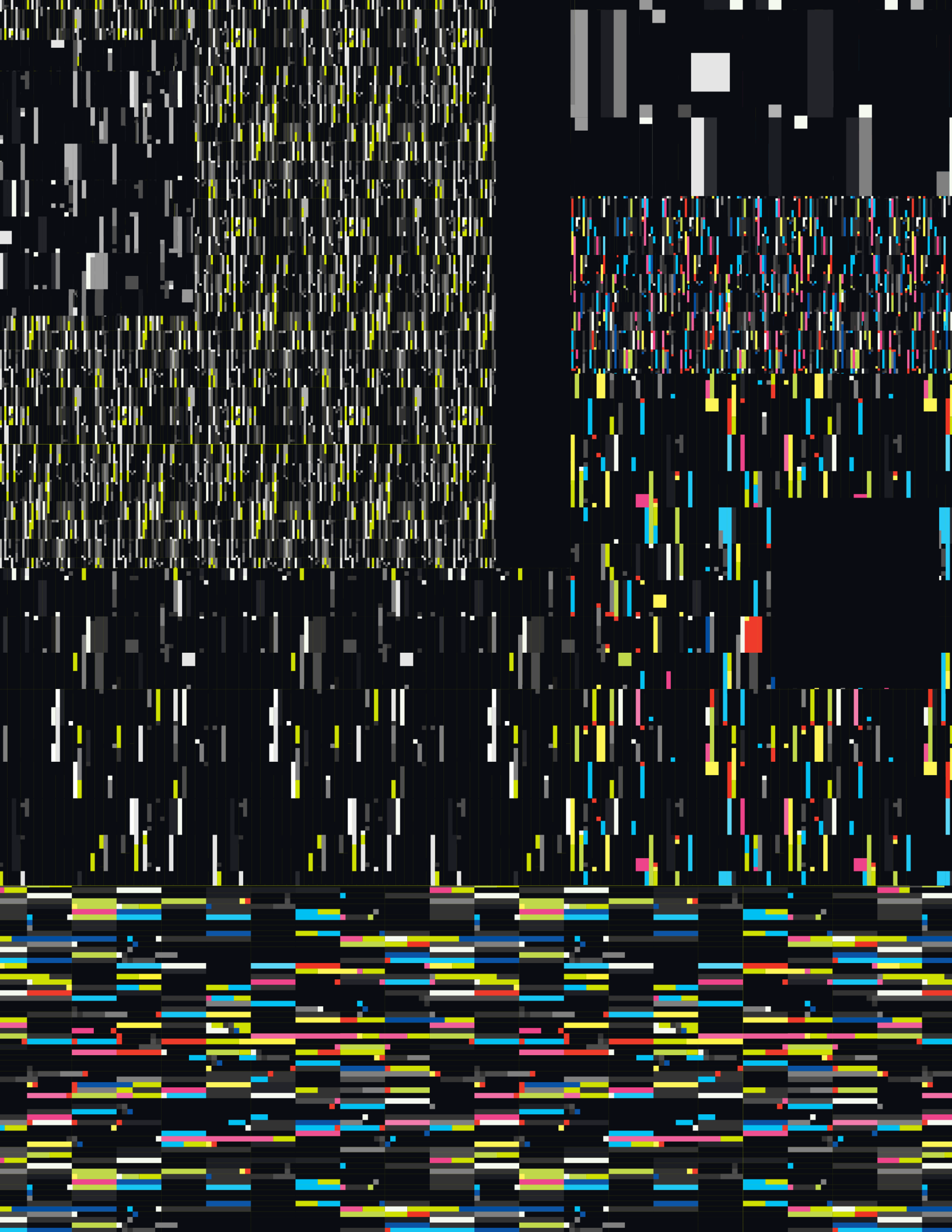
Appendix: Election integrity spaces and programs in Brazil and the Philippines

Technology, Regulatory, & Legal Approaches

TOOLS	Brazil	Philippines
Tech Advocacy	The tech policy debate is informed by reports and advocacy from coalitions of dozens of CSOs, including the ***Disinformation Articulation Room*** and the ***Coalition Rights on the Network***. 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.	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.
State Institutions	The ***Superior Electoral Court (TSE)*** played a central role in demanding platforms remove election rumors. Major platforms signed on to the 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. Despite this, "responses of digital platforms to widespread electoral disinformation were found to be delayed and ineffectual."	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.

On January 8, policy gaps allowed dangerous content to contribute to the riots.

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.

Strategic Litigation	***Democracy at Stake*** pursued strategic litigation against "political violence and domestic threats."	The ***Movement Against Disinformation*** provides legal defense to journalists while filing lawsuits against government officials who willfully spread falsehoods.

Recommendations

- 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.

- Support needed interventions like strategic litigation to make CSO work more sustainable, secure, and impactful in illiberal contexts.

- Focus more on platform policy gaps and less on content.

Civil Society Coalition Efforts to Correct, Educate, & Communicate

TOOLS	Brazil	Philippines
Fact-Checking	The ***Coalition for Checking***, a network of nine fact-checkers, worked with the TSE to identify and respond to election rumors. 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.	CSO coalitions in the Philippines focused heavily on fact-checking. Efforts were largely split across two leading coalitions: ***Tsek.ph*** and ***#FactsFirstPH***. 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.
Media Literacy	Media literacy was a component of the ***National Program against Disinformation***.	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.
Broad, Inclusive Coalitions	Broad coalitions, including with online influencers and legacy media, expanded the reach of CSO efforts. CSOs focused on LGBTQIA+ people, people of color, indigenous people, and the environment were included.	Narrower focus on fact-checking prevented coalitions from the breadth of reach that Brazilian counterparts achieved by including issue-focused CSOs. Some CSO projects include roundtables to share information and avoid duplication of effort,

Democracy at Stake supported national voter registration and anti-Bolsonaro activism through partnerships with online influencers.

Desinformante acted as both a media outlet covering influence operations and a CSO helping coordinate strategic response with peers.

Some actors fought "fire with fire," spreading false stories about Bolsonaro.

though interviews indicate these are smaller and less broad or inclusive than Brazilian counterparts.

Recommendations

- Encourage diverse coalitions which can reach different audiences and support one another with different skill sets.

- Build coalitions through democratic, bottom-up approaches.

- Encourage and support dedicated forums for information-sharing and strategizing, untethered to project deliverables.

- Encourage CSOs to expand projects into other geographic regions, supported by research into the unique needs and characteristics of communities there.

- Provide consistent funding between election cycles to encourage continued cooperation. Develop coalitions from the bottom-up so members feel rules and processes are fair and transparent, and created through consensus.

- Avoid "fighting fire with fire," i.e., engaging in influence operations to counter influence operations, or "punching down" at segments of the public who "fall for" such operations. Focus on elite accountability instead.

Knowledge Production & Pluralism

TOOLS	Brazil	Philippines
Academic Studies	The ***Disinformation Articulation Room*** provided space for coalition members to discuss and study the digital environment. ***Democracy in Check*** worked with the TSE, bringing together academics, activists, and advocates to study digital media.	There is a gap between research and practice, with civil society organizations unable to draw on academic insights to inform their work. 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. Academics have independently published public reports on the state of disinformation in the Philippines, funded by international and philanthropic organizations.
Investigations	***The National Program against Disinformation*** included media monitoring efforts.	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.

Recommendations

- Create a center for study of influence operations in the Global Majority world, or a series of regional centers.

- Promote iterative projects which unite research and practice as a loop, bringing academics and practitioners into constant contact.

- Promote accountability and understanding of influence operations in the Global Majority by supporting investigations into the economic drivers of "disinformation for hire."

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