

# Working towards healthier information ecosystems:

*Collective visions from civil society in Latin America and the Caribbean*



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This report is based on research conducted by The Engine Room, with support from Open Society Foundations, between September 2023 and March 2024.

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**THE ENGINE ROOM**

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# Introduction

Our work at The Engine Room focuses heavily on the use of tech and data in social justice organisations. In recent years, we have been witnessing concerning trends in relation to digital technologies' role in shaping information ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). (We're using the term "information ecosystems" throughout this report to refer to systems of information creation, exchange, flow and use)

All over the region, political polarisation and lack of trust have continued to increase.<sup>01</sup> Additionally, in many countries, meaningful access to information continues to be a challenge, and inequities in access to the internet and digital technologies impact many people, especially in rural areas and forest territories. At the same time, a significant number of state actors, corporate stakeholders and extremist groups in the region are using technology to surveil and undermine the work of activists.<sup>02</sup> Throughout the region, disinformation and misinformation have been used to incite hate speech against vulnerable groups,<sup>03</sup> and digital attacks against activists and journalists<sup>04</sup> are frequent<sup>05</sup> and becoming more sophisticated and pervasive.<sup>06</sup>

As we began this research, our team intended to contribute to building and sustaining healthier, more robust information ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean by compiling learnings from existing work being done by civil society in the region and mapping out some of the main challenges faced by those doing that work.

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**01** "With me, or against me": The intensification of political polarization in Latin America and the Caribbean," UNDP, February 28, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/me-or-against-me-intensification-political-polarization-latin-america-and-caribbean>; "In whom do we trust? Less in institutions and more in communities in LAC," UNDP, January 23, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/blog/whom-do-we-trust-less-institutions-and-more-communities-lac>.

**02** Natalie Southwick, "Surveillance Technology Is on the Rise in Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, (June 2023), <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/surveillance-technology-is-on-the-rise-in-latin-america/>.

**03** Eliška Pírková, "Fighting misinformation and defending free expression during COVID-19: recommendations for states," *Access Now*, (April 2020):3, <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Fighting-misinformation-and-defending-free-expression-during-COVID-19-recommendations-for-states-1.pdf>.

**04** "Press under attack – digital strategies to intimidate journalists in Latin America," *Access Now*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-under-attack-latin-america/>.

**05** Carolina de Assis, "Study shows 83 percent of gender editors in Argentina targeted by online violence," *LatAm Journalism Review*, (August 2023), <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/study-shows-83-percent-of-gender-editors-in-argentina-targeted-by-online-violence/>.

**06** Marie Lamensch, "For Rights Defenders, Cyber Is the New Battleground," *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, November 22, 2021, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/for-rights-defenders-cyber-is-the-new-battleground/>.



From our prior research and support work, we knew there was a lot that was out of balance: there isn't a shortage of "things to fix" if we want to create information ecosystems that are balanced, thriving and supportive of social justice. We also knew that the work of building healthier information ecosystems includes consolidating visions of what healthy, robust information ecosystems could look like. As the region hasn't necessarily sustained healthy, balanced information ecosystems on a wide scale and in the long term in the past, restoration of these ecosystems is also not necessarily about "going back" to a prior healthy state; it is instead focused on working to build stronger information ecosystems for the future.

In the course of conducting this research, we engaged with over 70 individuals working to improve the health of information ecosystems in LAC. The people we spoke to kindly shared their learnings and insights with us and inspired the collective visions for healthy, strong information ecosystems that were gathered as the project developed.

It is important to note here that, while information ecosystems encompass a variety of actors (including those within both private and public sectors), this research focuses primarily on civil society actors, including those who use information for their work (as consumers, producers, nodes, or facilitators of information), donors, organisers, activists from digital rights organisations, technologists for social justice and digital security experts, and researchers.

In **Part 1** of this report, we share an overview of some of the challenges and characteristics that shape the disequilibrium of information ecosystems in the region.

In the Interlude, we outline the collective visions for healthy, strong information ecosystems that we gathered as the project developed. This fits in with one of our focus areas for this research, which is bolstering "communicative power" – defined by Fung and Cohen (2021) as the capacity for sustained joint (or collective) action, to associate and explore interests and ideas together with others, aiming to arrive at common understandings and advance common concerns in the public sphere.<sup>07</sup>

In **Part 2**, we share some inspiring strategies used by civil society to restore information ecosystems in the region. Rather than present these strategies as "silver bullets" or "definitive solutions", the goal of this report is to indicate a variety of potential pathways for restoring information ecosystems and encourage funders, donors and other actors to support the work of those who are striving to materialise that restoration. Additionally, these strategies can also be a source of inspiration for the work that other civil society actors, technologists and digital rights advocates are building.

With this in mind, the **Conclusion** summarises some of the main areas of support needed by actors working to improve information ecosystems in LAC.

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<sup>07</sup> Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung, "Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere," in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* ed. Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore, and Rob Reich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 23-61, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14c-bUV20AUHzdaovj8hBRcN9w7xJlZa2/view>.

## Why we are using the frame of “information ecosystems”

In this report, the term “information ecosystems” refers to systems of information creation, exchange, flow, and use. By taking an ecosystems approach, we’re hoping to convey the complex ways in which information is produced, shared and disseminated, highlighting the interconnectedness of the different elements and actors that coexist in this ecosystem and encouraging a more holistic analysis of the challenges we’re facing when it comes to information.

Our research initially explored issues related to the framework of “information disorder”, which both highlighted the polluted state of our information landscape and provided an effective frame within which to talk about relevant challenges impacting civil society practitioners across Latin America, including inequities in access to internet and technological infrastructure, disinformation, online harassment, media manipulation, digital platforms, cybersurveillance, and harmful actors such as trolls, bots and influence operations. However, as we engaged with the experiences of organisers, activists, journalists and human rights defenders, our perspective expanded.

Encounters with community-driven initiatives such as local radio station networks in the Amazon, collective mural painting sessions in the neighbourhoods of Guatemala City with significant Maya populations, or the community information services organised by Nois Radio during protests in Colombia in 2021, among others, demonstrated the need to use a wider framework.

The term “information ecosystem” proved to be a good fit – understood as interconnected tissue with no rigid borders, where various actors from civil society, the private sector, the public sector, media systems and communities shape and build the ecosystem simultaneously. It is also an ecosystem increasingly influenced and shaped by digital technologies.

This holistic approach calls for recognising communication as a cultural practice and understanding information as serving a social purpose, intricately tied to the way communities in each territory think and co-create meaning, and contingent on the infrastructure, histories, and connections present in these areas.<sup>08</sup> Importantly, this is also not a new perspective for the Latin American context: it is something

<sup>08</sup> Inspired by: Courtney C. Radsch, “From Our Fellows: Envisioning a Healthy Information Ecosystem,” Center for Democracy and Technology, June 2, 2023, <https://cdt.org/insights/from-our-fellows-envisioning-a-healthy-information-ecosystem/>.

that Indigenous, Afro, and women's organisations in various countries within the region have already been practising through their work.<sup>09</sup>

As Claire Wardle, co-director of the Information Futures Lab at Brown University, points out in her essay 'Misunderstanding Disinformation', a systems-based perspective helps us to broaden our focus from just fact-checking problematic content travelling through the ecosystem;<sup>10</sup> the priority should rather be to understand the context and motivations driving individuals to create, consume, and share certain types of content, to identify what information people actually need, and to look at approaches that could help translate this information so that communities can live safe and healthy lives, have full access to educational, employment, and economic opportunities, and fully participate in key civic spaces.

"We cannot fact check our way out of polarisation, distrust, and scepticism," asserts Courtney C. Radsch, Ph.D., who developed a framework of 10 components to help the donor community envision how a healthy information ecosystem functions, how to avoid silos that prevent opportunities for collective action, and how to ensure multiple approaches are included and investments are mutually reinforcing.<sup>11</sup>

She writes about how an ecosystem approach enables actors to foster systems and norms for people to produce and share quality information, while addressing "the interplay between the technological infrastructure in which information and media systems are embedded."<sup>12</sup>

Taking an ecosystem approach can also support expanded awareness on the part of funders, allowing for better resource allocation and identification of gaps, as the focus is on the ecosystem rather than a sole partner or community.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, funders are already beginning to offer sustained support to foster community networks or ecosystems, funding partnerships and work that addresses community-identified needs.<sup>14</sup>

Ecosystems go beyond news to include what information people need to live. Radsch adds that in thinking through an ecosystem lens we can begin not only to identify what is wrong, but to build positive information ecosystems.<sup>15</sup>

**09** Read more in: Paola Mosso Cárdenas, "Transformative Technological Ecosystems Inspired by 'Buen Vivir,'" GenderIT, January 22, 2024, <https://genderit.org/es/feminist-talk/3-ecosistemas-tecnologicos-transformados-res-inspirados-en-el-buen-vivir>.

**10** Claire Wardle, "Misunderstanding Misinformation," *Issues in Science and Technology* 39, no. 3, (Spring 2023): 38-40, <https://doi.org/10.58875/ZAUD1691>.

**11** Radsch, "From Our Fellows."

**12** Radsch, "From Our Fellows."

**13** Radsch, "From Our Fellows."

**14** Mandy Van Deven and Jody Myrum, "How to Fund Narrative Ecosystems," *Non-profit Quarterly*, (February 2024), <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/how-to-fund-narrative-ecosystems/>.

**15** Radsch, "From Our Fellows."

# Key highlights from this research

## Information ecosystems have been out of balance for a long time

Digital technologies have a major role to play in the current state of information ecosystems in LAC. With that said, throughout this research both interviewees and others who engaged with this project highlighted how the imbalanced state of these ecosystems are also related to broader, systemic issues within information ecosystems in the region, such as the long-lasting presence of machismo, misogyny, racism, classism and ableism, exacerbated by authoritarian tendencies and the shrinking of civic space in the region.

In this context, information inequality continues to be a major problem, with people's basic information needs not being met. There is also a lack of infrastructure to support and meaningfully include the very communities that have been excluded from information ecosystems in the past. In addition, increasing political polarisation and lack of spaces for healthy conversations and exchanges contribute to people's civic disengagement.

We explore this further in **Part 1** of the report.



## There are already strong collective visions for healthier, more robust information ecosystems

Civil society has strong collective visions for what information ecosystems that sustain social justice and democracy could look like.

In this scenario, people's information needs are prioritised. Local, community-led information initiatives are thriving, people enjoy a sense of community and there are spaces for meaningful conversations that strengthen democratic processes. There is a diversity of actors coexisting and collaborating to sustain information ecosystems' health, and these ecosystems' tech infrastructure is built in ways that put social and climate justice at the centre. Journalists, activists and popular communicators are safe, and there is abundant funding to support actors from the communities who have been most impacted by information ecosystem imbalances.

These collective visions are explored in the **Interlude**.

## To restore information ecosystems, we need to think about tech but also look beyond tech

Some of the complex issues that affect the health of information ecosystems in LAC (such as information disorder including mis- and disinformation, potential harm caused by generative AI, and increasing polarisation) are intrinsically related to digital technologies, and there are a lot of assumptions that information ecosystems could be perfectly calibrated if techno-legal frameworks could be fixed. However, although digital technologies have a big role in information ecosystems, there are many other societal forces that shape them, and this calls for more holistic and strategic interventions. The work of creating stronger, healthier information ecosystems needs to address tech-related issues, but that can't be the only focus.

During the course of this research, we came across a number of inspiring initiatives that, for the most part, are using tech to help address information inequality, respond to people's priorities, cultivate people's sense of community, create meaningful conversations, design infrastructures that support social justice and protect those who are harmed by shrinking civic spaces.

In **Part 2** we share learnings from some of these initiatives.

## Sustained long-term funding is needed to nurture the sector

In order to achieve healthier, more robust information ecosystems there needs to be sustained support to strengthen local journalism, civil society organisations, popular communicators, activists and other social justice actors, and technologists critically

supporting these initiatives, in the region. This includes meeting people's tech and data needs, building digital resilience, ensuring meaningful connection through equitable and climate respecting infrastructure, fostering collaboration, and funding collective visions of healthier information ecosystems.

Interviewees asked for specific types of support and resources to more effectively navigate the challenges and complexities of information ecosystems, such as tools to combat information disorder, resources to protect against digital threats, and tech that is climate and privacy respecting, among other needs.

Long-term funding is especially important – particularly the type of long-term funding that allows for system capacity, and for space and time to dream and act on visions; and that invests in audience needs, nurtures smaller and grassroots organisations, and fosters a diversity of actors.

In the **Conclusion**, we provide recommendations for funders and donors on how they can support these actors.

# Methodology

This report is based on research conducted by The Engine Room between September 2023 and March 2024, which included a combination of desk research, community calls and interviews.

As part of our efforts to ensure this research was as useful as possible for those who engaged with the project, during the course of the research The Engine Room shared preliminary findings from the community calls and interviews publicly on our website, and via email with those who participated in the research.<sup>16</sup>

## Community calls

The Engine Room hosted three community calls between October 2023 and February 2024. These virtual gatherings were facilitated by the researchers working on this project and were attended by more than 60 individuals from more than 12 countries in LAC.<sup>17</sup> The group of individuals who attended the community calls included representatives of civil society organisations, representatives of social justice movements, digital rights activists, journalists, academics and members of philanthropic institutions.

In each of the community calls, The Engine Room proposed a theme to ground a semi-structured conversation, with the goal of deepening our understanding of how different actors working in LAC's information ecosystems perceived some of the issues being addressed in this research.

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<sup>16</sup> These preliminary findings can be found in the following blogs: Bárbara Paes, "To improve the information ecosystem we need to rebuild trust and focus on local, community-driven initiatives," The Engine Room (blog), November 2, 2023, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/a-slow-burning-process-to-improve-the-information-ecosystem-we-need-to-rebuild-trust-and-focus-on-local-community-driven-initiatives/>; Bárbara Paes, "Community diagnosis: Protecting the health of the Latin American Information Ecosystem," The Engine Room (blog), December 11, 2023, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/community-diagnosis-protecting-the-health-of-the-latin-american-information-ecosystems/>; Cristina Vélez Vieira, "Roots and Infrastructure: two key ingredients," The Engine Room (blog), February 14, 2024, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/roots-and-infrastructure-two-key-ingredients/>; Bárbara Paes, "For some in Latin America, the info ecosystem has always been hostile," The Engine Room (blog), March 12, 2024, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/latam-communities-eco-ecosystem-4/>; Olivia Johnson, "The hill is no longer called by its own name, but is 'The Hill of the Antennas,'" The Engine Room (blog), April 11, 2024, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/the-hill-is-no-longer-called-by-its-own-name-but-is-called-the-hill-of-the-antennas/>.

<sup>17</sup> The community call participants who indicated countries where they were based were from: Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, México, Perú, Uruguay, Venezuela. In addition to this, it is important to note that there were also participants who were from and/or whose work was focused on LAC and who were based in countries such as the US, the Netherlands, Finland, France and Denmark.

- \* The first community call included initial remarks from three speakers, followed by general discussion about the challenges civil society is facing in information ecosystems in Latin America and the opportunities the group saw for action. The speakers were Nathaly Espitia and Maria Juliana (Universidad Icesi, Cali, Colombia) representing Colectivo Noís Radio, Júlia Rocha representing Artigo 19, and Ramiro Alvarez Ugarte representing CELE. In total, this call included between 23-25 participants from 9 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- \* The second community call included 20 participants from 10 countries and it was structured as an open, facilitated discussion about the different ways each participant and their organisations were working to strengthen this ecosystem and the challenges they face in doing so.
- \* The third community call focused on a discussion about the kinds of infrastructures needed to collectively create a better flow of creation, distribution and reception of information in Latin America and the Caribbean. It included a panel discussion with five speakers (Isapi Rúa from Red Chaco in Bolivia; Melquiades (Kiado) Cruz, from INDIGITAL Initiative in Mexico; Amarilys Llanos, from Movimiento César sin Fracking y Sin Gas in Colombia; Oscar Parra from Rutas del Conflicto in Colombia; Nina Vieira, curator at Juízas Negras Para Ontem in Brazil) as well as the participation of 23-25 participants from 9 countries in the region.

In an effort to make sure our research was useful to those who engaged with this project, the community calls were also intended as spaces where The Engine Room could facilitate connections between organisations and individuals, as well as make our own tech and data support available to those attending and their networks.

## Interviews

From November 2023 to February 2024, The Engine Room conducted 21 interviews with a total of 28 individuals from 13 countries.<sup>18</sup> The group of interviewees included representatives of civil society, including organisers and activists working in a variety of ways to improve the health of information ecosystems; academics and other researchers whose focus is information ecosystems; journalists and representatives of independent online media portals; technical experts and technologists focusing on information ecosystems; and philanthropic institutions invested in information ecosystems. Interviewees were selected based on the type of work and/or intervention they were engaged in. Some interviewees also participated in the community calls described above, depending on their availability.

Each of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews took approximately one hour and focused on topics related to learnings and insights from interviewees' work and

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<sup>18</sup> See the full list of interviewees in Appendix 1.

experiences, challenges involved in doing this work, and potential opportunities to amplify the impact of those working to improve information ecosystems. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically, which resulted in the articulation of key themes explored in the report. Interview excerpts in this report have been edited for brevity and clarity, and to avoid exacerbating any potential risks interviewees may face.

To make sure we properly recognised the value of our interviewees' time and knowledge, we offered each of them a stipend in appreciation of their contribution.

## Research limitations

There are a number of limitations to this research. One crucial limitation lies in the fact that information ecosystems, especially in a context of increased platformisation, are constantly changing and evolving, with new challenges continuing to emerge. Another limitation is that this research was not able to cover all 33 countries in LAC, resulting in restricted representation from some areas, including Caribbean countries; as well as a heightened focus on examples from countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Chile. The interviews were conducted online in Spanish and Portuguese, community calls were hosted online in Spanish and Portuguese, and desk research was conducted in English, Spanish and Portuguese.

The findings from this research should therefore not be understood as fully representative of all information-ecosystem-related challenges and opportunities civil society actors (including journalists, researchers, and social justice organisations) face in the region.



# Definitions

## **➤ Information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation and malinformation:**

All of these terms relate to the spread of false and/or misleading information: **disinformation** is the intentional spread of false information to cause harm, while **misinformation** is the unintentional spread of false information. **Malinformation** refers to information that is not necessarily false, but lacks context and is used to mislead people: while “such information might be based on reality ... it is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, or country (e.g. email leaks, online harassment, and hate speech).”<sup>19</sup> In accordance with Wardle’s (2023) work on misunderstanding misinformation, we are using the umbrella term “**information disorder**” to categorise issues relating to fake news, disinformation, misinformation and malinformation.<sup>20</sup>

## **➤ Information inequality:**

The term “information inequality” is used in this report to refer to inequality in access to information, which can have a disproportionate effect on certain groups of people. In that sense, information inequality is a phenomenon that, among other things, hinders public participation and civic engagement, as well as acts as an

obstacle to people’s ability to access the information needed to support their individual and collective decision-making.

## **➤ Information ecosystems:**

We’re using the term “information ecosystems” to refer to systems of information creation, exchange, flow, and use. As mentioned in the Introduction, an ecosystem approach is used to convey the complex ways in which information is produced, shared and disseminated, highlighting the interconnectedness of the different elements and actors that coexist in this ecosystem and encouraging a more holistic analysis of the challenges we’re facing when it comes to information. For those interested in further reading, we recommend Courtney C. Radsch’s work<sup>21</sup> on healthy information ecosystems as a good starting place.

## **➤ News/Information desert:**

A news or information desert is a community with limited access to local (and credible) news sources. The UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media calls news deserts “a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds demo-

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<sup>19</sup> Claire Wardle and H. Hossein Derakshan, “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making,” Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09, (September 2017), <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

<sup>20</sup> Wardle, “Misunderstanding Misinformation.”

<sup>21</sup> Radsch, “From Our Fellows.”

cracy at the grassroots level.”<sup>22</sup> In addition to thinking about the aridness of quality in the news, we like Jessica Botelho’s work in thinking about news deserts as biomes, where there is still life, and seeds to water. In particular, she notes how even in areas where there is news scarcity, people are still connected to larger information ecosystems, through social media and other communication forms.<sup>23</sup> Similar to a news desert, an information desert refers to a community with limited access to useful information resources on a wider scale (for example, from government agencies or other institutions). We use this term to describe the lack of access to quality information from a variety of sources and the general lack of information infrastructure in certain communities.

### ➤ **Digital divide:**

The digital divide is the disparity in access to digital technology (which can include devices such as laptops, desktops, smartphones, tablets), as well as to the internet. The digital divide encompasses disparities in availability of tech or internet access, cost factors, quality of service and knowledge gaps (e.g. digital literacy and digital security).<sup>24</sup>

### ➤ **Media literacy:**

Media literacy is the ability to find, comprehend, analyse and use news media. With the rise in emerging technologies like AI, and information disorder, media literacy is an important tool in being able to recognise legitimate sources of information, dissect biases, seek second opinions, and understand arguments. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has found that there is significant evidence showing that media literacy training may be instrumental in people identifying false stories and news media. However, they caution that differences in pedagogy and training (in addition to barriers of scale and cost) mean that media literacy is not guaranteed to be an effective strategy in combating information disorder. They found that “the most successful variants empower motivated individuals to take control of their media consumption and seek out high-quality information – instilling confidence and a sense of responsibility alongside skills development.”<sup>25</sup> While media literacy was mentioned in our desk research, it did not come up widely in our interviews and is a topic that this report covers only loosely. However, there is certainly a need for greater investigation into use cases and effectiveness, and community interest in implementing media literacy education strategies.

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<sup>22</sup> “What Exactly is a ‘News Desert?’,” UNC Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.cislm.org/what-exactly-is-a-news-desert/>.

<sup>23</sup> Jéssica Botelho, “Por uma política de reflorestamento dos desertos de notícias,” CartaCapital (blogs), March 11, 2024, <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/blogs/br-cidades/por-uma-politica-de-reflorestamento-dos-desertos-de-noticias/>.

<sup>24</sup> Charlie Muller and João Paulo de Vasconcelos Aguiar, “What is the Digital Divide?,” Internet Society (blog), March 3, 2022, <https://www.internetsociety.org/blog/2022/03/what-is-the-digital-divide/>.

<sup>25</sup> Jon Bateman and Dean Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively: an Evidence Based Policy Guide,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (January 2024): 6, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/01/countering-disinformation-effectively-an-evidence-based-policy-guide?lang=en>.

### ➤ **Machismo:**

Machismo can be defined as a strong sense of masculine pride,<sup>26</sup> and similar to the term “toxic masculinity”, machismo can be exhibited through aggressiveness, possessiveness, exaggerated displays of masculinity and demeaning behaviour towards other genders.<sup>27</sup> Latin American feminists, starting in the 70s and 80s, have used the term to describe male aggression and violence. Since then, the term has been used by Latin feminists and scholars to criticise the patriarchal structure of gender relations in Latin communities.<sup>28</sup>

### ➤ **Popular communication and popular communicators:**

With origins in Latin American social movements from the 1970s and 1980s, the term “popular communication” (comunicación popular in Spanish, and comunicação popular in Portuguese) refers to communication initiatives that emerge from the action of social movements primarily linked to the sectors of the population who organise with the goals of survival, political participation, and social justice. Throughout this report, the term “popular communicators” is used to refer to individuals and organisations who are involved with popular communication initiatives. Terms like “alternative communication” or “community communication” are also used. The pedagogical principles of Paulo

Freire’s concept of liberatory education also inform popular communication.<sup>29</sup>

### ➤ **Platformisation:**

Platformisation can be understood as the growing economic and infrastructural significance of (social media) platforms; the term describes the rising relevance of social media networks (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, X, Instagram, TikTok) in how people access information and communicate with each other.<sup>30</sup>

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**26** “Machismo,” Real Academia Española, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://dle.rae.es/machismo>

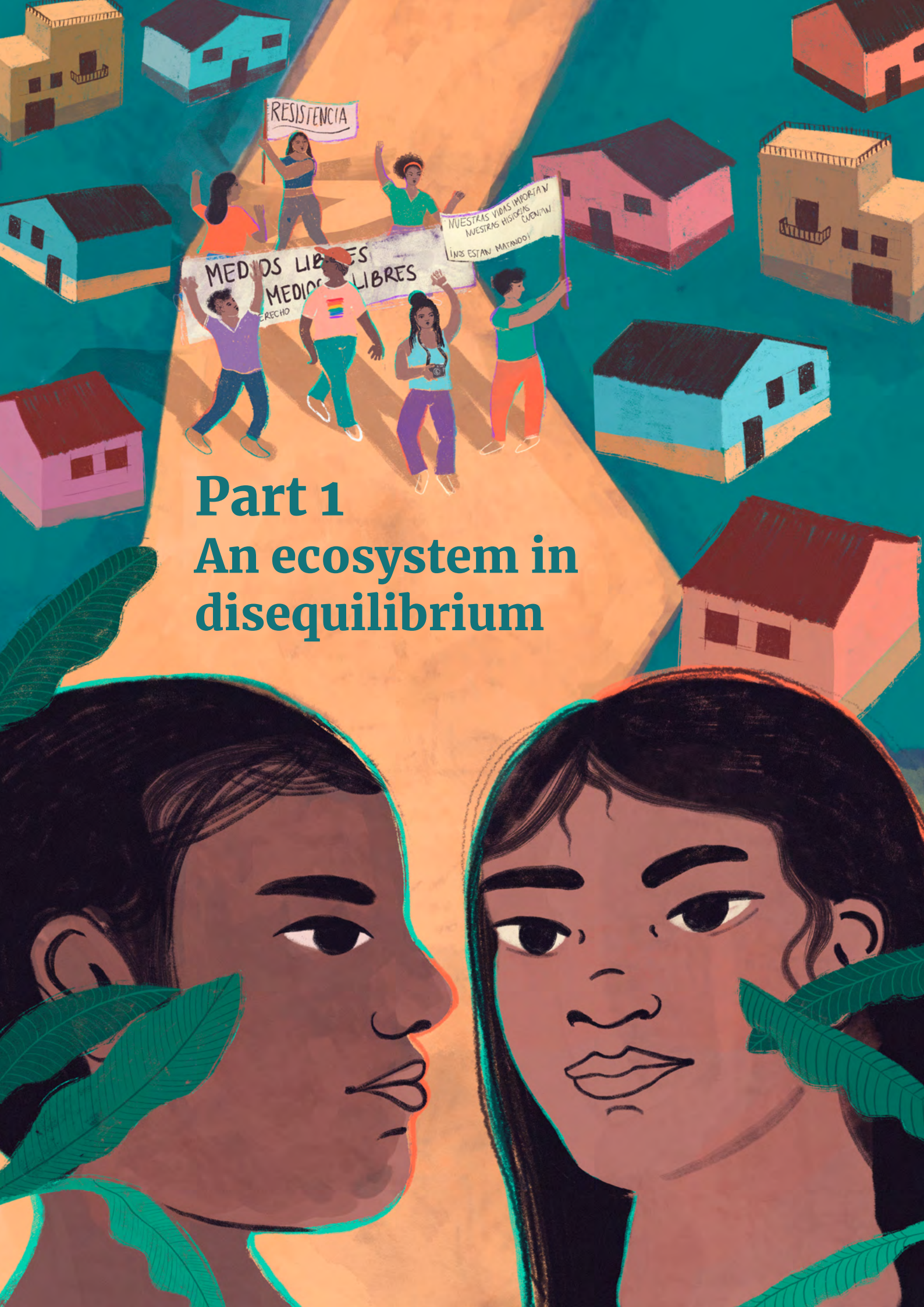
**27** Read more about machismo: “Machismo,” Glosario para la Igualdad by Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://campusgenero.inmujeres.gob.mx/glosario/terminos/machismo>

**28** Ramon Meza Opazo, “Latino Youth and Machismo: Working Towards a More Complex Understanding of Marginalized Masculinities,” Ryerson University Digital Commons Thesis Dissertation Paper 108, (May 2023), <https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14657271.v1>

**29** Círcula Maria Krohling Peruzzo, “Ideias de Paulo Freire aplicadas à Comunicação popular e comunitária,” Revista FAMECOS 24, no. 1, (2017), <https://doi.org/10.15448/1980-3729.2017.1.24207>.

**30** Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Richard Fletcher, “Comparing the platformization of news media systems: A cross-country analysis,” European Journal of Communication 38(5), (July 2023): 484–499, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231231189043>.





# Part 1

## An ecosystem in disequilibrium

From the beginning of this research, something that was repeatedly made clear by the organisations and individuals we engaged with was that information ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean are out of balance.

For the last decade, The Engine Room has been witness to concerning trends in relation to digital technologies' role in shaping information ecosystems in the region: Inequities in access to the internet and digital technologies continue to impact people's ability to meaningfully access information, especially those in rural areas and forest territories. More and more state actors, corporate stakeholders and extremist groups in the region have been using technology to surveil and undermine the work of activists.<sup>31</sup> Disinformation and misinformation have been used to instigate hate speech against vulnerable groups,<sup>32</sup> and digital attacks against activists and journalists<sup>33</sup> are frequent<sup>34</sup> and becoming both more sophisticated and more pervasive.<sup>35</sup>

When considering these (and other) challenges involving digital technologies and information ecosystems, it is common to see an exaggerated focus on assumptions that the "right" techno legal framework is all that is needed to "perfectly calibrate" things.<sup>36</sup>

But conversations with individuals as part of this research have consistently confirmed that the imbalanced nature of information ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean is nothing new; nor is it exclusively a result of harmful uses of digital technologies (though it can be exacerbated by these uses). There are many other societal forces that shape information ecosystems, which calls for a thoughtful consideration of more holistic and strategic interventions.<sup>37</sup> In other words, to really understand what is needed for stronger and healthier information ecosystems, tech cannot be the only focus.<sup>38</sup>

In this section we share some of the characteristics that define the disequilibrium of information ecosystems in the region, drawn from our interviews, community calls, and desk research. Rather than giving a deep description of all the elements that have contributed to this imbalance, we offer an overview of the elements that most heavily impact those working to build healthy information ecosystems.

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<sup>31</sup> Southwick, "Surveillance Technology Is on the Rise in Latin America."

<sup>32</sup> Pirková, "Fighting misinformation and defending free expression," 3.

<sup>33</sup> "Press under attack – digital strategies to intimidate journalists in Latin America."

<sup>34</sup> de Assis, "Study shows 83 percent of gender editors in Argentina targeted by online violence,"

<sup>35</sup> Lamensch, "For Rights Defenders, Cyber Is the New Battleground."

<sup>36</sup> Justin Hendrix and Dean Jackson, "How to Counter Disinformation Based on Science," *Tech Policy Press*, (February 2024), <https://www.techpolicy.press/how-to-counter-disinformation-based-on-science/>.

<sup>37</sup> Radsch, "From Our Fellows."

<sup>38</sup> Bateman and Jackson, "Countering Disinformation Effectively," 3.



# Information ecosystems have been hostile for a long time



Throughout this research, interviewees and community call participants have referenced how information ecosystems in LAC have been historically impacted by machismo, misogyny, racism, classism and ableism – and that as a consequence, some sectors of the population have had their histories erased, racist perceptions of them and their peoples perpetuated, access to information denied and their voices silenced. This is a reality that must be taken into consideration when examining the current state of information ecosystems in the region.

For example, when talking about misinformation in Brazil, researcher and communicator Catarina De Angola explains that, in her view, misinformation isn't a new phenomenon, but rather “the official history of [the country]”,<sup>39</sup> describing how media and academia have always built and disseminated stories that “dehumanise non-white and transgender existences”.

Throughout many countries in the region, Indigenous and Black communities have fought to preserve their memories and to combat stigma and exclusion, which are fueled by stereotypes and racist tropes perpetuated throughout the information ecosystem.<sup>40</sup> An analysis of journalistic articles in Argentina shows that media coverage in the country has contributed to the reinforcement of stereotypes and

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<sup>39</sup> Pedro Ribeiro Nogueira, “A história oficial do Brasil é desinformação” — indo além do trauma bolsonarista para pensar sua superação,” Escola de Ativismo, September 23, 2023, <https://escoladeativismo.org.br/a-historia-oficial-do-brasil-e-desinformacao-indo-alem-do-trauma-bolsonarista-para-pensar-sua-superacao/>.

<sup>40</sup> In much of Latin America, social movements have long defended the preservation of memory as a crucial tool to fight for social justice. In countries that experienced dictatorships, such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile (to name a few), the “right to memory” has been central element in the organising of pro-democracy movements, in their search for reparations for crimes committed during dictatorships and in the process of rebuilding democracies in the region. At the same time, in contexts impacted by colonial legacies of racism, memory preservation is also key to indigenous groups and *afrolatinos* and other groups. For example, in Brazil, memory preservation of Black history in the country is central to the organising led by racial justice movements. As seen in the following: Beatriz de Oliveira, “A memória é um importante instrumento de combate ao racismo,” Nós, (March 2023), <https://nosmulheresdaperiferia.com.br/a-memoria-e-um-importante-instrumento-de-combate-ao-racismo/>; Dalila Varela Singulane, “O impacto do racismo na preservação da memória,” NEXO Jornal, (September 2023), <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/o-impacto-do-racismo-na-preservacao-da-memoria/>; Mafuane Oliveira, “Preservar a memória negra é um ato político,” Fundação Rosa Luxemburgo, July 5, 2023, <https://rosalux.org.br/preservar-a-memoria-negra-e-um-ato-politico/>.

prejudices about Indigenous people.<sup>41</sup> In Brazil, researchers have described how Black people are still underrepresented in mainstream media and that it continues to reinforce racial stereotypes.<sup>42</sup> In Colombia, experts point out that racism in media coverage persists.<sup>43</sup>

This also means that, in much of LAC, people from marginalised groups have faced criminalisation and censorship, and have also had limited opportunity to be producers of information that is widely disseminated. In Brazil, where 54% of the population identifies as Afro-Brazilian, in 2015 only 22% of journalists were of Afro descent.<sup>44</sup> In Mexico, a survey of journalists in the country showed that only 3% of participants identified as Indigenous, though a little over 19% of the country's population is Indigenous.<sup>45</sup> In Colombia, civil society organisations have called for more participation of *afrocolombianos* in the media.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, those who are journalists or communicators, or who have public voices, often face violence and threats, which can be even worse for certain groups such as women journalists,<sup>47</sup> LGBTQI+ communicators and activists,<sup>48</sup> Indigenous women journalists,<sup>49</sup> and Black women journalists,<sup>50</sup> among others.

In our conversations, many pointed out that in order to successfully build healthier, robust information ecosystems, these underlying structural issues must be taken into account.

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<sup>41</sup> Rocío Pereyra, Exequiel Alonso, and Rocío Lencina, “La construcción noticiosa de los pueblos indígenas en los principales diarios online de Argentina,” *Revista de Comunicación* 20, n.1 (2021): 217-238, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26441/rc20.1-2021-a12>.

<sup>42</sup> Bruna da Paixão Santana, Everton Melo da Silva, and Yanne Angelim, “Negro(a)s na mídia brasileira: estereótipos e discriminação ao longo da formação social brasileira,” *Lutas Sociais* 22, no. 40 (2018): 52-66, <https://doi.org/10.23925/ls.v22i40.46651>.

<sup>43</sup> Florencia Pagola, “Racism persists in Colombian media, even with an Afro-Colombian woman as vice-president, say experts,” *LatAm Journalism Review*, (August 2023), <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/colombia-racism-in-the-media-and-an-afro-colombian-woman-in-the-vice-presidency/>.

<sup>44</sup> Guilherme Soares Dias, “Imprensa tem dificuldade de reconhecer seu racismo”, UOL ECOA, August 18, 2020, <https://www.uol.com.br/ecoa/ultimas-noticias/2020/08/18/imprensa-tem-dificuldade-de-reconhecer-seu-racismo-diz-professor-da-usp.htm?cmpid=copiaecola>.

<sup>45</sup> Blanca Juárez, “El periodismo en México se escribe entre violencia y precariedad laboral,” *El Economista*, (July 2023), <https://www.economista.com.mx/capitalhumano/El-periodismo-en-Mexico-se-escribe-entre-violencia-y-precariedad-laboral-20230726-0064.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Sandra Valoyes Villa, “Mujeres afro en los medios: resistiendo a los estereotipos,” Red Colombiana de Periodistas con Visión de Género, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.redperiodistasgenero.org/mujeres-afro-en-los-medios-resistiendo-a-los-estereotipos/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Periodistas argentinas denuncian la violencia de género digital,” UNFPA, July 19, 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/es/news/periodistas-argentinas-denuncian-la-violencia-de-g%C3%A9nero-digital>.

<sup>48</sup> Agência Mural, “Brasil: Comunicadores e ativistas periféricos relatam ataques virtuais e como tentam se proteger,” *Global Voices*, October 13, 2023, <https://pt.globalvoices.org/2023/10/13/brasil-comunicadores-e-ativistas-perifericos-relatam-ataques-virtuais-e-como-tentam-se-proteger/>.

<sup>49</sup> Luis Fernando Cantoral and Ruth Oblitas Quispe, “Mujeres, periodistas e indígenas: entre la invisibilidad, la violencia y la discriminación,” *Cuestione*, December 28, 2023, <https://cuestione.com/especiales/mujeres-periodistas-indigenas-invisibilidad-violencia-discriminacion/>.

<sup>50</sup> Jamile Santana and Laís Martins, “Black and Indigenous journalists are attacked online when they take a stand against racism,” *LatAm Journalism Review*, (March 2022), <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/black-and-indigenous-journalists-are-attacked-online-when-they-take-a-stand-against-racism/>.



# Authoritarian tendencies and a shrinking civic space

Information ecosystems across Latin America and the Caribbean currently exist within a broader context of shrinking civic space and diverse forms of authoritarianism being strengthened.

Authoritarianism isn't new for the region: it has accompanied the history of LAC, and seen a resurgence in recent times<sup>51</sup> under what has been diagnosed by human rights organisations as an alarming reversal of basic freedoms.<sup>52</sup> Human rights defenders and pro-democracy civil society organisations face increasingly hostile environments,<sup>53</sup> including criminalisation of their work, intimidation, harassment and physical attacks.

In addition to attacks on independent civil society and human rights defenders, the region has also witnessed an increasing number of attacks on the press and journalists,<sup>54</sup> and was named the deadliest region for journalists in 2022.<sup>55</sup> Hostile speech, raided homes and offices, arbitrary arrests,<sup>56</sup> various forms of threats, online attacks and extreme violence are all too common for many journalists and popular communicators in LAC.

In interviews and community calls with journalists and communicators from the region, the use of disinformation and propaganda associated with online violence against journalists and the media was highlighted as increasingly common.<sup>57</sup> One journalist describes how attacks to her physical and digital integrity have become routine:

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<sup>51</sup> Diana Esther Guzmán Rodríguez and Christy Crouse, "Resisting authoritarian tendencies in Latin America," *Dejusticia*, (June 2022), <https://www.dejusticia.org/en/column/resisting-authoritarian-tendencies-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>52</sup> "Latin America: Alarming Reversal of Basic Freedoms," HRW, January 13, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/13/latin-america-alarming-reversal-basic-freedoms>.

<sup>53</sup> "Defending Latin American Human Rights and Democracy Activists," *Freedom House*, (January 2022), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Special\\_Report\\_LAC\\_HRDs\\_PDF\\_ENGLISH\\_Final\\_01262022.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Special_Report_LAC_HRDs_PDF_ENGLISH_Final_01262022.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> "Latin America: Alarming Reversal of Basic Freedoms."

<sup>55</sup> "Latin America was the deadliest region for journalists in 2022," CPJ, January 24, 2023, <https://cpj.org/2023/01/latin-america-was-the-deadliest-region-for-journalists-in-2022/>.

<sup>56</sup> "Press Freedom Under Attack in Latin America," Free Press Unlimited, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/dossiers/press-freedom-under-attack-latin-america>.

<sup>57</sup> "Political pressure increasingly threatens journalistic independence and safety," Reporters Without Borders, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/region/americas>.

[Groups associated with organised crime] have come outside my [workplace], the police have come outside [my workplace], they have arrested [an individual close to the interviewee], the last thing that happened is that I suffered cyber attacks. So that's how they are trying to make our work unsustainable, trying to overwhelm us, to suffocate us.<sup>58</sup>

One of the results of this is that many journalists are self-censoring and/or altering their behaviour online to protect against attacks,<sup>59</sup> and the situation can be even worse for journalists and communicators who are women and LGBTQI+<sup>60</sup>: according to recent research, 85% of them have changed their behaviour online as a way protect themselves<sup>61</sup> and 83% of gender editors in Argentina, many of whom are women, have been targeted by online violence.<sup>62</sup> A female journalist in South America shares her experience after suffering a series of attacks due to her activity on social media:

In my case, as well as in the cases of other colleagues, after continuous attacks on social networks, I had to close my accounts. I had to delete, for example, my Twitter account. [Before, I used to share] news and publish [them] on my profile ... Now, there is a change [in my behaviour] and it is quite noticeable: in my Instagram there are not many photos, but the photos I share are more photos of my trips, they are very general questions, obviously without exposing much of the family.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to violence, many of the actors working for stronger information ecosystems in the region have also been facing laws and prosecutions that monitoring organisations deem repressive. In a range of countries, restrictions on civil society have been further enabled by governments' misuse of legislation to limit the work of civil society<sup>64</sup> and of journalists.<sup>65</sup> This includes criminalisation of those who have

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with a journalist who we are opting not to identify in this instance given the hostile context in which she works.

<sup>59</sup> "Nuevo estudio revela que el sector de medios digitales independientes latinoamericanos está creciendo, pero sujeto a ataques," Luminare, July 20, 2017, <https://luminaregroup.com/posts/news/nuevo-estudio-revela-que-el-sector-de-medios-digitales-independientes-latinoamericanos-esta-creciendo-pero-sujeto-a-ataques-1/es>.

<sup>60</sup> Agência Mural, "Brasil: Comunicadores e ativistas periféricos relatam ataques virtuais." <https://pt.global-voices.org/2023/10/13/brasil-comunicadores-e-ativistas-perifericos-relatam-ataques-virtuais-e-como-ten-tam-se-proteger/>

<sup>61</sup> Vitória Régia da Silva, "Desinformação e violência nas redes mudam comportamento de jornalistas, mostra pesquisa," genero numero, (abril de 2022), <https://www.generonumero.media/reportagens/desinformacao-violencia-nas-redes-pesquisa/>

<sup>62</sup> Assis, Carolina de. 'Study Shows 83 Percent of Gender Editors in Argentina Targeted by Online Violence'. LatAm Journalism Review by the Knight Center, 29 August 2023. <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/study-shows-83-percent-of-gender-editors-in-argentina-targeted-by-online-violence/>.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a journalist who we are opting not to identify in this instance given her recent experience with TFGBV.

<sup>64</sup> "Global Analysis 2022," Frontline Defenders, October 26, 2022, [https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535\\_fld\\_ga23\\_web.pdf](https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1535_fld_ga23_web.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> Adrian Shahbaz, "Crime and Punishment: The Twin Threats Faced by Journalists in Central America," Freedom House, (August 2023), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/crime-and-punishment-twin-threats-faced-journalists-central-america>.



denounced corruption,<sup>66</sup> arbitrary detentions, and the passing of “vaguely worded laws designed to characterise their opponents as common criminals, foreign agents, terrorists, or gang sympathisers.”<sup>67</sup>

This is part of a broader trend in the region, in which governments “codify repression” through weak legislation and offer a “legal façade to justify attacks on civil society”.<sup>68</sup> One journalist describes how the bureaucratic obstacles imposed by their national government to establishing “legal personhood” of her organisation become *de facto* roadblocks to the sustainability of her work:

A lot of us right now are fighting for, let’s say, first of all, our legal personhood. This would allow us to obtain better sustainability for our media’s projects ... in fact, it was a priority for this year. But this year there have been a lot of things here in [country] that have not allowed us to establish ourselves legally. We are not going to do it in [country], considering the closure of these civic spaces that are happening.<sup>69</sup>

The impact of all this is that many journalists, communicators and civil society actors are not able to safely do their work of producing and sharing information, exercising their freedom of speech, and investigating crucial issues.



<sup>66</sup> “Global Analysis 2022,” 28.

<sup>67</sup> Shahbaz, “Crime and Punishment.”

<sup>68</sup> Katie Burns, “Throwing the Book at Civil Society: Antidemocratic Regimes in the Americas Are Using the Law to Narrow Civic Spaces,” *Freedom House*, (December 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/throwing-book-civil-society-antidemocratic-regimes-americas-are-using-law-narrow-civic>.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a journalist who we are opting not to identify in this instance given the hostile context in which she works.



# Increasing polarisation and a lack of spaces for cultivating a sense of community and belonging



Political polarisation has become a defining feature of information ecosystems in LAC, which according to recent research has seen the greatest increase in political polarisation in the world in the last 20 years.<sup>70</sup>

In recent decades, digital technologies and platformisation have also played a big role in changing the ways people consume information, communicate and connect to one another. The ways digital platforms (including major social media platforms) mediate how people access news and information and influence what kind of information people may see or have access to has already been the subject of many research efforts, a number of which have concluded that often these platforms end up contributing to promoting “ideological bubbles that tend to confirm pre-conceived political beliefs”.<sup>71</sup> As increasing polarisation contributes to growing information disorder,<sup>72</sup> these ideological bubbles also become the place where misinformation and disinformation are disseminated in ways that reinforce individuals’ beliefs, and reaffirm worldviews from the groups they identify with.

Researchers, journalists and civil society actors we spoke to described how political polarisation has contributed to an overall feeling of rejection of democratic institutions and elections. In Brazil, for example, research has shown how fear of expressing political views is on the rise.<sup>73</sup> When talking about their work successfully encouraging youth participation in Brazilian elections, Maíra Berutti, Intelligence Director at social impact comms agency Quid, explains that many young people prefer not to engage in political processes, in order to avoid conflict:

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<sup>70</sup> “With me, or against me.”

<sup>71</sup> “With me, or against me.”

<sup>72</sup> Pramukh Nanjundaswamy Vasist, Debashis Chatterjee, and Satish Krishnan, “The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configurational Narrative,” *Inf Syst Front*, (April 2023): 1-26, [10.1007/s10796-023-10390-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-023-10390-w).

<sup>73</sup> Ester Borges e Heloisa Massaro, “Em ambiente de receio, confiança individual no emissor e no retransmissor é central no consumo de informações políticas, aponta nova pesquisa,” *InternetLab (blog)*, October 31, 2023, <https://internetlab.org.br/pt/pesquisa/em-ambiente-de-receio-confianca-individual-no-emissor-e-no-re-transmissor-e-central-no-consumo-de-informacoes-politicas-aponta-nova-pesquisa/>.

We understood that there were some young people who wanted to avoid these conflict environments. So they preferred not to register to vote so that at school they wouldn't have to defend one side or the other, or even at home with their families.<sup>74</sup>

In other words, because polarisation leads to a decrease of healthy, plural political conversations, and instead incentivises increasingly conflictive exchanges, it ends up lowering levels of civic engagement and pushes people away from engaging with democratic processes:

There were several reports of people saying 'Ah, I remember when I was a child, I used to go to vote with my parents and it was a really nice family moment'. And that's exactly what we feel we've lost today because of this context of polarisation, which has also had an impact on conflictive environments within the home.<sup>75</sup>

In this highly polarised environment, the work of journalists and civil society organisations becomes even more challenging. Chequeado, for example, is an Argentinian fact-checking non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan organisation whose mission is to "contribute to improving the quality of public debate to strengthen the democratic system". Though transparency is a core feature of their work – they openly share their methodologies, projects they're working on and publish their organisational finances – they described in an interview how it can be difficult to maintain legitimacy in a context of extreme political polarisation:

We are not partisan and we actively demonstrate that we are not partisan [by] showing that we check everybody, that we do not always put false on one side and true on the other, and all the rest of the things that we checkers do to make it very transparent that we are not playing with anybody ... But doing all that is not enough to be perceived as impartial ... If a political group or even the government decides to take you as an enemy and say that everything you say is false, even though it is not based on evidence, well, that damages your legitimacy in the eyes of their followers in a very marked way.<sup>76</sup>

Journalists and activists interviewed for this research have felt this impact first hand, and many have been on the receiving end of threats and attacks due to their reporting.

Restoring information ecosystems and undoing the extreme polarisation in the region is a generational task that will likely require decades more research, as well as significant gains in overcoming major challenges in the cultural-political landscape in LAC.

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Maira Berutti

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Maira Berutti

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Olivia Sohr

With this in mind, our research doesn't promise definitive answers to ending polarisation; rather, we're sharing some of the key themes related to polarisation that have come up in our interviews and community calls. One of these themes relates to how information ecosystems in LAC lack spaces and infrastructure that facilitate meaningful conversations,<sup>77</sup> feelings of community and a sense of belonging.

In our research, participants would often refer to a general sense that healthy information ecosystems are ones in which "people are able to listen and talk to each other".<sup>78</sup> They highlighted how important breaking the "bubbles" of polarisation is to reshaping information ecosystems, but also how difficult it is to do this work in such a fragmented context.<sup>79</sup> In mainstream social media, for example, it is not uncommon for people's perception of distance from those who do not identify with their own characteristics, opinions, perspectives to be amplified.<sup>80</sup>

In search of the elements that help maintain this status quo, many things came up. One of them was that there seems to be a prevalence of information initiatives that promote "unidirectional flows of information provision" – an approach that keeps people feeling like they're not a part of a community, because it doesn't make room for conversations. Even when initiatives are providing high quality information, they might be doing it in a way that doesn't open up dialogue.

One of our interviewees, Mirte Postema from the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation, explains how "sometimes, without meaning to do so, [the sector] ends up talking a little bit about 'journalism for journalists', with a capital or urban upper-middle class perspective," which isn't something that necessarily resonates with many audiences:

For me the thing that worries me the most is that there might be a lot of people who don't feel included, or [who might feel] like, 'this medium is not for me', or 'these messages are not for me', and we might be missing many opportunities to disseminate information.<sup>81</sup>

Exclusion of certain groups from media production also contributes to perceptions within these groups of lack of community and lack of belonging.

In the following sections, we share more about some of the strategies used by civil society to overcome these and other challenges.

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<sup>77</sup> The expression "meaningful conversations" here is meant as exchanges of opinions and political positions where people might have different perspectives, but they still have access to healthy exchanges, access to quality information, where people from different constituencies are able to engage in civic debate, dialogue and democratic deliberation.

<sup>78</sup> Paes, "To improve the information ecosystem we need to rebuild trust."

<sup>79</sup> "With me, or against me."

<sup>80</sup> Joan Esteban and Debraj Ray, "On the Measurement of Polarization," *Econometrica*, *Econometric Society* 62(4), (July 1994): 819-851, <https://ideas.repec.org/a/ecm/emetrp/v62y1994i4p819-51.html>; Jesse McCrosky, "How Social Media May Redistribute Trust Away From Institutions," *Data Ethics*, December 16, 2020, <https://dataethics.eu/how-social-media-may-redistribute-trust-away-from-institutions/>.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Mirte Postema

# Meaningful access to information



Information is a tool people can use to engage in democracy, learn about issues that impact their lives, and contribute to a more robust, civic space. As Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill state: “Information is crucial. It alone won’t solve the problem, but it is crucial for this process of civic engagement.”<sup>82</sup>

In our research, something that quickly became very clear is that there is a general perception among our interviewees that people’s basic information needs are not being met. This was attributed to a variety of causes, including a lack of local news entities, a dearth of news coverage for specific issues, limited funding for journalism, and insufficient recruitment and training of news staff, along with government failures to guarantee people’s rights to information.

This is compounded by a lack of funding for infrastructure, disparities in internet access,<sup>83</sup> larger policies of economic exclusion and marginalisation, especially affecting poorer and rural areas, and other public policy decisions that impact the production and dissemination of information. Journalists Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill write:

What, after all, would be a healthy information ecosystem, supported by public policies, which makes citizens sufficiently equipped to participate in the democratic process? To answer that question, we believe we need to put a new lens on what we consider journalism. Solving the problem of misinformation therefore involves broadening the concept of what we mean by production and consumption of information – especially at the local level.<sup>84</sup>

They raise the idea of “civic media”, an idea from Free Press’s ‘The Roadmap to Local News’, to describe organisations that typically fall outside of what are considered news institutions, but that are still dedicated to informing the public, focusing on community engagement.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill

<sup>83</sup> “Digital Inequality and Low-Income Households,” HUD Office of Policy Development and Research, last updated Fall 2016, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/fall16/highlight2.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill, “A gente quer salvar a indústria ou garantir o direito à informação?,” *NEXO Jornal*, (April 2023), <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/ensaio/2023/04/29/a-gente-quer-salvar-a-industria-ou-garantir-o-direito-a-informacao>.

<sup>85</sup> Moi and Weingrill, “A gente quer salvar a indústria.”

## News and information deserts

A term that frequently came up in this work was “news desert”, or a community with limited access to local (and credible) news sources.<sup>86</sup> But researcher Jéssica Botelho writes: “Deserts are also biomes, they have life.”<sup>87</sup> She argues: “It is necessary to look at the deserts of news not as isolated and incommunicable territories, but as territories that concentrate vulnerabilities, including informational ones.”<sup>88</sup>

While news deserts have an aridness of information, there are still seeds of local journalism to water and propagate: these regions are not isolated but rather interconnected with, and integral to, information ecosystems.

News deserts can be found throughout LAC, primarily in rural, but also in urban areas. In Brazil, 50% of municipalities can be called news deserts as they do not contain even one local news organisation. More still only have one to two local news institutions.<sup>89</sup> In Argentina, the Argentine Journalism Forum found in a 2021 investigation that 46.7% of all departments in the country fit the categorisation of “news desert”, with 25.2% more departments fitting the title of “semi-deserts”. In these places, there is a lack of local, independent news coverage, with much of the news coverage focusing on official government narratives.<sup>90</sup>

In our third community call we hosted, titled ‘Dreams of a collective infrastructure for information ecosystems in Latin America’, multiple panellists noted the lack of quality information produced to meet local information needs in some areas.

During this call, Oscar Parra from Rutas del Conflicto<sup>91</sup> in Colombia shared that in some areas of the country, for example, people only have access to police and army radio stations; the organisation works to bridge information needs by creating narratives outside of official government channels – especially when it comes to narratives around armed conflict and resistance – through data journalism, collecting victim testimonies, and fostering participatory storytelling, among other strategies.

Another participant in our community call, Amarilys Llanos from Movimiento Cesar sin Fracking y Sin Gas,<sup>92</sup> weaves economic power dimensions into the conversation of who

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<sup>86</sup> “What Exactly is a ‘News Desert’?.”

<sup>87</sup> Jéssica Botelho (@jessbotelho), “Deserto também é bioma, tem vida....,” X, March 14, 2024, <https://twitter.com/jessbotelho/status/1768300185371705575>.

<sup>88</sup> BRICADES, “Por uma política de reflorestamento dos desertos de notícias,” *CartaCapital*, (March 2024), <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/blogs/br-cidades/por-uma-politica-de-reflorestamento-dos-desertos-de-noticias/>.

<sup>89</sup> Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill, “A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas locais de informação,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review Brasil*, (July 2023), <https://ssir.com.br/governo/a-urgencia-de-investir-nos-ecossistemas-locais-de-informacao>.

<sup>90</sup> Júlio Lubianco, “News deserts and semi-deserts make up three quarters of Argentina and affect a third of the population,” *LatAm Journalism Review*, (June 2021), <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/news-deserts-argentina-2021/>.

<sup>91</sup> “El Portal Periodístico que Sigue el Rastro del Conflicto Armado en Colombia,” Rutas del Conflicto, accessed June 25, 2024, <https://rutasdelconflicto.com/>.

<sup>92</sup> Movimiento Cesar Sin Fracking y Sin Gas (@cesar\_sinfracking\_ysingas), “profile,” Instagram, accessed June 25, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/cesar\\_sinfracking\\_ysingas/](https://www.instagram.com/cesar_sinfracking_ysingas/).



has access to the internet and technology. She discusses how in some cases people have absolutely no access to information, and in other cases even when they do have access, that access is conditioned and adjusted to spread dominant narratives of those in economic and/or political power.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to territories lacking quality information from a diversity of sources, some populations face a lack of information resources catering to their own demographic. In a conversation about “information deserts”, one of our interviewees, Fabiola Gutiérrez, SembraMedia ambassador from Bolivia, shares how the existence of “information deserts” can impact people differently according to their contexts, especially in information ecosystems highly influenced by platformisation: “Perhaps another way of thinking about [the impact of information] deserts could be [age].”<sup>94</sup> She gives the example of news in Bolivia being geographically concentrated in the cities such as La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, and how much of the news is geared towards people aged 25 to 60, with little information resources for teenagers and elders.<sup>95</sup>

Desirée Esquivel, SembraMedia ambassador and founder of El Otro País, the first solutions journalism outlet in Paraguay, adds that there is a lack of available information related to certain topics like gender and the environment. She gives an example from Paraguay:

There is also very little talk about rural issues ... We don't talk much about deforestation, we [only] talk about it when there are fires [in the region], which [tend to happen] in August.<sup>96</sup>

Although there are many pressing climate issues that directly affect people's livelihoods, mainstream news coverage in LAC often ignores these topics in favour of larger stories. Indeed, a crucial concern with news deserts, and a lack of rural news coverage in particular, is that mainstream media often leaves out key issues that impact local contexts. Carolina Amaya from MalaYerba, a Salvadoran environmental media outlet, shares:

Here are farmers who don't understand that they are contaminating themselves because it is also their only alternative. The lack of environmental education in El Salvador is so great that now our aim is to enter more into environmental education. And that people also know what they are using or how to improve their quality of life. To do something more propositive, something more towards solutions journalism.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Johnson, “The hill is no longer called by its own name.”

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Fabiola Gutiérrez

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Desiree Esquivel

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Desiree Esquivel

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Carolina Amaya



Many of the organisations we spoke with are working to bridge information divides through initiatives centred around uplifting local stories, participative journalism and exchange of dialogue to ensure that people's voices are heard within information ecosystems. We share concrete examples of this work in **Part 2**.

## Local level journalism is crucial, but faces insufficient funding and staffing

It is well documented that the absence of local information ecosystems can allow space for corruption by public authorities to go unchecked, and reduces access to basic rights, in addition to discouraging citizen participation in political issues close to their daily lives.<sup>98</sup>

As journalists Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill argue: “Quality local coverage creates and sustains the feeling of belonging to a community and opens spaces for action and citizen participation.”<sup>99</sup>

Support for local journalism is something a number of other interviewees noted as being much needed, and an ongoing challenge.

A US-based report on the decline of local journalism found that many of the communities that lose newspapers do not receive print or digital replacements: “Invariably, the economically struggling, traditionally underserved communities that need local journalism the most are the very places where it is most difficult to sustain print or digital news organisations.”<sup>100</sup> The report supports global research suggesting that a decline in local journalism also contributes to a decline in civic engagement, reduced trust in media and increasing polarisation. Likewise, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has found that when local news sources shut down, they are most often replaced by social media, as people seek out different avenues for information. While there is a great deal of credible information on social media, it also opens the door for increased cases of malinformation, disinformation and polarisation.<sup>101</sup>

Addressing people's information needs isn't necessarily about producing *more* information; many of the individuals we spoke to are interested, rather, in ensuring that information initiatives – whether newspapers, *comunicación popular*, digital media, or other forms of media – are effectively responding to people's local information needs.

Indhira Suero, from SembraMedia in the Dominican Republic, talks about the excessive focus by media organisations on coverage of partisan politics or specific authorities in lieu of coverage that responds to people's immediate information needs:

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<sup>98</sup> Read more: Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless, *News Hole: The Demise of Local Journalism and Political Engagement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); “Moi and Weingrill, “A gente quer salvar a indústria.”

<sup>99</sup> Moi and Weingrill, “A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas.”

<sup>100</sup> “Struggling Communities Hardest Hit by Decline in Local Journalism,” Northwestern, June 29, 2022, <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2022/06/new-deserts-presskit/?fj=1>.

<sup>101</sup> Bateman and Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively,” 21.

Here we have breakfast, lunch and dinner with partisan politics or whatever the President does. So there are many media organisations that focus on that: on what the government says, on what the president is doing, etc. And that extends to everything, to digital media, to traditional media, to practically the entire ecosystem.<sup>102</sup>

Another interviewee, Ana Arriagada from the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) explains: "The media ecosystem in Latin America and in the world in general is very damaged. There is no hyper-local journalism ... that people trust more because they are people from their community."<sup>103</sup> Dayana Blanco Acendra (Ilex Acción Jurídica) also connects lack of regional diversity in media with a lack of legitimacy and trust:

What we are talking about here is that many times in this information system there are other things besides information, we are talking about the same question about trust in these leaders, about who is who, what legitimacy is there in the territory. Whose legitimacy is legitimately considered a valuable source of information and how. Sometimes these urban organisations or these urban media reach the territories and they are not doing it. They do not arrive with the intention of listening to what legitimate sources of information there are. Integrate them into these campaigns and work on more long-term relationships, building relationships or information nodes in the territory.<sup>104</sup>

Local journalism is essential in forging connections with communities and creating robust information flows. This journalism must include the voices from those in the communities to ensure that there are multi-directional information flows that reflect people's information needs.

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Indhira Suero

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Ana Arriagada

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Dayana Blanco Acendra

## A lack of diversity among the major voices in information ecosystems: Class and gender

Mirte Postema of the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation pointed out, in our interview, how many of the people producing news stories come from middle class backgrounds.

These are also typically the institutions that receive more stable funding, especially from international donors. She comments: “The recipients of international funds are also middle class people in urban centres with international projection, which in the end is a very particular segment of the population and a very small segment with which many people do not necessarily identify.”<sup>105</sup>

In addition to class disparities, Carolina Amaya from MalaYerba mentions the lack of gender diversity when it comes to Salvadorean media. She shares: “I think that right now we are not serving as an example within the Salvadoran media group of women leading the media, because even in the independent and big media, the majority of the leaders are men – we can only find men in the media.”<sup>106</sup>

Two main issues facing local journalism are a lack of funding and a lack of staffing. Journalism has long been a precarious industry, but research has shown that the field is becoming more unstable through tenuous contracting and freelancing, low pay (and gender pay gaps),<sup>107</sup> and downsizing and layoffs.<sup>108</sup>

Many of the funding challenges identified by our interviewees have to do with their perception of scarcity of resources in the field. Some question the longevity of journalism as a secure career path,<sup>109</sup> while others share concerns over the precariousness of freelancing, especially under authoritarian regimes.<sup>110</sup> Mirte Postema, of the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation, notes that funding is key to creating a more stable environment for journalists, to allow for organisations to pay higher salaries, offer benefits, and create a space for more daring, innovative ideas and collaborations.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Mirte Postema

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Carolina Amaya

<sup>107</sup> Jana Rick and Thomas Hanitzsch, “Journalists’ Perceptions of Precarity: Toward a Theoretical Model,” *Journalism Studies* 25 (2) (Winter 2023): 199–217, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2293827>.

<sup>108</sup> Erin Reid and Farnaz Ghaedipour, “Journalism jobs are precarious, financially insecure and require family support,” *The Conversation*, (March 2021), <https://theconversation.com/journalism-jobs-are-precarious-financially-insecure-and-require-family-support-157012>.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Daniel Villatoro

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Mirte Postema

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Mirte Postema; we expand on this issue in the Conclusion when we discuss funding recommendations

In explaining the challenges of producing quality information about and in the Amazon, Stefano Wroblewski from InfoAmazonia explains how access to high quality training for journalists is limited and it can be even worse in regions like the north of the country. At the same time, he also talks about the difficulty of retaining talent in certain regions of the country, since there is a tendency of highly qualified people going to states such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo where there is a relatively wider pool of job opportunities within media and journalism.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to producing *more* local journalism, there is a pressing need to have local-level information available to people in formats that people can use and understand. Literacy, including digital and media literacy, are also areas in need of support.

Journalists Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill told us about the podcast they produced during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver information to community members, adapting the format to fit information needs when they realised people did not have the money to pay for newspaper access, or sometimes the necessary education to read news stories.<sup>113</sup> The mediums in which content is produced is an important consideration when discussing information access.

## Looking beyond traditional news and recognising the need to strengthen other information actors

Throughout our interviews and desk research, it became evident that in order to ensure healthy information ecosystems, other information systems outside of the news ecosystem need to thrive. As Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill say,

It's not enough to talk about news and the professional production of information, of news, but also about access to information, which is more than just access to news. News is the information that wins, the market that can be bought and sold, the information needed to live and have access to rights in a locality, in a territory. So that's what this ecosystem discussion is for us.<sup>114</sup>

Additionally, they argue that in repairing this system we must begin by asking the audience what's missing for them: "What do you have in terms of information and what don't you have?"<sup>115</sup> Mirte Postema from the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation explains that currently there is a large portion of the population who don't read, watch or listen to the news. There need to be information resources that cover a range of issues, and that take forms that meet people where they are:

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Stefano Wroblewski

<sup>113</sup> We share this story in full in Part 2

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill

Quality journalism talks to the people. But although not all people necessarily want to have all the details of what the Congress did yesterday, they do probably want to know why they don't have water, why the traffic is a mess, why their health needs are not being met; the kinds of practical issues that public policy should address. But journalism doesn't always present information that way, or perhaps it hasn't been as aware of what the needs of other segments of the population are.<sup>116</sup>





# Lack of infrastructure to support excluded communities



One of the larger structural elements contributing to the state of disequilibrium within information ecosystems in LAC is the lack of infrastructure needed to include communities which have historically been excluded from these ecosystems.<sup>117</sup> This infrastructure includes technology and internet access (especially in disenfranchised communities), physical spaces and stable funding for organisations working to support marginalised communities.

Multiple interviewees for this report said that tech and data limitations in their teams (e.g. staffing capacity, skills training, access to hardware and software) inhibit their ability to maintain active and secure social media presences, staffing capacity and knowledge gaps prevent teams from smoothly adopting tech into workflows, and funding limitations prevent innovative programming.

## Platformisation and factors in choosing and maintaining social media accounts

Within the news industry, the rise in social media relevance means more news producers are gauging information significance from trending topics, using this data to produce content and then generating analytics based on engagement with the content.<sup>118</sup> Interviewees talked about the infrastructure of major social media platforms and how this shapes information ecosystems; within civil society organisations, there is the issue of having enough staff capacity to work on social media in the first place. Maira Berutti from Quid raises some of the complications of not having the staff capacity to manage active, dynamic social media accounts:

In the structure of the organisations I know, we have a communications department – these are people who are focused on updating the organisations’ website. That alone is a lot of work. It’s very difficult for that

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<sup>117</sup> Paes, “For some in Latin America, the info ecosystem has always been hostile.”

<sup>118</sup> David Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The Platformization of Making Media,” in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*, eds. Mirjam Prenger and Mark Dueze, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019):85-96, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/making-media/platformization-of-making-media/F54ECE2796B53614FB1CCC16A4249E08>.

same person to manage WhatsApp groups. One of the things we learned from these consultancies is that if the organisation can't afford a dedicated person to manage this community, it's very difficult to keep it active.<sup>119</sup>

Gabi Juns (Instituto Lamparina) shares:

I think there's a huge gap between knowing media behaviour and working on communication based on that behaviour, because, for example, we need to understand the media behaviour of more conservative and older people. But are any organisations working on Facebook? No. Are organisations working on YouTube? No. So there's a challenge of implementing communication in spaces other than Instagram.<sup>120</sup>

Thiane Neves Barros, a Brazilian researcher whose work "focuses on the experiences of Black women in *Amazônia*", talks about a group in Santarém that wishes to build their own digital space but does not have the capacity or the resources to make that dream a reality:

But their dream is to have their own digital space. They had a website. The website went down because they don't know how to keep it up and they also don't have the money to keep it up. It may seem silly, a website, but it's that place in the digital world that will allow them to sell, to talk, to write. It's their own space. And that's incredible! They don't want a YouTube channel. They don't want a super-engaged Instagram page. They want their own digital space.<sup>121</sup>

Smaller, grassroots organisations can struggle to afford (and maintain) digital technology even when there is a strong desire to do so. Technology affords visibility and connection for many organisations, but the upkeep can be difficult to maintain. Gabi Juns from Instituto Lamparina adds that it can be difficult to attract competitive communications staff in a field which can be quite lucrative across other sectors.<sup>122</sup> Other interviewees noted that organisations often do not have enough funding for the number of communications staff members that they need<sup>123</sup> nor the ability to train staff to use whatever tools are available.<sup>124</sup>

The reliance on proprietary, (often) paid-for tools and platforms is a difficulty for journalists and civil society organisations. Ana Arriagada (DFRLab) notes that there are transparency concerns in terms of how these platforms function, and how they conduct data analysis – an issue they are encountering as they adapt AI analysis into

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Maira Berutti

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Gabi Juns

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Thiane Neves Barros

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Gabi Juns

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Mirte Postema

<sup>124</sup> Interview with María Paula Murcia

their work.<sup>125</sup> Likewise, the business models of social media companies have resulted in more journalists and small CSOs paying for social media platforms for verification and to expand reach.

Some organisations have tried to adapt to these models to increase viewers and meet audiences where they are. Francisco José González López (Movilizadorio) shares how they launched a TikTok campaign of a curriculum they produced to incentivise citizen participation, working with influencers to break down the content into mini videos. They found this to be a successful way of improving people's skills (42% increase) and note that a greater investment in educational campaigns using social media would be a useful funder intervention. Although they deem this campaign a success, they do not have the resources to replicate what they know works or further explore other avenues.<sup>126</sup>

Stefano Wroblewski from InfoAmazonia argues that journalism is expensive and it can feel like journalists are in competition with social media in the sense that there are a variety of actors producing low quality information on social media and journalists have to compete with the saturation of content.<sup>127</sup>

## Infrastructures to support information access and sharing

In addition to the social media landscape, having the resources and tools to generate content in forms that people will actually use (or even be able to access in the first place) is an ongoing challenge.

A major barrier to accessing meaningful content is internet connectivity, a disparity that disproportionately targets those who have been historically and systemically marginalised. Latin America has high levels of inequality when it comes to internet access, and only 45.5% of Latin American households have broadband at home; the digital divide is particularly stark along lines of urban/rural contexts and gender, with 67% of urban households having access to broadband compared to 23% in rural areas.<sup>128</sup>

In our third community call, Kiado Cruz (INDIGITAL Initiative)<sup>129</sup> shares how the digital divide, and lack of affordable tech, devices and internet services continue to impact Indigenous communities in Mexico. He raises the issue of costs as a major barrier, with rural communities paying a much higher price for low service, compared to those in cities. He gives the example of how in his community [Zapotec community of Yagavila in the Rincón de la Sierra Norte of Oaxaca] internet is much more expensive than in the city.<sup>130</sup> Isapi Rúa from Red Chaco in Bolivia shares how a lack of infrastructure (including

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Ana Arriagada

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Francisco José González López

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Stefano Wroblewski

<sup>128</sup> "Latin America's Digital Divide: Overcoming Persistent Gaps," The Wilson Center, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/latin-americas-digital-divide-overcoming-persistent-gaps>.

<sup>129</sup> "Melquiades (Kiado) Cruz," Stanford PACS, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/person/melquiades-kiado-cruz/>.

<sup>130</sup> Johnson, "The hill is no longer called by its own name."

broadband and electricity) has resulted in people only being able to access information “little by little” in some instances. This is particularly true for Indigenous communities in Bolivia, especially when it comes to accessing information about the environment.<sup>131</sup>

In our interview, Sandra Xoquic (from Guatemalan organisation Instituto 25A, or I25A) raises the issue of information gaps that exist due to the loss of community spaces that make it possible for people to access the internet for free, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. She says:

There is a big barrier ... In Guatemala, internet access at the national level is very limited. In the City, for example, to have internet in your home there are plans for around 300 quetzales that not all people can afford. The places where people can access wifi are in some private schools and universities, also in shopping centres ... So digital communication is considered a privilege [only accessible] to a low percentage of the population. Outside of the city, it is even more difficult to access the internet.<sup>132</sup>

Thiane Neves Barros says that “*Amazônia* continues to be disenfranchised compared to other parts of Brazil,” referencing a report by the Internet Steering Committee<sup>133</sup> on how the Amazon has the least access to the media and the lowest amount of ICT infrastructure:

So it goes through several places, it goes through macro infrastructure, it goes through access and it goes through purchasing power of materials, devices and equipment. When you buy a computer online, you almost always pay for shipping, and shipping here is absurdly expensive. Anyway, this book is always more expensive here in *Amazônia* because of the country’s infrastructure, which is an infrastructure that prioritises a certain region, because it has that region or regions as the country’s main commercial and industrial centres and neglects another region that is more than half of the country’s national territory.<sup>134</sup>

The lack of information infrastructure can have far-reaching consequences, for instance when it comes to ensuring quality and accurate information around reproductive health. Dayana Blanco Acendra from Ilex Acción Jurídica raises the challenges of providing high quality information about access to abortion and reproductive justice in Colombia, especially for Afro-descendent women. They have found in their work that populations living in regions with poor information

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<sup>131</sup> Johnson, “The hill is no longer called by its own name.”

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Sandra Xoquic

<sup>133</sup> Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society and Brazilian Network Information Center, “Executive Summary - Survey on the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Brazilian Households - ICT Households 2021,” *Cetic.br*, (November 2022), <https://cetic.br/pt/publicacao/executive-summary-survey-on-the-use-of-information-and-communication-technologies-in-brazilian-households-ict-households-2021/>.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Thiane Neves Barros

infrastructure, are “mostly racialised, subordinated or impoverished populations, with little access to information, the internet, social networks, radio or television.”<sup>135</sup> She asks: “what are the possibilities for the departments with a majority Afro-descendant population? What are the possibilities we have, for example, to access the internet?”<sup>136</sup> She prompts organisations focusing on information access to prioritise regions in Colombia and Brazil with majority Afro-descendant inhabitants.

Supporting digital and physical infrastructures to maintain sustained information flows is a key part of building healthier information ecosystems. Bridging digital divides and tackling organisations’ tech and data needs, especially those operating in rural areas, who serve marginalised populations, will be an essential part of meeting information needs and filling information gaps. In **Part 2** and in the **Conclusion** we give examples of organisations working to meet some of these challenges as well as provide recommendations for funders regarding infrastructural support.

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Dayana Blanco Acendra

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Dayana Blanco Acendra



# Combating information disorder requires a multi-sector approach



The rise of information disorder, or the spread of malinformation, disinformation, and misinformation, is a pressing threat to information ecosystems; it is a threat to democratic processes like elections, disrupts societal cohesion,<sup>137</sup> and infringes on trust in news institutions worldwide.<sup>138</sup>

In ‘Misunderstanding Misinformation’, Wardle argues that people tend to share information that reaffirms and validates their worldviews. An aspect of sharing false or misleading information, can be attributed to larger desires of community and a need for connection. Wardle writes: “By focusing narrowly on problematic content, researchers are failing to understand the increasingly sizable number of people who create and share this content, and also overlooking the larger context of what information people actually need.”<sup>139</sup> For the purpose of this report, the issue we are most interested in is that people’s information needs are not being met, and that in order to overcome this saturation of inaccurate information, we are in need of strategies that build trust, counter and verify false narratives, and improve media literacy education.

In our interview, Ana Arriagada from the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) shares that one of the most valuable elements of the trainings they offer on countering disinformation is their effort to understand some of the underlying narratives behind why and how false information is spread. They say: “It’s important not only to know what information is false but to understand the narrative behind it and how this narrative is being moved and pushed. Who are the actors behind the disinformation?”<sup>140</sup> Understanding the major superspreaders<sup>141</sup> and originators of false narratives is an important element of creating counter narratives.

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<sup>137</sup> “Online disinformation: UNESCO unveils action plan to regulate social media platforms,” UNESCO, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/online-disinformation-unesco-unveils-action-plan-regulate-social-media-platforms>.

<sup>138</sup> Jesus Serrano, “Disinformation is a threat to our trust ecosystem. Experts explain how to curb it,” World Economic Forum, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/03/disinformation-trust-ecosystem-experts-curb-it/>.

<sup>139</sup> Wardle, “Misunderstanding Misinformation.”

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Ana Arriagada

<sup>141</sup> Matthew R. DeVerna et al., “Identifying and characterizing superspreaders of low-credibility content on Twitter,” PLoS One 19(5) (2024), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11111090/>.

While much of our research focuses on actors contributing to restoring information ecosystems, it is important to look at some key harmful actors within information ecosystems, including authoritarian governments, spyware companies, anonymous hyper-partisan accounts,<sup>142</sup> and influential politicians and individuals.

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but the speed at which false information is spread globally through new technologies and AI is a growing concern.<sup>143</sup> Although there are organisations working to rapidly label and fact check information, false information tends to move quicker and more cheaply than counter-narratives and corrective information.<sup>144</sup> Fact checking organisation Chequeado has researched how false health information is exported from the US into Latin America, with platforms taking longer to respond and take down harmful content when it is in Spanish.<sup>145</sup> There is an urgent need for collaboration across sectors, languages and borders to combat information disorder. In the following sections we outline some of the strategies as well as needs that interviewees raised concerning information disorder.

## Collaboration for countering information disorder

Wardle identifies the issue that oftentimes those tasked with studying, combating and funding information disorder do so in siloes, based on the context of the information itself such as elections, public health or the environment.<sup>146</sup> Olivia Sohr from Chequeado has advocated for taking a regional approach to addressing the spread of false and/or misleading information, especially concerning issues related to gender and reproductive justice.<sup>147</sup>

Ana Arriagada explains why there need to be more collaborative solutions outside of fact checking: “There’s still not an understanding that this is something much broader and that it has many ways of being addressed, and that while fact checking is extremely important, it’s only one part of what we can do.”<sup>148</sup> Multiple interviewees and community call participants, like Linterna Verde, Probox and Fundación Interpreta, note the effectiveness of collaboration and trying new approaches in combating information disorder, and identify this as an area for additional funding and attention. In **Part 2** we give examples of organisations collaborating to combat information disorder.

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<sup>142</sup> DeVerna et al., “Identifying and characterizing superspreaders.”

<sup>143</sup> “United Nations Global Principles For Information Integrity: Recommendations for Multi-stakeholder Action,” *United Nations*, (2024), <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un-global-principles-for-information-integrity-en.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> Bateman and Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively,” 6.

<sup>145</sup> Cristina Tardáguila, “Disinformation for Export: how false content generated in the United States reaches Latin America,” Chequeado, September 2, 2021, <https://chequeado.com/investigaciones/disinformacion-for-export-how-false-content-generated-in-the-united-states-reaches-latin-america/>.

<sup>146</sup> Wardle, “Misunderstanding Misinformation.”

<sup>147</sup> César López Linares, “Experts discuss at Summit how disinformation impacts democracy, migration, health, and gender issues in Latin America,” *LatAm Journalism Review*, (October 2023), <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/experts-discuss-at-summit-how-disinformation-impacts-democracy-migration-health-and-gender-issues-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Ana Arriagada

## Organisations lack the tech tools to effectively fact check against disinformation

The Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP), based in Costa Rica, has coordinated a series of reports documenting the rise of disinformation across Latin America and the Caribbean, with findings showing how the mechanisms designed to safeguard against it are in fact not doing so.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, there is no “silver bullet solution” in fighting disinformation, as many of the initiatives used to combat information disorder are unproven, insufficient or cannot effectively target the root cause of why and how the misleading information is spread. This is further exacerbated by the addition of AI and the rampant spread of misleading and false information on social media platforms.<sup>150</sup>

A Chilean study found that false information spreads faster, thus reaching more people than valid information on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).<sup>151</sup> Organisations are struggling to keep up with the inundation of information disorder, and often lack the tools and resources to do so. While not the sole solution, there are important tools used to verify the validity of information. CLIP shares how, in order to effectively combat fake information, there is a need for more tools to verify what information is true, especially when it comes to audio. They note, however, that those tools are particularly expensive and difficult to access.

There has been an increase in cases of Deepfakes that are more difficult to verify if they are true or not. Politicians and public figures know that they are difficult to verify and can always argue whether it is true or not, that some video, some audio is a fake and there is no easy way to disprove them for now ... especially in audio. Because in the videos it's still more or less easy to see that there's always mistakes in the face or the eyes or something, but in the audio it's harder to notice and there's not really any reliable tool to verify that.<sup>152</sup>

Tomás Lawrence from Interpreta, a Chilean foundation that has been working since 2016 to eliminate barriers to access data and digital research tools, estimates that civil society is five years behind those who have the resources to work on these issues in the private sector.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Catherine Osborn, “Inside Latin America’s Fake News Problem,” *Foreign Policy*, (August 2023), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/04/fake-news-disinformation-social-media-internet-journalism-brazil-election/>.

<sup>150</sup> Bateman and Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively.”

<sup>151</sup> Marcelo Mendoza et al., “A Study on Information Disorders on Social Networks during the Chilean Social Outbreak and COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Applied Sciences* 13, no. 9 (2023): 5347, <https://doi.org/10.3390/app13095347>.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Pablo Medina Uribe

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Tomás Lawrence

Pablo Medina Uribe from CLIP adds,

I do believe that the technology of disinformation has advanced much more than the technology of fact checkers in recent years. And I think it would be good to sit down and think about how to develop more advanced tools, but also of free access, because also, with the latest developments in social networks it is more difficult to investigate with open source tools; for example, on Twitter it is almost impossible.<sup>154</sup>

Technology alone is not sufficient in turning the tide against the spread of false and misleading information, especially that by malicious actors. However, equipping civil society organisations and journalists with better tools and resources to verify information is a way to more quickly and cost-effectively leverage fact-checking efforts.<sup>155</sup>

## Targeting root causes of information disorder

Sisi Wei, editor in chief at the Markup, writes that many communities that lack trustworthy, local news are inundated with *news mirages*, or a flooding of information disorder. This is especially true during elections and in other polarising times. She argues that combatting this is not solely about fact checking; it is also about ensuring that areas are not left as news deserts.<sup>156</sup> As Daniel Dessein, president of the Association of Journalistic Entities of Argentina (ADEPA) says: “When the damage has already been done, the way to attack it and clean it up is with good journalism.”<sup>157</sup>

Our interviewees note that “empty space” outside of official, government narratives can leave openings for misinformation and disinformation. Researchers from Brazil found that key narratives spread through disinformation most often seek to undermine democracy, weaken trust in institutions and lessen confidence in electoral processes.<sup>158</sup> Tomás Lawrence from Fundación Interpreta Chile gives an example of this phenomenon in regard to anti-migrant discourse:

Many times it happens that the authorities do not communicate certain things and that space is left open to rumour, to disinformation, which many times is taken advantage of by politicians, by the media and also by groups of people who take advantage of this space to position certain issues by associating them with [migrants]. That is where we also seek to generate this level of reality versus this imaginary ... many times is not questioned with respect to the migrant. So we avoid, in the end, the rights of migrants being violated.<sup>159</sup>

Olivia Sohr from Chequeado describes how events such as elections and the COVID-19 pandemic have ended up being used by harmful actors to spread disinformation.

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<sup>154</sup> Interview with Pablo Medina Uribe

<sup>155</sup> Bateman and Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively,” 34.

<sup>156</sup> Sisi Wei, “News mirages (not news deserts) are the scarier problem,” Nieman Lab, December 2023, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2023/12/news-mirages-not-news-deserts-are-the-scarier-problem/>.

<sup>157</sup> Linares, “Experts discuss at Summit how disinformation impacts democracy.”

<sup>158</sup> Moi and Weingrill, “A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas.”

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Tomás Lawrence

We identify avalanches of information, or an excess of information, in which disinformation is very easily mixed. And those moments can be predictable. As it is a presidential election, we know that the last week is going to be very intense because of the amount of information, because they are going to give information at the same time about the campaigns, the proposals, the voting places, the way of voting, the activities, etc. And there are unpredictable things like a pandemic that suddenly grabs the information agenda and for months we are bombarded and we feel an avalanche of information in which it is very easy for disinformation to slip in.<sup>160</sup>

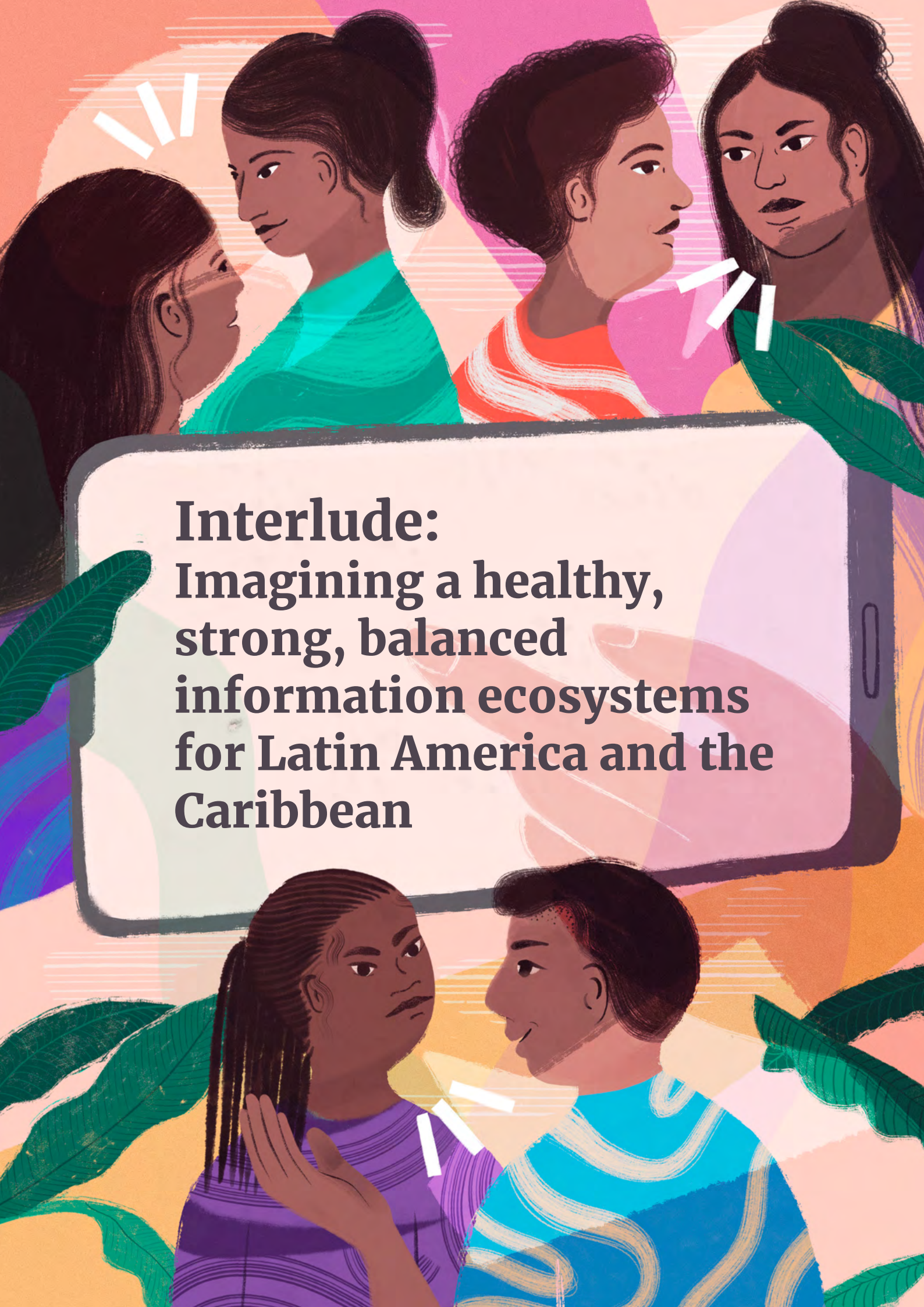
An underlying concern with the spread of misinformation and disinformation is distrust in reliable news. Chequeado says that traditional sources of legitimacy are being questioned for what “can be for good reasons and for bad reasons as well, but what it means is that an authority coming out to deny something is not enough for the population in all cases to believe that it is false. And that also complicates the ecosystem and the way we communicate and what we believe and so on.”<sup>161</sup> Restoring trust is an essential element of combating information disorder. In Part 2 and in the Conclusion we give more specific examples of how this can be done.

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<sup>160</sup> Interview with Olivia Sohr

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Olivia Sohr



An illustration featuring four diverse women in conversation. The top half shows three women in profile, facing right, with a fourth woman partially visible on the far right. They are set against a background of warm, abstract colors (orange, pink, purple) and stylized green leaves. A large, rounded rectangular text box is centered in the middle. The bottom half shows two women in profile, facing each other, with a similar background of warm colors and green leaves. The overall style is vibrant and artistic, with a focus on community and dialogue.

**Interlude:  
Imagining a healthy,  
strong, balanced  
information ecosystems  
for Latin America and the  
Caribbean**



In our conversations and interviews for this project, many shared with us how, in their experience, LAC hasn't necessarily sustained healthy, balanced information ecosystems on a wide scale in the past. Because of this, throughout this project, many of our interactions with technologists, organisers and journalists were guided by the underlying question: What do we dream of when we dream of healthy, balanced information ecosystems?

In this **Interlude**, we wanted to gather, in more concrete terms, what it was that the individuals and organisations who engaged with this project were collectively working towards. These pages include hopes and ideas that individuals who engaged with this project have been cultivating for decades (and generously shared with us), as well as the non-negotiable elements they envision as part of an information ecosystem that sustains social justice.

These collective visions are ones that dream expansively about healthier, more robust, more balanced information ecosystems. They are visions that are already being built: as we share in **Part 2**, civil society across the region has been working to make this vision a reality and, as we'll see in **Conclusion**, they need more support to realise it.



## People's information needs are prioritised and local, community-led information initiatives are thriving

Healthier and more robust information ecosystems effectively address peoples' most immediate information needs, especially those who have been historically marginalised; they are ecosystems in which local, community-led information initiatives are thriving. Individuals have access to a reliable flow of quality information about what is going on in their cities and neighbourhoods, and know what they need to exercise their basic human rights. They aren't just "consumers of news": their information needs are prioritised and they are part of a dialogue. In this vision, funding for local information ecosystems no longer feels scarce and an urgent need;<sup>162</sup> instead, it flows abundantly to community-driven initiatives.

## Journalists, activists and popular communicators are safe

In balanced information ecosystems, the safety of popular communicators and journalists is prioritised. Women, LGBTQI+, Black and Indigenous journalists, activists and popular communicators are no longer bearing the disproportionate impacts of violence within the information ecosystem. As they investigate, report, and inform, their work is no longer compromised by threats and attacks to their integrity (both physical and digital), and they have plenty of support in staying safe. They have the tools, knowledge and resources they need to maintain their digital security.



162 Moi and Weingrill, "A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas."



## People enjoy a sense of community and there are spaces for meaningful conversations that strengthen democratic processes

During our first community call there was one key message that continued to echo throughout the project:

A healthy information ecosystem is one where people are able to listen and talk to each other. <sup>163</sup>

Many people who engaged with this research have echoed the notion that in strong information ecosystems people have space to have meaningful conversations (that allow for deliberation and civic debate); this is seen as the antidote to polarisation and enriched political deliberation. <sup>164</sup> For example, Iliana Aguilar, Honduran feminist rapper and communicator, imagines information ecosystems with less violence, less polarisation and more conversations: “Without any discrimination, without any kind of violence towards people and above all with a lot of listening, but more than that, more human.”<sup>165</sup>

Relatedly, individuals living in a healthy information ecosystem experience less isolation and alienation from each other, and the “us vs them” sentiment that has become prevalent in so much of LAC is no longer as strong. Likewise, there are plenty of efforts to strengthen citizen dialogue and promote “discussion spaces” that bring “strangers [together] with strangers”. <sup>166</sup>

## The information ecosystem includes a diversity of actors

Multiple interviewees talked about how funding and resources need to be made available to a broader number of organisations based in different geographies, working from different standpoints and playing different roles. In healthy information ecosystems, there is plenty of funding, support and resources for civil society organisations, activists and journalists who are working to sustain the health of these ecosystems through different, complementary, and collaborative approaches. The people and initiatives best equipped to understand communities’ information needs, and to identify and implement effective strategies to improve their local information ecosystems, are no longer struggling to access funding. In this vision, initiatives aren’t worried about not

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<sup>163</sup> Paes, “To improve the information ecosystem.”

<sup>164</sup> “With me, or against me.”

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Iliana Aguilar

<sup>166</sup> Idea from interview with Mutante

getting as much funding as “harmful actors”, and they hold the power to decide their own priorities and manage the funds they receive.

Just as importantly, healthy information ecosystems hold space for people and communities that have suffered the impact of harmful information ecosystems, such as Indigenous people, Afrolatinos, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, community journalists and “voices that are not from the middle class”. In this vision, information ecosystems are strong both in urban spaces and major cities and also in rural areas, forest territories, and more. In this vision, language justice is a defining feature of systems of information creation, exchange, flow and use.

### **Tech infrastructure is built in ways that centres social and climate justice**

Researchers and organisers we engaged with throughout this research have emphasised the importance of considering the ecological implications of developing infrastructure - in other words, taking the eco-political repercussions of building more robust tech and information infrastructure into account. In stronger information ecosystems, people have access to digital technologies that exist in harmony with climate justice, land justice, racial justice, Indigenous justice; digital technologies are not seen as the sole solution when it comes to creating better information flows; and communities have autonomy and decision-making power in terms of if and how they engage with digital technologies. In this scenario, civil society, journalists and communicators are able to use tech and data to build and maintain the systems and platforms that would allow them to continue to maintain a healthy information ecosystem.







## Part 2 Restoring information ecosystems: inspiration from civil society

In this section, we share some of the inspiring strategies used by civil society to restore information ecosystems in the region. As we present these strategies, we recognise – along with many other researchers who have done extensive research in this area – that accurately determining the combination of strategies that will help us fully achieve a balanced, thriving ecosystem is a task that will require further careful examination and sustained research over a long period of time.<sup>167</sup>

At the same time, we are also compelled to share some of the strategies that have the potential to move LAC's information ecosystems closer to the collective vision we gathered in the **Interlude**. Information ecosystem health is vital to LAC's democracies and, though we are enthusiastically advocating for more research to be conducted on the effectiveness of various strategies rolled out by civil society, we also are eager to see some of this work being celebrated and supported as soon as possible.

The goal of sharing this collection of strategies is not to point to any “silver bullets” or “definitive solutions,” but rather to share some potential pathways forward. For some of the strategies we'll share here, it may be early to say how much long-term impact they'll generate. Nevertheless, if the seeds they're planting are never watered, we'll never know.

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<sup>167</sup> Wardle, “Misunderstanding Misinformation;” Bateman and Jackson, “Countering Disinformation Effectively.”

# A closer look at the seeds we want to water

With the above in mind, this section highlights some inspiring, transformative work that surfaced in our research.<sup>168</sup>

Instead of categorising initiatives by the techniques behind the interventions they use (e.g. examples of fact-checking, examples of media literacy, examples of local journalism, and so on), we are broadly clustering strategies by type of impact – in other words, by the changes they bring to the information ecosystem. Rather than pointing to one or two interventions as “successful solutions,” this approach recognises that what might be needed instead is a diversity of actors working with various types of strategies.

In this section we highlight the following strategies:

- 01.** Addressing information challenges from an ecosystems perspective
- 02.** Ensuring people’s actual information needs are prioritised
- 03.** Working at the local level: cultivating a sense of community
- 04.** Narrowing distances: creating meaningful conversations and going beyond digital spaces
- 05.** Creating the infrastructure we envision: building new systems centering the environment, contexts, knowledge traditions and existing technologies
- 06.** Protecting those who suffer from the impacts of information ecosystems that are hostile to activists, communicators and journalists
- 07.** Collaborating to build healthy ecosystems

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<sup>168</sup> There are a number of organisations, collectives, groups and individuals who are also leading work addressing these challenges and who are not listed here due to the limited scope of this research, which is not intended as a detailed, definitive mapping.





# 01

## Addressing information challenges from an ecosystems perspective

As explored in Part 1, an ecosystems perspective allows for actors to better understand and respond to people's information needs, while also understanding the larger interconnections of technology and information flows.

### Ilex Acción Jurídica

#### *Working in the Pacific Coast of Colombia to connect women with legal support*

Dayana Blanco Acendra, from Ilex Acción Jurídica, an organisation composed of Afro-Colombian lawyers fighting for racial justice through legal mobilisations and research,<sup>169</sup> finds that an ecosystem approach is essential to their reproductive justice work on the Pacific coast of Colombia. Creating inclusive dialogues is the basis of their work, she says – especially when transmitting important information, as it's important to understand where people are coming from:

We are a little tired of not being the active subjects of our own research, with the great transforming and technical power that we Afro-descendants have – and that is why an organisation like Ilex was born. All our work is done in a framework of exchange of knowledge, dialogue of knowledge ... This implies that we would go, they would teach us something and we would also share part of our knowledge with them.

With this mindset, Ilex works with midwives associations to promote reproductive education, namely a woman's right to choose. Although legally there is decriminalisation legislation protecting abortion up to the 24th week, in practice there are many other barriers to women freely making these decisions,

<sup>169</sup> “¿Quiénes somos?,” ILEX -Acción Jurídica, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://ilexaccionjuridica.org/nosotros/quienes-somos/>.

including the moral and cultural imaginaries surrounding voluntary interruption of pregnancies. “There are other things besides information, we are talking about the same question about trust in these leaders, about who is who, what legitimacy is there in the territory. Whose legitimacy is considered a valuable source of information, and how.”

Oftentimes, when outside media and urban organisations come to rural territories they are distrusted, in part because “they do not arrive with the intention of listening to what legitimate sources of information there are.” To counter this, Ilex works to integrate women from these communities into their advocacy work, building long-term relationships built on mutual trust and longstanding information nodes. In addition to midwives associations, they work with many actors throughout the local information ecosystem, including local organisations, lawyers and members of the community, to build a basis of information and a sense of trust.

Ilex notes that abortion is something that people can hold a lot of fear and guilt around, and establishing people and places of knowledge with whom/where they can have open and transparent conversations is an important starting point in this work. They use voice-to-voice communication through Whatsapp chains and community meeting spaces.

In practical terms, [someone can be at] the store buying a kilo of rice, and [they] run into [their] neighbour and she says “Hey, look, I was in a meeting with some girls [from an organisation] called Ilex ... And they were talking about a ruling there. And it increases the number of weeks of pregnancy to terminate it to 24 ...”<sup>170</sup>

By closing the distance between producers of information and communities, Ilex is taking a comprehensive approach to ensure that women are informed about the choices available to them





## 02

### Ensuring people's actual information needs are prioritised

Ensuring that there are adequate channels and avenues to address people's information needs is crucial, as is making sure that people's actual information needs are at the centre of this work – for example, through participatory journalism, exchange of dialogue, and listening exercises.

In this section we share examples of work that addresses people's information needs and then works with communities to ensure they can take that information and use it to make decisions, vote, create news, inform others and inspire change.

#### MalaYerba

##### *Reflecting Afro-descendent and Indigenous people's stories*

MalaYerba is a medium specialising in journalism focused on socio-environmental problems in Central America, with the goal of democratising information about the water, food and climate crises and registering the forced displacement of populations vulnerable to the climate crisis and megaprojects. Carolina Amaya shares that at MalaYerba they constantly seek to reflect the stories of Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations, not only for environmental stories, but also for stories focusing on human rights and freedoms. For her, doing this type of journalism is in itself swimming against the current and often disrupting the status quo: "That's why it's called *malayerba*, because, you know, the weed is that species that you don't want anywhere. You want to eradicate it, don't you? So the weed, no matter how much you want to, no matter how much you cut it, it will always come back."<sup>171</sup>

## Mullu

### *Participatory documentary-making*

Desirée Yépez, from Mullu and Radio Ambulante, prompts us to think of news not as a good but as a service. She holds that it is important for communities who have traditionally been “outside of setting the agenda”, such as Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, to have active roles in what stories get told. The audiovisual collective Mullu uses film and journalism as “platforms to fight for a more just, diverse and collective world”.<sup>172</sup> Desirée explains how their methodology includes the collaborative creation and distribution of films, reporting and videos, where the stories and realities of Indigenous, Afro-descendant and frontline communities is amplified:

What we do is integrate members of these communities within the team to try to develop spaces of exchange where they can learn about the more technical parts of journalism or about specific methodological parts. And go deep and learn precisely about their stories. When we do screenings of these documentaries in those communities and generate reflections. They are documentaries of the highest quality in terms of image, with the power of storytelling of journalism.<sup>173</sup>

She also shares an example of a few documentary projects Mullu completed, all of which involved filming in various communities in Peru, Ecuador and Mexico. The team worked alongside people who lived in these communities, integrating them into the project team, and creating avenues for dialogue and reflection.<sup>174</sup>

## I25A

### *Responding to community needs through Avenida Comunidad in Guatemala City*

Instituto 25A established a programme called *Avenida Comunidad*<sup>175</sup> in Guatemala City in order to foster a stronger sense of community belonging and respond to community information needs. Inspired by the mobilisations in 2015,<sup>176</sup> *Avenida Comunidad* is dedicated to supporting specific sectors of the city. Our interviewee Sandra Xoquic shares:

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<sup>172</sup> “Mullu,” Mullu, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://mullu.tv/>.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Desirée Yépez

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Desirée Yépez

<sup>175</sup> “Aprendizaje y Comunidad,” Instituto 25a, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://i25a.gt/aprendizaje-y-comunidad/>.

<sup>176</sup> In 2015, a series of demonstrations took place in Guatemala due to the president’s involvement with various scandals and political corruption that led to his resignation in the same year. Read more: Juan Paullier, “La revolución pacífica en la región más violenta del mundo,” *BBC News Mundo*, (September 2015), [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150903\\_guatemala\\_renuncia\\_otto\\_perez\\_molina\\_revolucion\\_tranquila\\_jp](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/09/150903_guatemala_renuncia_otto_perez_molina_revolucion_tranquila_jp).

That's the horizon that we have as an institute ... It is this search to affirm the confidence of the sense of community from the neighbourhood among the neighbours, through tools like theatre and muralism, with the use of popular education methodology, generating critical reflection of the living conditions in the areas where we live. Our community research processes have also given us data on how the population moves within the city, who they are, what they do, and what their needs are.

In doing this work they reaffirm the political nature of fostering a sense of belonging:

We want people to feel fulfilled living in their territory. The I25A seeks, together with people, to understand that our daily lives are conditioned by political decisions and this impacts our lives through, for example, public services such as security, transportation, education and health.

Some of the projects *Avenida Comunidad* have worked on include community radio programming and a mural project, bringing together elders and youth in the community. Community is central to all elements of this work, with technology used as a tool to facilitate community as well as in-person interactions. Sandra gives the example:

In community territories that is something natural, something that we have inherited from our grandparents, from our parents. Now that technology has been added, we use WhatsApp, but previously, when there was an assembly, we called it *Cabildo Abierto*, we summoned people and we went door to door ... [for] community building as well. For me it is very much part of organising. Within the organisation there is someone who takes care of the water, there is someone who takes care of the territorial protection, there is someone who also watches over the road. We are all in constant communication. I know my neighbour and so on. It is recognised that there is, for example, a leadership, because we also do community service through the Indigenous Mayor's Office; that is, we recognise our local authorities and we know what their function is within our community. In other words, we are very immersed in the community, nothing is disconnected in our day-to-day political work. This experience has helped us so that the residents of the city of Guatemala can organise themselves in their neighbourhoods.

This structure, of working from the community outwards, has allowed I25A to use a variety of communication forms, technologies and education strategies to ensure their community members stay informed and connected to each other's information needs.<sup>177</sup>



03

## Working at the local level: cultivating a sense of community

As seen in the case of I25A, strengthening the “local” in local information ecosystems is essential in developing a sense of belonging and combating polarisation. The sense that local, community-led information initiatives are fundamental to fostering stronger information ecosystems in the region as a whole is something that echoed throughout the duration of this project.

In our conversations, community calls and interviews, work that strengthens local information ecosystems was described in a variety of ways – which is a nod to how diverse this type of work can be by nature. Sometimes, interviewees would describe local information initiatives as work that is being led by local communities; sometimes, local information initiatives were more closely described as initiatives that responded effectively to people’s information needs in their local contexts; sometimes, local information initiatives were described as a combination of both these things. Most importantly, initiatives that are working to improve local information ecosystems are addressing inequity in information and facilitating civic engagement.

### Agência Mural

#### *Brazil: Podcasting public health information*

Izabela Moi from Agência Mural in Brazil describes how they used different types of local media to convey important information during the Covid-19 pandemic:

If you’re there in the territory, you know what’s missing, you know what works. I’ll give you an example from Agência Mural. At the start of the pandemic, everyone was discussing information: [people were asking] how were people going to survive, there was no vaccine, no-one was talking about masks and so on. The staff from Mural were very worried about our audience, because they knew their families, their friends, and nobody was going to be able to stay at home. Everyone was doing essential jobs. The year everyone stopped, these people didn’t stop, they carried on doing their jobs. They had to protect themselves. They didn’t have the money to buy information

from newspaper paywalls ... The information had to reach them. The staff said: “This information has to arrive every day via WhatsApp and audio.” We did an audio podcast every day for a year, during 2020. The number of messages saying “thank you, because I can’t read,” “thank you, because this goes to my family group chat, my friends’ group chat.” And everyone said the information was useful.<sup>178</sup>

## Agência Mural and Énois

### *Ensuring access to information about electoral processes in Brazil*

Since 2010, Agência Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias has been producing local journalism that celebrates the complexities of São Paulo’s *periferias* and recognises the political importance of local communities. With a diverse team, Agência Mural makes local journalism for *periferias* and by people from *periferias*, with the goal of fighting stereotypes and ensuring access to information.<sup>179</sup>

Founded in 2009, Énois is a laboratory that works to boost diversity, representation and inclusion in Brazilian journalism. More than 500 young people from *periferias* have graduated in journalism and more than 4 thousand students attended the online Journalism School. In time, these young people, through Énois, produced content in partnership with nationwide media outlets.<sup>180</sup>

In 2020, during São Paulo’s city elections, Agência Mural and Énois partnered to increase citizens’ access to information about electoral processes. Together, they hired *carros de som* (sound cars) to travel through seven regions of the city to broadcast five episodes of the podcast *Em Quarantena*. Produced by Mural, the audios were dedicated to explaining the electoral process to its listeners: residents of the *periferias*.<sup>181</sup>

This partnership led to over 35 hours of content being shared all over the city, covering everything from the differences between councillors and mayors to the content of the target plan that concerned *periferias* – which the population had the right to demand, and to demand from their representatives once elected.<sup>182</sup> To them, this initiative was a response to the information disorder that became so prevalent in election time in the country: “It was urgent to clear up the confusion that had been spread in large volumes, especially via WhatsApp. Thinking of ways to get the message across to the target audience also required another way of producing and distributing information.”<sup>183</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Izabela Moi in an Interview with Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill

<sup>179</sup> Learn more about the impact Agência Mural has generated in the lives of São Paulo residents: “Na Vida Real,” Agência Mural, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://agenciamural.org.br/institucional/impacto/>.

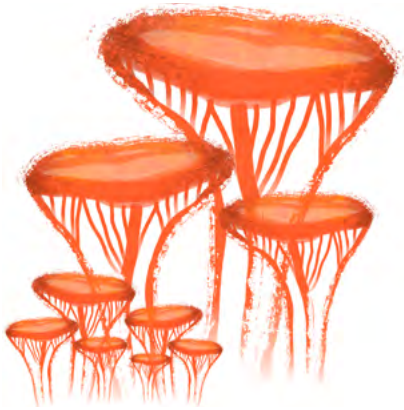
<sup>180</sup> Learn more about the work of Énois: “Projetos,” Énois, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://enoisconteudo.com.br/projetos>.

<sup>181</sup> Moi and Weingrill, “A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas.”

<sup>182</sup> This partnership is just one example of the ways Agência Mural and Énois are working to ensure information gets to people. Both organisations have many other projects through which they are working creatively towards better information ecosystems. Learn more at [agenciamural.org.br](https://agenciamural.org.br) and [enoisconteudo.com.br](https://enoisconteudo.com.br).

<sup>183</sup> Moi and Weingrill, “A urgência de investir nos ecossistemas.”





## 04

### Narrowing distances: creating meaningful conversations and going beyond digital spaces

In our research, we came across a number of initiatives working to narrow ideological and political distances with strategies that involve fostering spaces for meaningful conversations, as opposed to one-way information delivery, and not focusing exclusively on digital spaces. With this, they are questioning the gaps that exist between “producers of information” and “receivers of information” and bringing more people into active roles within information ecosystems.

This work can take many shapes and forms; this section highlights a few examples.

#### Colectivo Noís Radio

##### *Colombia: Radio as “medio de conversación”*

Colectivo Noís Radio in Colombia creates live radio programmes integrating soundscapes with voice, music and performances.<sup>184</sup> They don’t view themselves as a traditional radio, but rather see their work as a “*medio de conversación*” (conversation medium) for fluid exchange of information.<sup>185</sup>

#### Agencia Baudó

##### *Colombia: “Journalism that connects communities”*

Agencia Baudó is using innovative communication tools to do “journalism that connects communities”, covering environmental and climate issues, peace and conflict, gender and inclusion.<sup>186</sup> Agencia Baudó works with storytellers

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<sup>184</sup> “Convite,” Noís Radio, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://noisradio.co/>.

<sup>185</sup> Paes, “To improve the information ecosystem.”

<sup>186</sup> “Baudó,” Baudó Agencia Pública, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://baudoap.com/>.

who are not just providers of information, but rather local leaders working in their communities for social transformation. One of their projects, *Los Rastros del Cambio Climático*, presents audiovisual representation of how the climate emergency takes shape in Latin America, with photos, videos and audio bringing in the voices of Indigenous people.<sup>187</sup>

## data\_labe

### *Brazil: Crowd-sourcing environmental data via Whatsapp*

data\_labe's CocôZap uses citizen-generated data to demand environmental justice in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*.<sup>188</sup> In a city where almost one million people live in areas at risk of flooding or landslides, the climate emergency has made things worse, especially for people from low-income, majority Black neighbourhoods.<sup>189</sup> In Complexo de Favelas da Maré, where many have suffered from flooding and lack of sanitation,<sup>190</sup> data\_labe designed CocôZap as a tool for community members to report their experiences with water and sanitation, using WhatsApp to send photos, videos, and stories.

The data goes into its own database, designed to complement governmental data – which often overlooks the disproportionate ways environmental injustices impact people living in *favelas*. CocôZap's team, made of young people from Maré, has convened with neighbours frequently and produced articles about environmental justice, fostering an ongoing conversation. CocôZap is simple and highly sophisticated at the same time: building citizen data for/with a community is work that requires a deep understanding of complex community needs and a critical view of how insufficient (and, in some cases, biased) “official data” from government sources can be.<sup>191</sup>

With CocôZap and other projects, data\_labe has helped to shape the conversation about environmental and climate justice in Brazilian *favelas*.

Building relationships with communities isn't easily accomplished. A journalist from a Caribbean country shares how though some initiatives in their country might take the technical steps to set up channels for communication, this may not be enough for conversation to emerge:

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<sup>187</sup> “Los Rastros del Cambio Climático,” Baudó Agencia Pública, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://baudoap.com/cambio-climatico-en/>.

<sup>188</sup> “Coco Zap,” data\_labe, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://cocozap.datalabe.org/>.

<sup>189</sup> André Trigueiro, “RJ tem 925 mil pessoas vivendo em áreas de risco de enchentes ou deslizamentos, diz estudo,” *Globo*, (February 2022), <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2022/02/25/rj-tem-925-mil-pessoas-vivendo-em-areas-de-risco-de-enchentes-ou-deslizamentos-diz-estudo.ghtml>; “Chuvas no Rio repetem tragédia anunciada e acentuam desigualdades,” *Observatório do Clima*, (January 2024), <https://oc.eco.br/chuvas-no-rio-repetem-tragedia-anunciada-e-acentuam-desigualdades/>.

<sup>190</sup> Edilana Damasceno, “The Climate has Changed. And Now?,” Data\_labe, November 18, 2022, <https://datalabe.org/o-clima-mudou-e-agora/>.

<sup>191</sup> “Coco Zap.”

There are some media, for example, that create WhatsApp or Telegram channels, etcetera, but I don't see that communication or that relationship with the community.<sup>192</sup>

What seems to be key in the initiatives that are facilitating meaningful conversations effectively is that they are taking active steps towards designing strategies to foster relationships: they are listening deeply to community needs and priorities, meeting people where they are, and putting people's needs at the centre of the work.

## Mutante

### *a digital movement for citizen conversation*

Mutante is a “digital movement for citizen conversation” working in Latin America to create alternatives to face polarisation, fake news, “click tyranny” and “public agendas” manufactured by private interests. Focusing on gender, human rights, mental health and the environment, Mutante practises what they call “participative journalism,” calling on audiences to actively talk about their problems, building a public agenda collectively.<sup>193</sup> María Paula Murcia, Analysis and Impact Editor at Mutante, explains:

Let's say that the Mutante Foundation starts from the idea that journalism should not be unilateral in the sense of producing information for people who consume it but do not feel compelled by or do not respond to this information. Rather ... [Mutante works with] a participatory and constructive idea of journalism in which there are different agents who have the same validity. We understand the people who consume this information as agents. They are sources ... whose stories are just as legitimate to those that one finds, for example, in traditional reporting. In that way we build participatory journalism from the social media platforms, which are the basis of our information infrastructure.<sup>194</sup>

Mutante's methodology prioritises “weaving relationships and links with people” and it encompasses three phases: *Hablar* (where they collect stories, opinions, and responses from the audiences' perspectives), *Comprender* (where they invite experts to contribute evidence) and *Actuar* (where they roll out actions and content that empower citizens to do something about the issues they're facing).

### Starting where people are

During Mutante's first couple of years, they chose not to have a website, but rather focused on building a relationship with their audiences on the platforms and in the spaces that were most commonly used:

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<sup>192</sup> Interview with a journalist working in a Caribbean country.

<sup>193</sup> “Somos Mutante,” Mutante, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.mutante.org/somos-mutante/>.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with María Paula Murcia.

At the beginning .... we chose to be where the people were. In the end, building an audience that migrates to a web page from the mainstream social media platforms is very complex. So we did it the other way around: first we built an audience on social media platforms, mainly on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, and from there we built a website.

Mutante promotes conversations around gender issues, mental health, climate emergency and human rights. At the time we spoke to them for this research, Mutante were promoting conversations to amplify the understanding of human mobility due to climate causes in Colombia and to expose inequalities behind energy poverty in Colombian islands, and they have continued to create spaces for dialogue about the impacts of the climate emergency.<sup>195</sup>

A key strategy described by interviewees lies in recognising that information ecosystems are made of both online and offline spaces. While the logic of digital platforms can influence current flows of information even in low-connectivity contexts, many individuals who engaged with this research highlighted the need to also focus in non-digital spaces to truly strengthen information ecosystems.

Many particularly focused on the value of building spaces for conversations in physical spaces as a way to break silos and isolation, and to help foster a sense of community. For example, journalists Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill explain how this can help individuals and communities become more resilient to disinformation flowing in online spaces:

If we don't create these ecosystems that are a mix [of both digital and non-digital spaces], how do we create this resilience? In our vision [we find it important to raise the question]: "But what if we move away from digital?" It's about getting people to check out this information in real life. For example, we always talk about participating in councils at municipal level, about how it is a way of accessing information that makes people know how to verify it. If an individual is informed by the services she accesses, she'll be more resilient [to mis- and disinformation]. When there's a message like "don't get vaccinated, it'll kill you", if she knows the [public] health centre, and the health centre has an informational relationship with her, she is more resilient [to false information]. Anyway, I still believe in the local press, so that's why we say that it's a very complex composition,<sup>196</sup> but it will shield people from [information inequality], maybe not completely, but it will offer more tools for people to deal with it.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Mutante, "Refundar en "tierra firme": Necesidades y acciones para hablar, comprender y actuar sobre el desplazamiento climático," Mutante, (February 2024), <https://www.mutante.org/contenidos/refundar-en-tierra-firme-necesidades-y-acciones-para-hablar-comprender-y-actuar-sobre-el-desplazamiento-climatico/>; Juan Manuel Flórez Arias (con apoyo de La Liga Contra El Silencio), "La luz perdida: cuando el sol se apagó en las islas," *Mutante*, (March 2024), <https://www.mutante.org/contenidos/la-luz-perdida-cuando-el-sol-se-apago-en-las-islas/>; Mutante (@Mutanteorg), "Alguna vez estuviste en una playa que, años después, desapareció? ¿Te preocupa lo que podría pasar con las playas en Colombia?...," Instagram, March 19, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/mutanteorg/reel/C4tGEJBotcr/?hl=en>.

<sup>196</sup> To facilitate comprehension, in this section, the interviewee is referring to the idea that local press is part of a broader composition of actors, such as local trusted institutions, who should all be working to fight information inequality.

<sup>197</sup> Izabela Moi in an interview with Izabela Moi and Nina Weingrill

## Instituto Lamparina

### *Mobilising through public art exhibitions*

Instituto Lamparina has built narrative strategies for social justice causes in Brazil that combine digital campaigning and pop culture with a strong presence in physical spaces. Gabi Juns, director and co-founder of Instituto Lamparina, explains the rationale behind their campaign *Juízas Negras Para Ontem*, which coordinated art exhibitions in streets all over Brazil, to create mobilisation around the demand of having Brazil's first Black woman judge in the country's Supreme Federal Court:

Our idea is not to focus on purely digital campaigns ... we realised that we can have a greater impact on people's emotions when real things happen. [Not focusing on exclusively digital spaces] brings this sense of reality. The digital [sphere] is in a cultural dispute of disinformation, distrust and so on. But when we take it to the street, we build trust in digital. We realised that sometimes very simple actions, like sticking a poster on the walls of the city and having a photo of that in the newspapers – when we [have something like these posters featured in the] newspaper, [the campaign] has much more impact than [when nothing is] done offline. Sometimes very simple things bring a sense of “this [discussion] is real, this is happening”, and that moves [readers]. It's less for the people passing by on the street and more for [the impact] having an image of [an intervention in] real life happening.<sup>198</sup>

Given that Brazil's government is made up of majority white men, this initiative responds to a pressing need from local social justice movements.<sup>199</sup> During one of the community calls for this project, Nina Viera, curator from *Juízas Negras Para Ontem*, shared how they reproduced murals featuring artwork from 24 artists across various cities in Brazil, drawing media attention.<sup>200</sup>

Nina shared how using art and collective action led to an issue that had been very important for social movements to be discussed in traditional media and become infused in the national “imaginary”. This project used physical space (as well as multimedia) to transmit awareness around an issue to new audiences, invoking new representations of Black women in the media and sparking public conversations.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Interview with Gabi Juns

<sup>199</sup> Bruna Pereira and Macarena Aguilar, “More Black women are running for office in Brazil than ever. Can they win?” Open Democracy, September 23, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/black-women-candidates-brazil-general-election/>.

<sup>200</sup> “Mostra Nacional: Juízas Negras para Ontem,” Juízas Negras para Ontem, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.juizasnegrasparaontem.com.br/>.

<sup>201</sup> It is important to note that at the same time as this campaign was happening there were other Brazilian organisations also campaigning with the same goals, which added to the impact of the campaign. The organisation Mulheres Negras Decidem and Instituto Marielle Franco, for example, are two organisations led by Black women who have been working to increase Black women's political participation and who conducted impactful campaigns.



## Quid and Instituto Lamparina “Polyvocal” mobilising (with) feelings of hope and community

Quid and Instituto Lamparina shared with us some learnings from their work in a collective campaign, which involved many civil society actors, to get Brazilian youth to register to vote during one of the most important elections in the country’s recent history.<sup>202</sup>

Maíra Berutti, Director of Intelligence at Quid, talks about their work getting young people to vote – she says that focusing on recovering positive feelings formerly associated with democratic institutions is key:

We did social listening analysis that helped us understand what was being said about registering to vote, how the youth were mobilised or demobilised in relation to this issue. We identified a lot of nostalgia [...] We had this first insight that we would have to rescue a little of this, this positive feeling that existed in relation to that moment of the vote. Then we held discussion groups to understand some of the demotivation. We talked to young people who had already registered to vote and young people who hadn’t, so we could understand some of these nuances.

Gabi Juns from Instituto Lamparina talked about how they worked within a campaign ecosystem – that is, a group of different campaigns from different organisations with similar goals<sup>203</sup> – which emphasised to people that the issues they were campaigning around weren’t just “activist” issues: they were about people’s lives. This was especially important given Brazil’s highly polarised context:

I think that what we got very right [in the campaign] was finding [various] channels and messengers, not [just] activists. [So that the public would] understand that our causes are not “activist” causes: they are about life. And then we achieved some things in 2022 that were interesting: instead of all the organisations doing one unique campaign, we understood that we were going for a strategy of a lot of diversity. [With this], we also created the feeling that everyone is talking about [the issues] – not just a “small group of activists”. We’re seeing the strength of “pulverisation”. So, if I have to make campaign materials for five organisations to be able to position themselves with five different [visual] identities, I’m going to do it.

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<sup>202</sup> This campaign involved many civil society actors in Brazil and we encourage readers to learn more about this collaborative effort: “Speak Yourself: Mobilizing Youth to Win Brazil’s 2022 Election,” *Words to Win By*, podcast, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://wordstowinby-pod.com/speak-yourself/>; Letícia Paiva, “Mobilizações nas redes sociais buscam aumentar peso do voto jovem nas eleições 2022,” *Jota*, (April 2022), <https://www.jota.info/eleicoes/mobilizacoes-nas-redes-sociais-buscam-aumentar-peso-do-voto-jovem-nas-eleicoes-2022-25042022?non-beta=1>; Mariana Sanches, “Quem está por trás de campanha por voto jovem postada por Leo DiCaprio e que irritou Bolsonaro?,” *BBC News Brasil*, (May 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-61347034>.

<sup>203</sup> “Words To Win By,” *Words to Win By*, podcast, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://wordstowinby-pod.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/BRAZIL-WORDS-TO-WIN-BY-S3-Google-Docs.pdf>.

With this, the campaign defined itself as “polyvocal”, with “many voices coming together, each voice individual and distinct and speaking for change in the same direction”. They used messages that would inspire young people to vote by bringing up the reasons why they would vote (such as “Go vote for the Amazonian Forest” or “Go vote for Indigenous participation in politics”) and used creative strategies like working with the fanclub of a popular K-Pop band, getting support from celebrities and influencers and designing beautiful pieces that alluded to the progressive future they were working towards.<sup>204</sup>

In 2022, the year when this campaign was rolled out, Brazil had a record number of young voters registering to vote.<sup>205</sup>

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**204** “Words To Win By.”

**205** “TSE comemora número recorde de jovens eleitores nas Eleições 2022,” Tribunal Regional Eleitoral-CE, last updated June 19, 2022, <https://www.tre-ce.jus.br/comunicacao/noticias/2022/Maio/tse-comemora-numero-recorde-de-jovens-eleitores-nas-eleicoes-2022>.



## 05

### Creating the infrastructure we envision: building new systems centering the environment, contexts, knowledge traditions and existing technologies

Our interviewees and others we engaged with during this research emphasised the need for infrastructure that respects different knowledge traditions, especially Indigenous and Quilombola, and that avoids extractive methods.

Throughout our research, our interviewees and community call participants shared examples of how they have been quite literally building new digital systems and infrastructures from scratch, to allow for a diversity of actors to contribute to producing, using and sharing information.

These methods draw on knowledge from Indigenous, Quilombola, and Afro-descendent communities and leaders, recognizing that these sources of knowledge and ways of knowing are crucial to disseminating information. They incorporate climate justice and the environment as central elements.

In our third community call, Kiado Cruz from Indigital Initiatives reminded us that in developing infrastructure we must remember the eco-political toll of new technology. He brought in ideas of recycling infrastructure and re-investigating existing solutions to build more robust infrastructure. Throughout the region, others are also thinking about how infrastructure can be built in ways that are more aligned with socio-environmental justice. For example, one organisation in Brazil, Coolab, developed a prototype bamboo tower as a more inclusive and locally grown community network infrastructure.<sup>206</sup>

Amaryllis Llanos from Movimiento Cesar sin Fracking y Sin Gas also cautioned against the extractivist practices and mineral waste which commonly occur in adopting new technologies. She reminded us there must be balance in widening access to information while respecting the environment.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Krishnakumar Singh et al., “Bamboo for community networks: A plantation manual for Green Tower infrastructure,” *APC and Rhizomatica*, (February 2023), <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/final-book-english.pdf>.

<sup>207</sup> Johnson, “The hill is no longer called by its own name.”

Brazilian researcher Thiane Neves Barros shares how there needs to be a restructuring and reimagining of what infrastructure looks like in the Amazon. She discusses how, in her perspective, the government of Brazil has not prioritised the Amazon region, despite it covering more than half of the national territory. In terms of internet access, she argues the development of further infrastructure must reflect people's needs and contexts. She shares:

We need to think about how we can revise this business model and, at the same time, guarantee and stimulate community participation. Because, in the same way that community radio revolutionised community networks, today's internet access can be an opportunity to take ownership of technology, access and appropriation of technology, and access and autonomy for community decisions about what to do and how to do it.

Centering community needs and participation is key in building infrastructures, as is respecting knowledge traditions and existing structures.<sup>208</sup>

Creating systems of documentation and archives is also essential, to retain knowledge of what has been done and what has worked. Sometimes projects end due to limitations in staffing or funding, but the lessons learned and the knowledge gained are key to building new infrastructure and practices. In our interview, Leonardo Aranda from Medialabmx shares:

The effort is often very large and it's natural that a moment of exhaustion arrives and you say, "Well, the project has fulfilled its life cycle, it disappears." And when these types of projects disappear, they often leave no history and often leave no archive. And that makes it seem like nothing has been done when a lot has been done. We have been around for ten years, but there are spaces that maybe have been around for 20; there are [also] spaces that existed 20 years ago and no longer exist today.<sup>209</sup>

Ensuring that projects have a digital footprint, documenting organisations' stories, preserving memories and maintaining sustainable archives are ways in which organisations can remember and build on existing structures.<sup>210</sup> Likewise, in addition to documentation, choosing tools and tech that foster autonomy and resilience are other areas in which organisations are intentionally building infrastructures. In our interview with VitaActiva, they comment that in the advent of new tools and technologies, they have found the need to create their own systems as they try to "use the tools without them using us".<sup>211</sup> Ensuring autonomy, context-specificity and environmentally conscious decision-making in the restoration of information infrastructures is time consuming, but essential to building systems that will thrive.

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<sup>208</sup> Interview with Thiane Neves Barros

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Leonardo Aranda

<sup>210</sup> For more on documentation read our blogs: Bárbara Paes, "How do we document (and communicate!) our work when there's so much other work to do," *The Engine Room (blog)*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.the-engineerroom.org/library/how-do-we-document-and-communicate-our-work-when-theres-so-much-other-work-to-do/>; Cathy Richards, "How to Tell Your Organisation's Data Story," *The Engine Room (blog)*, March 21, 2024, <https://www.theengineerroom.org/library/how-to-tell-your-organisations-data-story/>.

<sup>211</sup> Interview with Nicole Martin

## How Medialabmx is taking innovative approaches to storytelling

In their work, Medialabmx is critical of taking technologies and tools at face value. In our interview they disclose how important it is to question the “dominant understandings” that define what technology is and what media is. They “expand the notion of media and technology” to include art as well as critical reflection on how we use digital technologies and how they relate to space.

They take this framing into their work, using technology and art in creative ways for storytelling. In the project *Voz pública*, which worked to document accounts of gender violence, they created an online platform for women and non-binary people to anonymously contribute textual and written personal accounts of gender violence.<sup>212</sup>

Dora Bartilotti, from Medialabmx, explains that they also wanted to combine the materialities of textiles and electronics for the project:

The textile ... was [there] to expand the notion of technology, as a technology from which we could work on different metaphors about the relationship between body, territory, textile text, voice, body, and public space. Based on these relationships, a series of textiles were generated that were a sort of spokesperson mechanism that amplified the stories of gender violence that were collected from the online platform.

The online text ended up forming a database of stories that was later or automatically downloaded through the electronic textile and converted into voice through a process of voice synthesis. It had a small program, a micro laptop – and then there are also metaphors between mobility and embodiment; to be able to take these stories to the public space.<sup>213</sup>

Medialabmx have also taken innovative approaches to visualising and documenting cases of forced disappearances and mining extractivism in Mexico, through mapping practices. Medialabmx’s approach – of widening our understanding of what technology is and how we interact with it – has resulted in powerful storytelling platforms using a variety of materials, methodologies and messaging.

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<sup>212</sup> For more information about this project, visit: “Voz Pública”, Medialabmx, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://medialabmx.org/tag/voz-publica/>

<sup>213</sup> Interview with Dora Bartilotti





## 06

### Protecting those who suffer from the impacts of hostility: activists, communicators and journalists

Healthy information ecosystems make room for diverse and pluralistic sources of information.<sup>214</sup> However, as previously discussed, LAC is often unsafe for those who work to create and disseminate information. For the individuals and organisations who engaged with this research, the restoration of information ecosystems must therefore include initiatives designed to improve the safety and wellbeing of popular communicators, journalists and civil society.

In this section, we share learnings from the work of some of the individuals and organisations who contribute to protecting and supporting activists, journalists and communicators who face violence, threats of violence or persecution due to the nature of their work.<sup>215</sup>

#### Vita Activa

##### *A feminist refuge from tech-facilitated gender based violence*

Throughout LAC, expressions of *machismo* are common within the information ecosystem, with journalists, communicators and activists often finding themselves at the receiving end of online violence and attacks that have gendered dimensions.

Technology facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV, also sometimes referred to as online gender based violence) has critical impacts on the lives of people who

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<sup>214</sup> Radsch, “From our Fellows.”

<sup>215</sup> We acknowledge that there is extensive work being done throughout the region related to the protection of civil society and journalists, as well as various lists and resources from organisations who offer protection, security support, legal support, and more. This section is not intended as an extensive review of all the initiatives working on these issues in the region, but rather as a nod to how needed and crucial this work is.

have suffered it – disrupting their lives, wellbeing, and often their ability to do their work and activism; as a strategy used to silence and censor journalists, activists and communicators – especially women and LGBTQI+ people – it also has broader repercussions on the overall ecosystem by critically affecting the conditions for diverse and pluralistic sources of information to thrive.

A growing number of initiatives are fighting this concerning trend throughout the region, actively building strategies to support those impacted by TFGBV and paving the way to what could be healthier information ecosystems for LAC.<sup>216</sup> One of those initiatives is Vita Activa, a helpline founded in 2019 that provides psychological and digital first aid for women and LGBTQI+ people, journalists, activists and human rights defenders who face online gender-based violence, stress, anxiety, chronic fatigue, trauma and pain.<sup>217</sup>

Nicole Martin, director at Vita Activa, says:

We always quote this data from IWMF that says that one in three women journalists consider leaving the profession because of online attacks and threats. That's very dangerous for the information ecosystem, isn't it? <sup>218</sup>

Nicole shares how Vita Activa's main working tools are active listening and psychological first aid, since dealing with TFGBV is a destabilising and emotionally difficult experience, which often leaves people who experience it feeling like they have lost autonomy and control:

Many times in a crisis one feels as if one loses control or as if the control of one's own life has been taken away, perhaps that it seems that now one's own life is in the hands of someone else. Our helpline accompaniment is specifically dedicated to providing psychological first aid to balance, focus and restore the person's sense of control.<sup>219</sup>

Among many other things, Vita Activa's work focuses on ensuring that autonomy is in the hands of those who experienced the harm:

Our accompaniment is from a place of empathy and self-determination of the person. [A place] of the autonomy of the person to decide, to take their own course ... We do emotional stabilisation during the crisis, so that it is the person who makes their decision autonomously on how they want to continue [and handle the crisis]. <sup>220</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> We have listed some of those initiatives here and we encourage readers to explore further: Bárbara Paes, "10 inspiring initiatives fighting online political violence against women in Latin America," *The Engine Room (blog)*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.theengineroom.org/library/10-inspiring-initiatives-fighting-online-political-violence-in-latin-america/>.

<sup>217</sup> "Somos una línea de ayuda/ We are a helpline," Vita Activa, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://vita-activa.org/>.

<sup>218</sup> Interview with Nicole Martin. She quotes a report by the International Women's Media Foundation which examines the professional dangers of being a female journalist in the news media. One of the findings is that one third of women journalists have considered abandoning their profession as a result of online attacks and violence. Read more: "Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting," International Women's Media Foundation, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://www.iwmf.org/attacks-and-harassment/>.

<sup>219</sup> Interview with Nicole Martin

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Nicole Martin



# 07

## Collaborating to build healthy ecosystems

Interviewees posit that collaboration and networks allow for different actors to know about each other,<sup>221</sup> speak up while maintaining their safety in contexts where freedom of speech is limited,<sup>222</sup> and expand the work of information access.<sup>223</sup> In our first community call, participants commented on the importance of cross-country dialogue in fostering spaces where activists and journalists can work together to build healthier information ecosystems. Part of this discussion covered the need for collaboration to discuss disinformation trends in the region and work together to anticipate threats before they emerge.<sup>224</sup> This sentiment was echoed in our second community call, where a participant noted: “If the actors who are damaging information ecosystems are really good at collaborating, we have to be even better.”<sup>225</sup> The following examples showcase successful collaborations our interviewees have been a part of, specifically in addressing information disorder across issue areas.

### CLIP

#### *Collaboration as an essential element of investigative journalism*

Pablo Medina Uribe from CLIP explains that a major element of their investigative journalism work is forming alliances transnationally, to investigate and understand topics that are relevant across multiple countries. This then allows for them to amplify the work of their partners and to “be able to investigate things that perhaps we could not investigate on our own.” They define their work as taking a traditional approach to journalism, in that their aim is to “provide the public with clear and concise information on how power moves,” especially in Latin America.<sup>226</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Tomás Lawrence

<sup>222</sup> Interview with Pablo Medina Uribe

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Stefano Wroblewski

<sup>224</sup> Paes, “To Improve the Information Ecosystem.”

<sup>225</sup> Paes, “Community Diagnosis.”

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Pablo Medina Uribe

We do trainings for journalists – mainly on how to investigate better. We do it in several topics, sometimes in corporate research, sometimes in international market research, sometimes in digital research, sometimes in open source digital research and a little bit more, depending on the experience we have accumulated in the research we have done ... and the last thing is that we try to create community where you find journalists, members of civil society and citizens interested in some of those issues where we can discuss better not only how to cover those issues, but what issues are important and how you can make alliances beyond journalism to address those issues.

They explain that through taking this collaborative and community focused approach they are better able to see how issues are interconnected. For instance, they can see parallels in disinformation around mining issues, carbon emissions and corporate corruption. By connecting civil society organisations working on carbon as well as disinformation, new connections and strategies emerge.<sup>227</sup>

One example of CLIP's work is the collaborative investigative journalism project *Mercenarios Digitales*, a transnational investigation that is the result of an alliance between media organisations from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.<sup>228</sup> In gathering evidence on the impact of an international network of disinformation actors operating in the region, the investigation was able to reveal how political marketing companies are linked to the far right.

## Chequeado

### *Building alliances for fact-checking*

Chequeado has found collaboration to be an essential element of their fact-checking work. In particular, they have found value in coalitions for research and alliances during electoral processes:

In electoral times we started to make these alliances with more than 100 media outlets throughout the country to disprove disinformation, and at the same time we developed new areas that went beyond journalism and then we developed the area of education to focus on adolescents, on media literacy. And also to work with journalists on fact checking techniques, and then the innovation part to develop technology.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with Pablo Medina Uribe

<sup>228</sup> *Mercenarios digitales* is an investigation coordinated by CLIP and which included Chequeado (Argentina), UOL and Agência Pública (Brasil), LaBot (Chile), Colombiacheck y Cuestión Pública (Colômbia), CRHoy, Interferencia y Lado B (Costa Rica), GK (Ecuador), Fact Chequeado (EEUU), Ocote (Guatemala), Contracorriente (Honduras), Animal Político y Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad (México), Confidencial y República 18 (Nicaragua), Ojo Público (Peru), El Surti (Paraguay), La Diaria (Uruguay) e três jornalistas investigativas (Bolívia e Espanha/Colômbia); Cazadores de Fake News (Venezuela), Fundación Karisma (Colômbia), Interpreta Lab (Chile), Lab Ciudadano (Honduras) e DRFLab (EUA); students from “Using Data to Investigate Across Borders” led by professor Giannina Segnini (University of Columbia, USA).

<sup>229</sup> Interview with Olivia Sohr

These collaborations allowed them to take the work a step further than they initially intended:

I think our role went from creating a non-traditional publication, because we were always digital, but thought of as something more traditional, to a space that tries to intervene in different parts of that ecosystem and in different ways.

They give the specific example of a large alliance they were involved in called *Reverso*, in 2019, 2021, and in 2023. Prior to this work they had focused on more targeted alliances with media institutions to write columns but this expanded the work to more intentional sharing of educational and informational resources. They said, “we started with the journalistic part and then came the educational part and then the innovation and technology part.”

They have found research alliances to be a strong strategy in fighting disinformation through knowledge sharing, mapping information flows and conducting research. They explain:

The second thing is to generate alliances and spaces in which those who have these different capacities can interact in order to generate this map. I think it is very important and necessary to have research on the more general trends, on how disinformation circulates in the different platforms, between platforms and between countries and so on, and that we do much of that as a supplementary layer to the fact check itself or to the specific check. Many times we use the specific fact check as an input to then have a more general picture.<sup>230</sup>

Working in collaboration with other journalists and researchers has allowed for expanded reach and more robust fact-checking efforts





# Conclusion

## Ways to further support the restoration of information ecosystems



In the **Interlude**, we presented collective visions for healthy, strong information ecosystems that we gathered as the project developed. As part of our research, we also set out to map out the resources and support needed by the individuals and organisations who are working to improve information ecosystems in LAC as they work to make this vision come to life.

This **Conclusion** summarises those needs, focusing mainly on two broad themes. The first theme relates to the tech and data needs these actors currently have – many of which can be addressed with further support from the funder community. The second theme focuses on the ways funders and donors could amplify their general support of these actors.<sup>231</sup> Building upon the insights gathered earlier, we are now focusing on identifying the specific resources and support that these actors need to further strengthen and scale up the projects that are working.

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**231** It is important to note that throughout our research, interviewees and community call participants shared with us other types of support and resources the sector could benefit from, which could come from a variety of actors, including governments, legislators, international organisations, and academia. This report does not explore these issues at length.

# An overview of the tech and data needs of actors working to improve information ecosystems

Many of the individuals and organisations who engaged with this research are using technology (or are interested in using technology) in their work.

As an organisation that works to ensure social justice organisations are better equipped to use technology and data in safe, responsible and strategic ways, while actively mitigating the vulnerabilities created by digital systems, we were curious to learn how tech and data could further amplify the strength of the work of those using tech and data in a variety of ways to build stronger information ecosystems in the region.

In our conversations with the individuals who engaged with this research, we asked them to share their main challenges and needs when it came to their use of tech and data. In this section, we share an overview of these challenges.

## Improving digital resilience in hostile information ecosystems

One of the most common needs mentioned by interviewees and others who engaged with this research was the need to strengthen digital care practices and, just as importantly, to have access to resources to improve their digital resilience.<sup>232</sup>

As covered in other parts of this report, it is not uncommon for activists, journalists and communicators to experience (or be concerned about the possibility of experiencing) violations of their privacy, surveillance from States or other harmful actors, and other security incidents.

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<sup>232</sup> The Engine Room currently defines digital resilience as: “a set of practices that support the ability of an organisation to protect itself from and respond to digital security threats, to ensure the wellbeing of its members/individuals, and to adopt infrastructures that respond to the ever-changing needs and contexts of the organisation and its members.” Learn more: Carolina Hadad, “New Project: Strengthening Our Digital Resilience,” *The Engine Room (blog)*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.theengineroom.org/new-project-strengthening-our-digital-resilience/>.

In our research, we've seen it is crucial that those working to improve information ecosystems have more resources to mitigate vulnerabilities and to improve digital resilience at an organisational level, in the long term. In that sense, some of the challenges mapped during this research include insufficient access to tools that allow for safe collaboration and communication, limited access to resources to support with identifying potential threats and mitigating digital security vulnerabilities, inequities in access to the internet and digital technologies, and low availability of resources to implement internal processes that would increase their digital resilience.

## Support with making informed decisions about tech tools that are aligned with social justice values

Another area of support identified through this research is around building up the capabilities, and having the resources, to make informed decisions about technology in ways that are aligned with individuals' political values and organisational goals.

Having the ability and access to resources that would allow organisations to develop and deepen what was called by some interviewees as a "critical view of tech and data" was seen as fundamental.

Throughout community calls and interviews, individuals who engaged with this research highlighted how, in their perception, there is a need for civil society – and specifically those working to improve information ecosystems – to enter a collective, critical dialogue around the use of technology. Many talked about their interest in engaging critically with mainstream technologies and, beyond that, engaging with alternatives that are justice-based. This includes having resources to make decisions about which tools to use in ways that are aligned with their work, to use and maintain privacy-respecting open source tools, to host tools themselves and/or with partners, and to engage in trainings that allow them to develop tech intuition and familiarity with these tools.

## Capacity to choose, design and maintain tech tools and data

There is a need for support to access tools and data that allow journalists, communicators and other actors to better understand and navigate the complexities of the information ecosystems in which they operate.

For example, journalists and communicators expressed interest in having better access to tools that would allow them to "listen to their audiences" and understand which types of content they engage better with, as well as tools to build their own digital spaces. Civil society organisations similarly expressed interest in accessing tools that would allow them better understand people's social media behaviour and, consequently, provide them with more data to be able to develop strategies on how to communicate on these platforms.



Another example, more closely related to the work of organisations who research information disorder and correlated themes, is the need to be able to access data that would allow organisations to do social media listening. When it comes to organisations that state the need for using tools to verify the veracity of content that is circulating on information ecosystems, interviewees shared that they're expensive and require technical skills, which can become an obstacle.

## Going beyond novelty: Developing in-house technological solutions beyond the prototype

During our research, organisations shared how, in their perception, there seems to be more interest from funders in supporting novel work, new solutions and prototypes – and less funding available to move a product past prototype phase and into development phase. More funding for this would allow more organisations to, for example, share the tech they develop with other organisations, think more strategically about the potential use of this tech in the long term, and/or further improve it to the point they want to get it to.

Olivia Sohr from Chequeado explains how funding for maintenance of tools can be essential:

In fact, at this very moment, we are in a process with five Latin American organisations, in addition to ourselves, making iterations for a tool that we developed as the beta version. It is a social media monitoring tool that allows you to have a kind of dashboard with [information that] circulates on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, all in one place. We developed the beta version, and now we have just secured funding for the next phase, not only to develop it but to do it together with these organisations and receive feedback from others. The idea is not to develop something that is just useful for Chequeado, but to involve other organisations from the beginning to have their input.<sup>233</sup>

An interviewee working on political participation and media literacy describes how they face challenges in ensuring resources to maintain one of their projects – a database comprising an overview of “narratives spreading on social media”...The dream for us could be to have a much more permanent observatory.”<sup>234</sup>

## Support in fighting for tech infrastructure that centres climate and and environmental justice

Inequities in access to the internet, as well as broader inequities in access to information and communication technologies, were noted as challenges to the work of both individuals and organisations working for better information ecosystems. These inequities reflect a larger pattern affecting especially people who are from communities who have been historically marginalised by oppressive systems.

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<sup>233</sup> Interview with Olivia Sohr

<sup>234</sup> Interview with a civil society leader we are opting not to identify



In the work of civil society organisations, these inequities generate practical obstacles as they try to ensure quality information is reaching people as they conduct their day-to-day activities. Supporting the development of infrastructure that is respectful to the environment and context-specific, to bridge digital divides and include excluded communities, is an ongoing challenge. Interviewees indicated how solving issues related to a lack of infrastructure might require, for instance, government intervention in widening access to broadband through subsidies and an investment in rural communities, as well as community generated efforts such as community radio programming, community networks and physical community spaces.

Relatedly, the need to be able to choose digital infrastructures that are supportive of climate and environmental justice was highlighted as fundamental. Interviewees and community call participants were quick to indicate that the work that seeks to increase access to tech and to the internet must be conducted in ways that are aligned with climate and environmental justice, as well as to the rights and needs of those most affected by social injustices.

## Ability to hire data and tech talent who are interested in supporting civil society organisations

As seen in Part 1, interviewees and community call participants shared their challenges hiring and maintaining staff with technical expertise that can hinder their operations and projects. Maíra Berutti from Quid shares how difficult it is to hire tech professionals in a competitive market: “It’s the complexity of hiring qualified professionals, because [technologists] are very well paid in the private market. So it’s very difficult to bring them [to the nonprofit sector] with competitive salaries.”<sup>235</sup> Gabi Juns from Instituto Lamparina shares this perspective: “And hiring teams with this knowledge – this is very difficult for NGOs, because salaries are very different.”<sup>236</sup>

Olivia Sohr from Chequeado talks about how hard it has been to keep a tech team in-house, but being able to do this has been meaningful for their work: “Having a programming team that has already been working on all these issues and that has a trajectory and so on, also helps us a lot to know where to put our energy.” María Paula Murcia from Mutante shares how hiring people with both tech skills and an understanding of the organisation’s mission has helped the organisation move their work forward. At the same time, this isn’t attainable without dedicated funding: interviewees share how challenging it is to afford hiring these types of professionals.

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<sup>235</sup> Interview with Maíra Berutti

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Gabi Juns

# A look at some of the ways funders can further support the health of information ecosystems

## Nurturing sustainable organisations

A recent study titled ‘Philanthropic Funding Landscaping for Healthy Information Ecosystems’ by TAI-Collaborative reveals that, globally, the proportion of philanthropic resources dedicated to funding projects aimed at achieving healthier information ecosystems is very low compared to other areas.<sup>237</sup> According to Candid’s Foundation Directory, an updated research database of philanthropic giving organised by thematic codes that specialises in data from the United States (US), only 2.7% of total funds are allocated to this thematic area.<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, a significant portion of these funds remains in the US; according to this database, only around 6.2% of philanthropic funding to support information ecosystems was channelled to aid recipient countries. These findings echo the scarcity that often affects the daily work of several individuals and organisations that participated in this research.

Mirte Postema, of the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation, observes that there are fewer and fewer options to apply for institutional core funds or grants that cover more than a year of work.<sup>239</sup> This poses challenges for journalism and civil society organisations seeking to produce truthful and independent information in this region, in a context of harassment from authoritarian regimes, human rights violations, and pressure from extractive companies. She says:

There is also a lot of stress and a lot of fear and a lot of scarcity. The existence of limitations in terms of resources means that collaborations are always challenging, that is, as donors we are always going to have to ensure

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<sup>237</sup> Cristina Ordóñez, “Philanthropic funding landscaping for Healthy Information Ecosystems,” Tai Collaborative, (April 2024), <https://taicollaborative.org/philanthropic-funding-landscaping-for-healthy-information-ecosystems>.

<sup>238</sup> Ordóñez, “Philanthropic funding landscaping for Healthy Information Ecosystems”

<sup>239</sup> Interview Mirte Postema

[that collaborations are viable for organisations]. I think that only by solving this situation of scarcity will you be able to have a much more fluid dynamic of cooperation and coordination in the information ecosystem.

In order to have more collaboration, strong storytelling and creativity, Postema adds, organisations and actors need access to stable, reliable funding and support.

Carolina Amaya, founder of MalaYerba, the first independent environmental media outlet in El Salvador, talks about her experiences applying for funding:

In my case, I often feel overwhelmed applying from mini-grant to mini-grant to make ends meet. We live off projects, and as we develop themes, each of us has another job aside from MalaYerba.<sup>240</sup>

She concludes by echoing something we heard from other interviewees and community call participants throughout the project: that the funding system tends to prioritise financing specific activities or pursuing certain strategic goals, sometimes overlooking the importance of building fundamental capacities within organisations.

Starting with obtaining legal counsel to secure legal status, there is also a need for initiatives that focus on financial education, as well as programs aimed at fostering well-being and mental health or ensuring physical safety for their teams.

## Investing in system capacity

Several organisations emphasised the importance of designing funding structures with an ecosystem approach. To achieve this, there is a need to facilitate connections among diverse stakeholders, including civil society organisations working across causes, journalists, activists, grassroots communicators, researchers, and government representatives. Fostering long-term exchanges and mutual reinforcement is key to strengthening information ecosystems.

During one of the community calls for this project, Agustina Paz Frontera de Latfem, a feminist media outlet based in Argentina with regional impact in Latin America, mentioned that although disinformation and its flows operate transnationally, and it is important to unite cross-border efforts, currently there are several practical challenges that can prevent working in a network with allies from other countries.<sup>241</sup>

These challenges in trans-border collaboration were further exacerbated by the pandemic, as Leonardo Aranda from Medialabmx, an organisation that seeks to expand the idea of media and technology through community and artistic activities,

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<sup>240</sup> Interview with Carolina Amaya

<sup>241</sup> Some of those challenges include limited availability for funding for transnational projects, practical difficulties associated with transferring funds and sending money to allies in other countries, particularly in the Argentine context. Reflections from that community call are available in the blog: Paes, “Community Diagnosis.”

points out.<sup>242</sup> Several in-person events that served as “communicating vessels” for the ecosystem were diluted, as well as resources to sustain pre-existing networks. (Examples of the impact of these in-person events include, for example, the annual meetings of regional hackfeminist organisations or the LabsurLAB MediaLabs network, which helped generate sustained dialogue between organisations with different perspectives.)

“Sometimes the maintenance of the network is thought of as something subsidiary when it is those ties of solidarity that help sustain the space in the medium term,” Aranda concludes, drawing attention to the importance of funders starting to view the capacity of the system as an outcome in itself, required to sustain all other outcomes.

The importance of investing in slow-building dialogues and bonds of trust was echoed by Carol Misorelli from IRIS, who mapped challenges faced by organisations working on narrative change in the region in 2023. In one of the community calls for this project, Misorelli noted how international or national collaborations require a process of aligning values, expectations, and agenda-setting that is very often underfunded. As pointed out in a recent report titled ‘Investing in Systems Change Capacity’ by Susan Misra and Marissa Guerrero for the Stanford Social Innovation Review, the value of a strong ecosystem lies not only in accelerating progress in opportune moments but also in better protecting advances when they are under threat.<sup>243</sup>

## Including responsive approaches

Some organisations have emphasised the importance of donors not only pursuing “strategic gains” but also adopting approaches that are sensitive to the evolving needs of the ecosystem. For instance, interviewees noted that training programs are sometimes launched in specific countries and on certain topics primarily because funding is available, rather than because these are the most pressing needs locally. In another example, Juliana Uribe, founder and director of Movilizadorio, shared that since 2019, her team has been eager to implement media literacy training to prepare citizens for the advent of artificial intelligence, but this initiative has struggled to gain timely traction as securing resources for this work has been a challenge.<sup>244</sup>

Uribe also believes that donors should communicate more effectively – not only with their grantees, but also with each other. This would help minimise duplicate efforts across the ecosystem. She suggests: “If funders communicated among themselves, they could coordinate their investments more effectively by understanding the focus of each other’s funded organisations. This way, they could ensure that the funding is directed in a coordinated manner.” By fostering such open communication and collaboration, donors can allocate their resources more efficiently and effectively, reducing overlap and maximising the impact of their contributions.

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<sup>242</sup> Interview Leonardo Aranda

<sup>243</sup> Misra, Susan, and Marissa Guerrero. “Investing in Systems Change Capacity (SSIR)”. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, (January 2024). <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/investing-in-systems-change-capacity>.

<sup>244</sup> Interview Juliana Uribe

## Commitment to diversity

For Thiane Neves Barros, a Brazilian researcher who has been working for years on the experiences of Black women from the Amazon with digital technologies, philanthropic efforts to strengthen information ecosystems must ensure that underrepresented voices are funded.<sup>245</sup> As Rachel Kleinfeld from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace<sup>246</sup> argues in her article ‘Democratization and De-escalation’, in societies with increasing levels of division, such as in Latin America, “the pro-democracy coalitions cannot remain elite urban alliances”. To avoid people continuing to talk within echo chambers (in which they only encounter information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own), and to make sure that broad sectors of the population are reached with information that connects with their lives, funding should strengthen not only newsrooms but also community communicators and independent creators, who produce information in a variety of formats.

For example, in Guatemala, where traditional media have lost legitimacy due to accusations of biased reporting in favour of one party or another, figures like Sonny Figueroa and Marvin del Cid have created large organic audiences through their WhatsApp channels and Facebook profiles around investigative articles that expose and mobilise citizens against corruption. Similarly, Iliana Aguilar, Honduran feminist rapper and communicator, has created feminist content through TikTok but states that it is difficult to find funding to maintain the digital community she has built.<sup>247</sup> She says that discovering the Creadoras Camp community and receiving training from them in camera handling, design, and storytelling was pivotal for her.<sup>248</sup> Now that she has an audience, she would like to have more resources to produce more videos. However, there are few opportunities for micro-funds to strengthen these new formats and voices.

During the second community call for this project, Ana Lucia Ramirez from Mujeres Al Borde, a transfeminist organisation that organises festivals and film schools, and produces and distributes films about LGBTIQP+ rights shared that, in their perspective, the playing field is not level and that some organisations may have advantages over others.<sup>249</sup> They say that, in their experience, the design of calls for funding can be sometimes tailored for a very “specific type” of organisation. On this same topic, Dayana Blanco Acendra, director of ILEX-Acción Jurídica, an organisation led by Afro-Colombian lawyers that supports grassroots organisations working for social justice, believes that it is also important for donors to be aware that it is crucial to level the playing field for new leadership, such as Black women. In regions like the Colombian Pacific Coast, this diversification of power structures can, for example, counter the

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<sup>245</sup> Interview with Thiane Neves Barros

<sup>246</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld, “Democratization and De-escalation,” *BTI Transformation Index (blog)*, April 23, 2024, <https://blog.bti-project.org/2024/04/23/democratization-and-de-escalation/>.

<sup>247</sup> Iliana Aguilar (@isaaaaura), “video,” TikTok, October 5, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@isaaaaura/video/7151042191547239686>.

<sup>248</sup> “Creadoras Camp,” Creadoras LatAm, accessed June 26, 2024, <https://creadoraslatam.com/>.

<sup>249</sup> Ana Lucia Ramirez from Mujeres Al Borde during a community call for this project.



patriarchal structures that block women's access to information related to reproductive and sexual rights.<sup>250</sup> Foundation for a Just Society and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund have published research on how philanthropies have overlooked funding for Black feminist organisations in LAC, noting that oftentimes these organisations rely on self-generated funds to do their work.<sup>251</sup> Increasing funding to underrepresented organisations, especially those led by Black women and those who dissent from sexual and gender norms will be an essential step.

Red tape also affects some organisations more than others. Newly created organisations, particularly those in rural areas or with small teams, report suffering from the “bureaucratisation” of funding delivery. They are often required to have a “fiscal sponsor”, an established organisation that manages the grant funds on their behalf, which they may not yet have, or they may lack accounts with specific characteristics. These bureaucratic barriers often disproportionately impact organisations led by or serving underrepresented communities, further limiting their access to crucial funding opportunities. Additionally, knowledge of English impacts organisations' access to funding from international funders and a lack of training in funding cycles pose significant limitations. To address these challenges, Pablo Medina from investigative journalism network CLIP says that one of the functions they have performed is to serve as an intermediary, helping emerging media receive their first funding to start joint investigative projects.

## Investing in audience strategies to better serve the public

New strategies to create more participatory spaces around information are emerging in the region, which involve engaging with people and communities not only as sources or audiences but also as participants in genuine conversations. To achieve this, new tools – digital or analogue – are needed to listen deeply to audiences' needs, interests, and vulnerabilities in terms of disinformation. Innovative strategies should then be sought to share this knowledge back with these audiences, in order to serve them better.

However, there are few sources of funding that allow journalists and civil society organisations to establish medium-term relationships with specific communities. For instance, I25A in Guatemala states that it would benefit from having more consolidated funds for data generation and resources to further deepen their relationships with neighbours, strengthen its neighbourhood organisation and better address common problems “through training, listening spaces and generation of narrative knowledge”.<sup>252</sup> Some media outlets doing solutions journalism told us that their work is not just about “covering an event”, but about engaging in a long-term process with local communities,

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<sup>250</sup> Interview with Dayana Blanco

<sup>251</sup> Foundation for a Just Society and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, “Resourcing Black Feminist Organizing in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Black Feminists Latin America and the Caribbean*, last updated 2023, <https://blackfeministlac.org/>.

<sup>252</sup> Interview Sandra Xoquic

which allows them to better understand the problems affecting people and identify the collective solutions communities want to advocate for. These journalistic investigations can involve processes that last several months, and often there is not enough funding.<sup>253</sup>

To reach certain audiences, another limitation relates to the high costs of social listening/digital platform research tools and the limited availability of data: “How can we also access and listen massively to our audiences when the tools that allow us to do that cost what they cost?” asks María Paula Murcia from Mutante.

Fact-checkers and organisations that want to work on prebunking or analysing discriminatory discourse against vulnerable groups on the internet also complain about the barriers to accessing specialised software for tracking disinformation campaigns.<sup>254</sup> They would also like to analyse rumours or problematic information travelling between different countries in the region, or have better tools for verifying deepfakes, but they lack sufficient support.

Several interviewees mentioned that donors remain heavily focused on financing traditional communication teams, consisting of a journalist, a community manager, and someone dedicated to events. However, in the face of the growing attention economy, where information competes with entertainment and “digital noise”, civil society groups and newsrooms need to have in-house capabilities not only to maintain social media accounts but also to build and sustain connected communities and audiences.

For example, Maira Berutti, director of intelligence at Quid, states that in Brazil, one of the most effective forms of content distribution is through WhatsApp group networks. However, for this to work, organisations need to have several people dedicated to maintaining the community dynamics in these spaces on a daily basis, which is difficult to fund. It is also important to form distribution strategies between organisations and artists, documentary producers, and cultural makers to harness the entertainment sector for narrative change (which has been noted as a growing donor portfolio globally).<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> We share more about the work of El Otro País in the blog post: Vélez Vieira, “Roots and Infrastructure.”

<sup>254</sup> Prebunking refers to the process of forewarning people that they might be exposed to disinformation and/or misinformation, so that if they do get exposed to it, they will be more resilient. Read more: Stephan Lewandowsky and Sander van der Linden, “Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 32 (2) (2021): 348–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983>; Jon Roozenbeek, Sander van der Linden, and Thomas Nygren, “Prebunking interventions based on “inoculation” theory can reduce susceptibility to misinformation across cultures,” *Harvard Kennedy School’s Misinformation Review*, (February 2020), <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/global-vaccination-badnews/>.

<sup>255</sup> Aisha Shillingford, “Building the Cultural Power Ecosystem,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, (Winter 2024), [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building\\_the\\_cultural\\_power\\_ecosystem#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_the_cultural_power_ecosystem#).

Ultimately, when it comes to restoring information ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean, change isn't going to happen overnight. As we've seen throughout this report, the imbalances of information ecosystems in these regions reflect broader systemic issues faced there. At the same time, this research has also made clear that the collective vision for healthy, more robust information ecosystems is already being built: various initiatives across civil society (some of which were mentioned in this report, many more that weren't) are working to get us closer to where we want to be.

In order for their work to continue to flourish, they need more support. We hope that this report provides some insight, inspiration and direction for those looking to further this work.



# Appendix Interviewees

- Ana Arriagada, Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)
- Carolina Amaya, MalaYerba
- Daniel Villatoro, International Women's Media Foundation
- Dayana Blanco Acendra, Ilex Acción Jurídica
- Desiree Esquivel, SembraMedia
- Desirée Yépez, Ella Cuenta, Mullu TV and Radio Ambulante
- Dora Bartilotti, Medialabmx
- Eliana Robles, Ilex Acción Jurídica
- Fabiola Gutiérrez, SembraMedia
- Francisco José González López, Movilizadorio
- Gabi Juns, Instituto Lamparina
- Iliana Aguilar, Creadoras Camp and La Terricuerpa
- Indhira Suero, SembraMedia
- Izabela Moi, Agência Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias
- José Hernandez, SembraMedia
- Juliana Uribe, Movilizadorio
- Leonardo Aranda, Medialabmx
- Maira Berutti, Quid
- María Paula Murcia, Mutante
- Mirte Postema, the Independent Journalism Fund of Seattle International Foundation
- Nicole Martin, Vita Activa
- Nina Weingrill, Énois and Escola de Jornalismo
- Olivia Sohr, Chequeado
- Pablo Medina Uribe, Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP)
- Sandra Xoquic, Instituto 25A
- Stefano Wroblewski, InfoAmazonia
- Thiane Neves Barros, Rede Transfeminista de Cuidados Digitais
- Tomás Lawrence, Interpreta





# THE ENGINE ROOM