Smartmatic

December 22, 2024

Their Article:

Prebunking: A New Tool Against Election Disinformation

Ever since 'fake news' disrupted crucial votes such as Brexit and the 2020 US Presidential Election, election stakeholders have been grappling with the challenge of disinformation. In fact, **the deterioration of information ecosystems has become so pervasive and ubiquitous that it's recognized as one of the biggest threats to election integrity** by organizations like the World Economic Forum and the Brennan Center for Justice.

Fortunately, a relatively new tool, known as prebunking, is showing promising results in the fight against disinformation and other forms of misinformation.

The concept of prebunking can be compared to vaccination in medicine, where the body is exposed to a weakened form of a pathogen to stimulate an immune response without causing illness. Similarly, prebunking presents pre-emptive counterarguments to false claims, thereby strengthening resilience against future misinformation. As in medicine, prevention is more impactful than cure. The goal is to equip audiences with the ability to identify and resist misinformation before it gains traction.

Leading prebunking researchers at companies like Google's Jigsaw and academic institutions like the University of Cambridge realized that misinformation 'has an Achilles heel'. That is, it frequently employs repetitive tactics and patterns. By recognizing these patterns historically, **they can anticipate and counteract future misinformation through pre-bunking.** These researchers are among the main proponents of prebunking.

IDEA International, an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide, analyzed disinformation in 53 countries across all continents between 2016 and 2021. Their study revealed that election-related disinformation is indeed repetitive. Specifically, **48% of disinformation targets the vote counting and voting processes**, and nearly 50% of all attacks occur during the voting period of the cycle.

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Allegations that technology has been hacked by foreign actors, that servers are located abroad, or that technology vendors are owned by nefarious entities are recurring themes. These claims became even more prevalent following the disinformation campaigns surrounding the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.

Given the repetitive nature of disinformation, election management bodies have an opportunity to anticipate where and how it will emerge. **This foresight can be leveraged to design proactive strategies, or "vaccines,"** to combat disinformation effectively.

A key advantage of prebunking is its focus on addressing broader narratives and the underlying manipulation techniques used to spread misinformation. Unlike fact-checking or warning labels on social media, which concentrate on debunking individual claims, prebunking takes a wider view of the information ecosystem. **This broader perspective allows election management bodies to tackle disinformation proactively**, without appearing politicized in their responses to false claims. Moreover, by exposing the techniques behind disinformation rather than targeting specific content, prebunking reduces the risk of accusations of infringing on free speech, offering a balanced and effective approach to safeguarding public trust.

While prebunking in elections is relatively new, promising experiences in recent elections provide reasons for optimism. Researchers from Yale University and the University of California, San Diego, demonstrated in a study that watching a prebunking video explaining the reasons behind the time taken to count ballots can significantly increase trust in election outcomes. This approach can mitigate up to 4 out of the 6 percentage points of distrust caused by reporting delays.

Although prebunking may not be a panacea, when it is well-implemented and combined with other techniques such as debunking, labeling, and voter literacy, **it becomes an invaluable tool for election management bodies in the fight against disinformation.**

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The Truth:

The article above from Smartmatic, while ostensibly discussing the solution to disinformation through prebunking, subtly employs several psychological manipulation tactics aimed at controlling the narrative and conditioning public perception:

Establishing Authority and Credibility: By citing what some people think are esteemed organizations like the World Economic Forum and the Brennan Center for Justice, Smartmatic attempts to position itself as some kind of authority on election integrity. This tactic leverages the halo effect, where the positive attributes of these respected institutions are transferred to Smartmatic, enhancing its perceived trustworthiness without necessarily proving its own systems' reliability.

Fear-Mongering: The article begins with a dire warning about the threat of disinformation to elections, invoking fear about the 'deterioration of information ecosystems'. This emotional manipulation tactic is designed to make readers anxious about the integrity of elections, thereby making them more receptive to Smartmatic's proposed solution, prebunking. Sadly, fear sells.

Repetitive Pattern Recognition: Smartmatic describes misinformation as having repetitive tactics, suggesting that they are well-versed in these patterns due to their research and partnerships with academic bodies like Cambridge and Google's Jigsaw. This establishes a narrative where Smartmatic is the expert in identifying and countering disinformation, subtly implying that their proprietary systems are above scrutiny because they understand the threats better than anyone else.

Prebunking as Conditioning: The concept of "prebunking" itself can be seen as a conditioning tactic. By framing prebunking as a

preventive measure against misinformation, Smartmatic is conditioning the public to accept their narrative before any counter-narrative can even be formed. This preemptive strategy is designed to inoculate the public against questioning Smartmatic's systems or practices, by preemptively discrediting potential criticisms as disinformation.

Generalization Over Specificity: By focusing on the broad techniques of disinformation rather than addressing specific instances or criticisms of their own systems, Smartmatic avoids detailed scrutiny. This tactic diverts attention from any potential flaws in their technology by generalizing the problem, making it seem as if any critique is just another example of the disinformation they are combating.

Appeal to Public Trust: The article suggests that prebunking combats disinformation without appearing politicized, thus positioning Smartmatic as an impartial guardian of the electoral process. This can be seen as an attempt to manipulate public trust by presenting themselves as defenders of democracy rather than as the commercial entity with vested interests that they are.

Selective Research Presentation: Mentioning specific studies that support prebunking while not addressing the potential for misuse or the criticisms of such methods is yet another form of manipulation. It presents a one-sided view that conveniently favors Smartmatic's narrative on election integrity.

Their intent here appears to be not to inform, but to preemptively shape public opinion in a way that discourages skepticism or new, potentially damaging, information about Smartmatic's voting systems. This article can be seen as an effort to condition citizens to trust Smartmatic's proprietary and opaque systems over public transparency and open scrutiny,

which are fundamental to democratic accountability.

I encourage all citizens NOT to fall for these tactics, and instead to question the motives behind such information operations. The only way for the people to legitimately trust THEIR elections is if the PEOPLE are who once again run THEIR elections. Remember, EARNED trust is worlds better than MANDATED trust, especially by those who profit on our blind trust.