

# COUNTERING DISINFORMATION IN ECUADOR

*Democracy! The Podcast*, Season 1 Episode 2, Under Attack: Malign Influence & Disinformation, 2021.



In Ecuador, the explosive growth of digital and social media has only fueled the fiery problem of disinformation. In 2013, former Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa passed a “gag law” to silence critical voices within the mainstream media. While the initiative failed to reign in dissenting voices on social media, it did give rise to “troll centers” connected to Correa and his supporters.

To help Ecuadorians get fact-based, reliable reporting in the lead-up to this year’s elections, the International Republican Institute’s team, working under the CEPPS consortium with funding from USAID, partnered with the government, the electoral body, civil society and candidate stakeholders to develop programs to counter disinformation and cyber-attacks.

Miguel Hernandez has served throughout Latin America since joining the International Republican Institute in 2004. As the Resident Program Director for Ecuador, he spoke with **CEPPS *Democracy! The Podcast* host, Adrienne Ross.**

## AR: What was Ecuador’s disinformation environment like before President Guillermo Lasso was elected in February 2021?

MH: Disinformation has reached new heights in Ecuador because of digitalization. During the run-up to the 2017 election, instances of disinformation were created in “troll centers” and were disseminated through social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. These campaigns aimed to discredit the opponents of then-President Rafael Correa. This same type of disinformation campaign was utilized both in the 2019 election and the conflicts in October of the same year and is still seen today during the COVID-19 crisis.

In fact, at least 18 troll centers have been identified in Ecuador, alone. In July 2020, Facebook removed a network that focused on several Latin American countries, aiming to influence political topics in the region. 77 of these pages were created by a single Facebook account and 55 Instagram accounts were connected to these troll centers in Ecuador.

## What sort of partnerships have you created through this program?

For the 2021 election, IRI is working to create systems of credible information and promote digital etiquette among stakeholders in the election. This offers the electorate impartial information.



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We want the media to rethink their current approach to informing the public.

IRI also assists the electoral body in the construction of communication protocol and has facilitated a discussion on the regulation of electoral expenses, including how campaigns use social media and other digital platforms.

We're also working with companies like Facebook by facilitating discussions with the government and electoral commission to better understand how algorithms can identify disinformation and, most importantly, its source.

### Could you see immediately that your work was making a difference?

Absolutely, the first challenge of combatting disinformation was identifying the source. We worked with the electoral commission on spending regulation and a digital etiquette pact. These tools made a difference for the authorities and civil society organizations to monitor and report disinformation and political violence.

### Could you see immediately that your work was making a difference in presidential the campaign?

Information attacks in Ecuador are a reality. In September 2019, the personal data of almost the entire population (almost 7 million people), was leaked from a government server. In 2017, on the day of the election, there was an electrical blackout that affected the national electoral council. The results of the election were inaccessible for an hour that evening. When the election commission portal got back online, it showed Lenin Moreno ahead with 80% of the votes. This was not in line with the trends we saw before the blackout.

IRI's efforts to improve the security of the national electoral council included training for 20 officers from the election commission. In this workshop, the participants were given the **Latin American Civil Security Campaign Playbook**, which was developed by IRI with Harvard University and the National Democratic Institute. The playbook outlines how to counter digital threats to democracy in areas such as data security, voting, and governance.

### What is the greatest thing you have learned about malign influence and disinformation in Ecuador?

Coordination is needed between the electoral body, the government and companies such as Microsoft, Facebook, and Twitter to identify information threats. However, the greatest force to counter disinformation is the media. The media must support credible sources of information to end the cycle of misinformation.

Media in Ecuador must find new ways to attract readers, effectively communicate, and rebuild the public's trust and interest. As more reliable, independent sources of information emerge, media in Ecuador will expand its contribution to the democratic process.

A well-informed society translates into well-informed political decisions.

**Read more from Miguel Hernandez [here](#).**



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