

Executive Summary

Reliable Information and Information Integrity for a Resilient Liberal Democracy

Purpose of the report

The report examines information integrity as a core condition for the resilience of liberal democracy in Austria. Its starting point is simple but far-reaching: **democratic accountability is only possible when citizens and institutions have access to reliable, independent, pluralistic and verifiable information.**

A liberal democracy is not defined by elections alone. It depends on limited and accountable power, the rule of law, fundamental rights, equality before the law, and effective parliamentary, judicial and public oversight. These safeguards can function only if parliamentarians, courts, journalists, researchers and citizens are able to obtain relevant information, scrutinise decisions, identify abuses of power and hold those responsible to account.

The report therefore treats information integrity not primarily as a question of combating individual pieces of disinformation, but as a question of **democratic infrastructure**. It asks whether the information environment enables society to detect, challenge and correct concentrations and abuses of power before democratic erosion becomes entrenched.

The analysis combines research on democratic resilience with a structured discussion of Austrian vulnerabilities, reform needs and policy options. The Austrian component draws in particular on an online discussion involving experts, academics, politicians and members of the Chance Demokratie network. The discussion was organised around four areas: the independence and future of ORF, Austria's public-service broadcaster; responses to disinformation, platform dynamics, AI manipulation and attacks on journalists; the design of media funding and government communication; and the transparency and accountability of political decision-making.

Information integrity is a democratic requirement, not a policy of state-defined truth

The report starts from the principle that **a liberal democracy does not require citizens to agree on political conclusions, values or priorities**. Political disagreement is inherent to democracy.

What democracy does require, however, is a sufficiently common basis of verifiable facts and procedures through which claims can be tested, criticised and corrected. If citizens increasingly inhabit separate realities in which even basic facts can no longer be jointly examined, meaningful democratic disagreement becomes more difficult.

The state should therefore not determine what constitutes political truth. Its role is to safeguard the conditions under which truth can be sought and claims can be tested. These conditions include independent journalism, free research, pluralistic media, access to public information, transparent

decision-making, open debate and the capacity of citizens to assess sources and distinguish between facts, opinions, advertising, propaganda and political communication.

This understanding also broadens the concept of freedom of opinion. Free political will formation is not secured merely by allowing everyone to speak. It can also be undermined by covert influence, systematic deception, manipulated distribution mechanisms or information environments that make reliable information difficult to identify or reach.

The objective of information-integrity policy must therefore be to **protect free democratic contestation, not to replace it.**

Information integrity as a system of democratic checks

A central argument of the report is that reliable information is indispensable because liberal democracy is a system of **limited and controllable power**.

Independent journalism plays a particularly important role. It gathers information, checks claims, explains complex developments and subjects public and private power to independent scrutiny. Its democratic value therefore extends beyond the provision of news. Journalism enables citizens to judge political action and provides parliament, civil society, academia and other institutions with information that can make accountability possible.

Pluralism is essential because no single institution can perform this function alone. A resilient information order therefore requires a diversity of independent newsrooms, public-service and private media, local and regional reporting, investigative journalism, specialist journalism and different editorial perspectives.

The purpose of pluralism is not to treat every claim as equally credible. Professional journalism must continue to assess information according to verifiable standards. Pluralism instead means preventing any government, political party, business interest, platform company or single media organisation from gaining the capacity to dominate the public information environment.

This is also why formal press freedom is insufficient. Journalism can be legally free while becoming materially dependent. Political influence may operate through appointments, ownership structures, public subsidies, government advertising, privileged access to information or the financing of public-service broadcasting. Economic dependence can arise from deteriorating business models, dependence on major advertisers or reliance on a small number of digital platforms. Legal harassment, abusive litigation, verbal attacks and physical threats can further restrict journalistic freedom in practice.

Journalistic independence therefore has to be protected legally, institutionally and economically.

Why this matters for democratic resilience

The report places these questions within the broader research on democratic erosion.

Contemporary autocratisation often does not begin with the abolition of elections or an open rejection of democracy. It can proceed gradually and through formally legal means. Governments may use parliamentary majorities, legislation, appointments, administrative decisions or changes in institutional rules to increase their room for manoeuvre while weakening constraints on power.

A recurring pattern is the progressive weakening of different forms of democratic control.

Free media, civil society and public criticism may come under pressure first. They can be delegitimised, economically weakened, subjected to regulatory pressure or intimidated. Once these **diagonal checks** become less effective, abuses of power become harder to detect and publicise.

The weakening of **horizontal checks** may follow: parliaments, courts, prosecutors and independent authorities can lose autonomy or effectiveness through changes to appointments, competences, mandates, disciplinary rules, budgets or information rights.

Eventually, even the conditions of electoral competition can be distorted without abolishing elections themselves.

The report therefore argues that the information environment should be regarded as an **early-warning and protective layer of liberal democracy**. A democracy becomes vulnerable long before elections disappear if citizens lose access to independent information, journalists can no longer scrutinise power effectively, public information becomes inaccessible, or the information environment is captured by political or economic interests.

The relevant question is not merely whether democratic institutions continue to exist formally. It is whether they retain the information and independence necessary to perform their constitutional and democratic functions.

From fighting disinformation to protecting the information ecosystem

The report identifies a significant conceptual shift: information policy should move beyond the correction of individual instances of “fake news” or disinformation.

The integrity of the information environment depends on the structures through which information is **created, financed, distributed, amplified, suppressed and accessed**.

This means looking at platform architecture and recommendation systems, economic incentives, artificial intelligence and synthetic content, the transparency of political communication, attacks on journalists, media pluralism, access to public information, independent research and monitoring, media literacy and technological dependencies.

In the digital environment, platforms do not simply host content. Their recommendation systems and business models influence what becomes visible, what receives reach and what disappears from public attention. Attention-based models can favour outrage, polarisation and emotionally charged content. Propaganda, pseudo-media and coordinated disinformation may therefore acquire structural advantages over slower, more differentiated forms of journalism.

Generative AI adds another layer. Deepfakes, synthetic voices and other artificial content make it increasingly difficult to establish authenticity, origin and provenance. The challenge is not only whether individual pieces of content are false, but whether citizens can still determine **where information came from and how it can be verified**.

The report therefore argues for a systemic approach combining regulation, enforcement, transparency, professional journalism, societal competence and alternative digital infrastructures.

Four central areas for Austrian policy

1. Public-service broadcasting as independent democratic infrastructure

The report understands ORF not primarily as another media company, but as part of Austria's democratic information infrastructure.

Its independence is not presented as a privilege of the organisation or its employees. It is a condition for journalists to fulfil a public mandate without political or economic interference.

The key challenge is therefore to make independence **structural rather than dependent on political restraint**.

This concerns, first, governance. Appointment procedures for supervisory bodies should combine professional competence, pluralism, societal legitimacy and effective distance from government and party control. Transparency, public criteria, incompatibility rules, cooling-off periods, reasoned appointments and safeguards against arbitrary dismissal are among the options discussed.

Second, management appointments should be protected against direct partisan control through clearly defined professional requirements, transparent procedures and greater accountability.

Third, independence requires predictable financing. A funding mechanism that can be adjusted annually or used politically creates a potential instrument of pressure. Public-service funding should therefore be sufficiently stable and insulated from short-term political intervention.

Fourth, ORF must remain capable of fulfilling its public-service mandate in a digital environment. Rules designed to restrict public-service online activity can become counterproductive if the resulting space is occupied not by Austrian private journalism but by large international platforms. Digital regulation should therefore focus more strongly on public value, quality, accessibility and journalistic impact rather than rigid format and volume restrictions.

At the same time, greater independence should be accompanied by greater public accountability. A publicly financed institution should be transparent about governance, costs, conflicts of interest and the fulfilment of its public mandate.

2. Protecting the information environment against manipulation

The second area concerns platforms, artificial intelligence, disinformation and attacks on journalists.

The report argues that regulation should move from dealing mainly with individual illegal or misleading content towards **systemic risk oversight**. Supervisory institutions require sufficient technical, analytical and institutional capacity to assess recommendation systems, distribution mechanisms and systemic risks.

Platform transparency is therefore central: how are recommendations generated, why are particular messages amplified, and which economic incentives shape their distribution?

At the same time, AI-generated and manipulated content requires clear rules on transparency, provenance and labelling. Questions of source attribution, journalistic content used by generative AI and institutional responsibility for enforcement also need to be addressed.

The protection of journalists forms another essential component. Verbal delegitimisation, coordinated online attacks, physical threats and abusive litigation can together create a chilling effect. The result may be self-censorship even where formal press freedom remains intact.

Effective protection against strategic lawsuits, practical access to legal remedies and stronger enforcement are therefore treated not merely as professional concerns for journalists, but as safeguards for democratic accountability.

Professional journalism itself is also part of the response. Greater transparency about editorial methods, clearer distinctions between fact, opinion and assumption, professional fact-checking and effective self-regulation can strengthen the capacity of journalism to act as a trusted source of independently verified information.

3. Public funding must strengthen journalism without buying influence

Media funding and government advertising are treated as two sides of the same democratic problem: both create financial relationships between the state and the media.

If these relationships are discretionary, opaque or politically controlled, they can create real or perceived dependencies.

The report therefore proposes a shift from conventional media subsidies based heavily on format, distribution or reach towards a more technology-neutral **funding of journalistic performance**. Relevant criteria could include editorial independence, professional standards, separation between advertising and editorial content, training, investigative capacity and other demonstrable elements of journalistic quality.

Particular attention should be given to forms of journalism that provide substantial democratic value but may not be commercially attractive, including investigative, local and regional, cultural, European and international reporting.

The institution allocating such funding must itself be protected against political influence. Transparent appointments, objective criteria, reasoned decisions and reviewability are therefore crucial.

Government advertising is regarded as especially sensitive because discretionary public advertising budgets can function as informal media subsidies. The options discussed range from far-reaching restrictions to strict statutory regulation. The common principle is that government communication should be limited to necessary, factual public information and should be allocated according to transparent, objective and non-discriminatory rules.

The fundamental principle is that **public money must not reward political proximity or editorial compliance**. It should strengthen independence, quality, pluralism and democratically relevant journalistic capacity.

4. Making political power more transparent and accountable

Information integrity also concerns the state as a producer and holder of information.

Transparency must extend beyond the publication of final laws or government decisions. Democratic scrutiny requires access to the chain of decision-making: the problem being addressed, the evidence

available, the interests consulted, the alternatives considered, the costs involved and the results eventually achieved.

Freedom of information becomes meaningful only if information rights can be exercised in practice. The report therefore emphasises proactive publication, accessible and machine-readable information, enforceable deadlines, effective complaint mechanisms and sufficient capacity within public authorities.

Political influence should also become more visible. Stakeholder and lobbying contacts, decision-making inputs and the use of public funds should be more transparent so that informal access does not become a hidden source of political power.

Parliament requires its own independent information capacity. Citizens' freedom of information cannot replace parliamentary scrutiny. Effective oversight requires access to documents, enforceable investigative powers and independent scientific and analytical expertise for members of parliament.

Legislation should also become more open earlier in the process. Consultation is more meaningful before political decisions are effectively finalised. Earlier publication of proposals, meaningful consultation, accessible committee proceedings and systematic evaluation can allow expertise and public input to affect policy while genuine choices still exist.

Finally, transparency must be understandable. Merely placing technical documents online does not create an informed public. Political and legal information must be findable, accessible and communicated in a form that people outside professional political and administrative circles can understand.

The Information Integrity Stress Test

A central contribution of the report is a stress test asking where liberal democracy, the rule of law and civil and political rights become vulnerable when information safeguards fail or are politically captured.

It identifies nine areas:

1. **Independent public-service broadcasting** – risk of political capture of a central information institution.
2. **Independent and pluralistic journalism** – risk of losing external scrutiny and genuine media pluralism.
3. **State influence over media** – risk of financially rewarding supportive reporting or disadvantaging critical media.
4. **Platforms and the digital information order** – risk of private control over visibility, reach and public attention.
5. **AI, synthetic content and authenticity** – risk of losing the ability to distinguish authentic from manipulated information.
6. **Protection of journalists and enforcement of rights** – risk that watchdogs are intimidated or prevented from performing their function.

7. **Media and information literacy** – risk that citizens and decision-makers become more vulnerable to manipulation.
8. **Transparent and accountable government** – risk that state and political power become increasingly difficult to scrutinise.
9. **Digital sovereignty and European information infrastructure** – risk of democratic public communication becoming dependent on a small number of private technological infrastructures.

The most important finding is that the greatest danger lies **not in one vulnerability alone but in their interaction**.

If public-service broadcasting becomes politically vulnerable while independent journalism loses economic capacity, state advertising creates dependencies, journalists are intimidated, official information becomes difficult to access and citizens increasingly depend on opaque platform algorithms, the result is more than a decline in media quality.

The entire society becomes less capable of observing and constraining power.

Three layers of democratic protection

The nine vulnerabilities can be condensed into three broader layers of protection.

1. Independence of information producers

This includes public-service broadcasting, private journalism, media funding, government advertising and the protection of journalists.

If this layer is captured, weakened or intimidated, democracy loses independent observers.

2. Accountability of government and political power

This includes freedom of information, parliamentary information rights, transparency of lobbying and public expenditure, and understandable political information.

If this layer is weakened, media, parliament, academia, courts and citizens become less able to examine how power is exercised.

3. Integrity of the information environment

This includes platforms, algorithms, artificial intelligence, media literacy and digital sovereignty.

If this layer fails, reliable information may continue to exist but become difficult to find, distinguish, verify or access.

The report therefore argues that information integrity can deteriorate **without formal censorship and without the systematic fabrication of information**. It may also be undermined when independent journalism becomes economically dependent, journalists are intimidated, public information is withheld, public-service media are politically influenced and the visibility of information is left to opaque platform mechanisms.

The political target: a resilient information infrastructure

The report proposes a clear strategic objective for Austria:

Austria should maintain an information infrastructure in which citizens, journalists, parliamentarians, the judiciary, academia and public administration have access to independent, pluralistic, transparent and verifiable information and are therefore able to scrutinise political, economic and social power effectively.

This objective implies several political guardrails.

The state must not establish an official truth regime.

Institutional independence must be secured structurally rather than merely proclaimed.

Public funding must be allocated according to objective, transparent and verifiable criteria.

Public accountability requires access to information.

Journalistic freedom must be protected legally, economically and institutionally.

Pluralism must be safeguarded both editorially and at the level of infrastructure.

Platform and AI regulation should make manipulation mechanisms more transparent and accountable without suppressing open democratic debate.

Media and information literacy should be treated as permanent democratic infrastructure rather than a succession of temporary projects.

Government information must be accessible and understandable, not merely technically public.

And the technological foundations of democratic communication should not become entirely dependent on a small number of commercial and non-European companies.

What a more resilient Austria would look like

The report illustrates the desired outcome through a scenario for Austria in 2029.

The central improvement would not be the disappearance of disinformation, political conflict or attempts at manipulation. A resilient democracy cannot prevent all such behaviour.

The difference would be that **power is harder to expand unnoticed**.

Political decisions, influence and public expenditure would be easier to scrutinise. Citizens would have access to several independent information sources rather than depending on the state, one media organisation or a single platform. Journalism would retain the capacity to investigate political and economic power. Parliament, courts, researchers and the public would have stronger and more independent information bases.

Manipulation would remain possible, but its conditions of success would be less favourable because provenance and distribution would be more transparent and more people would understand how platforms, algorithms and AI influence information.

Most importantly, democratic oversight would not depend on one institution alone. Public-service media, private and non-profit journalism, parliamentary scrutiny, courts, academia, freedom-of-information mechanisms and an informed public would operate as **mutually reinforcing safeguards**.

If one safeguard came under pressure, others could continue to detect, expose and challenge abuses of power.

Overall conclusion

The report's central conclusion is that **information integrity is not a narrow media-policy issue and cannot be reduced to counter-disinformation policy. It is a precondition for democratic self-government and for the resilience of liberal democracy.**

A democracy does not become resilient by eliminating disagreement or by protecting citizens from every false statement. It becomes resilient when citizens and institutions retain the capacity to determine where information comes from, test competing claims, expose deception, scrutinise decision-making and constrain concentrations of power.

The ultimate test for any information-integrity policy is therefore:

Does it increase or reduce the ability of citizens, journalists, parliament, courts and academia to obtain information independently, verify claims and hold power to account?

Policies contribute to democratic resilience when they diversify and strengthen independent sources of information, make political and economic influence more difficult to conceal, improve access to relevant information, protect watchdog institutions, increase transparency around distribution and manipulation, strengthen citizens' independent judgement and reduce dependence on individual centres of political, economic or technological power.

The desired outcome is not a centrally managed "correct" information environment. It is a **robust, pluralistic and accountable information ecosystem built around multiple independent safeguards.**

That redundancy is the essential source of resilience. Independent journalism, genuinely autonomous public-service media, transparent government information, strong parliamentary scrutiny, accessible research, informed citizens, accountable platforms and more diverse digital infrastructures together make it harder for any single actor to dominate the information space or disable democratic control.

In this sense, information integrity is ultimately about preserving democracy's capacity for **self-correction**: its ability to discover errors, expose abuses, challenge manipulation and prevent concentrations of power from becoming permanent.

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