

The Role and Features of Cross-sectoral Collaboration in Disinformation Governance

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Abstract. Disinformation constitutes a multifaceted challenge within the contemporary digital environment. Although governments, digital platforms, media organizations, and civil society actors have introduced regulatory, technological, and educational responses, these initiatives remain fragmented and focus on sector-specific responsibilities. This conceptual article explores the possibility that, although necessary, such approaches are more likely to conflict with one another when addressing disinformation as a complex and systemic issue. It develops a conceptual framework that redefines disinformation governance as a matter of cross-sectoral collaboration rather than divergent and competing strategies. Cross-sector collaboration is theorized as an institutional mechanism for constituting and sustaining collective agency, defined as the capacity of a group or network to operate as a unified actor, making decisions or undertaking coordinated actions. The analysis identifies the necessary preconditions for cross-sectoral collaboration, including identifying competencies and resources, reconciling interests, establishing common definitions of the issue, ensuring procedural transparency, fostering mutual understanding, building trust, and shared leadership. These are followed by the development of established norms of communication, which serve as foundational conditions for joint knowledge production and decision-making, both of which are central to the governance of complex societal challenges.

Keywords: disinformation; governance; digital communication; cross-sectoral collaboration.

Tarpsektorinio bendradarbiavimo vaidmuo ir ypatybės dezinformacijos reguliavime

Santrauka. Dezinformacija yra daugialypė problema šiuolaikinėje skaitmeninėje aplinkoje. Nors vyriausybės, skaitmeninės platformos, žiniasklaidos organizacijos ir pilietinės visuomenės suinteresuotosios organizacijos ėmė taikyti reguliavimo, technologines ir švietimo priemones, šios iniciatyvos tebėra fragmentiškos ir daugiausia orientuotos į konkrečių sektorių atsakomybę. Šiame konceptualiaame straipsnyje nagrinėjama galimybė, kad, nors tokie požiūriai yra būtini, sprendžiant sudėtingą ir sistemingą dezinformacijos problemą jie greičiausiai prieštarauja vieni kitiems. Straipsnyje pateikiama teorinė koncepcija, kurioje dezinformacijos valdymas apibrėžiamas kaip tarpsektorinis bendradarbiavimas, o ne kaip skirtingos ir konkuruojančios strategijos. Tarpsektorinis bendradarbiavimas teorizuojamas kaip institucinis mechanizmas, skirtas kolektyvinei veiklai kurti ir palaikyti, apibrėžiamas kaip grupės ar tinklo gebėjimas veikti kaip bendras veikėjas, priimti sprendimus ar imtis koordinuotų veiksmų, kurie pranoksta atskirų dalyvių pastangas. Analizėje nustatytos būtinos tarpsektorinio bendradarbiavimo sąlygos, įskaitant kompetencijų ir išteklių nustatymą, interesų suderinimą, bendrą problemos apibrėžimą, procedūrų skaidrumo užtikrinimą, tarpusavio supratimo skatinimą, pasitikėjimo stiprinimą ir bendrą lyderystę. Kartu su tuo atsiranda komunikacijos normos, kurias

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tampa pagrindinėmis sąlygomis bendram žinių formavimui ir sprendimų priėmimui, o tai yra esminiai sudėtingu visuomenės problemų sprendimo aspektai.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: dezinformacija; valdymas; skaitmeninė komunikacija; tarpsektorinis bendradarbiavimas.

Introduction

The development of the current digital space and its technologies presents a structural paradox or what Nielsen and Fletcher (2020) call a ‘complex realism’ for democracy: their impact is neither unambiguously positive nor entirely destructive, but profound, multifaceted, and context dependent. While early visions of the internet emphasised connectivity, collaboration, and democratic engagement as well as means of democratic deliberation, encouraging citizen engagement and broader participation in social processes (Barber, 1997; Gimmler, 2001), the dynamics of hyperconnectivity have fundamentally altered the organisation of public attention and meaning (Brubaker, 2023). Here lies the paradox: the same infrastructures that enable connection and rapid information exchange also undermine the conditions for collective sense-making (process of generating shared understanding and meaning), as the digital space becomes a fertile ground for information manipulation and algorithmically mediated visibility. To add more fuel to the fire, platformisation has created favourable conditions for digital infrastructures to become widely integrated, norm-setting systems that gain the power to regulate visibility, attention and value in markets, the media and everyday life (Van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018). However, the fundamental problem today is not platformisation as a process in itself, but, rather, how these architectures interact with political actors, identity-based group dynamics and information manipulation (misinformation and disinformation) through specific mechanisms, thus reinforcing epistemic and emotional divisions in society (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Information disruptions such as disinformation are created and sustained by interrelated socio-technical mechanisms that make them complex issues which are fundamentally contestable and resistant to solutions by a single actor.

Despite regulatory initiatives and interventions, disinformation continues to expose the limits of sector-specific responses. While governments, digital platforms, civil society organisations, journalists, educational and non-governmental organizations have each developed instruments to address harmful content, these efforts remain fragmented, unevenly coordinated, and largely reactive. While operating according to distinct institutional logics and accountability structures, actors address only partial dimensions of a problem that cuts across technological, political, and cultural domains. In this context, a central question emerges: under what conditions can collective policy actor be constituted in disinformation governance? This conceptual paper proposes cross-sector collaboration as a normative theoretical framework for addressing this question. Defined as long-term cooperation between governments, the private sector, and civil society to achieve common goals for the well-being of society by addressing complex social, technological, environmental, or other problems (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Koschmann et al., 2012; Clarke & Crane, 2018;

Vogel et al., 2022), cross-sector collaboration offers institutional arrangements capable of aligning responsibilities, coordinating action, and articulating shared norms across sectors. Although varying forms of cooperation have been extensively examined in fields such as public administration, sustainability, and crisis management, their potential contribution to disinformation governance remains under-theorised within communication studies.

The conceptual article is constituted of three parts: first, it establishes the structural and systematic complexity of disinformation as a governance challenge; second, it theorizes cross-sectoral collaboration as an institutional response to that complexity; and third, it maps the framework's constitutive elements onto specific actor constellations, value conflicts, and procedural requirements that characterize disinformation governance. In doing so, this article contributes to communication research by reframing disinformation governance as a structural and multistakeholder issue rather than individual or sector-specific responsibility. Methodologically, this article employs conceptual framework analysis (Jabareen, 2009) as its primary mode of inquiry. Rather than generating empirical findings through fieldwork or dataset analysis, conceptual framework analysis proceeds by systematically synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarly literature to construct a theoretical lens that can orient future empirical investigation. While existing research has extensively examined disinformation through the aspects of platform regulation, media literacy, content moderation, and resilience, these approaches often remain fragmented. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, this article advances a normative framework that understands cross-sector collaboration not merely as a coordination mechanism or policy tool, but as an institutional architecture through which collective agency and sense-making can be constituted and sustained in the digital public sphere.

Complexities of Disinformation and its Governance

In the past, societies grappled with the pervasive influence of wartime propaganda and disinformation, a tool wielded to sway public opinion and shape narratives for strategic purposes. Today, this challenge has only magnified as algorithmic amplification on digital platforms allows disinformation to spread with an unprecedented speed and precision. While disinformation is undoubtedly not a new phenomenon, it remains an ever-evolving challenge that societies have faced throughout history. However, the prevalence and adaptability of disinformation, particularly due to advances in digital technologies and networks, have intensified issues such as declining trust in democratic institutions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2021). Complex geopolitical events of the 21st century, including the Brexit referendum in 2016, the United States presidential election and electoral interference in 2016, and Russia's invasion into Ukraine in 2022, have renewed scholarly interest in the complexities of disinformation (Broda & Stromback, 2024). Despite increasing attention, disinformation and related forms of information manipulation remain characterized by definitional ambiguity in both research and policy. Farkas and Schousboe (2024) note that researchers continually develop new concepts to capture additional nuances, resulting in what the authors call 'terminologi-

cal cacophony'. At the same time, the absence of a universally accepted definition for disinformation in the policy areas has contributed to fragmented responses, for instance, in the Digital Service Act and other European Union documents (Seigneurin et al., 2025). With respect to the lack of conceptual clarity, this research will draw on several notable scholarly definitions to reveal the complexity of disinformation.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) offer a widely cited definition of *information disorders* in their report to the Council of Europe. Their framework distinguishes three primary components: *misinformation* (misleading information disseminated without intent to cause harm), *disinformation* (false information spread with the intent to mislead), and *malinformation* (accurate information shared with the intent to cause damage or manipulate), along with other forms of manipulated and falsified content. Chadwick and Stanyer (2021) identify deception as a unifying feature across disinformation and malinformation, but the defining characteristic is its intent to harm. Bateman and Jackson (2024) further conceptualize disinformation as a complex, historically rooted phenomenon that operates according to the logic of supply and demand. On the supply side, strong political and commercial incentives motivate hostile actors to create, disseminate, or tolerate misleading information. On the demand side, psychological needs drive individuals to accept or believe falsehoods. These dynamics indicate that information disruptions are not isolated communication issues, but rather symptoms of broader social and institutional processes (Bateman & Jackson, 2024). Disinformation agents can rapidly disseminate falsehoods by tailoring messages to current events and appealing to target audiences' emotions, concerns, and values, thereby shaping the tone and agenda of the public discourse.

Information overload in the digital environment, combined with uncertainty arising from geopolitical, social, and economic challenges, creates favourable conditions for the proliferation of information disorders. The prevalence of disinformation and related manipulative practices continues to rise. According to the Pew Research Centre (2025), a median of 72% of adults across 25 nations perceive the spread of false information online as a significant threat to their country. Similarly, the Global Risks Report (Elsner et al., 2025) identifies misinformation and disinformation as the top risk for 2027 for the second consecutive year, alongside increasing societal polarization. Jalli (2025) argues that misinformation and disinformation should be regarded as *informational-systemic risks*, as they often cascade beyond the digital sphere into other sectors, institutions, society, and governance. As a result, current strategies to combat disinformation that rely solely on technological or regulatory measures frequently yield only partial results.

The whole-of-society approach to disinformation (Donovan & Wardle, 2020), or 'leave' versus 'remove' is becoming a key issue in social media policy debates (Douek, 2020). The European Union's strategy for addressing disinformation in the digital space is characterized by two simultaneously applied yet competing logics. According to Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023), one approach frames disinformation as a threat to democratic systems and justifies the implementation of exceptional, stricter political measures. Whereas, the other approach relies on voluntary commitments and self-regulation by digital platforms, emphasizing non-binding legal measures and limited state intervention. This duality is

also evident among member states and their respective national strategies. Balčytienė et al. (2024) identify inconsistencies and gaps in current approaches to strengthening societal resilience in the Baltic region. Their analysis categorizes resilience strategies in the Baltic countries as either *hard power*, focusing on protectionism and deterrence, or *soft power*, which includes platform accountability, media and information literacy, and fact-checking. The researchers note that it remains unclear which measures are most likely to produce desirable outcomes (Balčytienė et al., 2024). Although cyber operations, sanctions, and bans on information channels may yield short-term effects, research indicates that their long-term effectiveness is limited, as alternative information channels often fill the resulting gaps (Pijpers & Arnold, 2025; Bateman & Jackson, 2024). Educational, cultural, and non-governmental organizations primarily implement media and information literacy initiatives. However, there is a notable lack of sustained, long-term projects aimed at enhancing public resilience (Balčytienė et al., 2024). While the coexistence of these two logics is not inherently problematic, their incompatibility in terms of values and implementation exposes a fundamental strategic weakness. This fragmented approach impedes the development of a coherent, consistent direction and risks leaving society caught between competing narratives that shift responsibility between restrictive measures and individual agency. Due to structural barriers and the narratives propagated by platform actors, the burden often falls on individual users. They are encouraged, as Tripodi et al. (2023) observe, to “do their own research” in an information landscape that can be opaque and challenging to navigate. This scenario risks placing undue responsibility on individuals, particularly given the systemic complexities and the intentional efforts of disinformation agents to exploit this decentralized landscape. Excessive reliance on fact-checking and self-directed knowledge acquisition increases the risk that individuals will accept alternative facts. This logic is favoured by platform companies and by governments seeking to shift responsibility.

Disinformation and related issues in the information space are dynamic, multi-layered, and involve diverse actors and sectors. As a result, they cannot be addressed within the confines of a single organization (Bianchi et al., 2021), and traditional management methods based on hierarchical measures often fail when confronted with these complex challenges. In both academic research (Dentoni et al., 2018; Montgomery, 2020; Corbin et al., 2025) and public discourse, disinformation and other challenges in the digital space are classified as *wicked problems*. These are problems that are socially, technologically, and politically complex, unpredictable, and, most importantly, lack simple solutions, particularly in democratic contexts. Multiple actors become responsible for what is termed by research as “the problem of many hands” (Helberger et al., 2017). National responses to disinformation require attention to various environments, including political, economic, social, cultural, and value-based factors, as well as a balanced approach between structural measures (Balčytienė et al., 2024). Efforts to mitigate risks frequently remain reactive, fragmented, and lack long-term impact. This is not only due to a lack of coordination but also because the problem’s root causes extend beyond the traditional boundaries of responsibility, by virtue of involving a combination of informational, emotional, and in-

stitutional breakdowns. Disinformation as a complex societal challenge and as a systemic risk shifts attention from individual to collective agency, which will be addressed further.

Cross-sectoral Collaboration as an Institutional Response to Fragmented Disinformation Governance

Agency is defined as an actor's capacity to operate within a specific context by utilizing available knowledge, resources, and transformative power (Knewitz, 2024). Here, knowledge includes both the ability to act and the understanding of how to act, which can be translated into skill (Kangaskoski, 2024). In the context of resilience against disinformation, agency is a key feature. Brown (as cited in Knewitz, 2024) argues that neoliberalism reframes individual agency as 'responsibilization', assigning individuals the responsibility to identify and pursue strategies for self-investment and entrepreneurship, thus positioning the individual as the sole relevant and accountable actor. Regarding resilience against disinformation, most commonly, social media platforms and other stakeholders promote individual agency through strategies such as fact-checking, avoiding news to reduce uncertainty, and conducting social media 'cleanses'. However, this emphasis on individual agency and self-responsibility should be interpreted as a form of governance rather than empowerment (Knewitz, 2024). Although these strategies may appear reasonable initially, over time they may lead to increased passivity among agents. In contrast, collective agency refers to the capacity of a group or network to function as a unified actor, making decisions or undertaking coordinated actions that exceed the sum of individual efforts. The formation of a collective requires co-individuation, where members develop a shared identity and remain receptive to internal tensions, particularly those arising from complex issues (Kangaskoski, 2024). According to Bandura (2000), collective agency is expressed through collective efficacy, defined as a group's shared belief in its ability to achieve desired outcomes through joint action. In this context, agency is not simply an aggregation of individual actions but, instead, it is realized through the relationships and dynamics within the group. The importance of collective agency in resilience against disinformation, therefore, requires further examination.

Furthermore, Dekker (as cited in Klein, 2020) argues that systemic crises often prompt a search for a singular 'broken' component, such as a missed check or incorrect decision. This approach creates the illusion that addressing one element will restore the proper system function. However, complex systems may fail even when all components operate according to their intended logic, thus indicating that dysfunction arises from the interactions among parts rather than from individual defects. Dekker highlights the importance of understanding how an entire functioning system can produce undesirable outcomes, by stating that a system may be "dysfunctional not because of a malfunction, but because of the way it works". This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary issues such as disinformation, where analysis frequently centres on individual failures, including the actions of social networks, certain voters, or communication errors. Such a focus often overlooks the influence of deeper systemic drivers, norms, and interactions of interests

that perpetuate dysfunction, even when individual decisions appear rational. Horowitz (2019) observes that disinformation does not require advanced technical expertise, as personal dissatisfaction with social and economic conditions can motivate individuals to engage in harmful digital behaviours, including the dissemination of rumours, falsehoods, and hate speech.

Due to this complexity, there is an increasing emphasis on shared – rather than single-actor – responsibility: cross-sectoral collaboration, or, at times, identified as multistakeholder initiatives, in which governments, digital technology platforms, the media, academia, and non-governmental organizations, as well as other relevant stakeholders come together to address a specific issue. In this context, cross-sectoral collaboration can be understood as cooperation between the public, private, and civil sectors to achieve common goals. This means that stakeholders share information, establish standard rules, coordinate actions, and implement joint decisions. Cross-sectoral collaboration is not only a coordination mechanism, but also a space where different value logics are reconciled, for example, freedom of speech, transparency, or accountability (Napoli, 2019). Previous studies have shown that cross-sectoral cooperation addresses social problems by promoting cross-sectoral learning, communication between organizations, and strengthening organizational capacities (Henry, 2024). This is confirmed by Bortkevičiūtė's (2023) study, which analyses public-private sector cooperation in crisis management in Lithuania during the COVID-19 pandemic. The author argues that cooperation is a “dynamic and cyclical process”, in which, joint activities enable organizations to learn about each other's competencies and working styles. If these activities have a positive impact (positive feedback), this helps the entire crisis management system to learn and contributes to the institutionalization of internally driven cooperation, thus making the system more resilient and adaptable to future challenges (Bortkevičiūtė, 2023). However, it is essential to acknowledge that cross-sectoral partnerships may face hindrances such as differing institutional logics and goals, power imbalances, varying levels of commitment, and, most importantly, contested values.

Even though cooperation is identified as a prerequisite for both increasing resilience and solving other complex problems in both European Union documents and national strategies, it often remains merely a rhetorical slogan rather than a truly established model of action. For example, in the EU Action Plan on Disinformation (European Commission, 2018), cooperation between platforms, fact-checkers, academics, and policymakers is presented as a key axis. Still, in practice, this model is often limited to voluntary agreements that lack clear commitments or long-term coordination mechanisms. In Lithuania, cooperation usually takes the form of sporadic, temporary responses, especially in the face of a crisis, such as the creation of ad-hoc expert groups or isolated initiatives. However, these initiatives often fail to become consistent, long-term decision-making practices. In other words, cooperation is usually considered necessary, but is not institutionalized as a structured response to complex challenges. We may thus ask ourselves: *What steps should stakeholders take to initiate a movement toward institutionalized collaboration to strengthen collective resilience and agency against disinformation?*

Conceptual Framework of Cross-sectoral Collaboration in its Relation to Disinformation Governance

While cross-sectoral collaboration has been proposed as a response to a variety of wicked problems such as climate and sustainability governance (Pedersen et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2021) or cybersecurity (Solansky & Beck, 2021), disinformation governance presents a distinctive combination of features that makes the institutional design of collaboration especially consequential. Unlike environmental risks, disinformation is self-referential: the very initiatives designed to counter it can be reframed by disinformation actors as themselves forms of manipulation or censorship (Hameleers, 2022), thereby delegitimizing governance efforts from within. Disinformation harms are often epistemic and affective (Serrano-Puche, 2021) rather than infrastructural, thereby making impact assessment uniquely contested. These features showcase that the procedural and normative dimensions of cross-sectoral collaboration such as trust-building, shared problem framing, communication norms are not peripheral to governance effectiveness, but, actually, central to it.

The cross-sectoral collaboration framework provides coherence and structure within fragmented contexts, while also promoting principles such as empathy, active listening, and ethical dialogue, which have previously received insufficient emphasis (Hoffmann, 2016). These dimensions are essential not only as technical solutions but also as normative and moral commitments. Disinformation, which is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and evaluative dimensions, is particularly prone to provoke normative value conflicts among stakeholders involved in collaboration efforts. Dissensus is more likely than consensus, given the presence of contrasting discourses, conflicting values, and disputed beliefs (Schwoon, 2025). For instance, in the case of strategies to combat disinformation, conflicting values can include freedom of speech versus harm reduction (Jacobs, 2022; Brown, 2023; Martinico & Monti, 2024), autonomy versus accountability in relation to platforms (Warnke et al., 2024), and many more aspects. Cross-sectoral collaboration in disinformation governance could not be reducible to technical coordination; it is also a normative undertaking, in which, participating institutions negotiate shared commitments to values such as accountability, transparency, and social solidarity. These value foundations constitute framework integrating adaptive capacities and systemic flexibility that enables governance arrangements to maintain legitimacy under conditions of uncertainty.

The scientific literature on cooperation and cross-sectoral collaborations identifies several key principles that influence the success of collaboration and may, at the same time, pose risks to joint decision-making. The first principle is the *identification of competencies and resources* (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Clarke & Macdonald, 2016). Effective partnerships begin with a clear understanding of the functions and resources that each partner contributes. When applied to disinformation governance, the principle of identifying competencies and resources draws attention to the structural asymmetries between the participating sectors. Governments hold regulatory authority and democratic legitimacy but are institutionally limited in their capacity to intervene in real-time information flows. Platforms possess the technical infrastructure and data access necessary to detect

coordinated manipulation at scale, and yet they face what Napoli (2019) describes as a legitimacy deficit when positioned as arbiters of acceptable public discourse. Civil society organizations and researchers, meanwhile, contribute forms of epistemic credibility and methodological expertise that neither governments nor platforms can easily replicate. As Ansell and Gash (2008) suggest, recognizing such asymmetries is not merely an organizational practicality but a condition for the legitimacy of the collaborative arrangement itself – opacity about who contributes what, and why, undermines the procedural trust on which sustained cross-sectoral cooperation depends. The second principle involves *reconciling interests and defining the common good* (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Each stakeholder contributes not only distinct goals but also unique institutional logics, such as those of the media, government institutions, NGOs, or civic organizations. It is critical to identify and engage any marginalized actors early in the process, such as small community groups as well as grassroots organizations who might otherwise be excluded. This risk is heightened in polarized environments, where initiatives may acquire political connotations or be perceived as aligned with specific interests, thereby exacerbating communication barriers (Tucker et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). In disinformation governance specifically, the tension between freedom of expression and harm reduction constitutes the central value conflict that cross-sectoral collaboration must navigate. Platform actors have historically framed moderation decisions in terms of technical neutrality or community standards, thereby deflecting normative accountability (Gillespie, 2018). State actors, particularly in polarized political environments, face pressure to instrumentalize disinformation governance for partisan purposes, which risks delegitimizing the entire collaborative architecture. Civil society organizations, meanwhile, may prioritize advocacy positions over procedural compromise. The third principle emphasizes *procedural transparency*, including agreed-upon participation rules, decision-making mechanisms, and clearly defined responsibilities. Procedural transparency is established not merely for formality, but, instead, to ensure predictability; public procedures mitigate the risk of delegitimization and foster long-term trust among partners (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Consequently, cross-sectoral collaboration becomes legitimate processes aimed at achieving long-term impact and results, rather than serving as superficial organizational rhetoric. By clarifying roles, aligning incentives, and stabilizing decision-making procedures, cross-sector partnerships transform disparate actors into a governance structure capable of collective, rather than reactive, action.

The research further characterizes cross-sectoral collaboration as progressing through stages such as *discovery*, *definition*, *deliberation*, and *decision-making and implementation* (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Gray & Purdy, 2018; Macdonald et al., 2022). During the discovery stage, it is essential to identify points of interest and potential contradictions. The definition stage requires agreement on definitions (of an issue at hand) and problem scope to prevent conceptual ambiguities in politicized contexts, such as the meanings of disinformation. For instance, Seigneurin et al. (2025) argues that the implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA) is constrained by ambiguous definitions of disinformation

and misinformation. Researchers' findings indicate that fragmented definitions threaten freedom of expression, research, countermeasure development, intervention effectiveness, and impact assessment (Seigneurin et al., 2025). The definition stage is particularly consequential in disinformation governance, given that the conceptual ambiguity, as documented by Farkas and Schousboe (2024) and Seigneurin et al. (2025), is not merely academic, but, instead, has direct institutional consequences. A cross-sectoral collaboration framework addresses this not by imposing a single authoritative definition yet by requiring that participating actors negotiate a working definition through the procedural stages of discovery and definition before moving to deliberation. During deliberation, active stakeholder involvement is necessary as formal representation is insufficient, while decision implementation requires public accountability and monitoring to reduce delegitimization risks (Emerson et al., 2012). The discovery and definition stages in its normative framework should guarantee information access and the inclusion of less resourceful stakeholders, as this is essential for building a shared knowledge base that minimizes miscommunication and mitigates disagreements (Lee & Esteve, 2022). In addition to these procedural elements, three informal factors are crucial: *trust*, *shared leadership*, and *resource transparency*. Trust is cultivated through consistent procedural practices and demonstrated competence. Leadership should be distributed according to stages and competencies, and resource management must be transparent and public to prevent doubts regarding the initiative's motives (Bryson et al., 2006). During periods of polarization, this trust is especially fragile, necessitating partnership designs that are transparent and comprehensible to both participants and the broader public (Huxham & Vangen, 2003).

While the aforementioned procedural elements are integral part of cross-sectoral collaboration framework, a significant challenge remains: contested values and institutional logics of diverse stakeholders. Although there is broad recognition of the need for collaborative approaches to societal challenges, stakeholders often opt out to working independently, as it is evident by multiple NGOs that independently work on, most commonly, short-term projects. Additionally, some stakeholders initially adopt uncompromising value positions, prioritizing their own logics over collective action and, in some cases, rejecting collaboration when values do not align (Schwoon, 2025). A well-designed collaboration does not automatically resolve disinformation or other digital challenges. The selection of governance structures for collaborative networks and institutional arrangements can either enhance or undermine outcomes, depending on initial conditions, stakeholder composition, and procedural quality (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Thus, the primary function of cross-sectoral collaboration is not to provide a universal solution, but, rather, to integrate procedural, technical, and cultural measures that address the diverse manifestations of disinformation. This analytical perspective clarifies both the potential and limitations of partnerships, highlighting that failure often results from inadequate design in addressing digital risks. In contexts characterized by wicked problems, such as disinformation governance, ad hoc or episodic cooperation is insufficient, as problem definitions, values, and responsibilities remain contested.

Analytical insight: cross-sectoral collaboration in Lithuania's national strategy against disinformation

The Baltic states have been at the forefront of developing responses to disinformation, and Lithuania in particular has built strong deterrence capabilities rooted in its historical experience with Soviet propaganda. Taken as practical analysis point and assessed through the cross-sectoral collaboration framework, Lithuania's disinformation policy architecture reveals a structural pattern in which institutional capacity is concentrated within a security and risk management logic rather than distributed across diverse stakeholders. The primary actors such as the National Crisis Management Centre, the State Security Department, and the Ministry of National Defence's Strategic Communication and Public Affairs Department operate within disinformation deterrence framework. Lithuania's National Security Strategy¹ acknowledges inter-institutional collaboration as a principle seeking to "strengthen cooperation among the public, private, academic, and non-governmental sectors by implementing coordinated programs in the areas of journalism, media, and information literacy, as well as strategic communication campaigns" (Article 37.6); yet, this collaboration is not formally institutionalized across all relevant stakeholders: what exists between state, civil society, media, and research actors takes predominantly the form of information sharing² and sporadic expert consultations³ rather than structured, sustained joint governance. When political priorities shift, so does the collaborative infrastructure, which means that trust built in one cycle does not reliably carry over to the next. While civil society or non-governmental organizations fact-checking units within major media outlets contribute essential competencies such as contextual expertise, community knowledge, public engagement, it can be observed that they are not structurally embedded in governance arrangements. Another major issue is digital platforms, the primary infrastructure through which disinformation reaches Lithuanian citizens. Their obligations under the Digital Services Act operate at the EU level, and they remain reactive and inconsistent even within that framework (Botan & Meyer, 2025). The framework identifies this as a fundamental incompleteness in the governance architecture: the sector with the greatest technical capacity for detection and moderation at scale is structurally outside the collaborative arrangement.

The Lithuanian disinformation policy example reveals a structural challenge: collaborative activity exists, yet it operates within separate institutional loci: security, risk management and deterrence on one side, and non-governmental and civil society (research and media included) media literacy and resilience strengthening initiatives on the other side that do not necessarily intersect procedurally. This separation reproduces precisely the

¹ Lithuania's National Security Strategy <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/en/legalAct/TAR.2627131DA3D2/GqUlwRVDtj>

² A unified channel for information exchange has been established among the NKVC, NGOs, and the academic community (2023) <https://lv.lt/lt/naujienos-1/tarp-nkvc-nvo-ir-akademines-bendruomenes-sukurtas-vieningas-kanalas-informacijos-mainams/>

³ Seime rinksis „elfai“ ir dezinformacijos ekspertai: kas ir kaip gins Lietuvą informaciniame kare? (2026) https://www.lrs.lt/sip/portal.show?p_r=35717&p_k=1&p_t=294571

fragmentation that the framework is designed to overcome, and it undermines the recognition of disinformation as a systemic risk that, by definition, exceeds the capacity of any single institutional logic. In Lithuania, collaboration remains declarative: acknowledged in strategic documents but not procedurally realised as a structured process in which actors from different sectors negotiate definitions, map asymmetries, and establish the trust necessary for sustained joint governance.

Conclusion

In summary, the conceptual analysis presented in this article demonstrates that complex challenges, such as disinformation, constitute systemic risks rather than isolated communication failures, necessitating a structural approach. Disinformation governance, therefore, reveals the limitations of traditional models and strategies. Two competing logics, i.e., *hard power*, which emphasizes risk mitigation, security measures, and deterrence, versus *soft power*, which includes fact-checking, media, and information literacy, operate in parallel with limited integration (Balčytienė et al., 2025). This dynamic often shifts responsibility to individuals who are expected to enhance their own resilience. Although individual agency remains central to resilience, the advancement of information manipulation and the post-truth era reveal the need for collective sense-making and agency.

The conceptual contribution of this article is threefold. First, it reframes disinformation governance as a collective agency problem rather than a coordination deficit, shifting attention from the question of who should act to how conditions for joint action can be institutionally constituted. Second, it applies the cross-sectoral collaboration framework specifically to the actor constellations, value conflicts, and procedural challenges that characterize disinformation governance, thus demonstrating that the framework's pre-conditions and stages map onto documented structural failures in current governance approaches. Third, it proposes a set of communication norms as the foundational layer of collaborative governance, without which, procedural arrangements remain vulnerable to value-based stalemates. These contributions are conceptual rather than empirical, and they are offered as a research framework for subsequent empirical research.

The increasing complexity of information disruptions, particularly in small and highly polarized societies such as the Baltic states, calls for the practical significance of this theoretical contribution. Future research should empirically investigate the application of the proposed framework across various national, regulatory, and sectoral contexts, especially in settings marked by high uncertainty, contested legitimacy, or asymmetric power relations. Such studies would further clarify how collective agency can be stabilized over time, and how cross-sectoral partnerships can transition from episodic cooperation to enduring governance capacities.

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