



International Panel on the Information Environment

Trends in the Information Environment

2026 Expert Survey Results

Synthesis Report 2026.3

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SYNOPSIS

In May and June 2026, the IPIE's fourth annual expert survey included 470 experts studying the information environment across 71 countries, almost half of whom focused on developing economies.

- Pessimism has climbed to its highest level yet. This year, 76% of experts expect the information environment in their country of expertise to worsen over the coming year, up from 53% in 2023.
- For four years running, experts agree on what a healthy information environment needs most: accurate information and a diversity of voices.
- Most experts, 76%, say people can find diverse viewpoints online, but only 28% think a majority of people in their country trust the main news outlets to report politics accurately.
- Lack of platform accountability and misinformation are seen as the biggest threats to the information environment, and experts consider generative AI a less urgent threat.
- For three years in a row, experts expect generative AI to make the information environment worse over the next five years, with AI-generated video their biggest worry and AI-generated text their smallest.
- Experts expect AI summaries in search engines to speed up how quickly people find what they are looking for, but to cut traffic to news sites and narrow the range of viewpoints they see.
- Search engines again rank as the technology seen most positively, 80% positive, while views on social media, generative AI, and recommender systems are mixed to negative, 35–45% positive.
- Research funding remains the most frequent barrier to studying the information environment, 67%, ahead of data access, 60%, and roughly a third of experts report government-related pressures on their work.

Behind these overall figures, experts in developing economies and the USA show similar patterns: they rate threats higher, report more government censorship and surveillance, and view the effects of technologies, including AI, similarly.

USA experts are nearly twice as likely as experts in all other countries to report government control of funding and pressure to align research with a political agenda as main barriers to studying the information environment.

Experts fall into three different groups based on their concerns: about half worry about almost every threat to the information environment, a third worry mainly about platform accountability and misinformation but not AI, and one in ten hardly worry at all.

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SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

How people consume information is changing again. Over the last two decades, the world's information has been a tap away through search engines, social platforms, and smartphones. The change now is less about absolute reach than about means of access and how information gets to people. They increasingly receive information already sorted for them rather than retrieving it themselves, whether through recommendation algorithms or, increasingly, generative AI systems that answer directly instead of only linking to a source. By early 2026, 60% of USA adults said they read the AI-generated summaries that now sit at the top of most search results [1]. A growing minority, especially younger users, treat chatbots as a place to look things up, news included [2]. The change is already visible in desktop browsing in the USA, where users spend more of their online time on AI tools like ChatGPT than on news media [3]. These tools are convenient, but the most popular ones currently rely on proprietary models that give a few companies an outsized influence over what people see.

This shift in how people access information is happening on already shaky ground. Trust in news is low across much of the world, many people actively avoid the news, and audiences for professional journalism keep thinning [2], [4]. Concern is not confined to any one region. Across 142 countries, 59% of regular internet users say they worry about encountering misinformation online [5]. Moreover, harmful and hateful content, opaque ranking systems, the erosion of privacy, and the steady churn of misinformation and polarization are still major concerns worldwide [6].

Who governs this environment is increasingly contested. Many politicians, especially those on the radical right, turn falsehoods and conspiracy theories to their advantage, a pattern documented across 26 countries [7]. Platforms, meanwhile, have stepped back from moderating content just as regulators have

begun to demand more. The EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) began hard enforcement in 2025, issuing its first major penalty, a 120 million EUR fine, to X and opening cases against other large platforms; the USA responded by framing such enforcement as censorship of USA companies and speech [8], [9]. Brazil's courts ordered a nationwide suspension of X in 2024 [10], and preferences over how speech should be governed diverge sharply across 40 countries [11]. The UK's Online Safety Act moved into enforcement during 2025 and 2026, with its regulator now acting against services that fall short [12], and China introduced mandatory labeling of AI-generated content in 2025 [13], ahead of the EU's own labeling obligations, which have applied from August 2026 [14]. That same month, Meta settled an 18 billion USD lawsuit over claims its platforms harm children, and the European Commission designated ChatGPT as a very large online search engine, bringing it under the DSA's regulation. DSA obligations around transparency, risk assessment, and researcher access to platform data can shape how platforms operating globally are governed and studied across borders, making information-environment governance an increasingly international rather than purely national issue.

Researchers studying these dynamics are under growing strain. In 2025, the USA canceled or suspended more than 7,800 federal research grants and reduced new U.S. National Science Foundation grants by roughly a quarter compared with the average of the previous ten years, with work on misinformation among the topics singled out [15], [16]. The USA is the best-documented case but is not an isolated one. Academic freedom has been in decline worldwide since the mid-2000s, and similar pressures are reported across many countries, among them Mexico, Russia, and Venezuela, though they draw less attention [17]. Thin funding, restricted data, and pressure on academic freedom now shape what gets studied, and this may push researchers away from their fields of research, or from certain research questions within them.

The information environment is now studied by a fast-growing but loosely connected field. It draws communication scholars, political scientists, computer scientists, information scientists, and psychologists, and they work across very different countries, use different methods, and start from different premises. No single study or report can fully map a field this contested and diverse. Since 2023, the IPIE has run a yearly survey to track how experts view the information environment, documenting where they agree and disagree and what remains unknown ([SR2023.3](#); [SR2024.2](#); [SR2025.2](#)). Each wave asks researchers to evaluate the information environment in their main country of expertise. This report presents the fourth wave, gathered in 2026.

Generative AI now cuts across every part of the information environment. It can lower the cost of producing content, assist journalists, and widen access to information. Equally, it can manufacture convincing falsehoods in large volumes and, through AI-powered searches, divert attention from the news organizations that do original reporting. Early evidence already points this way. After AI summaries began appearing in search results, users became markedly less likely to click through to a source [18]. Whether AI strengthens or corrodes the information environment is one of the main questions of this year's survey.

Research Questions

Expert surveys read a research field at a glance, surfacing agreement, disagreement, and blind spots that individual studies miss [19]. They have been used to justify prioritizing misinformation interventions in the Global South and to set the field's research agenda [20], [21]. Pooling expert judgment from around the world, this report pursues five questions for 2026:

1. What makes a healthy information environment?
2. What are the main threats to the information environment?

3. How are generative AI and other information technologies, including AI-powered searches, reshaping the information environment?
4. How do experts expect the information environment to change?
5. What barriers and pressures do experts face when studying the information environment?

SECTION 2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

A healthy information environment does more than supply facts. It gives people access to reliable reporting on public affairs and to a plurality of perspectives, including ones that challenge the powerful. That pluralism underpins democratic life. Well-informed citizens are more likely to take part in public decisions, form considered views, and hold officials to account [22].

That environment has grown more complex. People now consume a wide mix of traditional and digital sources, an abundance that brings choice but also fragmentation [22]. What is on offer differs from country to country depending on the supply of and demand for news [23], and where misinformation spreads, it can erode trust in reliable sources and sharpen existing tensions [24].

The information environment is itself a contested concept, defined differently across disciplines and by different governments [22], [25]. A standard definition is that information is meaningful, well-formed data; the environment is the physical, social, and digital surroundings that shape behavior [26]. For consistency with earlier surveys, respondents were asked to use the definition for the information environment that the IPIE has used since 2023:

The aggregate of the physical, social, and digital surroundings that influence how individuals, organizations, or countries communicate, interact, and process information.

Respondents were told they had been invited to participate in the survey because they study topics such as news, social media, digital platforms, recommendation algorithms, misinformation, hate speech, media and news literacy, and fact-checking. The IPIE's definition spans information that travels online and offline, through traditional and digital media, and at local, national, and international scales.

SECTION 3. METHODS

Experts were recruited through the channels built up during the survey's earlier waves. The starting frame came from systematic searches of Scopus and Web of Science for authors of peer-reviewed work on the information environment, first compiled for the 2023 survey and updated repeatedly since then (SR2023.3; SR2024.2; SR2025.2). We also added researchers reached through conferences and seminars, including the American Political Science Association, the International Communication Association, MisInfoCon, and the Multidisciplinary International Symposium on Disinformation in Open Online Media, along with the IPIE affiliates whose work touches on the information environment. For 2026, the frame was refreshed with contacts suggested by 2025 respondents and experts from countries underrepresented in earlier waves. In total, 3,409 experts were invited. The initial list included 3,244 names, and 165 more were added during the survey period through snowball nominations and additional targeted outreach to under-covered regions.

Eligibility rested on research activity rather than on job title or affiliation. To be invited, a person had to have authored peer-reviewed research on the information environment or been nominated on that basis by a respondent or an IPIE affiliate. Career stage, discipline, and sector were not restricted, and a quarter of respondents work outside academia. No eligibility screening was conducted for the questionnaire, so the criterion of research activity was applied when the invitation list was created.

Sampling

The survey was conducted between 6 May and 8 June 2026. A total of 509 researchers began the survey; 470 answered all questions and constituted the analytic sample, while 39 started but did not complete it. The 470 completions

represent about 14% of those invited, compared to 17% in 2024 and 2025.

Respondents reported expertise on 71 countries (Figure 1), spanning every world region (Table 1). While expertise remained concentrated on the USA and Western Europe, the sample included strong representation from developing economies such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, China, India, Malawi, the Philippines, Kenya, and Nigeria, as well as under-studied regions across Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and Southeast Asia.

Each respondent named a single main country of expertise, to which all country-level results refer. This is the country a respondent studies, and need not be where they live. We report results overall and, at the end of the results section, by developed versus developing economies, classifying each respondent's country of expertise according to the UN Trade and Development classification: "The developed economies broadly comprise Northern America and Europe, Israel, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand." Under this classification, 257 experts, 55%, are experts on developed economies and 213, 45%, on developing economies, up from previous years, 39% in 2023, 34% in 2024, and 40% in 2025. We use "developing economies" throughout for consistency with this classification. The full list of countries of expertise, with the number of experts on each, is given in the replication materials.

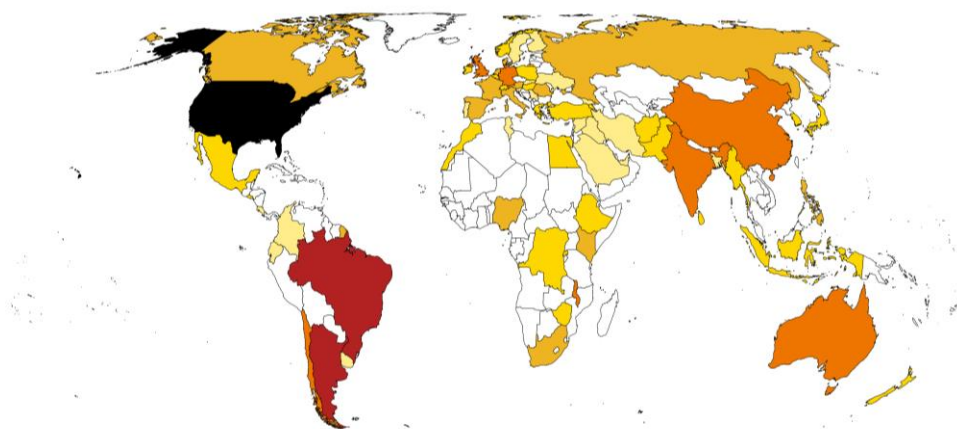
Part of this rise comes from countries new to the survey. Twelve developing economies appear for the first time in 2026, among them El Salvador, Ethiopia, Malawi, Myanmar, and Rwanda, together accounting for 29 respondents. The rest comes from deeper coverage of countries already represented, most of all Argentina, which grew from 8 experts to 23, followed by Chile and the Philippines, each adding 6.

Three-fourths of respondents work at academic institutions, with smaller numbers at non-profits or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments,

media outlets or private companies, and independent or other settings. Their disciplinary background is predominantly the social sciences, at 68%, followed by 18% in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), 10% in the humanities, and 2% in the medical sciences, with the remaining 3% in other fields.

The sample spanned all career stages, with 38% in mid-career and 29% each in early-career and late-career, alongside a small number of junior researchers still in training, such as students and interns. As in previous waves, more men, 62%, than women, 36%, responded to the survey, while 1% identified as non-binary and 1% preferred not to say. The median survey completion time was 20 minutes. Experts were generally confident in their answers, with 94% reporting moderate or very high confidence in their responses about their country of expertise.

Figure 1. Respondents' Expertise by Country.



Note: Shading reflects the number of experts reporting each country as their main country of expertise; map projection: Equal Earth Projection. ○ = 0; ● = 1, ● = 2–5, ● = 6–10, ● = 11–20, ● = 21–40, ● = 41–120.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

Table 1. Respondents' Expertise by Region.

Region	Number of experts
North America	195
Western Europe	167
Latin America and the Caribbean	108
East and Southeast Asia	49
Sub-Saharan Africa	48
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	41
South Asia	32
Middle East and North Africa	30
Oceania	20

Note: Regions are the options offered in the questionnaire and were self-selected; respondents could select multiple regions, so the total is 690, not 470. These regions are reported separately from the single country of expertise used elsewhere, and they do not map onto the classification used for the developed-versus-developing split.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

Instrument Design

The questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics, which complies with the General Data Protection Regulation. Because almost all respondents, 94%, chose English as the language of the survey in 2024, it was offered only in English this year. Respondents were offered 25 USD as compensation to complete the survey, which was facilitated by BHN Rewards, a digital gifting platform. We did not collect any identifying information, such as names, IP addresses, or location data. The questionnaire received ethics approval from the IPIE Ethics Committee [IPIE_Ethics_Committee_2026_001].

The instrument retained a core set of items from earlier versions of the survey to track trends, but new questions were added, including one on AI summaries in search engines. It also carried a set of country-specific questions that ask about each respondent's main country of expertise in finer detail. We report a few of these results here, but reserve most for a separate IPIE report.

Statistical Approach

Throughout the report, percentages represent shares of the 470 experts in the analytic sample and are rounded to the nearest whole number, so totals may not sum to exactly 100. Figures show 95% confidence intervals around each estimate using the Wilson score method. Differences between groups of experts were assessed with chi-squared tests of two proportions with a continuity correction, and we report only differences that pass the conventional 5% threshold. Full estimates, intervals, and test statistics for every comparison we ran, including those not narrated here, are on [GitHub](#).

Some results report a rating scale in collapsed form. Each figure note gives the collapse used, and the figures show the full distributions.

Every closed question offered a “don’t know” option. Those answers are kept in the denominator, so each percentage is a share of all 470 experts rather than of those who took a position, and the share choosing “don’t know” is shown separately in each figure.

The groups of experts described in the findings on threats and on generative AI come from latent class analyses of the underlying items, recoded to three ordinal levels. Three classes were retained in each case, supported by bootstrapped likelihood-ratio tests against a two-class solution. Respondents who answered “don’t know” to any item are excluded from both models. Because these are latent classes, the shares are estimated memberships that describe typical response patterns rather than strict categories. The class-conditional probabilities for the generative AI groups and the full model output are on [GitHub](#).

Quotations from the answers to the open-ended questions illustrate points the closed questions already establish. They were selected rather than coded systematically, so should be read as illustrations, not as evidence of how widely a

view is held. Each has been lightly edited to improve readability and reduce length without changing its meaning.

Fuller breakdowns by country and for experts on the USA against the rest of the world are provided on [GitHub](#), where the full questionnaire, analysis code, and data are available.

Limitations

- Each wave of the survey draws a different, partly self-selected sample, so respondents may not represent the wider population of experts. Responses are anonymous and cannot be linked across waves, so year-by-year comparisons are not panel comparisons and partly reflect shifts in who responded, though the main trends hold within individual countries across the different waves.
- The developed and developing groups are both broad, spanning countries with very different political, economic, and media systems. One difference between them is that between two heterogeneous aggregates. Where this matters most we report the USA separately, since it accounts for a quarter of the sample and on several measures does not behave like the rest of the developed group.
- The threat-related questions were cut from 13 items to 6, so although the 6 items are unchanged in wording, the ratings are not directly comparable with earlier waves. Respondents were asked to name a single country of expertise this year rather than up to two in 2025, so country and region counts differ from those in the 2025 report.
- The question on search engines does not distinguish between searches that do not produce AI-generated summaries and searches that do. Search engines now show these summaries by default, such as on Google. The favorable ratings for search engines should therefore not be read as ratings

for AI-assisted searches, which experts assessed separately and far less favorably.

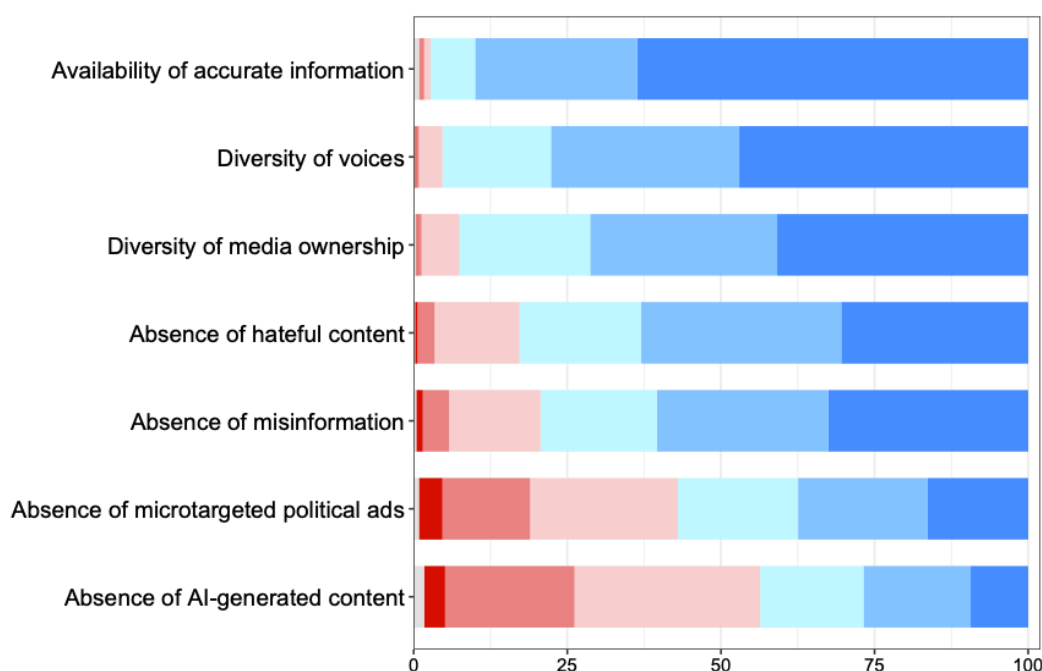
- The outlook question asks whether the information environment will get better or worse rather than rating its condition outright, and experts who were asked to forecast tend toward pessimism, so the high degree of pessimism should be interpreted cautiously. The item also combines direction and confidence in a single question.

SECTION 4. FINDINGS

Key Features of a Healthy Information Environment

Experts were asked how important various factors are for achieving a healthy information environment. As in the past three years, experts rated the availability of accurate information as the most important feature, with 64% calling it absolutely essential and 90% rating it extremely important or higher (Figure 2a). Diversity of voices ranked second, with 47% calling it absolutely essential, followed by diversity of media ownership at 41%. The absence of hateful content and of misinformation was rated highly important, while the absence of micro-targeted political advertising and AI-generated content was least important, though most experts still rated them at least moderately important.

Figure 2a. The Importance of Each Feature of a Healthy Information Environment.



Note: “How important are each of the following to achieve a good, healthy information environment?”

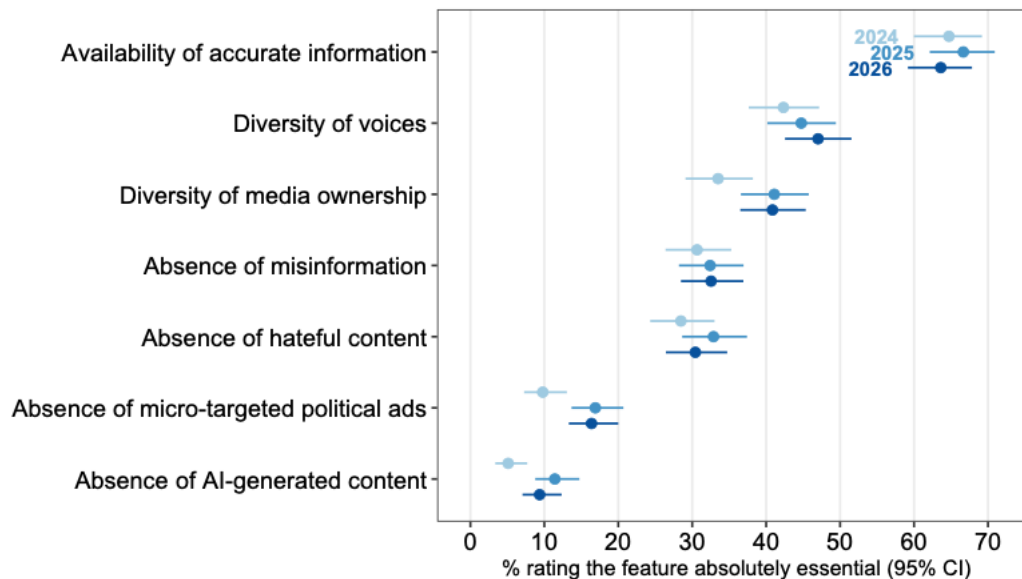
● = Don’t know, ● = Not important at all, ● = Not very important, ● = Moderately important, ● = Very important, ● = Extremely important, ● = Absolutely essential.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

This ranking has held for four years running. Accurate information has been rated absolutely essential by 64% to 67% of experts in every wave since the seven-point scale was introduced in 2024, and diversity of voices has ranked second throughout. Figure 2b shows all seven features across the three waves starting in 2024. All ratings are stable except for one. The share calling the absence of micro-targeted political advertising and of AI-generated content absolutely essential roughly doubled between 2024 and 2025, then held.

Most experts saw diverse voices as within reach, with 76% reporting that people in their country of expertise can find diverse viewpoints online at least somewhat easily, more so in developed than in developing economies. The quality of that information was a bigger concern than its diversity. Only 28% thought more than half of the population trusts the main news outlets to report accurately about

Figure 2b. The Importance of Each Feature of a Healthy Information Environment, 2024 to 2026.



Note: Percentage of experts rating each feature absolutely essential, with 95% confidence intervals. The seven-point scale was introduced in 2024, so 2023 is not comparable. $N = 412$ in 2024, 438 in 2025, and 470 in 2026.

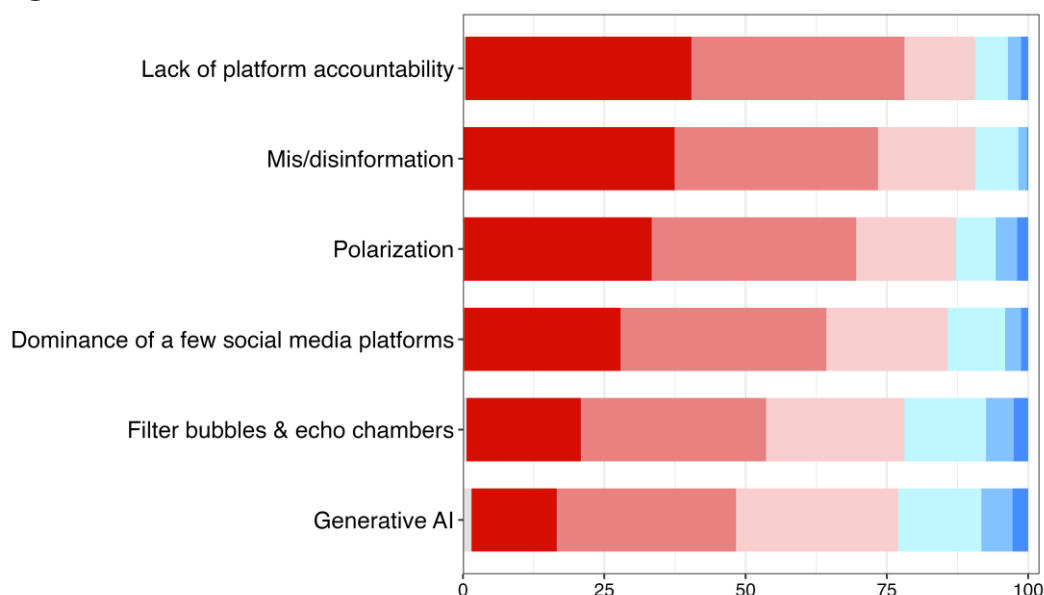
Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

politics, and only 37% thought the available information gives people the understanding they need to take part in civic life, a share markedly lower in developing economies.

Threats to the Information Environment

Experts rated how significant a threat each of six factors poses to the information environment in their main country of expertise, a set reduced from 13 items in 2025 through factor analysis. Lack of platform accountability was the most widely shared concern, rated a big or extreme threat by 78% of experts (Figure 3), narrowly ahead of misinformation, 73%, and polarization, 69%. The dominance of a few social media platforms, 64%, and filter bubbles or echo chambers, 53%, followed. Generative AI was rated the smallest of the six threats, though still a big or extreme threat for 47% of experts.

Figure 3. Main Threats to the Information Environment.



Note: “How significant a threat do you think each of the following poses to the information environment in [your main country of expertise]?” ● = Don’t know, ● = Extreme threat, ● = Big threat, ● = Moderate threat, ● = Small threat, ● = Very small threat, ● = Not a threat at all.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

“The polarization is extreme to the point that public discourse has been limited to echo chambers.” – Expert on the Philippines

“The situation in Finland was better before Musk controlled X and Facebook changed its policies. [...] Facebook and X have worsened the political discussion and enabled the extremes to find suitable audience - echo chamber - to promote their ideas.” – Expert on Finland

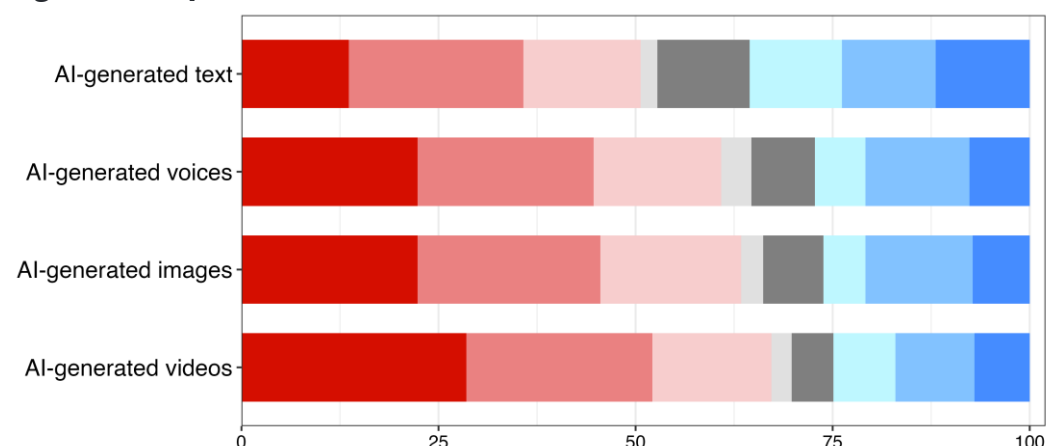
This perception is consistent with evidence that hate speech on X rose by about 50% after the platform changed ownership and remained elevated [27], and that X’s algorithmic feed promotes conservative content while demoting traditional news sources, shifting users’ policy attitudes to the right [28]. Experts’ views on regulatory regimes differ by region. Only 26% of EU experts report weak or absent legal disclosure requirements for content and platforms, against 58% elsewhere, so the EU’s regulatory framework is visible to the experts who study it.

Behind these averages, experts fall into roughly three groups. About half, 52%, are broadly alarmed, treating almost every threat, from platforms and misinformation to polarization and generative AI, as big or extreme. A little over a third, 37%, concentrate their concern on platform accountability and misinformation but worry far less about generative AI or filter bubbles. A small group, 11%, is broadly unworried, rating most threats low. Experts on developing economies cluster in the alarmed group. Social scientists, two-thirds of the sample, are less likely than researchers from other disciplines to fall into the alarmed group.

Generative AI and Other Information Technologies

Asked how generative AI tools will affect the information environment over the next five years, experts were broadly pessimistic. AI-generated video drew the most concern, with 67% expecting it to worsen the information environment, followed by AI-generated images at 63% and voices at 61% (Figure 4a).

Figure 4a. Expected Effects of Generative AI over the Next Five Years.



Note: “How do you think generative AI tools will affect the information environment in the next 5 years?”
 ● = Greatly worsen, ● = Somewhat worsen, ● = Slightly worsen, ● = Don't know, ● = Neither, ● = Slightly improve, ● = Somewhat improve, ● = Greatly improve.

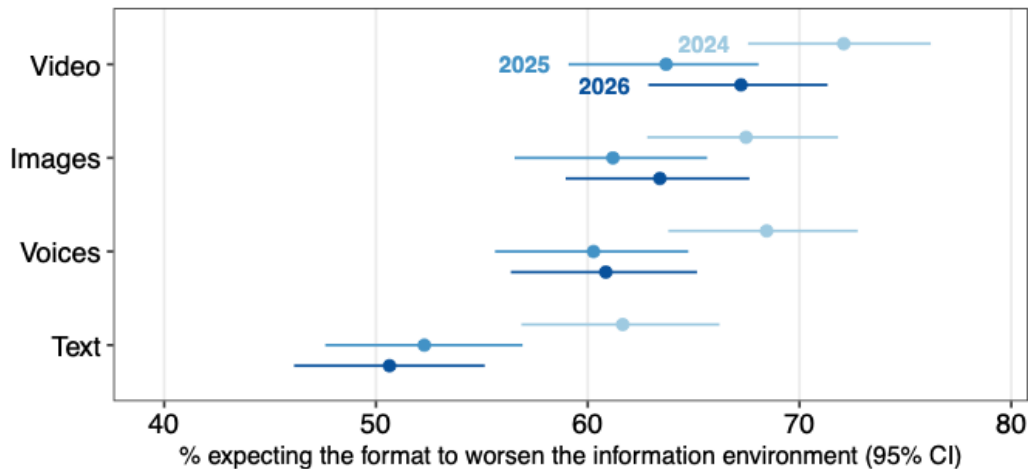
Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

AI-generated text was the least worrying, though half of experts still expected it to worsen the environment. These results replicate the 2024 and 2025 surveys, in which video was consistently the greatest worry and text the least (Figure 4b). This pattern contrasts with recent experimental evidence on persuasive effects, which suggests that text-based generative AI misinformation may currently pose greater risks than visual generative AI misinformation ([SR2026.2](#)).

These judgments varied by field. Social scientists were the most pessimistic about generative AI's trajectory. Among them, 76% expected AI-generated video to worsen the information environment, versus 45% of STEM scholars and 47% of humanities scholars.

Experts fall into three camps on where generative AI is heading. The largest group, 62%, expects generative AI to worsen the information environment across formats, though less uniformly for text. About a quarter, 27%, expect generative AI to improve the information environment. A small group, 11%, is divided by format, largely untroubled by AI-generated text but considerably more concerned about AI-generated video.

Figure 4b. Expected Effects of Generative AI, 2024 to 2026.



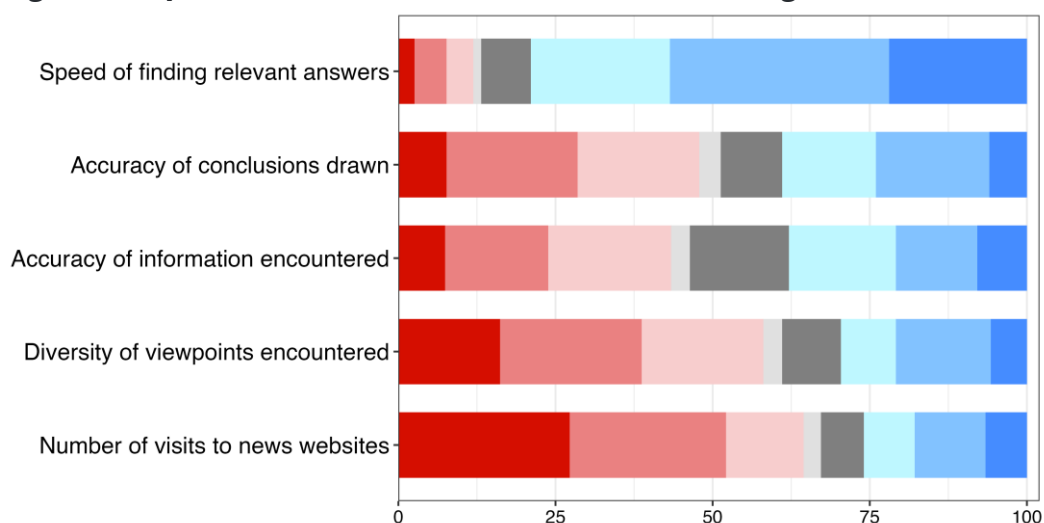
Note: Percentage of experts expecting each format to worsen the information environment over the next five years, with 95% confidence intervals. The item was not asked in 2023. *N* = 412 in 2024, 438 in 2025, and 470 in 2026.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

AI Summaries in Search Engines. New this year, the survey asked how AI summaries in search engines, the generated answers now shown above search results, will affect search outcomes. Experts described a sharp trade-off. As shown in Figure 5, a large majority, 79%, expected AI summaries to speed up how quickly users find relevant answers. But most expected them to reduce visits to news websites, 64%, and the diversity of viewpoints users encounter, 58%. Experts were divided on whether AI summaries improve or worsen the accuracy of the information encountered and of the conclusions users draw.

Effects of Information Technologies on Society. Experts judged whether the effects of four technologies on society have been positive or negative. Similar to last year, search engines stood out as clearly positive, with 80% of experts rating their societal effects as positive and only 8% as negative (Figure 6). Views on the other three technologies were more mixed. Recommender systems were the most negatively assessed, with 47% negative versus 35% positive, while social media was 45% positive versus 41% negative, and generative AI was 41% positive versus 34% negative, splitting experts almost evenly.

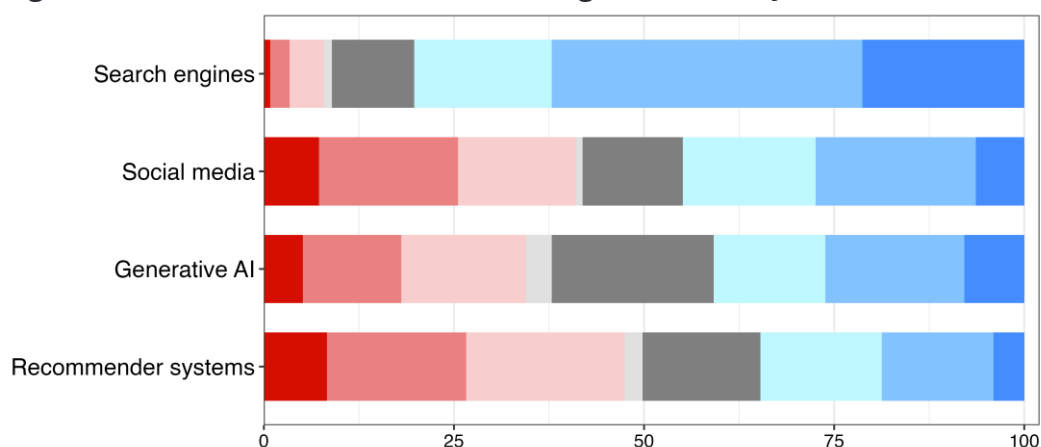
Figure 5. Expected Effects of AI Summaries in Search Engines.



Note: “To what extent do you think AI summaries in search engines will improve or worsen the following outcomes of a search in [your main country of expertise]?” ● = Worsen a lot, ● = Worsen, ● = Worsen a little, ● = Don’t know, ● = No change, ● = Improve a little, ● = Improve, ● = Improve a lot.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

Figure 6. Effects of Information Technologies on Society.



Note: “In [your main country of expertise], would you say that the effects of the following technologies and phenomena on society have been rather positive or negative?” ● = Very negative, ● = Negative, ● = Slightly negative, ● = Don’t know, ● = Neither, ● = Slightly positive, ● = Positive, ● = Very positive.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

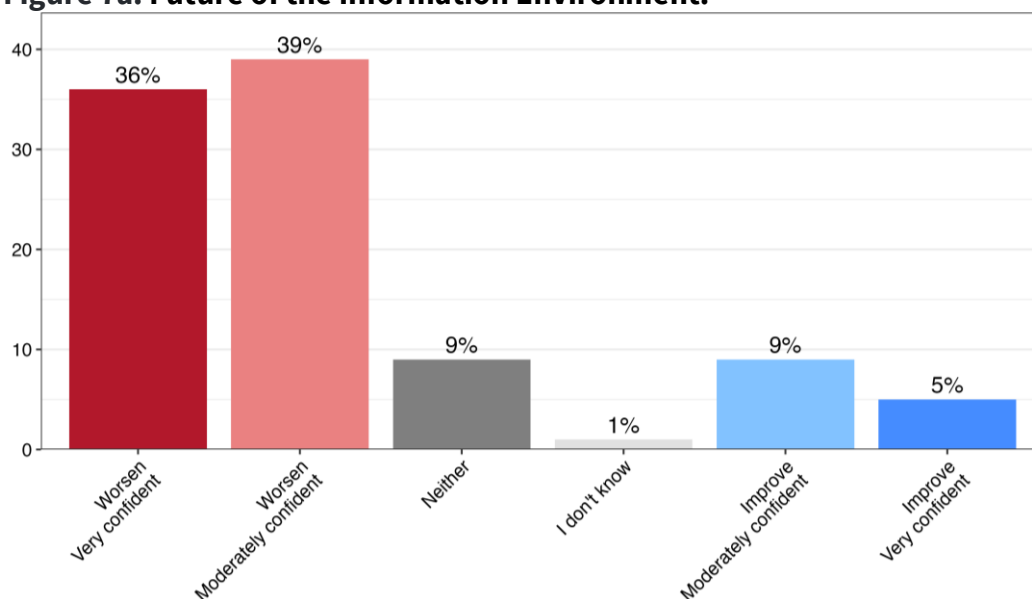
Experts also saw AI as starting to shape how people seek political information, though unevenly. Only 21% judged that more than half of the population in their country of expertise uses AI tools for this.

Experts' Outlook on the Future of the Information Environment

Experts remain pessimistic about the near future. Three in four, 76%, are moderately or very confident that the information environment in their country of expertise will worsen over the coming year, while 14% expect it to improve, 9% expect no change, and 1% are unsure (Figure 7a). Pessimism has risen since the wave of surveys began, from 53% in 2023 to 63% in 2024 and 72% in 2025 (Figure 7b). This year's increase, unlike the increases in the two previous waves, is not statistically significant, so it is too early to tell whether the trend is continuing or flattening.

The multi-year climb is not only about which experts responded each year. Restricting the comparison to the eight countries covered by at least five experts in every wave yields the same picture: 51% in 2023, 63% in 2024, 76% in 2025, and 76% in 2026. Holding the mix of developed- and developing-economy experts constant across waves shifts the 2026 figure slightly up rather than down.

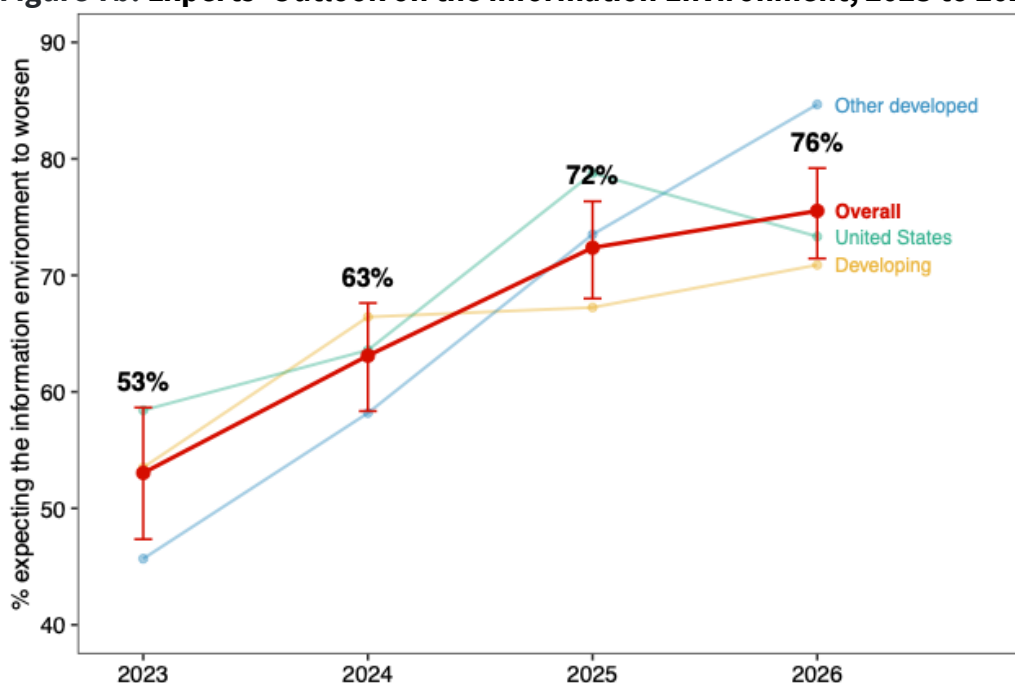
Figure 7a. Future of the Information Environment.



Note: “How confident are you that the information environment will improve or worsen in the next year in [your main country of expertise]?”

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

Figure 7b. Experts' Outlook on the Information Environment, 2023 to 2026.



Note: Percentage of experts moderately or very confident that the information environment in their country of expertise will worsen over the coming year, with 95% confidence intervals. $N = 296$ in 2023, 412 in 2024, 438 in 2025, and 470 in 2026. Faint lines show experts on developing economies ($n = 114, 140, 174, 213$ in 2023 to 2026 respectively), the USA (101, 162, 113, 120), and other developed economies (81, 110, 151, 137).

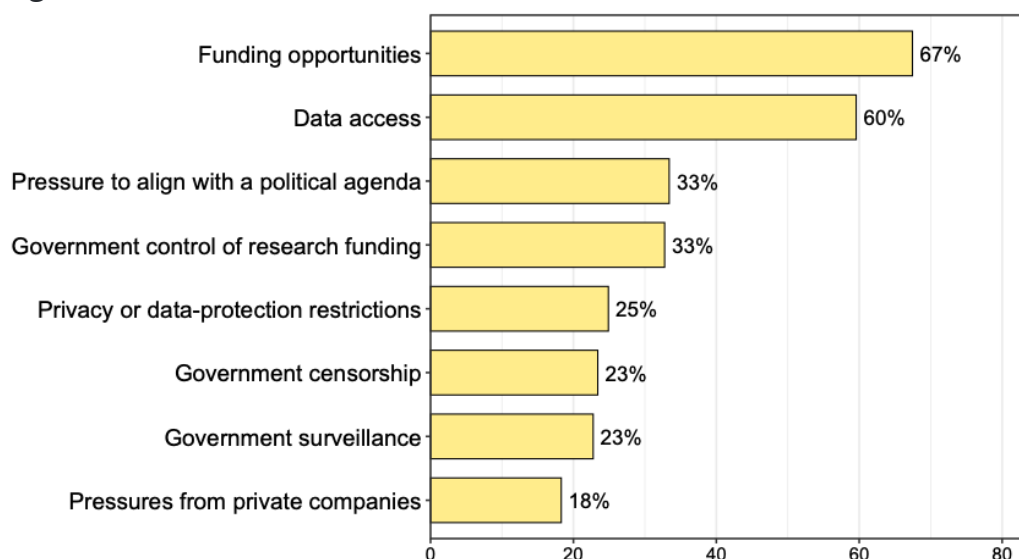
Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE 2023 to 2026.

If anything, the changing composition of the sample understates the rise, since the share of experts on developing economies, the less pessimistic group, has grown with each wave. Not all individual countries follow the aggregate pattern. In the USA, our largest single subsample, pessimism rose from 58% in 2023 to 64% in 2024, jumped to 79% in 2025, and eased to 73% this year.

Barriers to the Study of the Information Environment

Finally, experts reported the barriers they face in their work on the information environment. Availability of research funding was the most common barrier at 67%, ahead of data access at 60% (Figure 8a). Funding overtook data access as the top barrier in 2025 and remained the top barrier this year (Figure 8b).

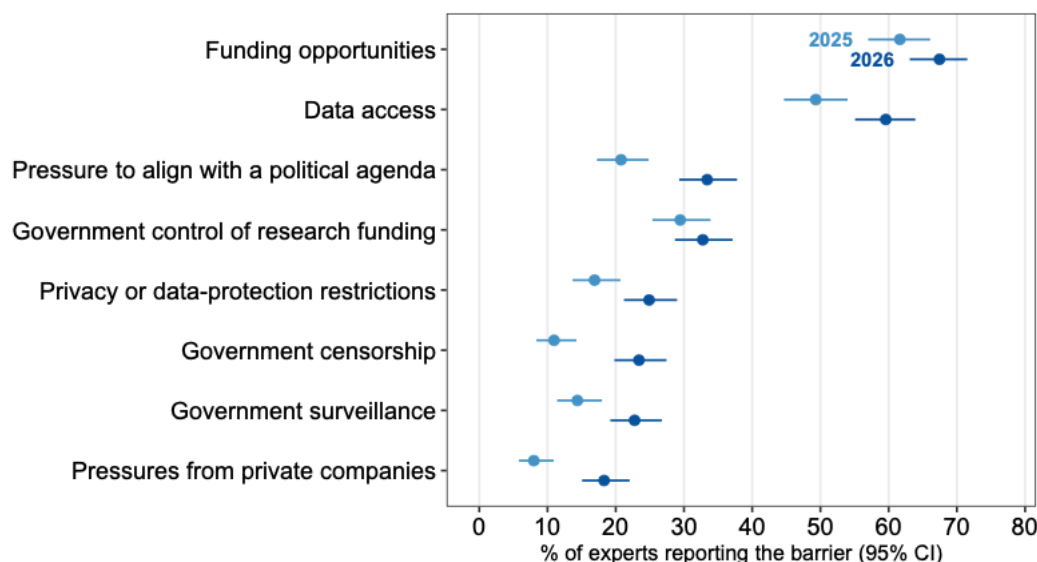
Figure 8a. Barriers to Research on the Information Environment.



Note: “What barriers or challenges do you currently face in your work on the information environment? Select all that apply.” Percentages are of all 470 experts; respondents could select multiple barriers.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

Figure 8b. Barriers to Research, 2025 and 2026.



Note: Percentage of all experts selecting each barrier, with 95% confidence intervals. The 2024 wave is excluded because it offered five response options against ten in 2025 and 2026, so its percentages are not comparable. The privacy item was reworded slightly in 2026. $N = 438$ in 2025 and 470 in 2026.

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE in 2025 and 2026.

Beyond resources, a third of experts reported pressure to align their research with a particular government’s political agenda and government control over research

funding, and roughly a quarter cited privacy and data-protection restrictions, government censorship, or government surveillance of their research. All of these were reported more often than in 2025, with the sharpest rises tied to political pressures. Pressure to align research with a government's agenda rose from 21% to 33%, government censorship from 11% to 23%, and pressure from private companies from 8% to 18%.

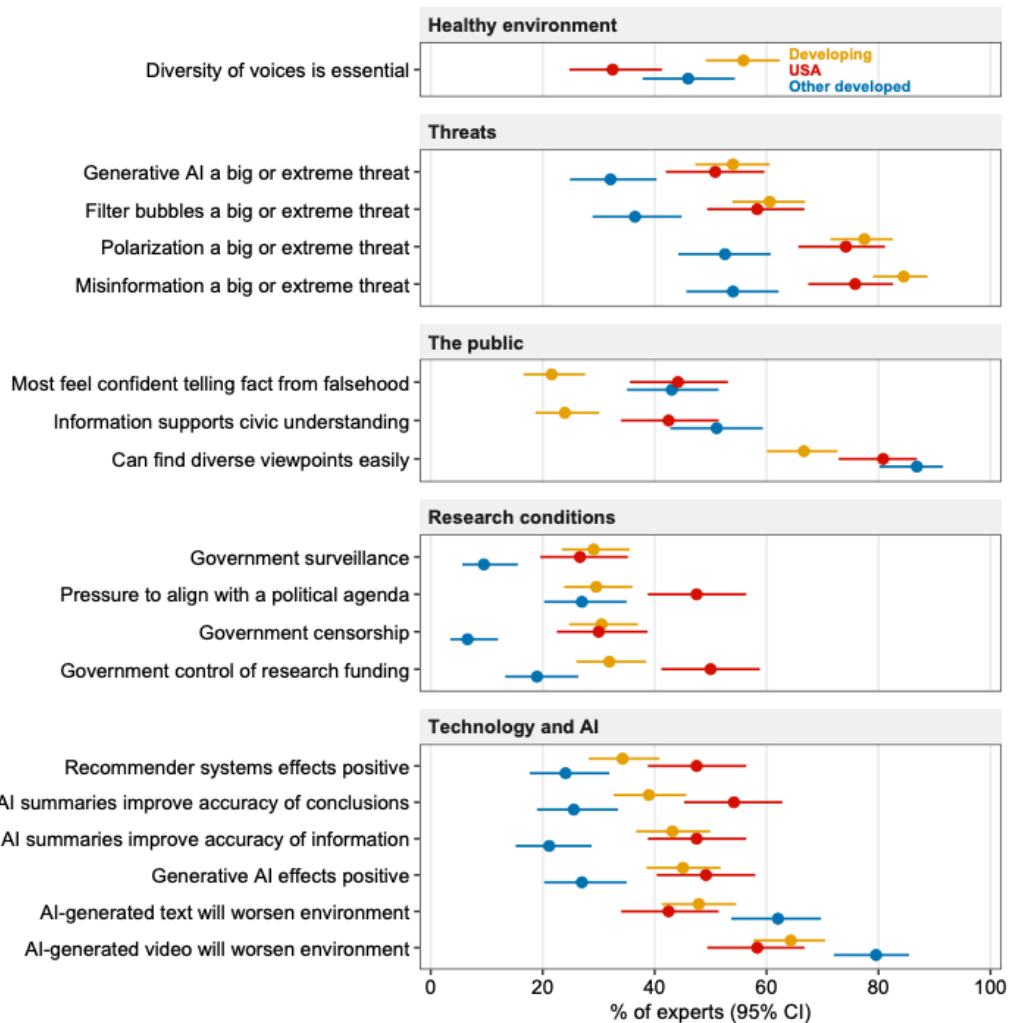
Differences Across Economies

This section reports how the results differ by economy (Figure 9), comparing experts on developing economies ($n = 213$) with those on the USA ($n = 120$), a quarter of the sample, and experts on other developed economies ($n = 137$), mostly European. The USA is separated from the other developed economies because the two rarely agree.

Experts on developing economies place more weight on the diversity of voices, with 56% calling it absolutely essential, compared with 46% for other developed economies and 33% for the USA. These same experts rate four of the six threats higher, with the largest differences for misinformation and polarization. On threats, USA experts are closest to experts on developing economies.

Judgments about the public follow the developed-versus-developing line more cleanly. Experts on developing economies were less likely to say people can find diverse viewpoints online easily (67% for developing economies versus 81% for the USA and 87% for other developed economies), that most people feel confident telling fact from falsehood (22% versus 44% and 43%), and that the available information supports civic understanding (24% versus 43% and 51%). They see both more misinformation and a public less equipped to withstand it.

Figure 9. Expert Assessments by Economy.



Note: Percentage of experts giving each response, with 95% confidence intervals. Orange = experts on developing economies ($n = 213$), red = experts on the USA ($n = 120$), blue = experts on other developed economies ($n = 137$).

Source: Based on data collected by the IPIE, 6 May to 8 June 2026.

On technology, experts on other developed economies stood apart. They were the most pessimistic about AI-generated content in every format, the least positive about generative AI, and the least likely to expect AI summaries in search engines to improve the accuracy of what people find or conclude (21% and 26%, versus 43% and 39% for developing economies and 48% and 54% for the USA). USA experts were the most positive about recommender systems.

Government censorship and surveillance were reported about as often by experts on the USA (30% and 27%) as by experts on developing economies (31% and 29%), but rarely by experts on other developed economies (7% and 9%). USA experts reported government control of research funding, 50%, and pressure to align research with a political agenda, 48%, most often. The USA is not unique in this. Experts on Argentina reported both at least as often, while experts on other countries like Brazil reported them far less often.

Finally, the most pessimistic experts on the future of the information environment are those in other developed economies (85% expect it to worsen, against 73% for the USA and 71% for developing economies).

SECTION 5. CONCLUSIONS

Four annual surveys now give an evolving picture of how experts read the global information environment. In May and June 2026, 470 experts covering 71 countries shared their assessments, the largest sample an annual survey has drawn and its most balanced, with almost half studying developing economies.

Some findings have proven durable. For the fourth year running, experts ranked the availability of accurate information and a diversity of voices as the two most important features of a healthy information environment. The ranking has not moved across four samples that have grown and changed in make-up.

The mood has grown more negative over the four waves. In 2026, roughly three in four experts, 76%, expected the information environment in their country of study to deteriorate over the coming year, up from 53% in 2023, 63% in 2024, and 72% in 2025. This year's increase, unlike those before it, is too small to distinguish from noise. Whether the trend continues or is flattening remains open.

The rise in pessimism is not confined to experts on any one part of the world. Those studying developed economies were somewhat more pessimistic, 79%, than those studying developing economies, 71%. The survey does not identify what has driven the increase. Platforms' retreat from content moderation, the regulatory conflict surrounding it, and the squeeze on research funding are plausible contributors, but testing them would require evidence this survey does not collect.

Asked to weigh specific threats, experts again named the lack of platform accountability first, ahead of misinformation and polarization. Although still seen as a threat, generative AI sat at the bottom of the list. The pattern suggests that experts are, for now, less troubled by new technology than by the power of the platforms that already dominate the information environment. Platform

accountability was rated a big or extreme threat by 78% of experts, compared to 47% for generative AI.

On generative AI, experts were most concerned by its most lifelike form, AI-generated video, and least concerned by AI-generated text. This echoes the two previous surveys and is a reminder that “generative AI” bundles together very different hazards. Yet a recent IPIE meta-analysis (SR2026.2) of experimental studies points to a possible mismatch between the perceived threat and the persuasive risk: AI-generated text is increasingly perceived as credible and may pose a greater persuasive risk than AI-generated images and videos, which people have become more skeptical of. Together, these findings suggest that the risks posed by generative AI may not always be the most conspicuous.

This year we added a question about a tool already in daily use: AI summaries in search engines. Experts described a clear trade-off. Most thought the summaries help people find answers faster, yet many also expected them to drain traffic from news sites and to flatten the range of viewpoints people encounter. This concern matches early evidence. After AI summaries began appearing in search engine results, click-through to sources fell sharply: users clicked 8% of the time when a summary appeared versus 15% when it did not [18]. On a desktop at least, USA users now spend more of their online time using AI tools than reading news [3]. Convenience, experts suggest, may come at the cost of a news ecosystem already under strain, and of exposure to diverse viewpoints.

Views on information technologies were mixed. Only search engines were seen as clearly positive; social media, recommender systems, and generative AI were not. Experts value search engines but are uneasy about the algorithms that increasingly decide what reaches people.

The conditions for studying the information environment have worsened. For a second year straight, a perceived shortage of research funding outranked data

access as the most common obstacle, though data access rebounded and the gap between the two narrowed. Many experts also reported political pressures, especially in the USA and developing economies. About a third pointed to demands that their work align with a government's agenda or to government control over research funding, and roughly a quarter to censorship or surveillance. Protecting funding, data access, and academic freedom is a necessity for the field in the years to come.

The survey revealed both clear areas of agreement and important divisions across experts. Consensus is strongest on what a healthy information environment needs and on the danger of unaccountable platforms. Experts split almost evenly on what generative AI has done to society so far. On where it is heading, they lean clearly toward pessimism.

Pessimism stands at a record high, after three years of steady increase. Alarm over platform accountability and misinformation is broad and steady. AI-driven searching, such as through AI chatbots, is already changing how people find information, in ways experts find both useful and unsettling. Taken together, this year's findings point to where action would matter most. It would mean holding platforms to account, sustaining the journalism that AI searches are already drawing readers away from, subjecting algorithms to scrutiny, investing in research on the information environment, and protecting the researchers and data that make any of this knowable.

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