

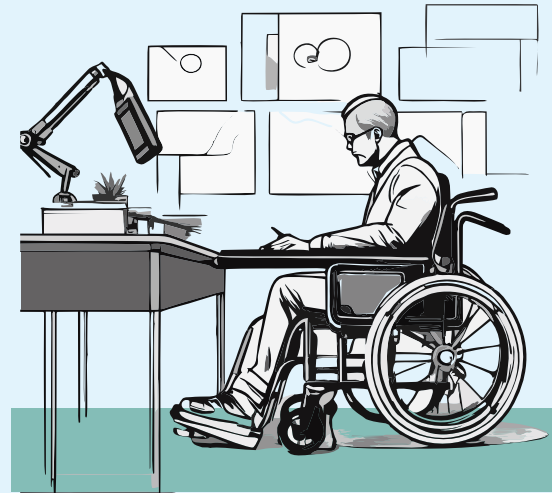


# Identifying and Countering Ableist Language Online

## What is Ableism?

Free political speech and robust public discourse are central to democratic societies. When people with disabilities participate in public life, they frequently encounter discrimination and stigma. Disability rights advocates use the term ableism to describe discrimination, harmful stereotypes, and prejudice against persons with disabilities. Ableism is rooted in the belief that persons with disabilities are “less than” people without disabilities and that disability is a problem with the individual rather than the result of societal barriers such as inaccessible buildings or information. Ableism devalues persons with disabilities as full participants in political and civic life.

Ableism can be apparent in many parts of the election process, including the choice of inaccessible venues as polling stations or not providing sign language interpretation at candidate debates. Ableism also has the potential to affect an electoral environment through the use of ableist speech by candidates, the media, citizens, and government officials. Ableist speech is offensive language associated with disability that perpetuates negative stereotypes. As discussed below, ableist speech can escalate to the level of illegal hate speech – language that vilifies, humiliates, or promotes intolerance and violence against a person or groups of persons by explicit or indirect reference to their race, national or ethnic origin, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, or other shared identity.<sup>1</sup> IFES' disability rights partners report that ableist speech increases online during election periods. Such speech limits political discourse and participation, not only for persons with disabilities; it can also create a hostile environment for other citizens. Countering ableism holistically is necessary to ensure that all people have the opportunity to participate in public life on an equal basis without fearing for their safety.



## Ableist Online Harassment and Hate Speech

As political life increasingly takes place online, harassment and bullying also become more common. The virtual spaces of social media afford anonymity to perpetrators, and it is easy, for example, to post hateful comments on a candidate's Facebook page. The impact of ableist online harassment not only affects the intended target but can also negatively affect all people – regardless of whether they have disabilities.

Ableist online harassment may occur in two ways: by directing derogatory language at a person with a disability, or by directing derogatory language about disability at a person without disabilities. Ableist online harassment targets disability as an identity. In some instances, negative stereotypes or outdated, archaic terms about





<sup>1</sup> Shein, Erica, and Lisa Reppell. [Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions](#) | IFES – The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2019, April 26). [www.ifes.org](http://www.ifes.org).

disability are used in the harassment of a political opponent or someone with another marginalized identity. These may rise to the level of hate speech.

## Platforms' Limited Capacity to Combat Ableism

Most major social media platforms include disability as a protected characteristic in their definitions of hate speech, meaning that content moderators can remove or downrank ableist language. Increasing numbers of voluntary anti-hate speech codes of conduct, such as the voluntary European Union Code of Conduct on countering illegal hate speech online, signal recognition of the dangers of hate speech. At the same time, legislative bodies around the world are regulating social media and tech platforms around issues of hate speech, inciteful and dangerous speech, and disinformation, including the European Union's Digital Services Act. However, social media platforms have demonstrated an inability<sup>2</sup> to effectively combat harassment, bullying, and hate speech, with many failing to improve moderation processes or remove hate speech that violates their policies. Major social media companies such as Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok have significantly decreased their reviews of flagged content and removal rates over the past few years.<sup>3</sup> The table below compares social media company policies on the inclusion of disability in their prohibitions of hate speech and bullying.

**Inclusion of disability in social media hate speech and bullying policies<sup>4</sup>**

	META Facebook and Instagram 	X/Twitter 	YouTube 	TikTok 
Explicit inclusion of disability as protected from hate speech	✓		✓	✓
Explicit inclusion of disability in prohibitions against bullying		✓	✓	✓

Even when social media platforms have policies against hate speech, they often do not cover ableist language and may even overlook it. In one prominent case in 2020, a post by a Facebook user in Myanmar was removed for making “insulting generalizations” about Muslims. Facebook removed the post under its Hate Speech Community Standard, which prohibits “statements of inferiority about the mental deficiencies of a person or group” on the basis of religion. In this case, Facebook indicated that the protected characteristic under attack was religious affiliation – that is, the ableist speech used to attack the target was not considered hate speech on its own. Meta's Oversight Board, which reviews Meta's most difficult and significant decisions related to content on Facebook and Instagram, overturned the content removal in part because “statements referring to Muslims as mentally unwell or psychologically unstable are not a strong part” of hate speech against Muslims in Myanmar.<sup>5</sup> The Oversight Board's decision did not acknowledge that ableist language can be offensive to persons with disabilities, even if it is not directed at them.

<sup>2</sup> [Press corner: EU Code of Conduct against online hate speech: latest evaluation shows slowdown in progress](#). (2022, November 24). European Commission.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> As of 24 February 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Oversight Board: [Overturned: Myanmar post about Muslims](#) | Independent Judgment. Transparency. Legitimacy. (n.d.). Oversightboard.com.

## How Election Management Bodies Can Protect Electoral Environments from Ableism

For election management bodies (EMBs), hate speech can have significant implications for election integrity and security. It is important to recognize that ableist hate speech is a form of psychological violence against persons with disabilities that may include calling for actions that result in physical or psychological harm.

On Election Day, poll workers, observers, and voters may experience physical and physiological violence incited by hate speech. Ableist hate speech can also be directed toward people without disabilities to attack or discredit the opinions and actions of candidates, officials, or voters. Persons with disabilities running for political office or serving as temporary election workers can also be targets of ableist hate speech. Any instance of ableist hate speech contributes to further marginalization of persons with disabilities.

EMBs can help to stop online ableist speech by instituting policies that protect all people against harassment and harmful language. By speaking out proactively and when encountering harassment, EMB leaders can help raise awareness discriminatory language and its consequences. Doing so can in turn help mobilize a public response. Electoral leaders are also well qualified to explain to electoral stakeholders how hate speech endangers electoral democracy. IFES's resource *Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies* provides guidance for EMBs on identifying and addressing hate speech throughout the electoral cycle.<sup>5</sup>



Sinhalese poster from CAN MH Lanka's "Our Vote Matters" voter education campaign that reads: "Do not use derogatory language about people with psychosocial disabilities to refer to your opponents during your election campaigns. It further stigmatizes people with psychosocial disabilities and can cause distress."

Ahead of the 2020 elections, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka partnered with the Consumer Action Network Mental Health Lanka (CAN MH Lanka) on Our Vote Matters, a voter education and advocacy campaign for persons with psychosocial disabilities. With support from the Election Commission, CAN MH Lanka led efforts to advocate for including Sri Lankans with psychosocial disabilities in the electoral process. As a result of CAN MH Lanka's advocacy, the chairman of the Election Commission made a public statement to political parties acknowledging and reaffirming the right of people with psychosocial disabilities to vote. The campaign also developed voter education materials to encourage people with psychosocial disabilities to vote, as well as materials directed at the general public as part of a campaign to reduce stigma, including by avoiding ableist language. The graphic at left is one example of those materials.

The baseline response for any EMB should be to ensure that, as an institution (including its members and staff at all levels), it does not engage in harassment or hate speech of any kind. Codes of ethical conduct and public service standards for election officials and guidelines for those authorized to speak on behalf of the EMB should directly address the issues of discrimination and ableist hate speech.

<sup>5</sup> [Countering Hate Speech in Elections: Strategies for Electoral Management Bodies](https://www.ifes.org/) | IFES – The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2023, May 18). [www.ifes.org](https://www.ifes.org/).

For efforts to combat ableism to succeed, EMBs need to work with external stakeholders. Public information campaigns and voter education programs empower the public to understand ableist harassment and hate speech and how to combat it. The media can also play an important role in raising awareness of this issue, not only by publishing stories about hate speech when it happens but also by prohibiting the use of ableist language in their editorial policies. Greater public awareness could push governments to define disability as a component of hate speech and codify laws that prohibit it.

## Best Practices in Countering Ableist Language:

- Engage a wide variety of stakeholders, including organizations of persons with disabilities, to design codes of conduct for political parties and candidates.
- Model good behavior at all levels of EMB staff.
- Ensure EMB officials speak out about ableist hate speech and its consequences, including increased risks of electoral violence.
- Support civil society initiatives to counter ableist harassment and hate speech.
- Monitor, collect, and report data on ableist harassment and hate speech.
- Train electoral stakeholders at all levels about ableist harassment and hate speech.
- Within the legal framework, take action against perpetrators of ableist hate speech.

**Read and download** *Identifying and Countering Ableist Language Online* on [www.IFES.org](http://www.IFES.org).

IFES's **Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology** provides EMBs and civil society with guidelines and recommendations to ensure the technology they use, procure and develop is fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

Learn more at [Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Electoral Technology](#).

Follow [@IFESDisability](#) to stay up to date on IFES's work on inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Contact [media@ifes.org](mailto:media@ifes.org) for more information.

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