# Harmful Speech in Sri Lanka

September 2024

> " When information integrity is targeted, so is democracy – which depends on a shared, fact-based perception of reality. False narratives, distortions and lies breed cynicism, disbelief and disengagement. They undermine social cohesion, putting the Sustainable Development Goals further out of reach. "
>
> **António Guterres**
> Secretary-General of the United Nations

TRENDS ON HARMFUL SPEECH[1]
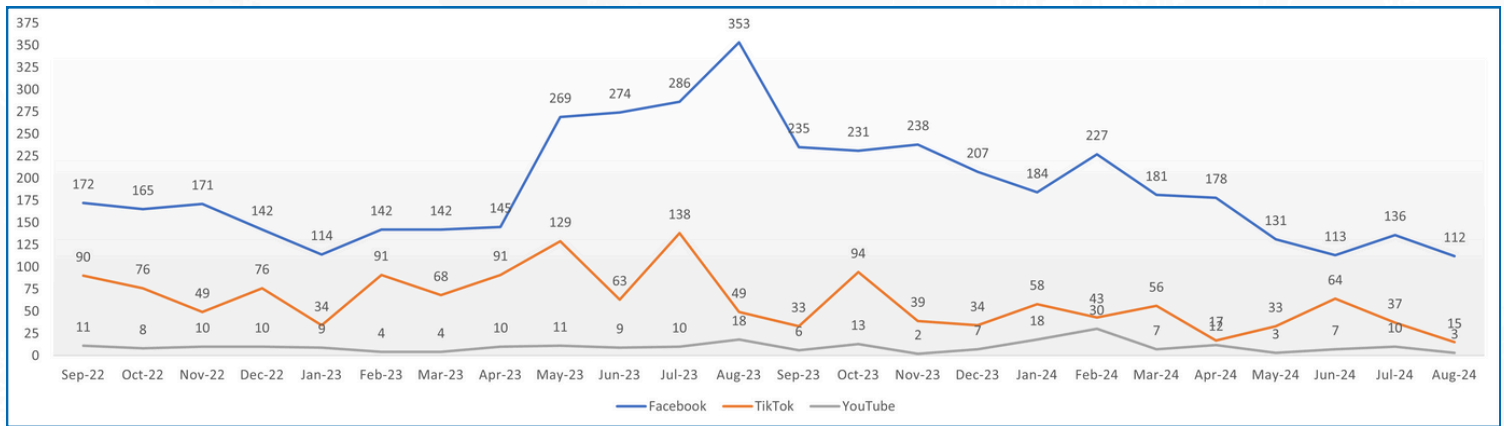
Harmful content (hate-speech, mis/disinformation, harassment, and incitement) is down 32% year-on-year in 2024. This was primarily on the back of a 52% decline in content targeting ethnic and religious minorities. [2]

Disinformation

Harmful speech targeting ethnic and/or religious groups
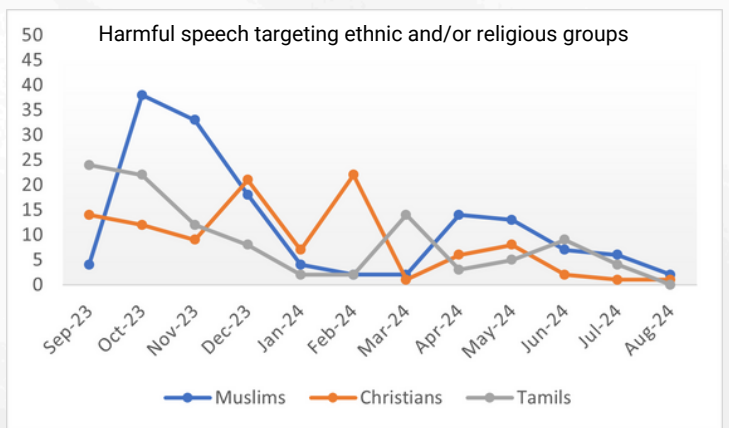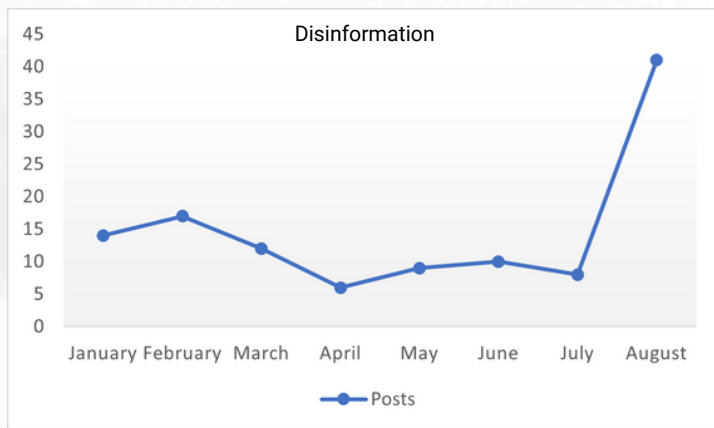
Dis/mis-information increased by five times from July to August, overlapping with the beginning of campaigning for the presidential elections.

Hate speech targeting ethnic and religious groups remain low even since the announcement of the presidential election, possibly as candidates and their supporters are appealing to voters from all communities, in what is expected to be a closely contested election.

Despite the positive trends on harmful content overall, content targeting women and girls remains a recurring concern, accounting for nearly 45% of all harmful content reported in 2024.

Although there are no women candidates at the upcoming presidential election, 53% of all harmful content recorded in August 2024 were targeted at women, much of which comprising of targeted harassment against female politicians and public figures.

1. Insights drawn from data collected by a civil society partner of the United Nations, based on the monitoring of Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok
2. UN in Sri Lanka relies on trusted external fact-checkers to independently monitor disinformation and misinformation narratives. The actual disinformation content prevalent online is expected to be higher due to monitoring capacity constraints.

	Response Rate	Removal Rate
TikTok	83.6%	79.6%
Facebook	79.6%	48.4%
YouTube	36.8%	19.7%

Responses from Platforms to content reported via trusted partner/flagger channels

EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

In May, a fabricated report claiming to be based on a survey by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the upcoming presidential election in Sri Lanka was shared on social media.
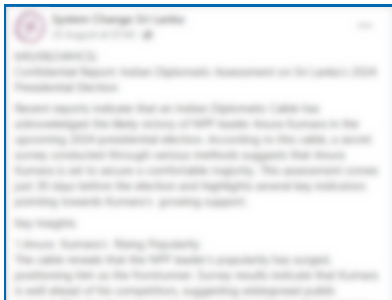
🔗 **Fact check**

In July, disinformation posts claiming that the European Union (EU) had conducted a survey on the Sri Lankan presidential election was shared on social media. The claim was later rejected by the EU.
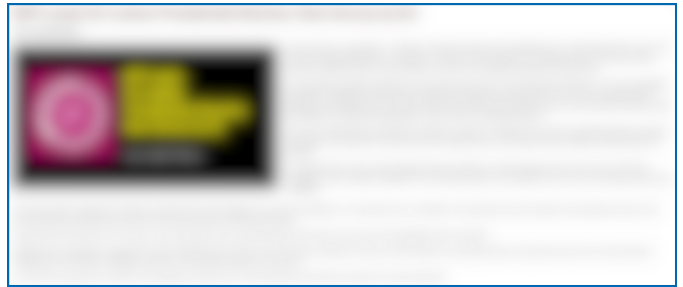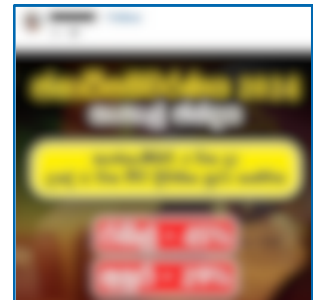
🔗 **Fact check**

In August, a post was shared claiming that a confidential Indian diplomatic cable had stated the likely victory of a specific candidate at Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election. The post suggests that the said cable was based on a survey. The claim was later rejected by the Indian High Commission.

🔗 **Fact check**

On September 5, just as the postal voting commenced, social media was flooded with posts with purported results, alleging that the number of votes received by various candidates had already been counted and shared. Postal voting counting will only commence on the evening of September 21st, only after the voting for the presidential election has closed.

🔗 **Fact check**

HOW TO RESPOND TO HARMFUL SPEECH

DISENGAGE when you know it's false and/or harmful to someone else

VERIFY authenticity before you share

AMPLIFY facts, call out mis/disinformation, and #UniteAgainstHate

#NoToHate
www.un.org/en/hate-speech