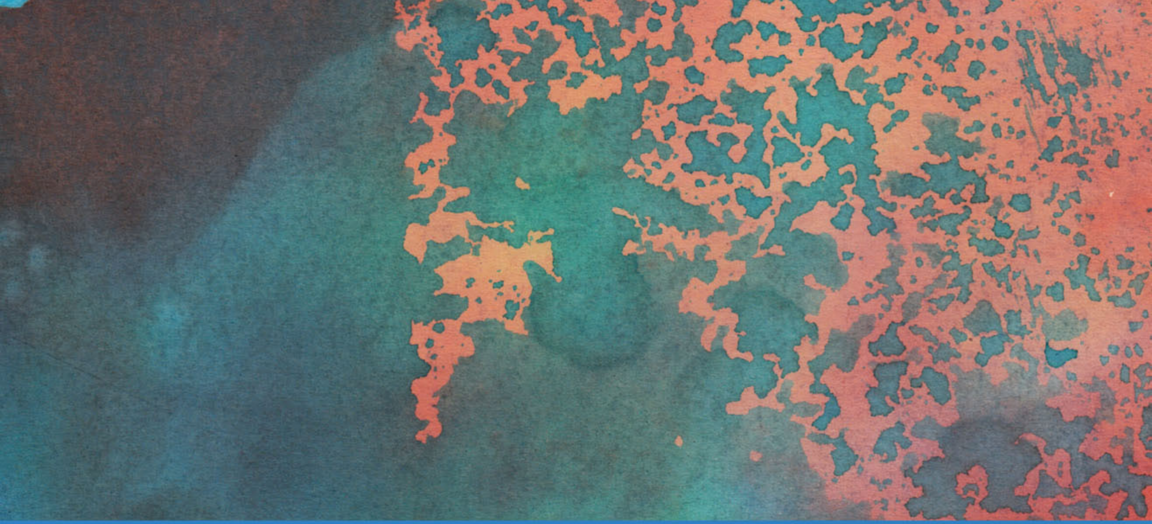
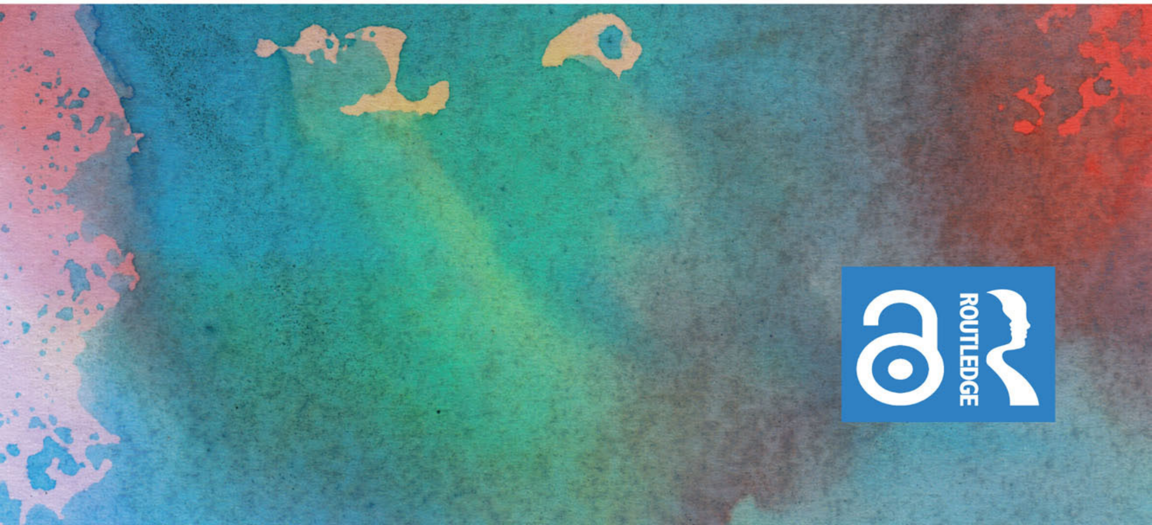


Routledge Studies in Media, Communication, and Politics

STATE-SPONSORED DISINFORMATION AROUND THE GLOBE

HOW POLITICIANS DECEIVE THEIR CITIZENS

Edited by Martin Echeverría, Sara García Santamaría
and Daniel C. Hallin



State-Sponsored Disinformation Around the Globe

This book explores the pervasive and globalised trajectory of domestic disinformation. It describes specific operations and general apparatuses of disinformation that are sponsored by the State institutions in several countries around the world, such as governments, political parties, and politicians.

With an international team of expert authors, this volume meticulously scrutinises instances of State-sponsored disinformation across a diverse spectrum of 14 countries encompassing Western and Eastern Europe, North and Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It examines how political landscapes amplify or constrain disinformation, advancing a comprehensive understanding of its dynamics in the contemporary global milieu. The book is organised in three sections that gather case studies from democratic, non-democratic, and transitional regimes.

Advancing the field of misinformation and disinformation studies by specialising in State-sponsored operations and their consequences, this book will be an essential volume for scholars and upper-level students of media and communication studies, journalism, political communication, disinformation and misinformation, social media, sociology, and international politics.

Martin Echeverría is Professor at the Center of Studies in Political Communication at Autonomous University of Puebla, Mexico. His work has been published in the International Journal of Press/Politics, International Journal of Communication, Journalism Studies, and other leading Ibero-American journals. He is Co-Chair of the Political Communication Section of IAMCR and his latest publication is *Political Entertainment in a Post-Authoritarian Democracy* (Routledge, 2023).

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State-Sponsored Disinformation Around the Globe

How Politicians Deceive their Citizens

Edited by Martin Echeverría, Sara García Santamaría and Daniel C. Hallin

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1 Introduction

Deceiving from the top: state-sponsored disinformation as a contemporary global phenomenon

Martin Echeverría, Sara García Santamaría, and Daniel C. Hallin

Introduction

Several years have passed since the shocking outcome of the 2016 Brexit and Trump elections. The disturbing role that disinformation played in those events produced a global moral panic, yet scholars have since been calling for caution (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). Some academics consider that mis/disinformation has always been embedded in societies, although it was only recently that it came into the spotlight, or that it is simply “endemic” to an information society (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021, p. 9). On the other hand, scholars have also stressed that attempts to disinform by groups and individuals are often marginal, ineffective, or ephemeral. People do not come across mis/disinformation very often and, even when they do, they are able to recognise and (selectively) dismiss it (Altay et al., 2023). Taken altogether, these views contend that democratic states and citizens have tools for countering disinformation and, thus, the apparent ubiquity of disinformation will not necessarily damage their institutions nor hinder citizen’s freedoms.

While cautious, we contend that there are instances in which disinformation matters and is worth further scholarly attention. Increased focus needs to be paid to disinformation campaigns that are systematically orchestrated by a collusion of domestic elite actors with the goal of damaging both the robustness of democratic institutions and citizens’ trust in them, while advancing their own goals. State actors, primarily governments, along with political parties, are often active participants in such networks, whether leading, facilitating, or legitimising them (Mondon, 2023). According to global data, these entities are the primary agents of disinformation in democratic states (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, 2019). Although their involvement is elusive and hard to trace, we can find cases in which state branches were involved in massive, coordinated disinformation campaigns during critical moments of high uncertainty, directed against their

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own citizens (Colomina & Sánchez, 2021). These concerns are exemplified by global governments' management of the COVID-19 crisis as exposed by the UK COVID-19 Inquiry, the Brexit offensive, or the campaigning of illiberal leaders such as Donald Trump in the USA, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Javier Milei in Argentina, or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

Regardless of its actual consequences, the cases mentioned above likely increased the vulnerability of citizens, subjecting them to potential manipulation, and posed a threat to the stability of democratic institutions and constituencies. Both factors signal that while constant disinformation from various agents with varying resources may not be overly concerning, particular attention should be given to disinformation sponsored or led by the state, especially during critical events or junctures.

While much public attention is directed at advanced digital technologies, such as AI, state actors are key because they have powerful material and symbolic resources at their disposal that make their disinformation efforts particularly threatening for democratic well-being. They have access to generous funding, are connected to vested interests and the mass media, and are involved in lawmaking and policymaking processes. In addition, the state is still protected by a halo of legitimacy in the public domain, even in illiberal and authoritarian contexts, which makes its involvement particularly compelling.

This book aims to bring scholarly attention to a specific disinformation agent—the powerful state—and its most frequent target: its citizens. By focusing on state-sponsored disinformation, we aim to foreground the active participation of states in deceiving their citizens for political gains. In doing so, we hope to assist researchers in identifying instances in which disinformation is significant both because of its reach and its harmful potential. We believe that this book contributes to a better understanding of the pervasiveness of state involvement in disinformation campaigns, examining the contextual factors that make them thrive and identifying the strategies that can help curtail their reach. This is essential for safeguarding democratic processes, protecting citizens from manipulation, and promoting informed decision-making in the digital age.

Additionally, this volume marks a departure from a first generation of works that are predominantly focused on specific countries, such as the USA, Britain, Russia, or China, or key crises, such as electoral contests or the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we propose a compilation of cases of state-sponsored disinformation from around the world across a range of political regimes. This shift serves three primary purposes. First, the examination of specific instances of state-sponsored disinformation yields a more nuanced and contextualised understanding of the phenomenon compared to cross-national studies, given its context-bound and far from homogeneous nature. Second, the diversity of epistemological and scholarly traditions collected contributes to expanding both our normative and practical understanding of the subject. Finally, a transversal reading of the book can help identify key elements that make state-sponsored disinformation thrive in some contexts and fail in others.

The remainder of this chapter aims to establish the significance of state-sponsored disinformation and to pinpoint the main themes cutting across the volume. First, we examine the elements of disinformation that become particularly powerful when mobilised by the state. This approach contributes to our understanding of how institutional agents shape disinformation (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). Second, we explain what makes the state one of the main disinforming agents, facilitating the kind of disinformation that should not be downplayed. Third, we examine the intertwining of the state with other vested interests in the dissemination of disinformation, as well as their mobilisation of ideological, financial, and technological tools for achieving their goals. The chapter concludes by describing the structure of the book and its rationale, presenting the 18 contributions that make the body of this volume.

What makes state-sponsored disinformation significant? Key elements and political implications

The European Union has defined disinformation as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (2018, p. 10). This working definition is helpful in differentiating disinformation from other similar concepts, such as misinformation, post-truth, or fake news. However, this definition seems too broad for grasping the kind of practices deployed by the state and its agents. Here, state-sponsored disinformation is understood as the systematic and coordinated effort by state actors and elite collaborators to intentionally spread false or misleading information on a large scale. This effort is coordinated because it puts the state at the center of broader elite power circuits that foster environments conducive to disinformation. The ultimate goal of state-sponsored disinformation is to gain political and economic dominance by controlling public discourse and opinions.

In the following lines, we will examine which elements of disinformation are particularly relevant when mobilised by the state. We will discuss six elements that set state-sponsored disinformation apart from other deceptive practices: (1) strategic planning, (2) privileged access to material and symbolic resources, (3) sophistication, (4) perceived legitimacy, (5) institutional power, and (6) corporate and media collusion.

First, state-sponsored disinformation is not only intentional but also (1) strategically planned, rather than reactive, spontaneous, or amateurish. It often takes the form of coordinated campaigns aimed at disrupting communication at a systemic level (McKay & Tenove, 2021, p. 707). In its most powerful forms, these well-funded disinformation operations work through a multi-channel bombardment (Colomina & Sánchez, 2021, p. 23), leaving little time for audiences to react (Giusti & Piras, 2020). Such a reach is possible because the state is a (2) resourceful agent with “greater access to resources, technology, personnel, and expertise compared with non-state actors” (Ingram, 2020) (more on that later).

The strategic nature of the deceit means that the state is a powerful yet slippery actor which uses (3) sophisticated disinformation strategies. Powerful and resourceful agents disseminate disinformation that is hard to identify because it is closer to half-truths, decontextualised true information, or skewed interpretations mingled with truths, creating a “factitious informational blend” whose verisimilitude is enhanced by visual cues, like photos or videos (Kapantai et al., 2021, p. 1302). This facticity load creates messages that escape people’s identification, precluding suspicion (Hameleers, 2023).

Unlike international corporations or think tanks, the (4) perceived legitimacy of the state among (more or less) broad groups of citizens grants it a degree of popular trust. This trust is often enough for granting the state the benefit of the doubt. However, a narrower part of the population may feel a loyalty towards the state which can manifest in two ways. Citizens’ connection with certain charismatic leaders and/or strong party identifications can increase their tolerance of certain half-truths and even make them reluctant to acknowledge any degree of falsehood in their statements. This provides state actors, particularly but not exclusively the populist ones, with a unique advantage that few other agents of disinformation can claim. At the same time, the state can find great independent helpers among loyal citizens present in “civil society organizations, Internet subcultures, youth groups, hacker collectives, fringe movements, social media influencers, and volunteers” (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019, p. 13). These virtual alliances and decentralised structures can complicate the identification of the state as a key sponsor of disinformation, as these intricacies help reinforce the covert nature of its operations.

Another strength of state actors is that they have direct access to institutional power (5). For instance, they can try to manipulate the judiciary through lawfare campaigns against their potential enemies, and they can interfere in domestic processes by using security agencies (Tenove, 2020) that purposely add noise to the informational disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). More importantly, state actors can attempt to implement policies that obscure their accountability and democratic obligations; in the case of illiberal governments, they can also instrumentalise legislation to curtail freedom of speech or dissent (Camargo & Simon, 2022; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

The driving force behind the power of state-disinformation strategies can be found in the (6) collusion between state actors and corporate stakeholders, including media owners. Much of the disinforming capacity of the state comes from its alliances with other organisations, such as think tanks that emerge during elections to later disappear. The state’s capacity multiplies using proxy organisations in the third or private sector and multiple contractors, such as public relations firms, campaign consultants, social media operators, and professional influencers (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2021).

Clear political implications arise from the dissemination of disinformation by various branches of the state, particularly governmental bodies, but also political parties and other elite actors. First and foremost, it constitutes an abuse of the legitimate power of the state, as it employs vast institutional resources against the very citizens who granted it such power. Second, it hinders the accountability of the state, a key condition of democratic governance, by concealing the truth and clouding the judgment of citizens about the government's performance and the threats they face. And third, it curtails citizens' right to information as well as freedom of expression, especially when disinformation is used for harassment and, ultimately, censorship (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018).

The mighty state and its media entanglements

A fundamental aspect of disinformation sponsored by the state is its material infrastructure, fundamentally comprising legacy and social media, which can be leveraged for the creation and dissemination of deception.

While legacy media can act as a vital barrier against disinformation when functioning autonomously, it can also serve as a powerful branch or key ally in the amplification of disinformation or suppression of accurate information. Alt-right, radical left, and partisan media such as tabloids and cable news that do not share the ethos nor the scrutiny practices of professional journalism are more prone to reproduce verbatim the scams from ideologically laden parties and governments (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Miller & Vaccari, 2020). When no strict autonomy provisions are in place, public service and captured commercial media resulting from clientelist alliances between media oligarchs and the regime can become mouthpieces of disinformation operations (European Union, 2018; Hall & Arguelles, 2021).

Even when legacy media refuse to join the toolbox of disinformation, media dependency on government information could still trigger a "cascade effect" of disinformation in public opinion (Entman, 2004), as exemplified during the Bush administration (2001–2009) in the USA. The state can also disable and disempower (independent) journalists (Merloe, 2015, p. 82) through harsh criticism, harassment, or digital censorship or repression. This volume presents several cases where social media is deployed in tandem with legacy media serving disinformation operations by the state.

On the other hand, as social media and messaging apps become the main source of news (Kalathil et al., 2020), states have learned to harness them for disinformation purposes. Their affordances, such as information abundance, anonymity, datafication, micro-targeting, or source impersonation, are well-documented in the literature. These affordances are intersected by two defining characteristics of online disinformation: amplification and automation.

The abundance of information allows agents with vested interests to flood citizens with rapid and sometimes conflicting information aimed at confusing users (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018). This property is heightened by the possibility for agents to remain anonymous, empowering paid or spontaneous trolls and facilitating the spread of large amounts of hostile messages (Giusti & Piras, 2020; Schia & Gjesvik, 2020).

The architecture of the platforms enables agents to harness large amounts of data from users' profiles and behavior. This capability facilitates the deployment of micro-targeted campaigns, tailor-made content, and the segmentation of those messages into different groups. Understanding the target audience allows disinformation agents to adjust their persuasion strategy based on the psychological profiles of their targets, exploiting their vulnerabilities and enhancing the likelihood of message efficacy (Barela & Duberry, 2021; Ohlin & Hollis, 2021). Governments in regimes without strong privacy protections, such as authoritarian ones, could factor in these operations the large personal data they harness from citizens throughout their lives. In any case, this affordance creates filter bubbles in which (dis)information is targeted to key groups aimed at reinforcing their belief systems and increasing their isolation (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020).

In the same vein, disinformation disseminators exploit the network logic of platforms, capitalizing on a recommendation culture that compels individuals to pay attention to and trust news and information based on the proximity and reputation of peers and family. Coupled with the capabilities of data collection, this affordance allows for the control of "networks among contacts, interconnections between people in virtual space, and the strength of these interconnections" (Gregor & Mlejnková, 2021, p. 92). Through this mechanism, individuals become susceptible to believing and sharing manipulated content (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Certain agents in illiberal or authoritarian environments skillfully leverage these affordances to engage in a deceptive practice beyond spreading false messages, involving the manipulation of source authenticity. Their practices entail co-opting influencers, opinion leaders, and other epistemic authorities (Hameleers, 2023), and, when support cannot be bought, creating false versions of these entities (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Similarly, the deployment of bots and trolls—automated accounts and hired disseminators—enables the simulation of consensus or distorts the popularity of a fact, belief, or interpretation of reality, a tactic known as astroturfing. Conversely, astroturfing is also utilised for mudslinging ideas or actors, censoring, or repressing dissenting voices (Berger, 2021).

Further, amplification involves artificially enhancing the reach of a communicator's message through prominent displays, hashtags, links, sharing, or algorithmic targeting. This is based on the data extracted from users and the personalised stimuli platforms use to encourage user amplification, such as shock, social belonging, or humor (Colomina & Sánchez, 2021; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). Savvy politicians may strategically utilise various channels and resources to amplify the reach of their messages or specific voices over others.

Lastly, automation delegates all the previous tasks of diffusion, data extraction, account fakery, and amplification, and even the crafting of messages, to automated and sometimes intelligent digital machines (AI). This exponentially increases their reach and impact (Ó Fathaigh et al., 2021).

In sum, the extensive institutional and material infrastructure, encompassing legacy media, social media intervention, proxies, as well as security agencies, endows the state with formidable capabilities in terms of both the breadth (by coordination and synchronicity capabilities) and depth (long-term execution) of its disinformation operations. These disinformation strategies can have significant consequences, as they are aimed at shaping public opinion, influencing electoral outcomes, and even inciting violence or social unrest. Recognising and countering state-sponsored disinformation is crucial for maintaining the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring an informed citizenry.

State-sponsored disinformation across the globe

A key argument throughout this chapter is that the state is not only a powerful agent of disinformation, but it also produces the kind of disinformation that poses a real threat to democratic well-being. However, its mechanisms vary in different types of regimes across the world.

In the case of non-democratic states, where disinformation has always been a key component of regime control, the current disinformation order has become a pretext for securitising society during (real or imaginary) crises, treating it as a threat to national security, and consequently strengthening their measures of control and repression of dissent (Giusti & Piras, 2020). When there are weak or no checks and balances, the state is more able to repress freedom of speech and expression with impunity (Hall & Arguelles, 2021).

The boost of disinformation operations by authoritarian governments comes from the combination of the global spread of social media and messaging apps, along with a shift in the tactics of authoritarian governments to secure legitimacy. For instance, Guriev and Triesman (2019) have observed the emergence of informational autocrats—rulers who, instead of resorting to physical repression or indoctrination, aim to deceitfully convince citizens about their benevolence, competence, and ability to solve people's problems. This is achieved through the capture of the legacy media and domination of social media, facilitated by well-financed bureaucratic structures with major investments in research and development (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Persily & Tucker, 2020). The media platforms also serve to control electoral narratives (Merloe, 2015). While oppositional parties are not necessarily banned, the state can interfere in the voting process to reduce "citizens' abilities to exercise their political rights" (Colomina & Sánchez, 2021, p. 68).

On the other hand, as Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2021) contend, "in an ideal world, the (democratic) state acts on behalf of the public interest and ensures that the public sphere is not only free to operate but also enabled to protect itself from organized lies" (p.32). However, in democracies—whether transitional or consolidated—state-disinformation tactics exhibit striking similarities with those in authoritarian contexts; throughout this volume, a clear convergence in tactics across various regimes is evident (Woolley and Howard, 2019). As we have already mentioned, even in democratic settings the primary agents of disinformation are governments and political parties (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, 2019), though this tendency may be more pronounced in specific local constituencies, including subnational authoritarian enclaves, where civic and media oversight is limited compared to national governments (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021).

For example, a shared feature of authoritarian and democratic far-right governments is the use of disinformation to suppress minorities opposing the main ideologies of the regimes—whether ethnic, religious, gender, or sexual orientation-based, etc. The deployment of hate speech, stigmatisation, and mobilisation against these groups can culminate in social harassment and physical violence. Additionally, far-right (populist) parties in democratic regimes, often supported by global vested interests and the conservative media, have emerged as key sources/disseminators of disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2021; Persily & Tucker, 2020). While these have been considered fringe practices in stable democracies, there is a risk of a contagion effect that favors the mainstreaming of disinformation in party politics.

Yet, a distinction is to be made. Full democracies in rich countries might be better prepared to face the disinformation deluge. Longstanding traditions of political competition, strong institutions, pluralistic media, and ample technological and educational resources make those countries more resilient to radical parties' disinformation. In contrast, in the global south, preexisting social cleavages, such as religion or ethnicity, combined with strong polarisation, might render disinformation a catalyst for discord and violence (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). As Feldstein contends, "when these technologies are adopted in places where civil society and government oversight are not robust, they may well facilitate the closing of civic space and the normalization of authoritarian values" (2021, p. 131). Nonetheless, the mainstreaming of state-sponsored disinformation is observable on a global scale, perhaps as part of a larger process of democratic backsliding (Schmotz, 2019). This is a contingency question we strive to explore across the cases of this book.

Structure of the book

The book is organised to reflect the diversity of appropriations that several states around the world have made of disinformation, their aims, practices, and resources. It primarily explores how powerful institutions of the state strategically launch disinformation operations within specific political and cultural contexts, especially during crises or significant national processes, targeting certain groups or their constituencies at large to achieve their goals. The key institutions the chapters analyse are the government and the political parties, the main agents of the disinforming state (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, 2019). The primary targets are the citizens at large, though in some cases, partisan, ethnic, religious, or foreign groups are affected.

The book is organised around 14 cases that reflect a rich and multifaceted global approach to state-sponsored disinformation. All in all, the book includes studies on both North (USA) and South America (Brazil, Argentina, and Cuba), Western (Spain and Greece) and Eastern Europe (Russia, Hungary, Turkey), Africa (Nigeria, Kenya), and Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia). The international scope of the book shows that state-sponsored disinformation has a true global reach and is not confined to specific geopolitical or cultural boundaries. Nonetheless, we have purposely avoided organising the book by geographical areas. The reason is that we wanted to examine state-sponsored disinformation across regions based on regimes criteria, fostering inter-regional scholarly dialogues and facilitating a dialogue between different cases. We believe that this is particularly important for the global south, which is often treated as an exception and compartmentalised in scholarly debates.

The sections of this volume are organised around types of political regimes, following the V-Dem classification (Lührmann et al., 2018). Our cases encompass what V-Dem labels as liberal democracies, such as South Korea; electoral democracies, like Brazil; electoral autocracies, like Turkey; and closed autocracies, such as Cuba. While the cases do not explore the link between the type or depth of autocracy or democratisation—a much-needed research program—we believe that such organisation can contribute to transversal readings that contribute to this debate.

There are three key narratives across the book: the role of the government, disinformation tactics, and historical overviews. A first group of cases focuses on government-sponsored disinformation, whether it's the disinformation industry in Kenya's elections, the delegitimisation of the electoral system in Brazil, or countering Chinese propaganda during Taiwan's elections. This theme underscores the significant impact of disinformation on democratic institutions and political stability. Another group of chapters explores the range of disinforming tactics used by states in cooperation with other elite actors and/or social media. These cases demonstrate how certain disinformation operations achieve success and with which consequences, while others fail due to poorly executed state deployment or interventions by contentious actors. Lastly, a third group of cases traces the recent historical trajectory of disinformation practices; from scandals to wiretapping in Greece, the combination of censorship and disinformation in Cuba, and the shift from ideological disinformation to a post-truth era in Nigeria. This theme suggests that disinformation strategies evolve over time, necessitating ongoing analysis and countermeasures.

The book is divided into three sections and 18 chapters:

PART I explores the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of state-sponsored disinformation. The chapters included aim to delve into a conceptual clarification and contextualisation. Chapter 2, by Petros Iosifidis (University of London, United Kingdom), explores the intricacies of disinformation, distinguishing it from propaganda and misinformation. While the focus has primarily been on external actors like Russia and China, democratically elected leaders are increasingly implicated in spreading disinformation, challenging Western liberal democracies. Petros contends that addressing state-sponsored disinformation necessitates comprehensive measures, including legal updates, corporate actions, robust media outlets, and civil society engagement, as well as the development of analytical tools to monitor and counteract these strategy-driven campaigns.

Chapter 3, by Grisel Salazar Rebolledo (Universidad Iberoamericana, México), challenges the prevalent Western-centric approach to disinformation by focusing on its manifestation and impact in the global south. Three critical aspects are highlighted: 1) the distinctive institutional weaknesses prevalent in these regions; 2) the pervasive socioeconomic gaps; and 3) the nature and entanglement of sources disseminating disinformation. The chapter argues that these factors, often overlooked in traditional analyses, are key for comprehending the dynamics of state-sponsored disinformation in non-Western liberal democracies.

In Chapter 4, Ahmed Farouk-Radwan and Jairo Lugo-Ocando (University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates) delve into the paradoxical role of statistics as both a vital tool for effective governance and a potential weapon for manipulation and oppression. Emphasising the indispensability of statistics in modern state administration, the authors highlight their pivotal role in resource allocation, understanding societal needs, and addressing critical issues. However, a critical lens is applied to historical instances where governments have abused statistics to control narratives and consolidate power. The chapter contends that the lack of adequate checks and balances transforms statistics from instruments of transparency and governance into tools of manipulation and oppression that contribute to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns.

PART II: Liberal Democracies encompasses regimes that implement an elite rotation system, as well as the rule of law and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and information rights. It draws cases from North America (the USA), Asia (South Korea and Taiwan), and Western Europe (Spain).

Chapter 5, by Michael Hameleers (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), explores the intricate relationship between populism and disinformation, specifically examining how (right-wing) populists craft a narrative that pits the virtuous ‘people’ against purportedly ‘corrupt’ elites. The article conceptualises two key relationships: (1) attributing blame to the media, seen as part of the corrupt elites, and (2) expressing populist ideas through people-centric, anti-expert, and evidence-free discourse. Through a content analysis of Donald Trump’s Tweets and US citizens' engagement on Facebook, the chapter provides qualitative evidence on the discursive construction of populist disinformation campaigns and the role of state actors in them.

Chapter 6, by Hyo-Jeong Lee (Sejong University, Korea), examines the aftermath of the tragic Sewol Ferry Disaster in South Korea that took place on April 16, 2014. The chapter explores the profound impact of the mismanagement of rescue efforts, the perceived lack of response from President Park, and the shock of losing 304 lives. In response to public scrutiny, the tragedy triggered the Park government to strategically manipulate information, initially scapegoating the ship owner. This case is an example of the intricate relationship between the state and the mainstream media and how they jointly mobilised irrelevant and sensationalised information, fostering conspiracy narratives and revealing the darker aspects of neoliberal South Korea.

Chapter 7, by David Vicente Torrico and María Díez-Garrido (University of Valladolid, Spain), investigates the role of the Spanish far-right party VOX in promoting misinformation about the climate crisis on Twitter. Over a six-month period from September 2022 to March 2023, messages from three Twitter accounts—VOX, its national leader, Santiago Abascal, and the leader of Madrid's Autonomous Community, Rocío Monasterio—were analysed. The findings indicate that VOX's Twitter discourse prioritises economic and political obstructionist elements, framing the climate crisis in national terms and as a perceived popular sacrifice against the elite. This research sheds light on the contribution of radical right-wing movements to the spread of disinformation on critical issues like climate change.

In Chapter 8, Aaron Huang, Economic Officer of the US Department of State, deviates slightly from the rest of the book by examining Taiwan's *resistance tactics* against Chinese disinformation campaigns during the 2020 elections. Through media monitoring and 40 expert interviews, the study reveals a holistic approach involving the government's debunking of fake news, civil society's vigilance through NGOs, and increased efficiency from companies like Facebook and LINE in tackling disinformation. Using the 2020 elections as a case study, the chapter reflects upon the motives, tactics, and actors in China's foreign information warfare, illustrating how it aims at destabilising democracies and weakening governance in target countries.

PART III: Electoral Democracies gather cases from democracies that have multiparty, free, and fair elections, yet the rule of law and liberal principles are not satisfied. The book compiles cases from South America (Brazil and Argentina), Western Europe (Greece), and Africa (Kenya).

Chapter 9 critically examines how Brazilian public authorities deployed disinformation on Meta's Facebook platform in the lead-up to the 2022 Brazilian elections. The goal was to sow distrust in the electoral system. Raquel Recuero (Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel), Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), Liziane Soares Guazina (University of Brasilia), and Bruno Araújo

(Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso) show how President Jair Bolsonaro and his supporters persistently alleged that the electronic voting machines were susceptible to fraud, despite independent audits confirming the system's reliability. These claims intensified as polls indicated Bolsonaro trailing behind leftist candidate Lula. Posts were polarised, with a significant presence of Bolsonaro supporters, including authorities, using disinformation to attack voting machines and the Electoral Supreme Court. The chapter explores the implications of these findings, shedding light on the role of authorities in utilizing disinformation for political ends and its impact on public perception and electoral outcomes.

In Chapter 10, Adriana Amado (Universidad Camilo José Cela, Spain) delves into the Argentinian context during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the use of disinformation by official sources. It reveals that government communication prioritised information from geopolitical allies, like Russia and China, over scientific evidence on COVID-19 vaccines. The absence of active transparency policies in Argentina facilitated the intensification of state-sponsored disinformation. Rather than providing trustworthy information, the government's communication contributed to a post-truth spiral by downplaying information from citizens and NGOs shared on social media. This case challenges the assumption that platforms necessarily threaten democracy, emphasising that civic dialogue on social media can fact-check state disinformation and activate civic accountability despite restrictions on freedom of expression.

Authored by Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock and Alexandros S. Moutzouridis (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece), Chapter 11 draws on two prominent cases in Greece: the Novartis bribery scandal and the recent wiretapping controversy. Both public affairs became disinformation scandals detrimental to the public interest. The Novartis case involved alleged kickbacks to doctors and government officials, while the wiretapping incident targeted journalists, political leaders, and citizens. The study unveils the systemic collusion between state functionaries, such as officials and parties in power, and the private media. Through interviews with individuals involved in the scandals and experts, the chapter exposes the entanglement of political and business interests driven by market conditions and emphasises the need for understanding the impact of state-sponsored disinformation on democracy.

In Chapter 12, Sam Kamau, from the National Defense University, and Alphonce Shiundu, from the fact-checking organisation Africa Check, both based in Nigeria, investigate the surge in disinformation during the 2022 Kenyan elections. The chapter draws on interviews with journalists, fact-checkers, influencers, as well as campaign actors, coupled with an analysis of online campaigns. The chapter unveils a well-organised, hierarchical, and well-funded disinformation machinery in which state actors are involved. The evidence shows that campaign actors strategically leverage digital platforms to manipulate public opinion through coordinated messaging, professionally crafted digital content, and strategic dissemination tactics. The chapter concludes with concerns about the normalisation of disinformation, emphasising ethical implications as political campaigning increasingly embraces and weaponises deceptive practices.

PART IV: Electoral and Closed Autocracies comprises states in which no de facto multiparty or free and fair elections are held. Yet, in electoral autocracies like Turkey, Hungary, Ukraine, Nigeria, and Malaysia, there are (at least) de jure multi-party elections, whereas in closed autocracies like Iran and Cuba, this requirement is not upheld.

In Chapter 13, Mine Gencel Bek (University of Siegen, Germany) scrutinises the dynamics of disinformation when used as a tool at the service of authoritarian populism in Turkey. The government's approach to disinformation initially emerged in response to social media's role during the Gezi protests in 2013. Initially reactive, these strategies have evolved to encompass both reactionary and proactive measures. The chapter examines how the government employs trolls and fabricates fake news to target and criminalise dissent, but simultaneously maintains an appearance of defending the truth by using state institutions as official verification channels or introducing legislation ostensibly aimed at combating disinformation.

Written by Gábor Polyák, Ágnes Urbán, Petra Szávai, and Kata Horváth (Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary), Chapter 14 delves into the orchestrated development of a potent government propaganda machinery under the Orbán regime in Hungary post-2010. Analysing the Hungarian scenario through the lens of the "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model, the chapter illustrates how legal and social control systems are systematically dismantled in a way that facilitates the circulation of unimpeded government messaging across diverse social groups, generously funded by public resources. The chapter concludes by evaluating the effectiveness of propaganda based on available data. Importantly, it emphasises that the government's control of the media is only achievable when the institutions and mechanisms of the rule of law have been dismantled, leaving little to no counterweight.

Chapter 15, by Bohdan Yuskiv (Rivne State University of Humanities, Ukraine) and Nataliia Karpchuk (Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University, Ukraine), delves into the realm of "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)", portraying it as a mostly non-illegal but threatening pattern of behavior with the potential to adversely affect values, procedures, and political processes. Using the Russian Federation's (RF) information activities in Ukraine as a case study, particularly on the eve of its 2022 intervention, the chapter highlights a powerful FIMI operation aimed at projecting an image of an invincible army. The objective was to intimidate Ukrainian political elites and citizens, framing resistance as "suicidal" and ultimately influencing state decisions in favor of the RF. By examining key messages from Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels, the chapter contributes to understanding FIMI as a growing political problem and a challenge to national security.

In Chapter 16, Paul Obi (Abuja School of Social and Political Thought, Nigeria) addresses the symbiotic rise of disinformation and disruptive politics globally. Focusing on Nigeria, the chapter explains the evolution and triggers of state-sponsored disinformation. By examining electoral, partisan, and ideological dimensions, it argues that the state's deployment of disinformation signifies a democratic disruption, impinging on people's right to know in the post-truth era. The study emphasises the urgency of enriching contextual and conceptual understanding of state-sponsored disinformation in Africa's largest democracy, shedding light on the complex interplay between information manipulation and democratic norms.

Chapter 17, by Pauline Pooi Yin Leong (Sunway University, Malaysia) and Benjamin Yew Hoong Loh (Taylor's University, Malaysia), explores the transformative impact of digital technology on Malaysia's political landscape, allowing the opposition and civil society to challenge the government's media monopoly. In response, the government has formed a media unit, recruiting political bloggers who evolved into cybertroopers operating on social media. Their strategies involve attacking the opposition, presenting counter-narratives, and portraying positive government support. This intense online battle has heightened instability, particularly through the amplification of racial and religious rhetoric. Malaysia serves as a warning against insufficient regulations, highlighting the potential consequences of governments and political parties engaging cybertroopers without constraints.

In Chapter 18, Andrés Shoai (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Spain) and Sergio García Magariño (Universidad Pública de Navarra, Spain) introduce a theoretical model comprising six interrelated categories that can be useful for analysing state-sponsored campaigns of disinformation and hate speech. The framework is applied to the campaign led by the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Bahá'ís, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country. Through this case study, the chapter illustrates the model's key precepts and tests their analytical value, while also providing insights for further reflection on state-sponsored disinformation and hate speech globally.

In Chapter 19, Cosette Celecia Pérez (Autonomous University of Hidalgo) and Julio Juárez Gámiz (National Autonomous University of Mexico) explore the Cuban state's response to the emergence of contentious actors that challenge the official narratives beyond the state-owned media. Following the July 11, 2021, protests, the state employed not only repression but also diversified its media strategies, as exemplified by the *Con Filo* TV show. Through content analysis, the chapter examines how *Con Filo* uses different strategies for disinforming about the protests and their supporters, further polarizing society.

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Part I

Theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of state-sponsored disinformation

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2 Theoretical understanding of State-Sponsored Disinformation

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Introduction. Contextualising disinformation

Communication historians claim that the term disinformation dates back to the Cold War era. Discussing Soviet Union disinformation tactics, Shultz and Godson (1984, p. 41) defined disinformation as “false, incomplete or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country”. More recently, the European Commission (EC, 2018a, pp. 3–4) defined it as, “verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm*”*. Disinformation is distinct from propaganda because it is neither based on ideologies nor facts (Chatterjee & Krekó, 2020). One could argue that it is based on twisted facts and what makes it powerful is the mingling of fact with fiction (lies, basically an untruth spoken as if it were truth). Further, when disinformation is shared unintentionally and unsuspiciously, the process is known as misinformation (Fetzer, 2014). In other words, misinformation is the spread of false information, but it is sent or shared without harmful intent. Disinformation, originating from official or unofficial agents, is basically false or misleading information that is intentionally disseminated and can cause chaos, confusion, public harm, as well as serious societal problems when it comes to sensitive socio-political issues such as security, the environment, and health. The widespread conspiracy theories and rumours around vaccines in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic are a good example of how false or misleading content is purposefully created with the intent to deceive and can therefore be damaging.

Lin et al. (2022) noted that the relationship between such disinformation campaigns and disease spread warrants investigation, particularly in the case of the Covid-19 outbreak. Some governments adopt authoritarian strategies, including disinformation and censorship, to protect against political accountability and criticism over the spread of epidemics. However, the effects of such activities are unclear. In their work, Lin et al. hypothesise that political disinformation may lead to worse public health outcomes. By examining comprehensive data on respiratory infections from 149 countries from 2001 to 2020, this study discovered that government-sponsored disinformation is positively associated with the spread of respiratory infections, including Covid-19. The findings imply that

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governments may contain the damage associated with pandemics by ending their sponsorship of disinformation campaigns.

It has now been some time since the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that, together with the health pandemic, it was also addressing an "infodemic", that is, an "overabundance of information, both online and offline" (WHO Director General, 2020). Even in the present day, the "infodemic" continues to undermine trust in vaccination efforts aiming to bring an end to the pandemic. In addition, disinformation is as much a weapon of war as bombs are. Budgar (2022) reminds us that in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, disinformation is particularly widespread and provides the example of the circulation of a video by Russia claiming Ukrainian casualties were fake news—just a bunch of mannequins dressed up as corpses. The video, originating on a Russian TV set, was an attempt to cast doubt on Ukrainian losses. Budgar (2022) goes on to say that, as the war continues, new techniques are being developed, such as the rise of fact-checkers (see more details on this in the below section on measures to combat disinformation). In Russia, fact-checkers were reporting and debunking videos supposedly going viral in Ukraine, but the videos were never circulated in Ukraine, meaning that the fact-checking itself was another disinformation campaign.

Disinformation is not merely motivated by the desire to create confusion among the citizenry, but also by political power or influence. Bennett and Livingston (2018, p. 124) define disinformation as "intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals". This has become more apparent in the digital, information society era. Whereas in the past the activity of disinformation agents was restricted because of the limited potential of analogue, linear media technologies, Chadwick (2013) considers how social media have been incorporated into mainstream political communication strategies. In this context, disinformation for the purposes of creating confusion or political motivations in the social media era is notably easier to spread and undeniably more threatening. Several news media companies today rely on social media to drive traffic to their own websites by frequently sharing clickable news stories there. But while social media are ideal for agents to disseminate deviant content, they are consequently becoming the most prominent forerunners of our current epistemic crisis (Napoli, 2019). Deviant agents build websites that imitate trusted news media publishers in order to lure users via social media posts. The approach is an effective means for disinformation agents to influence the political perceptions of unaware users.

A striking example here is the 2016 Brexit referendum that was largely based on post-truth politics. In the 2016 UK referendum, social media became a vehicle for contested political arguments, and post-truth positions defined the Remain and Leave camps. For instance, it was claimed that the UK Independence Party former leader Nigel Farage's anti-migrant tweets influenced many voters. Also, in the 2016 US presidential election, the victorious celebrity property tycoon

Donald Trump maintained a controversial online presence. He posted tweets about his campaign and engaged in a blatantly hateful online discourse aimed at his political opponents (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018). Distrust in political information has forced people to look inwards, giving rise to new forms of nationalism and populism (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020).

Nationalism (the idea that nations are better off acting independently than collectively) and populism (a philosophy directed to the needs of the common people and advocating a more equitable distribution of wealth and power) have challenged the globalisation trend. The rise of both these doctrines has had a negative effect on citizens' trust in their governments and contributed to the weakening of representative democracy (Flew & Iosifidis, 2020). The above definition of populism mainly applies to certain left-wing forms of the phenomenon but contrasts sharply with right-wing forms like the Trump movement in the US and Brexit. Trump's campaign to further isolate America by blocking southern immigration, Brexiteers' xenophobic ideas, as well as the tendency for citizens to vote for extreme parties in EU countries like France, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Spain, and Finland, are illustrations of the rise of nationalism and populism in recent years.

Growth of platforms and self-regulation

Many democratic states around the globe have imposed legal frameworks to prevent disinformation, with measures primarily addressed to technology companies. Digital platforms consist of applications and services that allow users to interact with each other. Together, they impact the commerce, communication, entertainment, and finance of billions of people. The rapid growth of Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Meta (which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp), and Microsoft platforms has prompted policymakers to rethink the governance and regulation of the digital economy sector. All these companies increased their profits during Covid-19 as most people were confined indoors and used their services to communicate and exchange information. Their combined market capitalisation is approximately 6 trillion US dollars, a figure larger than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of most global economies (Companies Market Cap, 2022). Despite a minor post-pandemic setback, all hold dominant positions within the economy (Aral, 2020; Waters, 2021). Economic concerns over market dominance and the elimination of competition, as well as socio-cultural concerns relating to harmful content and the spread of disinformation, have prompted governments to impose legal restrictions.

Digital platforms such as Facebook (renamed Meta) and Twitter have lately stepped in themselves to take down content that is false or misleading, including the setting up of the Facebook Oversight Board and the banning of the Twitter account of former US President Donald Trump following the Capitol Hill atrocities. The Oversight Board (OB) was created to help the giant online platform assess questions relating to freedom of speech; in other words, to decide what content to take down, what to leave up, and why. The OB, whose decisions are binding, consists of 40 members from across the globe, empowered to select content cases for review and to uphold or reverse Meta's content decisions. Meta has been struggling to address moderation regarding issues of violations of the privacy of users, the dissemination of unlawful and harmful content, and the political manipulation of selected groups of users, particularly in non-English-speaking regions (Wijeratne, 2020), for instance, the regulation of Spanish-language disinformation concerning Covid-19 (Paul, 2021). These problems have also been experienced by other platforms as automated, algorithmic tools have proven unable to detect illegal, harmful or misleading content. Such problems provided the rationale for establishing the OB.

The initiative is certainly a positive step to deal with the above issues, but according to Neuvonen and Sirkkunen (2022), it falls short of becoming a real "supreme court" of the online platform, for it cannot process enough cases, relies on idiosyncratic standards instead of general rules and principles, and has problems deciding which human rights principles to follow. In another case of self-regulation, Twitter was among the first online platforms to ban former US President Donald Trump's account after the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol by his supporters. The then-owners of the platform said that Twitter permanently suspended Trump because of the risk of further incitement following the storming of the Capitol in Washington. The former US President used Twitter, as well as other social network sites, to falsely claim there had been widespread voter fraud and had urged his supporters to march on the Capitol to protest. But in November 2022, Elon Musk, the richest man on earth and new owner of Twitter, announced the reactivation of Trump's account. Alongside the decision by Twitter, as of November 30, 2022, to no longer enforce its policy on Covid misinformation (a five-strike system that took action against accounts posting 'demonstrating false or misleading' content), Musk's announcement is certainly a step back. True, it is imperative to guarantee freedom of expression, independent global public spheres, and open civil society, but an individual's freedom of speech should stop at the point where it causes harm to another person or society (Iosifidis, 2022)

Social media platforms should continue proactively tackling disinformation aimed at undermining trusted and accurate content that can negatively influence democratic processes such as elections. This will help ease people's concerns about the threat that malicious state-linked fake news poses to society and democracy. Implementing rigorous self-regulation is also likely to prevent the state from intervening and legally enforcing digital platforms to take down harmful and misleading content. Further, taking proactive, preventative action to identify and minimise citizens' exposure to disinformation will increase people's trust in online platforms. As Chatterjee and Krekó (2020) claim, in the absence of reliable, clear information, people may revert to tribalism based on the narrative they agree with, thereby deepening cleavages.

Legal measures in selected countries and the EU

Since disinformation concerns are not always sufficiently addressed by self-regulation, several states and regional bodies like the EU have stepped in and imposed policy provisions. The Online Safety Bill in the UK, introduced in 2021 and updated on January 18, 2023, applies new rules for firms that host user-generated content (those that allow users to post their own content online or interact with each other), and for search engines, which will have tailored duties focussed on minimising the presentation of harmful search results to users. All platforms in scope will need to tackle and remove illegal material online, particularly material relating to terrorism, child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as disinformation. In France, the 1881 law from 2018 outlaws the dissemination of '"false news" and the spread of misinformation. The legislation is mainly designed to enact strict rules on the media during electoral campaigns and as such it gives authorities the power to remove fake content spread via social media and even block the sites that publish it. In the US, the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act, dated May 10, 2016, is the main legal measure to combat false information.

Turning to the EU initiatives, in December 2020 the EC proposed an *ex-ante* regulatory regime known as the Digital Services Act Package that specifically targets gatekeepers in the digital economy sector. The package is divided into the Digital Markets Act (DMA) whichcomplements and updates existing competition policy, and the Digital Services Act (DSA), revising the 2000 E-Commerce Directive. Disinformation and content moderation concerns require gatekeepers to do their due diligence in identifying it and taking it down. Ultimately, both democracy and free speech concerns (the DSA) and economic and consumer welfare concerns (DMA) are addressed. Alongside the DSA and DMA, there exists the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, building on the pioneering 2018 Code while setting more ambitious commitments and measures aimed at countering online disinformation. The new Code brings together a more diverse range of stakeholders than ever, empowering them to contribute to wide-ranging improvements by signing up to precise commitments relevant to their field. Such commitments include demonetising the dissemination of disinformation; guaranteeing transparency of political advertising; enhancing cooperation with fact-checkers; and facilitating researchers' access to data. It is important that both the DMA/DSA and the Code accomplish their goals in regulating digital platforms since as regulatory forerunners, other regions of the world will create copycat legislations.

Use of new technologies in the fight against disinformation

Fact-checking

The process of fact-checking is one of the most effective means of detecting digital disinformation (Guarino et al., 2020). Fact-checking concerns the correctness of factual statements and can be divided into human-based and automated systems of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (Nguyen & Kyumin, 2019). Journalistic fact-checking in the past century or so may have allowed news outlets to become trusted sources of information and, meanwhile, keep citizens objectively informed. It has to be said, though, that fact-checking has expanded at a time when trust in journalists, and especially social media, is declining, and it is not clear that it actually has the effect of reversing that decline. As news media have become more intertwined with digital tools and social media platforms, fact-checking processes have shifted toward a detection rather than a prevention mechanism. When it comes to online platforms, it is mainly the share option, introduced by Facebook/Meta a couple of years following its launch, as well as the retweet option on Twitter, that enabled agents to take digital disinformation to the next level since users could now unintentionally or intentionally spread deceitful news.

The meddling of the US elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016 demonstrated the dangers to democracy associated with the share option. Both the US presidential elections and the UK's decision to leave the EU through a voting referendum left many observers puzzled by the outcomes. Those 2016 shockwaves, combined with the 2018 Cambridge Analytica/SCL scandal, eventually prompted Facebook/Meta to increase its post-published digital fact-checking detection process. The social media giant began outsourcing the services of independent fact-checkers to flag and analyse disinformation, and today there are more than 80 fact-checking organisations working with Facebook. It should be noted, though, that the direct defence mechanism of fact-checking the huge digital ecosystem comes with numerous difficulties and there are doubts over its effectiveness as it might not be enough to undo the damage an untrue story has already done to democracy. Fact-checking may not be effective in changing pre-shaped perceptions, and it might not be shared back with all interpreters of the initial disinformation.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

According to the European Parliamentary Research Service study on AI (EPRS, 2019, p. 12), "Artificial Intelligence refers to advanced forms of machine learning, generally classified as algorithmic processes powered by advanced computing techniques such as neural networks and including in particular Deep Learning". Platforms such as Facebook/Meta and Twitter have for several years now begun to adopt AI and machine learning to combat disinformation. Facebook, alongside hiring thousands to identify hateful or offensive content, has also invested heavily in AI and machine learning to identify disinformation (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020; Woolley, 2020). Tools that have been used by social media to detect bad content include Deeptext, a software that is a deep learning-based text understanding engine that can understand with near-human accuracy the textual content of several thousand posts per second, spanning more than 20 languages (Abdulkader et al., 2016). Other companies such as Google have used similar AI tools to detect disinformation. Meanwhile, social media companies—driven by profits and shareholder pressures—will want to patent and protect their innovations rather than share them with others, so the advantage of disinformation agents seems destined to endure. This has also been the conclusive result of a large-scale European Parliament study on the use of AI in combating disinformation (EPRS, 2019).

Blockchain

Another promising technology in the fight against digital disinformation (one that essentially overlaps with AI) is blockchain. This technology enables the encryption and decentralisation of data that is timestamped and cannot be manipulated. The decentralised nature of the technology undoubtedly plays a major role in disrupting big industries, firms, institutions, and individuals. Tapscott and Tapscott (2016) claim that despite the promise of flatter organisations in the twenty-first century, most firms are still hierarchical in nature and that blockchain will disrupt organisational structures to the extent that many will become vastly flatter. Blockchain uses cryptographic techniques to create a secure, decentralised ledger that records transactions in a way that is transparent, verifiable, and resistant to tampering (https://fact.technology/learn/blockchain-technology-to-combat-fake-news/). The decentralised nature of blockchain can disrupt the information ecosystem, as a decentralised approach to news dissemination means that priority can be placed on the content. A blockchain news story travelling from one user to another will serve everyone's interest, as no single party can control it. Blockchain in news media, therefore, has the potential to be a game changer, since the content in the information ecosystem that works on a decentralised blockchain network can be officially verified (Dickson, 2017). As a tool for sales teams, blockchain-based registries can rank and filter trusted advertisers and ad content. But when the content is vague, divisive, or personal, for example, with political opinion pieces, the affordances of blockchain might not be enough to keep people from sharing content as their motivations might be a priori deceitful. If a supporter of a serving government wants to gather more support for that government, they might be more inclined to share a fake story despite knowing it is fake. And it is precisely in such occurrences that social media platforms can take more decisive action; once disinformation is identified from the source, they should be more inclined to take it down before it spreads.

Media and news literacy

In the context of a concerted and continuous effort to stifle disinformation and facilitate a digital democracy that supports the public interest, one can include media and news literacy across all ages and demographic standings. The

National Association of Media Literacy Education defines media literacy as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (2019, para. 1). The EU regards digital literacy as one of the most crucial skills of the twenty-first century in fighting back against digital disinformation and has come up with several policy recommendations in support of digital literacy programmes. The HLEG report (EC, 2018b, p. 25) states that "media and information literacy is acquiring a strategic importance for digital citizenship as basic educational competences were for citizens of the industrial age". It recommends integrating media literacies within national schools, training teachers, and engaging with libraries and fact-checkers. It further supports such programmes for all ages, which again is imperative in covering ground on the digital divide. Within this context, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) reiterates the value of acquiring knowledge to use and create media content responsibly and safely.

News literacy is currently the most significant subcategory of media literacy (Richter, 2019). It comprises three dimensions: access and use; critical understanding; and participation and production processes (ibid, p. 319). By increasing news literacy, citizens will eventually become more news literate, capable of identifying trustworthy news and information channels. Social science disciplines, such as communication studies, cultural studies, political economy of communication, film studies, journalism studies, etc. have several years of practice and understanding of news literacy to draw from, allowing us to acquire an understanding of the ways in which ideologies drive content, how production and distribution mechanisms work, and how we understand visual storytelling. The intersection of digital disinformation and news literacy, including updated digital literacy curricula, concerns identifying, detecting, and understanding dubious information, which is crucial to digital democracy. Therefore, efforts to defend ourselves against digital disinformation in the areas of digital use, safety, rights, security, and literacy need to be intensified.

National regulatory bodies and EU policies

National political and regulatory actions play a key role in shaping responses to disinformation. Many governments have responded to disinformation by passing rulings or updating existing laws related to disinformation. Such legislation ranges from media and electoral laws to cybersecurity and penal codes (Bontcheva & Posetti, 2020). Measures to protect the integrity of electoral processes from online disinformation and to ensure the transparency of online political advertising are good examples of such legislation. These include the French law on false information and non-binding guidelines passed by the Italian government (EC, 2018a). France, for instance, introduced laws to improve tech platforms' transparency on political advertising, requiring social media companies to create ad repositories. The French legislation enables its broadcasting agency to suspend or terminate broadcasters under the influence of foreign states if they spread false information likely to undermine electoral integrity.

At an EU level, the current thinking is that disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media, and harms democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to make informed decisions. Disinformation also often supports radical and extremist ideas and activities. In that sense, it impairs freedom of expression, media freedom, and pluralism, as well as the right of citizens to hold impartial opinions. As the European Court of Human Rights has concluded, this is particularly important in relation to elections. The EU approach to addressing online disinformation includes: a. improving transparency regarding the origin of information and the way it is produced, sponsored, disseminated, and targeted in order to enable citizens to assess the content they access online and to reveal possible attempts to manipulate opinion; b. promoting diversity of information, in order to enable citizens to make informed decisions based on critical thinking; c. fostering credibility of information by providing an indication of its trustworthiness, notably with the help of trusted flaggers, and by improving traceability of information and authentication of influential information providers; and d. fashioning inclusive solutions that require awareness-raising and more media literacy (EC, 2018a). More recently, the EU's goal has been to encourage debate and offer concrete ideas about addressing the problem, particularly considering the updated EU Code of Practice on Disinformation and the Digital Services Act.

Official disinformation in authoritarian regimes

So far, discussion on disinformation from official actors has mainly focused on the information warfare effort from authoritarian regimes like China to manipulate users in other countries. Myers and Mozur (2019, p. 5) argued that China is employing techniques to paint Hong Kong's democracy advocates as violent radicals. More specifically, in late June 2019, there were popular demonstration movements in Hong Kong asking for the territory's independence from mainland China. Chinese officials, who have lately stirred up more aggressively nationalist and anti-Western sentiment using state media (whose history of propagandising stretches back to Mao Zedong's era) and social media outlets, have manipulated the context of images and videos to undermine the protesters and begun branding them as terrorists, consisting of small violent gangs lacking popular support. Myers and Mozur claim that the assertion was more than just a spin of fake news, for the Communist Party exerts overwhelming control over media content inside China's Great Firewall (the combination of legislative actions and technologies enforced by the People's Republic of China to regulate the Internet), and it is now using it as a cudgel in an information war over the protests that have convulsed Hong Kong for months. The result, according to the commentators, is the creation of an alternative version of what was clearly a popular demonstration calling for Hong Kong's independence in both mainland China and abroad.

Lu (2022) examined the nuanced practices of Chinese state-sponsored disinformation campaigns as participatory digital warfare and proposed analysing disinformation beyond the framework of political communication. Through examples and cases, the author demonstrated that disinformation campaigns strategically utilise suggestive half-lies to mobilise alliances and silence enemies regardless of their nationalities. Depending on whether they conform to the Party agenda, some foreign actors can be enlisted as allies, while critical citizens are portrayed as enemies. Overall, the work argued that Chinese state-sponsored disinformation campaigns can stealthily recruit netizens to combat in an ongoing state-making project that potentially consolidates the authoritarian Party-state. Addressing the gap between Chinese traditional war philosophies and contemporary, technologically informed practices, the author pointed out the significance of participatory and cultural countermeasures.

This is also an illustration of how authoritarian governments that were once hailed as harbingers of democratic ideals have weaponised social media. One only has to recall the Arab Spring, namely a series of pro-democracy, anti-government protests and massive uprisings ignited by social media, that spread across much of the Arab world (including countries like Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain) in the early 2010s and the spring of 2011. Regrettably, many of the countries that experienced uprisings have returned to authoritarian rule as the respective leaderships used social media to spread their disinformation campaigns.

Focusing on the Middle East, Kenney and Bernadaux (2021) note that disinformation, while a global phenomenon, is particularly prevalent in the region, and there has been a rich history of fake news wielded as an offensive weapon by a wide range of stakeholders. The authors go on to say that non-state armed groups have been prolific in disseminating disinformation and provide the case of Hezbollah, which has gone so far as to set up disinformation training camps, attracting Iran-based militias, especially from Iraq. Citing a May 2020 detailed report from Omelas on the first few months of the Covid-19 information operations, the authors claim that "national governments of Middle East states are no bystanders to the disinformation onslaught" and list the example of the Emirati government, which has quoted fictitious Middle East specialists to support their anti-Qatar propaganda. Fake news, according to the authors, has long contributed to creating tensions that endanger fragile internal balances and international relationships in the region. In Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard regularly resorts to state-run media for disinformation campaigns. Platforms such as Fars News, the hardliner Tasnim News Agency (the semi-official news agency in Iran), and the English-speaking channel Press TV (Iranian news and documentary network) regularly spin American and European commentators as expressing support for Iran's policies.

The health pandemic provided an opportunity for other governments in the region to advance misleading information that could serve their interests. Fabricated news concerning Covid-19 was used both as a defensive and offensive weapon. Kenney and Bernadaux (2021) argue that, since the outbreak of coronavirus, some Middle Eastern states, often through state-run media outlets, have "dishonestly extolled the efficacy of their responses to the crisis". In Egypt, media falsehoods took the form of alleged praise from Italy thanking the generous Egyptian government for sending medical help. In Palestine, some news sites reported that Israeli TV had admitted that Gaza's health officials have better handled the epidemic than the Tel Aviv regime. In Syria, pro-government activists advanced the claim online that Bashar Al-Assad is personally searching for a cure to the virus in a Damascus laboratory. According to the authors, all this fake news promoted by media outlets, widely followed social media accounts, and government figures share the same objective, namely to mask their mismanagement of the crisis.

Turning to Russia, its authoritarian president, Vladimir Putin, has for a couple of decades been employing digital disinformation tactics to create disruption in liberal democracies of the Western world. Russian digital disinformation and its hybrid threat strategies are still not completely understood and therefore not all can be identified (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021). For instance, the Russian troll factory, the Internet Research Agency, is a well-known entity that has been assessed and monitored for several years. Yet others are only now being discovered. A report conducted by Graphika in 2020 identified a troll factory known as Secondary Infektion that began operations in 2014 and has posted over 2,500 pieces of content online (Nimmo et al., 2020), most of which did not manage to gain significant online traction (although the entity did obviously succeed in covering its tracks). In addition, the Russian military intelligence arm, the General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), has also been identified as a major disinformation hub.

In Europe, Russia's objectives include destabilising the region, preserving close ties with the Balkan States, and impeding Ukrainian and EU relations. Russia, which has already been among the world's top ten most targeted countries with cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns following the annexation of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, is currently targeting Ukrainian infrastructure with a massive disinformation campaign to shape the war narrative (Gavin, 2022). Between 2020 and 2021, Russia has initiated over 685,000 cyberattacks in Ukraine, and currently, as a result, Ukraine is defending itself on two fronts: territorially and the cyber sphere. Certainly, on the Russian side, as Gavin notes, a tightly controlled state-run media and the substantial use of disinformation, both from official state sources and online via bots, have helped the state exert narrative control over the conflict. This explains, in part, the low levels of opposition to the invasion within Russia (Gavin, 2022).

Across the Atlantic, an example of political and ideological motivations behind sophisticated and well-funded official agents includes the accusation that the Russian government interference in the 2016 US presidential election boosted the candidacy of Donald Trump. An investigation known as the Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election was conducted and submitted into record in March 2019. The report, known for short as The Mueller Report, did not establish any criminal conspiracy between Moscow and the Trump campaign (BBC, 2019). Attorney General William Barr noted a lack of evidence regarding American and Russian connections in the interference. Nonetheless, the report did stress that Russian illegal interference did occur "in sweeping and systematic fashion" (Mueller, 2019, p. 1). Volume I of the report mentions Russia's involvement in interfering in Facebook and Twitter through the use of individualised accounts and botnet activities.

Disinformation in Western democratic countries

Chatterjee and Krekó (2020) argue that, while democratic leaders have so far opposed authoritarians who deliberately deceived their citizens to create a virtual reality, "suddenly, state-sponsored disinformation is no longer reserved for authoritarians and dictators. It has infiltrated the Western democratic world, catching us all off guard". They go on to say that "state-sponsored disinformation in Western democracies is the elephant in the room" and that we must now recognise the painful truth that, even in a Western democracy, disinformation is difficult to stop, particularly when it comes from the political elite. In fact, democratically-elected leaders are increasingly accused of fuelling the spread of disinformation by confusing the public with multiple messages without clear and reliable information based on hard facts.

Since 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has created a highly centralised media empire with most media outlets conveying similar political messages and narratives favourable to the governing elite (e.g., the blaming of George Soros for the devaluation of the Hungarian currency and the false argument that the primary source of the pandemic is illegal migration). Other Central European governments like Romania and Bulgaria, also EU member states like the Central European government of Hungary, are adopting disinformation tactics related to vaccination in the post-pandemic era that have resulted in extremely low vaccination rates in the respective countries and eventually many deaths. In Poland, state-owned media have been reporting that opposition mayors have implemented policies that are facilitating the spread of the virus (Chatterjee & Krekó, 2020). Obviously, these examples pertain to transitional democracies (or post-authoritarian or non-consolidated ones) with long-held traditions of disinformation in the Soviet era, which now resurface.

Yet, it is not merely Central European territories that have employed such tactics. In the 2019 general election campaign in the UK, the incumbent Tories deployed a flood of fake news regarding Brexit and their political opponents until tech giants had to step in and remove some of their misleading ads. Earlier, the EU Referendum which led to the Brexit decision in 2016 was accompanied by a populist online narrative. The social media echo chamber tended to reinforce the anti-European rhetoric within the mainstream media, led by a chorus of Brexit-led newspapers and Leave campaigners. Across social media, anti-immigrant sentiment was fuelled by the view that a dysfunctional European elite was bent on undermining Britain's economy, sovereignty, and self-confidence. This led to xenophobic falsehoods claiming that a Vote Leave outcome would Canute-like turn back the "waves" of immigrants who were ready to pounce from Eastern Europe and the Syrian refugee crisis (Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018).

As said above, in the US, the Republican Presidential victor Donald Trump utilised social media to reach out to a disaffected electoral base to win the 2016 Presidential election against Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton. The highly controversial Trump, who had established his media capital as a property tycoon and television celebrity on The Apprentice (from 2004 onwards), developed his online presence through Twitter, where he regularly posted comments about his campaign, other candidates, political views, and the "rigged" mainstream media coverage. Trump was notorious for his negative, aggressive, and sometimes blatantly hateful tweets, in which he routinely called his opponents, political and otherwise, "losers" and "haters". For many, the Trump campaign was accompanied by the rise of "fake news" via close advisor Steve Bannon's online Breitbart News, information provocateurs, and "post-truth" politics. It has been unfortunate that one of the greater democracies such as the US has been associated with the rise of fake news and disinformation campaigns.

An afterword

It is clear then that state-backed disinformation is not exclusively confined to authoritarian and autocratic states, for it has exacerbated in Western liberal democracies. How can this new challenge be tackled? Because such extensive disinformation campaigns are a relatively new phenomenon in the West, there are no institutions ready to deal with domestic, homegrown, politically charged disinformation. We need to develop and test an analytical approach and assessment tool to monitor changes in the level of strategy-driven, state-sponsored disinformation activities. The pace of these issues has produced some excellent research work that is being undertaken, both through conventional academic routes, think tanks, and others. The sources cited throughout this chapter suggest that fact-checking and news literacy can be identified as the main detection mechanisms involved in combating digital disinformation. Responses toward digital disinformation involve communication strategies consisting mainly of debunking, rebuttals, and myth-busting but also of technologies used, such as AI and blockchain. Corporate voluntary actions to mitigate and counter disinformation, such as the employment of content moderators to detect and take down misleading content, are crucial. The initiative of Meta to set up the Oversight

Board to promote free expression by making independent decisions regarding content on Facebook and Instagram and by issuing recommendations on content policy should be applauded, despite its limitations.

I would stress here the key role of civil society in combating disinformation. Civic groups are more closely connected to citizens and are better placed to identify the negative disinformation impact on society, and, meanwhile, better equipped to build trust with local communities—a key factor in responding to specific information disorders—and are more likely to be perceived by all parties as relatively objective. More specifically, civic associations promote the cooperation of citizens from distinct interest and identity groups, such as females, ethnic minorities, and groups with protected characteristics like the disabled community. Civil organisations and coalitions are often best placed to identify disinformation campaigns that target marginalised groups and mobilise broad opposition and responses to these campaigns. (https://counteringdisinformation.org/topics/csos/complete-document-civil-society).

But more thinking is required to develop a workable analytical approach. Whereas there is certainly an international academic network interested in policy issues, platform overseeing, and disinformation, it is small relative to the size of the research community as a whole, and few of its members are in a position even minimally to affect debate. What I suggest is that potential fighting back mechanisms could be applied (and turn more impactful) by a combined effort by academics, journalists, technology platforms, taskforces, civil society, and regulatory bodies. This is a moment for research, but also for activism.

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3 Rethinking disinformation for the global South

Towards a particular research agenda

Grisel Salazar Rebolledo

Introduction

Disinformation is a phenomenon experienced worldwide, yet its causes and effects are mostly contextual and relative. The original concept of disinformation assumes that information can be accessed in its original, unaltered form (namely, without the prefix "dis"). Nevertheless, no one would affirm that there has been a moment in time when all citizens had the same power to obtain information and had the same capacities to process it for public decision-making, particularly when considering the state-sponsored type of disinformation, such as biased propaganda (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021; Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Camargo & Simon, 2022).

The term "information" colloquially refers to "any amount of data, code or text that is stored, sent, received or manipulated in any medium" (Adriaans, 2020). From a philosophical and even from an economic perspective, the explicit analysis of information as a concept is relatively recent and intimately bound to the rapid development of the so-called information technologies during the last two decades. Thus, the philosophy of the information field acknowledges that the definition of disinformation varies within different places, cultures, traditions, and institutional contexts (Adriaans, 2020; Sequoiah-Grayson & Floridi, 2022). At the same time, the influence of the economy of information has underlined the notion of information as a resource and a commodity.

These notions are relevant to introduce the value of information but also to discuss its relativistic nature. How people get, process, and make use of information widely varies across socioeconomic, institutional, and cultural regions. For that reason, when talking about disinformation, it is important to recognise the existing multiplicity of starting points to deal with information and, consequently, to deal with *dis*information.

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Throughout history, there has always been the presence of propaganda, inaccuracies, candid errors, malicious information, and defamation campaigns (Posetti & Ireton, 2018). However, in recent years, terms such as “disinformation”, “fake news”, and “post-truth” have emerged, particularly in the aftermath of significant political events like the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum. These events were characterised by the dissemination of manipulated data, which sparked intense emotions such as anger, fear, resentment, and even hatred towards specific social or political groups (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020). The widespread use of mass communication and social media has amplified the spread of disinformation, reaching larger audiences than ever before (Cover et al., 2022; Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019; Kreps, 2020). As a result, disinformation is now recognised globally as a contemporary phenomenon, especially in its digital form, posing a threat to democracy. However, it is important to note that this phenomenon is not entirely new, as it has been prevalent in the global South even before it became a major concern in the global North (Shabbir et al., 2021, p. 193).

In contexts where accountability mechanisms are weak, there are significant socioeconomic disparities, journalism is fragile and often under threat, and governments are not held in check, citizens are unlikely to have access to complete and accurate information that would enable them to make informed decisions. Scholars in the field of communication have shown that the establishment of a strong and independent press, which can protect societies from the pervasive effects of disinformation, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the transition to democracy (Voltmer, 2013; Vaca, 2015; Zielonka, 2015).

The causes and consequences of disinformation in countries of the global South differ from those in the global North, due to the extensive and prolonged experience of the phenomenon in the former. Disinformation acquires different features in the global South, and research on the spread of disinformation in Western societies often reflects a Western bias, treating it as an entirely new problem, while it has been a significant concern in many areas for many years, as argued by Kuru et al. (2021, p. 89).

One of the main biases is the tendency of focusing on the external sources of disinformation. Studies on the matter produced on the global North tend to ignore that political leaders, even the democratically elected, are increasingly fueling the spread of disinformation. Practices such as the centralisation of public media outlets, the delegitimisation of critical media, and verbal attacks against independent journalists have been expanding, particularly but not only in contexts where institutions lack enforcement power and in the absence of trustworthy media.

In recent years, there has been an increasing call to de-westernise the study of communication studies (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014). Disinformation studies have not been the exception, although only recently research conducted outside western democracies has just started to appear. However, the theoretical foundations that base this new strand of studies have been transferred almost intactly from the studies conducted in the global North (Merlingen, 2022; Colomina, 2021).

For the above reasons, in this chapter's objective is to reflect upon the concept and implications of disinformation when it is used to address the phenomenon outside Western liberal democracies. Specifically, it is argued that, at least, three aspects need to be taken into account when studying disinformation in the global South: 1) the institutional weaknesses that are distinctive of democracies of the global South; 2) socioeconomic inequities, that lead to heterogeneous access to technology and media consumption prevalent in these countries, and 3) the main sources that are responsible for spreading disinformation.

These inquiries do not only derive from a theoretical concern but also are crucial considerations to formulate sharper policies intended to combat disinformation and to implement media literacy projects.

This chapter is organised as follows: in the next section disinformation is presented as a "thick" concept as well as the most common confusions that appear when discussing it. Then, an overview of empirical studies that have been produced regarding disinformation is offered, in order to systematically assess to what extent the scholarship has examined countries of the global South *vis à vis* countries of the global North. Finally, the last section discusses some particularities that disinformation presents in the global South that inspire a potential comparative research agenda, and some concluding remarks are offered.

Conceptual disorders, "thick" concepts, and disinformation

Concepts are essential building blocks of thought and language. They allow us to understand and communicate about concrete realities in abstract terms, without simply generalising observed properties (Schedler, 2010, p. 2). However, in social sciences, there are often what are referred to as conceptual disorders, (Collier et al., 2006) which are epistemological problems that affect our understanding of meanings. These disorders can create various issues, similar to the effects of an illness. They can decrease the chances of achieving transparent and accurate research, cause empirical inconsistencies, and result in incoherent treatment of case studies. Most importantly, they can hinder the development of theories and explanations for the concept in question.

When talking about disinformation, two conceptual disorders appear.[1] In the first place, conceptual ambiguity refers to equivocal associations of terms with the same meaning. Confusion may arise if we have several words for one concept (Schedler, 2010, p. 5). The proliferation of similar terms to refer to slightly different meanings is common when talking about misinformation, disinformation, fake news, false news, or post-truth. The boundaries between one concept and the other are not clear nor objectively defined.

The second disorder refers to conceptual abuse. The hype of disinformation (and of all its sister concepts) as a rhetorical tool, and also as a colloquial term, has led to a "conceptual stretching", a term proposed originally by Giovanni Sartori to designate the overuse of concepts in political science. In their "perpetual quest of generalization", scholars often attempt to adapt categories to other cases regardless of whether the concept fits these new cases or not (Collier & Mahon, 1993).

Disinformation is a concept that usually is cited along with a myriad of terms such as misinformation, false news, post-truth, and other terms that have been clustered under the broad umbrella of "informative disorders" (Posetti & Ireton, 2018). These concepts are used very loosely, which provokes a "lack of definitional consistency (and) potentially underlies conflicting academic findings" (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021, p. 38).

Indeed, the term "fake news" has been criticised for its vagueness and potential for misuse. It can be weaponised by those in power to discredit legitimate news sources and spread their own disinformation, as has been seen in political contexts around the world. Some scholars prefer to use the term "disinformation" to refer to intentionally false or misleading information (Posetti & Ireton, 2018), while others suggest using more specific terms such as "propaganda", "hoax", or "rumour" depending on the nature and intent of the misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). However, the term fake news was rapidly contested, as it implies a profound contradiction: something that is considered "news" cannot be considered fake at the same time.

All these particularities are cited to show that disinformation is far from being a well-established, consolidated notion. As a concept, disinformation seems to have developed from the analysis of a few cases, mostly recent, and generally situated in the global North, thus yielding to what Coppedge (1999, p. 468) calls a "thick concept".

Thick concepts generally come from small-scale studies and are intended to make descriptions and to reach inferences about simple causation. But "thick concepts and theories are unwieldy in generalizing or rigorously testing complex hypotheses". While thick concepts involve more complexity and multidimensionality, they are context-dependent. For that reason, they cannot be applied to a multiplicity of cases without losing some important part of their meaning. On the other hand, thin concepts are broadly generalisable but their definition is somewhat "reductionist or simplistic" (Coppedge, 1999, p. 465).

Thin and thick concepts thus imply a trade-off between extension and "intension", understanding the latter as the "the internal content of a term or concept that constitutes its formal definition" (Sartori, 1970; Coppedge, 1999). Thin concepts usually "travel" well between contexts, but their intension is lower. On the other hand, thick concepts aim to profusely describe a phenomenon, as well as its dimensions, but they are not fully appliable to other contexts.

Thus, the high complexity and the multiple dimensions of disinformation as a concept call for a deeper reflection on its applicability to other contexts. Another challenge posed by thick concepts is the likelihood of arriving at general hypotheses. While the analysis of a few cases may lead to apparently plausible hypotheses based on the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent one, the dynamics of small-scale studies provoke that such a hypothesis might be derived from a specific time and place. It is not easy to escape from the contextual-dependent nature of thick concepts (Coppedge, 1999, p. 467). Thus, there is an inherent tension when trying to study disinformation in general terms, given that its implications have been derived mostly from case studies that come from the global North.

For the above reasons, it is of particular interest to think of disinformation in a contextualised fashion (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021), without assuming that, being a thick concept, its foundations will remain unaltered from one particular circumstance to another. In the next section, I will present an overview of how disinformation has been investigated across different institutional contexts in order to understand better if global South's particularities have been addressed by the scholarship on disinformation.

Examining global disparities: an overview of academic production imbalance across regions

Lenoir (2022) argues for a reframing of disinformation scholarship that considers the particularities of countries of the global South. He notes that in many non-liberal democratic countries, the notion of disinformation is opaque.

Efforts have been made recently to assemble collective volumes on disinformation studies in the global South, shedding light on the differences between the phenomenon in the global South and North. In 2021, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales edited *Disinformation in the Global South*, while Tumber and Waisbord edited *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, which included empirical examples of disinformation dynamics and consequences beyond liberal democracies. These publications encompass valuable insights and discoveries regarding the intricacies of disinformation, highlighting the significance of factors such as political histories, economic inequalities, and social polarisation in comprehending its proliferation. Nonetheless, there is a scarcity of articles that go beyond individual country case studies, and even fewer that compare the distinct characteristics of disinformation between the global North and the global South.

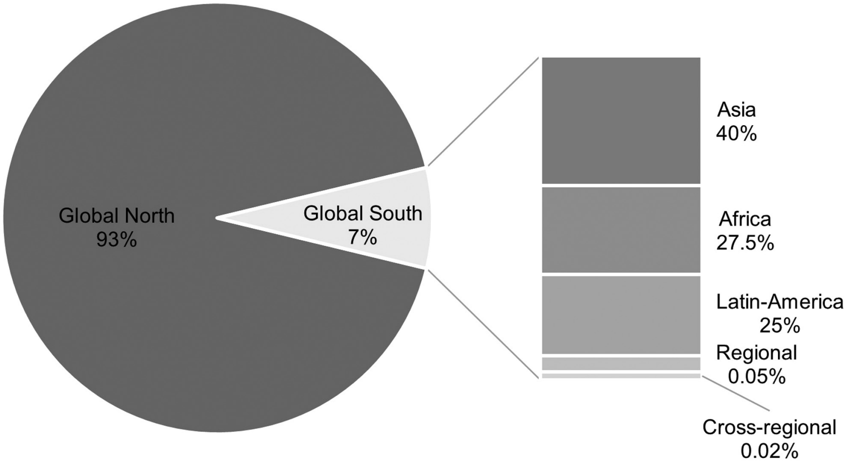

Figure 3.1 Geographical focus of empirical disinformation studies

Source: Own elaboration.

Though there is an incipient body of literature analysing disinformation in the global South, most studies have been restricted to countries in Asia (mostly China), leaving aside the study of African and Latin American countries, which have mostly been analysed in the light of the false claims made during the COVID-19 pandemic[2] and other global diseases.

To systematically assess to what extent the disinformation scholarship has examined countries of the global South, I present a meta-analysis of the research published in peer-reviewed journals in the last five years.

I analysed 532 articles from a selection of the top ten academic journals in Communication Studies. From those 532 articles, only 40 referred to countries of the global South.[3]

Regarding geographic distribution, from the total of articles on the global South, most articles were focused on Asian countries (16 out of 40, 40% of the total), followed by those referring to African countries (11 out of 40, 27.5% of total); and, finally, those considering Latin-American countries (10 out of 40, 25% of total). There are also two articles focusing on regional comparisons and one article comparing South Africa and Mexico (Figure 3.1).

The global results are shown in the following graph:

Disinformation in the global North and South

The former review demonstrates that although the study of disinformation has gained relevance in the last years, the literature has disproportionately focused on countries of the global North. Even more, few published studies have systematically investigated the differences between disinformation's features in the global North *vis-à-vis* the global South. In other words, disinformation has not made its path through comparative studies.

While almost neither of the reviewed studies constitute a comparative analysis, they offer important insights to better understand the dynamics of disinformation in the global South. For example, Schiffrin and Cunliffe-Jones (2021) have addressed how specific features of global South institutions affect the effectiveness of policies intended to combat online disinformation within these countries. The lack of strong fact-checking initiatives, the fragmented news literacy projects, and the diversity of liability laws and privacy protections are just a few examples of the environment in which disinformation unfolds in the global South, according to these authors. But more importantly, this work incorporates a section on the types and patterns of disinformation that are specifically found in the global South, including hate speech against religious and ethnic minorities, highlighting the actors commonly involved in initiating and spreading disinformation. Also, these authors discuss how poor socio-economic conditions fuel alternative sources of disinformation such as fraudulent job advertisements. Above all, this is one of the first attempts to discuss disinformation in relation to issues such as the low levels of trust towards authorities, the low institutional enforcement, and the lack of compliance with the law, all features of countries of the global South. The authors argue that "the different political and cultural contexts allow (disinformation) to happen and (affect) the different possibilities for solutions" (Schiffrin & Cunliffe-Jones, 2021, p. 162).

Another contextual element that must be considered when studying the implications of misinformation and disinformation in the global South are differences in sources and in intentionality. Silverman (2015, p. 15) distinguishes three stakeholders affecting the information flow: official sources of propaganda, fake news websites, and individual hoaxers. While it is naïve to think that disinformation can be contained at all, in contexts where institutions are weaker than in the global North, pernicious intents to disinform generally succeed.

Although it has been demonstrated that falsehood, whether intentional or unintentional, travels farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the journalistic verification (Vosoughi et al., 2018), countries in the global South present some features that make the effects of both misinformation and disinformation more prominent.

The weak development of journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; González de Bustamante & Relly, 2016; Hughes & Márquez, 2018; Waisbord, 2013) can lead to more reporting mistakes, increasing the probability of disinformation. Furthermore, this weak professionalism affects the ability to fact-check, leaving disinformation unchecked. Although fact-checking initiatives have emerged in countries such as Mexico (Verificado), Argentina (Chequeado), Perú (El Verificador), South Africa, and Senegal (Africa Check), evidence suggests that their effectiveness is limited. According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), false rumours can reach between 1,000 and 100,000 people on social media, whereas the truth is rarely spread to more than 1,000 people. These effects could be more severe in countries with low levels of media literacy.

Thus, countries of the global South constitute a more fertile ground for weaponising information, given that both journalists and citizens lack resources for flagging inaccuracies (Valenzuela et al. 2022). Also, as demonstrated by Galarza Molina (2020) in his research on *Verificado 2018*, a Mexican fact-checking initiative, people often express mistrust towards such exercises.

Towards a comparative agenda

The referred scholarship on disinformation as well as the systematic comparison between disinformation studies produced from the global North *vis-à-vis* those produced for the global South allow us to mark out at least three aspects that need to be addressed when studying disinformation in the global South. These aspects are: 1) the institutional weaknesses, distinctive of these contexts; 2) socioeconomic gaps prevalent in global South countries; and 3) the main sources that are responsible from spreading disinformation.

1) Institutional weaknesses

The problem of institutional weakness is widely recognised in the field of comparative politics (Brinks et al., 2109, p. 2). This issue has been discussed in relation to democratic consolidation, rule of law, economic growth, and accountability, among other subjects; however, the existing literature on disinformation has failed to specify how institutional weakness affects the spread, expansion, and consequences of disinformation.

Murillo and Levitsky (2012) argue that political science has tended to focus on stable institutions with a high degree of enforcement capacity, not giving enough attention to the specificities of instabilities and flaws that are common in most countries outside the global North.

If we consider institutions to be the basic rules of the game (Peters, 2012), it is easy to understand why using legislation to contain disinformation would be both ineffective and counterproductive in weak institutional environments. One example can be found in Cuba, where the Decree Law 35 has been enacted to supposedly protect citizens from the spread of disinformation. However, this instrument allows the government to impose an extreme vigilance of telecommunications in the name of the Revolution, which severely curtails freedom of speech and the right to access information (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

When a rule is enacted, an environment of institutional weakness creates an odd set of expectations. Sociopolitical actors cannot take for granted that other actors will feel compelled to comply with the norm, thus diminishing the propensity to cooperate with others and with the norms. Legislative initiatives intended to contain and combat disinformation assume a high enforcement capacity to ensure compliance by societal actors, including both politicians and tech companies.

In countries of the global South, hate speech and malicious information related to ethnic conflicts, racial tensions, or religious differences are common. However, low enforcement capacity hinders the punishment of those who issue such content. This highlights the need to address institutional weaknesses in these contexts, which are often distinct from those in the global North (Schiffrin & Cunliffe-Jones, 2021, p. 161).

Besides, the performance of weak institutions brings mistrust with it. The capability of judges to apply the law is viewed with scepticism. Additionally, low levels of trust in authorities make people suspicious of information disseminated by the government, motivating them to seek alternative sources. According to Bachmann et al. (2021), in countries where the media are owned and/or controlled by the state, media users may prefer to get information from social media, which may be perceived as more trustworthy, regardless of whether it is or not.

Another problem of low institutionalisation associated with the global South is the fragility of agencies that are responsible for gathering and granting access to information. On the one hand, the low enforcement capacity of transparency laws hinders the possibility of counteracting disinformation. On the other hand, when countries lack reliable statistics agencies, it is almost impossible to implement fact-checking initiatives (Schiffrin & Cunliffe-Jones, 2021).

2) Socioeconomic gaps

The second feature of the global South that needs to be addressed in disinformation studies is how socioeconomic gaps worsen the consequences of false news. While some research has uncovered socioeconomic factors contributing to the acceptance of disinformation (Pan et al., 2021; Guess et al., 2019, for China and for the US, respectively), most of these studies have been conducted at the individual level and within advanced democracies. As expected, these investigations demonstrate that participants' educational level and income are both negatively associated with their acceptance of disinformation, thus demonstrating a socioeconomical gap. However, more detail is needed to explore how this likelihood is experienced in contexts of deeper inequalities and with fewer opportunities to access fact-checking resources.

Access to the Internet has substantially increased in the last few years, mostly due to the expansion of cell phone use. As of July 2022, 92.1% of global internet users access the internet using a mobile phone (WeAreSocial & Hootsuite, 2022). However, the improvement in digital inclusion might be associated also with increased access to disinformation if digital literacy initiatives are not implemented decisively. For example, many cell phone companies offer access to social media for free, such as WhatsApp, which has been proven to be one of the most used digital resources in countries of the global South (Kuru et al., 2021), and one of the main channels through which disinformation circulates (Cardoso et al., 2022; Chagas, 2022). At the same time, while digital inclusion provides access to social media, it has been demonstrated that social media users do not necessarily have the same possibilities to access reliable sources such as newspapers or fact-checking sites (Johns, 2021).

Likewise, it should be explored with further detail how different segments of the population are affected by the spread of disinformation to better distinguish the most vulnerable groups and to design and implement specific public policies addressed to these populations.

Besides all of the above, countries of the global South lack the institutional capabilities to generate reliable indicators of the different dimensions and the consequences of disinformation among its populations. Also, it is necessary to establish measures to assess the news literacy rates within these countries. Taking the case of Mexico as an example, there is only one survey, (“Molec” readership survey integrated by the National Statistics Institute) that includes some data on the individual use of digital technologies to date. In this survey, data is produced only for broad reading habits, such as the frequency and rhythm of reading, the preferred reading materials, and general data on citizens’ willingness to pay for news. This survey does not consider news consumption habits on social media nor explores the trustworthiness perception of news sites. Thus, this data makes it very difficult to account for the magnitude and consequences of disinformation and to evaluate media literacy. This lack of reliable indicators not only affects the possibility of effective policy-making but also hinders the development of empirical studies.

3) Sources responsible for spreading disinformation

Finally, the concept of media systems, introduced by Hallin and Mancini (2004), and applied by the authors (2012) and by Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) in Southern Europe and Latin America, is very useful to understand how the configuration of media environments affects the particularities of disinformation.

Hall and Arguelles (2021) present a map of how media systems pose different incentives for disinformation in a paper focused on Southeast Asia. They argue that diverse disinformation campaigns commonly involve politicians and the state as the main source of inaccuracies and malicious information. Similarly, Hardy (2021) highlights how a high level of political parallelism places a series of incentives on media outlets to sustain inaccuracies that play in favour of certain political forces.

In the same way, low levels of journalistic professionalisation hinder the possibility of counteracting disinformation. For example, Zommer (2014) discusses how, in Latin America, although there has been a proliferation of fact-checking initiatives, they are hard to sustain long term, as they require highly qualified journalists and an important amount of expenses that not all outlets can afford.

The role of the state-press relationship also affects the propensity of certain actors to intervene in the public narratives, thus becoming sources of disinformation. Clientelism, which has been pointed out as one of the main features of media systems outside the Western world, might affect the incentives and capacities of media to counteract disinformation if their economic sustainability is compromised. Several Mexican outlets, such as *La Jornada*, receive large sums of resources through government advertisements. Despite having professional journalists and a long trajectory, *La Jornada* lacks a fact-checking unit. On the contrary, as documented by Haque et al. (2018) numerous independent fact-checking initiatives in countries like Turkey, Zimbabwe, and Iran face significant political pressures that hinder their growth and effectiveness. For instance, *Fact-Nameh*, an Iranian platform, has chosen to operate from Canada to circumvent the government's persistent efforts to block its content.

One more feature of media systems can be considered, even if it is not included in Hallin and Mancini's original approach to this concept. This feature is the presence of anti-press violence. A weak rule of law and the lack of institutional enforcement have been found to create a hazardous environment for watchdog journalism, particularly in violent contexts (Hughes & Márquez, 2017). Risk thus discourages journalists from getting involved in investigative projects and denouncing malfeasances and transgressions committed by public officers. This argument can be extended to understanding how anti-press violence discourages fact-checking initiatives, particularly in media systems in which the state has a high degree of intervention, through both formal and informal mechanisms, and journalistic independence is fragile (Garcia Santamaria, 2020).

Final remarks

As Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2021, p. 210) argue, "disinformation, whether its production, reception, or responses to it, can only be properly understood within the social, political, economic, and historical contexts where it is consumed and spread". While the study of disinformation has seen significant growth, there continues to be a pronounced imbalance in both the quantity and topics addressed in research produced by countries of the global North compared to research from the global South, as highlighted in the third section of this paper.

Additionally, a lot of critical reflection is needed around the concept of disinformation itself. Here I suggest that researchers should consider the "conceptual disorders" that challenge the strength of current studies. There is a need for a serious discussion on the nature of the concept of disinformation, including whether it is a thick or thin concept and how well it travels across different contexts and situations. It is important to consider whether what we refer to as disinformation is a new phenomenon or just the digital version of political propaganda and the lack of media literacy that has always existed, particularly in countries with low institutional development. Rather than falling into relativism, there is an urgent need to strengthen theoretical and conceptual reflections on disinformation, both as a dependent and independent variable.

Thus, although further investigation is needed to understand the particularities of disinformation within the global South, this research should be conducted more reflectively. Attempts to do comparative studies are practically absent, which makes it very difficult for scholars to grasp to what extent disinformation shares traits in different corners of the world.

Progress has been made in considering correlates of disinformation at the individual level, derived from sociodemographic and educational characteristics. However, variables at the meso and macro levels are rarely considered.

For starters, disinformation is intimately connected with the political context. Yet there is a lack of empirical studies that have attempted to test how and to what extent political variations influence the propensity of false news to spread, and the ability of fact-checking initiatives to neutralise it. Similarly, variables such as the degree of political fragmentation, the inter and intra-party competition, the strength of the party system, and the vigour of civil society, are some possible elements that might be considered from a broader perspective for this endeavour.

The relationship between media systems and disinformation, particularly state-sponsored disinformation, is also a critical issue. Media systems pose different incentives for disinformation: high levels of state intervention in media systems promote state-sponsored disinformation while low political parallelism might promote fact-checking efforts.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the press-state relationship to comprehend how states combat disinformation or how they can be sources of inaccuracies. The structural conditions of the journalistic profession have a significant impact on how disinformation is tackled. The degree of professionalism, the strength of journalistic identity, and the material conditions under which journalism operates can all play a role in either enhancing or mitigating efforts to combat disinformation.

Further scholarly research is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how media systems impact disinformation and the measures to counter it across different countries and contexts. This research should consider the interplay of various dimensions of media systems in shaping these outcomes.

As noted earlier, the presence of anti-press violence, understood as a macro level variable, also must be taken into account when seeking to understand the extent to which journalists are willing to participate in fact-checking initiatives, particularly those aimed at countering state-sponsored disinformation.

In sum, it is very positive that disinformation and its consequences have attracted a growing interest in recent years. However, it is urgent to strengthen its research agenda more reflectively. It has been mentioned that disinformation studies are "too big" or have gotten out of control (Camargo & Simon, 2022). In this sense, it is a priority to grant them a more determined directionality; and particularly, to interpret this phenomenon not in isolation, but in conjunction with its socioeconomic and political context.

Methodological appendix

I conducted a manual search of the articles including the terms "disinformation AND/OR misinformation" in the abstract, from a selection of the top ten academic journals in Communication Studies, according to *SCImago Journal Rank*. The selected journals were: 1) *New Media and Society*; 2) *Journalism*; 3) *Information, Communication and Society*; 4) *Journalism Practice*;and 5) *International Journal of Communication*. I excluded from the selection those journals referring to specific issues such as health communication, feminist studies, personal relationships, IT, and public relations.

Considering that scholarship on disinformation has considerably grown since 2017 to the date (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2021), I restricted the article search to a timespan between 2017 to 2022. Then, I distinguished between those articles that explicitly mention a country of the global South in their abstract and the rest.

In total, 532 articles were located. *New Media and Society is* the journal with the largest number of articles regarding disinformation, with 181 articles. However, from those 532, only 40 articles referred to countries of the global South (7.5% of the total). *Information, Communication and Society* is the journal with the largest number of articles concerning disinformation in countries from the global South, with 14, accounting for 16% for that journal. The specific details per journal can be consulted in the following table:

Table 3.1 Misinformation and disinformation articles in top journals of Communication Studies

Journal	*Number of articles on disinformation*	*Articles on disinformation regarding global South*	*Countries included*	*Region*
New Media and Society	181	1 Boczkowski et al.	Argentina	Latin America
		2 Chung and Wihbey	Mexico	Latin America
Journalism	91	1 Wasserman	South Africa	Africa
		2 Balod and Hameleers	Philippines	Asia
		3 Neo	Southeast Asia	Asia
		4 Singer	Several countries	Global
		5 Romero-Rodríguez and Aguaded	Venezuela	Latin America
		6 Selnes	Uganda	Africa
Information Communication and Society	88	1 Chen and Tang	China	Asia
		2 Yue et al.	China	Asia
		3 Chen et al.	China	Asia
		4 Olaniyan and Akpojivi	Nigeria	Africa
		5 Workneh	Ethiopia	Africa
		6 Williams and Tkach	Republic of Congo	Africa
		7 Suwana	Indonesia	Asia
		8 Kwanda and Lin	Indonesia	Asia
		9 Garbe et al.	Several African countries	Africa
		10 Lu and Yu	Several countries	Global
		11 Das and Schroeder	India	Asia
		12 Rabello et al.	South Africa and Mexico	Africa and Latin America
		13 Waisbord and Amado	Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela	Latin America
		14 Guerra and d’Andréa	Brazil	Latin America

Journal	*Number of articles on disinformation*	*Articles on disinformation regarding global South*		*Countries included*	*Region*
Journalism Practice	124	1	Goyanes et al.	Ecuador	Latin America
		2	Gondwe et al.	Sub-Saharian Africa	Africa
		3	Wang et al.	China	Asia
		4	Guan and Wang	China	Asia
		5	Ejaz et al.	Pakistan	Asia
		6	Rodríguez-Pérez et al.	Several countries of Ibero-America	Latin America
		7	Christensen and Khalil	Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq	Asia
		8	Krajewski and Ekdale	Haiti	Americas
		9	Kumar	India	Asia
International Journal of Communication	48	1	Marchant and Stremlau	Several countries in Africa	Africa
		2	Madrid-Morales et al.	Several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa	Africa
		3	Bolsover	India	Asia
		4	Abrahams and Leber	Several countries of the Middle East and North Africa	Africa and Asia
		5	Johns	Malaysia	Asia
		6	Martínez-Carrillo and Tamul	Mexico	Latin America
		7	Shah	India	Asia
		8	Chagas	Brazil	Latin America
		9	Kaiser et al.	Brazil	Latin America
Total	**Articles on disinformation: 532**		**Articles on disinformation in the global South: 40**		

Notes

1 The discussion on conceptual disorders is taken from Schedler.
2 The exception would be Brazil and Argentina, where fake news spread during electoral campaigns have also been analyzed (see, for example Chagas, and the forthcoming work by Boczkowski on Argentinian elections).
3 The details on the methodology can be consulted in the Appendix.

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4 Statistics and state-sponsored disinformation

Understanding the propaganda war on numbers

Ahmed Farouk-Radwan and
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Introduction

We start by acknowledging that statistics are a central tool for the modern state. Without them, governments would find it almost impossible to administer and allocate resources rationally, know the needs of the population, or shed light on urgent and crucial problems that need our attention. Moreover, as Michael E. Hobart (2018) has eloquently demonstrated, these numbers gave sense to the modern state and gave science its current foothold in society. Therefore, it is not the point of this chapter to discredit their immense value but rather to highlight their misuse by a variety of governments to manipulate people and hold on to power. As we will argue here, perhaps statistics do not lie, but certainly many governments have done so using them.

In most liberal democracies, statistics are collected, organised, and processed following standards that deem them credible. These standards are also upheld in many non-democratic societies, where there is a high degree of compliance. But not all places are the same, and the fundamental conundrum persists: If the state is the entity responsible for safeguarding the integrity of these numbers, can we trust them in those cases in which some states use these numbers to engage in misinformation activities? In other words, what are the specific circumstances in which the public can trust the validity and reliability of statistics being communicated to them by the government? Furthermore, what is the role of statistics in possible state-sponsored disinformation, and how are these numbers used to advance propaganda by the state?

The answer to the first question, as we explore in this chapter, is that people can mostly trust these numbers when there are the necessary checks and balances in place that secure the independence of the bodies gathering and processing the statistics and make the data available for critical assessment to all. The second question, however, needs to be placed in a historical context because the

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use of statistics in state-sponsored disinformation campaigns has a history that continues to resonate in our time. Indeed, by understanding how they evolved in a complex setting of data that furthers power agendas, we can appreciate their value as cultural artefacts that are useful to examine society and set better public policy but that are by no means neutral. We argue that given their symbolic power and their close relation to the state, these numbers are at the centre of propaganda. In so doing, we refer to several examples that help us illustrate our argument.

Indeed, history presents us with multiple examples where numbers have been part of Psychological Operations (PSYOP) to achieve what experts call informational dominance (Libicki, 1997; Miller, 2004), despite their undeniable value for policy making and planning. In fact, statistics have at times been used as part of general deception strategies. On those occasions they have been linked to disinformation campaigns that aimed at asserting hegemonic control over strategic narratives, both in times of war and peace. States and multilateral organisations have used statistics to lie about their population and economic performance, such as China in recent years (Crabbe, 2014), justify austerity programmes, privatise commodities and companies in the Global South (Jerven, 2013), and even underpin totalitarian fascist regimes (Prévost, 2009).

In the past, statistics were a vital part of the so-called ‘strong languages’ that underpinned colonial rule (Kalpagam, 2014). These were discursive interventions by means of which the modes of life of non-European peoples came to be radically transformed by Western power by developing a sense of hegemonic superiority and implanting the ideology of the colonisers. Statistics reinforced the ideas of ‘order’ and ‘civilisation’ and were instrumental in cementing the idea that Britain, as a conquering Empire, was a civilising force for good. In so doing, not only numbers assisted governments but also underpinned notions of manifest destiny of the old colonisers (Pels, 1997; Zuberi, 2001).

Indeed, the statistical movement in Britain had a powerful role in legitimising the colonial administration by enabling an imagined—but fictional—unified commonwealth idea of a benign coloniser, while seeding racist ideologies such as Eugenics that supported the presence of the masters in occupied territories (Caglioti, 2017; Darwin, 1919; Godin, 2007; Zuberi, 2001). As part of the positive enterprise that underpinned the Enlightenment as a political project, numbers helped to convey all sorts of pseudoscientific ideas that tried to legitimise colonialism, domination, and slavery (Curran, 2011; Roberts, 2013).

In truth, statistics have always played a central role in underpinning the legitimacy of strategic narratives, and even more importantly, they have been pivotal in upholding the boundaries of prevalent discursive regimes. By this, we mean that statistics provided in the past the foundations for the logos when dominant rhetoric has been displayed. These numbers convey symbolically facts and truthfulness for assumptions around ‘common sense’ ideas that have been linked to those in power (Rosenfeld, 2011).

In those occasions in which the state has been used to manipulate society rather than to form and implement ethical rational policy, statistics have been used to sell to the public discourses of dominance and to drown subaltern voices by de-legitimising individual and personal experiences (Roberts, 2011; Saini, 2019; Zuberi, 2001). In the 1920s, for example, statistics were used by officials in the US to claim White racial superiority (Fischer et al., 2020); a pervasive narrative that continues even today in the voices of people such as Charles A. Murray (1999).

Beyond surveys and polls during elections and manipulation of casualties during wartime, such as in Iraq and Vietnam, the most influential types of statistics have been those that refer to the economy. During the Cold War, for example, to win the hearts and minds in the then-called Third World, both superpowers tried to use statistics to their own propaganda advantage. The statistical framework in the West was based on economic numbers that exhibit the progress made by the market-driven economy and liberal democracy against the socialist model advocated by the Soviets. The statistical scaffolding was set by Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of the Breton Woods agreements that created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Helleiner, 2014, p. 7).

These institutions paved the way for global governance through numbers, as they came to centralise and control the economic narratives for development and later shaped the statistical system of the United Nations.pTwo central elements were at the core of these efforts to spread and consolidate US hegemony in the post-war era. On the one hand, the emphasis on the communication aspect of the newly created United Nations was to allow it to be also a discourse of international power (Alleyne, 2003). On the other hand, the relentless use of statistics to project ‘soft power’ and spread the idea of the superiority of the free market in the development arena (Lugo-Ocando & Nguyen, 2017).

The concept of soft power was originally used in the context of international relations and diplomacy. It was coined by political scientist Joseph Nye (1990, 2008) in the late 20th century. It refers to a country's ability to influence others and shape international relations through non-coercive and non-military means. Soft power is based on attraction and persuasion rather than force or coercion. It is often contrasted with "hard power”, which involves the use of military force or economic sanctions to achieve a country's goals. The concept is increasingly used in media and communication studies in relation to the capabilities of the media to confer power by shaping discursive regimes, framing issues, and setting agendas (Chitty et al., 2017; Goldsmith & Horiuchi, 2012).

These aspects became intertwined both in policy and the public imagination as part of the push to limit and neutralise Soviet propaganda. Indeed, as it is widely recognised today, the adoption of statistics such as the Gross Domestic

Product (GDP) after the 1944 Bretton Woods conference was a way of controlling the strategic narratives around development and selling the idea of the superiority of the market economy over the centralised planning of the Soviet system (Fioramonti, 2013, 2014)

Using Immanuel Wallerstein's (1993) world system analysis, we could argue that in the division of the world between core and periphery, statistics and numbers emerged as a powerful language in the construction of modern power and ultimately information supremacy. This is because hegemony from the centre takes the form of three types of dominance: productivity dominance, trade dominance, and financial dominance. These types of dominance consolidated the notion of who was powerful and who was not.

Emulating what Benito Mussolini did in Italy with the adoption of the Gini coefficient to demonstrate the superiority of fascism both as a political system and as an imperial power in Ethiopia (Prévost, 2009), post-war US understood the need to legitimise its dominant narrative through numbers while setting the parameters of a new discursive regime that underpinned private ownership and the free-market economy (Escobar, 1995).

The United Nations system started by privileging the strategic communication of these numbers, allocating resources, and designing policy around the projection of soft power by means of the mass media and communication efforts in general (Alleyne, 2003). This was complemented by the efforts made by multilateral organisations within the United Nations system to acquire authorial control over international governance by means of the statistics they compile and validate in order to underpin policy (Coyle, 2014; Fioramonti, 2013).

Even the then Soviet Union, originally reluctant to adopt these numbers, succumbed to them and ended up adopting the measures prescribed by US and European economists to assess its own economic progress and that of its satellite and ally states (Coyle, 2015; Eberstadt, 1995). Over the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, these numbers became central to the strategic narratives around global governance and facilitated the imposition of power. Since then, they have become a central instrument in the projection of ideology and pivotal in securing authorial control over truth.(Seyb, 2015a; Seyb, 2015b)

Overall, what people know about the world today is in part thanks to numbers centralised in the United Nations system, which continues to play a significant role in standardising economic, political, and social concepts, defining codes and classifications, setting aggregation procedures, and even determining the characteristics and nature of all national statistics. Moreover, by means of these numbers, key multilateral institutions have been able to impose particular sets of policies and approaches.

However, some of these numbers are misleading at best. This is because most are just aggregated from national and regional accounts that, in many cases are flawed in their origin, lacking rigour, or are just blunt manipulations. For years, for example, the World Bank and the private sector have been parading the positive effects of sustaining economic growth in places such as Kenya in relation to women's empowerment and wellbeing (Ellis et al., 2007). However, upon closer look one notices that most significant improvements have mostly happened at the top tier of the population, and, in reality, most people have little to show from the past years of economic growth (Muigua, 2021). In reality, as it happens in most places in the world, the growth at the top has skewed the mean average upward while leaving those at the bottom behind. As some authors have pointed out in this and other similar cases, "the statistics have been abused to fabricate evidence of success regarding the Millennium Development Goals" (Jarven, 2013, p. 96).

The fact remains that statistics are overwhelmingly produced by national governments. This means that the same institutions that produce the numbers are, at the same time, the custodians of their integrity. In other words, the nation-state is not only responsible for determining how the data is collected and defining the meaning of each statistic but also oversees the reliability and validity while upholding the consistency of the way they are interpreted and presented.

Only in a few countries—mostly well-established liberal democracies—has there has been a meaningful attempt to create independent bodies that can look after the integrity of statistics, and which are commissioned to stop political leaders and government officials from abusing them to manipulate and lie to society. These bodies are often governmental organisations that are awarded independence by the parliament or Congress and that have a particular remit and organisational robustness that confer upon them freedom and professional autonomy.

Nevertheless, even in places such as the UK we see abuses, misuses, and blunt manipulation using statistics by officials. This is true even though the UK Statistics Authority, an independent government body that oversees the Office for National Statistics, has mandated a national code of practice for official statistics. For example, back in 2014, the UK Statistics Authority withdrew gold-standard status from police figures, pointing to accumulating evidence of unreliability. The Authority said in its report that these numbers were not reliable since there was a degree of fiddling and dishonesty in the ways these numbers were gathered, processed, and presented to the public (Travis, 2014). To this day, no certification of these statistics has happened, and malpractice continues to prevail because successive governments from both political parties have used them to advance particular agendas (Hope, 2011; MacDonald, 2002; Walker, 2022).

Stats and Soft Power

Statistics provide soft power because they confer authority and legitimacy to strategic narratives. This is why they are also important for journalism as a political institution, both to secure authorial control and to act as gatekeepers of truth.

Walter Lippmann (1889–1974) argued that statistics were quintessential in the pursuit of objective news reporting and central in establishing journalism as a scientific activity that seeks truth (Seyb, 2015a). In this sense, there is a long tradition within journalism in which numbers bring 'certainty' to the facts and events reported by journalists (Anderson, 2018). Statistics, therefore, have been key in defining discursive regimes, while also being particularly useful in underpinning authorial control over what is claimed to be the truth (Lugo-Ocando & Lawson, 2017).

In more recent times, many journalists and large segments of the mainstream news media have embedded themselves in the idea of data journalism to achieve this degree of certainty (Anderson, 2018; Ausserhofer et al., 2020; Borges-Rey et al., 2018; Meyer, 2002). This is because of its promises of bringing back verifiable-factual-objective truth. Many consider statistics both facts and sources in the articulation of news stories as they set the record in public debates (Brandao, 2016; Bumpstead et al., 2011; Martisini, 2018). Indeed, this symbolic power draws from the perceived notion that they are an objective source of information and serve as conveyors of facts (Lugo-Ocando & Brandão, 2016).

Having said that, these same numbers are socially constructed, playing the role of cultural artefacts that convey ideology and meaning to events and people. By this, we mean that statistics reflect a socially constructed reality that signifies both ideology and power. To give an example, 60 years ago, the UK counted acts of homosexuality as crimes against society, while this is not the case today. Meanwhile, that same country now counts shouting racial slurs in public as a hate crime in its national statistics, while labelling anyone doing so a criminal.

Given their malleable nature, these numbers are at times abused in order to perform disinformation activities at a variety of levels, given their power to underpin certain ideas and set the parameters for discourses (Briant, 2022; Shaffer, 2019; Spicer, 2018). The case of immigration numbers in Europe and the US is emblematic because it goes to show how numbers are always contextualised within strategic narratives.

Indeed, statistics around so-called illegal immigrants—as defined by those who overstay their visa—are often associated in the media and in the public imagination with individuals smuggled through the land borders rather than with those arriving on commercial airlines (which is, in fact the greater volume by far). Because of this misconception, public attention and political pressure lean towards building a wall rather than implementing better screening procedures at the points of airport departure; although, one ought to acknowledge, a border wall makes for a much better metaphor for populist leaders wanting to secure votes.

However, the most concerning aspect of this misappropriation of statistics comes from the state itself, when it uses them to disinform, manipulate, and lie. Particularly, the public is entirely dependent upon the ability and willingness of governments to be transparent and accurate when creating and using these numbers. In simple words, without a firm commitment to transparency and integrity regarding these numbers, they can be easily weaponised to manipulate and deceive. This 'ability' and 'will' to develop numbers that are valid and reliable is not always present among officials, and instead we find many examples of governments deliberately misusing statistics.

The use of information dominance by the state is not new, and for years these numbers were part of the strategic narratives associated with the struggles during the Cold War (Alberts et al., 2001; Miller, 2004). Statistics became a state weapon of attrition in the context of propaganda to annihilate the enemy's morale and credibility. In many cases, it has been the use of numbers by the state that has provided the necessary strategic advantage in most rhetorical efforts to win the hearts and minds of the public.

One example was the Arab-Israeli conflict, which undermined the confidence of the Arab peoples in their rulers and governments, something that had long-term effects. In the 1967 Six-Day War—also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War—between Israel and the neighbouring states of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Egypt performed very poorly. Despite that, the Egyptian radio at that time issued many statements with numbers confirming the superiority of the Egyptian forces and their downing of Israeli planes, which enabled the troops to approach Tel Aviv, while the Israeli army was advancing in the Sinai Peninsula until it reached the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Brooks (2006) discussed the role of the autocratic regime in fabricating the numbers to deceive the people, which had an impact on many of the social, economic, and psychological repercussions that occurred after the war.

De Atkine (1999) analysed the reasons for the Arabs' loss of their wars with Israel and emphasised that the wrong use of information, the control of limited government parties over it, and the failure to provide it properly, as well as the failure to publish correct information for public opinion, are some of the reasons for the loss. On June 5, 1967, the Israeli Air Force struck a tactical first strike that, within hours, destroyed the air forces of Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. Israel had more than doubled its size within six days. Egyptian forces, without any plans or orders, executed a disorganised retreat. A panicked Field Marshal Amer gave the retreat order on June 6th, one day into the war. Therefore, in the early days, the Egyptian government did not admit defeat and published data through the radio stations with the voices of enthusiastic broadcasters about the number of downed Israeli planes. Then, the citizens were surprised when President Nasser announced that he had left power because of the defeat (Aboul-Enein, 2005). The narrative about the war first appeared on the second day of the war when the Egyptian government launched a massive propaganda campaign that also included reports of false victories using "Cairo Radio" and "Egypt's Voice of the Arabs" (Bleier, 1999; Podeh, 2004).

Another classical example of this, as documented by historian Lewis Sorley (2011), was General William Westmoreland's inability to understand the political significance of numbers during the Vietnam War, particularly those relating to US casualties when they entered into the public debate. While Westmoreland was emphasising the number of casualties inflicted upon the North Vietnamese, thinking that by killing as many enemies as he could, the US would win the war, he neglected completely the fact that in the propaganda war it was the much smaller but more significant number of deaths on his own side that really counted in the larger universe of US politics and public opinion; something that the Vietnamese state took full advantage of.

Another example was that of the UK after the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, when the government, led by Tony Blair, tried to manipulate the public by referencing statistics in the hope of keeping down the number of civilian casualties in that country after the invasion. The then Foreign Secretary under New Labour, John Straw, initially quoted that the Iraqi Ministry of Health, under the control of the Western occupation forces in the 90s, kept the numbers below 4,000 casualties.

Only after it became self-evident that these numbers were risible in the public eye did Straw started to indicate the numbers offered by the Iraq Body Count. This was despite numerous calls by experts and government advisors to refer instead to the Lancet surveys of Iraq War casualties or the ORB survey of Iraq War casualties (Dyer, 2005; Guterman, 2005; Rappert, 2016). As one can suspect, the main reason was that the last two cases provided estimates far larger than the earlier. Moreover, the Iraq Body Count, which maintains a public database of violent civilian deaths since the 2003 invasion, is mostly based on deaths reported in the Western media, which was deeply embedded with the US military at the time and had little independent access outside the Green Zone in Baghdad. Meanwhile, the other two studies rely instead on estimations of excess deaths based on surveys on-site. Most experts agreed about the confidence in the statistics provided by the latter in comparison to the Body Count project.

Consequently, Straw and most of the Blair cabinet were able to justify at the time, to a certain degree, the invasion. They claimed that collateral casualties were still below what the Saddam Hussein regime, by means of human rights violations, had caused over the years in Iraq. This will remain a dark episode in the history of the use of statistics by any democratic government in the world and a reminder that even when governments put safeguards in place, there is always the possibility that disinformation and propaganda can take over.

Muhammad Idrees Ahmad (2015) makes a very similar argument in the case of Pakistan during the so-called war on Terror displayed by the US and other Western allies. He refers particularly to the drone strikes, which created a truly humanitarian conundrum. According to this scholar, by fetishising statistics as hard facts without regard for the underlying data, the US and UK governments were able to advance an agenda to manufacture consent in their own countries to gain the public's support for the war with little to no scrutiny by the media.

Consequently, polls showed high support for the tactics used by the US and, to a lesser degree, the UK. He adds that dubious statistics help sustain the image of a surgical war with little collateral damage; a rhetorical strategy, based on the falsehood of a bloodless war, that has been repeatedly embraced by propagandists since the first Gulf War of 1991.

Points of discussion

It might seem a paradox that some governments would promote disinformation by using statistics. After all, statistics are supposed to be objective data with the sole purpose of conveying information that allows for better planning, policymaking, and enlightening the public. Having said that, there are ample examples of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns that use statistics to undermine the other side. The current war in Ukraine is a classic example of using the number of casualties on each side to paint a picture of self-success and the defeat of the enemy. In the fog of war, however, it is impossible to know the exact numbers of soldier and civilian deaths, as both the statistics and the actual events are difficult to scrutinise.

It is not only the case that some governments deliberately select numbers and sources or that they intentionally provide misinterpretations so they can push forward their own agendas. It is also the case that governments make up statistics almost from thin air to provide a false sense of being in control. For years, successive Chinese governments have been misleading their own citizens and the rest of the world by claiming numbers in a diversity of areas, including population and, more recently statistics on loan defaults and inflation (Tastan, 2023; Wigglesworth et al, 2023).

In fact, China's official demographic figures have been systematically overestimated, and the authorities have consistently cracked down on anyone who questions their data. For example, Yi Fuxian's book *Big Country with an Empty Nest* (2013) was quickly banned when it originally appeared in 2007 because it voiced concerns about China's one-child policy and predicted that the Chinese population would begin to shrink in 2017, not in 2033–2034, as Chinese officials and the United Nations' 2006 World Population Prospects (WPP) had projected (Fuxian, 2022). As historian Niall Ferguson (2022) has pointed out, the reason for this manipulation of statistics is that for the Chinese authorities, its demographics "spell decline, not domination" in the world stage.

One final example is that of Argentina, which for a long time has been suspected of understating its inflation figures to avoid paying high interest rates on government bonds indexed to inflation (Michalski & Stoltz, 2013). For decades, successive governments in that country have deliberately provided inaccurate inflation reporting to claim economic achievements and gain public support (Bronstein, 2015).

Other countries in the region, such as Cuba and Venezuela, have followed suit and have gone so far as to simply make up numbers on inflation from thin air. Even today, few trust the numbers on consumer prices coming out of any of these countries. Overall, malpractice continues to be prevalent in the institutions that gather and produce these numbers. The key point is that statistics continue to be a central element for the strategic narratives and propaganda efforts that help them stay in power (Hirschfeld, 2007; Lugo-Ocando & Martinisi, 2022).

From these cases, we can see how many governments have used and abused statistics to manipulate and push propaganda and disinformation. Many have even been caught red-handed promoting disinformation by using statistics, particularly those with weak institutions that have little ability to restrain disinformation attempts by officials in power. In so doing, they have not only undermined public trust in these numbers but made it much harder to create consensus around policy and actions needed to address fundamental issues in society. When governments in China or Venezuela use statistics to lie, it then becomes impossible to develop rational and coherent responses to areas such as economic growth, monetary policy, poverty, or crime.

Statistics are still one of the few cultural artefacts that, in the public discourse, can create some degree of consensus and broad agreement. This is because they are still perceived by most people as sources of information that are factual and objective in their representations of reality. However, in places such as the UK, over 20% of people think that there is some level of political interference in the production of statistics (Pullinger, 2020; UK Statistics Authority, 2021).

Some reflections

At some point during the spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in 2020, the responses to it from government officials and political leaders truly resembled an attrition warfare of words, one in which the different state actors started to use statistics as part of wider propaganda efforts to show the world who had been more efficient and who had failed in dealing with the crisis. For those who resisted lockdowns for fear of economic losses, statistics from Sweden came in handy to show that you could get through the pandemic without closing down the economy, as well as still referring today to the economic downturn in China as a direct result of excessive curfews.

It is a given fact that political leaders have tried over time to reassert their own power by mobilizing and co-opting statistics, using them in their own strategic narratives. During the Cold War, the USA and the USSR rushed to try to control media narratives to disseminate their own ideologies and models. The battle with numbers during COVID-19 was no different as these debates highlight the fact that the use of numbers is both contested and deeply ideological (Lugo-Ocando & Lawson, 2017). They tell who should be praised for adopting the 'correct' strategy by locking down people in their homes and who instead were allowing thousands to die while trying to create 'herd immunity' and keep the economy going. To many of us, who are convinced of the rationality of science, there is no doubt that the numbers tell one story. But for millions who believe in messianic leaders and have fallen prey to demagogues, populists, and conspiracy theories, the exact same numbers seem to be telling them a completely different story.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw numbers being used by different state actors in their struggle for legitimacy on the international stage and in their efforts to project soft power across the globe. Numbers about deaths, donated masks, numbers of vaccines delivered, and how many recovered were all part of the rhetorical efforts at the time. Leaders in China, Russia, South Korea, and the US, all went public to show how they were 'more' efficiently handling the crisis while, at the same time, also using these numbers to point fingers at others.

Numbers were used to fuel conspiracy theories, which even suggested the creation of the virus in a lab in Wuhan given the initially low rates of death reported by the government there. Mutual allegations also emerged that not only were certain governments not providing accurate statistics about their own death tolls, but that the World Health Organization itself was colluding with China in obscuring the real dimension of the crisis in that country. Despite being debunked, many of these narratives follow their way into ample segments of society and continue to fuel distrust and resentment against governments and medical experts (Alba & Frenkel, 2020).

Consequently, public trust in statistics among important segments of the public has eroded over the years (Davies, 2017; Rampell, 2017; Sundaram, 2018). According to a YouGov/America poll, even though one-third of US adults believe that most or all government figures are accurate, most people are nevertheless sceptical. These attitudes are strongly defined by political views. While the majority of Democrats think all or most government statistics are reliable, 42% of Republicans believe few or no statistics put out by the government (Frankovic, 2017). This explains in part the lack of effectiveness in using statistics to convey messages about the need for vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lawson & Lugo-Ocando, 2022).

To make matters worse, most of the statistics are disseminated through the news media in times in which public trust in journalism and the mainstream media as political institutions is at a record low, making the case that the messenger shoots the message. Therefore, we need to make a distinction between the gathering and production of statistics and how they are disseminated to the public. In this last part, corporate and political interest groups have made and continue to make detrimental interventions within liberal and illiberal regimes.

Today, armies of trolls operating in a diversity of places around the world incorporate statistics in their own narratives to underpin blunt lies. If we must point fingers as to who to blame for this state of affairs, we should say all states that have abused statistics to misinform in the past. In liberal democracies, there has been a serious attempt to preserve the integrity of these numbers by creating independent institutions and authorities to safeguard their independence from government or corporate meddling. This is contrary to many authoritarian regimes that have a long history of manipulating numbers to advance propaganda. However, even in democracies, numbers continue to be the subject of mismanagement, such as the case of crime statistics in the UK, which are considered to fail every single test of transparency, reliability, and neutrality by the government's own watchdog. As soon as there is a crisis or a war, democratically elected governments tend to behave as the worst denominator when it comes to their national statistics. This is because the problem is far more complex given the histories of numbers and the fact that today they are communicated mostly through media that at times, even when free and independent, choose to subordinate themselves to governments and corporations to obscure truth and misinform people. The challenge for the people is to make sure that their governments make statistics a transparent tool for public accountability and not an instrument for deception and lies.

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5 Populist disinformation

Mapping the discursive connections between online populism and disinformation in the US[1]

Michael Hameleers

Introduction

The rapid dissemination of mis- and disinformation through digital media and the rise of populist movements have both been regarded as key threats to contemporary democracy. To date, populism and mis- and disinformation have been studied within separate research fields. However, there is a strong conceptual affinity between these concepts (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). First, populism's antagonistic worldview that frames a divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites may also apply to a cleavage between honest people and lying elites accused of spreading disinformation. Second, populism forwards negativity, conflict, and incivility whilst foregrounding ordinary people's feelings and experiences. Such people-centric expressions of knowledge and experiences are juxtaposed to expert knowledge and empirical evidence—which are either circumvented or attacked.

Although this does not mean that populism is the same as disinformation, or that populists always spread falsehoods, it does indicate that the central stylistic and framing elements of populism can give rise to a type of argumentation in which people-centric experiences are preferred over expert knowledge and empirical evidence. In addition to this specific way of constructing knowledge, the societal consequences of populism and disinformation may be comparable, in the sense that they both forward a strong delegitimising message. By attributing blame to the alleged 'corrupt' or self-interested elites whilst emphasising the centrality of ordinary people, populist communication may create strong societal cleavages. Specifically, the in-group of deprived people is framed in opposition to dishonest, lying, and corrupt out-groups that are said to harm the people (Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017). But why would people accept such information?

Extant research on the political consequences of mis- and disinformation posits that people have a tendency to accept information that aligns with their partisan lenses, whereas they avoid or counterargue messages that attack or

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oppose their identities (Thorson, 2016). As a result of such defensive motivations, polarisation between ‘us and them’ may be amplified, potentially trapping people in fact-free populist echo chambers that resonate with their worldviews, irrespective of their veracity. In this chapter, we extend the conceptualisation of the interconnectedness of populism and disinformation beyond their shared political consequences by focusing on two central connections between these concepts: (1) blaming the media or other elite institutions as part of a populist communication strategy, and (2) populist disinformation as a discursive construction of fact-free, anti-elitist, and people-centric discourse in which conflict and negativity trump factually accurate and rational exchanges.

We rely on a qualitative content analysis of social media data collected in the US to empirically explore how these two relationships are constructed online. The main research questions guiding this endeavour are: (1) How are the media and journalists or other knowledge institutions blamed for being dishonest and inaccurate?; and (2) How are populist expressions reflecting a discourse that circumvents empirical knowledge and expert analyses? As these two relationships may be expressed by both populist politicians and disenchanted ordinary citizens (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), the qualitative analysis focuses on both the direct communication of a radical right-wing populist (Donald Trump) and the constructions of reality by ordinary citizens expressing their views on Facebook as an ‘imagined community’ of distrust and disenchantment. Taken together, this chapter aims to offer conceptual and empirical evidence of the two ways in which populism and disinformation are connected—both in terms of a blame-shifting label and the discursive construction of reality.

Theory

Populist communication connected to the attribution of blame to the media

Populism essentially cultivates a central opposition in politics and society. Specifically, the ordinary people are pitted against the ‘corrupt’ elites deemed responsible for the problems experienced by the people (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Considering that populist ideas articulate that the ordinary people are not represented by the ‘corrupt’ and self-interested elites, populism strongly relates to attributions of blame (Hameleers et al., 2017). More specifically, hardships and crises experienced by the ordinary people are said to be caused by elites that are allegedly unwilling and unable to represent their ‘own’ people. Thus, populism essentially blames the elites—who can be politicians, corporations, media elites, or supra-national institutions—for causing the negative developments that are experienced by the silenced and powerless people.

To date, empirical research has explored how populist communication is constructed on ungated online media settings (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Yet, we lack studies that inductively explore how populism is constructed and which discursive elements are central to the construction of the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (but see e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2019). To move forward with this, the current chapter aims to explore how the central building blocks of populist discourse are constructed by politicians and citizens, and how these constructions reflect disinformation or misinformation as both a label and a style of communication (see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019, for a distinction between disinformation as genre and label).

Misinformation can basically be understood as the spread of inaccurate or false information disseminated without the intention to mislead (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Wardle, 2017). Disinformation, in contrast, can be defined as the goal-directed and deceptive use of false or fabricated information in order to achieve profit or cause harm to individuals, groups, or democracy at large (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017). Although mis- and disinformation are not the same as populist communication, we can identify a discursive connection between both concepts. This connection applies both to the targets of populism’s blame attribution (i.e., the fake news media) and the style of communicating populist discourse (i.e., circumventing experts and empirical knowledge).

This relationship can, first of all, be understood as a blame-shifting tactic, in which anti-media sentiments are expressed (also see e.g., Krämer, 2017). In line with this, populist ideas can regard the established media outlets as part of the ‘corrupt’ establishment that is far removed from the people’s experiences. Populism’s blame attribution strategy may thus apply to the attribution of causal responsibility to the established media and journalists, and therefore cultivates an epistemic blame attribution that delegitimises established knowledge. Therefore, we first identify a relationship between populist rhetoric and attributions of mis- and disinformation: next to shifting blame to political elites, populist communication can shift blame to the established press or media elites for not representing the ordinary people’s worldview (misinformation) or for deliberately lying to them (disinformation).

Hence, populist ideas can regard elite actors as part of a lying or dishonest enemy that does not represent the people’s truth. In line with this, established media, journalists, and other elites that are responsible for disseminating knowledge are delegitimised as part of populism’s blame-shifting label. In line with this conceptualisation of the populism-disinformation relationship, this article aims to understand how politicians in the US and ‘ordinary’ people use social network sites to express populist boundaries that blame the media for the people’s problems. Here, we are mostly interested in how radical-right wing populist actors, such as former president Trump in the US, who have theoretically been associated with the spread of disinformation (e.g., Ross & Rivers, 2018), attribute blame to the media by accusing them of disinformation. However, it still remains an open question if, and if so, how, the affinity between the ideational core of populism and discourses of (un)truthfulness or the radical right-wing component is the driving force of attributions of blame to the media. For this reason, we will contrast one most likely case of media scapegoating and fake news accusations (Trump) against other cases (left-wing populists and mainstream politicians).

In this chapter, a 'mostly likely' case of polarising disinformation accusations was chosen. Hence, the high levels of polarisation, fragmentation, and populism—combined with low trust in established institutions—make the US a vulnerable disinformation case (Humprecht et al., 2020). As fake news accusations may abound in a context of polarisation, fragmentation, and low trust in established information sources, we consider the US a relevant case for understanding the discursive relationship between populism and disinformation. Especially Trump's communication can be regarded as a stereotypical case of media delegitimisation that aligns with a radical right-wing populist framing of reality (e.g., Bhat & Chadha, 2020). With regards to the assumed relationship between populism and accusations of disinformation, we pose the following research questions: How are delegitimising references to the media as a scapegoat for the people's problems constructed in social media content communicated by Trump (RQ1) and comments expressed by citizens (RQ2)? Considering that politicians are more likely to communicate political ideas via Twitter and citizens more likely to express themselves via Facebook (e.g., Vosoughi et al., 2018), we focus on different platforms for politicians' and citizens' discourses.

Populist disinformation as a style of fact-free communication

Next to the blame-shifting relationship, this chapter considers the affinity between the framing of populism and the stylistic elements featured in disinformation campaigns. Hence, the second connection between populism and communicative untruthfulness conceptualised in this chapter—populist mis- or disinformation—describes the connection or discursive affinity between populist styles of communication and the expression of fact-free sentiments that circumvent, delegitimise, reject, and attack sources of expert knowledge and empirical evidence. But what populist styles may align with the communication of mis- and disinformation as false information?

Populist communication has been referred to as people-centric, conflict-focused, emotionalised (i.e., through anger and fear expressed toward the out-group), and based on common sense and gut feelings rather than rationality (Ernst et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). Such styles may also be present in disinformation, which often contains a delegitimizing and emotionalised narrative that targets established sources of information (e.g., Hameleers, 2022). Extending this argument, this chapter forwards the argument that the circumvention or attack of empirical evidence and expert-based analyses and knowledge may align with a style of argumentation that relies on people-centric experiences, feelings, and opinions instead of verified information.

Taking into account that populism, especially when expressed in online settings, shares a similar communication strategy (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Krämer, 2014), the second relationship between disinformation and populism is regarded as a discursive affinity between the constructions of reality through both populist and disinformation narratives. This stylistic affinity revolves around an emphasis on people-centric experiences over empirical evidence and expert knowledge. Although this does not imply that information without expert knowledge and empirical evidence references is always false, or that information with such references is always true, it does connect to a type of communication that deviates from journalistic principles that strive for the truth (Waisbord, 2018). The people's opinions, feelings, and experiences are less susceptible to verification and scrutiny than information presented as empirical evidence. Hence, they may not be subject to scrutiny as the true experiences of the people should always be central in political decision-making according to the populist master frame.

Building further on this discursive affinity between populist styles and disinformation narratives, the second research question of this chapter explores if, and if so, how, populist communication aligns with a communication tactic that avoids verified empirical evidence and experts whilst prioritising conflict, emotions, and people's experiences. The corresponding research question reads as follows: How are online populist expressions communicated by Trump (RQ3) and ordinary citizens in the US (RQ4) reflecting the circumvention or attack of elitist knowledge and empirical evidence whilst prioritising experiences, conflict, and people-centrism as the focal point of reality?

Method

The four research questions are answered through a qualitative analysis of social media content in the US. Specifically, for this chapter, the direct communication of Trump and other US politicians on Twitter and the communication of ordinary citizens on Facebook was scraped and analysed discursively. These social media channels were chosen for different reasons. Centrally, the affordances perspective was used to contrast people-centric communication on Facebook with politicians' communication on Twitter. This perspective entails that different social media channels may respond to and empower different needs for communication, interaction, and sharing (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2018). Twitter is mostly used to acquire novel information and can be used as a one-directional communication channel for political actors and other elite communicators. More specifically, followers receive updates from connections that are not necessarily reciprocal connections or 'friends'. Politicians frequently use (or have used in the past) Twitter as this channel enables them to reach a large number of followers, with whom they do not have to be connected. Moreover, social media channels such as Twitter allow politicians to circumvent the gatekeeping functions and higher thresholds of established media and journalism, for which access is restricted or mediated.

Communication among ordinary citizens or members of the public on Facebook is more likely to be guided by strong-tie networks (e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2018). People mostly know each other, and connections are mutual on Facebook. In addition, Facebook interactions among citizens typically allow for richer and more detailed discussions and less elitist interactions than the response sections offered by Twitter. Based on these different uses connected to Twitter and Facebook, data from politicians' Twitter accounts in the US were scraped. Here, the qualitative analysis focused on Donald Trump as a stereotypical right-wing populist actor who is known to communicate hostile blame attributions to the media. The analysis was conducted at the time that Trump was president of the US with access to Twitter.

To further explore whether populist delegitimisations, anti-media sentiments, and the proposed relationships between disinformation and populism are essentially part of a radical right-wing populist phenomenon, Trump's Twitter communication was contrasted with the direct communication of the left-wing populist actor Bernie Sanders and a mainstream politician with a different political affinity (Hillary Clinton). The key aim of the case selection procedures was to explore and empirically map the theoretical premise that populist disinformation mainly pertains to the radical right-wing of the political spectrum and therefore is less salient in the communication of other political actors.

For the sample of Facebook communities used by ordinary citizens in the US to vent their disenchantment and populist attitudes, a most-likely strategy for the selection of cases was also employed: publicly accessible online communities revolving around the celebration of ordinary citizens and native people, whilst providing a forum for anti-elitist communication, were used to get inductive insights into the construction of populist disinformation by the ordinary people themselves.

The sample frame reflected a key electoral event in the US in order to map the antagonist and conflict-oriented discourse associated with populist disinformation: the presidential elections in the US. This event took place on November 8, 2016. In this setting, the four months of Twitter activity selected as relevant for a rich and thick analysis of content yielded 1,153 tweets by Donald Trump (excluding non-relevant entries and retweets). This sample was extended with 603 tweets posted by Bernie Sanders and 405 tweets from Hillary Clinton.

To contrast this Twitter communication with the Facebook communication of ordinary citizens publishing their ideas in online communities, we focused on exactly the same time period. Here, two publicly accessible Facebook community pages that reflected radical-right wing issue positions were sampled. As they typically reflect hostility, people-centrism, and anti-establishment communication, authoritarian Facebook pages were sampled (one patriotist community page and one nativist page were selected). The sampling strategy consisted of two stages or 'layers' of selection: original posts on communities as well as replies that included engagement with these posts were selected in order to maintain narrative constructions of ordinary citizens co-constructing meaning online. Based on principles of maximum variation and saturation (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a small sample of ten original posts in each community was found to be sufficient for saturation (meaning that an additional sample of new posts did not yield additional findings). For every post, the first ten replies were selected (ordered by date). In total, 20 posts and 234 replies were analysed. To contrast these most likely community pages to negative cases, we added one left-wing community page that reflected an anti-corporation perspective, whilst articulating a more inclusive understanding of the people (which is in contrast to the authoritarian emphasis of the radical right-wing pages).

The posts and/or responses were analysed at the level of tweets, Facebook posts, or replies. The Grounded Theory approach was used to analyse the data in a step-by-step approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The coding process was selective in the sense that only excerpts that were relevant in light of the research questions were coded. First of all, open coding was applied to label segments of tweets, Facebook posts, and responses in light of the sensitising concepts that offered the building blocks of the four research questions (i.e., discursive constructions of truth, fake, misinformation, disinformation, populism). Furthermore, we looked at the type of argumentation used to make claims about reality: was empirical research quoted? Were expert analyses referred to? Did the politician or citizen refer to experiences and common sense as argumentation/evidence for their issue positions?

During the second step of focused coding, this extensive list of codes (500+) was reduced by merging unique open codes, reformulating codes to higher levels of abstraction, and raising codes to categories. Codes were grouped and ordered based on their variety. In this process, piles of codes related to the construction of truth, the attribution of blame to (mainstream) media, falsehoods, and populism were made. These groups were used when conceptualising dimensions that captured variety in the concepts of interest. Finally, during the step of axial coding, connections between these groups were made. All in all, the analysis was focused on mapping how the two theoretically proposed relationships between populism and disinformation in the online setting were shaped discursively. Thus, how was populist disinformation presented as a blame-shifting label versus a style that attacked, circumvented, or delegitimized expert knowledge and empirical evidence? Although it can be noted that content was selected based on the dependent variable, considering that communication with a high likelihood to contain populism and disinformation was included, the analysis does not strive toward representativeness or an assessment of the relative dominance of populist disinformation. Rather, the focus on most likely cases of the targeted expressions was intended to map—as rich and detailed as possible—the different ways in which populism and disinformation are entangled discursively.

Results

The Divide between honest people and lying ledia

Trump often used Twitter to scapegoat the traditional press for withholding the truth from ordinary people. The media, and mainstream media in particular, were blamed for spreading lies that deprived the people of the truth. This can be exemplified by the following Tweet containing an anti-media sentiment expressed by Trump: “Not only does the media give a platform to hate groups, but the media turns a blind eye to the gang violence on our streets!” . Even more explicitly, Trump actively referred to a number of media channels he regarded as part of the so-called ‘fake news’ media—allegedly the greatest enemy of the American people: “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” References to the “danger to our country” or “the American people” explicate the discursive linkage between blame attributed to the media and populist communication that expresses a central divide between ordinary native citizens and the corrupt or dangerous out-groups responsible for the people’s deprivation. In line with this, Trump expressed that *because* the media are not reporting accurately on the facts that happened, and as they deliberately distort the truth, the native people are threatened severely.

Trump further emphasised that the media’s dishonesty and inaccurate reporting are goal-directed and deliberate: “FAKE NEWS media knowingly doesn’t tell the truth. A great danger to our country. The failing @nytimes has become a joke. Likewise @CNN. Sad!” These accusations of disinformation further point to an alleged political goal or hidden agenda of the news media: “Crooked Hillary colluded w/FBI and DOJ and media is covering up to protect her. It’s a #RiggedSystem! Our country deserves better!” Trump blamed different allegedly ‘biased’ news outlets for disproportionately supporting Democrats, supporting the idea that Trump blamed the media for being hostile against his party. In this reading, these opposed media outlets are referred to as propaganda machines that promote and uncritically disseminate the political agenda of the Democrats whilst disregarding, attacking, or strategically neglecting the Republicans.

The references of Trump to established media also reveal the discursive framing of an alleged “climate of dishonesty and disinformation” as a key threat to the native ordinary people. Trump specifically used adjectives such as dishonest, rigged, dirty, crooked, and fake to denote that the media are an enemy of the people. Contrasting this fake news label and disinformation accusation central to Trump’s communication with other political actors, it can be confirmed that hostile media sentiments and accusations of disinformation do not spill over to left-wing populists or the mainstream. Thus, Bernie Sanders did not voice hostile media sentiments. Specifically, disinformation, fake news, or related accusations were not addressed to the established press or other sources of information. The discourses of (un)truthfulness voiced by him did emphasise an antagonism between the people's reality and the lies spread by his political opponent Trump (at least in the pre-election period). In the pre- and post-election periods, Clinton also did not explicitly engage in discourses of (un)truthfulness, although her partisan communication blamed Trump for being dishonest and inaccurate in his depiction of reality.

A populist conception of truth: ordinary people are honest

To answer the second research question, we looked at the affinity between populist constructions of knowledge and truths and disinformation discourses. In the direct Twitter communication of Trump, expert analyses and empirical evidence are oftentimes neglected and discredited, whereas ordinary people are regarded as the most reliable source of honest and accurate information. This type of evidence that prioritises common sense and ordinary people was used to interpret many different issues, for example, the (failing) expenditures of the government. Trump frequently made delegitimising claims without any references to evidence, statistics, numbers, or expert opinion.

More specifically, as illustrated by the following quote, Trump actively defended the political agenda he pursues as the agenda governed by the common sense of the American people: "Our agenda is NOT a partisan agenda—it is the mainstream, common sense agenda of the American People". Moreover, Trump explicitly referred to "facts" and "the truth" without contextualising such claims with empirical evidence to support these truths.

In these references to the truth and the centrality of ordinary people's reality, the two types of relationships—accusations of disinformation and a populist framing of truth and reality—oftentimes co-occurred in single interpretations. As Trump tweeted in 2018: The Fake News hates me saying that they are the Enemy of the People only because they know it's TRUE. I am providing a great service by explaining this to the American People. They purposely cause great division & distrust. They can also cause War! They are very dangerous & sick!

Foregrounding the people's honest and pure truth was not just a right-wing populist idea communicated by Trump. The left-wing populist actor Bernie Sanders also emphasised that ordinary people are right, whereas elitist outsiders (i.e., corporations) are breaking their promises by lying to the people. This can be illustrated by the following Tweet in 2016: "Time and again Native Americans have seen the government break solemn promises and corporations put profits ahead of their sovereign rights".

Importantly, Trump's populist disinformation narrative often contained blame attributions and hostile claims without offering expert knowledge and empirical evidence. Hence, when blaming experts and the media, Trump did not offer evidence to illustrate why they were wrong, and rather referred to common sense and his own observations to back up delegitimising labels: The so-called experts on Trump over at the New York Times wrote a long and boring article on my cellphone usage that is so incorrect I do not have time here to correct it. I only use Government Phones, and have only one seldom used government cell phone. Story is soooo wrong!

Facebook users' construction of honest 'Us' versus dishonest 'Them'

The two relationships between populism and disinformation under study—the blame-shifting label and the discursive construction of reality—were also identified in the reality constructions of US Facebook users who were part of anti-elite communities. Here, we will mostly pay attention to the main differences between the themes already identified in Trump's tweets and the Facebook posts of citizens. First of all, Facebook users sharing their disenchantment made a less clear distinction between trustworthy versus corrupt media outlets. Ordinary citizens frequently lumped the media, opposed partisans, and governmental institutions together as an elitist outsider that did not comprehend the people's reality. As one member of a Facebook community explained: "Those that are white getting in trouble for hate (racist) crimes and yet the far left communist Democrat controlled media never seem to report these hate crimes against the whites" (Facebook user, February 15, 2017).

Based on the analysis of the Facebook posts, we can conclude that the epistemic and moral boundary between the innocent and honest ordinary people and the lying elites was more salient than reflected in the direct communication of the radical right-wing populist leader. Similar to the political discourse on Twitter, however, people referred to their understandings of a universal reality or one truth without using empirical evidence or facts: "That's the truth. People with jobs don't vote Democrat unless they just don't understand what goes on in this world" (Facebook user, April 6, 2017).

If we contrast these reality constructions to the reality expressions salient on the left-wing Facebook community page, we can conclude that people-centrism and a focus on the common sense of ordinary people are salient themes on these community pages as well. On these pages, the reality constructions and lies of corporate and political elites are contrasted to ordinary people's experiences. Here, we see a left-wing populist construction in which the hardworking ordinary citizen is juxtaposed to the self-interested elites. Media critique is salient here as well, but it takes on less hostile and uncivil forms. Although the hostile media critique on the right-wing populist pages may be considered as accusations of disinformation or fake news—as an intentional attribution of deception and misleading information is expressed—the left-wing pages more closely reflected attributions of misinformation.

Thus, although media critique may be a universal theme and a central element of Facebook pages that reflect more people oriented and critical views on politics, only radical right-wing pages strongly reflected the discursive relationships between populism and disinformation. Hence, the affinity between populism and the ‘fake news label’ (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) is a more defining characteristic of radical right-wing and authoritarian online communities.

Discussion and conclusion

In current digital societies, the spread of dishonest or inaccurate information may have far-reaching political consequences (van Aelst et al., 2017). Online, the epistemic and universal status of factual information increasingly becomes the focal point of heated debates, and people’s acceptance of information may be driven by defensive and consistency motivations rather than the motivation to reach the most accurate decisions (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). At the same time, populist movements are popular and influential online (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017), and increasingly take centre stage in the epistemic and post-factual debates by delegitimising elitist or established understandings of a factual reality—further contributing to the erosion of a shared belief and trust in science, empirical evidence, and expert knowledge. Amidst this epistemic crisis, this chapter sought to conceptually and empirically identify the affinity between disinformation narratives and populist discourse.

Against this backdrop, this chapter has proposed a two-sided relationship between populism and mis- and disinformation: (1) the attribution of mis- and disinformation to the (media) elites; and (2) populist disinformation as a communication style that may circumvent empirical evidence and expert analysis, whilst placing common sense and ordinary people at the centre stage of reality. Based on the qualitative analyses reported in this paper, we found that Trump in the US expressed a populist boundary between the dishonest, inaccurate, and fake media and ordinary native people who were victimized by the media’s dishonesty. These attributions can be seen as accusations of disinformation: the media were accused of deliberately distorting reality to promote their own biased political agendas.

Supporting the theoretical premise that populist discourse is often devoid of empirical facts, expert knowledge, or a rational foundation (e.g., Waisbord, 2018), Trump’s anti-media discourse clearly avoided expert knowledge, statistics, verifiable facts, or evidence, and relied on common sense and the people’s truth as evidence for the populist claims made. In that sense, a clear evidence-driven foundation for fake news accusations was often missing. There was little room for balance or opposing viewpoints, and the populist discourse was generally one-sided and presented as the only reality opposed to the fake news presented by opposing politicians and media sources. However, this does not mean that references to experts and evidence were absent in all accusations and delegitimising narratives. In line with the ideas of epistemic populism, alternative sources of expertise that resonated with partisan claims were used to legitimise accusations at times (see, e.g., Saurette & Gunster, 2011). Although these ‘experts’ and sources of evidence are not featured in legacy media or conventional knowledge disseminators, such references can be used to enhance the legitimacy of delegitimising claims (also see Peck, 2019 on ‘Fox Populism’).

One central implication of these findings is that social network sites such as Twitter provide (populist) politicians with a platform to express delegitimising discourse that is devoid of a fact-based narrative. This may eventually increase polarised divides in society, and raise levels of political distrust and cynicism among the electorate (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Explicit attacks targeted at the news media were only found on the radical-right and did not spill over to the communication tactics of left-wing populists or mainstream politicians. Left-wing populists may, however, emphasise people’s centrality and attributed dishonesty to their political rivals and the (corporate) establishment. Hence, discourses of untruthfulness can be connected to populism in general, whereas the explicit reliance on common sense and emotions as the focal point of reality and blame attribution to the ‘lying’ established press is a communication tactic of radical right-wing populists in particular.

But how is populist disinformation constructed by ordinary citizens online? The qualitative content analysis of citizens’ discourse on Facebook largely confirms the findings of the politicians’ discourse, pointing to a clear link between populist interpretations expressed by right-wing populists and disenchanted or nativist ordinary citizens. The difference mainly revolves around the type of moral and epistemic cleavage emphasised by the public. More specifically, citizens communicating in certain Facebook communities referred to the political and media elites as a larger enemy threatening ordinary people, whereas Trump articulated a more fine-grained distinction between the fake news media and politicians of the opposing party. The analysis of the negative cases—left-wing-orientated Facebook community pages—revealed that emphasising the people’s truth is not restricted to radical right-wing populist interpretations. However, media critique was less hostile and focused more on unintended false information (misinformation) than intentional deception (disinformation). These findings indicate that citizens communicating their political perspectives on different platforms do distinguish between attributions of mis- and disinformation.

There are important avenues for future research on this topic. Future research may extend the analysis to different platforms (i.e., including commentary sections of mainstream outlets) and political actors (i.e., a clearer distinction between populist and mainstream actors may be relevant). Second, the qualitative and inductive findings presented in this article offer some important insights into how populist disinformation manifests itself online, but may be extended with (automated) content analytic research that also provides insights into the relative salience of, and relationships between, different forms of populist sentiments targeted at the media.

Note

1 *This is a revised and updated version of the following open access publication:* Hameleers, M. (2020). Populist disinformation: Exploring intersections between online populism and disinformation in the US and the Netherlands. *Politics and Governance*, *8*(1), 146–157.

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6 From tragedy to oblivion

State-sponsored disinformation in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster

Hyo-Jeong Lee

Introduction

South Korea witnessed a massive wave of disinformation in the aftermath of the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014. The catastrophe was one of the worst tragedies in contemporary South Korean history. On the morning of April 16, a cruise boat named Sewol was sailing to the southern resort island of Jeju, carrying 476 passengers—most of them teenage high school students on their field trip. The ferry began to tilt violently in the middle of the journey and sank into the sea. Of the passengers on board, 304 people drowned.

However, what followed the innocent deaths of schoolchildren were organised responses by mainstream media that concealed and distorted the nature of the incident, whose reports became a "media catastrophe" (Kim, 2014). Previous research encapsulates the manipulative sight of the media landscape. First, between what was reported in the media and what actually happened at the scene, there was a reconciled gap (Jeong, 2015; Yoon, 2014; Kim et al., 2015). The media coverage was tainted by misleading, false, and biased information, dubbed the "sinking of journalism" (Lee, 2016). Second, the overall trends of misinformation contributed to the reinforcement of the government's voice. The mainstream media edited, deleted, and distorted the news narratives to support the frame of the government (Park, 2016; Kim & Ham, 2015; Song, 2016). A new word, "gi-re-ki", came into popular parlance: combining the terms "journalist" (gi-ja) and "trash" (th-re-ki), gi-re-ki indicted the mainstream media as trash.

That is, faced with the death of the citizens, the mainstream media did not work as independent truth-seekers of the tragedy but as subordinate agencies under the government. Journalism responded to a logic of instrumentalisation, as Hallin and Manici explain: "the control of the media by outside actors, parties, politicians, social groups or movements or economic actors seeking political influences who use them to intervene in the world of politics" (2004, p. 37).

To understand the feeble condition of the mainstream media, whose autonomy was significantly influenced and limited by state power, it is necessary to examine the media environment of contemporary South Korea. The nation is widely

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considered a consolidated liberal democracy with a robust media environment and constitutional protections for the freedom of the press (Haggard & You, 2015; Seo, 2022). Since the June Democratic Uprising in 1987, which established democratic and direct presidential elections, the government has exercised checks and balances through its three branches: the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Press freedom has also significantly improved. Freedom House upgraded South Korea's "freedom of the press" status from "partially free" to "free" in the early 2000s (2019). Nam Jae-il (2006) describes the gradual independence of the media from the control of the government in four stages: "subordination one-way cooperation" (1988–1993), "government-centred close ties" (1993–1998), "close ties in conflict" (1998–2003), and "autonomous tension" (2003–2008). During the two liberal presidencies of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations from 1998 to 2008, the press enjoyed unprecedented autonomy.

However, during Lee Myung-bak's administration (2008–2013), a conservative presidency followed, and the media system went back to the past (Seo, 2022). Lee appointed his close associates to the top positions at public broadcast companies and news agencies KBS, MBC, and YTN. Against the inappropriate government interference, journalists and staff members of the stations went on strike, calling for editorial independence and the resignation of pro-government corporate presidents. However, the broadcast stations dealt with the conflicts by taking disciplinary action against the participants. During Lee's tenure, 180 journalists were demoted or dismissed by their media organisations, which was the worst discipline since the 1980s under the military dictatorship (Lee, 2010). By doing so, the state rebuilt the media system to spread favourable news coverage of Lee while reducing critical voices. When Park Geun-hye took office in 2012, she also took over this slanted media environment and the repressive media policy. The two conservative presidencies are described as "a dark decade for press freedom" (Reporters Without Borders, 2018).

Hence, when the Sewol ferry disaster happened in 2014, the Park administration had the conditions to easily instrumentalise the media. Then it may well be asked: under which situations do political powers such as governments, politicians, or parties put political pressure on the media? Mancini (2012) suggests three major forms of instrumentalisation. In the first case, politicians attempt to use the mass media to support their candidacy for public office or to oppose other candidates. Elections are common cases in which media instrumentalisation takes place. In the second case, political actors use the mass media to increase their interests and obtain favourable decisions regarding legislation. Third, journalism can be used to extract resources from the state by catering to specific interests. So to speak, politicians try to instrumentalise the mass media for a specific interest, such as an election victory, a favourable legislative choice, or financial gains.

However, when it comes to the Sewol ferry disaster, there seems to be no such competitor, legislative or economic gain. It was an unfortunate accident that took the lives of citizens, including 250 young students. Then why did the state instrumentalise the mass media? What kinds of tactics and narratives did they use for this tragic incident? And what were the consequences? This chapter follows the unfolding media catastrophe orchestrated by the government after the massive deaths of its citizens.

To this end, what follows briefly explains the Sewol ferry disaster and its political characteristics. Next, the chapter approaches the government's strategies for dealing with the tragedy in two ways: state-led conspiracy theories and the logic of neoliberalism. By analysing governmental policies and media discourse that were closely intertwined with each other, this article explains how the state gave citizens an artful injunction to move on and forget the national tragedy.

The Sewol disaster as the televised national tragedy

When the Sewol ferry crisis broke out, TV channels broadcasted it at length. For South Korean citizens, it was their first experience witnessing an outbreak of a domestic disaster and its progress in real-time via the media. The nation was riveted by the tragic unfolding of teenagers trapped inside the drowning ship. On display was the dismal failure of the national system to protect its citizens. First, the captain and crew abandoned the young passengers. Then, coastal guards on patrol boats and maritime police officers in helicopters were dispatched, yet they did not attempt to enter the ferry or even call for evacuation on their megaphones. They made only minimum rescue efforts that took the passengers in their sight. While the captain escaped the ferry, and the coast guards were circling around the Sewol ferry, the passengers inside only heard a repeated announcement asking them to "stay still."

There was at least one hour to save the passengers between the time of the first call for help (8:52 am) and the time when the last exit of the cabin submerged (10:18 am) (Sewol Ferry Archivist Team, 2016). The passengers were all wearing life jackets under the deck. If the passengers had evacuated, they would have been immediately rescued by the coast guard or multiple commercial ships (4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster People's Investigation Committee, 2017). However, no one made the evacuation call. Some passengers, who happened to be on the deck or jumped into the water on their own decision, were saved. Consequently, three hundred four passengers trapped inside were buried at sea with the vessel. The majority of the victims were schoolchildren who faithfully obeyed the wrong the instruction (Table 6.1).

Seven hours later, after the ship had completely submerged, citizens encountered another deplorable scene: President Park Geun-hye, who had been absent during the entire crisis, finally appeared before the public at 5:15 pm. Park's

Table 6.1 Survival rate of the passengers according to the groups.

	Students	*Teachers*	*Individual travellers*	*Sailors*	*Service staff*	*Total*
Passenger	325	14	104	23	10	476
Survive	75	3	71	18	5	172
Death	250	11	33	5	5	304
Survival rate	23%	21%	68%	78%	50%	36%

appearance was nationally televised. Upon arriving at the government disaster-response headquarters, she asked in a calm and gracious tone: “The students are wearing life vests, so why is it so hard to find them?” Her demeanour had no hint of anxiety, urgency, or worry. Her ignorant remark showed that she was not aware of the day’s incidents—that the passengers were trapped inside the overturned and submerged ship and thus could not be seen in the open sea.[1] It became obvious that the president did not follow the breaking news broadcasts aired by every major news outlet while the whole nation was witnessing the increasingly desperate emergency ending up with massive deaths (Kim, 2017; Suh, 2017).

Therefore, the Sewol disaster exposed gaping loopholes in the crisis management system to South Korean citizens. In the wake of the tragic event, mass gatherings were held to mourn the young victims who had died due to the negligence and incompetence of the authorities. Citizens, filling the streets and squares across the country, urged the Park administration to thoroughly investigate the ferry’s sinking and the mismanagement of the rescue. On May 3, 2014, there were 154 rallies held across the country, and candlelight vigils continued every Saturday in May (Park, 2014). The goal of the mass protests was clear, expressed in the three major slogans: “uncover the truth”, “punish persons in charge”, and “establish a safe society” (Lee, 2017, pp. 187–188). Their voices claimed: The government should reveal the reason for the deaths and hold accountable those who had abandoned their duty not to repeat this kind of absurd tragedy.

State-led conspiracy theories

Confronting the public request to reveal the truth, the state did not initiate legal proceedings for official investigations. Instead, the administration brought a new figure to the centre of the event. On April 20, President Park ordered an investigation into the ownership of the ferry. As if waiting for her request, the prosecutors swiftly started full-scale operations against a specific person, Yoo Byung-eun, the CEO of Semo Corporation, which owned the Cheonghaejin Marine company that operated the Sewol ferry.

As soon as prosecutors raided Yoo's house, Semo's head office, and affiliates' offices to seize documents, they held multiple press conferences to explain his personal affairs and business corruption. Moreover, prosecutors, one of the most powerful governmental agencies that exclusively possessed the authority to indict and investigate, had background briefings with journalists to leak confidential information. Mainstream media literally dictated and fleshed out prosecutors' briefings: Yoo was portrayed as a man with two personas, a businessman and religious leader, who hid secrets and mysteries as seen in Table 6.2. (Similar news reports flooded the mainstream media).

According to news reports, Yoo Byung-eun was a corrupt businessman as well as a leader of a religious cult called the Salvation Sect. He was suspected in the cult's 1987 mass suicide-murder incident in which 32 people from his group were found dead. Moreover, in 1990, Semo Marine, a predecessor of Cheonghaejin Marine, suffered a maritime accident causing the death of 14 workers on the Han River, which consequently made the company bankrupt. However, he set up puppet representatives to maintain his power over the business and increase his personal wealth based on his fame among his fanatical religious cult followers and his secret connections across the political and business

Table 6.2 Headlines of news reports depicting Yoo Byung-eun's character as a businessman and religious leader.

Yoo's persona	*Headlines*
Businessman	Yoo's known companies and fortunes are just the tip of the iceberg: How was "Yoo's Kingdom" built? (*Kyunghyang Shinmun*, May 6, 2014). From politics to entertainment, Yoo's enormous spider web of secret connections (*Kukmin-Ilbo*, May 3, 2014). Yoo's people are in every key post in politics and business (*Maeil Business Newspaper*, May 4, 2014). Two women in the veil: are they managing Yoo's secret property in the U.S.? (Segye-Ilbo, May 7, 2014). Suspicions of illegal Yoo family property: "The three great mysteries" (*Munhwa-Ilbo*, April 23, 2014).
Religious leader	Cheonghaejin Marine company linked to a religious cult, Salvation Sect (*kyeonggi-Ilbo*, April 22, 2014). "32 people massacred" in Odaeyang mass suicide: Is Yoo Byung-un behind? (*Herald Corporation*, April 22, 2014). "I thought of Yoo Byung-un as Jesus": Confession of one of the Salvation Sect members (*Hankyoreh*, April 25, 2014). Yoo: Shocking connection between Odaeyang mass suicide and the Sewol ferry disaster (*Segye-Ilbo*, April 22, 2014). Mystery of the Salvation Sect: 90% of Cheonghaejin Marine company employees, including the Sewol captain, are the cult believers of Yoo (*KBS*, April 22, 2014).

worlds. He made business funds from church members' offerings and investments and took out loans with his church's real estate as collateral. As a result, his family had accumulated a fortune of about 240 billion won (US$230 million), with more assets suspected to be hidden.

These reports have never been confirmed (Joo, 2015). However, in the media, the shadowy businessman turned into a corrupt villain who eluded the law even after causing gruesome deaths and committing financial fraud. Park confirmed this story as an official account by releasing a statement saying, "The Cheonghaejin Marine company has been seeking private interests greedily and consequently caused the Sewol ferry disaster" on May 9, 2014 (Yonhap News, 2014).

Since its outset, the Sewol disaster was a "real-time media spectacle" and the tragic moments were repeatedly broadcast (Kal, 2019). The live broadcast clearly showed the failure of the rescue operation, which brought about massive casualties. In turn, the catastrophe left multiple pieces of visible evidence of whom the authorities should hold accountable for the incident: the captain, coast guards, and government officials in the Ministry of Maritime, Ministry of the Interior and Safety, and the presidential Blue House. However, the government concentrated resources on Yoo, a person who had not been on the scene. Through the lens of the media, Yoo was presented as a powerful person who could exert clandestine influence on political events.

The Park administration's measures in response to the Sewol ferry disaster could be likened to conspiracy theories in that they attempted to explain the ultimate causes of the event as covert actions rather than overt activities. Conspiracy theory could be one of the outcomes of disinformation since information disorder caused by disinformation creates an environment for conspiracy theories to thrive. While disinformation is primarily categorised by its intention of deliberate falsehood—compared to misinformation which involves involuntary errors—the conceptualisation of conspiracy theories often involves psychological processes. Conspiracy theories have been discussed from diverse perspectives in relation to politics: since Richard Hofstadter (1965) described a paranoid style in American politics, conspiracy theories are widely considered a symptom of a general crisis of trust in government (Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Goldberg, 2001; DiFonzo, 2019). In party politics, conspiracy theory is associated with populist politicians' common tool to vilify their opponents and/or support their parties, which in turn, is a sign of the retreat of democratic values (Plenta, 2020; Hellinger, 2019). In more dangerous cases, conspiracy theories could be used to express "virulent hostility to racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or political others" (Fenster, 2008, p. 11).

Conspiracy theories have distinguishing characteristics, but in all of them, the common element is the way in which a conspiracy narrative is organised: some hidden group of people directs events through a secret plot. In the Sewol disaster, the authorities' conspiracy theory was implicitly pointing to Yoo as the hidden sinister power controlling his religious cult followers behind the tragedy.

Faced with the joint attack of the administration, prosecutors, and the media, Yoo Byung-eun and his family chose to flee. The authorities allocated much time and resources to arrest the fugitives. The largest manhunt in South Korean history was launched, mobilising 15 public prosecutors, 110 investigators, 1,450,000 police officers on land, 2,100 maritime police officers, and 60 vessels against their stowing away (Joo, 2015). Moreover, a 500 million won (US $500,000) reward was offered for his capture, and neighbourhood watch meetings throughout the country, which had disappeared from history in the 1990s, were revived. Yoo's whereabouts were traced across the nation. The fugitive stories were plastered all over the newspaper, online, and TV news. The headlines were mostly sensationalist: "Yoo's hidden empire guards his family", "Yoo's hideout with one woman in her thirties", and "Desperately need to catch Yoo, even his shadow" (Kang, 2014; Yoo, 2014).

Immediately after the sinking, the media paid attention to the incident itself, such as the potential causes of the sinking, problems in the rescue operation, and stories of the young victims. However, as the Park government officially announced the investigation of Yoo Byung-eun on April 20 and the prosecutors began unofficial meetings with journalists on April 29, the media coverage dramatically changed. The initial questions, including the government's mishandling and irresponsibility, hid behind Yoo's rumours and gossip. The Committee of Special Investigation for the Sewol ferry disaster released its research on news coverage in the third hearing on September 1–2, 2016, and Figure 6.1

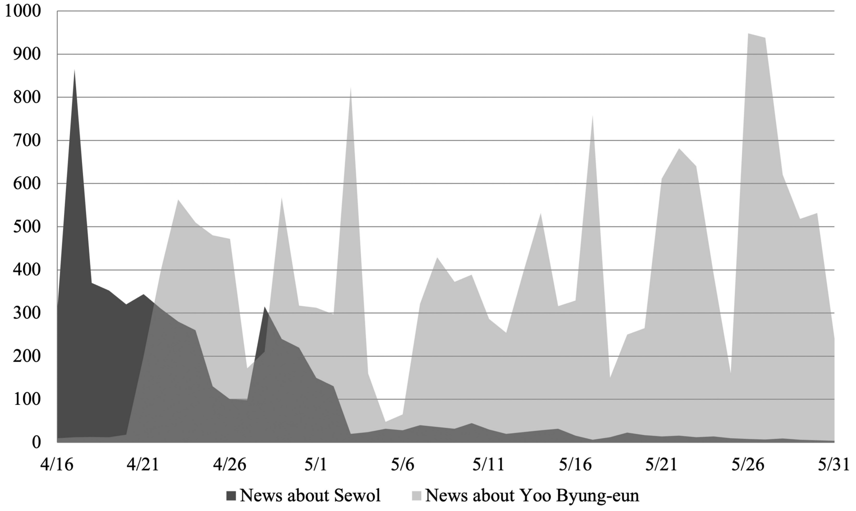

Figure 6.1 The change in news coverage provided by the Committee of Special Investigation for the Sewol ferry disaster (2016).

shows how the media coverage became increasingly preoccupied with stories on Yoo over the Sewol ferry news.

Considering all these circumstances, Yoo Byung-eun was a scapegoat chosen with painstaking care by the state: the ship accident that his company had caused in the past was similar enough to remind people of the Sewol disaster; his religious eccentricity and business corruption had provocative elements to draw public animosity and criticism easily. The Park administration presented Yoo as a villain, and the mainstream media provided seemingly endless gossip with sensational details to hold public attention to his story. Then, upon the presidential office's order, the prosecutors and police came to the front to catch the criminal. TV stations broadcast the chase-and-run live to heighten a sense of urgency. A novelist summarised this situation with this acute remark: "What movie, what TV show, would dare to flaunt itself in the face of this blockbuster thriller produced by the state, directed by the government in the shadows, and staffed by prosecutors and the press?" (Yi, 2014)

Some cultural theorists understand conspiracy theory as a symptom or response to anxieties and uncertainties about the location of power in complex societies. In the face of anonymous and large-scale social changes and the growing division of labour, people increasingly feel disconnected and alienated from society (Melley, 2000). This condition, in turn, generates "increasing doubt and uncertainty" about power, identity, and agency (Knight, 2000, p. 10). In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson (1988) argues that conspiracy theories offer people a way to understand the complexities of social relations in the postmodern age. Instead of disregarding conspiracy theories as a pathological condition, he describes these paranoiac stories as the poor person's desperate attempt to grasp their social system. When he uses the words "poor" and "desperate", this implies that an individual subject is put in an increasingly disadvantageous position to synthesise social relations comprehensively. The information that an individual could get is disconnected and fragmented in this contemporary society pervaded by technologies and simulacra. In turn, to get a total picture of social relations, a person depends on a conspiracy that explains "a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility" only based on minimal basic components (Jameson, 1992, p. 9).

What is missing in Jameson's account is the possibility of states and media collaborating to create a conspiracy theory to feed the public. The South Korean government, which had blanket authority and abilities to obtain, control, and distribute information, used its power to plant seeds from which citizens would grow a crime fiction.

The authorities must have anticipated that public attention on the Sewol disaster would die down while people were engrossed in piecing together the scattered information. They might have hoped that public anger would be directed towards bad Yoo instead of the government. This show was finally over when Yoo's decomposed body was found in an orchard on June 12, 2014. As if proving it was a set-up, the president's office, prosecutors, police, and media stopped all the orders, investigations, and stories about him after his death.

Not truth but neoliberal logic

The authorities' quest to shift blame did not end with Yoo's death, just as the public continued to hold the state accountable and wanted answers. According to a survey from July 28 to 30, 2014, by Gallup Korea, 88% of respondents answered, "the cause and liability of the Sewol disaster were not revealed yet", and 94% of the respondents said they did "not trust the investigation by the prosecutors and police" (Gallup Korea, 2014). Confronting the government that evaded investigation, the civic society began to call for an independent body of inspectors to thoroughly and transparently investigate the disaster. Civic groups collected signatures for the petition for the enactment of the Sewol Special Act to efficiently unearth the cause of the sinking ferry, and 3,501,266 signatures were collected in a month (4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster People's Investigation Committee, 2017, p. 243).

The victims' families were at the centre of these persistent efforts for truth-seeking. To demand the enactment of the special law, the families took a wide range of actions: they staged overnight sit-in protests at the National Assembly Building for 119 days and at the Chung-un community service centre near the Presidential Blue House for 76 days; they marched 900 kilometres around the country for 38 days; they conducted lecture tours to give firsthand accounts that the mainstream media ignored; they went on hunger strikes, the longest lasting up to 46 days.

The government responded to their pleas with convoluted and manipulative strategies. While the bills were pending in the National Assembly, the Park government announced compensation plans, marking out a colossal amount of money to be paid to the bereaved families. They deliberately mistranslated the Sewol families' voice for truth into a demand for monetary advantage. They applied neoliberal logic to the struggle for social justice and truth.

Neoliberalism is commonly defined as a political and economic philosophy that emphasises free trade, deregulation, globalisation, and a reduction in government. However, as many scholars point out, neoliberalism is not just a model of political economy but has extensively penetrated into the social and cultural aspects of people's lives and practically shapes individuals' perceptions (Colaguori, 2023; McGuigan, 2014; Scharff, 2016). Wendy Brown (2015) explains how political economy is intertwined with the human domain. According to her, under the neoliberal system, every human domain is framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those domains are not directly monetised. In the human domain, where everything is evaluated by economic value, people's constant and ubiquitous aim is "to entrepreneurialize its endeavor, appreciate its value, and increase its rating and ranking" (36). In turn, neoliberalism is not just about money, markets, and the economy but a condition under which raw economic rationality is applied to all dimensions of human life.

Wingard (2013) argues, based on pervading neoliberal rationality, that politics and the media have systemically dehumanised vulnerable groups through the employment of neoliberal logic and rhetoric. She suggests a case of Texas House Bill 2012 that aimed to fine or imprison employers who hired undocumented immigrants. She pays attention to a stipulation that Texans who employ undocumented immigrants within their private homes (as maids, lawn care workers, or any other position) are exempt. Wingard claims that this bill not only brands immigrants as a threat to American citizens' economic activities in the public realm but also reduces immigrants' social identity to a means to manage their domestic sphere. Through neoliberal logic, groups of undocumented immigrants were treated as less than human and "forwarded as terms or economic features, not subjects, bodies, or people" (8).

The Texas bill against undocumented immigrants overlaps with the Park administration's response toward the Sewol victims. The government evacuated the bereaved families' struggle from its initial event referent, combined it with economic terms and value, and reassembled it into a new event for economic gains. Beginning May 25, 2014, throughout her regime, the authorities suggested several formats of compensation packages. In the first plan, the government announced that at least 100 billion won (US $ 100 million) would be provided for the victims. Then, they kept changing the number and added other plans, such as monthly living cost support, a tax cut, and designation as martyrs, and so on.

Most mainstream media did not question whether this was the right move (Kim, 2017). Instead, they fleshed out the governmental plans and further spread them: how much money would be allocated per person; how much more money the Sewol victims would receive compared to other incidents; and which conditions would determine the amount of compensation money for each victim (Park, 2014; Jeong, 2014). Rumours became rampant online: "The key demand of the Sewol Special Act is for huge amounts of money"; "Once the bills are passed, the victims' families would receive independent income for all their lives. That's why the bereaved families stage protests" (Lee, 2014). Through the collaboration between the state and mainstream media, the desperate struggle of the bereaved families for truth and justice came to be cast as a cynical negotiation over money.

Brown argues that the consequence of rampant neoliberal logic is rugged individualism and self-reliance. As neoliberalism submits all spheres of life to economisation, neoliberal rationality permeates not only our environment but also the very idea of human beings; that is, it transforms humans themselves according to a specific image of the economy. Human beings are rendered as human capital, evaluated by economic value. This change gets rid of differences between individuals, even their diverse roles in market systems as owners, workers, and consumers. Consequently, it is inevitable that people compete with each other as little capitals in every sphere. Once competition becomes normative, their relationship with others becomes not cooperation but a race. The public realm shrinks, and people are absorbed in pursuing their own gain even when faced with public purposes or common problems.

The Park government's consistent tactics created such an effect. With a series of compensation plans, several questions emerged: whether the Sewol ferry victims deserved those amounts of money; were the rest of the citizens supposed to make up for the huge tax money? (Cheon, 2015).[2] The solidarity between families and citizens, which once was so strong that general citizens identified with the victims, began to loosen and cracked.

The mainstream media and the president's conservative supporters described the victims' families as people seeking advantages and a free ride. The bereaved families cried that they were fighting for an investigation, not monetary compensation. However, their desperate voices were masked by a massive amount of mainstream news coverage. Regardless of the truth, the trend of public opinion began to change. A big data company, Ars Praxia, and news magazine, *SinsaIN*, analysed citizens' comments on articles about the Sewol ferry disaster from April to September. During April and May, "sympathy" was overwhelming. However, as the government repeatedly announced the compensation plans, "privilege", which had been almost zero, began to drastically increase (Cheon, 2015) (Figure 6.2).

Hate speech started explicitly at this time. "Profiteers of coffins", "tax thief", "greedy desire itself"—unimaginable words right after the disaster were circulated among the ruling party's politicians, government officials, and conservative journalists (Jeong & Han, 2016). The victims' families were stigmatised

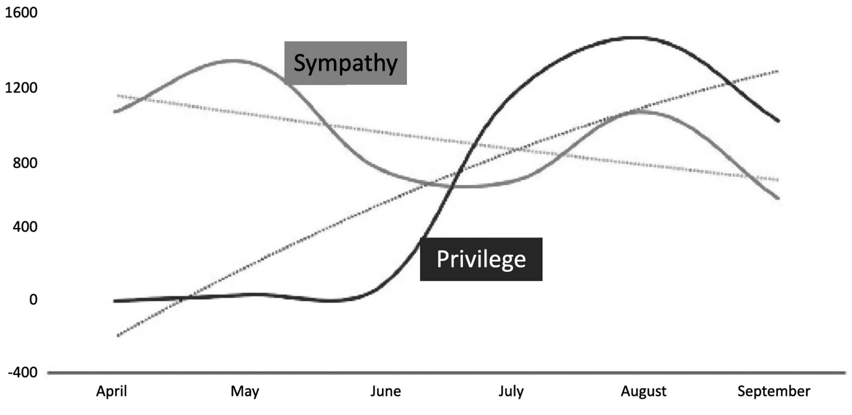

Figure 6.2 Public opinion about the victims and their families of the Sewol disaster provided by Ars Praxia and SisaIN (2015).

as an “opportunistic” group by the media. They accused the victims’ families of milking the spotlight and trying to use the sinking as a pretext to wrest compensation from the government. As the state’s neoliberal operation mercilessly continued, the grieving families’ desperate plea for a thorough investigation was translated into a greedy desire for money. The parents, who had lost their precious children, had to fight not only for the truth but also against social stigma and prejudice. In *Please Get Back Home on Friday* (4/16 Sewol Ferry Disaster Recording Team, 2015), a book recording the bereaved families’ oral stories, Choi Soon-hwa, a mother who lost her daughter, said:

> We just wanted to know why our children were dead. No one intended to be a fighter in the first place. But the government dragged us to the battle. We never imagined the state would treat us this cruelly.
>
> (157, translated by the author)

Moon Jong-taek, a father who lost his son, said:

> I feel like we, the bereaved families, are now back on-board the Sewol ferry. Politicians and journalists put containers, iron lumps, and sacks on our backs. It seems we became worse villains than the sailors and the coast guard.
>
> (187–188, translated by the author)

The families of victims, who were already deeply wounded by their loss, were retraumatised by the manipulated antagonism of the authorities.

Conclusion

The Sewol ferry disaster, as a live broadcast event, turned citizens into witnesses of the tragedy. They watched young children die due to the authorities’ incompetence and indifference. Experiencing strong affective feelings of grief, anger, and sorrow, citizens took to the streets to hold the authorities accountable for the untimely deaths. As seen in the ensuing massive candlelight rallies, the community of witnesses was moving into a broad-based political community with strong emotional bonds.

To repress citizen protesters, the Park administration’s method of choice was to disseminate disinformation. It is ironic and symbolic that President Park Geun-hye is the daughter of the military dictator Park Chung-hee who seized power through a military coup in 1961. Under the regime of Park Chung-hee, such protests would have been squashed with military force. However, in the liberal democracy of the 21st century, Park Geun-hye knew that she could not use similar violent operations to crush dissent. To silence the public, she counted on manipulated information in the media.

Immediately after the sinking, when citizens' attention was at its peak, the government attempted to distract public attention from its mismanagement by introducing irrelevant or misleading information. As Donna Kossy writes, "Conspiracy theories are like black holes—they suck in everything that comes their way, regardless of content or origin" (1994, p. 191). State-sponsored conspiracy theories were used to stifle public outrage by keeping people's interests occupied with the stories of Yoo.

Then their next move was to attack the foundation of the political community with neoliberal logic. By casting the victims' families as greedy people who tried to earn financial gain from their loss, the authorities struck a cleavage between the victims and citizens. The state attempted to shrink support for the victims' families in the public realm by stimulating what Wendy Brown calls "neoliberal rationality".

When citizens initially witnessed the tragic sinking and realised the youth of the victims, the Sewol disaster seemed like a singular event. After the sinking, citizens willingly got on board and fought together against the government that had failed to rescue the children yet evaded responsibility. One journalist said, "I am left alive not because I did well" (Joo, 2014). Citizens shared the public sentiment that they or their children could have been victims on the "boat of the Republic of Korea".

The continuing state-sponsored disinformation attacked the core of the collective sympathy. In *Cold Intimacies* (2007), Eva Illouz proposes a concept, emotional capitalism, a culture in which "emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (5). Illouz argues that people's emotions become objects to be controlled through communication, aligning them with the goals of capital. Through the employment of neoliberal logic, the Park administration created manipulated feelings of antagonism toward the bereaved families in order to silence public voices. Power has certainly not disappeared, but it has become more subtle in neoliberal democracy.

Notes

1 The presidential office refused to provide a clear explanation of why she had not been briefed about the accident for about seven hours and why she had not been properly aware of the situation at about 5:15 pm. In turn, questions about Park's whereabouts during the emergency, the so-called "seven missing hours", continued dogging her during her entire presidency until she was impeached for another political scandal, "Cho Soon-sil Gate" in 2017.

2 This split was accelerated with one of the compensation plans, special college admissions for Danwon High School students. In South Korea, college admission has been widely recognised as one of the few opportunities to fairly move up the social ladder. Moreover, since every year about 70% of teenagers go to college in South Korea, this issue has the potential to irritate most citizens. The timing of the announcement of the special college admissions coincided with a shift in public sentiment expressed in online comments from sympathy to privilege.

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7 Spanish far-right and environmental disinformation

VOX's obstructionist discourse on the climate crisis on Twitter

David Vicente Torrico and
María Díez-Garrido

Introduction

The effects of human action on the planet have caused undeniable climate change and unprecedented global warming, according to the report published in 2022 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is a part of the United Nations.

This is a matter of great concern to 74.7% of the Spanish population, as shown by the Spanish Sociological Research Centre (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas) barometer of February 2023. It is also one of the main concerns among European citizens (Eurobarometer, 2023).

This social concern about climate change has been paralleled by significant media interest in the environment since the beginning of the 21st century, with a particular impact in the media by the Fridays for Future ecological movement starting in 2018 (Amondarain et al., 2022). In this regard, Rivas-de-Roca (2020) points out that this movement incorporates some elements of cyberpolitics and utilises digital tools like Twitter for information and communication, surpassing traditional media (Vicente Torrico & González Puente, 2022).

Furthermore, there has been a considerable increase in concern about misinformation in recent years, as evidenced by the growing literature on this topic (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Thomson et al., 2022). Specifically, there is a rhetorical adversity surrounding climate change, with a prevalence of misinformation (Lewandowsky, 2020).

This article will analyse the environmental discourse of the political party VOX on Twitter, with a specific focus on obstructionist approaches to the climate crisis—they do not deny climate change but oppose climate action (Almiron & Moreno, 2022)—which are common among far-right parties globally (D'Angelo, 2019). To accomplish this, firstly, a theoretical framework will be presented that addresses the rise of misinformation surrounding climate

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change and subsequently reflects on the disinformation discourse of the main representative of the far-right in Spain. Next, the objectives of the study will be introduced, along with the methodology used to analyse the tweets of VOX and its leaders on Twitter. Lastly, after explaining the findings, the main conclusions of the research will be presented.

Theoretical framework

From disinformation to climate change obstructionism

The democratisation of information on the Internet has not only enabled users to interact and share information, but has also had some negative consequences, such as the proliferation of disinformation on social media. This has become one of the main dangers to present-day democracies (Bennet & Livingston, 2018), casting doubt on the credibility of key sources of information (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2020).

In this regard, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of misinformation and disinformation, as pointed out by Hameleers (2020). The former refers to the spread of false or erroneous information, which may have been transmitted inadvertently or out of ignorance. Disinformation, on the other hand, entails the intentional dissemination of misleading, manipulated, or decontextualised content with the aim of achieving certain objectives, frequently of a political nature.

Since the 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit referendum, there has been a significant amount of scholarly research on disinformation, as highlighted by Kucharski (2016), who has focused on the effects of such discourse on the Internet. The virality of certain messages has led to the rapid spread of false content. According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), disinformation spreads six times faster than truth on the Internet.

Part of the scientific literature in recent years has focused on how disinformation discourses have challenged science (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, there was a surge in research specifically addressing the spread of false information related to this topic, which was even termed an “infodemic” (Zarocostas, 2020).

However, it is not only public health that has been of interest in the study of scientific disinformation. The climate crisis has also received special attention in recent years in studies on disinformation (Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). Disinformation stances against climate change are often motivated by pre-existing beliefs but also by political polarisation (Levy et al., 2021). In this regard, disinformation and climate change obstructionist discourses can be found on the Internet.

According to Lewandowsky (2020), there is high polarisation, especially in the United States, regarding climate change. Opposition to climate science relies on scepticism and the politicisation of this issue, with arguments that are often inconsistent, as highlighted by the same author.

In recent times, some authors have preferred to use the term "climate obstructionism" (McKie, 2021; Moreno Olmeda, 2022; Moreno & Thornton, 2022) instead of "climate denialism." Almiron and Moreno (2022) argue that the term "denialism" is not appropriate to define those who obstruct or do not support climate action. These authors claim that obstructionists do not deny science but rather oppose climate policies. They also indicate that this concept can be polarising and does not fully reflect the climate countermovement. In another study, Moreno Olmeda (2022) asserts that these actors aim at "creating and disseminating misinformation about climate science and climate change in general" (2022, p. 121).

According to the Climate Social Science Network (2021), obstruction against climate change has the following objectives:

> 1) Maintain or transform the public agenda so that the desired framing is accepted as the common sense in that particular area, and assure that public opinion does not support climate action; 2) Shape the media agenda to promote particular perspectives that cast doubt on actions to address climate change; and 3) Influence the political process to select policies that do not support climate action.

This study will precisely focus on the dissemination of climate obstructionist discourse, as mentioned earlier, by right-wing political actors.

The disinformation discourse of the far-right and its relation to climate action

In a context of disinformation and polarisation like the current one, there is a rise in academic studies that focus on the spread of disinformation discourses by the far-right and radical right (Bennet & Livingston, 2018; Hameleers, 2020). Bennet and Livingston highlight that this is not a new reality, nor exclusive to other political ideologies, but it is particularly common in these types of radical parties and movements.

> While there is surely some degree of truth-stretching running across the political spectrum, it appears particularly concentrated on the authoritarian right, where liberal democratic values present growing challenges to movement values of ethnic nationalism and the restoration of mythical cultural traditions.
>
> (Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p. 125)

The rhetoric of radical right-wing populist parties is based on anti-elitism and messages against certain minorities, such as migrants and Muslims (Muddle, 2007). In this regard, social media platforms provide an opportunity for these movements to propagate their discourse (Darius & Stephany, 2022) without the filters of traditional media.

VOX is the leading radical right-wing party in Spain. Although it was founded in 2013, it only managed to gain representation in the Spanish Congress of Deputies in 2019. One of the elements that has fuelled VOX's success has been Catalan independence (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020). VOX is currently the third-largest political force in Spain, with 12.39% of the votes in the 2023 General Elections[1]. The party has also played a key role in the constitution of local and regional governments in Spain in the 2023 elections[2]. Since the VOX party became the third political force in Spain in 2019, there have been numerous investigations that have focused on their discourse on social media platforms (Aladro Vico & Requeijo Rey, 2020; Castro Martínez & Díaz Morilla, 2021; Rebollo Bueno, 2022), as well as their relationship with disinformation (Hernández Conde & Fernández García, 2019; Simón Astudillo & Santana Chaves, 2022; Sánchez-Castillo et al., 2023).

In an analysis by Simón Astudillo and Santana Chaves (2022) of the Twitter posts by Santiago Abascal, the leader of VOX, and Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil, it was concluded that Abascal used negative emotions such as anger and disgust in his tweets related to disinformation messages.

This article will focus on the propagation of obstructionist discourses by VOX on Twitter. There are already studies that corroborate the link between the far-right and the spread of disinformation about climate change (Hultman et al., 2019; Vowles & Hultman, 2021). Right-wing populist parties in Europe are indeed opposed to climate action, as reflected in a study by Schaller and Carius (2019), which increases the interest in analysing the promotion of these ideas by the Spanish political party VOX.

In this regard, Moreno and Thornton (2022) have already pointed out that the Spanish far-right political party VOX has a discourse that opposes climate action, with nationalist and polarising elements. These authors highlight the characteristics of their discourse:

> In the case of the amendment to the climate change law presented by VOX, there are frames of denial of the scientific consensus on climate change, rejection of scientific projections, and criticism of climate science, without the frame of outright denial of the existence of climate change.
>
> (Moreno & Thornton, 2022, p. 36)

Their work focused on analysing the complete amendment to the Climate Change and Energy Transition Bill presented by VOX in the Spanish Parliament. In this chapter, the aim is to broaden the point of view and study their obstructionist discourse on Twitter. In addition, we do not only want to study the case of the

Climate Change Law, but also the references made to environmental and climate issues.

This research aims to study whether the discourse of the Spanish far-right party VOX promotes disinformation on climate change. For this purpose, we will examine, firstly, whether the Twitter messages of accounts linked to VOX promote climate obstructionism. Secondly, we will analyse the type of obstructionist discourse they promote and its characteristics. Finally, we will explore whether VOX uses any information sources to support its discourse, whether through mentions, links, or multimedia content.

Methodology

To fulfil the objectives, messages published by VOX between September 2022 and February 2023 in a convenient period that ensures a representative sample for analysis, including various significant events at both the national and international levels, were collected. These data were gathered from three Twitter accounts: the party's official account (@VOX_es), the national leader's account (@Santi_ABASCAL), and the leader of the Madrid Autonomous Community's account (@monasterioR). A search was conducted among the tweets from these three accounts for messages related to the climate crisis, environmentalism, and sustainability. The following words and their derivatives were searched for in the text of the tweets: climate change, climate, environment, climate agenda, ecology, green/s, nature, sustainability, Agenda 2030, COP27, natural resources, energy, recycling, renewables, nuclear, greenhouse, CO2, warming, solar, and wind.

Lastly, a sample of 95 original messages was obtained, which underwent content analysis to study whether VOX's discourse on the climate crisis contained obstructionist elements in the fight against climate change. Thus, retweets were excluded from the sample.

Our research employs a methodological approach that combines content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990) and frame analysis (Benford & Snow, 2000), both widely recognised in the field of social sciences (Neuendorf, 2002). These techniques allow us to deduce the intentions of message creators and explore potential effects on the audience.

To conduct our analysis, we developed a pre-coding template encompassing all the relevant elements necessary to achieve our research objectives. The template integrates specific analysis criteria for studying Twitter posts by Arévalo Salinas (2014, p. 158), Costa Sánchez (2014, p. 35), and González Puente (2021). Additionally, it incorporates rhetorical and semantic elements characteristic of obstructionist discourse, drawing inspiration from the works of Almirón et al. (2020) and Abellán López (2021, p. 291). Please refer to Table 7.1 for a comprehensive overview of these elements.

The first block of analysis aims to characterise the tweet based on the message, its author, and the date it was published on Twitter. Next, we address the

Table 7.1 Codebook. Source: created by the author/s

Tweet			
DISSEMINATION	Creator Date of post Mentions Media sources URL links Hashtags	**TOPICS**	1. Scientific - 1.1 Existence and reliability - 1.2 Human responsibility - 1.3 Extent of consequences 2. Economic - 2.1 Costly solutions - 2.2 Minimal benefits 3. Political - 3.1 Individualism is useless - 3.2 Those in charge must act 4. Redefinition - 4.1 Proposals - 4.2 Complaints

presence of mentions to other users, media sources, external resources or links, and hashtags. In the second block of analysis, we present the elements that define the narrative construction of the obstructionist discourse, focusing on four main divisions: scientific, economic and political rejections and, finally, the redefinition of the climate issue. Thus, the scientific approach consists of questioning the existence of climate change and the reliability of supporting studies, as well as relativising human influence on the planet's climate and the predicted impacts. The economic frame associates the fight against climate change with costly investments and irreparable damage to the market and points out the minimal benefits to society. Political refusal alludes to the inability of the individual to influence the future of the planet and instead redirects responsibility towards those who cause the problem. Lastly, the redefinition of the issue involves the proposal of alternative policies and the denunciation of irregularities within the system.

Results

The ideological debate surrounding the climate emergency on Twitter has generated a total of 95 posts shared by the official VOX account and two of its main representatives, the party’s national president, Santiago Abascal, and the president and spokesperson in the Community of Madrid, Rocío Monasterio, during the six-month period analysed in this study. These data reveal a daily average of 0.53 messages for the overall dataset, with the official VOX party profile contributing the highest number of results to the study, as shown in Table 7.2.

If we take the historical activity of the three analysed accounts as a reference, we can observe that the average daily number of posts is much higher than the one recorded in our research, as shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.2 Twitter publications by the analyzed accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

Twitter account	*No. of tweets (sample)*	*Tweets/day (sample)*
@vox_es	78	0.433
@Santi_ABASCAL	13	0.072
@monasterioR	4	0.022

Table 7.3 Historical publications of the analyzed accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

Twitter account	*Account active since*	*No. of tweets*	*Tweets/day (historical)*
@VOX_es	2013.11	76,819	22.6
@Santi_ABASCAL	2011.03	37,281	7.7
@monasterioR	2013.12	35,079	10.4

According to the provided data, the volume of messages published during the analysed period indicates a low intensity of the climate issue on the agenda of this political party, despite it being one of the moments with the highest institutional activity in this matter.

Parliamentary activity, both at the national and international levels, has acted as a catalyst for the climate debate within the political party and among its representatives. Thus, the month of September has been the most prolific in terms of published messages. This surge can be attributed to the presentation of a proposed amendment by VOX against the Climate Change Law during parliamentary sessions. The proposed amendment outlines a development plan emphasising energy sovereignty through the reopening of nuclear power plants and the exploitation of natural resources. This proposal, coupled with the assertion of the right to decide, which they claim has been "usurped" from citizens, forms the core argument through which the political party aims to influence the reshaping of the climate debate during the analysed period. This influence is reflected in the following events: Figure 7.1.

- *Government control session (2022.09.14).*
- *Restrictions on electric vehicle recharging in France (2022.09.26).*
- *Start of COP 27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt (2022.11.07).*
- *Organisation of the III ECR Campus by the party itself (2022.12.03).*
- *Traffic restrictions in Madrid Central (2023.01.01).*
- *European resolution against the sale of vehicles by 2035 (2023.02.14).*

The discourse of VOX and its main representatives regarding the climate issue presents a dual aspect. On one hand, the political party questions the economic

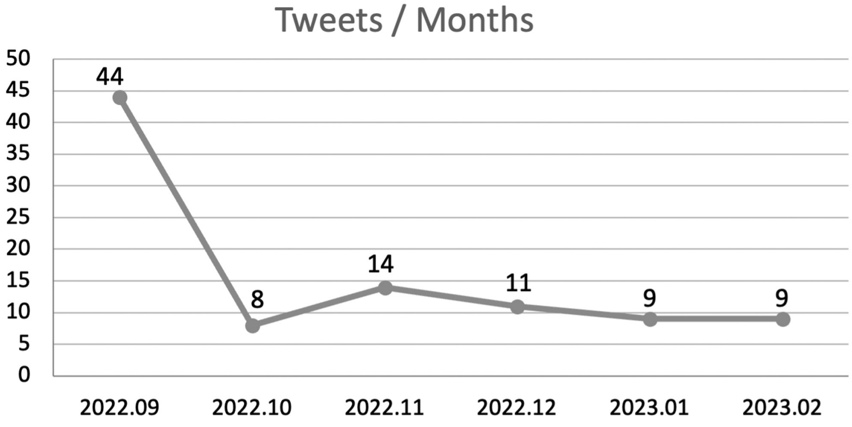

Figure 7.1 Timeline of Twitter publications. Source: created by the author/s

and political actions taken at the international level to combat the climate emergency. On the other hand, it capitalises on the attention garnered by the aforementioned events to shape the debate by reconfiguring the issue through a new definition of the diagnosis, prognosis, and motivations of those involved.

According to the codebook outlined in the methodology section, the majority of the messages disseminated by VOX, Santiago Abascal, and Rocío Monasterio focus on the economic aspect (61%), highlighting the high costs associated with green policies implemented by the government. In this regard, references to the cost of energy and terms such as prosperity, well-being, impoverishment, and ruin are common. In second place, with 20% of the tweets, the political party seeks to redefine the debate surrounding the climate emergency through a series of alternative measures (11%), such as the hydrological plan, the reopening of nuclear power plants, or the right to decide on the exploitation of natural resources within national territory. This challenges the global consensus on degrowth by advocating for economic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, VOX denounces the impact of conservation policies on primary sector collectives (8%), such as farmers, livestock breeders, and fishermen, positioning themselves as the rational alternative to international impositions. This reframing portrays the environment as a market commodity at the service of Spaniards. In third place, 18% of the publications employ arguments characteristic of political denialism. These include the futility of individual sacrifices (7%) and the need for responsibility to be borne by those responsible (11%), including European authorities, the most polluting countries today (China and India), and the largest gas exporter (Russia). Finally, scientific denialism has a marginal presence, as Rocío Monasterio questions the existence and reliability of the climate emergency by comparing it to Mao's Little Red Book, treating it as a political manifesto rather than a real problem, as shown in Figure 7.2.

VOX's communicative strategy regarding the climate crisis amplifies echo chambers around denialist argumentation. They do not actively engage in the debate on this issue but rather serve as an echo chamber for accounts, whether political, social, or media-related, that share the same ideology.

It is worth noting that out of the 95 analysed messages, 56 do not mention any other account, while the remaining 39 publications make use of this resource in 47 instances. The most mentioned accounts in their discourse belong to members of the party itself (80%), followed by affiliated institutions (11%), and media outlets sharing their ideology (9%). The most frequently referenced politicians in the discourse on the climate emergency are high-ranking party officials who are often present in the media and public debates, such as Santiago Abascal (president), Ignacio Garriga (secretary-general of the organisation), Jorge Buxadé (Eurodeputy and vice president of Political Action), and Iván Espinosa de los Monteros (spokesperson of the parliamentary group), as shown in Figure 7.3.

Regarding affiliated institutions, the political party interacts with its own foundation (Disenso Foundation), its own union (Solidarity), its own debate forums (Madrid Forum and New Economy Forum) and mentions an international movement that supports conservative ideology called Heritage. These institutions, supported by the party itself, serve to disseminate and validate its position in a context of negotiating meanings around climate policies.

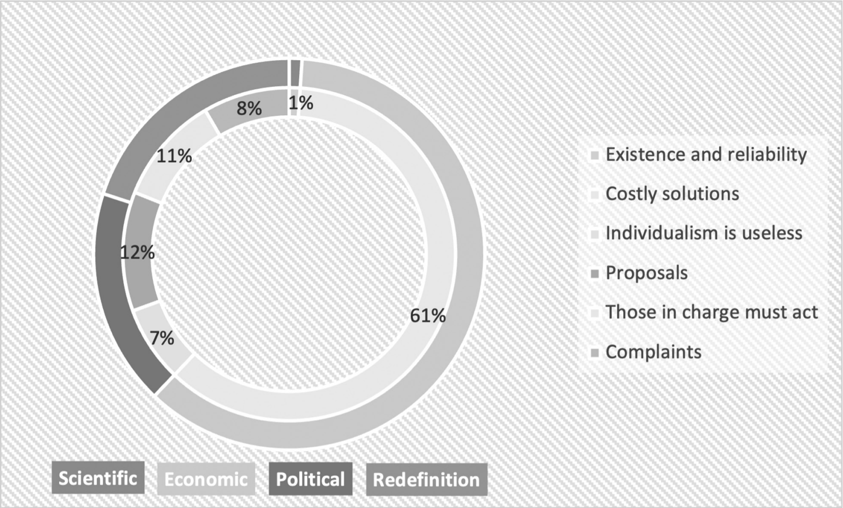

Figure 7.2 Dominant frame of representation. Source: created by the author/s.

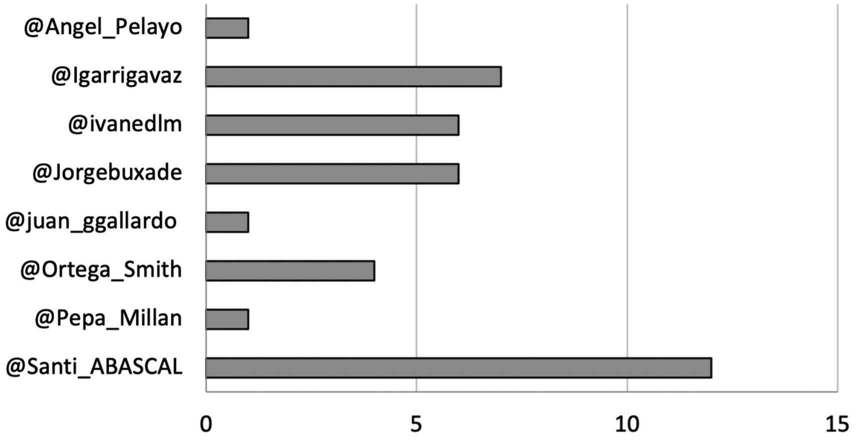

Figure 7.3 Mentioned Public Representatives' Accounts. Source: created by the author/s.

Table 7.4 Links appearing in their publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No links (51)			
Twitter (29)	VOX (6)	*La Gaceta* (5)	Jorge Buxadé (3)
Media (15)	*La Gaceta* (5)	*La Vanguardia* (3)	*El Mundo* (2)
Web (1)	VOX (1)		

In the case of media outlets, two mentions have been recorded for the radio programme *Es la mañana de Federico*, a conservative morning magazine in which members of VOX regularly participate, as well as a reference to the newspapers *El Debate*'and *La Opinión de Murcia*, both with an ideological alignment identical to that of the organisation. If we consider the use of links in the publications, we observe that the discourse remains self-referential and does not rely on external references to validate its content. In line with the study of the mentioned accounts, the most frequently used resource is the posts of other users, including their own media outlet (*La Gaceta de la Iberosfera*), party accounts (VOX, Jorge Buxadé, VOX Europa, and VOX CyL), or their union (Solidaridad). Among the linked news articles, *La Gaceta de la Iberosfera* accounts for 1 out of every 3 results, followed by conservative media outlets such as *El Mundo* or their participation in *El Debate* and *La Opinión de Murcia*. Finally, the VOX website is also linked once (Table 7.4).

Another type of link involves multimedia files included in the publications. In this regard, VOX's use of this resource reinforces its own discourse by focusing on showcasing its main representatives in parliamentary sessions or in media appearances.

The speeches by Santiago Abascal in the Congress of Deputies are shared not only on the day of their delivery but also as archival material to reinforce their positions. The same applies to Jorge Buxadé's interventions from the party's headquarters, giving his discourse an institutional character. The rest of the video interventions show party members as guests in conferences, meetings, or media discussions. Regarding infographics, the political party presents the basic ideas of its energy sovereignty plan, which involves exploring and exploiting natural resources and restarting the operation of nuclear power plants. Additionally, they use this format to highlight the main threats that, from their point of view, the 2030 agenda poses to citizens. Lastly, images are used to share headlines opposing their stance (instead of linking to the full text) and to demonstrate their support for social mobilisations protesting against regulations affecting the primary sector (Table 7.5).

The analysis of hashtags sheds light on the self-referential and alternative discourse to global plans in the fight against the climate emergency, although their usage is limited in the analysed sample. The count of hashtags yields a total of 29 results, indicating that almost two-thirds of the messages do not make use of this type of resource.

Among the most recurring ideas, the promotion of party-organised events stands out, representing 41% of the total, with a special impact from the ECR Campus (European Conservatives and Reformists), which accumulates ten results. The most used hashtag also has a self-reflective nature, referring to the party's most prominent environmental policy proposal, which is energy sovereignty. This idea appears on 11 occasions, accounting for 38% of the cases.

The alternative discourse is reflected in the remaining two categories, as the political party seeks to influence the digital debate surrounding the COP27 summit by tagging their criticisms of the participants in three of their messages, an equal number dedicated to calling for a public debate on energy management with slogans such as "We want to decide" or "Spain decides", as referred in Table 7.6.

Finally, to complete our study, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the discourse disseminated by the political party through Twitter, taking into account Snow and Benford's (2000) principles on identity fields and collective action in the social construction of movements.

Table 7.5 Multimedia resources included in the publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No media (35)			
Video (47)	Santiago Abascal (16)	Jorge Buxadé (8)	Ignacio Garriga (6)
Infographic (9)	Proposals (5)	Complaints (2)	Archive (2)
Image (5)	Press headlines (4)	Demonstration (1)	

Table 7.6 Hashtags appearing in the publications. Source: created by the author/s.

No hashtags (66)			
Own events (12)	#CampusECR (10)	#ForumSocial (1)	#VIVA22 (1)
Others' events (3)	#COP27 (3)		
Proposals (11)	#SoberaníaEnergéticaVOX (11)		
Complaints (3)	#QueremosDecidir (2)	#EspañaDecide (1)	

Thus, a clear division is established between "them" (other Spanish political parties and international institutions) and "us" (VOX and the Spanish people). The diagnosis suggests that the 2030 Agenda, the international framework for the coming years adopted by national governments, poses a threat to the economic and energy capacity of citizens. They argue that these policies are senseless, leading only to the loss of freedoms and poverty. Ecologism, therefore, would be an excuse used by the powerful, often characterised as oligarchs and foreign multinational corporations serving Germany, to destroy the welfare state of nations while profiting from it. The prognosis involves reclaiming energy sovereignty through the exploitation of domestic natural resources. This measure should be proposed for a popular vote through a referendum, as they claim it is the only way to reduce the energy bills of Spanish citizens. The motivation arises from opposition to others, defending the interests of Spaniards and their prosperity against the neglect and omission of others. They present themselves as the alternative to climate fanaticism silenced by the powerful, being the only ones daring to confront the follies of progressive fanatics and seeking to restore prosperity to Spaniards.

Discussion

The results obtained in our research demonstrate the presence of a discursive strategy by VOX and its main representatives that aligns with the current climate obstructionism principles, characterised by shifting the debate from the existence or severity of the phenomenon to its political and economic consequences and implications, as reflected in the studies by Heras (2013) and Martín Sánchez (2020). This transition from negationism to obstructionism has already been detected in mainstream media (Frances Bloomfield & Tillery, 2019; Martín Sosa, 2021), but not yet in social media, as shown by the works of Erviti et al. (2018) on the web and by Vicente Torrico on YouTube (2023).

According to the results, the far-right party presents an impossible debate between environmental protection and economic development, conceiving nature as a commodity that should be exploited by the market to reduce dependence on foreign sources and lower costs. Thus, the discourse was mainly economic.

In the context of a global threat, VOX's measures are interpreted at the local level, addressing national issues such as energy dependence, deindustrialization, and depopulation of rural areas, and proposing policies that deviate from the global consensus, thus redefining the problem.

For VOX, the measures imposed by national governments and international institutions represent a clear detriment to citizens. They present a dialectical battle between those responsible for the economic and energy crisis and the loss of freedoms, referred to as "powerful", "oligarchs", "multinationals", or "establishment", and the people who suffer the consequences of the policies they did not vote for, including those proposed by their own party.

The discourse is articulated around emotions, with a scenario dominated by the enemy, whom they label as powerful, oligarchic, multinational, or the ruling class, and an oppressed people who will only find liberation in VOX and its Plan for Energy Sovereignty. This is achieved through solipsistic rhetoric, in which they echo their own content, either through mentions, multimedia content, or hashtags that circumscribe the debate within their own circle.

The informational sources included in the analysed messages belong to other party accounts or their leaders, organisations affiliated with the party, or media outlets whose interests converge with those of the far-right party. Thus, under an illusory image of public validation, the analysed users rely on their own interventions in parliamentary sessions and in sympathetic media to reinforce the credibility of their discourse, presenting no greater scientific endorsement than their own words.

The narrative construction analysed aligns with the fundamental principles of climate obstructionism, which structures its discourses around fallacies of authority, suspicions of external pressures and conspiracies, as well as misdefinitions and erroneous analogies, as documented by Heras (2018) and Vicente Torrico (2019). These postulates aim to undermine the credibility of political and scientific institutions and delay the adoption of social and economic measures. Their goal is to maintain the economic status quo and discredit global consensus.

Notes

1 Source: https://elecciones.generales23j.es.
2 Source: https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20230529/vox-resultado-elecciones-municipales-autonomicas-2023/2447774.shtml

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8 Combatting and defeating Chinese propaganda and disinformation

A case study of Taiwan's 2020 elections

Aaron Huang[1,2]

Introduction

The USA was overwhelmed by Russian propaganda and disinformation during its 2016 elections and, like many western countries, has since embarked on a quest to combat these Russian attacks and safeguard its electoral process. However, in an era of Sino-American great power competition, there is a new electoral threat: Chinese propaganda and disinformation. Combined with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese propaganda and disinformation have the potential to influence the world's perception of Beijing, distort target countries' images globally, and reshape international norms and values on human rights, rule of law, and sovereignty, having significant implications for geopolitics and international order (Rolland, 2020). Thus, we must better comprehend China's propaganda and disinformation power and ways to defeat it. Using Taiwan's 2020 presidential and legislative elections as a case study, this chapter aims to do just that: 1) to analyse Chinese propaganda and disinformation's capabilities and limits and 2) to understand how a small country such as Taiwan (smaller than China by a factor of 23 in GDP, 60 in population size, and 267 in land mass) was able to combat and defeat China's information campaigns.

In 2017, Walker coined the term "sharp power" in international affairs, which helped us understand a tool to target a country's political and information environments. Jackson (2018) then explained how the digital revolution has facilitated the rise of this power, including disinformation, propaganda, and misinformation. Nye (2019) has discussed how states use sharp power, and this has been applied to a number of studies on Chinese propaganda and disinformation operations against Taiwan (Hsiao, 2018) and how the Chinese government has exploited Taiwan's media environment to continue its information campaign (Cole, 2017). However, sharp power researchers often highlight the many threats and dangers of state disinformation, rather than countermeasures and solutions.

This chapter employs the concept of sharp power to explain Chinese propaganda and disinformation activities. Coined by the National Endowment of Democracy, sharp power refers to a country's asymmetric ability to perforate the target country's political and informational ecosystems (Cardenal et al., 2017). The goals are to cut the target country's fabric of society and to stoke and amplify

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existing divisions (Cardenal et al., 2017). Sharp power tactics include those of information warfare: propaganda, media manipulation, and disinformation. It is different from soft power because it is not about attraction or persuasion, but manipulation, distraction, confusion, division, and repression (Cardenal et al., 2017). Moreover, unlike soft power, sharp power lacks transparency, accountability, journalistic integrity, and diversity of thought and focuses on political, rather than cultural, aims, such as advancing state narratives. Sharp power has become of special concern because research is showing that falsehood diffuses "significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects [are] more pronounced for false political news" (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

International research on China's operations in Taiwan up until this point has been sporadic, and we are lacking a systematic survey of China's information activities on the island. In addition, English-language research in this area often uses anecdotal and circumstantial evidence to portray "China" broadly as the manipulator, frequently and unknowingly relying on reporting from media outlets that are anti-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and pro-independence (e.g., *Liberty Times, Taipei News*, and *Apple Daily*). As a result, western research may suffer from bias, editorialising, and inaccuracies.

This chapter adds to the field of state disinformation by systematically examining China's 2020 election interference campaign in Taiwan's media landscape while considering Taiwanese media's political leanings and agendas. Unlike previous studies, this chapter 1) methodically dissects a campaign to better understand Chinese propaganda and disinformation; 2) studies the effects of the campaign to analyse China's disinformation capabilities and limits; and 3) offers possible cures to disinformation by unraveling Taiwan's multi-pronged response.

The chapter utilises two methods to gauge the effects of Chinese sharp power on the elections and Taiwan's cross-sector response: qualitative interviews and media monitoring. First, the project's focus was on qualitative interviews. The author interviewed 40 individuals, most of them Taiwanese government officials in the digital, communications, and security spheres; television, print, and online journalists; political and civil society leaders; and academics. Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, most individuals are attributed only by their respective organisations. Most of the interviews were conducted in Taipei, Taiwan, with nine done in the USA. The interviews were semi-structured and mostly in Mandarin. Second, for two months before Taiwan's 2020 elections, the author monitored the daily newspapers of three major Taiwanese print outlets accused of being influenced by China (i.e., *China Times*, *Want Daily*, *United Daily News*). The author systematically scanned for and collected propaganda and disinformation content from the front pages.

This chapter uses the preponderance of evidence method to gauge the effects of Chinese sharp power and Taiwan's response. This qualitative method builds a case on how effective both sides were by reaching convergent conclusions from an accumulation of circumstantial evidence from different expert interviews and polls. The method draws from Jamieson's systematisation of the effects of Russian sharp power on the USA's 2016 elections (see, for example, Jamieson, 2018).

Identifying Chinese sharp power attacks in the 2020 elections

Chinese sharp power campaigns in Taiwan began around 2008, experts suggest. Through traditional Taiwanese media, Chinese propaganda thrived during former Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou's tenure (2008 to 2016). It thrived because the propaganda was focused on how amazing China was, and that was beneficial to Ma's friendly cross-Strait relations agenda. Negative online disinformation operations, however, became apparent in 2016, after Tsai Ing-wen was elected president and as Taiwanese people of all ages, especially older people, started using Facebook and LINE (a messaging app similar to WhatsApp). Since then, Taiwan's traditional and social media have been spreading and mutually reinforcing falsehoods from China (Cole, 2017). During the 2020 election period, as Tsai stated, "China has increased its coercion tactics… It has been doing so through a combination of military threats, disinformation and propaganda, infiltration, and other methods" (Pan, 2019). The main Chinese sharp power attacks during the 2020 elections are discussed below.

1) Questioning President Tsai's doctoral degree (May 2019)

The first is the falsehood that Tsai Ing-wen's London School of Economics (LSE) doctoral degree was fake. Here, China's role was to propagate and amplify this false story. If one single attack was to affect the electoral outcome, it would have been this one. The false story came about during the ruling DPP's presidential primary election. Because Tsai was unable to find her LSE diploma, thesis, and transcript at the beginning to prove her degree, the story gained further traction. Furthermore, China's cyber army flooded Taiwan's social media space with this story ("諷刺", 2019). Even though the LSE later confirmed her doctorate in an official statement, this disinformation continued to be spread by both traditional and social media outlets (陳弘美, 2020).

2) Influencing top Taiwanese media leaders at a Beijing conference (May 10, 2019)

In its second notable influence operation, the Chinese government gathered 70 Taiwanese media leaders in Beijing on May 10, 2019, and asked them to fulfil their social responsibilities and help promote the peaceful unification process (Cole, 2019). The "Cross-Strait Media People Summit" was co-hosted by Taiwan's Want Want China Times Media Group, long suspected of taking direction from the Chinese government, and China's Beijing Newspaper Group, a

Chinese state media entity. During the conference, Wang Yang, then a Politburo Standing Committee member and one of China's seven top leaders, said that media from both sides of the Strait must

> [U]phold national ethics, fulfil their social responsibilities, and jointly play the role of communicating to people on both sides of the Strait by promoting Chinese culture, deepening the integration of emotions, and continuing to promote the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and the process of peaceful reunification of the motherland, and strive to realize the China dream.
>
> (Schmitt & Mazza, 2019)

After laughing at his mocking of the Taiwanese government, Taiwanese executives were told by Wang, "as we want to realize 'peaceful unification, one country, two systems', we need to rely on the joint efforts with our friends in the media… I believe you understand the situation… history will remember you" (Hille, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the executives were from outlets accused of being under Beijing's influence.

3) Rehashing contentious domestic issues (throughout the elections)

The third tactic is the online rehashing of contentious domestic issues that dominated the 2018 midterm elections, when the ruling DPP lost significant support. Experts claimed that the Chinese cyber army and content farms created and/or circulated in Taiwan's cyberspace fake stories on polarising issues, including same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ rights, pension reform, nuclear energy, and labour laws. For example, there were fake stories claiming that queer Taiwanese blood donors were causing HIV to spread. Other fake online claims accused the Taiwanese government of 1) using pension funds to attract Korean and Japanese tourists to make up for the drop in Chinese tourism and 2) giving Taiwanese Pride Parade organisers financial support so that they could bring in overseas queer people to join the parade (Su, 2019).

4) Smearing a defected Chinese spy who exposed its covert influence operations (November 2019)

Fourth, China launched a smear campaign to discredit William Wang, a defected Chinese spy who blew the whistle on Chinese interference operations abroad (McKenzie et al., 2019). Wang, who is now in Australia seeking asylum, detailed how he was given a fake South Korean passport in May to infiltrate Taiwan and launch an operation to defeat Tsai in the 2020 elections (Myers & Cave, 2019). This operation would have included directing a cyber army, working with Taiwanese media executives, and creating media and internet companies to launch targeted attacks and shift political opinions (McKenzie et al., 2019). Almost immediately, the Chinese government dismissed his accusations and said he was a convicted criminal (McKenzie & Joske, 2020). Chinese disinformation tried to paint Wang as being close to the DPP by propagating a picture of someone who looks like him at a DPP gathering. In the two months leading up to the elections, *Want Daily*, a newspaper reportedly under Chinese influence, published four front-page propaganda stories against Wang, two of which came directly from Chinese state media outlets. Likewise, *China Times*, under the same media group as *Want Daily*, published five such front-page propaganda stories, two of which were pulled directly from the Chinese state media *Global Times*.

5) Attacking the government's foreign interference bill (December 2019)
Fifth, there was a concerted attack online, on television, and in newspapers against the government's Anti-Infiltration Bill, which sought to stem foreign infiltration into Taiwan's political system. For example, in the two months leading up to the elections, *Want Daily* had six front-page propaganda stories against this bill, with lines similar to those of the Chinese government. Similarly, *China Times* had two front-page propaganda stories, one of which came directly from Chinese state media *China News Service*.

6) Creating doubts around Taiwan's election integrity (January 2020)
Finally, China sought to affect the public perception of the integrity of Taiwan's election results. Before the elections, Taiwan's Central Election Commission (CEC) debunked two to three salient false news stories per day. After the elections, there were Chinese disinformation packages aiming to invalidate Tsai's victory and blame the CIA for manipulating the results. The Taiwan Fact Check Centre, a nonprofit dedicated to debunking falsehoods, also reported significant disinformation activities around the electoral process.

Dissecting Chinese propaganda and disinformation: motives, tactics, actors

The Chinese government aims at keeping the CCP in power, and it does that by trying to maintain legitimacy in two key areas: developing the economy and protecting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As economic development slows, territorial integrity becomes more important, and thus, the Taiwan issue increases in salience as well. Taiwan is a core CCP issue, and while the CCP's eventual goal is unification, its immediate goal is to deter Taiwanese independence. Beijing wants to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence because it worries that Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet would then be inspired to follow suit, endangering China's territorial integrity and domestic stability. There are several elements that fuel Taiwan's desire to declare independence: Taiwan's democracy is strengthening a Taiwanese identity that is separate from China's and runs against Chinese nationalism, committed to a constitutional system that is missing in China. Therefore, China uses propaganda and disinformation tactics with the goal of disrupting these elements. To meet its objectives, China employed five key methods in Taiwan's 2020 elections: worsening existing social, political, economic, and generational divides; controlling and absorbing traditional media financially; using its cyber army; and obfuscating attack sources through technological, commercial, and legal means. In the lines to follow, we will examine each of these methods.

First, China has learnt from Russian propaganda and disinformation operations in Ukraine and the USA and has used sharp power to create and exacerbate societal divisions within Taiwan. One example is the Chinese cyber army's persistent rehashing of contentious domestic issues from Taiwan's 2018 referenda, such as queer sex education and pension reforms, during the 2020 elections. These issues in 2018 were able to split society based on educational, income, generational, and geographical lines. This method is particularly useful because extreme polarisation is a major weakness of democracies. With severe interest divergence, politics becomes more antagonistic and hostile, consensus becomes more difficult to build, it becomes more challenging for a government to serve the majority's interests, and governing becomes more complicated.

Second, the Chinese government exercises its sharp power by controlling Taiwanese media groups financially. It does this by supporting media owners' businesses in China, by becoming an important part of news outlets' revenue streams, and by establishing its own outlets in Taiwan (Hsu, 2014). Many Taiwanese media owners conduct business in China. To protect their Chinese business interests and gain Chinese government support (whether legal or commercial), the owners, who often already have pro-China views, take newspaper directions from Beijing and other Chinese provincial leaders. Similarly, because the Chinese government is essential to their revenue streams (whether through advertisements or covert subsidies), outlets, especially smaller ones, take China's guidelines and self-censor on "sensitive" issues (Lee & Cheng, 2019). For example, on June 4, 2019, many Taiwanese outlets did not report on the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. While one often views propaganda as pushing information, this is propaganda by removing information from the media ecosystem (Cardenal et al., 2017). The Chinese government also establishes its own outlets in Taiwan, such as the *Taiwan China Review News*. In this case, the *Taiwan China Review News* has offices and reporters in Taiwan and is legally a Taiwanese media agency, but it is tied to Hong Kong's *China Review News*, which reportedly takes Chinese government instructions.

Third, the Chinese government utilises its cyber army (i.e., fake accounts, purchased accounts, content farms, and online media outlets) to exert sharp power in three ways: spreading disinformation online and on PTT (the Taiwanese equivalent of Reddit), creating and/or circulating negative propaganda about Taiwan, and propagating fake news on LINE ("瞄準", 2019). All three are further amplified online, on television, and in newspapers by compromised traditional Taiwanese media ("瞄準", 2019). These fake news stories have the effect of not only changing perceptions but also taking an advantageous position at influencing the narrative and topic of the day. A recent study has shown that PTT accounts that were moderately pro-DPP shifted to pro-CCP after being purchased on Taiwanese and Chinese auction sites ahead of the elections (Schmitt & Mazza, 2019). Journalists reported that small, online media outlets post content directly from the Chinese government and content farms; in one case, 23 of these outlets posted the same PRC propaganda article simultaneously without even changing the title ("紅色", 2019). Moreover, an investigation found that 60% of contentious information and fake news on LINE came from abroad (劉致昕 et al., 2019). Much of it was from China with simplified Chinese characters, Chinese language usage, and Chinese government propaganda (劉致昕 et al., 2019).

Fourth, China obfuscates and hides its attack sources. For its cyber army accounts, their IP addresses and locations bounce to Australia, Singapore, and other places, making it difficult for Taiwan's national security apparatus to obtain technical proof of where the cyber information attacks originate from. For its "advertisements" (i.e., propaganda) in traditional media, the TAO has created companies such as Jiuzhou Culture Communication Center and Publishing Exchange Center Across the Taiwan Strait to purchase stories, according to uncovered contracts and multiple people with direct knowledge of the arrangements (Lee & Cheng, 2019). Reporters are often not told that what they are writing are "advertisements". Instead, they are simply directed by editors to draft these stories. Furthermore, when a *Financial Times* journalist blew the whistle on China's influence on the Want Want Group, the group sued her and sent people to harass her, hoping to make an example of her for anyone who wished to speak out (Hille, 2019).

Many components of the Chinese state and national security apparatus help the PRC exercise its sharp power, particularly in Taiwan and its 2020 elections (沈伯洋 & 黃祥儒, 2020). The central government plays a sizable and leading role in Chinese sharp power. *The Cyberspace Administration of China* (i.e., the Office of the Central Leading Group for Cyberspace Affairs), headed by Xi, is a supra-ministerial policy and coordination body that worked with the Central Propaganda Department to create a working group on Taiwan. *The Central Propaganda Department* is cited as having a professional cyber group to influence Taiwanese elections and providing compromised Taiwanese outlets with content for them to write positive stories about China (Kassam, 2019; Lee & Cheng, 2019). *The United Front Work Department* is traditionally tasked with influencing foreign individuals and organizations (沈伯洋 & 黃祥儒, 2020). It also works extensively in Hong Kong (Lo et al., 2019). The Taiwanese government is confident that the *People's Liberation Army's Strategic Support Force* is behind many "troll factories" and "content farms" that are spreading Chinese propaganda and disinformation in Taiwan (Cole, 2018b). Through uncovered, signed contracts between the *State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO)* and compromised Taiwanese outlets, *Reuters* found that the TAO is paying these companies for coverage (Lee & Cheng, 2019).

Local governments and other government entities also help implement Chinese propaganda and disinformation. *Reuters* found that municipal governments and provincial TAOs sponsor Chinese propaganda in Taiwanese news organisations, based on interviews and uncovered financial documents (Lee & Cheng, 2019). *The 50-Cent Party* consists primarily of government employees paid by the Chinese government to create posts on a part-time basis outside their normal jobs (King et al., 2017). Its aim is to counter government criticism and prevent collective action through strategic distraction and censorship (King et al., 2017). It operates by inserting pro-Chinese government comments into online conversations (King et al., 2017). The party produces 448 million posts annually, with the aim of overwhelming the information system. It is accused of interfering in Taiwan's 2018 and 2020 elections (Cole, 2018a). Lastly, there are local actors on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Chinese content farms that operate in Taiwan include 密訊 (one of the most shared in Taiwan), 觸極者, 每日頭條, 壹讀, 觀察哲網, and Buzz Orange (孔德廉 et al., 2019). China also employs *local intermediaries*, Chinese firms established in Taiwan, and online Taiwanese celebrities as conduits for its sharp power work (Cardenal et al., 2017; Cole, 2018a; 沈伯洋 & 黃祥儒, 2020).

Consequences

Despite how serious of a threat Chinese sharp power is, Taiwan was able to blunt its impact on the 2020 elections. The interviewees seemed to share the opinion that Chinese influence operations had little effect on the election results. They observed that, compared to the 2018 local elections, the 2020 elections saw significantly less Chinese and general propaganda and disinformation packages. The interviewees added that most propaganda and disinformation stories were unable to inflict maximum damage, as they were swiftly exposed and debunked. All four major political parties (DPP, KMT, TPP, NPP) stated that Chinese sharp power did not affect their polling numbers and election results. If one of China's objectives was to elect a China-friendly president and legislature, then Beijing failed in that regard. On January 11, 2020, President Tsai was reelected with a historic 8.17 million votes (57.13 percent) (Sam, 2020). In the legislature, the ruling DPP retained its majority with 61 out of 113 seats. Turnout increased as well, with 74.90% of eligible voters voting, compared to 66.27% in 2016.

However, Chinese sharp power did worsen political and social polarisation and widen the generational divide to a certain extent. It made political and social bubbles more difficult to pop, increased mutual suspicion between the KMT and the DPP, and strengthened conservatives' and the KMT base's disdain for Tsai. Generationally, Chinese actions included infiltrating a Facebook support group page for young people whose parents voted for Han to move young people's political positions further away from those of their parents. In terms of media operations, it further split the informational space, one for the pro-China side and the other for the anti-China side.

In this context, we wonder: how did Taiwan, the country ranked most exposed to foreign disinformation globally, survive, combat, and defeat China's information attacks (孔德廉 et al., 2019)? The answer is that after being inundated and overwhelmed by Chinese propaganda and disinformation in the 2018 midterm elections, Taiwan embarked on a whole-of-society mission in 2019 and 2020 to defend against such attacks, including efforts from the government, the private sector, and civil society.

After the 2018 electoral losses, the government realised that it had to communicate with the public more effectively, better explain its activities and actions on a regular basis, and build more trust with its citizenry. Rooted in these aims, the government started countering propaganda and disinformation in five main ways: 1) systematically monitoring traditional and social media, 2) debunking falsehoods by using truthful information-spreading strategies, 3) raising awareness of sharp power through a public health metaphor, 4) creating and enforcing laws to punish sharp power actors, and 5) collaborating with social media and messaging apps as well as their users.

To improve internal coordination, the ruling DPP created a cross-government and DPP communication group aimed at (1) media monitoring that searches for propaganda and disinformation around the clock. This social media group analyses online political discussions and how information is disseminated and consumed on the Internet. Once someone finds a fake news story, top officials determine its validity and harm. There is then a judgment call on whether to respond. The two must-respond criteria are if the fake news story is reported on television and/or if there are many online engagements with that story. If they decide to respond, they will delegate the debunking to the most appropriate agency or authority.

Once the government moves to the (2) debunking stage, the race to win the narrative begins. The debunking criteria are that the response has to be fast, short, easily understandable, humorous, high level, and easily spreadable. First, the government releases a press statement providing accurate information. Second, it uploads a debunking meme on its social media pages. The government chooses to deliver the correct information through a meme because it is short, funny, easy to understand, and easy to share, qualities that online viral content share. The reasoning behind the humour requirement is twofold: humour and outrage are two mutually exclusive outlets of anger, so the government uses humour to prevent and disarm outrage. Second, humour attracts young netizens, who can then share the meme with their less media-literate family members since people tend to accept clarifications more from those they trust. Third, the government asks its online followers and supporters to share the meme as broadly as possible. Fourth, if the fake news is severe, the appropriate government minister will host a high-level press conference to draw on traditional media's reach and debunk the falsehood. The goal of these steps is to make the clarification propagate faster and farther than the fake news story. The government aims to give the public an information "immunisation shot" by pre-empting fake news with accurate ones so that people are exposed to the truth before learning about the falsehood.

The government sets an ambitious goal of responding in two hours, but many of its ministries have been able to do so in only 60 minutes. Because the government times its clarification with the news cycle, its response is reported by the traditional media. As for reach, journalists interviewed shared that they generally do not hear about a fake news story until they see the government's response, and Facebook stated that the government's debunking responses spread more broadly than fake news on its platform. In this way, the government has the potential to overcome the familiarity bias trap (i.e., repeating a false claim strengthens the claim) because people hear the facts before they are exposed to the falsehoods.

Besides reactively countering fake news, the Tsai administration has been actively raising public awareness of both general and Chinese propaganda and disinformation. The approach is presented by using public health jargon through a virus metaphor. The government is trying to build the public mindset that fake news is simply a virus and that people who believe and share it are not bad people; rather, they have simply caught the virus. Anyone can catch and spread the virus, so everyone should work together to detect and prevent its spread. This framing takes away the good-bad binary from fake news and thereby removes fake news' polarisation effect. There is no shame or blame for being tricked by it or spreading it because anyone can be a victim. From here, the focus shifts to education. The government has been driving media literacy trucks to rural areas to conduct workshops on how to identify fake news for citizens with less media experience (often older people). On the Chinese fake news issue specifically, the ruling DPP proposed and passed the Anti-Infiltration Bill before the elections primarily to warn the public about the ongoing, malicious foreign activities occurring in its midst.

There are three other reasons for passing the new Anti-Infiltration Law: to deter Chinese interference in the upcoming elections, to react to defected Chinese spy Wang's revelations on Chinese sharp power activities, and to frame the elections as a referendum on Chinese penetration into Taiwan ("反滲透法：台灣", 2019). The law states that if any person or entity receives support from "overseas hostile forces" in donations, in an election or referendum, in lobbying, or in disrupting assembly, that person or entity will face imprisonment of up to five years and fines of up to $335,000, or ten million NTD ("反滲透法條文", 2019). Immediately after it became law, *Master Chain*, the only Taiwanese media that had an office in China, criticised the law, closed its Taiwan operations, and relocated to Beijing ("反滲透法剛過", 2019). Furthermore, Want Want Group's top media managers are worried about how the law will affect them. Separately, the NCC has been more strictly enforcing Taiwan's factual and balanced reporting regulation for television and radio. For example, Want Want Group's CTi TV was fined over $186,000 (5.63 million NTD) in 2019 mostly for broadcasting and spreading falsehoods ("去年被罰", 2020). Combined with the public rally against their biases, Want Want Group's outlets have been reported as more balanced ever since.

Social media and messaging apps have also played a crucial role, along with users' collaboration. Facebook and LINE, two main disinformation hotbeds in Taiwan, were also crucial in combatting Chinese sharp power through their numerous advances over 2019. Facebook does not have a policy stating that everything on its platform has to be true, but it does remove content and accounts that violate its community standards, hide content that breaks local laws, and downgrade fake news, and Facebook actively did all three during the election season. In both October and December 2019, Facebook removed hundreds of accounts and content farms for breaking community standards by engaging in abusive audience building (孔德廉 et al., 2019). Specifically in the December 13 case, as part of the effort to protect Taiwan's election integrity, Facebook removed 118 fan pages, 99 groups, and 51 duplicate accounts for "artificially inflating their posts' reach" (吳妍, 2019; Su, 2019). Facebook also cooperated closely with Taiwan's Central Election Commission during the election period to remove voter suppression content (e.g., false election information that could suppress votes) and hide posts that broke Taiwanese electoral laws. Moreover, Facebook worked, and continues to work, with a third-party fact-checking organisation (i.e., Taiwan Fact Check Centre) to downrank false information. Operating independently, the centre rates Facebook content for its validity. If it rates a post as false or mixed, then Facebook downranks that post. Once it is downranked, users will no longer be passively exposed to its false information. A user can still actively find this post, but the post will then have the correct information (provided by the centre) attached to it.

LINE, is arguably the most important social media application in Taiwan. It has 21 million monthly active users on an island of only around 24 million people. In Taiwan, 9.3 billion LINE messages are sent every day, and each Taiwanese user receives over 100 daily messages on average. Fake news runs rampant on the application, and its end-to-end encryption makes it extremely difficult to track the spread and origin of fake news (陳瑞霖, 2019). However, the "LINE Digital Responsibility Plan" was announced in March 2019 and worked with Taiwan's executive branch and four NGOs to create the "LINE information checker" portal in July 2019, right in time for the elections. Whenever users find questionable information on LINE, they can forward it to the portal and receive a fact-checking report created by these NGOs. As of January 7, 2020, four days before the elections, it had fact-checked over 30,000 suspicious news stories sent by 140,000 users, and its debunking page had been viewed over four million times.

Shocked by the overwhelming force of PRC propaganda and disinformation in the 2018 elections, the Taiwanese public became more alert to the problem and began engaging in *activism* and *organisational-building* to counter Chinese sharp power. For example, its activism work culminated in the Anti-Red Media March (red refers to the CCP's colour) in June 2019, when 20,000 people rallied against compromised Taiwanese media, such as *China Times* and CTi TV (10萬人, 2019). In another example, young people organised and created the LINE group "Have You Cared For Your Elders Today?", a "debunking farm" that creates and shares fake-news debunking memes so that young people can forward them to their more susceptible family members.

Taiwanese civil society also made strides in building organisations that drastically decreased disinformation during the 2020 elections. First, in terms of fact-checking, civil society organisations Taiwan Fact Check Center (TFCC), MyGoPen, Cofacts, and Rum Toast have been working with Facebook and LINE since 2019 to identify, verify, and downrank dubious posts. These groups also have been working with the Taiwanese government to obtain accurate, up-to-date information quickly. Because of the amount of disinformation, groups such as Cofacts and Watchout have been using crowdsourcing and bots for rapid fact-checking and response (Han, 2018). Dr. Puma Shen credited them, as well as Double Think Labs, for blocking Chinese disinformation and dulling Chinese sharp power's effects in the 2020 elections. For attribution work, the TFCC has been able to trace disinformation packages back to the Chinese government (in its investigation number 204, for example), helping convince the public that Chinese infiltration operations are alive and well (蘇志宗, 2019). Finally, Double Think Labs is now conducting a study through surveys and focus groups to attempt to estimate the effects of fake news on the 2020 voters and their decisions.

Conclusion

Through the sharp power model, this chapter has dissected Chinese propaganda and disinformation operations in Taiwan's 2020 elections, including their motives, tactics, actions, and actors. It has argued that while contributing to polarisation and generational divides, these operations were blunted by Taiwan's whole-of-society response and did little to affect election results. This chapter helps us better understand the mechanisms of Chinese disinformation and sheds light on possible effective counter responses to propaganda and disinformation in general, particularly the importance of cross-sector cooperation. To further the study of state disinformation, one can seek to quantify the effects of propaganda and disinformation to better gauge their influence on social and political discourse and events.

Notes

1. This chapter was researched and written as part of the author's graduate thesis in 2020. This chapter reflects the author's views only. It should not be viewed as representing the views of the US government.
2. This chapter was originally published as the following: *Huang*, Aaron. "Combatting and Defeating Chinese Propaganda and Disinformation: A Case Study of Taiwan's 2020 Elections". Paper, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, July 2020. Much of the information in this chapter derives from this paper, especially insights from the 40 in-language interviews conducted. Readers can refer to this paper for interview citations.

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9 State-sponsored disinformation in Brazil

Distrust and delegitimisation of the electoral system through the use of political authority Facebook accounts

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Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss how social media platforms are used to spread and legitimise state-sponsored disinformation about the democratic electoral process in Brazil. This is a particularly important issue in countries that have experienced long periods of dictatorship and where democratic institutions are still in their initial stages. In Brazil, voting only became a right for all citizens over 16 years old (and an obligation for those over 18) after the 1988 Constitution.

Several cases of fraud involving election ballots have been registered throughout Brazil's history, such as the substitution of ballots or changes to how paper ballots were counted. After re-democratisation in 1988, Brazil discussed introducing electronic ballots and even went so far as to test them; however, it took until 1996 before they were widely adopted for the country's electoral process[1]. The electronic ballot has been improved since then and has also been submitted to several public security tests over the years. The Brazilian Electoral Supreme Court has recently adopted biometric identification for citizens to cast their ballots.

Even after the successful implementation of the electronic ballot, since 2018 there has been increasing doubt cast over the legitimacy of the process and the reliability of the elections in the country, mostly by then-presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro and his right-wing supporters. Social media channels, widely used by Bolsonaro during his campaign, were key to spreading these narratives and this strategy (Recuero, 2020; Ruediger et al., 2020). Since Bolsonaro's election in 2018, many of these conspiracy theories and doubts decreased; however, they would return with each successive election, even more so in the 2022 elections.

Given this particular context, our goal in this chapter is to discuss disinformation about the electronic ballot supported by or attributed to Brazilian state

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authorities on Meta's Facebook. By state authorities, we mean agents who hold state-sponsored positions with public money, mostly elected politicians. Social media platforms have played an important role in spreading disinformation, particularly by political authorities and parties (see Soares et al., 2021). Understanding how these agents influence this ecosystem is key to designing better tools to help combat harmful and antidemocratic content. As a result, we explore how public authorities are represented on Facebook, how they impact the circulation of disinformation, and which narratives are legitimised by groups and pages. To do so, we employ a dataset of Facebook's 89,450 posts about the electronic ballot taken from 13,471 public groups and web pages.

The Brazilian context

The 2022 presidential election in Brazil was a two-round system held at the beginning and the end of October. The country was mostly split between Bolsonaro and his right-wing Liberal Party (running for re-election) and the leftist former president Lula da Silva and his Worker's Party. There were 11 presidential candidates in the first round of elections, with Lula (48.43%) and Bolsonaro (43.20%) accounting for more than 91% of the total number of votes.

Lula built a "great coalition"[2] of political parties from the left, centre, and even the liberal right to challenge Bolsonaro's far-right government policies and constant threats of a coup if he should lose the election[3]. Part of Bolsonaro and his supporters' strategy was to undermine the reliability of the electronic ballot, using conspiracy theories to claim that the process was tainted and fraudulent[4]. Much of this narrative was based on false and fabricated evidence, as well as conspiracies (Recuero et al., 2021; Recuero, 2020; Ruediger et al., 2020). The distrust of the voting system was the focus of Bolsonaro's electoral campaign and has become the focal point of the Brazilian political-electoral agenda. The use of this kind of content by the president, government officials, and far-right political leaders led to an institutional crisis, threatening the credibility of the electoral system and the very institutions that guarantee the elections. For example, in July 2022, less than three months before the first round of elections, Bolsonaro called on ambassadors to repeatedly attack the Brazilian electoral system[5]. Bolsonaro called on the Federal Police to launch an inquiry into hackers trying to interfere in the Electoral Court system in 2018, thus launching false conclusions about alleged weaknesses in the electronic voting system. Even after the Justice ensured the public that the hackers did not damage the election, Bolsonaro insisted that the electronic ballot box would not be reliable.

The use of disinformation or suspicious content by Bolsonaro was characteristic of his political discourse during his presidency. Livestreams on YouTube or posts on Facebook and Twitter played an important role in disseminating unreliable information about the Covid-19 pandemic (Monari et al., 2021) and encouraged supporters to continue attacking the electoral system. The misleading content published by the president was removed by the platforms, and far-right political leaders, such as former deputy Roberto Jefferson and re-elected deputy Carla Zambeli, who defend the use of political violence against opponents during the elections, had their social media accounts cancelled by the Supreme Electoral Court.

Social media, polarisation, and state-sponsored disinformation

The growth of political polarisation in Brazil and many other countries since the mid-2010s coincides with the growth of the far-right and far-right movements. Political polarisation has been associated with disinformation and the emergence of echo chambers in a number of works (Barberá et al., 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2017). These works describe polarisation as a phenomenon that tends to be related to the circulation of disinformation, particularly on social media.

Social media has been associated with trolling and disinformation, particularly because it gives everyone a voice, including extremists (Tucker et al., 2017). The very nature of these platforms increases the reach and engagement of this problematic content, often through the ease with which it circulates and is legitimised (Sunstein, 2001). The emergence of echo chambers, environments where only one kind of discourse circulates, can be a threat to democracy as they create ideologically-based content where both users and algorithms filter out ideas, thus insulating themselves from rebuttal (Cinelli et al., 2021). Social media platforms have also provided extremists with audiences. These structures also offer environments where conspiracies and disinformation circulate more freely (Barberá, 2020). The combination of these factors may increase the risk for democracies, particularly in countries where social media is widely used but not yet regulated, such as Brazil.

Lastly, another problem associated with social media and political polarisation is the spread of disinformation. Among the many actors that engage in the spread of disinformation, such as trolls, hired trolls, hyperpartisan websites, conspiracy theorists, foreign governments, and others, these tools also give politicians and other state actors “closer” contact with their audience and the power to influence their views (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

State-sponsored actors using social media to manipulate public opinion have been described in many works. For example, Zannettou et al. (2018) showed how state-sponsored trolls from Russia disseminated content to influence the opinions of people in other countries, something these authors referred to as “disinformation warfare”. Possetti and Matthews (2018) also point out the growing importance of state-sponsored disinformation of political information online, particularly by governments and state authorities, in order to sway public opinion.

In Brazil, Bolsonaro was the first president to openly use disinformation as a political communication strategy (Amarante, 2021). Even though his persistent allegations about the electoral process or other issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, were constantly rebutted by fact-checkers and journalists, he continued to make these claims (Seibt & Dannenberg, 2021; Penteado et al., 2022). Thus, communication from the Bolsonaro government was characterised by strong personalism with a dualistic strategy: doing away with the institutional nature of federal government communication structures and replacing them with official profiles on digital channels of supporters and allies. These strategies led to increased ambiguity surrounding the official nature of publications by authorities and, at the same time, gave legitimacy to the information disclosed, including information that was flagrantly uninformative (Recuero & Soares, 2022).

Personal profiles of authorities and government officials are an instrumental part of the complex far-right digital communication system in Brazil due to the fact that they disseminate information on public platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. These profiles often reach a larger audience than official government profiles and have played an important role in swaying public opinion on elections and other issues of public debate. Moreover, during Jair Bolsonaro's government, these profiles from authorities, allies, and government officials were instrumental in politicising important issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic, spreading disinformation, and increasing political polarisation (Recuero, Soares et al., 2020; Chagas & Stefano, 2022).

Nunes et al. (2021) identified the eight most relevant "Bolsonarista" leader profiles on Facebook during 2020–2021. According to the authors, these profiles constituted the Bolsonarista base in those years, reaching the highest number of engagements and shares in the analysed period. All of these leaders hold public office in the Brazilian Legislative. Three belong to the Bolsonaro family, including the President of the Republic and his sons Eduardo, Flavio, and Carlos Bolsonaro. The other five are federal deputies elected by the parties supporting Bolsonaro's government. Some of these profiles had more than 300 posts published in a single month (August 2021).

This environment of disinformation on social media, promoted by political authorities, is a deliberate attempt to personalise government communication in Brazil (Weber, 2021). The profiles of political authorities constituted the core of Bolsonaro's digital government communication, publishing personal opinions as official points of view on public policies and disseminating them on a daily basis.

The reason that these personal profiles publish official content can be attributed to at least three factors. The first is the capital that authorities accumulate from the political dispute on social networks. Several of these agents are political leaders who constantly mobilise their supporters and followers. Jair Bolsonaro's personal Facebook profile, for example, has 15 million followers, while the institutional page of the Presidency of the Republic of Brazil currently has 136 thousand followers.

The second factor is using personal profiles as a way to avoid the legal restrictions of public administration rules. According to Article 37 of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, “the direct and indirect public administration of the Powers of the Union, the States, the Federal District, and the Municipalities shall obey the principles of legality, impersonality, morality, publicity and efficiency”. Morelli-Mendes et al. (2015) claim that these obligations also apply to public servants in official positions. The authors point out that all officially published content must support the educational and informative nature of the messages, which implies that the absence of names, images, and symbols could disobey the principles of impersonality and morality (p. 7).

These obligations, however, are not always considered in a normative way by Brazilian high authorities who share political content (even rumours and conspiracy theories), claiming it is their right to freedom of expression or simply their personal opinion. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that the level of tolerance for publishing depends on the level of hierarchy the government or the allies of Bolsonarismo have. It goes back to the historical contradictions of Brazilian authoritarian culture that blur the boundaries between “what you can do and what you cannot do” represented in the famous phrase “do you know who you are speaking to?” (Damatta, 2020).

The third factor is that political leaders in Brazil use social media as their main tool for communicating mobilisation strategies. In fact, several authors have pointed out a strong compatibility between populism and social media (Engesser et al., 2016; Bobba, 2018; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). Although social media is not the exclusive tool/instrument for populist politicians, nor is it the only space for disseminating their ideas, the fact is that social media offers unparalleled access to the public sphere and provides opportunities for large-scale direct communication between populist leaders and their supporters. As such, the media bring extremist discourses closer to traditional politics, rewarding populist leaders with discursive opportunities in the public sphere previously conditioned by gatekeepers such as journalism.

Populism and the Bolsonarism movement

The Bolsonarism movement was consolidated with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, following a number of crises the country had experienced since June 2013, namely large right-wing street demonstrations, the Operation Lava Jato corruption scandal, the economic crisis, the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, and the media’s discourse on corruption. This media discourse has led to the emergence and propagation of far-right populist discourse over the last two decades (Guazina et al., 2022).

As a far-right wing social movement, Bolsonarismo has distinct layers and degrees of involvement, identified by Rennó (2022) as an unprecedented conservative right-wing alignment. According to this author, it is “an amalgamation of the different Brazilian rights, enhanced in their extremism" (p. 151). The movement spread at a time when the field of political identity in Brazil was going through a reorganising process with the emergence of a new digital public sphere. Bolsonaro's support groups employed populist mobilisation strategies to consolidate a Bolsonarist digital sphere, which became the focus of political dispute. After Bolsonaro's presidential victory, Bolsonarist political leaders emerging from this digital sphere also became high authorities in the federal government or in the federal legislative and Senate chambers (Cesarino, 2019; 2020).

Bolsonarismo further polarised Brazilian society, leading to several instances of political violence in 2018, which then started to occur repeatedly throughout Bolsonaro's term in office, including the 2022 elections. Bolsonarismo is, in essence, an authoritarian movement that is incompatible with the values of liberal democracy. Its agenda can most accurately be summarised by Bolsonaro's campaign slogan: God, Homeland, and Family (Kalil, 2018). A hallmark of Bolsonarismo is its autocratic perspective on the political process, demonstrated by its constant attacks against authorities and instances of democratic government by its leaders and many of its supporters, including elected politicians and state agents. They attack civil society groups, opposition political parties, journalists, universities, and courts, often refer to them as scapegoats and enemies of the homeland.

Despite the multitude of Bolsonarismo supporters, the perception of the Supreme Electoral Court and the Federal Supreme Court as enemies became a common focal point of political narratives from the extreme right. The Federal Supreme Court was a direct target of Bolsonarismo as it fought back against the authoritarian measures of Bolsonaro's government. After the 2022 election, the Supreme Electoral Court opened official investigations against Bolsonaro and his inner circle of political supporters for attacking the electoral system and using bribes to obtain votes[6]. Those under investigation included authorities and officials such as federal representatives and senators, as well as members of Bolsonaro's family.

The attacks against the courts helped mobilise Bolsornaro's supporters by using radical antagonism, exploring what Mudde (2019) described as one of the main characteristics of populism (an ideology that organises society through antagonistic views between two established and irreconcilable groups): the morally superior view on one side and the corrupt elites on the other. Political populist leaders thus claim they are representatives of "the people". These processes are often based on close contact with supporters.

In this sense, Laclau (2005) defines populism as a discourse of political construction marked by a dualistic logic that places the people against the elite. For Laclau, populism is established when a leader incites a series of unsatisfied and socially dispersed demands, making them equivalent and parts of the whole represented by the signifier "people". However, the danger to democracy is not necessarily in the dualism of "us versus them" but in the ideological content that the populist leader spreads to fulfil the meanings of "people" and "elites", and in the degree of radicalisation proposed in the mobilisation strategies.

Populism also benefits from the process of disintermediation established by digital platforms. Digital networks often allow populists to avoid the thematic, aesthetic, and discursive mediation of journalism and communicate the themes and approaches that said populist leaders believe will be more effective toward mobilising their supporters. Social media allows populist leaders to freely adopt communication strategies and specific aesthetics and discourses that are not compatible with traditional media.

Cesarino (2019) summarises the main discursive mechanisms used by the Bolsonarism movement on social media. According to the author, these mechanisms can be understood on two fronts: one for promoting differences (which establishes the friend-enemy relationship) and one for equivalences (which allows for a close relationship between populist leaders and the public). The author goes on to identify the following strategies based on military and marketing logics: 1) permanent mobilisation through alarmist and conspiratorial content; 2) the "inverted mirror of the enemy" attack, where accusations are used as an attack; and 3) the creation of a direct channel of communication between leaders and the public that delegitimises the production of authorised knowledge in the public sphere (p. 533). These mechanisms are important as they are also used to legitimate and spread disinformation among these groups and may also be strategies used by state agents.

Methods

Our main goal for this discussion is to analyse how state authorities weaponise social media platforms, particularly Facebook, by using disinformation to delegitimise the electoral process and further, democracy. We want to explore (1) how state authorities are represented in this dataset and in the general structure of the conversation about the electronic voting machines; (2) how they impact the spread of disinformation; and (3) which narratives about the electronic ballot are legitimised in these groups. Our case study focuses on the electoral process in Brazil, in particular, the Brazilian electoral voting machines in 2022. To analyse these issues, our study uses social network analysis (SNA) (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) and content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Lindgreen, 2016).

Data collection

We started by collecting public Facebook posts using CrowdTangle. We used the keyword "urna eletrônica" (electronic voting machines) to obtain 89,450 posts published in 13,471 public groups and pages from September 2021 up to and including September 2022. We chose this one-year period in order to get an idea about how these discourses were shared on these pages. We chose this period because it was close to the presidential election (October 3, 2022), capturing the campaign (which started in August) and the pre-campaign (which started last year, with the parties choosing their candidates). It was enough time to capture different moments of the criticism the ballot received. CrowdTangle is a third-party platform that was acquired by Meta, which gives researchers access to public Facebook data. While the tool is quite popular, we don't know how complete the dataset is. CrowdTangle argued that its data is very close to complete, but posts are often deleted from the dataset if the database is not downloaded. This data collection method may have some setbacks, but after checking the Facebook posts, we believe most of them to be complete.

Data analysis

Next, we focused on Social Network Analysis to create a bipartite network of shared links and pages/groups using a modularity algorithm to highlight possible clusters of pages sharing the same URLs. This allowed us to connect the most shared content to the pages/groups that shared it, and create a network of the most shared content and the pages/groups that were more engaged in sharing it. We used indegree (the number of connections received by each node in the dataset) to rank the most shared links and outdegree (the number of connections created by each node in the dataset) to rank the most active pages/groups. This method was previously used and validated in other papers (Recuero et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2021). The modularity algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) creates clusters of nodes that tend to share the same connections. In this case, the algorithm creates a visualisation where pages that tend to share the same connections to the same content appear closer to each other than other pages. These groups are called clusters.

We then qualitatively examined the 50 most shared links and posts in the 50 pages/groups that shared the most content in order to identify the type of content that was shared in each group. We used a textual classification analysis focused on the pages/links shared on Facebook. To identify disinformation, we used Brazilian fact-checking services such as Lupa and Aos Fatos. We considered disinformation to include not only factual content used to discredit the electoral process but also opinions and legitimisation of this content.

Our third step was to analyse the text from each post sharing content in the right-wing cluster in order to better understand which elements of Bolsonarism and Bolsonarist discourse were present, and what concepts were shared the most. Through these concepts, we believe we can find evidence of different narratives that spread around the electronic ballot boxes. To do this, we analysed 37,762 posts published by the far-right cluster identified through the social network analysis process. We chose to focus solely on this set of posts as our main goal was to understand if and how this Facebook group discredited the electronic voting machines.

We used Connect Concept Analysis (Lindgreen, 2016), a type of content analysis where we first identify the most used words in the unit of analysis and then the co-occurrences of these concepts in order to highlight the most used discourse in the group. We used the 100 most commonly used words and classified them into groups according to the original meaning of each unit. The result is presented in a graph, where the size of the word represents its presence in the data, the strength of the connections, and the colours represent the tendency to occur together in the units analysed.

Results

When examining the network structure of shared links, we found out that the network follows a polarisation pattern, containing two large clusters (Figure 9.1). As the image shows, this polarised network structure indicates that pages/groups from each cluster have a tendency to share the same content within the group, which also suggests a pattern of "content bubble".

The structure of the network represents polarised political conversations (Sunstein, 2009; 2001). The presence of two massive groups shows the tendency of these groups to share the same content, as described by Barberá (2015) and Ribeiro et al. (2017). This structure indicates that clusters generally tend to share

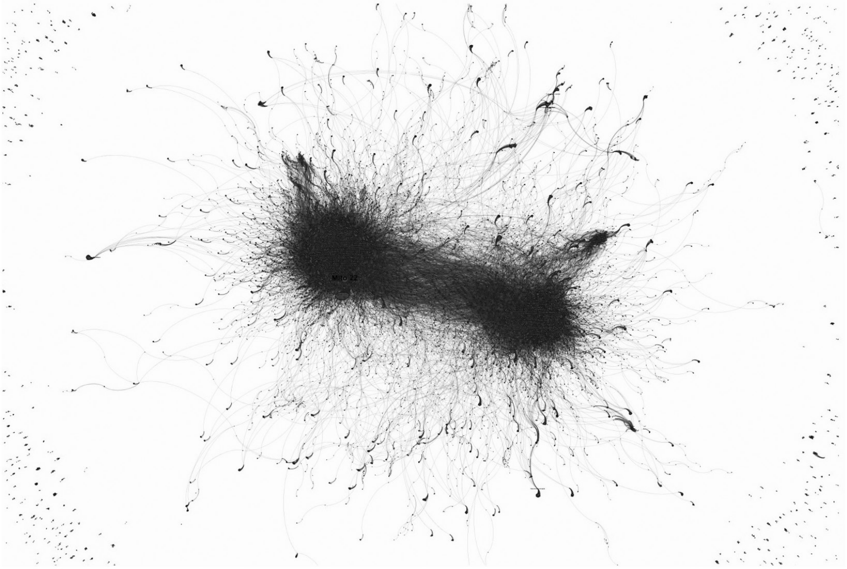


Figure 9.1 A network of public pages/groups on Facebook that shared content about the Brazilian electronic voting machines.

similar content with each other and not within each other. To better understand this relationship, we examined the groups that made up each cluster.

We further examined the pages and groups within each cluster and classified the top 50 by outdegree. The outdegree of each page shows how much content they shared in our dataset, meaning pages and groups that were more active in sharing content. Table 9.1 summarises the nodes that shared the content. Based on this table, we can see that, while one cluster has a large prevalence of pages and groups from Bolsonaro's supporters and far-right supporters, the other cluster has pages that contain leftist activism, the leftist candidate Lula da Silva, and media outlets.

In general, this polarised structure reflects a far-right group (Bolsonaro's supporters, on the left) and a leftist group (Lula da Silva's supporters, on the right), thus highlighting the political polarisation in the country (Figure 9.2). In this case, the majority of links that circulated in one group did not circulate in the other. These findings show the social media structure of polarised conversations and polarised content and how it can balkanise discussions about political candidates in the country (Sunstein, 2009; 2001), as well as increase radicalisation (Tucker et al., 2017).

One of the clusters was mostly composed of right and far-right activist accounts, but also included official politician accounts. The other cluster was mostly composed of left-wing activists and news outlets. In both groups, the pages/groups that shared the most content were primarily activist pages/groups in support of politicians.

Here, we can see two critical points of data. The first is that far-right content is much more engaged in sharing content and sharing similar content, which shows a certain level of organisation and coordination. All the average degrees on the right are higher than their counterparts on the left. Not only are they higher, but links from Bolsonaro supporters have almost three times the level of engagement than links from Lula supporters. This suggests that the far-right Bolsonaro supporters are much more mobilised in sharing content about their candidate, as Cesarino (2019) points out.

Table 9.1 Nodes of pages and groups that are more active in sharing content

	Cluster 1 – Far right	*Average outdegree*		*Cluster 2 – Left*	*Average outdegree*
Official state representative pages	03	252.6	Official state representative pages	0	0
Bolsonaro supporters	40	310.8	Lula supporters	48	123.3
Others	7	153.1	Media outlets	2	110

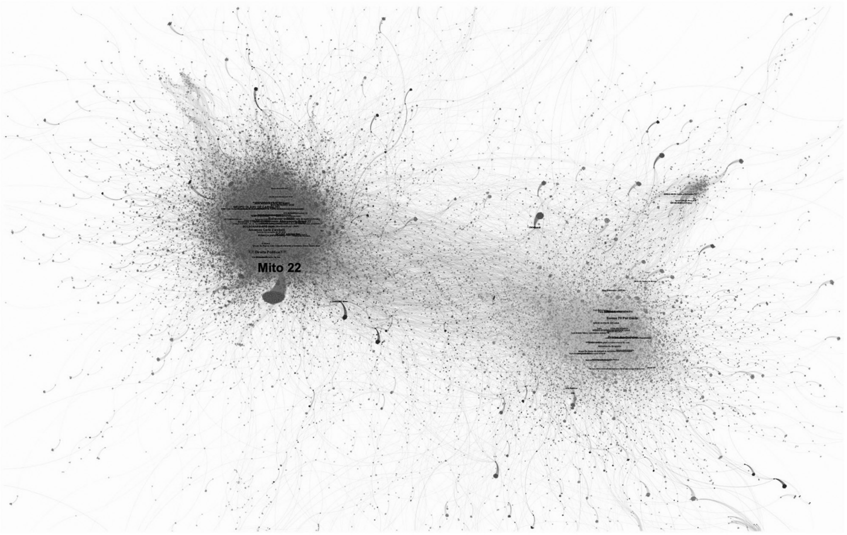


Figure 9.2 Network clusters with far-right nodes (light grey) and leftist nodes (dark grey).

When we looked into the types of pages/groups and activity, we saw that only the far-right group contained official state representative accounts, including Jair Bolsonaro's official page and pages from ministers and deputies. We also noticed that the average outdegree (indicating how engaged these pages/groups are in sharing content) is much higher for these groups when compared to the leftist outdegree.

The fact that authorities use social media channels to give themselves more visibility and connect with their audience is not new. However, research has shown that this "disintermediation" has also been used by populist leaders and politicians to connect with their audience and mobilise and disseminate problematic content (Engesser et al., 2016). In fact, that seems to be the case for Brazil.

When we examined the most shared links, we found that most of the content shared by the far-right cluster reflected criticism of the electronic voting machines and the Electoral Supreme Court (Table 9.2). This criticism often resorted to disinformation. Looking at the 50 most shared posts in each cluster (higher indegree), almost all content from the far-right cluster contained disinformation about the voting machines. For the leftist group, the majority of the shared content contained attacks on right-wing politicians or content about how trustworthy the electronic voting machine is. We also found that content classified as disinformation about the election had a higher average number of shares

Table 9.2 Disinformation and non-disinformation content shared by clusters

	Cluster 1 – Far right	*Average indegree*	*Cluster 2 – Leftist*	*Average indegree*
Disinformation content	40	182.8	0	0
Non-disinformation content	10	85	50	79

Table 9.3 Official state representative accounts

	Number of shared links	*With disinformation*
Account 1 (high-level official)	259	201 (77.6%)
Account 2 (high-level official)	167	160 (95.8%)
Account 3 (high-level official, i.e.: ministers and high government officials)	152	103 (67.7%)

(indegree) by the pages/groups in the far-right cluster, which indicates more engagement for this type of content.

This data suggests that not only is the far-right network much more engaged in sharing and legitimising disinformation about the voting machines, but most of the content shared in this cluster was misinformation.

Lastly, we examined how involved the state agents' accounts were in sharing disinformation. We examined all links shared by the three state authorities' accounts (Table 9.3).

These three official accounts shared a high number of links to disinformation about the electronic voting machines and the Brazilian elections. This does not mean that all the content they shared was disinformation, but most of the content posted about the electronic voting machines either questioned the process or was plainly false or misleading in general. The content that was shared the most came from politicians' official accounts, underscoring the seriousness of authorities legitimising this type of content. This shows that these state-sponsored accounts played a strong role in spreading and reinforcing disinformation about the voting machines and the election in Brazil. It also shows that state authorities played a stronger role in legitimising content, both for disinformation and information. 5,929 (93.2%) of the total 6,358 links containing some form of disinformation about the electronic voting machines came from Facebook. This also indicates that most of this content was shared on Facebook rather than inter-platform content. Finally, much of the disinformation is opinion-based, which may be one of the reasons Facebook is unable to moderate it.

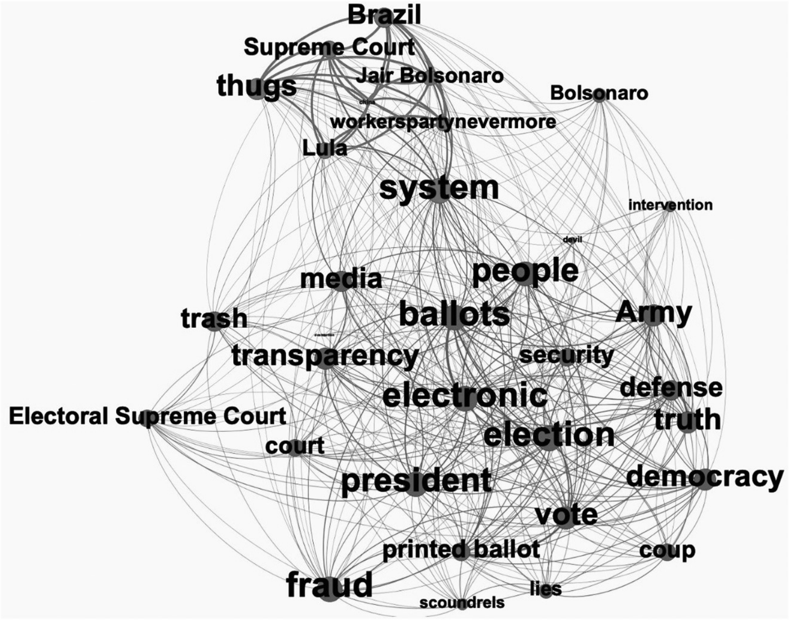
This data indicates that Brazilian far-right politicians and state authorities were instrumental in weaponising Facebook to protect their allies and legitimise

Bolsonaro's campaign using disinformation, which may also have an impact on extremism and polarisation, as referenced by other authors (Recuero, Soares et al., 2020; Chagas & Stefano, 2022). It also suggests that the disinformation these authorities post has a larger impact and gains more legitimacy, possibly due to the credibility associated with the government. These authorities use their connection to audiences, which is part of the populist strategy to increase visibility and engagement with their posts, while also increasing distrust and discredit regarding the electronic voting machines.

The disinformation identified in our case study acted as a form of political communication (Freelon & Wells, 2020) centred on creating distrust in how the electoral system is operated. Creating this distrust is a strategy for mobilising the people and their votes. This was done by sharing multimodal content, most of which was in the form of videos/images from Facebook users across different platforms.

Finally, we analysed the content of the messages which followed the links shared by the Bolsonaro supporters cluster. We developed the map below using the number of occurrences of each concept and the strength of their co-occurrence with others (Figure 9.3).

The map indicates that the "fraud" narrative used in the elections is strongly associated with the electronic voting machines. The institutions that coordinate the


Brazil
Supreme Court
Jair Bolsonaro
thugs
Bolsonaro
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workerspartynevermore
Lula
system
intervention
devil
people
media
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Army
trash
transparency
security
defense
electronic
Electoral Supreme Court
truth
election
court
president
democracy
vote
printed ballot
coup
fraud
lies
scoundrels

Figure 9.3 Co-occurrences of concepts that show the discourse in the right-wing cluster.

election process, the Electoral Supreme Court, and the Brazilian Supreme Court are associated with the terms "thugs" and "scoundrels". There are also claims for military intervention and the use "printed ballots". The electoral process is associated with the terms "lies" and "coup". There is also another cluster of messages against Lula da Silva and the Workers Party and in defence of Bolsonaro.

This data suggests that elements of populist discourse, particularly Bolsonarism, may be a factor in legitimising these messages. Here, we can see fundamental claims discrediting democratic institutions (for example, claiming a connection between these elites and a supposed election "coup" and "fraud" which would theoretically benefit Lula da Silva yet damage Bolsonaro). There are also strong elements of populism when Bolsonaro is presented as the great leader who fights against corrupt institutions, a common narrative in far-right ideologies (Guazina et al., 2022). Elements of religious discourse are also present, such as frequently referring to Lula da Silva as the "Devil" and using other terms such as "God" and "Hallelujah" (Kalil, 2018).

These elements of populism and Bolsonarism seem fundamental toward discrediting the election. Most of the disinformation is about conspiracies of election "fraud" and suspicions and false claims about the electronic voting machine. More important is the fact that most of this type of content contains accusations and claims that the Supreme Court and the Electoral Supreme Court are corrupt and play a part in the conspiracy.

Conclusion

Our data show that while state-sponsored official accounts were not the main force behind disinformation about the electronic voting machines, they were crucial in mobilising supporters because the three accounts that shared disinformation not only shared a lot of it but were also directly connected to the Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro. The fact that the cluster that shared disinformation on this subject is also composed of Bolsonaro supporters indicates that they spread the disinformation, which is legitimised by the authorities. Their engagement is another important finding, as these accounts seem to invest much more time and effort discrediting the election than the leftist ones do.

Most of the content comes from Facebook and shows that politicians are producing specific content and posting it on various platforms, thus reaching a wider audience (based on the algorithm). This also indicates that Bolsonarism has appropriated the platform in a much more efficient way than others have.

Our findings give us an overview of the disinformation spread on Facebook by the "Bolsonarist core machine" about electronic voting machines. They confirm that political authorities with direct links to Bolsonarism played a key role in disseminating this content. Their accusations originated from their official pages (verified by Facebook), using them to create a common enemy and a cause to fight—a populist strategy for promoting opposition and increasing visibility and engagement.

What's more, most of the content these accounts share is disinformation about the election and the electronic voting machines, but they are also capable of encouraging supporters and others to share and reproduce this problematic discourse. Thus, they are central for content legitimisation and for attacking the country's democracy.

Our findings show that the accounts we analysed are much more effective at sharing content because they use digital strategies, something which is commonplace for populists to do. In fact, they are key actors in the spread of disinformation, but the platform is still unable to flag disinformation as much of this shared content comes in the form of "opinion".

Lastly, the results give us important clues about the scope of action of disinformation agents within the Brazilian state and the impact of populist logic on Brazilian political communication. The campaign against electronic voting machines carried out by authorities indicates the dynamics of the interaction of Bolsonarist groups and how they were able to maintain a permanent mobilisation based on anti-establishment discourses and people's sovereignty claims. The military and marketing strategies mentioned by Cesarino (2019) promoted polarisation and gave those groups a moral justification for calling a coup d'état. In this sense, the violent attacks against the Brazilian Congress, the Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal), and the Presidential Palace (Palacio do Planalto) on January 8, 2023, can be understood as a concrete consequence of the spreading of disinformation strategies in a far-right populist logic.

Notes

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10 Citizen’s participation on social media against state-sponsored disinformation during the pandemic in Argentina[1]

Adriana Amado

Introduction: disinformation in a country without state transparency

The coronavirus outbreak presented common threats worldwide, but information and disinformation impacted countries differently in countries without transparency. High restrictions on freedom of the press, low institutional quality, and systematic disinformation may influence truth judgments (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). The pandemic campaign in Argentina is an illustrative case to analyse how the government limited public information to justify arbitrary decisions about public health and how citizens could counteract by activating civic accountability.

Consistent with a polarising communication style, the government labelled people who supported its decisions as patriotic and caring while characterising the critics as opponents of the nation’s health. An example of that coordinated strategy is this tweet from the Ministry of Interior, which backed the presidential statements: “With fact-based information, @alferdez deactivated lies and attempts to confuse and divide society. United Argentinian men and women continue with the same commitment to defending the health and lives of all in the face of this pandemic”.[2]

Citizens’ trust in government is seen as a critical ingredient for good governance during the pandemic, and its absence is likely to undermine governing capacity (Jennings et al., 2021). The period after the pandemic shows a progressive loss of trust and increasing polarisation. According to the Edelman Trust Report, public trust went from 49/100 to 37/100 between 2019 and 2023. Argentina is the most polarised country among the 28 countries the report analysed (Edelman, 2019, 2023).

The ruling Peronist party usually emphasises polarizing messages, presenting itself as the only source with the correct information and accusing the opposition and the press of being divisive. The pandemic slogan “*Cuidarte es cuidarnos*” (“Taking care of yourself means taking care of everyone”) also alluded to the responsibility for acting. Government harassment of the press and the

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opposition was particularly intense in the second half of 2020, when most countries returned to normal activities while Argentina kept schools closed and businesses shut down.

Disinformation was used to play down recommendations by prestigious scientific and international health agencies in the global press. In the name of fighting against fake news, the official statements tried to weaken the credibility of independent scientists and the press that presented alternative information. Therefore, journalists and professional associations denounced harassment and press freedom restrictions on many opportunities during the pandemic.[3]

Argentina is an excellent example of the close bond between populism and post-truth because it illustrates how disinformation is a tool for boosting suspicions and polarisation. As Waisbord proposed, populist politics is symptomatic of the consolidation of post-truth communication:

> Populism opposes fundamental principles of democratic communication, namely the need for fact-based, reasoned debate, tolerance, and solidarity – essential principles for viable public life in today's globalized and multicultural societies. It also rejects key principles of public communication, including the role of watchdog journalism, unfettered speech, state protection of speech rights, citizens' access to public information, and the centrality of deliberation across differences.
>
> (Waisbord, 2018, p. 2)

By 2022, 98% of the countries in Western Europe and North America were liberal democracies, and only 4% of the democracies in Latin America enjoyed a system that guarantees the protection of individual freedoms, a system of checks and balances, and freedom of expression (V-Dem Institute, 2022). The variables that analyse the quality of democracy include, specifically, the quality of information. Moreover, attitudes that obstruct free information or contribute to misinformation are non-democratic as they curtail citizens' rights to ask and know: "While disinformation, polarization, and autocratization reinforce each other, democracies reduce the spread of disinformation" (V-Dem Institute, 2023, p. 5).

According to this ranking, Argentina has been classified as an "electoral democracy" since 1984, when the country started the most extended period of democracy after many periods of military dictatorships. After all these years, the country could not solve the authoritarian heritage of official secrecy regarding public statistics, limited transparency, and obstacles to accessing public information. Although Argentina only passed a law granting access to public information in 2017, barriers to transparency still exist and have become an additional impediment to managing the crisis.

Polarisation, populism, and propaganda were tightly bonded in Argentina, making this case a conspicuous example of how these conditions consolidated a post-truth atmosphere. The pervasive propaganda repeating over eight months, "*Yo me quedo en casa*" ("I stay at home"), did not only trivialise the prevention of contagion with only one solution (the prolonged lockdown) but also presented the lockdown as a patriotic commitment. Far from being a crusade, citizens reported abuses by security forces enforcing the lockdown. Civic protests arose nationwide during 2020 and 2021; in some cases, state governments (police) used excessive force against marchers and limited journalists' ability to report on the situation, including arrest and criminal charges for breaking quarantine (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These circumstances put Argentina in such a position "where violence can puncture the dictator's image, prompting a spiral of protest and internal dissidence" (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

On March 20, 2020, President Alberto Fernández signed an Executive decree (297/2020) called "Preventive and Mandatory Social Isolation" which had 948 extensions or renewals over the following two years without the intervention of Congress. The resulting 234-day lockdown was one of the longest in the world in 2020, even more so than in Bolivia (131 days) and the United Kingdom (112 days). The Oxford University tracker confirmed that restrictions over 70% of mobility persisted until September 30, 2021 (Blavatnik School of Government, n.d.). Although global evidence soon showed that lockdowns were less effective than initially believed, the government maintained the decision. Many studies pointed out that other governments similarly misled the public about the real impact of lockdown policies and that social distancing led the public to question the efficacy of such procedures (Hatcher, 2020). The Fernández administration overestimated social distancing as the only tool against the coronavirus, a decision grounded in political reasons rather than scientific evidence and global trends.

In public messages, President Fernández and his spokespersons frequently insulted[4] critics who challenged the strict lockdown instructions, inflaming polarisation. Journalists and the opposition were publicly accused of acting against public health when they asked for information or compared the national situation with other countries that rolled back lockdown policies and other preventive measures. As the public data were not accessible, most of the reliable information came from independent specialists and citizens' initiatives on social media that brought new information to contrast with the official version. Contrary to what WHO defined as "infodemics", in countries like Argentina, social media was largely a reliable source of information where citizens could find sources that challenged the severe restrictions on access to information imposed by the government. The active participation of citizens promoted reopening long school closures by reuniting parents from all over the country (Baratta, 2021). Furthermore, the scandal of the celebration of parties in the presidential residency during the lockdown, when reunions were strictly prohibited, was exposed by a group of citizens on Twitter.[5]

Far from a transparency policy, sanitary communication was based on an aggressive advertising campaign of more than five thousand actions for the first semester of 2020. According to a governmental report,[6] the presidency published more than 19 Covid-19 campaigns, 88 pieces of advertising for TV, 87 for radio, and 137 for print media. This also meant a significant budget for media companies suffering from the economic crisis driven by the pandemic. Media received increased funding from the government, which was particularly necessary during a dramatic decrease in private advertising due to the suspension of economic activities.

Based on government data, about a 20% increase in government advertising for 2020 was estimated, and a 71% increase in 2021.[7] State advertising provided much-needed subsidies and helped to control the press as a form of direct censorship or indirect self-censorship of journalism (Shahbaz & Funk, 2020), especially in the provinces. If government advertising usually represented the principal subsidy for most media organisations in the pre-pandemic era (Crettaz, 2019), it was even more significant during the lockdowns. Hence, the dependence on governmental advertising conditioned the freedom to criticise the official version. The influence of advertising campaigns was directly due to indirect pressures on the press, given the strong media dependence on state funding.

This chapter focuses on state disinformation as an intentional strategy to generate delusions and misperceptions in a tradition of secrecy and poor transparency in the Argentinian context. Misinformation and disinformation refer to "sharing incorrect, inaccurate, or misleading content, but they are separated by intentionality. While misinformation entails accidentally sharing inaccurate content, disinformation constitutes deliberate deception, often based on outright fabrications" (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021, p. 34). In the case of Argentina, the government developed campaigns supposedly against fake news and anti-vaccine groups, both marginal phenomena in the country. On the contrary, during the pandemic, the population perceived that the government was the primary source of disinformation in Argentina (36%), in second place after politicians (43%) (Nielsen et al., 2021, p. 23).

Post-truth is characterised by general anxiety surrounding public truth claims and the legitimacy of those who present themselves as truth-tellers (Harsin, 2018). This concern is manifested in a constant preoccupation with accusations of dishonesty, which in turn promotes public scepticism and distrust. The post-truth system is embedded in a culture saturated with promotionalism and propaganda. The Argentine vaccine campaign showed many examples of intentionally misleading claims, which had a material impact on public health, and objective facts are often blurred by appealing to emotion and political belief.

The Covid-19 vaccine campaign illustrated three elements of the government's disinformation strategy: populist communication with insufficient data and transparency, perpetuating a one-sided, state-sponsored disinformation rather than scientific information, and the lack of coordination of information across jurisdictions. Together, these elements reinforced a post-truth system undermining social trust and democratic institutions.

Populist communication in action during the pandemic

Officers acted as information autocrats (Guriev & Treisman, 2019) during the pandemic, as they widely used disinformation to dismiss and criticise institutions and journalism. This strategy erodes public debates, not necessarily by disseminating falsehoods but by restricting public information, spreading inaccurate content, or denying alternative versions from the press or the citizens, as studies about Trump's style depicted (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Meeks, 2020). This mechanism is enhanced in times of uncertainty, such as the 2020 pandemic, where governments used disinformation to justify decisions (Waisbord, 2022). When fear spreads rapidly, institutions can use information as a valuable resource to communicate calmness and security and provide citizens with guidelines for compliance with public health measures (Aleixandre-Benavent et al., 2020). In critical, complex situations such as the coronavirus outbreak, citizens consider searching for essential information an activity (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). From the start of the pandemic, Argentinian citizens and independent specialists actively contrasted local news with that published by medical agencies, scientific journals, international media, and global organisations. This active and bubbling conversation could be frantic or chaotic but not necessarily unreliable: a lot of trustworthy sources for the press came from social media as doctors, data specialists, or simply citizens with time to verify information in the extended quarantine.

Populism here refers to a political communication style defined by top-down, leader-centred communication, antagonistic discourse against critics (including journalists and the media), and fixation with news coverage (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Elements commonly present in contemporary politics, such as personalising political communication, uncivil discourse, and politicians' obsession with media (Waisbord, 2018), were evident in Argentine public communication. Many organisations denounced the government's use of state-run media and social networks to discredit journalists and the open harassment of journalists by government officials (Jacob & Amado, 2021).

Since 2003, except for the four years during which the Peronist Party has governed, government communication has displayed populist traits: vertical patterns of communication, personalistic leadership; aggressiveness against critics; and obsessive control of news, considering critical media as reactionary opponents. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated the emotional populist patterns (Manfredi et al., 2022). The administration is part of the 'pink-tide' in the region that related the administrations of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina (2003–2015, 2019-2023) with 'left-wing populists' as Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2006–present), and Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela (1999–present). The Peronist Party emerged in the 1940s around the charismatic personality of Juan Domingo Perón, who established the tradition of nationalist, anti-elite, anti-US movements that explained the alignment towards

Russia and China during the pandemic. This populism is different from versions of liberal traditions, as it “places the state at the center of media systems and approaches market and civil society as opposed or subjected to the designs of the government. It sees journalism as inevitably divided between ‘popular-national’ and ‘foreign-oligarchic’ interests, and views the state as a necessary instrument to redress imbalances in democracies and press systems” (Waisbord, 2013).

Early in the pandemic, government propaganda justified the lockdown as the only way to prevent contagion. The administration needed a game-changer to end the quarantine and reopen activities. President Fernández announced the vaccination campaign on December 28, 2020, boasting that Argentina was among the first countries to start vaccination. Additionally, he intended to show the world the success of cooperation with the Russia-China axis against US hegemony (Osborn, 2021), reinforcing the party ideology.

The anti-US climate was, for many years, pushed forward by Chinese and Russian media worldwide (Milewski, 2020), which in Argentina strengthened geopolitical realignment. During her presidency, between 2007 and 2015, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner signed several commercial agreements, including the arrival of Spanish-language broadcasting Russia Today (RT) to the Argentine media system in 2014. And in 2021, as vice president, she supervised the negotiations for the Russian vaccine (Osborn, 2021). As part of this proximity, Argentine authorities collaborated with the Spanish translations of the documents to share them with regional governments, as mentioned by health ministry officers.

By the end of 2020, authorities celebrated a secret agreement with the Russian Direct Investment Fund, which funded and distributed the Sputnik V vaccine, supposedly giving Argentina priority in receiving the doses. Argentina was the first country outside the former Soviet Union to approve it on December 23, 2020, and the first shipment arrived with great fanfare. The government communication thoroughly used political polarisation to justify its purchase of Russian and Chinese vaccines through intense propaganda. A study of social media activity showed that the Russian state account @ActualidadRT tweets during the period contained 61 explicit mentions of Venezuela, 107 of Mexico, and 220 of Argentina (Linvill et al., 2022). The research established that Argentine state accounts and politicians were responsible for one-quarter of the conversation on the topic on Twitter. A similar percentage of all other verified accounts, mostly journalists, highlighted the country’s leaders’ decisive actions to secure ample supplies of vaccines amid the global shortfall.

The government never disclosed the technical documentation for acquiring the Russian and Chinese vaccines (Poder Ciudadano, 2022). Russia only published a peer-reviewed article in September 2020 with inconsistent results on I/II Phase trials without sharing data (Cazzola et al., 2021). The press release hardly shared third-phase results (Transparency International Global Health, 2021). The state’s disinformation intended to underestimate the controversy surrounding the Sputnik V vaccine. Many scholars asked for data accessible to anyone interested in verifying pragmatic, real-world studies, as the Gamaleya Center, the developer of Sputnik V, did not present consistent third-phase studies (Cazzola et al., 2021). The countries that had approved the Sputnik V vaccine, such as Argentina, Venezuela, Russia, and Turkey, are not recognised for having a tradition of transparent policies. Hence, accessing the documents that validated the government's decisions was impossible. Global health agencies such as the World Health Organization and its Americas office (PAHO) did not approve the Russian vaccine because doubts about its effectiveness against coronavirus mutations persisted. This circumstance represented an obstacle for people vaccinated with Sputnik V who could not travel to the European Union and the US, where only approved vaccines were accepted for entry.

Argentina paid the highest average price per vaccine agreement: U$ 80, substantially higher than the average in Latin America of U$ 6 and Brazil of U$ 11 (Transparency International Global Health, 2021, p. 28). Both Chinese and Russian vaccines, the providers that the Argentinian Government prioritised, were more expensive and less effective, so vaccinated people required an urgent third dose. In these critical circumstances, the aggressive communication from Russia reinforced the disinformation. For example, while the second dose of the Russian vaccine, based on a different vector, was unavailable, the Spanish Twitter account @SputnikVaccine pervasively announced[8] that the Russian laboratory soon delivered the second vector.

Three months after vaccination began, by the end of March 2021, only 1.6% of the population was fully vaccinated. Globally, the period between doses was 4 to 12 weeks. In Argentina, on March 31, 2021, with only 7.45% of the population having received one dose and the second dose unavailable, the Health Ministry decided to lengthen the interval to 12 weeks or more to "vaccinate more people with the first dose".[9] To justify this decision against WHO recommendations, the government cited the collaboration of state health institutes and the support of Peronist governors. For example, a group of investigators and Nicolás Kreplak, the Health Minister of the Buenos Aires province (where more than one-third of the country's population lives), published a paper to validate the idea that one dose was better than nothing (González et al., 2021).

Although the government tried to regain popularity during an economic and social crisis, the decision failed for several reasons. The supposed altruistic intentions were refuted by results, as Argentina faced the worst moment in the pandemic, with higher rates of deaths in 2021 than Peru and Brazil. The media of the vaccinated population conceals the divergence between the 24 provincial territories. For example, provinces such as Misiones, Chaco, Mendoza, and Chubut hovered around 60%, while the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires exceeded 94% with total doses. The facts confirmed that decisions put public health at stake.

By the end of December 2021, only 13.52% of the Argentine population had received the booster dose required to be immunised against the new coronavirus variant when Omicron appeared. In the same period, 57.42% of the population had the third dose in Chile and 44.1% in Uruguay. While the announcements of the vaccine against the coronavirus brought some hope to the world, Argentina ended 2021 with 118,176 deaths from Covid-19.

State propaganda is not public information

In populist communication, reliable information is usually replaced by propaganda and polarised versions of social events. According to this style, disinformation was used in Argentina as a tool for controlling the public debate to justify restrictions on the press and digital conversation. Far from improving the quality of information, the government directly or indirectly controlled local fact-checkers, mainly by imposing the official version on most of the verifications of state-run observatories and commercial fact-checkers.

Directly controlled initiatives were those under governmental departments. One of them was "Confiar" (To trust, in Spanish), a section of the website of the state agency Telam, created during the pandemic to fight the "infodemic [defined as] information epidemic within the pandemic", as the website described.[10] The posts only verified marginal rumours, without a demonstrated impact on public opinion, but were valuable to validate the government's version. The website had no transparency on methodology nor a responsible author for verifications, mostly relying on political versions rather than scientific data. An example related to the state disinformation campaign to justify the delay of the second dose is the supposed fake news attributed to a well-recognised pathologist, who properly recommended having two doses to be adequately immunised. With a pseudo-verification, the site tried to refute the scientist's statement by merely mentioning anonymous sources saying that one dose of the vaccine was effective.[11]

Another initiative came from Defensoría del Público, a name that confusingly alludes to an Ombudsman Office, although it is a government department regulated by the Audiovisual Media Law. During the pandemic, they proposed the creation of an observatory with the suggestive name of "Nodio" (Spanish acronym of No-hate), with the function of tracking "broadcast symbolic violence and malicious information".[12]

These initiatives directly controlled the public debate by flagging the information as right or wrong, according to its attachment to the official version. After the debate arose in society, the government created a commission called "Networks for the common good",[13] another mechanism of signaling to some persons to dissuade the people from public expression. Officers use those nicely sounding names to signal opposition and critical journalists. Professional associations, such as the Foro de Periodismo Argentino (FOPEA, a journalists' organisation), the Asociación de Entidades Periodísticas Argentinas[14] (ADEPA, the newspapers' association), and the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP, Interamerican Society of Newspapers)[15] expressed, on several occasions, their concerns about government authorities dictating what pandemic-related information is deemed appropriate.

These indirect controls of information coexisted with low levels of government transparency. Argentina scored 38 out of 100 in the Transparency International (2021) ranking, even lower than in previous years. Fact-checking organisations were limited to official information, which was often unverifiable. The ten vaccine contracts signed by the administration were still were in secrecy by the end of 2022. The agreement with the Russian Direct Investment Fund was announced on December 12, 2020. The press release informed that there were "sufficient doses to be able to vaccinate 10 million Argentines between January and February", adding that "the contract has a preference in favor of Argentina to be able to access the necessary doses to vaccinate 5 million more people during the month of March".[16] The populist rhetoric of the opposition to globalisation (Guriev & Treisman, 2019), involved in this case the alignment with the enemies of "the Empire", as the Peronist storytelling refers to the US and Europe. Reinforcing these patriotic sentiments, ministers constantly appealed to gaining independence from Western pharmaceutical corporations.

Civic organisations set formal requirements to access information for acquisitions, firstly in 2020 for sanitary supplies and then in 2021 for vaccine contracts (Poder Ciudadano, 2022). Still, the negotiations between the government and laboratories were only partially revealed—only data on prices, the number of doses, and the contract's total value. Access to vaccine information was repeatedly denied, even to members of Congress. In these circumstances, fact-checking organisations could only work with official reports, which were unreliable in many cases. For example, a fact-checker published information about the Covid-19 deaths but relied on the official source, the Health Ministry, without alternative verification parameters.[17]

When social media were more reliable than state sources

The longstanding political culture of secrecy and unreliable public statistics worsened during the pandemic. Although the Law of Information Access, issued in 2007, mandates data accessibility, the Health Ministry website barely offered general figures of daily cases after July 2020. The complete data set required statistical processing to be accessible. The main initiative for processing the data into graphs and interactive requests came from citizens, who began offering graphs and analyses from their Twitter accounts to the media and population. Soon, covidstats.com.ar turned into a site referenced in the leading media.[18]

The access to the site information allowed journalists to detect some inconsistencies in the official reports, such as delays in registering 22% of deaths in 10 days.[19] Similar irregularities in the registration of Covid-19 tests determined that the Our World in Data site of the University of Oxford excluded data from Argentina between September 30 and October 7, 2020 (Mathieu et al., n.d.).

Vaccination data had similar problems, especially in the distribution of vaccines in different provinces.

This is an example of quality information that citizens actively shared on social media, granting crowdsourced fact-checking of disinformation generated by the State. After the pandemic, online and social media consolidated their top position as a source of news in Argentina (Newman et al., 2022) while politics and government trust decreased (Edelman, 2019, 2023). Quite the opposite, the concept of "infodemic" was instrumental for the Argentine government to divide, on one side, official versions, which were the only considered legitimate, and on the other, citizens' news, which turned out to be attested to reliable sources. As part and parcel of the usual antagonism between the President and the press, the claim of infodemic became a motto to indiscriminately refer to information or disinformation. The official version was the only one to be repeated in the name of responsibility and respect for government orders and decisions.

The official advertising campaign warned citizens of the risk of an "infodemic" by repeating in all the media, "That's why, if you need information, we ask you to consult official sources. Preventing infodemic is another way of looking after each other". As established, alternative versions were signalled as suspicious and threatening to public health, and the president's spokesperson regularly harassed critical press and non-governmental sources, such as independent scientific or civic organisations that compared the Argentine situation to other countries.

To divide public opinion, officers clearly stated that the people who approved and shared official information were patriotic and responsible, and those who questioned governmental decisions were disloyal and insensitive to coronavirus victims. As part of this strategy, the government received the support of personalities like artists and intellectuals explicitly aligned with the official party.

Many academics reinforced the official vision with supportive messages on their social media and reports based on governmental data, which soon turned out to be wrong. For example, a group of researchers from Conicet, the state scientific agency, published a report about the social impact of the lockdown.[20] The authors criticised the press and suggested that the government not offer press conferences, reinforcing the politics of opacity instead of demanding transparency.

The mechanism is a classic propaganda tool (Domenach, 1986): supposedly reasonable people supported governmental decisions to control the pandemic against the people labelled seditious and accused of putting public health at risk merely by sharing alternative information from reliable sources. Science, in this perspective, is only on the government's side.

Another factor made the argument fallacious: The government blamed the press for contributing to the "infodemic" when it did not reflect the official position. However, the statements about the vaccines were primarily based on Russian information. The Peronist party in power built a state media system prone to receiving Russian information. Some reports confirmed the influence of Russian sources on social media in Argentina and Venezuela, the countries which bought the Sputnik V vaccine (Linvill et al., 2022; Torrealba et al., 2022).

Authorities did not present evidence of the supposed local "infodemic" against most research that confirmed that misinformation was a minimal part of the circulating information (Altay et al., 2023; Brennen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the high levels of immunised people as soon as the vaccine was available confirmed that, if fake news existed, it did not significantly impact the population. On the contrary, the level of information about most relevant Covid-19 issues demonstrated to be acceptable within the Argentinian population (Nielsen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the excess of Covid-19 content generated news avoidance (de Bruin et al., 2021) and scepticism, more than public opinion manipulation, as the government assumed when they referred to the risk of fake news. So "infodemic" was a presumptive diagnosis that was functional to the disinformation strategy of the government, without evidence of the presence of misinformation in society. This scenario increased scepticism among citizens, while trust in the institutions decreased, accelerating a post-truth spiral (Flew, 2021).

Conclusion: state sponsored truth vs citizen reinforced trust

Although the government insisted on presenting the pandemic policies as a success, the results were tragic. The mistakes in the vaccination process and the lack of accountability severely damaged Argentine society in many ways. By the end of the pandemic, in June 2022, Argentina was placed among the countries with the highest Covid-19 mortality per million people (Mathieu et al., n.d.). The longest lockdowns, including two years of school closures and travel restrictions, had severe social consequences. By the end of 2020, 42% of Argentina's urban population lived in poverty, according to the Institute of National Statistics reports. Extreme poverty affected 10.5% of the people, while child poverty was 57.7%. According to Unicef, in 2022, two in three children were deprived of fundamental rights such as education or access to primary well-being conditions.

Besides these tragic social consequences, pandemic communication accelerated the erosion of the credibility of the institutions and actors involved in the public conversation. Trust in sources between 2020 and 2021 substantially declined for all institutions except for personal contacts, according to a study by the Reuters Institute (Nielsen et al., 2021). A year after the pandemic, respondents mentioned scientists as the most reliable source (81%), followed by global health organisations (69%), national health organisations (59%), news organisations (48%), people known to respondents (46%), government (38%), unknown people (22%), and politicians (21%).

Information became essential for the government to legitimise the extraordinary decisions that the pandemic required. However, the Argentine government polluted public information while discrediting journalistic and civic sources.

Disinformation does not necessarily imply disseminating falsehoods (Waisbord, 2022). Partial truths are enough to fuel confusion or scepticism. Misinformation is particularly effective in this context of public distrust of the news media, which autocratic governments tend to build through the discrediting of institutions and journalism. As it is known, "The decline in trust in the press is both concomitant with declines in public faith in other institutions of democratic governance and a phenomenon in its own right". (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 146)

The pandemic undermined low levels of interpersonal trust (Latinobarómetro, 2018) and news consumption (Newman et al., 2019). In 2021, only one in three Argentines trusted the news (Newman et al., 2021). The study also confirmed that ideological position strongly determines news consumption in Argentina. The Covid-19 scenario amplified polarisation.

The 2019 presidential elections consolidated a two-party system in which two competing party coalitions, Peronist Frente de Todos (centre-left) and Juntos por el Cambio (centre-right), garnered nine out of ten votes. Mid-term elections in 2021 divided the chambers in half, making the ruling party lose the vast majority the Peronist party had kept in Parliament since 1989. Thus, the divide was established between those who supported the Executive's decisions and those who questioned them, treated as enemies of the population. The sudden support the new President won in the first month of the pandemic was rapidly lost in the subsequent months, reaching 2022, the lowest level of trust that a President has had since 2003 (Escuela de Gobierno, n.d.). The numerous protests all over the country, reclaiming human rights such as education and justice, were another evidence of social disenchantment. The 2021 midterm election confirmed the lowest level of support for the official party in the last 20 years.

These events show how the pandemic found the health system without transparency tools. Most academics were against transparency, reinforcing the governmental strategy as journalism depended on the initiatives of civil society. Argentina's government discredited digital activity during the pandemic through many institutions. Most research centres and academics are part of the state system and collaborated, purposefully or not, with the disinformation strategy. They signed reports and papers backing presidential decisions and supported the "infodemic" diagnoses without consistent evidence, prioritising supporting the government rather than defending the citizens' right to information.

These factors define the Argentine information system. The structure of the state media system is like the Russian media: both use the name of traditional media, but they are a "richly funded, well-staffed, formal organization in the world producing, disseminating, and marketing news in the service of the government" (Elswah & Howard, 2021). During the pandemic, this kind of state media was highly politicised (Litvinenko et al., 2022). The institutions leading the pseudo-fact-checking initiatives are part of the Argentine media system.

This case shows many differences in the disinformation approach for autocracies or electoral democracies compared to liberal democracies (Jennings et al., 2021). Contrary to the assumption of the WHO that platforms threaten democracy (Cosentino, 2023), this case showed that civic dialogue on social media can provide quality information and verify state disinformation in contexts without independent institutions and a free press. Furthermore, the participatory action of social media verified public statistics and provided reliable information to the press. Civic participation revealed in 2021 the most embarrassing scandal in the Presidential house, related to the First Lady's birthday party with many guests during the lockdown of 2020, while society was forbidden to leave home under any circumstances, including the burial of Covid-19 victims.

The global scale of the health crisis and the circulation of information facilitated comparing national strategies to the rest of the world and accessing information about vaccines that the government was supposed to share. State-sponsored disinformation was possible because Argentina has no policies of active transparency of government actions. Since the government will never aim to be accountable, citizens could actively ask for updated and accessible data on social media. In societies with prevalent governmental propaganda, freedom of the net was closely related to freedom of information.

Notes

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2 Twitter @wadodecorrido, "Con información concreta, @alferdez desarmó las mentiras y los intentos por confundir y dividir a la sociedad. Unidos, los argentinos y argentinas seguimos con el mismo compromiso de defender la salud y la vida de todos y todas ante esta pandemia". September 5, 2020, https://t.co/S3qdMDabIU.

3 La Nación, "Intimidaciones contra la prensa: 300 periodistas firmaron una solicitada", June 7, 2020, https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/intimidaciones-mas-300-periodistas-firmaron-solicitada-principales-nid2391242/.

4 The President frequently used expressions such as those quoted in the title of this article: "Alberto Fernández: And to the idiots, I tell them the Argentina of the rogues, it is over", *Bae Negocios*, March 25, 2020, retrieved from https://www.baenegocios.com/politica/Fernandez-dijo-que-el-aislamiento-si-es-necesario-lo-prolongara-pero-hoy-termina-el-martes-20200325-0057.html.

5 *La Nación*, "Polémica por ingresos a Olivos en el cumpleaños de Alberto Fernández, en pleno aislamiento", July 30, 2021, retrieved from https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/polemica-por-ingresos-a-olivos-en-el-cumpleanos-de-alberto-fernandez-en-pleno-aislamiento-nid29072021/.

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11 State-sponsored disinformation in Greece

From the Novartis scandal to the wiretapping of politicians, journalists, and citizens

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Introduction

During its post-bailout era, Greece faced a wave of corruption revelations and political polarisation, reaching momentum in 2016, when whistle-blowers' testimonies to the US Justice Department prompted Greek authorities to investigate bribes to doctors and officials by Novartis pharmaceutical company between 2012 and 2016 (Kohn et al., n.d.; Telloglou, 2017). Leading politicians were allegedly involved, spurring a long feud between political parties. In August 2022, while the notorious Novartis case remained legally unsettled, an unprecedented wiretapping scandal erupted. Journalists, politicians, ministers, and even military heads were reportedly targets of state surveillance (Karavokyris, 2022; Euractiv, 2022). Both cases triggered public disputes, controversial reporting, and polarisation. This study traces *patterns of collusion* and *corruption* between state functionaries, political interests, and commercial media in both cases. Valuable insights are extracted through interviews with expert witnesses in the *modus operandi* of power politics in Greece.

Disinformation is here perceived as the strategic supply of weaponised information. Others view it as the dissemination of misleading information aiming to manipulate public opinion and influence policy making (Fallis, 2015; Benkler et al., 2018). Conversely, *misinformation* concerns the sharing of false or misconceived information unintentionally (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The occurrence of both disinformation and misinformation can lead to information disorder, entailing problems of pervasive and systemic nature (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The study focuses on strategic, state-sponsored, but also collusionary types of disinformation, in which actors advance specific tactics, including scheduled propaganda launches to pre-emptively control information supply in order to manipulate opinions and public orientations.[1] Strategic state-sponsored

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disinformation is defined as: the systematic, coordinated effort by state and colluding elite actors to generate and disseminate false or misleading information, aiming to achieve political and economic dominance. Such subjugating disinformation supersedes sporadic instances. It is rather grounded in well-planned, timely strategies whose objectives are to eliminate opposition and gain absolute control over public discourse.

The driving force behind such *disinformation strategies* lies in the *collusion* between state actors, private media owners, and corporate stakeholders ascertaining mutual exploitation, while coordination renders such strategies potent and easier to implement, bypassing regulations and "the rule of law", without formally abolishing them. Corruption thrives in conditions of lacking transparency, ignorance, and confusion (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2011, p. 461; 2013, p. 31). Elite power circuits foster such environments conducive to disinformation, capacitating leading actors to benefit from the manipulation of the public, thereby consolidating mutually beneficial power. By leveraging their combined resources and influence, they can efficiently achieve their objectives, further entrenching disinformation as a tool for political dominance.

So, this study stresses the role of collusionary political and economic elite circuits, orchestrating and sustaining information manipulations. "Attack as defence" is the preeminent tactic observed in political communication efforts.[2] It forms part of a broader arsenal of hegemonic political communication strategies, essentially seeking to deny facts, distort reality, attack and intimidate dissident voices, causing confusion, coercion, and disorientation in the public. The conception of *strategic disinformation* comprises major components of obliterating real events from current affairs and news bulletins, whenever they counteract dominant rhetoric, or favour oppositional discourses. The implementation of disinformation tactics, combined with collusion between state and commercial media actors corrode political knowledge. Hence, disinformation is a key functional aspect in the process of inducing political ignorance. Thus, strategies of disempowering and exploitability of the audiences prevail (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2011, 2013, 2014a). The Greek specificity of disinformation is distinct in its explicitly collusionary and blatantly state-sponsored aspects which exacerbate democratic processes.[3]

The examined surveillance case can be seen in the light of an alarming expansion of spying software at a pan-European level. In 2017, the European Parliament (EP) cautioned for the strengthening of regulatory oversight to ascertain that intelligence services operate according to standards acceptable to democratic societies (EP, 2017). Nevertheless, the use of spyware by governments for surveillance purposes has expanded, causing concerns for EU citizens. It was accentuated after the revelation, in 2021, that Pegasus and equivalent spyware, including Predator and Candiru, were used on a large scale, targeting activists, opposition figures, journalists, diplomats, even members of the judiciary (Forbidden Stories & Amnesty International, 2020). Lack of independent institutional oversight contributes to abuses of such controversial spyware in countries like Hungary, Greece, Poland, and Spain. The complex structure of companies trading in spyware hinders transparency and accountability regarding acquisition and use by law enforcement and intelligence agencies (Mijatović, 2023).

This critical analysis of key events, media reports and discursive inputs illuminates disinformation practices and patterns evident in both the Novartis and the wiretapping case. They are examined from the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Meyer & Wodak, 2009),[4] crucial in identifying propaganda strategies and devices, as part of consistent efforts to shape events and influence public relations with an enterprise, idea, or group. Target audiences, means of reaching them, and the agencies utilising propaganda are all essential components. Wodak describes how textual and visual content, message control, and manipulation practices contribute to the discursive construction of propaganda.

Two semi-structured expert interviews and one expert interview provide insights into the unfolding of these affairs, and their intricate implications (Bogner et al., 2018). Although personal involvement of the interviewees may legitimately be criticised as predisposed subjectivity and bias, yet, this is the "focal point" (Van & Donders, 2019) that confers precious insight and context to this critical approach.

Interviewees were selected for their diverse, relevant perspectives on the cases. They are: (a) Ioanna Papadakou, a journalist specialising in legal reporting and currently Press Officer at The Left in the European Parliament; (b) Nikos Karachalios, a political communication analyst, former Strategy and Policy Planning Secretary of the Greek government (2004–2008); and (c) Alexandros Tarkas, op-ed columnist at *Dimokratia* newspaper, co-editor of *Defence and Diplomacy* magazine, and financial risk expert. Papadakou was selected for her involvement as an investigative journalist in the Novartis case, but also because she faced charges for her reporting. Tarkas was also among the accused journalists although he never reported on the case. These journalists were chosen with consideration also to their divergent ideological inclinations and non-partisan affiliation at the time of their involvement in the cases. Karachalios was chosen for his expertise in political communication strategy, his affiliation with the New Democracy (ND) party, and notably, his thorough knowledge of the peculiar ethos permeating the ruling party when the surveillance scandal surfaced. His critical perspective on government crisis management granted illuminating insights. The semi-structured interviews allowed for guided and open-ended discussions facilitating in-depth exploration.[5] After data collection, an issue-specific thematic analysis followed, and a cross-examination assisted in concentrating on aspects of disinformation.

The strange fate of inconclusive scandals in Greece

Authorities in Greece have long focused on what is classified as petty corruption and organised crime, from smuggling and trafficking to fraud and extortion (Bezlov

& Gounev, 2012). However, official inquiries and reporting on white-collar crime have been scant (Antonopoulos & Tagarov, 2012). Academic research analysed clientelism, yet it barely delved into issues of "elite integrity" and accountability of politicians and high-ranking officials. Cases that fall under the definition of institutional "upper-level" corruption, implicating politicians in power and legislators, have repeatedly shaken the Greek administrations, with justice being ineptly served (Lambropoulou, 2015, Morris, 2011). Such instances include:

- The notorious Siemens bribery scandal (2008) involving illicit dealings between company and government officials concerning projects on public security equipment for the 2004 Olympics and contracts with the Greek telecommunications organisation (OTE).[6] A decade later, the 20 defendants were acquitted due to the statute of limitations.
- The infamous Falciani list, ("Lagarde list"), was handed to the Greek government in 2010 by the then finance minister of France in order to tackle tax evasion. Reports revealed that the government altered the list and stalled the investigation. The then Finance Minister, George Papaconstantinou, was found guilty only of a misdemeanour and put on a three-year probation. The graver charges were dropped allegedly due to a lack of unequivocal evidence. Ironically, however, journalist and magazine director Kostas Vaxevanis, who published the list, was prosecuted twice for violating data privacy laws, to be acquitted in 2013 (Kitsantonis, 2013).

Collude to dominate: the entrenched political communication ethos

The relationship between the media and political elites in Greece is analysed in Hallin and Mancinis's *polarised pluralist* model, as observable also in other Mediterranean countries (2012). Apart from high levels of political polarisation, it features clientelism, bias, instrumentalisation by media power elites, but also governmental interference in the media and influence (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002).

Commercialisation and deregulation of the media sector in the 1990s resulted in ownership concentration into a handful of influential magnates (Papathanasopoulos, 2001; Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2014b); mainly tycoons in the construction and shipping industries, notably as bidders of public procurement contracts. This *power circuit of business interests* has long depended on reciprocal favours and support by political elites, who conversely depend on the former to propagate their political communication. This "mutual exploitation frame" underwent changes; dependence of media outlets on advertising revenue and lending deepened over time, reinforcing the triangle of intertwinement (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2014a, Iosifidis & Boucas, 2015).

Political corruption in Greece is brimming with scandals involving multinational companies and local magnates, justifying the notion that a *group of wealthy* *and powerful* “oligarchic families” essentially rule the country (Antonopoulos & Tagarov, 2012, p. 140; also: Leandros, 2011; Mylonas, 2021). This constellation preserved the bipartisan alternation of power between the ND and PASOK parties. An attempted breach to this pattern occurred in 2005, when the ND government of Kostas Karamanlis attempted end this domination by rendering media ownership incompatible with public contracts. He denounced “the pimps” (Kathimerini, 2004) vowing to contain the circuit of interests, only to see his government in severe disarray, overwhelmed by its own missteps.[7]

The left-wing SYRIZA, rising to power in 2015, did not achieve to *cleanse* it, as promised either. Its attempt to regulate the television sector failed. “The pimps’” success emanated from total control over journalism that led print and electronic media to operate under a covert state of self-censorship and marginalisation of critical reporting. Pluralism and press freedom are deteriorating in a “suffocating environment” (Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2022, p. 5; Papadopoulou, 2022).

The unfolding of two remarkable cases

The Novartis scandal

In 2016, an extraordinary bribery case involving the multinational pharmaceutical Novartis began to unfold in Greece. In concert with an investigation led by the United States Department of Justice, the Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Greek judicial authorities initiated a probe into payments to thousands of doctors and certain officials, between 2009 and 2015. The US authorities were already investigating violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA) by Novartis subsidiaries in South Korea, Vietnam, and Greece.

Namely, Novartis Greece “conspired with others to violate the FCPA, engaging in schemes of bribing employees of public hospitals in Greece to increase the sale of Novartis-branded pharmaceutical products” (Byrnes & Munro, 2022, para. 5). They caused 3 billion USD in damage to the state, during the period of debt crisis and fiscal austerity. Besides, due to Greece’s designation as a “reference country” for setting pharmaceutical tariffs in 25 national markets, these countries were negatively affected subsequently. Legal authorities relied on evidence by three whistle-blowers, senior employees at the Novartis-Greece subsidiary, protected as “public interest witnesses”. “Paradoxically”, dominant media launched partisan, rather than interrogative reporting of the Novartis scandal, during legal investigations. Polarisation culminated when two former prime ministers and eight leading politicians were incriminated in the case in 2018. All denied any wrongdoing. The opposition parties (ND, PASOK), which these are affiliated with, accused the then governing coalition of plotting to deliver a politically fatal blow against them.[8]

“The best defence is a bad offence”

Unprecedented discords among prosecutors intermittently hampered the investigation, causing partisan controversies within the judiciary. Accusations of political interference, dubious handling of whistle-blowers’ testimonies, and prosecutions against prosecutors, but also against reporters on the Novartis scandal, perplexed the case enormously. Following its 2019 election victory, the conservative ND party initiated an impeachment process against the corruption prosecutor and the outgoing deputy minister of Justice, thus setting an extraordinary, political court proceeding for their handling of the Novartis case.

In 2020, Novartis agreed a settlement with the US authorities, paying 347 million USD in criminal fines and civil charges because of FCPA violations. Nevertheless, in Greece the case remains inconclusive. Meanwhile, by August 2022, most individual accusations against statesmen were dropped. In June 2022, a ruling dismissed conspiracy charges against journalists, betraying groundless or opportunistic incriminations. Eventually, the Greek government filed a lawsuit against Novartis in 2022 for moral damages.

The 2022 state-sponsored wiretapping scandal

The state-wiretapping case erupted when Nikos Androulakis, current leader of the centrist PASOK-KINAL party, revealed that his phone was wiretapped by the National Intelligence Service (NIS-EYP) in fall 2021, crucially, during his running for the leadership. The attempt to hack it with the use of spyware Predator was certified by the European Parliament security services.

Financial journalist Thanassis Koukakis was a confirmed target of surveillance by the NIS-EYP in 2020, allegedly, for national security reasons. His phone was hacked with Predator, as attested by the independent interdisciplinary ‘Citizen Lab’ (University of Toronto). Paradoxically, the *Hellenic Authority for Communication Security and Privacy (ADAE)* was prevented from responding to Koukakis’ request, following a restricting law, of March 2021 with retroactive effect. Both the prime minister’s general secretary and the NIS-EYP head resigned over this scandal in August 2022. Although Kyriakos Mitsotakis brought NIS-EYP under his direct prime-ministerial control when elected, he claimed being unaware of Androulakis’ surveillance, acknowledged political wrongdoing, yet insisted this was legal.

This scandal, dubbed the “Greek Watergate”, attracted international media attention. ADAE notified that, in 2021, 15,000 orders were issued for NIS-EYP legal surveillance. Consecutive reports claimed it applied commercial spyware against diverse targets, including ministers, business leaders, officials, and even the National Defence General Chief of Staff. Revelations about state contracts with companies selling state-of-the-art spyware, along with contestable parliamentary procedures, betray efforts to disinform the public. The short-lived parliamentary committee investigating the Androulakis case found that his surveillance was legal, invoking the secrecy of national intelligence operations. It produced no accountability as to why a political leader was spied on. Opposition parties accused the ruling party of exploiting its majority in the committee to fix outcomes.[9] Similarly, the sessions of the Special Committee on Institutions and Transparency were conducted secretly. Lack of transparency regarding spying software procurement contracts accentuated concerns about broader applications of surveillance, irrespective of national security objectives.

Like in the Novartis scandal, in the wiretapping controversy, the mainstream media favoured governmental narratives. Content analysis findings, below, reveal patterns of pro-government bias and lack of impartial reporting. Indicatively, lambasting reports by international journalists' associations were totally effaced by leading media.[10]

Overlapping tactics and traits in both cases

The combined examination of the Novartis case and the 2022 wiretapping case allows a comparison of common denominators and patterns, as shown in Table 11.1."The common matrix"

Both the bribery and the surveillance scandals implicated *power circuits* of government functionaries and media interests, operated by the same political and media apparatus, dominant since the devastating debt crisis of Greece. Their capability of interfering in institutional functions, such as the Judiciary, betrays a "parastatal system", manifest at the core of both scandals. All three interviewees (Karachalios, Papadakou, Tarkas) identify the operation of this parastatal system as a key linking factor. According to Papadakou, "the clusters that set up the plot scenario are the same that, through the wiretapping, seek to seize control of the supply of information". Tarkas also attributes the scandals to a common factor using the term "institutional dysfunctions". Karachalios confirms a political denominator as "the common matrix" underlying the two cases, arguing that under the domination of "the pimps", the country experienced a "*gang-ification*"[11] process through which the ruling elite has come to employ underworld tactics to promote its interests. Notably, the impact of the country's adjustment programmes, viz. the conditionality attached to loan agreements, "expedited the *gang-ification*". Organised crime was boosted by the economic decline even "in high-ranking entanglement of interests". Such claims reinforce projections of the financial crisis as pressure to commit fraud in the private and public sectors (Krambia-Kapardis & Papastergiou, 2016). The cases share bias and disinformation in public discourse, contestable judicial interventions, partisan exploitation, and neutralising of institutions. Such transgressions spurred international condemnations against the suppression of press freedom (IPI, 2022a).

Table 11.1 Prevalent overlapping connections between the two cases

	The Novartis case	*The wiretapping case*
Common aspects and elements observed		
Post-bailout political, social, institutional establishment	Events took place between 2012 and 2016; the scandal was revealed in 2016 and has unfolded until 2022	Events took place between 2020 and 2022; the scandal was revealed in 2022
The trend of obfuscation and concealment	Complaints lodged for FBI document falsification; complaints against prosecutors refusing to receive/investigate potential evidence	Invocation of confidentiality used in the parliamentary inquiry; information is withheld on the grounds of national security; Law on surveillance 4790/2021, law on communications confidentiality 5002/2022
The targeting and/or persecution of investigative reporters, journalists, or officials	Prosecutions against four journalists, one prosecutor, and one former deputy minister of Justice	Discrediting and/or intimidation against media outlets/reporters revealing the names of wiretapped targets
Politicisation preponderates the public sphere via reporting on the mainstream media	"'Plot" theme: claims that scandal is fabricated by the opposition; Opposition using the scandal for their own political gains	"Political toxicity" rhetoric: argument that wrongdoing is unduly magnified by the opposition

Strategies and tactics: the arsenal of hegemonic/dominant political communication

Although the study of disinformation *per se* is relatively recent, it advances dynamically in political communication. Its mission is clear and its methods well-documented. In what follows, key disinformation tactics of the two cases are presented. Extending beyond the *fake news phenomenon*, disinformation is conceived here as a strategic weapon servicing mutually colluding partners (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2011; 2014a), "specifically constructed to produce effects, which assault key assumptions undergirding collective political decision-making" (Freelon & Wells, 2020, p. 151).

Disinformation in the Novartis case

The "plot" scenario

The ten prominent politicians, reportedly implicated in the Novartis case, denied wrongdoing like their political parties (ND, PASOK). In defending themselves, they counter-attacked by launching the “plot narrative”. According to this, a scheme was designed to frame them so as to benefit the SYRIZA government. Some of the *accused* sued the protected witnesses, whose testimonies substantiated the allegations. Terms such as pseudo-witnesses, slanderers, and hood-wearers subsequently figured in news headlines (Moustaka, 2018; Van Hagen, 2021). Such narratives essentially contested the existence of any scandal. Notwithstanding the fact that the *pharmaceutical company acknowledged crime* by settling with the US authorities and that it exerted pressure on “a foreign government and agencies and instrumentalities thereof […] to influence acts and decisions of such government” (USA v. Novartis Hellas SACI, 2020, p. 15), the defendants attempted to “counter and reshape reality” (p. 15).

Shooting the messenger(s)

The *changed* parliamentary majority of 2019 favoured the elevation of the “plot narrative” by transferring it to a special judicial procedure with stronger accusations against the former deputy justice minister, the pertinent corruption prosecutor,and four journalists. According to Papadakou, “the plot narrative was meticulously organised by implicated politicians to conceal the profound scandal”. Meanwhile, “established writers in mainstream media would blatantly call us [the reporters in defense] a ‘gang’”. Indeed, terms such as “gang” and “underworld” were used by the prime minister in the parliament (Hellenic Parliament, 2022, p. 6014). Papadakou highlights:

> Renowned journalists on payroll, television commentators, high-ranking producers would systematically focus only on one side of the allegations against us; they repeatedly mentioned my name although the penal code explicitly forbids it […]. The objective of *disinformation* was to finish once and for all with investigative reporters; to *impose silence* on anyone who considered attempting investigations, but mainly to send the message: Do not search, do not speak, or this will happen to you too.

Undoubtedly, SYRIZA exploited the case to boost its “moral advantage” discourse *versus* the “old” and “corrupt” bipartisan system (Chaidas, 2018), but the “scandal or plot” dilemma proved false. The scandal unquestionably exists primarily according to perpetrator Novartis and the Judicial Council (Order nr. 25/2022). Government officials had to publicly admit so (Ethnos, 2022b), and reporters had to apologise for falsely publishing that the prosecutor and minister were to stand trial for their charges (Mandrou, 2022a).

Hence, ruling party strategists succeeded in causing confusion about the defendants’ culpability by unnecessarily introducing a disctinct investigation into the procedure during the preliminary process. This new case was totally irrelevant to Novartis, since it concerned an irrelevant complaint filed by the entrepreneur Sabby Mionis against former Deputy Justice Minister, Dimitris Papangelopoulos and the journalists Tarkas, Papadakou and Ioannis Filippakis. This paradoxical merging of two heterogeneous cases "reshaped reality" to confuse, inter alia through misleading headlines, insinuating that the decision to bring the two officials to trial was linked to the Novartis case (Ethnos, 2022a). Corresponding confusion was created regarding the accused reporters. Tarkas never even covered the Novartis case. Nevertheless, the instrumentally added "Mionis case" implicated him in the investigation. Tarkas argues that this awkward twist of the legal process was contrived by

> some sick minds, who unfortunately misled the lawmakers of ND, invented the idea of extending Mr Papangelopoulos' bill of indictment to include any other case that could be used against him, while dragging into his case newspapers and reporters critical towards the governing party's leadership.

Considering the declining press freedom in Greece, an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Working Group report raised the issue of investigative journalists being charged when reporting on the Novartis case (OECD, 2022, p. 22). OECD raised the issue of retaliation against the whistle-blowers, urging Greece to *enhance whistle-blower reporting and protection* (2022). Yet another instance of impeding investigations was the falsification of FBI documents addressed to Greek authorities with crucial information on bribes paid to officials. Names of former ministers on the original document were deleted in the translated copy (Moustaka, 2022).

Disinformation in the wiretapping case

The pretext of 'toxicity'

Soon after the media storm caused by revelations that a political leader was spied on, the government embarked on a "damage control strategy". It revolved around the concept of political "toxicity". An observable trend in this practice is to launch offences but project instantly and attribute them on the opposition. Tactics include the employment of fake news, denial of facts by officials, and the dismissal of criticism as being "toxic politics. Such narratives served to deflect public discourse away from the severity of the wiretapping affairs. Toxicity in the "country's political life" (To Vima, 2022) was the official reason given for the resignation of the general secretary of the prime minister and NIS-EYP's chief. *Toxicity* was repeated frequently by the premier and cabinet ministers (Kathimerini, 2022a; Papantoniou, 2022; Prime Minister, 2022).

The mainstream media diligently adopted that concept while reporting on the wiretapping case. Collusionary feedback and interdependence became apparent when another report alleged that among the targets of surveillance were associates of Vangelis Marinakis, shipping magnate and owner of the conglomerate Ta

Nea (Clapp, 2022b). On November 7, the newspaper called for shedding "plenty of light" on the affair (Ta Nea, 2022b). The government's prompt legislative intervention was remarkable, limiting citizens' rights through two amendments: the Law on surveillance 4790/2021, prohibiting ADAE from satisfying citizens' requests on whether they were ever under surveillance for national security reasons, and the law on communications' confidentiality 5002/2022, allowing notification of citizens only three years after surveillance occurred.

Shooting the messenger(s)

Like the Novartis case, individuals and organisations publishing information on the affair were castigated or demeaned. Indicatively, the lists of names—as targets of surveillance—published by left-leaning newspaper *Documento* were denounced as fake and part of a plan to damage the government to favour the opposition (Kathimerini, 2022c, 2022d).

When Clapp, a critical *New York Times* (NYT) guest essayist stirred the Greek public sphere (2022a), his character was tarnished by the government's Press Officer and "embedded" media. Subsequently, they "half-apologized" over discrediting remarks against a Politico contributor (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 2022; Alexandris, 2022). Meanwhile, the ad hoc permanent parliamentary committee established to investigate the alleged surveillance of political targets, refused to summon key "witnesses" such as dealers in spyware and hampered proceedings by testifiers invoking confidentiality protection of the NIS-EYP.

Controlling the agenda

Agenda setting and news framing are typical. Indicatively, throughout the debt crisis, dominant media consistently followed a pro-bailout stance, conforming to Troika dictates (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2014b). Since technology developed tremendously, media system's economic interests suffered aggravating transformations. As a consequence, major digital and print media outlets grew more dependent, rendering them biased mouthpieces of the "elite network".

Scandals upset public life with rambling disruptions of press freedom in Greece (Rigopoulos, 2022), which has tumbled to the 108th position of the respective index (Reporters Without Borders, 2022). This was induced by legal restrictions; media dependence on government funds; life-threatening conditions (e.g. assassination of investigative reporter Giorgos Karaivaz in 2021). Reporters routinely complain about obstructions of their work leading to self-censorship.

The tightening of the government's grip on television, newspapers, and news portals is manifest through the distribution of state subsidies, first introduced in 2020 for public health campaigns when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted (IPI, 2022b). Selected media outlets receiving state funds were dubbed "the Petsas list" (Spokesman Stelios Petsas). The Media Freedom Rapid Response mission to Greece deemed the Petsas list as "exemplary of the lack of transparency in state funding of media in Greece" (2022, p. 12), because the bulk of the funds were mostly allocated to pro-government outlets (IPI contributor: The Manifold, 2020). Meanwhile, statements as to criteria for eligible media were never submitted officially.

Karachalios maintains that "disinformation is systemic". Political officials now "tell lies, as if they speak normally".[12] Meanwhile, journalists avoid "correcting them or holding them accountable". Hence, they collaborate in disinformation processes and reinforce them. This is evidenced in Papadakou's own experience.[13]

The objective of the content analysis was to ascertain whether media systematically deselect relevant news when these challenge dominant frames[14] and to identify pro-government bias in the news, encompassing aspects such as framing, the inclusion of diverse perspectives, choice of terminology, and overall approaches to wiretapping. Results indicate a marked inclination among mainstream media outlets to project the surveillance issue as a party-centred conflict, rather than addressing it as a human rights violation or highlighting the need for institutional scrutiny and *due rectifications*.[15] Crucially, news bulletins neglected to feature interviews or statements by key stakeholders, such as Christos Rammos (chairman of ADAE) or Sophie in 't Veldt (PEGA rapporteur). Another finding was the apparent adoption of phrasing consistent with that of government officials and of the prime minister, indicating biased reporting. Hence, the media failed to treat the controversy as a public interest issue. Instead, their focus was limited on the legality of NIS-EYP activities, invoking national security concerns, and the purported prime-ministerial unawareness of the Service's targets.

The role of the Greek judiciary: inadequacy, interference, or inertia?

The role of justice is crucial in revealing corruption cases. Yet, transgressions of judicial officials were identified at the core of certain cases, notably, in para-judicial circuits bribing judges through the mediation of attorneys. Despite reform efforts, "judicial corruption in Greece can be organised within networks of white-collar criminals" (Antonopoulos & Tagarov, 2012, p. 151). It has not been proven whether prosecutors or other judicial officials, involved in these cases, acted unlawfully to prevent or procrastinate outcomes.

In the Novartis case, a series of flabbergasting events occurred: the resignation of two corruption prosecutors, case dismissals, mutual accusations among prosecutors, grievances for political interference (Spiggou, 2020), the indictment of a former deputy minister of justice and a prosecutor, and the staggering quantity of media reporting on these events. All these elucidate that judicial independence is contestable, if not compromised. The prime anti-graft prosecutor who undertook the investigation into the bribery scheme in March 2017, Eleni Touloupaki, denounced attempts to target her "in order to stop any judicial investigation" (Moskowitz, 2020). Touloupaki was charged with abuse of power and was eventually impeached. Then, indicted again to be prosecuted before a special court, along with Papangelopoulos (Kathimerini, 2022b). These two and four journalists were accused of attempting to frame prominent politicians of the conservative ND and centrist PASOK. Besides, as alluded by Kathimerini reporter and Supreme Court accredited correspondent, Ioanna Mandrou:

> at the Supreme Court there were many who, from the beginning, noted that the broadening of the investigation to two fields was not easy, legally and practically, to fulfil; while some expressed concerns, arguing even that the Mionis case-file was sent to function as a 'backup' in case something went 'wrong' with the Novartis case.
>
> (2022b)

Two years later, the Judicial Council acquitted the journalists, but indicted the two officials for misconduct, irrelevant to the Novartis case (Judicial Council Order nr. 25/2022, pp. 272–281). Unsurprisingly, in its special report on Greece, the OECD explicitly expressed concern that "the events in the Pharmaceutical company case may suggest an attempt by the executive to interfere with an ongoing investigation" (2022, p. 43).

In the wiretapping case, the Supreme Court prosecutor, Isidoros Dogiakos, launched a probe into leaked information regarding the surveillance of "certain people" (IN, 2022). However, his probe fell short of investigating the *essence of surveillance itself*, prompting a strident statement from the Athens Bar Association (DSA, 2022), which urged the prosecutor not to limit his investigation. Meanwhile, jurists and legal experts, including former Deputy Prime Minister Evangelos Venizelos, warned of constitutional violations (Venizelos, 2022). Other critical inputs suggest that Dogiakos "attempted to block" an auditing procedure initialised by the ADAE (Michalopoulos, 2022) in response to requests by a Greek member of the European Parliament and a journalist—both targets of surveillance. Besides, Dogiakos issued an "expert opinion" against the authority's right to inquire telecommunication providers for surveilled phones, prompting the reaction of the authority's chairman (Kathimerini, 2023).

An authoritarian establishment in disguise

Greece's woes as a democracy suffering from corruption portend the dangers accosting its institutions when powerful political officials slip to crude disinformation tactics to defend their self-interest. The unfolding of the two scandals followed a discernible pattern of "crisis management" on behalf of the conservative government, consistent largely with Entman's observations on defence tactics employed by "the accused": denial, cover-up, obfuscation, the sacrifice of subordinates and *some* admission of incompetence (2012).

Proper accountability has been elusive in most recent scandals, an outcome that would have been impossible without tight control of political communication. So, the appearances of corruption and the charges thereof "are attempts to demonstrate a change of power and supremacy, but rarely result in actual prosecution and sentencing. Such charges are supposed to ameliorate the gap of trust between the public and politicians." (Lambropoulou, 2015, p. 437). OECD's remarks regarding the Novartis case are striking: "The lead examiners are seriously concerned that, since the entry into force of the Convention over 24 years ago, Greece has yet to sanction any natural or legal person for foreign bribery" (2022, p.15).

The role of the press is subverted by such ethos of concealment. When formidable market and political interests are endangered, their forces tend to collude to prevent scandals from exploding. Both the Novartis and the surveillance cases reveal a compound authoritarian system that has been recently emerging in Greece, where democratic institutions and the separation of powers appear to function normally but are fundamentally undermined. Indicatively, according to the Democratic Matrix measurement tool, "between 2020 and 2021, only Greece experienced a loss of democratic quality that resulted in *the conversion from a working to a deficient democracy*" (Lemm ēt al., 2022, p. 4). Unlike regimes measured as autocracies, such as Russia and China, Greece's establishment succeeds in preserving the facade of democratic institutions, without accountability. The power of the ruling elite appears unshakable: a) It instrumentalises corruption and partisanship to control the Justice system, b) it colludes to control journalism and thus manipulate public opinion, and c) it weaponises disinformation to conceal its sponsorship of a "gang-ification" of the political system and the economy. In such a regime, citizens are subjugated imperceptibly. In Karachalios' words: "it is irreversible". The problem permeates "not just the institutions of Justice and Democracy; the problem lies in the culture of acceptance" throughout society, to an extent of "alienation of the social conscience; which is graver and deeper than disinformation".

Concluding remarks: "The best defence is a bad offence"

This study retraced two scandals, the Novartis massive bribery and the 2022 state-sponsored wiretapping scandal. The first mainly concerns corruption while the second attacks fundamental civil rights. Both were analysed with emphasis on political communication ethics or absence thereof. Their examination, in the context of strategic state-sponsored disinformation and political corruption, aimed to contribute to the research on modalities of disinformation and its implications for democracy. Canvassing key events, media reports and expert interviews, this chapter identifies common, collusionary disinformation patterns.

The colluding, "compound power elites" consist of governing parties and strategically placed media moguls, who simultaneously "happen to be" the barons/owners of huge chunks of the Greek economy. Their comprehensive strategies comprise effacing issues from the public sphere, framed and distorted negative presentations, ad hominem attacks, incriminations of alternative or non-conforming journalists, stalling of law procedures to maintain an inconclusive result, and induced confusion through obfuscations, reality manipulation, or denying.

Comparing the two cases highlights that power elite perpetrators threaten to penalise or "exterminate" accusers and often do so. Such acts substantiate the degeneration into "gang-ification" of politics, which encompasses control and subjugation of any civic, press, public institution, independent authorities, judiciary functionaries, or political forces which dare stand up. The "heart of the corrupt matter" is always to prevail through defending by attacking. Such a vicious circle entails a stance of never giving in, never admitting failure. Such a lack of forbearance is lethal for democratic societies. Ipso facto this entails that the problems we are facing in Greece are not simply party-political but of the collapsing of the rule of law and the degenerative transmutation of democracy.

Notes

1 See also Bennett and Livingston (2020).

2 See Schopenhauer's dialectic stratagems (1896).

3 See also Marwick & Lewis, 2017.

4 CDA research encompasses several types of argumentations, cognitive strategies, implicit meanings, symbols, metaphors, style, and references in linguistic or visual form. As such, CDA is linked with both language semiotics and non-verbal meanings conveyed in the public sphere (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

5 Interviews took place in November 2022.

6 A 2012 settlement imposed reparations of €330 million although the total damages to the Greek state approached the huge sum of €2 billion (Lambropoulou, 2015).

7 Karamanlis aimed to legally enforce the constitutional provision of Article 14§9 which renders media ownership incompatible with the reception of public procurement contracts. Law professor Akritas Kaidatzis notes this was pursued clumsily, leading to EU opposition. Alias, both internal and external forces undermined the government (Karachalios, 2021).

8 Comprising the leftist SYRIZA and right-wing ANEL.

9 In the parliamentary inquiry on the "Petsas list" funding the pandemic campaigns, Mr Petsas himself was not summoned to testify, thanks to the ruling party's majority control of respective committee procedures.

10 PEGA is an ad hoc EP Committee established in 2022 to investigate the use of surveillance software.

11 The "gang-ification" of transactions between politicians and businesspeople includes covert meetings, misappropriation of public funds, bypassing of institutional procedures, oversight and potentially bribing key officials.

12 Ironically, a novel tool of pressure on journalism is the legal classification of spreading fake news as a criminal offence (Amendment 191 of the Penal Code, Law 4855/2021).

13 Papadakou asserts that her own journalistic research on Novartis received more publicity through international media than domestic.

14 The analysis was carried out on a total of 12 prime-time news bulletins, sourced from three leading Greek private television channels (SKAI, MEGA, ANT1). They correspond to significant dates relevant to the unfolding wiretapping scandal.

15 By contrast, independent websites and social media provided diligent reporting or dialogue.

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12 Investing in fake news? The disinformation industry in Kenya's 2022 elections

Samuel Kamau and Alphonce Shiundu

Introduction

Kenyan politics, specifically elections, have been plagued by ethnic, factional, regional, and religious fault lines since independence, which occasionally degenerate into violence. Political disinformation, divisive rhetoric, and propaganda have been an enduring aspect of elections in Kenya with noticeable peaks every five years. Conceptually, political disinformation is the deliberate production and spread of false and/or misleading information with an intention to sway public opinion or political choices; and to think of misinformation as the inadvertent spread of false or misleading information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is crucial to note that whenever people intentionally begin spreading false information to deceive and manipulate others, they have turned misinformation into disinformation. Disinformation too can become misinformation if, or when, people put out or spread false information without realising its deceptive origin or intent. In Kenya's August 2022 general elections, the level, magnitude, scope, intensity, and possible impact of political disinformation were markedly higher as they were contested in a highly polarised and competitive environment. This arose from the confusing scenario where the sitting president Uhuru Kenyatta abandoned his estranged deputy of ten years, William Ruto, and instead backed his long-time political rival, Raila Odinga under the Azimio la Umoja One Kenya Coalition Party. In such a scenario—where the country's politicians holding the top two public offices were fighting for power—it was almost inevitable for the state, its tools, people, and resources to be deployed in political disinformation (Table 12.1)

Increased internet penetration and uptake of social media have been major contributing factors to the spread of disinformation in Kenya and Africa. Kenya is ranked among Africa's top countries in smartphone penetration and social media usage as illustrated below:

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Table 12.1 Kenya's internet and smartphone statistics

Kenya's internet and smartphone statistics	
Smartphone penetration	67% of Kenya's mobile market
Internet penetration	23.35 million users or 42% of the population
WhatsApp	14 million users
Facebook	9.95 million users
YouTube	9.29 million users
Instagram	2.5 million users
Snap Chat	1.75 million users
Twitter	1.35 million users

Sources: www.africaoutlookmag.com; www.datareportal.com; www.statista.com.

Disinformation industry in Kenya

The concept of a disinformation industry deployed in Kenya refers to the coordinated approach in which false information is produced, packaged, and distributed online, or as McKay (2023) put it, the insidious way in which social media users are paid to spread false information with the goal of polluting the information ecosystem and ultimately voter choice. In construing political disinformation as an industry, Ong and Cabañes (2019) use the wide array of scholarly insights on the production studies and the cultural analyses of media industries. Put another way, they unpack political disinformation as a facet of the production culture—"as both product and process emerging from organizational structures, labor relations, and entrepreneurial subjectivities" (Ong & Cabañes, 2019, p. 5772). There's an economic incentive, machinery (digital tools, applications, and devices), a workforce (influencers-for-hire and social media users) for the production and distribution of false information and political content, including trolling, alongside a market with consumer preferences—in this case, partisan and polarised political supporters and ultimately political activism. Oxford Analytica (2023) noted that the disinformation industry is "now established in several parts of the world" including the Philippines, Russia, China, the US, and Iran (See also Ong & Cabañes, 2019).

In Kenya, a study by Madung and Obilo (2021) recently revealed the existence of a booming disinformation industry driven by influencers-for-hire to drive malicious, "coordinated, and inauthentic attacks on Twitter with the goal of swaying public opinion during the elections". The study noted that the influencers were hired by anonymous organisers to target journalists, judges, and political activists (Madung, 2022; McKay, 2023). There were concerted efforts by media houses, fact-checking organisations, and other stakeholders to address the scourge of false and misleading information, identified as a key concern in previous elections, and a major threat to free and fair elections in 2022 (Maweu, 2019; Mare et al., 2019). The Media Council of Kenya, the journalism regulator in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), launched a virtual network of fact-checking desks in the newsrooms using an online collaborative tool called *iVerify* to carry out fact-checking and to support accurate reporting. Fact-checking organisations such as Africa Check also partnered with Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Google to disrupt the flow of false information and amplify correct information around elections. By working with platforms, fact-checkers were able to scale the reach of their fact-checks, reduce the circulation of false information and alert platforms whenever incendiary content was polluting the information ecosystem. While some of these efforts had some measure of success, disinformation still flourished during the elections as the fact-checking and verification efforts could not match the speed, volume, and frequency of the production and dissemination of fake information circulating online (Lynch, 2023, McKay, 2023).

The first section of this chapter looks at electoral disinformation aided by digital technologies as well as its drivers. The second section presents the methodological approach adopted in this study, while the last part presents the findings, followed by a brief discussion.

Technology, disinformation, and elections

Political misinformation and disinformation have become a key characteristic of modern electoral contests across the world (Martin et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Shorey & Howard, 2016; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Current trends point to a growing popularity, prominence, prevalence, and influence of political disinformation, propaganda, and divisive narratives during elections worldwide both during polling and in election observation. While the strategy of spreading misleading information through coordinated disinformation campaigns first came into prominence during the US 2016 elections (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), the tactic of using disinformation to influence and change political opinion is now emerging as a necessary and accepted part of any effective campaign strategy in a competitive electoral environment (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

In the context of politics, disinformation is viewed as a tool for altering perceptions on a particular issue or subverting the political discourse by inserting false information (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020). Political actors appear to have mastered the art of strategically deploying false and misleading content as a weapon to gain political advantage (Morgan, 2018).

There are growing concerns over the potential of social media platforms to undermine democracy by disrupting political conversations, stoking political divisions, inflaming passions, and manipulating public opinion to achieve political objectives (Schia & Gjesvik, 2020). The social media architecture has allowed the emergence and deployment of organised internet trolls and bots, whose work is to disrupt, attack, offend, defend and manipulate opinion by spreading and amplifying content in digital spaces to achieve defined political agendas (Prier, 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Gorwa & Guilbeaut, 2018).

These new technologies and digital platforms continue to radically alter the contemporary information environment, fundamentally reshaping how citizens communicate with each other, bypassing traditional gatekeepers when connecting users across the world on one platform (Gillespie, 2015; Tufecki, 2018; Schia & Gjesvik, 2020; Kalsnes, 2019).

Many modern electoral contests have seen a growing trend of weaponisation of digital media platforms in a bid to control political narratives and electoral outcomes through complex disinformation campaigns (McKay, 2023).

Disinformation and elections in Africa

Since the Arab Spring, social media has become a key factor in democratic processes in Africa. African scholars like Maweu (2019), Mare et al. (2019), have explored the manifestation of misinformation and disinformation in Africa and noted how social media platforms have been used by state actors to influence opinions, entrench authoritarian rule, and undermine democracy.

Social media and the internet have been cited as the new avenues for spreading a cocktail of misinformation, hatred, propaganda and rumours. Nigeria, South Africa, and Zimbabwe have all witnessed a spike in false information during recent elections including the deployment of bots and troll armies (Mare et al., 2019; Maweu, 2019). In some cases, fake news and misinformation have been used to justify "unnecessary and disproportionate forms of state-ordered Internet shutdowns" (Mare et al., 2019, p. 4).

When examining the impact of fake news and the emerging post-truth political era, misinformation has had damaging social, political and economic impacts on Nigerian society. Online misinformation feeds and amplifies prevailing wedge issues in Nigeria like conflict, widespread corruption, weak institutions, marginalisation, threats of secession, and economic challenges to heighten divisions and animosities across communities, threatening the very democratic survival of the country.

The 2013 and 2017 general elections in Kenya were plagued with accusations of domestic and foreign interference (Amoah, 2020). Locally, it was claimed that the state's instruments actively sought to influence the outcome in favour of former President Uhuru Kenyatta. Internationally, British data mining firm Cambridge Analytica, now defunct, claimed to have actively participated in both campaigns to influence the outcome in favour of Kenyatta (McKay, 2023).

Recent revelations that an Israeli-based company was actively involved in trying to influence the 2022 Kenyan elections and other countries through hacking, sabotage, and weaponising disinformation using thousands of social media pages point to this growing trend of employing disinformation to influence public outcomes (Kirchgaessner et al., 2023).

While there has been some research on the growing role of political disinformation and misinformation in Africa, Mare et al. (2019) argue that there still "remains a gap in the empirical examination and theorization of the production and consumption of fake news and cyber-propaganda in Africa" including studies on the production and consumption of misinformation and disinformation in different political contexts and diverse populations (p. 7). There is a need to consider a localised (African) context in the examination of misinformation and disinformation in politics.

Methodology

Examining the hotly contested August 2022 Kenyan elections, this paper explores the following questions:

1. What was the role of disinformation in the 2022 general elections in Kenya?
2. What was the nature and architecture of the disinformation industry?
3. What explains the continued investment in disinformation by political actors in Kenya?

The researchers conducted a total of 19 face-to-face semi-structured interviews between the 17th and 29th October, 2022. The interviewed respondents included journalists (four), fact-checkers (three), political social media influencers (six), and key campaign actors/strategists (six) associated with the major camps. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviewees were sampled through purposive maximum variation sampling to include journalists, fact-checkers, social media influencers, and political campaign actors/strategists, to gain a deeper understanding of the political disinformation industry from multiple angles—including those generating falsehoods, those spreading it, and those expected to counter the falsehoods with accurate information. Through a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, the researchers were able to establish common themes and patterns across the data sets. The researchers also used open-source intelligence tools to identify and analysed key online campaigns in order to identify who the disinformation actors were, their networks, their strategies, and patterns of disinformation flows. Finally, we analysed several reports on disinformation and fake news released during the electioneering period by election watchdogs key among them Mozilla Foundation, Article 19, Media Council of Kenya, and Global Witness.

Findings

Role of disinformation in the 2022 general elections in Kenya

Disinformation was a key campaign strategy for the main actors in the 2022 elections in Kenya

The study established the existence of a well-organised, professionalised, hierarchical, and well-funded disinformation machinery during the August 2022 elections, characterised by coordinated messaging across offline and online platforms, professionally designed digital content, and an elaborate online dissemination strategy of disinformation content, across the two political sides with links to the state.

The nature and pattern of disinformation appeared to have a centralised command structure but with multiple coordinated outlets. Each side of the political divide created sophisticated digital operations bringing on board social media influencers, bot accounts, and online troops to secure an advantage over their political rivals and drive their agenda online. Major political events and developments like the party primaries, manifesto launches, elections day, vote counting, and supreme court hearings were supported through coordinated messaging online. The opposing camps engaged in fierce combat around these political events, trying to counter and outdo each other online. According to the interviewees, this involved sharing misleading information to gain advantage over the rival camp.

> The Kenya Kwanza Campaign backing the then Deputy President William Ruto created a political propaganda outfit styled as an intelligence platform. Dubbed the ‘Hustler Nation Intelligence Bureau (HNIB)’, the outfit was led by a former journalist-turned-political strategist. With over 2 million Twitter followers, the outfit served as a node for the dissemination of political disinformation against the rival State-backed Azimio la Umoja One Kenya campaign, whose candidate Raila Odinga, had been endorsed by then incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta.
>
> (RJ3)

Some of the posts attributed to the Hustler Nation Intelligence Bureau, the political propaganda outfit styled as an “intelligence” platform made unverified and difficult-to-prove claims styled as insider information, or “intelligence”, about top public administration and security officials planning to flee Kenya to Australia soon after elections. This was a political trope to paint the campaign of Raila Odinga, which was supported by the incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta and his ministers as being on the backfoot. The social media posts also alleged widespread bribery of government officials, the surreptitious strategising to roll out voter suppression tactics and the planning of violence to disrupt the voting process and undermine the credibility of the process[1].

The two main campaigns with a real shot at winning elections as per the pre-election polling: The Kenya Kwanza campaign (Kiswahili for "Kenya First") under William Ruto, and Azimio la Umoja (Kiswahili for "Quest for Unity") led by Raila Odinga. Both campaigns leveraged digital platforms to manipulate public opinion in order to achieve specific goals: agenda setting, framing issues, driving conversations, creating diversions, countering, and delegitimising opponents, attacking critics, and maintaining voter loyalty, among others.

Both campaigns adopted creative hashtags to drive their agendas and push narratives. Some of the key negative hashtags targeting the then Deputy President William Ruto included: #FakeHustler, #RutoTheEnemy, and #RutoAtatumaliza (Ruto will Finish us). The positive hashtags for the Ruto campaign were #FreedomIsComing, #TheRutoPromise, and #Rutothe5thPresident. On the other hand, the negative hashtags for the Azimio campaign included #RejectRailaOdinga and #BondoExpress (to signal that once Odinga loses the poll, he will be banished to his rural home in Bondo, Siaya County in Western Kenya). There was also #UhuruMustGo, a trope of Odinga as a project of Uhuru Kenyatta, the incumbent, who was also the chairperson of the Azimio coalition.

Besides, other hashtags attacked the credibility of the electoral commission.

The following excerpt from an interview with a journalist illustrates these operations:

> Every morning, Kenyans woke up to organized hashtags and keywords trending on Twitter, complete with professionally designed graphics, short videos, and cartoons. The same content would simultaneously appear on Facebook posts associated with key influencers and in multiple WhatsApp groups.
>
> (RJ2)

From the interviews with key campaign strategists, the researchers established that the campaigns had elaborate strategies to mainstream an issue in the daily political discourse. The whole campaign machinery, starting with the candidates, their surrogates—key politicians, religious leaders, trade unionists, civil society voices, political analyst, commentators, and aligned journalists—would amplify the central narrative on different platforms. Social media influencers, including celebrities and politicians, and the cyber troops, would then pick these narratives and push them across the different digital and social media platforms. The message would then organically grow and spread, saturating the public sphere. A campaign strategist working with the Ruto-led Kenya Kwanza team explained their approach:

> When we decided to make BBI (Building Bridges Initiative, a government-led constitutional review initiative) a key campaign issue, we settled on two key messages. One, that it was a ploy to make Raila Odinga President, and two, it was a conspiracy by the rich families to secure their interests at the

> expense of the poor majority. We agreed this would be repeated in every campaign forum by all campaign voices towards the end of 2021. The social media team-leads were tasked to keep repeating the messages across all online platforms.
>
> (RCS7)

A journalist interviewed for this study observed how coordinated messaging enabled the William Ruto campaign to turn the public against the Uhuru-Raila-led reforms:

> The Ruto camp succeeded in poisoning the public against the BBI referendum push by weaponizing disinformation. They settled on a common narrative broken into a set of key messages that were repeated in churches, rallies, town halls, talk shows and digital platforms. In the end, the initiative, though noble, was doomed to fail as the entire country turned against it and its architects.
>
> (RJ1)

From the interviews, we can conclude that social media influencers and fake accounts played an enhanced role during the 2022 elections. Accounts associated with well-known figures and influential social media users, some running accounts with over a million followers, were actively sharing misleading and/or unverified information that appeared to be aligned with the disinformation campaigns from both sides. The influencers ranged from prominent lawyers, digital political activists, widely followed bloggers, political party officials, government operatives, civil society activists, Kenyans in the diaspora, including some who were deported, sitting lawmakers at both the national and county levels, and popular social commentators, who had repackaged themselves as political analysts and partisan supporters of either of the campaigns.

Fake accounts mimicking influential personalities on Facebook and Twitter were used to amplify key messages being pushed by the campaigns as part of the disinformation networks. Some of the accounts include those of Davis Chirchir (a close ally of William Ruto) and Ngunjiri Wambugu (then a sitting legislator and close ally of Uhuru Kenyatta). The fake Chirchir account was used to push unverified election results, given his role as the chief agent for William Ruto.

The nature of disinformation in the 2022 elections

An analysis of disinformation content flagged by media houses and fact-checking organisations during the period immediately before, during, and after elections, as well as interviews with journalists and fact-checkers revealed the disinformation during the August 2022 elections manifested in the form of fabricated official letters, manipulated images and videos, fake newspaper headlines, fake newspaper articles, fake opinion polls, decontextualised information, repurposed cartoons, false endorsements of candidates, false news alerts, impostor websites, and fake social media posts, among others.

A further analysis of the disinformation content reveals several recurring themes and around certain recurring themes.

i. *The presidential candidates and their coalitions*

The disinformation attacks focused on the character and history of the leading presidential candidates. In the case of William Ruto, the attacks fabricated narratives that sought to portray him as a land grabber, corrupt, angry, a murderer, and a megalomaniac. The content focused on his political history, past court cases, and his role in the 2007/2008 post-election violence[2]. Popular hashtags against him included #WolfOfSugoi, #GhostWorker, #TerroristGuarantor, and #ArapMashamba (land grabber)[3].

In the case of Raila Odinga, the attacks focused on his ethnicity, education, age, health, past association with violence, rumours about witchcraft, and political treachery. In the same vein, the family of the outgoing President Uhuru Kenyatta was the target of vicious and vitriolic propaganda because of his support for Raila Odinga. They were accused of using their position of influence and privilege to impoverish the people while building their wealth. A journalist said in an interview:

> Ethnicity is a major driver of political competition and antagonism in Kenya. Like in previous elections, negative ethnic stereotyping was used to build ethnic solidarity against perceived 'enemy' tribes and 'secure' community interest. Disinformation was used to prey on these stereotypes which border on hate speech, heightening the political tensions.
>
> (RJ2)

The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), a raft of constitutional amendments championed by President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga and opposed by President William Ruto, provided the most compelling wedge issue of the 2022 contest, and was a key driver of disinformation. Ruto's campaign messaging blamed everything wrong with the country on President Uhuru Kenyatta's dalliance with Raila Odinga. The BBI reforms were framed as a conspiracy to secure power and wealth for the rich families at the expense of the poor Kenyans. The online space was flooded with pro and anti-BBI content organised around hashtags like #RejectBBI, #BBINonsense, and #BBIFraud.

On the other hand, the Azimio side associated with Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga trained their guns on the judges in the aftermath of the Court's ruling against the proposed reforms. There were online coordinated online attacks directed at the judges and William Ruto under the hashtags #RogueJudges and #WhyRutoStoppedBBI. The disinformation against judges was packaged in fabricated front pages, accusing some of the judges of taking money to release drug dealers, being gay, corrupt, and untrustworthy[4].

The goal of these attacks was to malign public figures, politicise ethnicity, weaponise class, and polarise the communities by amplifying wedge fault lines.

ii. *Delegitimising the elections management body, electoral process and unverified election results*

The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Kenya's electoral management body was targeted in the political disinformation campaigns with unverified allegations of bribery, rigging, and bias. Social media erupted with the hashtags such as #Chebukaticantbetrusted, #ExposedIEBC, #CorruptIEBC, and #ChebukatiOut. These hashtags were coordinated online campaigns according to the Twitter analytics tools, Hoaxy and SocialBearing .com[5]. IEBC refers to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission.

There were fake headlines claiming the chairperson of the electoral commission had taken bribes of up to US $3 million; others painting him as a man in fear for his life; and a poster of a doctored image of the chairperson dressed in a green and yellow jacket—the colours of the United Democratic Alliance, Ruto's political party[6]. These fabricated pieces of content spread falsehoods to delegitimise the chairperson and by extension the electoral body, as biased and in the pockets of rival campaigns. The claim that "his life was in danger" was a dog-whistle that a man under siege, was unlikely to have the courage to declare a fair result, because, they would likely buckle under pressure to stay alive.

As a political strategist puts it:

> We noticed the IEBC Chairman Mr. Chebukati, was not a neutral referee, his actions favoured Ruto [one of the candidates]. We decided to discredit him and his close allies partly to put pressure on him to do what is right, but also to make people stop taking him seriously.
>
> (RCS 6)

The study established that there were deliberate efforts to undermine confidence in the electoral process and delegitimise the electoral outcome through false information shared online. The claims of rigging and hacking are in line with a general trend around the world with efforts to delegitimise electoral outcomes. A fact-checker explained this strategy as follows:

> In the six days between election day and the final declaration by the IEBC, social media was awash with claims of rigging, hacking, and manipulation of results. The misleading content targeted the entire electoral process including the IEBC (the election management body) and its officials, election material, equipment, and technology for managing elections.
>
> (RFC 11)

There was a narrative that electoral officials from Smartmatic (the company that supplied electoral technology), some of them from Venezuela, were in the country to manipulate the elections. Graphics designed to look like newspapers furthered the narrative. These claimed the Venezuelans were "hackers" who had been "funded" by Ruto. Similar graphics linked the electoral commission chairperson to a plan to rig the polls for Ruto, and even claimed Ruto and Chebukati had had "night meetings"—political storytelling for plotting nefariously in the dark.

Prior to the official declaration of results, different versions of the election results were shared by the different camps and their disinformation merchants. Key influencers and political figures shared their own results which were then picked up and amplified by social media troops.

For instance, the secretary general of one of the leading political parties, allied to the Azimio la Umoja campaign, tweeted an image showing Odinga was in the lead. "97% [of the electoral] forms in. Baba the 5th", read the post. The official had a "verified" account, and the claim was that Odinga was leading and had clinched the position of Kenya's fifth president since independence. The image showed that Odinga had received 6.7 million votes or 51.96% of the total votes, while Ruto had received 6.1 million or 47.28%, with 97% of the polling stations reporting their results[7].

However, the rival camp posted a screenshot of what they said were their internal results showing Ruto was leading with 7.2 million votes, or 50.5%, with Odinga trailing at 6.9 million or 48.8% of the vote. This result, declared "final" was posted by a digital political strategist of the Ruto campaign and former top government official[8].

> It did not help that the different media houses who were running their own independent tallies kept displaying different results, which resulted in greater confusion. This resulted in general confusion and loss of confidence in the whole electoral process, setting the basis for rejection of results by the candidates and their supporters.
>
> (RJ4)

Mainstream media inadvertently drove the wave of disinformation around the election results. The top television stations Kenya Television Network (KTN), the Nation TV (NTV) and the Citizen TV, were all tallying the poll results from the polling stations uploaded on the secure portal of the electoral commission and made available to the public. Because there were no agreed criteria, the stations began collating and tallying the results as they saw fit. This led to a situation where one station would be showing Odinga in the lead; while the next station showed Ruto in the lead.

For instance, in one example, at 5.40pm on August 10, 2022, a day after the votes closed, while KTN showed Ruto in the lead with 2.56 million votes, and

Odinga trailing with 2.2 million votes; Citizen TV showed Odinga in the lead with 2.46 million votes with Ruto trailing with 2.2 million votes[9]. It didn't help that Citizen TV's owner had publicly campaigned for Odinga and the Azimio la Umoja campaign. Here was a case where campaign optics were used to process what should have been a straight incontestable maths of publicly available data. Besides, NTV showed Ruto in the lead with 2.95 million votes and Odinga trailing with 2.6 million votes.

The situation of different numbers led to unnecessary anxiety, as inevitably voters and audiences tuned into the station that showed results which satisfied their bias. While the results were accurate—it is just the methodologies and the speed of tallying that differed—it sowed the seed for a disinformation narrative about the credibility of the results. Eventually, the Kenyan electoral commission declared the finally tally on August 15, 2022 with Ruto as the winner with 7,176,141 votes, representing 50.49% of valid votes cast, while his rival Raila Odinga got 6,942,930 votes or 48.85% of all valid votes cast. (The East African, 2022).

Foreign actors and claims of results manipulation

The role of foreigners during the August 2022 elections was the subject of a heated debate online a few days before the elections and eventually became one of the issues raised at the Supreme Court in the presidential election petition. A few days before the elections, three Venezuelans were arrested at the airport carrying "sensitive election material" in their personal luggage. One of the Venezuelans working for the supplier of the electoral technology systems was identified as Jose Carmago. Shortly after, graphics appeared on Twitter (now X) showing Ruto as the "president-elect" picked by Venezuelans, and not elected by Kenyans[10]. The Azimio Coalition accused the IEBC of colluding with foreigners to manipulate results in favour of William Ruto.

During the Supreme Court petition challenging election results, lawyers acting for the petitioners alleged the Venezuelans intercepted, altered and uploaded result declaration forms on the IEBC servers. "James Camargo (a Venezuelan national) is the person who decided the president of Kenya", read the text on a social media graphic by a radio station reporting on the Supreme Court hearing[11]. The station attributed the quote to a lawyer affiliated with the Odinga campaign. These claims were extensively amplified on social media platforms.

The following excerpt from a social media influencer explains why these accusations were so popular:

> The narrative of foreign involvement in elections in Kenya is relatable among many Kenyans because of previous revelations that Cambridge Analytica had been recruited by the former President during 2013 and 2017 elections. Many people were likely to accept it without much questioning.
>
> (RCI17)

Rationale for continued investment in disinformation

Previous success with disinformation investment served as inspiration for greater investment in disinformation in 2022

The revelations by the British data mining company Cambridge Analytica that they successfully delivered two election victories for former President Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 and 2017 inspired the 2022 players to invest more in disinformation and propaganda.

This study established that the main campaigns engaged "new" consultants to augment their 2022 political campaigns. This was made possible by the availability of data on user profiles and location, which allowed the campaigns to target voters with great precision. As a fact-checker reveals,

> The 2013 and 2017 elections provided the 'proof' that disinformation and propaganda does indeed yield dividends for the players. In 2022, politicians just got better at in the use of disinformation, from the design, packaging, and dissemination.
>
> (RFC 13)

This points to the growing belief in the utility of disinformation to achieve political goals.

A youthful population and growing online connectivity

Increased internet connectivity, faster internet speeds, falling costs of data, smartphone penetration, the proliferation of social media platforms, and the explosion of video-sharing platforms have made digital platforms an important battleground in political mobilisation and allowed platforms to be (mis)appropriated for political ends, especially in the creation and dissemination of disinformation content. As a political strategist said:

> Kenya's population is largely youthful, with 75% of the population aged below 35…this demographic relies a lot on social media for information about everything, including politics. We saw this as an opportunity to drive our agenda online and grow our support, so we recruited digital teams to spread our messages at the grassroots.
>
> (RCS8)

The pandemic, online consumption of information, and the explosion of misinformation

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an explosion of misinformation and disinformation dubbed the infodemic as people shared misleading content on the origin, spread, prevention, cure, and vaccines.

A major consequence of Covid-19 was the increased consumption of content online and the rise of new content creators and influencers as people started spending more time working online. The anxiety associated with the pandemic and the absence of traditional gatekeepers meant citizens had a hard time assessing the quality of information they encountered online.

A journalist puts it this way:

> Unfortunately, by the time the campaign season started in earnest, the online infrastructure to facilitate the spread and uptake of disinformation was already in place to be exploited by opportunistic actors.
>
> (RJ1)

The Covid-19 containment measures imposed by the government restricted physical gatherings including political rallies, and social, and religious gatherings that have traditionally been used by politicians to mobilise voters. In response, campaigns turned to digital platforms to keep their campaigns alive. In the words of a prominent social media influencer:

> With the lockdown and the ban on political rallies, the candidates had to innovate. We designed online based campaign strategies including streaming our activities for a larger online audience.
>
> (RCI 13)

This shift to online campaigns saw an acceleration in disinformation efforts and campaigns sought to leverage the digital platforms to gain advantage over their rivals.

State involvement in disinformation

The study found indications of state involvement in disinformation during the campaigns. While it is difficult to pinpoint the sources of the false information with certainty—and even those who posted still have some reasonable wiggle room to deny deliberate attempts at political disinformation—there is no doubt that in the 2022 elections, the merchants of false information had links to the state, since both sides in the election campaign enjoyed state legitimacy. Ruto was the sitting deputy president while Uhuru Kenyatta was president and was actively involved in propping up the opposition leader Odinga. Both sides were actively supported by sitting state officers including governors, members of parliament, cabinet secretaries, and even top civil servants. Political bloggers supporting Raila Odinga's candidacy were well known defenders of the state and the President in the digital space, and it would appear they were simply redeployed to help Odinga's campaigns. This is what one of the interviewees concludes:

> The Nairobi County governor Johnson Sakaja, running against the preferred candidate of the president, was the target of vicious State-driven disinformation campaigns over questions of his academic credentials. The series of false content to keep the controversy alive on digital and media platforms pointed to a well-coordinated influence operation as they relied on information only in the possession of the State.
>
> (RFC 12)

On the day that Deputy President William Ruto was scheduled to launch his manifesto, a fake manifesto was posted on WhatsApp, and several screenshots of the pages circulated on Facebook and WhatsApp. These had incendiary and inciting content and kept the conversation away from Ruto's actual promises to the potency of the promises in the fake manifesto. While it is unclear who generated the fake manifesto, interviews with campaign insiders suggest it was designed and created by one of the political campaigns with state links given that the two key sides both had candidates publicly backed up by state officials and state resources. (Figure 12.1)

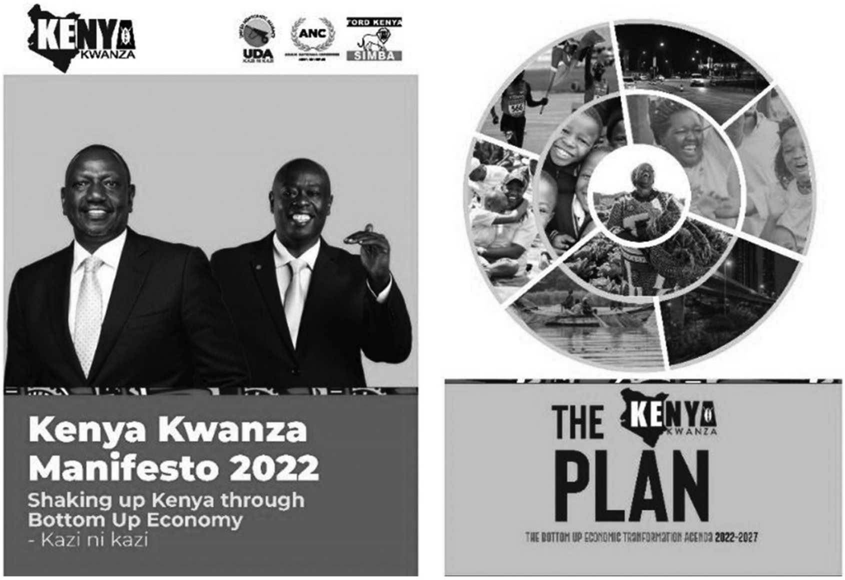
KENYA KWANZA
UDA
ANC
FORD KENYA
SIMBA
Kenya Kwanza Manifesto 2022
Shaking up Kenya through Bottom Up Economy
- Kazi ni kazi
THE KENYA KWANZA PLAN
THE BOTTOM UP ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION AGENDA 2022-2027

Figure 12.1 Side by side comparison of the cover pages of the fake (left) genuine (right) Kenya Kwanza Manifesto (Source: UDA Party website https://uda.ke/downloads-uda/#. (Photos of manifesto covers taken by the authors).

The architecture of the disinformation industry in Kenya

Interviews with key campaign actors and political operators from the two major coalitions revealed an elaborate piece of disinformation machinery at play during the August 2022 elections in Kenya. This disinformation infrastructure involved a disciplined hierarchical structure with networked structures operating from the national to the grassroots levels. The key investors in this disinformation strategy were political candidates and their campaigns, political parties, foreign actors, and businesspeople with vested interests:

1. **The command/sponsors:** At the apex of the disinformation chain are the campaign owners and disinformation sponsors. Their primary role is to give the mandate and provide the necessary finances to set up and drive the campaign operations. The presidential candidates sometimes sit at this apex body.
2. **The Disinformation Engine—The Political Strategy Teams and Think Tanks:** These comprise political and communication strategists and key campaign actors whose role is to provide the overall political and strategic direction for the campaign. They help to set the campaign objectives and conceptualise the overarching narrative for the campaign. They also link the different communication action groups with the central campaign organs.
3. **The Disinformation Factory—Communication Command Centre:** This is the team charged with translating the campaign strategies and the overall narrative into core campaign messages. This team also sets the campaign communication objectives and rolls out the implementation. Their role is to generate, create, and disseminate content and drive key messages on different online and offline platforms. They are organised around several departments.
    a. **Research and messaging—**comprising the digital leads, professional public relations, and communication professionals skilled in political communication. They are charged with the responsibility of taking the overall script and breaking it down into key messages. This team meets daily to plan for the campaigns.
    b. **Media and political voices—**These are politicians, political analysts, and media commentators who appear on TV, radio, online shows, rallies, town halls, and other campaign platforms to drive key campaign messages and narratives.
    c. **Content creators—**These are skilled writers, graphic designers, and video editors whose overall responsibility is to translate the campaign messages into shareable multimedia content that is then shared across the different platforms.
    d. **The troll armies/content disseminators—**These are hired online troops charged with the responsibility of disseminating the pre-made

content according to set daily targets. They include social media influencers with a huge following on different platforms, celebrity influencers, micro-influencers, fake accounts, multiple account holders, and bots. This group is charged with the responsibility of flooding the information space with propaganda content and trend hashtags, hijacking mainstream media narratives, creating artificial conversations, and bullying and silencing opponents.

e. **Community-based dissemination groups**—These are organised grassroots groups dispersed across geographical zones. Their work is to ignite political support at the grassroots by spreading and amplifying the centrally produced disinformation content to ensure maximum reach and impact. They are mostly organised in WhatsApp and Facebook groups and are linked to the national campaign communication command centre and the content factories. They help to crystallise the narratives and dominate the debates and conversations at the grassroots.

f. **The public**—The ultimate success of an effective disinformation campaign is when the messages are picked up and distributed by organic supporters, this way the narratives diffuse into the population becoming part of the daily social conversations. (Figure 12.2)

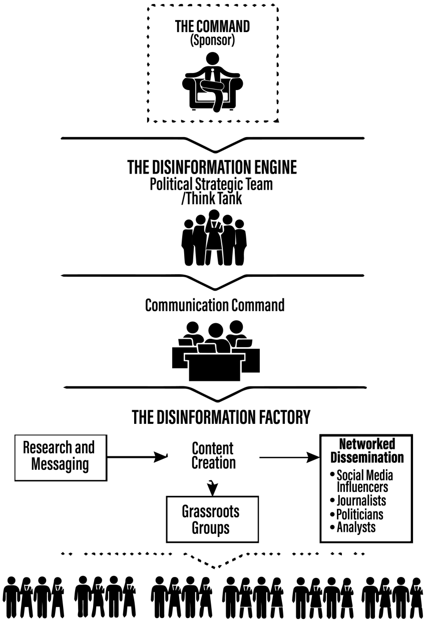
THE COMMAND
(Sponsor)
THE DISINFORMATION ENGINE
Political Strategic Team
/Think Tank
Communication Command
THE DISINFORMATION FACTORY
Research and Messaging
Content Creation
Networked Dissemination
• Social Media Influencers
• Journalists
• Politicians
• Analysts
Grassroots Groups

Figure 12.2 The Architecture of Disinformation

Source: Own elaboration based on information from campaign actors and political operatives.

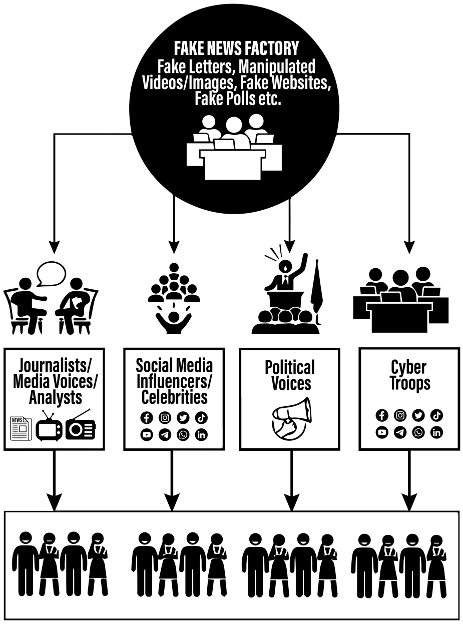
FAKE NEWS FACTORY
Fake Letters, Manipulated Videos/Images, Fake Websites, Fake Polls etc.
Journalists/ Media Voices/ Analysts
NEWS
Social Media Influencers/ Celebrities
Political Voices
Cyber Troops

Figure 12.3 Fake news factory. Source: Own elaboration based on information from campaign actors and political operatives.

An analysis of the flow of disinformation content reveals two patterns. In the first one, disinformation messaging originates offline, often through remarks made by candidates and their surrogates during campaign activities. The message is then picked up by their digital teams who package it and amplify it online. The message could be picked up by other politicians and surrogates offline and amplified further. In the second scenario, disinformation originates from disinformation labs and shared by the digital teams and social media influencers, the message is then picked up by the politicians and repeated in rallies and media interviews and again amplified online. In both scenarios, the loop must be completed to ensure there is back and forth between online and offline. (Figure 12.3)

Discussion and conclusion

Several factors played a key role in compounding the impact of disinformation during the 2022 election campaigns in Kenya. First, the prevailing polarised political environment, existing political fault-lines based on historical factors, and intense political rivalry among the three most prominent politicians in Kenya set the stage for unprecedented disinformation games. Prejudices and bias play a key role in the reception, consumption, and processing of misinformation. The political fallout between the president and his deputy triggered intense competition between the two former allies-turned-foes, creating fertile ground for disinformation to thrive.

Second, the two campaigns sought to maximise propaganda by elevating and using emotive wedge issues like class, ethnicity, and religion to win over the voters. The sensitivity of these issues easily appeals to the emotions of anger, anxiety, and fear and is likely to make voters more susceptible to the emotional hooks of disinformation campaigns.

Frustrations arising from the prevailing harsh economic times in the aftermath of Covid-19 made voters susceptible to manipulation. The Ruto-led Kenya Kwanza Campaign weaponised class divisions framing the contest between the "privileged rich dynasties" and "underprivileged poor hustlers" to incite anger against the dynasties and stir solidarity among the poor, unemployed, and those working in the informal sector.

Three, the almost infinite stream of information available on the internet and specifically social media has created a chaotic information environment that makes it hard for voters to discern the truth from lies. The vast amount of political information online overwhelms the voters' ability to find the truth, akin to "drinking water directly from a hosepipe". The strategy by the campaign and political actors is to pollute the information environment by continuously flooding it with well-designed content that makes it impossible for voters to navigate through the murky waters, leaving them susceptible to the targeted disinformation campaigns.

Four, there seems to be an established belief that political disinformation and misinformation has actual value and consequence on the political discourse, political opinions and possibly, the electoral outcomes. This explains the deliberate investment and the growing sophistication in the deployment of disinformation as a strategy in electoral contests. While the strategy of spreading misleading information through coordinated disinformation campaigns first came into prominence during the US 2016 elections (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017), the tactic of using disinformation to influence and change political opinion is now emerging as a necessary and popular part of any effective campaign strategy in a competitive electoral environment (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016, Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Successive elections in Kenya have witnessed the rise of a thriving disinformation industry enabled by a vibrant social media space which has seen influencers and organised trolls being deployed to influence the political discourse online (McKay, 2023). Notably though, with each election, the level of sophistication and organisation seems to be growing.

While questions linger on the nature and extent of the disruptive power of disinformation on democracy and elections (Benkler et al., 2018), the avalanche of false and misleading information witnessed during recent electoral contests across the world—in the UK, the US, Asia, and Africa—point to a growing belief that political disinformation and misinformation has some level of impact on electoral outcomes (Gomez & Ramcharan, 2022).

Young and fragile democracies like Kenya are especially vulnerable to this digital disinformation without the benefit of strong democratic safeguards. Unverified claims of rigging and voter fraud, preying on long-held ethnic distrust through exclusionary political rhetoric could potentially ignite violence in a country with a history of election related violence.

The danger of disinformation goes beyond deceiving voters, rather, by introducing doubt, anxiety, anger, or fear, disinformation can be used to achieve political disengagement and promote divisions and cynicism.

An enduring concern for fact-checkers, and scholars is the seeming normalisation and acceptance of disinformation tactics in electioneering with little regard to the related ethical concerns related to the undermining of democracy.

Notes

1 Relevant posts are publicly available on Facebook on these links: https://www.facebook.com/dennisitumbi/posts/pfbid02awuk5nsvxJqCDLPbQx8cQmKKBWFRmcMDYFXzejdCEa1mQQS579CnRfNUjg7GHwYJl; this https://www.facebook.com/dennisitumbi/posts/pfbid02BzXgK4uTCZACqyRYnrC8eF5JNFRQG8ekwEujzQ2X3rRh7CJLab8ynra4Z84tcoJql; and https://www.facebook.com/dennisitumbi/posts/pfbid02FMFZHfEiKdnSvYFzQSefeXG5UhDhcMYgUwB1icnQhduuayPzADuRoM5u9zPPKgQGl.

2 In late 2007 and early 2008, Kenya experienced one of the worst cases of electoral-related violence following the declaration of the election results. The violence left 1,300 dead and over 300 people displaced. Six individuals including current (William Ruto) and former President (Uhuru Kenyatta) were charged at the International Crimes Court at the Hague for the violence though the cases eventually collapsed.

3 An example of a graphic on a tweet with a manipulated photo of William Ruto linking him to land grabbing https://twitter.com/Lindaa_Ich/status/1311532357804003329.

4 The disinformation targeted four judges who declared as unconstitutional the government initiative to amend the Constitution throughthe BBI process. Link: https://twitter.com/ItsKiprotich1/status/1400810625115250692

5 Following the update in the Twitter API, access to hashtag analytics data via open-source intelligence data is limited. For more, see: https://digitalinvestigations.substack.com/p/worst-case-scenario-twitters-api.

6 For some of the manipulated newspaper headlines and the poster alleging bias on the part of the electoral commission chairperson, see links here: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0CQEFrGai67hNXhTG6JiQTkQ8CL5X7gKsHvbWd33GAcG5ZbMgbitpaVUUiZXo2Mzul&id=100054355315724; https://www.facebook.com/groups/1520256788269210/posts/2432113670416846; and https://twitter.com/otibrayoo/status/1560203560524070917.

7 An image of unverified election result with an image declaring Odinga as having won the elections is available here: https://twitter.com/edwinsifuna/status/1557278474808737792.

8 An unverified election result declaring Ruto the winner. See image here: https://twitter.com/OleItumbi/status/1558254578172399616.

9 The media houses actually did an explainer on why they were running different electoral results using the same set of data. See link to the explainer, which also includes images of the different numbers. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/national/article/2001452897/explainer-why-media-houses-have-different-presidential-results.

10 A look at the graphic declaring Ruto "Venezuela President-elect" in an election presided over by "Jose Carmago". https://twitter.com/njoshnjoshJN/status/1565731736482467841

11 An advocate quoted by ATG radio claiming the election was manipulated. See here a Twitter post with a graphic via handle @atgradiokenya https://twitter.com/atgradiokenya/status/1565638376182747136.

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Part IV

Electoral and closed autocracies

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13 Discourses and policies of disinformation in Turkey[1,2]

Mine Gencel Bek

Introduction

In their article titled "State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?", Vanessa A. Boese, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Yuko Sato, and Staffan I. Lindberg (2022) show us, by relying on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset, how autocratisation is rising too fast throughout the world in the last decade. According to the data, autocracies have extended to 70% of the world population in 2021. Secondly, they discuss the changing nature of autocratisation in 40 countries where political polarisation and autocratisation reinforce each other. They argue that freedom of expression and the media worsened as the top 20 declining indicators in the last decade. Turkey is one of the top six autocratising countries where anti-pluralist, nationalist, and reactionary parties use government power to drive autocratisation (the others are Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, and Serbia) (p. 990). The authors show the signs of how autocratisation processes are out of control, with the leaders currently taking bolder actions compared to the past. The leaders push polarisation to extreme levels in an environment where the use of derogatory rhetoric and hate speech increases. One of these signs is closely related to our topic in this chapter: The use of misinformation[3] by autocratic governments as a tool to manipulate public opinion at domestic and international levels (p. 993). It is especially alarming when we consider that not only the leaders or parties but also right-wing populist ideas circulate mostly on social mediav (Giraud & Poole, 2021).

This chapter, inspired by the work of Seva Gunitsky (2015), discusses social media in Turkey as a proactive tool of autocratic stability in the face of the disinformation campaigns led by the AKP's authoritarian regime (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party*). AKP was established in August 2001 and has been the ruling party for the last two decades, since November 2002. While initially framed as a lever of change and the collectivisation of political action (Tüfekçi, 2017), social media soon became a crucial means of governmental censorship, suppression, and surveillance (Yeşil et al., 2017) through trolling, bots, and bullying (Karataş & Saka, 2017). Gunitsky's (2015) argument is based on the idea that we have witnessed a shift in which regimes in Russia, China, and the Middle East moved beyond negative control, that is, suppressing

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online spaces, and are currently using social media to undermine the opposition, shape public discussion, and gather information about the public. Here we are interested in how disinformation has been used reactively and proactively in this process. The developments have shown us that social media in Turkey is not merely an obstacle to autocratic rule but one of the tools for the continuance of the regime. The chapter will show the changing understandings of social media with a focus on disinformation in recent years, in articulation with ongoing negative control strategies used by the regime (such as blocking, censoring, slowing down, and suppression) as well as increasing activity on so-called verification.

The chapter analyses state-led discourses, strategies, and policies on disinformation, including the processes of fabricating and disseminating fake news and deploying paid trolls while depicting social media as a site of crime and immorality in an alarming tone. It discusses the official institutions that disseminate pro-government ideas, focusing on some of them, such as Anadolu News Agency and the Turkish Radio Television (TRT), for propaganda in the name of verification, and the newly established institutions such as the official Directorate of Communication and contributing channels of official news verification. The limitation of access to and circulation of critical information through legal measures will be examined in light of the recent Disinformation Law, enacted in October 2022, with a claim to prevent disinformation on social media—though critics call it a law for censorship.

Disinformation and social media: from reactive to proactive?

The wave of protests against the ruling party AKP began with demonstrations in 2013 against a construction project planned in Gezi Park in Istanbul, for which social media was used as the main means of mobilisation. During the Gezi uprisings, the activists used Twitter in particular, since their actions could not find space in the mainstream press and TV channels. The situation has changed fundamentally ever since. The AKP government had already increased the control of the oppositional press and social media, establishing and strengthening pro-AKP news media outlets in the early 2010s. Later, the Party discovered the potential of social media, and Twitter specifically, as we see in the deployment of pro-AKP trolls on these platforms. The government presents those accounts as the voice of the people in a battle against dissent and intellectualism. Even though we have witnessed how social media was declared a source of evil by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other AKP politicians, they soon managed to establish an army of paid trolls who have been actively attacking and lynching civic rights defenders (Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Karataş & Saka, 2017). In accordance with how they are named by the critics as *Aktrolls* with the initials of AKP, Erkan Saka (2018) argues that they are not only organised and paid within the party structure but also there are those working voluntarily. In both cases, I would suggest that the involvement of non-paid trolls should not obstruct us from seeing the bigger picture. In fact, what matters the most is which causes these A*Ktrolls* serve: They have worked to legitimise AKP's Islamist, right-wing, authoritarian neo-liberalism. In a way, the AKP government is aware of the importance of both the old and new media in sustaining their autocratic regime, different from the tendency of populist leaders in other countries to bypass the legacy media and perform more direct communication with their own publics (Broersma & Eldridge, 2019, p. 195). Some recent research (Gencel Bek, 2023) has analysed how the legacy press framed social media during the 2013 Gezi events, as well as every year afterwards during the anniversary of the protests. The theme "social media, civic actions and mobilization" appeared predominantly in the first year, in 2013. In the following years, we see both a "negative" frame associating social media mostly with crime, issues of access, disinformation, and harm, as well as a "positive" frame related to new services and technology, small-scale social campaigns for good causes (such as campaigns on health, animals, education, and local scale initiatives), and publicity. According to the study, social media, as depicted by the mainstream media, has become an arena of both government oppression and commercial interests in neo-liberal capitalism.

Disinformation was initially framed as a complaint of the AKP government, as reflected in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speeches during the Gezi resistance. However, at the same time, the government, with "digital populism" (Bulut & Yörük, 2017) worked to create dangerous polarisation through aggressive disinformation campaigns since Gezi. It fabricated *fake* news and circulated it through both the mainstream and social media. Recent research (Karataş & Gencel Bek, 2023) shows that the most persistent practices involved delegitimising the protests based on vandalism and betrayal; targeting and criminalising prominent figures and celebrities joining the protests; accusing foreign powers of plotting Gezi; criticising the opposition for supporting Gezi; and circulating fake memories based on pseudo-events. This study argues that the government has attempted to convert fake news into fake memories by repeating them over the years despite counter-attempts to reveal this disinformation tactic (for instance, a *muezzin* who denied seeing that alcohol was consumed in the Dolmabahçe Mosque was sent into exile to a village following Erdoğan's claim that the Gezi protesters consumed alcohol there). It should also be mentioned that disinformation campaigns reigned not only on social media but were amplified by the legacy media, mainly owned by pro-governmental media companies. For example, 14 columnists from five newspapers circulated Erdogan's allegation of the 2013 Kabatas incident, where a veiled woman with a baby claimed to have been harassed by a semi-naked male protester (Bianet, 2015). As of now, the attack has not been confirmed.

Erdoğan accused Twitter of being the main "trouble", "terrorizing society" and serving as a medium of "lie" while in the following years, he requested that the internet and computers not be allowed to ruin young peoples national and moral emotions and pollute their cleanest souls, in a speech, regarding the people who had joined the Gezi protests (Sözcü, 2014). Disinformation has been used in Turkish as a direct translation of information pollution (‘bilgi kirliliği’ in Turkish) and is a political phenomenon compatible with the AKP’s populist authoritarianism.

Following the military coup attempt, which was claimed to be led by Fetullah Gülen (who is a clergyman and was a friend of Erdoğan and AKP for a long time), pro-AKP newspaper *Hürriyet*’s report (Öztürk, 2020) announced that FETÖ[4]’s “dirty game” on social media had been revealed. According to the report, it was revealed that FETÖ follows a roadmap and conducts disinformation and black propaganda by influencing the masses on social media in order to establish chaos in Turkey.

Thus, disinformation is conducted around the concepts of the “enemies”: We see this framing in many news stories which report “insulting Erdogan” cases as well as reports on cases of propaganda of terror organisation connections, such as PKK (The Kurdistan Workers’ Party) or FETÖ, mentioning the verdict of the courts by maintaining the language of criminalisation without any further investigative reporting or using any other source. Some disinforming headlines from *Hürriyet*, for example, report on an “Imprisonment punishment to a university student because of PKK propaganda” (CNN Turk, 2018), or “6 taken into custody in Eskişehir for PKK propaganda” (Sabah, 2018).

What is also interesting is the fact that anti-AKP news media, such as *Sözcü*, also contribute to reproducing and circulating these criminalising narratives. Their nationalist profile, their idea of enemies and terrorism threats, and their fear of being targeted by the government, can be the reasons for this approach. Disinformation is easily recognisable in these paper’s sourcing strategies since explanations made by official accredited sources are given directly in their reports without questioning or adding alternative explanations from other sources. One report, for example, uses the problematic, elastic definition of “general moral values” of society. The only source of the report is the police headquarters. It is, in fact, the same content as the official news agency Anadolu News Agency news: “Police Headquarters: Many channels that are not compatible with general moral values shut down” (Sözcü, 2020). Thus, pro-AKP sources aim at creating a moral panic by appealing to threats against people’s safety.

Official verification against disinformation?

News verification or fact-checking channels do not have a long history in Turkey, but they have increased in different forms. Previous research by Gencel Bek (2021) critically reviews news verification organisations such as *teyit.org* and the more ambiguous *Malumatfuruş*, since they sometimes both produce tabloidised, sensational news and can be rather uncritical of authoritarian discourses and policies of government ideas. Thus, current “independent” news verification channels are far from building a challenge to disinformation. Besides these, there are also pro-government groups aimed at the international arena that use the fight against disinformation as a “soft power” tool. One example is *Günün Yalanları (The Lies of the Day)*, a project of *Bosphorus Global* which aims to defend “Turkey” on the global stage (Yesil, 2021). The initiative, which publishes in Turkish, Arabic, and English, supports the government’s agenda by calling out “perceived manipulations and lies”. *The Lies of the Day* has a different section examining the “lies” of the foreign press with connections to another project, *Chronicles of Shame*” predominantly concentrating on Islamophobia and discrimination from other parts of the world. Another project called *Fact-checking Turkey* publishes in English and Arabic to monitor “the factual accuracy of various news and claims about Turkey”. As it has been previously argued (Gencel Bek, 2021) rather than pushing back against fake news, these pro-government organisations contribute to the media situation in Turkey as “amplifier[s] of misinformation” (Valenzuela et al., 2019, p. 803) by acting as part of the government’s propaganda machine.

The Islamist populist AKP regime tries to sustain its hegemony by establishing new institutions as well as making the existing ones work more directly for the government, especially for revealing presumably fake news. Current “fact-checking” initiatives are about to move to another stage. Rather than operating through so-called civil society initiatives, which are mostly pro-AKP, they are directly going to be operated by the state itself.

Besides purchasing the majority of mainstream news media and transforming them into its propaganda machine, the AKP government has also used the official news agency Anadolu News Agency and the 'public radio television' company, TRT, as propaganda tools while naming them as verification channels. For example, Anadolu News Agency has developed a news verification website (teyithatti[5]). When we look closer, it is possible to see that these verification channels work to increase the voice of the government while choosing their material to fact-check the critical media.

Around 400 videos (each of around four to five minutes) have been published by the TRT 1 channel since 2017 under the title of *Doğrusu ne?* (it can be translated as “what is the correct version”, or “what is the truth?”) with the slogan, “Lies never end unless it is not said what the correct one is”. The videos can be accessed from TRT *Doğrusu ne* YouTube’s channel. TRT does not operate as a public service channel but instead resembles instead a state-run broadcasting company, having lost its autonomous structure following the 1971 military coup (Yanardağoğlu, 2021). That situation changed even more dramatically in the last few years, especially after 2017, following the military coup attempt. While the details of this coup attempt are still secret and have been left without being investigated and publicly discussed, this was followed by further oppression of different segments of society with the excuse of protecting the country from “traitors” and “terrorists” under the declared emergency rule.

The *Directorate of Communication* was established in 2018 in connection to the Presidency of Turkey with an enormous official budget (in 2020, around 440 million TL) and a big building and staff (816 people) (Keten, 2022). According to the oppositional Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP) MP Murat Emir from Ankara, the suggested budget for advertisement and publicity in 2023 for the *Directorate of Communication* is 41 times more than the budget that the Ministry of Youth receives for fighting against drug addiction (Bildircin, 2022). Fahrettin Altun from the Directorate of Communications called for truth and an end to disinformation for an active public sphere recently in a meeting organised for the 20th anniversary of the AKP rule (TRT Haber, 2022). The Directorate has organised international strategic communications summits in the last two years to discuss combatting disinformation. The Directorate of Communication regularly publishes a *Disinformation Bulletin* (*Dezenformasyon Bülteni*) since October 2022. It publishes "the lies of the week" in a peculiar way, mostly without giving a source (Sözeri, 2022). An entry of the Disinformation Bulletin about the falsified report that an interrogation about the bombing in Taksim in November 2021 was prevented by the votes of AKP and MHP at the Parliament was reported as false (Kılıç, 2022). It is also important to mention that, following the blast in Taksim, social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and some Telegram servers, were restricted (Netblocks, 2022). There are many layers at issue: banning information on bombings, refusing parliamentary interrogation, complaining about the critical social media posts stating what happened and accusing them as producers of disinformation and lies, and establishing verification as a tool of oppression. Currently, there are also attempts to establish an official verification app called *Doğru mu*? (translated as *Is that True?*) which is currently in the test stage (Gazete Duvar, 2021).

Regulating 'disinformation' for limiting public information

When examining the statistics and data provided by critical civic associations that monitor disinformation in Turkey, it is possible to see the levels of governmental limitation, censorship, and control against freedom of speech and information. These take place by blocking websites, and deleting or removing published news stories, as well as prosecuting journalists. Independent Media Network Bianet (2022a) has been tracing the evolution of disinformation over the last 15 years, two years after the enactment of the 2007 Internet Law No. 5651. Ever since, 2,500 websites have been blocked, and 245,000 websites have been banned, with the excuse of protecting users from illegal and harmful content. After the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), which is far from working autonomously from the government, gained the authority to inspect online platforms with legislation accepted in 2019, many critical outlets were fined. One year later, another law brought other necessities for social media platforms such as storing their users' information in Turkey. Independent organisations have evaluated these policies as censorship mechanisms aimed at monitoring Internet platforms (Keten, 2022).

In the 2020 *EngelliWeb* report, Yaman Akdeniz and Ozan Güven (2021) reported the existence of a "complex Internet Censorship Mechanism" in

Turkey. For example, in 2020, 467,011 websites and domain names as well as 22,554 news articles (URLs) were blocked, while 15,832 news articles (URLs) were deleted or removed. The authors also consider that COVID-19 was used as an excuse to increase control. According to another report by the Free Web Turkey project (2021), at least 11,050 URLs, domain names, and social media posts were blocked from January 2021 to December 2021. Among them, 1,593 of the blocked URLs contained news articles, more than half related to Turkish President and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, his family, and AKP members. In total, 49 news websites were banned in 2021.

Besides controlling social media and digital news, media workers also experience prosecution. As Erol Önderoğlu (2022) summarises, in 2022, five media representatives were detained and 20 media representatives from eight cities were attacked (13 by the police and two by the far-right MHP forces). The report also lists the charges against 126 media representatives who faced trials between July and August that year. Some of these charges are "being a member of an illegal organization", "propagandizing for a terrorist organisation", "attempting to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Türkiye by using force and violence", and "degrading religious values" (Önderoğlu, 2022).

Legislation on disinformation, specifically aimed at combating the spread of fake news, was implemented by enacting Law number 7418 on October 18, 2022 (Resmi Gazete, 2022). According to the government, the law aims to punish with up to three years in prison for the circulation of fake news or disinformation that spreads panic, and endangers the security forces, or the general health of Turkish society. For the opposition parties and journalists' organisations, such as the Turkish Journalists' Union (TGS), the law considered criminalising journalism and limiting freedom of information (Michaelson, 2022). According to the law, social media companies will have to share the information of social media users who share "criminal" content upon demand within four hours; otherwise, they will be responsible for the content. Critiques arose on what criminal means and how it is to be defined (Sarp Nebil, 2022).

As soon as the law was enacted, we saw an application already while writing this article in November 2022. Oppositional party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was indicted with charges of "insult", "slander", and "insulting the Turkish nation and state" under the new law following a post on Twitter that criticised the government (Bianet 2022b).

Conclusion

Through the chapter, we have seen the simultaneous application of both reactive and proactive discourses and policies that frame and regulate social media. It is possible to see that, during and right after the Gezi protests, reactive policies increased. Proactive policies followed, but the Turkish government never dismissed the use of reactionary policies since there is an ongoing dissent that is perceived as a threat and, thus, needs to be silenced. There are concerns, especially at the conjuncture of the approaching elections in the summer of 2023.

This chapter has discussed how the authoritarian AKP government has directly implemented state-led disinformation campaigns since the 2013 Gezi protest through the creation and circulation of fake news and their yearly remembrance. The suppression of social media to obstruct the circulation of counter-voices through increasing legal mechanisms and trolls was implemented in a media ecology characterised by governmental hegemony. The mainstream newspapers and television stations were purchased and ruled by pro-AKP capital. In addition, the state broadcaster TRT and news agency Anadolu Agency have also been efficiently used to amplify pro-AKP ideas. At the same time, they were also used to discredit other voices through official news verification channels, which added to a number of already available government-friendly organisations and news verification channels. The Directorate of Communications of the Presidency also contributed to disseminating the official perspective in the country and the world while downgrading the counter-discourses by starting to publish a Disinformation Bulletin. As the last strategy, a specific bill was introduced to limit potentially oppositional ideas circulated on social media.

It is challenging for critical journalism to resist censorship and closures under severe legal threats while at the same time dealing with manipulation and disinformation campaigns. One of the difficulties is that the government is currently shifting the language and discourse of its critics in a way that serves its own agenda and policies. Developing a democratic approach to deal with these complex discourses and strategies for critical forces is a challenging task. The consequences, especially when they are linked with a judiciary increasingly dependent on an autocratic government, cost the freedom of civic rights defenders, journalists, and critical academics who are often targets of governmental campaigns and policies, as well as being lynched in both the pro-government legacy media and social media. In a context where even the leader of the main opposition party, CHP, is shown as a target and criminalised, it is not easy for ordinary people to express themselves and pay the price of running in the corridors of courts to claim their innocence and freedom, especially when they are not connected to any collectivities. Yet, the crucial role in challenging state-led disinformation strategies belongs to the oppositional forces, including critical journalists, academics, and activists who struggle despite many obstacles. This chapter aims to contribute to rendering the Turkish case visible beyond national borders by calling on the international community to advocate for and support the genuine values of freedom of information.

Post-script

While this text is being prepared for publication, we witnessed the media and social media misuse for disinformation before the general elections in May 2023. The election campaign process again confirmed how disinformation was implemented as policy and discourse. TRT and Anadolu News Agency were used as the sources of propaganda for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. According to RTÜK board member from CHP, İlhan Taşcı, from April 1 to May 11, TRT covered Erdoğan for more than 48 hours while the allocated time for Kılıçdaroğlu was only 32 minutes. The critical questioning by the main opposition party, CHP, of the issue remained visible only on some alternative online media and international media (Akpamuk, 2023). The problem of injustice was not limited to that during the election process: Erdoğan showed a manipulated video of CHP's leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu with the leaders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on a large screen to his supporters at an election rally in Istanbul. The video montaged the election campaign song of Kılıçdaroğlu with the speeches of PKK leaders. All the music, sound, words, and images were montaged as if it were one video. Even though the fact-checkers confirmed that the footage was a manipulation by combining two separate videos, as Karataş (2023) states, "cheapfakes can mislead the targeted segments of the public with less media literacy and pose significant threats to democratic politics and participation" (Karataş, 2023). The video was circulated on social media, including YouTube (Sancar, 2023) and in the pro-government media (Akpamuk, 2023). Emre Kızılkaya, vice president of the international press association IPI, International Press Institute, argues that by relying on the reports of Journo, these disinformation campaigns are also disseminated on the net by the digital platform Google, which foregrounds pro-government media in search. Out of all this climate, the "victory" of Erdoğan was not a big surprise. These tactics might increase further with the technological affordance of artificial intelligence.

Notes

1. Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) SFB 1472 "Transformations of the Popular"—43857702.
2. This chapter was submitted by the author on December 10th, 2022.
3. Even though misinformation is the result of a deliberate disinformation process (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021), the authors declare that they use disinformation and misinformation interchangeably (Boese et al., 2022, p. 1003).
4. His alleged followers were named FETÖ, an abbreviation of Fetullah Gülen Örgütü (Fetullahist Terror Organization).
5. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/teyithatti.

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14 Disinformation under the guise of democracy: lessons from Hungary

Gábor Polyák, Ágnes Urbán, Petra Szávai and Kata Horváth

Introduction

This chapter discusses how the Orbán governments in Hungary have developed an effective machinery for the production and dissemination of state-sponsored disinformation and other forms of government propaganda since 2010. The paper presents the Hungarian situation based on the "firehose of falsehood" propaganda model and its complement (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

This study argues that the success of propaganda can only be understood within a wider legal and social context, and therefore shows how legal and social control systems are being dismantled. The first part of the chapter presents a theoretical framework based on relevant literature on this kind of propaganda and adapts it to pseudo-democratic regimes such as the Orbán regime in Hungary. Subsequently, particular attention is paid to the legal, economic, and social environment that was built in parallel with the media system for the dissemination of state-sponsored disinformation. We are convinced that previous analyses have not paid enough attention to the broader context of the transformation of the Hungarian media system, without which the success of state disinformation and propaganda cannot be explained. The chapter is based on a review of legal and policy doctrines and related literature. Following this, and also based on our own primary research within the watchdog organisation Mertek Media Monitor, we summarise the main elements of the post-2010 transformation of the Hungarian media system, which the Orbán governments have undertaken to ensure that publicly funded political messages are disseminated unhindered, uncritically, and as widely as possible. The legal (Polyák, 2015 2019), economic (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020), and political (Bajomi-Lázár, 2021) aspects of the transformation of the Hungarian media system are well documented, interpreted, and placed in an international context (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021) in the literature and policy documents[1], so here we highlight only the aspects relevant to the spread of state-sponsored disinformation.

The last part of the chapter analyses one of the key instruments of state-sponsored disinformation in Hungary: the so-called national consultations, which were accompanied by major state campaigns and whose effects have already

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been reported in the literature. In relation to the national consultations, we have analysed both the questions asked and the issues covered by the non-governmental media during the consultation period, in order to show what the national consultations have diverted the public debate from.

The nature of propaganda in pseudo-democracies

Since 2010, Hungary, as a member state of the European Union with improving economic performance until 2021, has developed a political system based on unilateral declarations of power and the elimination of checks and balances, instead of social dialogue and democratic competition. The resulting system has been described in the literature by a number of adjectives (Körösényi et al., 2020), with Orbán himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington, 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy[2]. In this system, Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz four times won a two-thirds majority in the election in 2022. The pervasive, enemy-creating, and reality-bending, extremely loud political communication that we refer to here as propaganda is a strong pillar of the system's perpetuation.

We understand state-sponsored disinformation as a tool of propaganda (Martin 1982). Although there are broader definitions of propaganda (Ellul, 1973; Mareš & Mlejnková, 2021), in the context of this paper, propaganda is a form of political communication that seeks to persuade voters not through fact-based arguments but through a strong emotional, impulsive charge of communication. It usually relies on the creation of enemies, stereotyping, and the simplification of language, images, and content, and defines the election as a choice between different political systems (old vs. new, elite vs. power of the masses, good vs. evil), thus denying the legitimacy of political competition within a democratic framework. In the context of this study, propaganda is a tool of political influence that destroys the functioning of the democratic public sphere and ultimately deprives the electorate of the possibility of democratic decision-making.

Where propaganda serves the interests of the government or the political forces in power, and is produced and disseminated using public money and other state resources, it is state-sponsored.

The veracity of the messages is irrelevant to propaganda. Not all propaganda is disinformation, as propaganda can achieve its aims by amplifying some of the real facts or some opinions based on real facts and framing them in a way that appeals to emotions. While the aims of disinformation often coincide with those of political propaganda and are as destructive to the democratic public as propaganda, not all disinformation can be considered propaganda. For example, many of the non-political conspiracy theories and untrue health information do not meet the definition of propaganda used here. The common set of both types of manipulative communication is, however, ultimately very large.

The primary aim of propaganda is manipulation, often using untrue statements. These are excellent tools for achieving propaganda's aims: they can be used to provoke a strong emotional reaction, to strengthen the loyalties of one's own camp, to disqualify other points of view and their representatives, and to simplify complex problems. The aim of propaganda is not to communicate information but to convince on an emotional basis, and this type of communication is therefore, indifferent to the truth of the message.

"Firehose of falsehood"

The state-sponsored disinformation used by the Hungarian government fully meets the criteria that Paul and Matthews (2016) have defined as a "firehose of falsehood", which was initially conceptualised in relation to Russian propaganda. This comprehensive propaganda model is so resource-intensive that it can only be carried out at the state level in practice, through the uncontrolled use of public money and the misuse of state power. Hence, the "firehose of falsehood" always takes the form of state-sponsored disinformation. The aim of this propaganda model is to eliminate the checks and balances and make democratic competition impossible in an environment in which the illusory, formal skeleton of democratic limits and competition still exists. This propaganda is therefore not simply aimed at convincing, enthusing, and mobilising, but at covering up government abuses and failures, disqualifying competitors, hiding or denigrating alternatives, and ultimately creating an illusory reality that is false in all its elements. It is therefore the most widespread and effective form of state-sponsored disinformation. By radically restructuring the ownership and financing of the media system, it builds up an effective infrastructure for the dissemination of disinformation at public expense and uses this infrastructure to mass-produce and disseminate disinformation messages at public expense.

In the following, we describe the four main characteristics of this propaganda model, according to the authors (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

1. High-volume and multichannel: propaganda messages are delivered to audiences across a wide range of platforms and genres, not only through all possible forms of media channels but through educational and cultural institutions as well. Messages are essentially the same across all platforms and formats. Many times they are repeated verbatim; other times they repeat centrally defined phrases and idioms.
2. Rapid, continuous, and repetitive: the propaganda machine can react very quickly to new situations, changing topics, picking up and releasing narratives in a matter of seconds. The rapid changes of topics also mean that this communication dominates public discourse at any given moment, continually diverting the audience's attention to newer and newer topics, leaving no room for refuting certain falsehoods or for any real debate. In doing so, it

constantly draws citizens' attention to the issues that the government wants to talk about and distracts attention from those that the government would rather remain silent about. The topics are not only repeated on different platforms but are also recurrently interlinked. Increasingly, the public perceives that it is being presented with a single narrative, even if its details sharply contradict each other. This is nothing less than conspiracy theorising by the government.

3. Lacks commitment to objective reality: propaganda messages use the truth according to their own intentions. They are not necessarily based on blunt lies, although they do not shy away from them. The messages are usually truthful, but the real elements are framed and taken out of context. The selective and manipulative use of reality makes propaganda messages even more difficult to refute. Propaganda also serves the function of discouraging those who seek to refute the messages. After all, any debate about the truth of propaganda is doomed to failure. The propagandist can easily twist arguments to refute manipulative messages, utter superficial half-truths, appeal to emotions and passions, and attack the speaker instead of presenting counter-arguments. Debate is particularly difficult in a media situation in which the debate leader is also biased towards propaganda.
4. Lacks commitment to consistency: just as conspiracy theories are generally inconsistent, and believers in them do not expect consistency, so are government narratives composed of partially contradictory elements. These narratives are most often held together by the identity of the propaganda enemy. More important than the actual content of the propaganda is its ability to reinforce the identity of the community, the simplest and most effective means of which is to contrast the community with the values and groups represented by the designated enemy. Just as individual and community identities are not consistent, propaganda does not have to be either. In fact, the more contradictory messages appear, the stronger the feeling in the public that anything can be true, or the opposite of anything can be true. As a result of the relativisation of facts, refuting lies with real facts becomes almost impossible during debates.

In terms of the Hungarian experience, the characteristics listed by Paul and Matthews (2016) are complemented by a further characteristic, which follows the previous ones, namely the extremely polarising messages. The purpose and effect of propaganda messages is to create a public sphere in which supporters and critics of the government are placed at an unbridgeable distance from each other. A polarised public sphere is dominated by emotionally overwrought rhetoric, primarily focused on maintaining group identity, and mainly presenting extremist views (Tufekci, 2018). This has the advantage for the ruling parties of creating a strong loyalty among their own voters, and emotional loyalty maintains the electoral majority needed for re-election.

The experience of recent years in countries operating within a fundamentally democratic and constitutional framework shows that the propaganda that appears in these countries is really successful in dividing and polarising the public and society. This gap-widening propaganda has been used in the Brexit campaign (Hobolt et al., 2021), in the political success of Donald Trump (Jacobson, 2016), by Narendra Modi in India (Taberez, 2020), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Fernandes et al., 2020), and in some of the eastern member states of the European Union. Alongside Viktor Orban of Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland (Tworzecki, 2019), this political communication strategy has also been followed by Janez Janša of Slovenia (Krašovec & Deželan 2019).

Declining democracy in Hungary: eliminating the institutions of the rule of law

In 2010, after eight years of left-wing government, Viktor Orbán and his right-wing conservative party Fidesz won a significant electoral victory. They won two-thirds of the seats in parliament, which is enough to change the constitution under the Hungarian constitutional system, elements of which will be presented later in this paper. Orbán immediately used this mandate and radically changed the whole constitutional and legal system. As part of this process, he rewrote the electoral rules and has been shaping the electoral system to his own needs since the 2014 elections. This is an important factor in preserving the two-thirds majority.

The political, economic, and social system in Hungary after 2010 has been described in the literature by a number of adjectives (Körösényi et al., 2020) with Orbán himself calling it illiberal democracy (Puddington, 2017) and the European Parliament in 2022 calling it electoral autocracy[3].

An essential instrument for dismantling the guarantees of the rule of law has been the Fundamental Law adopted in 2011, which was drafted without participation from neither opposition parties nor civil society. The new institutional framework created by the constitution also allowed the governing party to appoint its own confidants to head all the public institutions that are supposed to control power. An emblematic example of this is the Constitutional Court, whose powers were significantly reduced, and by increasing the number of judges and appointing new judges, the Constitutional Court already had a stable majority of judges in 2013 who unconditionally supported the Fidesz government (Eötvös Károly Institute, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union & Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2015). Even so, it cannot be said that the Constitutional Court has taken only restrictive decisions on freedom of expression and media freedom. For example, the decisions ensuring the free publication of police officers' images in the press are important reinforcements of freedom of expression.[4] However, in cases concerning the media system, it has either not acted at all—notably the Media Council and the complaint about the independence of the public media—or has ruled in line with the ruling party's demands. The most important example of the latter is the decision on the competition regulatory environment of the creation of the Fidesz-affiliated media conglomerate Central European Press and Media Foundation, which unreservedly approved the government's right to take over the authorisation of media acquisitions from the competition authority and the media authority.[5]

In Hungary, there are institutions in charge of guaranteeing press freedom and the rule of law, such as *ombudsmen*, an autonomous competition and data protection authority, as well as the State Audit Office, which is supposed to control the management of public media and advertising. Under the Fidesz government, these institutions have lost their autonomy, their powers have been reduced, and they are headed by leaders loyal to Fidesz. The judiciary has also gradually become traversed by political influences. Without the independence of the judiciary, cases uncovered by journalists have no legal consequences. Another impact of the erosion of institutions that guarantee the rule of law is that journalists working for critical media outlets are denied access to information of public interest from pro-government politicians, governmental departments and agencies, and public bodies such as hospitals and schools. On top of that, they are less and less likely to be able to use legal means to force a response. Furthermore, with the dismantling of autonomous institutions, possible attacks against journalists can also go unpunished. In Hungary, physical violence against journalists has not occurred, but Pegasus spyware has been used by the state against journalists and media owners, and in these cases no state body has provided legal protection to the victims (European Parliament, 2022).

Weakening the autonomy of social and economic actors

The Fidesz government has not only abolished legal-constitutional and political checks and balances, but has also directly and deeply interfered in economic and social processes. For instance, it has progressively discredited and denigrated autonomous actors, from businesses to universities (Láncos, 2021).

The politicisation of the economy involves directing a significant share of public procurement to a narrow economic group, which also ensures that European Union subsidies are used for political purposes. Publicly funded acquisitions in strategic sectors such as energy, construction, agriculture, banking, and telecommunications ensure that the new ownership loyal to Orbán remains in a key position in the event of a change of government. In 2016, Orbán also identified the media as a strategic sector in which Hungarian ownership should be secured (Stubnya, 2016); by 2016, this expectation had in fact been met.

The politicised economy creates chains of dependency that link local entrepreneurs to the Orbán regime as suppliers of politically supported large corporations, and the low-skilled rural population primarily through so-called public works, i.e., the maintenance of low-value and low-wage jobs financed by public money. This strong economic vulnerability, which is typically associated with lower education and less diverse media consumption, increases, in our view, the susceptibility to propaganda. Indeed, resignation to one's own vulnerable, dependent situation is facilitated by the acceptance of a worldview that offers a stable order and protection from external enemies, often created by propaganda, in exchange for a dependent situation (Rieger et al., 2017).

Another important element in the overall transformation of society is the politicisation and political control of educational and cultural institutions. The full institutional centralisation of public education, the standardisation of textbooks, the ideological transformation of the centralised "national curriculum" and the acceleration of school segregation have already been implemented in the first half of the 2010s (Rado, 2020; Neumann, 2022 Ryder, 2022). At the time of closing the manuscript, the serious problems of public education (OECD, 2022) are taking some teachers, students, and parents to the streets, but the autonomy of educational institutions and teachers has been largely eliminated. This is the most important guarantee of the effectiveness of propaganda in the long term. Today, the Hungarian education system is characterised by the teaching of outdated fact-based knowledge instead of a critical approach, a complete lack of civic education, and at the same time, an overemphasis on sport, religion, and conservative authors (Neumann, 2022).

Building a media system for the dissemination of propaganda

Politically motivated media owners, extreme media concentration

Taking advantage of the economic, political, and social circumstances, Orbán has launched a far-reaching transformation of the media system. This transformation started immediately after the change of government in 2010 and continues to this day, with significant twists and turns. The media laws of 2010 created the institutional framework for media transformation, and the market takeovers and takeover attempts that started immediately after the change of government foreshadowed deeper structural changes. The aim of these transformations was and remains the creation of a media system in which publicly funded actors deliver publicly funded political campaigns and messages to the public without reservation. This captured media system (Dragomir, 2018; Griffen, 2020) is not intended to control and limit power but to stabilise illiberal governance as a beneficiary and committed supporter.

As a main result of the transformation of the Hungarian media market since 2010, a significant proportion of foreign investors withdrew from it, and their stakes were taken over by Hungarian investors. Typically, they were replaced as owners by businesspersons with strong ties to the governing party in Hungary (Mertek Media Monitor, 2016).

Until 2014, there was a highly centralised, essentially single-player media empire close to Fidesz, which was replaced between 2015 and 2018 by a diversified system with smaller owners, but even more closely linked to the party and Orbán. This was followed by a new process of monopolisation. In 2018, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány, KESMA) was created, which owns nearly 500 media outlets and is a major, but not the only, player in the pro-government media scenario.

Nowadays, media players can be assigned to one of three larger groups (Polyák et al., 2022). Pro-government media are defined as media companies or media outlets whose owners can be proven to have close links with the governing parties and state advertising accounts for at least one-third of their advertising revenues. Independent media are those for which none of these conditions are met. There is also a third, "grey zone" category of media in the Hungarian media market: those that do not exclusively or primarily convey the pro-government narrative in their content, give significant space to information and opinions critical of the government, but are exposed to direct government influence either by virtue of their ownership structure or by virtue of a share of state advertising of at least one third.

Public money at the service of party propaganda

The volume of propaganda is provided not only by the proliferating media channels, but also by the public money that keeps them alive (Bátorfy & Urbán, 2020). Public advertising serves both to disseminate government propaganda as widely as possible and to finance pro-government media. The pro-government media can thus count on stable funding regardless of the prevailing economic situation and its own performance, which is also a seriously market-distorting situation.

In 2022, the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister spent the most on advertising, followed by the state-owned gambling monopoly and the state tourism agency (Szalay, 2022). The vast majority of public money used as state advertisement, 86% in 2020, goes to media outlets and media companies close to the government (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021). Even if a non-government media outlet reaches the same or even a larger audience in a given market, advertising does not automatically follow. Public advertisers spent eight times more in the leading pro-government media outlet in the commercial television market and 45 times more in the news portal market than in the largest non-government competitor; the daily newspaper market, on the other hand, is entirely based on state advertising, with the only daily newspaper critical of the government receiving 78% of its advertising revenues from the state (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021).

Since 2020, public money has also been the fuel for disseminating propaganda on social media. In 2020, the Megafon Centre was founded by one of the leaders of a pro-government think tank organisation[6] funded by the government and government parties, whose main activity is to promote the Facebook posts of pro-government influencers (Bradford & Cullen, 2022). Facebook is the most popular platform in Hungary, but voters have also seen a lot of political advertising on YouTube (444.hu, 2022). The funding background of the Megafon Centre is not transparent. However, the court has ruled in a lawsuit that it is not illegal to claim that Megafon's operations are indirectly financed by public money through a foundation and a company (Bozzay, 2022). The Court's judgment therefore confirms that the Megafon Centre is also based on public money. Megafon spent €2.7 million on Facebook between April 2019 and April 2022, making it the largest political advertiser on Facebook in Hungary (444.hu, 2022). In second place is Fidesz, and in third place is the Hungarian government. Between April 2019 and April 2022, more than €11 million was spent on Facebook in favour of the ruling party Fidesz and €6.3 million in favour of the opposition parties. Social media became the main channel for Hungarian political communication in the 2022 election campaign (Bene & Farkas, 2022), making it clear to Hungarian voters that social media platforms are dominated by the player with more resources.

Emblematic tools of state-funding disinformation: national consultations

The national constitution as a political communication innovation

In the following, we present a propaganda innovation of the Fidesz government, the so-called national consultation (NC). National consultations are an effective tool for setting the political agenda, which, on the one hand, gives the appearance of voter participation and, on the other hand, sets the direction of public discourse for months with campaigns that flood all public channels. One of the most visible tools of Fidesz's reality-distorting propaganda instrument is the NC, which has been held 12 times since 2010.

Although consultation on decisions affecting citizens is an internationally known mechanism, the national consultation launched by Fidesz does not meet the most important methodological criteria of the procedure. The series of questions is a specific form of vertical production of mass support. They give the appearance of openness and participation but, in reality, they attempt to control citizens and the political and social agenda by creating a single, indisputable truth (Kövér, 2018; Barlai & Sik, 2017). The "questions" sent to each voter do not constitute a real consultation, since their phrasing and the answer options predetermine the intended direction of the outcome. In this context, they can serve no other function than to legitimise the government's future actions, backed in appearance by the "united will" of the voters. This operates as the government's attempt to control public discourse while pretending to be a proactive government that protects its voters (Sik & Domokos, 2019).

Every Hungarian voter, over 8 million, receives the questions by personalised letter by post, along with similarly distorting explanations, so even those who otherwise do not consume political news cannot avoid the national consultation (Sik & Domonkos, 2019). The national consultation is not a referendum, nor is it subject to any regulation at all. Furthermore, the campaigns for the national consultation, the consequences of the results, and the guarantees of the credibility of the results (including the transparency and reliability of the minimal information such as the number of responses received, the proportion of postal and online responses) are not regulated. Therefore, there is no legally enforceable consequence to these political actions, yet the government refers to them in both domestic and foreign policy communications as if they were at least representative polls (Sik-Domonkos, 2019). Finally, the reliability of the results is undermined by the fact that the online submission platform has been proven to allow the same citizen to submit his/her answer any number of times.

National consultations use a variety of manipulation techniques to try to force the government's agenda on the voters. These include using "anonymous majorities"[7] to justify their claims, embedding implicit answers in questions[8], "false dilemmas"[9], or using quite explicitly false claims[10] (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022). The national consultations have had a proven impact on the perception of refugees and NGOs, for instance. In a 2018 survey conducted by Vicsek and his colleagues, 82% of the population, for example, had heard the claim that "George Soros is organising the transportation of migrants to Europe", and 44% of them considered it to be true (Vicsek, 2020, p. 95) (Table 14.1).

Table 14.1 Manipulation techniques of National consultation (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022)

Manipulation techniques of National consultation (Diószegi-Horváth, 2022)	
Using "anonymous majorities"to justify their claims	"There are some people who propose that the new Hungarian constitution should also protect common values such as family, order, home, work and health. Others say this is not necessary. What do you think?"—National consultation—Questions on the new constitution (2011)
Embedding implicit answers in questions	"Brussels is preparing a dangerous action. It wants to force us to abolish the cuts in rationing. What do you think Hungary should do? 1) Defend the overheads reduction. Insist that Hungarian energy prices are determined by Hungary. 2) Let's accept Brussels' plan and leave it to big companies to set the prices"—Stop Brussels national consultation (2017)
”False dilemmas"	"Do you agree that the Hungarian government should support Hungarian families and unborn children rather than immigration?"—National consultation on immigration and terrorism (2015)
Using quite explicitly false claims	"George Soros wants to persuade Brussels to allow at least a million immigrants from Africa and the Middle East to settle in the European Union, including Hungary, every year. Do you support this point of the Soros plan?"—National consultation on the Soros Plan (2017)

Furthermore, national consultations contribute to the information disorder by attempting to control political discourse. Due to a massive communication campaign, the success of voter manipulation is indicated by the results of recent opinion polls. To illustrate the parallel realities that exist alongside the national consultation, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the Hungarian opposition daily *Népszava*, the only legacy newspaper that existed throughout the whole period and did not change its political orientation, to illustrate how Fidesz tries to steer the political and social agenda. *Népszava* is a daily newspaper with consistently left-wing values, respecting the professional and ethical rules of journalism (Mertek Media Monitor, 2021).

The national consultations and the campaigns to promote them are perfect examples of the propaganda model on which this study is based. The wording of the questionnaires sent to all households is inherently highly propositional, pushing a single correct position. The associated media campaigns flood all communication platforms, from street posters to talk shows on pro-government television to Facebook. Each consultation focuses on the latest political enemy or political success, yet often repeats themes from previous consultations. The topics of the consultation, the questions, and the response options offered contain serious misrepresentations and untruths. In all cases, this reinforces or deepens the polarisation of society.

To demonstrate these two reality-distorting mechanisms, we have selected two of the 12 national consultations. The two selected consultations are not just isolated examples; the analysis of the other national consultations can be found on the Mérték Media Monitor website. We have chosen to focus on the two examples that directly target the European Union. However, an important feature of government communication is that the "European Union" is never mentioned, only "Brussels" as some demonised distant "power machine".

For the "Stop Brussels" (2017) consultation, we examined national news in the print version of the newspaper in the week before and after the announcement of the national consultation and the publication of the questions, excluding publicist articles, as well as foreign, culture, and sports columns, along with other annexes of the journal. Thus, a total of 836 articles were subjected to content analysis, whereby the content of each article was analysed regardless of length. In the case of the 2022 consultation "seven questions on Brussels' sanctions", 499 articles of the *Népszava* newspaper's online national column were subjected to content analysis using the same technique. In doing so, we specifically wanted to map out what other important public phenomena the government was trying to distract attention from with the NC, thereby contributing to an information disorder.

"Stop Brussels!"—2017

In the week before and after the "Stop Brussels!"[11] national consultation announcement, the referendum against the plans to organise one of the next

Table 14.2 Reality distorting by national consultation

Reality distorting by national consultation		
National consultation	*The government narrative by the consultation questions*	*The most frequent public events published in Népszava*
Stop Brussels (2017)	Brussels wants to take powers away from Member States in several areas, so Brussels must be stopped[16]	NOlimpia referendum, OLAF investigation, and LexCeu
Seven questions on Brussels' sanctions 2022	Do Hungarian citizens agree with the sanctions against Russia (which had already been voted on by the Hungarian government at the time)?	Teachers protests and horrible conditions in education, Energy crisis

Olympic Games in Hungary[12], and the OLAF investigation[13] on the Metro 4 dominated the public discourse and the front page of *Népszava*[14].

The national consultation questionnaires were mailed on March 31, 2017, just a few days after the adoption of Lex CEU[15], which caused a huge international outcry. During the period under consideration, almost all issues of the daily newspaper covered the Central European University (CEU) and the law that made it impossible for NGOs to operate in Hungary. The Hungarian government submitted an amendment to the National Higher Education Act to the Parliament. Although the draft was based on normative terms, the only target institution was clearly the CEU, forcing the prestigious university to move to Vienna.

A total of 25 articles on the referendum against the Budapest Olympic Games were published in the 26 newspapers at the time of the public announcement of the survey. In the 13 issues published at the time the national consultations were posted, 38 articles dealt with the CEU. This proves that the two topics were dominating public debate in the so-called "opposition", although not all voters were aware of this due to the NC's campaign (Table 14.2).

"National consultation: seven questions on Brussels' sanctions"—2022

In 2022, the "seven questions on Brussels' sanctions" national consultation, the Fidesz government asked Hungarian citizens about sanctions on Russia that it had already voted for[17].

Of the 499 articles examined, 98 reported on protests[18] by teachers and students against the curtailment of teachers' right to strike[19] and the disastrous conditions of the education system[20]. This is a particularly high proportion considering that the really intense wave of protests only started on the tenth day of the period under consideration. After the complete abolition of the teachers' right to strike, many of them began civil disobedience to draw attention to the inhuman conditions that had prevailed in education for years. In response, the government fired several teachers in a clear attempt to intimidate them. However, this triggered an unprecedented wave of resistance, with tens of thousands of students and teachers protesting for several months.

The second most frequently mentioned topic was the increasing energy crisis in the country and the financial problems of municipalities left alone by the state[21], on which 33 articles were written by *Népszava* journalists.

What impact has this national consultation campaign had on public opinion? The European Union has traditionally been highly supported in Hungary, even among pro-government voters, and the Eurobarometer (2022) report shows that 60% of Hungarian respondents think that European Union membership is a good thing. Despite this, years of campaigning have not been in vain, with support for EU membership in Hungary falling by ten percentage points following the campaign against sanctions, according to the Medián survey (Hann, 2022).

In 2022, the effects of the National Consultation and the campaign on "Brussels sanctions" on public opinion were analysed (Vicsek, 2022). Again, the researchers formulated statements in line with the themes of the National Consultation and the government's frequently repeated messages. This time, they also looked at how responses from people with different party preferences varied. The claim that in Hungary "sanctions and war are the main causes of inflation" has already been heard by 81% of pro-government voters, and 78% of them also accept it, while 74% of opposition voters are familiar with the statement and 37% believe it to be true. The results show that there are clear differences in the perception of the statements' veracity on a partisan basis, but according to Vicsek, an important conclusion is that a considerably high proportion of opposition voters also accept the government's narrative (Vicsek, 2022, p. 4).

In the current war-related government communication, the hard-to-disprove, vague propaganda messages have been replaced by clear disinformation efforts. A survey conducted by Political Capital (2022) shows that as a result of government propaganda criticising the EU sanctions against Russia, 36% of the total population and 50% of government party voters (incorrectly) thought that Hungary did not vote in favour of the sanctions (p. 2). Government narratives that downplay Russia's responsibility for the war have even led governing party voters to put Russia only in third place on the imaginary ranking of parties possibly responsible; they consider that Ukraine and the USA are more to blame for the war (p. 5). These numbers suggest that recently the gap between government narratives and reality has become so wide that a massive part of the public is misinformed about even basic facts.

Conclusion

Since 2010, the Orbán regime has used huge amounts of public money to dominate public discourse. It uses public money to build, expand, and operate a media system that effectively communicates the government's messages rather than surveilling public power. On the other hand, it uses public money to run political campaigns that constantly set the agenda for political discourse.

This flood of state-sponsored communication builds a narrative that, while contradictory in some elements, provides a clear answer to how Orbán and Fidesz can continue to dominate public discourse and marginalise political alternatives. Constantly adapting to external circumstances, it uses the refugee crisis, the pandemic, or war to feed the propaganda. In each case, these campaigns create a fictitious or over-dimensioned enemy, divert public debate from real social problems or frame them in a favourable context for Fidesz, and portray Orban and Fidesz as the only possible saviours of the nation. These narratives are pervasive conspiracy theories that deeply divide society, while at the same time providing Fidesz with a stable majority in the elections.

At the same time, this state-sponsored disinformation would not be sufficient to ensure Orbán's continued political success if it were not accompanied by the dismantling of society's legal, economic, and cultural immune systems. Weakening the rule of law, and economic and cultural institutions significantly increases exposure to propaganda.

The institution of the national consultation is a perfect illustration of state-sponsored disinformation in action in Hungary. In an unregulated procedure with no legal consequences and no methodological foundations, Fidesz strengthens its position by means of manipulative questions, all of which are amplified by a publicly funded campaign using the publicly funded media system.

The durability of the Orbán regime also shows that Hungary is a unique case. The conditions that have made it possible to dismantle autonomous constitutional, economic, and cultural institutions and to create a pro-government media system can hardly be met simultaneously elsewhere. It is therefore worth looking at the Hungarian example as an illiberal laboratory from which the risks of the erosion of democracy and the democratic public sphere can be well understood. Others can thus avoid or better manage these risks.

Notes

1 See the country reports of the annual Media Pluralism Monitor at https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor/.

2 Interim Report on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded, 25.7.2022 - (C9-0000/2022 – 2018/0902R(NLE)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0217_EN.html.

3 Interim Report on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded, 25.7.2022 - (C9-0000/2022 – 2018/0902R(NLE)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0217_EN.html.

4 Decisions of the Constitutional Court Nr 28/2014. (IX. 29.) AB and 3/2017. (II. 25.) AB.

5 Decision of the Constitutional Court Nr 16/2020. (VII. 8.) AB.

6 Alapjogokért Központ, Centre for Fundamental Rights; about its function, see Bárd, Koncsik & Körtvélyesi (2022).

7 National consultation—Questions on the new Constitution (2011): "*There are some people who propose that the new Hungarian constitution should also protect common values such as family, order, home, work and health. Others say this is not necessary. What do you think?"*

8 Stop Brussels national consultation (2017).

9 National consultation on immigration and terrorism (2015): *"Do you agree that the Hungarian government should support Hungarian families and unborn children rather than immigration?"*

10 "National consultation on the Soros Plan" (2017): *"George Soros wants to persuade Brussels to allow at least a million immigrants from Africa and the Middle East to settle in the European Union, including Hungary, every year. Do you support this point of the Soros plan?"*

11 https://commission.europa.eu/publications/stop-brussels-european-commission-responds-hungarian-national-consultation_en.

12 https://www.euronews.com/2017/02/01/nolimpia-referendum-initiative-grows-in-budapest.

13 https://www.politico.eu/article/budapest-metro-scheme-tainted-by-fraud/.

14 The European anti-fraud office, OLAF, has recommended that Hungary refund the European Union nearly €160 million after its investigation. In 2017, the opposition party Momentum successfully campaigned against the Olympic Games.

15 https://verfassungsblog.de/legally-sophisticated-authoritarians-the-hungarian-lex-ceu/.

16 https://index.hu/belfold/2017/03/31/igy_nez_ki_a_legujabb_nemzeti_konzultacio/.

17 https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/29/orban-announces-national-consultation-on-energy-sanctions-but-what-is-this-exactly.

18 https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarians-renew-protests-demanding-higher-living-standards-teachers-2022-10-14/.

19 https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/14/teachers-unions-turn-to-european-court-of-human-rights-about-their-right-to-strike.

20 https://telex.hu/english/2022/10/06/how-underpaid-are-hungarian-teachers-really-in-comparison-with-other-tertiary-graduates.

21 https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/30/hungary-closing-public-facilities-due-to-soaring-cost-of-energy.

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15 Russian Federation's FIMI prior to its Intervention in Ukraine[1]

Bohdan Yuskiv and Nataliia Karpchuk

Introduction

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is a growing political and security challenge to the democratic world in general and Ukraine in particular. Foreign actors trying to manipulate and interfere with the information environment of other states use a variety of constantly evolving tactics, techniques, and procedures, often in combination with cybersecurity and hybrid threats (StratCom, 2021). FIMI is conducted by both state and non-state actors, as well as their proxies. States use FIMI to destabilise foreign countries for their advantage; private companies provide "disinformation for hire" to amplify sensationalist content and to get financial gains (Goldstein and Grossman, 2021). Media channels (broadcasting, press, social media, messenger apps, etc.) are used to disseminate the necessary (dis)information and achieve the desired effect.

For decades, Ukraine's information space has remained vulnerable to Russian propaganda and manipulation. The historical background has been laid since Ukraine was part of the USSR. Then the RF "information lobby" was formed powerfully promoting Russian narratives. The Soviet era instilled a sense of trust in foreign, and later non-state, channels of information. Probably, this is precisely what determines the attention of Ukrainians to various new communication channels, in particular Telegram. According to the USAID-Internews survey on media consumption (July–September 2022), 77% of Ukrainians prefer social networks to receive the news. In 2021, 20% consumed news from Telegram channels and, in 2022, this share increased to 60% (InMind Research 2022). Telegram has become the main channel for receiving news because it has several practical advantages: it duplicates messages from other channels, delivers news faster than other media, and offers a shortened version of the news. Access to news on the phone is more convenient and easier than on other devices. High-quality media check the reliability of the information, but Telegram bets on efficiency. Accordingly, propaganda, disinformation, and fakes can be easily spread. Television and YouTube actually take their news from Telegram channels which, according to the mentioned survey, displace Viber and WhatsApp.

The share of consumers minding the source of the news they accessed increased in 2022. Concurrently, as compared to 2021, fewer respondents reported paying

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attention to whether different points of view were presented. The share of those who were ready to trust their favourite media outlet "by default" had increased. Furthermore, 83% of respondents were aware of the existence of false materials, and most thought they could recognise them. Many people also believed that disinformation was "not a pressing problem". In 2022, the share of those who came across common disinformation narratives equalled 49%. One in three respondents discussed those narratives with their friends or family. The motivation for information sharing was "just a reason to talk". There was a decrease in personal consumption of Russian media—only 12% of respondents used them in 2022, and the main reason was to find out "what they are saying about Ukraine" (InMind Research 2022).

In Ukraine, the blocking of Russian Internet resources began in 2017. The President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko introduced additional sanctions against Russia (Poroshenko signed an order, 2017). They required blocking Internet providers' access to the web resources of VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Mail.ru, Yandex, Kaspersky Lab, DrWeb, the official distributor of 1C in Ukraine etc. for three years—450 companies in total. However, Telegram, Viber, and WhatsApp remained outside these restrictions. The new law "On Media" is supposed to ban all TV channels and other media resources originating from the aggressor state, but the entire reform will last for ten years (The Law of Ukraine 2022). The law came into force on March 31, 2023.

Inciting truth through disinformation

Until recently, the term most commonly used in political discourse to identify issues concerning the information manipulation was disinformation, from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya*, deriving from the title of a KGB black propaganda department responsible for producing false information intended to deceive the public opinion (Giusti and Piras 2021, p. 2). Disinformation "can be composed of mostly true facts, stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message and is always part of a larger plan or agenda" (NED, 2017). Being neglected for a while by international relations, it has recently been greatly revived because of the RF's policy of expansion.

For decades, Russia has been fabricating an alternative reality for its citizens and foreign countries. The state's very existence seems to depend on promoting the regime's different truth. Being believed is a tool for its survival (Zafesova 2021, p. 108, 110). Russia attempts to impose its truth through state-sponsored disinformation as the basis of special information operations. The digital revolution has provided Russia with new tools and tactics that have put the country at the forefront of global information warfare (Bechis 2021, p.119). The Russian military and political elite see information warfare as an endless state of war that is non-reliant on any *casus belli* but instead is a pillar of a long-term power strategy (Waltzman 2017, p. 4). Researchers from the National Endowment for

Democracy (USA) even coined a new term to denote Russian attempts to exert influence in the information space. “Sharp power” is the ability to wield influence that “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries”; its form and method might even resemble a “soft power” operation, its main goal is to win over the public opinion of a foreign country and to get leverage in its political system (Cardenal et al. 2017,p. 6). Russia’s “sharp power” influence is “not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centres on distraction and manipulation” (Walter and Ludwig, 2017).

Considering the complexity of hybrid Russian (as well as Chinese) influence, in its 2021 Report, the Task Force on Strategic Communications and the Department of Information Analysis of the EU introduced the new concept of “foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI)” which has replaced the concept of “disinformation” (StratCom, 2021). FIMI is a pattern of behaviour that threatens or may negatively affect values, procedures, and political processes. The activity is manipulative and conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Its subjects may involve state or non-state entities, including their proxies inside and outside of their territory. The report acknowledges that FIMI is routinely used to undermine public confidence in the democratic institutions’ legitimacy and efficacy. It may contribute to an increased polarisation within the EU and escalate political violence in conflict-prone regions.

While the FIMI activity conducted by the Russian government and its proxies adapts its messages to the tactical priorities of specific situations, its strategic objective remains to undermine the West and strengthen the Kremlin’s influence in the world. To this end, it is steadily expanding its toolkit to disseminate and strategically amplify its narratives, including combinations of cyber-attacks and leaking of selective and often forged or distorted information. Beyond state-financed media (RT and Sputnik), its international FIMI efforts also employ ecosystems of local proxies and amplifiers, like Telegram channels that, at first glance, are not always recognisable by the audience as supported or financed by the Kremlin (United States Department, 2022).

Whereas other states’ information operations are generally guided by facts, i.e., messages are followed and supported by citations, videos, and photos, their authenticity is scrupulously checked, Russia’s foreign policymakers create “facts” to be broadcast to targeted audiences to achieve strategic objectives (Allen & Moore 2018). In particular, such a special FIMI operation can be focused on “disrupting military and government leadership, misleading the enemy, forming desirable public opinions, organising antigovernment activities, etc. aimed at decreasing the determination of the opponent to resist” (Müür, Mölder, Sazonov 2016,p. 2).

Unlike the concept of “disinformation”, the concept of FIMI is new in terms of scientific understanding. The RF’s war against Ukraine activated the European community in its desire to understand, assess, and effectively counter Russian destructive influence. In addition to the aforementioned StratCom Report

(StratCom, 2021), the issue is analysed by The EU Agency for Cybersecurity claiming that although disinformation is a prominent part of FIMI, the latter emphasises manipulative behaviours (Magonara & Malatras, 2022). The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (Council of the EU, 2022b) and the July 2022 Council Conclusions on FIMI (Council of the EU, 2022a) both refer to the importance of countering FIMI, hybrid and cyber threats.

This is why, in our opinion, the concept of "FIMI" fits well to describe the entire spectrum of destructive information influence exerted by the RF on citizens and decision-makers of states chosen for the offensive, both in military and informational terms.

Research hypothesis and aim

Adopting the USSR methods, to provide information support for the planned war in Ukraine, the RF used a combination of 1) disinformation as the practice of misinforming or misleading adversaries with false information to slow, degrade, or stop effective responses to an associated Russian activity (Connable et al. 2020,p. 27); 2) deception as the complex of measures to confuse the enemy regarding the presence and disposition of forces, their condition, readiness, actions, and plans (Giles & Seaboyer 2018, p. 10) reflexive control as "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action" (Thomas, 2016). The underlying goal of these tactics was to alter the enemy's perceptions, to make him think what the RF wants him to think and do what it wants him to do (Bechis 2020, p. 123).

The operation was aimed at two key audiences: 1) Russian society and advocates of the "Russkiy mir" in Ukraine to foster their understanding and support for a future "special military operation" on the territory of Ukraine; and 2) the majority of Ukrainian citizens, the state's leadership and its military and political elite. In the Ukrainian information space, these messages were broadcast and discussed on various media platforms (not necessarily pro-Russian). Russian narratives were actively promoted by pro-Russian parties. Taking into account the fact that the decision to start a war against Ukraine had already been made in Kremlin circles, we presume that the goal of Russia's FIMI was to intimidate the political elite of Ukraine and ordinary citizens, to frame any desire to fight as practically "suicidal" and to induce the state leadership and President, in particular, to make decisions in favour of the RF. Obviously, at the same time, this was also the message to the West not to interfere in the war by the RF's allegedly mighty, highly professional army and not to expose itself to an inevitable defeat in Ukraine.

In this context, the research subject is specified special FIMI operations of the RF, the image of the Russian military forces as the strongest and invincible army in the world on the eve (and in fact during the preparation) of the new stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine which began on February 24, 2022. The research purpose is to substantiate that in the Telegram channel of the state-owned Russian news agency (RIA Novosti) and in selected pro-Ukrainian and Ukrainian pro-Russian Telegram channels was an RF FIMI operation and to reveal the specifics of its implementation.

Data set and methodology

Ukrainians prefer various Telegram channels as a quick source of information as they have been "spun" as independent of the influence of the authorities precisely due to their encryption technology and the difficulty of blocking them (Hoda, 2020). However, this messaging app structure helps the spread and deeper penetration of disinformation because: Telegram uses end-to-end encryption which is considered one of the safest; it is possible to create a "secret chat" where communication cannot be intercepted since the message is encrypted on the sender's device and decrypted directly by the recipient's device (in other channels, chats, and groups, communication is also protected but encryption goes through the server); Telegram rules define only three categories of banned topics: spam and fraudulent messages, promotion of violence, and illegal porn; a user knows nothing about the owners and authors; it is easy to create and fill the channel with posts; and there is a system of instant notifications (Iliuk 2021; Telegram FAQ, 2023). Nevertheless, Ukrainians are attracted to information sources—alternative to official outlets—which position themselves as insiders.

A recent study has analysed InsiderUA—a Ukrainian Telegram channel—unveiling the structure of Ukraine's strategic communications in the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war (Karpchuk, Yuskiv, Pelekh, 2022). It covered the first 100 days of a full-scale war. The current study has expanded the list and analysed eight Telegram channels during the year leading to the war.

We have examined and compared the state-owned Russian agency RIA Novosti (https://t.me/rian_ru), the Ukrainian agency UNIAN (https://t.me/uniannet), Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua) (https://t.me/znua_live), InsiderUA (https://t.me/insiderUKR), pro-Russian Ukrainian Telegram channels ZeRada (https://t.me/ZeRada1), Ukraina.ru (https://t.me/ukraina_ru), Open Ukraine 37# (https://t.me/OpenUkraine), and Legitimniy (https://t.me/legitimniy). The following factors determined the sampling: 1) Russian RIA Novosti is one of the most powerful RF state channels and presents the position of the political leadership; 2) pro-Ukrainian channels: UNIAN, although a private agency, nevertheless reflects the state policy and it is often quoted in TV news; Dzerkalo Tyzhnia is a recognised most qualitative and responsible media (IMI, 2022); InsiderUA is one of the most popular Telegram political news channels with a clear pro-Ukrainian position; and 3) when selecting Ukrainian pro-Russian channels, we used the list of Telegram channels that, according to the Security Service of Ukraine, are coordinated by the General Staff of the RF (Bohdaniok, 2022).

Then, we chose those with the most subscribers. The number of subscribers and channel citation indexes are given in Table 15.1.

In this study, FIMI operations are characterised by certain properties which are the necessary conditions for their implementation: 1) compliance with the pattern of a special information operation; 2) a multi-agents model of information distribution, i.e., many media (here—Telegram channels) distribute the same/similar messages; 3) a clear strategy of information influence (here it is an increase in the images of the RF' Armed Forces, against the background of a decrease in the images of Ukrainian and Western Armed Forces); and 4) thought-out implementation (several groups of messages): background (history of the Russian army), reports to enhance the image of the RF's Armed Forces, and messages to damage the image of other armed forces (Del Corso et al., 2005; Kleinberg, 2006; Lande et al., 2006; Rakesh et al., 2014).

We consider that, if empirical data (messages) complied with previous criteria, then we would take it as valid FIMI data. Our scrutiny involved two stages: 1) selection of messages from Telegram channels; and 2) analysis of the empirical data compliance with the necessary conditions for the FIMI implementation (Figure 15.1):

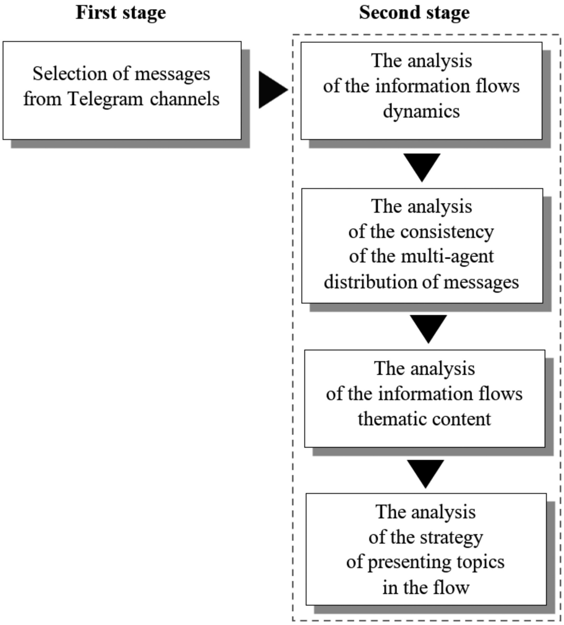
First stage
Second stage
Selection of messages from Telegram channels
The analysis of the information flows dynamics
The analysis of the consistency of the multi-agent distribution of messages
The analysis of the information flows thematic content
The analysis of the strategy of presenting topics in the flow

Figure 15.1 The stages of the Telegram channels' analysis.

In the first stage, we read and selected messages from Telegram channels that met the following criteria: 1) publication period—from January 1, 2021, to February 23, 2022; 2) keywords—“army” and “Armed Forces” (in Ukrainian and Russian). Then, the filtered messages were exported to an internal R format for further synthesis and statistical characterisation. The total number of messages meeting these criteria is given in Table 15.1.

Table 15.1 In the second stage, the research process consisted of four parts:

1. The analysis of the information flow dynamics: the studied set of messages of three Telegram channels groups (1) Russian RIA Novosti, (2) pro-Russian, and (3) Ukrainian Telegram channels were considered separate information flows. Each information flow corresponded to a time series which, in turn, consisted of the number of reports published each week of the analysed period.

Information flow dynamics were studied by Kleinberg (2016), Lande et al., (2006) etc. Typical profiles of possible aggressive/offensive information operations were determined; one of the templates is shown in Figure 15.2. It is a generalised presentation of information operations conducted by financial institutions, multinational corporations and states.

The analysis of an information operation time series, like FIMI, shows that a certain “surge” is characteristic for each typical stage of the messages’ dissemination. The graph in general represents a series of waves of smooth growth and decrease phases in the number of messages. The time series curve can have a different shape, i.e. it can have a larger/smaller range of oscillations and be more/less stretched in time, but it clearly shows the sequence of phases: background—calm—“artillery preparation”—calm—attack/trigger of increase. In information attacks, the objects of influence have been predetermined. Planning is based on sufficiently accurate information about these objects. An information attack most often requires some information occasion, its promotion and steps to prevent information countermeasures (Dodonov et al 2021:287).

The dynamics of the information flows may differ from the typical template at a certain moment. Most often, this is a sign of the beginning of another operation, which refers to a narrower topic, or a sign of the division of the initial thematic operation into several lower-level operations. However, the general trend remains.

The greater the coverage of the target audience, the higher the efficacy of the information operation. For this purpose, as many media as possible should be involved in the operation, i.e. it is a model of multi-agent dissemination of information when many media (in our case—Telegram channels) distribute messages with the same/similar content.

Table 15.1 Statistical characteristics of Telegram channels

Telegram channel	*Statistics*			*Number of messages during the research period (January 1, 2021–February 23, 2022)*	
	Subscribers	*Citation index* [2]	*Subscribers that read the channel's posts (% of the number of subscribers)*	*Total number*	*Messages mentioning the Armed Forces (% of total quantity)*
			Russian		
• RIA Novosti	2,608,523	10,635.6	35%	66,503	337 (0.5%)
			Ukrainian		
• UNIAN	882,838	1,374.5[3]	42%	7,085	73 (1%)
• Dzerkalo tyzhny(ZN. Ua)	61,828	462.6	22%	8,318	37 (0.4%)
• InsiderUA	1,427,850	2,349.3	39%	6,688	234 (3.5%)
			Pro-Russian in Ukraine		
• Ukraina.ru	225,088	2,914.7	32%	22,942	1,546 (6.7%)
• Open Ukraine 37#	191,135	1,594.9	40%	3,810	261 (6.9%)
• Legitimniy	874,899	1,684.7	65%	3,429	31 (0.9%)
• ZeRada	325,417	1,029.7	77%	2,844	52 (1.8%)

Source: Compiled by the authors TGStat data (as of January 31, 2023; TGStat. (2023). https://uk.tgstat.com/en).

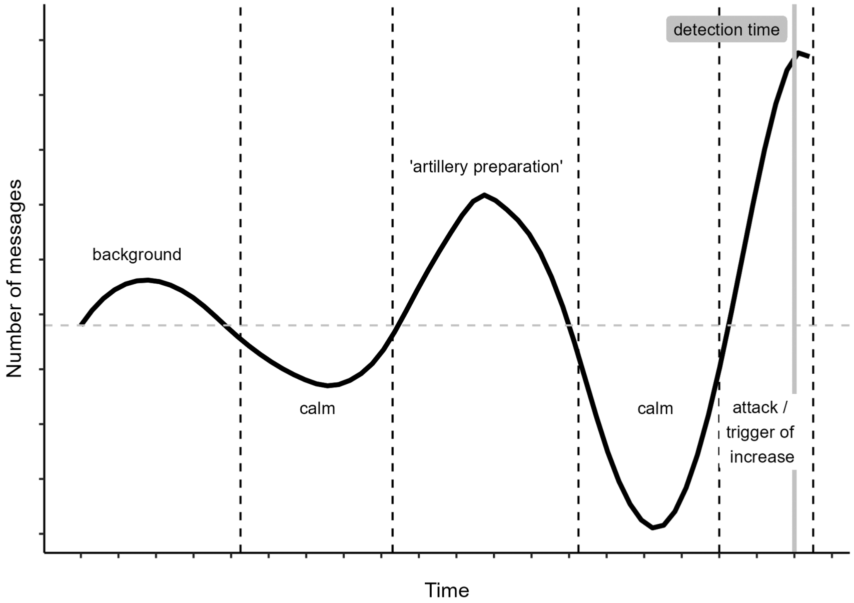

Figure 15.2 Dynamics of the number of messages during information operations (Dodonov et al 2013 : 248).

2. The analysis of the consistency of the multi-agent distribution of messages, i.e., the consistency of the number of messages of the mentioned three groups of Telegram channels in time. Cross-correlation analysis was used (Cryer, 2008) to determine the degree of simultaneity of messages and lag dependencies between series, that is, the influence of one series on another with a delay or lead.
3. The analysis of the information flow thematic content: reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Crosley 2021) was used to identify themes. After thematic coding, the number of messages was calculated on each of the defined topics for each flow; visualisation of the calculations and comparative analysis determined the top priority topics of each group of the researched Telegram channels.
4. The analysis of the strategy of presenting topics in the flow: in our opinion, it is the order that forms the basis of constructing the necessary picture of reality for the successful manipulation of public opinion. In our case, the thematic-temporal structure of the combined flow of the Russian Telegram channel RIA Novosti and the set of pro-Russian channels was studied. Calculations were performed in the R programming language using dplyr, tidyr, tidytext, tidyverse, ggplot2, stats, and other packages.

Findings

The analysis highlights four instances of FIMI operations against Ukraine and its Armed Forces on the eve of a full-scale war.

The first evidence

The charts below present the dynamics of messages for each group of Telegram channels (Figure 15.3).

A simple comparison of the graphs above shows almost full compliance of all three flows with the typical template of the information operation in Fig. 15.2. The graph of the Russian Telegram channel initially shows a distinct surge from week 8 to week 14 (a background is formed) and then the dynamic curve gradually stabilises. Starting from week 29, and through week 52 (the end of 2021), there are several discrete surges, which can be understood as a multi-stage "artillery preparation". The following brief period of calm, from week 53 to week 56, then turns into a rapid information attack.

Pro-Russian Telegram channels promptly assist the Russian ones, almost simultaneously duplicating their messages and feeding them with their

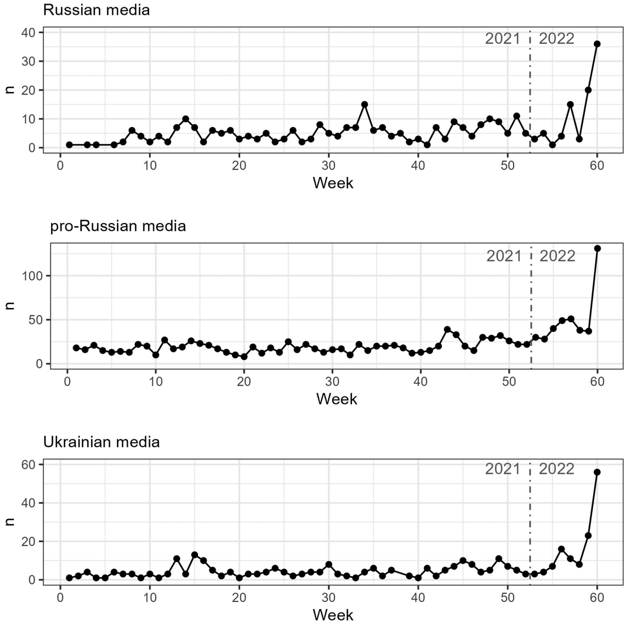

Figure 15.3 Dynamics of information flows of Russian, pro-Russian, and Ukrainian Telegram channels.

information flows. Specifically, the first surge also begins in the 8th week (with a very slight decrease in the number of publications in the following weeks) and continues until the next significant surge in week 43. After a brief (by the number of messages) period of calm, the channels actively join the information attack. Their information attack even precedes the attack (lag-delayed publications are added to the new messages) of the Russian channel, being both active by the start of the Russian military offensive against Ukraine. The state-owned Russian channels must at least maintain the image of not being in favour of the war. Instead, pro-Russian channels receive instructions to cover certain topics (the Security Service of Ukraine claims such supervision) and to prepare the basis for subsequent Russian messages. In addition, quite often such pro-Russian messages resemble violent fantasies of extremists, whereas the background of messages from the RF looks balanced and objective.

Ukrainian Telegram channels, to a certain extent, duplicate the behaviour of Russian and pro-Russian ones, showing a distinct lag of surges. This is a defensive position, i.e. they need time to respond; as they do not set the mode in this operation. Firstly, the number of publications in response is much smaller; and secondly, the first surge takes place as early as week 13. Subsequent surges are also delayed to week 30, against the Russian surge of week 29, and week 49,against the Russian week 34. Then surges follow with a lag of one week.

The analysis clearly shows a sign that a purposeful FIMI operation has been conducted against Ukraine through Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels. A counteraction is reflected in Ukrainian Telegram channels.

The second evidence

The consistency of messages, in terms of the number of publications between three groups of Telegram channels, is shown in the correlograms in Figure 15.4. The dependence of information flows was assessed using autocorrelation showing which past values are most useful for predicting future values. The autocorrelation function (ACF) is a function of estimating the autocorrelation coefficient depending on the time lag (delay/lead) between stationary time series.

Figure 15.4 presents the estimation of the cross-correlation of information flows as stationary time series depending on lagged leads/delays. Cross-correlations with the value of lag variables 0, –1, or +1 are essential and statistically significant (values go beyond the dotted blue interval). This proves that the maximum delay in the number of messages (reaction to other groups' posts) between flows is one week and with a very small value of the mutual correlation coefficient. Reports made as a reaction to other publications are made within the same week.

The mutual correlation between the time series of Russian and Ukrainian Telegram channels' publications with a lag of 0 is quite high (0.79). Correlations

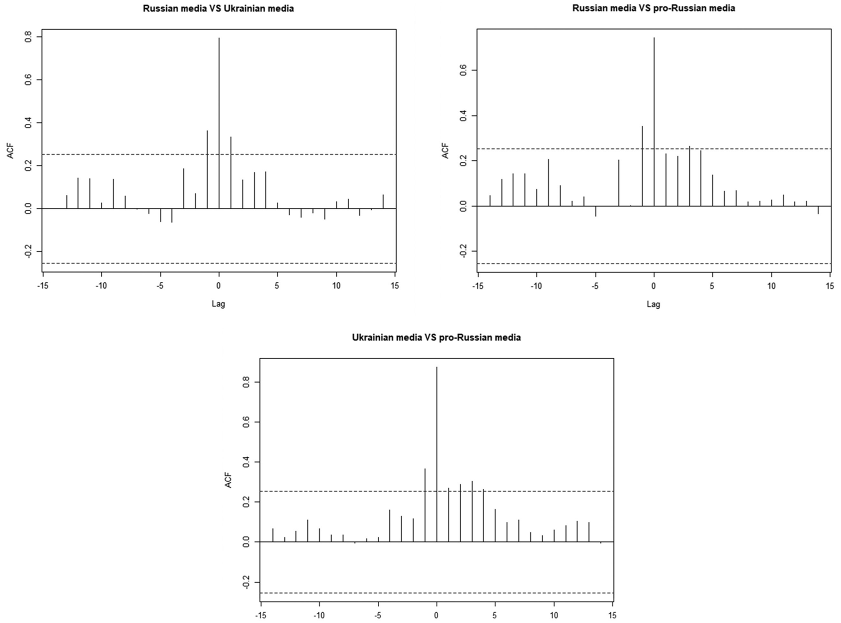

Figure. 15.4 Results of cross-correlation analysis of the number of publications between three groups of Telegram channels

with a delay of one week of Ukrainian Telegram channels are very insignificant (0.33), as well as a lead of one week (0.36).

There is a similarity between Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels. The cross-correlation coefficient with a lag of 0 shows a relatively high level (0.74) and the lead of pro-Russian Telegram channels by one week gives a cross-correlation of 0.35.

Likewise, the cross-correlation coefficient between Ukrainian and pro-Russian Telegram channels with a lag of 0 is 0.87; the delay of pro-Russian Telegram channels gives an insignificant correlation (0.36). Here, however, there is the lead of the pro-Russian information flow with lags of two and three with a significant but slightly smaller cross-correlation: 0.29 and 0.30, respectively.

We should emphasise that these conclusions do not contradict the conclusions of the of the previous necessary condition verification as the surges in information flows for three Telegram channel groups differed greatly. In fact, the concept of "surges" implies significant changes in the number of publications compared to previous weeks while the correlation of time series implies a constant, even insignificant, reaction to any changes in information flows. Thus, from the data, it looks like the RF information activities in the media space are agreed upon and coordinated.

The third evidence

The thematic content of the Telegram channels information flows attempts to frame the perception of reality. The conducted analysis indicates the prevalence of certain topics in the messages (Figure 15.5 (a), (b), (c)):

1) Regarding the RF army:

- RIA Novosti—the RF state-owned agency Telegram channel—pays the most attention to messages about the RF's newest weapons which are admired and bought abroad; the second position is occupied by general messages concerning the Russian army (in particular, appointments to the posts of generals, COVID-19 in the army, medical examination in the army, rules of conscription into the army). The purpose seems to be making the topic of the army present in the media space, even when there is no real occasion. On the third position, there are reports on the greatness, heroism and "salvation" role of the USSR army in WWII and the publication of previously secret materials that indicate the brutality and atrocities of the Japanese, German, and OUN/UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army/Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists) armies, as well as that of the Baltic countries. The thematic analysis shows a

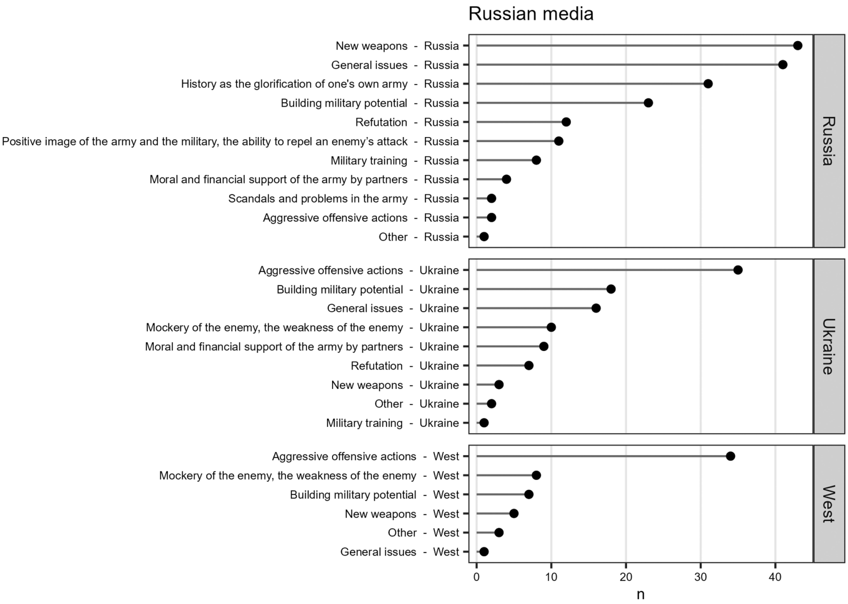

Figure 15.5 (a). The thematic content of the Russian Telegram channel (RIA Novosti).

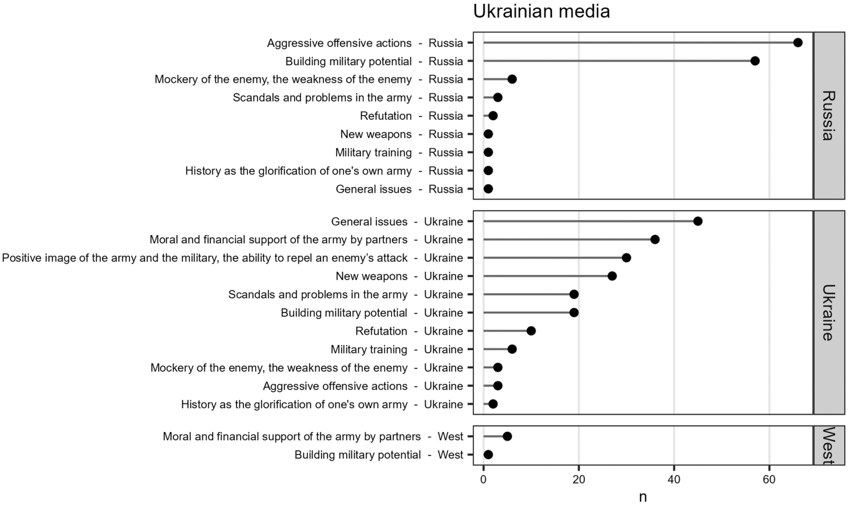

Figure 15.5 (b). The thematic content of Ukrainian Telegram channels information flows.

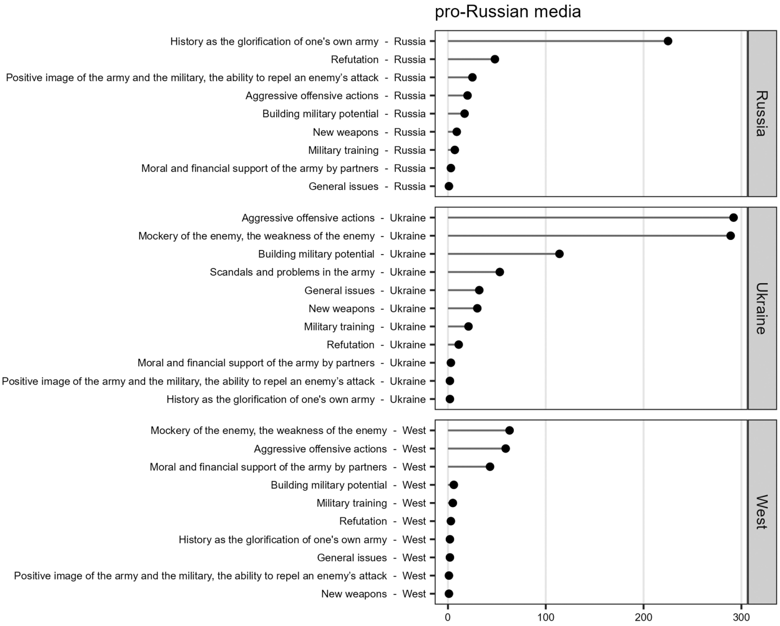

Figure 15.5 (c). The thematic content of pro-Russian Telegram channels information flows.

purposive manipulation of historical facts. Reports about the positive image of the RF modern army are quite a few (they occupy the sixth position);
- Pro-Russian Telegram channels (ZeRada, Ukraina.ru, Open Ukraine 37# and Legitimniy): the top theme is devoted to the historical greatness of the Tsarist Russian army and the army of the USSR, the RF army being their "rightful successor". These messages are more emotionally elated than those of RIA Novosti and demonstrate absolute admiration for the Russian army at various historical periods. Concurrently, a clear message is noticeable: "The Russian army is a noble saviour army". The second position is occupied by refutations about the RF potential attack on Ukraine (this topic is in the fifth position in RIA Novosti);
- Pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels (UNIAN, Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua), InsiderUA): the RF aggressive offensive actions and its military capacity building.

2) Regarding the Armed Forces of Ukraine:

- RIA Novosti: aggressive offensive actions and development of the military capacity of Ukraine's Armed Forces. The third position is occupied by general issues concerning the army of Ukraine. Taken into context, these topics do not seem accidental but serve a clear purpose: to prepare for the next information confrontation during a full-scale war while maintaining the information presence of the Ukrainian army in the media space;
- Pro-Russian Telegram channels (ZeRada, Ukraina.ru, Open Ukraine 37# and Legitimniy): almost the same number of messages depict, on the one hand, the Ukrainian Armed Forces as an aggressive entity, and, on the other hand, there is a constant mockery at everything related to the army of Ukraine. The third position is occupied by messages on the development of the Armed Forces military capacity and the fourth position refers to scandals in the army. This "vacillation" simultaneously pursues two goals, i.e. to intimidate its pro-Russian audience with the aggressive army of Ukraine while, on the other hand, portraying the Armed Forces of Ukraine as a ridiculously weak entity against the background of the RF glorified army. This paradox can be explained by a range of factors: the will to confuse the audience and make it doubt common sensical reality which is a typical technique of Russian propaganda and disinformation tactics; the need to strive to "capture" a wider audience and demonstrate the higher image of the Russian army while degrading the image of the Ukrainian army;
- Pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels (UNIAN, Dzerkalo Tyzhnia (ZN.Ua), InsiderUA): the main topics refer to general issues, partners' moral and financial support of the army, the construction of a positive image of the Armed Forces and the ability to resist the enemy's attacks, new weapons.

3) Regarding the West:

- RIA Novosti focuses on the aggressive nature of the West;
- pro-Russian Telegram channels pay little attention to the West, but their messages emphasise the opposite: mocking the West, and then demonstrating its aggressive nature;
- pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels: there is quite a small number of messages and they focus on the moral and financial support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine by the West (Figure 15.5 (a) Figure 15.5 (b) Figure 15.5 (c)).

Open demonstration of the power of the Russian army is derived implicitly: in reports about the historical past of the Russian army, reports that negatively position the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and the West in general. Thus, the frame "The RF Armed Forces are the army of liberators and victors" is constructed by the Russian state-owned RIA Novosti and pro-Russian Ukrainian Telegram channels, and this lays the foundations of how the RF Armed Forces will be perceived in the year leading to the war.

The fourth evidence

In the first set of evidence, we claimed that pro-Russian Telegram channels promptly assist the Russian one by duplicating its messages or creating the background for the next RF information throw. We have merged the information flows of the RIA Novosti and pro-Russian Telegram channels and their thematic-temporal structure demonstrates the strategy of presenting topics in information flows (Figure 15.6):

- Throughout the entire special FIMI operation, the Russian army's history and its military are unquestionably glorified;
- The army's positive image has a certain regularity, yet the coverage is not significant;
- On average, one to three (maximum) messages refer to the latest weapons, and the highest number of messages (nine) on this topic appear on week 34 (August 2021—that was the time when the results of the military-technical forum "Army 2021" were presented, mainly about the concluded contracts for the production and sale of Russian weapons);
- Refutation of the RF's potential attack on Ukraine is rarely present in the Russian Telegram channel, but it is often mentioned from week 47 onward (November 2021) in pro-Russian channels, reaching up to six messages in January 2022;
- The "surge" of reports concerning the RF' potential aggressive actions, its military capacity building and training falls on the week before the attack on Ukraine.

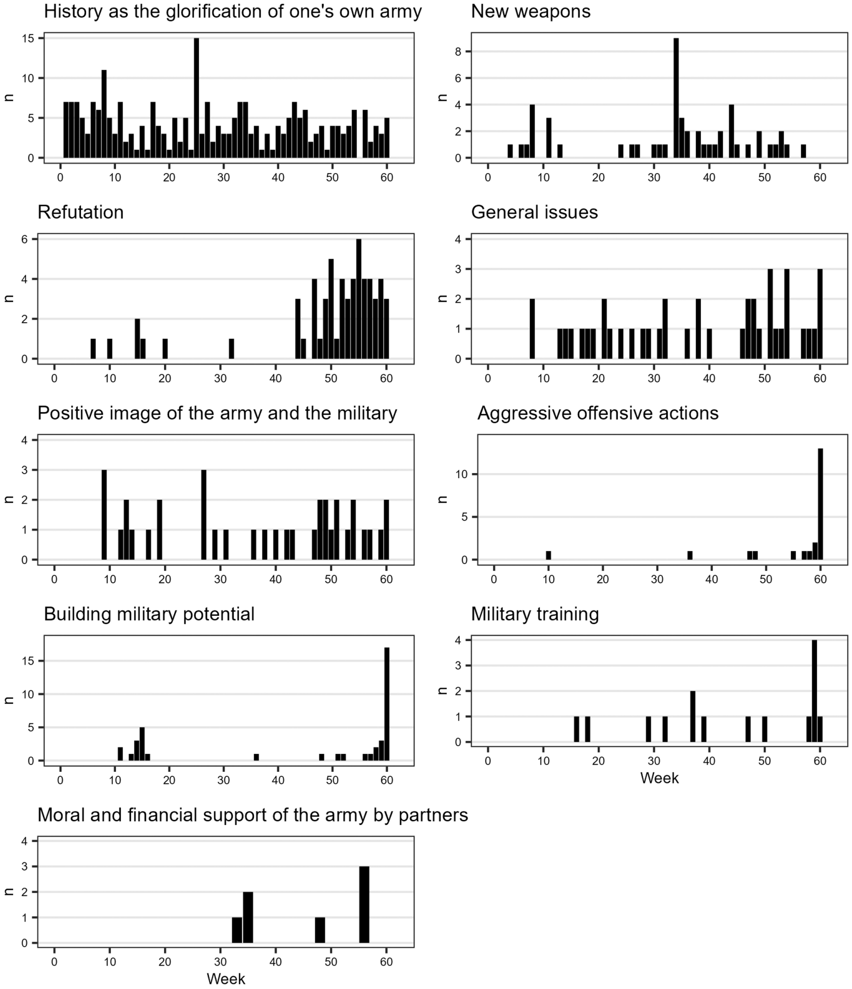

Figure 15.6 Thematic and temporal structure of Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels.

In other words, the thematic and temporal structure of Russian and pro-Russian Telegram channels forms the background of the general perception of the RF Armed Forces as a historically invincible army. Simultaneously, they do not focus directly on the army's modern military activity. We assume that was done on purpose to lull the vigilance of Ukraine and the West (it was important for the RF as Western intelligence services reported on a potential Russian attack on Ukraine). And only on the eve of the invasion, the number of reports concerning the "military readiness" of the Russian army increase.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the hypothesis about the implementation of a special FIMI operation by the Russian Federation is confirmed, but on the other hand, we expected that this operation would be more straightforward and loud, instead, it turned out to be more subtle, although definitely intrusive. Obviously, this is how the "soft impact" of this FIMI operation manifests itself. We may conclude that this FIMI is a sign of the RF's "sharp power" aimed to distract, manipulate the public opinion, and to influence the political and information environments in Ukraine.

Notes

1 This study was conducted in the framework of the Jean Monnet Module "EU Strategic Communications: Counteraction to Destructive Influences" ((№ 101047033 ERASMUS-JMO-2021-MODULE).

2 The citation index is calculated based on the analysis of all mentions of the channel including reposts and mentions of the channel's publications in other Telegram channels.

3 Data as of August 2022. Currently, TGStat does not show data for this channel.

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16 The genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation in Nigeria

Elections, political deception, and governing through the lens of post-truth

Paul A. Obi

Introduction

While in politics, it is believed that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose; a phrase often attributed to former New York Governor, Mario Cuomo, it's also a quote that connotes the gap between campaigning and governance. Intrinsically, the gulf between manipulative information and reality is now a recurring decimal within the political space. Thus, this trend is often practicalised with the spread of manipulative information during election campaigns and governance alike—in the form of disinformation and propaganda. Experience shows that, when a party engages in electoral disinformation and campaign deception, chances are that disinformation will become part of a state-sponsored communication system and a clandestine strategy for statecraft. Categorically, state-sponsored disinformation could be at the centre stage of politics and governance championed either by entertainment-oriented figures like Donald Trump and Tayyip Erdogan (Fuchs 2018; Gerbaudo 2021; Altheide 2023) or by a politico-meditated demagogue (Mercieca 2019; Patapan 2019; Roberts-Miller 2020) who deploys digital technologies for purposes of control, disinformation, and socio-political disruption. In some emerging and advanced democracies, disinformation is now a political playbook, intersecting politics and communication, particularly, in communicating with the masses. In recent years, leaders from Brazil, Philippines, and even Nigeria often engage in disinformation as a gateway to electoral victory, fighting political opponents, advancing and fostering *strongman* politics (Rachman 2022). Thus, the seeming reliance by political elites on deceptive communication behaviour underpins the degree the attacks on democracy have escalated.

The deployment of disinformation can be achieved through spreading fake news, scare mongering and infodemics (Endong & Obi 2022), disinformation, and propaganda alongside different forms of threats outside the tenets of democracy. And as (Woolley 2023) postulated, disinformation could also include theatrically manufacturing attacks against political opposition that do not conform

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to democratic practices and principles. Within the axis of liberal democracy, leaders and political elites are normatively measured through their communication on the basis of trustworthiness, honesty, and transparency; with reliable track records and commitment to the public good. Or some form of conformity with facts and truth (Zelizer's (2004)—aligning public communication and information systems. However, is there a high proclivity to political deception and disinformation in state-sponsored communication? What then characterises state-sponsored disinformation in the Global South and emerging democracies like Nigeria? Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2022) write that it is imperative to consider both micro and macro-level characteristics across the communication ecosystem when studying disinformation. They argued that the level of exposure to disinformation in the Global South in countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa was far more compared to Western democracies like the United States. Likewise, scholars have pointed out that, despite the concentration of disinformation research in Western democracies during Trump's era, new studies should endeavour to go beyond the overt focus on technology and also outlined such research on marginalised communities in the Global South for a better global understanding of disinformation (Cabañes, 2020; Xia, 2021). Hameleers (2023) for example explained that disinformation should be studied from a context-bound angle, in ascertaining the conditionalities that compel political actors to deceive their citizens, lie, and de-contextualise information in their respective domains. Equally, Nigeria aptly fits into one of the Global South countries that requires further study of disinformation beyond the areas of social technical systems (Howard, 2020).

Nigeria is a transitional democracy, that returned to democratic governance in 1999 after decades of military rule and after independence from the British in 1960. Nigeria remains Africa's biggest economy, the most populous black nation and largest democracy by population within the continent, and has held competitive elections seven times since 1999 without any military interruption in the midst of a rising wave of democratic backsliding in West Africa (Arriola *et al,* 2023). Although, the country practices liberal democracy and can fall within the ambit of electoral democracy, V-Dem (2022) in its annual report categorised Nigeria alongside El Salvador and Tunisia as being an *electoral autocracy.* Freedom House (2022), in its annual report, tagged Nigeria as *partly free* both on the scale of Global Freedom Index and the Internet Freedom Index. As Campbell and Quinn (2021) explained, social media bans (Twitter in the Nigerian case) and other digital suppression and disinformation might have accounted for this rating. Within the last two decades, digital technologies have also redefined the country's democracy, electoral, participatory, and deliberative politics (Diamond, 2012; Akinfemisoye, 2013; Cheeseman *et al,* 2020). In the 2023 presidential election, social media campaigns propelled the not-too popular Labour Party and its presidential candidate, Peter Obi, to a frontrunner in the February 25th presidential ballot. This is a phenomenon that Obadare

(2023) termed the online ardor. Despite this novel development occasioned by digital technologies, cases of disinformation, misinformation, censorship, and propaganda have also peaked in recent times (Okoro & Emmanuel, 2018; Pate *et al,* 2020; Obi, 2023a), contributing to disruptive politics and fueling part of the broader crises of media and deliberative democracy.

Further, as technology, social media and the Internet spread in the Global South, citizens saw a window to vent their angst against authoritarian regimes and totalitarian culture, hold states and leaders to account, scrutinise policies, and *police* abuse of power by sharing public officials' misdemeanors across the digital spectrum. In transitional democracies, the state needed a balance of power to counter this new digital influence, where disinformation and information manipulation are instrumentalised. This, led to state-sponsored disinformation in a way. Kperogi (2020), for instance, argues that the predominant politics of information manipulation and disinformation by the Nigerian state within the last seven years are founded in what he calls "propagandocracy". This is a phenomenon in which the state is administered by deliberate falsehood, government-backed disinformation, and manipulative mediated communication. Over the last three decades, amidst the platformisation of society (van Dijck *et al,* 2018) and high-tech politics (Wheeler, 1998), information manipulation is no longer the exclusive preserve of non-state actors and tech-savvy youths, but also a trend that the state has embraced. In unpacking disinformation, scholars maintained that; it is a fierce, *deliberate* and *intentional* spread of misinformation, falsehood, unverifiable facts, fake news, and other propagandist content, (Tucker *et al,* 2018; Guess & Lyons, 2020). This spectacle is often midwifed by state actors, state institutions, and other stakeholders in the information ecosystem. Scholarly research indicates how states use disinformation to target their citizens (Feldstein, 2019; Morgenbesser, 2020), or undermine foreign nations from a socio-political standpoint and during electoral contests (Jamieson, 2020; Howard, 2020; McKay & Tenove, 2021). How has this trend been replicated in Nigeria?

In Nigeria, there is an erosion of symbolic deliberation in political culture and deliberative democracy, due mostly to the collapse of monopolistic and oligopolistic media platforms in the country (Obadare, 2004; Kperogi, 2022), motivated by the expansion of the internet and social media. In the same token, the Nigerian state has also embedded disinformation within the last seven years, wherein the public has been thrown into the uncertainty of separating political deception from reality. In recent years, overwhelming cases of state-backed disinformation appear to have taken a toll and gained traction in the discursive space in Nigeria (Olaniyan & Akpojivi, 2021), mostly at the presidential level, after the current ruling political party rode to power deploying electoral disinformation in 2015. As Obi (2023b) observed, there is a high turnout of propaganda and disinformation associated with presidential communication in Nigeria, such that, information manipulation forms part of the governing process that is projected to the public, leading also to democratic distrust. A practical case to this point is that the newly appointed Minister of Information, Mohammed Idris Magaji, stated that the current government will not engage in “fake news and lies” (THISDAY, 2023). Clearly attesting to the fact that the last government between 2015 to 2023 was peddling fake news and disinformation. With established cases of fake news and disinformation in the country (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; Pate *et al,* 2020), it is therefore imperative to examine the dynamics of state-sponsored disinformation in Nigeria, through the lens of post-truth phenomena. Further, post-truth entails a chaotic and disruptive nature of public communication and information systems, obfuscation of truth and facts, clear negation of evidence, and the growing decline of trust in media institutions, the press and journalism among other socio-cultural communication malaises targeted at truth, facts, information, and democracy itself (Suiter, 2016; McIntyre, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Cosentino, 2020; Carothers & Press, 2022).

From the foregoing, the onus of this chapter is to deconstruct and reconstruct the trajectory of state-induced disinformation in Nigeria, and nudge it within the prism of manipulative communication, as such manipulation could be a product of state-controled media ecosystem system as in Russia (Cushion, 2022). It seeks to connect the dots between electoral and state-sponsored disinformation and the illusion of truth in Nigeria. The study relies on cases of disinformation from Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election campaign, and shows how the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation is jump-started, and how the phenomenon is entrenched in governance in Nigeria. In view of the theoretical endeavour thrust upon this corpus of work, this study portrays the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation in Nigeria and argues that the subtle elevation of disinformation by the state as part of statecraft is indicative of the re-animation of disrupting democracy and a rising pattern of encroachment on the rights of the public to know. Using data collated from the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential campaign communication in 2015 as a methodological approach, and texts and speeches from the last government under former President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration (2015–2023), the study unearths how electoral disinformation also leads to state-sponsored disinformation and the illusion of truth in governance (See Figure 16.1). The chapter unravels this task by first showcasing the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation from electoral—ideological—partisan disinformation to propagandocracy and finally to the illusion of truth in Nigeria. A fundamental contribution of this chapter, is that it illuminates the evolution and genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation mostly in the Global South, specifically, in an emerging democracy like Nigeria. Critically, the study heralds the urgency for enriching the theoretical disinformation prims, both in context and concept, and how state-sponsored disinformation has panned out in Africa’s biggest democracy.

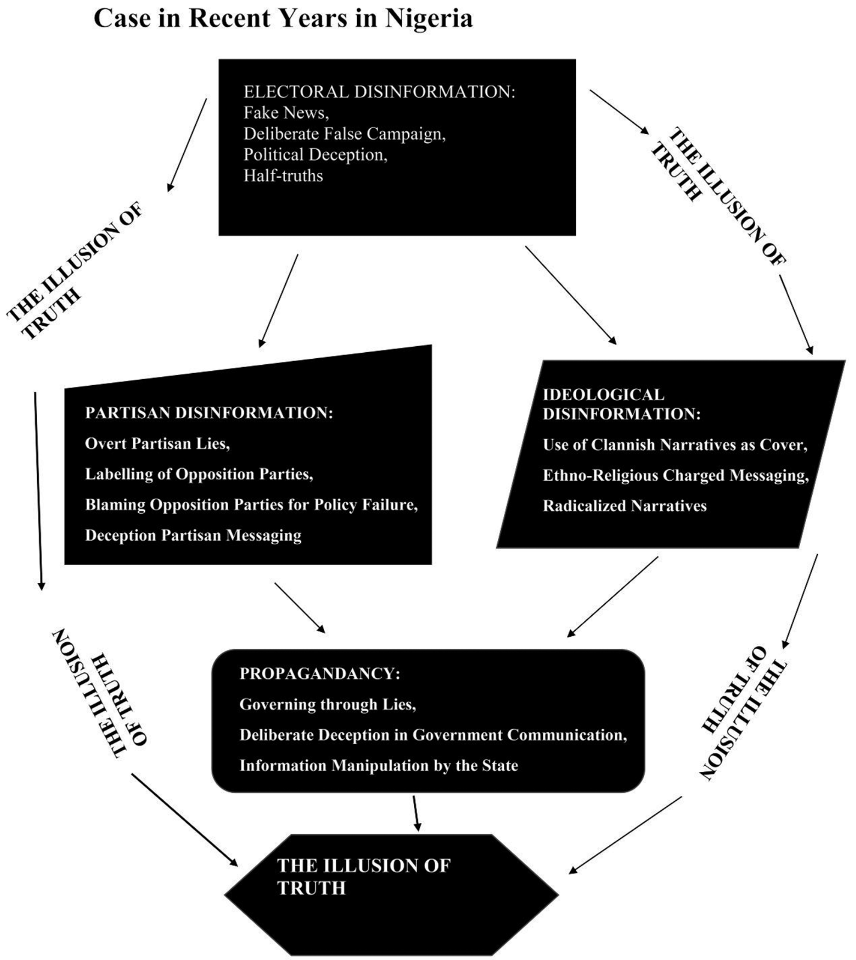
Case in Recent Years in Nigeria
ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION:
Fake News,
Deliberate False Campaign,
Political Deception,
Half-truths
THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH
THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH
PARTISAN DISINFORMATION:
Overt Partisan Lies,
Labelling of Opposition Parties,
Blaming Opposition Parties for Policy Failure,
Deception Partisan Messaging
IDEOLOGICAL DISINFORMATION:
Use of Clannish Narratives as Cover,
Ethno-Religious Charged Messaging,
Radicalized Narratives
THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH
THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH
PROPAGANDANCY:
Governing through Lies,
Deliberate Deception in Government Communication,
Information Manipulation by the State
THE ILLUSION OF TRUTH

Figure 16.1 The Genealogy of State-Sponsored Disinformation—prepared by author based on patterns of disinformation spread by the Nigerian state.

Electoral disinformation in the post-truth era

Considering that elections are a democratic necessity and common procedure for both advanced liberal democracies and transitional states, some politicians rely on (dis)information as a component of elections. In this sub-chapter, the essence is to illuminate how disinformation now forms part of electoral contest around the globe in both advanced liberal democracies and other hybrid regimes. The spread of disinformation has become a universal phenomenon such that no matter the institutional strength of such a democracy, disinformation and computational propaganda pervade such democratic societies mostly during elections (Woolley & Howard, 2019; Maweu, 2019; Jamieson, 2020; Ndlela, 2020; Tenove, 2020). Even autocratic states often seek to conduct elections even in the midst of raging cases of abuse of the rule of law and liberal-democratic rights,as well as disrupting the information ecosystem and further embedding electoral authoritarianism. Schedler (2006) argues that electoral authoritarianism pushes for regular elections, while at the same time, orchestrating the violation of liberal-democratic principles like transparency and truth. Roberts-Miller (2020) further highlighted the degree to which electoral authoritarianism is advanced in the midst of other breaches, such as manipulative communication and disinformation that often disrupt democracy. Here, the choice of *disinformation* instead of misinformation is significant, given that, disinformation comes with *intentional* and *deliberate* acts of *spreading false information, untruth, fake news purposefully* aimed at *misleading* the public. Most times, disinformation gets at its peak during elections on the virtual sphere, as the 2016 US presidential election, Brexit, and other competitive elections have proven (Wasserman, 2017; Jamieson, 2020; Ndlela, 2020; Tenove, 2020). In recent times, disinformation has contributed also to the disruption of democracy and also obstructs the frontiers of mundane public information ecology. This is evident despite earlier ecstatic promises of technology ending autocracy and safeguarding democracy (Street, 1997; Barber, 2001). This disruption negates other euphoric scholarly commentary on the technological enhancement of democracy (Agre, 1994; Toffler & Toffler, 1995; Poster, 2001; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Loader & Mercea, 2014). In the same breath, there were also some cautionary studies about the inability of technology and the internet to fulfill those aspirational projections of technology impacting democracy positively, due to the use of technology for undemocratic goals, especially by authoritarian states (Hindman, 2009; Curran *et al.,* 2012; McChesney, 2013; Moore, 2018).

In some respects, state-sponsored disinformation has also become part of the systemic process to disrupt democracy in various ways, including elections, the media, free press, and accountability. There are established cases of the state racing up to catch up with other *peddlers* of disinformation, ushering disruptions in the media and information ecosystem. Sinpeng (2020) and Oser *et al* (2022) argued that, notwithstanding the surge in the liberalisation of online political participation and affordances of political dissent and oppositional politics, there is rather a rise in authoritarian resilience and what Diamond (2020) called *democratic recession* in South East Asia, including other parts of the Global South. Most of these disruptions are spearheaded through information manipulation and disinformation. Critically, in most transitional democracies, state-sponsored disinformation is extensively deployed during elections to inject political fear and embolden tribal and radical groups in countries like Brazil, Turkey, Colombia, and Philippines among others. Research further indicated an increasing pace of disinformation during elections in Africa and other climes (Maweu, 2019; Ndlela, 2020; Çelik, 2020; Cheeseman, et al. 2021).

Moreover, in recent history, disruptive politics and polarisation are mostly spearheaded through disinformation, aided by technology, alongside what scholars have termed digital authoritarianism (Zuboff, 2019; Fukuyama, 2022; Diamond 2019; 2022). Russian state invention and the coinage of "dezinformatsiya" (disinformation) and its deployment for political and authoritarian endgame appears to have evolved over the years indicating how states embrace disinformation and spread deception (Bradshaw & Howard 2018; Freelon & Wells 2020). In emerging other democracies, the tendency of information manipulation, state-sponsored disinformation, digital authoritarianism, and suppression has been proven as well (Feldstein, 2021; Woolley, 2022). These cases are often practicalised mostly during elections.

Sometimes, where the electoral contest becomes fierce or indicates a photo-finish race, incumbent authoritarian leaders often deploy *mediated* tactics like disinformation, as the Brazilian case has shown (Bartholomew, 2022) to attack perceived opponents. Such tactics include blackmailing the media through disinformation, going after journalists, staging media blackouts, or subtly employing coercive regulatory tactics to clamp down on the media. While individuals, groups and agencies on the fringes can spread disinformation that might even be disingenuous to democratic governance, state-sponsored disinformation is now rampant and targeted at citizens and democratic institutions like the press, elections, and issues of public accountability. Often, this pattern of state-backed disinformation and post-truth gets more practical, becoming the defining moment in governance. Succinctly, state-sponsored disinformation has now set off as an effective lubricant for authoritarian practices—and as Glasius (2018, p. 517) posits, with the aim to "sabotage accountability to the people".

Merloe (2015) further hypothesised about how confusion is sown in electoral messaging using disinformation in hybrid regimes. In Nigeria, there are growing cases of electoral disinformation, where fake news and propaganda are continually churned out during elections, (Cheeseman *et al*, 2020; Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2020). In emerging democracies like Nigeria, populist candidates such as ethnic populists often deployed distorted data and coercive disinformation alongside authoritarian threats in election campaigns as tools for electoral victory. Cheeseman & Larmer (2013) argue that the alignment of populism and ethnicity tends to produce ethnopopulists or what they called ethnopulism, of which the Buhari/APC change mantra of the 2015 presidential election shares some semblance. That is the combination of tribal and ethnic politics with populism in election campaigns in order to sway support. Similarly, Aririguzoh (2019) found out that the then candidate Muhammadu Buhari and the All Progressives Congress (APC) deployed more misrepresentation, disinformation, and political deception like "Buhari's Son-in-law is Igbo" and "$20 billion missing" in winning votes (See Table 16.1).

Table 16.1 Electoral and state-Sponsored partisan disinformation in Nigeria—prepared by authored based on APC's 2015 elections campaign and government communication 2015–2023.

2015 Electoral disinformation	*State-sponsored partisan disinformation (2015–2023)*
1 Buhari to spend Christmas in Idemili—Igbo land	1 PDP cause of misery, suffering, and poor governance
2 Buhari son-in-law an Igbo	2 We have technically defeated terrorism and are securing the country
3 $20 billion missing from NNPC	3 Opposition and critics are enemies of the state
4 Buhari built all the Nigerian refineries	4 PDP sponsors of #EndSARS protest
	5 IPOB an arm of PDP

Elections and the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation

The nexus linking electoral, partisan, and ideological-driven disinformation is not far-fetched, given that in electoral contests; both candidates and voters are influenced by their own partisan ideologies and rely on critical information for active participation. As Elff (2018, p. 138) rightly posited, "for candidates, ideologies are just means to win elections. For voters, ideologies are means for reduction of information cost". In Nigeria, the 2015 presidential election remains a watershed in the history of the country, from a political perspective. As previous research has indicated, a high percentage of the electoral victory of APC was attained through disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, and the manipulation of campaign messaging (Abang & Okon, 2018; Aririguzoh, 2019; Okolie *et al.,* 2021).

Very often, the pattern of electoral (dis)information goes a long way to determine the extent of state-sponsored disinformation in democratic governance. By tapping into the pool of electoral disinformation, the desire therefore will be to sustain the political deception and hoodwink citizens with more partisan and ideological disinformation in governing. Instructively, state-sponsored disinformation in the Global South, Nigeria in particular, is mainly geared towards spreading falsehoods to create; (i) information and digital production of political fear for opponents and supporters alike, (ii) ignite polarisation along ethnic and religious lines, (iii) mobilise the radical base and clannish groups for political and electoral support, and (iv) disrupt public scrutiny and democratic institutions of accountability, as Glasius (2018) pointed out. Critically, in consonance with evocative technologies, disinformation has significantly rendered these ideological battles around the world fiercer and more combative (Zhao, 2008; Monbiot, 2016), including introducing what Altheide (2023) termed *gonzo politics of fear*, elevated by the Trump administration. Thus, some studies point to the rise of ideological disinformation and populism around the world, (Freelon & Lokot, 2020; van der Linden *et al.,* 2020; Baptista & Gradim, 2021), and across a broad spectrum of the ideological divides.

Though populism is not normatively interwoven with disinformation, in Western democracies, there are cases where populist leaders deployed disinformation for political contestation (Hameleers, 2021; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Rather, the trajectory, evolution and genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation as replicated here in the Nigerian case, often kick off from electoral disinformation during campaign seasons, leading to ideological disinformation in government, transiting to partisan disinformation as part of the pushback strategy, and finally culminating to propagandocracy (Kperogi, 2020). In ideological disinformation—the phenomenon is strengthened through embedding clannish, tribal and other ideologies shared by a group through information manipulation and dissemination. This is preceded by partisan disinformation—focused on labelling opponents with unverifiable facts in a partisan manner; these trends together lead to a whole gamut of propagandocracy—where governmental messaging and communication in governance is centered on deception and information manipulation. See Figure 16.1 for further elucidation. This genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation (re)positions the state in a web of illusion of truth, where political deception of citizens becomes a distinctive feature of statecraft (See Figure 16.1). Often, disinformation appeals to citizens when championed by populist political leaders. Gagnon et al. (2018) characterised populism as emotionally-induced political demands or appeals on issues or crises using (neo) nationalism, sexism, ethnicity, (re)ordering, and racism, all aimed at encroaching and breaching liberal-democratic norms and rational deliberation in society. This phenomenon often becomes a political tool mostly in diverse democracies and multiethnic societies like Nigeria, where populism is combined hand-in-hand with disinformation for both inordinate and illiberal political contestation.

In Nigeria, there is therefore intersection between election disinformation, partisan disinformation, electoral populism, and ideological disinformation. Populist leaders who ride on the back of populism assert their political power by embracing ideological disinformation, or becoming ethnic populists to defend themselves and the state (Cheeseman & Larmer, 2013). Given that populism thrives on political deception, and disinformation during elections; when such leaders fail to deliver on their electoral promises conveyed through propaganda and disinformation, the tendency is to recruit and galvanise their ideological base—tribe, religion, radical groups, and co-evals—to spread more ideological and partisan disinformation based on identities and political party affiliations. State-sponsored disinformation that is partisanly and ideologically driven is therefore more of a *circling the wagons* for self-preservation and power consolidation, where the state's information and communication system becomes more ideological, partisan, binary, and exploits an *us vs. them* approach. This has been the case in recent years in Nigeria.

Inside Nigeria's state-sponsored disinformation toolbox: a lead to the illusion of truth

In 2015, Nigeria witnessed one of the most hotly contested presidential elections that polarised the country across tribal and religious lines. For instance, the then incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari of the APC squared up in the presidential race. To some Nigerians then, the ruling party and incumbent government under Jonathan was performing below expectations; issues of insecurity, misgovernance, and a lack of accountability were topical issues. The then opposition party, APC, latched on those perceived policy flops to campaign against the PDP. The presidential campaign communication of the APC was phenomenal, such that, its messaging was propagandist in nature and laden with disinformation. As clearly highlighted in the preceding sections, the 2015 presidential election in which Cambridge Analytica was indicted remains a testimony of how information manipulation has disrupted democracies and facilitated deception by politicians (Edkale & Tully, 2019). In the Nigerian case, the 2015 presidential polls therefore remain a historical landmark both in political communication and political science studies. In its campaign during the presidential race, the APC deployed massive disinformation campaigns that many Nigerian citizens now believed helped the opposition party to win the presidential poll in 2015. This trend somehow made the spread of disinformation and fake news a continuum, including tilting such disinformation towards partisanship (See Table 16.1).

According to The Cable (Tijani, 2015), the APC pushed out 81 campaign promises, some of which turned out to be mere propaganda. While campaign promises are propagandistic in nature; in the Nigerian 2015 presidential election, some of the messages were disinformation. But in a defensive mood, the government then intensified state-sponsored disinformation in governance, such that some of the state-sponsored communications can be situated within the web of deception and partisanship. In partisan disinformation, the Nigerian government's efforts led by APC, the ruling party, in communicating with the people are more often partisan rather than policy-driven, resorting to labelling the opposition party as the culprit. The combination of state-sponsored disinformation and deception by politicians tilts the state and citizenry to an atmosphere of the illusion of truth, even as social media now provides the platforms for pushback against such disinformation. Here, the state suffers from a trust deficit, citizens are denied facts and truth; deception and propagandocracy then reign as supreme examples of the post-truth world. The table 16.1 below shows how entrenched state-sponsored disinformation has been built up from electoral to partisan disinformation.

In contextualizing Table 16.1 from both the electoral and partisan disinformation prisms, the examples are indicators showing how electoral disinformation often leads to partisan disinformation as elucidated in Figure 16.1. Thus, the examples in the *electoral disinformation* column were speeches made by APC operatives during the 2015 electioneering and campaign season; those in the partisanship column are statements and speeches made by government officials of the ruling APC's administration between 2015 and 2023. In *i* and *ii* focusing on electoral disinformation, *Buhari to spend Christmas in Igbo land* was disinformation to persuade potential voters opposed to then-presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari over issues of tribalism, clannish tendency, and bigotry. The same applies to *ii*, where Buhari's daughter was said to have married an Igbo man—a strategy driven by electoral disinformation to convince voters of Igbo extraction, a major tribe in Nigeria, to vote for Buhari, a Fulani from a different tribe in Northern Nigeria. Also, *iii* was a report by the former Central Bank Governor who was clandestinely supporting APC to take over government from the then-ruling PDP. By banding such an amount, the aim was to cast the then government and the party PDP in a bad light before the voters. The amount and figure $20 billion were later discovered to be fake news and disinformation—no such amount went missing.

Further, the partisan column is indicative of attempts by the government to shift blame for failure to opposition party through disinformation, where every ill-policy or misstep is blamed on the opposition party. A tactic meant to sidestep accountability and avoid taking responsibility for the Nigerian state. This reduces the state's communication systems to not just public information manoeuvres, lacking accountability and transparency, but manipulative machines for deception, deceiving the masses. As Figure 16.1 shows, government communication at this level becomes more partisan, and governance runs under the principles of propagandocracy. Facts and truth are sacrificed for partisanship, citizens become more disinformed and deceived, and public communication by the state becomes more ideologically partisan, derailing democracy further. In such a scenario, state-sponsored disinformation adds up to the crises of democracy, thereby, contributing to what Ressa (2022,p. 4) termed "democracy's death by a thousand cut" through viral lies, deception, and disinformation.

Conclusion

The wave of state-sponsored disinformation has become a great source of concern in the midst of increasing democratic recession and suppression around the world, particularly within West Africa. Most of the research that has focused on this subject primarily centred on the spread and technological affordances that characterised disinformation. This chapter has somehow veered away a little; exploring how disinformation in the Global South and transitional democracies like Nigeria emanates from electoral contests and gets well entrenched in the polity and governance proper. The chapter, in all, reiterates the disruptive nature of state-sponsored disinformation, geared towards encroachment of liberal-democratic tenets of truth, transparency, and trust; including attempts to pull down constitutional firewalls for accountability and the rights of the public to know.

The study showcased how the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation evolved, and how the Nigerian state instrumentalises and systemises disinformation in governance. It also underscores the level with which failure to fulfil electoral promises spearheaded through disinformation and propaganda in election campaigns could somehow snowball into partisan and ideological disinformation and propagandocracy, thereby disrupting effective democratic deliberation. The basic premise of this chapter is foregrounded on state-sponsored disinformation as a tool for disrupting democracy and counter-liberal phenomena—specifically, the erosion of truth and purity of governmental communication by the state. The chapter, thus, supports more rigour that will first upend electoral, partisan, and ideological disinformation at the cradle and formation stages—mostly through fact-checking platforms as exemplified in the 2023 Nigeria general elections circle.

While the chapter has not interrogated the cognitive and psychological perspectives of disinformation by state officials and politicians in Nigeria, these two aspects and gaps should be further considered in exploring and examining disinformation in future research. Yet, in (re)calibrating the intertwined relationship involving electoral, partisan, ideological disinformation, and propagandocracy, the study contributes to the understanding of state-sponsored disinformation in emerging democracies like Nigeria. With the mismatch of statecraft and disinformation, this study locates state-sponsored disinformation as a risk to both democracy and the information ecosystem, especially the continuous cases of disinformation sabotaging accountability and disabling critical voices in the public sphere (Glasius, 2018). The chapter not only denotes the entrenchment of partisan disinformation from a governmental context but also makes available the genealogy of state-sponsored disinformation, and underpins how politicians deceive their citizens. Overall, the interrogation of state-sponsored disinformation in Nigeria, laid out in this chapter, should therefore inspire us as a compelling task in resetting the struggle for rational public discourse, deliberative democracy, and even the defense of democracy itself, particularly in transitional states like Nigeria.

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17 State-sponsored Disinformation through digital media in Malaysia

Pauline Pooi Yin Leong and
Benjamin Yew Hoong Loh

Introduction and background

As a developing democratic nation with multi-ethnic, multi-religious citizens who are part of the digital ecosystem, Malaysia is an interesting case study of how new technologies have impacted the political process. From its initial start as a communication tool for the opposition and civil society to break the government's monopoly on traditional media, it has now morphed to become an essential part of the latter's political communication arsenal to influence public opinion. Thus, the objective of this chapter is to chronicle the amalgamation of digital technologies, from the state's early abhorrence of online media to its adoption of digital disinformation operations in Malaysia's electoral authoritarian system. It aims to investigate how the assimilation of bloggers into the state network led to the development of sockpuppetry and digital astroturfing by cybertroopers, notably during general election campaigns where cyber-warfare intensifies. This chapter also hopes to contribute to the discussion of state-sponsored disinformation strategies and their effect on electoral outcomes and the political environment.

Malaysia is a federation of 13 states with three federal territories. The Federation of Malaya achieved independence from the United Kingdom on August 31, 1957. On September 16, 1963, Singapore, Sabah (formerly British North Borneo), and Sarawak joined to form the Federation of Malaysia. However, on August 9, 1965, Singapore left the federation. Malaysia was governed by the alliance *Barisan Nasional* (BN–National Front) since independence, which made it the longest-serving elected government in the world until the 14th general election (GE14) in 2018 when the opposition *Pakatan Harapan* (PH–Alliance of Hope) managed to garner sufficient seats in Parliament to form the next government. Malaysia is viewed by scholars (Schedler, 2006) as a country that practices "electoral" authoritarianism, where democratic elections are held but in reality, these are often manipulated to favour the incumbent government, and institutional reforms are sporadic and ineffective. The BN

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government does not overtly rig the elections but subtly dominates through other means (Case, 2009) such as the control of print, radio, and television through legislation and ownership. Laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Sedition Act, and Official Secrets Act are used to limit the publication of content that the government deems can affect public order, safety, and security. Newspapers need a licence to own a printing press, which the Minister of Home Affairs has the discretion to grant, impose conditions on, refuse, or revoke. Public broadcaster *Radio Televisyen Malaysia* is under the purview of the Ministry of Communications while private radio and television stations are regulated by the Communications and Multimedia Act. Media control is also achieved through political ownership, whereby government parties or political groups directly own or indirectly use proxies to run media organisations (Centre for Independent Journalism, 2022).

Digital media emerged in Malaysia in the 1990s as part of the government's master plan to develop new economic sectors by tapping into information and communications technology (ICT). The Multimedia Super Corridor, a special economic zone, was introduced in 1996 to attract world-class multinational technology companies to Malaysia and advance the local digital economy. This has been replaced by the Malaysia Digital Initiative (MDI), launched in July 2022, which also aims to boost the country's technological capabilities and digital industry. While such actions have spurred Malaysia's economic growth in ICT, they have also influenced the country's political and democratic processes.

Digital media became an avenue for the opposition and civil society to circulate news and information that challenged the official narrative and broke the government's monopoly on traditional media—print, television, and radio. Due to such roadblocks, the opposition had limited opportunities to challenge the government's version in the public domain until ICT was introduced and became an alternative medium to traditional media. The BN government's stronghold slowly eroded as the opposition used digital media to chisel away at public support (Weiss, 2012)

Prior to the emergence of ICT, there were "independent" or "alternative" media in Malaysia that circulated information through hard copies, but these had limited readership and little interactivity. Therefore, the advent of digital media in Malaysia catalysed political change by facilitating political competition. This was first evident during the sacking of ex-Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the rise of the *Reformasi* (Reformation) movement in the late 1990s, which saw the proliferation of e-mail listservs, online discussion lists, Usenet groups, and political websites that offered news about the incident, which differed from the official narrative put forward by traditional media. Digital media provided information in the public sphere that raised the awareness of Malaysians; they also morphed into tools for mobilising events and rallies.

While short message service (SMS) was used in the 2004 general election, socio-political blogs influenced the 2008 general election landscape as they incorporated news on current events, commentary, feedback, and reader interaction (Weiss, 2012). When social media developed, online communities emerged as netizens interacted regularly through technological platforms and developed relationships with each other (Gruzd et al., 2011). This facilitated communication, networking, and mobilisation among civil society activists and the public. The BN government viewed the growing presence of its political competitors in cyberspace as a threat and reacted by establishing its New Media Unit and recruiting political bloggers who eventually transitioned into cybertroopers who were well-versed with social networking sites.

Thus, it was unsurprising that Facebook and other social media such as Twitter were the main forms of political communication in the 13th general election in 2013 (GE13), while Facebook Live and WhatsApp dominated GE14. In the recently concluded GE15 in 2022, TikTok had a profound influence on first-time voters who automatically received voting rights upon reaching 18, thanks to the passing of the Undi18 (Vote18) bill. Therefore, the advent of digital media in Malaysia has had a significant impact on the political and democratic process by facilitating political competition, especially during general elections.

State-sponsored disinformation: from scarcity to abundance

Throughout history, dictatorships and authoritarian regimes have effectively utilised state-sponsored disinformation tactics to maintain power by manipulating and controlling information (Chatterjee & Krekó, 2020) to garner support and shape public opinion in their favour; they also isolate their opponents by discrediting differing ideologies (Nyst & Monaco, 2018). The Soviet Union's use of Cold War disinformation tactics to propagate its ideology gave rise to "propaganda". Western democracies have often criticised such use, believing that these threaten democratic principles, but today, they have started utilising state-sponsored disinformation to shape public discourse by promoting ideologies to reinforce entrenched power structures, especially information dissemination during wartime (Shanker & Schmitt, 2003).

The emergence of the Internet dramatically changed communication channels and information flow by increasing its velocity, volume, and diversity. This proved to be a challenge for states pursuing information control. For the past three decades, there have been two iterations of state information control practices. First was information scarcity, whereby governments restricted access to the information superhighway (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006). For example, in the early 2000s, India blocked Yahoo! Groups, and China created its "Great Firewall". Laws were developed and filters were used to stop the dissemination of "unsuitable" content.

However, some states have realised that it is impossible to block such content as technologically savvy users often find ways to circumvent it. Thus, the past decade has seen a change in strategy to information abundance, whereby states shifted from controlling online activities to profiting from them, after realising that user-generated data disseminated online constitutes information that can be transformed into power (Nyst & Monaco, 2018). Commercial surveillance technology has enabled governments to monitor citizens (Deibert, 2013; Granick, 2017); they have also discovered that the Internet has innovations to disseminate propaganda which, if used successfully, obviates the need for censorship. The goal of disinformation is to confuse people with multiple messages that contain false information to sow confusion and distrust for political gain (Chatterjee & Krekó, 2020).

Thus, there is a dramatic rise in state-sponsored disinformation operations across the world due to ICT, which enables the spread of disinformation at an unprecedented speed and volume (Barela & Duberry, 2021). Digital marketing strategies are being used in politics, enabling marketers, politicians, political parties, and governments to exploit the same tools and techniques and access citizens' data to influence their behaviour in disinformation campaigns. The current digital political landscape is where the state creates distrust in the media by circulating conspiracy theories and untruths for its own benefit (Ball, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). States can leverage the technological ability of social media to amplify messages by deploying bots to circulate posts, hashtags, and memes, creating the illusion of an organic groundswell of support. Digital media can be used to organise online hate mobs to harass, intimidate, and discredit people whom they perceive as threatening their power (Nyst & Monaco, 2018).

The contemporary threat to democracies is the use of clandestine political agents or cybertroopers to infiltrate and distort discussions in the digital public sphere. The latest Oxford Internet Institute report noted the prevalence of such activities in 81 countries (Bradshaw et al., 2021) ranging from local attempts to change public opinion to support government narratives to more egregious attempts to maintain state power. This report provides a taxonomy to identify cybertrooper activities such as digital astroturfing, which is the use of sockpuppet accounts to generate false support online or to spread and reinforce disinformation or politically advantageous rhetoric.

We used the report's framework as the basis of our case study analysis of Malaysia, which has a deep history of engaging in state-sponsored activities to manipulate political discourse. While there have been several scholars who have examined the role of cybertroopers in Malaysia (which we have cited here), these examinations are quite limited and dated. Thus, our analysis is based on our digital ethnographic observations as media scholars on the activities of cybertroopers from 2018 until the present. We observed various online sites and platforms where Malaysian politics are discussed, such as Facebook, Twitter, and local online forums. Many of these discussions are centred around current political issues, so focusing on certain keywords and monitoring these sites on a weekly basis is sufficient to keep abreast of cybertrooper activity on these platforms.

Through long-term monitoring of these sites, we can often infer potential cybertroopers by observing the rhetoric that is being used in these online discussions. We coded the data using critical discourse analysis based on cybertrooper-led discourses across multiple platforms to identify cybertrooper strategies, tactics, and messaging campaigns.

The next section will focus on the growing presence of bloggers in Malaysia's public discourse and their formative role in influencing public opinion on political issues. We will discuss the first proponents of blogging who were highly popular and influential among netizens, much to the consternation of the government, which then tried to stem the tide unsuccessfully. It then changed its tack to persuading bloggers to switch their support, which led to their recruitment into the government and the transition into teams of cybertroopers with the emergence of social media as the dominant form of online communication, resulting in the rise of state-sponsored disinformation in Malaysia, especially during general elections. We will also examine this phenomenon during the last two recent general elections—the 14th in 2018 and the 15th in 2022.

Bloggers

Many of the first independent political bloggers were ex-journalists or tech-savvy Malaysians who blogged to criticise the government (Hopkins, 2012). Starting as early as 2006 with Jeff Ooi, who ran the "Screenshots" blog, and ex-*Malay Mail* editor Ahirudin Atan, who ran the "Rocky's Bru" blog, these bloggers directly and scathingly criticised government policies and politicians in ways that traditional media would never do due to concerns about breaching laws on public order and safety. While the government controls public broadcasting, most newspapers and private broadcasters are directly or indirectly owned by political parties aligned with the government. Sidestepping the strict restrictions on Malaysia's traditional media space, many bloggers ignored journalistic standards for a personalised and emotive form of writing that resonated well with urban Malaysians. Online blogs, due to limited Internet access, mainly targeted netizens living in the Klang Valley and spoke to their political frustrations. These political bloggers then had high Alexa rankings and were considered the Fifth Estate (Tapsell, 2013).

However, having more bloggers did not necessarily mean that the online public sphere had quality information. A survey by Tan and Ibrahim (2008) found that half of the bloggers used pseudonyms, and most did not always check their facts. In 2007, former Information Minister, the late Datuk Seri Zainuddin Maidin, told Malaysians to ignore *goblok* (Indonesian slang for stupid) bloggers who were motivated by self-interest and used by others to destroy the country. The same year, then Deputy Energy, Water, and Communications Minister Datuk Shaziman Abu Mansor's suggestion that bloggers who use locally-hosted websites be registered to prevent the spread of negative or malicious content online was rebuffed. Lacking formal legislation to censor or limit blogging platforms, the government used defamation lawsuits to silence them. Both Ahirudin Atan and Jeff Ooi were sued by a government-linked newspaper, *The New Straits Times Press (Malaysia) Berhad* (NSTP), and certain individuals, including its deputy chairman, Kalimullah Hassan (George, 2007).

Many bloggers decried this defamation suit as an attack on their freedom of speech and, in response, sought ways to collectively self-organise to defend themselves by going online to mobilise themselves and their supporters. Initially, they affiliated themselves as "Bloggers United" which subsequently became the National Alliance of Bloggers (All-Blogs) in April 2007, to promote blogging and protect bloggers. This blogger alliance included journalists disenchanted with the BN government and bloggers who supported the opposition (Hopkins, 2012). Ahirudin Atan, as pro-tem president of All-Blogs, participated in the Bloggers United Malaysia meeting on World Press Freedom Day in 2007, attended by bloggers, journalists, and opposition politicians.

The BN administration became concerned about its inability to control the public narrative, especially in cyberspace, and in July 2007, UMNO was reportedly "recruiting [a] team of writers to fight 'cyber war'". In late August 2007, All-Blogs organised a meeting to launch its logo and "Blog House", a location for its members. By this point, many anti-government bloggers began running for parliament, with some winning seats as opposition politicians, such as Jeff Ooi and Elizabeth Wong, who had used their blogging platform to build sufficient prominence and support from the public. There were already signs that group members were moving in different directions (Hopkins, 2012).

Nevertheless, the BN government's confidence about its control of traditional media led to the loss of a two-thirds majority in the 2008 general election and control of five states. Ex-premier Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said, "We certainly lost the Internet war, the cyberwar … It was a serious misjudgement … We thought that the newspapers and TV were supposed to be important, but young people were looking at SMSes and blogs" (Kee, 2008). The BN government began intensively recruiting bloggers and cybertroopers to be its digital army in the cyber war against the opposition. Then Prime Minister Badawi instructed the then Information Minister to meet bloggers "to better understand their sentiments"; the latter were also given weekly TV airtime for a few months. Former UMNO information chief Muhammad Muhammad Taib, ex-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, and even UMNO Youth started their blogs. Specifically, former premiers Najib Razak and Mahathir began courting many of these bloggers to switch allegiances and adopt a more "pro-government" approach (Hopkins, 2012). Government-supported bloggers posted articles celebrating government achievements, talking up policies, and attacking political opponents. These early bloggers were not working for the government or UMNO as a whole but for specific politicians and their respective camps. Najib and Mahathir were rumoured to have employed many pro-government bloggers to post scathing commentaries about then Prime Minister Badawi, in an attempt to challenge his premiership and highlight his failings. The latter eventually resigned, and his deputy Najib became Prime Minister.

This marked the achievement of a faction of All-Blogs members, ostensibly led by Ahirudin Atan, with possible links to pro-Najib factions in UMNO. In contrast, other members were pro-opposition and civil society, with the aim of removing UMNO and BN from power (Hopkins, 2012). Eventually, the disagreement between the two factions publicly emerged in 2009. Subsequently, Ahirudin revealed in 2010 that the Malay bloggers, who became part of All-Blogs, had the objective of staging a "war" against then Prime Minister Badawi. He also announced the cessation of All-Blogs and the formation of "Bloggers for Malaysia" (BfM), which eventually became Blog House Malaysia (BHM). Conceptualised as a formal version of All-Blogs, BHM was intended to comprise independent bloggers from various political stances. However, BHM's president identified himself as a "pro-government blogger", implying that other founding members had similar inclinations. In April 2011, BHM organised a conference for regional bloggers at a luxury hotel with sponsorship from government-linked companies such as Telekom and Petronas. Then Prime Minister Najib delivered the keynote address, as did Mahathir, who was BHM's patron. All these indicated that BHM bloggers received official government sanctions (Hopkins, 2012). The co-opting of bloggers into the government apparatus shows how state-sponsored disinformation started in Malaysia.

Cybertroopers

Nevertheless, BHM began losing its place in the Malaysian public sphere as alternative online media outlets like *Malaysiakini*, *The Malaysian Insider*, and *Free Malaysia Today* gained more prominence and renown as legitimate and credible media outlets. The rapid adoption of social media among Malaysians also meant that people were shifting from blogs to online media.

The government had initially sought to block access to these online news sites and even used Distributed Denial of Service attacks to prevent Malaysians from reading them, but these efforts were easily circumvented and inadvertently highlighted these sites. This was where UMNO's secondary gambit, which led to the creation of cybertroopers, paid off. Formed under UMNO's New Media Unit, the Cybertrooper Team was established by its then-chairperson, Tun Faisal, in 2004 to clandestinely build support for the government and attack the opposition by actively engaging in online media spaces. Seeing immense public support towards the opposition in all online spaces—including social media, online forums, and blogs—UMNO felt it necessary to "manufacture" their supporters online. Many of the first cybertroopers were recruited from pro-government bloggers, which then expanded to include hiring party faithful to engage in cybertrooper activities.

These include sockpuppetry, the act of masquerading as a real user to express certain political beliefs that support the government, and digital astroturfing, which is the act of using multiple sockpuppet accounts to amplify engagement towards specific posts and narratives, giving the illusion of widespread public support. These cybertroopers focused on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. They also operate in the comment sections of online media such as *Malaysiakini* (as most online news media have closed their comment sections) and popular online forums such as Lowyat.net and Cari.com.my. Most cybertrooper activities on these platforms focused on two strategies: attacking and presenting counter-narratives against the opposition, as well as portraying positive public support for the government.

First-hand accounts from cybertroopers are limited, with only a handful of testimonies and revelations from ex-cybertrooper managers. The first big expose which laid bare the presence of state-sponsored disinformation teams came from Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, also known as "Ratu Naga" (Dragon Queen). Starting as a blogger in 2008, she joined the ranks of pro-government cybertroopers by 2013 and assisted in the BN government's disinformation campaigns. Specialising in the manufacturing and propagation of disinformation about opposition parties, her 80-strong team used puppet accounts to stoke racial hate against the opposition. She claimed that her team's viral video was deceptive and misrepresented the opposition, resulting in the latter losing the 2014 Teluk Intan by-election by 500 votes. If the BN government's reputation was being affected by a news story, she and her team would create diversions to distract people's attention away from the criticism (Guest, 2018). Another example is the hiring of cybertroopers by Rosmah Mansor, wife of ex-Prime Minister Najib, between 2012 and 2018. Based on revelations from her corruption trial, some 40 cybertroopers were allegedly paid up to RM100,000 (USD $22,700) monthly. They were led by prominent UMNO stalwart, Papagomo, and used several notable BN-linked accounts to "counter allegations and slander against her" (Hafiz, 2020).

As Malaysians began shifting away from online news towards social media, these cybertroopers became more effective. Facebook was the main hotbed of activity, with pro-government cybertroopers dominating discourse in these spaces. Their astroturfing capacity evolved to include trolling, where any dissenting or pro-opposition opinions were attacked or trolled by sockpuppet accounts, allowing them to control the narrative among their mainly Malay audience. Subsequently, many of these activities moved away from party control to be directly administered by government agencies and ministries, most notably *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Khas* (JASA—Special Affairs Department), which was under the then Communications and Multimedia Ministry.

The work by such cybertroopers was known as "Black Ops", "Cyberwar", and "Propaganda". They were part of a cyber-army network that was fostered and often bankrolled by the BN government. In November 2017, UMNO organised a Social Media Convention, attended by some 4,000 cybertroopers. At that event, ex-Prime Minister Najib called on them to mobilise themselves to thwart opposition cyberattacks during the upcoming GE14, adding that BN had to win the social media war to remain in office.

The run-up to GE14 in 2018 saw an increase in bot activity flooding *TwitterJaya* (Malaysia's Twitter Sphere). According to the Washington-based Digital Forensic Research (DFR) lab of the Atlantic Council think tank, "over 17,000 bots tweeted content related to the Malaysian election" immediately after the election date was announced. Pro-government tweets contained infographics, memes, and images illustrating government policies, photos of BN supporters with party flags, and "I love PM" signs, which credited UMNO's information technology department. There were also attacks on the opposition, with hashtags such as #SayNoToPH and #KalahkanPakatan (#DefeatPakatan) used around 44,100 times by 17,600 users from April 12 to 20, 2018. DFR discovered that 9 of the top 10 most active bot accounts with pro-government content and anti-opposition hashtags contained Russian-sounding names with Cyrillic script. While this did not suggest foreign interference, DFR said it was indicative of behind-the-scenes campaigners who purchased some bots from "Russian-speaking bot herders". In some cases, these bots targeted prominent opposition or civil society activists for harassment. Twitter subsequently removed 500 accounts that posted spam or malicious content about the election.

GE14 was a test for the then-incumbent Prime Minister Najib, who used bots as part of his campaign strategy to overcome his negative public image due to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad scandal. However, Najib and his BN government ultimately lost the election to PH for the first time since gaining independence in 1957.

Post General Election 14 (GE14) in 2018

With the change of government, PH sought to dismantle many of these state-supported cybertroopers by closing down JASA and cancelling contracts of thousands of rumoured salaried cybertroopers, resulting in many becoming free agents. Some reverted to working for political parties such as UMNO or the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) or becoming anti-PH "political die-hards"—regular netizens who engage in cybertrooper-like behaviours in political discourses online. These include aggressively promoting positive news about their chosen political party, antagonising and harassing their political opponents, and astroturfing through creating fake accounts and trolling. Essentially, they are radicalised political supporters cum cybertroopers who are not financially supported by any political stakeholders.

Once out of power, cybertroopers for UMNO and the conservative Islamic party, *Parti Islam Se-Malaysia* (PAS), worked together to destabilise the PH government by playing up racial and religious issues, arguing that the latter was no longer prioritising Malay Muslim welfare. They attacked the Democratic

Action Party (DAP), a predominantly Chinese political party and a major component of the PH government, by painting it as the bogeyman steering the country towards secularism and liberalism.

The key attack occurred at the end of 2018 when the PH government attempted to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The opposition claimed that this move would negatively affect the position of Islam as the religion of the Federation and the privileged status of Malay and *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) communities under the Malaysian Constitution. UMNO and PAS politicians, as well as their cybertroopers, started to push the narrative that DAP was attempting to secularise the country and remove the special status of the Malay majority. This culminated in the Anti-ICERD rally in December 2018, where UMNO and PAS confirmed their cooperation. This heralded PH's decline as it lost almost all by-elections over the next year and a half.

While PH did not appear to employ its government cybertroopers, it is believed that *Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia* (*Bersatu*—Malaysian United Indigenous Party), a component party in PH founded by ex-Prime Minister Mahathir, did engage in their use. Many of *Bersatu's* ministers, MPs, and their cybertroopers attacked DAP using racial and religious rhetoric. Consequently, the weakened PH government was only in power for 22 months before losing its parliamentary majority in 2020 when more than 30 MPs left, triggering the resignation of Mahathir as Prime Minister. Also known as the "Sheraton Move", this saw the formation of a new *Perikatan Nasional* (PN—National Alliance) government consisting of *Bersatu*, UMNO, and PAS under the leadership of Muhyiddin Yassin. The PN government re-established JASA and subsequently rebranded it as *Jabatan Komunikasi Komuniti* (J-KOM—Community Communications Department). Its proposed 2021 budget of RM 85.5 million for its revival was slashed to RM 40 million after a huge outcry from the opposition and the public.

Due to the unusual circumstances that produced this PN government, strong tensions emerged between *Bersatu,* a smaller and newer party, and the old UMNO juggernaut that wanted to reclaim its political primacy. As this took place amidst the Covid-19 lockdowns to minimise physical engagements and contain the effects of the pandemic, online spaces became a major battleground for this internal political struggle. Cybertroopers from opposing camps began attacking and undermining various ministers and their policies, which caused the PN government to be unstable. Combined with PH also seeking to reclaim power, then-Prime Minister Muhyiddin was focused on protecting his administration rather than handling the pandemic.

Despite this, the PN government collapsed in August 2021 and was succeeded by a new UMNO-led government with Ismail Sabri as the Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the cabinet and component parties in this "new" administration were practically the same as the previous. The continued infighting meant that the new BN-led government was still unstable. To resolve this, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the opposition PH. J-KOM was missing from Budget 2022, yet cybertrooper activities continued online as the proxy internal war between UMNO and *Bersatu* continued.

In August 2022, Meta released its Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report, which identified a series of active troll farms on social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram that were linked to the Malaysian Royal Police. The tech giant discovered the network after reviewing information from Clemson University researchers in the US and found that these troll farms engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" which focused on supporting government initiatives through cybertrooper activity and paid advertisements, and attacking the opposition with claims of corruption (Veena, 2022). We suspect that the use of government agencies to engage in cybertrooper activity was due to a reduced J-KOM budget which has resulted in various civil service institutions having to execute such "work" to save costs.

GE15 in 2022

The intense infighting within the UMNO-led government and immense internal pressure from his party resulted in the then Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri, dissolving parliament. The snap GE15 on November 19 caught everyone by surprise, as this fell during the monsoon season when flooding affects many parts of the country and constrains campaigning—a political *faux pas*. With three or more cornered fights happening between former government allies BN and PN against the then opposition PH as well as independent candidates, cybertroopers played a key role in election campaigning. Based on our social media monitoring, we observed that cybertrooper activities were intense as they flooded propaganda content on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While PH relied mainly on political diehards to support their online campaigns, PN and BN engaged in the direct use of covert cybertroopers. However, there appeared to be reduced concentrated cybertrooper activity as both camps were believed to have shared teams, causing divided loyalties. Most astroturfing and sockpuppetry focused on the main parties and their leaders rather than minor candidates. Unlike previous general elections where cybertrooper engagement followed party hierarchies, with top warlords employing most "troops" and less important candidates enjoying limited support, cybertrooper machinery in GE15 lacked a unified focus with candidates appearing to only employ cybertroopers for individual campaigns with limited sharing among party hopefuls.

As the pool of cybertroopers shrank, some candidates sought to pay social media influencers. Leaked posts indicated that BN and PN campaigns made payment offers to social media influencers, to promote their campaign messaging based on their follower size. We observed an increase in many Malay lifestyle influencers suddenly promoting certain candidates during GE15. The efficacy of this approach has not been analysed in detail, but using "celebrity endorsement" approaches has not been fruitful in past elections (Amir Zafran & Muhamad Takiyuddin, 2018).

The dark horse in GE15, which many observers initially failed to notice, was the unprecedented influence of TikTok. Traditionally, Facebook and Twitter were the online spaces for political discussions on elections. Monitoring TikTok was challenging due to its highly aggressive algorithm, which allowed for political campaigns to go almost unnoticed. Thanks to the passing of the Undi18 legislation and automatic voter registration, some 6.23 million new voters became eligible in GE15. Although TikTok does not allow political advertising, politicians and parties were still able to create content and engage third parties, such as social media influencers, to promote their messages. For example, former Prime Minister Muhyiddin's TikTok video, where he awkwardly dances to a hip-hop track by Singaporean singer Alyph and "swipes" away BN and PH logos, garnered at least 4 million views in a day. PN campaigners and cybertroopers, particularly PAS, had the strongest impact. By utilising its ideological focus on conservative Islam and Malay values, they relied on TikTok's algorithm to distribute their targeted messages to the Malay heartlands instead of relying on old-school ground campaigning. PAS credited its capture of 49 out of 222 seats (22.1%) in GE15, the biggest gain in the party's history, to the use of TikTok in its campaigning (Nurzali, 2022). Although this "green wave", alluding to PAS' green flag, resulted in PN winning a substantial number of 73 out of 222 seats (32.9%), the coalition was unable to gather sufficient support to form the next government after GE15. No coalition achieved a simple majority, resulting in a hung parliament, the first in the country's history.

During the days of closed-door negotiations to form the next government, when it appeared that PN might not be included, there was an increase in racially charged TikTok videos that raised fears of a possible repeat of the May 13, 1969 racial riots. The videos or content creators "had no identifiable links to one another" but alleged that chaos would occur if the Chinese-led DAP was allowed to be part of the government after GE15, which would cause the downfall of the Malay community. Many of these videos featured suggestive captions of possible violence, of people swinging weapons and driving around with PAS flags. One particular video saw young Malay men on horseback with flags that resembled the Islamic State. Unfortunately, TikTok's automated moderation engine that uses artificial intelligence was not able to properly detect videos in *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay language), resulting in removal delays. Although TikTok encouraged the public to use its in-app function to report harmful content, racial tensions still rose, leading the police to establish checkpoints. Anxieties were still high even as Anwar was sworn in as Prime Minister a week later and only subsided when digital communications minister Fahmi Fadzil announced that TikTok removed more than 1,000 videos the week after GE15 concluded. While digital media has been utilised by political parties as a campaign tool in past general elections, it has taken a darker turn with a focus on racial and religious issues as a means to whip up political support for certain political parties. However, this increases tension and division within the multi-racial, multi-religious Malaysian society as such digital content causes feelings of ill-will among different ethnic groups. This experience serves as a possible sign of dark times ahead with social media.

Conclusion

Even as the world faces the onslaught of politically sponsored cybertroopers that distort and disrupt elections everywhere, Malaysia has been dealing with it, for better or worse, far longer than most. Inauthentic disinformation campaigns have been around in Malaysia for more than 20 years, from blogs to social media. Since its inception, cybertroopers in Malaysia have always focused on rhetorical sock-puppetry rather than the common horde-like astroturfing. The latter is easier to operate, identify, and block as opposed to rhetoric-focused campaigns that require more sophistication and strategic planning, something that Malaysian political parties have had two decades to practice and hone. Our findings clearly show how the state has amalgamated digital technologies into its disinformation operations, especially during various general elections. Even as the dust is settling on the divisive and polemic GE15, the work and presence of cybertroopers are expected to continue and remain a permanent fixture within Malaysia's digital public sphere. Technological movements towards new social media platforms such as TikTok mean that sophisticated tactics and strategies are constantly evolving.

Malaysia serves as a warning of what could occur if there are insufficient regulations that allow governments and political parties to engage cybertroopers unabatedly. Any opposing argument can be dismissed as "the work of cybertroopers" which taints political discourse and creates a poisonous democratic environment. While it remains to be seen if the new unity government can provide sufficient regulation for Malaysia's media space to curb the growing presence of cybertroopers, there is optimism that it has learned from past mistakes post-GE14 and will bring about much-needed reforms.

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18 State-sponsored disinformation, hate speech, and violence

Mapping conceptual connections through Iran's anti-Bahá'í propaganda[1]

Andrés Shoai and Sergio García Magariño

Introduction

Campaigns that combine hate speech and disinformation against vulnerable minorities persist in the 21st century as a strategy intimately connected to direct violence and frequently sponsored by specific governments. The role played by these discursive practices in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda genocides has been well-documented (Oberschall, 2000; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014), whereas the recent human rights catastrophe of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar provides an example of their persisting force well into the present century (Kironska & Peng, 2021; Ronan, 2019). In these cases, as in less notorious ones, verbal attacks and distortions of facts have been used effectively to incite violence and discrimination against specific populations. Additionally, the systematic use of online media for manipulation campaigns has been detected in 70 countries, according to an Oxford study that also highlights how digital spaces are co-opted by many authoritarian regimes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Aggressive language and deception are certainly not new, and neither is the fundamental contribution they can make to structural and direct violence. However, the concepts of "hate speech" and "disinformation" have only gained prominence in the last decade in scholarly work, legal frameworks, and policy debates (Kapantai et al., 2021; Paz et al., 2020). These works address the complexity, speed, global reach, and the loosening of ethical standards that characterise communications in the current media environment. Although a diverse range of studies about these two concepts is rapidly accumulating, the relationship between both notions—as well as their connection to state-sponsored behaviour—still constitutes a fuzzy subject.

In this chapter, we argue that developing conceptual clarity about this subject, and studying it empirically, are two important, pending, and interconnected tasks. On the one hand, by implementing a review of key theoretical developments and research works, this chapter will identify and describe some fundamental connections between state-sponsored disinformation and

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state-sponsored hate speech, as well as the relationship of these communication practices with more flagrant violations of human rights against specific populations. On the other hand, to test this general framework and draw new insights from factual experience, those conceptual categories will be used in the process of organising and interpreting available information about a contemporary case, which is the persecution carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran against the Bahá'ís, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country.

Naturally, disinformation and hate speech do not exist or thrive in a vacuum. A number of studies present some key contextual reference points, such as Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) "information disorder", Bennet and Livingston's (2018) "disinformation order", and Chadwick's (2019) "crisis of public communication". What these assessments have in common is the observation of deteriorating democratic values in a rapidly-changing media environment—"a complex web of motivations for creating, disseminating and consuming … 'polluted' messages" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 4), and the erosion of "authenticity, rationality, tolerance, and trust" in the dynamics of public opinion formation (Chadwick, 2019, p. 4). It is within this general context that we approach the following sections.

The disinformation-hate-violence triangle

Before exploring the entanglement between disinformation, hate speech, and violence, presenting a separate definition for each component of this "triangle" will prove useful. Although they have been conceptualised in various ways, a certain gravitation among scholars towards some key defining features for each one of these subjects constitutes a positive exception in the all-too-fragmented sphere of social studies.

Concerning disinformation, a succinct and widely accepted definition is "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (European Commission, 2018, p. 3).

We understand hate speech, on the other hand, as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group" on the basis of some "identity factor", such as race, religion, gender, or other (UN, 2019a, p. 2). Even when morally unacceptable or socially harmful, acts that fit under this wide definition of hate speech do not necessarily constitute a crime, especially in legislations where freedom of expression is considered a fundamental value. If speech assumes the form of "incitement", however, things change. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), for example, states that "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law" (Art. 20).

This leads us to the third component of our conceptual triangle, which is the subject of violence. Galtung's (1990) classical theorisation on interrelated forms of violence provides important contextual elements about this topic (Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021). Whereas direct violence is composed of visible events, its variations across multiple circumstances can be explained in terms of its root causes in cultural and structural forms of violence. Under this perspective, physical or verbal aggression (direct violence) can be interpreted, for example, as emanating from the normalisation of hate speech, prejudices, and stereotypes against certain groups (cultural violence), which can in turn be institutionally sanctioned through state-sponsored social and economic discrimination (structural violence). At the same time, direct expressions of violence reinforce structural and cultural aspects.

Although a universally accepted framework that determines when a state is engaging in acts of disinformation, hate, or violence does not exist, it is important to note that the collective construction that comes closest to such a framework is the human rights principles and norms. The intimate relationship between human rights and the theme of this chapter will be evidenced in different ways in the following sections. These sections will seek to conceptually integrate state-sponsored expressions of hate speech and disinformation with more direct forms of violence that constitute flagrant violations of human rights. As we do not have records of previous theoretical works that address these subjects in an integrated way, our objective required the study of literature reviews that present the state of the art for each of these matters independently (in other words, for each "vertex" of the "triangle"), on the one hand, and publications that observe each of the possible relationships (or "sides" of the "triangle"), on the other. All the conceptual postulates and empirical observations that help define and interrelate these subjects were analysed by mutual comparison with the goal of classifying them into broad categories. Six statements emerged as a result; they will be presented as the components of a preliminary theoretical model that can guide future research efforts on the matter.

As mentioned in the introduction, our second specific objective is to analyse those connections through an empirical case study in order to explore how they operate in practice and generate new theoretical insights from social reality. The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran combines the three elements of state-sponsored hate, disinformation, and human rights violations, and can therefore provide paradigmatic value (Brookshaw & Fazel, 2008; Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). Complementing the academic literature, the case study will be developed through primary sources: official reports and resolutions from intergovernmental organisations, documents from the *Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran*—which include official state and media documents from this country—, reports from human rights organisations, and accounts published by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC), the organisation that represents the Bahá'ís at the United Nations and other international fora. The documents will be content-analysed through qualitative techniques using our theoretical model as a set of pre-defined organising categories of information.

Apart from defining conceptual postulates and observing a case in order to understand its internal features and mechanisms, our work intends to generate new insights for further theoretical refinement. This implies a dialogue between theory development and a case study, an epistemological strategy used in approaches such as *process tracing* (Bennett & Checkel, 2014).

Theoretical model

This section offers an initial theoretical model of six interrelated postulates to facilitate the analysis of state-sponsored hate and disinformation campaigns, based on the available conceptual and empirical studies on the matter. By "initial model" we mean an approximation to the object of study in order to capture its complexity and breadth by representing some of its key features and mechanisms, rather than a detailed network of explanatory interactions.

Hate relies on disinformation

While disinformation can exist and spread without relying on hate, the opposite is hardly imaginable. When hate drives action, truth and falsehood become relativised weapons. Although hate speech and disinformation seem to have a multifaceted relationship, this is the aspect that is predominantly assumed and reported in the literature. Terms like "invariably" (George, 2020, p. 146), "inextricably" (Kojan et al., 2020, p. 81), and "essential" (Holvoet, 2022, p. 2) are used to characterise the reliance of hate speech—including incitement—on disinformation. Previous research has found that partisan attacks, negativity, and hate speech are most likely to occur in false information that deviates the furthest from reality (Hameleers et al., 2022). It should be noted, however, that not all content imbued with hatred reveals its own aggressive characteristics. Hate speech can also appear to be "articulately and reasonably expressed" (Sorial, 2015, p. 299).

Hate incitement is a predictor of direct violence, including mass atrocities

Much work has been carried out to determine the relationship between incitement and violent action, and solid arguments about the former being a "precursor, indicator, predictor, and catalyst" of the latter have been made (Richter et al., 2018, p. 40). We have chosen the word "predictor" for this model because of its value for early warning and prevention purposes, and in order to move beyond debates about causality between speech and violence, as both are clearly multidimensional and complex objects of study.

It should also be noted that strong connections have been observed not only with respect to the concept of incitement but also when using the more general concept of hate speech, with its intimate nexus to deception. "Hate speech begets hate crimes, as can misinformation and disinformation" (UN, 2021a, p. 7). In the case of mass atrocities, including genocide, emphasis should be added. The UN framework to analyse these crimes includes "acts of incitement or hate propaganda" targeting particular groups or individuals among the "triggering factors" (UN, 2019b, p. 17). Genocides involve the participation of large numbers of ordinary individuals transformed by "messages, imagery, and power relationships that dehumanize the intended targets" (Kopel, 2016, p. 452).

The seemingly ubiquitous presence of aggressive and deceiving discourses in online environments might suggest—at least to the uninformed observer—that such practices are somehow "diluted" across cyberspace, equally affecting diverse segments of the population, with attackers and victims constantly exchanging roles. However, this is not the case. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, three-quarters of hate speech cases around the world target specific minorities (UN, 2021a). Of course, targets are not always numerically defined. Concepts like "vulnerable groups" and "gendered disinformation and hate" help to address other defining characteristics of target populations (Juárez-Rodríguez, 2015; Judson, 2020).

Disinformation (and counter-disinformation) pose threats to human rights

While the previous component of our theoretical model highlights the danger that public expressions of hate can pose to people's fundamental rights, disinformation itself—even when free from hate speech—shares the same characteristic. This is because it depends on practices that "infringe on the autonomy and dignity of the person" (Glassius & Michaelsen, 2018, p. 3795). An illustration of this point is how disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic affected the right to public health (Ramírez-Bañuelos, 2021). As reported by a recent UN document, there is "growing evidence that disinformation tends to thrive where human rights are constrained, where the public information regime is not robust, and where media quality, diversity and independence is weak" (UN, 2021b, p. 2). In such contexts, counter-disinformation initiatives can be understood as a way of protecting human rights. However, it should also be noted that counter-disinformation can be used to justify human rights violations (Colomina et al., 2021). What becomes clear when considering this double-edged relationship is that human rights principles offer "a normative framework that should underpin responses" to disinformation (Jones, 2019, p. 2).

State agency implies a unique concentration of resources

Troll factories, controlled mass media, surveillance, restrictions on information access, special propaganda offices, as well as instrumentalised education systems, state-religion institutions, and co-opted public figures are some of the resources used by certain states to deceive and spread hate for specific interests. Clearly, states are “the most prolific users of disinformation” for a reason (Gunatilleke, 2021)—they possess all the necessary capabilities. A relevant example is the massive use of coordinated fake social media accounts controlled by human, bot, and cyborg state actors to spread computational propaganda and disinformation, especially in critical moments of public life (Beskow & Carley, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Niblock et al., 2022; Zannettou et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the state’s potential for discriminatory and deceiving communications cannot be fully assessed without considering the role that policy, administration, and legislation—even constitutional texts—can have in allowing, expressing, and engendering hate and disinformation. For example, Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar are left stateless through the constitutionally accepted notion of “national races” (*taingyintha*) (Cheesman, 2017).

Hate campaigns are structured and underpinned by wider narratives

When analysing a hate campaign, attention tends to be drawn to speech acts that are extreme, but these expressions do not work in a vacuum. “Hate campaigns comprise multiple, layered, loosely interlocking messages, disseminated by different actors over years or decades” (George, 2020, p. 147). These messages have some basic features, such as the dehumanisation of a target group and the reinforcement of a positive in-group feeling (Ibrahim, 2019; Kojan et al., 2020; Uyheng et al., 2022). A feature we mentioned previously is their reliance on disinformation narratives, which in turn are not completely out of touch with reality—they “alter, doctor or manipulate” information (Hameleers, 2023, p. 8). At the same time, speech acts happen in an even wider discursive context. Master narratives, which cultivate a primary social identity, provide the backdrop and are regularly refreshed with contemporary examples from the news and other sources (Levinger, 2018).

The strategies are multilevel and multichannel

Considering the scale and power of state structures, intentions to deceive and spread hate will usually move into action through specific objectives and multiple means and levels of implementation. These levels are conceptually organised in various ways, usually by interconnecting terms like operations, manoeuvres, tactics, behaviours, practices, and toolkits (e.g., Bhatia & Arora, 2024; European Commission, 2022; Lukito, 2020; Vargas et al., 2020). No model or terminology has been proven to be universally applicable. The important premise is to consider multiple strategic levels and relations organised around objectives or intentions.

On the other hand, as the object of study is communicative in nature and massive in its reach, the use of media is usually a key criterion when selecting research problems of disinformation and hate speech. Digitally mediated communication is the dominant focus, especially social media, but there is no reason to assume that malicious agents will choose specific media types in the clear-cut manner that communication scholars frequently do. Usually, a strong communication objective calls for a multichannel approach. Neither can we assume that offline practices like a sermon from a pulpit or a pamphlet on a doorstep are intrinsically less relevant.

Case study: Iran's hate and disinformation against the Bahá'ís

Adherents of the Bahá'í faith have faced violent opposition in Iran since their religion's inception in the mid-nineteenth century, and they have been under a new wave of systematic and state-sponsored persecution from the early 1980s to the present day (Amanat, 2008; Ghanea, 2002; Milani, 2016, Zabihi-Moghaddam, 2016). With a community of around 350,000 members, Bahá'ís form the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country. However, they are regarded by the state as "unprotected infidels" (UN, 2019c, p. 13). They are murdered with impunity, imprisoned without due process, their properties are confiscated, and their rights to work and education denied, just to mention some examples of violations.

This section will focus on the discursive aspect of the persecution by analysing state-sponsored disinformation and hate speech, as well as their relationship to violence. Considering the evident complexity of such a task, it is expected that the six components of our theoretical model will help us build a case study that provides both clarity and breadth, on the one hand, and generates new insights for theoretical reflection, on the other.

Reliance of hate on disinformation

Manipulation of truth has historically been a key ingredient in the "otherisation" narratives about the Bahá'ís in Iran (Chehabi, 2008; Yazdani, 2012), but the relation between the contemporary concepts of "hate speech" and "disinformation" requires scrutiny of specific communication contents. The organisation representing the Bahá'ís has gathered a sampling of official and semi-official anti-Bahá'í propaganda issued in Iran during a 16-month period, documenting around 400 articles, broadcasts, and other materials (BIC, 2011). The report identifies several recurring themes—that Bahá'ís are agents of Zionism or spies for Israel, that the Bahá'í Faith was created by imperialist powers like Great Britain or Russia, that it is a "misguided sect" associated with "cultlike" practices, and several others. It also observes a shift in these themes, which are "expanding from traditional theological attacks to those with a more contemporary flavor, with the goal of prejudicing the increasingly secular-minded Iranian population" (BIC, 2011, p. 13). The media examples provided by the report show that incitement can rely on disinformation to an extent where the distinction between the two becomes only analytical. For example, an article stating that Bahá'ís are, according to their teachings, "free to marry their daughters, sisters, aunts and uncles" constitutes both an incitement to hatred and a baseless fabrication at the same time (BIC, 2011, p. 21).

The predicting qualities of hate speech

The Bahá'í case shows how aggressive speech precedes violence on many levels. For example, at a general or historical level, Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse presented this minority as Iran's "internal Other" for decades before climaxing in the Islamic Revolution (Yazdani, 2012), which in turn was followed by several atrocities—including the execution of over 200 Bahá'ís—by a regime that actively moved along the pathway towards genocide (Affolter, 2005; Bigelow, 1992; Momen, 2005).

An example of a more specific analytical focus is the Bahá'í International Community's (2012) report about the happenings in Semnan between 2005 and 2012, where anti-Bahá'í seminars, sermons, pamphlets, and radio programmes created an atmosphere of animosity where both officials and citizens became free to act with impunity. The same approach can be narrowed down to an event-level of analysis—for example, as the document recounts, a single conference given in early December 2009 by the author of an anti-Bahá'í book was immediately followed by a series of raids in 20 Bahá'í homes (BIC, 2012, p. 17).

Counter-disinformation as a justification of human rights violations

In Iran, the precept of countering disinformation is instrumentalised by the government for Internet censorship and shutdowns, which are common in the country, and draft legislation for "preventing and countering publication of false information" has been created to increase control over the media (UN, 2021c, p. 12). However, direct attacks on communities and individuals, including Bahá'ís, are also made on the same grounds. A charge commonly used by Iranian officials is the "spreading of lies" (Sanasarian, 2012, p. 312). For example, court documents against Sahba Rezvani, who was imprisoned in 2008, charge her with "propaganda against the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (BIC, 2012, p. 21).

The state's concentration of resources

In Iran, "discrimination against the Baha'i community is legally sanctioned" (UN, 2017, p. 16) while "widely exercised by various organs of the Iranian state" (Milani, 2016, p. 137). Official budgets have included allocations for "educational" programmes to "confront" the Bahá'í Faith, and state organs have been established for that purpose (BIC, 2019, p. 12). The following example can help in understanding the institutionalised nature of hate. In 2007, the Education Department in Shiraz circulated a form to be completed by all non-Muslim students. The section for "religion" listed only four options: "Christian", "Jew", "Zoroastrian", and "Perverse Bahaist sect" (BIC, 2013, p. 23).

Hate and disinformation activities are implemented not only through such discriminatory policies, but also by blocking the application of non-discrimination policies. For example, Bahá'ís have long been denied access to any means of communication with the public and cannot counter the accusations propagated about them and their religion, which is in contradiction with Article 5 of Iran's Press Law (BIC, 2019).

A key dimension of the campaigns against the Bahá'ís, is a network of hundreds of political, judicial, and religious leaders that openly speak and write against this minority (BIC, 2018). Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, for example, issued a religious decree (*fatwa*) on his website stating that "you should avoid any association and dealings with this perverse and misguided sect" (BIC, 2019, p. 13). The volume of anti-Bahá'í media content is difficult to measure, but it includes thousands of articles, videos, and other materials (https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org). Bahá'í representatives have denounced that the propaganda is "shocking in its volume and vehemence, its scope and sophistication" (BIC, 2012, p. 2). They also inform that other sources of slander, such as graffiti, pamphlets, and anonymous letters, contain "without fail" the same language found in media affiliated with the government (BIC, 2019, p. 12).

Wider narratives

Hate campaigns are structured and underpinned by wider social narratives. In this respect, the case shows how such structures can persist over time, even when some of their protagonists and specific details can be "conveniently" supplanted in different periods. For example, the successive accusations of Bahá'ís as agents of the Russian, Ottoman, and British empires in different stages of Iranian history over the past 150 years have now taken on the form of Bahá'ís as agents of Zionism and Israel in contemporary official discourse (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2008).

At the same time, the master narrative about the Bahá'ís has a more fundamental religious component. As adherents of a post-Islamic religion, Bahá'ís are referred to as followers of "the misguided and misleading sect" (*firqa-ye ḍālla-yi muḍilla*) (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 125). For this reason, they are considered religiously unclean (*najis*). This long-standing belief has persisted as a backdrop for anti-Bahá'í rhetoric and discrimination in the 21st century. For example, a *fatwa* signed by six Grand Ayatollahs in 2010 states that they "are even more *Najis* than dogs" (BIC, 2017, p. 120), and dogs are considered ritually impure in Islam. Using Ervin Staub's analysis of the road to genocide, Affolter (2005) shows how the anti-Bahá'í narrative is a fundamental strategy for excluding people from one's own "moral universe" (Affolter, 2005, p. 89).

The strategic perspective

Currently available information on the Bahá'í case shows the value of gathering evidence at the highest level of government in order to understand strategies. The official policy of the Iranian government against this minority is summarised in a secret memorandum obtained in 1993 by a UN Representative (BIC, 2017). Signed by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, it states that "the government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked" (BIC, 2017, p. 95). This document, which remains in effect 30 years later, outlines measures to restrict the educational, economic, and cultural life of Iranian Bahá'ís, including the creation of special propaganda offices. On the other hand, public speeches and *fatwas* of the Supreme Leader set the tone for anti-Bahá'í rhetoric and are usually followed by multiple amplifying messages in media organisations affiliated with the government (BIC, 2012).

While massive disinformation operations deployed by the government of Iran through fake accounts on Twitter and other social media have been detected and analysed (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Nemr & Gangware, 2019, Niblock et al., 2022), the study of official documents, public speeches, and legacy media content can place social media activity within wider strategies and detect specific state policies and campaigns. In this context, offline activities cannot be underestimated. Visual arts festivals where participants are incentivised to design anti-Bahá'í posters, or the presentation of numerous anti-Bahá'í books at Tehran book exhibitions and fairs, are examples of such operations (BIC, 2022).

Discussion and conclusions

Describing a state-sponsored campaign of hate and disinformation, and its connections to violence, can be a difficult challenge. The present chapter has sought to facilitate this task by pointing out some of the key components and interconnections that make up such campaigns. Through a series of conceptual statements, we have shown how hate speech uses disinformation and constitutes a predictor of direct violence, including mass atrocities, and we have also highlighted how disinformation and alleged counter-disinformation actions—even when analysed independently from hate speech—can pose threats to human rights. Additionally, we have considered the characteristics that state sponsorship provides to this disinformation-hate-violence triangle—an incomparable concentration of resources and the execution of strategies through multiple channels and levels of implementation. Our model also points out the importance of understanding governmental communication strategies in contexts that go beyond state structures, as these discursive practices usually derive their power from wider social narratives that are in turn reinforced through state action.

The analytical value and the main precepts of this initial model were illustrated through Iran's anti-Bahá'í propaganda. This case study has also generated some conceptual insights that, even when not fundamentally altering the framework, can prove useful in future research endeavours. Concerning the reliance of hate speech on disinformation, the Bahá'í case shows how this relationship can be strong to an extent where the distinction between the two becomes only analytical, as deception and hate incitement can be constituent elements of one discourse, one campaign, and even one statement. Regarding the predictive qualities of hate speech in relation to violence, the case reveals that these qualities can be observed at different levels of analysis, ranging from historical processes to event-specific views.

With respect to the structural properties of hate speech, the connection of these discourses to wider social narratives, and the potency they can gain when sponsored by the state, the case study helps us move from general notions to more specific analytical categories that can be helpful in gathering and organising information. Furthermore, it shows how evidence from official documents, public speeches, state-affiliated legacy media, and offline communications can clarify the underlying strategies and provide context to the social media operations that are usually the focus of disinformation studies.

As this chapter focused on state-sponsored campaigns—and not on the wider social processes of hate speech and disinformation—some contextual aspects have been excluded from the analysis, such as the roles of non-state actors like social media platforms and users, or the response patterns shown by the populations under attack (Karlberg, 2010). Although our approach has intentionally chosen state action as the focal point, it is only based on an analytical distinction, as state action is connected to wider societal processes.

Note

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19 From censorship to disinformation: Cuba's official discourse on contentious activism

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Introduction

This chapter aims to characterise the discursive strategies employed by the Cuban State through the TV show *Con Filo* in response to emergent practices of contentious activism facilitated by the new independent digital cybermedia. We consider it interesting to study the framing of the opposition on national television as well as its emergent communicative role within a changing and increasingly heterogeneous context. This is the case of press-power relationships characteristic of Soviet regimes, which were dominant in Cuba during the first post-revolution decades (García, 2004; Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014).

The arrival of the Internet in Cuba, its gradual access to and Cuban citizens, has transformed the public sphere by expanding opportunities for civic deliberation on issues of collective interest. Two government measures that facilitated access to the Web on the island were, first, the legalisation of the possession of cell phone lines in 2008, previously prohibited to national citizens; and second, the gradual increase in Internet access through browsing rooms and Wi-Fi zones in different parts of the country. This, together with the emergence of digital media that is critical and independent of state power, has contributed to the circulation of online information in Cuba being faster and less controlled by the State. This has favoured the emergence of peripheral public spaces that make the public sphere more open and accessible to ordinary citizens (Leyva & Somohano, 2008; Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014; Díaz, 2018).

This context has also enabled the emergence and visibility of new media actors that are contentious towards the political regime, such as human rights activists, independent news sites, and "artivists", or artist-activists. All of this has occurred despite the broad legal framework stipulating that political dissidents in Cuba do not have the status of an opposition and the fact that such groups and their activities are repressed by the regime, which systematically criminalises them (Celecia, 2020; Veiga et al., 2020; Gallego, 2020).

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In this context, the term "contentious actors" allows us to refer to different social actors who have in common the carrying out of various forms of collective action against governmental and party interests. In this undoubtedly heterogeneous group, we find those who consider themselves opponents—given their political interests and despite the lack of legal basis for doing so, others who assume themselves as human rights activists, and others who define themselves as part of an "independent civil society" not recognised by the State-Party. However, they are all assumed by the power to be "enemies". Finally, contentious activism is shaped through the defence of human rights and political participation from the institutional margins, actions that are exercised consciously and in a planned manner.

Although the 2019 Cuban Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press and the rights of assembly, demonstration, and association, several points of the Penal Code restrict those rights. Point 1 of Act No. 88 on the Protection of the National Independence and Economy of Cuba, for example, defines the acts that may support or facilitate the political destabilisation of the country and support the United States' embargo against the island and establishes the sanctions for these acts (Law 88 of, 1999).

This law establishes several anti-revolutionary offences, including providing information that would assist the United States in its policy towards the island; accumulating, reproducing, or disseminating material of a subversive nature; collaborating with anti-revolutionary foreign media; and receiving or distributing financial, material, or other means from the Government of the United States of America or private entities for subversive purposes. Penalties range from three to 15 years' imprisonment and/or fines (Law 88 ba, 1999). The Cuban law also forbids associations or independent parties from running for office or carrying out any type of political campaign.

Despite these tightly regulated conditions for free speech, the Internet and new technologies have been used as platforms for political and civic expression and participation. Two government measures that made access to public communication more flexible and thereby favoured the creation of independent online media were, first, the legalisation of the purchase of cell phone lines in 2008, previously prohibited to national citizens; and second, the gradual increase in Internet access in Cuba. Non state-owned Cuban cybermedia, created and managed primarily by professional journalists, accounts for the emergence in the virtual space of publications that are presented as alternatives to the communication generated by the government (Celecia, 2020). These communicative actions have also had an impact on the configuration of public communication at a sub-national level by eroding the state monopoly on the public dissemination of information.

In this work, we consider forms of contentious collective action all the speeches, repertoires, and strategies that represent a challenge to the regime and/or are perceived by the regime as a threat (Svampa, 2009; Tilly & Wood, 2010), promote and defend human rights, extend citizen participation, democratise the political system, and pluralise the public space. Generally, these forms of contentious action take place in a collectively organised manner, although it has become more common to observe individual spontaneous expressions of criticism (Celecia, 2020). An example of this is the protests that took place in different parts of Cuba in July 2021, from now on referred to as 11J.

On July 11, 2021, thousands of people spontaneously took to the streets in dozens of cities across Cuba to protest; those numbers were not seen for decades. The 11J protesters demanded a change in living conditions in Cuba. These protests were a response not only to shortages of food, personal hygiene items, medicines, and electricity cuts but also to restrictive measures taken by the government in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Amnesty International, 2022).

Although we do not have exact figures for the protesters, some media and NGOs report that the number of those arrested for 11J was between 6,000 and 8,000 (BBC, 2022). Meanwhile, the NGO Cubalex reported 1,074 reports of arrests, while the databases of the Justicia 11J Project (Justice 11J, 2023) report that due to these protests, nearly 1,500 people were arrested, of which more than 500 remain detained. Likewise, 297 of these people were sentenced to prison, including 36 to sentences of between five and 25 years for the crime of sedition (BBC, 2022; Justicia 11J, 2023). The charges needed to be legitimized by the state-run media, making them believable. This led the Cuban government to implement unprecedented communication strategies in a bid to recover control of the narrative regarding the protests.

Following the mass protests of 11J, the Cuban state not only used repression, imprisonment, and legal measures to suffocate social unrest (Amnesty International, 2022). That date also marked a shift in the official media strategy when addressing oppositional issues. A month after the protests, the Cuban Television Information System—part of the state media monopoly— launched the programme *Con Filo* as a response to the content that was circulating on social media. Some of the messages spread during the protests called for changes in the country's political system under the slogan "Homeland and life" [Patria y vida]. These changes called for democratic changes, including respect for human rights and civil liberties like the right to freedom of expression and reunion.

The slogan "Homeland and life"—the antithesis of the government's "Homeland or Death"—was popularised in Cuba during the year 2021 through a song of the same name.[1] The song's creators are Cuban rappers, some residents of the United States and others from the island, who have been linked to contentious activism. People reappropriated the title of a song, which became a symbol of new citizen-led demands that challenged the official narrative.

In this chapter, we will start by contextualising the Cuban media environment, moving from its normative references to the characteristics that the public sphere has acquired on the island in recent years. Emphasis will be placed on how the arrival of the Internet and new technologies in Cuba, as well as the emergence of alternative communication media, have pluralised the accounts of the country's reality, while the circulation of information has become much faster and less controlled.

The theoretical framework is based on contributions regarding disinformation as a communicative phenomenon and reflections on the intertwining between political systems and the media (van Dyk, 2022; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As part of the methodological strategy, we carried out a qualitative content analysis of *Con Filo* based on a theoretical coding that helped us unveil the disinformation strategies taken by the Cuban government and its state-owned media apparatus when framing contentious activism. The final section presents and analyses the findings. The aim is to discuss how the case study sheds light on the government's strategies for the planned dissemination of disinformation in the context of a state-controlled media system, such as the Cuban context. This singular case, however, is increasingly influenced by the configuration of public communication of a transnational nature.

Government-led disinformation and free speech

This chapter argues that televised infotainment programmes in the state-run media such as *Con Filo* generate disinformation, which is visible through the conscious omission of details, the lack of contrast between sources, the presentation of unilateral points of view, as well as the use of infotainment, such as mockery or irony, to ridicule contentious activism. Infotainment replicates the style and form of an entertainment program. Several researchers warn of the negative consequences generated by infotainment, such as the risk of using it as a way of disguising disinformation (Prior, 2003; Nguyen, 2012; Jebril et al., 2013).

Although disinformation takes different forms, there seems to be a consensus in the fact that it involves the deliberate distribution of false, deceptive, fabricated, or manipulated content, which erodes the quality of democracy and, in the case of authoritarian regimes, serves to further restrict freedom of expression, generate a false consensus, and manipulate public opinion (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; T.-H.Lin et al., 2022). It is also false information that is deliberately spread by those in power to mislead people, gain support, and reduce resistance, especially during crucial political moments (T.-H. Lin et al., 2022).

Disinformation can be used by politicians and their allies with the objective of altering the public perception of crises. Disinformation is often disseminated by a variety of agents that are linked to governments. In the context of political protests, previous research has found that authoritarian states have used both censorship and disinformation to discredit protesters (T.-H.Lin et al., 2022; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Likewise, as described by Sierra and Sola (2020), the polarisation of ideological positions and the use of ideologically charged language form part of the rhetorical-discursive strategies of disinformation. In the same way, disinformation is fundamentally related to power and uneven access to information. This has real, material impacts, such as the silencing and character assassination of marginalised groups (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). This is visible in the Cuban case.

Disinformation is likely to trigger institutional distrust in public authorities or traditional media (Humprecht, 2023; Rucinská et al., 2023), although in the case of Cuba, many people do not have the opportunity to fact-check information provided by state media. However, the possibility of finding alternative information on the government through independent digital media and digital social networks is a reality.

Contentious activism and the official discourse of the Cuban state

Following the triumph of the revolution in 1959, changes affected all levels of Cuba's social, economic, and political life. In a short space of time, all the media became social property and controlled by the State-Party, inspired by the Soviet model (García, 2004). In theory, the people own the media, since it is understood that the party and the state are the people, as invoked in the constitution (García, 2004; Geertz et al., 2009). In practice, however, citizens and their concerns are disconnected from the governmental agenda (Celecia, 2018b).

The claims of an adversarial international context and the need to defend the revolutionary project in the face of a threatening enemy are used as justifications for limiting freedom of expression in the name of national security (García, 2004; González, 2009; Fariñas, 2011). From the start of the revolutionary period, the state media therefore assumed a highly defensive position against any pronouncement or initiative that was not aligned with Fidel Castro's political project (Celecia, 2018a). The effort to maintain a cohesive and positive image of the revolution also resulted in a defensive posture; the government adopted the idea that Cuba is a "fortress under siege" that must be protected against a powerful enemy (incarnated by the United States).

In accordance with this, the government has been implementing campaigns to discredit diverse forms of contentiousness, opposition, and political dissidence in Cuba for more than six decades. Their main objective was to discredit such voices by questioning their legitimacy and denting their credibility. This has been achieved by highlighting mistakes made by their members and their alleged alliances with foreign powers. Linking them to the United States government, for example, enables a symbolic association with anti-revolutionary (and thus, allegedly anti-Cuban) interests.

The official discourse reinforces the idea of an orthodox continuity of the revolutionary process. For instance, the socialist character of the Cuban political system was deemed irrevocable during the 2022 constitutional reform. However, the package of socio-economic reforms implemented by the government of Raúl

Castro since 2010 has evidenced symptoms of a non-declared political change on the island over the last decade.[2]

The impact of these changes on the public sphere, in general, and on the media, in particular, can be appreciated in the transition from a Soviet model based on censorship and state control of all information to one that is more complex. The emergence of new digital news sites and independent journalists has challenged the hegemony of the official discourse (Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014). This is despite the notable asymmetry that exists between the state and the rest of the actors in the public sphere.

All of this facilitated the emergence of alternative spaces for information and deliberation on public affairs in the digital context. This communicational context allowed the protests of July 11 in Cuba to have an immediate international echo, both through social media and Cuban alternative digital media. The repercussions of the protests (pronouncements, solidarity actions with demonstrators, government repression) also framed the debates that took place in the digital environment.

11J and the change of communication strategies

Previous works help us understand the Cuban government's reaction to the crisis context in which the protests of 11J occurred. For example, as explained by T.H. Lin et al. (2022), authoritarian governments adopt communication strategies that include disinformation and censorship to protect themselves from political responsibility and criticism for certain actions or phenomena that they do not adequately address. Although this also occurs in democratic countries, an important difference is the lack of checks and balances and oversight of government actions that exist in the former. In the Cuban case, these strategies are often used when addressing sensitive issues, such as economic or public health crises. In the case of the demonstrations and contentious activism, they have manifested themselves by discrediting opponents and justifying the repressive actions against contentious actors.

As part of the informational counter-offensive undertaken by the Cuban government, it launched the television programme *Con Filo* a month after the protests, which aired on Tuesdays and Thursdays on the main channel of the state-owned national television and in prime time. The broadcast lasts 15 minutes and generally rounds up facts and opinions circulating in the state-run media and on social networks, analysing Cuban society.

The emergence of the space is described by its creators as a response to "the bombardment of false narratives" that the country had to face following the 11J protests, and its aim is to put "the articulation of the media war against the island" in context (EcuRed, 2023, s/p). The programme defines itself as having "a touch of humour" that seeks "to demonstrate, with facts and evidence, how there is an attempt to impose chaos on the island through the use of subversive" strategies (EcuRed, 2023, s/p).

Methodology

For the elaboration of this study, the *Con Filo* programme was analysed during its first three months of broadcasts, a period in which the programme covered the repercussions of 11J. The total number of programmes taken into consideration as the body of analysis was 48, which were broadcast between August and October 2021. It was decided to analyse the whole corpus of each programme in its entirety—and not in terms of segments, notes, or utterances—as it is a short programme (approximately 15 minutes). In addition, each episode usually deals with a single theme, and the narrative resources used in the programme (interviews and audio-visual clips) contribute to its development and framing.

Content analysis was conducted through a codebook that included 30 variables, although only those ten that turned out to be the most relevant for the identification of rhetorical-discursive elements aligned with the strategy of disinformation were considered here. These variables are: the use of discursive resources[3] aimed at delegitimising the external group of the Revolution/or the "others"; thematic structuring (in response to statements by opponents, in response to dissident actions, in commemoration of an official date); the use of sources and points of view; explicit positive references to the Cuban Revolution; explicit negative references to dissidence; the presence of unsubstantiated statements; disqualifications; and dominant framing.

The analysis began with visualisations of some of the programs within the analysis universe that helped define the sample and guide the construction of a codebook detailing the variables, their observables, as well as the operational elements to reliably conduct the analysis. Likewise, we trained three coders who helped with data recording. With the first version of the content analysis guide and the codebook, a pilot test was carried out that allowed both documents to be adjusted and registration criteria to be unified.

The variables used draw from reviews of the state of the art and the theoretical framework. Textual elements that have already been described in previous research as misinformation strategies were considered as variables, such as exaggeration/hyperbolisation, unilateral coverage, and conflict framing, among others (Prior, 2003; Nguyen, 2012; Jebril et al., 2013; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Kuo & Marwick, 2021; T.-H.Lin et al., 2022; van Dyk, 2022). Likewise, others were incorporated that were also functional to the objective of the study: to characterise the discursive strategies present in *the Con Filo* programme when addressing contentious action, starting from the premise that such textual resources and content structuring are aligned with disinformation strategies.

Disinformation strategies, from a rhetorical point of view, can be associated with a series of expressive resources that tend to delegitimise the "others" or external group. These disqualifications usually contain value judgments but not arguments. In this case and based on the preliminary reviews of the *Con Filo*

Table 19.1 Rethorical strategies of disinformation

Rhetorical resources	*Example*
Irony	"It would seem that since things are quiet here—complicated with waiting in lines, facing a pandemic peak, and enduring the occasional power outage, indicating that things are not exactly wonderful here either, but calm at last—our neighbours in Florida decided to continue, by themselves and with their own efforts, the struggle on the streets, even if they were American streets"[4].
Mockery	"The curious thing is that even though they declared themselves peaceful, they have expressed solidarity with the San Isidro Movement, in particular with Míster 'Pacificancia'[5], also known as Maikel Osorbo"[6].
Exaggeration	"They have been trying to turn victims into perpetrators and terrorists into opponents for decades"[7].

programme as well as the review of the state of the art, we established the following expressive resources related to the delegitimisation of "others": irony, exaggeration, and mockery (Table 19.1). Meanwhile, among the possible frames, we considered those of conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, economic consequences (embargo), and morality (revolutionary duty), and incorporated the lack of any of these frames (none) as an option. The typification of frames is based on the proposal developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000).

Different authors have used censorship, polarisation, and politicisation as indicators to identify government-sponsored disinformation (Lin et al., 2022). These indicators of the presence of disinformation have also been considered in this study, to which we have added the identification of infotainment elements. Censorship, for example, was operationalised through the registration of the presence of sources and points of view, while the polarisation and politicisation of content were visible through the registration of explicit positive references to the Revolution and explicit negative references to dissidence. Meanwhile, infotainment was identified through the presence of mockery and irony.

Next, we will present the findings derived from the content analysis. We will begin by presenting the key results, then review the numerical data and its interpretation, and finally present our inferences as well as the systematisation of the findings.

Strategies of disinformation in *Con Filo*

Content analysis revealed the behaviour of the ten variables that we will review below. Its interpretation, from a qualitative perspective, allowed us to identify discursive strategies for disinformation such as the presentation of facts from a unilateral point of view, the presence of infotainment elements, the presence of unsupported statements, and the stigmatisation of the external group, or "others".

Irony was present in all programmes analysed; exaggeration was present in roughly 94% of the total, in 45 of the 48 programmes, while mockery appeared in 81.3% of them. The presence of these discursive strategies is related to the overall style of *Con Filo*, which, as mentioned at the beginning, is defined as a programme with "a touch of humour" (EcuRed, 2023, n/p). The satirical tone of the programme, evident through these discursive strategies, is one of the elements that connect it with infotainment and, at the same time, with narratives of disinformation.

Likewise, these rhetorical resources—irony, exaggeration and mockery—are consistent with the construction of a discourse based on the disqualification of an external group represented by the opponents of the regime, but which omits other journalistic strategies, such as the presentation of facts and evidence to sustain that analysis. Thus, these three strategies overlap in most of the *Con Filo* broadcasts analysed for this study. It is, therefore, a discourse centred on undermining the legitimacy of the contentious protagonists and their discourse and actions who, in addition, do not have the right to respond within official media spaces. The discourse is hyperbolic and bombastic, offering a value judgment on the dissidence and describing its actions without meeting professional journalistic standards.

These examples show that the variables are not mutually exclusive, and irony is combined with mockery and exaggeration, while at the same time unsupported claims that are equally disqualifying towards opposing activists may also be present.

Besides, we found that 39.6% of the programmes (19) were structured thematically to respond to statements made by contentious individuals, while another 33.3% of the programmes (16) were developed to analyse and criticise dissident actions, including those related to 11J. This shows not only how contentious activism has become an interlocutor with the official discourse but also how it sets the agenda as the programmes respond to activists' statements and actions. The intention of the programme was to frame the issues in a way that is coherent with the state information policy. But even so, their approaches followed the issues that contentious activism put into circulation in different spaces on the web.

The way in which the thematic structuring of the programmes was established seems to be coherent with the fact that the *Con Filo* programme was conceived as a space for responding to debates that take place on social media. This might have played in favour of contentious activists, who can strategically spark debates that oblige the state to take a public position.

The dominant framework presented by the programme was one of conflict, with a 52.1% presence (in 25 programmes)[8]. The framework of conflict relates to the narratives of disinformation by reinforcing the delegitimisation and stigmatisation of the external group, who is deemed responsible for the confrontation. The "others" are accused of sparking conflict because of their deviation from the socially acceptable norm and from what the state deems to be morally desirable, so they are judged from an ideological background, usually devoid of arguments and evidence. The recurrence of this framework is consistent with the belligerent attitude of the official discourse towards its detractors and with the constant representation of a them-and-us scenario featuring irreconcilable antagonists.

Conflict is also akin to the confrontational logic assumed by the narrative of *Con Filo*, in which the internal group of the revolution is represented as possessing a moral superiority that pre-empts the position and arguments of the external group, the opposition (Table 19.2).

In 91.7% of the programmes, *Con Filo* used a range of sources (usually more than two), yet the diversity of points of view from those sources was minimal as they all supported the official discourse uncritically. Thus, in 72.9% of the programmes (35), the point of view put across by the official discourse was defended in a unilateral manner, without any contrasting sources or balanced accounts. Not only is there an absence of dissenting voices, but the voices that are presented are aligned with the official discourse, which reveals the lack of critical positions and the absence of any real debate. This reflects a diverse but not pluralistic coverage, which, while consistent with the authoritarian context and the state monopoly on the mass media (with its nuances) that exists in Cuba, can also happen in democratic environments.

Regarding the sources used in the programmes, we also found that the primary source was social media (31.3%), followed by "experts" (29.2%), and foreign media outlets (27.1%). This also constitutes an element of differentiation in

Table 19.2 Analysis dimensions

Analysis dimension	*Variable*	*Programmes*	*Percentage*
Discursive strategies	Irony	48	100%
	Mockery	39	81.3%
	Exaggeration	45	93.8%
	Disqualifications	42	87.5%
	Explicit positive reference to the Revolution	31	64.6%
	Explicit negative reference to dissent	34	70.8%
Frames	Dominant framing (conflict)	25	52.1%
Sources and points of view	Primary information source (social networks)	15	31.3%
	Unilateral points of view	35	72.9%
Argumentative management	Unsubstantiated claims	42	87.5%

relation to most state media shows, which primarily use official national sources, i.e., officials, experts, managers, and others, through institutionalised and standardised strategies (Celecia, 2019; Souto & Cáceres, 2010). This variable shows how *Con Filo's* information counter-offensive moves from a strategy of traditional governmental sources towards one that incorporates (directly or indirectly) new actors and non-state information sources. However, it maintains the presentation of voices aligned with the official discourse. This introduces bias into the information presented and generates accounts that, while not necessarily false, can be misleading due to the omission of data and perspectives.

This finding concerning the use of sources of information shows that the discourse on contentious actions seeks to establish a dialogue with debates on social networks, with Facebook and Twitter as its references and counterparts. Interestingly, the dialogues between individuals and organisations that converge in a transnational and de-territorialised space seem to lead the regime to rely on foreign media and experts who often happen to be foreigners.

The producers of *Con Filo* have implemented a diversified sourcing strategy that relies on foreign voices, albeit always friendly to the political regime. This shows how the sourcing strategy of the state-owned media is mediated, among other factors, by society's growing demand for information, the influence of the foreign press on the state agenda, and citizens' access to various sources of information online. All these factors condition the media agenda and oblige it to report on certain facts (Fariñas, 2011; Gallego, 2021). This has been particularly noticeable in the state media's coverage of contentious activism (Celecia, 2018b).

Prior to 11J, the official discourse paid little attention to contentious issues on its agenda. This only happened at specific junctures, such as when an individual or event reached international relevance. In this case, we can identify a chain of actions and interactions involving activists, their communication, and their visibility strategies. Likewise, international media, institutions, and individuals that shape international public opinion have often been the target of disinformation strategies by official Cuban media seeking to legitimise the political system and discredit contentious positions through the use of an information counter-offensive. Shows such as *Con Filo* introduce a new strategy since they no longer appear as sporadic responses but rather as an ongoing dynamic. With this, the official discourse becomes a constant target of contentious activism, turning the narratives of misinformation around this group that have been identified in this study into everyday life.

The centralised nature of the Cuban state-run media and its dependency on the party mean that there is often a confluence of objectives between the press and its sources, which are eminently official institutions. In the case of the programmes analysed for this study, official sources were present in only one of the programmes in the sample (2.1%), while the Cuban state-run media was present in three (6.3%). Some of the independent Cuban media referenced in

Con Filo during the analysed period were *ADN*, *El Estornudo*, *El toque*, and *CiberCuba*. In some cases, these media were not only criticised but also served as sources of information, as in the programme on August 11, 2021[9], where DNA—though discredited—is one of the information sources when referring to an event. This is also a novel element that confirms the way in which contentious actors have gone from being usually omitted to being assumed as voices in an official medium.

Explicit positive references to the Cuban Revolution were found in 64.6% of the programs in the sample, while explicit negative references to dissidence were observed in 70.8% of the programs analysed. Thus, the *Con Filo* programme reinforced the construction of the revolution/counter-revolution binomial that has characterised the government's rhetoric in its construction of the internal group and the external group.

One of the most significant variables for determining the presence of disinformation strategies in *Con Filo* was the presence of unsubstantiated claims. The presence of unsubstantiated claims was observed in 87.5% of the programmes analysed. Disqualifications were equally present in 42 of the 48 programmes studied. Disqualifications were identified by the presence of expressions that offended, discredited, or invalidated something or someone without the presentation of arguments. Both strategies point to a discourse lacking evidential elements, centred on attacks on contentious activism. These judgments are difficult to verify or contrast unless an exercise in verifying information is carried out.

For example, in the programme of August 23, 2021, when referring to the Cuban independent media, the host affirms that:[10]

> It is very common to see that a reality parallel to their facts is built on Cuba through their manipulation. Fake news is used; stories that hyperbolize certain edges of reality are used while others are hidden; data and images are falsified; and euphemisms are used to distort the meaning of certain phenomena.
>
> (Torres, Fernández & Álvarez, 2021)(*Con Filo*, 2021)

In the same programme, what the programme defines as the "Ten most ridiculous fake news stories about Cuba" are presented, but the media outlets in which they were published or the networks in which they were disseminated are not cited, nor is evidence of their circulation presented.

We found another unsupported claim in the programme on October 13, 2021. In this episode of *Con Filo*, the announcer states that an activist has links to terrorists and suggests that they also maintain connections with the United States government; however, no evidence is presented for these accusations here either.

> Associated with terrorists and military invasion enthusiasts, Junior García insists on categorizing himself as a peaceful civic activist. He also insists on

> declaring that he is independent, that he does not follow instructions, and that he owes nothing to anyone. However, the United States Embassy in Cuba tweets enthusiastic support, and the Cuban American National Foundation offers him all their help, from the goodness of their hearts, obviously.
>
> (Torres, Fernández & Álvarez, 2021) *Con Filo*, 2021)[11]

The findings derived from the content analysis allow for systematising how disinformation narratives were generated in the *Con Filo* programme, with an emphasis on the use of discursive strategies such as irony, mockery, and exaggeration. Other elements at the discursive level that coincide with disinformation narratives are those that aim to construct conflict between the internal and external groups, for example, through the presence of explicit positive references to the Revolution and explicit negative references to dissent. Likewise, fundamental elements in the identification of disinformation narratives were the detection of unsupported claims, the absence of source contrast, and the one-sidedness of viewpoints.

Conclusion

Con Filo seeks to present itself as a space for controversy and debate, but in its discourse, the limits of acceptable political positions are very clear, as evidenced by the explicitly positive references to the "internal" group of the revolution and negative references to the "outsiders"; contrast which is consistent with the narratives of misinformation.

The presence of disinformation was also observed through omissions, evident through the identification of unsubstantiated statements. The presentation of decontextualised facts was frequent, as was the absence of contrasting sources and the presentation of news from markedly partial and partisan perspectives. Other elements consistent with the strategies of disinformation tend towards spectacularisation, which is tangible in the programmes analysed through the use of exaggeration, irony, mockery, and an accentuation of the confrontation.

In *Con Filo*, it can be observed how topics tend to be articulated according to the guidelines set by the opposition discourse in alternative digital media and on social networks. Throughout the programme, the pro-government narrative generates a counter-offensive discourse in response to what those in power call "the media war against Cuba". This confrontational logic of the official discourse is not new, but what is new is the way in which the regime interacts with debates sparked by contentious activism post-11J.

The fight for the control of narratives is not an element of disinformation on itself. However, these strategies through which this counteroffensive takes shape do adopt elements of disinformation. As a result, the traditional censorship of issues, voices, and points of view has been replaced by strategies that include the dissemination of false or misleading information, for example, through the presentation of decontextualised images, claims, and/or disclamations that are difficult to verify, and the absence of diverse sources with which to contrast points of view on the issues raised.

Con Filo maintains the same stigmatising rhetoric towards contentious activism that the official discourse has historically upheld, but now within the format of an informative programme. These narratives amplify and reinforce the exclusive and stigmatising discourse around the political opposition, pre-existing in Cuba, and serve to legitimise and rationalise violence against activists and protesters. However, it is significant that, for the first time, opponents of the regime are taken to be interlocutors whose statements and actions set the pace of *Con Filo*'s agenda.

Notes

1 The phrase "Homeland or Death, we will win!" ["Patria o muerte ¡Venceremos!] was first pronounced by Fidel Castro in March 1960, after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, and has since been used as one of the main slogans of the Cuban regime.
2 Some examples are the flourishing of self-employment, the flexibilisation of immigration policies for Cuban citizens, the widening access to the Internet and digital technologies, and even citizens' right to buy and sell properties
3 Among the discursive resources, we consider the absence/presence of irony, exaggeration, and mockery.
4 This programme has the title: Why are there Two Cuba's on the networks? (August 25, 2021).
5 "Pacificancia" would be a distortion of the word Pacifism, which the activist Maikel Osorbo used in a live broadcast on his social networks.
6 This programme has the title: Is the November anti-Cuban plan Peaceful, Legal and Civid? (October 13, 2021).
7 This programme has the title: Why do they want to appropriate our Symbols? (August 19, 2021).
8 According to the typology of frames of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), the conflict frame is present when all or most of the following narratives are identified: the story alludes to a certain disagreement between two or more parties; the story reports that an individual/group makes some kind of reproach to another(s); the story alludes to two or more positions around the embroidered problem; the story is constructed by alluding to winners and losers.
9 This programme has the title: How does blackmail work against Cuban artists?
10 This programme has the title: How do you search for imposing opinion matrix on Cuba on the Internet?
11 This programme has the title: Is the November anti-Cuban plan Peaceful, Legal and Civic? (October 13, 2021).

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