

*The Era of Dis-and-  
Misinformation*

**Public Diplomacy as International Media Development:  
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Democracy Promotion**  
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Tangled Skein**  
Bohdan HARASYMIW

**Narratives of Misinformation: Comparative Histories of  
U.S. and Indian Lynchings**  
Feeza VASUDEVA and Nicholas BARKDULL

**Coup with a Q: Misinformation, The U.S. Capitol  
Insurrection, and Perspectives from the Field of  
Communication**  
Arthur D. SOTO-VÁSQUEZ

**Waves of Reversal and Progress: Social Media and  
Women's Activism in the Sudanese Spring**  
Nadra HASHIM

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Mnangagwa Regime, 2017-2021**  
Vincent CHENZI



# SETON HALL JOURNAL OF DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

As the world continues to recover from the devastating fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, navigating the harms of misinformation and disinformation remain at the forefront of global conversations on paving the path forward. Preventing the dissemination of false information—particularly during a time where the ways in which we engage with information environments have fundamentally changed—is increasingly complex. Social media platforms have enabled users to not only engage with media but become distributors of it themselves. When coupled with bad actors, limited repercussions, and poor content regulation, social networks are easily weaponized. At all scales of governance misinformation and disinformation campaigns pose a multidimensional threat. In Myanmar and China, disinformation campaigns were leveraged to target minority groups, while in Central and Eastern Europe, they serve as the cornerstone of destabilizing operations between adversarial states. In yet another facet, countries like Turkey, China, Russia, and Iran have embraced digital authoritarianism and restrict policies on internet accessibility under the pretext of stemming the spread of “fake news.”

This year’s issue seeks to shed light on the nature of these evolving threats from a variety of innovative and understudied perspectives. The twenty-second volume of the Journal contains four articles on disinformation. Nicholas J. Cull explores the gaps in government responses to obstacles within the information space and presents a path toward building resilience to disinformation using the core approaches of public diplomacy. Peter J. Phillips and Gabriela Pohl explain the applicability of decision theory in gauging how disinformation may sway decision-making in uncertain or high-risk situations. Michael Christensen and Leonie Holthaus examine anti-disinformation efforts undertaken by democracy promotion organizations and discuss several challenges to democracy based on their findings. Lastly, Bohdan Harasymiw provides a timely discussion of Russian disinformation in Ukraine and examines the conditions that led President Zelenskyy to impose sanctions against pro-Russian actors.

The last four articles explore the role of crime and conflict in the age of misinformation. Feeza Vasudeva and Nicholas Barkdull compare misinformation narratives in the U.S. and India by focusing on the histories of lynching. Arthur D. Soto-Vásquez examines the spread of misinformation with a communications lens, focusing specifically on the unfolding of events which led to the 2021 U.S. Capitol insurrection. Nadra Hashim explains the impact of social media on the spread of information, particularly for political activism in the 2019 Sudanese Spring. Lastly, Vincent Chenzi examines the spread of fake news by the Mnangagwa regime and its effects on the Zimbabwean population. This issue explores the causes and effects of the spread of misinformation and disinformation throughout different parts of the world and will be timely for years to come given the ever-increasing role and breadth of new technologies infiltrating people’s everyday lives.

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## THE ERA OF DIS-AND-MISINFORMATION

Volume XXII, Number 1

- P06** Public Diplomacy as International Media Development: State-Funded Pathways to Countering Disinformation  
Nicholas J. CULL
- P24** The Hidden Logic of Disinformation and the Prioritization of Alternatives  
Peter J. PHILLIPS and Gabriela POHL
- P35** Disinformation and the Problem of Credibility in Democracy Promotion  
Michael CHRISTENSEN and Leonie HOLTHAUS
- P47** Confronting Russian Disinformation in Ukraine: A Tangled Skein  
Bohdan HARASYMIW
- P60** Narratives of Misinformation: Comparative Histories of U.S. and Indian Lynchings  
Feeza VASUDEVA and Nicholas BARKDULL
- P73** Coup with a Q: Misinformation, The U.S. Capitol Insurrection, and Perspectives from the Field of Communication  
Arthur D. SOTO-VÁSQUEZ
- P85** Waves of Reversal and Progress: Social Media and Women's Activism in the Sudanese Spring  
Nadra HASHIM
- P97** Fake News, Corruption, Human Rights, and the Mnangagwa Regime, 2017-2021  
Vincent CHENZI

## PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AS INTERNATIONAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT: STATE-FUNDED PATHWAYS TO COUNTERING DISINFORMATION<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article will look at the ways in which western governments have historically responded to challenges in the information space and focus on a particular neglected dimension: public diplomacy to develop free or free-er journalism. The piece will argue that there are five core approaches: 1) External Leadership/Norm Building; 2) Institution Building; 3) Surrogate Journalism, 4) Professional Development/Network Building; and 5) Civil Society Development. Problems inherent in these approaches during the Cold War will be flagged. The article will continue with a survey of how these approaches are being used today as part of a mechanism to build resilient media in the areas most vulnerable to disinformation. The piece will argue that such work needs to be connected to other policies and sustained, pointing out where some recent steps have proved counterproductive. It will conclude with a call for sustained research in the area, which has been neglected by both scholars of journalism and public diplomacy.

### INTRODUCTION

The winter of 2013/2014 brought a profound political shock to Europe: the crisis in Ukraine. The events themselves probably excited less interest than they should have, but the surrounding confusion served as an alarm bell. As people inside Ukraine and further afield struggled to comprehend the realities on the ground—what was happening in Kyiv's Maidan Square, who the troops crossing into eastern provinces were, how a Dutch airliner came to be shot down—it was clear that the news media itself was now a battleground. Information had been weaponized. Researchers at the Finnish Defense Agency caught the mood of the moment when they embraced the term “hybrid warfare” to describe the situation; although, to Ukrainians caught in the crossfire, it was simply warfare.<sup>1</sup> Strategists looked for mechanisms to push back against the internal confusion and the uncertainly nurtured as a deliberate policy by the Russian government. One of the policy tools that attracted attention was international media development: building robust media within the crisis zone so that audiences had their own trustworthy local sources to

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Russian Readings conference, held at the University of Leeds, 27-28 October 2018: ‘What should journalists do in the age of post-journalism? Media in the Post-Truth Age,’ A revised version was presented to the research seminar of the Reuter's Center for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford in March 2019. I am grateful to participants in both events for their input. Monroe Price and Hans Klein have also shaped my thinking.

rebut the big lies coming from the propaganda machines. In the months that followed, western countries and their agencies began working to assist independent news outlets and build up alternatives to those tainted with propaganda. Participants in the initiative included the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the (then) U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the government of the Netherlands, and a range of German political foundations. Some called for more. Poland's Adam Michnik, with the insight of both a veteran dissident journalist and a historian, spoke of the need for a "Marshall plan of free media."<sup>2</sup>

As so often occurs in international politics, the initiatives reflected a return to policies of the past. They reaffirmed a link between public diplomacy and the news media, albeit in the haphazard way of an international community struggling to find a solution in the midst of crisis. This paper seeks to step back and consider the longer-term relationship between media and public diplomacy. It will review some of the strategies which have been tried in the past and consider what worked, what needs to be left behind, and what, if anything, should be recovered for the struggles in the era of weaponized information. This paper is in two parts: one reflects my work as a scholar of the past of public diplomacy and the other is based on my experiences as an observer and adviser on its practice in the wake of the shock of 2014. Over the past three years, I have interviewed journalists at the receiving end of western support in a dozen or so post-Communist countries, and one of my objectives in writing this piece is to see whether any coherent findings could be drawn from that testimony.

## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA**

Let me start with definitions. Public diplomacy is the way in which international actors extend the interests of their foreign policy through engagement with a foreign public. The term when used in this way dates from 1965 when the U.S. needed a way to talk about its external communication in the midst of the Cold War. The practice is much older. In its classic form, public diplomacy is comprised of five core elements: listening (engaging a foreign public by collecting information from them and feeding that into the policy process), advocacy (engaging a foreign public by explaining elements of policy through a media campaign of some kind), cultural diplomacy (facilitating the export of an element of life from an actor's own experience or managing an experience in that realm for a policy end), exchange (facilitating a mutual lived experience across an international divide for a policy end, perhaps through education) and international broadcasting (providing news and commentary for an international audience).<sup>3</sup>

News media is an obvious point of contact between actors and the public and has often figured in the process of public diplomacy. To take each classic form of public diplomacy in turn, journalism is the major source for the information required for listening, indeed in the days before scientific polling editorials were the only way to gauge public opinion. A classic example of this was the elaborate media monitoring operation established by the British government for the neutral United States in the run-up to Pearl Harbor so that no nuance of shifting opinion would be missed. The political reports generated from that material at the embassy by Oxford philosophy professor, Isaiah Berlin, became required reading at the highest level of government on both sides of the



Atlantic. Media organizations serve as platforms for advocacy and, hence, journalists have often been cultivated as proxy-advocates. A good example of this is the way in which the British government cultivated the American radio correspondent Edward R. Murrow during the London Blitz, understanding that their experience and needs would be better expressed in his voice than their own.<sup>4</sup> Journalism has been an element of culture which countries have sought to develop alongside other substantial ones like teaching their language or nurturing an appreciation for their arts, sending its own best-known journalists overseas as speakers and teachers. While sometimes these journalists have been conceptualized as windows on the home culture, at other points they have been understood as exemplars of a process worth sharing. The British Council was involved in projects to nurture such arts as journalism and playwriting in Eastern Europe following the end of Communism. With journalists recognized as multipliers of ideas and people with the potential to reach the widest audiences, foreign journalists have often been cultivated through leader exchanges. Most significantly of all, international actors have themselves sponsored journalism. The best examples of this are the international broadcasters: the BBC World Service, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Deutsche Welle (DW), Radio France International, and so forth. The achievement of these institutions is beyond question. The BBC played a key role in sustaining wartime resistance to Hitler, while at the time of the political changes in 1989, the leaders of the Eastern European reform—such as Czechoslovakia’s Vaclav Havel—spoke of the radios as a lifeline in the darkest days and an essential element in the transformation.<sup>5</sup>

There are two core models of international broadcasting: a national projection model, in which a country presents itself and its views and values to the world in its own and strategically significant languages; and what has become known as the “surrogate” model where, rather than talk about itself, the international actor creates a platform to provide news about the target area to the target area according to its values as a surrogate or substitute for local media. The terminology of surrogacy was developed by RFE/RL as they refined their approach to the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. In reality, the boundaries are no longer clear cut, and most of today’s international broadcasters are hybrids of these approaches.

## INTERNATIONAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

International media development (also known as media assistance) is the practice of an international actor supporting elements of the news media in or for another country with a view to improve its reach and quality.<sup>6</sup> The interface between public diplomacy and journalism is not necessarily international media development. Some contact with journalists is plainly motivated by narrow ideas of advocacy and the hope of inculcating an actor’s point of view as efficiently as possible. The British government in the early years of World War II wanted Edward R. Murrow to be sympathetic to them rather than be the best objective journalist possible. Media development is distinct from simply engaging journalists in public diplomacy. It is also different from simple media capacity building, such as installing a television station in the capital of a satellite state. The U.S. government gifted a television to its client regime in South Vietnam but failed to develop a



culture of free media. History has plenty of examples of institutions created in such projects being incorporated into state propaganda machines, some of which actively hurt free media. Media development is a form of political capacity building: enhancing the deep democratic capability of a society by building a free media that can play a full role in the functioning of the public sphere.

## **FIVE MODELS OF HISTORICAL MEDIA DEVELOPMENT**

Historically, there have been five core approaches of media development in public diplomacy: external leadership/norm building; institution building; surrogate media; professional development/network building; and civil society development. Each of these approaches was practiced by national governments during the twentieth century, with additional models supplementing pre-existing approaches to build an overall pattern of support for free or free-er media. The work may have begun with western democracies but also will be seen with other kinds of similar, state-adopted approaches. Of course, the idea of development as a goal requires a sense that under-development was a problem, and that outside intervention was appropriate to address that deficit. Such thinking deserves its own discussion, but it is certainly the case that an awareness of the deficits in mass media around the world became a major concern during the middle years of the twentieth century. The United States was ahead of the rest of the world in developing a systematic approach to the education of its own journalists with major programs founded at the beginning of the twentieth century. This movement coincided with the realization that elements of civil life in a democracy were too important to be trusted to talented amateurs or unexamined professions staffed by craftsmen who learned their practice on the job. Western Europe moved in a similar direction only after World War II. The story has been told before, but the role of foreign policy has typically been ignored.<sup>7</sup>

### **MODEL I: EXTERNAL LEADERSHIP/NORM BUILDING**

One of the core ways in which public diplomacy has connected to the development of media is through the external endorsement of particular values. This approach was certainly present during the first decades of systematic engagement of foreign publics. During the 1930s, international relations became increasingly conceptualized as a competition between democratic values and extreme alternatives to the right or left, and democratic governments drew attention to their traditions of free media and presented these as examples for international admiration and, by implication, emulation. The great proponent of British national projection, Sir Stephen Tallents, included a number of British newspapers on his list of admirable British institutions alongside the monarchy, Shakespeare, the Royal Navy, Metropolitan Police, and such: *The Times*, *Punch*, and *Manchester Guardian*.<sup>8</sup>

The United States government was still more forthright in the run-up to Pearl Harbor, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt worked to define the values that his country would work to perpetuate and, ultimately, fight to defend. It was significant that his great articulation of international values, his Four Freedoms speech of January 1941, included freedom of speech. As

readiness evolved into active belligerence, the Roosevelt administration considered a proactive approach to world media with a global framework for a free press. As Australian historian of propaganda Matthew Fishburn has noted, both British and American propaganda on the eve of war focused on Nazi public book burning as the antithesis of democratic values. President Roosevelt underlined the point in a message to the Booksellers of America in 1942, which was destined to become one of his best-known quotations:

*Books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can abolish memory .... In this war, we know, books are weapons. And it is a part of your dedication always to make them weapons for man's freedom.*<sup>9</sup>

The vision of free media as a postwar value persisted into the Cold War, as documented in Margaret Blanchard's *Exporting the First Amendment: The Press-Government Crusade of 1945–1952*. However, as scholars of cultural imperialism such as Herbert I. Schiller have pointed out, for all the professed idealism of the campaign, the United States government and the country's great publishers plainly anticipated immense political and commercial benefits from a global free press.<sup>10</sup> The United States backed the creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the hope that it would deliver leadership towards the free exchange of information. Although UNESCO developed with other priorities, the principle of free media remained a tool in the rhetorical arsenal. The U.S. appealed to media freedom periodically to shame enemies and even upbraid allies at home and abroad. Domestic concerns prompted Harry Truman to speak against censorship in August 1950:

*Once a government is committed to the principle of silencing the voice of opposition, it has only one way to go, and that is down the path of increasingly repressive measures, until it becomes a source of terror to all its citizens and creates a country where everyone lives in fear.*<sup>11</sup>

President Eisenhower took a similar line—conflating the press and the purging of libraries—telling the graduates of Dartmouth:

*Don't join the book burners. Don't think you are going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book, as long as that document does not offend our own ideas of decency. That should be the only censorship.*<sup>12</sup>

The theme of media freedom in the rhetoric of the West was only a starting point. True development of a free press required more than words.

## MODEL II: INSTITUTION BUILDING

The most elaborate contribution to the development of free media was the media platforms created specifically for societies which lacked them. The allied governments did exactly this as part of the postwar reeducation of Germany and Japan. Allied occupation of enemy territories at the end of World War II was an experiment in political and social engineering on a massive scale. The underlying logic was inherited from the progressive reformers of the turn of the century via Roosevelt's New Deal. Societies were sick because of their environment and institutions. Better institutions would produce better societies, hence a program of wholesale institution building. Job number one in Western Germany, Austria, and Japan was to develop the democratic media which could support democratic societies. In Japan, the U.S. occupiers purged journalists overly identified with the old regime and devised the new constitution imposed in 1946. Its twenty-first article read:

*Freedom of assembly and association as well as speech, press and all other forms of expression are guaranteed. (2) No censorship shall be maintained, nor shall the secrecy of any means of communication be violated.*<sup>13</sup>

The German/Austrian case included the creation of magazines and newspapers like *Der Monat* and *Nuer Zeitung*, newsreels, and entire radio stations like *Rot Weis Rot* in Vienna. There are two points to make. One is that U.S. enthusiasm for this kind of reconstruction was measured by the degree of threat perceived from the Communists. Secondly, as Jessica Geinow-Hecht has demonstrated, the process was not necessarily one of cultural transmission of American journalism's values to Germany, but of restoration: bringing back the exiled journalists from the Weimar era and rebuilding and repopulating democratic media institutions rather than creating them from scratch.<sup>14</sup> This element of having local figures and traditions to work with was absent in other less successful episodes of this kind of enterprise, such as the U.S. creation of media institutions for post-Saddam Iraq—there were no “Weimar era” Iraqis on hand to step into the breach—which helps to explain the differences in outcomes.

The postwar allied effort was reflected beyond the former enemies. In 1948, UNESCO convened a conference on freedom of information which urged countries around the world not only to develop capacity in journalism through education but to focus on ethics and “inculcation in future journalists of a keen sense of the moral and social responsibility of their profession, stressing the undesirability of commercialism, sensationalism and racial and religious intolerance.”<sup>15</sup> UNESCO also created a sub-commission on Freedom of Information and the Press. The subject was obviously fraught with Cold War politics, and the UN cultural body did most work in simply facilitating the inter-availability of media materials and promoting dialogue between press platforms. The work was much helped in 1951 by the creation of an International Press Institute in Zurich.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most notable examples of institution building in our own time was the creation of Al Jazeera as a satellite news broadcaster for the Middle East. While the eventual station was a project of the government of Qatar, its origins lay in an institution building project of the British government in cooperation with Saudi Arabia. In the mid-1990s, the BBC formed a plan for a commercial Arab language television channel and began training a corps of Arab journalists to staff it. When the original project soured on account of its Saudi partnership, it was relatively easy for Qatar to recruit the trained team for its own initiative. Philip Seib has spoken of an “Al Jazeera effect” transforming media in the region. Ironically, despite the creation of Al Jazeera representing an evolutionary leap for the media of that region away from local, state-controlled vanity stations for rulers and towards a genuine public sphere, the democratic implications were lost on many western analysts who heard only the criticism of western intervention in the region.<sup>17</sup>

### MODEL III: SURROGATE MEDIA

As the story of Al Jazeera suggests, an international actor helping to establish an external media outlet runs the risk that it might develop in an unfavorable direction. Such worries are minimized where the outlet is controlled by the actor, hence the value of the surrogate media model of the Cold War. Surrogate media was anticipated by wartime broadcasting from Britain, when communities in exile from Nazi-occupied Europe were recruited to create services of “Radio London” aimed at their homelands.<sup>18</sup> The effort included training, but the broadcasters tended to be politicians like Denmark’s Christmas Moeller or Belgium’s Victor De Laveleye rather than novices. Skills taught tended to be in delivery rather than news gathering. When the war ended, broadcasters returned to politics rather than continuing journalism careers. The Cold War surrogate stations are a different story. The best known—Radio Free Europe—had an origin in a desire to play propaganda hard ball and to create the kind of free media that was repressed in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. It was also a way to employ refugees from the Communist Bloc, some of whom we now know were not simply anti-communist but former collaborators with the Nazis. The cover story for these stations was that they were NGOs created by public donations sent to a Free Europe Committee by concerned American citizens. The reality was that the lion’s share of the funding came covertly from the CIA. The revelation of CIA support in the later 1960s required a different kind of funding model and once it was clear that the stations were, as Communist propaganda put it, “neither European nor free,” listenership went up. As Cold War broadcasting carried on beyond its first round of recruits, the western radios became journalistic academies, training a new generation of broadcasters-in-exile, who seem to have often moved from one to another. These started, perhaps, at RFE or its Soviet-focused sister RL in Munich and moved to DW in Cologne or the BBC World Service in London.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1970s, the asymmetry of global media had become a live issue in international politics. Matters came to a head at the close of the decade with the commissioning and publication by UNESCO of the MacBride Report. The report noted that the commercial media of the era remained dominated by the channels established by the colonial powers and called for a New World International Communications Order (NWICO) in which many voices could contribute to a global

conversation.<sup>20</sup> The report was a gift to the Eastern Bloc which immediately began to champion the idea of NWICO as a justification for limiting access to western media in the developing world. Perhaps the smartest responses came from the legacy communicators themselves who established foundations to build capacity in the developing world, the best known being the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford: a pioneering example of corporate social responsibility in the media field. Surrogate broadcasting had its analogue in print media as governments of both West and East looked to sustain external publications sympathetic to their outlook. It was a classic tactic of the Soviet Union in the 1930s but imitated by the West in the 1950s. The CIA paid particular attention to the non-communist left, covertly funding the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Western Europe. Analogous activities sustained non-communist journals in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>21</sup> The revelation of the source of support was traumatic to journalists and damaging to the credibility of the publications concerned. Covert sponsorship is a high-risk strategy best left in the history books.

#### **MODEL IV: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/NETWORK BUILDING**

There are lighter touch approaches than actually creating institutions. Governments have long understood that professional connections across boundaries can be powerful transmitters of values. Much of the early propaganda of the post-revolutionary Soviet state sought to use such mechanisms.<sup>22</sup> Within the British Empire, from 1919, the Commonwealth Press Union operated an exchange program to allow working journalists to gain direct experience of the profession elsewhere in the Empire.<sup>23</sup> U.S. public diplomacy also looked to promote mutual understanding by sponsoring professional development. The United States began such work in 1940 when a newly created office headed by Nelson Rockefeller launched a program to bring Latin American journalists to the U.S. for short exchange visits. The idea was not so much to build a democratic press as to build the kind of personal links and knowledge with the elite of the Latin American press corps that might serve as a hedge against anti-American sentiment, but subsequent iterations of the approach had a more developmental tone.<sup>24</sup>

During the Cold War, short international leader visits became a major tool not only of the United States but of many other countries to bring rising stars in a target country to connect into the initiators' professional or political networks. Journalists were a major group cultivated in this way by the United States Information Agency (USIA). Well known British journalists brought to the United States in the USIA's International Visitor Leadership Program included Nik Gowing.<sup>25</sup> Britain had similar programs.<sup>26</sup> As with surrogate broadcasting, the creation of networks was not untouched by the covert. A program to bring South African journalists to the Neiman Center at Harvard was sponsored in its early years by the Fairfield Foundation, a CIA front. The program outlived its origins, and its alumni became many of South African journalism's best-known names.<sup>27</sup> America's Cold War adversaries used parallel methods to communicate their own views to the next generation of journalists. Michael Meyan has convincingly documented the efforts of the East German government to steer the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) towards their preferred vision of journalist education for the developing world

in the 1960s and early 1970s and has no hesitation including that conference among the battlefields of the Cultural Cold War.<sup>28</sup>

In parallel with programs like leader visits, public diplomacy exchanges also sent speakers overseas with media development agendas. One of the most successful lecturers in the U.S. Department of State's International Educational Exchange Program in the early 1950s was Dean Kenneth Olson of Northwestern University, whose workshops on journalism across several weeks in Athens in 1953 were so popular that they had to be held in the great Parliament Hall. At that point, no Greek universities offered training in journalism.<sup>29</sup>

## MODEL V: CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT

The 1980s saw the overdue emergence of a fifth model of media development/media assistance: civil society development. While projects of this kind had occurred from the 1950s onwards, the rallying cry for a cohesive effort came in 1982 when President Ronald Reagan, speaking in Westminster, called for a global crusade for democracy that would leave the Soviet approach on "the ash heap of history." The tool which the Reagan administration called into being to accomplish this was the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a bipartisan quasi-nongovernmental organization drawing together Republican, Democrat, and Trade Union initiatives. Allied states developed their own instruments including the Westminster Foundation in the United Kingdom. The preexisting German political foundations (*stiftungen*) such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (1925), Konrad Adenauer Foundation (1955), or corporate foundations like the Robert Bosch (1964), spearheaded a German response. Projects included work to strengthen free media in vulnerable places; initially, Latin America figured large as countries emerged from dictatorship or, in the language of the Reagan years, resisted outside subversion.<sup>30</sup>

The 1980s also saw the creation of global professional initiatives such as Reporters Without Borders (1985) and the redirection of existing NGOs like Freedom House in the United States, which was founded in 1941 as a way of rallying Americans around international democratic causes in the wake of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech. By the 1980s, Freedom House was a major conduit for U.S. government support to media development projects and a key source for comparative world rankings on freedom of the press.<sup>31</sup> Other players to emerge in the 1980s included Internews, initially a small outfit conceived by David Hoffmann and two friends in California who hoped to short-circuit the Cold War by connecting audiences in the U.S. and USSR for joint events via satellite linkups. After a string of successful events in partnership with the ABC TV news network, they broadened their work to include assisting the development of free media.<sup>32</sup>

More tactical projects in the 1980s included a U.S. project to give newsgathering skills to the Mujahedeen fighting the USSR in Afghanistan, understanding that the impact of a stinger missile on a Soviet helicopter would be greatly increased if the world could actually witness the occurrence. The program was controversial at the time as it was delivered through a contract with Boston University.<sup>33</sup> The flip side of this was a negotiation process with the Soviet Union which could be termed media disarmament: discussing ways to deescalate media aspects of the Cold War, reduce media stereotyping and disinformation, and improve mutual access. Such direct talks began



in 1986 and proved surprisingly effective, perhaps because they were pushing at an open door when a will to change was dominant. Early projects included an exchange of editors.<sup>34</sup>

The political changes of 1989 through 1992 created an immense new stage for media development. The entire apparatus of western public diplomacy looked to build media capacity in the Eastern Bloc. Major partners included the Soros Foundation, Internews, and exchange organizations like the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). While finding FM affiliates for rebroadcasting the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was seen by some as a short cut, others looked to more fundamental change. Free media benchmarks were built into the twenty-first chapter of European Union accession documents, and media elements were included in such international enterprises as the work of the OSCE. The old Cold War media became a source for broadcasters in the new Eastern Europe. Examples of this included the transformation of RIAS (the U.S. sponsored Radio in the American Sector of Berlin) into domestic German channels and compensatory creation of a RIAS commission to promote mutual German American understanding and cooperation in the field of journalism through exchange. In terms of my models, a surrogate had been transformed into an example of exchange/network development.<sup>35</sup> The 1990s saw further recognition that media had to be a component of global development. Milestones included the creation of the BBC World Service Trust in 1999 as a media-oriented NGO. In 2011, this became BBC Media Action. Much British government support for media development is delivered through BBC Media Action.<sup>36</sup>

By the turn of the millennium, the subject of media development was attracting systematic scholarly attention. Pioneers included Monroe Price who drew important strands together in a report called "Mapping Media Assistance."<sup>37</sup> The most comprehensive overview of the field came from Ellen Hume who produced a comprehensive survey of the U.S. government's global effort to support free media since the end of the Cold War, and the worldwide state of the art. She estimated that over USD \$600 million in federal aid had been spent and not all wisely. Her report had excellent recommendations for future development but called for coordination and a critical eye. Unfortunately, its publication coincided with yet another justification for rapid and uncritical expenditure: the outbreak of the Global War on Terror.<sup>38</sup>

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, refocused attention on the need for media development. Initially the frame was crude, based on the assumption that the answer to President Bush's rhetorical question: "why do they hate us" was "because bad men tell them to." All of the classic models of media development diplomacy were used. Probably the least effective was the direct creation of institutions following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Some U.S. occupation government broadcasters literally became the apparatus of the militias as U.S. forces withdrew. Surrogates fared somewhat better. Despite well publicized teething troubles, the stations of the Middle East Broadcasting Network—Radio Sawa and Al Hurra—at least survived in the broadcasting landscape and did best when they developed niche feeds for distinct audiences.<sup>39</sup> Exchange/Network initiatives include a new generation of exchanges focused on international media development, such as the Murrow Fellowships which, since 2006, brought young journalists from the Islamic world to the United States for networking visits.<sup>40</sup> The United Kingdom cultivated



journalists through its Chevening Scholarships. Civil society development in time became the most important element, with multiple donors collaborating to develop and support new initiatives in regions of concern for violent extremism.

Then came the winter of 2014 and the shock of Ukraine. Policy proposals included the European Endowment of Democracy (EED) report of 2015, “Bringing Plurality and Balance to Russian Language Media,” with its recommendation of major programs of media capacity building.<sup>41</sup> Media development had returned as a major concern of public policy, but what can be learned from the experience of its application?

## **MEDIA DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TODAY**

The crisis sparked by Ukraine’s difficulties has seen a revival in the interrelationship of public diplomacy and international media development. Once again, all of the familiar models have been used. Leadership/more dissemination has included the launch by the foreign ministries of the United Kingdom and Canada of a free media initiative, based around a major international conference held in June 2019. The initiative was the passion project of then-Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, and included a high-profile spokesperson: human rights lawyer, Amal Clooney.<sup>42</sup> Free media is one of the aspects of British life emphasized by the British Council in its international programming.<sup>43</sup> Institution building has included investment in a number of platforms including a new category of actors: the fact check website. Internal agencies include the European Union’s counter disinformation website.<sup>44</sup> Externally supported sites include the Ukrainian site StopFake, which now operates in multiple languages.<sup>45</sup> The value of surrogate broadcasters has been affirmed with new projects including Radio Free Europe’s Current Time.<sup>46</sup> Network and exchange projects have looked to develop capacity. U.S. State Department exchange funds support a wide range of events including a journalism summer school in Central Asia.<sup>47</sup> Civil society programs include a number of community projects especially those working with young people and connecting them to both media tools and the idea of community transformation.

Activities have been so intense in the most vulnerable media markets—those in the frontline of Kremlin adventurism—that an entire ecosystem has developed democratically focused free media supported by western NGOs and governmental development funding. Outlets in the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) have been perhaps the most important voice in documenting corruption across the region. Western governments have recognized that if such places were left to the free market, it seems clear that the media would either be clients of the government or in the pocket of an oligarch owner. Taking the western Balkans as a case: the region has too many newspapers chasing too few readers, journalists so underpaid that they are tempted to take money to keep news out of the public eye, and a media culture dominated by scandal mongers. Libel laws are used for intimidation, and external advertising skews editorial positions. Governments routinely use their own ad placement as a way to reward positive coverage or withhold it to punish criticism. The present author was told by several sources in Montenegro that death notices have been used by its government as leverage, subsidizing one and starving another

paper. Embassies and NGOs work to improve the landscape, but aid could be delivered in a more effective way.

There is clearly a problem of a lack of donor coordination. Small broadcasters, like the Russian language station Hromadske in Ukraine, live from donor check to donor check and find it difficult to provide the kind of job security necessary to retain skilled employees. They regularly lose technical crew to oligarch media. Of the media managers and journalists, I spoke to, all agreed that grants need to be longer and more coordinated to enable longer range planning for those delivering the services. It also makes sense to create resources which endangered media can bid to for support, such as the basket fund proposed in the EED recommendation document of 2015.

Some of the challenges are legal. In the western Balkans especially, litigation is used to punish published critics and discourage any writers from following suit. One possible response outside of the explicit sponsorship of publications would be to support a legal defense fund to assist those under attack from political enemies with deep pockets. Some challenges are educational. Media education has been slow to adapt in many of the Eastern Partnership countries. One editor in the western Balkans spoke of graduates so digitally illiterate as to arrive in his outlet unable to send emails. Looking for ways to develop media literacy among school age children and professional schools of journalism for students wishing to specialize seems to be an important way forward.

The surrogate model remains valid. Established international broadcasters serve as important incubators of talent at both early- and mid-career. More than this, the existence of external, authoritative news is an essential reference point for societies with emerging or troubled news cultures. My caveat with this would be that it is essential that broadcasters consider the needs of their audience rather than assume a one size fits all agenda. To be specific, generic international news is often of limited interest compared to material which engages social issues, which is underrepresented in many of the local news cultures I looked at, namely the Baltics and Western Balkans.

One of the problems with journalistic development being channeled through public diplomacy agencies and budgets is that they are understood by their respective treasuries and parliaments as mechanisms to boost the image of the sponsoring state rather than partners for mutual development or security. Their political masters look for wins that can be relayed into the domestic political discussion as evidence that this or that international challenge is in hand. This kind of trumpeting of success can easily be counterproductive, undermining the credibility of partners overseas. Some media outlets have learned to be wary of support from more loquacious donors. I am not suggesting that support should be covert—that too has its risks in the world of WikiLeaks—but that agencies should take care not to publicize their activity in a way that undercuts the recipient or makes them appear to be a foreign puppet rather than an expression of local values and thinking.

One issue of media support is to consider the entire context in which the news media is received. For Russian speakers—even those politically at odds with Moscow—Kremlin media was their standard source because of the surrounding entertainment programming, some of which included western material shown under license. Interested governments might do well to see what can be done to help politically valuable services access premium western content at a preferred

rate to create a competitive entertainment context for their journalists. At the same time, it might be worth opening a discussion about the ethics of western corporations exporting entertainment to platforms whose owners/operators are not sympathetic to their politics and subject to sanctions in other ways.

The last thing to be said about the attempt to develop media is that it needs to be coordinated with policy. It makes no sense to attempt to build free media if other aspects of national policy undercut that. In some parts of the map, it is important to stand behind existing principles. Across the western Balkans, journalists resent the way in which the European Commission soft pedals its media requirements in its efforts to cultivate the region's would-be member regimes. In some locations, this dynamic has included a European Union ambassador actively discouraging a journalist from running a story about corruption in a local government lest it rock the boat.

The same issue plays out in national policy. In the context of counter-Kremlin media, it seems like a first principal that national policies should avoid confirming Kremlin narratives. The Kremlin narrative that there is no moral distinction between East and West is not countered when London remains the destination of choice for oligarch cash. The Kremlin narrative that the West is not simply opposed to the leadership in the East but to the people and their values and culture is not helped by media crudely demonizing all things Russian.

There might even be an argument for sparing criticism of Kremlin leadership. This is a particular challenge for surrogate media; yet, as Alban Webb's study of British Cold War broadcasting has shown, the BBC Russian service did well with a policy of not getting between the Soviet public and its admiration for their leaders, including Stalin. They found it to be more productive to focus on issues and instances in which the system was failing the people. The broadcasts were framed as springing from a love of Russia, not loathing.<sup>48</sup>

## CAVEATS

Public diplomacy tends to see itself as always of benefit, but the case of media development must impose some elements of caution. As has already been noted, the efforts of the Cold War included counterproductive covert funding which damaged the credibility of its recipients, and today's journalists are rightly wary of association with government-sponsored entities. More than this, there are indications that media development is one part of what has gone wrong in the relationship between the media of the East and the West. Russian scholar Vasily Gatov has pointed out that many of the most virulent anti-western journalists in the Kremlin's current stable were exactly the same people who were cultivated in the corporate media's expansion of its presence in the former Soviet Union in the aftermath of the political change. Their present political positions including the relaying of disinformation are, he suggested, tinged with a bitter disillusionment borne of being picked up by the likes of NBC and CNN only to be dropped again. The editor in chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, has personal experience of the U.S. as a recipient of a FLEX scholarship to study in the United States. Gatov's recommendation was to "research the revenge" in order to understand RT.<sup>49</sup> There is a familiar trope in western science fiction television in which a benevolent actor revisits a location where they or a colleague had attempted to do good in the

past only to find that something has gone terribly wrong.<sup>50</sup> The media landscape of the western Balkans feels like that. Institutions created in the wake of the Dayton Accords and then cut loose as policy priorities shifted elsewhere have themselves become the problem. Problems are compounded by overly hasty decisions like the premature termination of the BBC's Serbian Service in 2011 as a budget cutting measure. The service returned as a digital service in March 2018.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Considering the history of international media development, it is clear that there is a tendency towards short-termism and crisis response while neglecting longer term and sustainable approaches. One might even suspect that some projects are funded by governments seeking to show their own populations that they are responding to a crisis and that some institutions follow the money into a space in which they lack the experience to function effectively. There is also a failure to study the subject and to integrate media into the mainstream of public diplomacy scholarship in the same way as exchanges or international broadcasting more generally.

It is clear that we live in a moment of crisis, and media is at the heart of the problem. Social media has hit the global public like a virus and found them susceptible to misdirection and confusion simply because the media is new and vulnerable to extremes. It is commonplace to say that media has been weaponized. It is also worth observing that international media development/media assistance has also been weaponized. While the antagonists of the West—Russia and China—do not claim superior media freedom, they do claim that western media freedoms are illusory. They have their own surrogate programs; consider the way in which RT welcomes dissident voices excluded from mainstream media in the United States or United Kingdom. The fixation on creating global media networks reflects an understanding of the soft power of western news networks and their defining influence in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, the slandering of George Soros suggests that his Open Society Foundation programs—so many of which focused on media development—were making a difference and constituted a threat to the ascendancy of autocrats.

Continued media development is essential, but it should be informed by the needs of communities around the world and provided with care to avoid a rush. Lower profile work such as assisting in the development of regulatory authorities should not be neglected. The final element must be to remember not merely to promote media freedom overseas and endorse it in rhetoric, but for governments to pursue policies that match. It is difficult for the United Kingdom to present itself as a home of media freedom when it holds Julian Assange on remand. It was difficult for the United States to endorse media freedom when journalists and managers at Voice of America were battling the Trump administration over their own editorial independence. It is difficult for the West to stand for media freedom when its allies in the Persian Gulf imprison dissident journalists such as the United Arab Emirates' Ahmed Mansoor or Bahrain's Mahmoud al-Jaziri, and the Saudis notoriously go so far as to murder Jamal Khashoggi.

This is no moment to back away from international media development; rather, it is a time when international actors with a commitment to democratic values should look to new international initiatives in the field as a way to respond to the challenge that the RAND Corporation memorably termed “truth decay.”<sup>52</sup> It is also a moment to reexamine internal behaviors and values, with an understanding that strategic adversaries will not be slow to draw attention to examples of hypocrisy and double standards. The bottom line is that in the twenty-first century the boundaries of security have shifted. Governments must get used to a world in which reputation is part of security and stands as an asset to be protected and a target to be assailed as never before. In such a world, the communication platforms of other nations are the terrain on which vital struggles will be fought. Working to ensure their integrity and wellbeing is not just a kindness but essential to the future of the democratic way of life.

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# THE HIDDEN LOGIC OF DISINFORMATION AND THE PRIORITIZATION OF ALTERNATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

Both orthodox and behavioral decision theory are concerned with the prioritization of alternative risky prospects. We are concerned with how this ranking or prioritization process is impacted by disinformation. This might interest those who support the use of decision theory in international relations. In fact, international relations scholars were among the first to apply prospect theory, a key theoretical framework of behavioral economics, to the analysis of situations falling outside of the usual types of risky choices that interested economists. In this paper, we explain how decision theory may be used to analyze the ways in which disinformation—an old but perennial problem—may influence the decisions of individuals and groups working under conditions of risk and uncertainty. Those proponents of prospect theory's use in political science and international relations may find it possible to incorporate part of this explanation into their analysis. It is, of course, a matter for individual scholars to determine the degree of significance accorded to the impact of micro-foundations on the direction of international affairs.

## INTRODUCTION

**D**isinformation, unlike misinformation, is deliberately designed to deceive. The word seems to have come from the Russian *'dezinformatsiya'* which, in Soviet intelligence doctrine, was a favored 'active measure' (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya*).<sup>1</sup> Google's Ngram Viewer shows that the word 'disinformation' began to appear with increasing regularity at the beginning of the 1960s, reaching a peak in 1988. After a long period of decline and stagnation, usage accelerated again after 2014 and by the end of 2019, disinformation was appearing almost as frequently as it had in 1988. This revival in the fortunes of disinformation not only represents a more frequent usage in contemporary discourse (alongside 'fake news'), but also reflects the gradually growing awareness among commentators that disinformation campaigns reminiscent of the Soviet era, powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms, are a potential threat to stability.<sup>2</sup> Although we might think of disinformation as a damaging political story or a conspiracy theory that we would certainly spot if we were both alert and educated, there is a deeper layer to disinformation. The hidden logic

of disinformation embeds an objective to disrupt an adversary's decision-making process. The day-to-day business of international affairs, including intelligence, counterintelligence, and diplomacy, requires the relevant decision-makers to assess and evaluate alternatives constantly. These are mostly 'small' decisions, of course, but we cannot overlook their cumulative effect. They might include, for instance, hiring and recruitment, prioritization of different skillsets, the decision to lease rather than buy a piece of equipment, and so forth. Organizations are shaped by a long series of such small decisions. From these small decisions, we can work up the scale to include, for example, more strategically significant decisions such as the allocation of funds to signals intelligence technologies (e.g., satellites) or artificial intelligence capabilities. Ultimately, we come to policy decisions and, eventually, to those comparatively rare situations characterized by a single decision of international and historical import.

In each case, decision-makers choose from among alternatives or, conversely, anticipate how an adversary may choose. A disinformation campaign does not necessarily have to disseminate a believable false story about one or another of the available alternatives to influence a decision-maker's choice. Rather, something as simple as separating and highlighting the negative outcomes or integrating the positive outcomes that *might* be expected to result from a particular alternative may be sufficient to tilt the decision one way or the other. The outcomes need not even be contrived, though their integration or dis-integration may be. That is the potential subtlety of disinformation. Disinformation presents complex challenges because it adds further nuance to an already complex world. It is estimated that humanity will create 463 quintillion bytes of data *per day* by 2025.<sup>3</sup> Decision theory, which is sometimes called the economics of information, provides us with a framework that we can use to organize our thinking about disinformation and its effects on the decision-making process.<sup>4</sup> Mainstream decision theory, both orthodox and behavioral, depicts the decision task as an optimization problem. The decision-maker ranks or prioritizes the alternatives according to some criterion and selects the best-ranked option. To rank the alternatives, the decision-maker evaluates the outcomes ( $x$ 's) and their associated probabilities ( $p$ 's). Disinformation, if it is effective, distorts the decision-maker's assessment of the  $x$ 's and  $p$ 's, producing a muddle-headed ordering of alternatives and, potentially, a sub-optimal choice.

There are two pictures of the optimization process, one orthodox and one behavioral, that overshadow all the others. The first is expected utility theory.<sup>5</sup> The second is prospect theory.<sup>6</sup> Expected utility theory is a *prescriptive* model that generates a ranking of the alternatives based on the utility that the decision-maker associates with each possible outcome weighted by the probability that the outcome will occur.<sup>7</sup> The ranking criterion is expected utility. The rational decision-maker selects the alternative with the highest expected utility. Prospect theory is a *descriptive* model that generates a ranking of the alternatives based on the utility (value) that the decision-maker associates with each possible outcome weighted by a decision weight (a transformed probability). The prospect theory ranking may diverge from the expected utility ranking because the prospect theory decision-maker is buffeted by certain psychological factors that do not affect the expected utility decision-maker. It is through the cracks opened by these factors that disinformation may seep into the decision-making process.

In this paper, we discuss the possibility that the characteristics of the human decision-making process—loss aversion, reference point dependence, risk preferences, probability weighting, diminishing sensitivity, and mental accounting—each provide an opening for disinformation. For example, people feel losses more than gains of the same magnitude and, in fact, tend to overestimate the negative impact of losses when forecasting their future feelings.<sup>8</sup> This asymmetry in the way that losses and gains are evaluated can sway decision-makers from the correct decision. Disinformation campaigns that prey on loss aversion might simply emphasize the potential losses that could flow from a particular course of action, making it seem relatively unattractive. Exploring disinformation from this perspective helps us to dim the mystique associated with disinformation campaigns and takes us a step closer to designing and implementing effective countermeasures. For those international relations scholars who have embraced prospect theory and more generally a ‘micro-foundations’ approach to the analysis of international decision-making, the analysis presented in this paper can be seen as a small step towards incorporating the potential effects of disinformation into their theoretical frameworks.

## DECISION THEORY & THE PRIORITIZATION OF ALTERNATIVES

Decision theory depicts the decision problem as a prioritization task based on an evaluation of each alternative’s outcomes ( $x$ ’s) and their associated probabilities ( $p$ ’s). Expected utility theory *prescribes* the best prioritization of alternatives. Choices that agree with the ordering prescribed by expected utility theory are said to be rational. The theory says that the expected utility for each alternative should be worked out by first transforming outcomes into utility numbers, then weighting those utilities by the probability that the outcome will occur. Summing over all outcomes gives the expected utility for the alternative and the decision-maker should choose the alternative with the highest expected utility. Formally,

$$EU = \sum_{i=1}^n u(x_i)p_i$$

A divergence of the actual ordering from the prescribed ordering is a sub-optimality.<sup>9</sup> It is not ordinarily possible to diverge and yet maintain adherence to the mathematical logic of the theory. Importantly, however, it can be shown that disinformation can influence the ordering of alternatives without breaking any of the formal rules of expected utility theory. This somewhat counterintuitive outcome can be experienced during a disinformation cascade where decision-makers continue to update their beliefs in accordance with Bayes’ rule, but each updated belief leads them in the wrong direction and, ultimately, to a sub-optimal choice.<sup>10</sup>

A disinformation cascade can form when just a few decision-makers choose in a particular direction and everyone else finds that it is optimal to ignore whatever private information they have and follow suit. This is similar to the process by which a fad may emerge. Once enough

people have signaled their belief in the quality of an item by displaying their purchase, the next decision-maker in the sequence may find that the best course of action is to purchase the item too, even if that decision-maker holds some private information to the contrary. And, of course, many people will buy the item simply because everyone else has. But what factors play a role in making those few decision-makers at the beginning, whose choices might precipitate a cascade, susceptible to disinformation in the first place? Or, even if a cascade fails to form, by which pathway can disinformation make its way into an individual's decision-making process and begin to shape the outcomes of that process? To begin to explain, we make use of a model of the decision-making process that can generate deeper narratives than expected utility theory. Prospect theory helps us to identify the pathways through which disinformation may seep into the decision-making process and be absorbed in such a way as to potentially subvert the ordering of the alternatives.

In assessing the outcomes, judging the probabilities, and ordering the alternatives, the prospect theory decision-maker's choice process is open in ways that the expected utility maximiser's decision-making process is not. To generalize expected utility theory, Kahneman & Tversky (1979) and, later, Tversky & Kahneman (1992), had to build more complexity into their model. Despite this, the similarities in structure remain visible:

$$V = \sum v(\Delta x_i) \pi(p_i)$$

The prospect value,  $V$ , for a risky prospect is determined by taking the weighted sum of the value (utility) of each outcome. Where expected utility theory computes the utility of the outcome in absolute terms,  $u(x_i)$ , prospect theory computes the value of outcomes relative to a reference point,  $v(\Delta x_i)$ . And where expected utility theory weights the utility of each outcome linearly by its probability,  $p_i$ , prospect theory weights the value of each outcome nonlinearly by a decision weight,  $\pi(p_i)$ . The following three equations tell us how to compute the value (utility) for an outcome and its decision weight.<sup>11</sup> The first gives us an S-shaped value function, inflecting from convex to concave at the reference point, contrasting with the everywhere concave utility function of expected utility theory. The second and third equations give us an inverse S-shaped probability weighting function, contrasting with expected utility theory's linear probability weighting function.

$$v(\Delta x) = \begin{cases} (\Delta x)^\alpha & \Delta x \geq 0 \\ -\lambda(-\Delta x)^\beta & \Delta x < 0 \end{cases}$$

$$\pi^+(p) := \frac{(p)^\gamma}{(p^\gamma + (1-p)^\gamma)^{1/\gamma}} \quad \Delta x \geq 0$$

$$\pi^-(p) := \frac{(p)^\delta}{(p^\delta + (1-p)^\delta)^{1/\delta}} \quad \Delta x < 0$$

Prospect theory allows us to say much more about the decision-making process than expected utility theory. Like all the developments in decision theory, prospect theory adds to our cumulative knowledge of human behavior. Much of this knowledge is acquired during childhood as we learn how to interact with others; we add to it as we get older. Ultimately, day-to-day observation exhausts itself and knowledge is augmented only by deliberate and formal investigation. We make use of this specialized knowledge in the same way as we do our generally acquired knowledge. We use it to interpret and explain observed human action, knowing full well that our explanation is unlikely to be complete. In higher stakes contexts, even a marginal improvement in our ability to discuss patterns in human decision-making can be significant. Prospect theory allows us to say the following:

1. Decision-makers do not always assess outcomes ( $x$ 's) absolutely but relative to a reference point. A positively valued outcome such as the number of people in a crowd at a political rally is a loss if it falls short of the reference point. If 2,000 people were expected to attend, a crowd of 500 is framed as a loss of 1,500.
2. When the decision-maker finds herself in a situation of having accumulated gains (i.e., she finds herself in what is called the domain of gains), she is sometimes risk averse and chooses more conservatively.
3. When decision-makers find themselves in the domain of losses, they are sometimes risk seeking. This behavior is accentuated by loss aversion.
4. A loss averse decision-maker feels losses more than gains of the same magnitude (e.g., losing \$100 feels worse than winning \$100 feels pleasant). He will usually work harder and take more risk to extricate himself from the domain of losses.
5. Changes in outcomes that are further away from the reference point do not influence the decision-maker as readily as outcomes closer to the reference point. Outcomes are subject to diminishing sensitivity.
6. Decision-makers generally overweight unlikely outcomes and underweight likely outcomes. If an outcome has a 10 percent chance of occurring, the expected utility decision-maker weights the outcome by 0.10. A prospect theory decision-maker, though, might weight the outcome by 0.13, or more. At the other end of the distribution, an outcome with a 90 percent likelihood will be accorded a weight of 0.90 by the expected utility decision-maker but, perhaps, a weight of 0.86 by the prospect theory decision-maker. This tendency is observed even when the decision-maker knows that he or she possesses a complete and accurate set of probabilities.

After its publication in 1979, Kahneman & Tversky's prospect theory quickly became a key part of the emerging field of behavioral economics.<sup>12</sup> Outside of economics, international relations offered some very interesting examples of prospect theory application. Of note is the collection of papers from a special issue of *Political Psychology* that appeared in June 1992, entitled *Prospect Theory and Political Psychology*. In that issue, Levy (1992a, 1992b) and Jervis (1992) assess the

advantages and limitations of using prospect theory to examine the types of decisions and events that interest international relations scholars, while McInerney (1992) and McDermott (1992) explore its application to the analysis of two events: (1) Soviet policy towards Syria 1966-1967; and (2) the Iranian hostage rescue mission. At the same time, in a separate journal, Richardson (1992) presented an analysis of decision-making during the Suez crisis. Because Richardson (1992) did not draw directly on prospect theory, the analysis is interesting to compare with those that did.

In following years, the ground that these early contributors had staked out was defended,<sup>13</sup> critiqued,<sup>14</sup> and supplemented.<sup>15</sup> A focus on ‘big’ international decisions, such as the decision to launch Desert Storm, may have made the things that prospect theory allows us to say about the decision-making process seem somewhat lacking in explanatory power relative to the inexorable movement of the machinery of international affairs. On these grounds, the criticisms are certainly understandable. We would not try to argue that prospect theory explains such decisions of international significance but, rather, that it gives us more to say about them, or offers one or more aspects of a potential interpretation of them that may lead us to insights that we could not have accessed before.<sup>16</sup> On a similar note, prospect theory seems small compared to a sweeping international disinformation campaign but not so small compared to a myriad of micro-disinformation events that aim not to convince the public of some story or other but to sway a decision-maker away from one alternative and towards another.

## DISINFORMATION & DECISION

With so much being written about AI, it is easy to overlook the fact that decision-makers in government, intelligence agencies, and most other organizations face the challenging and often daunting task of selecting which AI systems to purchase, design, or apply (if any). This is a decision that must be made under conditions of risk and uncertainty. We can use the evaluation of alternative AI systems to frame our discussion of how the decision-making process described by prospect theory may be swayed by disinformation. This does not involve the creation of a big and misleading story about one type of system or about AI systems in general. On the contrary, it can be much more subtle.

There are at least several types of AI. One classification is: (1) analytic AI; (2) functional AI; (3) interactive AI; (4) text AI; and (5) visual AI.<sup>17</sup> Each one of these types can be directed towards solving different problems. The first two scan large datasets for patterns and, if desired, make decisions based on what has been uncovered. Interactive AI includes functions such as interactive chat. Text AI includes functions such as natural language processing. Text AI, for instance, might be used to categorize documents. Visual AI can do for images what text AI does for text. It might be used to scan and categorize large volumes of visual data (photographs and other images). Decision theory depicts the problem confronting decision-makers as a prioritization task. Each of the alternatives within each of these types is assessed based on its outcomes ( $x$ 's) and probabilities ( $p$ 's). The outcomes may include, for example, time savings, cost savings, or competitive



advantages. The best ranked alternative is chosen and that might include remaining with the status quo (i.e., not investing in AI technology at all).

Various motives for disinformation campaigners can be imagined for this context. Our focus is on how a disinformation campaign, regardless of specific motive, might sway a decision in favor or against a type of AI, in favor or against a particular application, or in favor or against AI in general *without* being what might be called a ‘big lie.’ Prospect theory allows us to identify several openings, and subsequent research in decision theory, especially on mental accounting, allows us to identify several more. By focusing on the decision-making process, we can see how more blatant disinformation campaigns (e.g., exaggerating a particular capability or fabricating a particular AI-related breakthrough) may be complemented by, or even serve as cover for, more targeted micro-campaigns that distribute disinformation about the  $x$ ’s and  $p$ ’s, the foundation for the evaluation of alternatives. This approach also helps us to identify the types of things that a disinformation campaigner needs to know to build an effective campaign.

Suppose the disinformation campaigner wants to sway a target’s decision away from a particular visual AI product, at least temporarily. At the micro-campaign level, the engine of the disinformation campaign might include the performance metrics that characterize the product (i.e., the outcomes,  $x$ ’s, that can be expected to be achieved by using it). Negative information about achievable outcomes is not a necessary condition for a successful disinformation campaign and, in any case, might be relatively easy to detect if it contrasts markedly with the target’s own internal investigations. Rather, the disinformation campaigner might, for instance, disseminate performance metrics that are positive but of a distinctly different standard deviation (higher or lower) than the performance metrics of competing products.

Additional intelligence about the target may enhance the effectiveness of the disinformation campaign. Prospect theory depicts the decision-maker as being risk seeking in the domain of losses and risk averse in the domain of gains. If the target is in the domain of gains, more variable outcomes act as a deterrence. A higher standard deviation is unfavorable to the risk averse decision-maker and if the dispersion of possible  $x$ ’s is perceived by the target to be wider, the product may slip lower on a ranking of the available alternatives. However, if the target is in the domain of losses, alternatives with a greater dispersion of possible outcomes may become *more* attractive, especially if they offer the prospect of an outcome above the reference point. The target’s recent record of technology selection and application might be sufficient indication of which domain is relevant. If the disinformation campaigner concludes that the target is in the domain of losses (gains), the dispersion of the fabricated performance metrics must be lower (higher) if the purpose is to sway the target’s decision *away* from the product. While this is only a glimpse of the nature of such a micro-level disinformation campaign, we stress once more our main point that the disinformation campaign need not involve anything that is obviously false.

An evaluation of alternatives, both within expected utility theory and prospect theory, is based on the outcomes ( $x$ ’s) and the probabilities ( $p$ ’s). While the expected utility decision-maker may estimate probabilities incorrectly, the errors are not systematic. The prospect theory decision-maker systematically distorts the probabilities *even when* he or she knows them to be completely

correct. The underweighting of likely outcomes and the overweighting of unlikely outcomes is another lever for the disinformation campaigner. If the target is in the domain of gains and displays risk aversion, probability weighting produces an underweighting of positive outcomes, reinforcing risk aversion. If the target is in the domain of losses, probability weighting produces an underweighting of negative outcomes, reinforcing risk seeking. The extremes of the probability distribution are attention catching.<sup>18</sup> By highlighting the extremes of the distribution of the outcomes (i.e., a very favorable performance metric and a very unfavorable one), the disinformation campaigner might act to increase the level of attention that the target naturally directs towards the extremes of the distribution and reinforce the effect of fabricated performance metrics.

Stepping outside of the formal structure of prospect theory, the heuristics or fast-thinking rules of thumb that Tversky & Kahneman (1974) identified as being a part of many people's judgement processes give additional scope for the decision-maker to be swayed by disinformation. People judge something as being likely or not depending on how easily they can call to mind instances of a relevant outcome. This is the availability heuristic. Interestingly, like the other things we have mentioned so far, obviously false information need not be central to the disinformation campaign. The disinformation may instead be focused on frequency of outcomes. To sway a decision away from one alternative, it may only be necessary to work to make one possible outcome ( $x$ ) more *available* to the decision-maker than other outcomes. This 'more available' outcome need not be fabricated (i.e., it could be a plausible outcome that might be experienced). It is its 'availability' that is contrived.

Interestingly, another of Tversky & Kahneman's (1974) heuristics has an unexpected impact on decision-makers and leads us to caution about the effect of even blatantly false disinformation on the decision-making process. Tversky & Kahneman (1974) found that when people first begin an assessment of the magnitude or likelihood of an outcome, their initial first guess or estimate can act as an anchor on subsequent deliberations and, consequently, they fail to adjust sufficiently, and their final conclusion is too high or too low. Somewhat startlingly, they found that irrelevant numbers can serve as anchors. Participants in their experiments would first watch the spin of a random number wheel. Those who witnessed a higher random number would produce higher estimates of the number of African countries in the United Nations than those participants who witnessed a lower random number. This gives us some cause for concern. It is possible that even outrageous and obvious disinformation may serve as an anchor for decisions.

## CONCLUSION & DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Decision theory depicts the decision problem as a prioritization or ranking task. The ranking of alternatives is based on expected outcomes ( $x$ 's) and their probabilities ( $p$ 's). Viewing disinformation campaigns from this perspective diminishes the mystique that can sometimes be associated with disinformation and, more importantly, attenuates the idea that disinformation is constituted by big and obvious falsehoods that we would always recognize if we were alert enough. While the 'big lie' nature of some disinformation campaigns must be acknowledged, the subtlety

of disinformation directed towards the micro-level of decision is something that must be accorded sufficient attention. Influencing the target's ranking of alternatives by means of shaping the decision-maker's perception of the possible outcomes and their probabilities is a distinct form of disinformation campaign that does not necessitate obvious or blatant falsehoods.

Identifying the openings in the decision-making process through which disinformation may seep is something that may be aided by an understanding of decision theory, both orthodox and behavioral. Whereas we set out solely to identify some of these openings, we recognized along the way that decision theory might also help us to identify the types of things that a disinformation campaigner would need to know about the target to ensure a more effective campaign. We mentioned the target's accumulated successes or failures in a decision context as one of these things. We used investment in AI as our example decision context. Disinformation might be crafted with context-shaping objectives (e.g., to push a target towards or away from a context). This probably encompasses a popular view of 'big' disinformation. However, within each decision context there are multitudes of smaller choices among products, applications, personnel, approaches etc. that can potentially have their orderings shaped enough to move one alternative up or down the target's preference ordering.

Whether the micro-foundations of decisions are important to the ebb and flow of international affairs is a matter for debate. For those who are inclined to think there is something in micro-foundations that may shape macro-level contexts, there is ample scope for further investigation. The structure of decision theory directs our attention to the ordering of alternatives based on expected outcomes and likelihoods. In prospect theory, we have a behavioral framework that can be used to determine an ordering of alternatives that is shaped by various factors, including reference points, loss aversion, and probability weighting. Since 1980, behavioral economists and psychologists have worked on building a long list of ways in which the ordering of alternatives can diverge from the optimal ranking prescribed by expected utility theory. Among the ideas that can usefully be explored is Thaler's (1980, 1985, 1999) concept of mental accounting.

The framing of outcomes as gains and losses relative to a reference is central to prospect theory. Mental accounting refers to the way in which people allocate outcomes to different mental categories. For example, a person may take more risk with money that has been 'won' (house money) than with their 'own' money. Exploring this idea led Thaler (1999) to investigate the ways in which people manipulate the framing of gains and losses to maximize their own happiness. For example, people prefer to receive several gifts in several different boxes rather than several gifts in a single box (i.e., segregated gains), but they prefer the loss of \$10 to two losses of \$5 (i.e., integrated gains). It follows from this that people's happiness can be manipulated by the way in which outcomes are presented to them, not falsely, but segregated, integrated, or in some other arrangement. We end with the thread of an idea. If a decision-maker prefers segregated gains and integrated losses, disinformation that manipulates the segregation or integration of outcomes may be just as effective as disinformation that manipulates or fabricates the outcomes themselves.

## NOTES

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- 6 D. Kahneman and A. Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," *Econometrica*, vol. 47 (1979), 263-291.
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16 In behavioral economics, for example, it was discovered that investors exhibit a tendency to hold losing investments too long and sell winning investments too soon. This is a tendency and not everyone does it. Once observed, behavioral economists were willing to accept as part of the explanation at least, a prospect theory-based argument. That is, once gains are accumulated, the investor becomes more risk averse and tries to protect those gains. If losses are experienced, the investor is risk seeking, triggered by loss aversion to take risk to recover. There is no attempt to 'prove' that the investor is a prospect theory decision-maker. The theory is used interpretatively. See Shefrin & Statman (1984) and DeBondt & Thaler (1984).

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## DISINFORMATION AND THE PROBLEM OF CREDIBILITY IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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### ABSTRACT

The problem of disinformation is widely seen as a threat to democracy. Scholars, journalists, and civil society organizations have quickly developed tools to track and counter various forms of disinformation, but efforts to strengthen democratic institutions in the digital age are far less coordinated. In some cases, these efforts are built on outdated assumptions about the role of truth in democratic participation. In this article, we argue that the threat that disinformation poses to democracy is less about the undermining of truth, and more about limiting access to forms of information necessary for collective efforts to democratize political power. We develop our argument by discussing the ways that this threat has reoriented theoretical, practical, and normative assumptions about the nature of democracy and democratization. We draw on our research on the field of international democracy promotion to inform this discussion. International democracy promotion is one of the few areas that has directly worked on the problem of disinformation. The organizations in this field, some of which grew from Cold War-era propaganda and information campaigns, have histories of building the type of trust in democratic processes that disinformation campaigns often aim to undermine. As the experiences of democracy promoters show, establishing the legal legitimacy of democratic institutions does not guarantee that people will trust in them. In an online world, trustworthiness requires forms of credibility that are more intimately connected to people's everyday lives. For democracy promotion experts, building this credibility has been a problem due to factors that are unique to the field. As a result, over time these experts have developed responses to anti-democratic information campaigns meant to attack their credibility and the credibility of democratic reforms. By outlining how democracy promotion organizations have coordinated international anti-disinformation efforts, this article outlines some of the challenges that disinformation poses to democracy based on the experiences of professionals in this field.



## INTRODUCTION: DISINFORMATION AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

True and accurate information is widely seen as crucial to the functioning of democratic processes such as free and fair elections and political organizing. In recent years, these processes have been threatened by the rise of disinformation online, most often defined as intentionally misleading information. Whether it has come from information campaigns carried out by authoritarian and corrupt leaders or from the polarization of the public sphere, the presence of disinformation is usually interpreted as an indicator of democratic backsliding in both established and newer democracies.<sup>1</sup> To address this global problem, research centers have sprung up to identify and track disinformation online, and the “fact-checking” beat has created a new sub-genre of professional and citizen journalism.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, this reaction comes from the perception that disinformation is a threat because it shatters the shared sense of truth and reality that underpins democratic civil society. We argue, however, that the threat disinformation poses to democracy has less to do with shared truth, and more to do with *access* to information. For leaders or groups looking to consolidate different forms of political, economic, and social power, disinformation acts to short-circuit the flow of information that is necessary for collective efforts to democratize these types of power or to fight corruption. Thus, the purpose of most disinformation is not to deceive, *per se*, but to attack the credibility of activists, political opponents, rival states, or democratic institutions. As we argue below, this threat has far-reaching consequences and has reoriented many key theoretical, practical, and normative assumptions about the nature of democracy and democratization.

Our argument draws on research we have conducted mapping and analyzing the professional practices that make up the field of international democracy promotion.<sup>3</sup> This field is made up of organizations headquartered in wealthy democracies that develop and fund a range of programs focused on electoral monitoring and assistance, parliamentary training, judicial reform, and civil society support. Such programs require public trust, but historically these organizations have found themselves working in political contexts where people are mistrustful of attempts to promote Western-style democracy. Especially in the early years, Cold War logics framed this version of liberal democracy, which championed the spread of global capitalism, and lead to many critics associating democracy promotion with “Western Imperialism.” This critical perception was not unfounded. In the early 1980s, the first U.S. democracy promotion organizations took over some of the pro-democracy propaganda efforts from the U.S. Information Agency intended to counter Soviet disinformation.<sup>4</sup> However, as Western powers started to move many of their strategic information operations out of the shadows, pro-democracy programs moved away from relying on propaganda and towards a model grounded in the logic of international aid. Establishing arms-length organizations for democracy promotion, which is how the field is organized today, was one way to put a legitimate face on these efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Because of this questionable history, democracy promotion organizations from the United States and Western Europe had to continuously reinvent their messaging and practices to gain credibility as allies in democratic change rather than as simply promoters of Western foreign policy goals. This has meant that organizations in this field have built expertise generating public trust in



democracy, a form of expertise that is increasingly relevant to those concerned with the threat disinformation poses to democracy. It is not a coincidence, then, that democracy promoters have recently begun to coordinate and support international civil society responses to the threat of disinformation, and the field is now one of the main sources of international coordination on this issue.<sup>6</sup> Our recent research on the field reflects this shift in both the funding priorities of democracy promotion organizations as well as the specific programs we have observed in our research, such as Holthaus' recent work in Tunisia.<sup>7</sup>

The broader goal of our argument is to bring some clarity to recent debates about the range of phenomena labelled "post-truth politics" and the apparent global crisis of democratic legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> The term "post-truth" is often used as an umbrella category describing misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other forms of "problematic information" online.<sup>9</sup> However, in the years immediately following the Brexit referendum and the Trump election in 2016, a number of prominent Western commentators claimed that these campaigns' willingness to embrace lies and half-truths indicated a new era of politics based on emotion rather than reason. This perspective was flawed for two main reasons that are relevant to the following argument. First, as many quickly pointed out, framing the problem in terms of a new era of post-truth reflects a mistaken form of liberal idealism that underestimates the importance of emotion in previous political eras and overestimates the rational nature of politics.<sup>10</sup>

There is also a long history of disinformation and misleading campaigns even in the most established democracies. Secondly, and more importantly, these commentaries about a new post-truth era blamed technology, specifically social media platforms, for degrading the quality of political discourse. There are multiple complex problems created by social media platforms that are designed to sell advertising, but we argue it is inaccurate to claim that social media has caused a degradation of political discourse. Instead, we view social media platforms as tools which have many possibilities both for democratic activists and for authoritarian or corrupt leaders. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum through social media and was, in many ways, a response to legacy media failing to accurately represent the experiences of Black communities. In this case, the "truth" that was broadcast on the evening news did not reflect the reality in American cities, and activists using social media could better communicate this reality.

What the advent of social media has made clear is that the political relevance of particular facts or versions of the truth can be contested. In this sense, disinformation cannot be reduced to a single problem that can be solved by promoting truth over lies. Instead, we approach it as a symptom of interconnected problems related to power and inequality that confront democracies of all types. What is unique about the present situation is the degree to which malign actors have learned to use social media to target the formal legitimacy of democratic institutions, which might otherwise mitigate inequality and protect against the consolidation of political power.

The fact that disinformation often explicitly targets the credibility of political actors working for democratic transparency, social and economic justice, or human rights promotion presents three crucial challenges to contemporary approaches for promoting democracy. The first challenge is theoretical; it raises the question of what types of trust are required to make democratic

institutions, such as electoral systems or public health campaigns, effective when the authority of these systems is regularly questioned online. The second challenge is practical; it relates to the types of information strategies that have been most effective at developing democratic resistance to disinformation campaigns. The third and final challenge is a reiteration of the crucial normative questions that have always been at the core of debates about democracy. These questions relate to which democratic rights or forms of social justice political communities prioritize, such as how to balance free expression with anti-hate speech regulations. Considering these challenges in the context of international democracy promotion, with all its historical complexity, is an especially useful way to understand the threat posed by disinformation. As suggested above, these challenges raise as many questions about how people access political information as they do about the truth or accuracy of this information.

### **THEORETICAL CHALLENGE: DEFINING TRUST IN DEMOCRACY**

Aside from a few key exceptions, governments are not able to block access to information to the degree that they could in previous generations. For most networked societies, the challenge now is sorting through the noise to find the most trustworthy information. This makes the question of trust central to contemporary democratic politics. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the role of trust in democracy was also one of the most popular subjects in Western social and political theory. Globalization was making political life in rich democracies more complex; scholars asked whether the versions of empire and hegemony that seemed to accompany the immense power of global capital would undermine the possibility for collective self-governance.<sup>11</sup> For example, in an ever more interconnected world, would people be able to adapt to a more generalized form of trust in democratic institutions or would they retreat to a more particularized trust focused on nationalism, ethnicity, or religion?<sup>12</sup> Similarly, some scholars worried that this interconnection, combined with technological advances, might alienate citizens from their local communities and impoverish civic life. Robert Putnam framed this problem in the classical communitarian language of civic association and public trust and extended it to argue that trust in a community could be measured as a form of social capital.<sup>13</sup> While some criticized Putnam's American-centric approach to understanding trust and democracy at the time, his argument was part of a much broader effort to elevate the concept of "civil society" as an important component of political life.

Today, arguments about civil society as a source of collective trust have shifted significantly. One of the central assumptions of Putnam's American-centric version of social capital theory is that networks of reciprocity provide a strong foundation for democratic governance; such networks increase the capacity of citizens to ensure the public accountability of political leaders through mechanisms like public protest and other negative feedback.<sup>14</sup> The problem with this assumption is that not all communities have equally democratic demands. While Putnam supposed that collective forms of entertainment, such as bowling leagues, were a good proxy for reciprocity and community support, there are many communities today that form on social media which provide networks for people who want to protest vaccines or hold rallies in favor of white nationalism.<sup>15</sup>

In some ways, social media has made associational culture too efficient, such that a given politician only needs to respond to the desires of the loudest and most politically powerful networks and can easily reject otherwise popular policies without fear of political consequences. A second and related reason social capital theory offers a limited understanding of trust is that it assumes an overly homogenous notion of civil society. Democracies with the type of “civic cultures” valued by these theorists have always been good at marginalizing and oppressing minority communities who had very good reasons to mistrust local and national governments. If anything, the social media era has revealed that if trust is a public good, its democratic effects are unequally distributed.

A theory of democracy focused on “civil society” also became popular among democracy promotion organizations starting in the late 1990s. As the experiences of post-Soviet countries showed, the limitations of top-down models of democratization that focused primarily on elections prompted a turn toward a “new paradigm” of projects meant to support bottom-up civil society initiatives.<sup>16</sup> However, the effect of this new interest in civil society aid was not that large international donors gave up any control over funding priorities to grassroots activists. Instead, this focus on local NGOs created a process by which funding was directed to those organizations that could effectively write grant applications, usually in the language of the donor, as well as file project reports and maintain transparent accounting practices related to donor funds.<sup>17</sup> This led to a proliferation of local NGOs that had professionalized and devoted resources to maintaining funding relationships rather than building grassroots support. Scholars from the Global South referred to this process as one of “NGOization,” whereby civil society organizations became bifurcated into modern NGOs, which received the bulk of international aid funding, and traditional or grassroots NGOs, which were member-driven and received little international funding.<sup>18</sup> These modern NGOs also tended to avoid politically contentious projects and therefore produced a depoliticizing effect by engaging in what Theda Skocpol describes as “advocacy politics.”<sup>19</sup> The problem is that advocacy politics replaces organizing with an approach to political problems that relies on interventions by experts on behalf of affected communities.

In the recent history of democracy promotion, projects have often involved civil society interventions that could be categorized as advocacy politics and required a generalized trust in the benevolence and expertise of wealthy donors. While many of the program staff we have spoken to in our research process acknowledge the importance of partnering with local organizations and avoiding a top-down approach to democracy aid, the bifurcation of professional and traditional civil society organizations throughout the Global South can create an extra layer of distrust. From this perspective, democracy programs need to build a form of local credibility that goes beyond generalized trust. Building credibility in the contemporary media environment is no easy task, especially if a program does not draw on grassroots organizing and instead adopts priorities that conform with donor demands. Credibility has long been a concern for scholars in a range of fields, but contemporary studies more commonly focus on media credibility, which can include questions about the credibility of a source, of a medium, or of a message.<sup>20</sup> Disinformation campaigns can effectively target any of these three forms together or separately. For example, Zeynep Tufekci explains how the Turkish government uses disinformation to undermine democratic challengers

by simultaneously denouncing both political opponents and Twitter in general before engaging in Twitter campaigns, intending to flood the discourse with confusing and misleading messages.<sup>21</sup> For activists demanding democratic reforms, social media can be a powerful tool to scale political messages. However, as Tufekci points out, authoritarian governments figure that further reach comes with less secure claims to credibility. In this context, trust in democracy is diffused throughout complex information networks. In networks flooded with poor quality information, building credibility requires more subjective appeals and deeper connections.

### **PRACTICAL CHALLENGE: FACT-CHECKING IS NOT ENOUGH**

In his modern history of disinformation, Thomas Rid suggests that the sheer amount of information available to the average smartphone user means that contemporary forms of disinformation are much less predictable or measured than the active measures of the Cold War period.<sup>22</sup> For communications security scholars like Rid, disinformation should not be understood as the work of master manipulators planting specific false or misleading news stories, but as imprecise and often unsophisticated efforts that, while possibly initiated by a particularly skillful hack and leak operation, most often take unpredictable and contingent paths to becoming amplified and entering the broader political discourse. One reason for this is that the noisy information ecosystems already contain vast amounts of *misinformation*—rumors, conspiracy theories, suspect health information, etc.—that are shared not out of malicious intent, but because it is entertaining or confirms pre-existing biases.<sup>23</sup> In an online ecosystem where a single meme or story might have multiple ambivalent meanings, what might seem like coordinated political campaigns may rely on networked amplification effects generated by both “trollish” behavior and reactions from traditional media sources.<sup>24</sup>

The “Pizzagate” conspiracy theory exemplifies a complex network in which misinformation is often a product of collective participation rather than a single political actor fooling or misleading unsuspecting users. This conspiracy theory developed after followers of the broader QAnon conspiracy theory mined and connected disparate pieces of information from an email trove from Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign chair’s personal account that were published on Wikileaks. Participants identified awkward references to “pizza” as a code indicating that high-ranking members of the party were running a child sex-trafficking ring out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria. The original leak may have come from Russian malign actors, but enthusiastic participants in a collective online phenomenon imagined and spread stories about the pizzeria. Pizzagate, the broader conspiracy built around QAnon, and the subsequent #StopTheSteal campaign are useful examples for discussing the global challenge of disinformation; they show that wealthy established democracies are vulnerable to the anti-democratic effects of disinformation, and that the truth of these stories was, in many ways, besides the point.

This presents a practical problem for those working to counter disinformation. Fact-checking, by itself, does not significantly affect political forms of disinformation. As a number of sociologists have pointed out, misinformation and conspiracy theories are not spread by people who are simply uninformed; for many, misinformation can tap into “deep cultural narratives,” or

the stories that people use to make sense of their lives and social contexts.<sup>25</sup> Misinformation can therefore feel true because it is interesting, exciting, or even a product of what believers see as critical thinking and research.<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, if misinformation feels true because it speaks to social anxieties or aligns with peoples' political identities, combating misinformation may not simply be a problem of education. As democracy promotion organizations have found out, legitimate information sources often cannot compete with the more informal networks on social media.

An example from Holthaus' field research on electoral assistance in Tunisia illustrates this point. In 2019, a range of democracy promotion organizations, including the EU's electoral assistance body, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and others, endeavored to enhance the quality of the Tunisian parliamentary elections. These groups noted that online campaigning was going to be especially important for this election. Tunisia has a population of about 11 million people and there were about 7 million registered Tunisian Facebook accounts at the time. A huge Tunisian diasporic community of about 1 million people was also active on Facebook, both searching for information and commenting on the campaign. The EU program supported the hiring of local Tunisians as "social media experts" to account for the importance of online campaigning and to track online trends, although it was clear that EU staff eyed this work with skepticism.<sup>27</sup> Most importantly, however, the electoral assistance program lacked a mechanism to transfer information gathered from the evaluation of online campaigns into any sort of proactive response. For this reason, the evaluations of the social media experts were minimized in the EU reports. As a joint report on the election from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) later noted, the problem of disinformation was primarily addressed by a website meant to track and counter campaign-related disinformation initiated by the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) and the Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP).<sup>28</sup> This effort, however, occurred later in the campaign and was separate from the EU's assistance efforts, which were underdeveloped and ineffective compared to the Tunisian media initiative.

This example highlights the practical difficulty that organizations face in the field of democracy promotion. In this case, program staff anticipated that social media engagement would be important during the campaign, but they could not develop the type of credible media responses that local media organizations could generate. This is because the HAICA and TAP had a much greater ability not only to evaluate the information ecosystem, but to engage in a way that would be meaningful to Tunisians. An assistance model built around hiring social media experts to extract information from the online discourse and translate it for the donor organizations was at a major disadvantage in terms of both speed and flexibility. The dynamics of this case can generally apply to other efforts to counter disinformation because it indicates the limits of centralized responses to political narratives that evolve and spread in real time. This is a practical problem for efforts to promote the credibility of democratic institutions but, in many ways, it is also a normative problem.



## **NORMATIVE CHALLENGE: EXTREMISM AND OPPRESSION ARE THE REAL THREATS**

As a recent report submitted by the Center for Law and Democracy to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression makes clear, responses to the problem of disinformation are varied and not always compatible with democratic rights.<sup>29</sup> In Myanmar and Thailand, government-backed anti-disinformation groups have targeted political dissidents, and even spread their own disinformation. In democracies such as Mexico and India, disinformation initiatives housed within government agencies have raised questions about the impact on freedom of expression. For autocratic leaders, the rhetoric of disinformation and fake news are floating signifiers that can be used to silence critics or attack the credibility of external actors.<sup>30</sup> Partly because of this symbolic openness, most democratic governments have avoided direct regulation of disinformation and instead pressured social media companies to develop and enforce content moderation policies on misleading information. Taken together, this range of responses suggests that the problem of disinformation is like a mirror of a political system. Dealing with the problem and the threat it poses to the credibility of democratic institutions requires an assessment of the types of disinformation that are most damaging as well as developing strategies that reflect a government's democratic priorities. This process, by definition, is a political and normative exercise.

Over the past few years, some clear trends have emerged in the types of disinformation that are most damaging. In the now infamous case of the Internet Research Agency's (IRA) disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, some of the most common narratives pushed by IRA accounts were faux calls for social justice using the language of Black Lives Matter activists.<sup>31</sup> Some of these narratives included critiques of the Hillary Clinton campaign. However, researchers found that the goal seemed to be sowing what the antagonists regarded as social discord. On one level, this seemed to be a misunderstanding about the nature of political discourse in the United States, where contentious debate is often thought of as a feature of a healthy system. However, this was also instructive for scholars of disinformation because it typified political narratives that were the most effective vehicles for misleading information—narratives that speak to the deepest forms of inequality and injustice in a political community.

In this sense, the IRA was copying attention-hacking and media manipulation strategies that, in the U.S. context, could be traced back to the development of the alt-right.<sup>32</sup> This included the coordinated online attacks and trolling used in explicitly misogynist campaigns such as "Gamergate," a coordinated harassment campaign of prominent women in the gaming community, where disinformation was identified as a tool to spread online hate. Likewise, the IRA's targeting of Black communities was related to what media scholars, such as Deen Freelon, have identified as a phenomenon of "digital blackface," which entails "Black impersonation for disinformation purposes" and operates as a "manifestation of anti-Black racism regardless of the perpetrators' intentions."<sup>33</sup> In these cases, the questionable veracity of the messages was far less important than the fact that these were new strategies for spreading misogyny and racism. Disinformation campaigns are thus often effective when they engage with painful and polarizing issues around marginalization and historical tragedies. Such campaigns can frustrate collective efforts to work



towards justice and undermine pro-democracy advocates trying to generate broad support (or generalized trust) for democratic processes. This is especially the case if the democracy advocates are outside of the targeted political community.

Democracy promotion organizations are starting to take note of this relationship between disinformation and the targeting of marginalized groups. For example, the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project, which maps civil society organizations working on issues of dis- and misinformation, released a report on the Romanian election outlining the social media reach of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).<sup>34</sup> The AUR had fared surprisingly well in the election relative to expectations, but an analysis of their social media accounts suggested that the leader of the AUR had a far greater reach than any other politician. According to the report, the AUR was a key disseminator of disinformation related to the election, but they generated popularity on Facebook and other platforms through both nationalist narratives about outside threats, especially Hungary, and by promoting sexist, racist, and homophobic material. In this sense, the disinformation was embedded in extreme political narratives. The mainstream press actively denounced these narratives, though this may have helped encourage the popularity of the content. For democracy promoters, these types of media monitoring projects are becoming more important for electoral assistance work. While the general approach of these organizations has been to avoid engaging in debates concerning traditionally marginalized groups in a particular country, disinformation campaigns thrive when they can exploit the ambivalence toward extremist politics. To fortify democratic institutions against disinformation therefore requires a normative approach that identifies extremism and is unafraid to amplify the voices of groups that have been traditionally marginalized.

## CONCLUSION: A NEW DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY?

Throughout its history, the field of international democracy promotion has had a credibility problem. The idea of wealthy countries pursuing exploitative foreign policy objectives in one moment and then lecturing a government about the virtues of democracy and fairness in the next was always a hard sell. At the same time, the recent struggles that wealthy democracies have had with malign information campaigns creates new ground for building solidarity with partners in the Global South. According to many of the people we have talked to in this field, the examples of Brexit and the Trump presidency have made it clear that "we're all in the same boat" when it comes to disinformation. The fact that organizations in this field have recently prioritized the problem of disinformation is an indicator of how important access to good information is to the contingent and slow work of building and maintaining democratic institutions. Disinformation is not a new problem, but it has recently presented some new challenges to traditional assumptions about democracy. In an information ecosystem in which the realities of economic and social inequalities are clear, building democratic legitimacy through a generalized trust in existing institutions will not always work. For many who feel excluded from or ignored by these institutions, media narratives that speak to their fears and anxieties often are more effective. In this sense, the best way to fortify democracy is to address the deep inequalities that exist in every

society. A public sphere that tolerates and even justifies these inequalities is bound to create avenues for malign actors to exploit these fears and anxieties.

## NOTES

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- 11 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- 12 Mark E. Warren, *Democracy and Trust*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- 13 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. The conceptual framework was actually developed in Putnam’s earlier work in Italy (Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993.), which was written in the tradition of American communitarianism from Tocqueville to David Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Studies in National Policy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; as well as Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba’s *The Civic Culture; Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1963.
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# CONFRONTING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN UKRAINE: A TANGLED SKEIN

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*We should not cast our closest neighbor and fraternal nation in some kind of unfavorable light.<sup>1</sup>*

**VLADIMIR PUTIN,**  
*President of Russia*

## ABSTRACT

In a surprise move in February 2021, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, closed down three pro-Russian television channels and imposed sanctions on their owners. This was unprecedented, both from the point of view of being an infringement on freedom of speech (or of disinformation) and of the use of sanctions in the domestic context, usually aimed at foreign entities or persons. Nor was the timing evidently opportune, in the absence of any apparent trigger. As one Ukrainian journalist expressed it: “Why had Ukraine hesitated to sanction top-tier pro-Russian actors before and can current measures blunt Russian influence on Ukrainian politics?”<sup>2</sup> Since Russian disinformation in Ukraine has been a constant factor since independence, particularly following the Orange Revolution, this article sets out to assess the rationale for Zelenskyy’s abrupt action within the context of Ukrainian politics and its possible effectiveness.

## INTRODUCTION

Russian disinformation has a long history and an equally vast scope.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC) calls the enterprise an ecosystem because of its comprehensive coverage of the world and of the means of communication.

*The ecosystem, reports GEC, consists of five main pillars: official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation.<sup>4</sup>*

These various sources of propaganda and disinformation operate on the idea of “perpetual adversarial competition in the information environment” producing a volume and variety of messages that in total reinforce one another while shielding the Kremlin from responsibility by their apparent autonomy.<sup>5</sup> As an example, among the proxy sites catalogued by the GEC pertinent to the topic at hand is News Front, based in Crimea, which supports Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> Stories it has promulgated have included: COVID-19 is a U.S. biological weapon which has been tested on Ukrainians; the Ukrainian cooperation with the EU is a disaster and the EU has

abandoned Ukraine to the ravages of COVID-19; Ukraine is an IMF colony; Zelenskyy and George Soros are CIA puppets; and Kyiv streets are being patrolled by Nazis. When YouTube removed some of News Front's accounts, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the decision.<sup>7</sup> In the current geopolitical climate, the aims of Russia's multifarious agencies and proxies in this field are to discredit liberal democracy in general and the United States in particular, to create confusion and uncertainty about the existence of accurate information, and to promote favorable images of Russia, its leaders, and its policies.

While Russian disinformation directed at the United States and its allies aims to mislead, its objective in Ukraine is more ambitious. It is intended, as has been succinctly formulated:

*At the minimum, to demoralize; and at the maximum, to provoke a popular backlash against the Ukrainian government, even a putsch [or coup]. It is intended to sustain a narrative that the political leadership has abandoned the frontline forces fighting in eastern Ukraine, especially among army conscripts and nationalist paramilitary volunteer units.<sup>8</sup>*

There are numerous specific examples. During the Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14, Russian trolls waged an effective information war against Ukraine, endorsed by President Vladimir Putin himself.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of 500 items of Russian disinformation propagated in 2014-15, revealed the following major narratives: "Ukraine as a fascist and failed state" on the verge of disintegration or annexation; distortion and de-legitimation of Ukrainian relations with NATO and the EU; and absolving Russia of complicity in invading and occupying the country as well as in the downing by missile fire of flight MH17.<sup>10</sup> The invasion, occupation, and annexation of Crimea was significantly aided by the preceding propaganda campaign conducted by Russian state media. A similar campaign opened the war in Donbas in eastern Ukraine by stoking fear of what the Russian media labelled as being the fascist coup in Kyiv.<sup>11</sup> The blame for Russian interference in the U.S. elections of 2016 was shifted onto Ukraine by the same propaganda machine.<sup>12</sup> In Ukraine's presidential elections of 2019,

*The overarching strategy of the Kremlin could be identified as discrediting the election process, undermining Ukrainian authorities, and questioning the post-Maidan environment.<sup>13</sup>*

According to monitors and observers,

*The majority of disinformation messages targeted at the Ukrainian elections stemmed from the grand narrative claiming that the elections would be rigged, illegitimate, and should not be trusted no matter the result.<sup>14</sup>*



The Zelenskyy team claimed that it had “been the subject of an intense disinformation campaign,”<sup>15</sup> yet none of the Russian disinformation messaging seems to have prevented Zelenskyy from leading Poroshenko, the incumbent, on the first ballot—30 percent to 15—and defeating him on the second with an unprecedented 73 percent. There was, however, a very low turnout of 61 percent, attributable to a general disenchantment with democracy on the part of the Ukrainian electorate.

### IN THE FACE OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION, UKRAINE IS NOT ENTIRELY DEFENSELESS

No one can properly assess the effects on people’s thoughts and actions of either the propaganda in the first place or its countermeasures in the second. For instance, according to a 2018 CSIS report, the organization StopFake.org, which began at the Mohyla University’s School of Journalism in 2014,

*Has debunked more than a thousand stories from Russian mainstream media... The content reaches 230,000 followers on social media... As the holder of the largest archive of Russian fake news, StopFake.org fact-checks, de-bunks, edits, translates, researches and disseminates information.*<sup>16</sup>

In early 2020, on Zelenskyy’s initiative, two draft laws were introduced to counter disinformation, one on the media and the other specifically on disinformation.<sup>17</sup> Journalists and media freedom advocates in Ukraine and Europe, however, expressed reservations about such measures, seen as going beyond countering Russian aggression.<sup>18</sup> A pilot project by IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board), which began in 2018 in fifty schools within four Ukrainian cities to teach students to detect hate speech, identify fake news, and discern fact from opinion, showed positive results; the curriculum was planned to expand back to the U.S.<sup>19</sup> The European database EUvsDisinfo also monitors and registers Russian disinformation directed at Ukraine, which may lessen its effect.<sup>20</sup> Andriy Yermak, head of the presidential administration in Ukraine, has appealed to the EU and NATO to work together to defeat Russian disinformation; to that end, he and Zelenskyy met with Charles Michel, President of the European Council, and Vice-President of the European Commission, in Brussels in October 2020.<sup>21</sup> In January 2021, it was revealed that Ukraine had launched an International Office to Counter Disinformation and Propaganda, but its functions, according to a security specialist who was skeptical about her government’s ability to tap into and utilize appropriate expertise, were unclear.<sup>22</sup> While such countermeasures may ameliorate the situation by stimulating greater awareness of disinformation or by embarrassing its propagators, the only way to interrupt the flow is to cut off the source.

In a series of decrees in February 2021, putting into effect decisions of the National Security and Defense Council, President Zelenskyy unexpectedly imposed sanctions on businessmen Taras Kozak and Viktor Medvedchuk, their wives, three television channels owned by them (effectively shutting them down), six other individuals, and 19 companies connected to the Medvedchuk family for various anti-Ukrainian activities.<sup>23</sup> He justified the move as necessary to “fight against the

danger of Russian aggression in the information arena.” Messrs. Kozak and Medvedchuk are leading members of an opposition bloc (Opposition Platform—For Life, OPZZh) in the national assembly (Verkhovna Rada) and are the actual beneficiary owners of the three TV channels, nominally held by their wives so as to avoid scrutiny but effectively controlled by Medvedchuk himself. Kozak has been called “Medvedchuk’s wallet.” It was also alleged that they had financed their broadcasting channels through the illegal sale of coal from one of the occupied “people’s republics” in the rebel-held Donbas, thus in fact promoting terrorism, one of the grounds for sanctions being applied domestically. The principal aim of the sanctions, however, was to close down Russian propaganda in Ukraine. The three channels—ZIK, 112, and NewsOne—were noted for programs which discredited the Euromaidan Revolution, denigrated democracy in the United States, poured scorn on “western vaccines” in the struggle against COVID-19, and accused George Soros of controlling Ukraine through civic activist puppets who were recipients of his foundation’s grants. In October 2018, the Verkhovna Rada had recommended sanctioning channels 112 and NewsOne, but this was never enacted, in part due to the imminent presidential election and fears the action would be perceived as a partisan political move.

The imposition of the sanctions was endorsed by many individuals, including Mikheil Saakashvili, the UK ambassador Melinda Simons, and Anders Åslund, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, as well as by the United States and the *Kyiv Post* newspaper.<sup>24</sup> The international and European federations of journalists condemned the sanctions as “an extrajudicial and politically motivated curtailment of freedom of expression.”<sup>25</sup> Their criticism was based purely on the principle of freedom of speech, without reference to the actual situation which involved the propagation of disinformation. Russian President Putin described the sanctions as an American-inspired geopolitical game of double standards; his press secretary called it shocking, a sign of the growing power of reactionary forces which might lead Ukraine to pursue a military solution for the Donbas problem.<sup>26</sup> The sanctions were being contested in court. According to Yuri Zoria, Zelenskyy took advantage of the change of international climate to introduce these dramatic measures which Ukraine’s vulnerability and foreign disapproval had inhibited earlier. A Ukrainian public opinion poll conducted on February 22-23, 2021, showed that 58 percent of respondents supported the imposition of sanctions on Medvedchuk and his spouse; of the 40 percent who considered themselves well aware of the decision, 73 percent approved.<sup>27</sup>

Taras Kozak, nominal owner of the three sanctioned TV channels, began his career as a taxation and customs official working alongside Medvedchuk’s brother at one time.<sup>28</sup> When Medvedchuk was head of the presidential administration (office of the president), he secured Kozak’s appointment as a regional customs head. After leaving the customs service in 2021, Kozak joined a civic organization headed by Medvedchuk. In 2014, he was elected to the Verkhovna Rada as a member of the Opposition Bloc, a successor to Yanukovych’s Party of Regions, now headed by Medvedchuk. His asset declaration for 2013 recorded an income of 1.1 million *hryvni* (UAH), including 82,000 in dividends and 678,000 in a savings account. In 2019, his dividend income had risen to over 237 million UAH. The dividends came from a Cyprus-registered company connected to a series of shell companies (some ostensibly owned by his partner, Natalia

Lavreniuk) which engaged in no business that could be detected other than providing millions in forgivable loans to one another. In 2018, Kozak transferred his banking to Belarus, where his 8-million-euro account sits alongside those of Medvedchuk and the latter's wife, Oksana Marchenko. That same year, he purchased NewsOne and channel 112 for a reported 103 million UAH; in 2019, he acquired ZIK for an undisclosed sum, estimated by media managers to have been worth between USD \$15 to \$20 million.

Medvedchuk and Putin are friends; more than that, they are *kumy*—Putin is godfather to his friend's youngest daughter.<sup>29</sup> They became acquainted twenty years previously, just after Putin's election as President of Russia. Medvedchuk then became Putin's unofficial but influential representative in Ukraine, vetting Ukrainian politicians and getting them Kremlin approval. In 2014, when he acted as intermediary between Yanukovych and Putin, he was sanctioned by the U.S. government for "being a threat to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>30</sup> Mikeil Saakashvili has claimed that Putin supported Medvedchuk's TV news channels to the tune of USD \$1.5 billion.<sup>31</sup>

*Sanctions against Medvedchuk and Marchenko, explained a Jamestown Foundation analyst, are effective for 3 years. They freeze all of the couple's assets; ban the use and management of their property; restrict trade operations; block the transit of resources, flights and shipment across Ukraine; prohibit the withdrawal of capital from Ukraine; suspend economic and financial obligations to them; terminate the issuing of permissions and licenses on the import and export of currency; and restrict cash withdrawals from cards discharged by foreign residents.*<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Zelenskyy decreed the re-nationalization of an oil pipeline linked to Medvedchuk which transports fuel from a Marchenko-owned refinery in Rostov to Europe; some fuel is also smuggled to the LPR/DPR (the rebel "people's republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk). With almost 100 companies in their portfolio, the Medvedchuks were unlikely to suffer from the sanctions, but fuel supplies in Ukraine would probably be affected.<sup>33</sup>

Zelenskyy seems to have come to the realization that Russian disinformation was part of an all-embracing assault on the viability of his country that needed to be challenged at least, if not eradicated altogether. Hence, his framing of the sanctions decisions as a matter of combatting a threat to national security. As he said at the time:

*This was not a spur of the moment decision, but one that has been in the works for a long time based on information from many Ukrainian government agencies. This is by no means an attack on freedom of speech. It is a well-founded decision to protect national security.*<sup>34</sup>

A series of other moves by his administration would seem to bear out a strategic reorientation on his part regarding Russia in particular: a parliamentarian was expelled from Zelenskyy's Servant

of the People caucus in the Verkhovna Rada after having been sanctioned by Washington for being part of a Russian group promoting false allegations against Joe Biden in the presidential elections; Ukraine used sanctions to prevent a Chinese company's takeover of the helicopter engine manufacturer Motor Sich; and ten *ex-siloviki* (officials in law enforcement and security) were sanctioned for aiding Russian aggression and terrorism, including a former interior minister and the head of the security service.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, this marked a turning point in Zelenskyy's dealing with the Donbas war and indirectly with the Kremlin.<sup>36</sup>

For his part Medvedchuk maintained that Zelenskyy's actions were prompted by the latter's rapidly falling ratings and the challenge presented by the Opposition Platform's lead in the polls.<sup>37</sup> "With around 21 percent of decided voters supporting it, OPZZh now polls higher than any other party, according to one recent survey."<sup>38</sup> There may have been some truth in this as a motivating factor. Another survey, for example, conducted February 11-16, 2021, jointly by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) and Socis, showed Servant of the People in third place, trailing behind Medvedchuk's OPZZh and Poroshenko's European Solidarity.<sup>39</sup> When asked in the same survey about their attitude towards the closure of the three TV channels, a plurality of 46.4 percent was positive; 34.7 percent, negative. A majority (58 percent) reported the decision had not changed their assessment of Zelenskyy whereas 20 percent stated that it had improved and 17.4 percent, worsened. If he had been thus motivated, the decision to sanction did not pay off well for Zelenskyy.

There are also other political factors to consider. Observers believed the attack on Medvedchuk had upset the balance of power within the 44-member OPZZh caucus. Medvedchuk's wing was being challenged and potentially overshadowed by the one led by Serhiy Lyovochkin and Yuriy Boyko for the leadership not only of the party but also of the pro-Russian forces in the country generally.<sup>40</sup> Boyko, renowned as a pro-Russian politician, polled 0.2 percent in the presidential race in 2014; in 2019, he obtained 11.7 percent,<sup>41</sup> a rise in popularity that may well concern Zelenskyy as he ponders re-election. Vanquishing Medvedchuk, however, would not vitiate the pro-Russian opposition forces, as various concurrent events were showing: the shut-down of the anti-corruption institutions; the antics of the Constitutional Court; and the punishment meted out to Odesa activist Serhiy Sternenko.<sup>42</sup>

The president's own deputy chief of staff, formerly a police official under Yanukovich, facing embezzlement charges, was being ably shielded from prosecution by Ukraine's corrupt legal institutions using the well-tested device of charging his whistle-blower instead.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to disentangle political opposition, pro-Russian orientation, and corruption as in this case, but they operate in tandem. Their combined effect is to hold back democratic reform and make the country more susceptible to Russian influence, which opposes this aspiration. Protecting someone with questionable character and allegiance thus undermines President Zelenskyy's pro-Ukrainian and pro-democratic credentials. These instances illustrated some of the many machinations engineered by pro-Russian actors and sympathizers within the field of Ukrainian politics and administration which aim at throwing the authorities off-balance in their pursuit of reform and independent statehood.

## HAS RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AFFECTED THE UKRAINIAN PUBLIC?

Whether Russian disinformation had affected the Ukrainian public's thinking, and thus justified Zelenskyy's sanctions, is a difficult question. We cannot make a direct link between the themes of Russian disinformation in Ukraine and public opinion in that country.<sup>44</sup> Surveys of public opinion, to my knowledge, do not ask specific questions to test receptivity to such ideas. Indirectly, however, we may gain a general sense of the effectiveness of Russian disinformation—and the efficacy of countermeasures—by examining responses to questions that plausibly could be interpreted as probing for the penetration of such orientations into popular consciousness. Assuming it to be acceptable as a reasonable proxy, let me cite a KIIS survey conducted in February 2021, assessing the attitudes of Ukrainian citizens to Russia. The results showed that 41 percent had a favorable attitude and 42 percent, negative.<sup>45</sup> These proportions were unchanged from September 2020. In the short term, nothing was happening, no matter what the TV stations were broadcasting, if they had any influence at all.

There was no reason for Zelenskyy to get alarmed, from this evidence. On a chart plotting the dynamics of this attitude since the question was first asked in 2008, the KIIS showed a positive attitude of around 90 percent towards Russia until mid-2010; a plateau of just over 80 percent until February 2014; a drastic decline to 30 percent in May 2015; a recovery to around 57 percent in February 2019; and a steady decline again from then on. Important to note that positive attitudes began to improve *before* the three controversial channels began broadcasting; they started to decline (which they should not have if under the influence of Russian disinformation) *before* Zelenskyy's action to close them down. Zelenskyy, in other words, was *following*, not *leading*, public opinion, according to this evidence. As a matter of fact, Ukrainian citizens' positive attitude to Russia has fluctuated independently of Russian propaganda aimed at them; besides that, it has been in long-term secular decline compared to where it stood in April 2008 (88 percent) and in February 2021 (41 percent).

The same survey asked about respondents' choice of relationship between the two states. In February 2021, 88 percent preferred Ukraine to be independent of Russia, a decline of two percentage points from September 2020 (not statistically significant, given the margin of error). Once again, the long-term trend was in the opposite direction to the aim of pro-Russian disinformation which was to nullify Ukrainian statehood—from a level of about 80 percent in 2009-13, it jumped to 90 percent in 2015 and has remained relatively stable thereafter. The percentage of respondents who believe that Ukraine and Russia should unite into a single state has correspondingly declined from 2008 to 2021. On February 5-7, 2021, KIIS conducted a telephone survey on Ukrainians' attitudes to the actions of President Zelenskyy in banning the three TV channels.<sup>46</sup> Using a split-sample procedure, the researchers asked each half of the sample a different version of the same question. In one part of the study, 34.6 percent of respondents considered the ban a "necessary step to protect the state," while 40.8 percent considered it "a mistake that only limits the rights of citizens." In the second half, 43 percent supported Zelenskyy's actions; 40.3 percent did not.<sup>47</sup> It was possible to interpret these results as both favorable and



unfavorable for Zelenskyy, but impossible to determine the part played by pro-Russian propaganda in forming such attitudes. The picture was murky.

The president of Ukraine might perhaps have shown more interest in the public's answers to a series of questionnaires dealing with his and his party's popularity. In the February 5-7, 2021, poll, for instance, rating candidates for the presidency, Zelenskyy was still the most popular having been chosen by 16.2 percent of all respondents and by 22.7 percent of decided voters.<sup>48</sup> He was followed by Poroshenko (13.1 and 18.3) and Yuliia Tymoshenko (10.3 and 14.5). This was good news, except that in 2019, Zelenskyy had garnered 30.2 percent of the vote in the first round establishing a very clear lead. The president might have also been cheered by an improvement in the people's trust in him as a politician—at the end of February he was trusted by 39.5 percent of respondents to a KIIS survey, an improvement of four percentage points since January.<sup>49</sup> All Ukrainian politicians are distrusted more than trusted, but Zelenskyy was the least distrusted with a deficit of only 14.7 percent.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, asked about leaders of neighboring countries, Ukrainians' level of trust in Vladimir Putin had dropped from 14.4 to 10.8 percent between January and February 2021, not a favorable reflection on the efficacy of Russian propaganda and disinformation within Ukraine.

In terms of voting intentions for the Verkhovna Rada, the dynamics were more fluid. In December 2020, the opposition OPZZh party led with 23.1 percent of decided voters against 20.9 for President Zelenskyy's Servant of the People party.<sup>51</sup> This may have been the basis for the alarm said to be felt by Zelenskyy as he contemplated the sanctions against Medvedchuk's TV channels.<sup>52</sup> By February, the ranking had been reversed, however, with 21.3 percent for Servant of the People and 18.1 for OPZZh. Of concern otherwise might have been the significant rise in support for Tymoshenko's Fatherland—from 9.8 percent of decided voters in December to 14.4 in February. Particularly concerning for the president also might have been results from the February 5-7, 2021, survey, which put Servant of the People in *third* place (15.5 percent of decided voters), behind Poroshenko's European Solidarity (18.1) and Medvedchuk's OPZZh (16.8).<sup>53</sup> However, public opinion surveys in Ukraine are not known for their accuracy.

## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, conventional public opinion surveys are poor instruments for gauging Ukrainians' vulnerability to Russian disinformation in general, and particularly for those messages emanating from the TV channels in question. Reportedly they supported both Poroshenko and Zelenskyy in the 2019 presidential elections, yet these channels' influence could not have been decisive. In the grand scheme of things, which is what the surveys depict, Russian disinformation in Ukraine could be like mass advertising—present everywhere, but so commonplace as to be merely a daily nuisance rather than a conscious influence on popular thinking. The noise of Russian propaganda is certainly a thorn in the side of independence-minded politicians in Ukraine, including President Zelenskyy, consciousness of which detracts from conveying the government's messages. Thus, Ukraine's politicians and political institutions remain in disrepute among the population generally, although this poor reputation stems from more than the effect solely of



Russian propaganda. And Russian disinformation, for all its prowess, must compete with other sources of information so that its influence on public consciousness cannot be considered as an exclusive source. How it manifests itself in the actions and attitudes of Ukrainians is a conundrum.

In politics, everything is connected to everything else. Zelenskyy wants to end the war in the Donbas, re-establish Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea, and get re-elected. The source of his major troubles is in Moscow. By bringing down Medvedchuk and closing the three pro-Russian TV channels, he is striking at Putin and the challenge from OPZZh along with resurgent Yanukovich forces which threaten to overtake him simultaneously. He now has the backing of Washington, which was absent under Donald Trump. As his assault on pro-Russian influence expands beyond the communications sphere to other actors, he maybe able to blunt Russia's influence on Ukrainian politics. But to halt the flow of Russian disinformation, which is meant to suppress Ukraine's independence, he will have to wait until the Master of the Kremlin changes his mind and accepts Ukraine as a sovereign, independent state instead of a Russian province which, based on the current record, will never happen.

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- 14 Ibid. This sounds so familiar, very similar to US President Donald Trump à propos the 2020 elections, as though they were singing from the same hymnal on both sides of the Atlantic.
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## NARRATIVES OF MISINFORMATION: COMPARATIVE HISTORIES OF U.S. AND INDIAN LYNCHINGS

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### ABSTRACT

The last decade kicked off a rash of mob violence in India that the media immediately labeled as “lynchings.” Lynching, a sensitive word, carries with itself the cultural connotations of the history of violent slavery in the U.S., as well as its baggage of racial configurations. However, is it appropriate to refer to mob violence in India as lynching, and if so, what purpose and weight does this term hold? In an attempt to answer this, the article performs a comparative analysis of the U.S.’ history of lynching and recent Indian cases. In describing the term’s history, two stories of misinformation are uncovered—one linked with newspapers and photographs, the other with social and visual media. Comparing the twin stories of lynching divulges the commonality of supremacist narratives regardless of the technologies used. Under these narratives of misinformation, lynching itself becomes a sinister technology that dominant groups use to assert their supremacy by violently defiling otherized bodies.

### INTRODUCTION

The last decade kicked off a rash of mob violence in India that the media immediately labeled as “lynchings”—a sensitive word to use, whether the Indian media realized it or not. However, one has to suspect they did realize its full weight, as lynching in its core is sensationalist. It can be used, appropriately or not, to draw attention by instantly invoking the history of violent slavery in the United States as well as configurations of race relations dominant in U.S. society. A comparative analysis between the U.S. history of lynching and recent Indian cases can be useful to describe the context of this word as both a *result* and *cause* of misinformation. By analyzing the narratives of the word lynching, describing its history and symbolism can illuminate some trends. In the case of this study, the comparison of the twin stories of lynching in the U.S. and India can reveal the difference of technologies used for dissemination, a commonality of supremacist narratives. To do so, the study focuses on some prominent U.S. definitions of lynching. Due to the U.S. experience with brutality and its history of lynching, even seemingly innocent definitions will



have to be political, so the objectives of the defining texts will be considered part of the definitions themselves. The article will then trace the definitions back to a narrative of white supremacy, violently inscribed on black bodies by mobilizing the spectacle of the leisure event called lynching. Similarly, the Indian story begins with an unraveling of *misinformed* definitions as applied by the media to recent episodes of mob violence, which then uncovers a narrative of the superior Hindu state marred by the “Muslim Other.”

The study of narratives around lynchings is significant because the susceptibility of misinformation is in its capability to transmit and instigate false narratives. This is potentially dangerous because, unlike fake news or conspiracy theories cascading through social media, false narratives are not marked by their passage from individual to individual. They are constructed and shaped by incongruent pieces of information that have been drawn from different sources. As Jerome Bruner has asserted, on a collective level, narratives are “social constructions that coherently interrelate a sequence of historical and current events; they are accounts of a community’s collective experiences, embodied in its belief system and represent the collective’s symbolically constructed shared identity.”<sup>1</sup> They build up and structure a conceivable reality. Understood thus, there is no particular age of misinformation but narratives of (mis)information. Following this, we can conclude that while the histories of the groups involved are mobilized by different technologies and have their own contexts, lynching itself is a sinister technology that dominant groups use to drive a false narrative of their supremacy by violently defiling otherized bodies.

### CONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE OF U.S. LYNCHINGS

An effective place for a brief analysis of lynchings in the U.S. is to start with existing definitions, both popular and academic. The way that the term is defined and applied demonstrates the weight of its narrative, which permeates U.S. society at every level. In fact, regarding former President Donald Trump’s use of the term “lynching” in reference to his impending impeachment in 2019, Karen Baynes-Dunning, the interim president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, stated that “for Trump to characterize a legal impeachment inquiry as a lynching shows a complete disrespect for the thousands of Black people lynched—murdered—throughout our nation’s history in acts of racism and hatred.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, Trump’s use is exactly in line with the false narrative surrounding the term in the first place.

Any definition will therefore be political, and the goals of the defining text need to be considered. To start at the most basic example, Merriam-Webster defines the verb “lynch” as “to put to death (as by hanging) by mob action without legal approval or permission.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, lynching is not just hanging by the neck but includes any murder by a mob of people. Contained within this definition is both an explanation and an excuse for lynching. Here, lynching is perpetrated by a group of people, outside of the law, and, at some point, that group of people has transformed into a “mob.” The implication is that the mob acts both irrationally and as a unit. Another implication that is not quite present in this definition is that the mob is asserting their superiority over the individual(s) who are being lynched. Amy Louise Wood affirms this when she

writes that lynching is characteristic of mob violence for a supposed crime or even to intimidate a particular group, thereby also making it a radical form of social control, often involving a display of a spectacle.<sup>4</sup> Occurrences of lynchings and parallel instances of mob violence are found in many societies.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of lynching covers much more ground. Here, the asserted supremacy of the mob is openly part of the definition; they are punishing a transgressor or intimidating a group, and the crucial element of spectacle is included. Still, it all comes down to the last sentence, where mob violence is granted some power over groups, making them irrational; and since *every* society does it, it is just an unfortunate phenomenon of humanity (or, so the definition seems to assure us). The definition is, therefore, more informative than the Webster's version, and reflects the whole weight of the guilty society. Another way of looking at the narrative of lynching is through statistics. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has put these statistics into simple and straightforward language:

*From 1882-1968, 4,743 lynchings occurred in the United States. Of these people that were lynched 3,446 were black. The blacks lynched accounted for 72.7% of the people lynched. These numbers seem large, but it is known that not all of the lynchings were ever recorded. Out of the 4,743 people lynched only 1,297 white people were lynched. That is only 27.3%. Many of the whites lynched were lynched for helping the black or being anti lynching and even for domestic crimes.<sup>6</sup>*

Of course, the story of lynchings in the United States is the story of white backlash against slaves being freed. However, the white people in the above-mentioned statistics also include groups, such as Italian Americans. Out west, Chinese and Latinx people were also lynched. Therefore, lynching in the United States is not just the story of faceless mobs committing extrajudicial killings, but of white people consciously and actively asserting supremacy. Here we can use a better definition, provided by a fellow academic in the form of poetic scholarly prose. In his essay, Rasul Mowatt is specifically discussing the effects of lynching photographs:

*Lynchings showcased the White population's unchecked authority over their fellow Black citizens. The lynched, through this position as a massacred, tortured and dismembered body that was judged and condemned in the spirit of celebration and spectacle, reverse their role with their torturer and murderer, America.... In this damned America lives the researcher, myself, who must call into question various thoughts, feelings and experiences in order to take part in this discourse.<sup>7</sup>*

In Mowatt's description of lynching, we find something that contrasts with the sanitized Wikipedia and Webster's versions: There are no "mobs" killing "groups." Instead, there is the "White population," showcasing their authority over "Black citizens." There is "the lynched" and "their torturer and murderer, America." Finally, there is the researcher, whose subjectivity is pulled into

this definition to take part in the discourse just as the images and descriptions of the events interpolate all who see them. A crucial element in this is that Mowatt reads lynching as leisure. As evidence, he states:

*Black bodies would line streets, lamp posts, alleys or would be hung from trees like ornaments to a degree far more common than that we wish to acknowledge today... Photographs were taken during most of these acts of racial violence capturing not only the occurrences but also how those who came witnessed and viewed the lynching. Smiles sprung wide as cameras flashed. Eyes looked eager and excited as opposed to being sunken in shame... This was a festivity due to the observed emphasis on posing with the body. This was an event as opposed to an application of the law.<sup>8</sup>*

Narratives of lynching in this light give us an insightful definition—one that looks back at the United States as a white supremacist society. The technology of photography shows individual faces and smiles—not simply a mob. The fact that it is a leisure activity lends intentionality to the actors—an intentionality that is robbed away by a mob framing. Finally, the event is public and recorded for history to see.

The story of lynching in the United States is a false narrative of white supremacy, the falsity of which is the narrative of whites being superior to others, rather than the very real impacts it had and continues to have on social hierarchies. In a way, the use of the term “false” here is paradoxical because the narratives are real and have real impacts, but we use the term to denote that the racist concepts themselves are false. We do this because narratives of supremacy need to be immediately and unequivocally countered as false for the very reason that their spread is literally fatal. The accounts of black villainy justified lynching as a “community's proper response to heinous crimes against neighborhood values.”<sup>9</sup> The false narratives of the rapes of white women by black men further cemented the idea of black criminality and the superiority of the white. Later debunked through statistical and positivistic approaches as undertaken by Ida B. Wells, the misinformed idea nonetheless remained embedded in the psyche of white supremacy and helped galvanize mobs and popular sentiments.<sup>10</sup> Despite these narratives, the subsequent research has shown that the lynching was more about “controlling black mobility, black political organizing, and black independence.”<sup>11</sup> They thrived as part of the U.S. regime’s economy of governance—a negotiation with white citizens to allow them to exact justice outside the law, as bills against lynching were repeatedly blocked at the height of the violence. They became a tool of racial terror, a means used to effectuate Jim Crow laws and racialized hierarchy. Black bodies were tortured, castrated, strangled, and burned to ashes. Furthermore, it is still part of the public consciousness that many of these lynchings were performed upon men accused of raping white women. The narrative claims to protect white women from the otherized, animalistic “Blacks.” Therefore, it is this narrative, which is also a narrative of misinformation, that should be examined to compare it with its analog in India.

## The False Narrative of White Supremacy

In the film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), there is a scene in which U.S. soldiers negotiate a deal with a Vietnamese prostitute. Eightball, a black soldier played by Dorian Harewood, starts to leave with the prostitute, but Animal Mother, a white soldier played by Adam Baldwin, stops Eightball and says, “All fucking n—— must fucking hang,” before taking the prostitute for himself. In one sentence, Animal Mother summarizes the role of black bodies in the United States as the stepping-stone for white supremacy. The double meaning of the word “hang” invokes the U.S. history of lynching as Animal Mother physically takes possession of the woman from the black man, slapping his hand off her arm in the process. “Hang” also implies that black people have to wait their turn, letting white men go first. In this particular film, it also serves as a commentary on the U.S. use of black bodies to die in their war—black bodies used to colonize yellow bodies, with the spoils going to white men. This line can only be so effective because of the established narrative of white supremacy built upon lynching. Consequently, that narrative can only be so established because of the spectacle, leisure activity of lynching with photographs, newspaper stories, and body parts taken as souvenirs.<sup>12</sup>

Wendy Harding begins her analysis of lynching, which took place in 1911 outside a theater in Livermore. She does so to highlight the elements of spectacle, performance, and staging, coming to the assertion that the lynching spectacle, “the event itself—was staged by and for the white communities... The performative dimension of the ritual is acknowledged in newspaper reports that resort to theatrical metaphors.”<sup>13</sup> Theatrical metaphors are indeed revealing here if we think in terms of cinematic gazes. Consider these gazes applied to Mowatt’s (or indeed any) lynching photographs. To parallel Laura Mulvey’s verbiage in her famous essay on cinema, there are three different looks associated with these photographs: that of the camera as it records the leisure event, that of the audience as it views the photograph, and that of the actor-characters at each other within the photographic reality/illusion. The purpose of taking these photographs is to prevent a distancing awareness in the audience—both black and white. The society that views these photographs takes on the roles of the actors within—the white viewers become the Whites, smiling proudly, and the black viewers become the Blacks, bodies desecrated and invalidated, and their respective subjectivities continue to play out this narrative in the present. That is the purpose of recording a lynching with photographs or words, but the spectacle (and therefore the narrative) also plays out in real-time as those present witness the lynching. Therein lies the power of the interplay of spectacle and narrative that occur at a U.S. lynching. The false narrative detailed above becomes real by taking place across the tangible mediums of black-and-white photographs, newspapers, the theater stage, the movie screen, and social media, but the one constant that remains in pushing this narrative is that of lynching.

## THE CASE OF INDIAN LYNCHINGS

While the narrative of lynchings in the U.S. has had time to be cultivated, refined, and challenged, the narrative of Indian lynchings is still being written. To understand this narrative in progress, we need to understand how lynching has been contextualized in India. The word lynching crept into the Indian media and political landscape almost unnoticed. Before 2014, the majority of Indians were unfamiliar with the word and its meaning. Part of the reason is that there is no Hindi equivalent of the word lynching. The closest possible expression would be “*hatya*,” or “murder,” in most Sanskrit-derived languages when translated. However, *hatya* cannot be equated to extra-judicial violence by a mob and it is not comprehensive enough to cover the specific form of violence that India witnessed in the last decade.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the entry of the narrative of lynching into Indian consciousness was almost unexceptional. This, of course, does not mean that there was no particular public form of violence by a mob targeting certain groups. Nevertheless, the recent articulation of this violence as lynching is an attribute of the last decade. Earlier, English news dailies such as *The Hindu* or *The Times of India* used the word lynching to describe a disparate and wide range of incidents. From communal killing over cows to the killing of a leopard; from mob violence in reaction to child kidnapping to a murder by a spurned lover, the ambit of lynching was stretched injudiciously to accommodate a broad spectrum of violence.<sup>15</sup> Thus, this was not a case of misinformation but misinformed information. This is because in its earlier usage the word lynching had no function in establishing a narrative. It had no socio-political connotations but was used as a euphemism to describe disparate incidents of violence, thereby glossing over the specificities of the lynching.

It was only in the last decade that the word lynching saw a semantic change and its meaning was stretched to become a part of the narrative of conflict. This fact is attested by the use of lynching terminology to articulate the considerable rise of mob violence against individuals from certain communities. These communities, which predominantly include Muslim and Dalit religious minorities, increasingly became the target of hate crimes. Extraordinary and spectacular by its nature, lynching has become a part of the narrative of hate crime, albeit an extremely gruesome one. Within this acknowledgment, we need to find an understanding of lynching in India, while being aware that the meaning of lynching has changed over the years. All the while, the complexity of defining the word, therefore, becomes both common and dissimilar to the challenge of defining any term. This is because “all human language is fraught with a certain degree of instability, but in particular times and places some words become more politicized, less stable, and rhetorically more contested than other words.”<sup>16</sup> Lynching signified this case in point for the United States in the last two centuries and is signifying it for India right now. Highlighting the selective nature of violence against communities, the now-defunct *Hate Crime Watch* reported 282 hate crime attacks between 2009 until April 2, 2019, in India. From these attacks, they were able to determine the religion of 252 victims and perpetrators. Muslims were victims of 64 percent of attacks, Christians 16 percent, and Hindus 16 percent. Overall, the perpetrators were predominantly Hindus (in 56 percent of cases).<sup>17</sup>

In the United States, the rise in incidents of lynching was tied to the end of slavery. However, in India, this rise is tied to the changing nature of the state and the resurgence of right-wing

nationalism with the advent to power of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Following the ideology of Hindutva or supremacy of Hindus, the BJP has repeatedly used the misinformed rhetoric of cow protection to encourage violence. The totemic cow, a symbol of purity, cannot be consumed as per Indian tradition. Following a long campaign by Hindu radicals, cow slaughter was banned in India in 2014. The legal precedent against cow slaughter was followed by the rise of vigilante groups who appointed themselves as the judge, jury, and executioner in the name of protecting traditional Hindu values. Muslims and Dalits, considered as consumers and slaughterers of cows, increasingly became the targets of lynching. Cow-related lynchings have become so common that Sandipan Baksi and Aravindhan Nagarajan have called for a separate analysis for bovine-related mob lynching deaths. They write:

*This category has its own characteristics — the victims are largely Muslims, the proximate causes often based on rumors, built upon the prejudices against a community. It is also revealing that the proportion of this type of lynching among all cases of mob violence has increased in the last three years.<sup>18</sup>*

Thus, misinformation becomes a significant part of this narrative as lynchings were instigated not only by cow protection but also by issues such as false social media rumors.

Yet again, this does not present a complete picture. Unlike in the U.S., where there was an inertia on the part of the government to present accurate data and be compiled by private organizations, such as the NAACP, the Indian government refuses to report official data. Thus, suppression of information became a significant aspect of this narrative. Furthermore, we see a tendency to attribute lynchings not to social aspects, but to technologies like WhatsApp, to the spread of misinformation.<sup>19</sup> For example, one government employee writes, “we are trying to counter the misinformation by aggressive campaigning on social media, WhatsApp, and local TV channels.”<sup>20</sup> However, even with the lack of official data and dispersal of blame on misinformation, a clear picture does emerge, and Indian lynching is not the story of a faceless mob. Rather, it is the story of some specific communities being targeted by another dominant community that wants to assert its supremacy. This is conducted through the construction of a narrative of transgression. In the case of lynchings in the United States, the transgression is often the rape of white women, while the Indian narrative constructs transgression around cow consumption and child abduction. Of course, in a broader sense, the two elements of cow consumption and child abduction might seem disparate, but in both of these phenomena, the victims include members from communities who are seen as outsiders. Certain journalist accounts have highlighted the trend. For example, Abdul Kalam Azad mentions:



*In most of the cases, the victims of lynching and hate crime belong to marginalized groups like Muslim, Adivasi, Dalit, Christian and others. Allegations of cow smuggling, beef eating, love jihad as well as of heinous crimes like rape and sexual violence make it more convenient to orchestrate lynching and mob violence.<sup>21</sup>*

The similarity with U.S. lynchings does not end here. In the United States, the dominant narrative in early stages glossed over the historicity of race relations between white people and black people. Similarly, in India there is almost a sense of vincible ignorance, where the dominant narrative has been reduced to protection of cows or children, thereby bypassing the historicity of relations between Hindu and Muslim communities and, to an extent, of intra-Hindu relations. Furthermore, like the crowd-sourced definition of U.S. lynching where the transgression is punished by a mob that is assumed to be irrational, the popular understanding of the Indian narrative of lynching has relegated its function to “moral panic” and “mass hysteria.” This is evident from the way the media has construed lynching stories. For instance, it is not uncommon to see headlines such as: “Child-lifting rumors fuel mob hysteria across the state”; “Not Just Social Media: What is Driving India’s Mass Hysteria over Suspicions of Child Lifting”; or “How Narendra Modi Helped Spread Anti-Beef Hysteria in India.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, there is a construction of a narrative within writings that aim to highlight “mass hysteria,” “madness,” or “panic.” For instance, a news report about a lynching over a child abduction rumor on WhatsApp reads:

*Although Indian authorities have clarified that there was no truth to the rumors and that the targeted people were innocent, the deadly and brutal attacks – which are often captured on cell phones and shared on social media – have spread across the country amid snowballing hysteria and moral panic.<sup>23</sup>*

Thus, an entire narrative of hysteria has been constructed and shielded through hyperbolic linguistic excess. Misinformation becomes a part of the narrative and not a driving factor. This highlights the pattern followed by the U.S. media during the lynching era where media narratives detailed the incident and reasons behind it without reflecting on the moral economy of lynching and thereby reducing the politics behind it.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, the Indian media has followed a similar pattern, wherein the media plays a role in “imprinting certain descriptors in the collective consciousness, creating the language with which to speak of such incidents.”<sup>25</sup> This language has diminished the history and politics behind lynching, as evident through the particular framing of incidents.

### **THE FALSE NARRATIVE OF HINDU SUPREMACY**

If the narrative of lynching in the United States cannot distance itself from the history of race relations, the narrative of Indian lynching cannot distance itself from its colonial past and its communal social structure. Communal essence has defined the configurations of social and political arrangements in Indian society partly because of governmental technologies of colonial

rule in the Foucauldian sense and the partition of India.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the construction of people in post-colonial India is haunted by older ethnographic concepts that entered the field of knowledge and which demarcated Hindu and Muslim bodies. This has led to the structuration of essentialist identities with the supposition of the presence of the communities acquiring a fixed ontological character. It is on this backdrop that Hindus and Muslims have been constructed as antagonist identities. For a Hindu body, Muslim bodies have come to represent a particular anxiety.<sup>27</sup> Rooted in partition, a Muslim body has come to represent the original sin and to further embody fundamental anxiety of nationalism itself—of the nation as something unachieved.<sup>28</sup> As such, every Muslim becomes, at a certain level, a symbol of national frustration and insecurity.

However, like every other racialized and predatory identity, the Hindu identity is not a fact, but a project, the construction of which requires mobilization.<sup>29</sup> Discourses of crisis, misinformation, and praxes of violence become important tools for this mobilization. The discourse of crisis is constructed around the grand narrative of the golden past of India under Vedic rule which was subsequently sullied by the arrival of Muslims. The glorious past whose nucleus hides a Brahmanical core is tied with the priestly caste and the notions of purity and inviolability surrounding cows.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the misinformed narrative of cow protection becomes significant, and the violence in the form of lynching becomes not only justified but also encouraged.

The totem of the cow brings together the narrative of the crisis of Hindu purity and the violence of lynching. This is evident if we examine some cases of lynching. In one such case, Mohammad Akhlaq, a farmworker, was brutally lynched because of misinformation that he had beef in his house.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Junaid and his three friends were attacked over rumors of beef consumption.<sup>32</sup> Through these incidents, we see examples of the convergence of the discourse of crisis, misinformation, and violence, a narrative that has been widened to include any outsider. Similar to the U.S. case, lynching becomes a representation of hierarchy as well as an excess of violence against particular people and their bodies. It screams in its sensationalism about the eventuality of transgressing this hierarchy, and the violent methods used to assert supremacy.

## U.S. AND INDIAN RACIAL NARRATIVES IN DIALOGUE

The narrative of lynching around the world is highly fraught and entangled with both effects and histories of hatred. Certainly, there are similarities in the U.S. and Indian cases. In both cases, a group comes together to kill an individual for a supposed social transgression so great the usual law and order machinery cannot handle it. In the U.S., the victim is often black; in India, the victim is often Muslim. The story of lynching, therefore, is the story of supremacy inscribed violently on Black and Muslim bodies, which are not merely individual bodies, but which are entrenched in their particular socio-historical materiality—or in other words, in their constructed narratives. Is there an essential difference between those bodies? Whether beaten, severed, dragged through the streets, stoned, or hanged, the lie being told seems to be the same: “We are superior to the Other.”

In the end, the difference between a Black body and a Muslim body in a lynching is the narrative and social history that led to that point, rather than the technology used to disseminate the event. In the United States, that history includes slavery, colonialism, civil war, Jim Crow laws,

civil rights movements, and a thousand other points along the way. In India, that history includes caste, colonialism, and partition amongst its own set of a thousand historical points. Both these histories are violently inscribed on the differentiated body. One is of course differentiated based on religion and the other on race, and the two are different. Although, the Muslim faith is entangled with race and as Faisal Devji articulates, an identity becomes racial when the group has no control over it.<sup>33</sup> By all means, this form of racism is not congruent with conventional racism, and yet in its own way, it does determine the body as the site of difference. If the Black body becomes identifiable by its color, the Muslim body is identified through burqas, beards, and other marks.

Nevertheless, the false narratives of supremacy do not distinguish between religion and race. To a supremacist narrative, there is no Muslim body or Black body. There is only another body, objectified as a symbol of inferior Otherness. Surely some Indian newspapers streamlined the term “lynching” because it invokes that violent, spectacle history of U.S. society, but the term nevertheless appears to be paradoxically both appropriate and appropriated to serve the false narrative. While they can be mislabeled, Indian lynchings as spectacle events do occur, and they serve a similar purpose to their U.S. counterpart. Giving it the same English name points both cynically and optimistically at the history of lynching and includes India as the latest installment of that story.

Of course, highlighting the similarities between the two narratives does not necessarily mean negating their differences and therefore the individual stories behind them. There cannot be a zero position to write a whole and unembellished story of lynching.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, this story cannot be reduced to be an effect of any technology. Therefore, any research on lynching has to be articulated in the light of its contingency and partiality. As Kirk Floss points out, the main concern here is that a lynching is not a monolithic story but a motley collection of stories and narratives that cannot be separated from U.S. race relations. In other words, “there is no before-racism in U.S. history. Nor, unfortunately, is there an after-racism.”<sup>35</sup> If we try to replicate this logic in the Indian context, we will find that indeed there is no before-partition for the Indian state, and there is, unfortunately, no after-partition. This is not simply a trick of semantics—it is true that the U.S. and Indian states do not exist outside of their bigoted framings—but it takes place on a much deeper level. The Indian state was defined as a separation from Pakistan, and this has everything to do with the colonized past under the British and Mughal empires. Caste and communal divides are entangled here, as well as that all-encompassing idea of Hindu purity and the totemic cow. Therefore, Indian history is one of partition in many senses of the word.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the motley collection of stories that make up Indian lynchings. Indiscriminately labeling all mob violence as the same erases names, contexts, backgrounds, and histories for these stories. News reports then begin to focus on the mob and their “hysterical” nature. Instead of Mohammed Azam, Mohammed Mazlum Ansari, or Mohammed Imteyaz Khan, the focus shifts to the hysterical mob who lynched another man named Mohammed. This is dangerous because it can be twisted to serve the false supremacist narrative. The Hindu nation’s illness is men named Mohammed and the usual law and order machinery has failed to control it, so hysterical mobs take the matter into their own hands. The hysteria then becomes a

type of fever—an immunological response of the nation. Similarly, in the context of the history detailed above, the black men in the United States were seen as a social ill—as rapists of white women. Such social ills justify vigilantism, and the communal, leisure event of a lynching reinforces that justification.

## CONCLUSION

Seen in this light, lynching is not a result of a supremacist narrative. Rather, lynching itself is a sinister technology that dominant groups use to drive a false narrative of their supremacy by violently defiling otherized bodies. It is simultaneously a self-reassuring act and a ritual of purification that seeks to persuade society at large and the government to comply with the act. Therefore, we can conclude that the term “lynching” is appropriate for modern mob violence in India, yet it is still a term that is disseminated across media to propagate a false and misinformed narrative. It is therefore not so much the media used to record the event that matters, but the event itself and the weight of the name we give it. Consequently, we find no joy in coming to this conclusion because the word carries with it the ominous prophecy of U.S. history, in which the whole weight of a bloody supremacist narrative plows on through the decades like a woefully unstoppable juggernaut.

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## COUP WITH A Q: MISINFORMATION, THE U.S. CAPITOL INSURRECTION, AND PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

The question of how to address the spread of misinformation in the digital era has become an international issue. Drawing from the field of communication, this article discusses three perspectives that could inform the debate and potential policy responses. First, the article covers the concept of the public sphere and how it applies to information flow. Second, it covers how responses that focus on media literacy development often fall short. Lastly, it provides an alternative account of misinformation as a process in which cultural groups are demarcated. All three perspectives are contextualized through contemporary issues like “fake news,” the 2020 presidential election, communication during the presidency of Donald Trump, COVID-19, the conspiracy theory QAnon, and the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, along with a historical review of misinformation culture in the United States.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2021, it seems as though the fever of misinformation and hate among right-wing groups in the United States have reached a breaking point. On January 6, 2021, a violent mob breached the U.S. Capitol during the certification of the 2020 presidential election, temporarily forcing the process to halt. Five people died, and there is speculation that many members of Congress were close to being physically harmed.<sup>1</sup> While many points of failure have already been identified as direct causes of the political violence on January 6, the role of misinformation, particularly how alternative conspiratorial realities have taken hold among the far right and Republican party in the U.S., deserves a longer and more contextualized discussion. Following the surprising outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, many sought explanations for the victory of Donald Trump. One of the most promising, if incomplete, explanations was the idea of “fake news”—scare quotes intended. *Fake news* as a term in 2016 and 2017 failed to capture the full issue of the spread of misinformation, but it represented an attempt to begin to understand the new political reality. The power of misinformation lies in confirming people’s preexisting perceptions of an issue or a political candidate.<sup>2</sup> For example, a voter in 2016 who already had a conviction that Hillary Clinton was a corrupt and “nasty woman”—or even just that *all politicians are corrupt*—would be more likely to read a fake news post about the dealings of the Clinton Foundation and believe it. Fast forward to 2020, and those same predilections could easily lead someone to believe that the

election was fraudulent. Further, misinformation ecologies on the internet show signs of epistemic closure, meaning no outside information or correction could pierce the veil of lies. There are many reasons for this closure, but the dismissal of any competing realities as fake by then U.S. president and his supporting media certainly contributed.

The Trump presidency invited more press scrutiny than any other because of the entanglement of his personal businesses and public governance. President Trump's twitter posts and tumultuous administration also invited constant media coverage. He often lashed out and sought to delegitimize criticism of him. Despite his failures as a public leader, however, he is an excellent promoter of his own brand. Trump reappropriated the fake news term that was first used to categorize false stories and applied it to mainstream, journalistic outlets that criticized him. Afterward, the term fake news began to lose its usefulness in analyzing the larger issues of misinformation. In 2020, especially as other crises like the COVID-19 pandemic led to further breakdowns in social trust, disturbing conspiratorial systems of thought like QAnon rose up among the most ardent of Trump supporters.<sup>3</sup> Among many of those who stormed the Capitol, QAnon was more than a factor; it was a quasi-religious driving force.

This topic is especially relevant in a hyper-connected and mediated social world and during a raging, once-in-a-lifetime health crisis. This article will be arranged as follows: I will briefly discuss how misinformation is traditionally defined and instances throughout U.S. history that add texture to those definitions. Then, I will discuss why the breakdown of trusted information flow is harmful to what communication scholars refer to as the public sphere. Next, I will explain how the response to the rise of misinformation is shaped by the notion of digital divides and why correction approaches may be insufficient. Finally, I draw from cultural approaches to communication to offer a different take on the implication of misinformation in society that will be useful for scholars of diplomacy and international relations. The main argument centers on the fact that Trump used the term fake news to draw cultural lines separating his supporters from the rest of society, and thus created the opportunity for a widespread, alternative, conspiratorial reality to percolate. This resulted in a further breakdown of the public sphere and added confusion through which he hoped to become the sole trusted source of information among his supporters. Further, this attack on the public sphere resonated because it conforms to what scholars call the conservative deep story.

## **MISINFORMATION: FROM THE PARANOID STYLE TO QANON**

Misinformation can broadly be understood as “cases in which people’s beliefs about factual matters are not supported by clear evidence and expert opinion.”<sup>4</sup> As the past few years have shown, popular social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp help contribute to misinformation spread,<sup>5</sup> even as these platforms have taken a more active role in addressing the issue.<sup>6</sup> The role of social media platforms in spreading misinformation to greater numbers of people in rapid fashion cannot be overstated and should be addressed through policy. However, it also should be noted that anti-scientific beliefs, distrust of experts, and conspiracy theories are a recurring feature in U.S. politics—and are matters with no easy fix.

There is a slow-burning “death of expertise” in the United States, as prevalent culture increasingly regards scientific and specialized knowledge as elitist and/or irrelevant to everyday life.<sup>7</sup> The internet is not the sole culprit here; concurrent trends like the commodification of higher education and the 24-hour, hyper-partisan news cycle has led to breakdowns in expert trust. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public was instructed not to use masks for fear of limited supply. When this instruction was changed as new evidence of asymptomatic spread emerged, dubious citizens viewed experts as being “wrong” rather than adjusting recommendations according to new evidence.

This general antipathy toward experts is a part of what has been termed the “paranoid style” of U.S. politics.<sup>8</sup> Writing in response to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign for U.S. president, Hofstadter notes there has been a long tradition in the United States of fear, anger, and paranoia toward a supposed shadowy cabal of evildoers behind the scenes. The groups change depending on the chapter of U.S. history you are reading. They include the Masons, the Catholic Church, and international bankers, to name just a few. After World War II in the U.S., the enemy, according to groups like the John Birch Society, was a vast conspiracy of communists who infiltrated the news media, entertainment, academia, and even corporations. The distinguishing feature of paranoid political movements is a feeling that these groups have not only taken over but also dispossess conspiracy adherents of their livelihoods. They feel as though they are losing their grip on their way of life, and the contemporary media makes their imaginings of a cabal that much more vivid. The *Grand Remplacement* theory prominent among the far right in France and Europe broadly follows a similar logic of elite collusion and dispossession of the rightful citizens.

A predominant conspiracy theory of the rightwing today, QAnon, shares the basic features of past movements: belief in a widespread network of conspirators and a feeling of lost status among its followers. It also “offers its adherents an addictive alternative reality that requires their participation and, through this participation, draws them into the elaborate architecture of the conspiracy.”<sup>9</sup> This builds on the decentralized and participatory nature of social media platforms and the overall trend toward gamification in new media. One rather unique feature of QAnon adherents is the belief that there is one elite figure fighting against the imagined cabal—Donald Trump. After Trump disputed the 2020 election results—citing massive fraud and a stolen election—and invited his followers to Washington, D.C., it was almost inevitable that a large contingent of those who stormed the Capitol would be QAnon believers.<sup>10</sup> And since the pandemic, Qanon has gone global – appearing in over 70 countries with Germany and Brazil seeing some of the largest followings.<sup>11</sup>

Misinformation is part of wider conspiracy theories like QAnon, but there is also a particular sociological and cultural element at play. The remainder of this article will take a step back to contextualize the misinformation phenomenon from three perspectives drawn from the fields of communication and media studies. These lessons should be useful for those interested in international relations and diplomacy, as they can be applied to a variety of contexts and nations.

## THE FRAGMENTED PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere is a foundational concept in the study of political communication. German philosopher Jürgen Habermas coined the term, and this section of the essay will first define what the public sphere means in communication theory and what role the media plays in its function. Next, it will discuss how Trump's repeated characterization of mainstream media as "the enemy of the people" and "fake news" is best contextualized in critiques of Habermas's ideal public sphere. Here I argue that the limits of democratic deliberation in the public sphere allow for the discourse of untrustworthy media to take root.

The public sphere is distinct from the privatized spaces of economic trade and the home. The bourgeois public sphere is also separate from the state. In eighteenth-century Europe, it arose from literary culture and transformed into a place where public opinion was formed and criticism of state action could be articulated.<sup>12</sup> Some principal aspirational features of the public sphere include: it should be open to all people regardless of social status, and issues of common concern should be discussed once people are gathered.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the public sphere has implicit values embedded into it, such as freedom of speech and expression, and society has to reflect those values for the public sphere to function as a conduit of political action. Thus, the ideal public sphere has a powerful socializing aspect. For example, the Enlightenment era thinking of eighteenth-century Europe heavily influenced the framers of the U.S. Constitution to include a bill of rights, which included free speech and assembly protections.

What role does the media play in the ideal public sphere? Habermas writes that the public sphere requires a means to transmit information over the increasing distance between people as the nation grew larger. There is also a need for information to be interpreted once it is received. In the eighteenth century, this took place in the form of literary forums in cafés where men came together to discuss the media of the time. The early printing press played a critical role here, but as new media technologies were formed, new social practices around consuming media emerged.

Despite criticisms of the public sphere, Habermas recognized that the ideal public sphere exists only for a short but influential period. His later thinking concerned how the economic and public spheres began to merge as media became commercialized. This made the public sphere an arena "infiltrated by power," where manipulation of the public would happen for political purposes.<sup>14</sup> The shortcomings of the ideal public sphere may be apparent by now. According to Fraser, despite its promise of openness regardless of social rank, public discussion was restricted to men of certain upper classes. Inherent in this formulation was a belief that literate people must also be rational participants in the public sphere. In addition, the common concern of the people was often a misnomer for the concerns of the upper classes in Europe. The ethics of slavery or colonialism were simply outside the frame of rational discourse, and the genteelness of the public sphere hid the ugly and violent global system that undergirded it. If the "public sphere was to be an arena in which interlocutors would set aside such characteristics as difference in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers,"<sup>15</sup> then the state could substitute the will of the many with the public will of a few, with a veneer of public deliberation.

The breakdown of the public sphere—due to commercialization, as Habermas argues, or due to its inherent flaws, as Fraser argues—allowed for the mistrust of mainstream news to emerge. This is clear when Trump and his supporters make critiques of the news media both as covering him only for the ratings (a function of commercialized media) and for the musings of a certain class of highly educated, coast-dwelling social elites (a function of class difference). Peter Dahlgren was prescient on the issue of the fragmented media landscape presenting a challenge to the public sphere.<sup>16</sup> He concludes his 2005 article by saying,

*The Internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, and if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political communication system, specific counter public spheres on the Internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics.*<sup>17</sup>

The internet as mediation technology allows for expanded free expression for those who were less likely to express their thoughts in the traditional unitary sphere. However, this fragmentation of the common public also creates pockets of space where misinformation can take hold.

There are several factors that destabilize the public sphere on the internet, per Dahlgren; three are relevant to the issue of misinformation. First, “increased sociocultural heterogeneity” brings difference to the forefront of deliberation. We can think of Trump supporters who claim to feel like minorities in a country that is “no longer theirs” as their status is challenged. The second factor is the growth of new media platforms along with the “blurring and hybridization of genres, and the erosion of the distinction between journalism and non-journalism.”<sup>18</sup> For example, we can think here of infotainment such as political comedy podcasts and YouTube channels as the blurring of genres. We can also think of the merging of editorializing and reporting in commercial news outlets common on prime-time cable news. Third, the professionalization of political communication pushes average citizens away from the public sphere. The amount of information generated in the digital era requires specialized knowledge and training. The public reaction to this is best encapsulated in pro-Brexit leader Michael Gove’s quote, “Britons have had enough of experts.”

A fragmented public sphere is fecund ground for misinformation to take root. Because the mainstream news is now just one option among a variety of information sources and thus is no longer a common reality, alternative realities can flourish. The breakdown of the public sphere means a breakdown of *the public*, and, until early 2021, the responses by liberal society at large were woefully inept at combatting this destabilization. Whether it was due to a misguided American exceptionalist belief “that it could not happen here” or an unwillingness to act, the conventional responses have had limited effect. This failure will be explored more in the next section.

## DIGITAL DIVIDES AND MEDIA LITERACY

One response to the rise of misinformation has been to combat it with media literacy skill development. For example, schools have integrated online media literacy into the responsibilities of educators and librarians. In another attempt to combat misinformation spread, social media platforms labeled 2020 election misinformation as “disputed.” This push assumes that those who read, share, believe, and act upon fake news lack media literacy skills. This section details how this policy solution discourse mirrors scholarly debates around the digital divide.

The early digital divide literature focused on the binary of those who had internet access and those who did not. Writing in 2003, then Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan argued, “a ‘digital divide’ threatens to exacerbate already-wide gaps between rich and poor, within and among countries.” He continued, “One of the hallmarks of the information society—openness—is a crucial ingredient of democracy and good governance.”<sup>19</sup> This was an early argument from the highest levels that mere access was a key step toward more democratic societies. Digital divide literature matured in subsequent years, with the primary qualitative difference being that the binary of access or no access was incomplete to understanding the nature of internet use. Scholars began to look at the quality of access to the internet. For example, children and youth often had access to the internet in the late 2000s. However, socioeconomic status correlated with the kind of access—in-home or at school—and the quality—high-speed or low bandwidth.<sup>20</sup>

The late 2000s also witnessed the rise of mobile communication and internet access, which further complicated the idea of a digital divide. For example,

*In 2009, just 27% of American teens with mobile phones reported using their devices to access the internet. However, teens from lower income families and minority teens were significantly more likely to use their phones to go online.*<sup>21</sup>

Again, as the access divide closed, other divides were magnified. Those of lower socioeconomic status disproportionately used mobile phones for internet access; however, their device choice also reduced the opportunity to access the full affordances of the internet.

As access became less of an issue, increasing information literacy skills and correcting false information became the focus of reformers. Social correction online depends on addressing misinformation through users’ own intimate social networks, whether it is online or offline. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many families handled correction in person after seeing misinformation online.<sup>22</sup> Other studies have shown that online social correction is more effective when there are multiple consistent corrections appearing in one user’s social media network, and especially when the corrective post cites a source to challenge the misinformation.<sup>23</sup> The social media platforms that host misinformation have also taken steps to prevent its spread. In early May 2020, YouTube, Facebook, and others removed the so-called Plandemic video from their platforms after it spread quickly.<sup>24</sup> The video was filled with conspiratorial thinking such as COVID-19 being a hoax and was being used to justify limit freedom. The video received over 8 million views and



was one of the most watched videos on the internet in the early weeks of the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> The actions taken by media platforms to remove the video may have come too late; in June 2020, Pew reported that of those who were aware of the Plandemic video, nearly a third said its claims might be true.<sup>26</sup> Another study found that discourses regarding the attack of civil liberties increased afterward.<sup>27</sup>

Automated fact-checking by platforms has been advanced as one potential solution.<sup>28</sup> Visually presenting information that nudges the user to read accurate content might be effective as well, as

*Previous work has found that observational correction can take place via mechanisms built into social media platforms, like the related stories algorithm on Facebook, which promotes stories similar to the original shared link.<sup>29</sup>*

However, fact-checking and information presentation may go only so far. Pennycook et al. argue that addressing the fake news phenomenon requires an acknowledgment of the platform incentives which are communicated to users. In general, most users do not wish to intentionally share misleading information. Nevertheless, the accuracy of information is less of a concern than the positive social aspects of sharing on social media, such as posting comments and receiving attention. The incentive to receive positive feedback on social media overrides the desire to share accurate information. This phenomenon is termed the attention-based account of misinformation spread.<sup>30</sup>

Increasing access does not automatically lead to better societal outcomes, as social and economic differences will remain. The turn to misinformation and conspiracy theories will not be ameliorated by increased media literacy or platform correction, since these are responses that depend on individual changes in behavior even though the root of the issue is systemic and cultural, as I will discuss in the next section. It may even be the case that the isolation and increased screen time as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the further spread of misinformation. Trumpism is in part a reaction against the neo-liberal turn, where wages and quality of life stagnated.<sup>31</sup> Trump designating the media as “the enemy of the people” allows for his supporters to blame their troubles not on the policies that led to their misfortune but on the media as well as the usual suspects like immigrants, Black Americans, elites, and others. Increasing media literacy is an incomplete response to misinformation because it ignores the cultural power of labeling the media as fake news.

## **(Mis)COMMUNICATION AS CULTURE**

Perhaps the foundations of misinformation are deeper than social media policies or a lack of media literacy. Instead, we should consider Trump’s labeling of oppositional media as fake news and misinformation broadly as part of maintaining the boundaries of a community of supporters. To do so, I will discuss the work of James Carey, a philosopher of communication and culture, to explain how the narratives that Trumpism and right-wing misinformation offer a community of belief. Then I will further analyze Trump’s initial use of the fake news label as a way of creating

an alternative nationalism apart from the imagined communities that Benedict Anderson discusses. These community strengthening tendencies are reliant on what scholars also call the “deep story,” derived from Arlie Hochschild’s detailed account of the Tea Party in Louisiana.

First, it is important to differentiate between what Carey calls the transmission view of communication and the cultural view. In Carey’s words, in the transmission view “communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people.”<sup>32</sup> This method of communication is fundamentally passive in nature. Senders of information have all the power of the message, while receivers take in information passively. In contrast, the cultural view sees communication as the creation of community as opposed to the simple transmission of information. Carey writes that the cultural view “is linked to terms such as ‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’”<sup>33</sup> Carey notes the power of ritualized forms of communication, such as religious services and sporting events, to create forms of identity. Rituals

*See the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.*<sup>34</sup>

Instead of convincing people to pursue a political action, ritualized forms of communication subtly persuade people to maintain their community cohesion *through political action*. Voting for Trump becomes a means to preserve a certain way of life. Further, Trump’s characterizing of the media as fake news subtly asks his supporter community to disregard any information they read or hear that does not come from Trump or affiliated sources. During the Capitol attack, it was not a coincidence that journalists were also targeted by the mob.<sup>35</sup>

Trump’s repeated use of the label fake news creates an ordered, meaningful, and cultural world for his supporters in which the news media could not be trusted. Even for people who did not support him, his repetitive remarks planted seeds of doubt and confused the public. This contrasts with the idea of “imagined communities” as theorized by Benedict Anderson. Nations, per Anderson, are the preeminent imagined communities of people. He writes, “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>36</sup> The communication technology which enabled the massive community formation in the early twentieth century was the newspaper. According to Carey, newspapers allow citizens to participate in the daily dramatic action of the nation, whether it is political events or war. This seeks to explain why Trump primarily targeted the two main American papers of record in his rhetoric: the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. They were two of the most aggressive in pursuing investigations into his administration. What has replaced these national papers for groups like QAnon in reporting the daily dramatic action? The postings and interpretations of the mysterious “Q” figure.

What does this mean for Trump's supporters? A *Washington Post* story from 2017 showed how Trump's supporters appreciated his belligerence toward the media. One woman characterized his actions as giving the media a well-deserved "spanking."<sup>37</sup> Some also said they felt under attack again similar to how they felt during the 2016 election. Their sense of community was under threat, and they viewed the media as treating their hero unfairly. Trump demarcated a new market of loyalty where people had trusted him as their ultimate information resource.<sup>38</sup>

Put simply, conspiracy theories like QAnon give order to a confusing world. Recognizing that there exists a nation within a nation is no doubt frightening. The Biden campaign promised unity and a time to heal yet moving forward presents many challenges. The conspiracy theories and loyalty to Trump as a political and cultural figure resonate because they touch on the "deep story" held dearly by a significant amount of the American population. The "deep story" at the heart of American conservatism, as termed by Hothschild, is that there is an entire nation of hardworking, good Christian people in the forgotten corners of the country who are being burdened by government bureaucrats and scorned by Hollywood elites. While they work hard, moochers and immigrants live large on the government dole paid for with their tax dollars.<sup>39</sup> This deep story, trades more so in feelings over facts and has been amplified by conservative traditional and social media.<sup>40</sup> The deep story remains powerful, and it is easy to see how it can be slightly altered so that the scornful elite are actually the shadowy evil doers in the mythos of QAnon.

## THE NEW NORMAL

Twitter and other social media platforms' decision to remove Trump's accounts led to a short-term decrease in misinformation,<sup>41</sup> but this is only a Band-Aid for a serious wound. By Summer 2021 there were already new rumblings of an August "Trump Restoration" in Qanon groups online.<sup>42</sup> There will remain a cohort of people in the United States who fervently support Trump and do not accept common political reality. As I have discussed in this essay, both issues are cultural and bigger than the misinformation problem. In other words, one cannot assume an easy fix like different social media policies or broader misinformation correction will heal the wound deep in the heart of society. As Hochschild discusses, the deep story at the heart of American conservatism is undergirded by a real economic precarity that has diminished wages and quality of life for almost everyone in the United States except the wealthiest. The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to social isolation and widespread suffering *alongside* the crisis of late-stage neo-liberal capitalist alienation, laid bare these issues. Flashing back to 2015 and 2016, when the outlines of the impending crises were coming into focus, fake news emerged as a fashionable term despite a long history of disinformation and propaganda. Trump seized the term used initially to denigrate his election and, instead, turned it toward the critical media. He was able to characterize the media as dishonest and thereby diminish their capability to criticize him. Misinformation as political practice thus took root.

This article situated the misinformation problem within a historical context. The rise of QAnon as an animating force on the right was discussed as a common feature in American history but also as unique to the digital-era affordances of social media. I also endeavored to show that the COVID-

19 pandemic and the electoral crisis culminating in the attack on the Capitol were closely intertwined. Using a cultural view of communication, one can understand Trump's appeal as tribal and boundary-defining. Designating most news outlets as "the other" further strengthened his power as the leader of his supporters. At the same time, right wing media reinforce the deep story of grievance which gave Trump the fertile ground to run on. Trump also gave form to a political personality type that is highly adaptable to other countries. Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines, and Le Pen in France, just to name a few prominent figures, follow a similar form to Trump. They espouse a nationalistic populism, treat the press with disdain, capitalize on fears of the other, and most importantly, have a strong base of political fans. And while misinformation spreads in each international context, there still remains real suffering that is translated into cultural grievance against immigrants, elites, and the general other. It remains to be seen what will become of the Q movement now that Trump has left the presidency—and Twitter—but the response should remain the same. He, his supporters, and misinformation are a symptom of deep alienation, not the cause. There is one path where we pretend everything is fine and another where we recognize that a different end is, at least, possible.

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## WAVES OF REVERSAL AND PROGRESS: SOCIAL MEDIA AND WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN THE SUDANESE SPRING

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### ABSTRACT

In the year following the Arab Spring, observers, journalists, and scholars began to predict an authoritarian reversal, including the beginning of a long winter.<sup>1</sup> So, in 2019, when a peaceful coalition of Sudanese activists successfully deposed President Omer Al-Bashir, it was a sign that the political climate in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region would continue to be highly changeable—and somewhat unpredictable. Sudan's late spring captured global attention because of the wide use of digital media to capture its progress, and the image of high-profile feminist symbolism. There was the image of Alaa Salah, dressed in a white *toab*, the presence of an elegant symbol of a glorious past.<sup>2</sup> The defiant *Kandaka*, or Queen Pharaoh, who once repelled foreign empires at the threshold of her nation; now she stood on the hood of a car, calling out a government which engaged in crime and corruption, and which had flouted the democratic process for three decades.<sup>3</sup> Beyond imagery, and far more difficult to capture, was the revolutionary process of the *Kandaka* leadership—and the loyal persistence of their followers. This includes the role of Sudan's storied labor and professional unions as they engaged in clandestine leadership in organizing regime change. Then there was a conspicuous presence of social media used by young women, gathered *en masse*, advancing change, and documenting what Samuel Huntington has called a fourth wave of democratic revolution.

### INTRODUCTION

The 2019 Sudanese Spring has advanced regime change and women's rights, reflecting the age-old axiom that democracy is safe so long as strong states are met by resilient civil societies. More broadly, the Arab Spring has been a study of both traditional and emerging new civil society organizations struggling against authoritarian states. A review of recent literature concerning the Arab Spring reflects an informal consensus. Rather than a "false start," a democratic surge in MENA states confirms instead the emergence of a fourth wave of global democratization.<sup>4</sup> The current wave of democratic activism is characterized by two important factors: its members and its means. The former includes the high visibility of a heretofore reticent demographic, young women leaders. These emerging members of the MENA political community have at their disposal a new medium by which to organize, proliferate, and document their insurgency, namely digital media. Among prevailing World Systems theorists, Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, *Clash of Civilizations*, and *Third Wave* are

among the most quoted academic formulations used to analyze economic progress. The *Third Wave* further describes the push forward, swing back of democratic civil society versus authoritarian state forces. Since 2012, much of the analysis of the Arab Spring has relied on Huntington's construction of third wave democratization.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, Huntington enumerated several democratic reversals, many of which took place in the MENA region.<sup>6</sup> When the Arab Spring activism spread throughout the region in 2012, important analysis of events relied on Huntington's construction of third wave democratization. The most significant debate that ensued considered whether the Arab Spring constituted a fourth wave of global democratization that had its origins in North Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Long-term projections about the permanence or instability of emerging democratic regimes as a basis for establishing whether the Arab spring is in fact a fourth wave should be set aside, at least for the moment. A better test of power and reach of democratic revolution in the MENA region is measured by the emergence of a new source of revolutionary leadership—young women—and a new means of organizing revolution—digital media. This article argues that, whether emerging democratic regimes survive reversal, the current nature of democratic revolution is new and distinct from third wave democratic activism. It is distinct because digital media has made the spring not only a democratic act, but a democratic process, emphasizing a plurality of scribes and forms of historical documentation.

In late 2018, a myriad constituency of the Sudanese working society formed a coalition of civic organizations and unions. In January 2019, this assembly announced a coalition they called the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). The FFC issued a declaration, published on social media, calling for “peaceful struggle until the totalitarian regime is removed.”<sup>8</sup> In Western print and internet media, the public face of the FFC was the Sudan Professional Association, and Munathaba Nisaei Sudani wa Seeassi (MANSAM). The Arabic pronunciation of *Munathaba Nisaei Sudani wa Seeassi* translates to the Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups. MANSAM is a “women’s rights coalition.... of 176 members with representation from eight different political parties and 13 civil society bodies.”<sup>9</sup>

Elite consensus cannot begin to characterize the vast numbers of poor or unemployed that took to the streets during the *cause* that came to be known as the Arab Spring.<sup>10</sup> The MENA region has endured authoritarian rule and bouts of economic failure, creating dissatisfaction in the working and middle classes.<sup>11</sup> Once one MENA country experienced a democratic surge, the others followed suit, exhibiting what Huntington calls the *demonstration effect*, or more commonly, a domino effect. Economic uncertainty is just one of several factors that set the stage for the Arab Spring, inspiring what Huntington calls “surging global democratic revolution.” In this instance, there was a notable rush of global south, fourth wave feminism.<sup>12</sup>

The intersection of fourth wave feminism, social media, and global governance were among topics that the Research Committee on Sociology of Law discussed at its 2018 annual conference. Held a year before the Sudanese Spring, the conference focused on law and citizenry beyond *the state*.<sup>13</sup> A decade earlier, and certainly by the time of the Arab Spring, it was clear that the intersection of social media and global governance was mobilizing large swathes of civil society

eager to challenge both democratic and authoritarian governance.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the MENA regional springs made one reality quite clear: democratic power is now subject to independent forms of mass communication. This reality is confirmed by a general feminist critique, which argues that access, or lack of access, to technology in this instance, or educational and employment opportunities in previous generations limit democratic participation.<sup>15</sup>

## DOCUMENTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION

Reviewing a generation of feminist literature focused on emerging between 1970-1990, Debra Anne Donahoe revealed a converging set of problems. Until recently, there was a lack of interest by some governments and even several international NGOs in studying, recording, or formulating policy concerning *women's work*.<sup>16</sup>

Documenting women's activism in the first decades of the new millennium is also challenging, but for different reasons. The ability to study any kind of activism has largely been predicated on whether expression of dissent is permitted and whether it can be documented. One factor which promotes self-documentation and has also served as a vehicle for promoting and supporting civil society is the rise of social media. The ability to communicate beyond, above, or around the state has made it possible to study activism, especially women's global activism.

According to U.S. Marine Major SJ Kuhlow, a 2013 study of tweets by Tunisian and Egyptian women illuminates the extent of their participation in the virtual staging which led real-world activism.<sup>17</sup> Her report further indicates that the participation of women in social media in these contexts exceeded men's participation. In a world connected through social media, and in a region where 60 percent of the population are youth and women of all ages account for more than 50 percent of the population, revolutionary social media and dispersed disruptions will be a constant. Furthermore, as half of the youthful population are women, this has created an *intersection* which has formed its own wave of persistent political activism.

As the Sudanese Spring is studied more intensively, virtual broadcasting data of women's communication among the FFC, MANSAM, and the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) will document the extent to which women participated and more vitally how they led the movement to depose President al-Bashir. Social media has published, or "televised," the MENA revolution. What is less certain is whether the revolution can institutionalize democratic change, and whether efforts to combat persistent corruption can withstand authoritarian reversal. As such, it is necessary to study the progress of the *springs*. The technological revolution of social media, unavailable to earlier generations, has coordinated widely scattered and economically diverse populations into a coherent force for renewing political dissent. How and under what conditions dissent transforms into democratic revolution may remain mysterious. Certainly, there are numerous conditions, reasons, and, ultimately, a variety of explanations for revolt. Often a catalytic event and its aftershocks can have a *demonstration effect* and catch observers, even potential revolutionaries, off guard.<sup>18</sup>

## A DECADES LONG DESERT SPRING: THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Well before 2019, a Sudanese youth movement, which had been struggling against the al-Bashir regime since 2004, was inspired to redouble their efforts when they witnessed regional activism during the year 2011 through 2012. Dubbed *Girifna*, or Fed-up, this movement was a legacy of Egypt's 2004 *Kefaya*, or Enough, movement.<sup>19</sup> *Girifna* reflected the kind of diverse organization which characterized Sudanese anger directed against a regime infringing on civil liberties in the north while war mongering throughout the other regions of the nation.<sup>20</sup> This included “low intensity conflicts” in Eastern Sudan toward the Beja people, those in central Sudan, and in South Khordofan and the Blue Nile region.<sup>21</sup> *Girifna* membership included young people representing pockets of resistance from Darfur, South Sudan, before it seceded, the Nuba Mountains, as well as Wad Nubdawi, Sajjana, Bahri, Jabra, al-Kalaakla, and Um Badda neighborhoods in Khartoum.<sup>22</sup> Eventually the demonstrations attracted a wider audience and greater participation.<sup>23</sup> In 2012, Open Democracy posted the account of an anonymous *Girifna* leader:

*Women have consistently played an important part as leaders of and participants in the movement. One of the recent protests coordinated by Girifna, which took place on Friday, July 13th, 2012, was named ‘Kandake Protest,’ or ‘the Protest of Strong Women,’ which saw mothers, daughters, sisters and others taking to the streets against the regime.*<sup>24</sup>

In 2011-2012, *Girifna*'s leaders, many of whom were women, adopted a strategy of staging multiple, coinciding demonstrations.<sup>25</sup> This strategy prevented mass casualty losses of civilians at the hands of the military, which would be adopted by the FFC in 2019.<sup>26</sup> The *Girifna* members continued their protests in the year of the Arab Spring, and well after 2012. As a result, they suffered harsh reprisals as opposition to the al-Bashir regime continued.<sup>27</sup> Women leaders were singled out for brutal, criminal reprisal.<sup>28</sup> In 2019, *Girifna* even supported the FFC, even though it was not a formal signatory to the January 2019 FFC declaration.<sup>29</sup>

By the time other MENA nations were springing forth, rebellion was continuing to gain traction in Sudan. Although the *Girifna* movement was not ultimately successful, it was an early indication that Sudanese youth and young women were prepared, *en masse*, to oppose the al-Bashir regime.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the springs in Tunisia or Egypt, where the military ultimately deferred to the wishes of its citizenry and ousted long-reigning strong men in 2012, Sudan's armed forces sided with President al-Bashir. The National Security and Intelligence Service (NISS) arrested the leaders of the *Girifna* movement, most notably its women, who were then subject to abuse and torture, as recounted in a testimony posted online.<sup>31</sup> Though difficult to substantiate outside a courtroom, the account of *Girifna* women echoes the sworn testimony of Darfur's female residents made against the al-Bashir regime and given to the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).<sup>32</sup>

The history of the al-Bashir regime is a story of escalating violence, which began as a casual indifference to civil society and the protection of human rights. In 1990, the year after General al-Bashir became president, he drafted laws banning trade unions and discouraged female participation in public and civil life.<sup>33</sup> These acts were only the beginning of numerous authoritarian reversals. The Sudanese security state began encroaching into all areas of civilian life.<sup>34</sup> What followed over the next years was a flight of educated elite to the West and to the Arab Gulf nations. For the stalwart who remained, a millennial generation benefitted from an exponential growth of private universities.<sup>35</sup> These schools would eventually become an important site of Sudan's tech-savvy, fourth wave democratic resistance.

On campuses during 2011-2012, and again in 2019, various protests, led by students born a decade after al-Bashir's rise to power, were staged, but were just as often frustrated. However erratic these small rebellions were, they introduced the use of popular organization powered by social media. As such, the protest enjoyed a life beyond the university and beyond the incident that sparked the protest.<sup>36</sup> Noting this use of digital defiance, the al-Bashir regime stepped up its surveillance. According to the 2018 State Department Sudan Country Report:

*[Sudan's] The Interim National Constitution provides for freedom of the press, but authorities prevented newspapers from reporting on issues they deemed sensitive. Throughout the year [2017-18] the government verbally warned newspapers of red line topics on which the press could not report. Such topics included corruption, university protests, the weak economy and declining value of the Sudanese pound, deaths of persons in detention, the fuel crisis, government security services, and government action in conflict areas. Measures taken by the government included regular and direct prepublication censorship.<sup>37</sup>*

The al-Bashir regime would punish its opponents by arresting them without charge and keeping them prisoner for extended periods, without trial.<sup>38</sup> After a period that might stretch from days to months, they might be charged or tried. As such, political prisoners could be incarcerated for years. In June 2018, President al-Bashir pressed for and received parliamentary approval for a standing prison sentence of two to three years to combat *cybercrimes*, including the broadcasting of news that was critical of the regime.<sup>39</sup>

Paradoxically, Sudanese women and youth were increasing their criticism of the regime, with many of them expressing their opposition to the al-Bashir regime using social media. The confluence of antiquity and modernity was especially compelling when women, issuing protesting directives on their smart phones, began to take to the streets wearing long discarded toabs (pronounced thawbs). The practicality of the smart phone and the symbolism of the white toab, worn by grandmothers who protested colonial rule, were not lost on older generations of Sudanese.<sup>40</sup> The intersecting and reinforcing weave of women's cultural, political, and trade organizations in the years leading to independence remained in the national political consciousness, even as the regime criminalized civil society and waged war instead.

From the beginning of the Spring in December 2019, government security forces, particularly the NISS, responded to the protests with excessive force, using live ammunition to disperse unarmed protesters.<sup>41</sup> The NISS rounded up thousands of protesters, opposition leaders, organizers, and activists, often violently, and detained hundreds without charge for months, beating and abusing many. Government agencies censored the media by confiscating newspapers, arresting journalists, blocking social media, and shutting down or expelling foreign media.<sup>42</sup>

### THE SUDANESE SUMMER: THE ROLE OF GENDER IN A DIGITIZED CIVIL SOCIETY

The uprising would sustain months of withering attacks. In the days between December 2018 and April 2019, international media would learn through social media that the persistent planning of the FFC promoting continued civil disobedience was beginning to have an impact.<sup>43</sup> Initially, these regular demonstrations took place every Friday, but soon these episodic gatherings gave way to daily displays of political resistance. Then the military stepped in. After that, and according to a variety of internet and print narratives provided by the Sudan Professionals Association (SPA), women emerged as leaders at the forefront of protest, “amplifying the voices in the street and serving as an organizational backbone for the movement.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to professional women, a tech-savvy infantry and many new graduates helped sustain the movement through their growing numbers in real and virtual protests.<sup>45</sup> President al-Bashir realized too late the efficacy of virtual protests. Ultimately, he restricted internet and other media usage. Netblocks, a self-described global “civil society striv[ing] for an open and inclusive digital future,” documented the government’s attempt to limit digital traffic.<sup>46</sup> According to Bill Toulas:

*While the streets were rampant with teargas and even live ammunition, the internet users in the country were experiencing widespread blocks, mainly affecting access to popular social media platforms. According to a Netblocks report, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Periscope, were all blocked on the ISP (Internet Service Provider) level. The operators that imposed the blocks include SDN, MTN, Sudatel and Kanartel, group that accounts for the vast majority of the country’s internet services. To cover the rest as well, an extensive power outage that disabled 45% of all communications in Sudan followed shortly. The government arrested nearly fifty professional women in the early months of the uprising.*<sup>47</sup>



According to Awad and Ali, the al-Bashir regime:

*Detain[ed] activists and denounce [d] 'those who conspire' against the state and 'seek to attack.' Government forces have also attacked hospitals and doctors who attempted to heal protestors, while interrogating and censoring journalist reporting on protests - labeling them 'agitators' for 'incitement of hatred against the state.'*<sup>48</sup>

The persistent bullying by the al-Bashir regime of civil society leaders, notably women and medical professionals, follows a pattern of behavior exhibited by many state leaders throughout the MENA Spring(s). As international support of women protesting grew, President al-Bashir announced the release of all women prisoners on International Women's Day. This included the women leaders of numerous civil society groups, most notably Adeela Al Zebaq, president of the Sudanese Women's Union. This late gesture, would not, however, silence calls for his removal. According to Declan Walsh:

*General Abdelkhalig and other senior generals ousted Mr. Al-Bashir in a bloodless coup in the predawn darkness of April 11. They used jamming devices to block his cellphones, and when he realized he'd been outmaneuvered, Mr. Al-Bashir was stunned and furious, General Abdelkhalig said, revealing for the first time, details of how the military gave way to civilian protest, and engineered a coup.*<sup>49</sup>

The victory was astonishing. Civil society leaders, notably women, convinced the military to remove their strong man. Even more astounding was that President al-Bashir was removed using the same tactics he used on protesters. After President al-Bashir was arrested, negotiations between civilian and military authorities began almost immediately. The Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the FFC agreed that Ambassador Abdalla Hamdok, a British-trained Sudanese economist and diplomat, should act as Prime Minister. Minister Hamdok, who had served most recently as Deputy Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, was sworn in on August 21, 2019. Almost immediately, the scale of what would be required to establish good relations with civilians was clear. In October, the prime minister began replacing numerous al-Bashir officials with civilian leaders.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding gender equity, Hamdok appointed women to positions as Foreign Minister and Chief Justice, as well as other ministerial positions. In November 2019, he used social media to issue a statement repealing all laws restricting women, dress, work, and association.<sup>51</sup> Embracing civil authority, Sudanese women have put their faith in pressing for gender equity even if there is no guarantee of achieving parity. Meanwhile, work on gender equity continues. Huda Shafiq of MANSAM suggested that while Prime Minister Hamdok has made important appointments, the need to expand participation in governance and to achieve parity was important. According to Shafiq:

*We actually put together a database of women specialized in each different sector, so when the ministers of the cabinet were formed, we submitted candidates for each ministry with full CVs. Yet still we only have four ministers. Assigning women to these top positions is a step forward but we are not being fairly represented.*<sup>52</sup>

## THE WAVE FORWARD: INSTITUTIONALIZING NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND ALERT SOCIETIES

Trade unionism in Sudan created a bulwark against anti-civilian elements within the military. Youth and women in Sudan, throughout the MENA region, and across Africa, seem aware of potential threats, and seem poised to move civil society forward. In 2018, the African Union (AU) appointed Aya Chebbi, a young female Tunisian activist, to be the first ever AU Youth Envoy. Founder of Afresist, a youth leadership program and multimedia platform, Chebbi is also cofounder of other youth and technology-led organizations. As the AU youth delegate, she is responsible for assisting the AU in pursuing its Demographic Dividend Roadmap. The roadmap seeks to promote “investment in Africa’s young people in the areas of employment and entrepreneurship, education and skills development, health and wellbeing, and rights, governance and youth empowerment.”<sup>53</sup> This is a tall order, but as a proponent of social media and a leader in African youth and civil society, Chebbi reflects a new group of skilled and organized citizens. This *emerging-technologies* generation is a fourth wave of democratic activists who are not bound by territory.

The democratic springs in the MENA region have indicated that fourth wave feminist activism is an important and energizing factor in fourth wave democratic governance.<sup>54</sup> The AU appointment of Chebbi—a youth leader, a woman, and an expert in digital technologies—indicates that representatives of African civil society believe that the future is female and the revolution will be digitized. This sentiment is echoed elsewhere. More specifically, in 2018, the European International Institute for the Sociology of Law convened a conference which focused on the intersection of the fourth wave of feminism and social media, international networking, and global governance. In the broader Middle East, and most recently during the Arab Spring, fourth wave feminism was also on display. Despite *democratic reversals*, its leaders created a space for emerging members of civil society. As young women continue to use social media, mobilizing diverse swathes of their national community, their kind of persistent and virtual activism may be the best response to third wave authoritarianism. This virtual organizing may be vital in countries which lack a politically engaged civil society.

Not all women or people, young or old, have access to a computer or even a smart phone. Lack of access to emerging technologies in this era, like a lack of access to education or money in previous eras, can limit participation in democratic governance.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, developing and promoting traditional working and civic associations remains relevant. Taken together with traditional trade unionists, which have historically protected members from public and tangible aggressions of the state, young women and men may find that they are obliged to regularly join

democratic protests in order to safeguard digitized civil society from the private, virtual attacks of aspiring authorities.<sup>56</sup>

This conflict between the state and civil society will continue in both the real and virtual realms of modern political activism. In MENA countries, climate change and food shortages exacerbate problems and sharpen the *restiveness of most publics*.<sup>57</sup> To keep political conditions favorable, MENA activists may have to revisit the winning strategy of the 2011-2012 springs—forming broad coalitions that can check the praetorian excesses of militaries. These popular coalitions, increasingly joined and led by tech-savvy women, will also have to seek out and promote the kind of civilian leadership that is willing to spend more money on bread than on guns. Two years have passed since Sudan's 2019 spring. Economic and political obstacles to peace, reconciliation, and growth are *staggering*, but Sudanese activists continue to press for civilian participation and progress.<sup>58</sup>

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# FAKE NEWS, CORRUPTION, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE MNANGAGWA REGIME, 2017-2021

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## ABSTRACT

This manuscript evaluates fake news receptivity among Zimbabwean citizens. It argues that the Mnangagwa regime has utilized fake news via traditional and online digital platforms with the purpose of destroying the political opposition and vindicating the state's role in corruption and human rights abuses since 2017. The study's findings were collected from a sample of 100 respondents from both the incumbent Mnangagwa regime and political opposition stalwarts. The research concluded that the state-sponsored fake news campaign has, to a larger extent, failed to appeal to the wider Zimbabwean population except for a small segment made up of ruling party loyalists profiting from the status quo.

## INTRODUCTION

This study sought to interrogate the depth of state-sponsored fake news receptivity among Zimbabwean citizens from diverse socio-economic and political backgrounds. It was conducted using three variables: fake news undermining the role of corruption by incumbent government officials; fake news rejecting the state's role in human rights abuses; and fake news directed at extinguishing the political opposition. The study argues that there is overwhelming evidence that implicates the Mnangagwa regime in corruption and gross human rights abuses against journalists, civil rights, and political activists.<sup>1</sup> According to the Transparency International corruption list, Zimbabwe is ranked at 160 out of 175 countries.<sup>2</sup> This is slightly behind Nigeria, whose corruption is perceived to be endemic for decades, and just above Iraq, whose corruption is considered a greater threat to domestic stability than terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Also, Zimbabwe is among several nations where comprehensive and targeted sanctions regimes have been imposed due to human rights abuses, specifically civil and political rights. Apart from Zimbabwe, other nations on the sanctions list include Belarus, Burundi, and Cuba.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, agents of the Mnangagwa regime have indiscriminately incarcerated, tortured, maimed, and murdered Zimbabwe's political opposition, journalists, and civil rights activists. Hove and Chenzi also stated that:

*Since Mnangagwa came into power, human rights abuses and deaths have been recorded. For example, alleged protesters were killed by the military on 1 August 2018 soon after the contested 30 July 2018 harmonized elections. Once more during the #ShutdownZimbabwe upheaval, at least 12 people were killed whilst 78 suffered from gunshot injuries and more than 242 reports of torture and inhumane treatment; also, 466 cases of arbitrary arrests and detentions were reported.<sup>5</sup>*

This situation in Zimbabwe has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, with cases increasing by 141 percent, whilst COVID-19 related deaths increased by 235 percent between December 31, 2020, and January 31, 2021.<sup>6</sup> There are also serious allegations that the Mnangagwa faction has weaponized COVID-19 to eliminate supporters of his lieutenant, Vice President Constantino Chiwenga.<sup>7</sup> This is grounded on the basis that five military bigwigs, who were responsible for removing Zimbabwe's erstwhile leader, President Mugabe, and are aligned to Vice President Chiwenga, have all died under suspicious circumstances but have been officially reported as COVID-19 fatalities.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, errant opposition political parties, trade union organizations, and human rights activists have been brutally suppressed under the guise of upholding COVID-19 lockdown regulations. On the other hand, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and its affiliates continue to conduct rallies, meetings, and festivities without any consequences.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, by-elections in opposition strongholds have been indefinitely suspended on the pretext of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, Zimbabwe's biggest mobile network provider Econet was barred from sending 'unsolicited' daily COVID-19 update text messages.<sup>10</sup> It was suspected that Econet's daily COVID-19 updates were making it difficult for the Mnangagwa regime to doctor figures in order to deny opposition and civil rights demonstrations on the pretext of upholding COVID-19 lockdown regulations.<sup>11</sup>

The research, therefore, argues that the incumbent Mnangagwa regime has utilized fake news for misinformation and disinformation purposes to conceal the truth regarding its role in corruption allegations, human rights abuses, and perplexing the political opposition. The misinformation and disinformation campaign by the Mnangagwa administration is spread via traditional media platforms, such as press, radio and television, and online digital platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. In this regard, Mwareya stated that financial desperation, coupled by the proliferation of digital technologies in Zimbabwe, makes it potent for the distribution of disinformation among its population. This was evidenced by a pronounced increase of internet and mobile phone penetration which increased by 52 and 85 percent respectively during the first quarter of 2018.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the study sought to identify the extent to which Zimbabweans have accepted the state-sponsored fake news by interrogating citizens from both the political opposition and the ruling ZANU-PF party. The research is significant towards understanding the understudied subject of fake news receptivity in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. The study also sheds light on the nexus between fake news, crime, and human rights in the Global South. Furthermore, the research sheds light on how autocratic governments in the developing world are using digital media platforms for misinformation and disinformation purposes.

Although there is no universally agreed definition for fake news, for the purpose of this study, fake news refers to any content that is deliberately fashioned to mislead the public, which includes gossip, deceptive information, and hoaxes.<sup>13</sup> However, in this research, conspiracy theories will not be considered as fake news because by definition they are problematic to authenticate as true or false and they are naturally created by individuals or groups who believe their conspiracies to be true.<sup>14</sup> The distinction between misinformation and disinformation can be reduced to intention. Whereas disinformation is normally used to refer to orchestrated or deliberate efforts to confuse and manipulate people, misinformation typically refers to deceptive information that has been generated or shared without malicious intent.<sup>15</sup> The study is broadly divided into four sections excluding the introduction. The first part comprises the study's methodology, whilst the second part contains the literature review. The conceptual framework forms the third segment whilst the discussion of findings constitutes the fourth and final portion.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was largely qualitative and descriptive, and it sought to shed light on the understudied phenomenon of fake news receptivity in the Global South through a Fake News Receptivity Test (FNRT) using Zimbabwe as a case study. The research was conducted in Harare—Zimbabwe's capital between February 20, 2021, and March 10, 2021. The study was largely restricted to Harare's Central Business District (CBD) due to its convenience in accessing key informants. A total of one hundred participants were purposefully sampled from Zimbabweans belonging to the two major political parties (ZANU-PF led by Emmerson Mnangagwa and Movement for Democratic Change Alliance [MDC-Alliance] led by Nelson Chamisa). The participants were selected through snowball sampling after identifying sixteen key informants based on their position and role in Zimbabwe's politics. The sixteen participants referred the researcher to the rest of the informants. From the hundred participants, fifty were supporters of the Mnangagwa regime. These included two senior military officers, eight intelligence operatives, one former Member of Parliament (MP), five junior police officers, five junior military officers, six war veterans and twenty-three members of ZANU-PF party structures. The other fifty participants were drawn from supporters of the MDC-Alliance, and they comprised of eighteen members of MDC-Alliance party structures, five human rights activists, two councilors, four nurses, eight vendors, three teachers, two lawyers, three journalists, four university students and one MP. These respondents were aged between 22 and 74 years, while 78 percent of the informants were males, and the remaining 22 percent were females. Regarding education levels of the participants, 6 percent had doctorate degrees, 38 percent had university degrees, 13 percent had college diplomas, 39 percent had high school diplomas, and the remaining 4 percent were holders of junior certificates. All the informants were able to read and write in English.

Given the diverse personalities of the people who were interviewed, it was the researchers' opinion that their views would be vital for this study. Whilst a one-hundred-person sample may appear small for a study of this nature, the research identified participants from various walks of life who represented the Zimbabwean population. Furthermore, other scholars argue that findings

from small sample populations are more reliable than larger ones since small sample sizes usually furnish highly dependable findings depending on the adopted sampling routine.<sup>16</sup>

The study utilized questionnaires that were broadly divided into two segments. The questionnaires were given to the participants after they had expressed interest to partake in the research. Thus, a sample of 100 questionnaire respondents was considered to be satisfactory to avoid data saturation. The first segment of the questionnaire was quantitative in approach, and it consisted of mostly closed-ended and pre-coded questions to permit analysis of data via Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Respondents were asked to indicate how they considered state-sponsored fake news using three variables: corruption, human rights abuses, and the political opposition's activities. They indicated their responses on a five-point scale denoted by 1-5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and five signifying strongly agree. The second section of the questionnaire consisted of only three open-ended questions drawn from each of the three variables which invited the respondents to comment on how they viewed the state-sponsored media reports on the three variables. Qualitative data was analyzed through summative content analysis and was used to support the quantitative data from the first segment of the questionnaire. The information was analyzed using SPSS to disclose descriptive statistics. Each interview session lasted between 25 to 35 minutes.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, primary data supported by secondary data from online and print media platforms was also utilized. The sources mainly consisted of both state-sponsored and anti-state reports covering issues on corruption, human rights abuses and political opposition activities. The sources provided evidence of the nature and intentions of state-sponsored fake news including evidence to prove its fallacy. All ethical protocols were observed in this study. Respondents and participants voluntarily provided their information, and they were assured that their information would be used solely for this research. To maintain anonymity, all the responses were not linked to any particular respondent or participant. However, where necessary and for the sake of emphasis, responses were linked to a group of participants, as opposed to individual participants.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, there is a growing body of literature on fake news receptivity. However, the bulk of these studies were conducted in the global north, especially in the United States. Gordon Pennycook, a professor of behavioral science, has conducted a few key studies that have evaluated people's receptivity to fake news. In 2015, Pennycook teamed up with four other scholars in a study titled, "On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound nonsense."<sup>17</sup> He described "nonsense" as something that is intended to affect; though, it has been created without consideration for the truth. Lying in contrast involves a deliberate subversion and manipulation of the facts.<sup>18</sup> Pennycook et al came up with three questions: 1) Is the audience capable of detecting blatant nonsense? 2) Who is most likely to fall prey to nonsense and 3) why? Using hundreds of participants and the BRT to assess if a person is likely to accept nonsense as real news, Pennycook and his team discovered that people differ in their proclivity to attribute profundity to nonsense

statements. That is, people with inferior cognitive aptitude are more susceptible to ontological misperceptions and conspiratorial ideation.<sup>19</sup>

Using the BRT, Pennycook and Rand published a manuscript that disclosed that exposure to fake news is appropriately explicated by a dearth of perception, rather than motivated reasoning.<sup>20</sup> They also critiqued Kahan's motivated reasoning approach that was used to describe fake news acceptance, as it suggested that belief in political fake news was primarily motivated by partisanship. For example, people are more inclined to fake news information that is agreeable to their political ideology.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the motivated reasoning explanation has been suspected to predict a positive rapport between analytic reasoning and hypothetical accuracy of politically consistent fake news headlines or that political polarization augments with more analytical reasoning.<sup>22</sup> However, by conducting research that involved over 3,000 participants, Pennycook and Rand identified constant evidence that people who are more keen to reason analytically when given a set of reasoning problems are less likely to mistakenly reason that fake news is truthful, irrespective of their political ideology.<sup>23</sup>

On a similar note, Anthony and Moulding conducted a study that indicated that cognition and political identity are factors that influence fake news reception.<sup>24</sup> In a U.S. study, participants were evaluated on a Political Identity Scale (PIS) ranging from 0 (strongly pro-Clinton) to 100 (strongly pro-Trump). It was discovered that the closer a participant was to a score of 100 on the PIS, the more they regarded fake news about Hillary Clinton as accurate.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, for participants with a score closer to 0 on the PIS, in other words, those who were more pro-Clinton, the more they evaluated fake news about Donald Trump as truthful.<sup>26</sup>

Outside of the U.S., results obtained from a study with Saudi Arabian participants showed that fake news acceptance was determined by three demographic categories: gender, age and education. Age had the highest consequence on the reception of fake news.<sup>27</sup> Education, on the other hand, displayed a negative result, which led scholars to conclude that education negatively influences the acceptance of fake news. It was also discovered that culture was not a direct factor of fake news acceptance; nevertheless, it did have a noteworthy effect on the spread of fake news.<sup>28</sup>

In the Global South, dis- and misinformation campaigns are also utilized by governments to realize various goals which may not be in the best interest of the citizenry. There is still a dearth of literature on fake news acceptance. For example, Chenzi conducted a study that argued that the proliferation of digital technology and social media platforms in the African continent is intensifying xenophobic violence in South Africa and other parts of the African continent. His main argument was that xenophobic fake news disseminated by both indigenous South Africans (autochthons) and foreign migrants (aliens) living in South Africa via online echo chambers increased xenophobic tensions. That is, through these online echo chambers, they share and discuss confirmatory information which usually contains deliberately false claims which intensify tension during xenophobic episodes within and outside South Africa.<sup>29</sup> Although scholars generally agree that fake news has a part to play in Africa's socio-economic and political landscape, the bulk of the literature has tended to explore the consequences of accepting fake news as truth.<sup>30</sup> Therefore,

there is still a need to conduct research focusing on the subject of fake news acceptance within the African continent.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research subscribes to the counter-publics theory. Counter-publics communities are spaces where marginalized subaltern underbellies of society utilize alternative media platforms to challenge the state and the political elites in power. The study posits that the anti-state counter-publics communities thrived during the Mugabe era and were instrumental in his deposition.<sup>31</sup> In Zimbabwe, the counter-publics communities mainly utilized Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to organize pockets of resistance, where issues ranging from state corruption, human rights abuses, and electoral fraud were freely discussed without fear of the state and its agents. These counter-publics communities acted as echo chambers, where elements opposed to the government freely congregated. Jamieson and Cappella expound that the allegory of an echo chamber refers to a space where common reference frames and reinforcing feedback loops are generated for those who listen to, read and watch media from particular platforms.<sup>32</sup> Since 2000, the Zimbabwean government imposed a monopoly on all traditional media outlets, reducing them to mouthpieces for government propaganda.<sup>33</sup> This forced elements that were opposed to the state to conceal themselves in online digital echo chambers with the intention of enjoying the media freedoms that the state denied them. However, echo chambers tend to have a downside, as debates among like-minded individuals, who are shut off from external sentiments, can have a negative effect on the emotions of individual members within the cluster and reinforce group polarization.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, experimental evidence has revealed that confirmatory information shared within echo chambers gets easily accepted, even if it contains deliberately false claims.<sup>35</sup>

A direct connection between fake news, corruption, and human rights abuses exists in Zimbabwe. That is, fake news sponsored by the state has been utilized to deny the existence of corruption and human rights abuses. Since the ascendancy to power by Emmerson Mnangagwa following the November 2017 coup, fake news through misinformation and disinformation campaigns have been a weapon of choice for the Mnangagwa regime. This does not imply that there were no misinformation and disinformation campaigns before Mnangagwa's ascendancy to the presidency. Under the Mugabe regime, there was similarly rampant state-sponsored fake news.<sup>36</sup> However, the misinformation and disinformation by the Mugabe regime was limited to the public sphere via traditional media platforms, such as press, radio and television, which allowed the opposition community to congregate online by forming digital counter-publics communities. These online communities dispelled the state-sponsored fake news and mobilized anti-state resistance.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the Mugabe regime, the Mnangagwa regime increased its tempo by utilizing both traditional and online digital platforms to destroy the anti-state digital counter-publics communities by recruiting moles to spread fake news on the counter-publics spaces.<sup>38</sup>

The counter-publics theory posits that the proliferation of media platforms, in this case internet social media to the general public can influence widespread political revolt.<sup>39</sup> The marginalized citizens often embrace and make use of these alternative media platforms to create counter-



hegemonic cyber-communities to confront the state and the political elites in power.<sup>40</sup> In Zimbabwe, the existence of suffocating regulations including the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) of 2002, and Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) of 2002 which violated personal freedoms of assembly, expression and opinion led many to embrace digital counter-publics communities.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Susen also postulated that:

*Social groups that are excluded from sharing the monopoly of symbolic violence in a given society have an interest in creating alternative public spheres that are materially sustained by counter-hegemonic practices and ideologically legitimated by counter-hegemonic discourses. The empowering potentials of alternative public spheres emanate from their capacity to challenge the legitimacy of dominant practices and dominant discourses by creating counter-hegemonic realms based on alternative practices and alternative discourses.*<sup>42</sup>

Zimbabweans especially members of the political opposition embraced alternative counter-publics spaces to challenge the state especially in the post-2009 era when economic reforms led to the proliferation of digital media technologies.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, these digital counter-publics spaces especially, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook enabled marginalized Zimbabweans to circumvent legal constraints and challenge the authoritarian state. Hence in 2016 alone, Zimbabwe recorded over forty civilian-led demonstrations which were spearheaded by digital counter-publics communities.<sup>44</sup> In this regard, the emergence of the Mnangagwa regime in 2017 coupled by a volatile counter-publics community led the government to also embrace digital counter-publics communities by proxy through state sponsored agents known as *Varakashi*.

Hence, it is against this background that this study subscribes to the counter-publics theory as the appropriate theoretical framework.<sup>45</sup> The Mnangagwa regime utilized the public sphere of press, radio, and television, yet most Zimbabweans distrusted the public media since it had been reduced to ruling party propaganda tools.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the real threat of the state-sponsored fake news was felt on the online digital counter-publics platforms.

The anti-government digital counter-publics spaces were mainly dominated by members from Zimbabwe's urban regions, which are technologically advanced and are also centers of the opposition MDC-Alliance. These digital counter-publics spaces emerged during the 2009 period following the Government of National Unity (GNU) between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the MDC formations.<sup>47</sup> Graphic images, videos, audio recordings and documents which implicated members of the ruling party on issues regarding corruption, gross economic mismanagement, poor service provision, abductions, police and military brutality and extrajudicial killings were openly shared and discussed.<sup>48</sup> There is overwhelming evidence on these digital counter-publics spaces to suggest that Zimbabwe's economic crisis is largely a consequence of the corrupt cartel activities linked to the ruling ZANU-PF party. According to the *Maverick Citizen's* "Report on Cartel Power Dynamics in Zimbabwe," dishonest cartels run the country in order to fulfil a monopolistic role, fix prices, and stifle competition and are comprised of influential politicians and private sector

players.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, there is serious entanglement and abuse of institutions for managing property rights, law, and finance. This is more pronounced in the mining, transport, and agriculture sectors to facilitate rent-seeking by cartels.<sup>50</sup> Zimbabwe's political patrons, especially from the ZANU-PF party, are at the center of virtually all cartels—aiding public and private sector bureaucrats and businesses loyal to them from which they accrue illicit profits. The chairperson of the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) Justice Loice Matanda-Moyo also reported that illicit cross-border transactions alone cost the country USD \$3 billion each year.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, evaluations suggest that gold worth more than USD \$1.5 billion is smuggled out of Zimbabwe each year, often ending up in Dubai. Moreover, there are reports that Zimbabwe's diamond industry lost billions of dollars' worth of diamonds still unaccounted for, the value of which is conceivably as high as USD \$15 billion.<sup>52</sup>

Billions of dollars have been fraudulently taken from ordinary citizens as a result of the cartels domestic activities. Corrupt private sector players and public bureaucrats are the recipients of these funds. In addition, Zimbabwe loses a billion dollars each year from corruption by police, education, transport and local government officials according to the Transparency International Zimbabwe (TIZ) report.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the report implicated Zimbabwe's incumbent president in a scandalous deal that immediately depreciated by 23 percent the value of the country's currency.<sup>54</sup> Added to that, the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development's (ZCDD) analysis of the 2018 Zimbabwe Auditor General report revealed that:

*In 2018, transactions worth US\$5.8 billion, EUR5 million and 319 thousand South African Rand had financial irregularities ranging from unsupported expenditure, excess expenditure, outstanding payments to suppliers of goods and services, transfers of funds without treasury approval among other issues. This constitutes about 82 percent of government expenditure for 2018.*<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, the majority of Zimbabweans live from hand to mouth and the members of the political opposition and Western nations attribute these corrupt activities as the main cause of Zimbabwe's economic crisis. However, through the agency of traditional and digital media platforms, the ruling ZANU-PF party utilized fake news (mis – and disinformation) to deny its role in the corruption scandals. Instead, the responsibility for failing to deliver public goods is attributed to the “illegal” sanctions imposed by the United States and its Western allies.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, this study sought to analyze the degree of receptivity of the false state-sponsored narrative denying its role in corruption, human rights abuses and the underperforming economy by sampling Zimbabweans who are generally the main target of the fake news campaign.

Besides corruption, state-backed human rights abuses in Zimbabwe under the Mnangagwa regime are endemic and fake news has been utilized to conceal the abuses; that is, the freedom of expression and the press has been brutally suppressed. Journalists and activists are frequently arrested, imprisoned and occasionally tortured and murdered. On March 6, 2021, the MDC-Alliance national chairperson Thabitha Khumalo was attacked and left for dead at her residence

whilst Lovernder Chiwaya, former MDC-Alliance Hurungwe Councilor was abducted and murdered on August 20, 2020.<sup>57</sup> In Zimbabwe, more than 5,500 abductions were recorded since 2000.<sup>58</sup> During the August 1, 2018, January 14-17, 2019 and August 16-22, 2019 protests, a total of 23 protestors were killed, at least 17 women were raped, 81 suffered gunshot wounds, whilst more than 1,000 civilians were summarily imprisoned as suspected protesters during door-to-door raids.<sup>59</sup> Out of the 23 murdered protesters, twenty of the victims died from gunshots, while three died from injuries sustained following severe beatings.<sup>60</sup>

These former victims recalled graphic memories of being forced to endure horrendous abuse at the hands of masked assailants. This included being beaten and denied food for days, electrocution, rape, death threats and being forced to consume each other's bodily fluids.<sup>61</sup> However, these activities have not gone unnoticed by the general public through anti-government digital counter-publics spheres, which have exposed the abuses to the world. Jonathan Moyo a former ZANU-PF member during the Mugabe regime, exposed the identity of the faceless group behind the clandestine killings, torture and abductions on his Twitter account. He stated that the assailants were all affiliated to ZANU-PF, but some were either employed by the dreaded secret police or Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), or Military Intelligence Division (MID).<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, these topics had a negative effect on the Mnangagwa regime. Particularly, electoral defeat evidenced by the 2018 harmonized elections whereby the Solidarity Peace Trust (SPT) reported that due to the disgruntled electorate, the MDC-Alliance won 71.12 percent and 66.32 percent of the presidential vote in Harare and Bulawayo, respectively, which are Zimbabwe's major urban centers.<sup>63</sup> The urban electorate felt that a change in government was in order so as to curtail human rights abuses, corruption, and improve public service provisions.<sup>64</sup> The other effect of the anti-state online counter-publics community activities was that they led to the polarization of the Zimbabwean government by the international community due to human rights abuses. On February 1, 2021, The United Kingdom announced its first set of sanctions against Zimbabwe for human rights violations, which included a travel ban and asset freeze.<sup>65</sup> It cited a crackdown on protests in January 2019 and post-election violence in 2018, which all led to the deaths of 23 Zimbabwean protestors. These sanctions targeted four Zimbabwean senior security officials: Minister for State Security Owen Ncube, CIO Chief Isaac Moyo, ZRP Commissioner General Godwin Matanga, and former commander of the presidential guard Anselem Sanyatwa.<sup>66</sup> Again, U.S. President Joe Biden extended sanctions against Zimbabwe's government officials for another year, including Emmerson Mnangagwa from March 6, 2021. President Biden cited issues regarding the absence of progress on the most fundamental reforms needed to guarantee the rule of law, democratic governance, and the protection of human rights.<sup>67</sup>

The other effect of the negative publicity by anti-government digital counter-publics communities was low foreign direct investment (FDI). This was despite the Mnangagwa regime's assurances that Zimbabwe was once again ready to reengage with the international community through its mantra, "Zimbabwe is open for business." Nevertheless, Zimbabwe remained a pariah state for international investors, who cited state corruption, political instability and economic

uncertainty fueled by hyperinflation tagged at a yearly average of 838 percent.<sup>68</sup> The counter-publics community also encouraged nationwide anti-government civil unrest on August 1, 2018, January 14-17, 2019, and August 16-22, 2019. They also quoted the government's complicity regarding high inflation, eroded incomes, food insecurity, and shortages of fuel and water.<sup>69</sup>

To avert the unceasing tide of online criticism and its negative consequences, the Mnangagwa regime created its own anonymous shadow organization of social media trolls utilizing similar counter-publics spaces to spread fake news on its behalf best-known locally as *Varakashi*. The faceless group *Varakashi* was officially launched in May 2018 by President Emmerson Mnangagwa during a political rally towards the July 2018 elections. *Varakashi* have used all forms of underhand dealings to tarnish and destroy the lives and social standing of their online targets. These activities have ranged from lies, exaggerations, fabrications, hate speech and even hacking. This group is mainly composed of unemployed youths, state security operatives and ZANU-PF sympathizers. Therefore, *Varakashi* became instrumental in spreading fake news online on behalf of the Mnangagwa regime. The word *varakashi* is derived from Shona, Zimbabwe's main indigenous language, and it directly translates to the English word *destroyers*. The name resonated with the primary purpose of the group, which was to "disrupt online debates and stymie criticism against the Mnangagwa regime."<sup>70</sup> At the inauguration of *Varakashi*, President Mnangagwa stated that, "Some of us are old; you are still youthful and masters of technology. The new digital chatrooms are war rooms. Jump in and hammer party enemies online. Don't play second fiddle."<sup>71</sup> The paper argues that the emergence of *Varakashi* was motivated by the desire to counter the pro-opposition counter-publics echo chambers by puncturing holes through state-sponsored narratives laced with misinformation and disinformation. This was driven by the desire to win the urban electorate, dispel allegations of state involvement in corruption and human rights abuses, exonerate the Mnangagwa regime's role in Zimbabwe's crisis, and boost foreign investor confidence.

Different countries have experienced the challenges of fake news differently since it is a heterogeneous phenomenon that has been used for varying motives.<sup>72</sup> In the Zimbabwean case, fake news is at the very center of the Mnangagwa regime's effort to sanitize its image both locally and abroad. Through the agency of *Varakashi* and state-controlled media, the Mnangagwa regime embarked on a misinformation and disinformation campaign to counter allegations regarding its involvement in corruption, human rights abuses and violating the rule of law. On the issue of the alleged abductions and torture of journalists and activists, fake news through misinformation and disinformation by *Varakashi* was utilized in denying the allegations. Instead, the heinous acts were blamed on a "third force" or accusing the victims of staging false abductions and torture allegations to soil the "good name" of the Mnangagwa regime.<sup>73</sup> As a case in point, Zimbabweans were astounded with disbelief following the testimony by two army generals at the commission of inquiry into the August 1, 2018, shootings in Harare following the country's disputed elections. Although the shooting of the civilians was captured on camera by dozens of foreign journalists, the generals denied that government troops were involved.<sup>74</sup> Instead, the military accused the opposition MDC-Alliance for the shooting.<sup>75</sup>

Again, the Mnangagwa regime, through its media channels, strongly denied any corruption activities by its affiliated members or its devastating effects on Zimbabwe's economy despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>76</sup> Instead, it launched a global state-sponsored misinformation and disinformation campaign which attributed the Zimbabwean crisis to "illegal sanctions" by the United States and its allies.<sup>77</sup> Sanctions, rather than corruption, were pointed out by the Zimbabwean government as the primary cause of Zimbabwe's woes. Consequently, October 25, 2019 was declared a public holiday to facilitate an "anti-sanction march" in Harare.<sup>78</sup> The Mnangagwa regime utilized its traditional and digital media platforms to embark on a misinformation and disinformation campaign which blamed sanctions for everything including economic collapse, low FDI, unemployment, poor service delivery, famine and even low pass rates in local schools.<sup>79</sup> However, it has also been discovered that sanctions can provide autocratic regimes with an excuse to obscure economic misconduct and fraud, while the public shoulders the burden of heightened resource shortage and deteriorating livelihoods.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, through its misinformation and disinformation outlets, the Mnangagwa regime also downplayed the impact of corruption and argued that it was doing everything in its power to bring to justice all alleged corrupt officials through the ZACC.<sup>81</sup>

The Mnangagwa regime also utilized fake news to destroy the opposition MDC-Alliance and its members. Between August 16-22, 2019, the MDC-Alliance had intended to organize a wave of nationwide nonviolent protests to compel President Mnangagwa to resign due to increasing socio-economic and political challenges affecting Zimbabwe.<sup>82</sup> However, on the eve of the protests, the ZRP appealed to the High Court to accept a claim that the MDC-Alliance was organizing a violent protest. In support of this, the police alleged that they had seized bags of granite stones and dozens of catapults from two unmarked automobiles a few days before the protests, although there was no evidence linking the contraband to the MDC-Alliance.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the High Court granted the petition, and the report was broadcast on state-affiliated online and public media outlets. Consequently, the protests were violently suppressed by heavily armed police.<sup>84</sup>

Again, Nelson Chamisa, the leader of MDC-Alliance, has been a target of fake news attacks by the agents of the Mnangagwa regime or *Varakashi*. In February 2019, Chamisa fell victim to an online attack by a ZANU-PF propagandist and member of *Varakashi* using the Facebook name Jones Musara. Musara used his own Facebook page to post allegations that the MDC-Alliance leader was having an extramarital affair with a Harare woman.<sup>85</sup> The accusation was meant to disqualify Chamisa from the electorate since he was challenging Mnangagwa's presidential victory in the highly contested July 2018 elections. Yet again, Chamisa fell victim to fake news after another member of *Varakashi* posted a viral crudely doctored WhatsApp conversation purported to be between Chamisa and Charlton Hwende, a Kuwadzana East MP.<sup>86</sup> The doctored messages appeared as if Chamisa and Hwende were overjoyed over a planned violent demonstration led by the Matebele minority, which was to be staged in May 2019 to overthrow the Mnangagwa regime.<sup>87</sup> The intention of the post was to score a number of victories for the Mnangagwa regime, such as creating enmity between Chamisa and his Matebele support base; deliberately providing the police with compelling evidence to prohibit a planned MDC-Alliance demonstration; and



imprisoning Chamisa for treasonous charges. In July 2019, members of *Varakashi* hacked Chamisa's Twitter account and posted comments which appeared to portray that the opposition leader was supporting the Mnangagwa regime's unpopular policies.<sup>88</sup> The hacking and posting of the controversial comments by *Varakashi* disguised as the opposition leader was meant to do irreparable damage to the image of the opposition leader and the MDC-Alliance in the eyes of the opposition electorate. Drawing from the above stated state-sponsored fake news campaigns, the study further investigated the extent to which Zimbabweans in particular and the international community in general accepted the Mnangagwa regime's fake news crusade.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The paper conducted a FNRT to assess whether the state-sponsored fake news campaign to sanitize its role in corruption, human rights abuses and incriminating the political opposition was effective. The results obtained from the FNRT indicated that fake news acceptance was primarily determined by political affiliation more than anything else. That is, 67 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that the Mnangagwa regime was complicit in human rights abuses, corruption and destroying the political opposition. The 67 percent was made up of fifty respondents from the political opposition and seventeen respondents from the Mnangagwa regime affiliates. These associates comprised of members from the security sector, such as junior police, military, and intelligence operatives. It appears that although junior members of Zimbabwe's security sector are enforcers of the Mnangagwa regime's will, which makes them de facto ZANU-PF supporters, they do not genuinely buy into the misinformation and disinformation campaign. Instead, their duty to the government as civil servants makes them unwilling tools of the Mnangagwa regime.<sup>89</sup>

The remaining 33 percent which agreed with the Mnangagwa regime's fake news campaign largely comprised of ZANU-PF stalwarts, including senior military officers, MPs, war veterans and members of ZANU-PF party structures. There are several reasons why they accept state-sponsored fake news. Namely, these individuals are chiefly the ones enjoying the *status quo* and are the same people largely responsible for the propagation of fake news.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, this makes the FNRT a question of political affiliation. This scenario echoes Anthony and Moulding's findings that cognition and political identity are factors that influence fake news reception.<sup>91</sup> However, unlike Anthony and Moulding, in Zimbabwe the FNRT is determined primarily by political identity more than anything else. This is because the 33 percent which agreed with the state propagation comprised of people with various educational, gender, economic, age and occupational backgrounds but belonging to the same political party. To this end, it can be gleaned from the FNRT's findings that the state-sponsored fake news campaign has been a failure since the bulk of the political opposition, and some of the agents of the Mnangagwa regime itself, do not agree with the misinformation and disinformation.

Furthermore, there is evidence to support the findings that the state-sponsored fake news has failed to convince Zimbabweans that the Mnangagwa regime is not involved in corruption, human rights abuses and political opposition victimization. The October 25, 2019 "anti-sanction march," for example, was spoiled by poor attendance and a survey by Eyewitness News reported that



numerous citizens argued that the march failed to address the issue of biting economic depression, which citizens believed was primarily instigated by the state.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Zimbabwe remains a pariah state in the international community since FDI remains stagnant. More so, members of the Mnangagwa regime, including President Emmerson Mnangagwa himself, remain on the targeted sanctions list for human rights abuses despite extensive misinformation and disinformation campaigns to exonerate the regime.

## CONCLUSION

Zimbabwe remains a pariah state within the international system characterized by corruption, human rights abuses, and repression of the political opposition. Recent technological advances have only made matters worse. The proliferation of online digital technologies has only become a weapon of choice for the Mnangagwa regime to expand its fake news campaign to sanitize its role in gross human rights abuses, corruption, and political chicanery. Fortunately, this misinformation and disinformation crusade has largely failed to exonerate the regime in the eyes of both Zimbabwean citizens and the international community.

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