

WEAPONIZING INFORMATION: THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF DISINFORMATION

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Abstract

Geopolitical events, hybrid threats, and political agendas, particularly of a populist nature, are increasingly pervasive in global media, therefore the imperative to understand the intricacies of disinformation extends beyond mere countermeasures. To effectively mitigate the spread and creation of disinformation, an examination of the primary reasons contributing to its emergence is essential, thus the primary objective of the research is to investigate the most common reasons for the emergence of disinformation and assess its impact on society. The methodology used employs a diverse range of methods, including literature analysis, content analysis, historical methods, and legal interpretation where applicable. Furthermore, it utilizes general scientific techniques such as induction, deduction, and synthesis.

Keywords: Disinformation, political psychology, political agendas, manipulation

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Introduction

Contrary to a common perception that “fake news is not new – it is probably as old as humanity” (Townsend, 2017), it likely existed as long as humans learned to communicate in a common language. As societies developed languages and sophisticated methods of communicating information, the manipulation of that knowledge for multiple reasons was unavoidable. This historical intertwining of communication and deception raises numerous important questions: When did disinformation first become a serious instrument for political influence? Is disinformation intended to achieve goals other than those of politics? And, most importantly, what are the broader societal implications of this widespread practice? The exploration of these topics is the foundation of our research, which seeks to discover the diverse nature and deep implications of deception. Our research begins with an overview of the historical anthropology of disinformation, charting its history through different eras. From ancient civilizations to modern democracies, the deliberate transmission of false or misleading information has been a continual instrument of manipulation, reflecting the complex interplay of knowledge, power, and society dynamics. Our research will delve into the political psychology of disinformation and then investigate the mechanisms by which misinformation affects human cognition, emotions, and political behavior. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of how people perceive and react to disinformation allows us to gain insight into its efficacy and the threats it presents to rational debate and democratic institutions. The spread of disinformation threatens to undermine the fundamental ideals of informed citizenry and accountability, weakening public trust and increasing societal divides. This study examines the effects of disinformation via a political perspective, highlighting the vital need for legislation to combat disinformation and foster a more informed, resilient public discussion.

A Historical Perspective

Throughout history, humanity has had a complex relationship with disinformation, including information manipulation. Distinguishing between truth and untruth has always been difficult, with people regularly attempting to alter the informational environment in their favour. Although contemporary technology may exacerbate our continual fight with information, resolving the problem of misinformation necessitates a focus on human-centred solutions (Green et al., 2023, p. 3-4). Examples of our intricate relationship with information and all of its distortions date back to the ancient Greeks. Thucydides, an Athenian general who found himself exiled during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE), a significant conflict that saw Sparta and Athens as adversaries, dedicated his time to meticulously documenting the events of the war. Both city-states heavily relied on disinformation methods during this lengthy conflict to undermine their opponent's determination and thwart their strategic goals. These early psychological warfare techniques, as detailed in Thucydides' work and translated by Crawley in 1874, included fabricating information, overstating military might, and misleading the adversary about troop movements to create doubt and erode confidence both within and between the opposing groups (Thucydides, 1950, p.108; p. 210). The meticulous effort Thucydides made to confirm facts with eyewitnesses demonstrated his methodology, which established a new benchmark for accuracy and veracity in historical reporting. It is meant to last and assist individuals who are trying to comprehend the intricacies of human political dynamics. Thucydides' story serves as a testament to the importance of critical engagement with information, a notion particularly applicable in comprehending or combatting misinformation, by refusing to simplify or slant his tales (Dewald, et al., 2020).

This critical approach to information, emphasizing scrutiny and the avoidance of bias, forms a bridge to the Renaissance period. Developed by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-15th century, the printing press revolutionized the way information was produced, disseminated, and accessed (Giles, 1996, p. 613). While the printing press was a groundbreaking invention, its ability to rapidly disseminate ideas facilitated the propagation of misinformation, sparking controversies and prompting governments and religious authorities to exert control over the flow of information through censorship laws and licensing systems. This era marked the genesis of the publishing industry, fraught with challenges concerning copyright and intellectual property rights. As books became increasingly sought after, publishers were thrust into the complexities of managing ownership and distribution, laying the groundwork for the contemporary publishing landscape that grapples with the enduring issue of disinformation (Posetti and Matthews, 2018, p. 1).

Niccolò Machiavelli, born in 1469 in Florence, Italy, is frequently celebrated as a pioneering figure in the realms of modern political philosophy and political science. Machiavelli's 16th-century writings, which discuss the use of deceit and manipulation in politics, have left a legacy that remains relevant in modern democratic politics, despite seeming anachronistic and inappropriate (Ramsay, 2012, p. 2-3). In the 16th century, those who wanted real news believed that leaked secret government reports were reliable sources, such as Venetian government correspondence, known as *relazioni*. However, it was not long before authentic documents were leaked, followed by fraudulent *relazioni* leaks. Historians started to contribute to news verification by providing their sources as corroborating footnotes by the 17th century. Influential scholarly news sources and a demand for news that could be verified scientifically were both sparked by the trial surrounding Galileo's findings in 1610. As printing grew, so did fake news, ranging from tales of sea monsters to blaming sinners for natural disasters. The 1755 Lisbon Earthquake became a notorious example, with the church and authorities citing divine retribution. In Portugal, fake news pamphlets suggested miraculous survivals due to the Virgin Mary, prompting Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire to challenge such religiously motivated narratives and advocate against fake religious news (Soll, 2016). Despite the advancements of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, disinformation continued to thrive. In the period leading up to the French Revolution (1789-1799), Paris was flooded with pamphlets from various political factions, each presenting conflicting information about the government's dire financial situation. This era illustrated the need for scepticism and analytical skills among readers to discern truth from manipulated facts. Even revered figures like Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) engaged

in spreading disinformation for political purposes. Franklin crafted stories of Native Americans allied with the British committing atrocities to fuel support for the American Revolution. Similarly, propaganda was used to exaggerate the British threat, encouraging enlistment and support for the cause (Soll, 2016). During the mid-18th century, amidst the peak of the Jacobite uprising in Great Britain, rogue printers engaged in the dissemination of false news, notably claiming that King George II was sick, aiming to undermine the ruling establishment. This misinformation was then circulated by more credible printing houses, blurring the lines between reality and falsehood (Bruins, 2022).

The allure of sensationalism has long been a lucrative aspect of journalism, with the early 19th century seeing the rise of modern newspapers that mixed genuine scoops with fabricated stories to boost sales. Notable instances include The New York Sun's "*Great Moon Hoax*" of 1835 and the anti-Catholic fervour stirred by false reports in Philadelphia in 1844, both of which had significant societal impacts. The Gilded Age then witnessed the zenith of yellow journalism, characterized by the use of misleading interviews, fake experts, and exaggerated stories aimed at manipulating public emotions. Figures like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst epitomized this era, with Hearst famously contributing to the outbreak of the Spanish-American War through sensationalized and fabricated news (Soll, 2016). In 1916, egg prices soared to 80 cents a dozen in parts of the U.S., prompting women and public officials to plan a statewide boycott. However, Chicago newspapers prematurely reported a ten-cent drop in egg prices and proclaimed the "*Cost of Living Smashed*", only for it to be revealed as false the next day when egg prices remained unchanged. Accusations arose that the newspapers had colluded with food retailers. Despite the misleading reports, egg prices continued to be driven by supply and demand, rising steadily in the aftermath of the boycotts. In 1917, during the height of World War I, the Times and the Daily Mail in London ran stories, citing "anonymous sources", about a supposed "Kadaver" factory in Germany that converted the dead bodies of soldiers into glycerine for soap and margarine production. Years beyond the war, it was revealed that these tales were fabrications spread by MI7 (A British Military Intelligence branch focused on media relations and propaganda), which had planted the story in the press through a special correspondent for the Daily Express, as part of wartime propaganda efforts. In 1938, the Columbia Broadcasting Network's radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' "*War of the Worlds*" caused widespread panic by presenting the first two-thirds of the story as real breaking news alerts of an alien invasion. The realistic portrayal led to a public uproar, with many professionals, including doctors and soldiers, readying to combat the fictional Martians. The show's producers were caught off guard by the belief in the broadcast's authenticity (Bruins, 2022). This era of misinformation eventually provoked a public demand for more reliable and objective news, leading to the emergence of a more fact-based journalism industry by the turn of the century.

However, the commitment to objective journalism faced challenges, especially during the tumultuous periods of World War II and the Cold War, when government propaganda and accusations of media manipulation were rampant. Despite this, the 1960s introduced a new wave of journalists who, despite questioning the feasibility of absolute objectivity, adhered to principles of veracity and credible sourcing in their reporting. This evolution underscores the ongoing tension between sensationalism and the pursuit of objective journalism, highlighting the complex dynamics of media integrity and public trust (Soll, 2016). It can be concluded that the comprehensive examination of the history of disinformation and fake news has successfully established a foundational understanding of its evolution and societal impact. The next chapter is set to delve into the underlying reasons behind disinformation, scrutinizing the motivations and mechanisms that fuel the propagation of false information.

Reasons Behind Disinformation

The terminology spectrum of disinformation can be a complex one. In 2017, the term "fake news" was named Collins Dictionary's word of the year and has continued to make headlines. While this concept has many synonyms – disinformation campaigns, cyber propaganda, cognitive hacking, and information warfare – it's just one facet of the bigger problem: the manipulation of public opinion to affect the real

world (Gu et al., 2017, pp. 4-5). This article will focus primarily on the aspect of manipulation, rather than on the terminology itself. To provide some clarity, the authors Krasnova and Grinavica (2024), in their article “International Cooperation in Combating Disinformation,” refer to the conceptual report on national strategic communication and information security for 2023-2027. They indicate that “disinformation is false or misleading content disseminated with the intent to deceive and/or gain economic or political advantage, which can harm the state and its society or a segment thereof”. In contrast, “misinformation may be spread unintentionally, yet it does not exclude the possibility of harmful consequences for the state and society” (p. 16). Therefore, it is important to note that both “disinformation” and “misinformation” will be used interchangeably to define “fake news”, without further exploration into the etymology of these terms.

Today, disinformation can take many forms, including hostile propaganda, ideological diversion, trolling, and malevolent moderation of online discussions (Benkler et al., 2018, pp. 12-13). Disinformation is a widespread tactic, often used in large-scale campaigns by governments or intelligence agencies to mislead populations, especially during political conflicts (Załoga, 2022, pp. 44-45). During the 2016 US presidential election, Twitter discovered over 50,000 Russian-linked spam accounts promoting controversial election-related content. Climate change denial, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and war in Syria are other issues that have been steeped in disinformation (Feingold, 2022). Such campaigns might spread false information about a nation's military capabilities or intentions, undermining public security, trust in institutions, and economic stability. Targeted to deceive and manipulate, disinformation relies on a veneer of truth to seem credible, making it a potent tool for dividing societies and destabilizing rival states, like in the ongoing tensions between the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the European Union. These coordinated efforts represent global disinformation campaigns with far-reaching impacts (Załoga, 2022, pp. 44-45). Disinformation can impact not only the political sphere but also extend its influence on public health, social harmony, economic stability, and scientific progress. The COVID-19 pandemic was significantly obstructed by disinformation. The issue escalated to such an extent that pandemic-related deceit earned the moniker “infodemic”. *“There seems to be barely an area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 crisis”*, remarked Guy Berger, a senior UNESCO official and one of the United Nations' primary experts fighting disinformation, in 2020 (Feingold, 2022). The widespread nature of disinformation, which ranges from political manipulations to public health issues, highlights its significance as a multidimensional instrument for sowing strife and instability across multiple sectors. Moving forward, we will investigate the primary drivers of disinformation, such as political ambitions and power dynamics, the exploitation of social divides, and the strategic undermining of trust in information sources, to gain a better understanding of its widespread impact and the challenges it presents.

Legal Perspective

States are not prohibited from spreading disinformation in accordance with international legal norms, except in certain specific areas. The transmission of false information is regulated by the International Convention on the Use of Broadcasting for Peace, according to which a small number of states have agreed to prohibit and halt (any) transmission of false statements if it could harm international relations. According to the International Telecommunications Union's radio regulations, states have an obligation not to transmit false or misleading signals, but this is more related to the identification of the transmitter, rather than the content of the transmission. However, deliberate informational intervention in the internal affairs of other states, which is prohibited under international customary law, can be considered interference within the framework of the non-interference principle (Grinavica and Krasnova, 2024, p. 17).

The regulation of disinformation has become a critical focus in the European Union and around the world, prompting the development of strong legal frameworks. In 2018, the EU launched the Code of Practice on Disinformation, a ground-breaking self-regulation initiative that brought together digital platforms and stakeholders to combat false information. The 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation brought together global industry players to commit to countering disinformation. The EU's disinformation strategy relies

on the Code, which effectively limits the spread of disinformation online during elections and responds quickly to crises like the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In May 2021, the Commission published extensive guidance to remedy the weaknesses of the 2018 Code and improve its effectiveness, following an assessment of its first implementation phase. The signatories to the 2018 Code, along with a broad variety of potential signatories, participated in the revision process that resulted in the Strengthened Code, which was presented to the Commission on June 16, 2022 (European Union, n.d.-a). This initiative laid the groundwork for the Digital Services Act (DSA) of 2024, which mandates large internet platforms to identify and address systemic risks, including disinformation. The move from voluntary commitments to enforced norms reflects the EU's determination to solve this issue. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) supports these initiatives by encouraging research and collaboration across Europe (European Union, n.d.-b). Additionally, the EU Action Plan against Disinformation advocates for a coordinated approach, fostering collaboration among EU member states and international partners (European Union External Action, 2018). On a worldwide scale, The United Nations (UN) has addressed disinformation through initiatives like the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the UNESCO Internet Universality ROAM-X Indicators, and the promotion of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which emphasizes the right to receive and impart information. UNESCO's Internet Universality ROAM-X Indicators offer a comprehensive framework for assessing the impact of disinformation, focusing on human rights, openness, accessibility, and multi-stakeholder participation. These metrics are critical to guaranteeing openness and accountability in the digital environment (UNESCO, n.d.). In addition to the frameworks discussed, there are also other international efforts and initiatives aimed at regulating disinformation, both within the EU and on a global scale, contributing to a more comprehensive approach to this complex issue.

Disinformation Driven by Political Ambitions and Power Dynamics

Since 2016, disinformation has gained significant attention from academics and the general public due to the rise of right-wing, white nationalism, which was highlighted by Brexit and Trump's election (Kreiss, 2021, p. 507). At the heart of disinformation lies the quest for political gain and the dynamics of power. Political entities and governments wield misinformation as a weapon to undermine opponents, influence electoral outcomes, and sway public opinion to solidify their authority (Bennett, et al., 2018, p. 128). For instance, the article *"Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics"* by Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick explores the unexpected victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Evidence suggests that Trump's Electoral College victory was instead due to his messaging to white voters that traditional white American economic, political, and social status was under threat. Another perspective points to social media misinformation's role, suggesting that it has disrupted a once-universal truth consensus maintained by traditional media and driven a global lean toward far-right populism. Yet, such views overlook deeper reasons behind disinformation's spread and neglect the historical context of these political shifts (Kuo and Marwick, 2021, p. 2). Driven by political ambitions and the pursuit of power, actors often deploy disinformation as a tool in international politics to sway international opinion and impact government policies. Lanoszka (2019) argues that despite widespread concerns, the strategic effectiveness of disinformation is limited by several key factors: the inherent uncertainty within international relations, the pre-existing biases and prejudices of individuals and policymakers, and the availability of countermeasures against disinformation campaigns, even in highly polarized political environments. Supporting this perspective, Shires (2021) emphasizes the need to distinguish between first-order disinformation, which directly concerns political or other events, and higher-order disinformation, which involves meta-level disinformation about disinformation itself. Shires' work highlights the complexity of understanding disinformation's reasons and impact and underscores the importance of identifying the multi-layered tactics employed in disinformation campaigns to fully grasp their potential effects on international politics (Shires, 2021, p. 260). Democracy's struggle with disinformation demands a grasp of its workings, effects, and countermeasures to protect democratic

tenets. Digital platforms, evolving quickly, serve as key arenas for the fast, widespread spread of falsehoods, testing established methods of fact-checking and trust.

Exploiting Social Divides

Moreover, the exploitation of social divides presents a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns, aiming to amplify societal fractures and mobilize ideological extremes to erode the social fabric. Extensive research indicates that disinformation narratives often reinforce and amplify existing ideologies, especially those related to race and inequality. The role of identity-based hierarchies, notably racial ones, is crucial in the development, dissemination, and acceptance of disinformation narratives (Kuo and Marwick, 2021, p. 1). This method uses the emotional force of contentious issues to engage and manipulate audiences, widening fissures between different groups of society and hindering the chance of constructive discourse or reconciliation (Priopae-Șerbănesc, 2021, p. 269). Disinformation strategically amplifies pre-existing societal tensions, making reconciliation more challenging and polarization more severe. This amplification often occurs on social media platforms, where echo chambers and algorithmic biases reinforce and exacerbate divisive narratives (Sliwa, 2020, p. 20; p. 43). Disinformation operations undermine democracy by instilling scepticism and distrust in democratic institutions and procedures. The loss of trust in these institutions further divides society, as individuals and groups lose faith in the systems supposed to promote fairness, justice, and equality (McKay and Tenove, 2021, p. 708). Disinformation efforts frequently target certain identity groups, using vulnerabilities and historical grievances to foment conflict. By manipulating group dynamics, these efforts can radicalize members against perceived out-groups, resulting in increased intergroup conflict and division (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 130). The lack of robust data privacy protections enables disinformation actors to micro-target individuals based on their vulnerabilities, preferences, and biases. This micro-targeting allows for the precision delivery of disinformation, maximizing its impact on susceptible individuals and further polarizing the public (Unger, 2021, pp. 310-311).

Undermining Trust in Information Sources

Another key factor is the loss of faith in traditional information sources. This era of negotiable reality, marked by a flood of misinformation, undermines confidence in established media, experts, and authorities, complicating the public's ability to discern truth from falsehoods. The rise of social media platforms has provided fertile ground for the spread of disinformation, capitalizing on the algorithms that prioritize content engagement over accuracy. These platforms enable the rapid dissemination of false information, reaching vast audiences with minimal effort. Moreover, the creation of echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to viewpoints similar to their own, reinforces existing beliefs and isolates individuals from divergent perspectives. This environment facilitates the uncritical acceptance and sharing of disinformation, amplifying its reach and impact (Bąkiewicz, 2023, p. 5). For instance, Ferrara et al. (2020) chart the landscape of social media manipulation in the context of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, focusing on characterizing automation and distortion. Their findings indicate that despite being outnumbered, bots generated spikes of conversations around real-world political events that are comparable to human activity. This exacerbated the consumption of content produced by users with similar political views, worsening political echo chambers and highlighting coordinated efforts by various countries to distort political narratives and propagate disinformation on social media platforms (Ferrara et al., 2020, pp.1-2). One significant yet often overlooked driver of disinformation is economic gain. Certain entities create and disseminate disinformation to attract website clicks and engage viewers, generating revenue through advertising. This model exploits the sensational nature of disinformation, leveraging human curiosity and emotional response for financial profit. The phenomenon is especially prevalent on the internet, where sensational or controversial content is more likely to attract attention and, consequently, more clicks and views (Ruiz, 2023, p. 3). The 2016 US presidential election highlighted this

issue, as unfounded news about the candidates spread widely, potentially influencing voter perceptions. As the term “fake news” gained prominence, its meaning evolved. Politicians started using the term to denounce credible news organizations, alleging biased or false reporting. This tactic muddled the waters between genuine and false news, complicating the public's ability to discern truth, and inadvertently amplifying the impact of actual disinformation.

Recently, the swift spread of disinformation has been propelled not just by social media, but also by the emergence of sophisticated artificial intelligence technologies, such as Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT). These technologies, which can produce coherent text on a large scale, have significantly reduced the barriers to generating disinformation for a wide array of actors, from individuals conducting experiments to political entities and state-sponsored groups aiming to sow societal discord or confusion (Solaiman et al., 2019, p. 6). Throughout history, technological advancements such as the printing press, photography, and social media have facilitated the spread of fake news. While videos were once considered a more reliable form of news due to the difficulty of manipulation compared to photos or text, the advent of deepfakes has put their credibility at risk. Deepfakes utilize advanced software and machine learning to superimpose the face of a celebrity or politician onto another person's body, creating convincingly false videos. As this technology becomes more sophisticated, detecting deepfakes will be increasingly challenging, although some signs like flickering or blurring around the face may still betray amateur attempts. It's important to remain vigilant when evaluating the authenticity of videos (BBC, n.d.). Deepfakes introduce a new level of indeterminacy and cynicism in online civic culture, contributing to a generalized uncertainty and reduced trust in news on social media platforms (Vaccari and Chadwick, 2020). This erosion of trust has far-reaching implications, weakening the foundation of informed public discourse and rendering societies more susceptible to manipulation and deceit (Fallis, 2015, p. 415). Addressing this requires targeted efforts to discredit the information source without broadly undermining trust in information ecosystems (Heaton, 2021). The dissemination of disinformation is linked to the decline of democratic institutions, with movements and parties exploiting social media to mobilize supporters against mainstream media and governments. This results in a loss of public confidence and opens the door to alternative, often less credible, information sources (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 130).

Tactics and Impacts of Disinformation in Modern Information Warfare

Disinformation is also a tool of psychological warfare, employed by states to undermine the morale or cohesion of enemy populations or to sow discord among allies. Throughout history, states have used disinformation campaigns to shape public opinion abroad, a practice prevalent during the Cold War as the US and USSR engaged in global information warfare. Then, without the internet, efforts relied on traditional outlets like print media, radio, cinema, and art. However, the past three decades have seen a drastic transformation in the spread of disinformation due to technological progress, significantly boosting, for example, Russia's capacity to disseminate false information (Verrier, 2023). Nisbet and Kamenchuk delve into the psychology behind state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, emphasizing how individual emotional and cognitive reactions, intensified by wider social, political, and cultural movements, are more crucial to the effectiveness of these campaigns than the specific technologies or platforms used (2019). Human memory is inherently flawed, susceptible to mistakes and lapses in attention. Our brains do not differentiate between true and false information when forming memories. In today's environment, saturated with misinformation and “fake news”, discerning accuracy becomes increasingly challenging. A 2009 meta-analysis conducted by a developmental psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), found that while internet usage has enhanced visual-spatial intelligence, it concurrently diminishes the capacity for “deep processing”. This deep processing is crucial for engaging in mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive reasoning, critical thinking, creativity, and introspection (Greenfield, 2009, p. 70). Thereby, the deliberate framing of narratives in disinformation campaigns is intended to not only mislead but also influence society norms and values, having a long-term impact on public opinion and behaviour. The table below presents an expanded overview of the methods utilized in disinformation campaigns, detailing the various strategies employed to deceive and manipulate.

Table 1. Disinformation Tactics and Their Impacts

Method	Explanation	Strategic Impact
Fabricated Content	Creating entirely false information, stories, or news articles with no basis in fact.	Directly undermines truth and creates alternative realities, destabilizing societal trust in factual reporting.
Manipulated Content	Altering real information or imagery to mislead, often by taking them out of context.	Distorts perception, fostering confusion and mistrust among the public towards genuine information sources.
Imposter Content	Mimicking credible sources to spread false information through fake websites or social media accounts.	Erodes trust in established institutions by exploiting their perceived credibility to disseminate falsehoods.
Misleading Headlines	Using headlines that do not reflect the article content, designed to sensationalize information or generate clicks.	Capitalizes on the tendency to read only headlines, spreading disinformation widely with minimal engagement.
False Context	Sharing genuine information with false contextual details, leading to incorrect conclusions.	Manipulates the interpretation of facts, encouraging erroneous beliefs or understandings among the audience.
False Connection	Using unrelated images, videos, or links that do not support the content, creating a misleading impression.	Creates an illusion of evidence supporting false narratives, enhancing their perceived validity.
Satire or Parody	Presenting satire or parody that can be mistaken for genuine news, especially when context is stripped.	Utilizes the guise of humour to bypass rational scrutiny, potentially spreading misinformation under the radar of critical analysis.
Misleading Content	Presenting facts selectively or framing information in a biased way to lead to incorrect understanding.	Shapes public opinion by exploiting cognitive biases, subtly guiding perceptions in desired directions without overt falsehoods.
Deepfakes and AI	Using AI to create or alter recordings convincingly depicting false events.	Undermines the authenticity of audiovisual evidence, increasing scepticism towards genuine recordings and eroding the basis for shared reality.
Social Media Bots	Automated accounts amplifying disinformation, making it seem more popular or accepted.	Exploits algorithms and social tendencies to increase the visibility and perceived acceptance of disinformation, creating an echo chamber effect.
Troll Farms	Groups working to produce and spread disinformation online, often stirring controversy.	Actively disrupts online discourse, sowing discord and polarizing communities to weaken social cohesion.
Information Overload	Flooding the space with a high volume of news and stories, making true vs. false information differentiation difficult.	Overwhelms the capacity for critical analysis among the public, leading to disengagement or reliance on heuristics prone to manipulation.
Emotional Exploitation	Leveraging emotionally charged content to provoke reactions and spread rapidly, bypassing rational analysis.	Directly targets emotional responses to override critical thinking, fostering division and entrenching polarized views.
Strategic Framing	Shaping narratives to not only mislead but to reshape societal norms and values.	Aims to realign public opinion and behaviour over time, subtly altering the cultural and ideological landscape to achieve long-term strategic objectives.

Source: Results of literature analysis, developed by the authors (2024).

According to the available research, headlines in social media, especially when they are bold or sensational, play a pivotal role in capturing public interest – highlighting a trend where many individuals form opinions based on headlines alone, with social media comments reflecting a broad belief in understanding complex issues through a brief glance at 140 characters: “More people read headlines than the actual article; and X (Twitter) comments show that many people believe they know the content based on just 140 characters in a tweet. In fake news, that headline or tweet is designed to be attention-grabbing and something that reinforces extreme views” (Townsend, 2017). This pattern emphasizes the importance of first impressions in the digital age, when headlines and tweets not only attract interest but also shape the reader's comprehension and perceptions from the start. If a person holds a certain belief, and then they encounter a headline or information that shocks or contradicts that belief, it can lead to a state of cognitive dissonance. The discomfort arises from the conflict between their existing belief and the new, potentially conflicting information (Figl et al., 2019, p. 2). Disinformation tactics, which manipulate cultural and ideological perceptions, represent a serious threat to the integrity of democratic institutions, social cohesion, and the development of inclusive national identities.

Conclusions

1. Disinformation has always been a potent weapon for influencing public opinion, from psychological warfare employed by the ancient Greeks to the sensationalism of yellow journalism. Its ongoing influence on the course of history is seen in the persistent employment of disinformation in a variety of contexts, including undermining opponents, influencing public opinion, and rationalizing political acts. This historical pattern highlights the enduring necessity for alertness and critical thinking in the face of disinformation, underscoring the profound difficulties in distinguishing truth from deception.
2. The strategic use of disinformation demonstrates a purposeful desire to manipulate public opinion, promote conflicts, and destabilize civilizations by creating an environment in which truth is challenged and facts are negotiable. Efforts to combat disinformation necessitate a multifaceted approach that includes education, media literacy, and the development of tools to detect and reduce its dissemination.
3. Disinformation is often driven by political ambitions and power dynamics, serving as a tool for those in positions of authority to manipulate public perception and maintain or enhance their grip on power. This strategic deployment of misleading information highlights one of the core reasons for the prevalence of disinformation: the pursuit of political advantage and control over the narrative.
4. Capitalizing on social rifts is one of primary reasons behind the dissemination of disinformation since it aims to increase tensions and mobilize ideological extremes. This method not only exacerbates divisiveness but also prevents productive dialog, making reconciliation more difficult. Addressing the core causes of these divisions and cultivating an environment of open debate and understanding are critical to reducing the impact of disinformation.
5. Disinformation campaigns exploit the decline in public trust in information sources, utilizing the rapid proliferation of digital platforms to disseminate false narratives widely and quickly. The role of economic incentives in propagating disinformation highlights the need for regulatory measures and ethical standards in digital advertising and content monetization, aiming to disrupt the financial motivations behind the spread of false information.
6. The emergence of sophisticated technologies such as deepfakes and artificial intelligence has introduced new dimensions to the challenge of disinformation, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between real and manipulated content. Collaborative efforts between governments, tech companies, civil society, and the international community are essential in addressing the complex and evolving nature of disinformation, ensuring a resilient and informed public sphere.

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