

Democracy Endangered by Online Disinformation

Summary

- Disinformation undermines trust in elections, shattering the function of democracy’s core institution. Countering disinformation is therefore key to protect democracy.
- Disinformation fuels political polarization, that together increase the risk of political violence. Autocratizing governments increase their spread of disinformation substantially.
- Disinformation strengthens autocracies but weakens democracies.

Disinformation Undermines Trust in Elections

Citizens’ ability to freely deliberate and vote are key to healthy democracies. However, evidence from a recent global study demonstrate that online disinformation campaigns increase especially during elections (IDEA, 2023). The same study also evidence that electoral management bodies are the most frequent target. Around elections, the credibility of electoral management bodies is the object in 94% of the electoral cycles studied. In addition, evidence demonstrates that exposure to claims of voter fraud reduces overall confidence in elections (Berlinski et al., 2023).

Online disinformation undermines trust in democracy’s core institution. It leads to questioning electoral integrity and aggravating incorrect negative beliefs about the fairness of elections. Brazil is a case in point. False claims about the reliability of its electronic voting system escalated in the lead up to the 2018 and 2022 elections; fact checking initiatives failed to change such negative beliefs about the fairness of the results (Batista et al., 2022).

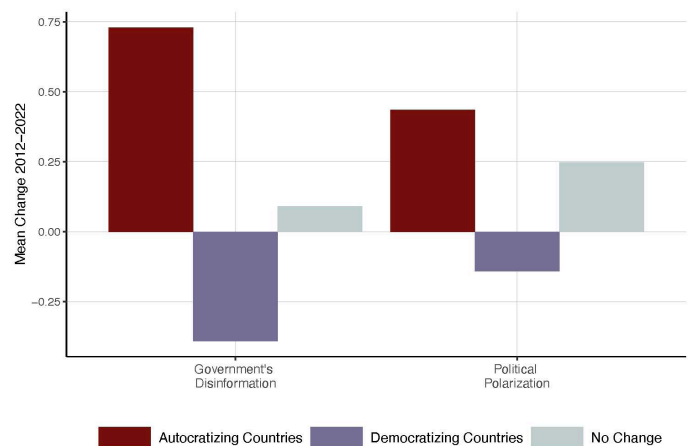
Disinformation also reduces electoral accountability. While accurate information enables people to hold candidates accountable in elections, false information misguides voters and prevents them from evaluating candidates’ actual performance (Boese et al., 2022). The core democratic mechanism of vertical accountability is shattered. Countering disinformation is thus key to upholding electoral integrity and thereby democracy, in the long term.

Disinformation refers to the spread of false information with an intention to deceive. It is often used alongside concepts such as misinformation or ‘fake news’.

Disinformation Increases Political Polarization

Social media platforms amplify the reach and spread of disinformation. Empirical research shows that false political news on Twitter are 70% more likely to be retweeted than true stories are, in all categories of information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

FIGURE 1. GOVERNMENT DISSEMINATION OF FALSE INFORMATION, AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION, 2012-2022.



Governments have increased their use of social media to spread false information both at home and abroad (Sato et al. 2023). A global inventory of organized social media manipulation found that in 81 countries, social media was used to spread disinformation at an industrialized scale (Bradshaw, Bailey and Howard, 2021). Russia is an instructive example where the government staged a disinformation campaign at home during the Crimea invasion and extensive campaigns abroad during the 2016 and 2020 US elections (Iasiello, 2017; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016).

Disinformation also fuels polarization. Robust scientific evidence shows that online disinformation exacerbates divisions between winners and losers and thus increases polarization (Mauk & Grömping, 2023).

Specifically, anti-pluralist parties use disinformation to steer citizens's preferences and make opposing groups into "enemies".

This creates a vicious circle where disinformation and political polarization mutually reinforce each other (Boese et al. 2022). In a survey of internet users across 25 nations, 83% of respondents state that disinformation has negative effects on their country's politics and political discussions (IPSOS/CIGI 2019). Polarization fueled by online disinformation then effectively increases the likelihood of political violence. A recent empirical study found that countries where political actors spread disinformation are more likely to experience domestic terrorism (Piazza, 2021).

Disinformation Strengthens Autocracies but Weakens Democracies

Research shows a relationship between disinformation, autocratization, and polarization. Specifically, evidence shows that

disinformation weakens people's willingness to protest in autocracies that lack alternative sources of information. This hampers prospects of democratization and acts as a force of authoritarian stability (Sato et al., 2023).

In democracies, disinformation has the opposite effect. Fueling polarization, it is used to advance anti-democratic forces even if it can also accelerate pro-democratic mobilization, as in Brazil recently. So while high levels of disinformation does not necessarily lead to democratic breakdown, research shows that democracies are more likely to experience onsets of autocratization when disinformation levels are high (Sato et al. 2023, also see Boese et al 2022).

In conclusion, disinformation is a powerful tool for autocrats to remain in power; it helps 'wanna-be' autocrats to undermine democracy; and threatens the core institutions of democracy.

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