The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions

W Lance Bennett
University of Washington, USA

Steven Livingston
The George Washington University, USA

Abstract

Many democratic nations are experiencing increased levels of false information circulating through social media and political websites that mimic journalism formats. In many cases, this disinformation is associated with the efforts of movements and parties on the radical right to mobilize supporters against centre parties and the mainstream press that carries their messages. The spread of disinformation can be traced to growing legitimacy problems in many democracies. Declining citizen confidence in institutions undermines the credibility of official information in the news and opens publics to alternative information sources. Those sources are often associated with both nationalist (primarily radical right) and foreign (commonly Russian) strategies to undermine institutional legitimacy and destabilize centre parties, governments and elections. The Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States are among the most prominent examples of disinformation campaigns intended to disrupt normal democratic order, but many other nations display signs of disinformation and democratic disruption. The origins of these problems and their implications for political communication research are explored.

Keywords

Disinformation, fake news, institutions, political communication

Corresponding author:
W Lance Bennett, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA.
Email: lbennett@u.washington.edu

> Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others
> that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you
> had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise.
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Shortly after Donald Trump moved into the White House, a little-known filmmaker named Ami Horowitz told Fox News' Tucker Carlson (2017) that Sweden was facing an unprecedented crime wave at the hands of Muslim refugees and immigrants. Horowitz's claims were reinforced by a video montage consisting of a dark-skinned man hitting a policeman, shots of a burning car and short clips taken from Horowitz's film. It is unclear whether the scenes of the burning car or the assault on the policeman were shot in Sweden, though that was the implication. Swedish police officers are heard to confirm the existence of a massive rise in crime linked to Muslim immigration. Throughout the Fox News segment, Carlson maintains a look of bemused incredulity at the naiveté of the Swedes.

At a political rally in Florida, the next day, President Trump said, 'You look at what's happening last night in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this?' (Noack, 2017). Those were good questions: What happened in Sweden and who would believe it? Trump's enigmatic remarks set off a flurry of inquiries by reporters in Europe and the United States. Did Trump have intelligence agency reports on something that no one else knew? Eventually, Trump would confess that he got his information from the Horowitz interview on Fox News. Yet, by the next day, many of Horowitz's statements in the film and in subsequent interviews were ridiculed by Swedish authorities and dismissed as nonsense by most news and fact-checking organizations (Aftonbladet, 2017; Topping, 2017). The policemen featured in Horowitz's film even accused him of distorting their views with selective editing, a claim that was backed up by Horowitz's cameraman (Lindkvist, 2017). To make matters worse for his storyline, even the right-wing US site Breitbart could not come up with evidence to lend credence to Horowitz's and Fox News' take on crime in Sweden (Gramer, 2017).

A few days later, the story grew more bizarre when a Russian news crew turned up in Rinkeby, a suburb of Stockholm with a sizable Muslim immigrant population, offering cash to residents willing to stage a riot for their cameras. 'They came up to us and said they wanted to see some action. They wanted to bribe us 400 [krona] each' (Gramer, 2017). This bit of immersive theatre unfolded as a real Danish radio news crew stumbled on the scene and ended up covering the Russian fake news team's failed efforts to orchestrate a make-believe riot.

Meanwhile, back in the United States, Fox News' former star Bill O'Reilly invited someone named Nils Bilts, hyped as a 'Swedish defense and national security adviser', to confirm the immigrant crime wave narrative (Taylor, 2017). In the segment's introduction, O'Reilly emphasized – ironically, given his subsequent firing from Fox for sexual harassment – that rampant sexual assaults had left 'women feeling unsafe'. Bilt gravely confirmed O'Reilly's assertions. The next day, a Swedish newspaper discovered that not only was Bilt unknown in Swedish military or security circles, his name was not actually Bilt. Furthermore, Nils G. Tolling, his real name, had spent a year in a Virginia prison for assault. In short, while using a pseudonym, a real ex-convict qua fake security expert

appeared on O'Reilly's then top rated Fox News programme to confirm mostly fabricated allegations of rape and other crimes.

This upside down world of disinformation can have dizzying effects, as *The Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum (2017) attempted to summarize the chain of fabrication:

> A faked film inspired the president to cite an imaginary crisis, the existence of which was confirmed by a fake expert – and which now inspired another television team to try to create a real crisis using real people (in a neighborhood crawling with both real and fake journalists) to make it all seem true.

Disinformation and the radical right

How do we make sense of such disorienting episodes of disinformation that have begun to appear in many nations? In particular, how do we decide whether dubious stories are isolated moments of disorienting absurdity, or part of larger information flows aimed at, in the above case, spreading anti-refugee propaganda and fueling right-wing reactionary movements? We provisionally define disinformation, to be elaborated below, as the following: *intentional falsehoods spread as news stories or simulated documentary formats to advance political goals*. We also suggest caution in adopting the term 'fake news' that has become a popular media reference on grounds that it tends to frame the problem as isolated incidents of falsehood and confusion. By contrast, *disinformation* invites looking at more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them. Solving these problems requires more than just fact-checking and setting the record straight and goes to deeper issues of repairing political institutions and democratic values. While the origins of much, and perhaps most, disinformation are obscure, it often passes through the gates of the legacy media, resulting in an 'amplifier effect' for stories that would be dismissed as absurd in earlier eras of more effective press gatekeeping. It is ironic that this amplifier effect may be strengthened when quality news organizations attempt to fact check and correct the record (Wood and Porter, 2018). An earlier case in the United States was the 'birther movement' that promoted the idea that Barack Obama was born outside the United States and therefore disqualified to be President. Despite the production, on more than one occasion, of an official birth certificate verifying that Obama was born in Hawaii, duplicitous political figures such as Donald Trump were able to gain the simultaneous attention of both the legacy press and a then emerging 'alt-right' media system. This media amplification fed back through mainstream and alternative communication channels as a disruptive and disorienting reverberation, reaching mainstream audiences. Trump bowed out of a run for the presidency in 2011–2012 and was even made a laughingstock by President Obama at a National Press Club dinner with Trump in attendance (MacAskill, 2011). Yet, by the next election cycle, the political and media environment had changed enough to enable someone once dismissed as a joke to ride a seemingly obsessive disregard for facts to the presidency in 2016.

Both during the campaign and as the president, Trump often dismissed the mainstream press as 'fake news'. After his first year in office, he created the Fake News

Awards, with four going to CNN, two to *The New York Times*, while ABC, *Washington Post, Time* and *Newsweek* rounded out the top 10 with one prize each. Such antics shocked many, but his supporters seemed to celebrate the disregard for facts, decorum and basic decency as 'Trump-telling-it-like-it-is'. The distracting attacks on the mainstream press, paired with supportive but spurious storylines in the alt-right media liberated large numbers of people from the constraints of evidence and reason and fueled public discourses driven by anger, hate, prejudice and lies.

Attacks on the press are not new. For example, Richard Nixon's vice president Spiro Agnew is remembered for his criminal conviction on charges of tax evasion and for his famous 1970 speech when he referred to the press as 'nattering nabobs of negativism' (Sullivan, 2016). Nor are fake news stories particularly new developments. Indeed, activists (primarily on the right) have developed methods of hidden camera stings and creative editing to lure political opponents into media traps (Dorf and Tarrow, 2017). A healthy press system can generally absorb occasional official attacks on the press, and scattered partisan sting operations that make the news. But it is something else entirely when public information systems develop large media networks that routinely spread deception and amplify official attacks on the legacy press. Those who support the radical right in the United States and, to varying degrees in other countries, can now find alternative media promoting opposing versions of daily reality. These algorithmically enabled communities of like-minded persons now exist on scales not captured by terms like 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2012).

While there is surely some degree of truth-stretching running across the political spectrum, it appears particularly concentrated on the authoritarian right, where liberal democratic values present growing challenges to movement values of ethnic nationalism and the restoration of mythical cultural traditions. The term 'alt-right' originated in the United States and referred initially to White nationalists, neo-Nazis and their communication media. However, the term has expanded in recent years to encompass a broader range of interconnected radical right causes and conspiracies promoted through information sites that often mimic journalism formats in order to distribute strategic disinformation. It is this tilt towards strategic partisan disinformation that distinguishes the alt-right from more conservative or centre-right media.

There are of course grey areas in the boundaries between what counts as journalism, partisan journalism and the alt-right disinformation order. In addition, sites and organizations move around for various reasons, as Fox news in the United States has become more of a bridge between the legacy press and the alt-right sphere while Breitbart (as of this writing) has emerged as the centre of a dense alt-right media sphere. In our analyses, we use the term *alt-right media* to refer to sites and platforms that produce and distribute disinformation in order to advance partisan agendas and to destabilize opponents and institutions. Disinformation is sometimes mixed with news reports of documented events to enhance its aura of authenticity. This characterization departs a bit from the classification offered by Faris et al. (2017), which retains the alt-right label for White nationalist sites and places Breitbart in the centre of what they term a 'right wing media ecosystem', which they credit with spreading disinformation. We prefer to distinguish between sites that are importantly engaged with spreading disinformation such as Breitbart (which we term alt-right), and conservative media that continue to practice journalism with a partisan

spin. Indeed, we defer to no less an authority than Steve Bannon, Trump campaign chief, former White House advisor, who was later reinstated and then fired as CEO of Breitbart. Bannon proclaimed that, as a result of his leadership at Breitbart, 'We're the platform for the alt-right' (Posner, 2016). When he was dismissed from his position at the White House, Bannon was reported to have said, 'Now I'm free. I've got my hands back on my weapons'. (Gold and Farhi, 2017). It turned out that the real control of the weapons belonged to the billionaire Mercer family who invested in Breitbart and objected to Bannon's criticism of Trump and his family in a popular tell-all book about the West Wing.

Similar distinctions between alt-right disinformation sites, the partisan press and mainstream journalism can be applied to other nations. Indeed, a prominent subtext of the disinformation order in many nations is to level charges of 'fake news' or the 'lying press' at journalism that attempts to correct disinformation, or to reassert other norms of democratic decorum. Typical of Trump rallies in the United States, as well as the anti-refugee PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) movement and the aligned Alternative für Deutschland Party in Germany, chants of 'lying press' at public rallies were often covered by the mainstream media, further empowering radical movements to challenge the established information order. Beyond reaching broader audiences with disorienting messages, a variety of media platforms (varying across nations) offer alternative communication spaces to produce and distribute subcultural narratives of stronger authority, nationalism, anti-immigrant elite conspiracies that often traffic in anti-Semitic tropes, and the restoration of traditional (White) nationalist values, among others. Those narratives, in turn, often cycle back through the mainstream media, repeating the disinformation–amplification–reverberation (DAR) cycle.

The movement of disinformation between alt-right and mainstream media has many effects, including emboldening radical attacks on mainstream journalists. In Germany, for example, there have been numerous threats and right-wing social media attacks on journalists covering the refugee crisis, making many of them guarded about their public statements (*Spiegel,* 2016). In the 2016 US election, Trump crowds at rallies often chanted 'fake news' and 'lying press' as the candidate pointed at reporters covering the events, resulting in security guards escorting journalists from rallies for their safety. Such intimidation did not stop with the presidential election. In another case, a Republican congressional candidate physically assaulted a reporter from *The Guardian* newspaper (Wong and Levin, 2017). And as president, Trump continued to call CNN and its White House correspondent 'fake news' (CNN Video, 2017). He even retweeted a doctored video of himself at a wrestling match doing violence to a CNN journalist. All of this understandably produces shock in many good citizens who wonder what is happening to their once stable democracies and generally harmonious societies.

The origins and implications of an emerging disinformation order

In this article, we offer modest steps towards understanding the communication processes at work in the spread of disinformation in democratic societies. We suggest that public spheres in many nations have become divided and disrupted as growing challenges confront the democratic centring principles of (a) authoritative information, (b)

emanating from social and political institutions that (c) engage trusting and credulous publics. At the core of our argument is the breakdown of trust in democratic institutions of press and politics (along with educational and civil society institutions in more advanced cases). This loss of trust is not ephemeral but grounded in the hollowing of parties and diminished electoral representation. By contrast, in the high modern period of democracy, in the mid to late 20th century, trust in institutions was greater and public authorities commanded more control over public information (Bennett and Pfetsch, in press). For example, Eurobarometer trends for citizens of the European Union (EU) show that average trust levels for national parliaments and governments have dropped to around 30%, down a dozen points from levels recorded before the financial crisis of 2008 (European Commission, 2015: 6). National differences are of course substantial, as an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on trust in institutions indicates. Nations such as Germany and Switzerland have rebounded since the financial crisis to higher levels of trust in national governments, but more than half of the European members of the OECD (2017: 20) have slipped below 2007 confidence levels.

Despite growing signs that serious disruptions are occurring in public spheres in many democracies, most political communication and press politics research continues to study how authoritative information is framed by legacy media organizations and distributed to publics who use it to inform their engagement with political institutions such as parties and elections. The implication of much of the research that fills journals in these fields is that most democratic nations continue to operate with encompassing and reasonably functional democratic pubic spheres. The disruptive bits often become lumped into the burgeoning study of populism, which floats mysteriously above the institutional order as if it is the result of inexplicably grumpy publics who are annoyed by elites these days. With the convenient add-on of populism, the democratic order sails on in research journals, propelled by the usual concepts (framing, agenda-setting, indexing, gatekeeping, and effects), which often seem more the objects of study than useful concepts for understanding actual politics (Bennett and Pfetsch, in press).

To some extent, the persistence of research that reifies and reconstructs a passing order is somewhat understandable since the surfaces of politics appear much as ever: the mainstream press continues to report what officials say, many citizens continue to consume and react to that information, and elections continue to be held and winners and losers generally accept the results as the will of the people. However, under this surface are growing legitimacy crisis produced by the hollowing out of centre parties as mechanisms for meaningful citizen engagement (Mair, 2013). Perhaps, even more disturbing are findings of diminished electoral and policy representation for all but the upper economic demographics in most democratic nations (Bartels, 2017). These conditions, along with the rising power of business elites and the reliance on market solutions to social problems as prescribed by neoliberal policy regimes, have led Crouch (2004) to give the term *post-democracy* to these increasingly superficial democratic processes.

This breakdown of core processes of political representation, along with the declining authority of institutions and public officials opens national information systems to a mix of strategic disinformation from both national and foreign actors. Adding chaos to these disinformation flows are large volumes of independently produced fake news aimed at

getting clicks and shares to support standard business models on social media. When this 'for-profit' fake news takes on partisan aspects, as it often does, it may be picked up by social media bots and distributed as part of larger disinformation campaigns.

The breakdown of authority in democratic institutions, combined with the growth of alternative information channels producing popular political mythologies, is mobilizing many citizens to join the upsurge in support for movements and parties outside the centre, particularly on the right. As these radical right movements reject the core institutions of press and politics, along with the authorities who speak through them, there is a growing demand for alternative information and leadership that explains how things got so out of order. There is no shortage in the supply of such information. Depending on the country, one finds a mix of sources, including (a) alt news sites promoting ethnic nationalism, anti-immigrant and refugee hate news, and globalist conspiracies, along with tie-ins to daily national political news developments; (b) party and movement website networks such as those run by the Austrian Freedom Party, with links to Facebook and social media accounts of leaders supplying updates on party news, interspersed with 'nostalgic' nationalist propaganda; (c) foreign 'non linear warfare' operations (a term coined by Putin advisor Vladislav Surkov) aimed at destabilizing elections and governments; and (d) along with enterprising fake news businesses springing up in the 'attention economy'.

There are of course some radical left networks also spreading disinformation, and engaging with fake news. Like their counterparts on the right, many on the radical left have become wary of centre parties and the corruption of democratic institutions, adding to the legitimacy crisis of modern democracy (Della Porta et al., 2017). However, the more general tendency on the radical left is to use impressive outlays of social media and web platforms to organize episodic economic justice and anti-political corruption mobilizations such as Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish M-15 Indignados. Beyond these visible but short-lived movements, and a handful of movement-parties such as Podemos in Spain, the left seems to have become more engaged with local projects, often celebrating an ethos of direct, deliberative, participatory democracy that does not translate well into party formation or comparable levels of electoral success. (Bennett et al., 2017; Curtis, 2016).

The role of changing media systems

Not only was trust in institutions and official information higher during earlier eras of democracy, there were comparably fewer media channels through which official information passed. The combination of higher trust and fewer public information sources enabled both authorities and the press to exercise more effective gatekeeping against wild or dangerous narratives from the social fringes or foreign adversaries. The more recent volatile mix of institutional corrosion and media abundance has enabled counter politics to take on corrosive and undemocratic forms in many societies, as alternative media flows reach large audiences and help organize movements and parties that have gained higher levels of electoral success. An important aspect of this mobilization of radical right movements involves the circulation of counter cultural narratives that challenge the very principles of democratic freedoms and tolerance and undermine the norms of reason and evidence on which rational public debate in democracies depends.

If we are to understand the rise of undemocratic or 'illiberal' politics preying on the weakness of core institutions, understanding the proliferation of communication channels is a good place to begin (Zakaria, 1997). Compared to the mass media era, the current age displays a kaleidoscopic mediascape of television networks, newspapers and magazines (both online and print), YouTube, WikiLeak, and LiveLeak content, Astroturf think tanks, radical websites spreading disinformation using journalistic formats, Twitter and Facebook among other social media, troll factories, bots, and 4chan discussion threads, among others. Also important but nearly impossible to study, because of the inaccessibility of data, are Snapchat, Tor-protected websites, and messaging and communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Signal messaging and Voice-over-Internet Protocol, Telegram Messenger, and Proton Mail. While some are billion-dollar media empires, others are billionaire-backed and heavily trafficked websites such as the US sites *Breitbart*, backed by early Trump supporter Robert Mercer, and *The Daily Caller*, backed by Charles Koch and other far right players to promote a broad anti-government agenda (Gold, 2017). Other sites such as *InfoWars* depend on sales of often-bizarre products such as *Survival Shield X*-2 *Next Level Nascent Iodine* (US$39.95 per ounce) hawked by CEO and anchor Alex Jones (Brown, 2017; Reed, 2017).

In the case of the United States, these visible, heavily trafficked, and often networked media link in and out of broader networks of political foundations, think tanks, grass roots and Astroturf political organizations, communication professionals and political organizers. This complex set of organizations advances an agenda that mixes tax and regulatory benefits for the wealthy, with disinformation about climate change, immigration, refugees, government waste and ineptitude, and a host of other issues aimed at stirring political crowds. Those larger publics provide political cover and electoral power for the political agendas of those attempting to manage these unwieldy political assemblages (Mayer, 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez, 2016). The different publics and political agendas running through the sprawling networks of the radical right in America suggest that there are various tensions and political fault lines around race, anti-Semitism and various conspiracy theories. However, these networks can also display remarkable coherence of organization, reflecting the 'hybridity' that Chadwick (2013) describes in various political communication processes associated with a post-bureaucratic order. For example, it is clear that high levels of framing coherence and audience reach assisted the Trump election in 2016. Moreover, right-wing media networks also played a role in setting the mainstream media agenda for that election (Faris et al., 2017). It has also become clear that foreign agents such as Russian hackers like Fancy Bear, trolls and bots spread partisan disinformation to many voters, adding another layer of complexity to national disinformation orders (Brustein, 2016).

Trump was in many ways both a creature and an assembler of these motley networks, navigating the fault lines both before and after his election by communicating with neo-Nazis, White nationalists, anti-globalist conspiracy networks interspersed with discourses about immigrants, refugees, Islam and terrorists. During the election, he fired up discontented voters, both Republicans and Democrats, with his populist promises to 'drain the swamp' of corruption in Washington. Trump's continuous twitter blasts broke the mould for presidential communications and press government relations, directly reaching his large following of real, fake and bot accounts (20 million in January 2017

and jumping to 46 million a year later). Beyond their direct audience reach, Trump's tweets fueled a large volume of news across the mainstream and alternative media spheres keeping the focus of attention on himself, although often in negative ways. While chaos dominated both social media and the headlines, the Trump team quietly repopulated the 'swamp' of government with his own set of industrial lobbyists and former executives empowered to regulate their own industries. For the most part, the mainstream news cycle focused on a mix of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and congressional investigations, scandals, staff resignations, and Trump's own bizarre behaviour. His continuing attacks on the 'fake news media' such as CNN seemed aimed at shoring up his dwindling popular support and inoculating his movement against whatever bad news might emerge from the many investigations underway.

Although the United States may be exceptional in the degree to which disinformation has become fully integrated into national politics, various patterns of disruptive movements, parties and disinformation can be found in most democracies today. Many nations continue to hold dissembling factions in check by strong centre parties and grand coalitions. Yet, the impact of disinformation is pronounced even in more stable nations such as Germany. While overall faith in institutions and the legacy press remains high, there are growing disruptions of elections, government, and everyday civility due to an angry right-wing movement has broken with the traditional institutional order. The movement insulates itself from once authoritative information by actively producing its own disinformation, while consuming and spreading similar stories from Russian sources. Beyond the spread of fake news, German parties, politicians and government agencies have experienced a wave of cyber attacks from Russian sources, including the 'Fancy Bear' hacker group that released Clinton campaign emails during the US elections in 2016. Other teams linked to Russian intelligence agencies have hacked Bundestag data and email archives. All of this occurs against the backdrop of a steady flow of fake news stories from Russian media outlets, with stories widely circulated on social media by bots. Both domestic and foreign disinformation aim to disrupt the institutional order, undermine politicians, stir anti-refugee sentiments and create confusion around elections. As a result of these disruptions, Germany passed legislation (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz) against fake news and hate-speech in social media. The law requires media companies to remove such content or face large fines, a tricky problem that immediately led Facebook to raise a host of legal objections.

Many other nations suffering similar disruptions seem to trust that the centre institutions will hold firm against the prospects of illiberal factions gaining power. For example, Swedes may take comfort that the Sweden Democrats appear to have topped out as the third largest party and will not be invited into governing coalitions any time soon. And citizens in Austria, Switzerland and Denmark may be thankful that when their radical right nationalist parties have entered or supported governments, they have proved less extreme than those in some neighbouring countries. Perhaps, civil society and political institutions in these countries are stronger and better able to stop the drift into illiberalism. However, even when radical right parties and governments in other nations avoid the illiberal paths taken in the United States, Hungary, Poland, Turkey or most of the Balkans, it is important to pay attention to the direction of public discourses, violations of public safety and proposed policies.

Even cases that do not fit cleanly into a story about the rise of the radical right reflect deeper institutional and communication breakdowns within democracies: the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the rise of Bepe Grillo and the sprawling Five *Star Movement* in Italy, or Emmanuel Macron and his *En Marche* movement/party that won the French elections in 2017 (Iacoboni, 2016). Signaling deeper institutional disruption, Macron's election came with record low voter turnouts despite unsavoury competition from the National Front, and his approval ratings slid from the mid-60s into the mid-30% range after 3 months in office.

Diagnosing the problem: Radical right or populism?

It is difficult for many who remain attached to the political centre to take the disorienting narratives emerging from these disinformation ecologies seriously. As a result, one can easily miss the empowerment offered to those who embrace and spread the disinformation. What appear on the surface to be blatantly false and bizarre stories may appeal to deeper myths and emotions among publics who support anti-democratic policies such as limitations on the free press and restrictions on civil liberties. Few centrist citizens can stomach spending much time browsing through the alt-right media sites, and it is easy to dismiss the wild stories that pass through the mainstream press as isolated cases. However, evidence suggests they are part of broader trend. A recent study of nations in the EU linking European Social Survey data to election trends and party programmes shows that vote share of radical right parties has grown disproportionately to counterparts on the left. Moreover, election gains by parties on the radical right (i.e. beyond the centre-right Christian Democrats and liberal parties) are also disproportionate to the actual population distributions of citizens who identify on radical left and radical right (Bennett et al., 2017). Detailing the reasons for this electoral imbalance on the left, or the differences in media use habits, is beyond our space limit here. As for the right, however, we can point to the emotional resonance and convergence of radical right discourses blending nationalism, anti-globalism, racism, welfare nationalism, anti-immigrant and refugee themes, and the need for strong leadership and order.

Mainstream communication research has largely settled on populism as an easy catch-all reference for many of these developments. However, analyses of populism often miss how much deeper and more elaborate these intellectual formulations go beyond simple hostility towards elites. Some frameworks for populist communication do, of course, include discussions of exclusionary social discourses about race or refugees (Reinemann et al., 2017). However, there is little consensus about whether to include exclusionary discourses in standard definitions or research designs with the result that the study of populism has become mired in poorly defined concepts and methods. For example, many studies of so-called 'thin' (i.e. anti-elite) populism persist in finding greater balance between left and right populism, begging the question of why the radical right has grown larger and become better organized than the corresponding left. However, as one drills down beyond thin populism and into layers of racism, nationalism, anti-globalism, restrictions on the press, social exclusion (immigrants, refugees), and other topics, it becomes clear that the underlying issues go far beyond mere anger at elites. What the focus on populism generally misses are these deeper political agendas and the breaches

with basic democratic values and communication processes. In the next section, we examine the defining elements of the emerging disinformation order that supports the rise of the radical right.

Identifying the elements of the disinformation order

One obvious focus for research in this area is to examine the strategic uses of disinformation campaigns by parties and politicians seeking to build movements and advance electoral goals by creating alternative information systems that block the mainstream press and provide followers with emotionally satisfying beliefs around which they can organize. Preliminary research suggests that alt-right information networks operate differently in different nations, sometimes organized by political parties, as in Austria and Hungary, while other cases center around nationalist culture sites and social media networks, as documented by Bounegru at al. (2017). Subsequent research shows the interesting struggles between extreme movement activists and more strategic party officials in nations such as Finland, Italy and the United States, as summarized by Bennett et al. (2017).

Beyond national-level mobilization of movements, parties and election campaigns, a second dimension of the disinformation order is the targeting of domestic political processes, parties and politicians by foreign agents and governments as a growing form of strategic information warfare. Strategic efforts to insert propaganda and partisan information into the domestic communication of other nations prey upon the contemporary ennui and anger that accompanies the hollowing out of mainstream institutions of the state and society (Mishra, 2017). For example, Russian hybrid warfare measures now include coordinated efforts by troll factories, hackers and bots to disrupt democratic processes from elections, to legislative communication, to public discussions of issues (Pomerantsev, 2014). Such activities have been reported in different contexts in the United Kingdom, Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States, among other nations. Various national case studies of 'computational propaganda' (2017) are now available from a team led by Phil Howard at Oxford University.

Scholars have associated such forms of disinformation more commonly with authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia, among others. In China, over 2 million persons (the *wumao dang* or 50 cent party) are paid a modest amount to post comments on social media. Collectively, approximately 448 million phony comments are posed by the *wumao dang* each year (King et al., 2017; Phillips, 2016). In Russia, the 'St Petersburg troll factory' is actually a company called the Internet Research Agency, one of several Russian firms that train and pay trolls. In 2013, the troll factory employed about 600 people and had an estimated annual budget of US$10 million (Bugorkova, 2015). Trolls were expected to post on news articles 50 times a day. Others had to maintain six Facebook accounts and publish at least three posts daily. Twitter trolls were required to have at least 10 accounts and tweet at least 50 times daily on each. All were assigned specific targets and goals for the number of followers they needed to attract (Benedictus, 2016). In 2018, indictments of 13 Russians by U.S. special prosecutor Robert Mueller further documented the extent of these operations (BBC News 2018).

Beyond introducing disinformation into its own domestic politics, part of the Russian operation is geostrategic. The Russian state is pushing back against the pressure of North

Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion and the West's reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea and interference in Ukraine, among other issues. According to US intelligence agencies, Fancy Bear, a Russian cyber-espionage group, hacked the servers used by the Democratic Party and released emails to WikiLeaks that were damaging to Hillary Clinton's campaign. Fancy Bear also broke into computers at the Bundestag in Berlin (Bota, 2017). In the Netherlands, a referendum on a trade agreement with Ukraine (Higgins, 2017) was subject to a trolling campaign built around a fake community of Ukrainians said to be living in exile in the Netherlands. In fact, they were Russian trolls posing as Ukrainians. In February 2017, Norway said that Russia-linked hackers had attacked the Labor Party, the defence and foreign ministries and the security service themselves (*BBC News*, 2017). Similar stories have emerged about Russian trolling in France, the United Kingdom and Germany (*The Economist*, 2017). Reminiscent of Horowitz's film about Sweden at the opening of this article, the German-language Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik served up false accounts of a Russian–German teenager named 'Lisa' who it said was raped by Muslim migrants in Berlin (Deardon, 2017). German police disconfirmed the story.

This chaotic mix of disinformation is rendered even more challenging to study due to the ranks of apolitical disinformation entrepreneurs producing fake news to make money in the booming 'attention economy' of online media. Many of these fake stories circulate widely and become grist for alt-right media commentary and elaboration. A study of fake and 'real' news on Facebook during the 2016 US election showed that the top 20 fake stories drew more engagement than the top real news stories by a margin of 8.7–7.3 million, measured by shares, reactions and comments. Moreover, the fake stories gained greater engagement in the final months before the election and engagement with real news declined. The stories that drew the most engagement were either anti-Clinton or pro Trump, including a highly circulated story claiming that The Pope had endorsed Trump. In addition, over 100 political websites, mostly promoting Trump were traced to locations in Macedonia. Much of the traffic to those and other fake news sites were driven by stories circulating on Facebook (Silverman, 2016). While they may seem to be isolated, the broad circulation of many of these fake stories is likely due to being picked up and spread by partisan sites and bots, echoed many times over by social media sharing.

To its credit, Facebook has conducted an internal study of this problem and determined that many forms of disinformation were operating in its networks of 2 billion users, making these problems both national and international in scope (Weedon et al., 2017). The Facebook report noted that the term fake news implies too narrow a view of the larger problems. Instead, the focus was placed on disinformation as the key problem, noting that disinformation is intentional, often strategic (targeting particular demographics) and may encompass both fake stories and coordinated efforts from both real and fake accounts to engage particular audiences. We provisionally adopt the official Facebook statement on disinformation as a reasonable operationalization that expands upon our opening definition:

> Disinformation – Inaccurate or manipulated information content that is spread intentionally. This can include false news, or it can involve more subtle methods such as false flag operations,

feeding inaccurate quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries, or knowingly amplifying biased or misleading information. Disinformation is distinct from misinformation, which is the inadvertent or unintentional spread of inaccurate information without malicious intent. (Weedon et al., 2017: 5)

The reach of social media, along with the difficulties policing it, enable political agents to reach vast national and international audiences with strategic 'Information Operations' defined as the following: 'Actions taken by governments or non-state actors to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic or geopolitical outcome'. (Weedon et al., 2017: 5). Unfortunately, Facebook's data are proprietary, resulting in the prospect of the company policing itself. Facebook, along with many media companies that inadvertently spread disinformation, faces challenging decisions about weeding disinformation from a broad spectrum of political discourses without damaging free speech, customer relations and business models.

Given the daunting mix of institutional decline, public sphere disruptions, and the growing attacks on journalism and enlightenment values, it may be that we have entered a 'post-truth' order (Harsin, 2015). If so, democracies based on norms of debate, deliberation, compromise and reason will not fare well. Clearly, not all nations face the same degree of media disruption, but press/politics research and political communication more generally need to address these issues beyond producing more work on populist communication that misses the underlying issues and the depth of democratic disorder.

Conclusion

One may take some comfort that the disarray across the democracies today is not as ominously patterned as the fascist movements that brought on the earlier collapse of democratic order in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. However, it nevertheless seems worrisome that no democratic nation appears immune from communication breakdowns in which sources from within and without spread disinformation that disrupts once more authoritative information flows from government officials through the mainstream press to publics. Indeed, it may be a sign of the times that the first international centre for 'countering hybrid threats' has been established in Finland in cooperation with NATO and eight other nations, a development that was officially 'welcomed' by the EU (2017). In the emerging vernacular, 'hybrid threats' may arise from state and non-state actors and include hacking, financial manipulation, currency destabilization or money laundering, and disinformation campaigns 'using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalize, recruit, and direct proxy actors …' (European Commission, 2016).

Research on the production of disinformation and its effects in democracies is currently surging, but the agenda and frameworks are not clear, and links to more conventional political communication research need to be forged. One obvious direction following from our argument involves identifying the characteristics of disinformation in different societies, noting where similar factors are in play and where important national differences exist. Another area for research is to put disinformation in broader political context, both domestic and foreign. In some nations, disinformation is far from a random or marginal problem, as it is linked to political funders, think tanks, heavily trafficked

media, movements and parties. These contextual patterns are important to identify. In addition, foreign interventions into national affairs have become a clear danger to the integrity of political processes and the coherence of the communication that defines them. Studying the operations of hackers, trolls and bots should become a more central area of political communication research.

Beyond these obvious areas for future research, we also suggest developing better perspectives on the nature of the problem. Much of our argument points to looking less at isolated examples of 'fake news' and paying more attention to how they and other disruptive processes fit into larger 'disinformation orders'. Part of this broadening of perspective is to resist easy efforts to make the problem go away by fact-checking initiatives and educating citizens about the perils of fake news. Many citizens actively seek such information in order to support identities and political activities that stem from emotional and material dislocations from the modern national and global institutional orders. What appears from the outside to be false information may actually engage deeper emotional truths for members of rising movements that wilfully defy reason. The intention is often to create irreparable breaches in democratic public spheres that have traditionally been based on enlightenment values and reasoned debate.

Once established among sizable enough populations, these alternative information systems can further threaten the centrist democratic order, as witnessed, for example, in the Brexit campaign, the election and the subsequent presidential communications of Donald Trump, the more general rise of radical right in many nations. These developments have been associated with the spread of violence and hate crimes against refugees, and religious and ethnic minorities in many nations. As radical movements and parties rise in power, disinformation and fake news become part of communication strategies for attacking and destabilizing opponents, and for establishing new 'illiberal' modes of governance.

All of these developments suggest the need to revise political communication theory and scholarship to problematize dominant assumptions about the coherence and functionality of communication flows between institutional actors, the media and publics. This shift in thinking about the scope and coherence of public communication entails nothing short of rethinking prevailing assumptions about the unity and inclusiveness of democratic public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch, in press). Finally, we urge colleagues in the field to consider ways in which normative perspectives may be developed to assess the levels of disinformation and democratic disruption in different societies. Perhaps, political communication can recommend ways of restoring public engagement with political institutions that better represent citizens and meet their information needs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Aftonbladet (2017) After Trump's 'last night in Sweden': Here are the errors in Fox News' report on Swedish immigration. *Aftonbladet*, 20 February. Available at: http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/g26Lk.

Applebaum A (2017) Sweden, immigrants and Trump's post-Enlightenment world. *Washington Post*, 12 March. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/sweden-immigrants-and-trumps-post-enlightenment-world/2017/03/12/97ea9c32-05b1-11e7-b1e9-a05d3c21f7cf_story.html?utm_term=.9487b01bc380.

Bartels LM (2017) Political inequality in affluent democracies. *Social Science Research Council* (Democracy Papers), 17 July Available at: http://items.ssrc.org/political-inequality-in-affluent-democracies/.

BBC News (2017) Norway institutions 'targeted by Russia-linked hackers'. *BBC News*, 3 February. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38859491.

BBC News (2018) *Russia-Trump inquiry: Full text of Mueller's indictment.* 16 February. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-43091945.

Benedictus L (2016) Invasion of the troll armies: From Russian Trump supporters to Turkish state stooges. *The Guardian*, 6 November. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/06/troll-armies-social-media-trump-russian.

Bennett WL and Pfetsch B (in press) Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication*.

Bennett WL, Segerberg A and Knüpfer CB (2017) The democratic interface: Technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Information, Communication & Society*: 20: 1–26. Available at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1348533?needAccess=true.

Bota A (2017) Merkel and the fancy Bear. *Zeit*, 12 May. Available at: http://www.zeit.de/digital/2017-05/cyberattack-bundestag-angela-merkel-fancy-bear-hacker-russia/komplettansicht.

Bounegru L, Gray J, Venturini T, et al. (2017) A field guide to fake news and other information disorders. *Amsterdam: Public Data Lab*. Available at: https:// fakenews. publicdatalab. org/.

Brown S (2017) Alex Jones's media empire is a machine built to sell snake-oil diet supplements. *New York Magazine*, 4 May Available at: http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/05/how-does-alex-jones-make-money.html.

Brustein J (2016) Trump's Twitter bots turned out on election day. *Bloomberg Technology*, 17 November. Available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-17/trump-s-twitter-bots-turned-out-on-election-day.

Bugorkova O (2015) Ukraine conflict: Inside Russia's 'Kremlin Troll Factory'. *BBC News*, 19 March. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31962644.

Carlson (2017) Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eUTywtvuUc.

Chadwick A (2013) *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Computational Propaganda (2017) The computational propaganda project. *Oxford Internet Institute*. Available at: http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/category/publishing/working-papers/.

Crouch C (2004) Post-democracy. Cambridge: Polity.

Curtis A (2016) HyperNormalisation. *BBC Documentary*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fny99f8amM.

Deardon L (2017) NATO accuses Sputnik news of distributing misinformation as part of 'Kremlin Propaganda Machine'. *The Independent*, 11 February. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/sputnik-news-russian-government-owned-controlled-nato-accuses-kremlin-propaganda-machine-a7574721.html.

Dorf MC and Tarrow S (2017) Stings and scams: 'Fake news', the first amendment, and the new activist journalism. *Journal of Constitutional Law* 20(1): 1–20.

European Commission (2015) *Public opinion in the European Union*. July. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_first_en.pdf.

European Commission (2016) Joint framework on countering hybrid threats, 6 April. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52016JC0018.

European Union (2017) EU welcomes establishment of the Finnish centre of excellence for countering hybrid threats, 4 April. Available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/24572/EU%20welcomes%20establishment%20of%20the%20Finnish%20Centre%20of%20Excellence%20for%20countering%20hybrid%20threats.

Faris R, Roberts H, Etling B, et al. (2017) Partisanship, propaganda, and disinformation: Online media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. *Berkman Klein Center* (Harvard), 16 August. Available at: https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud.

Gold H (2017) Breitbart reveals owners *Politico*, 24 February. Available at: http://www.politico.com/blogs/on-media/2017/02/breitbart-reveals-owners-ceo-larry-solov-mercer-family-and-susie-breitrbart-235358.

Gold M and Farhi P (2017) Bannon's next move: A return to Breitbart news, with more reach than ever. *Washington Post*, 18 August. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/bannons-next-move-a-return-to-breitbart-news-with-more-reach-than-ever/2017/08/18/3502d18c-843e-11e7-b359-15a3617c767b_story.html?utm_term=.1ced3c5d842a.

Gramer R (2017) Russian TV Crew Tries to Bribe Swedish Youngsters to Rio on Camera. *Foreign Policy*, 7 March. Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/07/russian-tv-crew-tries-to-bribe-swedish-youngsters-to-riot-on-camera-stockholm-rinkeby-russia-disinformation-media-immigration-migration-sweden/.

Harsin J (2015) Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8(2): 327–333.

Higgins A (2017) Fake news, fake Ukrainians: How a group of Russians tilted a Dutch vote. *The New York Times*, 16 February. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-fake-news-dutch-vote.html.

Iacoboni J (2016) The affaire between the five star movement and Putin's emissaries. *La Stampa*, 14 November. Available at: http://www.lastampa.it/2016/11/14/esteri/lastampa-in-english/the-affaire-between-the-five-star-movement-and-putins-emissaries-FhssevSl2AvCL5rFFsve3J/pagina.html.

King G, Pan J and Roberts ME (2017) How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction not engaged. *American Political Science Review* 1–18. Available at: https://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/psr_1700014_r.pdf.

Lindkvist H (2017) Swedish police featured in Fox News segment: Filmmaker is a madman. *Dagens Nyheter*, 26 February. Available at: http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/nyheter/swedish-police-featured-in-fox-news-segment-filmmaker-is-a-madman/.

MacAskill E (2011) Donald Trump bows out of 2012 U.S. Presidential election race. *The Guardian*, 16 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/16/donald-trump-us-presidential-race.

Mair P (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. New York: Verso Books.

Mayer J (2016) *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. New York: Anchor Books.

Mishra P (2017) *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Noack R (2017) Sweden has no idea what Trump meant when he said, 'You look at what's happening … in Sweden'. *Washington Post*, 19 February. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.

com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/19/sweden-has-no-idea-what-trump-meant-when-he-said-you-look-at-whats-happening-in-sweden/?utm_term=.cb88d098a613.

OECD (2017) *Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust*. Paris: OECD Publishing. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-en.

Pariser E (2012) *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin Books.

Phillips T (2016) Chinese officials create 448m bogus social media posts a year. *The Guardian*, 20 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/20/chinese-officials-create-488m-social-media-posts-a-year-study-finds.

Pomerantsev P (2014) How Putin is reinventing warfare. *Foreign Policy*, 5 May. Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/05/how-putin-is-reinventing-warfare/.

Porta DD, Kouki H, Mosca L, et al. (2017) *Movement Parties Against Austerity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Posner S (2016) How Donald Trump's new campaign chief created an online heaven for White nationalists. *Mother Jones*, 22 August. Available at: http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/stephen-bannon-donald-trump-alt-right-breitbart-news/.

Reed R (2017) John Oliver mocks Alex Jones for using fear to upsell 'Taint Wipes'. *Rolling Stone*, 31 July. Available at: http://www.rollingstone.com/tv/news/john-oliver-mocks-alex-jones-for-upselling-taint-wipes-w494958.

Reinemann C, Aalborg T, Esser F, et al. (2017) Populist political communication: Toward a model of its causes, forms and effects. In: Toril A, Frank E, Carsten R, et al. (eds) *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. New York: Routledge, pp. 12–28.

Silverman C (2016) This analysis shows how viral fake news outperformed real news on Facebook. *Buzzfeed*, 16 November. Available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.llEQaVa9k#.heAKV-vVWz.

Skocpol T and Hertel-Fernandez A (2016) The Koch network and Republican Party extremism. *Perspectives on Politics* 14(3): 681–699.

Spiegel (2016) Lying press? Germans lose faith in the fourth estate, Spiegel, 24 February. Available at: http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/most-germans-think-the-press-is-lying-to-them-about-refugees-a-1079049.html.

Sullivan M (2016) Just like Agnew, Trump blames a negative press: The public keeps buying it. *Washington Post*, 31 May. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/just-like-agnew-trump-blames-a-negative-press-the-public-keeps-buying-it/2016/05/31/1031fcd0-2755-11e6-b989-4e5479715b54_story.html?utm_term=.c849cbb4de1b.

Taylor A (2017) Who is Nils Bildt? Swedish 'national security adviser' interviewed by Fox News is a mystery to Swedes. *Washington Post*, 25 February. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/25/who-is-nils-bildt-swedish-national-security-advisor-interviewed-by-fox-news-is-a-mystery-to-swedes/?utm_term=.7205462e2215.

The Economist (2017) Europe is trying to keep Russia from influencing its elections. *The Economist*, 15 April. Available at: https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21720665-france-and-germany-fear-propaganda-and-espionage-favouring-pro-kremlin-candidates-europe-trying.

Topping A (2017) 'Sweden, who would believe this?' Trump cites non-existent terror attack. *The Guardian*, 19 February. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/19/sweden-trump-cites-non-existent-terror-attack.

Weedon J, Nuland W and Stamos A (2017) Information operations and Facebook. *Facebook*, 27 April. Available at: https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf.

Wong JC and Levin S (2017) Republican candidate charged with assault after 'body-slamming' Guardian reporter. *The Guardian*, 25 May. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/24/greg-gianforte-bodyslams-reporter-ben-jacobs-montana.

Wood T and Porter E (2018). The elusive backfire effect: Mass attitudes' steadfast factual adherence. *Political Behavior*, pp. 1–29.

Zakaria F (1997) The rise of illiberal democracy. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy.