DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 08.04.2024 | Jürgen Neyer

Disinformation isn't the problem

In this super election year, truths become a rare commodity, and the struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation of reality takes centre stage

The year 2024 seems to be a year of big decisions. The European Parliament elections in June and the US presidential election in November... politics and the media are talking of a showdown between democracy and disinformation. Add the elections in Russia and India to that and almost half of the world's population will be casting their vote this year.

According to EU High Representative Josep Borrell, 'malicious foreign actors' are trying to win the 'battle of narrative'. Disinformation is being pumped out, aimed at dividing society and undermining trust in state institutions, as stated by the German Federal Government. Social media is purportedly being used to spread lies, disinformation and deep fakes, which is rapidly generating false information and creating filter bubbles and echo chambers. It is also being claimed that artificial intelligence, deep fakes and personalised algorithms are building on the already existing uncertainty, reducing confidence in democratic institutions.

Does this threaten the very core of democracy?

There are a number of major counterpoints to the theory that a social media-driven flood of disinformation is posing a threat to democracy. Firstly, there is the term itself. We can distinguish 'disinformation' from simply 'false information' on the basis of whether there was any malicious intent. False information is a mistake; disinformation is an outright lie. However, the line between the two is often difficult to draw. How do we know whether someone is acting maliciously unless we are mindreaders?

The term 'disinformation' is often a misnomer, all too often applied in political spheres to anyone who simply takes a different view. This has been (and still can be) frequently observed on both sides of the debate surrounding the dangers of the coronavirus in recent years. There are still

no empirically meaningful studies that demonstrate that disinformation, filter bubbles and echo chambers have had any clear impact. Far from it, most studies show a low prevalence of disinformation, with little to no demonstrable effects. There even seems to be a link between intensive media use and a differentiated opinion.

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It is also unclear whether disinformation campaigns are capable of having a lasting effect at all. Even Lutz Güllner, the head of strategic communications at the European External Action Service, who is responsible for the EU's efforts to prevent Russian interference in the elections to the European Parliament, admits that nothing is actually known about this. Existing empirical studies suggest that disinformation makes up just a small fraction of the information available online and even then only reaches a small minority. Most users are well aware that self-proclaimed influencers and dubious websites should not necessarily be regarded as trustworthy sources of information.

The most important counterargument is perhaps the fact that there has never been a greater amount of high-quality knowledge available at such a low cost than we have today. Media libraries, blogs, political talk shows on TV, simple and inexpensive digital access to a variety of daily newspapers and other magazines... it has never been easier for anyone to access information. Forty years ago, most people lived in an information desert, reading one newspaper and possibly watching the news on one television channel. Not a shred of information diversity. But the internet and social media have since brought about a huge increase in plurality when it comes to forming opinions, albeit often hand in hand with increased uncertainty. However, this has shaped the modern era from as early as the 16th century, when the printing press was invented. Plurality is the epistemic foundation of an open society. From this point of view, it is a condition for democracy, not a threat to it.

The problem lies elsewhere

It is important not to misunderstand these counterarguments though. There are indeed dangers on a more abstract and yet more fundamental level. The core problem with ensuring a stable democracy is not with people lying and using information strategically to manipulate others' opinions — that is nothing new. Rather, it is because in Europe today, we move in different arenas of truth that are increasingly difficult to

reconcile.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson, Russian President Vladimir Putin explained in detail why he thought Ukraine belonged to Russia. He didn't necessarily lie but expressed a subjective truth built on historical constructions, which he probably truly believes in, as bizarre as that might sound to many Western ears. Likewise, the rhetoric iterated by Trump supporters that the Democratic Party is leading America into the abyss may not really qualify as a lie spread against their better knowledge; it is the presumed sincerity, not the lie, that should concern us. In modern society, incontrovertible truths become a rare commodity, and the struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation of reality takes centre stage. Unfortunately, the myth that we like to believe, that there is only a single truth in this day and age, which can be fact-checked, holds little water.

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In the philosophical debate, the underlying difficulty of determining truth can be found in an argument dating back to Aristotle about what actually constitutes truth. The general consensus today is that the truthful content of propositions cannot be directly derived from reality (facts) but can only be verified by way of other propositions. This dismantles the idea that some kind of congruence between proposition and reality can be determined. This 'coherence theory of truth' responds to the problem by understanding as true only those propositions that can be applied without contradiction to a larger context of propositions that we have already accepted as true. So, truth is what complements our construction of the world (and our prejudices) without contradiction.

But if agreement with conviction becomes the key criterion instead of facts, then the truth threatens to become intersectional, subjective and specific to context; the truth for some almost inevitably becomes a falsehood for others. How is this relevant to the current debate on disinformation? For the US, it first means that 100 million potential Trump supporters are neither (exclusively) liars, nor idiots. Rather, they live in a world that combines a firm belief in traditional values, a rejection of East Coast intellectualism and a reluctance towards post-modern contingency. It is a philosophy consisting of mutually reinforcing aspects that provide a fixed framework for classifying new information. One

where there is no need for fact-checkers or experts.

How can we and should we deal with such a fundamental dispute? Democracy is not a philosophical room for debate; there are always times when incompatible and harshly spoken positions clash. We must learn to weather these storms while preventing the truth from drifting away. This is not simply a matter of fact-checking, but rather continually renewing society's understanding of the foundation of truth. Liberals and conservatives, right and left, feminists and old white men must keep talking to each other. Then we have no reason to fear malicious foreign actors or even a battle of narrative.



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