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THESIS

**DECONSTRUCTING DEMOCRACY: AN EXAMINATION OF
DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND THE EFFECTS
ON AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

by

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September 2023

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DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND THE EFFECTS ON AMERICAN
DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how foreign and domestic disinformation threatens American democracy and security. Unlike inadvertent misinformation, disinformation involves intentionally false content meant to cause harm. Current academic models provide critical insight into the coordinated processes that systematically undermine institutions, distort understanding, and sow division, as seen on January 6. Such insidious democratic backsliding and information warfare indicate an urgent need to defend democratic principles against disinformation's dangers. This thesis uses an evaluative paradigm of comparative analysis in three steps. The first step involves applying definitions and frameworks to assess disinformation campaigns. The next step establishes the indicators of a functioning democracy. The final step involves examining the incidence of democratic erosion and its consequences. Then, based on this inquiry's findings, this thesis offers a comparative analysis of three disinformation campaigns: Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal. This thesis concludes that examining the intersection of inequality and polarization, formulating countermeasures, and anticipating psychosocial impacts can provide a comprehensive understanding of contemporary democracy's challenges and a path forward. The vigilant safeguarding of America's democratic foundations is critical amid disinformation's complex threats.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AEP	Analytic Exchange Program
AI	artificial intelligence
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSC	Cyberspace Solarium Commission
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DNC	Democratic National Committee
EA	executive aggrandizement
EU	European Union
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
FSB	Russian Federal Security Service
GEC	Global Engagement Center
GRU	Russian Main Intelligence Directorate
HSM	hostile social manipulation
IRA	Internet Research Agency
SEM	strategic election manipulation
SVR	Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
UGC	user-generated content
UK	United Kingdom
VSM	voting system manufacturer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, there has been a surge in foreign and domestic disinformation (DI) campaigns online.¹ Primarily, nations such as Russia and China have weaponized information to incite division within the United States.² Such influence campaigns represent covert soft power techniques that allow these adversaries to achieve their political objectives covertly.³ DI's attractiveness as a weapon lies in its cost-effectiveness, minimal infrastructure requirements, and potency in exploiting vulnerabilities in socially divided societies.⁴ The omnipresence of social media, combined with its algorithmic amplification and lack of oversight, intensifies DI's reach.⁵ Consequently, the United States remains susceptible to these campaigns, emphasizing a security policy gap in managing such threats.⁶ This thesis explores the repercussions of DI operations on U.S. democracy and homeland security by starting with the following questions.

1. To what extent have targeted DI campaigns contributed to the degradation of democracy in the United States?

¹ Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns: A Whole-of-Society Issue* (Washington, DC: Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, 2019), 2, https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo150650/ia_combatting-targeted-disinformation-campaigns.pdf.

² Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media in 2016," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 163, no. 2 (2019): 135, <https://www.amphilsoc.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/attachments/Jamieson.pdf>.

³ Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018): 39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26542705>.

⁴ Raphael S. Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media: Study Overview and Conclusions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), 37, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z1.html.

⁵ Christina Nemr and William Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Park Advisors, 2019), 11, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>; Yariv Tsfaty et al., "Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News: Literature Review and Synthesis," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44, no. 2 (2020): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1759443>.

⁶ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," 36.

2. Furthermore, to what extent has the erosion of U.S. democratic institutions caused by DI created existential threats to the homeland?

Through a qualitative comparative approach, this thesis found the following. First, DI campaigns, both foreign and domestic, distort public perceptions and aim to create a post-truth society where distinguishing between fact and falsehood becomes a challenge, thereby benefiting the disseminators by weakening their adversaries. Second, technological advancements, especially on social media platforms, exacerbate DI's reach and impact while domestic actors and nation-states amplify DI for personal and geopolitical gains. Third, the United States faces a nuanced erosion of democracy, intensified by societal polarization fueled by domestic DI operations. Fourth, this creeping democratic backsliding, combined with foreign state-sponsored DI campaigns, not only endangers democratic principles but also threatens national security. Fifth, although DI is a significant threat, it is crucial to understand it within the broader context of the pre-existing societal fractures it exploits. The research underscores the need to comprehensively address these interwoven challenges to secure the future of democracies, especially the United States.

The rise of anti-establishment sentiment and DI campaigns erodes objective truth, endangering democracy's foundations. These compromises inform voting and productive debate, potentially fueling societal unrest and radical acts. Thus, this thesis offers the following policies for counteracting DI.

- Government policy: Implement content accuracy and transparency regulations in political ads, ensuring no infringement on free speech.
- Media responsibility: Mainstream media should prioritize fact-checking and transparency while social media platforms must revise algorithms and improve content moderation.
- Public education: Embed media literacy and digital citizenship in curricula, emphasizing students' discerning credible information and understanding platform mechanics.

- Besides addressing DI, fortifying democracy is paramount, for which the following measures are suggested:
 - Government measures: Preserve electoral integrity, uphold legal standards, encourage bipartisan unity, and protect press and judicial independence.
 - Civics education: Teach citizens about governmental systems, cultivating critical-thinking and fostering active, respectful participation.

This thesis contributes to the homeland security enterprise by highlighting the escalating threat of both foreign and domestic DI to America's national security, democracy, and social fabric. It offers frameworks to track the transformation of DI into campaigns that destabilize institutions and values, aiding in their detection and disruption. This work guides efforts to protect America's democratic foundations from DI threats.

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With gratitude,

Dave

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I. INTRODUCTION

Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.

—John Adams

Weaponized foreign and domestic disinformation (DI) campaigns have increased since the 2016 U.S. presidential election.¹ These DI campaigns create a twofold problem for the United States.² The first problem is that foreign adversaries—notably Russia and China—use informational warfare strategies to attack the United States to sow division and discord. Russia’s interference during the 2016 presidential campaign season had a distinct impact on the election outcome.³ Indeed, Russian Military Intelligence (GRU) initiated a hack-and-release scheme involving the Democratic National Committee’s email servers. The Internet Research Agency (IRA)’s release of high-level committee members’ emails unleashed a DI campaign on the American public.

Ultimately, influence campaigns and other “active measures” are an efficient and covert method for implementing soft power control over an opponent.⁴ Through DI campaigns, America’s enemies achieve their political and strategic goals with non-military techniques while concealing any involvement.⁵ The U.S. Senate’s Select Committee on Intelligence has warned of the far-reaching consequences of Russian activities:

¹ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combating Targeted Disinformation Campaigns: A Whole-of-Society Issue* (Washington, DC: Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, 2019), 2, https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo150650/ia_combating-targeted-disinformation-campaigns.pdf.

² Disinformation campaigns may be sophisticated, multi-step attacks designed to confuse, increase polarization, and diminish trust in democratic institutions. Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combating Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*.

³ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media in 2016,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 163, no. 2 (2019): 135, <https://www.amphilsoc.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/attachments/Jamieson.pdf>.

⁴ Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (2018): 39, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26542705>.

⁵ Géza Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” in *Proceedings of FIKUSZ Symposium for Young Researchers*, ed. A. Kelemen-Erdos et al. (Budapest: Obuda University, 2020), 210, <https://kgk.uni-obuda.hu/fikusz>.

Moscow's behavior reflects Russia's more aggressive cyber posture in recent years, which poses a major threat to U.S. military, diplomatic, commercial, and critical infrastructure networks, as well as, as we've seen now, our elections. Russia's activities in 2016 demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations.⁶

The United States' exposure to these sorts of influence operations enables foreign power manipulation of the domestic agenda.

The second problem space created by DI hits closer to home. DI operations are not solely the domain of foreign adversaries. Domestic actors have perpetuated foreign DI campaigns within the United States and initiated DI for political gain.⁷ The IRA specifically targeted Donald Trump's campaign organization in the months leading up to the U.S. presidential election.⁸ In his report on Russian interference in the 2016 election, Robert Mueller states, "Among the U.S. 'leaders of public opinion' targeted by the IRA were various members and surrogates of the Trump Campaign. In total, Trump Campaign affiliates promoted dozens of tweets, posts, and other political content created by the IRA."⁹ In addition to being proxies for external threat actors, politicians have assimilated DI operations into their routines. Politicians have adopted DI tactics like those of foreign adversaries' campaigns. Allen and West explain why politicians have turned to DI to garner supporters: "Politicians fight with everything they have, and policymaking has become more a matter of might than right. The information ecosystem rewards those who are angry with one another by amplifying their messages and expanding their popularity."¹⁰ Indeed, domestic political operatives such as Donald Trump have harnessed the power of DI and

⁶ *Open Hearing on the Intelligence Community's Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions in the 2016 U.S. Elections before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate*, 115th Cong. (2017), 7, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=819454>.

⁷ Yariv Tsfati et al., "Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News: Literature Review and Synthesis," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44, no. 2 (2020): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1759443>.

⁸ Robert S. Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2019), 33, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>.

⁹ Mueller, 1:33.

¹⁰ John R. Allen and Darrell M. West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2021), 14, ProQuest.

social media, creating false narratives to confuse and obfuscate the truth, allowing manipulation of public opinion.¹¹ These conspiracies proliferated as DI rallied Trump's political supporters and simultaneously alienated centrists, causing an increase in political polarization.¹² The net result has been an attack on truth, increased confusion among the public, and increased division among the political parties and their supporters.

DI has several attributes in foreign and domestic efforts, making it an attractive weapon for bad actors. DI campaigns are relatively cheap, require minimal infrastructure, and prey on socially vulnerable societies.¹³ Modern DI tactics have become highly effective because of the widespread use of social media platforms. Popularity-based algorithms drive these social sharing sites and bot networks; amplifying them has far-reaching effects.¹⁴ Additionally, information-sharing platforms lack general oversight, and this feature arms political operatives with the ability to spread unvetted information to the American public at will.¹⁵ DI campaigns are a potent weapon that current American security policy is not adequately managing in grey zone operations.¹⁶ In this way, the United States has opened itself up for exploitation and manipulation.

¹¹ Marwick and Lewis note that "Donald Trump has long been known as an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist. Perhaps most famously, in 2011 he became one of the biggest proponents of the 'Birther' theory. Even while he was the President at the height of the COVID pandemic, he 'openly embraced anti-vaccination.'" Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017), 21, https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/DataAndSociety_MediaManipulationAndDisinformationOnline-1.pdf.

¹² Andrew H. Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol," *Violence: An International Journal* 2, no. 1 (April 2021): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/26330024211010043>.

¹³ Raphael S. Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media: Study Overview and Conclusions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), 37, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z1.html.

¹⁴ Nemr and Gangware describe how "bot networks consisting of fake profiles amplify the message and create the illusion of high activity and popularity across multiple platforms at once, gaming recommendation and rating algorithms." Christina Nemr and William Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction: Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Park Advisors, 2019), 11, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Weapons-of-Mass-Distraction-Foreign-State-Sponsored-Disinformation-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>.

¹⁵ Tsifti et al., "Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News," 158.

¹⁶ Hoffman defines *gray zone tactics* as follows: "Those covert or illegal activities of nontraditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage." Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," 36.

DI campaigns are usually chosen strategically to foster divisive, emotional, and controversial issues. Ultimately, foreign and domestic DI operations aim to exploit existing societal fissures to cause turmoil and bewilder the American public. In this context, this thesis aspires to identify the effect of these DI operations on U.S. democracy and homeland security.

A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To what extent have targeted DI campaigns contributed to the degradation of democracy in the United States? Furthermore, to what extent has the erosion of U.S. democratic institutions caused by DI created existential threats to the homeland?

B. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis aimed to examine to what extent targeted DI campaigns contribute to the erosion of U.S. democratic institutions and create existential threats to the homeland.¹⁷ These conclusions have significant implications for counteracting the effects of domestic and foreign DI campaigns and providing a framework to measure whether the degradation of consolidated democracy has transpired. This thesis achieved its objective using an evaluative paradigm of comparative analysis in three steps. The first step used the chosen definitions and frameworks to assess DI and DI campaigns. The next step established the indicators of a functioning democracy. Finally, this thesis examined the incidence of democratic erosion and its consequences.

A framework provided by Wardle and Derakhshan aided this research by clarifying the definitions of mis-, dis-, and malinformation. This research applied the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)'s DI kill chain model comprising six steps: recon, build, seed,

¹⁷ This thesis adopts Freelon and Wells's definition of disinformation: "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit." Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, "Disinformation as Political Communication," *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755>. The Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program's framework for disinformation campaigns is used to examine targeted disinformation operations in this thesis. Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combating Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4. Linz and Stepan's model of consolidated democracy serves as the paradigm for a healthy democracy against which democratic erosion or backsliding is measured. Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.

copy, amplify, and control. Using this framework allowed for a thorough examination of the DI aspects of the selected case studies. Linz and Stepan's framework, which measures and compares the effectiveness of a democracy, was used to determine the severity of any consequences. Linz and Stepan's model of consolidated democracy comprises five critical interrelated areas—"civil society, political society, the rule of law, state apparatus, and economic society"—that work together to create an "interacting system."¹⁸ Linz and Stepan's framework offered a benchmark to establish the occurrence of democratic erosion. Finally, an adapted version of Rubin's disease triangle model helped to explain the DI ecosystem that has enabled threat actors to carry out operations.

Based on the findings of this thesis, a comparative case study analysis was conducted, and recommendations were offered for improvements and future research areas. This comparative analysis examined three DI campaigns: Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal. These cases share key similarities in their political nature and impact on democratic institutions, but a systematic analysis of their backgrounds, distributions, consequences, and implications revealed essential differences. In examining case studies, this research used the frameworks for DI campaigns and consolidated democracy to evaluate whether the foreign or domestic threat actors have used DI campaigns and to what extent those campaigns caused democratic erosion. These case studies were selected because they represent three compelling examples of recent DI campaigns involving both foreign and domestic threat actors.

The analysis provided a background on each DI case, outlined the distribution methods and objectives, detailed the social and political consequences, discussed the broader democratic implications, and highlighted similarities and differences regarding the nature of DI, the role of foreign interference, and the scale and impact of democratic erosion across the cases. In conclusion, this comparative analysis showed how such targeted DI campaigns, despite some variances, collectively threaten democratic societies by undermining trust, stoking division, and inciting real-world action.

¹⁸ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 13. The literature review in Chapter II discusses research on democratic progress and regress and provides an overview of Linz and Stepan's model.

Ultimately, this thesis sought to demonstrate the impact of DI campaigns on U.S. democratic practices. The research used in this thesis incorporated primary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, multiple secondary sources, and gray literature, including government reports. Due to the contemporary nature of this thesis topic, the research used news articles and varied forms of media.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND BACKGROUND

The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.

—Sun Tzu

This literature review explores the available research about DI and targeted DI campaigns to find consensus among scholars regarding definitions to use in this research. In addition, this review examines the academic debates surrounding some of the causes of distrust in government and the possible effects of DI campaigns on public confidence in democratic institutions.

A. DEFINING DI

Scholars distinguish the definitions and functions of false information, whether misinformation, malinformation, or propaganda. Various forms of false information thrive, such as misinformation, malinformation, fake news, propaganda, active measures, malign influence, and conspiracy theories.¹⁹ Some forms, such as DI and malinformation, are more nuanced.²⁰ Other forms of information differ vastly, such as DI and propaganda. The Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program (AEP) explains that propaganda can be a legitimate government activity designed to influence public opinion about a policy or issue using information that so closely mirrors advertising or publicity that the three are often difficult to differentiate.²¹ Malinformation is also factual information; however, as Wardle

¹⁹ As described by Jones-Jang, Kim, and Kenski, “A popular term, fake news should be treated as a type of disinformation that is intentionally and verifiably false.” S. Mo Jones-Jang, Dam Hee Kim, and Kate Kenski, “Perceptions of Mis- or Disinformation Exposure Predict Political Cynicism: Evidence from a Two-Wave Survey during the 2018 U.S. Democracy Midterm Elections,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 10 (October 2021): 3107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820943878>. See also Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, CSC White Paper no. 6 (Washington, DC: Cyberspace Solarium Commission, 2021), 6, ProQuest.

²⁰ According to Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation . . . excludes deceptive messages that may cause harm without the disseminators’ knowledge (misinformation) and non-deceptive messages intended to harm others (e.g., slurs based on racial, sexual, or gender identity). Disinformation messages under this definition are munitions in campaigns of information warfare, non-lethal weapons intended to subdue adversaries rather than reason with them.” Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 145–46.

²¹ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4.

and Derakhshan explain, it “is truthful information used to harm (either by moving private information into the public arena or using people’s affiliations, like their religion, against them)” (see Figure 1).²² Examples of malinformation include hate speech, harassment, and leaks of sensitive information. The authentic and accurate content of malinformation employed for nefarious purposes sets it apart from dis- and mis-information.²³ According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, misinformation is not purposefully false or shared to deceive the recipient; it is merely incorrect information shared incidentally.²⁴ Informational activities abound; sorting them academically for concise reference avoids bewilderment.

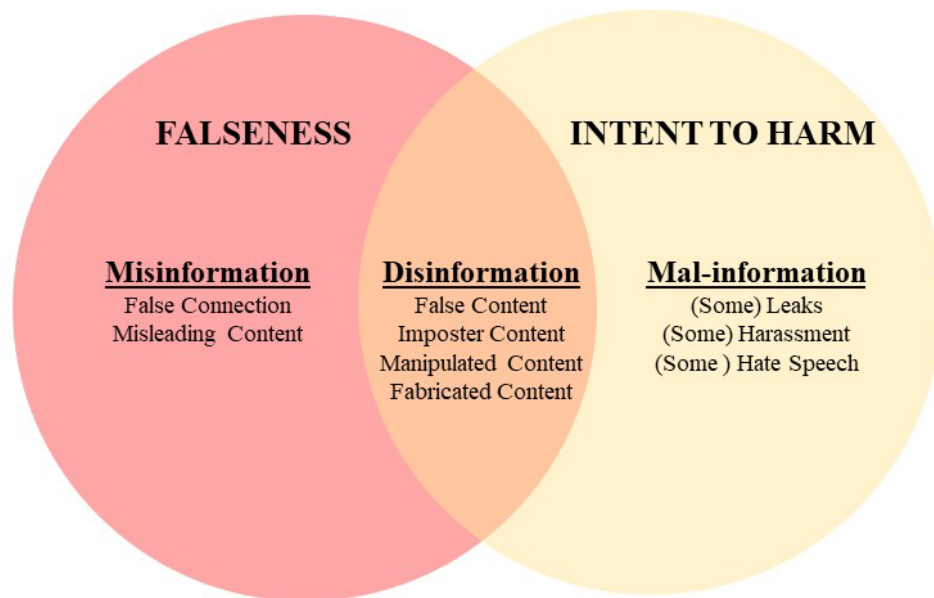


Figure 1. Components of Information Disorders.²⁵

²² Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making*, DGI(2017)09 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017), 27, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

²³ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4.

²⁴ Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council, “Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation: Planning and Incident Response Guide for Election Officials” (Washington, DC: Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Administration, 2022), <https://www.cisa.gov/mdm>.

²⁵ Adapted from Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, 5.

Conspiracy theories are yet another subcategory of information activity aligned with DI. According to van der Linden et al., conspiracy theories, “like many other types of rumors—provide relatively simple causal explanations for events that are otherwise experienced as complex, uncertain, ambiguous, and potentially troubling or threatening.”²⁶ Applebaum concurs, explaining that the simple nature of these “secrets” appeals to the emotional needs of the believers, satisfying a need for privilege and power.²⁷ Marwick and Lewis explain that malign actors could repurpose conspiracy theories formed as misinformation: “Regardless of how or why they spread, conspiracy theories can have tangible negative effects.”²⁸ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook clarify how DI packaged as a conspiracy theory is detrimental to institutional trust: “The mere exposure to conspiratorial discourse, even if the conspiratorial claims are dismissed, makes people less likely to accept official information.”²⁹ The use of and belief in conspiracy theories are highly asymmetrical among political parties and their followers. DiMaggio writes, “Scholarly research on political polarization reinforces the notion that conspiracy theorizing should be expected to be a heavily rightwing Republican phenomenon.”³⁰ Many scholars highlight this trend, including van der Linden et al.; Bennett and Livingston; and Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, who identify an imbalance in reliance on conspiratorial thinking and party affiliation.³¹ At first glance, one might assume conspiracy theories do

²⁶ Sander van der Linden et al., “The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking,” *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2021): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12681>.

²⁷ Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), 45.

²⁸ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 18.

²⁹ Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich K. H. Ecker, and John Cook, “Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the ‘Post-truth’ Era,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, no. 4 (December 2017): 355, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008>.

³⁰ Anthony R. DiMaggio, “Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent: QAnon, the ‘Big Lie’, Covid-19, and the Rise of Rightwing Propaganda,” *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (2022): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211073669>.

³¹ van der Linden et al., “The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited,” 46; W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, “The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions,” *European Journal of Communication* 33, no. 2 (April 2018): 584, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317>; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation,” 358.

not merit discussion because they represent fringe community content. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, conspiracy theories fuel targeted DI campaigns.

The fundamental need for a precise definition of DI arises from the copious discussions of informational activities in recent years. Since the academic and public spheres have overexamined various forms of deceptive information practices, specific terms—most notably “fake news”—have lost their meaning.³² Moreover, as Wardle and Derakhshan point out, recognizing shared explanations and using rigor when assigning definitions are critical.³³ The assorted forms of mis-, dis-, and malinformation have become commonplace and interchangeable. Substituting these terms for one another is highly inaccurate, confuses the discussion, and more importantly, slows progress in mitigating the problems they cause. Jack points out the dangers of not using the correct terminology:

Journalists, commentators, policymakers, and scholars have a variety of words at their disposal—*propaganda*, *disinformation*, *misinformation*, and so on—to describe the accuracy and relevance of media content. These terms can carry a lot of baggage. They have each accrued different cultural associations and historical meanings and can take on different shades of meaning in different contexts. These differences may seem small, but they matter. The words we choose to describe media manipulation can lead to assumptions about how information spreads, who spreads it, and who receives it. These assumptions can shape what kinds of interventions or solutions seem desirable, appropriate, or even possible.³⁴

The body of research on DI has grown rapidly since 2016. Researchers such as Freelon and Wells, Nemr and Gangware, and Rid share a standard, vague definition of DI. In their research on DI as a political tool, Freelon and Wells have adopted a definition from the European Commission’s High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, which includes “three critical criteria: 1) deception, 2) potential for harm, and 3) an intent to harm. It thus excludes deceptive messages that may cause harm without

³² Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, 5.

³³ Wardle and Derakhshan, 17.

³⁴ Caroline Jack, *Lexicon of Lies* (New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017), 1, <https://data.society.net/library/lexicon-of-lies/>. Original emphasis.

the disseminators' knowledge (misinformation) and non-deceptive messages intended to harm others.”³⁵ The High Level Expert Group writes, “Disinformation . . . includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to cause public harm intentionally or for profit.”³⁶ As noted by the authors, this “succinct” designation includes the element of harm that distinguishes DI from misinformation. Thus, these scholars are explicit about what DI is not. In their view, DI is not misinformation or malinformation. The consensus in the literature is that the key to DI is the intent to harm combined with malicious deception, which is not true of the other forms.³⁷

Although this research considers harm elemental in the definition, other authors contribute disparate factors in describing DI. For example, Bennett and Livingston describe DI's use of “intentional falsehoods” to advance political objectives.³⁸ Although Bennett and Livingston correctly observe that DI contains falsehoods, Nemr and Gangware point out that DI can and often does contain authentic content or truthful elements used deceitfully.³⁹ Furthermore, Rid and the Cyberspace Solarium Commission (CSC) contend that the most effective forms of DI contain some truth that makes public consumption of the falsehood more palatable.⁴⁰ Although DI is a multi-purpose tool, its use in the political sphere is the subject of this thesis research, and Bennett and Livingston's acknowledgment of such use in this realm is essential. Bennett and Livingston explain that bad actors wield DI to weaken adversaries and further their strategic goals on the world stage.⁴¹ Wardle and

³⁵ Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 146.

³⁶ High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, *A Multi-dimensional Approach to Disinformation: Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), 3, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>.

³⁷ Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 146.

³⁸ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 124.

³⁹ Nemr and Gangware explain, “It can be difficult to ascribe precise parameters to disinformation. For example, disinformation is not always composed of fabrications. It can consist of true facts, pieced together to portray a distorted view of reality.” Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 4.

⁴⁰ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 10; Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 6.

⁴¹ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 134.

Derakhshan as well as Jack explain that rigorous definitions are critical to addressing information activities and their potential consequences.⁴² DI aims to cause harm, so not recognizing this intent will only attenuate academic research on malicious DI use.

Not all societies are prone to the effects of outside threat actors and their use of DI campaigns. Autocratic states have a competitive advantage over liberal democracies because they regulate social media and other information outlets, often referred to as digital authoritarianism.⁴³ Democratic nations, by nature, are susceptible to the use of adversarial DI.⁴⁴ An open society and free press are prerequisites for successfully targeting a nation-state for DI. Rid supports this idea with evidence from the Stasi—the East German Ministry for State Security. He documents the Stasi’s belief that journalism and intelligence agencies engaged in active measures have a symbiotic relationship.⁴⁵ A congressional white paper acknowledges that adversaries exploit the “slow and messy” process in which democracies operate.⁴⁶ Sloss concludes, “Russia and China are working ‘to upend the Western liberal order by turning Western virtues of openness . . . into vulnerabilities to be exploited.’”⁴⁷

The literature provides a general understanding of DI, with some authors adding more specificity than others. Scholars concur that state and non-state actors deceptively use information, either false or authentic content, to cause harm intentionally in the socio-political domain to gain a power advantage over an intended adversary. The authors agree that a concise yet thorough definition is vital to conducting proper research and identifying possible policy solutions for DI’s consequences.

⁴² Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, 48; Jack, *Lexicon of Lies*, 1.

⁴³ David Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter: Protecting Democracies from Information Warfare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 141.

⁴⁴ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 134.

⁴⁵ Rid expounds on the Stasi’s philosophy: “Intelligence and journalism, in Wagenbreth’s view, had ‘entered a kind of marriage,’ he said. ‘They complement each other and can’t let go of each other.’ The Stasi knew that the press was addicted to leaks, and that scoop-hungry reporters would even publish anonymous leaks.” Rid, *Active Measures*, 195.

⁴⁶ According to the Cyberspace Solarium Commission, “No system of government is perfect, and adversaries exploit citizens’ frustration with democratic outcomes and the sometimes slow and messy process by which democracies fashion their policies.” Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 9.

⁴⁷ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 4.

B. DI CAMPAIGNS

A body of literature discusses DI campaigns—one of the many information forms used by nefarious actors as a part of broader mechanisms designed to exert influence and control.⁴⁸ In its report, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, the AEP provides a detailed description of DI campaign management, called the DI kill chain, including steps and responsible actors (see Figure 2).⁴⁹ The cyber kill chain, initially developed by Lockheed Martin to describe the process of defending against cyber intrusion, inspired the DI kill chain.

⁴⁸ The academic literature identifies different forms of disinformation, including influence operations, active measures, grey zone operations, and hybrid warfare. Michael J. Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation: Present Realities and Emerging Trends* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 15, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2713.html; Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 212; Global Engagement Center, *GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2020), 5; Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4. The RAND Corporation defines *influence operations* as “the collection of tactical information about an adversary as well as the dissemination of propaganda in pursuit of a competitive advantage over an opponent.” “Information Operations,” RAND Corporation, accessed August 22, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/topics/information-operations.html>. Rid explains that the term *active measures* was used by the Soviet Union to describe psychological influence operations conducted by its clandestine intelligence units. Rid, *Active Measures*, 6. Hoffman defines *gray zone operations* as “those covert or illegal activities of nontraditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage.” Hoffman defines *hybrid warfare* as “a blend of hard and soft power. A combination of instruments, some military and some non-military, choreographed to surprise, confuse and wear down an opponent, hybrid warfare is ambiguous in both source and intent.” Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” 36, 39. Notwithstanding this array of disinformation, this research focuses solely on disinformation campaigns. Disinformation activities are an intentional act meant to damage an adversary, unlike the other forms of information. HSM, influence operations, grey ops, and hybrid warfare may involve a multitude of methods including disinformation.

⁴⁹ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 15.



Figure 2. Fundamental Elements of a Disinformation Campaign.⁵⁰

The DI kill chain framework identifies the steps that “threat actors” take to complete the campaign objective or “effect.” At the onset, the agent conducts reconnaissance of the information environment to select the target audience. The threat actor then weaponizes the campaign in the build phase, creating false online personas and acquiring the requisite computing infrastructure. After finalizing the design content, the campaign launches the seed phase by delivering content to selected “drop points.” The copy phase “fertilizes” the campaign by commenting on the original post and sharing it via multiple accounts, including those of the fake personas from the build phase. The amplification phase is, arguably, the most important; as Wardle and Derakhshan conclude, “Without amplification, dis-information goes nowhere.”⁵¹ Amplification occurs through multiple modes, some inauthentic and others authentic, but unwittingly causes the spread. Key to the operation is the threat actor’s ability to deny involvement. This partitioning of involvement occurs in the control phase by manipulating the target audience via inciting conflict and consensus, shielding the creator behind a wall of genuine engagement. Finally, the effect phase reaches the objective, which, according to DHS, is a post-truth stage.⁵² Pennycook and Rand adopt *Oxford Dictionaries’* definition of post-truth: “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public

⁵⁰ Source: Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, 27.

⁵¹ Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, 13.

⁵² Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combating Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 16.

opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁵³ The AEP summarizes the DI kill chain and other operations like it with one of the most concise and appropriate definitions of DI campaigns:

A disinformation campaign occurs when a person, group of people or entity (a “threat actor”) coordinate [s] to distribute false or misleading information while concealing the true objectives of the campaign. The objectives of disinformation campaigns can be broad (e.g., sowing discord in a population) or targeted (e.g., propagating a counternarrative to domestic protests) and may employ all information types (disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, propaganda, and true information). The target of a disinformation campaign is the person or group the threat actor aims to influence in order to achieve the campaign’s objective.⁵⁴

This literature and the model provided by the AEP are critical in understanding how operations create a post-truth society. Senior leadership can better formulate policy to address the threat by analyzing these processes and consequences. If the end goal of DI campaigns is a post-truth society, the relevant literature regarding this phenomenon helps to explain its attributes and effects. In Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook’s bleaker, more descriptive vision of a post-truth world, “experts are derided as untrustworthy or elitist whenever their reported facts threaten the rule of the well-financed or the prejudices of the uninformed.”⁵⁵

This post-truth effect will advance existing fractures and tensions in society to the point that liberal democracy cannot defend against the influence of autocracies. Sloss argues that the definitive reason for DI campaigns is “to undermine liberal democracies from within, and to transform the liberal international order into a system that is more hospitable to illiberal authoritarian regimes.”⁵⁶ If the experts are correct about DI’s role in creating a post-truth society, then significant consequences follow for democratic

⁵³ Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, “Lazy, Not Biased: Susceptibility to Partisan Fake News Is Better Explained by Lack of Reasoning Than by Motivated Reasoning,” *Cognition* 188 (July 2019): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.011>.

⁵⁴ Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4.

⁵⁵ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation,” 354.

⁵⁶ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 15.

institutions that rely on critical-thinking.⁵⁷ The current form of government in the United States faces irreparable damage if the post-truth phenomenon affects its institutional functions. No other articles on DI campaigns elaborate on these types of operations in as much detail as the AEP's report.

In her thesis, Korta offers a framework called “information laundering 2.0” that likens DI's entering the public sphere to the financial crime of money laundering.⁵⁸ In her model, Korta breaks the process into three phases. First, the placement phase sees the creation of the false narrative or other DI and its introduction into the information ecosystem. Next, in the layering phase, three components of the internet—enablers, accelerators, and amplifiers—act on the information and obfuscate the source and intent of the inauthentic information. Third, the integration phase marks the information's entrance into public discourse. Korta's concept is a novel way of framing the handling of DI, even if its steps resemble the DI kill chain.

The Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) provides an in-depth look at Russia's DI machine. The GEC describes Russia's various outlets, or “pillars,” and how DI spreads in an organized campaign, thereby contributing significantly to the literature (see Figure 3).⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Facione expounds on the importance of critical-thinking: “The experts say critical thinking is fundamental to, if not essential for, ‘a rational and democratic society.’ What might the experts mean by this? Well, how wise would democracy be if people abandoned critical thinking?” Peter A. Facione, “Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts,” *Insight Assessment* 1, no. 1 (2020): 24.

⁵⁸ Samantha M. Korta, “Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies: An Information Laundering Model for Homeland Security” (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018), 80, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/58322>.

⁵⁹ Global Engagement Center, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda*, 10.



Figure 3. Pillars of Russia’s DI Ecosystem.⁶⁰

The GEC categorizes this collection of entities as an ecosystem “that allows for varied and overlapping approaches that reinforce each other.”⁶¹ The GEC explains that DI spreads through the ecosystem at different rates and sometimes with conflicting messaging. This explanation adheres to the framework established in the AEP’s DI kill chain. Russia’s DI ecosystem provides it with three distinct benefits:

First, it allows for the introduction of numerous variations of the same false narratives. This allows for the different pillars of the ecosystem to fine-tune their disinformation narratives to suit different target audiences because there is no need for consistency, as there would be with attributed government communications. Second, it provides plausible deniability for Kremlin officials when proxy sites peddle blatant and dangerous disinformation, allowing them to deflect criticism while still introducing pernicious information. Third, it creates a media multiplier effect among the different pillars of the ecosystem that boost their reach and resonance.⁶²

⁶⁰ Source: Global Engagement Center, *Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda*, 8.

⁶¹ Global Engagement Center, 34.

⁶² Global Engagement Center, 5.

Media sources, proxies, bots, and government and non-government organizations comprise Russia's DI pillars. Nemr and Gangware further describe the components: "At present, Russia's information warfare machine functions like a diverse and interconnected ecosystem of actors, including state-backed media outlets, social media accounts, intelligence agencies, and cyber criminals."⁶³ Russia's DI machine is complex, and the use of disparate actors across all levels of government and the private sector makes it a difficult target for its adversaries.

C. DISEASE TRIANGLE AS A MODEL

Writing about the information ecosystem and how DI spreads, Rubin introduces another conceptual model. In her study of causal factors and interventions for DI, Rubin adopts an epidemiological model used to describe disease transmission among plants, developed initially by George McNew, a scientist at the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research. Rubin states, "An epidemiological model is suitable for modeling the phenomenon of DI and misinformation as a socio-technological disease of epidemic proportion."⁶⁴ According to Rubin, three components form the disinformation and misinformation triangle. The first is the susceptible host, which she portrays as "information-overloaded, time-pressed, or gullible news readers/social media users."⁶⁵ The second factor is the conducive environment, which Rubin explains is a user-generated platform for news or social media content that is either "toxic or complicit."⁶⁶ The third part of the triangle is the virulent pathogen—intentionally harmful and deceptive content introduced into the conducive environment. As Rubin's model demonstrates the spread of disinformation, it offers areas to examine for possible DI solutions. A modified version of Rubin's model reflects the actors involved in the DI kill chain and more accurately represents DI campaign activities. As shown in Figure 4, three causal factors are necessary

⁶³ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 16.

⁶⁴ Victoria L. Rubin, "Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle: A Conceptual Model for 'Fake News' Epidemic, Causal Factors and Interventions," *Journal of Documentation* 75, no. 5 (2019): 1022, <https://doi.org/10.1108/jd-12-2018-0209>.

⁶⁵ Rubin, 1023.

⁶⁶ Rubin, 1023.

to carry out a DI campaign effectively; an operation lacking one of the factors will not succeed. Together, the causal factors create the DI ecosystem.

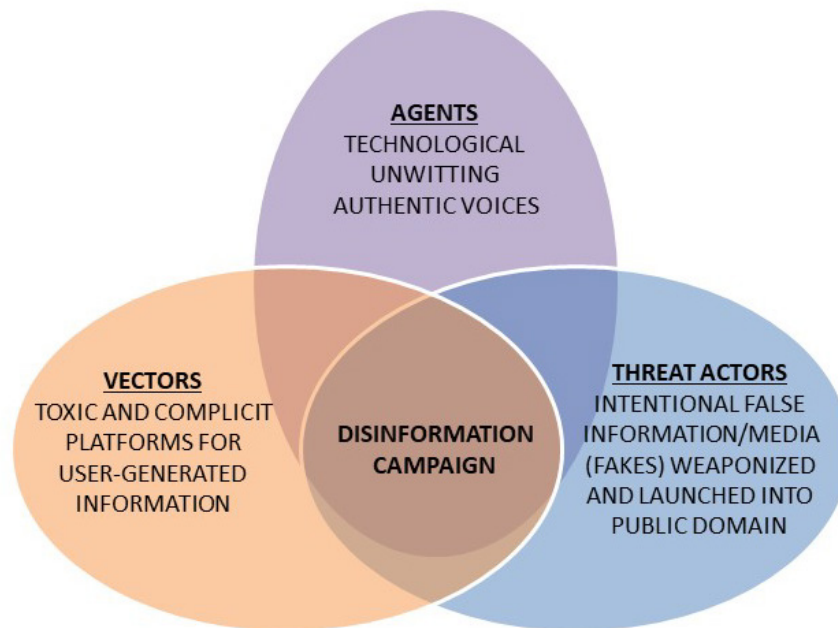


Figure 4. Disinformation Ecosystem.⁶⁷

Researchers have created many frameworks to diagram DI campaigns. They share similar attributes, but like the definitions used by researchers and academics, these frameworks show a lack of consensus. For example, Mazarr et al. introduce *hostile social manipulation* (HSM) as “the purposeful, systematic generation and dissemination of information to produce harmful social, political, and economic outcomes in a target area by affecting beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.”⁶⁸ The HSM definition resembles the AEP’s targeted DI campaign, with two distinct differences. The first distinction is the information activity, whatever form it takes, intended by HSM instigators to “do damage to the target state or use the information campaign to allow it to undertake aggressive, hostile

⁶⁷ Adapted from Rubin, 1023.

⁶⁸ Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 15.

actions.”⁶⁹ The second distinction is the focus on information channels, especially social networks, as a mechanism to “corrupt the infosphere.”⁷⁰ The CSC explains the use and goal of influence operations:

Adversaries of the United States, operating out of both foreign and domestic locations, conduct operations to spread both disinformation and misinformation in the United States to undermine public confidence in core democratic institutions, sow discord and polarize the population, and place the health and safety of Americans at risk.⁷¹

Thus, understanding DI operations as highly structured and curated endeavors is critical to countering them. Examining the processes used will provide opportunities to disrupt future DI campaigns.

In sum, the research thoroughly verifies the goals of DI campaigns. Essentially, threat actors seek a competitive advantage over their adversaries through DI.⁷² The methods used exacerbate existing societal and political divisions, making easy fodder for manipulation and control that end in confusion and doubt. This condition, often labeled by researchers as post-truth, weakens an enemy and allows the threat actor to dominate a nation-state, which is the objective of the DI campaign. Gémesi illustrates this point with Russia’s intended use of DI: “Chaos is the strategy the Kremlin pursues: Gerasimov specifies that the objective is to achieve an environment of permanent unrest and conflict within an enemy state.”⁷³ Such confusion can lead to factors inside and outside the government apparatus that create regime distrust.

D. THE HISTORY OF WEAPONIZED INFORMATION

DI introduced into the world and shared by the public with abandon is dangerous. However, a strategically targeted DI campaign can wreak havoc. As the AEP states, “A

⁶⁹ Mazarr et al., 15.

⁷⁰ Mazarr et al., 8.

⁷¹ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 6.

⁷² Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 12; Rid, *Active Measures*, 8; Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4; Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 9.

⁷³ Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 210.

[DI campaign] is more insidious than simply telling lies on the internet. One untrue meme or contrived story may be a single thread in a broader operation seeking to influence a target population through methods that violate democratic values, societal norms and, in some jurisdictions, the law.”⁷⁴ DI campaigns are information warfare, existing in one form or another as long as recorded history, and state and non-state actors, both foreign and domestic, have been the perpetrators. Cohen compares the reinvigoration of DI campaigns in the digital era to using the machine gun in early aviation. Just as the addition of the machine gun revolutionized aerial warfare, so has the social media boom of this century revolutionized DI.⁷⁵ Indeed, the risks manifest in DI have existed for millennia.

Nevertheless, the relentless 24/7 news cycle portrays DI as a new and burgeoning threat to Western democracy—a fallacy, according to Rid.⁷⁶ However, this DI is actively used in wars, political campaigns, and public debates over society’s controversial issues. Using false information planted by opposing sides to help change opinions is far from new. Garrett writes that the introduction of false claims “to sway public opinion dates back to the time of ancient Greece.”⁷⁷ DI has a long history in the United States; its use was pivotal during the American Revolution and “arguably launched the Spanish American War . . . [when the] USS *Maine* . . . mysteriously exploded in Havana Harbor,” an incident the U.S. media blamed on Spain, without tangible evidence.⁷⁸

Rid describes the four waves of DI campaigns waged in the modern era. The first wave occurred in the 1920s and 1930s with the advent and popularization of the radio. A 1925 *Harper’s Magazine* article, “Fake News and the Public,” revealed how the era’s new technologies aided DI’s spread and the public’s difficulty discerning fact from fiction. The late 1940s after World War II heralded the second wave, when the Central Intelligence

⁷⁴ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 4.

⁷⁵ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 2.

⁷⁶ Rid, *Active Measures*, 8.

⁷⁷ R. Kelly Garrett, “The ‘Echo Chamber’ Distraction: Disinformation Campaigns Are the Problem, Not Audience Fragmentation,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 6, no. 4 (December 2017): 372, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.09.011>.

⁷⁸ Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 152.

Agency “professionalized” its methods of “political warfare.”⁷⁹ In the 1970s, the third wave refined and polished DI techniques, which had found global use in security agencies. The creation and widespread use of social media platforms reinvigorated the fourth wave of DI.

Ironically, almost 100 years after the first wave of DI, society is facing the same problems again.⁸⁰ DI was no stranger to Americans in the past, “but its profile in the U.S. has grown rapidly in the last two decades.”⁸¹ One of the reasons is that the technology used in DI dissemination has reached new levels due to factors that affect almost everything in modern life. The connectedness of people through digital media and mass access to sharing platforms have revolutionized the weaponization of information.

What makes these targeted information campaigns truly sinister is their seemingly benign nature. A simple online rumor or faked picture can be the start of a coordinated attack in a multi-step process designed to achieve a threat actor’s end goal. Propaganda or influence operations are conducted by nation-states in times of peace and war for legitimate purposes to sway public opinion on issues.⁸² However, its mysterious nature and deceptive objectives set DI apart from other informational activities.

E. GREY ZONE OPERATIONS

An article written in 2013 by General Valery Gerasimov, Russia’s chief of the General Staff, outlined his views on modern warfare, which relied on “non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals. . . . They have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”⁸³ Russia’s DI doctrine creates a playbook for the total disruption of enemy society through information tactics alone; these “non-military tactics”

⁷⁹ Rid, *Active Measures*, 6.

⁸⁰ Nir Grinberg et al., “Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Science* 363, no. 6425 (2019): 374, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706>.

⁸¹ Garrett, “The ‘Echo Chamber’ Distraction,” 372.

⁸² Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 5.

⁸³ Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 210.

no longer augment traditional warfare but substantively replace “actual war.”⁸⁴ Active measures, so named by Russian intelligence services of the Cold War era, have been used belligerently against opponents, including the United States. Grey zone operations are the use of non-kinetic activities to weaken an opponent. As defined by Hoffman, “Gray zone tactics [are those] covert or illegal activities of nontraditional statecraft that are below the threshold of armed, organized violence; including disruption of order, political subversion of government or non-governmental organizations, psychological operations, abuse of legal processes, and financial corruption as part of an integrated design to achieve strategic advantage.”⁸⁵ Sloss adds that “information warfare is an effective, low-cost tool for conducting warfare by political means.”⁸⁶

Rid has documented Russia’s long use of active measures, reflecting on Lenin’s attitudes. According to Rid, Lenin believed that “one way to whip up and spread agitation was to expose what those in power were trying to hide,” thereby fomenting distrust in hostile governments and their allies.⁸⁷ Hoffman agrees: “Russia’s toolkit has always included the exploitation of non-military aggression” with the intent of creating confusion and discontent among its adversaries to “project influence.”⁸⁸ Sloss suggests that grey zone operations and DI are a severe threat to American liberal democracy and relationships with U.S. partners and allies.⁸⁹ However, Sloss revises his assertion in expressing that Russia’s efforts to undermine government trust have been negligible and that other internal factors have created this condition.⁹⁰

Hoffman suggests that the United States has fallen behind its opponents in waging war in this grey zone.⁹¹ Overall, the research supports this stance, highlighting the

⁸⁴ Gémesi, 210.

⁸⁵ Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” 36.

⁸⁶ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 14.

⁸⁷ Rid, *Active Measures*, 317.

⁸⁸ Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” 33.

⁸⁹ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 12.

⁹⁰ Sloss, 42.

⁹¹ Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict,” 34.

evolution of modern warfare with a focus on Russia's (and other adversaries') strategic shift toward non-military tactics for achieving political and strategic goals. These tactics—active measures and grey zone operations—involve subverting governments, spreading disinformation, and disrupting societies through informational operations and other means. Although these methods have been part of the antagonist's toolkit for some time, they have now become a significant replacement for traditional warfare. Notably, however, efforts of American adversaries to undermine the public's trust in the U.S. government may not be solely to blame for current conditions, as internal factors play a role, too.

F. CONCLUSION

This discussion has covered different types of false information, including misinformation, malinformation, propaganda, fake news, malign influence, and conspiracy theories and highlighted the importance of precise definitions to address these issues. This chapter also explored DI campaigns, whereby intentionally disseminated false or misleading information or authentic information deceitfully manipulated causes harm and exerts influence. The AEP's DI kill chain describes the steps involved in a DI campaign. The authors warn of the negative consequences of a post-truth society and the impact of DI campaigns on democratic institutions.

The examined research is significant because it explains the concept of DI and its impact on society. The passage also discusses different frameworks for understanding DI campaigns, such as the epidemiological model used by Rubin and the HSM model introduced by Mazarr et al. Understanding DI operations as highly structured and curated endeavors is essential for disrupting future DI campaigns.

The history of weaponized information is vital to this exploration, including the use of disinformation campaigns in warfare, politics, and public debates. It describes how the connectedness of people through digital media and mass access to sharing platforms has revolutionized the weaponization of information. The research suggests that the United States needs to acknowledge the threat posed by grey zone operations and actively work to counter them to safeguard national security.

III. THE DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it.

—Jonathan Swift

This chapter uses Rubin’s DI ecosystem framework, comprising three dependent elements, to identify the threat actors running DI campaigns, the media transmitting the campaigns, and the agents and accomplices facilitating the endeavor (see Figure 4, Chapter II). The threat actors plan, execute, and achieve the objectives of a DI campaign; the vector permits the spread of the DI; and the agents facilitate the DI campaigns.⁹² The agents can be software, generative artificial intelligence (AI), or humans who knowingly or unknowingly aid in the authentication and spread of DI. This research scrutinizes all three components and discusses their role in DI campaigns and the threat they pose to the United States.

A. THREAT ACTORS

A broad spectrum of threat actors—from nation-states such as Russia, North Korea, and China to state-sponsored collectives including the IRA and Spamouflage Dragon—may implement DI campaigns. DI, once perceived exclusively as a tactic of foreign autocratic regimes, has also permeated domestic landscapes. Notably, prominent political figures such as Donald Trump and partisan commentators Alex Jones and Tucker Carlson have been associated with the propagation of such tactics.⁹³ These actors operate both overseas and domestically. As with the ambiguity surrounding actors’ motivations and objectives, there are significant complexities concerning the identities of those involved in DI campaigns. Any individual, driven by aligned interests, can instigate or support such a campaign in favor of these groups, thereby adding to the overall uncertainty and difficulty of attribution. This research examines a few of the most likely, hostile foreign-state actors

⁹² In the modern era, DI may re-blossom from rapid improvements in social media technology even if the legacy media still has a vital role in the ecosystem.

⁹³ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 21.

targeting the United States, discusses domestic actors that wield DI, and explores how these campaigns impact U.S. homeland security.

1. Nation-State Actors

The use of DI and grey zone operations by nation-states is neither new nor universal. State actors that seek to leverage a competitive advantage over their adversaries utilize DI campaigns in novel ways and for a variety of desired strategic outcomes. For example, China has used DI to shape the narrative surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. Allegedly, China used a variety of channels, such as social media platforms, press conferences, and state-sponsored news outlets, to propagate the theory that the virus did not originate in Wuhan, China.⁹⁴ Instead, it suggested the virus had been brought to Wuhan by the U.S. military, thereby diverting international blame and scrutiny away from China.⁹⁵ This narrative marked a significant shift from traditional DI strategies, employing a more sophisticated and multifaceted approach.

Cohen et al. suggest that using social media with DI has produced a significant advance in hybrid warfare, similar to adding machine guns to airplanes during World War I.⁹⁶ The CSC recognizes that the United States faces significant threats from foreign antagonists, namely Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. These autocratic nations perceive themselves as deeply entrenched in an information war, a conflict they believe was initiated by the United States and its allies.⁹⁷ To that end, they have invested heavily in and prepared for engagement using any tactics needed to achieve superiority in this informational battlespace.

⁹⁴ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 7.

⁹⁵ Steven Lee Myers, “China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/world/asia/coronavirus-china-conspiracy-theory.html>.

⁹⁶ Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media*, 9.

⁹⁷ According to Mazarr et al., “They [autocratic nations] see many forms of information competition as parts of an overarching, holistic competitive space and pay less attention to precise definitional categories or institutional silos than do Western governments. They are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in the effort and assembling considerable experience with this tool of statecraft. Though some of the initial Russian political efforts were haphazard and amateur, that is not likely to remain true for long. Both countries are dedicated to controlling their domestic information environment and using information tactics to gain increasing leverage over other countries.” Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 12.

a. Russia

Russia is one of the most prominent of America's adversaries implementing DI operations, including its so-called active measures: *konspiratsiya* (conspiracy), *provokatsiya* (provocation), *kompromat* (compromising evidence), *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation), and the firehose of falsehood.⁹⁸ To be sure, DI is integral to Russian (formerly Soviet) foreign policies extending back many generations.⁹⁹ The CSC outlines the Russian framework for DI processes:

Russia employs a mix of methods to muddy the information environment in pursuit of both long-term objectives, including undermining the instruments of U.S. power and trust in democratic institutions, and short-term objectives, such as cultivating civil tension over specific issues like race relations or influencing elections.¹⁰⁰

Konspiratsiya, which involves amplifying conspiracy theories, was used in conjunction with coordinated hacking and spreading of DI through social media in 2016. Specifically, hacked emails became the basis for what was known as the Pizzagate conspiracy, which accused high-level Democrats of running an international child sex slave ring from a Washington, DC, pizza restaurant. Russian DI operations went into high gear for the 2016 U.S. presidential election. For example, Russian troll farms orchestrated by the IRA manipulated American media, thus changing the agenda in democratic discussions.¹⁰¹ Many approaches—including cyber espionage, the attempted hacking of local electoral systems, and a large-scale propaganda effort by state-sponsored media—

⁹⁸ Shannon Brown, "Information Operations" (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, April 27, 2023).

⁹⁹ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Internet Research Agency (IRA) LLC is a Russian entity engaged in political and electoral interference operations. Beginning as early as 2014, the IRA began operations to interfere with the U.S. political system, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election, with a strategic goal of sowing discord. The IRA operated through several Russian entities, including Internet Research LLC, MediaSintez LLC, GlavSet LLC, MixInfo LLC, Azimut LLC, and NovInfo LLC. Russian national Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin provided funding to the IRA through companies that he controlled: Concord Management and Consulting LLC and Concord Catering (collectively "Concord"). Concord sent funds, recommended personnel, and oversaw the IRA's activities through reporting and interactions with IRA's management. "Rewards for Justice—Reward Offer for Information on Russian Interference in U.S. Elections," Department of State, July 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/rewards-for-justice-reward-offer-for-information-on-russian-interference-in-u-s-elections/>.

were employed by the Russian Federation to cause an imbalance during the election season.¹⁰²

However, Russia's most effective strategy involved the "steal-and-release" method combined with an active konspiratsiya campaign. Ever chasing sensational headlines to draw followers and drive profits, the U.S. news media latched onto the next scandalous story in fall 2016, when WikiLeaks released stolen emails online from Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta.¹⁰³ While Podesta's emails were "ordinary" and "contained no evidence of lawbreaking, major hypocrisy or tawdry scandal," as Leonhardt notes, the story still dominated the news cycle, swaying opinion and shifting the conversation from relevant election conversation.¹⁰⁴ The *New York Times* contextualized the communications while failing to disclose that a hostile foreign government had stolen them. The *Times*, through a series of reports, gave credence to a story not especially newsworthy and inadvertently fulfilled a role in Russia's DI campaign.¹⁰⁵ A senior writer for the *Times* commented, "The overhyped coverage of the hacked emails was the media's worst mistake in 2016—one sure to be repeated if not properly understood."¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, investigations revealed that the email contents had resulted from hacking activity, later attributed to a Russian military unit involved in the steal-and-release operation.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰² S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 19–31.

¹⁰³ Tom LoBianco, Laura Koran, and Dan Mercia, "Wikileaks Posts Apparent Excerpts of Clinton Wall Street Speeches," CNN, October 8, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/07/politics/john-podesta-emails-hacked/index.html>.

¹⁰⁴ According to Leonhardt, "Despite the mundane quality of the Clinton emails, the media covered them as a profound revelation. The tone often suggested a big investigative scoop. But this was no scoop. It was material stolen by a hostile foreign government, posted for all to see, and it was only occasionally revealing. It deserved some coverage, but far less. The overhyped coverage of the hacked emails was the media's worst mistake in 2016—one sure to be repeated if not properly understood. Television was the biggest offender, but print media was hardly blameless." David Leonhardt, "A French Lesson for the American Media," *New York Times*, May 9, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/09/opinion/a-french-lesson-for-the-american-media.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Jamieson, "How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media," 135.

¹⁰⁶ Jamieson, 134.

¹⁰⁷ As Mueller details in his report, "Two military units of the GRU carried out the computer intrusions into the Clinton Campaign, DNC, and DCCC: Military Units 26165 and 74455. Military Unit 26165 is a GRU cyber unit dedicated to targeting military, political, governmental, and non-governmental organizations outside of Russia, including in the United States." Mueller, *Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 1:36.

campaign significantly affected public opinion regarding the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and promoted spurious conjecture and DI (see Figure 5).¹⁰⁸

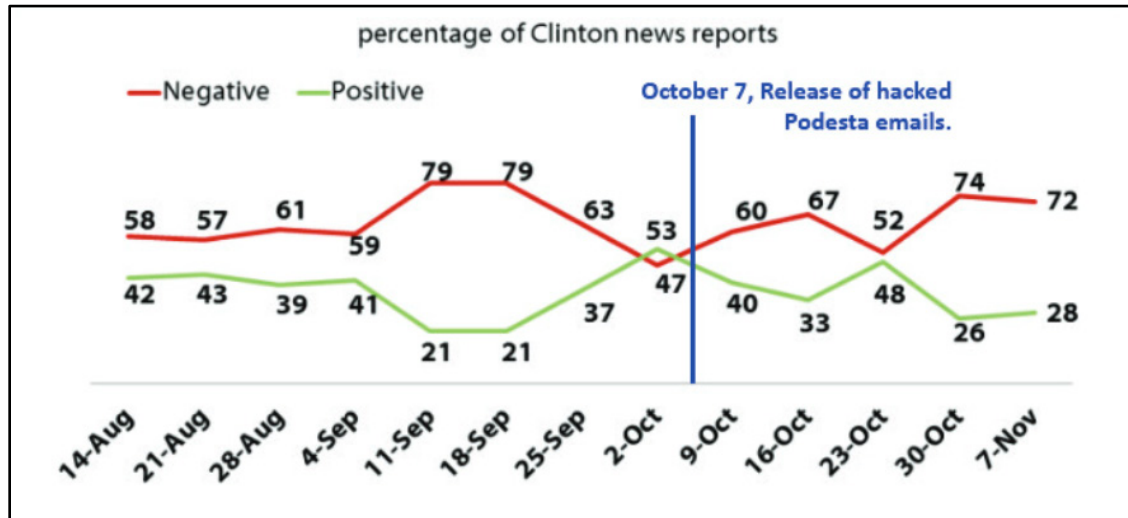


Figure 5. Tone of Clinton’s News Coverage by Week.¹⁰⁹

Provokatsiya refers to a provocation designed to trigger a response from the party being provoked, often with manipulative or deceptive undertones. Russian “honeypot” operations are a form of provokatsiya that employs attractive spies to provoke an enemy into revealing information or behaving in a damaging way. A classic case was Anna Chapman, arrested in 2010, who was part of a Russian sleeper cell in the United States.¹¹⁰

Dezinformatsiya involves fabricating actions or documents to confuse and dismay the enemy. One of the most enduring and legendary examples of this DI form was Operation Infektion, Russia’s most successful DI campaign, which blamed the United States for the AIDS pandemic. In an article fed to a pro-Soviet Indian paper, *The Patriot*, reporters claimed the United States created AIDS in bio-warfare labs at Ft. Deitrick in

¹⁰⁸ S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 17; Jamieson, “How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media,” 135.

¹⁰⁹ Source: Jamieson, “How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media,” 132.

¹¹⁰ Brett Forrest, “The Big Russian Life of Anna Chapman, Ex-Spy,” Politico, January 4, 2012, <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2012/01/the-big-russian-life-of-anna-chapman-ex-spy-069297>.

Maryland. Other pro-Soviet sources, then Soviet-controlled media, and eventually the Western press amplified the DI. At the pinnacle of the operation, Dan Rather aired the story on *CBS Evening News*. Even though CBS refuted the inauthentic content, the story had already damaged America's reputation overseas and domestically.¹¹¹

Kompromat is compromising material used to recruit or control an individual. In the case of former Russian economy minister Alexei Ulyukayev in 2016, kompromat led to his removal after an internal power struggle among political elites.¹¹² He was convicted on corruption charges after being caught in a sting operation while allegedly accepting a \$2 million bribe. The operation was broadcast on national television and used as a tool for public humiliation. This incident highlighted the effective use of kompromat in modern Russian politics.

The firehose of falsehood is an effective technique that takes advantage of the media's multiplier effect, creating what the GEC calls a "disinformation storm."¹¹³ The firehose model's four features make it effective:

1. High-volume and multi-channel
2. Rapid, continuous, and repetitive
3. Lacks commitment to objective reality
4. Lacks commitment to consistency.¹¹⁴

Messaging surrounding the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 shot down over Eastern Ukraine in July 2014 is an example of the firehose model in practice. Russia, primarily held responsible by the international community, launched a DI campaign

¹¹¹ Adam B. Ellick and Adam Westbrook, "Operation Infektion: Russian Disinformation: From Cold War to Kanye," *New York Times*, November 12, 2018, ProQuest.

¹¹² Polina Nikolskaya and Darya Korsunskaya, "Russian Ex-Minister Ulyukayev Jailed for Eight Years over \$2 Million Bribe," Reuters, December 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-ulyukayev-verdict-idUSKBN1E90SN>.

¹¹³ Global Engagement Center, *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda*, 5.

¹¹⁴ The firehose model consists of high-volume, multi-channel communication, whereby information flows through sources such as radio, imagery, television, and internet. The information is rapid, continuous, and repetitive, making the messaging more credible due to the "illusory truth effect." Such communications may lack consistency and, in some cases, provide outright opposing narratives. Audiences often overlook the varied and contradicting information from a single source. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 2–9, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

suggesting a flurry of alternate and discordant theories, few of which seemed plausible, such as the plane being shot down by a Ukrainian fighter jet or a missile fired by Ukrainian forces. These narratives were propagated despite extensive evidence pointing to a Russian-made missile system as the cause—a significant example of DI employed to manipulate public opinion and evade responsibility. Use of the information firehose involves many external and internal sources whereby conflated and opposing views inundate the receiver until the truth is nearly impossible to discern.

To conduct its DI activities, Russia commands a diversified information war machine comprising Russia's intelligence services—the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU)—and public sphere entities, including social media companies, news outlets, hackers, activists, and criminals.¹¹⁵ Russia has expertly employed state-controlled media outlets such as Sputnik and RT to facilitate its DI campaigns at home and abroad.

The hearing on Russian interference before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found that “Moscow’s behavior reflects Russia’s more aggressive cyber posture in recent years, which poses a major threat to U.S. military, diplomatic, commercial, and critical infrastructure networks, as well as . . . our elections.”¹¹⁶ Among researchers, however, there is some debate about whether Russia’s active measures are as impactful on election outcomes as the U.S. government fears.¹¹⁷ Given that social media is the primary distribution method for Russian information operations, research has shown the overwhelming amount of traffic on popular platforms often drowns out Russian messaging, giving it relatively little attention.¹¹⁸ Additionally, Rid postulates that the IRA has had minimal impact in swaying the choices of American voters; IRA efforts have focused on quantity over quality and amounted to only a minute percentage of platform

¹¹⁵ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 16.

¹¹⁶ S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Rid, *Active Measures*, 407; Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 42; Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 176.

¹¹⁸ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 18.

traffic on Twitter.¹¹⁹ Despite what critics deem an ineffective and “amateurish” effort to disrupt the 2016 presidential election, Russian DI campaigns have had reach and consequences in other areas. Their persistent and overwhelming nature makes them a threat the United States should consider seriously.¹²⁰

The research shows the significant role that DI operations play in Russian foreign policy and the ways in which various methods influence public opinion, including amplifying conspiracy theories and fabricating actions or documents. Russia’s outlook that it is continuously at war in the grey zone seriously threatens its antagonists, especially the United States.

b. China

Chinese DI capabilities are also quite robust, actively running DI campaigns and cyber operations around the globe. The Chinese exert extreme control over the internet and social media within its borders. Dubbed the Great Firewall, Project Golden Shield sought to turn the internet, a freewheeling flood of information and ideas elsewhere in the world, into a massive spyware system for Chinese citizens.¹²¹ As Sloss declares, “China’s ambitions are global: it aims to reshape the global information environment to align with its authoritarian values.”¹²² The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rigorously controls all media and bans social media use by regular citizens, a tacit acknowledgment of this technology’s power in shaping opinion. Yet, while autocratic regimes have turned to technology as another way to control their populations, they also use technology to spread authoritarian ideals.

Chinese DI campaigns differ slightly from Russian information operations. The focus is often on political influence, such as bringing discredit to domestic pro-democracy movements and economic efforts, as the campaign wielded against major clothing retailer

¹¹⁹ Rid, *Active Measures*, 406.

¹²⁰ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 18.

¹²¹ Peter Warren Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 96.

¹²² Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 76.

H&M illustrated.¹²³ The CCP influence operations also seek to reinforce Chinese sovereignty, targeting the Chinese diaspora and establishing China’s legitimacy on the world stage.¹²⁴ Unlike Russia’s DI lexicon, Chinese terminology for DI operations is not widely known or discussed in open-source literature. Strategic deception and information warfare are not unheard of by Chinese military and intelligence units. The Chinese military’s concept of “three warfares”—consisting of psychological, media, and legal warfare—incorporates elements of DI and propaganda.

Chinese DI operations were active in 2019 and the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Spamouflage Dragon, a politically motivated group, exercised media warfare by directing a DI campaign to influence American policies. The campaign targeted COVID measures, racial tensions, and the Trump administration and criticized Tik Tok. Spamouflage leveraged AI technologies to produce inauthentic accounts featuring deepfake pictures and videos in English. However, the generated content was often so riddled with language errors and editing flaws that its messaging and origin were obvious, and it lost the potential to deceive.¹²⁵

Like Russian active measures, Chinese foreign influence operations are varied, with actors ranging from state-sponsored entities to independent trolls contributing to the cacophony. One particularly effective method involves using paid trolls, a strategy both state and non-state groups harness to amplify their narratives. The CSC explains this Chinese strategy:

A new class of vocal and vitriolic diplomats colloquially referred to as ‘Wolf Warriors,’ often take the lead in propagating conspiracy theories via official Twitter accounts, interviews, and press releases. . . . In addition to

¹²³ The Communist Party’s youth wing denounced H&M on social media and posted an archival photo of slaves on a Mississippi cotton plantation. Official news outlets piled on with their own indignant memes and hashtags. Patriotic web users carried the message across the utmost corners of the Chinese internet. Within hours, a tsunami of nationalist fury crashed down on H&M, Nike, Uniqlo, and other international clothing brands, becoming the latest eruption over China’s policies in its western region of Xinjiang, a major cotton producer. Raymond Zhong and Paul Mozur, “How China’s Outrage Machine Kicked Up a Storm Over H&M,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/29/business/china-xinjiang-cotton-hm.html>.

¹²⁴ Brown, “Information Operations.”

¹²⁵ Ben Nimmo et al., *Spamouflage Goes to America* (New York: Graphika, 2020), 1, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_spamouflage_goes_to_america.pdf.

the push by individual high-level diplomats, a dedicated community of state-paid internet users, often called the “50 cent party,” echoes these talking points amid praise of the CCP across the internet.”¹²⁶

However, the efficacy of such efforts, particularly those of China, is debatable. Nemr and Gangware argue that they represent transparent propaganda, thereby failing in their intent to deceive.¹²⁷

c. Iran and North Korea

Iran and North Korea also conduct DI against the United States. Indeed, Iran’s maneuvers in the DI sphere closely resemble China’s as it is heavily involved in “promoting particular policy interests aligned with the Iranian government. Iranian interests promoted by these accounts include anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian narratives and condemnations of Iran’s adversary Saudi Arabia.”¹²⁸ Similarly, North Korea promotes its policies through propaganda focusing on South Korea. Recently, North Korea has turned to a novel use of DI, integrating information operations into cybercrime. As described by Nemr and Gangware, North Korea’s for-profit DI tactics are uncommon among nation-state DI campaigns. Nemr and Gangware describe how North Korea has adapted covert DI tactics to avoid the imposition of international sanctions:

North Koreans based in places like China have created a web of fake profiles and businesses on professional networking and freelancing platforms to deceive viewers and earn IT [information technology] contracting business from clients around the globe. The money swindled from these illicit scams ends up in the coffers of the North Korean regime when the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is desperate for funds.¹²⁹

d. Summary

This examination of nation-state DI strategies reveals the breadth and sophistication of these operations. While not a new phenomenon, the use of DI has been dramatically

¹²⁶ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 7.

¹²⁷ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 23.

¹²⁸ Nemr and Gangware, 23.

¹²⁹ Nemr and Gangware, 25.

amplified by the reach and speed of social media platforms. Each nation—Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—employs its unique approach, leveraging social, political, and historical contexts to achieve its strategic goals. Whether it is Russia’s historical prowess in DI strategies, China’s mass manipulation of narratives, or the more niche operations of Iran and North Korea, these campaigns represent an ever-evolving threat.

In conclusion, the efficacy and impact of these operations remain contentious, reflecting the complexities of assessing their influence in the multi-dimensional information space. Some researchers argue that these DI efforts may not consistently achieve their intended effect due to their transparency, language errors, or inconspicuousness in the flood of information on social media platforms. However, the United States should not underestimate the potential for even small DI campaigns to fuel social divides, destabilize democratic institutions, or divert attention from crucial issues.

2. Domestic Political Actors

Domestically, high-profile political personalities like Donald Trump and partisan pundits like Alex Jones and Tucker Carlson have been linked to the spread of DI to confuse, polarize, or spread ideological views. Bennett and Livingston find that while representatives of all political views can use DI, their research has shown it “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.”¹³⁰

Propaganda, influence, and outright lies have been traditional tools of politicians throughout American history. Yet, as Tsfat et al. argue, the frequency and strategic nature of political DI have been amplified: “Opportunities to disseminate DI directly to the public, bypassing the media’s gatekeeping and their editorial scrutiny, have increased with the rise of social media and the possibilities they afford and with a weakening of . . . ‘factual accountability.’”¹³¹ It is crucial to reveal the practice of circumventing legacy media

¹³⁰ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 125.

¹³¹ Tsfat et al., “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News,” 158.

standards because it sheds light on the evolving landscape of DI in politics. Traditional media outlets, which generally follow strict editorial standards and fact-checking procedures, are being bypassed as politicians increasingly use social media platforms to communicate directly with the public. Consequently, the public is exposed to potentially misleading or false information, which can significantly impact its perception and understanding of political events or figures and, ultimately, its decision-making process. This dynamic has profound implications for democratic processes and norms as it undermines informed citizen participation and trust in public institutions.

Research shows that since 2012, there has been a rise in authoritarian regimes and politicians with autocratic tendencies.¹³² The origin of such autocratic regimes, now seen worldwide, was Lenin’s illiberal one-party state established in 1917, according to Applebaum. The author articulates, “Unlike Marxism, the illiberal one-party state is not a philosophy. It is a mechanism for holding power, and it functions happily alongside many ideologies.”¹³³ Piazza writes,

Political actors have recognized the utility of disseminating misleading or disinformation—propaganda—through social media channels. . . . By purposefully deluging the internet with disinformation, they aim to create a disorienting “cacophony” that overwhelms citizens, prompting them to retreat to the safety of political tribalism.¹³⁴

Authoritarian leaders employ strategies to muddle the truth and introduce convoluted political dialogs. By instigating such confusion, they can exploit the individuals who yearn for simple solutions, enticing them toward ideological echo chambers.¹³⁵ The phenomenon of populism has oscillated throughout American history but experienced a resurgence under Trump’s leadership. Populism thrives on the binary narrative of “us

¹³² Bastian Herre, “The ‘Regimes of the World’ Data: How Do Researchers Measure Democracy?,” *Our World in Data*, December 2, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/regimes-of-the-world-data>.

¹³³ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 22.

¹³⁴ James A. Piazza, “Fake News: The Effects of Social Media Disinformation on Domestic Terrorism,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 15, no. 1 (2022): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2021.1895263>.

¹³⁵ Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 38.

versus them,” which necessitates a consistent stream of perceived adversaries.¹³⁶ DI, particularly when it disseminates fabricated existential threats, serves as the ideal instrument for autocratic politicians to incite fear and engender division.¹³⁷

Former President Donald Trump fervently embraced this tactic. Marwick and Lewis describe Trump as an “enthusiastic conspiracy theorist” who originated and amplified many DI campaigns regarding former President Obama, COVID-19, and the 2020 elections.¹³⁸ Trump’s use of DI benefited several Russian DI campaigns by creating content and amplifying inauthentic information to support his narratives.¹³⁹ Regarding the 2020 election results, the *Final Report* on the January 6 Capitol attacks concludes, “What President Trump was saying was, in sum, exactly what the Russian government wanted to be said—but he was doing it on his own initiative and from the trappings of the Oval Office.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, it can be concluded that Trump’s active participation in and propagation of DI significantly influenced both the domestic and international information landscape, and Trump did so in his capacity as the president. He reshaped political narratives according to his agenda and inadvertently or purposefully reinforced the DI campaigns of foreign powers such as Russia. This case highlights the profound impact that a high-ranking official can have on the integrity of information flow and public discourse when leveraging DI as a tool of political strategy.

Trump and the alt-right are not the only domestic political actors to have used DI. The Clinton administration’s approach to press independence came under scrutiny in a 1996 report by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, with the highlighted

¹³⁶ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 22.

¹³⁷ Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 265.

¹³⁸ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 21; House of Representatives, *Final Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 2022), 197, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-J6-REPORT/pdf/GPO-J6-REPORT.pdf>.

¹³⁹ Mueller, *Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 1:33.

¹⁴⁰ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 811. With President Trump in the White House, Russia benefited from a powerful American messenger who created and spread damaging disinformation that it could amplify. The Intelligence Community’s comprehensive March 2021 assessment noted that throughout the 2020 federal election cycle, “Russian online influence actors generally promoted former President Trump and his commentary.” House of Representatives, 808.

issues revealing a concerning trend in the administration's approach to informational activities, notably its resorting to DI to hinder accurate press reporting. In the report, journalists noted the Clinton administration's pursuit of policies that "show [ed] a disregard for the independence of the press in reporting what the government [was] up to."¹⁴¹ These policy directives—including thought policing, interference in Freedom of Information Act requests, and, most importantly, DI—showed a worrisome trend regarding the informational activities of a sitting president's administration. The report notes at least four instances between 1995 and 1996 in which the White House knowingly released DI to obscure press reporting.

There are few, if any, laws to protect against DI in the United States. In 2022, DHS tried to establish a Disinformation Governance Board that would provide oversight and counter DI. However, it was short-lived, as members of the president's political opposition reacted with fierce resistance. In an ironic twist, members of the Republican Party and their social media followers circulated DI about the board's intended role.¹⁴² The brief yet aggressive campaign created enough controversy that DHS backed down on its efforts. The administration disbanded the committee in the face of this withering onslaught.¹⁴³ Ward and Beyer note that political actors in many countries, including the United States, "have used and benefited from DI campaigns meant to embolden their bases and secure power," so the very same politicians who "could legislate change often have a vested interest in perpetuating DI."¹⁴⁴

The significance of these findings goes beyond historical examinations, offering a sobering reminder of how the strategic manipulation of information can destabilize

¹⁴¹ Debra Gersh Hernandez, "Inconsistent Policy," *Editor & Publisher* 129, no. 16 (1996): 9, <https://doi.org/19437234>.

¹⁴² Jon Allsop, "Smears, Opacity, and the Implosion of a Government Disinformation Board," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 20, 2022, https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/disinformation_governance_board.php.

¹⁴³ Rob Garver, "Homeland Security's 'Disinformation Governance Board' Assailed by Lawmakers," *Voice of America News*, May 5, 2022, ProQuest.

¹⁴⁴ Megan Ward and Jessica Beyer, *Vulnerable Landscapes: Case Studies of Violence and Disinformation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2019), 12, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/vulnerable_landscapes_case_studies.pdf.

democratic systems. Such tactics in an era characterized by the rapid dissemination of information through social media and digital platforms underscore potential threats to democratic institutions and norms.

Often, domestic and foreign DI campaigns interact with and amplify each other, whether intentionally or inadvertently. These actors use various methods to achieve desired strategic outcomes, including amplifying conspiracy theories, fabricating actions or documents, and employing paid trolls. The use of social media has allowed for the rapid spread of DI, which can have consequences in various areas. While there is some debate about the impact of these campaigns on election outcomes, the overwhelming nature of the messaging and the persistence of the threat make them a severe concern for U.S. homeland security. The following section discusses threat actors' means of conveying inauthentic content to their intended audiences.

B. VECTORS

Threat actors launch a campaign in the seed phase of the DI kill chain, whereby they select the initial drop points or platforms for delivering the DI. These platforms are known as vectors, a term taken from the biological transmission of disease. The first decades of the 21st century have witnessed a rise in social media usage, profoundly impacting the spread of DI. Yet, legacy media have played a historical role and remain relevant in the modern era. The CSC elaborates further: “In the context of disinformation, vectors represent how information spreads. In the United States, any discussion of disinformation necessarily involves social media platforms. This attention is merited mainly as, according to Pew Research Center, 53 percent of American adults read the news on social media.”¹⁴⁵

1. Social Media

Threat actors manipulate social media users' urge to share information and seduce them with content to reel them in. According to the AEP, purveyors of DI disguised as news are incentivized to produce and distribute “alluring content” to draw consumers'

¹⁴⁵ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 8.

attention.¹⁴⁶ Social media’s revolutionary role is in amplifying DI, primarily due to the speed and ease with which it connects people to others. DI operations strategically employ social media apps such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat and other commercial platforms, websites, and blog posts. All of these are becoming cheaper to run, join, and exploit due to increased technological advances. Filloux frames the social media and DI collaboration in terms of Moore’s Law: “What we see unfolding right before our eyes is nothing less than Moore’s Law applied to the distribution of misinformation: an exponential growth of available technology coupled with a rapid collapse of costs.”¹⁴⁷ If for example, Moore’s Law were applied to advances in social media, the amount of social data—including posts, likes, shares, tweets, and comments—created and processed would double approximately every two years. The volume, velocity, and variety of these data have increased exponentially due to several factors, including growing numbers of users, higher levels of user engagement, and the emergence of new platforms. Digital platforms, from commercial social media to anonymous message boards, have become fertile ground for the unchecked proliferation of DI, thereby presenting a critical threat to the authentic information environment.

In addition to the commercial sites that require users to register for accounts, various Chan boards such as 4chan and 8chan allow anonymous and virtually unregulated content sharing. These boards are predominately harmless common interest sites, yet many have been linked to and used by extremists, becoming breeding grounds for conspiracy theories derived from planted DI.¹⁴⁸ The danger in these under- or unregulated message boards is they act as gateways to legitimate media sources. Inauthentic content can easily be transmitted and then relayed by a “trusted” media source in a process called trading up, whereby a small story is posted on social media or message boards that carry a threat actor’s

¹⁴⁶ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 9.

¹⁴⁷ Frederic Filloux, “You Can’t Sell News for What It Costs to Make,” *Walkley Magazine*, August 6, 2017, <https://medium.com/the-walkley-magazine/you-cant-sell-news-for-what-it-costs-to-make-7a4def964ffa>.

¹⁴⁸ Oscar Gonzalez, “8chan, 8kun, 4chan, Endchan: What You Need to Know,” CNET, November 7, 2019, <https://www.cnet.com/news/politics/8chan-8kun-4chan-endchan-what-you-need-to-know-internet-forums/>.

narrative and eventually gain popularity and viability until more legitimate media outlets amplify the content.¹⁴⁹

Krafft and Donovan offer greater insight into how “authorless” social media content gains legitimacy through trading up. The authors examined a case involving messaging on the 4chan board about the 2017 car-ramming attack in Charlottesville. A witness, Brennan Gilmore, shared a video of the attack with the police and posted it online. Almost immediately, the alt-right and neo-Nazi commentators on 4chan vilified the witness, and a DI campaign began accusing him of involvement in Heather Heyer’s death. Within 72 hours, the DI had been picked up by the *Alex Jones Show* and other more legitimate media sources.¹⁵⁰ In the Charlottesville case, Krafft and Donovan found that inauthentic content in the DI campaign persisted despite skepticism and opposing evidence: “We attribute this persistence to a combination of the DI’s identity confirming characteristics, the selective curation of positive evidence into easily transportable evidence collages, and the mechanism of platform filtering.”¹⁵¹

Common access to technology that allows individuals to create, spread, and read news without traditional media processes to ensure its authenticity is at the heart of modern DI operations.¹⁵² The advent and ubiquity of user-generated content (UGC) have led to an upheaval of traditional legacy media production.¹⁵³ The threat posed by UGC lies in the lack of vetting or fact-checking. Tech entrepreneurs eager to create an online utopia embraced the fact that UGC would be void of restrictions, but they did not foresee the

¹⁴⁹ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Brennan Gilmore, “How I Became Fake News,” *Politico Magazine*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/08/21/fake-news-charlottesville-215514>.

¹⁵¹ P. M. Krafft and Joan Donovan, “Disinformation by Design: The Use of Evidence Collages and Platform Filtering in a Media Manipulation Campaign,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 209, <https://doi.org/10/gg5dxv>.

¹⁵² Jones-Jang, Kim, and Kenski, “Perceptions of Mis- or Disinformation Exposure,” 3107.

¹⁵³ UGC, as defined by Barbosa dos Santos, is “any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur an expressive or communicative effect either on an individual manner or combined with other contributions from the same or other sources.” Marcelo Luis Barbosa dos Santos, “The ‘So-Called’ UGC: An Updated Definition of User-Generated Content in the Age of Social Media,” *Online Information Review* 46, no. 1 (2022): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-06-2020-0258>.

speed and ease with which mass audiences could use these technologies to spread information crafted with malintent.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the social media revolution has transformed “passive consumers” of news into active producers and disseminators.¹⁵⁵ Nemr and Gangware affirm that this “democratization” of communication creation and distribution has created an environment “ripe for exploitation by bad actors.”¹⁵⁶ Consequently, the influence of ordinary citizens in spreading DI raises concerns about the credibility of information and the blurred distinction between trusted media sources and misleading content. In their research on multi-modal DI, Hameleers et al. concluded that on this level playing field, where anyone can “report” the news, “the source of DI did not affect its credibility [and] specifically, the finding that ordinary citizens are equally as persuasive as CNN in spreading DI may be worrisome.”¹⁵⁷

Tech companies have unwittingly played an expanding role in DI campaigns. Having upended various industries in the traditional sector, “they have also disrupted another, more insidious trade—DI and propaganda,” according to Nemr and Gangware.¹⁵⁸ In her research, Jamieson identified several vulnerabilities in social media platform design that allow the manipulation of inauthentic content that precedes trading up narratives used in DI campaigns. Jamieson found evidence that five different program-build capabilities allowed threat actors to exploit social media applications (see Table 1). Jamieson asserts,

In essence, the platforms are designed as a delivery mechanism to turn like-minded users into consumers sold to advertisers. Because of the United States’ disposition to protect both forms of expression and channels of political communication, the capacity of these outlets to shield identity,

¹⁵⁴ Michael Hameleers et al., “A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies? The Effects and Mechanisms of Multimodal Disinformation and Rebuttals Disseminated via Social Media,” *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): 333, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1674979>.

¹⁵⁵ Mathias Osmundsen et al., “Partisan Polarization Is the Primary Psychological Motivation behind Political Fake News Sharing on Twitter,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 3 (August 2021): 1000, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000290>.

¹⁵⁶ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 2.

¹⁵⁷ Hameleers et al., “A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies?,” 298.

¹⁵⁸ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 2.

harvest personal data, facilitate sharing, and target advertising is largely unregulated.¹⁵⁹

Table 1. Program-Build Capabilities and Effects.¹⁶⁰

Ability	Effect
Obscuration	Hides identity of users, masking source information
Aggregation	Draws like-minded users together, creating echo chambers
Agitation	Elicits strong emotions such as anger, fear, and prejudice
Amplification	Drives content consumption by linking and alerting the aggregated audiences to the existence of congenial content
Targeting	Focuses information by appealing to susceptible, demographically isolable groups

In agreement with Jamieson, Kydd uncovers in his research that the bottom-up nature of content proliferation, in addition to the algorithms, has “pushed content” both inflammatory and aligned with groups of users, thus creating dangerous echo chambers.¹⁶¹ Garret and Grinberg et al. disagree, noting that typical internet users do not avoid content that challenges their beliefs and that echo chamber experiences were a small fraction of social media encounters.¹⁶² As Grinberg et al. found, “The vast majority of political exposures, across all political groups, still came from popular non-fake news sources. This is reassuring in contrast to claims of political echo chambers and fake news garnering more engagement than real news during the election.”¹⁶³

In conclusion, social media, still in its relative infancy, has become a powerful tool for those masterminding DI campaigns. Cohen et al. posit, “Unlike disinformation transmitted via other media—print, radio, or television—disinformation on social media

¹⁵⁹ Jamieson, “How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media,” 127.

¹⁶⁰ Adapted from Jamieson, 135.

¹⁶¹ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 11.

¹⁶² Garrett, “The ‘Echo Chamber’ Distraction,” 370; Grinberg et al., “Fake News on Twitter,” 4.

¹⁶³ Grinberg et al., “Fake News on Twitter,” 4.

opens new frontiers for personalization and microtargeting.”¹⁶⁴ Estimates obtained in polling have shown that upwards of 47 percent of Americans receive their news from social media. This number could increase in the future, making social media an effective conduit for bad actors, foreign and domestic, to run DI campaigns.¹⁶⁵ While social media platforms have become ubiquitous and a primary provider for news sharing and collection, DI existed long before Facebook and Twitter. The Russians, and the Soviets before them, used websites, television, radio, and print media with significant effect.¹⁶⁶

2. Legacy News Media

The role of legacy media in DI campaigns is not minimal despite the popularity and abundance of social media platforms. While social media platforms significantly influence the spread of false information, they alone do not cause users to endorse falsehoods. Instead, established news media outlets inadvertently contribute to the dissemination of DI. Furthermore, legacy media’s credibility and authority play a legitimizing role. This complex relationship between legacy media and DI underscores the need to understand how established news sources become part of the campaign cycle.

a. Introduction of DI into Legacy Media

Is legacy media’s role in DI campaigns minimal due to the popularity and abundance of social media platforms? With over half the American population relying on a social media app to deliver news content, one might assume traditional news media would play only a minor role in DI operations. However, Garrett argues, “The best evidence we have to date suggests that social media are influential, but that they are not a primary cause of falsehood endorsement.”¹⁶⁷ For example, the controversy surrounding Pizzagate was relegated to Chan message boards and circulated by like-minded conspiracy theorists.

¹⁶⁴ Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media*, 21.

¹⁶⁵ David M. J. Lazer et al., “The Science of Fake News,” *Science* 359, no. 6380 (2018): 1096, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aao2998>.

¹⁶⁶ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 8.

¹⁶⁷ R. Kelly Garrett, “Social Media’s Contribution to Political Misperceptions in U.S. Presidential Elections,” ed. I-Ching Lee, *PLoS One* 14, no. 3 (2019): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213500>.

When threats of violence and harassment resulted in a physical confrontation, legacy media deemed the story newsworthy and covered the incident and the DI that led to it.¹⁶⁸ This news coverage inadvertently spread the DI to a much wider audience. Tsfatı et al. concur: “Research also indicates that the reach of fake news sites and the consumption of fake news stories online are limited to quite small parts of the population. Taken together, this [finding] implies that many people may hear about fake news stories through mainstream news media.”¹⁶⁹ DI spreads quickly through social media due to its organic ground-up structure. No gatekeepers check UGC before users hit the send button; such a safeguard is not typically true of legacy media sources either because of their established fact-checking standards.

Then, how did established news media with appointed gatekeepers and fact-checkers become part of the DI kill chain? There are two avenues for the introduction of DI into mainstream media. The first is due to the media industry’s profit motivation—sometimes, the bottom line drives content. Marwick and Lewis state that DI popularized through social media works its way into traditional media because “the mainstream media’s predilection for sensationalism, need for constant novelty, and emphasis on profits over civic responsibility made them vulnerable to strategic manipulation.”¹⁷⁰ The need for attention-grabbing stories that draw viewers and readers is a strong motivator in bypassing the factual accountability processes commonly upheld by journalists. This rush to report DI makes legacy media a vital component of the DI kill chain. One salient example was during news coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing. A reporter from CNN received a lead concerning a suspect’s arrest that turned out to be mis- or disinformation. The reporter broke the news without thoroughly vetting it, causing harm to the investigative efforts and his network’s reputation.

Second, a more paradoxical route for DI entering the mainstream arises from honest reporting. Stories centered on DI make national news because the media tries to correct

¹⁶⁸ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 55.

¹⁶⁹ Tsfatı et al., “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News,” 158.

¹⁷⁰ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 48.

any DI reported. Inadvertently, media coverage aimed to correct DI increases public exposure to it. Tsftati et al. expound on this phenomenon: “Important to remember is that for the most part, when mainstream media cover fake news stories, they do so with an explicit intention to correct the false information.”¹⁷¹ Marwick and Lewis recount an example of such inadvertent exposure. When then-presidential candidate Trump ran for election in 2016, he continually made bizarre assertions based on conspiracy theories. The authors assert that because these claims made by a public persona seeking the highest government position in the country were so outrageous, the mainstream news media reported on them. Marwick and Lewis explain, “Even if the mainstream news was reporting on it in shock or disgust, it still led millions of viewers and readers to be exposed to these ideas.”¹⁷²

All in all, despite a growing lack of trust in traditional news outlets, they still wield considerable influence due to their ability to amplify information and the difficulties associated with correcting disinformation. This intricate interplay between legacy media and DI emphasizes the importance of news sources’ becoming entangled with misleading information.

b. A Legitimizing Authority

Intentional or not, DI introduced into the legacy media news cycle can have harmful consequences that aid threat actors running a campaign. Trusted public institutions such as long-standing media outlets attach an unofficial stamp of legitimacy to the stories they propagate because they are reputable institutions in the public’s view. This was the situation concerning the Unite the Right murder witness Brennan Gilmore, as the accusations about him rose from Chan board chatter to national partisan news fodder. The trading-up cycle described by Krafft and Donovan that often begins in disreputable “fringe platforms” ends with DI broadcast by mainstream media.¹⁷³ In a report titled *Hoax in the*

¹⁷¹ Tsftati et al., “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News,” 165; Krafft and Donovan, “Disinformation by Design,” 209.

¹⁷² Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 21.

¹⁷³ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 9.

Machine, researchers note many instances of Fox News making “unsubstantiated and false on-air claims” about voting machine manufacturers to discredit their accuracy or technical vulnerabilities.¹⁷⁴ Because of the prominence of the reporting source and its repetition in the 24-hour news cycle, this story was legitimized in the minds of many viewers.

c. Amplifier of DI

In the amplify phase, any repetition of DI helps to spread the message, ensuring as much contact with the public as possible. In terms of reach, there are few better sources than print and TV news companies to accomplish that. Therefore, Tsftati et al. declare, “Mainstream media are . . . probably a significant amplifier and disseminator of false stories—even if they, for the most part, cover fake news with an intent to set the record straight and correct the fabricated information.”¹⁷⁵ Again, Marwick and Lewis are vocal on this point and believe that manufactured stories and planted DI would remain at the fringe level were it not for the “media’s predilection for sensationalism, need for constant novelty, and emphasis on profits over civic responsibility.”¹⁷⁶ Rid cites a troll campaign, run by the Russian IRA featuring Facebook ads, that would have been ineffective had it not been for media outlets. The Democratic politicians investigating malfeasance released the ads in a report, which was covered by the *New York Times* in a front-page story “that described the Satan-vs.-Jesus arm-wrestling image, and scores of news outlets, national

¹⁷⁴ Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine: Disinformation against Voting Systems Manufacturers and Technologies in the 2022 U.S. Midterm Elections* (Somerville, MA: Recorded Future, 2022), 4, <https://www.recordedfuture.com/hoax-in-the-machine-disinformation-against-voting-systems-in-the-2022-us-midterm-elections>.

¹⁷⁵ Tsftati et al., “Causes and Consequences of Mainstream Media Dissemination of Fake News,” 160.

¹⁷⁶ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 48.

and international, picked up the illustration from there.”¹⁷⁷ The news media achieved what the IRA could not and essentially completed the DI campaign for the Russians.

In summary, the power of legacy media amplification cannot be overstated. Compounding this ability to reach the masses is that once a story is released, it cannot be retracted easily. The research suggests that correcting DI is challenging, as people often continue to rely on false information even after being presented with corrections. Despite the intention to set the record straight, the mainstream media can inadvertently amplify and disseminate false stories due to factors like sensationalism, the pursuit of novelty, and profit-oriented priorities. Legacy media manipulation is highlighted in the trading-up cycle, demonstrated when DI planted on fringe social media is elevated to the mainstream “trusted” media sources without appropriate vetting.

d. A Growing Distrust of Traditional News

In addition to the research concerning distrust of the government and its institutions, there is a growing body of research regarding media distrust. The legacy media plays a vital role in government responsibility. The independent news media has been a mainstay of liberal democracy, but many researchers report that public trust in it has hit an all-time low. Marwick and Lewis detail a Gallup poll released in September 2016, which “found that Americans’ trust in the mass media ‘to report the news fully, accurately and fairly’ was, at 32%, the lowest in the organization’s polling history.”¹⁷⁸ The erosion of trust in the media undermines its role as a trusted and essential democratic mechanism for holding executive power accountable, potentially leading to profound consequences.

¹⁷⁷ According to Rid, “The original ad, however, was one of the IRA’s least successful; it displayed just for one day, cost 64 rubles (then \$1), had a meager seventy-one impressions, and just fourteen Americans clicked on it. This poor performance was more representative of the IRA’s overall effort than the top ten posts. The median number of so-called impressions for the preelection political ads from St. Petersburg was just 199. Moreover, impressions overstate impact, as this metric counts only what users scroll past on their perpetual feeds, not what they actually read and engage with. The next day *The New York Times* ran a front-page piece that described the Satan-vs.-Jesus arm-wrestling image, and scores of news outlets, national and international, picked up the illustration from there. The ad had become an icon—but not for effective disinformation. The ad epitomized how mainstream press coverage generated the actual effect of a disinformation operation. This effect was precisely what Wagenbreth, the Stasi’s master of dirty tricks, had been talking about in 1986. Social media had actually increased the significance of traditional journalism as an amplifier of disinformation operations.” Rid, *Active Measures*, 408.

¹⁷⁸ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 40.

How has legacy media come to lose the respect and trust of the American public? While the polling numbers reflect a drop in confidence steadily declined in the last several years, many decades ago, the groundwork for this situation was laid.¹⁷⁹ Many positive and progressive changes emerged from the civil rights era of the 1960s—most notably, the media played a crucial role in highlighting the injustices and inequalities faced by marginalized communities. However, one seed planted then would grow to have dramatic unintended consequences. As a result of social pressures to expand minority rights, factions developed, especially in academia, the media, and the entertainment industry. In numerous instances, right-wing elites and their supporters found themselves pitted against a power base displaying strong liberal inclinations. This very public and influential collective of like-minded individuals, in turn, left conservatives feeling significantly under-represented, particularly by news outlets.

This conservative void remained in the legacy media until the 1980s, with the advent of the right-leaning alternative press. Its conservative show hosts catered to the population segment they felt had been ignored and looked down on by the mainstream media. The right wing’s mission was to “balance” the views of its liberal counterparts, whom it regarded as biased ideologues.¹⁸⁰ Kydd summarizes his view of the leading alternative right-wing news source, Fox, which denigrated other legacy media sources as partisan opposition:

Fox’s primary targets were Democrats and the liberal “mainstream” media. Their foundational message was that everyone but us despises you, looks down upon you, is politically biased, and is lying to you. Only Fox is on your side and tells you the truth. In effect, there [are] no objective, independent sources of information; only enemies lie to you and us, your friends. While initially directed at their media competitors, the distrust of objective information quickly extended to opposition politicians and the government as a whole.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” Gallup News, October 7, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>.

¹⁸⁰ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 10.

¹⁸¹ Kydd, 10–11.

What developed from this political void was a hyper-partisan battle within the media. In the early days of partisan news wars, Fox led the vanguard, with other right-wing conservative outlets such as Breitbart, Newsmax, OAN, and others following suit. The website AllSides provides information regarding media bias and misinformation; the chart in Figure 6 represents media outlets and their political leanings—from left, to left-leaning, to center, to right-leaning, to right. Numerous news channels with democratic leanings, such as MSNBC and NPR, have also emerged from the left-wing political spectrum. In addition to political affiliations and biases, a credibility spectrum exists that spans both traditional and alternative media sources. Hyper-partisan news platforms across the range often engage in DI. A case in point is Alex Jones of *Info Wars* fame, who has actively spread DI.¹⁸² Even more mainstream networks like Fox have programs and personalities identified as posing a high risk for promoting DI content.¹⁸³ In this heightened climate, threat actors have found occasionally willing and at times oblivious partners to amplify their DI campaigns and achieve their objectives.

¹⁸² Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 21.

¹⁸³ According to the Global Disinformation Index, “The Fox News programmes ranged from low to maximum risk; Fox News was the only network in the sample to carry high- and maximum-risk programmes. Tucker Carlson Tonight, The Ingraham Angle, Hannity and Justice with Judge Jeanine, all primetime opinion programmes, were rated as maximum risk, indicating that these programmes were highly likely to disseminate adversarial narratives that disinform their viewers.” Global Disinformation Index, *Measuring Disinformation Risk on TV News Programming: A Demonstration Study of Three U.S. Networks* (London: Global Disinformation Index, 2022), 16, <https://www.disinformationindex.org/research/2022-10-06-measuring-disinformation-risk-on-tv-news-programming-a-demonstration-study-of-three-u-s-networks/>.



Figure 6. Media Bias.¹⁸⁴

Another source of rising distrust in Western democratic institutions is the media itself. Indeed, Freelon and Wells believe the media is partly responsible for the precarious relations between the public and legacy news outlets, due to negligence.¹⁸⁵ Hameleers et al. agree, highlighting that misgivings about the legacy media’s reporting are often warranted. They suggest, “The fierce debate on the media’s truthfulness and accuracy has become particularly prominent in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. elections, where a large quantity of ‘news stories’ were found to be inaccurate, or flat-out incorrect.”¹⁸⁶

This mistrust in the legacy media could undermine the foundation of a healthy democracy and have several implications. Losing the media as a trusted source could lead to a lack of reliable information, which would cause the public to seek out information

¹⁸⁴ Source: “AllSides Media Bias Chart,” AllSides, February 21, 2019, <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>.

¹⁸⁵ Freelon and Wells, “Disinformation as Political Communication,” 146.

¹⁸⁶ Hameleers et al., “A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies?,” 281.

from sources that might not have the integrity or fact-checking capability that many legacy news outlets rely on. For media companies, declining numbers of viewers and readers would mean declining revenues, thus compounding the other problems. Recapturing the audience could drive the legacy news to intensify sensationalistic aspects of its reporting, thus exposing new outlets to further DI operations.

C. AGENTS AND THEIR INFLUENCING FACTORS

Despite the involvement of technology, humans drive every facet of the DI kill chain. Traditional forms of media appear more complicit than social media in the spread of DI, and the connectedness of modern media networks acts as a force multiplier for threat actors' campaigns. Who, then, are the agents engaged in sharing DI? What are some of the psychological factors that drive them?

1. Technological

DI is evolving beyond textual formats and increasingly embracing visual media, further complicating the challenge of discerning truth from deceit. This evolution is fueled primarily by advanced technologies such as AI and deep learning. Two significant contributors to this modern DI landscape include AI-powered bots and deepfakes. The discussion that follows illustrates how these technological advancements have reshaped the DI landscape and explores their implications for individuals, societies, and democratic institutions.

a. Bots

The power of DI stems from repetition. While threat actors rely on human input to make DI seem authentic, they bolster the effect of mass sharing using technology. One of these tools involves AI software known as bots.¹⁸⁷ Leveraging the power of AI and big

¹⁸⁷ The DHS Office of Cyber and Infrastructure Analysis defines social media bots as programs that “can be used on social media platforms to do various useful and malicious tasks while simulating human behavior. These programs use artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and other programs or databases to imitate legitimate users posting content.” “Social Media Bots Overview,” Office of Cyber and Infrastructure Analysis, May 2018, https://niccs.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/ncsam_socialmediabotsoverview_508.pdf?trackDocs=ncsam_socialmediabotsoverview_508.pdf.

data, threat actors can transform their campaigns into informational tsunamis. Based on research estimates collected in 2017, the number of active bots on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter totaled 190 million.¹⁸⁸ As Marwick and Lewis add, “Bots . . . can have significant amplification effects. Bots are cheap and easy to deploy, and constantly changing, so they can be quickly leveraged to spread information on current issues.”¹⁸⁹

b. Deepfakes

The written word and its role in DI—whether human-generated or created with bots using machine learning models—are a focus of research. However, Hameleers et al. find that the realm of false content is increasingly multi-modal.¹⁹⁰ The information environment is becoming polluted with inauthentic pictures and videos that are progressively harder to distinguish from genuine content. Langa as well as Satariano and Mozur warns that using AI-generated visuals in DI could readily exploit political institutions, including elections, thus causing severe national security concerns.¹⁹¹ This multi-modal form, commonly referred to as a deepfake, is defined as “a highly realistic digital image, often a video, created with AI.”¹⁹² Until recently, fake videos were scarce and mostly unrealistic due to “the lack of sophisticated editing tools, the high demand on domain expertise, and the complex and time-consuming process involved.”¹⁹³ Mazarr et al. share,

Artificial intelligence and related fields such as machine learning; virtual and augmented reality; high-fidelity video and audio capture and impersonation; and the emergence of an “internet of things” in which data are being gathered from and shared among most things people interact with

¹⁸⁸ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 15.

¹⁸⁹ Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Hameleers et al., “A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies?,” 282.

¹⁹¹ Jack Langa, “Deepfakes, Real Consequences: Crafting Legislation to Combat Threats Posed by Deepfakes,” *Boston University Law Review* 101, no. 2 (March 2021): 800; Adam Satariano and Paul Mozur, “How Deepfake Videos Are Used to Spread Disinformation,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/technology/artificial-intelligence-training-deepfake.html>.

¹⁹² Langa, “Deepfakes, Real Consequences,” 763.

¹⁹³ Langa, 763.

in daily life are creating the potential for much more sophisticated campaigns of social manipulation.¹⁹⁴

Langa writes, “The release of a well-timed deep fake also has the potential to interfere in state and federal elections by injecting convincing falsehoods and uncertainty concerning candidates’ personal lives and policy positions into the electoral process.”¹⁹⁵ Such an event unfolded with the dissemination of several digitally manipulated deepfake images of former President Donald Trump and Dr. Anthony Fauci amid a selection of legitimate photos. The fabricated images, showing the two in a congenial and intimate embrace, were circulated via a Twitter account associated with Governor Ron DeSantis’s presidential campaign (see Figure 7). Dr. Fauci, a pivotal figure during the COVID-19 pandemic, became a polarizing beacon for right-leaning political partisans. The intent behind the distribution of these images, which portray Trump and Fauci with a seemingly amicable rapport, is to sway Trump’s following strategically toward Governor DeSantis. Leveraging Dr. Fauci as a controversial and divisive figure, this tactic actively engages potential voters for both Trump and DeSantis.

¹⁹⁴ Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 14.

¹⁹⁵ Langa, “Deepfakes, Real Consequences,” 772.



Figure 7. Deepfake Pictures of Trump and Fauci.¹⁹⁶

Domestic political actors and foreign DI campaigns, such as Spamouflage Dragon, will increasingly harness these technologies to add another layer of realistic deception to their messaging. The danger is that though the fact-checking of written DI can occur, images derived from emerging technologies will be exponentially more difficult to discern from reality, especially if their placement is strategically timed.¹⁹⁷ Given the hardship and ineffectiveness of retracting a written news item, reversing the impact of faked images will be even more problematic.

2. Witting and Unwitting Agents

The human element of DI spread plays a crucial role even with the tremendous number of bots available to amplify the message. Witting agents could be other accounts

¹⁹⁶ Source: James Vincent, “DeSantis Attack Ad Uses Fake AI Images of Trump Embracing Fauci,” *Verge*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.theverge.com/2023/6/8/23753626/deepfake-political-attack-ad-ron-desantis-donald-trump-anthony-fauci>.

¹⁹⁷ Langa explains how deepfakes may influence public opinion: “A well-timed deepfake, distributed when there is ‘enough window for the fake to circulate but not enough window for the victim to debunk it effectively,’ could influence the outcome of an election by creating a ‘decisional chokepoint []: [a] narrow window [] of time during which irrevocable decisions are made, and during which the circulation of false information therefore may have irremediable effects’” (Langa’s brackets). Langa, “Deepfakes, Real Consequences,” 773.

created and controlled by the threat actor, or they could be quasi-legitimate authorities, such as WikiLeaks or RT, which appear to give the message a legitimate source. On the other hand, unwitting agents, as defined by the AEP, are “people or entities supporting a DI campaign while unaware of the malign motives underlying the campaign. A ‘useful idiot’ is a type of unwitting agent who is perceived to be sympathetic to the actor’s cause but does not comprehend the objectives of the campaign.”¹⁹⁸ In the report *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, Nemr and Gangware provide some insight into why these unwitting actors are an integral part of DI campaigns:

For all that has changed about disinformation and the ability to disseminate it, arguably the most important element has remained the same: the audience. No number of social media bots would be effective in spreading disinformation if the messages did not exploit fundamental human biases and behavior. People are not rational consumers of information. They seek swift, reassuring answers and messages that give them a sense of identity and belonging. The truth can be compromised when people believe and share information that adheres to their worldview.¹⁹⁹

Researchers have examined some psychological factors in information sharing conducted by unwitting agents. Identifying the reason for their involvement is vital in countering DI spread by unwitting agents.

3. Cognitive Limitations and Individual Attributes

This section explores the psychological factors that contribute to the behavior of unwitting agents, their susceptibility to conformity and inherent truth biases, and their inability to analyze information critically. However, there are some opposing views in the literature. Political ideology and echo chambers are often cited as motivators for sharing DI. Research has shown that a belief in DI and conspiracy theories is prevalent disproportionately among right-wing and populist groups.²⁰⁰ Wardle and Derakhshan argue that because the content involved in DI is designed to drive an emotional response,

¹⁹⁸ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 14.

¹⁹⁹ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 3.

²⁰⁰ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 584; van der Linden et al., “The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited,” 46; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation,” 358.

consumers, especially of social media, want to reshare it with other like-minded individuals in “their tribes.”²⁰¹ For example, Republican or Democratic supporters share information that provides “evidence” to further their beliefs, in a sort of confirmation bias, despite its veracity (or lack thereof).

On the other hand, Korta writes about the backfire effect, where information is summarily discredited, not because of its accuracy but because of its source and contradictory nature.²⁰² Other experts contend that while the inclination to accept and share DI is exhibited more prominently in specific political and ideological factions, other underlying cognitive factors explain this phenomenon. Many scholars have identified inherent bias, cognitive decline, laziness, and a lack of critical-thinking as root causes for these behaviors, which can occur when confronted with content overload.²⁰³

Rubin elaborates on the psychological elements that induce behaviors by “useful idiots” and how these individuals are prone to conformist tendencies and biases toward perceived truths. Due to specific cognitive constraints, coupled with personal characteristics like credulity and deficient emotional intelligence, these individuals become adherents of DI without realizing it. They then distribute this inauthentic information among their social circles, mistakenly believing they are enlightening and assisting others. In addition to bias, unwitting agents rarely fact-check the information before them and seldom read more than a headline before rebroadcasting the DI.²⁰⁴ Most interactions are shallow at best, which lends to the unhindered sharing of DI. Rubin identifies multiple

²⁰¹ Wardle and Derakhshan, *Information Disorder*, 7.

²⁰² Quoting Lewandowsky et al., Korta explains, “Confirmation bias is also closely related to a concept called the ‘backfire effect,’ which can occur when another person contradicts someone’s beliefs. Rather than considering the argument, the individual may ‘implicitly counterargue against any information that challenges their world view.’ The individual feels as if he or she is being attacked, and must dispel that feeling by fighting back rather than truly considering the information. Thus, an attempt to debunk misinformation can actually result in reinforcing the very belief you are looking to change.” Stephan Lewandowsky et al., “Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 13, no. 3 (December 2012): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612451018>, quoted in Korta, “Fake News, Conspiracy Theories, and Lies,” 51.

²⁰³ Grinberg et al., “Fake News on Twitter,” 4; Pennycook and Rand, “Lazy, Not Biased,” 48; Stephanie Preston et al., “Detecting Fake News on Facebook: The Role of Emotional Intelligence,” *PLoS One* 16, no. 3 (March 2021): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246757>; Rubin, “Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle,” 1017.

²⁰⁴ Rubin, “Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle,” 1022.

factors contributing to an information consumer's tendency to dismiss or ignore DI. Among these factors, the time-consuming nature of fact-checking emerges as a significant challenge. Given the overwhelming amount of material in today's information-rich environment, not every reader can meticulously cross-check every piece of information encountered. Applebaum adds,

False, partisan, and often deliberately misleading narratives now spread in digital wildfires, cascades of falsehood that move too fast for fact checkers to keep up. And even if they could, it no longer matters: a part of the public will never read or see fact-checking websites, and if they do they won't believe them.²⁰⁵

Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook cite research conducted on false information and subsequent attempts to correct it. The findings show that despite persuasive efforts to reverse DI, "corrections are rarely fully effective: that is, despite being corrected, and despite acknowledging the correction, people by and large continue to rely at least partially on information they know to be false."²⁰⁶

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, instances of false information claimed that 5G technology caused or exacerbated the spread of the virus. Although these assertions lacked any backing from scientific evidence, they resonated with individuals either prone to conspiracy theories or misinformed, leading them to share these unfounded beliefs openly. This unhindered sharing of DI led to public confusion, panic, and even incidents of vandalism targeting telecommunication infrastructure.²⁰⁷ Despite efforts at content moderation and attempts at countering the false narratives by the World Health Organization and the National Institutes of Health, these dangerous myths persisted.²⁰⁸ Threat actors count on this disbelief and complacency to maximize the efficiency of DI

²⁰⁵ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 113.

²⁰⁶ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, "Beyond Misinformation," 355.

²⁰⁷ Adam Satariano and Davey Alba, "Burning Cell Towers, Out of Baseless Fear They Spread the Virus," *New York Times*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/technology/coronavirus-5g-uk.html>.

²⁰⁸ Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, *Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2020), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/>.

campaigns. In a successful DI campaign that relies on repetition, unwitting agents are a massive force multiplier.

In their exploration of the often unperceived nature of deception, researchers have identified two significant factors. One significant factor, identified by Frank et al., is the presence of inherent truth bias.²⁰⁹ Most individuals consuming information, particularly news, do not anticipate being deceived or misled. The second, revealed by Pennycook and Rand, stems from individuals' potential incapacity to identify and discern DI, leading them to mistake vagueness for profundity—termed “pseudo-profound bullshit.”²¹⁰ Humans demonstrate a tendency to embrace information even when its true meaning eludes them.

Nemr and Gangware point out that the inundation of communication due to repetition and amplification is crucial to the DI campaign's success:

The sheer volume of content is another crucial factor enabling disinformation. Six thousand tweets are sent every second and Facebook hosts 300 million new photos every day. The volume of information, combined with people's limited attention spans, also makes it difficult to discern between high- and low-quality information, creating an environment in which disinformation has the potential to go viral.²¹¹

Nemr and Gangware also note that people are rarely “rational consumers of information” for the cognitive psychological reasons discussed.²¹² Threat actors such as Russia rely on inundation tactics and these limitations to overwhelm people. High-volume content is one of the distinctive features of the Russian firehose of falsehood that makes it so effective.

This analysis highlights several factors contributing to the acceptance of DI by information consumers. These factors include the time-consuming nature of fact-checking, inherent truth bias, individuals' difficulty in identifying and discerning disinformation, and

²⁰⁹ Mark G. Frank et al., “Individual and Small Group Accuracy in Judging Truthful and Deceptive Communication,” *Group Decision and Negotiation* 13, no. 1 (January 2004): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:GRUP.0000011945.85141.af>.

²¹⁰ Gordon Pennycook et al., “On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-Profound Bullshit,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 10, no. 6 (November 2015): 550, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1930297500006999>; Rubin, “Disinformation and Misinformation Triangle,” 1022.

²¹¹ Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 7.

²¹² Nemr and Gangware, 7.

the overwhelming volume of information in today's environment. Threat actors exploit these cognitive limitations and inundate individuals with high-volume content to effectively spread DI.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter has revealed that the actors behind the operationalization of DI campaigns span a wide range, from nation-states and their sponsored groups to political actors. These operatives can be either foreign or domestic, and their motivations and objectives often overlap, leading to grey areas where individuals may support DI campaigns based on shared interests. Nation-state actors, such as Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, play a significant role in utilizing DI as part of their foreign policies and information warfare strategies. Russia, in particular, has a long history of employing DI tactics to undermine democratic institutions and sow civil tension. Perhaps more worrisome has been the recent trend of DI campaigns curated by domestic politicians and aimed at the American public. The dissemination of DI is a complex process driven by human involvement, despite the involvement of technology. Traditional media platforms are often more complicit in spreading DI than social media, and the interconnectedness of modern media networks acts as a force multiplier for threat actors' campaigns. The use of technological tools such as bots and deepfakes enhances the impact and reach of DI, making it challenging to distinguish authentic content from manipulated or false information.

IV. DECLINE OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL: VIABLE DEMOCRACIES, EROSION, AND THE OUTCOMES

The drift into authoritarianism doesn't always set off alarm bells.

—Steven Levitsky

This chapter examines the complex processes of democratic erosion and its various forms, from backsliding to regression and reversion to authoritarian rule. It begins by defining the spectrum of political regimes, from liberal democracy to autocracy. The discussion then focuses on the degradation of democracy, analyzing accelerators like polarization, populism, and soft coups. It highlights the role of DI in these catalysts of regime change that fuel democratic decline. The chapter concludes by distinguishing between democratic backsliding, regression, and outright democratic reversion. It underscores democracy's fragility and the need to safeguard pluralism, minority rights, and other core principles to counter internal and external threats to democratic integrity. The aim is to elucidate the multifaceted dynamics influenced by DI campaigns that can undermine democracies if left unchecked.

A. SPECTRUM OF POLITICAL REGIMES

There is a wide array of governments ranging from democratic to totalitarian, with autocracy and its multiple forms occupying the middle ground. Throughout history, people have established myriad governance structures encompassing diverse subsets. A thorough discussion of all these is beyond the scope of this research, but a framework for examining democracy and its alternatives is needed.

Sloss uses four classifications of government, taken from the Regimes of the World Database (see Figure 8).²¹³ Citizens of a *closed autocracy* do not have the power to choose either the executive or legislature members. Under *electoral autocracy*, voters have the right to participate in multi-party elections, yet they lack the freedoms usually associated with uninhibited and consequential elections. An *electoral democracy* holds competitive

²¹³ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 7; Herre, "The 'Regimes of the World' Data."

multi-party elections and confers a degree of political rights and civil liberties—but may lack a strong rule of law, constraints on executive power, and protections for minority groups. The focus of a *liberal democracy* is protecting the individual and minority rights of the electorate who chose their executive and legislature. Citizens enjoy equal treatment under the law and a government regulated with a system of checks and balances. The various regimes, except for a closed autocracy, appear similar. Three of these governments—electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy—have an electoral process in place, so they carry some attributes of democracy. Data collected by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) show that almost half the global populace, or 72 of 167 countries, lives under some measure of democratic government.²¹⁴

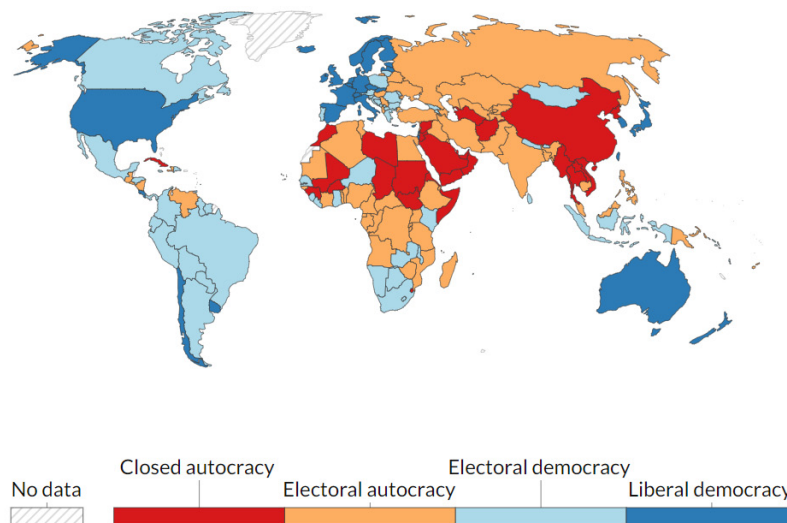


Figure 8. Political Regimes of the World by Type.²¹⁵

While Sloss uses four broad classifications for regime types, not all governments fall neatly into these categories. Democracy is a more fluid concept in Linz and Stepan’s writings on democratic consolidation: “There is a continuum from low to high-quality

²¹⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2022: Frontline Democracy and the Battle for Ukraine* (London: Economist Intelligence, 2022), 3, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>.

²¹⁵ Source: Herre, “The ‘Regimes of the World’ Data.”

democracies.”²¹⁶ Hudson adds that democracy, even after centuries of experimental evolution, is “an ideal to be continually sought after, rather than a settled system to be admired complacently.”²¹⁷ The significance of this democratic continuum is the ability of governments to shift on this scale, and that possibility exists for even the most stalwart democratic regimes. As Levitsky and Ziblatt note,

Comparing our current predicament to democratic crises in other parts of the world and at other moments of history it becomes clear that America is not so different from other nations. Our constitutional system, while older and more robust than any in history, is vulnerable to the same pathologies that have killed democracy elsewhere.²¹⁸

Indeed, Applebaum and Mounk share similar viewpoints about the myth of American democracy’s indestructibility. Still, the American system of government is perishable, and for those who disagree, history has proven otherwise.²¹⁹

Linz and Stepan analyze what constitutes the state and how a state differs from a nation. This line of examination is critical when the discussion turns to populism and the advancement of nationalist movements in contemporary democracies. Linz and Stepan adopt Max Weber’s definition of a state:

an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation, to which the organized corporate activity of the administrative staff, which is also regulated by legislation, is oriented. This system of order claims binding authority, not only over the members of the state, the citizens, most of whom have obtained membership by birth, but also, to a very large extent, over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction. It is thus a compulsory association with a territorial basis.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 6.

²¹⁷ William E. Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril: Seven Challenges to America’s Future*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1998), 26.

²¹⁸ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 230.

²¹⁹ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 142; Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 254.

²²⁰ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 17.

Nations, on the other hand, do not possess these organizational functions. Instead, they are a psychological construct contingent on the “identification of the people who constitute it.”²²¹

The distinction between state and nation is critical when examining threats to democracy, especially from populist nationalist movements. Populists frequently conflate the state with the nation, promoting an exclusive nationalist identity rather than a civic conception of the state as representing all citizens equally.²²² This posture allows populists to claim they represent the “true nation” or the “real people” against the existing state institutions and constitutional order. On this basis, they argue for overriding or actively dismantling state institutions that do not align with their conception of the national will.²²³ Blurring the line between state and nation justifies rolling back minority rights or constraints on executive power in the name of a unitary, homogeneous nation.²²⁴ However, the state serves all citizens regardless of national identity and upholds their common rights and liberties. The nation is a more exclusive ethnic or cultural construct. Failing to maintain this distinction enables the erosion of rights for those excluded from the populist’s narrow conception of the nation. Therefore, examining the proper roles of state versus nation is essential to explaining how populists exploit nationalist sentiments as a pretext for unwinding democratic institutions and constitutionalism designed to protect all citizens.

The following section provides a robust understanding of liberal democracy and is essential for examining threats to democratic systems. By establishing an ideal vision of liberal democracy, we can better analyze the forces that imperil democracies and lead to backsliding or reversion to authoritarianism.

²²¹ Linz and Stepan, 22.

²²² “Nationalism and Populism: What Is the Difference? How Are They Connected?,” *Liberties*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/nationalism-and-populism/43717>.

²²³ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 2018): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0020>.

²²⁴ Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (October 2021): 31, <https://doi.org/10/gn3c37>.

B. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

By defining what constitutes a fully established, functioning democracy, this section expands the understanding of how external and internal actors may transform a democratic system into another form of government. Scholars also refer to a fully established, functioning democracy as a *viable, liberal, or consolidated democracy*. Linz reflects on the characteristics of democracy: “We shall call a political system democratic when it allows the free formulation of political preferences, through the use of basic freedoms of association, information, and communication, for free competition between leaders to validate at regular intervals by nonviolent means their claim to rule”²²⁵ What sets a liberal democracy apart from other democratic forms is the rights and freedoms afforded individuals in conjunction with the voters’ ability to guide policy implementation.

Several researchers agree that the checks-and-balances system is essential in a liberal democracy. It prevents any group or executive from dominating the system and eroding its core democratic values.²²⁶ Levitsky and Ziblatt assert that two informal practices have ensured the success of the checks-and-balances system in the modern era of the United States: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. The authors define *mutual toleration* as an agreement that political “rivals play by constitutional rules; we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern. We may disagree with, and even strongly dislike our rivals, but we nevertheless accept them as legitimate.”²²⁷ Institutional forbearance is framed as legal self-restraint. While political rivals may have the ability to enforce certain lawful or institutional prerogatives, they avoid “actions that, while respecting the letter of the law, obviously violate its spirit.”²²⁸

²²⁵ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 58.

²²⁶ According to Mounk, “Liberal democracies are full of checks and balances that are meant to stop any one party from amassing too much power and to reconcile the interests of different groups.” Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 8. See also Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 138; Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 35.

²²⁷ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 102.

²²⁸ Levitsky and Ziblatt, 106.

Together, these formal and informal practices provide normative guardrails for concessions and compromise to exist and for democracy to flourish.

Achieving a full-fledged democratic status involves two processes: transition and consolidation. In their work titled *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Linz and Stepan focus on the consolidation of democracy: “Essentially, we mean by a consolidated democracy a political situation in which, in a phrase, democracy has become the only game in town.”²²⁹ According to the authors, “Democracy is more than a regime; it is an interacting system. No single arena in such a system can function properly without some support from one, or often all, of the other.”²³⁰ First, a vibrant civil society consisting of voluntary groups and movements independent of the state provides channels for political expression and helps check state power. Second, a functional political society with open inter-party competition, political leadership, and electoral systems is vital for democratic consolidation. Third, an independent judiciary and impartial legal framework must uphold the rule of law to guarantee civil liberties and constitutionalism. Fourth, the state bureaucracy needs to be professionalized and depoliticized to reinforce bureaucratic norms of neutrality. Finally, a market economy must protect property rights and economic freedoms for democracy to endure.

Hudson contributes three of the most common characteristics found in the democratic models, such as Linz and Stepan’s five arenas. First, according to Hudson, “democracy means popular rule; that is, government based on popular sovereignty (as opposed, say, to the divine right of kings) and subject to popular control.”²³¹ This feature is best represented in Linz and Stepan’s arena of political society and the rule of law. The second key element of democracy is the possession of political rights by all citizens. Although these rights and the ability to exercise them may vary among different models, their existence sets democracies apart from authoritarian regimes, which have an

²²⁹ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 5.

²³⁰ Linz and Stepan, 13.

²³¹ Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril*, 25.

“aristocracy . . . or preordained class or group in society.”²³² Hudson concludes with *political liberty*, defined as the freedom of the citizenry to express themselves and exert influence and will on the government. Linz and Stepan’s political society arena contains elements of this feature, but political liberty more closely aligns with the role of civil society in Linz and Stepan’s consolidated democracy framework.

Dahl’s polyarchy model outlines seven core institutions and processes necessary for a fully functioning democracy.²³³ First, control over government decisions should lie with officials elected by citizens, enabling public contestation for power. Second, elections must be inclusive, free, fair, and frequent to allow the public to wield power. Third, nearly all adults should have the right to vote without restrictive suffrage conditions that undermine representativeness. Fourth, citizens should be able to run and campaign for elected office without unreasonable barriers. Liberal democracy must protect freedom of expression on political matters without danger of punishment to facilitate open debate. Sixth, diverse sources of information should be available to prevent government monopolies or censorship. Finally, associational autonomy allows citizens to form political groups and organizations free from government interference and control. According to Dahl, the more these dimensions are attained, the closer a political system approaches the ideals of liberal democracy.

While Dahl’s polyarchy model and Linz and Stepan’s five arenas framework both analyze multiple dimensions of democracy beyond elections; aim to define institutional criteria for assessing democratic quality; emphasize participation, competition, and civil liberties; and provide tools to evaluate the depth of democracy across cases, there are also crucial differences. Dahl focuses more narrowly on electoral contestation, suffrage rights, and freedom of expression. In contrast, Linz and Stepan look more broadly at civil society, political society, rule of law, state bureaucracy, and economic society. Dahl’s polyarchy model centers on dimensions of inclusion and competition for power while Linz and Stepan are more concerned with how the five arenas interact to embed democracy across spheres.

²³² Hudson, 25.

²³³ Robert Alan Dahl, *Polyarchy; Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

In essence, Dahl outlines specific benchmarks for electoral and participatory democracy whereas Linz and Stepan provide a broader societal perspective on the foundations of the political system. Both models offer complementary lenses for analyzing the procedures and foundations sustaining liberal democracy.

The research on models of liberal democracy underscores that healthy democracies depend on aspects beyond elections. A consolidated democracy requires a robust civil society, inclusive political competition, the rule of law, professional bureaucracy, and protections for economic freedoms. This understanding cautions against an overly procedural view of democracy and highlights the interconnected societal, political, and legal spheres needed to sustain it. Threats to democracy often target these complementary arenas. Thus, preserving liberal democracy requires vigilance across institutions to counter forces undermining rights, competition, oversight, or expression or the foundations enabling them. Given its susceptibility to external threats, such as DI campaigns, democracy can backslide to more autocratic regime types under the right conditions.

1. Degradation of Democracy

Democracy is neither monolithic nor immutable. This fluidity in regime type is vital to understanding democracy's fallibility. The EIU, which benchmarks democratic health across 60 indicators, downgraded the United States from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy" in 2016 due to a decline in public trust in governmental institutions and political participation.²³⁴ These factors led it to conclude that faith and effectiveness in U.S. democratic governance had deteriorated.

Sloss has also documented measures of democratic degradation in the United States, citing data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute, which found the liberal democracy rating had dropped significantly, from .814 in 2016 to .700 in 2019.²³⁵ Kleinfeld also contributes with research from Europe's International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance that "now classifies the United States as a

²³⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index*, 67.

²³⁵ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 199.

‘backsliding democracy’; and Freedom House shows the United States on one of the fastest downward trajectories of any country, now ranking U.S. democratic quality alongside Romania and Croatia.”²³⁶ Falling scores in these academic ratings of democracy prove that even the United States is not immune to backslide, regression, and possible reversion.

2. Catalysts of Regime Change

Populism and polarization can act as catalysts for regime change, but the relationship is complex and multi-dimensional and can take various forms depending on the context. Populist leaders can catalyze regime change by mobilizing widespread public sentiment against the existing order. Intense polarization can cause a crisis of governance that facilitates regime change. For example, deep political divisions and a failure to reach a consensus on critical issues can lead to government collapse, triggering political regime changes. High levels of polarization can also contribute to social unrest, which can be another catalyst for regime change. However, both populism and polarization can lead to various outcomes; not all are positive for democracy or stability. They can lead to the rise of authoritarianism, erosion of democratic norms, and political instability. Moreover, the new regime may not necessarily solve the issues that led to its rise in the first place, as the fundamental problems causing populism and polarization often require deep socioeconomic transformations.

a. Populism

Liberal democracy faces a novel and mounting threat in the form of populism. “Populism is a movement, not a form of government, and a product of the democratic process whose candidates win through legitimate elections,” according to members of the League of Women Voters’ International Relations Committee.²³⁷ While relying on

²³⁶ Rachel Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy” (working paper, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022), 4, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/15/five-strategies-to-support-u.s.-democracy-pub-87918>.

²³⁷ Judy Whiton et al., “The Rise of Populism in Europe and the US” (Montgomery County, MD: League of Women Voters of Montgomery County, 2019).

democratic themes and mechanisms, populist attributes provide an authoritarian edge and a tendency to undermine liberal rights and institutional constraints.

While Latin America has historically been the center of nationalist and populist movements, Europe and the United States have seen a groundswell of populist support in the last decade.²³⁸ The United Kingdom (UK)'s withdrawal from the European Union (EU), anti-migration actions on the U.S. southern border and in France, and the Catalanian independence movement are some of the issues drawing attention from populist leaders and their followers; these seemingly disparate topics have a common thread: the involvement of DI campaigns.²³⁹

Academics argue that the election of populist leaders contributes to democratic degradation. In examining the variety of democracies worldwide, Mounk has found that many governments in Western Europe and the Americas have faded from liberal to illiberal; he attributes this change to an increasing populist movement, which adulterates democracies. In essence, populist politics erodes institutional checks on executive power, demonizes the opposition, centralizes authority, and undermines facts, law, and unity. These populist endeavors can ruin the core pillars of liberal democracy over time. Because of these populist tendencies, Mounk warns that “illiberal democracies are always in danger of degenerating into electoral dictatorships.”²⁴⁰ Applebaum concurs, having documented many experiences from the UK to Eastern Europe that support her view that populism is a profound threat to the open, pluralistic liberal democracies of the post-war order.²⁴¹ She

²³⁸ Gideon Rose, “The Power of Populism,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issue-packages/2016-10-17/power-populism>.

²³⁹ Ocampo explains, “There is a common thread linking the recent populist outbreaks in the United States and Europe: Russia’s behind-the-scenes involvement. Robert Mueller’s investigation has already revealed that, at least since 2014, the Russians launched a multimillion dollar effort to sow discord in U.S. politics and interfere with the electoral process. This strategy was implemented mostly through social media and managed by shadowy ‘troll farms’ operating from Russian territory and linked to Vladimir Putin’s government. A lengthy report by the minority members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee details the arsenal of ‘unconventional weapons’ that Russia is using to undermine Western democracies. Moscow’s shadow also extends throughout Europe.” Emilio Ocampo, “Populism: A Global Menace,” *El Blog de Emilio Ocampo*, April 9, 2018, <https://emilioocampoblog.wordpress.com/2018/04/07/populism-a-global-menace/>.

²⁴⁰ Yascha Mounk, “The Undemocratic Dilemma,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0030>.

²⁴¹ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*.

argues it inevitably leads to illiberalism, nationalism, and the erosion of democratic safeguards against authoritarianism.

Populists aim to trigger strong emotional reactions from their followers, often aimed at under-represented groups. DI has become an effective method for rallying support and fueling hatred toward targeted minority groups. A common theme in the populist narrative is restorative nostalgia, a tool employed to recall a perceived idyllic past, according to Applebaum.²⁴² For example, Donald Trump’s slogan “Make America Great Again” evokes an idealistic past era of American prosperity and power. This slogan, which has tapped into nostalgia for a perceived better time, serves as a means of fostering unity among supporters, enabling the creation of a shared identity.²⁴³ It propagates an image of a glorious past tarnished by the present elite, thereby warranting a return to “better days.”²⁴⁴ These nostalgic tropes have created a charged emotional atmosphere in which threat actors have furnished DI campaigns.

Additionally, populists propagate “us-versus-them” polarization that sharply divides “the people” from a corrupt elite “other.”²⁴⁵ Populist leaders garner support by claiming they are waging war on the government insiders ruining the nation. Haggard and Kaufman convey that this populist narrative has been successful for several illiberal politicians in Venezuela, Turkey, and the United States.²⁴⁶ They attack institutions like the courts, media, and regulatory bodies that constrain the majority. Authentic liberal democracy requires an ongoing cycle of dialog, compromise, and yielding among diverse interest groups. Despite delays and difficulties that arise due to adherence to normative

²⁴² Applebaum, 75.

²⁴³ Anna Maria C. Behler et al., “Making America Great Again? National Nostalgia’s Effect on Outgroup Perceptions,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.555667>.

²⁴⁴ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 75.

²⁴⁵ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 21.

²⁴⁶ As Haggard and Kaufman observe, “Chávez’s leftist campaign and Orbán’s appeal from the right had surprisingly similar themes, evoking a battle of ‘the people’ against corrupt economic or cosmopolitan elites and dishonest political establishments. Trump’s 2016 campaign trod a surprisingly similar path, targeting Washington, D.C., as a ‘swamp’ and characterizing his political opponents as tools of ‘coastal elites’ and a ‘deep state.’” Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 32.

guardrails, democratic leaders persevere. For those inclined toward autocracy, democratic politics can prove immensely frustrating. “For them, checks and balances feel like a straitjacket,” posit Levitsky and Ziblatt.²⁴⁷ The inability to exert unchecked power and bypass institutional safeguards often leads to their perception of intolerable frustration within democratic processes.

DI operations have provided domestic and foreign threat actors with the tools to stir emotion, thus solidifying in-group/out-group narratives. Applebaum recounts a DI operation run in the aftermath of the 2019 Notre Dame fire in Paris that used a combination of messaging apps, memes, and AI-generated images to point blame at the Muslim community.²⁴⁸ With the already heightened emotions surrounding migration from the Middle East, right-wing populists accused a minority community of burning down a beloved national (Christian) symbol, inciting anger and hatred to further their views.

The populist elite narrative is that the world is complex and that its leadership has simple, straightforward answers; however, should the citizenry not follow its counsel, maintaining control might require resorting to various means, from education to outright force.²⁴⁹ Mounk expounds, “Populist leaders’ willingness to offer solutions so simple that they can never work is very dangerous. Once they are in power, their policies will likely exacerbate the problems that drove public anger in the first place.”²⁵⁰ Therefore, the easy solutions that populists propose often prove inadequate in practice, but admitting failure would damage their narrative and support. Thus, when policies fail, populists frequently resort to undemocratic means—scapegoating opposition, expanding executive power, spreading DI—to deflect blame and retain control. These actions put democracy further at risk. Populism’s marriage of authoritarianism and ideological rigidity allows little substantive debate or compromise when simple fixes inevitably come up short. This combination endangers democracy during a populist leader’s rise, by sowing division, and

²⁴⁷ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 77.

²⁴⁸ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 137.

²⁴⁹ Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 11.

²⁵⁰ Mounk, 38.

after taking power, when grasping populists double down on control rather than correct course.

b. Polarization

DI operations have capitalized on social tensions, exploiting them to deepen divisions and, thus, contributing to polarization.²⁵¹ However, Nemr and Gangware counter this observation: “Given the human motivations that drive online behavior, . . . it is more likely that polarization exacerbates fake news, rather than fake news exacerbating polarization.”²⁵² Information operations have detrimental psychosocial effects on consumers, impacting their views and behaviors regarding politics and government.²⁵³ The extent to which DI campaigns affect polarization remains in debate. Sloss explains increasing levels of polarization are not in dispute, though the underlying causes are.²⁵⁴

Many researchers have identified polarization as an antecedent to democratic degradation.²⁵⁵ Yet, a properly functioning democracy requires a level of polarization. In *Federalist* no. 10 and no. 51, Madison addresses the issue of factionalism, the forerunner to modern polarization, arguing that the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances in the Constitution would prevent any one faction from dominating the government.²⁵⁶ He also suggests that diverse interests and opinions among the people

²⁵¹ Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 10.

²⁵² Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 9.

²⁵³ Piazza describes these effects: “Online disinformation is linked to increased hostility towards liberal, centrist or establishment political figures, erosion of faith in the trustworthiness of social and political institutions and heightened toleration of or support for fringe, anti-establishment or radical political actors and movements. . . . Experts also argue that online disinformation helps to weaken support for democratic governance and increases tolerance of authoritarianism.” Piazza, “Fake News,” 56.

²⁵⁴ Sloss describes the crux of this debate: “Social scientists disagree about the underlying causes of polarization. One important book, co-authored by a group of Harvard scholars, contends that the root cause of polarization in the United States is ‘the right-wing media ecosystem,’ led by Fox News, Breitbart, and the late Rush Limbaugh. Another important book, written by a journalist, contends that political polarization in the United States has its roots in the civil rights debates of the 1960s.” Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 126.

²⁵⁵ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 27; Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 8; Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 10; Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 115.

²⁵⁶ *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Ian Shapiro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 48, ProQuest.

would make it difficult for any one faction to gain a majority and impose its will on the rest of the country. While the *Federalist Papers* do not directly address contemporary polarization, they provide a framework for thinking about how to deal with the problem of existing factions, which are essential to a liberal democratic society.

Researchers theorize that polarization has widened since the Johnson administration in the 1960s. As a result, political actors resort to extreme measures to garner support—stoking tensions and anger drives identity politics, whereby every vote, discussion, or piece of legislation becomes existential.²⁵⁷ In this heightened state, as Allen and West describe, “the incentives political leaders have to keep their supporters angry have eliminated voices of reason. Politicians fight with everything they have, and policymaking has become more a matter of might than right.”²⁵⁸ Political party polarization has evolved from a mere division of ideas into a radicalized practice as ideological diversity has dwindled within political factions. Extreme partisanship has gradually replaced centrist and moderate voices, transforming the political landscape into a more binary and confrontational one, an effect Marche labels “ideological sorting.”²⁵⁹

And while a healthy level of disagreement is expected and can lead to the development of more robust policies through constructive debate, severe levels of polarization can compromise democratic processes. The left has contributed its share to widening the gap between ideological viewpoints, yet studies have found polarization levels asymmetrically higher in the Republican Party.²⁶⁰ This polarization has facilitated a more authoritarian style in U.S. politics, contributing to the rapid decline of democratic norms and values. By encouraging a sense of tribalism, DI campaigns have heightened an

²⁵⁷ Kydd expounds on this idea: “It is widely observed that American politics are increasingly polarized. . . . At the level of party politics, this shift was caused by Lyndon Johnson’s decision to side with the civil rights movement of African Americans on behalf of the Democratic Party in the mid-1960s. This meant that the Democrats could now appeal clearly to white liberals, African Americans, and other minorities, but had effectively abandoned their conservative white supporters. These voters therefore shifted their partisan affiliation to the Republicans, which Richard Nixon capitalized on in 1968 in the ‘Southern strategy.’” Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 9.

²⁵⁸ Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 14.

²⁵⁹ Stephen Marche, *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2022), 84.

²⁶⁰ Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 4.

us-versus-them narrative, which, in turn, contributes to an increase in radicalization.²⁶¹ Political disagreements have escalated into personal animosities, eroding the concept of commonality.²⁶² Today's politicians and voters increasingly view their counterparts from the opposing party as rivals and enemies threatening their way of life.²⁶³

Marche writes, "America is becoming two Americas, Americas that hate each other, that don't speak to each other. No one occupies the middle ground anymore; everyone has separated into one side or the other."²⁶⁴ Polarization is a distinctly complex phenomenon that impacts the political elite and ordinary citizens.²⁶⁵ Its effects on democracy are far-reaching, leading to radicalization and the decline of democratic norms. McCoy and Somer have developed a framework that lays out the steps from polarization to a disregard of normative guardrails (see Figure 9). Moreover, this process undermines the basic principles of democratic discourse and, if left unchecked, could further destabilize the political environment and threaten the democratic integrity of the United States.

²⁶¹ Haggard and Kaufman, "The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding," 31.

²⁶² Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 176; Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 6; Haggard and Kaufman, "The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding," 30.

²⁶³ Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict," 8; Carroll Doherty et al., *As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration with the Two-Party System* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2022), 54, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>.

²⁶⁴ Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 84.

²⁶⁵ Gary C. Jacobson, "Polarization, Gridlock, and Presidential Campaign Politics in 2016," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 667, no. 1 (September 2016): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216658921>.

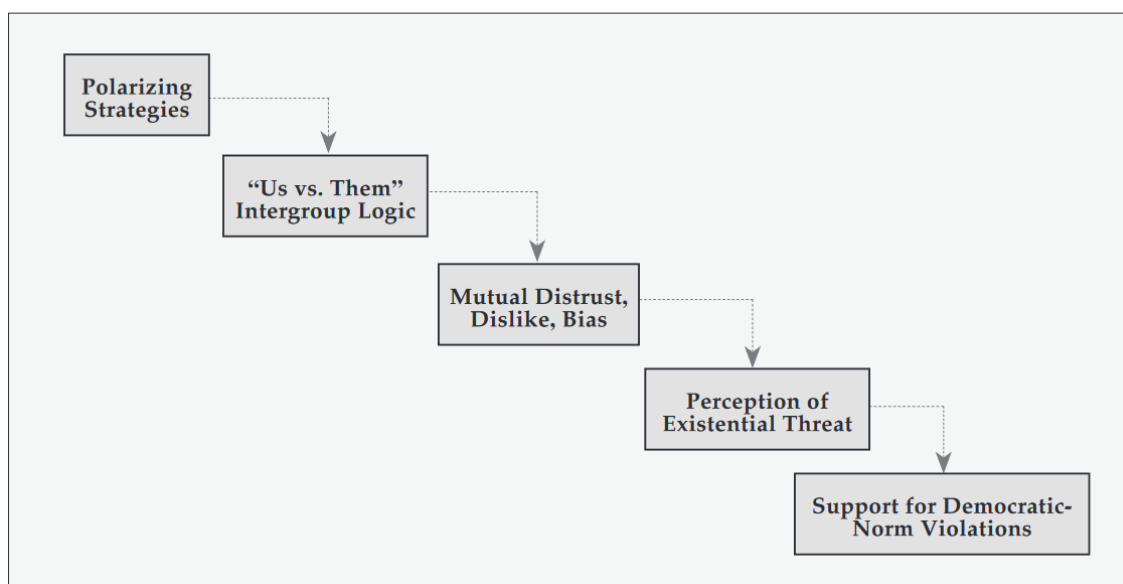


Figure 9. Path from Polarization to Democratic Erosion.²⁶⁶

In conclusion, deep-seated mistrust intensified by DI hampers bipartisan cooperation; thus, reaching a consensus on significant policy issues is nearly impossible. Such a toxic atmosphere feeds into polarization, reducing willingness to abide by normative guardrails and reducing the ability to agree on common policy issues.²⁶⁷

c. Soft Coups

Linz attributes government breakdown to the failure to react effectively to crises that demand urgent action.²⁶⁸ In this way, stalemate and gridlock can prove fatal to the established regime. Marche declares, “The breakdowns in the political information systems matter because they make it nearly impossible for the U.S. to deal with the coming emergencies. The fruit of hyper-partisanship and a toxic informational environment is

²⁶⁶ Source: Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, “Overcoming Polarization,” *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 1 (2021): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0012>.

²⁶⁷ Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 17.

²⁶⁸ Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 50.

paralysis—paralysis at a moment of peril.”²⁶⁹ Levitsky and Ziblatt have documented several instances of the president’s taking extraordinary measures outside the executive’s routine powers in one of these perilous moments.²⁷⁰ The fear is that a leader with an authoritarian inclination could seize on this crisis and shatter the normative guardrails by which all sitting American presidents have abided.

Using piecemeal tactics to waver from American democratic norms, a president might erect a dangerous one-way street. One of these incremental tactics used by recent presidential administrations is the executive order.²⁷¹ Referring to this executive power consolidation as a “soft or self-coup,” Marche describes how this bypass of the legislature has expanded:

A self-coup is well underway in America already. The rise of executive power is the rare case of a truly bipartisan trend. The use of executive legislation, bypassing Congress, began in earnest with Ronald Reagan, continued under Clinton, expanded under Bush, and became standard under Obama and Trump. What was once an exception made for cases of national emergency now goes unremarked.²⁷²

Acknowledging this shift makes it evident that what was once considered a concession, employed in extreme cases, has become normalized. This normalization raises concerns about the erosion of checks and balances and the diminishing role of Congress in the legislative process.

d. Summary

Discussing these regime change catalysts is a broad stroke on a complex issue. The actual results depend on a range of factors, including the political culture, the strength of

²⁶⁹ Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 104.

²⁷⁰ Levitsky and Ziblatt describe some of these extraordinary measures: “In the United States . . . security crises have permitted executive power grabs, from Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus to Roosevelt’s internment of Japanese Americans to Bush’s USA PATRIOT Act. But there was an important difference. Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Bush were committed democrats, and at the end of the day, each of them exercised considerable forbearance in wielding the vast authority generated by crisis.” Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 193.

²⁷¹ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 38.

²⁷² Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 168.

institutions, economic conditions, and the role of international actors. Hence, while populism and polarization can certainly catalyze regime change, the type and stability of the resulting regime can vary widely.

3. Methods of Democratic Decline

It is critical to showcase the elements and factors involved in regimes experiencing backsliding or regression to some form of lesser democracy. Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions within a country that is still fundamentally democratic. Haggard and Kaufman's, Bermeo's, and Marche's research into these methods of decline provide ample warning of backsliding's dangers; perhaps the greatest one is its indiscernible nature. The slow and subtle nature of backsliding sets it apart from regression, representing a more substantial deterioration. In regression, core attributes of democracy—such as free elections, civil liberties, and the rule of law—are severely undermined. Democratic regression denotes an acute breakdown of democratic governance. Democratic reversion occurs when a country transitions fully from some form of democratic rule to an authoritarian or totalitarian regime—a complete reversal to a non-democratic system of government. These terms refer to varying degrees of dismantling democratic governance, with reversion being the most extreme and complete form of degeneration to non-democratic rule.

a. Backsliding

Historically, coups and revolutions have played a significant role in regime change. However, Bermeo and Hudson note that violent overthrows and military juntas are not a part of the American political tradition: instead, the United States faces a gradual erosion of democratic values, which often goes unnoticed by most Americans.²⁷³ Haggard and Kaufman define this threat, called *democratic backsliding*: “the incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments.”²⁷⁴ According to Bermeo, “Democracies are now more likely . . . to decline piece by piece

²⁷³ Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 15; Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril*, 315.

²⁷⁴ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 27.

instead of falling to one blow.”²⁷⁵ Features may include minor but anti-democratic restrictions on civil liberties, media freedoms, and the rule of law. Backsliding can lead liberal democracies gradually toward hybrid regime types such as illiberal democracy, undemocratic liberalism, or electoral autocracy. Several authors—Linz, Sloss, Kleinfeld, and Mounk, to name a few—have developed frameworks to illustrate this decline.

Regarding democratic regression in regimes, Linz hypothesizes that viable democratic governments rely on three factors that exhibit direct, indirect, or feedback interactions that impact stability and performance. The efficacy and effectiveness of the administration’s affairs directly influence a democratic government’s legitimacy (see Figure 10). As shown in Linz’s framework, efficacy and effectiveness are central to stability and legitimacy; without them, democracies are subject to backslide. Crises and insolvable problems threaten this frame and provide those not committed to liberal democracy an opportunity to effect regime change. Linz labels this competition the “disloyal opposition.”²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 15.

²⁷⁶ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 75.

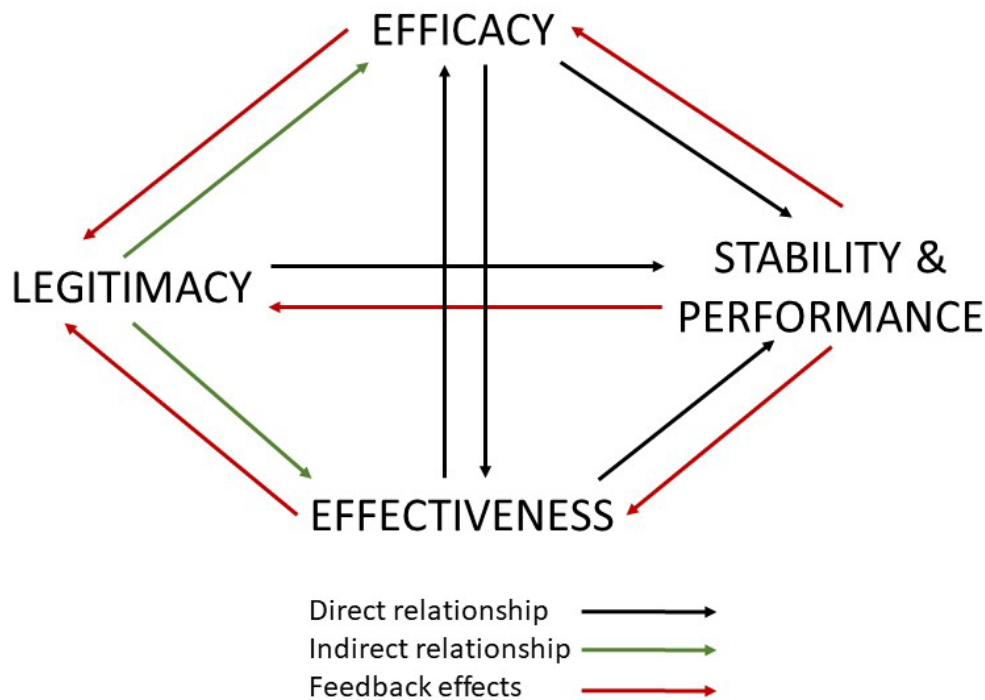


Figure 10. Elements of Democratic Efficacy.²⁷⁷

In a crisis phase that truly challenges authentic democracy, Linz describes that any degradation of the three legitimacy elements creates tension and a feeling that “something must be done.”²⁷⁸ The disloyal opposition often manipulates this atmosphere, not by creating a solution for the crisis or correcting government functions but by exploiting the political calamity. This exploitation usually involves increasing executive powers and issuing emergency orders, as well as other slightly undemocratic measures. These measures are a stepping-stone to backslide and democratic degradation. Linz also notes that it is impossible to make a democratic regime more democratic through undemocratic actions such as those appreciated by populist leaders. Democratic backslide occurs through

²⁷⁷ Adapted from Linz, 19.

²⁷⁸ Linz explains that this “phase is characterized by the widespread circulation of rumors, increased mobilization in the streets, both anomic and organized violence, toleration or justification of some of those acts by some sectors of society, and above all, increased pressure from the disloyal opposition. The readiness to believe in conspiracies and the rapid diffusion of rumors, sometimes encouraged by limits imposed on the news media in an attempt to control the situation, contribute to the uncertainty and unpredictability that may lead to worsening of economic crises.” Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 75.

purposeful changes enacted by authoritarian leaders and their supporters in the executive and judicial branches.²⁷⁹

Haggard and Kaufman comment that extremist views may arise from severe polarization and a lack of commitment to democratic institutional norms that threaten a functioning democracy. Linz points out that often “extremist politics are the result of structural strains, and in certain societies, certain historical situations, they engage large segments of the population. However, their capacity to do so is generally a reflection of a failure of the democratic leadership.”²⁸⁰ The authors’ first theory emphasizes inequalities caused by economic uncertainty and social cleavages leading to regime inefficacy, opening the door for anti-democratic allures. The second theory hinges on the political elites’ failure to discourage the rise of extremists who are divided by ethnic, religious, and racial issues, which cause mass polarization. Substantial research supports both theories, yet no matter the cause, the impact of polarization on democratic backsliding is contingent on the ability of potential autocrats to seize control of the executive branch.²⁸¹ Polarization can either facilitate or impede the consolidation of power. Maintaining a centrist party that can build consensus and operate within the democratic guardrails is critical; without that element, regression ensues.

Backsliding can lead to various destinations at different speeds, as the deterioration of democratic values and institutions can occur at varying rates and result in different outcomes.²⁸² As Haggard and Kaufman elucidate, “Illiberal executives who reach office through elections typically test normative limits through piecemeal initiatives to weaken constraints, making each subsequent step easier to pursue.”²⁸³ In her analysis, Bermeo highlights three forms of incremental backsliding that can occur individually or contemporaneously: promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, and strategic election manipulation (see Table 2). DI has a fundamental role throughout these backslide types.

²⁷⁹ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 3.

²⁸⁰ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 12.

²⁸¹ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 27.

²⁸² Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 6.

²⁸³ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 35.

The proliferation of DI through social media platforms is undeniably one of the major contributing factors in the incremental backsliding of democratic norms.²⁸⁴ Haggard and Kaufman explain, “Autocrats are master polarizers, and they foment divisions in part by exaggerations and outright falsehoods about the intentions of their adversaries: the elites and other nefarious forces that stand in the way of the popular will.”²⁸⁵ The systematic distribution of DI erodes public trust, undermines the integrity of elections, and fuels division and polarization within society, thereby facilitating the erosion of democratic values over time.

Table 2. Types of Backsliding.²⁸⁶

Backslide Type	Features
Promissory coups	• Ouster of elected government framed as a defense of democratic legality • Public promise to hold elections and restore democracy soon
Executive aggrandizement	• More common • Elected executives weaken checks on executive power • Series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces
Strategic election manipulation	Actions aimed at tilting elections in favor of incumbents in a way that does not appear fraudulent: • Hampering media access • Using government funds for incumbent campaigns • Keeping opposition candidates off the ballot • Hampering voter registration • Packing electoral commissions • Harassing opponents

²⁸⁴ Haggard and Kaufman, 39.

²⁸⁵ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 82.

²⁸⁶ Adapted from Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 5–19.

b. *Reversion and Regression*

Democratic reversion and democratic regression are distinct concepts that capture different aspects of the decline or erosion of democratic institutions and norms. While they both describe a negative trajectory for democracy, their meanings have subtle differences. For example, democratic backsliding suggests a more nuanced and complex process that can occur over an extended period. Democratic regression describes a more substantial shift away from democracy than backsliding, where core elements like free and fair elections, judicial independence, and civil rights are severely curtailed.²⁸⁷ These moves represent a substantial breakdown of democratic governance.

Building on the stages of regression, democratic reversion implies a more deliberate, purposeful authority.²⁸⁸ Reversion can include measures such as dismantling checks and balances, restricting civil liberties, eroding political rights, and concentrating power in the hands of a few.²⁸⁹ Haggard and Kaufman's frame is meant to explain democratic regression (see Figure 11). Behind this framework are two theories that drive polarization, the starting point for reversion. Haggard and Kaufman note that reversion occurs within a democratic framework and often through constitutional processes, not suddenly in a coup through violations of the law.²⁹⁰ Unchecked regression can quickly become democratic reversion, leading to an autocratic or totalitarian state.

²⁸⁷ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 4.

²⁸⁸ Aziz Z. Huq and Tom Ginsburg, "How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy," *UCLA Law Review* 65, no. 1 (February 2018): 93, <https://doi.org/10/gnfs6x>.

²⁸⁹ Huq and Ginsburg, 83.

²⁹⁰ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 57.

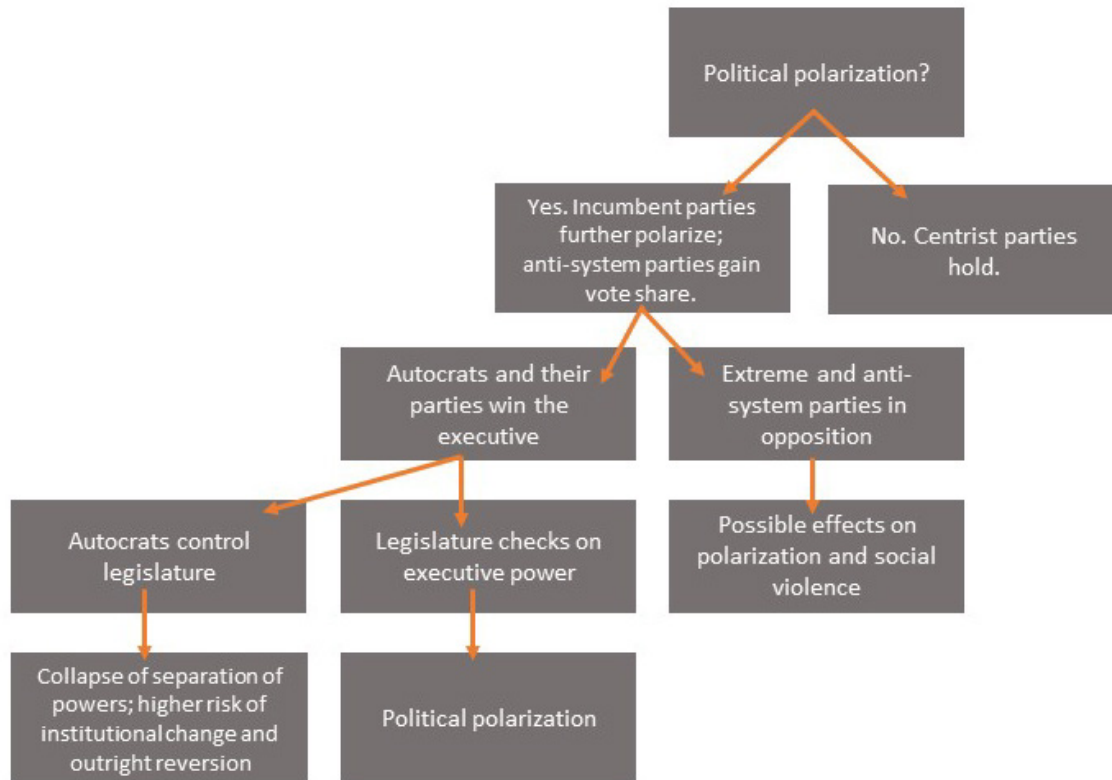


Figure 11. Theoretical Framework of Backsliding.²⁹¹

c. *Outcomes*

Democratic backsliding and regression do not necessarily result in a wholesale reversion to authoritarianism—there are intermediary phases in the erosion of rights and pluralism. The research in the following sections postulates that democratic backsliding and regression can morph liberal democracies into hybrid or, if reversions occur, fully autocratic regimes. The nuances between democratic backsliding, regression, and reversion are crucial, as they portray varying modes in democracy’s decline.

Illiberal democracies retain some political rights and electoral processes but lack substantive freedoms and institutional constraints on authority. Undemocratic liberalism describes regimes that permit civil liberties while subverting political rights and representation. And outright authoritarianism entails the thorough dismantling of

²⁹¹ Adapted from Haggard and Kaufman, 5.

democratic institutions and principles. Mounk’s framework illustrates how liberal democracies can decline into diminished democratic forms before a complete autocratic takeover (see Figure 12).²⁹²

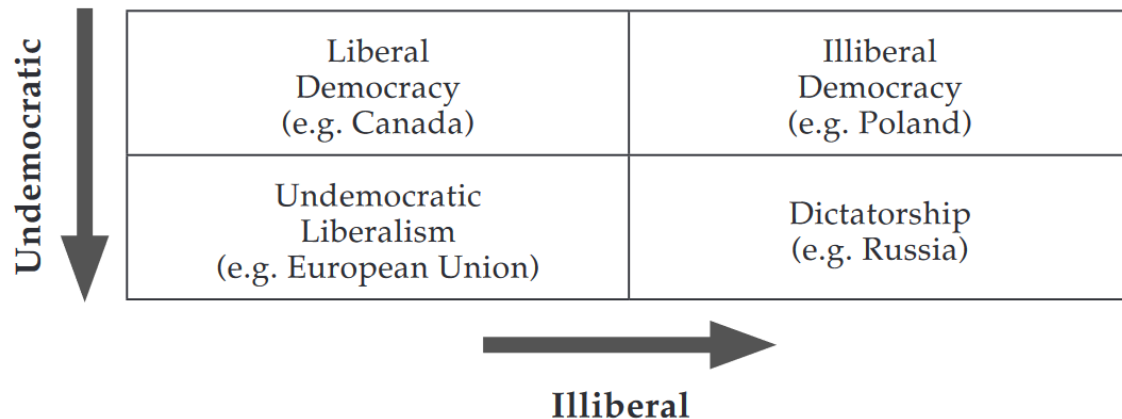


Figure 12. Liberalism–Democracy Matrix.²⁹³

These distinctions highlight that erosion occurs across a spectrum—through targeting constraints on power with piecemeal policies, victimizing marginalized groups, and spreading disinformation to inflame polarization. While the slope is slippery, recognizing these transitional phases provides opportunities for counteraction before totalitarian outcomes become inevitable.

C. ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The democratic backsliding of the 21st century reveals a disconcerting trend: a growing skepticism of democratic institutions and their practices among the populace.²⁹⁴ This discontent has made democratic decline to an illiberal status possible. Kydd documents how former president Trump exhibited some of these characteristics in the United States: “Trump could have been a radical leader who reoriented domestic discourse

²⁹² Mounk, “The Undemocratic Dilemma,” 99.

²⁹³ Source: Mounk, 100.

²⁹⁴ Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 11.

and foreign policy, but still participated normally in the democratic system. What set him further apart and paved the way for violence was his utter lack of commitment to democracy and his firm adherence to the conspiratorial mind-set.”²⁹⁵

The inherent complexities of human nature and the structure of social organization continue to challenge the implementation and operation of democracy.²⁹⁶ Some illiberal leaders, driven by impatience or opportunism, are tempted to circumvent democratic procedures for expedience. According to Hudson, “Sometimes doing things nondemocratically is just simpler than wrestling with democratic procedures.”²⁹⁷ This behavior not only undermines democratic processes but also creates potential threats to the stability of democratic societies.

This evolving dynamic threatens to distort the democratic landscape significantly, requiring careful observation and response. Mounk sums it up as follows: “Unless the defenders of liberal democracy manage to stand up to the populists, illiberal democracy will always be in danger of descending into outright dictatorship.”²⁹⁸ How this transformation comes to pass may be a matter of chance; according to Levitsky and Ziblatt, “Democratic breakdown doesn’t need a blueprint. . . . It can be the result of a sequence of unanticipated events—an escalating tit-for-tat between a demagogic, norm-breaking leader and a threatened political establishment.”²⁹⁹

Finally, it is essential to consider the backdrop against which these events unfold. For years, latent challenges such as political polarization and the manipulation of safe seats by politicians have steadily undermined the health of democracies, opening the door for an authoritarian playbook that has significantly accelerated the disintegration of democratic systems.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁵ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 15.

²⁹⁶ Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril*, 26.

²⁹⁷ Hudson, 26.

²⁹⁸ Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 52.

²⁹⁹ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 75.

³⁰⁰ Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 4.

D. UNDEMOCRATIC LIBERALISM

Undemocratic liberalism refers to political regimes that formally retain substantial protections of civil liberties and individual rights such as the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and religion while lacking meaningful democratic participation and representation.³⁰¹ For example, independent media and human rights groups may operate freely, but unfair elections and barriers to political opposition persist. Regarding current trends that lead to the rise of undemocratic liberalism, Mounk observes,

In recent decades, as ordinary citizens' living standards have stagnated and anger at the political establishment has skyrocketed, these two fundamental components of politics in the West have come into conflict. As a result, liberal democracy is bifurcating, giving rise to two new regime forms: "illiberal democracy," or democracy without rights, and "undemocratic liberalism," or rights without democracy.³⁰²

Another feature of undemocratic liberalism is that independent courts may continue to uphold the rule of law, yet real policymaking power lies with unelected technocrats and bureaucracies rather than democratically elected representatives. Thus, while judicial norms are maintained, policy decisions are made by unaccountable officials in a system that restricts meaningful democratic participation despite having some trappings of liberalism. Systems discourage robust multi-party competition, even if they do not jail opposition figures. While an electoral process exists, legislatures function primarily as rubber stamps, with substantive decisions made by unaccountable executives and elites. Essentially, to maintain a facade of liberalism, undemocratic liberalism preserves individual freedoms. This facade conceals an uncompetitive and unrepresentative governance system structured to exclude challenges to the political status quo.

By limiting genuine democratic contestation, undemocratic liberalism allows a relatively small elite significant leeway to pursue its interests without meaningful checks

³⁰¹ Cas Mudde, "Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism," Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy, July 16, 2023, <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century>.

³⁰² Yascha Mounk, "Illiberal Democracy or Undemocratic Liberalism?," Project Syndicate, June 9, 2016, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/trump-european-populism-technocracy-by-yascha-mounk-1-2016-06>.

from civil society or the ballot box. For example, the original American political system heavily circumscribed liberalism and democracy.³⁰³ White male Americans alone restricted liberal rights such as the rule of law and fundamental freedoms. Society denied women many rights while it wholly excluded enslaved people and Native Americans from enjoying civil liberties or legal protections. Therefore, even though America's early history laid the foundations of liberal democracy, its application even then was profoundly limited along racial, gender, and ethnic lines.³⁰⁴

E. AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

In his work on totalitarianism and authoritarianism, Linz adopts a definition of totalitarianism first developed by Friedrich and Brzezinski.³⁰⁵ Linz considers a dictatorship a transitory government, not yet a consolidated totalitarian government. None of these regimes are homogeneous or monolithic, and myriad factors can force change from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Democratic reversion leads to an authoritarian regime. Levitsky and Ziblatt provide four indicators meant to describe potential autocratic behavior. The first indicator is the rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game—what Haggard and Kaufman term the “normative guardrails.” Second, autocrats demonize (or deny the legitimacy of) the opposition party with false claims and the use of DI campaigns. Tolerating or encouraging violence comes next, implemented positively through armed militias or tacitly by not rebuking or preventing violent action. The final indicator is the

³⁰³ Sheri Berman, “The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2017): 36.

³⁰⁴ Yascha Mounk, “The Week Democracy Died: How Brexit, Nice, Turkey, and Trump Are All Connected,” *Slate*, August 14, 2016, https://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/08/the_week_democracy_died_how_brexit_nice_turkey_and_trump_are_all_connected.html.

³⁰⁵ Linz proposes six generally accepted elements of a totalitarian regime: “(1) a totalist ideology; (2) a single party committed to this ideology and usually led by one man, the dictator; (3) a fully developed secret police and three kinds of monopoly or more precisely monopolistic control; namely, that of (a) mass communications, (b) operational weapons, and (c) all organizations including economic ones, thus involving a centrally planned economy.” Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, 65.

curtailing of opponents' civil liberties by restricting opposing voices, especially the media.³⁰⁶

Democratic breakdown does not always follow a plan; instead, it can emerge unpredictably from escalating tensions between nonconforming leaders and the established political order. Populist leaders' proclivity toward autocracy provides a sobering reminder of democracy's vulnerability in the face of charismatic demagoguery. A complex interaction of factors characterizes the journey from liberal democracy to authoritarianism, where the internal weaknesses of democratic institutions and the ambitious maneuvers of power-hungry leaders can erode democracy.

F. CONCLUSION

The research presented shows that democracy is not simply a static state but rather a complex, multifaceted system vulnerable to erosion. Healthy democratic regimes are not uniform or absolute. Viable democracies rely on far more than elections alone—they require strong civil society, the rule of law, professional bureaucracy, inclusive political competition, and minority rights protections. When these interconnected components weaken, liberal democracy faces threats from populist authoritarianism, polarization, disinformation, and soft coups that act as catalysts for democratic decline.

A key focus of the contributions in this area is on democratic backsliding, a gradual deterioration of democratic processes and institutions that occurs within a functioning democracy. Further attacks on democratic norms can lead to substantial degradation in the form of regression. At the extreme, unchecked erosion can enable outright reversion to autocracy. No democracy, however long-standing, is immune, but recognizing the subtle processes of democratic decline allows for counteraction before the inevitable collapse. However, left to the devices of an autocratic leader, liberal democracy could face reversion, leading to authoritarianism.

³⁰⁶ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 23.

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V. CONSEQUENCES OF DI CAMPAIGNS

To destroy a society, it is first necessary to delegitimize its basic institutions.

—Jean Kirkpatrick

This chapter examines the multifaceted societal consequences of DI campaigns, connecting to the overall thesis by highlighting the corrosive impacts that undermine democracy. The chapter begins by analyzing how DI fuels public distrust in government institutions, contributing to inefficacy and polarization. It then explores the rise of post-truth mentalities and the erosion of shared facts and the reason-based discourse vital for democracy. Next, the chapter details specific consequences for democratic institutions including elections, governance, and political violence. It illuminates how DI campaigns exploit social divisions and vulnerabilities to spread chaos, hatred, and unreason, which decay the foundations upholding viable democracies. The aim is to underscore the far-reaching reverberations of systemic DI across the social, political, and epistemological landscapes, which steadily erode democratic norms and stability when left unchecked. Elucidating these diverse impacts provides a compelling case for vigilance and accountability in the information ecosystem.

A. DISTRUST IN GOVERNMENT

The point of this section is to comprehensively explore the causes and impacts of rising distrust in government institutions, particularly in the context of liberal democracies such as the United States. This portion, which introduces concepts such as “anti-government patriotism,” vividly illustrates how DI campaigns and partisan polarization actively intensify. The section further underscores how such deep-seated mistrust in government and between citizens can undermine democratic discourse and processes, leading to governmental inefficacy and threatening democratic norms and values. Last, it brings to light the significant role played by DI, asserting that understanding and combating the acceptance and endorsement of DI are critical to restoring public trust and preserving democratic integrity. The literature regarding distrust spans a range of concepts, from participatory failure to complete defiance of the established government.

This cynicism toward the government deteriorates the government efficacy and effectiveness that Linz outlines as crucial to regime legitimacy.³⁰⁷ Without this equation, a stable liberal democracy cannot function.

In Allen and West's view, several partisan issues have brought the United States "to a point where democracy is at risk, fundamental problems are not being addressed, and political mistrust has risen to dangerous levels."³⁰⁸ Underlying these partisan issues are DI campaigns that exacerbate existing tensions. In his research on the Capitol attack on January 6, Kydd notes that a growing asymmetrical polarization has led to a grievous mistrust of the government and opposing political views.³⁰⁹ Therefore, the intense partisanship and increasing polarization, exacerbated by DI campaigns, have created a deep-seated distrust of not only government but also the very fabric of democratic discourse. In such a climate, citizens may view each other more as enemies than as fellow nationals participating in a democratic process. This demonization of the opposing side damages any democracy, as it hampers the spirit of constructive dialog, collaboration, and compromise essential to democratic governance.

1. Causes of Distrust

Marche introduces an interesting concept surrounding government distrust called *anti-government patriotism*, a "widespread, if confusing, popular support for opposition to the U.S. government."³¹⁰ This paradoxical concept may be initially confusing to some. It refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals express intense love and loyalty to their country (patriotism) while harboring deep suspicion—even opposition—toward the government that administers their country. Many countries, including the United States, tie this concept deeply to their democratic ethos. In a democracy, citizens can criticize the

³⁰⁷ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 19.

³⁰⁸ Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 24.

³⁰⁹ Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol," 10.

³¹⁰ Marche uses "the term 'anti-government patriot' to describe the hard right in the United States. [He] believe [s] the phrase captures the basic connection between a wildly diverse collection of groups. They hate the government but they love the country. The intensity of their hatred for government is how they express their love for their country. They believe that the federal authority is destroying the true America." Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 30.

government, demand transparency and accountability, and even call for radical changes. However, anti-government patriotism results when this healthy skepticism turns into chronic distrust or an oppositional stance that rejects the government's role or legitimacy entirely. Anti-government patriots might see the government as fundamentally corrupt, ineffective, or threatening to their freedoms. They may feel that the "true" nation is distinct from, or even opposed to, the established government. At the same time, they remain deeply patriotic, believing in their country's ideals, culture, and people. This complex mix of deep national love and institutional skepticism is the crux of "anti-government patriotism."

Amid the shifting political landscape, Marche highlights a startling transformation in partisan beliefs and governmental skepticism. The author explains that views once seen as extremist have become common among followers of certain political parties due to the eroding level of centrist support.³¹¹ Furthermore, the most bizarre aspect of this opposition and distrust is the support by elected government officials, who actively work to undermine democratic norms and institutions.³¹² Mann and Ornstein, who research mistrust in the U.S. government, observe,

The contemporary GOP [Republican Party] . . . has veered toward tolerance of extreme ideological beliefs and policies and embrace of cynical and destructive means to advance political ends over problem solving. These tendencies have led to disdain for negotiation and compromise unless forced into them and rejection of the legitimacy of its partisan opposition.³¹³

While politicians of both parties have embraced extremist views, the literature reveals that the phenomenon is more common on the right side of the aisle.³¹⁴

³¹¹ Marche, 37.

³¹² Marche, 37.

³¹³ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 185.

³¹⁴ Kleinfeld, "Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy," 4.

Kydd believes this political asymmetry creates an in-group/out-group relationship between competing political parties.³¹⁵ For example, one may observe political disparity in the United States through the increasingly polarized positions of the Democratic and Republican Parties.³¹⁶ The perceived political asymmetry creates a strong sense of group identity, with each party viewing the opposite side as the out-group or the other. As the divide deepens, finding middle ground for compromise becomes increasingly difficult. This asymmetrical dynamic can stoke hostility, leading to a political climate where conflict and confrontation wrought by DI replace cooperation. Moreover, this increasingly hostile climate stifles productive dialog, preventing the mutual understanding necessary for a healthy, functioning democracy.

Building on this concept of political asymmetry and the inherently divisive nature it introduces, there is another layer to consider. Kleinfeld delves deeper into the motivations driving politicians in this polarized landscape and how they lead to regime distrust. She believes politicians seeking office rely on these identity politics rather than supporting substantive policy issues or bipartisanship, as the latter would negatively impact their election chances.³¹⁷ Thus, politicians maneuver to curry popular support with their electorate by adhering to extremist views. Politicians prioritizing party loyalty and personal gain over public service can lead to policies and actions that do not necessarily align with the public good. Examples of this type of misplaced prioritization include decisions that disproportionately benefit a political base, neglecting the needs and concerns of those

³¹⁵ Kydd, citing Iyengar, maintains, “This [development] has led to an increase in ‘affective polarization,’ or a sense of identification with the party and hostility toward the opposite party. . . . Partisans are more convinced that the other side is untrustworthy, unpatriotic, and hostile. Parties are not just vehicles for achieving desired policy results, they are identity groups, or tribes.” Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 10.

³¹⁶ DiMaggio, “Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent,” 14.

³¹⁷ As Kleinfeld reveals, “That [course of action] is [possible] because leaders of this new Republican faction are not only further right but are also far less committed to democratic institutions, practices, and norms. They are aware that in increasingly safe seats, their main threat is from a primary challenger. A base whose majority is White, evangelical, rural men, and which in 2016 gained a larger percentage of formerly swing voters who cared about identity issues but wanted more government economic redistribution, is more easily motivated by identity than by traditional conservative policy issues such as small government or low taxes. These politicians have also come of political age seeing that bipartisanship can enable hit ads that hurt their chances in primaries but that violence and voting manipulation will not be punished at the ballot box.” Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 5.

outside the party. Over time, such practices can generate a sense of disillusionment and distrust among citizens who feel unrepresented or marginalized by their government.

Bridging from the idea of politicians neglecting the needs of those outside their party, these actions often culminate in the rise of more pronounced political movements. One of the most striking manifestations of this phenomenon has appeared in the promotion of populism in both Europe and the United States. Mounk's examination of the rise of populism in Europe and the United States mirrors Marche's anti-government patriotism concept. Mounk explains that in times of turmoil, populists engage in blame-shifting, attributing any economic or moral decline of the nation to the influence of interlopers enabled by the establishment government.³¹⁸ The author states, "People in the capital, populists of all stripes argue, are either in it for themselves or in cahoots with the nation's enemies."³¹⁹ This sentiment underpins the populist and anti-government patriot movements' ideology and level of suspicion. These movements curry significant support from vast swaths of the population and could affect profound change due to the number and zeal of their followers.

The profound modification resulting from the rise of populism and anti-government patriotism can manifest in various forms, such as political shifts and changes and institutional transformations. In extreme scenarios, the populist and anti-government patriotism movements can even break democratic norms and systems, moving a country toward authoritarianism.³²⁰ Ultimately, these variations could reshape a nation's political, social, and economic landscape. Digging deeper into the nuances of these transformations, it becomes essential to comprehend how individual beliefs and the broader political environment intersect. Research findings indicate no inherent correlation between political

³¹⁸ Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 8.

³¹⁹ Mounk, 8.

³²⁰ Mounk describes the effect of these movements: "This worldview breeds two political desires, and most populists are savvy enough to embrace both. First, populists claim, an honest leader—one who shares the pure outlook of the people and is willing to fight on their behalf—needs to win high office. And second, once this honest leader is in charge, he needs to abolish the institutional roadblocks that might stop him from carrying out the will of the people." Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 8.

stances or the intensity of such perspectives and adherence to questionable concepts.³²¹ Enders and Uscinski write that it is only when these concepts become affiliated with political entities, ideologies, or groups that political beliefs—whether rooted in identity or ideology—align with these “dubious ideas.”³²² When these ideas steer clear of political attachments, their association with partisanship or political ideologies diminishes. DI campaigns have significantly risen in the United States and Europe, causing chaos and uncertainty around topics like COVID-19, 5G technology, and national elections. However, the academic realm presents divided opinions on what drives DI endorsement.

Recognizing the dynamics that foster acceptance and reliance on DI is crucial, as such beliefs sow seeds of distrust in governing systems.³²³ Contrary to the common theory that biases or party affiliations make individuals susceptible to DI, scholars like Pennycook and Rand argue that the absence of analytical reasoning or critical-thinking makes one vulnerable.³²⁴ Their research illustrates that even when faced with extreme partisan headlines, such as “Joe Biden Promises to Abolish All Private Property within First Year of Presidency,” individuals with more extreme political views that possess heightened cognitive awareness tend to be more discerning and less likely to be swayed.

However, some social scientists, including Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook; Bennett and Livingston; Sloss; and DiMaggio, disagree with that stance and believe widespread government distrust is a wholly partisan experience. Despite Pennycook and Rand’s objections, most of the literature supports the idea of a partisan bias toward governmental distrust fostered by an asymmetric belief in DI.³²⁵ Discovering the root

³²¹ Adam M. Enders and Joseph E. Uscinski, “Are Misinformation, Antiscientific Claims, and Conspiracy Theories for Political Extremists?,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 4 (June 2021): 600, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220960805>; Preston et al., “Detecting Fake News on Facebook,” 9.

³²² Enders and Uscinski, “Misinformation, Antiscientific Claims, and Conspiracy Theories,” 600.

³²³ Piazza, “Fake News,” 56.

³²⁴ Pennycook and Rand, “Lazy, Not Biased,” 48.

³²⁵ Bennett and Livingston, “The Disinformation Order,” 584; Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 4; DiMaggio, “Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent,” 14; Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 127; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation,” 358.

cause of DI acceptance is critical to its prevention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, rampant DI campaigns attributed to domestic and foreign actors disparately impacted right-leaning political supporters.

2. Impacts of Distrust

Distrust in governmental institutions, underpinned by rising polarization and fueled by disinformation campaigns, poses a significant challenge to the foundations of liberal democracies. Various scholars provide insights into the roots and ramifications of this erosion of trust. Applebaum, Stone, Hudson, Tubbs, and Balack each shed light on specific facets of the broader issue, revealing the complexities of this multifaceted challenge. Examining their analyses offers a comprehensive understanding of the potential perils that unchecked mistrust can usher into the democratic realm.

Applebaum contributes the impacts of this mistrust, pointing out that hyper-partisanship has led to a general misgiving concerning authority figures, experts, and the “establishment.” In her opinion, this distrust creates an environment where neutrality is impossible because there can be no apolitical actors or institutions in the views of the polarized.³²⁶ One of the most infamous examples from the “Vote Leave” camp during the Brexit referendum involved the claim that “the UK sends £350m a week to the E.U.”—inauthentic information that endures to this day.³²⁷ Stone argues that the architects of the claim designed it to incite anger and frustration about perceived wasteful spending, aiming to influence people to vote for Brexit. This DI piece became a flashpoint in the Brexit debate, with critics of the Leave campaign pointing out the inaccuracy of the claim and supporters often doubling down on the underlying sentiment. In this case, the DI successfully inflamed emotions on both sides of the issue, adding significant fuel to the already heated Brexit debate.

³²⁶ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 113.

³²⁷ Peter Stone, “US Rightwing Figures in Step with Kremlin over Ukraine Disinformation, Experts Say,” *Guardian*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/06/us-right-wing-republicans-russia-ukraine-disinformation>.

Hudson believes that essential democratic processes create inherent problems. The inner workings of democracy and its institutions do not inherently follow a simple or expedient process; the lack of immediate results gives citizens the impression that politicians are indifferent. This perception causes an ever-decreasing level of confidence in government institutions.³²⁸

Tubbs identifies an underlying mutual theme that exists in nationalist and populist ideologies. Tubbs posits, “The common root is the connection to such tipping points as economic inequality, phobias, and perceived threats from outsiders.”³²⁹ In other words, Tubbs believes that these social conditions foster distrust, as fear drives individuals into self-sorted groups, closed off from differing opinions. Balack concurs: “Widespread disgruntlement lends itself to generating an us-versus-them environment whereby in-groups and out-groups solidify and grow. Extremism becomes an acceptable approach for viewing and interacting within society.”³³⁰ Such findings are significant because these factors tie directly to political movements aimed at corrupting democracies.

In conclusion, the growing distrust in governmental institutions in liberal democracies, marked by rising partisan polarization, anti-government patriotism, and DI campaigns, has severe implications for societies. If left unchecked, this trend threatens the fundamental principles of democratic systems. Widespread sentiments of anti-government opposition and the proliferation of DI do not merely distort the truth but disrupt societal cohesion and reshape political landscapes. Understanding these phenomena is critical to combating the erosion of public trust, preserving democratic values, and ensuring effective governance.

³²⁸ Hudson defends the separation-of-powers structure yet acknowledges it creates an inherent bias that “inhibits government responsiveness” and gives rise to citizens’ perceptions that “those politicians in Washington cannot seem to get anything done.” Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril*, 45.

³²⁹ Christian D. Tubbs, “Conditions of Democratic Erosion: Has U.S. Democracy Reached a Tipping Point?” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018), 6, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/61290>.

³³⁰ Marie L. Balak, “The Nexus of Societal Fragility and Extremism” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2022), 107, <https://hdl.handle.net/10945/71431>.

B. TRUTH DECAY AND THE POST-TRUTH SOCIETY

The main point of this section is to explore and explain the concept of a post-truth society, emphasizing how DI campaigns and the decline of objective facts have corroded public discourse, eroded trust in institutions, and undermined democratic processes. The research expounds on the idea that DI is particularly harmful because it exploits pre-existing societal vulnerabilities and is often more compelling to people than objective facts, leading to “truth decay.” This section critically analyzes how this societal shift can have wide-ranging and detrimental impacts on democratic societies, specifically impacting two crucial aspects of healthy democracies: an informed electorate and the ability to debate opposing views.

Unheard of before 2016, *Oxford Dictionaries* highlighted post-truth as the word of the year and defined it as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”³³¹ Matthews et al. characterize truth decay as a general skepticism of fact-based evidence and an overreliance on opinion.³³² Truth decay is another concept relating to post-truth or the decreasing reliance on objective facts.³³³ The authors find that a combination of factors affects people’s vulnerability to truth decay, including race and cognitive biases. The authors reveal that this deep-seated sentiment regarding the federal government reflects a faded trust in “formerly respected institutions as sources of factual information.”³³⁴ The manifestation of a post-truth reality is one of the more damaging consequences of DI, the side effect of a society bombarded with inauthentic divisive information.³³⁵

³³¹ Pennycook and Rand, “Lazy, Not Biased,” 48.

³³² Luke J. Matthews et al., *Individual Differences in Resistance to Truth Decay: Exploring the Role of Reasoning and Cognitive Biases* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2022), 1, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A112-17>.

³³³ Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 213.

³³⁴ Matthews et al., *Individual Differences in Resistance to Truth Decay*, 1.

³³⁵ Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 212.

In their research, Einstein and Glick discovered that encountering a conspiracy theory can detrimentally influence faith in government services and institutions.³³⁶ Furthermore, Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook found that attempts to negate inauthentic information from DI exposure were ineffective due to a phenomenon labeled “continued-influence belief.”³³⁷ The authors provide an example concerning the existence of WMDs in Iraq:

In some circumstances, when the correction challenges people’s worldviews, belief in false information may ironically even increase. . . . When Republicans are informed that there were no Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in Iraq immediately before the invasion of 2003, their mistaken beliefs in the existence of WMDs may become even stronger.³³⁸

Unpersuaded by valid evidence, sufferers of the post-truth effect could dominate a society, creating a reality where facts could cease to exist. Instead, the loudest voices follow their politics to shape dogmas and policies for the remainder. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook describes a dystopian future where “experts are derided as untrustworthy or elitist whenever their reported facts threaten the rule of the well-financed or the prejudices of the uninformed.”³³⁹ Thus, the insidious danger lies in the potential for the post-truth condition, fueled by DI, to descend into epistemic chaos and fact-detached policymaking. This scenario allows the most strident ideological voices to supplant objective truth and reason, thereby dominating the narrative.

While this post-truth condition may seem confusing and ethereal, it can have concrete implications and wide-ranging effects on society—from politics to health, to the environment, to the economy, to social cohesion. Gerasimov states that DI’s goal is to sow

³³⁶ Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick, “Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories,” *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3 (September 2015): 679–701, <https://doi.org/10/f7pwwb>.

³³⁷ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook describe this behavior as follows: “Corrections are rarely fully effective: that is, despite being corrected, and despite acknowledging the correction, people by and large continue to rely at least partially on information they know to be false. This phenomenon is known as the continued-influence effect . . . , and it has been observed across a broad range of materials and modes of testing, persisting even when participants are warned at the outset that they may be misinformed.” Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, “Beyond Misinformation,” 355.

³³⁸ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, 355.

³³⁹ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, 354.

chaos in society.³⁴⁰ The most effective way to accomplish that goal is to exacerbate existing social tensions. Gémesi adds that this target is “even easier to reach in a society where objective facts are less important and have lesser influence than emotions and beliefs.”³⁴¹

Throughout U.S. history into the modern era, debates have raged over emotionally charged topics, including ideological disagreements over political orientation, gender-based concerns, ethnicity, and religion. These contentious issues, which have been brewing for a long time and lack clear-cut resolutions, are ripe for exploitation by threat actors. They fan the flames by spreading DI, heightening tensions on both sides. According to the AEP, the results are a “heightened state of agitation [that] may fuel acts of harassment and violence.”³⁴² Using a modicum of technology and little effort, adversaries can incite public outrage, increase polarization and domestic radicalization, and weaken the nation from the inside out.³⁴³ For example, in the United States, DI campaigns deepened polarization and, more importantly, led to disjointed and ineffective responses to slow the spread of the pandemic.³⁴⁴

Mazarr et al. believe that truth decay and its associated indicator, DI, reflect deep-seated complications with democracy. The authors contend, “Social manipulation is effective to the degree that vulnerabilities in a society allow it. Such techniques can seldom create from whole cloth the situations that allow an aggressor to manipulate political life; they can only take advantage of realities being created by underlying trends.”³⁴⁵ Adversarial manipulation creates a post-truth phenomenon that significantly impacts two fundamental aspects of a healthy democratic society: a well-informed electorate and the capacity to debate opposing views. This manipulation of truth undercuts the notion of an

³⁴⁰ Gémesi, “Hybrid Warfare and Disinformation in the Post-truth Era,” 212–13.

³⁴¹ Gémesi, 212.

³⁴² Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, *Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns*, 6.

³⁴³ Public–Private Analytic Exchange Program, 7.

³⁴⁴ Eoin Flaherty, Tristan Sturm, and Elizabeth Farries, “The Conspiracy of Covid-19 and 5G: Spatial Analysis Fallacies in the Age of Data Democratization,” *Social Science & Medicine* 293 (January 2022): 114546, <https://10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114546>.

³⁴⁵ Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 27.

informed society as the cornerstone of democracy. DI campaigns blur the lines between reality and falsehood, leading to poor critical-thinking and decision-making based on false information.

C. EPISTEMIC ORDER AND AN INFORMED SOCIETY

The foundational principles of democracy, as articulated by pivotal figures such as Thomas Jefferson, set the stage for comprehending the disruptive effects of disinformation. According to Jefferson, democracy relies on a well-informed and participatory electorate to make policy and political choices.³⁴⁶ The aftermath of DI campaigns has long-lasting and deep-running consequences that demolish this ideal. Epistemic order refers to how societies organize and validate knowledge. In a given society, systems, norms, and structures actively validate what is true or false, assign value to what is relevant or irrelevant, and grant authority to what is deemed essential or dismissible. An “informed society” gives citizens easy access to accurate, comprehensive, and relevant information, and citizens use this information to participate actively in social, political, and economic decisions that affect them.³⁴⁷

Who creates this order, how they do so, and what constitutes an informed society are vital to sustaining a liberal democracy. Disruptions to these environments from blurred lines between authentic and inauthentic communications facilitate political decisions based on emotion and false theories instead of facts. Seeking intellectual refuge among like-minded individuals and the prevalence of conformity bias outweigh critical-thinking and cause unknowable harm. O'Connor and Weatherall describe the ramifications of a breakdown in society's critical-thinking, what Kitcher has termed a *vulgar democracy*:

the majority-rules picture of democracy, where we make decisions about what science to support, what constraints to place on it, and ultimately what policies to adopt in light of that science by putting them to a vote. Vulgar

³⁴⁶ Jennifer L. Hochschild and Katherine Levine Einstein, “Do Facts Matter? Information and Misinformation in American Politics,” *Political Science Quarterly* 130, no. 4 (2015): 587, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12398>.

³⁴⁷ Chris Brown, Ruth Luzmore, and Jana Groß Ophoff, “Facilitating the Ideas-Informed Society: A Systematic Review,” *Emerald Open Research* 4, no. 25 (2022): 3, <https://doi.org/10.35241/emeraldopenres.14729.1>.

democracy is a “tyranny of ignorance.” Public beliefs are often worse than ignorant: they are actively misinformed and manipulated.³⁴⁸

Vulgar democracy can erode epistemic order by dismissing expert knowledge and promoting misinformation. This erosion can lead to distrust in institutions and experts, undermining the importance of evidence-based decision-making and enabling policy choices based on populist sentiment rather than sound evidence. For a highly functioning liberal democracy to exist, there must be epistemic order. One cannot overlook the importance of the populace to employ critical-thinking. In all aspects of American democratic institutions, objective analysis and the ability to form a reasoned opinion are vital.³⁴⁹

DI creates inherent obstacles that, without critical-thinking, can have negative impacts. DiMaggio warns against the quality of the contemporary information environment: “If the information that people consume is systematically distorted and characterized by manipulation and propaganda, there is little reason to think that public policy outcomes will be well-informed or rational.”³⁵⁰ A report by the Insikt Group provides an example of this phenomenon during the 2020 and 2022 elections in the United States. DI that claimed widespread voter fraud was propagated and amplified across various platforms, distorting the information environment. Despite numerous audits and court cases proving otherwise, these baseless claims made many question the elections’ legitimacy.³⁵¹ This scenario suggests that a compromised information environment not only threatens democratic processes by fostering mistrust and division but also leads to public policies based on misinformation and populist sentiment rather than rational, well-informed decision-making.

Furthermore, election DI cases highlight the importance of safeguarding information ecosystems and promoting media literacy to ensure that public discourse and

³⁴⁸ O’Connor and Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age*, 185.

³⁴⁹ Facione, “Critical Thinking,” 24.

³⁵⁰ DiMaggio, “Conspiracy Theories and the Manufacture of Dissent,” 2.

³⁵¹ Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine*, 3.

policy outcomes are rooted in reality and evidence. The alternative, Mazarr et al. warn, is “infosphere corruption”—instead of wholesale manipulation of society, the endgame is to wreak havoc and prevent the public from discerning the truth.³⁵² The inherent danger of DI is the subtle way it consumes the epistemic order. As Rid states, “Active measures erode that order, but they do so slowly, subtly, like ice melting.”³⁵³ Attacks on informed society may render the electorate incapable of or avert it from thinking critically and making accurate fact-based decisions. If the populace is not well-versed, it loses the capacity to disagree yet work toward consensus, thus tainting the epistemic order.

D. WARPED CIVIC DISCOURSE

A post-truth society created partly due to DI and exacerbated by other political factors has warped the facility to have a civil public discourse. Applebaum condemns this lack of civil discourse, especially in established liberal democracies: “There is now no common debate, let alone a common narrative. People have always had different opinions. Now they have different facts.”³⁵⁴ Sloss advances this thought that democracies need debate but that social division driven by outside influence has created “parallel but separate universes” where citizens and political actors suffer from “cognitive polarization.”³⁵⁵ Enders and Uscinski offer a tangible example of this trend in the U.S. climate-change debate.³⁵⁶ DI has contributed to an environment where one group firmly believes in the scientific consensus that human activity drives climate change. At the same time, another rejects this perspective and sees climate change as a hoax or an exaggerated issue. Each group has differing opinions and believes in a different set of “facts” presented mainly by its preferred media outlets and thought leaders. The significant point here is that such cognitive polarization, fueled by DI and lacking civil discourse, makes reaching a

³⁵² Mazarr et al., *Hostile Social Manipulation*, 8.

³⁵³ Rid, *Active Measures*, 11.

³⁵⁴ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 113.

³⁵⁵ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 127; Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

³⁵⁶ Enders and Uscinski, “Misinformation, Antiscientific Claims, and Conspiracy Theories,” 584, 589.

consensus on important matters, such as climate policy, exceedingly challenging. Failure of compromise stalls progress and can result in policies that fail to address critical issues effectively. Democracies, inherently reliant on informed debate and consensus-building, suffer when this cognitive polarization substitutes parallel realities for dialog, thus jeopardizing social cohesion and effective policymaking.

Calm discourse in the public sphere is viewed by most as an ideal scenario whereby individuals engage in rational and respectful conversations to address societal issues. However, achieving this utopian vision can be incredibly challenging.³⁵⁷ In today's highly factionalized society, where individuals withdraw to the safety of "their tribes," people often approach discussions with strong emotions and preconceived notions, and every disagreement becomes an existential challenge.³⁵⁸ Thus, fostering an environment of calm and respectful discourse becomes increasingly complex and even more critical. The goal is to rebuild citizens' trust and work toward collective solutions for societal issues rather than being locked in perpetual conflict.

McIntire reports an alarming trend involving armed demonstrators attending or gathering in public places such as political rallies, election sites, and nonviolent protests. The author explains that these occurrences skyrocketed in states with open-carry laws, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firearms at political rallies can have a chilling effect on free discourse, potentially undermining the democratic values of open dialog, peaceful assembly, and the exchange of ideas. As McIntire views it, "Deploying the Second Amendment in service of the First has become a way to buttress a policy argument, a sort of silent, if intimidating, bullhorn."³⁵⁹ This intimidation tactic deters people from freely expressing their opinions, engaging in open discussions, or participating in public events. When individuals feel physically threatened, their ability to exercise their right to free speech and peaceful assembly is compromised.

³⁵⁷ Jamieson, "How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media," 123.

³⁵⁸ Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol," 10; Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*, 265.

³⁵⁹ Mike McIntire, "At Protests across America, Guns Are Doing the Talking," *New York Times*, November 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/26/us/guns-protests-open-carry.html>.

Essentially, the world is witnessing the rise of a post-truth society characterized by the marginalization of objective facts in favor of emotionally charged viewpoints and personal opinions. This shift, primarily fueled by DI campaigns, has led to truth decay and a general skepticism toward fact-based evidence. The result is the erosion of trust in institutions once revered as reliable information sources. This post-truth condition is not merely an abstract concept but has tangible ramifications for U.S. society, particularly democracy.³⁶⁰

Truth decay and post-truth effects infringe upon two fundamental pillars of a robust democratic society: an informed electorate and the ability to engage in productive debates. The DI campaigns fueling these effects sow chaos and discord, polarize communities, and exploit societal vulnerabilities, ultimately aiming to weaken the nation from within.

E. DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

This segment explores the vulnerability of the electorate to DI campaigns and the impacts on democratic processes. It underscores the rise of DI in elections and voters' inability to navigate it critically, leading to a disproportionate influence of emotion over rational deliberation in the political process. The changing landscape of politics, with an emphasis on candidate personality and declining electoral competitiveness, has further complicated this situation. The reliance on media to disseminate political messages opens doors for DI campaigns to exploit information vulnerabilities. Despite debates over the impact of DI on voter behavior, the consensus is that DI has contributed to eroding trust in the electoral system and democracy at large. This section points out that DI has triggered the passing of restrictive voting laws by sowing doubts about election integrity. This interplay of DI, partisan politics, and policy changes underscores the potential for DI to inflict lasting damage on democratic processes.

³⁶⁰ Kydd believes these societal breakdowns could lead to significant upheaval, including “widespread political violence, as extremists think there is no alternative to achieve their aims. This could lead to assassinations, broader violence against civilians, and a potential civil war between right-wing forces and elements of the state that remain loyal to the constitution.” Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 4.

1. Elections and Voters

Despite its increasing use in recent elections, the electorate appears unprepared for exposure to DI.³⁶¹ DI campaigns have a long history, yet voters often lack the necessary awareness and critical-thinking skills to navigate the DI landscape effectively. Political campaigns exacerbate susceptibility to DI campaigns aimed at voters by prioritizing the mobilization of voters based on their partisan identities instead of focusing primarily on logical inducement.³⁶² As a result, emotion tends to overshadow rational deliberation, playing a disproportionate role in shaping political dynamics.

In today's era of personality-centered politics, political parties have taken a back seat in their traditional role of fostering candidates.³⁶³ Hudson explains that decreased importance of the political parties is partly due to a growing emphasis on the personality and character of individual candidates and declining electoral competitiveness due to incumbents having the upper hand in fending off electoral contenders. Instead, candidates rely heavily on the media to disseminate their messages and shape public opinion. However, this reliance on media becomes problematic considering the influence of social and legacy media platforms in conveying targeted DI campaigns. These campaigns often exploit vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem, further complicating the ability to build an informed electorate.

While some detractors argue that DI (through social media) has a limited impact on voter behavior due to its dilution by copious platform traffic, research offers alternative explanations for DI's lack of voting influence.³⁶⁴ For example, Kalla and Broockman believe that voters' choices are relatively unwavering and not subject to the stimulus of

³⁶¹ Rid, *Active Measures*, 8.

³⁶² Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 82.

³⁶³ Hudson, *American Democracy in Peril*, 166.

³⁶⁴ Rid, *Active Measures*, 408; Nemr and Gangware, *Weapons of Mass Distraction*, 22; Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (May 2017): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>.

DI.³⁶⁵ Nevertheless, DI degrades voters' trust in the electoral system, weakening the foundation of democracy. DI campaigns have increasingly cast suspicion on the fairness and free expression of the American electoral system.³⁶⁶ Such campaigns have created a climate of mistrust among voters, eroding confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

Notably, DI surrounding voter fraud allegations has led to the implementation of numerous obstructive voting laws.³⁶⁷ An Insikt Group report from 2022 documents “substantial evidence of misinformation and disinformation targeting voting systems manufacturers across mainstream and alternative internet platforms ahead of the 2022 U.S. midterm elections.”³⁶⁸ In their research, Panditharatne et al. have found supporting evidence of DI operations targeting voting systems and discussed some anti-democratic policy changes due to partisan acceptance of this DI. Since 2020, states across the nation have produced an unprecedented wave of new restrictive voting laws. These laws—motivated in part by partisan lies about a stolen election—have reshaped the country's electoral system. At least 18 states passed 34 laws restricting voting access since the beginning of 2021. Marche sums up this effect, declaring that DI traded up from UGC to politically affiliated news outlets can influence government policy: “The disinformation pipeline flows into real power: internet-generated fantasies move through conservative media into the policy arena. Fantastic visions bleed into real politics.”³⁶⁹

In summary, voters often lack the necessary awareness and critical-thinking skills to deal with DI effects, which poses a significant threat to democratic processes. Political campaigns compound these effects by rallying voters based on their partisan identities

³⁶⁵ Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, “The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (February 2018): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000363>.

³⁶⁶ Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 8.

³⁶⁷ Mekela Panditharatne et al., *Information Gaps and Misinformation in the 2022 Elections* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, 2023), 6, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/information-gaps-and-misinformation-2022-elections>.

³⁶⁸ Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine*, 3.

³⁶⁹ Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 23.

rather than rational deliberation, giving emotion a disproportionate influence in shaping political dynamics. The evidence suggests that DI campaigns targeting voting systems manufacturers and spreading DI about voter fraud have had a tangible impact on the American electoral system. These influence operations have resulted in obstructive voting laws and policy changes that may have anti-democratic implications. These campaigns further contribute to the erosion of confidence in the integrity of elections and create divisions within the democratic process.

2. Ineffectual Governance

Purposefully disseminating false or misleading information can exacerbate political polarization and contribute to the extinction of moderate voices by driving wedges between different political ideologies. By fueling mistrust and misunderstanding, DI can solidify extreme positions and make it more difficult for individuals to find common ground. When parties hold steadfast to opposing positions, reaching a consensus and progressing on essential issues become increasingly tricky. This refusal to alter course or compromise often results in stalemates or hasty swings between policy positions, weakening effective governance.³⁷⁰

DI intensifies an environment where dialog and compromise are replaced with opposition and conflict, obstructing efficient government performance. This heightened polarization poses a significant challenge to democracy, regardless of its underlying causes.³⁷¹ DI distorts the political landscape by presenting polarized views as the norm, thereby silencing or marginalizing moderate voices. The extinction of moderate voices in politics has had a detrimental impact on political conflict.³⁷² In essence, DI acts as a catalyst that accelerates and intensifies existing political divisions.

The concept of divergent perceptions “reflects differences in how people perceive, select, evaluate, and/or weigh cues in a situation to form a perception. The frequency of

³⁷⁰ Haggard and Kaufman, “The Anatomy of Democratic Backsliding,” 31.

³⁷¹ Haggard and Kaufman, 31.

³⁷² Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 14.

such differences plays a crucial role in determining the potential for cooperation.”³⁷³ Kydd explains how the incidence of divergent perceptions among political leaders can impact regime efficacy: “If they [divergent perceptions] are rare enough, cooperation can still be sustained by strategies that involve temporary mutual punishment without agreement on who is at fault. If they are common, however, cooperation breaks down. In the current era, the divergent perceptions appear to be frequent and profound, making cooperation a long shot.”³⁷⁴ In the United States and other advanced democracies, polarization within the political class has reached new heights; divergent perceptions are no longer occasional sticking points but the status quo.³⁷⁵ McCoy and Somer explain the danger in this situation: “Majoritarian institutions easily turn into existential threats when competitors come to see politics as a zero-sum game.”³⁷⁶

Applebaum illustrates how a DI campaign could impact a democratic government’s regime efficacy by analyzing Brexit and its outcomes. The Conservative-backed campaign supporting the UK’s exit from the EU was highly controversial, extraordinarily politicized, and emotionally charged. The rhetoric on both sides of the appeal was strong. Still, the Leave camp (Brexit supporters) benefited from DI used to enrage its supporters—devised primarily by domestic actors and thoroughly amplified by overt and covert Russian efforts.³⁷⁷ The stress placed on the British government from polarization brought government efficacy to a standstill and had long-term impacts on its legitimacy. As McCoy and Somer describe, the “new divides over Brexit—fed by the political strategies of the Conservative and U.K. Independence Parties—led to three years of government paralysis and dysfunction.”³⁷⁸

³⁷³ Zhanna Lyubikh et al., “Why, How, and When Divergent Perceptions Become Dysfunctional in Organizations: A Motivated Cognition Perspective,” *Research in Organizational Behavior* 42 (February 2022): 100177, <https://doi.org/10/gr9fx3>.

³⁷⁴ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 17.

³⁷⁵ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 36.

³⁷⁶ McCoy and Somer, “Overcoming Polarization,” 12.

³⁷⁷ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 88; Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 49–58.

³⁷⁸ McCoy and Somer, “Overcoming Polarization,” 6.

A similar yet more acute scenario played out in the United States. President Trump, facing ouster after a defeat by then President-elect Biden, propagated rampant DI and conspiracy theories regarding the 2020 election results.³⁷⁹ The Big Lie (or the Big Steal, depending on its framing), as it came to be known, claimed Trump lost due to widespread election interference and was subsequently found by multiple authorities to be entirely without merit.³⁸⁰ The DI campaign, seeded by Trump, was copied by his supporters and amplified by a range of influence operations authorized by President Putin of Russia.³⁸¹ Allen and West recount how months of DI whipped Trump supporters into a frenzied protest “that culminated directly, and at his behest, with the assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. On that day, Americans stared into the abyss of a failed state. For the briefest of moments, the executive branch of the U.S. government forcibly and violently unseated the legislative branch, engaged in fulfilling its constitutional duty.”³⁸² The events of January 6, spurred directly by the executive’s call to action, marked a harrowing episode in American history. It was not merely a violent protest but a moment when the United States came perilously close to a constitutional crisis. The unprecedented assault on the U.S. Capitol showcased the fragility of democracy. When one branch of government seeks to overthrow another, it underscores the essential need for checks and balances.

In both the Brexit and the Capitol insurrection cases, McCoy and Allen highlight that despite dire circumstances, democracy prevailed, and the restoration of legitimacy and efficacy took place. Still, these events were not without consequences, and the enduring effects might remain unknown for some time.

As a result of the government’s incapacity to solve the problems before them, public disaffection with the political system grows, leading to a higher level of distrust in institutions. This situation further exacerbates the divisions within society as individuals

³⁷⁹ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 811.

³⁸⁰ House of Representatives, 239.

³⁸¹ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 807; National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections*, ICA 2020–00078D (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021), 2, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications>.

³⁸² Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 5, 7.

lose trust in the ruling regime and its ability to address their concerns.³⁸³ A disloyal opposition sometimes challenges the existing authority, offering “temporary emergency” measures to solve the crisis. A legal power transfer would occur, supported by a citizenry disaffected by the current government looking for a resolution.³⁸⁴ An authoritarian leader would assume power and claim to work to restore democracy, even if it meant disbanding constitutional safeguards and democratic institutions. The populace would follow in a process Levitsky and Ziblatt have termed *collective abdication*, “the transfer of authority to a leader who threatens democracy—usually flow[ing] from one of two sources.”³⁸⁵ The first is a prevalent misconception that an authoritarian leader can be effectively controlled or restrained.³⁸⁶ The other, called *ideological collusion*, occurs when

the authoritarian’s agenda overlaps sufficiently with that of mainstream politicians that abdication is desirable, or at least preferable to the alternatives. But when faced with a would-be authoritarian, establishment politicians must unambiguously reject him or her and do everything possible to defend democratic institutions—even if that means temporarily joining forces with bitter rivals.³⁸⁷

However, abdication to an authority willing to dismantle democratic institutions is exceptionally precarious. Marche forewarns, “Democracies are built around institutions larger than partisan struggle; they survive on the strength of those institutions. ‘The delegitimization of national institutions inevitably leads to chaos.’”³⁸⁸ Thus, the erosion of trust in foundational democratic institutions not only threatens the immediate stability of the nation but risks plunging society into a long-term state of disorder and vulnerability.

Ultimately, DI significantly challenges modern democratic processes and governance efficacy. It preys on the electorate’s susceptibility, fueling emotions over rational deliberation, and amplifies political polarization. This piece highlights how

³⁸³ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 50.

³⁸⁴ Linz, 77.

³⁸⁵ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 67.

³⁸⁶ Levitsky and Ziblatt, 67.

³⁸⁷ Levitsky and Ziblatt, 67.

³⁸⁸ Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 7.

personality-centered politics, decreasing electoral competitiveness, and media-dependent campaigning have facilitated DI campaigns. These campaigns have eroded public trust in the electoral system, fostering the spread of voter fraud allegations and prompting restrictive voting laws. Moreover, DI widens political divides and silences moderate voices, leading to inefficient governance characterized by stalemates and abrupt policy shifts. Last, the piece illuminates the severe potential of DI to foster a climate ripe for an authoritarian takeover as public trust in government wanes, and citizens seek seemingly stable alternatives.

F. POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Deepening political polarization, driven in part by the calculated spread of DI, is closely associated with a concerning rise in political violence. This linkage emphasizes the need to critically examine the mechanisms and impacts of DI in exacerbating ideological divides, fostering hostility, promoting radical ideologies, and, ultimately, instigating violence. This examination takes on further urgency as we grapple with disconcerting instances of political violence.

Kleinfeld relates how politically motivated violence, particularly from right-wing groups, has risen: “In the face of ginned-up beliefs that their democracy is under threat and emboldened by the feeling that some police and politicians will excuse their actions, right-wing violence is skyrocketing”³⁸⁹ Kleinfeld has documented data retrieved from the Global Terrorism Database, as shown in Figure 13, indicating an increase in domestic terror attacks, especially those politically or ideologically motivated.

³⁸⁹ Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 10.

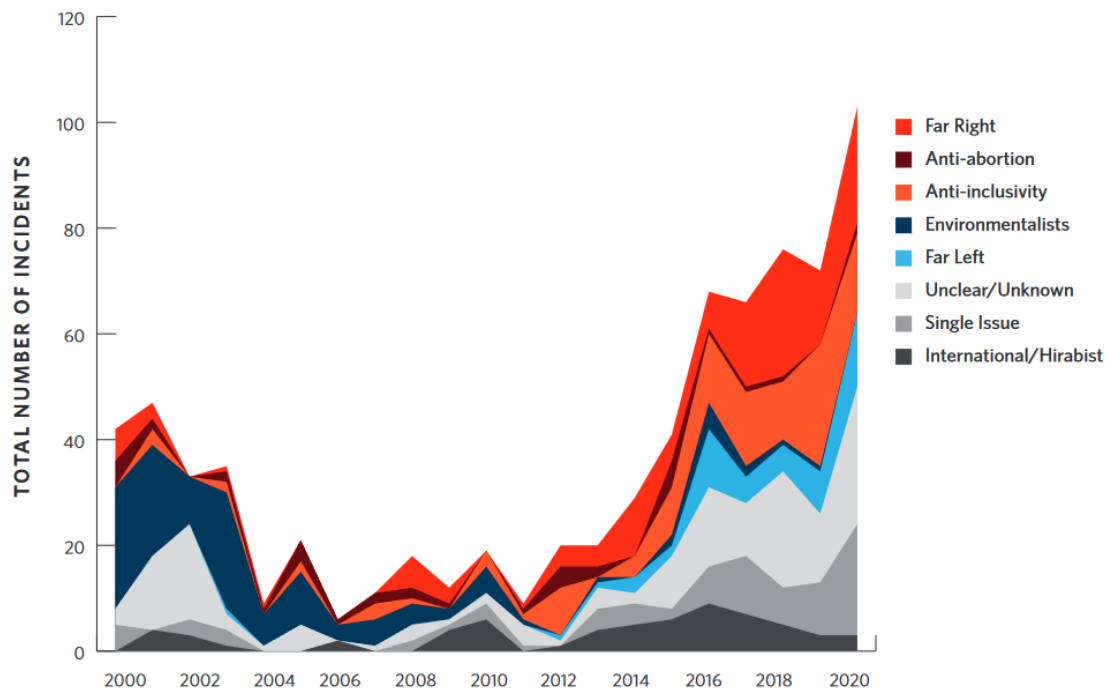


Figure 13. Terrorist Attacks in the United States by Ideology, 2000–2020.³⁹⁰

Stalemates in government and the feeling that some ideological groups are under-represented or have no voice have revealed deep-seated frustrations. This toxic ecosystem creates an environment for extremist ideologies and radicalization, ripe for threat actors to exploit through DI campaigns. Increased rhetoric based on inauthentic information may lead to acts of violence as individuals or groups seek to advance their agendas or retaliate against perceived enemies.³⁹¹ Marche describes this feeling as the “hum of hyper-partisanship, the rage, and loathing of everyday American politics, [and it] generates a widespread tolerance for violence.”³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Source: Kleinfeld, 10.

³⁹¹ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 10; Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, “The Accelerating Threat of the Political Assassination,” War on the Rocks, August 24, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/08/the-accelerating-threat-of-the-political-assassination/>; Balak, “The Nexus of Societal Fragility and Extremism.”

³⁹² Marche, *The Next Civil War*, 72.

Additionally, Levitsky and Ziblatt believe an autocratic leader's ascent often results in societal polarization. DI plays a crucial role in the polarization of society, enabling a willing autocrat to foster an atmosphere of anxiety, intimidation, and mutual suspicion.³⁹³ Paradoxically, the leader's use of menacing language can have unintended consequences.³⁹⁴ It may drive the media to discard its professional standards, resorting to fraught measures to undermine the government. Likewise, the opposition may conclude that severe actions are justified to remove the government for what it perceives to be the nation's greater good. Therefore, DI can feed into a cycle of mutual distrust, escalating conflict, and further societal polarization, potentially undermining the democratic processes and paving the way for more autocratic practices.

Piazza, in his research on the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021, asserts that the "recent mob violence . . . underscores the urgency of addressing DI disseminated through social media by top political officials, including the President of the United States, as an accelerant of terrorism and political violence in the context of extreme political polarization."³⁹⁵ False or misleading information deliberately spread through various channels, including social media, exacerbates existing divisions and deepens mistrust among political groups. Piazza expounds on this idea, "Mass political polarization, which we have seen is fueled in part by online disinformation, produces a host of negative attitudes and behaviors, many of which have the potential to increase the probability that a country will experience higher rates of political violence and terrorism."³⁹⁶ Polarization driven by online DI creates negative attitudes and behaviors and increases the likelihood of a country experiencing higher rates of political violence and terrorism. This possibility of bloodshed underscores the severe consequences that can arise from the unchecked spread of disinformation, particularly within a politically divided society.

³⁹³ Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 76.

³⁹⁴ Alan Fier, "As Right-Wing Rhetoric Escalates, So Do Threats and Violence," *New York Times*, August 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/13/nyregion/right-wing-rhetoric-threats-violence.html>.

³⁹⁵ Piazza, "Fake News," 70.

³⁹⁶ Piazza, 60.

Foreign and domestic DI campaigns have maligned the electoral system and cast doubts in voters' minds about whether it is possible to have a fair election in the United States.³⁹⁷ Consequently, some extreme partisans have resorted to threats and intimidation aimed at people involved in the election process. According to Kleinfeld, "Threats of violence against election workers, once nearly nonexistent, are now frequent—the Department of Justice . . . has tracked over a thousand threats against election officials since 2020. Fears of criminal, legal, or violent repercussions are creating an exodus of mid-level professional staff—the level of resignations since 2020 is unprecedented."³⁹⁸ Several states, most recently Nevada, have enacted legislation to protect electoral workers specifically.³⁹⁹ Violent intimidation of those ensuring fair and free elections directly threatens democracy. However, in an even more disturbing turn, election deniers are replacing those who have left, including many in high-level positions who oversee voting at the state level.⁴⁰⁰ Partisan officials overturning close elections pose a significant risk to democratic stability.

Conversely, if state institutions persist in upholding Democratic victories despite skepticism from the right, it may fuel political violence as extremists perceive no alternative to achieving their goals.⁴⁰¹ The events of January 6, 2021, shattered any notion it would be farfetched to imagine occupying the Capitol to obstruct the certification of a presidential election. The alarming rise of radicalization and extremism has reached such levels that this once unimaginable scenario has become a harsh reality.

³⁹⁷ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 807; Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine*, 3.

³⁹⁸ Kleinfeld, "Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy," 7.

³⁹⁹ As detailed by Stern, "Threats and intimidation of election workers had ramped up significantly in Nevada and across the country amid falsehoods and conspiracy theories about foul play denying former President Donald Trump victory in the 2020 presidential race. Other states have taken similar steps to better protect election officials in recent years, including Maine, Vermont, Washington, New Mexico and Oklahoma." Gabe Stern, "Nevada Becomes Latest to Enhance Penalties for Election Worker Intimidation after Statewide Exodus," AP News, May 30, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/elections-nevada-cisco-augilar-secretary-of-state-d006acb17b60b46057a2884458a807b4>.

⁴⁰⁰ Caroline Sullivan, "Statewide Election Denier Roundup," Democracy Docket, October 21, 2022, <https://www.democracymarket.com/analysis/statewide-election-denier-roundup/>.

⁴⁰¹ Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol," 4.

Kydd warns that failures to prevent the election of President Biden might result in even more drastic actions, as partisan extremists could turn to strategic political assassination: “a campaign of assassination targeted at prominent Democrats and electoral officials in swing states could affect the outcome of elections.”⁴⁰² A 2020 plot to kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer could undoubtedly have ended in her assassination, believes Kydd.⁴⁰³ Despite the FBI’s successful intervention and foiling of the planned attempt by self-avowed militia members, it is a striking reminder that domestic violent extremists continue to pose a grave and imminent threat.⁴⁰⁴

In recent times, the United States has witnessed a significant rise in establishing new and prominent armed militias, adding to the inventory of existing groups. DI has assumed multifaceted and influential roles within the domain of armed anti-government groups, facilitating recruitment, motivating radicalization, and disseminating the organizations’ messages.⁴⁰⁵ Notable factions like the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, Boogaloo Boys, and others have emerged, each with distinct affiliations and political ideologies. However, they share a common goal of promoting armed resistance against what they view as an oppressive federal government. These groups have sometimes gone beyond mere rhetoric and taken action to advance their cause.⁴⁰⁶ This surge in the visibility and proliferation of armed militias in the United States is a concerning development. It highlights growing dissatisfaction with the government and its policies among specific population segments. The existence of these militias serves as a stark reminder of the profound divisions that permeate the country and the significant risk of heightened political polarization.

⁴⁰² Kydd, 17.

⁴⁰³ Kydd, 18.

⁴⁰⁴ Graham Macklin, “The Conspiracy to Kidnap Governor Gretchen Whitmer,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 6 (July/August 2021), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-conspiracy-to-kidnap-governor-gretchen-whitmer/>.

⁴⁰⁵ Randall Blazak, “Revisiting the White Boys from Portland to Ukraine: Anomie and Right-Wing Extremism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* (2022): 15, 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221108940>.

⁴⁰⁶ Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 13.

In sum, the influence and reach of DI have precipitated a tumultuous era of heightened political polarization and violence in the United States. The intersection of DI with political extremism and violent acts poses a significant threat to democratic processes and societal stability. Deepening political polarization fueled by DI substantially threatens social and political stability in the United States. The rise of armed militias and politically motivated violence reflects the growing divisions within society. Even more dramatically, the fueling of hostility and hatred among different factions, stemming from a lack of shared understanding and common ground, escalates to a level where violence becomes perceived as the most viable alternative.

Foreign and domestic DI campaigns have targeted the electoral system, inciting threats and intimidation against election workers. The potential for overturning close elections or denying the rightful winner fuels political violence, as extremists perceive no alternative to achieving their goals. The rise of radicalization and extremism has reached such levels that even more drastic actions, including strategic political assassination, are not improbable.

G. CONCLUSION

The research presented makes evident the extensive consequences of DI across the social, political, and epistemological landscapes. DI corrodes public trust in institutions, fosters truth decay, distorts democratic processes, paralyzes governance, and catalyzes political violence. Its exploitation of societal divisions and cognitive biases can have cascading impacts across communities. Yet recognizing the pathways from DI to its tangible harms underscores the urgent need for accountability and vigilance.

The literature suggests that rising anti-establishment sentiment, fueled by DI campaigns, correlates with the growth of a post-truth society. The dismissal of objective facts in favor of emotionally charged beliefs and personal opinions threatens the very foundations of democracy. It erodes the critical pillars of an informed electorate and the capacity for constructive debates, potentially leading to societal upheaval and widespread political violence. What once was deemed impossible is now alarmingly feasible due to the intensifying degrees of radicalization and extremism fostered by targeted DI campaigns.

VI. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter compares and contrasts three distinctive DI campaigns—Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal, scrutinizing their unique features and assessing their impacts on the intended objectives. The chapter first provides a background on each case, investigates their distribution methods and objectives, and explores their broader social, political, and democratic implications. All the events under investigation occurred within the past decade, involving foreign and domestic participants. Though their goals varied, they all influenced the democratic institutions of their target governments. Finally, the chapter underscores the multifaceted threats posed by DI to democratic societies.

A. CASE BACKGROUNDS

In an age of digital ubiquity, the ease with which information and, more alarmingly, DI spread has become a focal point of concern for democracies around the globe. From pizza parlors in Washington, DC, to the halls of the UK Parliament, to the very steps of the U.S. Capitol, DI campaigns have entwined themselves in the political fabric, challenging perceptions of truth and undermining trust in foundational institutions. This section introduces three prominent examples of this phenomenon.

1. Pizzagate

Pizzagate refers to an unfounded conspiracy theory claiming prominent Democrats operated a child-trafficking ring from a Washington, DC, pizzeria. This notion originated from hacked Democratic National Committee (DNC) emails leaked in 2016. Academics divide it into two phases—the hacking and leak operation and the subsequent false conspiracy theory spread through a DI campaign based on the stolen material.

2. Brexit

The Brexit case revolves around DI campaigns to sway the 2016 public referendum on the UK's EU membership. These operations profoundly impacted public discourse and democratic institutions. The polarized climate contributed to extremist violence, including the murder of member of Parliament Jo Cox by a far-right extremist.

3. The Big Steal

The so-called Big Steal has been used to describe DI regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential election, alleging that widespread voter fraud stole the election from Donald Trump. This narrative influenced the January 6 Capitol attack, catalyzed by a systematic DI crusade undermining U.S. electoral integrity.

B. DI DISTRIBUTION AND OBJECTIVE

DI campaigns wield significant power in this interconnected age, influencing public opinion and destabilizing democracies. This section explores these pivotal moments, revealing the strategies and intentions behind their respective DI campaigns.

1. Pizzagate

Two Russian-affiliated hacking groups, Fancy Bear (APT28) and Cozy Bear (APT29), penetrated the DNC network in 2015 and 2016 using spear-phishing emails.⁴⁰⁷ They deployed malware like X-Agent and X-Tunnel upon access to monitor communications and extract data.⁴⁰⁸ This pilfered information later surfaced on platforms like DCLeaks and WikiLeaks.⁴⁰⁹ On the whole, the public found the emails benign. Still, these actors fabricated and spread misleading narratives across social media to smear Clinton.⁴¹⁰

The conspiracy theory rapidly spread across platforms, most notably social media. Users shared, retweeted, and commented on various interpretations, amplifying the theory's reach. Certain mainstream news outlets covered the leaks, further boosting their visibility.⁴¹¹ Foreign entities, particularly Russian groups like the IRA, intensified the

⁴⁰⁷ Mueller, *Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 1:38.

⁴⁰⁸ Mueller, 1:38.

⁴⁰⁹ S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 10; Paul Bleakley, "Panic, Pizza and Mainstreaming the Alt-Right: A Social Media Analysis of Pizzagate and the Rise of the QAnon Conspiracy," *Current Sociology* 71, no. 3 (May 2023): 516, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211034896>.

⁴¹⁰ Mueller, *Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 1:1.

⁴¹¹ Jamieson, "How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media," 134; Bleakley, "Panic, Pizza and Mainstreaming the Alt-Right," 516.

spread by promoting the theory on social media and state-backed media, aiming to sway the U.S. election outcome.⁴¹²

2. Brexit

Ahead of the Brexit referendum, the Vote Leave campaign exploited public fears with tailored emotional DI portraying the EU negatively. The campaign harnessed data analytics to micro-target voters, delivering tailored emotional DI pieces through digital ads.⁴¹³ The potency of these messages was augmented by their personalization, playing on public fears and biases. Russia also interfered via state news outlets and social media, proliferating divisive content to sway the vote toward the UK's leaving the EU to weaken Western institutions.⁴¹⁴

3. The Big Steal

By casting doubt on the election's legitimacy without presenting concrete evidence, Trump laid the foundation for a widespread narrative of a "stolen election."⁴¹⁵ Right-leaning U.S. media outlets seized upon his claims and further amplified them, providing an echo chamber that reverberated these assertions. The relentless legacy media coverage and a barrage of organic and possibly coordinated social media posts propelled these claims into mainstream discourse, as explained in Chapter III.

International actors, most notably entities associated with Russia, saw an opportunity to exploit these internal divisions and further shake the public's trust in the

⁴¹² S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 17; Mueller, *Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, 1:12.

⁴¹³ Trithara describes this campaign: "According to testimony from Christopher Wylie, the former Cambridge Analytica employee and whistleblower, the Ripon tool 'utilized the algorithms from the Facebook data.' Wylie is referencing data harvested from 87 million Facebook users by Professor Aleksandr Kogan's Global Science Research (GSR) app. This information was used to psychologically profile audiences and craft Brexit-related messages with distorted facts underpinned by emotions." Dakoda Trithara, "Securitizing Disinformation: The Case of Westminster's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee," *Democracy and Security* (2020): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2020.1740685>.

⁴¹⁴ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 49.

⁴¹⁵ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 201; Steven A. Sund, *Courage under Fire: Under Siege and Outnumbered 58 to 1 on January 6* (Ashland, OR: Blackstone Publishing, 2023), 44–45; Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine*, 3.

democratic process.⁴¹⁶ These foreign entities worked hand in hand with the domestic narrative, even if not directly coordinated. The culmination of these efforts, both from domestic and international sources, aimed to challenge and delegitimize the integrity of the 2020 U.S. election outcome.⁴¹⁷

C. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

In an era marked by the digital proliferation of information, DI campaigns have emerged as potent tools capable of exacerbating social and political divides and inciting real-world violence. The corrosive impact of DI on democracies has never been more evident. This section looks into these episodes, exploring the strategies and fallout of the campaigns that manipulated public perception and sparked societal unrest.

1. Pizzagate

The DI campaigns surrounding the DNC hacks and Pizzagate significantly exacerbated existing social and political issues, intensifying political polarization, erosion of trust in institutions, debates over media integrity, threats to public safety, and the need for internet regulation and privacy. Both incidents contributed to the deepening of political divisions in the United States, turning an already contentious election season into a more hostile and mistrustful environment. The DNC hacks, which led to misleading narratives about internal party corruption, challenged the political system's integrity. At the same time, Pizzagate stoked baseless fears about elite conspiracies, further driving public mistrust in government and media. In terms of media integrity, the role of various media outlets in inadvertently amplifying the reach of these conspiracy theories prompted discussions about journalistic standards and the media's responsibility to verify information before publication. The real-world violence incited by the Pizzagate conspiracy marked a distressing intersection of online DI and public safety. Last, the misuse of private information and the potential for online manipulation highlighted by

⁴¹⁶ National Intelligence Council, *Foreign Threats*, 2; S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 10.

⁴¹⁷ House of Representatives, *The January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol*, 811.

these cases ignited debates about the pressing need for stronger internet regulation and data privacy protections.

2. Brexit

DI exacerbated several social and political issues during Brexit, causing deep divisions and generating public unrest. One of the primary social issues was the sharpening of societal polarization. Misleading narratives stoked fears about immigration, national identity, and economic well-being. Applebaum relates what some of the divisive DI leaders of the Vote Leave campaign propagated:

If we left the E.U., Johnson claimed, there would be an extra £350 million a week—an imaginary number for the National Health Service. If we stayed in the E.U., we would be forced to accept Turkey as a member, which was also untrue. Farage appeared in front of a poster showing huge crowds of Syrians trekking toward Europe, even though there was no reason why any of them would end up in the United Kingdom, which is not part of the Schengen Area, Europe’s border-free zone.

DI drove the Vote Leave and Vote Remain factions, a pre-established rift, further apart, creating a chasm in public opinion. Fueled by DI, this discord contributed to social tensions and conflicts, resulting in a more fractured society.⁴¹⁸ Political issues, too, worsened as the referendum’s legitimacy came under scrutiny due to the onslaught of false narratives. Public anger and distrust in the government rose, and in the face of the slow democratic process, “Brexiters’ scorn for British institutions grew more intense.”⁴¹⁹ Such heightening of divisions can also breed social unrest, further destabilizing society.

DI regarding the alleged benefits of leaving the EU, for instance, skewed public understanding of the potential economic implications, causing voters to cast their ballots based on distorted information.⁴²⁰ Therefore, the deliberate use of DI during pivotal moments such as Brexit reveals the vulnerability of democracies in the digital age. When DI replaces informed discourse, it distorts public perceptions and threatens the foundation

⁴¹⁸ Sloss, *Tyrants on Twitter*, 57.

⁴¹⁹ Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 91.

⁴²⁰ Trithara, “Securitizing Disinformation,” 10.

of democratic decision-making. The Brexit scenario illustrates that unchecked DI can propel a nation toward decisions that might not align with its people's best interests or genuine will.

Moreover, the role of foreign entities, particularly Russia, in spreading DI during the Brexit campaign further complicated the political landscape. The fact that a foreign power could potentially influence a domestic political event raised questions about the integrity of the democratic process and sovereignty. DI created a climate of fear, hostility, and division that helped incite extremist violence against a government representative.

3. The Big Steal

The DI campaign surrounding the Big Steal has exacerbated several social and political issues in the United States. First, it has deepened the political divide, fueling mistrust and antagonism between different factions of the electorate. This polarization is not only limited to the public; it extends to governmental institutions, causing legislative gridlock and hindering productive bipartisan cooperation.⁴²¹ Second, the Big Steal narrative has eroded faith in the democratic process. Despite a lack of substantial evidence, the persistent claims of election fraud have led a significant portion of the population to question the integrity of the electoral system.⁴²² In terms of sowing doubt in the American voting process, Kleinfeld believes DI “has succeeded in creating an alternate reality that facts cannot dislodge. This media echo chamber does not need to create a solid story that can be confirmed or denied. Instead, it is selling doubt.”⁴²³

This skepticism profoundly threatens the democratic ethos, as faith in the system is essential for its functioning, as explained in Chapter V. In addition, the DI campaign has also fomented social unrest, as evidenced by the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. These incidents also illustrate the potential of DI to incite violence, thus creating a public safety concern.

⁴²¹ Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 24.

⁴²² Kydd, “Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol,” 16.

⁴²³ Kleinfeld, “Five Strategies to Support U.S. Democracy,” 8.

D. BROADER DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

DI campaigns pose significant challenges to the core tenets of democracy. Through the lens of these cases, this section examines the role of domestic and foreign entities, coupled with the vast reach of social media platforms.

1. Pizzagate

The DI campaigns surrounding the DNC hacks and Pizzagate have profound implications for democracy. These events represent how false narratives and DI can destabilize democratic processes and erode public trust in democratic institutions. By promoting the idea of corruption within the Democratic Party, these campaigns fed into a broader narrative of a rigged system, which could have lasting impacts on public faith in democracy.⁴²⁴ A citizenry that believes its electoral system is corrupt may become disengaged and distrustful of the government.⁴²⁵ The potential effects on the electoral process include lower voter turnout or protest votes and, ultimately, a weakening of the representative nature of democracy.⁴²⁶

This event illustrated how unchecked DI and conspiracy theories can fuel extremism and potentially lead to violent actions, directly threatening public safety. This real-world violence fueled by online DI is a severe concern for any democratic society, threatening the peace and order that democracies need to function.

Moreover, both cases led to an erosion of trust in the news media. In a healthy democracy, the media serves as an essential check and balance, providing citizens with the information they need to make informed decisions. When DI campaigns undermine trust in the media, they weaken this critical democratic pillar.

⁴²⁴ S., *Assessment on Russian Activities and Intentions*, 6.

⁴²⁵ Gabriel Sanchez and Keesha Middlemass, “Misinformation Is Eroding the Public’s Confidence in Democracy,” Brookings Institution, July 26, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy/>.

⁴²⁶ Balak, “The Nexus of Societal Fragility and Extremism,” 102.

2. Brexit

The DI campaign surrounding Brexit has had far-reaching democratic implications. First, the spread of DI compromised the very foundation of democracy—epistemic order and an informed society. For democracy to function effectively, citizens must be adequately informed about the issues at stake. The spread of false narratives during the Brexit referendum potentially skewed public understanding. These conversations led to decisions based on DI rather than a precise analysis of the potential implications of leaving the EU.

Brexit DI amplified political polarization, leading to an increasingly divided society. The use of populist narratives and restorative nostalgia amplified this polarization. Such divisions can make reaching a consensus on essential issues challenging, inhibiting effective governance and potentially leading to legislative gridlock. McCoy and Somer maintain that “new divides over Brexit—fed by the political strategies of the Conservative and UK Independence Parties—led to three years of government paralysis and dysfunction.”⁴²⁷ This type of government inefficacy leads to delegitimization of the regimes and possible backslide or regression.⁴²⁸

The Brexit DI campaign undermined trust in democratic institutions and processes. Misleading narratives, particularly those concerning the alleged benefits of leaving the EU, challenged the transparency and credibility of these institutions. When faith in these entities erodes, it threatens the functioning of democracy as it relies on public trust and participation.

Concerns about foreign interference, mainly from Russia, in spreading DI during the Brexit campaign pose significant questions about national sovereignty. If foreign

⁴²⁷ McCoy and Somer, “Overcoming Polarization,” 6.

⁴²⁸ Unsolvable problems, a disloyal opposition ready to exploit them to challenge the regime; the decay of democratic authenticity among the regime’s supporting parties; and the loss of efficacy, effectiveness (particularly in the face of violence), and ultimately legitimacy, lead to a generalized atmosphere of tension, a widespread feeling that something has to be done, which is reflected in heightened politicization. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 75.

powers can influence domestic political events through DI, it raises alarm about the security and integrity of the democratic process.

Finally, the Brexit DI campaign has sparked a global ethical conversation about protecting democratic processes while ensuring free speech related to social media platforms. As these platforms play an increasingly significant role in shaping public opinion, their potential to disseminate DI can profoundly affect democratic processes. Thus, balancing freedom of speech and curbing the spread of DI is a pressing democratic concern in the digital age.

3. The Big Steal

This DI campaign presented a severe challenge to democratic institutions, as it spread doubt and confusion among the public regarding the integrity of the election process, a cornerstone of any democratic society. The persistent, unfounded claims of widespread election fraud made people question the legitimacy of the election results. Such skepticism, in turn, fuels cynicism toward democratic processes, reduces voter turnout in subsequent elections, and potentially incites violent behaviors, as seen on January 6, 2021, during the attempted insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

The DI disseminated during this campaign deepened political polarization, thereby hampering the functioning of democratic institutions. Finding common ground for bipartisan cooperation proves difficult when citizens become entrenched in partisan views influenced by DI. This lack of political compromise can lead to legislative snarl and hinder the ability of a democracy to adapt and address new challenges.⁴²⁹ This deadlock significantly impacts regime efficacy, as described by Linz, and has the potential to cause further democratic erosion.

The Big Steal DI campaign has amplified the risk of “illiberal democracy,” whereby the rule of the majority becomes a tool to marginalize and suppress minority voices. Populist viewpoints espoused by leaders with autocratic tendencies can seriously damage the democratic normative guardrails. With DI campaigns driving narratives that paint

⁴²⁹ Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 14.

political opponents as existential threats, democratic debates may be replaced by winner-take-all politics, thus undermining pluralism.

In this case, DI has eroded the democratic principle of an informed society, which is necessary for making reasoned decisions about who should govern. DI has warped the public's understanding of reality, leading to decisions based not on factual evidence but on falsehoods and emotions. The campaign has fostered an environment in which the impact of objective facts on public opinion has diminished. The rise of sentiment-based appeals and personal beliefs that directly contradict objective realities has led to the emergence of a post-truth environment. This scenario makes constructive political discourse increasingly tricky.

The Big Steal narrative raises urgent questions about regulating digital spaces, where much of this DI spreads. While freedom of expression is a critical democratic value, the unfettered spread of malicious DI can undermine democratic processes. Thus, the challenge lies in regulating digital spaces to prevent the spread of DI while respecting freedom of speech. In sum, the DI campaign surrounding the Big Steal poses a multifaceted threat to democratic societies by undermining trust in electoral processes, deepening political polarization, promoting illiberal tendencies, misinforming citizens, and posing complex regulatory challenges for digital spaces.

E. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

DI campaigns, as illustrated by Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal, have become potent tools that significantly influence public perceptions and political outcomes. While distinct in origin and context, each event revolved around manipulating facts to craft pernicious narratives, targeting politicians, or eroding trust in democratic systems.

For instance, in the case of Pizzagate, what started as a series of hacked emails from the DNC was maliciously contorted into a wide-ranging conspiracy of a child-trafficking ring run by prominent politicians. The real danger in this conspiracy peaked when a concerned citizen, swayed by the conspiracy, walked into the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC, armed with an assault rifle, intending to “self-investigate” the fictitious claims.

Brexit's DI campaign was more nuanced. With foreign actors like Russia subtly playing their part, the campaign witnessed the strategic use of microtargeting. This technique played on the public's fears, such as immigration concerns, exemplified by the infamous "Breaking Point" poster showing a long queue of migrants, suggesting that the UK was at its limit. The Leave campaign stoked economic fears with claims the UK had been sending £350 million per week to the EU, a widely discredited figure that still affected public sentiment.

The Big Steal, on the other hand, revolved around the aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Here, the baseless allegations of election fraud were not merely whispered in secluded corners of the internet but vocally championed by prominent figures, including former President Trump. These claims found a megaphone in media outlets like Fox News, which amplified them, adding to their perceived legitimacy. The narrative's potency culminated in the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, where thousands, driven by the belief that the election had been "stolen," stormed one of America's most symbolic buildings in an attempt to overthrow a democratic institution.

Russia's interference is a common thread binding these narratives, albeit to varying degrees. In Brexit and Pizzagate, its involvement was more prevalent, through online trolls or selective leaks, while in the Big Steal, its role was less pronounced, with domestic actors taking the leading role in DI dissemination.

The media landscape's role in these events was also multi-dimensional. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook inadvertently became conduits for spreading Pizzagate conspiracy theories; the Big Steal saw deliberate and calculated amplification by certain media outlets. This bifurcation presents a significant challenge in countering such narratives, as the line between unintentional spread and intentional amplification becomes blurred.

In essence, through their shared themes and unique nuances, these cases underscore the dangers that unchecked DI campaigns pose. Not only do they mislead; they also have real-world consequences—from violent incidents to major political decisions. Addressing

this challenge requires a multi-pronged approach, considering the evolving nature of DI and the means of spreading it.

F. CONCLUSION

These occurrences underline the debilitating influence of DI campaigns on democracy, as they erode confidence, deepen societal rifts, and spur tangible consequences. Yet, nuances exist in the type of DI, the involvement of external players, and the severity of democratic deterioration in each scenario. To encapsulate this chapter, these three DI campaigns converge on a singular aftermath: they challenged the pillars of democratic societies, eroding faith in and the efficacy of democratic systems and values. Confronting the increasing sway of such campaigns mandates a decisive and comprehensive strategy to protect democracy from the rising tide of DI tactics.

VII. CONCLUSION

Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.

—Winston Churchill

DI, as evidenced by the content of this research, stands at the heart of a subtle assault on democratic principles. DI campaigns, often state-sponsored and always with malicious intent, can corrode trust, exacerbate societal divisions, and lead to tangible real-world consequences, as seen in the events examined through comparative case study analysis. The implications of these orchestrated DI campaigns are vast and complex, affecting both international relations and domestic cohesion.

This thesis research aimed to clarify this murky realm, considering the mechanisms, impacts, and potential countermeasures against the challenges posed by DI campaigns. This conclusion reviews the findings of this exploration, makes recommendations for possible countermeasures to DI, and finally identifies gaps in this thesis that warrant future inquiry. This research highlighted the distinction between DI, misinformation, and other information activities to provide rigor when assigning definitions. This study used current academic models to examine the threat actors, vectors, and agents that control DI campaigns. Through analyzing cases like Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal, the tangible repercussions, particularly in the United States, on democratic societies were presented.

To sum up, this thesis endeavored to spotlight the profound challenges of DI campaigns and their impact on American democratic principles and institutions. Through careful investigation and thoughtful recommendations, this author has sought not only to diagnose the problem but also to pave the way toward solutions, ensuring that democratic principles, values, and institutions remain robust against these contemporary threats.

A. FINDINGS

DI campaigns have become potent tools threatening democratic processes, institutional trust, and societal cohesion. The ramifications are evident—from domestic actors leveraging them to further their goals to foreign states harnessing their power for

geopolitical gain. These changes are not just apparent in ideological philosophy but in the day-to-day functions of our society and, more critically, in democratic processes and institutions. This section provides structured insight into the key findings.

1. Disinformation: A Pathway to a Post-truth Society

DI is intentionally misleading content designed to erode trust in societal institutions, distort public perceptions, and create a post-truth society that undermines foundational values, ultimately benefiting its purveyors by weakening their adversaries. DI involves intentionally false or misleading content designed to cause harm, unlike inadvertently false misinformation. Models such as the DI kill chain and DI ecosystem outline the environment and coordinated steps in executing such campaigns. These frameworks enable academics and practitioners to trace how DI evolves from inauthentic content to weaponized campaigns. These campaigns do more than spread lies; they systematically undermine trust in key institutions, distort public understanding, and sow societal divisions. When a society cannot differentiate between truth and falsehood, its foundational pillars—such as epistemic order, an informed society, and mutual trust—crumble. This post-truth condition has the ability to weaken nations, democratic and non-democratic alike, and benefit the purveyors of DI.

2. Amplification through Technology

Nation-states and domestic actors amplify DI through digital platforms and advanced technology. Malevolent actors exploit the resulting gaps as trust in media and government erodes. While nation-states wield DI campaigns as a tool for geopolitical gain, domestic actors also harness their power to further ideological narratives in pursuit of personal gain. The weaponization of information transcends borders, and in an interconnected world, this becomes especially threatening. Social media platforms magnify this threat, giving DI a reach that traditional media cannot achieve alone. Advanced technological tools like bots and deepfakes push the envelope further, making truth discernment even harder. While social media has revolutionized DI proliferation due to the ease with which users share information, the traditional media still amplifies and legitimizes DI due to its establishment position and widespread reach. Furthermore,

cognitive limitations and biases often cause individuals to consume and spread DI unintentionally. This spread diminishes trust in media and causes faith in government to dwindle, creating a vacuum often filled by nefarious actors.

Orchestrated DI efforts corrode trust in democratic processes and institutions, amplify societal fractures, and even escalate to physical violence, tragically evidenced by events like the January 6 Capitol attack. Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal exemplify the real-world consequences of DI campaigns.

3. In the United States: A Subtle Erosion of Democracy

The United States has faced subtle democratic backsliding, intensified by societal polarization aided by domestic DI operations; unchecked, this trend risks regressing into illiberal democracy. The United States is currently grappling with an insidious form of democratic backsliding, a phenomenon distinct from the overt coups or abrupt revolutions familiar to history. Presently, democratic backsliding in the United States is not an abrupt change but a deceptive erosion that occurs within the democratic process, differentiating it from regression and reversion.⁴³⁰ As elected officials orchestrate these piecemeal attacks on democratic norms, societal polarization deepens, driven by economic disparities and long-standing divisions. Bermeo's framework, referenced in Chapter IV, highlights tactics such as promissory coups, executive aggrandizement (EA), and strategic election manipulation (SEM) that autocrats use to chip away at the normative democratic guardrails. In the past five years, the United States has witnessed several attacks on its democratic foundations, all under the direction of Donald Trump.⁴³¹ These are listed here, annotated with their tactical category. The first is a DI campaign surrounding the 2020 presidential election, which aggressively promoted unfounded claims of voter fraud to undermine public confidence in the election's integrity (SEM).⁴³² Efforts were also made to

⁴³⁰ Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World*, 4.

⁴³¹ According to Kydd, "What set him [Trump] further apart and paved the way for violence was his utter lack of commitment to democracy and his firm adherence to the conspiratorial mind-set. Trump's admiration for dictators around the world clearly extended to an ambition to follow in their footsteps." Kydd, "Decline, Radicalization and the Attack on the U.S. Capitol," 15.

⁴³² Insikt Group, *Hoax in the Machine*, 3.

undermine independent institutions such as the judiciary by denigrating the courts and the judges who preside over them (EA).⁴³³ The media faced concerted attacks, leading to widespread distrust and suppression of dissent within its ranks (EA and SEM).⁴³⁴ Independent agencies, like the FBI, were politicized to target or intimidate critics and opposition members (SEM).⁴³⁵ Last, efforts to curtail democratic participation were manifest in tighter voter registration requirements and restrictions on voting access (SEM).⁴³⁶ If not addressed, this trajectory could result in a regression to an illiberal democracy, and under the control of an autocrat, it might revert entirely.

4. External Threats: Beyond Our Borders

Foreign state-sponsored DI campaigns pose a significant existential threat to the United States, not only undermining its democratic foundations but also threatening its national security. Simultaneously, the existential threat to the homeland cannot be overstated. The United States finds itself in a precarious position, contending with adversaries who seamlessly blur the lines between war and peace. These foreign state-sponsored DI campaigns are not just undermining democracy; they present a clear and present danger to U.S. national security, leveraging information as a potent weapon. The effects are not solely abstract: the ripples of their influence—shaping public opinion, sowing societal discord, and destabilizing the nation—threaten to undo the very fabric of the country. The resurgence of authoritarian tendencies in this climate is alarming, indicating a pressing need for an assertive reaffirmation and defense of democratic principles.

⁴³³ Kevin Judd and Keith Watters, “Trump’s Attacks on Courts Undermine Judicial Independence,” ABA Journal, June 28, 2018, https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/trumps_attacks_on_courts_undermines_judicial_independence.

⁴³⁴ Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Ladd, “Destroying Trust in the Media, Science, and Government Has Left America Vulnerable to Disaster,” Brookings Institution, May 1, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/destroying-trust-in-the-media-science-and-government-has-left-america-vulnerable-to-disaster/>.

⁴³⁵ Martha Kinsella, “January 6 Committee Revelations Show Need to Prevent Politicization of Justice Department,” Brennan Center for Justice, October 25, 2022, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/january-6-committee-revelations-show-need-prevent-politicization-justice>.

⁴³⁶ “Voting Laws Roundup: October 2021,” Brennan Center for Justice, October 4, 2021, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-october-2021>.

5. Disinformation: A Catalyst for Democratic Decline

While not the sole threat to democracy, DI dangerously exploits and exacerbates existing societal divisions, manipulating tensions that already simmer beneath the surface. While DI poses a significant danger to democratic societies, it does not exist as the sole threat in isolation. Instead, DI campaigns worsen existing social, political, and economic tensions. They leverage societal divisions around race, class, and culture to manipulate public sentiment. Even in a healthy democracy, fractures exist based on ideological disagreements, disparities in status and wealth, or feelings of disenfranchisement among certain groups. DI threat actors can selectively highlight or invent “facts” that inflame these underlying tensions and turn groups against each other. They prey on fears, frustrations, and resentments that already simmer beneath the surface. Therefore, DI’s danger stems from how it can strategically amplify social divisions rather than create threats from nothing. Ultimately, DI remains one challenge among many facing democracies, but it is incredibly potent due to its intersection with and manipulation of existing vulnerabilities. An effective response must involve addressing the root tensions that enable DI to flourish in the first place.

In summary, DI campaigns cast long shadows over democracies worldwide by eroding trust in foundational institutions to escalate geopolitical threats. The United States is no exception to these threats. Four pivotal areas have emerged from this research: the interplay of DI campaigns and the creation of a post-truth society, the increasing role technological advancements play in the amplification of information operations, the duplicitous role domestic DI campaigns play in subtly undermining democratic norms, and finally, the existential threat foreign DI actions pose to the U.S. homeland. It is imperative for democracies, especially the United States, to recognize, understand, and address these challenges to safeguard their future.

Fundamentally, no single solution can address a challenge as complex and evolving as DI. Instead, an array of collaborative efforts across the public and private spheres will be essential to inoculate democracies against false and misleading narratives that exploit social divisions and threaten foundational stability. The following recommendations

underscore the need for an in-depth approach to counter DI and strengthen democratic resilience.

B. RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditional weapons of war have quantifiable effects on their intended targets; DI's impact, conversely, is nebulous. While it is possible to identify instances when false information influenced public opinion or incited real-world events, quantifying the breadth and depth of its influence remains a challenge.⁴³⁷ Academics cannot definitively measure how many minds were changed or actions spurred purely due to DI.

Considering this lacuna, safeguarding the future requires comprehensive countermeasures: initiatives to insulate the public against manipulative narratives, fortify media literacy, and promote transparency in digital platforms. Moreover, while DI's menace looms large, its worst outcomes could be mitigated with a vigilant, informed populace; robust institutional defenses; and leadership unwaveringly committed to democratic ideals. The following subsections explore various strategies and recommendations that the nation can adopt to counteract the detrimental effects of DI and strengthen its democratic foundations.

1. Countering DI

DI poses a significant threat to democratic values and principles. Nations can use the following strategies and recommendations to mitigate the harmful effects of DI and bolster their democratic foundations. From government interventions to public education, these strategies underscore the nature of the challenge and highlight the importance of collaborative efforts to preserve truth and democratic values in contemporary society.

a. Government Policy Intervention

Governments play a vital role in shaping the broader environment in which information is disseminated. Government agencies could provide regulatory frameworks to compel platforms to remove false content or disclose political advertisements' origins.

⁴³⁷ Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media*, 32.

The government could focus on the prevention of DI production and distribution.⁴³⁸ Regarding counter-production, if stringent policies could be enforced against actors that propagate DI, primarily foreign entities attempting to destabilize domestic affairs, the onslaught of DI exposure to the nation could be slowed. On the distribution side, the creation of strict legal repercussions by governments could deter the deliberate spread of falsehoods. However, policymakers must strike a balance, ensuring they do not inadvertently stifle genuine freedom of speech and expression. Recent experiments by government policy groups to counter DI have shown that these efforts have become highly politicized and sparked significant controversy. Efforts by DHS to establish a Disinformation Governance Board backfired, partially due to a clumsy rollout. Additionally, the oversight working group came under Republican condemnation:

Representative James Comer, the senior Republican on the House Oversight and Reform Committee, attacked the group in a letter that said, in part, “The creation of the Disinformation Governance Board appears to double down on this Administration’s continued abuse of taxpayer dollars and the federal government’s powers to attack Americans who disagree with its policies, smearing them as extremists and perpetrators of mis- dis- and mal-information.”⁴³⁹

b. Legacy and Social Media Controls

Traditional news outlets, including newspapers, television, and radio, remain influential sources of information for many. These outlets should prioritize fact-checking, transparent sourcing, and unbiased reporting to counter DI. Establishing trust and credibility could serve as a counterweight to dubious information sources. Collaboration between outlets to expose and debunk falsehoods and transparency in corrections and retractions could further solidify their role as reliable information purveyors and revitalize their function as gatekeepers of reliable information.

Digital platforms, especially social media, have become hotbeds for DI spread due to their vast reach and algorithmic designs that often prioritize sensational content. Drawing on insights from researchers like Cohen et al. and Grinberg et al., platforms could

⁴³⁸ Cohen et al., 41.

⁴³⁹ Garver, “‘Disinformation Governance Board’ Assailed by Lawmakers.”

refine their algorithms to deprioritize misleading content.⁴⁴⁰ Enhanced moderation tools, partnerships with third-party fact-checkers, and more explicit content guidelines could further mitigate the spread.⁴⁴¹ Furthermore, transparency in content promotion mechanisms and advertisement sources might help users discern genuine information from sponsored or malicious content.⁴⁴²

However, smaller social media platforms and limited resources face challenges combating DI because their focus on growth and niche audiences makes strict content moderation tricky.⁴⁴³ While larger platforms act under scrutiny, smaller ones may resist due to their commitment to user autonomy or free speech values. The blend of decentralization and UGC complicates their approach to DI.

c. Public Education

Perhaps one of the most sustainable solutions lies in equipping individuals with the skills to discern credible information from DI. By integrating media literacy into educational curricula, students could learn to critically analyze sources and use inoculation theory techniques such as pre-bunking to defend against DI.⁴⁴⁴ Educating the younger generations in digital citizenship concepts will aid in their understanding of the mechanics of digital platforms and help them recognize common tactics used in DI campaigns.⁴⁴⁵ Beyond school settings, public campaigns and workshops could raise awareness and provide tools for the wider public to navigate the complex information landscape. An

⁴⁴⁰ Grinberg et al., “Fake News on Twitter,” 4; Allen and West, *Ways to Reconcile and Heal America*, 22; Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media*.

⁴⁴¹ Joan Donovan and Danah Boyd, “Stop the Presses? Moving from Strategic Silence to Strategic Amplification in a Networked Media Ecosystem,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 2 (February 2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878229>.

⁴⁴² Cyberspace Solarium Commission, *Countering Disinformation in the United States*, 11.

⁴⁴³ Cohen et al., *Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media*, 30.

⁴⁴⁴ Shannon Bond, “False Information Is Everywhere. ‘Pre-Bunking’ Tries to Head It Off Early,” NPR, October 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/28/1132021770/false-information-is-everywhere-pre-bunking-tries-to-head-it-off-early>.

⁴⁴⁵ Benjamin Gleason and Sam von Gillern, “Digital Citizenship with Social Media: Participatory Practices of Teaching and Learning in Secondary Education,” *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 21, no. 1 (2018): 208, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26273880>.

educated populace, well-versed in recognizing and rejecting falsehoods, is one of the most potent defenses against the pervasive problem of DI.⁴⁴⁶

Integrating media literacy into educational curricula is a commendable step toward combating DI. However, challenges arise in ensuring this education remains unbiased and current amid rapidly evolving DI techniques. Limited resources, potential political influences, and the risk of shifting the onus entirely onto individuals might hinder its effectiveness.⁴⁴⁷ Additionally, older generations might not benefit as much from these new curricular additions, and there could be resistance to their implementation.⁴⁴⁸ Thus, while media literacy education is crucial, its introduction demands careful planning and adaptability to achieve the desired impact.

2. Inoculating Democracy

To protect against democratic backsliding, the U.S. government must take proactive measures like safeguarding elections, promoting bipartisanship, fostering an informed citizenry through civics education, and upholding the rule of law and independent institutions.

3. Government Measures

To combat democratic erosion, the U.S. government should prioritize safeguarding the electoral process and modernizing voting systems to ensure electoral integrity. Furthermore, protecting the rule of law, promoting bipartisanship, protecting press freedom, and maintaining an independent judiciary will uphold democratic principles.⁴⁴⁹ Political parties should return to their role as gatekeepers of their organizations, filtering

⁴⁴⁶ Gleason and von Gillern.

⁴⁴⁷ Alice Huguet et al., *Exploring Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Mitigating Truth Decay* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 15–16, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3050.html.

⁴⁴⁸ Huguet et al., xiv.

⁴⁴⁹ Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 163.

out potential autocrats and threats to democracy.⁴⁵⁰ Together, these efforts have a chance to bolster the nation's democratic foundations.

Equally crucial is fostering an informed citizenry. Civics education is indispensable in fortifying democratic systems against erosion. Central to the tenets of democracy is an informed citizenry, and civics education lays the foundation by elucidating the structure and operations of political systems.⁴⁵¹ It is not solely about understanding the mechanisms of government; it is about cultivating critical-thinking skills to discern truths in an era dominated by misinformation. By promoting active participation—whether voting, community involvement, or public service—civics education breeds a generation of citizens deeply engaged with democratic values; furthermore, it instills a sense of collective responsibility, urging individuals to see themselves as part of a societal tapestry where the well-being of the community often supersedes personal interests.

As populism and autocratic tendencies threaten democracies globally, an educated populace is a safeguard, less likely to be swayed by transient, charismatic leaders who might compromise foundational democratic norms.⁴⁵² Civics education also champions pluralism, fostering tolerance and respect for diverse viewpoints, which are crucial for unity in various societies.⁴⁵³ This education may help rebuild trust in institutions by demystifying their functions. In essence, bolstering civics education is a proactive measure, ensuring that citizens remain the vanguards of democratic values amid evolving challenges.

C. FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis provided in this thesis lays a solid groundwork for the challenges posed by democratic erosion processes, such as backsliding, regression, and reversion in the United States, accentuated by the influence of DI campaigns. However, gaps exist, so delving deeper, future research should focus on the intricate mechanisms and strategies by which elected governments drive democratic degradation. A comprehensive exploration of

⁴⁵⁰ Balak, “The Nexus of Societal Fragility and Extremism,” 40.

⁴⁵¹ Hochschild and Einstein, “Do Facts Matter?”

⁴⁵² Mounk, “The Undemocratic Dilemma.”

⁴⁵³ Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 166.

the intersection between economic inequalities and political polarization is crucial, given their intertwined roles in fueling democratic erosion. Moreover, a closer examination of the unchecked power of potential autocrats, especially their stranglehold on the legislative branch, could shed light on the depth of the challenge.

While this thesis addressed significant cases like Pizzagate, Brexit, and the Big Steal, a comparative study involving similar campaigns in other democracies or historical examples from the United States could enrich one's understanding of the broader spectrum of DI threats. Notably, the pervasive role of technology, mainly social media platforms, in disseminating and amplifying DI remains a critical area for exploration. This thesis has examined foreign state-sponsored DI campaigns' intricacies, origins, objectives, and modus operandi, yet due to the rapid advancement of technology, these methods will experience a rapid evolution in the coming years. A continued examination of DI campaigns will be paramount in anticipating the external threats to U.S. national security.

Last, beyond merely identifying these threats, research should pivot toward formulating and evaluating strategies to counter them and understanding the more profound psychological and societal implications they bring about. By addressing these gaps, future research could weave a more detailed tapestry of the myriad challenges to contemporary democracy and chart a way forward.

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