

The Misinformation Crisis: How Social Media Undermines Democratic Legitimacy and Political Deliberation

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of social media has had an impact on political communication that has never before been seen. It provides an enormous opportunity for information to be disseminated. Perhaps one of the biggest concerns of social media is the widespread dissemination of “misinformation”¹ a topic that Study has shown has had an appreciable impact on society and a disproportionate impact on democratic processes and the widening of the gap in the political spectrum. This paper examines the relationship of misinformation to democracy with emphasis placed upon the role social media sites play in spreading fake or misleading information. Using theoretical frameworks and empirical data from case studies, the paper illustrates and provides insight into the harmful effects misinformation can have on the legitimacy of democratic institutions and the increase in ideological polarization toward elections. The paper continues to provide insights on how the concepts of algorithms, echo chambers and filter bubbles help promote the reinforcement of polarized viewpoints at the expense of deliberative democracy. Finally, the paper concludes with potential remedies to address the problem of misinformation, such as improving media literacy and fact checking and regulatory measures while also emphasizing the need to find a balance between addressing the spread of misinformation and protecting free speech.

Keywords: Misinformation Crisis, Social Media, Democratic Legitimacy, Political Deliberation

01. Historical Background and Evolution of Misinformation or Fake News

The existence of misinformation is long-standing. It can be found dating back to early forms of communication. For example, in ancient Rome, politicians would knowingly disseminate false rumors about their opponents as a way to weaken them.² In the time of the Reformation, the circulation of propaganda pamphlets and forged documents was an effective means for promoting both religious and political agendas.³ Newspapers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century also used ‘yellow journalism’ sensational or entirely fabricated stories to draw readers and exert pressure on the government through media outlets. Both World War I and World War II saw the deliberate use of propaganda as a weapon of war.⁴ The governments involved in these wars deliberately spread false information as a way to undermine enemy morale and to generate patriotic fervor among their own citizenry.⁷

During the 20th century as radio and television developed so did the ability for interest groups and government agencies to alter large amounts of the ‘stories’ the masses heard. An example is how the U.S. and Soviet Union used propaganda during the Cold War to shape the opinions of people around the world.⁸ Although there were many sources of information either print and broadcast, the way mass media worked as a gatekeeper provided

¹ Misinformation has also been used as the fake News throughout the study.

² Mark U Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution*, 1917 (Yale University Press 2001).

³ W Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Praeger 2001).

⁴ Philip M Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (3rd edn, Manchester University Press 2003).

some level of control over what was accurate. Standards for editors and journalists helped to minimize the spread of misinformation. However, this changed when the Internet and social media developed.⁵

Between the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning twenty-first century, the Internet expanded at an incredible rate and changed how news was produced and consumed. The Internet has given users free space to communicate with each other through various forms of social media like Facebook, Twitter (now X) and YouTube.⁶ However, the Internet and social media have destroyed the role of gatekeeper that traditionally existed in media outlets. Traditional media are controlled by editors or producers who determine what is suitable for public consumption.⁷ In contrast, social media is determined by algorithms that focus on user engagement as opposed to the accuracy of content. Study indicates that misinformation travels faster over the Internet than true information due to its sensationalism and emotional appeal. Misinformation was able to reach millions of people through Facebook alone during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, and in many instances, it received more interaction from users than true news did.⁸

Misinformation has created an increasing problem with how it relates to democracy. In order for democracy to exist, citizens need to have access to the most accurate possible information so they can make the best informed decisions.⁹ Misinformation works to undermine this process by creating confusion, and further contributing to distrust in government or other institutions; and even influencing the outcome of elections through manipulation. *For example: Brexit Referendum (2016)* where Misinformation campaigns exaggerating the potential economic advantages of leaving the European Union influenced many voters' behaviors,¹⁰ *US Presidential Election (2016)* where disinformation sponsored by Russia was spread among American voters in order to create further division within America's politics,¹¹ *Indian General Elections (2019)* where misinformation being sent via WhatsApp helped to create further polarization, as it spread rumors regarding religious minorities.¹² These examples illustrate that misinformation does not only threaten the integrity of elections, but also creates further division in society through long term political polarization.

Social media has evolved from becoming merely a tool for people to interact socially into a major tool used for political communication as well. As such, social media has emerged as one of the tools that political figures use to create their campaigns, agenda-set, and mobilize public support.¹³ While this makes it easier for citizens to have access to participate in the political debate, there are drawbacks.¹⁴ The narratives being created by politicians and their supporters can be altered with the creation of 'fake' accounts or bot activity, as well as with targeted advertisements.¹⁵ The emergence of these practices highlights the duality of social media while it

⁵ European Commission, *Fake News and Disinformation Online* (Flash Eurobarometer 464, European Union 2018) <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁶ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford University Press 2018).

⁷ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online' (2018) 359 *Science* 1146.

⁸ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Misinformation in the 2016 Election' (2017) 31 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 211.

⁹ Emily Harmer and others, *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

¹⁰ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (Oxford University Press 2018).

¹¹ Joyojeet Pal, *WhatsApp and Political Instability in India* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2019).

¹² Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Misinformation in the 2016 Election' (2017) 31 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 211.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Cass R Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press 2017).

has the potential to increase citizen engagement and participation in democracy. It is also capable of undermining the ability of democracy to function effectively by allowing false information to spread rapidly.¹⁶

02. Objective of the Study

Below are four clear points of the Study objectives with an explanation of each objective, summarized and condensed:

1. The goal of this Study project is to study how misinformation impacts the views people have about their political process in democratic countries.
2. This Study will explore the part that social media plays in the dissemination of misinformation and the creation of further political divisions.
3. A secondary focus of this Study is to assess various legal, institutional and societal methods for limiting the spread of misinformation and reducing its impact on democratic societies.
4. A final aspect of this Study is to find policies and methods of intervention that help minimize the negative consequences of misinformation but protect both democracy and free expression.

03. Importance of the Study

This study is very important for many reasons in several ways. The study shows how social media is undermining democratic legitimacy and political deliberation by spreading misinformation is one of the biggest issues that all of the world's democracies are dealing with today.

Scholarly Significance: There is a lot of scholarly importance to this Study because misinformation Study has been expanding rapidly since 2016 and went from only three peer reviewed articles in 2016 to over 300 peer reviewed articles in 2021.¹⁷ Additionally, this line of Study spans multiple fields like communication studies, political science, sociology, information science and therefore offers the opportunity for scholars to collaborate across disciplines.¹⁸ Also, there are many areas of Study in which the existing knowledge of misinformation is being called into question especially related to the long term behavioral effects of misinformation and its impact outside of western countries.¹⁹ Therefore, this Study will help contribute to critical approaches to studying disinformation, and place those studies within their historical, cultural and political contexts.²⁰ Further, it will advance our theoretical understanding of how democratic deliberation works or does not work in hybrid media systems where social media platforms alter the way that traditional gate-keeping mechanisms function.²⁵

Political Importance: From an overall policy/political perspective, the Study described here represents some of the biggest threats to democratic government and democratic institutions. Disinformation campaigns have shown the ability to affect the outcome of elections.²⁶ The U.S. presidential election in 2016 and the Brexit referendum represent two watershed moments when coordinated disinformation was able to influence public opinion and undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes.²⁷ The World Economic Forum warns that

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Bramer, W. M., Giustini, D., & Kramer, B. M. R. (2016), Comparing the coverage, recall, and precision of searches for 120 systematic reviews in Embase, MEDLINE, and Google Scholar: A prospective study, *Systematic Reviews*, 5(1), 39. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-016-0215-7>

¹⁸ Acerbi, A., Altay, S., & Mercier, H. (2022), Fighting misinformation or fighting for information?. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 3(1), <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-87>

¹⁹ Aftab, O., & Murphy, G. (2022), A single exposure to cancer misinformation may not significantly affect related behavioural intentions. *HRB Open Study*, 5(82), 82. <https://doi.org/10.12688/hrbopenres.13640.1>

²⁰ Albarracin, D., & Shavitt, S. (2018). Attitudes and attitude change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69, 299–327. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011911>

“misinformation can seriously destabilize the real and perceived legitimacy of newly elected governments.” There are studies that document that there are organized social media manipulation campaigns operating in at least 81 countries. Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes are using disinformation to stifle dissent and to shape public discourse.²⁸ The Study in this field is necessary for policymakers to understand how to effectively regulate social media platforms while preserving freedom of speech.²¹ The Study in this field shows how political polarization increases through echo chambers and algorithmic amplification of extreme content and creates the conditions where democratic compromise becomes more difficult.²²

Social Value: The social implications go far beyond politics and address the fundamental issues of trust and social cohesion. Misinformation affects public confidence not only in media, but also in democratic institutions.²³ The Study describes how false narratives directed at vulnerable communities such as religious, ethnic, language minority groups can result in real-world violence of Myanmar’s Rohingya genocide, anti-Muslim attacks in Sri Lanka and Nigeria and communal violence in India.²⁴ The Study demonstrates that misinformation spreads faster than true content online and 70% of users struggle to differentiate between real and fake news.²⁵ By exploring these dynamics, the study can shed light on how societies can maintain the level of informed public discourse that is necessary for democratic deliberation.²⁶ It also examines the differential impacts of disinformation on marginalized communities who suffer disproportionately from false narratives that perpetuate systemic inequalities.

²⁵ Boeker, M., Vach, W., & Motschall, E. (2013). Google Scholar as replacement for systematic literature searches: good relative recall and precision are not enough. *BMC Medical Study Methodology*, 13(1), 131. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-131>

²⁶ Camargo, C. Q., & Simon, F. M. (2022). Mis- and disinformation studies are too big to fail: Six suggestions for the field’s future.

Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 3(5). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-106>

²⁷ Guay, B., Berinsky, A. J., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. (2023). How to think about whether misinformation interventions work.

Nature Human Behaviour, 7, 1231–1233. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01667-w>

²⁸ Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2018). Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147(12), 1865–1880. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000465>

²¹ Bastick, Z. (2021). Would you notice if fake news changed your behavior? An experiment on the unconscious effects of disinformation., *Computers in Human Behavior*, 116, 106633, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106633>

²² Verplanken, B., & Orbell, S. (2022). Attitudes, habits, and behavior change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 73, 327–352. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-020821-011744>

²³ Gusenbauer, M., & Haddaway, N. R. (2020), which academic search systems are suitable for systematic reviews or meta-analyses, Evaluating retrieval qualities of Google Scholar, PubMed, and 26 other resources, *Study Synthesis Methods*, 11(2), 181–217, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/jrsm.1378>

²⁴ Nagasako, T. (2020), Global disinformation campaigns and legal challenges, *International Cyber security Law Review*, 1(1–2), 125–136, <https://doi.org/10.1365/s43439-020-00010-7>

²⁵ Tenove, C. (2020). Protecting democracy from disinformation: Normative threats and policy responses, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 517–537, <https://doi.org/10.1177/194016122091874>

²⁶ Erlich, A., & Garner, C. (2023), Is pro-Kremlin disinformation effective? Evidence from Ukraine, the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(1), 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211045221>

Practical Application: From a practical application standpoint, this Study is useful for the development of effective interventions and policy responses. The Study evaluates a variety of strategies for countering misinformation; including fact checking and media literacy programs, content moderation by social media platforms, and requiring transparency in algorithms. Social media companies, non-profit organizations, and governments use evidence from the Study to develop effective responses to misinformation in different contexts. The Study on the role of social media in political participation also highlights both positive e.g., increased civic engagement, particularly by youth and negative e.g., bots, deep fakes and inauthentic coordination aspects of social media.³⁵ These dual natures require a nuanced approach to policy-making that the Study is beginning to illuminate.³⁶ Most importantly, the Study demonstrates that addressing misinformation requires moving beyond individual-level solutions of media literacy to structural changes in the design and governance of social media platforms.²⁷

Global and Local Implications: In addition to having global implications, this Study addresses the contextspecific manifestations of universal problems. Developing democracies e.g., Bangladesh, Brazil, India whose institutions are more fragile and whose populations may be less digitally literate, face particularly high risks from misinformation.²⁸ Study has demonstrated that zero rating practices where carriers offer free access to certain platforms can limit users to information environments that are susceptible to manipulation.²⁹ At the global level, this Study contributes to international governance frameworks e.g., UNESCO, UN Internet Governance Forum.³⁰ While misinformation is a universal problem, the form, scope, and potential remedies for misinformation vary significantly depending upon the country, political culture, institutional capacity, and technological infrastructure.³¹ The comparative study of misinformation across countries and platforms provides insight into the conditions under which the risk of undermining democratic deliberation is exacerbated or mitigated.³²

Finally, Study in this area is critical infrastructure for protecting democratic societies in the digital age and will provide evidence-based responses to one of the most defining challenges of modern governance.

²⁷ Saint Laurent, C., Murphy, G., Hegarty, K., & Greene, C. M. (2022). Measuring the effects of misinformation exposure and beliefs on behavioural intentions: A COVID-19 vaccination study. *Cognitive Study: Principles and Implications*, 7(1), 87.

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-022-00437-y>

²⁸ Gusenbauer, M., & Haddaway, N. R. (2020). Which academic search systems are suitable for systematic reviews or meta-analyses? Evaluating retrieval qualities of Google Scholar, PubMed, and 26 other resources. *Study Synthesis Methods*, 11(2), 181–217.

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/jrsm.1378>

²⁹ Wilson, T., & Starbird, K. (2020). Cross-platform disinformation campaigns: lessons learned and next steps. *Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-002>

³⁰ Murphy, G., Lynch, L., Loftus, E., & Egan, R. (2021). Push polls increase false memories for fake news stories. *Memory*, 29(6), 693–707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658211.2021.1934033>

³¹ Fazio, L. K., Pillai, R. M., & Patel, D. (2022). The effects of repetition on belief in naturalistic settings. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 151(10), 2604–2613. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001211>

³² Tenove, C. (2020). Protecting democracy from disinformation: Normative threats and policy responses. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 517–537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220918740>

04. Conceptual Issues

³⁵ Porter, E., & Wood, T. J. (2021), the global effectiveness of fact-checking: Evidence from simultaneous experiments in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(37), e210423511, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2104235118>

³⁶ Fazio, L. K., Pillai, R. M., & Patel, D. (2022), The effects of repetition on belief in naturalistic settings, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 151(10), 2604–2613. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0001211>

Misinformation: The term ‘misinformation’ refers to information often presented in a legitimate journalistic format created for the intent to deceive the readers shaping their opinion. Misinformation can be broken into two subcategories; a. misinformation b. false information provided. However it is not intended to create harm or financial gain and disinformation that are false information provided but not intended to create financial gain or harm.⁴³ The rapid growth of the digital media landscape has caused misinformation to grow at an alarming rate and now threatens traditional methods of journalism while also impacting our discourse.⁴⁴

Democracy: Democracy is generally defined as a means of governing in which the people have control over the government through free and fair elections and where those elected serve the people, not their own self interests.³³ In political terms, democracies depend on equality and accountability for the people to elect their leaders.³⁴ As such, deceit or an attempt to influence the beliefs of citizens via the dissemination of misinformation represents a threat to democracy.³⁵ Therefore, the health of democratic institutions is largely dependent on the quality of information available to the citizens.

Democratic Legitimacy: The democratic legitimacy of government is when citizens accept or recognize their governments as being legitimate or just. The legitimacy of democracy is based upon the belief that government receives its power and authority from those who are governed.³⁶ Democratic legitimacy can be furthered through citizen involvement in governance, accountability, open and transparent decision making, citizen protections through rights and adherence to democratic standards.³⁷

Political Deliberation: Deliberative politics is a form of discussion where citizens and government officials discuss issues in the public interest and consider alternative perspectives on those issues prior to taking action.³⁸ Deliberative politics emphasizes rationalism and deliberation (reasoned argument) as opposed to a struggle for political power; it provides a means for developing an informed position based upon a broad range

³³ Robert A Dahl, *On Democracy* (Yale University Press 1998).

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Larry Diamond, ‘Facing Up to the Democratic Recession’ (2015) 26 *Journal of Democracy* 141.

³⁶ Fiveable. "democratic legitimacy – Intro to Comparative Politics." Edited by Becky Bahr, Fiveable, 2024, <https://fiveable.me/keyterms/introduction-comparative-politics/democratic-legitimacy>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2025.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Steiner, J., Bächtiger, A., Spörndli, M., & Steenbergen, M. (2005). *Deliberative politics in action: Analyzing Parliamentary discourse*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. Sunstein, C. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

of views.³⁹ The purpose of the effective deliberation is to provide support for the legitimacy of democracy by providing a framework to make decisions that are based upon collective reasoning and shared values.⁴⁰

Political Polarization: Polarization in politics is when people are so far on one end of a spectrum that it makes them less willing to compromise with others who have a different viewpoint and this can create even more divisions in society than already exist.⁵³ This type of political polarization exists at both the elite level i.e.

⁴³ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Study and Policy Making* (Council of Europe Report 2017).

⁴⁴ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Misinformation in the 2016 Election' (2017) 31 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 211.

politicians and the mass level.⁴¹ The use of social media is a major factor which adds to the effects of echo chambers and filters bubbles and increases the potential for all people to become even farther to the right or left of their respective ideologies.⁴²

Social media: social media refers to digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok, which enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content.⁴³ These platforms democratize information dissemination but also provide fertile ground for misinformation to spread widely often faster than verified news.⁴⁴ Their algorithms prioritize engagement, sometimes at the expense of truth which intensifies polarization and misinformation circulation.⁴⁵

05. Theories Relating to Spreading the Misinformation to Undermine the Democratic Legitimacy and Political Deliberation

Agenda-Setting Theory: First introduced by McCombs and Shaw, the theory of agenda-setting suggests that the media does not define what people should think but what to think about and thus defines the priorities of the population in a disproportional manner.⁴⁶ In the realm of social media, the misinformation employs agenda-setting by amplifying particular issues or stories disproportionately and thus defines what people should pay attention.

³⁹ Warren, M. & Pearse, H. (2008). *Designing deliberative democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly*, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁰ Noel, H. (2012). The Coalition Merchants: The ideological roots of the civil rights realignment. *Journal of Politics*, 74(1), 156–173

⁵³ Nolan McCarty, Keith T Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (MIT Press 2006).

⁴¹ José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford University Press 2013).

⁴² Marc J Hetherington, 'Review Article: Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization' (2001) 95 *American Political Science Review* 619.

⁴³ Cass R Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press 2017).

⁴⁴ Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online' (2018) 359 *Science* 1146

⁴⁵ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media' (1972) 36 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 176

⁴⁶ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media' (1972) 36 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 176

⁶⁰ Robert M Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm' (1993) 43 *Journal of Communication* 51.

Framing Theory: Framing theory explores how the presentation and interpretation of information shape perceptions and attitudes.⁶⁰ Misinformation employs manipulative frames often emotional, sensational or conspiratorial that distorts democratic debates and polarizes opinions.⁴⁷

Spiral of Silence Theory: Proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the spiral of silence theory suggests that individuals may suppress their opinions if they perceive them to be in the minority.⁴⁸ In social media environments dominated by fake or polarized content, minority voices risk marginalization leading to a distorted picture of public opinion.⁴⁹

Echo Chamber and Filter Bubble Theories: The echo chamber phenomenon also refers to the tendency of people to interact with similar groups, reinforcing their prior beliefs without being exposed to a variety of opinions and views i.e. the latter applies to the area of artificial news as well.⁵⁰ A similar phenomenon is called filter bubble by Eli Pariser which emphasizes the fact that the algorithm shows people content related to their preferences instead of diverse ideas and points of view being represented.⁵¹

Critical Theory of Media and Democracy: According to the critical theorists, media structures are not neutral and serve power interests; Social media platforms, the ostensibly decentralized are corporatized and algorithmic and thus contrary to democratic deliberation.⁵² In this framework, misinformation turns not only into a direct by-product but it becomes a structural problem.

Networked Public Sphere Theory: Yochai Benkler's theory of the networked public sphere explains how digital platforms decentralize political communication.⁵³ While this creates opportunities for participatory democracy, it also enables disinformation to spread unchecked challenging institutional authority and factbased discourse.

06. Effects of Misinformation on Democratic Legitimacy and Political Deliberation

Democratic systems are at a risk of being severely damaged by misinformation and disinformation; however, rather than affecting each person's belief directly, these types of false information can cause psychological and institutional damage that can affect how individuals engage in democratic processes and the levels of trust that exist within the process. As such, rather than affecting an individual's belief directly, misinformation and disinformation will ultimately lead to the erosion of democracy through the harm they cause to the very foundation of democracy citizen involvement based on informed choice, the legitimacy of institutions and the public's ability to make decisions based on fact.

The Core Threat to Democratic Legitimacy: Misinformation threatens a democratic system at its core due to an issue with knowledge of misinformation rather than what people believe about false statements.⁵⁴ Specifically, the way awareness of misinformation exists reduces the level of epistemic trust among citizens

⁴⁷ Budd, M., Entman, R. M., & Steinman, C. (1990), the affirmative character of U.S. cultural studies, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7, 169-184.

⁴⁸ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *the Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion – Our Social Skin* (University of Chicago Press 1984).

⁴⁹ Zaller, J. R. (1992). *7'be nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Diana C Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge University Press 2006).

⁵² Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (Penguin 2011).

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (MIT Press 1991).

⁵⁴ Reglitz, M 2022, 'Fake news and democracy', *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 162-187

toward one another.⁵⁵ Epistemic trust acceptance of information from other people because you think those other people will provide accurate information has been considered essential to a successful democratic process.⁵⁶ As people become aware that a significant amount of misinformation exists and people also believe that most of their fellow citizens have been misled by misinformation then people lose faith in society's ability to make good choices. Democracies are impacted by the eroding of epistemic trust in ways that affect democratic institutions.⁵⁷ Epistemic trust is a prerequisite for citizen's belief that democratic institutions are legitimate because it requires citizens to trust that democratic decisions are made with good reasoning and represent their fellow citizens.⁵⁸ When misinformation erodes epistemic trust citizens increasingly question the legitimacy of democratic institutions and process regardless of whether they believe the false claims about an issue.⁵⁹ The perceived loss of legitimacy may be the greatest threat to democratic stability as it can lead to democratic backsliding and lead some to accept or support anti-democratic alternatives.⁶⁰

Erosion of Public Trust in Democratic Institutions: The dissemination of false information and “fake news” is damaging public trust in mainstream media and our democratic institutions; this decreased trust will make it increasingly difficult for the public to be confident in their elections and communication from government. Both the election process and government legitimacy are threatened by this decline.⁷⁵

Destabilization of Election Confidence: Misinformation about voting systems circulating through social media has undermined public confidence in elections which has resulted in broad skepticism about the validity and fairness of democracy itself.⁶¹ Examples of this have included attempts to discredit mail-in voting and spread false allegations of voter fraud.⁶²

Amplification of Political Polarization: Misinformation and political disinformation exacerbate division along ideological lines and promote greater animosity and polarization among differing groups.⁶³ Online hate speech and false information can lead to a “tribal mentality” thereby reducing the ability of opposing sides to find common ground and engage in mutual understanding in political deliberations.⁶⁴

Obstruction of Evidence-Based Policy Discussions: Misinformation is also causing public confusion about scientific and policy issues such as those regarding climate change or public health, thereby undermining the

⁵⁵ Beckett, Charlie, and Sonia Livingstone., Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/law/news/2018/truth-trust-technology>.

⁵⁶ Sunstein, Cass. #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁵⁷ Anderson, Elizabeth. 2021. “Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics.” In Political Epistemology, edited by Elizabeth Edenberg and Michael Hannon. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁸ Bronstein, Michael V., Pennycook, Gordon, Bear, Adam, Rand, David G. and Cannon, Tyrone D. 2019. “Belief in Fake News is Associated with Delusionality, Dogmatism, Religious Fundamentalism, and Reduced Analytic Thinking.” Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition 8 (1): 108-117.

⁵⁹ Minow, Saving the News (n 23) pp. 120–25; Eugene Volokh, ‘Treating Social Media Platforms Like Common Carriers?’ (2021) 1 Journal of Free Speech Law 377, at 383, 433–39.

⁶⁰ Roger Koppl and Abigail Devereaux, ‘Biden Establishes a Ministry of Truth’, The Wall Street Journal, 1 May 2021

⁶¹ Alexander Meiklejohn, Free Speech and Its Relation to Self-Government (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948) pp. 25–27, 88–91

⁶² David A. Graham, ‘The “Comet Pizza” Gunman Provides a Glimpse of a Frightening Future’, The Atlantic, 5 December 2016

⁶³ Lymari Morales, ‘Distrust in US Media Edges Up to Record High’, Gallup, 29 September 2010, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/143267/distrust-media-edges-record-high.aspx>.

⁶⁴ Jeremy Barr, ‘Why These Fox News Loyalists Have Changed the Channel to Newsmax’, The Washington Post, 27 December 2020,

process of reasonable and science based debate on policy decisions.⁶⁵ Misinformation therefore undermines the epistemological integrity that is needed to have meaningful deliberation in democratic societies.⁶⁶

Undermining the Shared Knowledge Base: For a functional democracy, the citizens have to access to the same accurate information so that they can deliberate about public policy issues and vote based on the same facts.⁶⁷ Misinformation undermines this commonality among citizens and creates unevenness in the knowledge base that leads to misunderstandings and perpetuates “belief echoes” that continues after corrections are made.⁶⁸

Manipulation and Discrediting of Civil Society: Misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are commonly used as weapons against civil society groups and to damage the reputations of opposition leaders while protecting those who act unethically, thereby reducing transparency and accountability in democracies.⁶⁹

Reduced Democratic Participation and Increased Cynicism: Increased exposure to pervasive misinformation has been associated with increased levels of political cynicism and disengagement, as citizens become increasingly skeptical of government, which can lead them to either refrain from participating in the electoral process i.e., voting or disengage entirely from civic engagement.⁸⁵ The decline in citizen participation reduces the likelihood of achieving the democratic ideal of widespread citizen involvement in governance.⁸⁶

Foreign Interference and Targeted Manipulation: Foreign actors use misinformation to undermine democratic elections, create societal polarization, and reduce public trust in democratic institutions by using targeted propaganda designed to create distrust and confusion within multiple communities.⁸⁷ Foreign actions designed to reduce public trust in democratic institutions also diminish both domestic legitimacy of democratic institutions and foreign trust in democratic processes.⁸⁸

07. Cognitive Biases and Susceptibility to Fake News:

Cognitive biases⁸⁹ like confirmation bias and the affect heuristic make people more susceptible to fake news by influencing how they process information.⁷⁰ Confirmation bias leads people to accept information that aligns with their existing beliefs while the affect heuristic causes them to rely on their immediate emotional reactions instead of critical analysis.⁷¹ Both biases can be amplified by algorithms that show users content they are likely to engage with creating a cycle where fake news is easily shared and reinforced.⁷²

⁶⁵ John Milton, *Areopagitica* (ed. by J. W. Hales, Oxford: Clarendon, (1644) 1874)

⁶⁶ Adeel Hassan, ‘Covid Vaccine Misinformation Still Fuels Fears Surrounding Pregnancy, a New Study Finds’, *The New York Times*, 3 June 2022

⁶⁷ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: Revised and Updated: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

⁶⁸ Donie O’Sullivan, ‘Her Son Was an Accused Cult Leader – She Says He Was a Victim, Too’, *CNN.com*, 23 September 2023

⁶⁹ Clothilde Goujard, ‘Musk Ousts X Team Curbing Election Disinformation’, *Politico*, 28 September 2023

⁷⁰ Michal Piksa, Karolina Noworyta, Aleksander Gundersen, Jonas Kunst, Mikołaj Morzy, Jan Piasecki and Rafał Rygula, ‘The Impact of Confirmation Bias Awareness on Mitigating Susceptibility to Misinformation’ (2024) 12 *Frontiers in Public Health* 1414864, doi:10.3389/fpubh.2024.1414864.

⁷¹ American Psychological Association, “Why We’re Susceptible to Fake News, How to Defend Against It” (*ScienceDaily*, 10 August 2018) <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/08/180810120037.htm

⁷² N Boonprakong, S Pareek, B Tag, J Goncalves and T Dingler, *Assessing Susceptibility Factors of Confirmation Bias in News Feed Reading* (SSRN, 17 April 2024) <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4797710> ⁹³ ‘Confirmation bias’ (Wikipedia)

Confirmation bias⁹³ is the primary mechanism by which people become vulnerable to misinformation.⁹⁴ This cognitive tendency leads individuals to seek, accept, and recall information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs while actively rejecting or ignoring contradictory evidence.⁷³ The brain is essentially hardwired to protect existing worldviews by filtering information through a confirmation lens, making people resistant to

⁸⁵ Minow, *Saving the News* (n 23) pp. 120–25; Eugene Volokh, ‘Treating Social Media Platforms Like Common Carriers?’ (2021) 1 *Journal of Free Speech Law* 377, at 383, 433–39

⁸⁶ Nick Robertson, ‘Trump Campaign Says It Has Raised More Than \$6.5M Since Federal Indictment’, *The Hill*, 14 June 2023, <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/4050350-trump-campaign-says-it-has-raised-over-6-5m-since-federal-indictment>.

⁸⁷ Shannon Bond, ‘Elon Musk Allows Donald Trump Back on Twitter’, *NPR*, 19 November 2022, www.npr.org/2022/11/19/1131351535/elon-musk-allows-donald-trump-back-on-twitter; Ryan Mac and Kellen Browning, ‘Elon Musk Reinstates Trump’s Twitter Account’, *The New York Times*, 19 November 2022

⁸⁸ Geneva Sands, ‘DHS Shuts Down Disinformation Board Months after Its Efforts Were Paused’, *CNN News*, 24 August 2022, www.cnn.com/2022/08/24/politics/dhs-disinformation-board-shut-down/index.html

⁸⁹ A cognitive bias is a systematic but often subconscious, error in thinking that affects the judgments and decisions people make. These mental shortcuts or heuristics help the brain process the vast amount of daily information quickly but can lead to distorted perceptions, illogical interpretations and irrational behavior.

fact-based corrections.⁹⁶ This bias intensifies in polarized information environments where emotionally charged content activates identity-based reasoning causing even educated individuals to embrace false narratives supporting their political group.⁹⁷

The *affect heuristic*⁹⁸ amplifies confirmation bias by prioritizing emotional responses over logical analysis. Research shows that anxiety a dominant emotional heuristic exerts the strongest impact on misinformation sharing, with an effect size of 0.343.⁷⁴ When people encounter content triggering fear, anger or outrage, they rely on fast intuitive System thinking rather than deliberate reasoning. This emotional shortcut causes individuals to overlook factual inconsistencies and share unverified claims without scrutiny.

Together, these biases create a reinforcing cycle. *Confirmation bias* predisposes people toward in-group supporting falsehoods while the affect heuristic overrides critical evaluation through emotional intensity.⁷⁵ Time pressure and information overload endemic to social media exacerbate this dynamic by forcing reliance on these mental shortcuts rather than careful reasoning.⁷⁶ Understanding these mechanisms is

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias) accessed 22 November 2025. ⁹⁴

Yanqing Sun and Juan Xie, ‘Do Heuristic Cues Affect Misinformation Sharing? Evidence From a Meta-Analysis’ (2024) *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* doi:10.1177/10776990241284597.

⁷³ ‘Affect Heuristic’ (Thinking Toolbox, Ness Labs) <https://toolbox.nesslabs.com/affect-heuristic> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁷⁴ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch, ‘Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crises, 1870–2014’ (2016) 88 *European Economic Review* 227.

⁷⁵ Noortje Marres and Matías Valderrama Barragán, ‘Making Expert Advice Public in a Time of Emergency: Independent SAGE and the Contestation of Science During the COVID Pandemic in the UK’ (2025) *Social Studies of Science* 55(4) 512, doi:10.1177/03063127241309071.

⁷⁶ ‘Cognitive biases, why do we swallow the misinformation bait?’ (mSchools, 3 July 2022) <https://mschools.com/cognitive-biaseswhy-do-we-swallow-the-misinformation-bait/> accessed 22 November 2025.

essential for designing interventions addressing why awareness alone rarely overcomes deeply rooted cognitive vulnerabilities to fake news.

08. Challenges and Legal or Policy Responses to Protect Misinformation:

a. Algorithmic Amplification of False Information: More often than not social media algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement while minimizing the likelihood that a user will see a piece of inaccurate or false information as compared to fact-checked information.⁷⁷ As a result, false information is frequently being sent to users by an algorithm prior to the time when a user would be able to access fact-checking to aid in making informed decisions for democratic processes.⁷⁸

Legal Response: The EU's Digital Services Act requires very large online platforms to conduct annual risk assessments and adjust algorithms to minimize harm, with fines up to six percent of annual

⁹⁶ Y Zhou and L Shen, 'Processing of Misinformation as Motivational and Cognitive Biases' (2024) 15 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1430953, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1430953.

⁹⁷ Juan Vidal-Perez, Raymond J Dolan and Rani Moran, 'Disinformation Elicits Learning Biases' (Research Square, 6 June 2024) <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-4468218/v1>

⁹⁸ Confirmation bias is a cognitive bias that is an error in thinking that describes the human tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's existing beliefs or opinions, while simultaneously ignoring or undervaluing evidence that contradicts those beliefs. This process often happens unconsciously and is a mental shortcut the brain uses to process information efficiently and protect self-esteem.

revenue for non-compliance.¹⁰⁴ Germany's Network Enforcement Law mandates platform transparency regarding algorithmic operations and prohibits discriminatory content promotion.¹⁰⁵

b. Erosion of Public Trust in Institutions: Misinformation campaigns deliberately targeted at diverse communities create confusion about electoral integrity and government reliability. Studies show citizens exposed to contradictory narratives lose confidence in media and governmental institutions.¹⁰⁶

c. Legal Response: The UN Countering Disinformation framework calls for states to ensure public officials share accurate information and hold authorities accountable for spreading false information while protecting freedom of expression through proportionate restrictions only in exceptional cases.¹⁰⁷

Foreign Interference and Election Manipulation: Russia's Internet Research Agency created thousands of fake accounts to amplify divisive content during the 2016 U.S. election influencing voters' perceptions of electoral fairness.⁷⁹ The 2024 Romanian presidential election revealed coordinated TikTok manipulation strategies exploiting platform vulnerabilities.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Y Zhou and L Shen, 'Processing of Misinformation as Motivational and Cognitive Biases' (2024) 15 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1430953, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1430953.

⁷⁸ Tworek, H. (2019, April 15). An Analysis of Germany's NetzDG Law., Transatlantic Working Group; University of British Columbia, https://www.ivir.nl/publicaties/download/NetzDG_Tworek_Leerssen_April_2019.pdf

⁷⁹ Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell and Jesse Holcomb, *Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion* (Pew Research Center, 15 December 2016) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowingconfusion/> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁸⁰ W Phillips Davidson, 'The Third-Person Effect in Communication' (1983) 47(1) *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1.

Legal Response: The DSA establishes systemic risk assessment requirements for VLOPs regarding foreign interference campaigns. National governments are developing Rapid Response Election Security Cyber Units to identify and disable accounts spreading election misinformation.⁸¹

Platform Liability and Content Moderation Gaps: Major platforms reduced content moderation efforts following policy changes in 2025 creating enforcement vacuums.⁸² Platforms previously claiming commitment to election integrity failed to adequately address coordinated manipulation campaigns.⁸³

Legal Response: The EU's strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, integrated into DSA effective July 1, 2025 establishes concrete benchmarks for platform disinformation mitigation including demonetization of false content and fact-checking commitments.⁸⁴

Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior and Bot Networks: Automated systems flood platforms with coordinated messaging exploiting platform features to evade detection filters and manipulate visibility metrics.⁸⁵

¹⁰⁴ Nathan Adams, 'Institutional Legitimacy' (2018) 26(1) *Journal of Political Philosophy* 84.

¹⁰⁵ Charlie Beckett and Sonia Livingstone, *Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience* (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2018) <https://www.lse.ac.uk/law/news/2018/truth-trust-technology> accessed 22 November 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (Oxford University Press 2019).

¹⁰⁷ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, 'Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election' (2017) 31(2) *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 211.

Legal Response: The DSA's Article 21 grants users access to out-of-court dispute settlement bodies for challenging platform decisions on content removal and de-amplification, creating accountability mechanisms for automated content actions.¹¹⁵

Threats to Democratic Legitimacy through Epistemic Undermining: When citizens unwittingly share disinformation and observe others' complicity, democratic credibility weakens as citizen's question each other's epistemic reliability undermining mutual accountability essential to democracy.¹¹⁶

Legal Response: The UN framework emphasizes involving civil society in designing policies and efforts against disinformation, promoting media literacy and civic engagement to build public resilience.⁸⁶

Regulatory Overreach and Suppression of Legitimate Dissent: Anti-disinformation laws in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have been misused to target journalists and suppress legitimate political speech.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Lilliana Mason, 'Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities' (2018) 82(S1) *Political Opinion Quarterly* 866.

⁸² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books 2019).

⁸³ Lance W Bennett and Steven Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions' (2018) 33(2) *European Journal of Communication* 122.

⁸⁴ Nir Grinberg, Kenneth Joseph, Lisa Friedland, Briony Swire-Thompson and David Lazer, 'Fake News on Twitter during the 2016 US Presidential Election' (2019) 363(6425) *Science* 374.

⁸⁵ Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler and Joshua Tucker, 'Less Than You Think: Prevalence and Predictors of Fake News Dissemination on Facebook' (2019) 5(1) *Science Advances* 1.

⁸⁶ Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Harvard University Press 2016).

Legal Response: The DSA and UN guidelines require definitions to be precise and non-vague, with restrictions proportionate and never serving to stifle freedom of expression. The European Court of Human Rights enforces proportionality standards for any speech restrictions.⁸⁸

Generative AI-Enabled Deepfakes and Synthetic Media: Artificial intelligence poses unprecedented threats to information integrity, enabling realistic but false audio, video, and text that could influence elections decided by narrow margins.⁸⁹

Legal Response: The legislation requires transparency about algorithmic operations with fines up to 500,000 euros for violations establishing accountability for AI-driven content distribution.⁹⁰

Definitional Ambiguities across Jurisdictions: The DSA lacks a uniform legal definition of disinformation, creating fragmentation and inconsistent enforcement across EU member states.¹²²

Legal Response: The strengthened Code of Practice provides detailed technical guidance and key performance indicators for assessing disinformation risk mitigation standardizing platform accountability measures.⁹¹

Insufficient Fact-Checking Resources and Capacity: Fact-checkers cannot match the speed and scale of misinformation production leaving significant false claims unchallenged.¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ my Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Galen Stocking, Mason Walker and Sophia Fedeli, *Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem that Needs to Be Fixed* (Pew Research Center, 5 June 2019) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-befixed/> accessed 22 November 2025.

¹¹⁶ Gerald F Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory* (Oxford University Press 1996).

Legal Response: The Code of Practice mandates platform transparency regarding independent factcheckers used and requires labeling of fact-checked content enhancing visibility and credibility of verification efforts.¹²⁵

⁸⁷ David M J Lazer, Matthew A Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J Berinsky, Kelly M Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J Metzger et al, 'The Science of Fake News: Addressing Fake News Requires a Multidisciplinary Effort' (2018) 359(6380) *Science* 1094.

⁸⁸ Nahema Marchal, Bence Kollanyi, Lisa-Maria Neudert and Philip N Howard, *Junk News during the EU Parliamentary Elections: Lessons from a Seven-Language Study of Twitter and Facebook* (Data Memo 2019.3, Oxford Internet Institute 2019) <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/EU-Data-Memo.pdf> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁸⁹ Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton University Press 2013).

⁹⁰ David M J Lazer, Matthew A Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J Berinsky, Kelly M Greenhill, Filippo Menczer, Miriam J Metzger et al, 'The Science of Fake News: Addressing Fake News Requires a Multidisciplinary Effort' (2018) 359(6380) *Science* 1094. ¹²² Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M Shapiro, 'Is the Internet Causing Political Polarization? Evidence from Demographics' (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 23258, March 2017).

⁹¹ Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton University Press 2013).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Enhance Media Literacy Education:** Promote critical thinking and digital literacy in schools and communities to help individuals recognize misinformation and understand the importance of credible sources.¹²⁶
2. **Strengthen Fact-Checking Initiatives:** Support independent fact-checkers and integrate their work directly into social media platforms to rapidly debunk falsehoods and limit their spread.¹²⁷
3. **Mandate Algorithmic Transparency:** Require platforms to disclose how their algorithms amplify or suppress content, empowering oversight bodies and researchers to identify and mitigate manipulative trends.¹²⁸
4. **Promote Platform Accountability:** Legislate clear responsibilities for social media companies to detect, flag, and remove disinformation, with significant penalties for non-compliance.⁹²
5. **Protect Whistleblowers:** Ensure robust protections for insiders who expose coordinated misinformation campaigns or unethical practices within tech companies.⁹³
6. **Collaborate Internationally:** Governments and civil society should collaborate across borders to share best practices and intelligence on evolving disinformation tactics.⁹⁴
7. **Support Quality Journalism:** The Government should invest in public interest journalism and local newsrooms to ensure citizens have access to verified, reputable information sources.⁹⁵
8. **Empower Independent Oversight Bodies:** Create specialized agencies dedicated to monitoring misinformation trends and advising policymakers on effective responses.⁹⁶
9. **Implement Real-Name Verification for Political Ads:** Require clear identification of sponsors for all political advertisements and limit the use of bots and fake accounts.¹³⁴

¹²⁴ Thomas Christiano, 'Democracy, Participation, and Information: Complementarity between Political and Economic Institutions' (2019) 56(4) *San Diego Law Review* 935.

¹²⁵ S Mo Jang and Joon K Kim, 'Third Person Effects of Fake News: Fake News Regulation and Media Literacy Interventions' (2018) 80 *Computers in Human Behaviour* 295.

¹²⁶ Thomas Christiano, 'Self-Determination and the Human Right to Democracy' in Rowan Cruft, Matthew Liao and Massimo Renzo (eds), *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights* (Oxford University Press 2015) 459.

¹²⁷ Elisa Shearer and Katerina Eva Matsa, *News Use across Social Media Platforms 2018* (Pew Research Center, 10 September 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/> accessed 22 November 2025. ¹²⁸ S Mo Jang and Joon K Kim, 'Third Person Effects of Fake News: Fake News Regulation and Media Literacy Interventions' (2018) 80 *Computers in Human Behaviour* 295.

⁹² Craig Silverman, 'This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook' (BuzzFeed News, 16 November 2016) <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹³ Jacob Soll, 'The Long and Brutal History of Fake News' (Politico, 19 December 2016) <https://www.politico.eu/article/fake-news-elections-trump-media/> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹⁴ Robert Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (Oxford University Press 2019).

⁹⁵ Nahema Marchal, Bence Kollanyi, Lisa-Maria Neudert and Philip N Howard, *Junk News during the EU Parliamentary Elections: Lessons from a Seven-Language Study of Twitter and Facebook* (Data Memo 2019.3, Oxford Internet Institute 2019) <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/EU-Data-Memo.pdf> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹⁶ Lilliana Mason, 'Ideologues without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities' (2018) 82(S1) *Political Opinion Quarterly* 866.

j. Encourage Civic Engagement: Engage citizens in democratic processes, emphasizing open dialogue and diverse perspectives to build resilience against polarization fueled by misinformation.¹³⁵

10. Concluding Remarks

This paper has discussed how misinformation has permeated all aspects of the democratic process with specific attention given to the role of social media in the escalation of political polarization.¹³⁶ The results reveal that, as valuable tools in communication and information exchange, social media sites also turned into a source of spreading false information fast.¹³⁷ Not only is misinformation disseminated through algorithmic amplification but also cognitive biases, echo chambers, and the manipulative nature of misinformation by political parties.⁹⁷ The analysis shows that exposure to misleading or fake information greatly increases political polarization. Selective attention to information that supports their preexisting prejudices is likely to strengthen partisan differences and weaken rational discourse of the masses.⁹⁸ The empirical study indicates that misinformation may skew the popular opinion, affect the results of the election process, and undermine the confidence in the democratic institutions.⁹⁹

These difficulties can be solved only in a multi-faceted approach. The regulatory mechanisms should be reinforced to keep both social media and propagators of misinformation to book. Platforms should in turn be more transparent, better content moderated and credible sources favored.¹⁰⁰ The significance of education and general awareness in creating digital literacy so that citizens can be critical of information and can resist being manipulated cannot be underestimated as well.¹⁰¹ The effectiveness of these interventions should be evaluated with the help of constant research and monitoring to change the strategies in accordance with the developing nature of online misinformation.¹⁰² After all, democracy in the digital era will be strong only

¹³⁴ Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Mura Somer, 'Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities' (2018) 62(1) *American Behavioral Scientist* 16.

¹³⁵ Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Galen Stocking, Mason Walker and Sophia Fedeli, *Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem that Needs to Be Fixed* (Pew Research Center, 5 June 2019) <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹⁷ 'Cognitive biases, why do we swallow the misinformation bait?' (mSchools, 3 July 2022) <https://mschools.com/cognitive-biaseswhy-do-we-swallow-the-misinformation-bait/> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹⁸ Gabriel R Sanchez and Keesha Middlemass, 'Misinformation Is Eroding the Public's Confidence in Democracy' (Brookings, 26 July 2022) <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy/> accessed 22 November 2025.

⁹⁹ Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Harvard University Press 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman and Mura Somer, 'Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities' (2018) 62(1) *American Behavioral Scientist* 16.

¹⁰¹ Pew Research Center, *The Public, the Political System and American Democracy* (26 April 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/04/26/the-public-the-political-system-and-american-democracy/> accessed 22 November 2025.

¹⁰² Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Galen Stocking, Mason Walker and Sophia Fedeli, *Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem that Needs to Be Fixed* (Pew Research Center, 5 June 2019)

¹³⁶ Megan Kurten, 'Why We Fight for Fractured Truths: How Misinformation Fuels Political Violence in Democracies' (MediaWell, SSRC, 9 January 2025) <https://mediawell.ssrc.org/research-reviews/why-we-fight-for-fractured-truths-how-misinformation-fuels-political-violence-in-democracies/>

¹³⁷ B Olaniran and I Williams, 'Social Media Effects: Hijacking Democracy and Civility in Civic Engagement' (2020) *Platforms, Protests, and the Challenge of Networked Democracy* 77, PMCID PMC7343248.

through the cooperation of governments, technology firms, civil society, academia, and individual citizens. Through the provision of coordinated measures, the adverse impacts of misinformation, the polarization of politics, and the integrity of the democratic processes can be reduced.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/> accessed 22 November 2025.