

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
DEMOCRACY

E-PAPER

A Companion to Democracy #3

Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: Causes, Trends, and Their Influence on Democracy

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A Publication of Heinrich Böll Foundation, August 2020

Preface to the e-paper series “A Companion to Democracy”

Democracy is multifaceted, adaptable – and must constantly meet new challenges. Democratic systems are influenced by the historical and social context, by a country’s geopolitical circumstances, by the political climate and by the interaction between institutions and actors. But democracy cannot be taken for granted. It has to be fought for, revitalised and renewed.

There are a number of trends and challenges that affect democracy and democratisation. Some, like autocratisation, corruption, the delegitimisation of democratic institutions, the shrinking space for civil society or the dissemination of misleading and erroneous information, such as fake news, can shake democracy to its core. Others like human rights, active civil society engagement and accountability strengthen its foundations and develop alongside it.

The e-paper series “A Companion to Democracy” examines pressing trends and challenges facing the world and analyses how they impact democracy and democratisation.

Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: Causes, Trends, and Their Influence on Democracy

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1. Introduction

Disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation pollute the information space worldwide and the trend of manipulating facts continues to disrupt public communication and, consequently, democratic processes in societies. Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are of course not a new phenomenon, but the proliferation of social media has made this issue more urgent.

In the political sphere, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation have the power to influence political processes. This is particularly the case in countries with a low level of media literacy and in less democratic countries in which misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are often used as a weapon for discrediting all those who express views and take action in opposition to state authorities and business interests, uncover corruption and human rights abuses, and demand accountability from state actors. Consequently, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation have the power to promote negative narratives about civil society and to discredit the work of NGOs. International NGOs and civil society worldwide are exposed to online attacks and campaigns that spread false information.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the phenomena of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, as well as their impact on the political sphere. In addition, the paper attempts to explain the harmful influence of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation on public debates, democratic processes, and civil society engagement.

2. Historical origins of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

Two recent events brought an old term back to life, albeit with a slightly altered meaning. The events – Brexit and the US presidential election campaign in 2016 – were marked by fake news propagated through the media and social networks and promoted in the public domain. The term “fake news” encompasses misinformation (when false information is shared with no intended harm), disinformation (when false information is shared with the intention to cause harm), and malinformation (when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere) (definitions by Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It would be an exaggeration to suggest that both events, Brexit and Trump’s election victory, were directly affected by the spread of fake news or that some foreign powers and their actions behind the scenes brought about such a sequence of events. Nevertheless, the existence and influence of fake news before and after these events are undeniable.

The concept of fake news is not a novelty of the media landscape of the 21st century, but rather emerged with the appearance of the first newspapers, initially serving to entertain and/or perhaps help sell more copies. There were no evil intentions, and journalists or editors made sure that the reader was aware that the information presented was not true. Over the years, politicians and businesspeople realised the potential of fake news and started to use it for manipulation – politicians with the intention to reach a certain position in society, and businesspeople to gain profit. The trend of not marking fake news as such continues to this date, and it has become exceedingly difficult to recognise such news. Ironically, only satirical portals continue to mark their news as fake.

Even though truth was the foundation of journalism, with journalists embodying the role of conscientious individuals in the societies of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, soon those who embellished information appeared, using journalism and journalists for their own agenda and propaganda. This came to prominence particularly during World War I, when the warring sides, especially the UK, the USA, and later Germany, realised that armies and soldiers were not enough so they began using various manipulative techniques to influence the public and even their own soldiers. One soldier on the losing side, Adolf Hitler, directed all his power in the rise of Nazism to propaganda, with the help of Joseph Goebbels. Both the media and propaganda were also needed for the rise of the Soviet totalitarian system. When they were not enough, the idea was “spread” by force. With these two totalitarian regimes in mind, it is unclear which one created “disinformation”. Allegedly, the Soviet Union used that term to describe “political propaganda of Nazi Germany” (Brezar, 2019). According to Breton, who cites *The Dictionary of the Russian Language* from 1949, disinformation is the “act of misleading with the help of false information” (2000: 62). Disinformation is, just like propaganda, supported by individuals, organisations, and even governments, all for the realisation of their interests.

While the USA, the Soviet Union, and their allies were busy after World War II with the Cold War, the rest of the world started their struggle for independence or riddance of foreign control. These struggles, sometimes peaceful and often revolutionary, resulted in the creation of many new countries and political systems (in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America). The fall of the Berlin Wall led to the reunification of Germany, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia disintegrated, and Czechs and Slovaks peacefully parted. While single-party systems turned to a democratic form of government, the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia was marked by the worst kind of news reporting – war-mongering.

After the Yugoslav War, media attention focused on Iraq and Afghanistan until the second decade of the 21st century and the start of the Ukrainian armed conflict and the advent of Brexit and Trump. The old trusted techniques of propaganda and disinformation were used in the war in Ukraine, the key advocates for Brexit (Nigel Farage, for example) admitted lying to the British citizens, Trump’s team used “alternative facts” and created fake news (leading some prominent newspapers to create online fact-checking platforms), and there is even a suspicion that Russia played a significant role in the spread of disinformation. The world, meanwhile, entered the post-truth phase – one in which emotions and personal beliefs are far more important than facts and the truth. ¹

In this brief historical overview of the existence of fake news, it is obvious that there was a clear intention in its dissemination – it was used out of pure amusement and to spread humour, as a relief from harsh everyday life, but more often it was used to further a particular interest, political or material/financial. While satire or parody belonged to the first category, the second category consisted of fabricated posts (news articles, radio and television broadcasts, manipulated photos, or online portal posts) or pure propaganda.

In almost every case, one can clearly determine whether a particular piece of media content, in all the 400 years of journalistic history, is fake news (misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation). But to do so, it is necessary to define terms such as “fake news”, “alternative facts”, and “post-truth”, as well as to clarify whether it is possible to have a generic term for misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and whether the term “fake news” is that term.

1 Even though Steve Tesich was credited as the first user of the term “post-truth”, when he used it while writing about Watergate in *The Nation* in 1992, the systematic use of this term dates back to 2004 and the book *The Post-Truth Era* by Ralph Keyes. However, even Walter Lippmann talked about it in his work *Public Opinion* from 1922, where he stated that a myth does not always have to be false, but can also be true or half-true (Lippmann [1922], 2004: 67). We will discuss the term “post-truth” later in the paper.

3. Information disorder – key concepts and definitions

If truth is the foundation of journalism, news is its key genre – without it, there are no journalists, media, or journalism as a profession. In the beginning, news writing followed the rule, established back in the ancient Rome, that is was important to answer five questions (the 5 Ws): who, what, where, when, why. The rule has been expanded over time to include “how” (H) and the mandatory attribution of sources, as well as “what next” (W) that addresses the question of what happens next. If all of these questions are answered, as noted by Stjepan Malović, the result is “hard, undisputed facts ... with no lies, accurate, balanced, and objective” (2007: 86; translated by M.O.). Do we get an answer from fake news? We do. The only difference is that the answer is a lie and as such cannot be classified as news. News must be truthful – if it is fake, it cannot be considered news. In this sense, fake news is an oxymoron.

3.1. Fake news – definitions, motives, forms

Among the numerous authors and academics who have brought due diligence to the phenomenon of fake news so as to give it a definition and typology, two names stand out – Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow. The authors state that fake news is “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (2017: 4). There are two key motives, according to them – material, as online publications on social networks could bring substantial income when users visit certain online pages; and ideological, because of the support political candidates, political parties, and their programs might receive (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 7). They also describe several “close cousins” of fake news:

- 1) unintentional reporting mistakes;
- 2) rumors that do not originate from a particular news article;
- 3) conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true);
- 4) satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual;
- 5) false statements by politicians;
- and 6) reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017: 5).

A similar division is offered by Edson C. Tandoc Jr. et al, who explain that fake news has six forms; “(1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda.... Fake news hides under a veneer of legitimacy as it takes on some form of credibility by trying to appear like real news” (2017: 11).

David Klein and Joshua Wueller define fake news as the “online publication of intentionally or knowingly false statements of fact” (2017: 6). According to John Allen Riggins, fake news “could be understood as intentionally misleading context

made to imitate journalistic content with the primary aim of generating profit" (2017: 1315). Lion Gu, Vladimir Kropotov, and Fyodor Yarochkin state that fake news is "the promotion and propagation of news articles via social media. These articles are promoted in such a way that they appear to be spread by other users, as opposed to being paid-for advertising. The news stories distributed are designed to influence or manipulate users' opinions on a certain topic towards certain objectives" (2017: 5). Finally, Ethical Journalism Network ² defines fake news as "information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts."

3.2. Disinformation, misinformation, malinformation

Using the dimensions of harm and falseness, Wardle and Derakhshan describe the differences between these three types of information in their report "Information Disorder" (2017):

Dis-information. Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.

Mis-information. Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

Mal-information. Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country (2017: 20).

According to the authors, these three terms encompass the definition "fake news" but the authors warn that it is "important to distinguish messages that are true from those that are false, and messages that are created, produced or distributed by 'agents' who intend to do harm from those that are not" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 20).

2 The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), which describes itself as "an international network of media created to advance education, particularly education in ethics and respect for human rights", consists of a coalition of more than 70 groups of journalists, editors, press owners, and media support groups from across the globe; more details at: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are>.

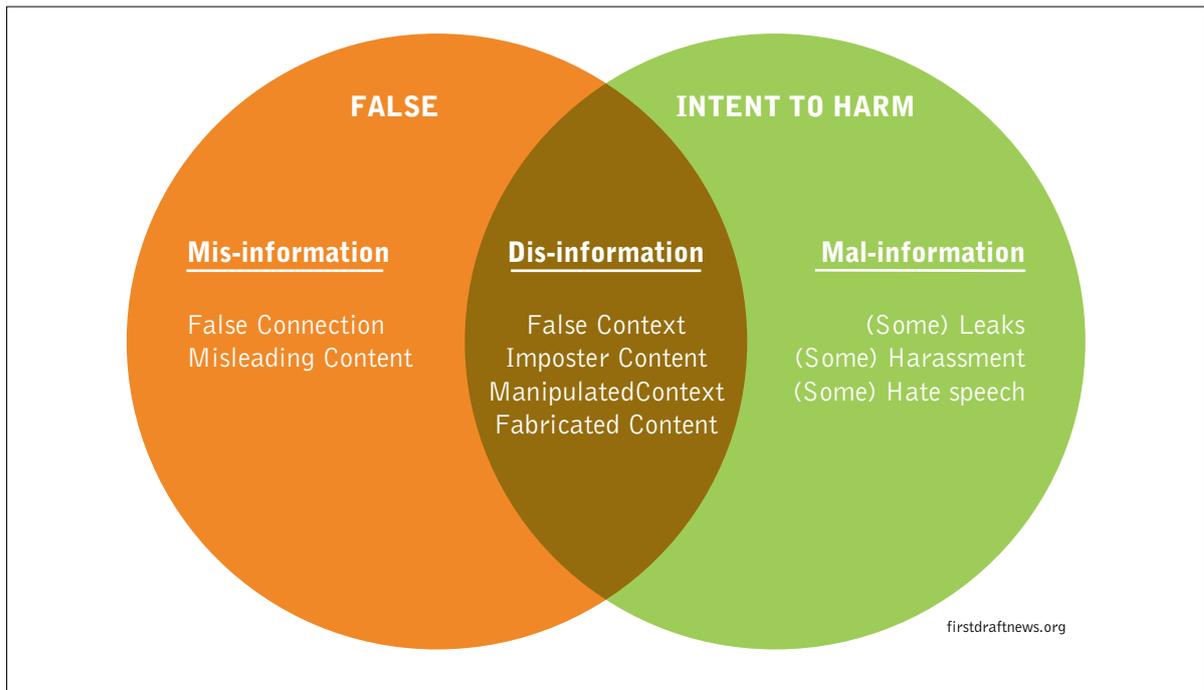


Chart 1: Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (First Draft in Asanov, 2019).³

While explaining what these three terms could be and what kind of motivation they could offer, Wardle states that disinformation is “motivated by three distinct factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for the sake of it.”

When disinformation is shared it often turns into misinformation. Misinformation also describes false content, but the person sharing doesn’t realize that it is false or misleading. Often a piece of disinformation is picked up by someone who does not realize it’s false, and shares it with their networks, believing that they are helping (Wardle, 2019b).

Wardle cites those feeling “connected to their ‘tribe’, whether that means members of the same political party, parents who don’t vaccinate their children, activists who are concerned about climate change, or those who belong to a certain religion, race or ethnic group” as an example of users of misinformation. As an example of malinformation, Wardle points to the case “when Russian agents hacked into emails from the Democratic National Committee and the Hillary Clinton campaign and leaked certain details to the public to damage reputations” (2019b).

We include some types of hate speech and harassment under the malinformation category, as people are often targeted because of their personal history or affiliations. While the information can sometimes be based on reality (for example targeting someone based on their religion) the information is being used strategically to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, 20–21).

³ The full article, by Temir Asanov, can be found at: <https://medium.com/@tasanoff/fake-news-in-modern-news-media-disinformation-misinformation-and-malinformation-e4fdfa2ab571>.

Nicole Cooke simplifies this issue and explains that “the concepts of misinformation and disinformation (mis/dis) can be thought of as two sides of the same coin” (2017: 136). Quoting other authors (Fox, 1983; Losee, 1997; Zhou & Zhang, 2007), she notes that “misinformation is simply defined as information that is incomplete ... but it can also be categorized as information that is uncertain, vague, or ambiguous.” Cooke goes further and quotes the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “disinformation” as “the dissemination of deliberately false information” (2017: 136).

Hendricks and Vestergaard claim that “misinformation is rarely all false” and provide a recipe for success: “If the misinformation is to have effect, it should not too easily reveal its fraudulence. Misinformation must seem reliable in order to effectively mislead people. Misinformation is therefore often a mixture of something allegedly true; something doubtful, twisted, and undocumented; and downright false information” (2019: 55).

Not even Caroline Jack, in her book *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information* mentions the term “malinformation”, but she does explain the difference between the misinformation (information whose inaccuracy is unintentional) and disinformation (information that is deliberately false or misleading). She states that misinformation “includes information reported in error” and adds that it “can spread when journalists misinterpret or fail to independently verify a source’s claims” (2017: 2).

The distinction between misinformation and disinformation has often been used to capture that difference in intent. While both terms refer to misleading information, misinformation is usually used to imply no deliberate intent to mislead, while disinformation implies knowing deception. It is often difficult, however, to prove the actor’s intent. In public discourse, misinformation is thus used more frequently than disinformation – a tendency that deceptive actors can exploit to try to maintain credibility (Jack, 2017: 15).

Ian Reilly mentions that fake news “represents information of various stripes that is presented as real but is patently false, fabricated, or exaggerated to the point where it no longer corresponds to reality; what is more, this information operates in the express interests of deceiving or misleading a targeted or imagined audience” (2018: 3). On the other hand, Lazer et al define fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” and states that it “overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people)” (Lazer et al, 2018: 1094). The same authors avoid using the term “false news”, similar to those who want to avoid the “use of fake news as a political weapon”, adding that: “We have retained it because of its value as a scientific construct, and because its political salience draws attention to an important subject” (Lazer et al, 2018: 1094). However, in this paper, we use the term “fake news” mainly because it is the concept mostly widely recognised by the general public and because there is both enough scientific and practical evidence of its legitimacy.

We believe the stated concepts of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation could be unified under the term "information disorder". Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation can be observed as a part of the information disorder paradigm, since they are forms of fake news. However, while fake news aims for a complete manipulation of the public and is intentionally false and fabricated with this specific purpose in mind, alternative facts imply the existence of objective facts that are present somewhere but contextualized to drive the story. In other words, alternative facts match the existing data and the facts are cast in a context that suits political powers.

Stating that the term "alternative facts" exists in other disciplines too, such as law, philosophy, and mathematics, Tommi Lehtonen singles out two main meanings, very reminiscent of the definition of disinformation and misinformation. According to the first, fake news can be seen as "a statement known to be false but deliberately presented as being true, that is, a lie". According to the second, fake news can be "an error or something mistakenly accepted as true...a claim that is possibly true (and there may even be some evidence for its being true) or a claim that could be true, but is not" (Lehtonen, 2018: 213).⁴

4 We will discuss alternative facts in more depth later on in the paper.

4. Distortion of truth and manipulation of consent

One of the key messages of Brexit advocates during the pre-referendum campaign was the alleged payment of £350m weekly to finance the European Union. That claim was used by two key figures of the Brexit campaign, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, who stated that the money could be better used if redirected to the National Health Service (NHS). FullFact, an independent fact-checking charity organisation, as well as the UK Office for National Statistics, stated that the alleged amount was wrong (Office for National Statistics, 2017). The day after the referendum, which went in favour of Brexit, Nigel Farage admitted that he lied (Good Morning Britain, 2016). Both consciously used the false data, or disinformation, to manipulate the population and gain political points.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the president of the world's greatest power uses disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation at his will. In his daily tweets, Donald Trump uses "information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person [Barack Obama's place of birth, for example], social group [lies about immigrants and the number of annual criminal offences], organization [the World Health Organization (WHO) to whom he has denied funding] or a country" [sometimes Mexico, other times China, Iran, and even Montenegro].⁵ In addition, he uses "information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm" [as in the statement that he will build a wall between Colorado and Mexico even though they do not share a border] or "information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person [Elizabeth Warren, whom he called "Pocahontas" because she is of Native American heritage], organization or a country" [North Korea, for example] (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017: 20). Just in response to Trump, *The Washington Post* created a fact-checking platform and *The New York Times* created a column, "Trump's Lies", that ran for two years, filled with all the misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation the president spread. (Leonhardt & Thompson, 2017).

Despite the criticism, Trump did not let up. With his posts on Twitter, as journalist Tomislav Klauški states, Trump "secured 24/7 media coverage on all social platforms and in all media" (2017: 11), and replied to the media that criticised him almost on a daily basis. Trump addressed them as the "fake news media". On top of this list, he placed US mainstream media such as CNN, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. "This is a witch-hunt – pointing fingers and crying 'witch' in the expectation that such

5 While explaining why he thinks NATO should not defend every member state, Donald Trump commented how Montenegro is a "tiny country with very strong people". He went on to say that "they're very aggressive people", before concluding, "They may get aggressive, and congratulations, you're in world war three" (The Guardian, 2018).

incriminations will lead to public distrust and opprobrium”, as Tarlach McGonagle says, adding, “It also contributes to a climate of hostility and aggression towards journalists and the media” (McGonagle, 2017: 209).

Nevertheless, Trump is not the only one who treats those who do not think like him in a way that “sometimes...undermine[s] the reputation and credibility of individual journalists, individual media organisations and the media generally” (McGonagle, 2017: 209). This is often done by other politicians as well, and Wardle warns that they regard the opinions and political stances of their opponents as “false rather than different”, while “journalists’ mistakes are classified as lies”. They often aim to “create satirical content” and call it “part ‘false news’ and part ‘false informing’” (Wardle, 2017, in Kulić, 2019: 6). Media that criticise the government and its key players, just like in Trump’s case, are either labelled with false accusations or as being a factor of destabilisation. That particular form of verbal aggression against journalists and media is a “very dangerous development for every democratic society” (McGonagle, 2017: 209). This has been recognised not only by the European Council, but also by the United Nations who warn that this form of “demonisation” encourages attacks on journalists and jeopardises their safety.

Another politician and the leader of world’s ninth-largest economy, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, is not just at loggerheads with the media but also with NGOs, due to some controversial press releases that his government issued during the Covid-19 pandemic. Twitter deemed these press releases as disinformation and dangerous for the health and lives of citizens. Bolsonaro managed something that even Trump could not: his tweets were deleted. The history of Bolsonaro’s abuse of social networks and of his clashes with opponents is not only connected to Covid-19, even though he has become known as the leader of “coronavirus-denial movement”. It goes further back into the recent past when Brazil’s National Congress created a special commission to investigate the spreading of misinformation and disinformation, even the defamation of political opponents, by a structure linked to Bolsonaro’s office (also called the “Office of Hatred”; Ricard & Medeiros, 2020). Prior to this, the focus of Bolsonaro’s unfounded claims was aimed at NGOs, who he claimed were responsible for the wildfires that destroyed parts of the Amazon rainforest in retaliation for him cutting their funding from the budget. “Asked whether he had evidence, or whether he could name the NGOs involved, Bolsonaro said there were no written records and it was just his feeling” (Watts, 2019). This is a pattern of the post-truth phenomenon, when “alternative facts” replace actual facts, and feelings have more weight than evidence.

Moreover, all societies – from consolidated democracies to hybrid or fragile democracies – are experiencing a surge of different forms of influence on journalists and media. Most of the time, there is a political and/or economic influence – sometimes visible (which is characteristic for autocratic societies and even fragile democracies), but most often hidden (democratic societies). On one hand, there is the influence of the government, and on the other hand, there is the influence of money – instruments used “to discipline” media. As a result, those with political and economic power use the media to show

all their might, and place the media in their own service rather than in the service of the public. In that sense, Turčilo and Buljubašić recognise direct (censorship, threats, economic pressure) and indirect (manipulation, bribery) pressure on the media, all with the main aim of “buying silence”⁶ or “making sure that media does not act according to public interest but the interest of the political (or other) elites” (2017: 11). Because of all this, marketing and advertising agencies, along with big corporations, are the ones who very often dictate media content. However, the media need information from the political and business spheres too. They gather such information from spokespersons or public relations representatives, and sometimes even from spin-doctors. This is the information the media rely on, and it must be treated with a great deal of caution. All this can endanger professionalism and ethical standards, especially because of the political and economic pressure.

After all, when political and economic power engulfs journalism, the first thing to suffer is the truth. In that respect, Yuval Noah Harari warns that “great power inevitably distorts the truth” because “the essence of power is to change reality rather than seeing it as it is” (2019: 280, translation by M.O.). However, people tend to trust those in power rather than the “rational authority who consciously spreads the truth,” as Šušnjić puts it. People are prone to trust the “irrational authority [that] unconsciously spread[s] the deceptions or consciously lies”.

Rational authority is based on knowledge, irrational authority on power.... Rational authority is judged by what it says, irrational authority by who says it. The first one teaches us, the second one scares us. The first one is powerful to the extent that it causes us to be reasonable, the other one is powerful to the extent that it instils powerful fear in us (Šušnjić, 2008: 59; translated by M.O.).

Using fear as the main weapon, political power in fragile democracies and autocracies is aware of something else: it is the supreme authority. Its decisions are not questioned, its rightness is taken for granted, and very little time is needed from the conception of an idea to its realisation. This is different in democratic societies in which argumentation is key and authority is based on the power of arguments and not vice versa. Therefore, democratic societies value the word or argumentation (rational authority), whereas weak democracies value information based on its source (irrational authority).

Political and economic power players can count on yet another thing. Their high positions in society guarantee media coverage. So by communicating their messages via the media or other channels such as social networks (Trump on Twitter is a good example), they can

6 The book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, by Robert McChesney, talks about the American way of “buying silence”. He warns that media is often not allowed to criticise advertisers. He notes that “professional standards notwithstanding, there has been a kind of ‘Eleventh Commandment’ in the commercial news media: Thou Shalt Not Cover Big Companies and Billionaires Critically. This makes very good economic sense, as the local powers are often major advertisers. It makes sense politically and socially too, as the media owners and managers run in the same circles as the major shareholders and executives of the local corporate powerhouses” (2008: XIV).

reach the public and try to convince them of the correctness of their measures, ideas, or decisions. They count on the public's acceptance of these measures, ideas, or decisions; a process that 100 years ago was given the name "manufacturing consent" by Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays. The term signifies the difference between democratic societies where it is applied based on arguments and undemocratic societies where arguments are irrelevant because the decisions are made by one person in power or a group of people close to them. A century ago, Lippmann explained that "the creation of content" is important for political activity, and also that propaganda is needed, but he saw it as "not necessarily in the sinister meaning of the word". With that, he stated, "the old constants of our thinking have become variables" (Lippmann [1922], 1997: 158).

I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully ..., unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions (Lippmann [1922], 1997: 19).

Lippmann's ideas were further elaborated by Bernays, according to whom the engineering of consent is based "on thorough knowledge of the situation and on the application of scientific principles and tried practices in the task of getting people to support ideas and programs" (1947: 114). "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind," Bernays asked, "is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing about it?" (Bernays, [1928] 2005: 47).

Both Lippmann and Bernays were the target of heavy criticism by Noam Chomsky, who disliked the term "manufacturing of consent". Chomsky stated that this means "to bring about agreement on the part of the public for things that they did not want by the new techniques of propaganda" (1997: 14f). Commenting on the term "bewildered herd", Chomsky ironically says: "Turn their attention to something else. Keep them out of trouble. Make sure that they remain at most spectators of action, occasionally lending their weight to one or another of the real leaders, who they may select among" (2002: 18). Those theoretical postulates and the criticism that followed are the real danger of the lowering of standards that should be important in a democratic society – the chosen minority rules the majority, asking little of them except on election day. In return, they count on undisputed support between two elections and expect their acceptance of everything they do.

Analysing whether the "manufacturing of consent" is possible in the 21st century, Alessandro Amadori and John Lloyd point out Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin as perfect examples. Amadori calls that kind of rule "soft authoritarianism" and explains that it is "based not so much on force as but on manipulation of consensus, on semantic transformation of reality, on control of thought, on persuasion and social pressure through these new objects of collective desire, which are forms of mass communication" (Amadori; in Lloyd, 2004: 54). While serving as prime minister, Berlusconi also managed his own private media empire and could influence the state television broadcaster RAI. Besides his powerful media company, he owned a PR agency, a marketing agency, and a

publishing company. "His control of obvious and subconscious messages from television screens," notes Lloyd, "means that he has more influence, real and potential, on people's choices than any leader in the world of advanced democracies should have" (2004: 54). Everything that Berlusconi⁷ had in the first decade of the 21st century, Russian leader Vladimir Putin had and still has now. His leadership, as prime minister and as president, is seen by Lloyd to be a form of "dangerous power", just as he said about Berlusconi. He adds that this is authoritarianism (that evolved from soft into very hard) that "replaces many of the pioneering institutions of civic societies and brings democratic institutions – parliament, executive authorities, the judicial system – under the direct control of the president in the Kremlin" (2004: 54).

Berlusconi and Putin, and Italy and Russia, are, of course, not the same. Russia, under Putin's firm leadership, is accused of creating disinformation and the European Council started a political initiative to combat fake news that is said to be part of Russian misinformation campaigns and state propaganda directed from the Kremlin towards the European Union. This has been an ongoing battle for the last five years, addressed through the project EUvsDisinfo, with a specific focus on disinformation and propaganda, as well as their influence on the functioning of the EU and its member states. Other EU institutions went further. For example, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) dedicated two resolutions to this problem, both adopted in 2018. According to the first resolution, PACE considers "fake news", "propaganda", and "disinformation" as different forms of manipulation, whereas in the second resolution "fake news" is identified as a form of "mass disinformation campaigns", which constitute a technique of a "hybrid war", with both of resolutions aimed at Russia as the culprit (Bayer et al, 2019).

The distortion of the truth and the manipulation of the consent of ordinary people by political and economic elites, and the discrediting of the media and political opponents by accusing them of spreading disinformation and misleading the public are indicators of a post-truth era. Just as the phenomenon of fake news did not begin with the US presidential election, Brexit, or Russia's alleged influence, the phenomenon will not disappear any time soon. It will continue, as Claire Wardle warns, because "most of this content is designed not to persuade people in any particular direction but to cause confusion, to overwhelm and to undermine trust in democratic institutions from the electoral system to journalism" (Wardle, 2019a).

7 "A free media system independent of political interference is vital for democracy, and yet politicians in different parts of the world try to control information flows", states Zielonka. "Young and emerging democracies are particularly vulnerable to media capture by political and corporate interests because of their fragile institutions, polarized civil society, and transnational economic pressures. However, as the case of Silvio Berlusconi plainly shows, manipulation of the media is also possible in well-established democracies" (2016: 2).

5. Democracy at risk in post-truth society – how misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation destroy democratic values

The distortion of truth, the disorder of information, and the manipulation of consent are direct ways in which political elites put democratic values at risk in their societies. Democracies, in their philosophical essence, but also in practice, rely on well-informed and politically educated citizens, who define key issues in their communities, call on their political representatives to solve these issues, and monitor the steps that representatives take to fulfil public needs. Therefore, citizens participate in various ways in making informed voting decisions. However, political representatives also need to be well informed (mostly about the needs of their communities and their citizens) and politically responsible in order to meet these needs in a way that is in the best interest of society. Negotiations between citizens and their political representatives happen in the public sphere, and since contemporary democracies are mediated democracies, the media play an important role in both providing reliable information for public and political representatives and in opening space for them to negotiate possible solutions to detected problems. In that context, information which the public receives, as well as messages which the public sends to and receives from political representatives are essential for democratic processes in every society and for strengthening democratic competence and civic participation.

Thus fake news threatens democracies, civic participation, and efficient governance. It jeopardises the right of the public to be well informed and to discuss societal issues based on reliable, high-quality, accurate information based on the public interest. Online media and digital platforms have become widely debated in the context of fake news dissemination. Quite often debates on the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are reduced mainly to these new communication channels, which is understandable due to their progressive growth. Laura Chinchilla, former president of Costa Rica and chair of the Kofi Annan Commission on Elections and Democracy in the Digital Age, put it as follows:

On the one hand, digital technologies have played a vital role in providing free access to government data and information; encouraging citizen participation in public decision making; introducing new voices to the public debate; fostering the transparency and scrutiny of administrative actions; knitting global advocacies together on issues affecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy; and mobilizing new actors eager to find alternative avenues for political participation. The Arab Spring almost a decade ago, the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong this summer and the toppling of Puerto Rico's governor in July are only a few examples.

On the other, the alarming number of episodes involving the use of social media platforms to manipulate elections and public debates, as well as the surge of extremist groups using the internet to incite hatred and violence, clearly warns us that the adverse relationship between those platforms and democracy is no longer just anecdotal. Fake news is as old as news, and hate speech is as old as speech. But the digital age has provided a ripe environment for the virulent reproduction and visibility of both. To be clear, the promise of the betterment of the human condition held by new technologies is beyond question. But the risks have become just as apparent.⁸

However, it is important to emphasise that, unlike popular belief that fake news (misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation) are mainly spread by online media (mainly social networks used by both ordinary citizens and political leaders such as Donald Trump), other media (print, radio, TV) often play a role in spreading fake news as well, due to various already-mentioned reasons (political and economic dependence, ownership models, etc.). In addition, there is enough evidence so far to suggest a virulent spread of fake news globally. An MIT study found that “the top 1% of false news cascades diffused to between 1,000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1,000 people.”⁹ In terms of actors who spread disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, it is important to mention that various different actors spread fake news. From ordinary people with low levels of media literacy who uncritically share unreliable content on their personal social network accounts, over politically and economically powerful people who use fake news to shape public opinion or to present their private interest as public interest, to states and governments who use it to enhance their influence and improve their geopolitical status¹⁰ – all of these actors play a role in the spreading of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. The European Commission summarises this trend as follows: “Low-cost computers are replacing high-cost weapons as an instrument of power in asymmetrical cyber and information warfare. Information security has to address a wide and diverse range of ‘enemies’ — from the ‘geek in the back room’ to criminal organizations and governments.”¹¹

It is important to mention that the impact of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation varies depending on the level of democracy in a particular state or society. Closed authoritarian regimes are systems in which the state itself – that is, the political elites – controls the media systems (traditional media) and limits opportunities for access to online platforms. As a result, these elites continue to be the primary actors who spread

8 For more details see Laura Chincilla’s paper “Post-Truth Politics Afflicts the Global South, Too”, available at: <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/supporting-democracy-and-elections-with-integrity/annan-commission/post-truth-politics-afflicts-the-global-south-too/>.

9 Vosoughi, Soroush, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. (2018). “The Spread of True and False News Online”, Science, available at: <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

10 Examples of all these actors were mentioned in the previous section.

11 More details at: https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/foresight/topic/increasing-influence-new-governing-systems/fake-news-disinformation-threatens-democracy_en.

disinformation and propaganda. In contrast, in more democratic systems, media and online platforms are freer and more open for various actors that can spread fake news. This creates a political environment that is not considered as democratic, but rather influenced by political manipulation, political propaganda, and populist narratives. In such an environment, a new term is used to describe the manipulation of the public using emotional rhetoric, rather than a rational and argument-based political discourse. That term is "post-truth" and it is primarily used to explain the political campaigning of the current US president, Donald Trump.

Trump's arrival at the White House and his inauguration is, along with fake news, associated with the term "alternative fact", owing to its frequent use in political and media discourse. "Alternative fact" was chosen as the worst word or phrase of the year in the first year of Trump's presidency. It was first used on the day after Trump's inauguration by the president's adviser Kellyanne Conway to explain a statement made by the president's then-spokesman Sean Spicer about the number of people attending the inauguration ceremony (Bradner, 2017).

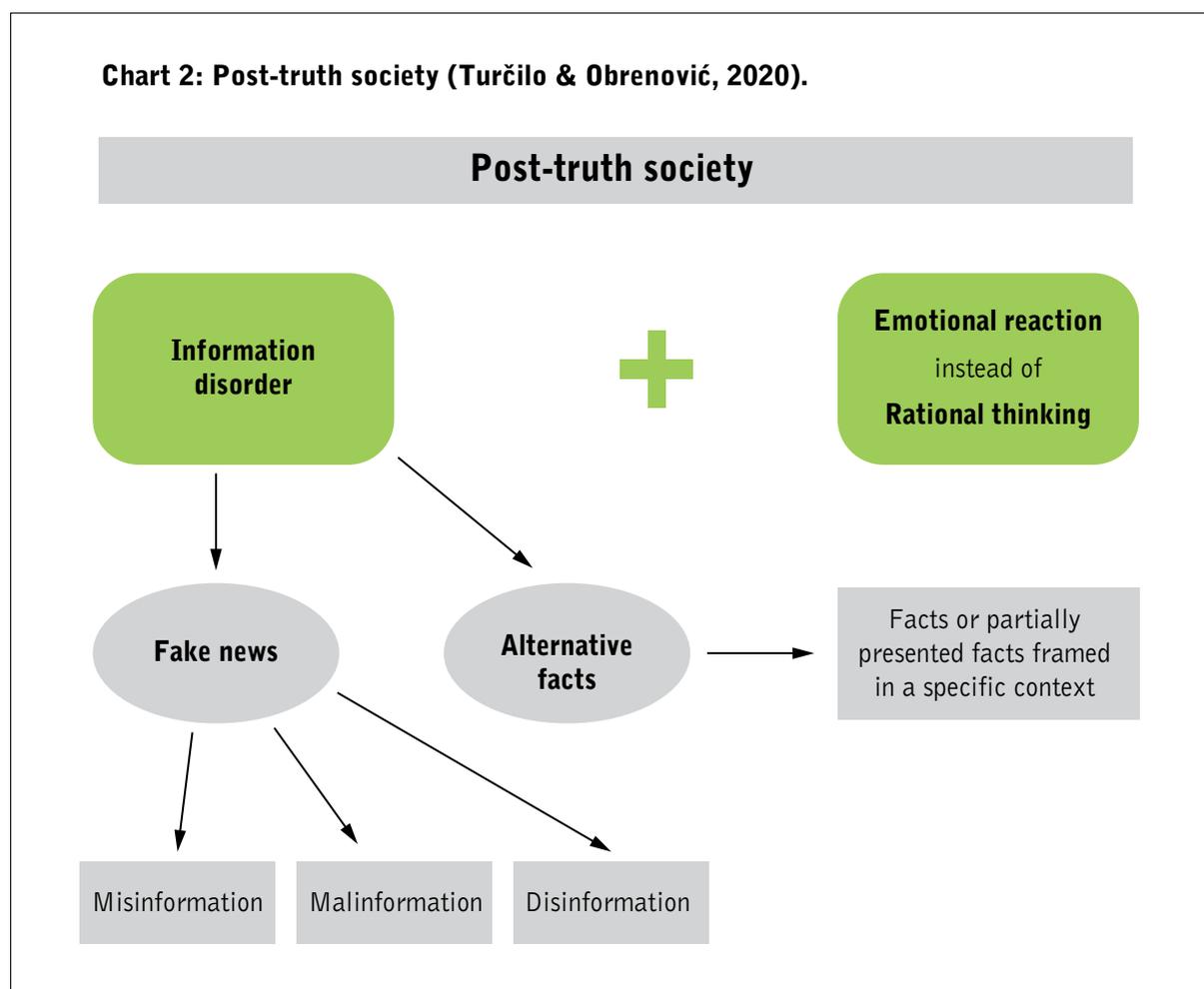
The post-truth is the term that officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016. Put most succinctly, post-truth signifies a communication paradigm in the 21st century in which "I think, therefore, I exist" is replaced by "I believe, so I am right", i.e. in which objective facts have less influence on shaping public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs. Post-truth refers to such a media and societal system in which the public interest is placed behind the particular interests of the elite and in which media manipulation is almost legitimate method of coming to power and staying in power. The post-truth society is not only a society in which truth is not a priority; it has almost become its contradiction – a society in which the truth is undesirable, unprofitable, and irrelevant. Fake news and clickbait become the only measure of media success – and this success involves attracting as many people as possible to their site/portal or other media and achieving an emotional reaction to a particular content, which is later emphasised through endless discussions on social networks mainly based on the "explosion" of emotional charge and often hate speech. The 2017 year brings, however, a new phenomenon that is immanent to Trump's political populism, which is described by the term "alternative facts", first used by his adviser Kellyanne Conway, saying that, no matter how the media report, the government has "alternative facts". Alternative facts are not just different facts compared to those transmitted by the media. They are also neither false information nor facts that someone has appropriated for themselves in order to achieve financial and other profits and place them when it suits him. Alternative facts are, in fact, the facts "framed" in a particular context or presented only partially in order to dissuade the public and produce a certain reaction.¹²

12 Turčilo, Lejla and Belma Buljubašić. (2018). Alternative Facts and Post-Truth in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Who (Really) Sets the Agenda? (Sarajevo: IMEP), available at: https://www.academia.edu/38159189/ALTERNATIVE_FACTS_AND_POST-TRUTH_IN_BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA_WHO_REALLY_CREATES_THE_AGENDA_OF_MEDIA.

In expanding the narrative of fake news to alternative facts, bringing it under the rubric of information disorder, Marju Himma-Kadakas gives several examples, among them the Ukrainian armed conflict, the Brexit referendum, and the 2016 US presidential election. In that respect, it is quoted that in the context of those events, fake news “could have been interpreted as intentionally widely spread misinformation; alternative facts could have been treated as the intentional misinterpretation of factual material”.

Fake news is also a tool in the information war; in this context the distribution of false information is deliberate and uses the strategic narratives that have the components of news factors of Anglo-American journalistic culture (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016). This sort of misinformation is spread primarily via social media but is occasionally published by mainstream media and substantially distributed ... and, due to this, was validated as journalistic facts (Himma-Kadakas, 2017: 26).

Put in more simple terms, post-truth society is one which is based on the information disorder – either on fake news (misinformation, disinformation, and/or malinformation) or alternative facts (true or partly true information framed in a specific context) – to which the public reacts emotionally rather than rationally.



Post-truth society is a challenge to democracy. The democratic principle of freedom of speech is misused in the post-truth society, as are other principles, such as:

- *Citizen involvement in decision making* – it should be based on well-informed citizens capable of making competent decisions, which, of course, is not possible in the post-truth society, which is based on fake news and alternative facts;
- *A system of representation* – if citizens are responding to information emotionally rather than by rational reasoning, it is more likely that they will not elect those who will represent them in their best interest, but rather those who are better manipulators;
- *Some degree of equality among citizens* – equality includes equal opportunities for accessing high-quality information in the public interest, which in post-truth society is not the case for all (most high-quality, reliable information is available to privileged people, while ordinary citizens are exposed to fake news and alternative facts);
- *Education* – post-truth societies are mainly those with low levels of media literacy, which is usually not part of the educational system; education in such societies is not based on encouraging critical thinking, but rather on memorizing “unquestionable truths” imposed by those who manipulate.

However, the trend of societies being turned into post-truth societies is not only present in autocratic states and non-democratic societies. It is present in democratic societies as well, especially during the pre-election period when the production of alternative facts, fake news, propaganda, etc. begins. A number of media outlets serve exclusively the purpose of electoral manipulation and propaganda and are established right before elections. In addition, it also happens that the already existing media take the side of certain political options and they work to advocate and frame the facts in the context that suits them, neglecting public interest. Of course, this would not be possible without the third constituent of the public sphere – the public. So why does the public trust the powerful? Why do they trust the media? Why do they react emotionally and not rationally to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation?

Referring to a number of studies, Castells (2013) states that “people tend to believe what they want to believe”, adding that “experiments show that people are much more critical when evaluating those facts that are contrary to their beliefs than when evaluating those facts that support what they think” (2013: 153). In doing so, he also explains how people look at politics “through the eyes of candidates” and act “based on their positive or negative feelings about those candidates” (2013: 154). “People vote for the candidate who evokes the right feelings, not the candidate who presents the best arguments” (Westen, 2007: 125; in Castells, 2013: 154). Đuro Šušnjić also concludes that “the feelings, thoughts, and behaviour of individuals and groups change not only under the influence of the content of the message, but also depending on the source of the message, which may be more or less authoritative for them” (2008: 59). The

content of the message in such situations is suppressed behind a source that, because of its authority, is considered to be exclusively telling the truth. “Individuals and groups,” Šušnjić points out, “are often incapable of clearly separating a message from its source, of distinguishing the meaning of a message from the power of authority, and therefore accept the message as valid simply by being expressed by some authority” (2008: 59). This is, actually, a starting point of a dominant political trend in many societies nowadays, which we describe as populism.

Cambridge Dictionary defines populism as “political ideas and activities that aim to get the support of ordinary people by giving them what they want.”¹³ German political scientist Jan-Werner Müller, one of the leading authorities on the phenomenon of populism, believes that populism is:

...a particular imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but, I shall argue, ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.... Populists claim that they, and only they, represent the people. Other political competitors are just part of the immoral, corrupt elite, or so populists say, while not having power themselves; when in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition. The populist core claim also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with (Müller, 2016: 28).

Depending on the society in which it is developing, on the political and economic moment and context, but also on the elites (the “enemies” it opposes), populism may not only be on the right, but also on the left of the political spectrum. Both in the left and in the right version, as many authors have observed, populists will always appeal to “the people” and give them false promises. Two continents are characteristic of the analysis of the division of populism into left and right – South America and Europe. While left-wing populism is predominantly present in South America, right-wing populism is on the rise in Europe (although there are also numerous leftist populists there).

Populism joined with the mass use of fake news and alternative facts is a danger to democracy because it “polarizes society, stigmatises its political opponents and ‘foreign elements’ in the name of ‘the moral majority’, encourages intolerance, undermines democratic political institutions, and imposes simplified narratives that strive for an authoritarian transformation of society” (Zakošek, 2010: 8). Examples of populism using fake news narratives in contemporary democracies can be found in the doctrines of US president Donald Trump, former Italian prime minister and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi, and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán. Of course, populism and its use of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation are not the only danger to democracies today. However, they are becoming increasingly present worldwide, and as such require global and/or regional strategies for preventing the manipulation of citizens.

13 More details at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/populism>.

6. Civil society and the global struggle with misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and the actors who spread them, also have the power to promote negative narratives about civil society and to discredit the work of NGOs. Around the world, there is a growing concern that international NGOs and civil society organisations are vulnerable to online attacks and campaigns that spread false information. These attacks are designed to sow division and confusion, stigmatise civil society, disparage targeted organisations and their leaders, and promote inaccurate views about the communities they support. In general, the aim, in non-democratic societies and authoritarian regimes, is to silence any dissonant voices. This phenomenon is often called “shrinking space”.¹⁴

The rise of populist movements and leaders in many countries and perceptions of dysfunctional governance and uneven growth, combined with social struggles over migration, have fuelled anger with the political establishment. The consequences have been well-documented: voters have increasingly turned to outsider parties, some of which embrace explicitly nativist and exclusionary platforms.

This context of resurgent nationalism poses several challenges for civil society. It creates a hostile context for groups defending progressive values and the rights of vulnerable minorities, including refugees and LGBTQI communities. It also represents a challenge for civic groups that rely on international networks, human rights frameworks, and funding: not surprisingly, right-wing populists have lashed out against these groups as representative of unfettered “globalism” and cosmopolitan elitism. Other (decidedly non-populist) leaders increasingly borrow from this populist toolbox to attack their critics. It is easier to dismiss domestic critics as “George Soros-funded agents” than to engage with their arguments. In countries where these trends have fuelled political and social polarisation, civic actors face additional challenges: polarisation tends to be reflected within civil society, which makes it more difficult to build broad coalitions and facilitates government attacks (Brechenmacher, 2019).

Usage of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation as a means of stigmatising and discrediting civil society actors runs along several key lines:

14 The term “shrinking space” has been used by a number of organisations, such as the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Parliament, the European Foundation Centre, Amnesty International, to describe how the democratic space for civil society is under attack.

- Civil society actors are being accused (mainly by governments) of not being elected (as opposed to political parties and leaders in power), so their legitimacy is often questioned;
- Civil society actors are being accused of being “foreign agents”, if they are supported by international donors – this is the case, for example, in Hungary¹⁵, but also in Egypt, Russia, etc.;¹⁶
- Civil society actors are being accused of collaboration with opposition political parties – this is the case, for example, in Croatia, where prime minister Andrej Plenković calls certain NGOs the “extended hand of the opposition”;¹⁷
- Civil society actors are being accused of “serving their own interests”, that is, working on projects from which only they profit; this is usually supported by the “argument” that they have high salaries, travel abroad for trainings and seminars, and enjoy a privileged lifestyle.

In all the aforementioned cases, misinformation and disinformation, as well as alternative facts, are used to provoke negative emotions among the general public towards the NGO sector and civil society in general, and to influence public opinion to strongly support governmental actions, rather than encourage critical debate. Lack of credible information thus affects civil society as well as ordinary citizens.

When it comes to the discrediting of civil society by (mainly) political authorities, another important aspect of communication is important to mention: the asymmetry in access to communication channels. Put simply, especially in less developed countries and more authoritarian regimes, civil society actors have never had the same access to media outlets as governments and/or politicians. Mainstream media, due to their ownership models, close relations to those in power, self-censorship, etc., offer more space to government officials than civil society actors and, in many cases, restrictions are placed on online communication channels by governments in authoritarian regimes (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia).

Critical social and political periods and events, such as the period before national elections, present environments that exacerbate the trends described above, and provide fertile opportunities for governments for surveillance and limiting the flow of information. Organizations that need to defend their credibility because of disinformation are burdened with new expenses and workflows to mitigate risk. The amount of time that a team spends identifying disinformation and responding can be taxing. (Oh & Adkins, 2018: 13).

15 More on this at: <https://www.dw.com/en/hungarian-civil-society-victimized-by-orban-government/a-39088538>.

16 For further information see Tysiachniouk, Maria, Svetlana Tulaeva, and Laura A. Henry. (2018). “Civil Society Under the Law ‘On Foreign Agents’: NGO Strategies and Network Transformation”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09668136.2018.1463512>.

17 More details at: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/civilno-drustvo-od-servisa-do-uznemiravanja-vlasti>.

Not so rarely, government officials and/or their closest aides are involved in producing and spreading fake news themselves. Apart from the already-mentioned cases, one of the most recent incidents involves the son of Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro.

The political storm engulfing Brazil's far-right president has intensified with reports that federal police investigators have identified his son as one of the alleged key members of a "criminal fake news racket" engaged in threatening and defaming Brazilian authorities. One of Brazil's top newspapers, the *Folha de São Paulo*, claimed an investigation by Brazil's equivalent to the FBI had homed in on Carlos Bolsonaro, the president's social-media-savvy son. Carlos Bolsonaro, 37, rejected the claims as "garbage" and "a joke" on Twitter, where he has 1.7 million followers.¹⁸

Of course, the trend of spreading fake news is a worldwide phenomenon, not only with regard to the discrediting of civil society actors, but also with regard to shaping public opinion and bringing political processes in line with the interests of those in power. The Kofi Annan Foundation lists some examples of the spread of fake news around the world:

In India, the world's largest democracy, fact-checking news sites estimated that during the most recent parliamentary elections, the spread of misinformation increased by 40 percent compared with non-election times. In February [2019], during Nigeria's latest elections, false information about the supposed violence in polling stations located in opposition strongholds was widely spread. In Brazil, during the 2018 presidential elections, electoral authorities were forced to redouble their efforts to counter the spread of videos showing false alterations of results in the voting machines.

India, Nigeria and Brazil have something in common: the prevalent use of WhatsApp, the preferred messaging app in Africa, Latin America and many Asian countries (with 1.6 billion active users monthly, in 180 countries) to share information with family and friends....

Naturally, some countries are considering ways to hold companies accountable for the harmful content presented on their platforms, which will surely trigger necessary debates on the dynamics between the right to privacy, economic freedom and freedom of speech.¹⁹

18 More about this at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/bolsonaro-in-fresh-crisis-over-sons-alleged-links-to-fake-news-racket>.

19 For more information see Chinchilla, Laura. (2019). "Post-Truth Politics Afflicts the Global South, Too", available at: <https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/supporting-democracy-and-elections-with-integrity/annan-commission/post-truth-politics-afflicts-the-global-south-too/>.

In general, the strategies for the prevention and fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation depend on two key questions:

1. *What is the level of democracy in a society?* More democratic societies are more prone to strategies that vigorously preserve freedom of speech while preventing and combating fake news. They also keep communication channels (such as online media platforms and social networks) open, while at the same time working on raising awareness of fake news and raising media and political literacy among citizens, as part of a long-term strategy for the prevention and fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Nordic countries are an example of such an approach). On the other hand, less democratic and/or more authoritarian regimes mainly impose rigid approaches, aimed more at preserving the status quo in society rather than fighting against fake news. Closing communication channels for citizens and declaring those voicing opposition and dissident opinions to be fake news producers, liars, terrorists, etc. are the most common techniques (in Turkey, Iran, and China, but lately also in the USA).
2. *Who are the key actors in the spread of fake news?* The five main actors are the states themselves (as a form of propaganda and information warfare aimed at interfering in other states' internal issues and politics; Russian interference in Brexit and the US presidential election are the most recent examples); politicians and governments (using fake news as an internal propaganda device to keep citizens quiet and to guarantee their hold on power); the media (closely affiliated with or owned by political or business elites, using fake news to manipulate the public and create a public opinion which is not based on facts and a true picture of society); various social movements, such as the extreme right and anti-LGBTI, anti-feminist, and anti-migrant movements (spreading fake news mainly to discredit and dehumanise members of specific groups they oppose); and ordinary people (spreading fake news mainly due to a low level of media literacy and not being able to recognise manipulation and propaganda). To prevent information warfare, regional and global strategies need to be developed and international stakeholders engaged (such as UN and EU bodies). When it comes to politicians and state leaders using fake news, civil society actors need to become "allies" with citizens in the fight against such practices and, actually, fight for democracy (possible methods for doing so include fact-checking and campaigning). The fight against the spread of fake news by the media has to include both regulatory and self-regulatory bodies and civil society actors, which should work together to prevent such media wrongdoing (it is always important to mention that their activities have to ensure freedom of speech is fully respected). The fight against social movements involved in the spread of fake news must include long-term strategies, campaigning, and working with citizens to "break the cycle" of propaganda, fear-mongering, and negative narratives. When it comes to fake news spread by ordinary citizens, the only strategy that appears effective is the long-term development of media literacy skills and competencies.

When it comes to civil society organisations and their fight against the misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that jeopardise their work, strategies for breaking down the dominant narratives against them include:

- When it comes to civil society actors being accused (mainly by governments) of not being elected (as opposed to political parties and leaders in power), thus often putting their legitimacy in doubt, they need to continuously work on demonstrating that they are rooted in the population – for example by sharing stories of the people they work with in society and how they make changes in their lives (testimonials of some sort);
- When it comes to civil society actors being accused of being “foreign agents”, if they are supported by international donors, they need to disclose their funding and expenses to the general public (through their websites, annual reports, etc.) and to explain, in easily understandable terms, how the money is used to support local initiatives and communities. It may also help to explain the agenda of the civil society actors and their contribution to democracy and citizens’ welfare, and to carry out campaigns to promote their work. This, of course, will not stop (mainly) governments from levelling accusations at them, but it will help increase support among citizens;
- When it comes to civil society actors being accused of collaborating with the opposition (political parties), the solution might be to raise political literacy among the citizens, so that they understand the mission and agenda of civil society;
- When it comes to civil society actors being accused of “serving their own interests”, that is, working on projects from which only they benefit (which is usually supported by the “argument” that they have high salaries, travel abroad for trainings and seminars, and enjoy a privileged lifestyle), spending transparency is the best practice.

How can civil society contribute to the fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in society? The approach that we advocate is aimed at preserving (or strengthening) democratic values in societies, at preserving freedom of speech, and at working on enhancing citizens’ competencies to deal with fake news in a way that is useful to both themselves and their societies. Civil society could and should play a vital role in these processes, both in raising awareness of fake news and raising the level of civic education. This is even more important in less developed democracies, where civil society actors should consider integrating strategies for preventing and combating fake news into their wider strategies.

One could ask why we prefer civil society as opposed to state and/or global actors. Well, the answer is quite simple and obvious: while state actors in their fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation might (again especially in less democratic countries) put freedom of speech at risk, civil society has the potential to develop strategies (combining civic education and activism) to prevent and fight against misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation by more democratic means. Laura

Chincilla synthesised the debate on combating fake news and preserving democracy, stating:

And yet, the most important debate we could be having, in both developed and developing countries, might be whether or not the quality of our public conversations, as informed by national levels of education, human development and institutional strength, is sufficient to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, or to separate the just from the unjust, as Aristotle set forth in the 4th century B.C.²⁰

20 For more information see *ibid.*

7. Steps for preventing and fighting misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

As mentioned before, two main strategies (which have proven successful so far) are currently used at the global level to prevent and combat the spread of fake news and its use for political manipulation: fact-checking and media literacy.

Fact-checking has, in a way, moved one of the primary functions of media – verifying information before publishing it – from the media to other actors, mainly NGOs. There are two ways fact-checking is used: to monitor the veracity of political statements by leaders (there are numerous organisations and media outlets in the USA, for example, that fact-check statements made by Donald Trump), and to monitor the veracity of mass media content (mainly done by various NGOs). It is worth mentioning that, although it appears to be a new phenomenon that has developed with the rise of online media, fact-checking has existed before in traditional media, albeit with a slightly different approach. For example, the role of press councils worldwide is precisely to mediate between the media and the public in cases where the latter is not satisfied with media content in terms of factual accuracy, approach, context, etc. That is a form of fact-checking as well. However, in its contemporary manifestation, fact-checking is:

a process seeking to investigate (an issue) in order to verify the fact. However, while instructive, this necessarily concise definition is limited in its understanding of the practical outworkings of what constitutes fact-checking, the variation and scope of its practices, as well as the factors and social, political and cultural contexts in which fact-checking has become an established practice.²¹

Fact-checking is aimed at holding both political leaders and the media accountable. The work of fact-checkers helps the public better understand not only the factual accuracy of published information, but also the context, the framing, and the reasons why information is presented in certain ways. That, of course, requires the public to have an open mind and a specific set of skills and competencies, which leads to another important strategy for preventing the spread of fake news – media literacy.

A media literate person understands the roles and functions of media in society and is able to critically evaluate media content and to interact with media, especially online media, in a mindful way. A media literate person has a need for media education (which implies that media literacy is a learned competence, that is, it is not an intuitive skill acquired only through the use of media); a need for training in understanding the media

21 For more information see Leonard, Allan, Alan Meban, and Orna Young. “What is fact-checking and why is it important?”, available at: <https://coinform.eu/what-is-fact-checking-and-why-is-it-important/>.

(which implies the social role of the media and the need to understand how they are integrated into society); a need for constant questioning of media content (implying a critical attitude of users); and a need for self-expression (implying citizen participation in the communication community, not just their passive role in receiving media messages).

However, media literacy has another, equally important, dimension related to the use of media for the purpose of intercultural dialogue and social participation. UNESCO's resources and strategies for developing media literacy²² rightfully refers to this aspect of media literacy as a mechanism for contributing not only to an individual's quality of life, but also to society and the community. Specifically, if we were to take data, information, knowledge, and wisdom as the key contents of the global information community (or information society), we could say that the task of media literacy is to enable us to collect data and process information, but it must not stop there. Perhaps even more important is the creation of a knowledge pool in society, based on the collected data and available information. In addition, the goal of media literacy is the achievement of community wisdom, which would lead to a "responsible community" or "democratic society", in the ideal-typical sense of the term. A responsible community would be a community governed by those who know the most and who are elected by citizens who made an "informed choice" (based on a sufficient amount of validated, objective, reliable, quality information). Media literacy is thus understood as a prerequisite for competent participation in public life, and as such, it encompasses more than the interpretation and creation of media content. Its expanded definition includes critical thinking, global citizenship, communication, collaboration and leadership, and creativity and entrepreneurship. Alternatively, to paraphrase Gerjuoy's quote, often attributed to Toffler, the illiterate of the 21st century is not the one who cannot read and write, but the one who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn (Toffler, 1970: 414).

Such widely understood media literacy becomes a meta-competence – it goes beyond the interrelationship between the individual and the media, that is, media content, becoming a competence for social participation and global citizenship. It is clear that as such, it must be a part of the educational system, that is, educational strategies and policies. Moreover, it must be developed by applying the concept of lifelong learning, that is, through all five cycles of education: pre-school, primary, secondary, university, and adult education, and through formal and non-formal education programs. Media literacy can be either a separate course or a part of other courses and trainings, but in any case, it must consist of a combination of media knowledge and skills to use such knowledge, all for the purpose of managing the quality of people's lives and circumstances. As Angela Phillips says, "Without information that can be trusted, it is impossible for ordinary people to take part in the governance of their country.... [We need to] look for something better because we have not, as yet, evolved a means of providing trustworthy channels of information that do not over-represent the views of the most powerful to the detriment of the rest" (Phillips, 2015: 11).

22 More details at: <http://www.unesco.org>.

8. Concluding remarks: is there an exit strategy at the global, regional, and local levels?

As this paper has tried to show, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation have become a great obstacle to contemporary societies and a great threat to democratic values in these societies. At the global, regional, and local levels, they cause conflicts, harm citizens, and mislead decision-making processes. Information disorder results in societal disorder, and the rise of fake news and manipulation through alternative facts results in a rise of populism worldwide and vice versa. Since this infodemia²³ is global, reaction to it has to be global as well.

Media literate citizens, responsible media outlets (responsible to the public and truth) that do pre-publishing fact-checking, NGOs that do post-publishing fact-checking, and political leaders that provide a democratic environment for public debate based on facts would, indeed, create the perfect society, which we could call a true democracy. However, this is, at this very moment, a pure utopia. Raising the level of media literacy and expanding the practice of fact-checking are two important steps that need to be taken in order to combat fake news and political manipulation, but at this point we would recommend some other steps as well:

- Clear criteria for and precise definitions of fake news should be adopted globally in order to create global strategies for preventing and combating fake news dissemination, and in order to prevent political leaders in non-democratic societies from using the fight against fake news as a reason or excuse to limit free speech in their societies.
- Rules and regulations, as well as strategies, should be adopted globally, but need to be adjusted to the regional and local context. Simple copy-paste practices would not work worldwide.
- Awareness campaigns should be developed both globally and locally in order to make people more aware of manipulation.
- Since online media platforms are becoming the new “battlefield” for the spread of fake news and manipulation, IT companies and platform owners (including Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) should work closely with the EU, the UN, and other international organisations in preventing and combating the spread of fake news.

23 The term has been widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic to describe how the spread of fake news and unreliable information is becoming global.

- Civil society actors could and should play a crucial role in both raising awareness of the spread of fake news and providing tools and competencies to citizens so that they can better understand these forms of manipulation and can better deal with them.
- In all these processes, the protection of free speech is crucial. No strategy or regulation for preventing fake news should be implemented at the expense of limiting the freedom of speech in any society or country.

This paper has made it clear that misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation have become new threats to democracy. As mentioned before, information disorder is creating global political and economic disorder as well. Consequently, all global, regional, and local actors (at the national, supranational, and subnational levels) should be included in strategies for preventing and combating these threats.

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Imprint

Published by Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e. V., International Democracy Programme,
Gajev trg 2, 71000 Sarajevo

Contact: Merima Šišić, Project Coordinator, **E** merima.sisic@de.boell.org

Editor: Todd Brown

Place of publication: www.boell.de/en

Release date: August 2020

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