

Disinformation and Threats to Democratic Integrity: Social, Business, and Political Contexts.

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ABSTRACT

Disinformation has emerged as a significant threat to democratic integrity, particularly within the context of social, business, and political environments. This study employs a qualitative methodology, which is essential for understanding the complexities of social phenomena, and utilizes bibliographic research as its primary research procedure. The general objective of this paper is to discuss disinformation and the threats it poses to democratic integrity. The research concludes that in the contemporary international system, disinformation is a tactic employed by both democratic and non-democratic regimes, being particularly pronounced in countries where there are weaknesses in the information and security systems.

Keywords: *Disinformation, Democratic Integrity, Social Contexts, Political Contexts.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Disinformation has become an increasingly prevalent and concerning phenomenon in contemporary society, with significant impacts on the integrity of democratic processes. This scenario necessitates an in-depth analysis to understand its implications and potential solutions. The dissemination of false news often reinforces existing prejudices and divisions within society. This can lead to a polarization that intensifies, where different groups become entrenched in their own "information bubbles," ignoring information that does not confirm their beliefs.

The relevance of this study is justified by the growing threat that disinformation poses to democracy, particularly with the rise of social media and the dissemination of false news. The manipulation of public opinion through distorted or fabricated information can lead to polarization, undermine trust in institutions, and even influence electoral outcomes. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the mechanisms and actors involved in this process to develop effective strategies for combating disinformation and preserving democratic integrity.

The research adopts a qualitative approach, which is essential for understanding the complexity of social phenomena. The general objective of this article is to discuss disinformation and the threats to democratic integrity. To achieve this purpose, the specific objectives are: to investigate the facilitators of disinformation; to highlight the dangers posed by disinformation that proliferates on social networks; to relate disinformation, post-truth, and fake news in the contemporary public sphere; and to emphasize the external and internal interferences that provoke disinformation.

The article is structured into four sections. The first is this introduction, in which the research objectives are explained. The second section is dedicated to the methodology employed in the development of the study. In the third section, a theoretical foundation on the addressed themes is developed. Finally, the fourth section is reserved for the conclusion, where the final considerations are presented.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The methodology of the article titled "Disinformation and Threats to Democratic Integrity" adopts a qualitative approach, which is essential for understanding the complexity of social phenomena. According to Creswell (2017, p. 25), "qualitative research seeks to understand human experience and the meaning that individuals attribute to their lived experiences." The research procedure employed was bibliographic research, which consists of a systematic review of the existing literature on the subject.

According to Gil (2019, p. 15), "bibliographic research is a survey of information already published on a given subject, allowing the researcher to understand the state of the art." The research is grounded in scientific articles obtained from reputable journals as well as dissertations that address the same theme, enabling a thorough analysis of the implications of disinformation for democratic integrity.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Facilitators and Disinformation

At the outset, it is important to note that this research does not aim to delve into a problematic discussion regarding the objectivity of knowledge and the subjectivization of truth at the moment it enters a discursive practice. It is clarified that, for the authors, it is entirely sufficient to consider the element of intentionality in the manipulation of reality (understood as data or information about facts) as the distinguishing factor between truth and falsehood; between what appears to be true and what is transformed into falsehood.

It is well-known that, in politics, intentionality plays a crucial role in the acquisition of power in its various forms. Thus, the ability to manipulate reality strengthens the power of those who possess it, both in relative and absolute terms. With the "complexification" of politics, which occurs at multiple interconnected levels and involves a variety of actors, both formal and informal, in national and international contexts, the capacity to manipulate reality enables simultaneous action across different spheres, generating a variety of effects both in the short and long term.

Regarding the manipulation of reality, Safatle (2019, p. 216) argues that: "The manipulation of reality becomes an essential tool for those seeking power, allowing them to shape perceptions and influence decisions across multiple spheres."

The widespread use of digital media has provided every individual with the opportunity to create and disseminate disinformation rapidly, especially through sharing on social networks, reaching a potentially global audience.

Information technology offers powerful tools for the large-scale propagation of false information, such as so-called bots, which are automated programs capable of viralizing content on social media. It is believed that these bots were extensively used during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly when President Bolsonaro himself stated that "those who took the COVID-19 vaccine would contract AIDS." This is a moment that requires a high level of alertness, as a recognized figure such as the president of a nation propagated this fake news during his live broadcasts (Domingos, 2021).

The techniques for manipulating information have become increasingly sophisticated, particularly with the advent of deepfake technology, which utilizes artificial intelligence to overlay one person's face onto another in videos, creating realistic effects, or to reproduce someone's voice, attributing words to them that were never spoken.

Regarding deepfake, França (2023, p. 01) states: "Contemporary society is accompanied by a series of technological innovations, especially those related to the production of digital content. Such resources unfold into sources of disinformation, as exemplified by what has been termed deepfake imagery."

Additionally, due to low costs and ease of use, anyone has the capacity to create websites or blogs that disseminate false news, where opinions and comments can be disguised as impartial information. These manipulation methods, when compared to conventional approaches, tend to impact the emotional sphere of the recipients, generating more persistent effects.

3.2 Disinformation Advancing on Social Networks

Manipulated information can have varying impacts depending on the nature of the emitters and the channels used for its dissemination, such as television, print media, online newspapers, and social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and Kwai. The public's reaction to exposure to this manipulated information is becoming increasingly unpredictable: the creation and dissemination of fake news can provoke disorientation, indignation, and concern, but can also be met with curiosity and amusement, sometimes encouraging the desire to participate in the "creative" process of disinformation.

Regarding the creation and dissemination of fake news that leads to disinformation, Tatiana Dourado (2020) demonstrated in her doctoral thesis that, from a sample of 57 fake news items propagated primarily by 1,073 accounts, which reached nearly 4 million shares in the final months of the 2018 elections, Jair Bolsonaro was the greatest beneficiary, directly or indirectly, of the distribution of fake news, while Lula/Haddad were the main victims.

Promoting media literacy among the population, teaching critical skills to evaluate the veracity of information and understand how the algorithms that govern digital platforms work. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2017), media education involves a set of competencies so that students are able to analyze and evaluate information, and thus interact in society in a critical and reflective way, within the technological context that involves a variety of media tools and platforms.

Hobbs and Jensen (2009, p.07) had already pointed out that:

Media education requires active questioning and critical thinking about the messages we create and receive; it is an expanded conceptualization of literacy; it develops competencies for learners of all ages and requires integrated, interactive, and repeated practice; its purpose is to develop informed, reflective, and engaged participants, essential for a democratic society; the media are seen as part of culture and function as agents of socialization; and people use their skills, beliefs, and experiences to make sense of media messages.

The process of disseminating disinformation easily allows anyone to be either a recipient or an author of false information. On social networks, in particular, a process of opinion polarization occurs, characterized by the presence of conflicting factions, fueled by information—whether true or manipulated—that supports different positions.

The degradation of political debate, the politics of hatred and resentment that lead to viewing political opponents as enemies to be fought by any means, and the delegitimization of competencies regarding opinions have contributed to the emergence of populism in its various forms. With the circulation of disinformation through social networks, which, unlike print media and traditional journalism, do not always apply rigorous fact-checking systems (especially due to the precariousness of journalism and the frequent use of freelance journalists), debunking fake news becomes particularly challenging. For social networks, the question arises of who has the legitimacy to control the content published, in addition to the lack of consensus on how to act in response to the publication of false news.

D'Almonte, Siqueira, and Silva (2023) conducted a study that involved the collection of 80 fake news items about vaccines from Brazilian websites specializing in debunking, a strategy for detecting and unmasking disinformation. Through the application of an analytical protocol, the researchers mapped the main characteristics present in the formulation of these publications. Content analysis revealed that Facebook and WhatsApp are the most utilized social networks for disseminating this type of content.

Approximately 59% of the fake news items are entirely false, and most narratives emphasize potential risks of vaccines as a persuasive strategy. The most cited sources are purportedly doctors and scientists, aiming to create a sense of reliability. The survey also indicated that 60% of the publications contained grammatical and spelling errors in their texts.

As can be observed, the issue under analysis is not simple, as it involves a change in the very essence of the network, the (re)definition of users' spaces of freedom on the platforms, the assumption of significant authority by non-state entities, and the possible reconfiguration of the relationship between platforms and public institutions, whether state or international.

The establishment of the Facebook Oversight Board, a collegiate body created to ensure additional and independent control over the removal of content and the suspension of accounts for alleged violations of community standards, clearly illustrates the challenges, risks, and opportunities present in this context.

If governments are tasked with regulating the sector, at least two risks may arise: the first is that some governments (not only authoritarian ones) might exploit the situation to control the content that their citizens share, deciding which messages should be kept and which should be removed, thereby infringing upon the delicate sphere of freedom of expression; the second is that, in the absence of global governance, a wide range of distinct regulations could emerge, resulting in significant inequalities in internet access and compromising its essence as a global network.

Nohara and Moreira (2023, p. 02) report that:

In Brazil, since the introduction of PL 2.630 in 2020, under the rapporteurship of Orlando Silva in the Chamber of Deputies, there have been significant advances regarding the consensus and debates on the limits and impacts of the freedom to disseminate information on platforms, devices, and networks. However, this project remains under in-depth discussion.

The issue of guaranteeing equality manifests itself in another way: although anyone with internet access can, in principle, create and disseminate fake news, combating disinformation requires technical skills, general knowledge, analytical capacity, and the use of sources. Furthermore, the growing use of artificial intelligence to address disinformation is currently concentrated in specialized centers, which means that not everyone has the same opportunities to differentiate true information from manipulated information.

The aforementioned trends can weaken democratic regimes and the practices that sustain them. On the one hand, the internal political dynamic is characterized by a high level of belligerence, undermining good governance and administrative efficiency; on the other hand, various external actors—such as states, economic agents, and organized networks—can interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, especially at critical moments like elections. Within countries, the use of disinformation tends to create an environment of distrust and conflict, favoring charismatic political figures who can polarize the electorate and take advantage of this situation.

It is important to note that the use of rumors, lies, and out-of-context information as a political strategy is an age-old practice. However, the scale at which disinformation is disseminated on social networks has elevated this issue to a new level, with the potential to threaten democracy itself. In this sense, it is not surprising that most recent research in political science addressing the democratic crisis includes this theme (Mounk, 2019; Snyder, 2019).

In the Brazilian context, during the 2018 election, this issue became central to the public debate. Media reports and in-depth analyses showed how Bolsonaro's presidential campaign intensively used fake news as an electoral tactic. This resulted in the creation of the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, known as the "CPMI das Fake News," in the National Congress, and prompted the drafting of several proposals to regulate this phenomenon (Rodrigues; Bonone & Mielli, 2021).

Various manipulation strategies aim to support or discredit political leaders, promoting the personalization of politics at the expense of the party system and mediation. Strategies for controlling disinformation can also compromise democracy by conferring more power to the entities responsible for this control and, with regard to regulatory intervention by states, allowing them to censor certain information, labeling it as disinformation, in order to exercise strict control over public opinion (Rodrigues; Bonone & Mielli, 2021).

In a broader panorama, disinformation can result in lasting consequences, such as widespread skepticism and distrust towards the information system, political and social institutions, and can affect the ability to meaningfully participate in the democratic public debate.

3.3 Disinformation, Post-Truth and Fake News in the Contemporary Public Sphere

Recently, the debate on disinformation has gained widespread international visibility; however, the meaning of the term seems to have acquired new characteristics compared to the 20th-century concept. Until a few decades ago, the term referred to a "gray" or "black" propaganda tactic employed by political actors – operating in democratic, authoritarian or totalitarian regimes – with the aim of maximizing consensus through communication techniques designed to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and influence the behavior of the masses. Currently, disinformation presents more subtle contours: the number of actors using it has expanded, not only for political reasons but also for commercial or recreational purposes.

Moreover, the variety of technological means and techniques enabling the creation and dissemination of false or manipulated information has increased, allowing specific targets to be precisely reached through big data profiles and analyses.

In the context of Brazil, the largest democracy in Latin America, the documentary "La fabrique du mensonge" (The Lie Factory) recalls the controversies generated during the last presidential campaign, where supporters of then-candidate Jair Bolsonaro believed and spread, through various social media, several false news items accusing the candidates of the Workers' Party (PT), Bolsonaro's main rival, of trying to implement the so-called "gay kit" and "penis-shaped pacifier" in public schools. These allegations were seen as attempts to induce children to adopt a gender ideology and consider homosexuality as a sexual option. This wave of disinformation was sustained by a structure known as the "hate office," where followers of Bolsonarist ideals massively sent false or misleading messages using a widely popular tool among Brazilians: WhatsApp (Guiol, 2020).

It is urgent to identify solutions (or "democratic filters") to prevent the manipulation of public opinion and contain disinformation, relying on cultural institutions, the educational system, intellectuals and information professionals, since, at the beginning of the third millennium, the possibility of effectively combating the proliferation of false and manipulated information seems like a mirage.

Nascimento (2022, p. 22) states that:

In the Brazilian context, it is evident that in the spheres of politics, economics and public management, there are clear attempts to manipulate information with the aim of gaining popular support for projects such as labor reform and the privatization of public and state-owned companies. Moreover, through misleading or false information, there is excessive encouragement of entrepreneurship and the uberization of labor, the mobilization of certain political groups on social networks, and the collection of user profile data for targeted political advertising.

This may be linked to the fact that, compared to a century ago, a remarkable transformation has occurred: indifference to truth or accuracy has become the norm, rather than the exception, in the conduct of political debate and the formation of public opinion. This indifference to truth reveals itself as an essential characteristic of the discursive regime of our societies, as well as being a widely disseminated epistemological attitude among individuals. In short, we could call this transformation post-truth.

Siebert and Pereira (2020, p. 08) state that:

The definition of post-truth is related to a political act, reflecting a society that prioritizes its well-being in relation to information rather than being concerned with its quality or veracity. Influenced by ideologies, the individual tends to be selective in their beliefs, accepting as true the information that strengthens their discourse and their ideological and historical position.

The role of disinformation, especially fake news, becomes fundamental: in a post-truth regime, truth claims do not disappear; on the contrary, we observe a proliferation and politicization of truth, where facts (data, images, news) are transformed into tools for the creation of alternative truths. Just as post-truth, fake news also faces defining challenges.

Post-truth manifests itself in the form of memes, jokes, headlines, books, rumors, in short, a succession of quick and constant statements that resonate with certain meanings, support certain positions, and contradict common sense. Simultaneously, post-truth seems to precede the statement, being in the order of the ideological (Siebert & Pereira, 2020).

Some authors question the relevance of continuing to use the term "fake news," arguing that it lacks a clear and widely accepted meaning, is descriptively limited, and is often used as a political weapon. However, although these reasons indicate that the term fake news is problematic, they do not seem sufficient to justify scholars abandoning the term, allowing it to remain in the hands of propagandists of various political orientations who use it to discredit opponents and reinforce their own truth claims (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandocjr, Weilim & Ling, 2018).

Currently, we do not have a better term to describe information that is partially or totally false, but still has a certain degree of plausibility and is rapidly disseminated through digital communication technologies. In a discursive context characterized by post-truth, the relevance of narrative, and the predominance of an emotional logic, what really matters is the impression the news makes on the mind of the reader or listener, and, above all, the practical effect it produces.

However, it is essential to understand that the ongoing changes in political discourse are happening in the context of a "platformized" public sphere, where different platforms - a term that encompasses websites of various natures and levels of complexity, from public administration portals to review and reservation service websites, in addition to social networks - not only reflect, but also shape the social reality in which they operate.

Thus, the web is not just a medium or infrastructure, but an ecosystem that influences content, modes of production, and forms of communication consumption, including politics, and within which power relations are established. Due to its intermediary nature, digital communication makes news consumption appear to be an individual choice - we choose which headline to click, but often this choice is facilitated, if not induced, by algorithms that analyze our social networks and browsing preferences. Moreover, due to the virality that characterizes it, each piece of news becomes material for "real-time" sharing and commenting within circuits formed by the aggregation of similar preferences, where opinions tend to consolidate and polarize (referring to "information shards" and "echo chambers").

The expressions "information bubbles" and "echo chambers," although just metaphors in the face of the dynamics of circulation on digital social networks, are used to understand the flow of information in these environments, which limit access to a wide spectrum of information that may contradict other worldviews of the user. Studies indicate that echo chamber effects contribute to opinion polarization, virality, and the spread of disinformation, constituting an initial movement for diffusion (Törnberg, 2018; Burns, 2019).

The danger of the so-called 'imperialism of platforms,' which like the great powers of a century ago would wage war to extract data from digital interactions and use it to obtain maximum profit, can have significant consequences. More serious implications of consumerism and the ecological crisis linked to the processes of production, distribution, and disposal of industrial products, if we consider the possible effects of digital psychopolitics, which would allow, through big data, access to the collective unconscious and understand and

exploit the psychosocial dynamics of the masses, the more serious implications of consumerism and even the ecological crisis become evident.

The widespread ease of access to information provided by digital technology does not seem to have improved individuals' ability to diversify their sources of information and develop their critical thinking. "Tailor-made" information, within the intermediary and documentary context - where everyone has access to the necessary tools and knowledge to create and disseminate documents that support their truth claims - not only does not prevent, but also makes it increasingly difficult to identify disinformation in a traditional way.

In light of all this, it is important to highlight that the extent that disinformation can reach is so vast and ancient that this phenomenon can be easily identified in "history books, political speeches, comic books or widely circulated newspapers. It is not an isolated action, but rather a complex set of actions that create an intentionally elaborated scenario" (Brisola & Bezerra, 2018, p. 15).

While we all become information hunters, paradoxically, we lack guidance to help us not be overwhelmed by information flows. We are facing a discomfort known as information fatigue syndrome, which compromises our analytical capacity and makes us vulnerable to disinformation.

3.4 External and Internal Interferences

The contemporary information system, characterized by increasingly equitable accessibility, extensive and unlimited penetration, as well as a wide range of tools that allow for the manipulation and dissemination of information, can generate or intensify international tensions and conflicts. The dissemination of information and disinformation transcends national borders, and control over the content of messages is not the exclusive prerogative of authorities with internationally recognized legitimacy.

In the absence of global governance over the use of platforms, an anarchic and fragmented regime has been established. In this scenario, some actors who do not always respond to the will of the governments of the countries in which they operate, but who may be aligned with or share their orientations, especially in foreign policy, have the opportunity to take actions to influence the internal politics of third countries.

Gomes, Holanda Filho, and Costa (2020, p. 08) assert that:

The dissemination of false information aims to deceive people, and individuals often do not realize that it is always necessary to verify the source and quality of this information. The approach and variations of this information are quite diverse; some are related to conspiracy theories, to inappropriate policies of certain governments, while others exploit a true discourse and surreptitiously include false data within it [...].

When analyzing disinformation campaigns that utilize replicative tools, such as bots, it is essential to identify who the 'principal' is, and if it is not possible to clearly determine the involvement of government agencies, to investigate the relationship between the government and the agents (individuals or groups) involved. Often, especially in non-democratic contexts, some individuals act autonomously, aligning themselves with governmental views to gain recognition and benefits from central authorities, but this does not automatically imply that these individuals are acting under the guidance of the governments (Recuero, 2018).

Another complex issue is the definition and measurement of the influence exerted through disinformation campaigns. Even when there is evidence of disturbance by agents located in third countries, who disseminate manipulated messages to influence a specific outcome in an election, it is necessary to evaluate not only the magnitude (number of accounts reached) but also the nature of the message, that is, to classify its content (such as derogatory language or falsified data) (Recuero, 2018).

In general, disinformation campaigns are influenced by partisan media, which are communication vehicles that generate content with the appearance of journalism and claim to present an "alternative" truth to that disseminated by traditional media. This results in the creation of a parallel narrative based on false or manipulated information (Tucker et al., 2018; Larsson, 2019).

The nature of the recipients is crucial to understanding whether disinformation aims solely to reinforce the positions of groups communicating in so-called "echo chambers" that are politically aligned with the agents of disinformation, or if it seeks to alter the position of opposing groups. If the flow of disinformation reaches groups with opposing or neutral views, it is necessary to assess whether this truly provokes a change in opinion and voting intention. Currently, studies providing clear information on these aspects remain scarce.

Fonseca and Santos Neto (2021, p. 08) report that:

The current political scenario, which has been forming over the years based on an alternative access structure through networks and social media, is increasingly aligned with discussions about the impact of communication on voting decisions. Thus, it is observed that the way information can be manipulated to target a specific audience or objective is configured within a new social process: fake news—directly linked to the processes of disinformation and post-truth.

As can be observed, voting is heavily influenced by social media, but it is also still affected by traditional factors such as education level, belonging to a specific social context, gender, age, place of residence (large cities or small localities), as well as the internal political system and the information system. When external attacks

occur, this is often due to internal failures in control systems and/or the presence of incomplete information or information contaminated by disinformation produced by competing internal actors. Regarding the risk of external interferences, it is important to note that disinformation is a complex process that must be evaluated at all its stages, involving various actors (Soares, 2020).

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research exposes the risks that disinformation poses to democracy, analyzing its internal and external ramifications. It reports that, within democratic countries, disinformation is primarily used to support or challenge the credibility and public image of political leaders and parties, influencing the relationships between majorities and oppositions.

The article reveals that when considering the construction or strengthening of consensus, disinformation becomes a tactic that allows for the influence of public opinion, especially through social networks, activating and reinforcing polarized opinions based on specific worldviews and contaminating public debate. It directs citizens' attention to certain topics and events, diverting it from others that may have even greater political relevance.

It is noteworthy that although governments are becoming increasingly active in addressing disinformation, it is important to emphasize that they are not the only actors involved in disinformation campaigns and that the interests of those disseminating false or manipulated information can vary widely.

In light of all that has been researched, the study indicates that disinformation represents a complex challenge with varied characteristics for contemporary democracies, requiring a comprehensive and collaborative approach to mitigate its effects. The key to addressing this phenomenon lies in the combination of education, appropriate regulation, and robust journalism. Only through coordinated and sustained efforts will it be possible to preserve the integrity of democratic processes and ensure an informed and resilient society.

Finally, it is concluded that in the contemporary international system, disinformation is a tactic employed by both democratic and non-democratic regimes, being particularly pronounced in countries where there are weaknesses in the information and security systems.

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