

REG

5/2026 (10)

MAYO - JUNIO

ISSN electrónico: 2697-0511

REVISTA
DE ESTUDIOS
GLOBALES

ANÁLISIS HISTÓRICO
Y CAMBIO SOCIAL

SUMARIO

PRESENTACIÓN

ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	Política y Pospolítica en la Modernidad Hipertecnológica	7
ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	Datafication and the Crisis of the Person in Postpolitical Society	13
ALEJANDRO DE HARO HONRUBIA	Los desafíos de las nuevas tecnologías en la modernidad líquida. Una propuesta antro-po-técnica frente a los riesgos de la necro-técnica para la condición humana	31
CAMILA CUELLO	Entre el Mundo y el Desierto: Una lectura arendtiana de las redes sociales	45
CARL DOLAN	Disinformation, Democracy and the Myth of the Informed Citizen	61
JORDAN ZALIS	The Role of Integrated Marketing and Media Technology in the Diplomatic Projection of U.S. State Power	85
MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD ALEXANDER DANIEL CASTLETON FLORES	La Propiedad de los Medios de Pensamiento: Tecnología, Pospolítica y el Gobierno de Nadie	119

ESTUDIOS

RAMIRO HERNÁNDEZ ROMERO	La guerra fría ideológico-cultural en América Latina: la controversia del Proyecto Simpático en Colombia	129
RUTH FERRERO-TURRIÓN	Capitalismo autoritario: mutaciones neoliberales, soberanía corporativa y resistencias democráticas	169

CRÍTICA

ANTONIO VIÑAO FRAGO	Escolarización y medio rural: ¿progreso o imposición, modernización o aculturación, movilidad social o desarraigo?	195
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Disinformation, Democracy and the Myth of the Informed Citizen

Carl Dolan

European Policy Centre
Bruselas

Abstract: There is an emerging policy discourse in the European Union that the current democratic malaise that Europe is facing is a product of a 'post-truth' mentality that is contemporaneous with, and caused by, the rise in social media use. More specifically the ease with which malign actors can disseminate disinformation via social media and online more generally has a material effect on political processes and democratic elections. I argue that this discourse exaggerates both the novelty and perniciousness of online disinformation for democracy.

Key words: Political Speech; Democracy; Disinformation.

Desinformación, Democracia y el mito del ciudadano informado

Resumen: Existe un discurso político emergente en la Unión Europea según el cual el actual malestar democrático al que se enfrenta Europa es producto de una mentalidad de la «posverdad», contemporánea y provocada por el aumento del uso de las redes sociales. Más concretamente, se sostiene que la facilidad con la que actores malintencionados pueden difundir desinformación a través de las redes sociales y de internet en general tiene un efecto significativo sobre los procesos políticos y las elecciones democráticas. En este trabajo argumento que este discurso exagera tanto la novedad como el carácter perjudicial de la desinformación en internet para la democracia.

Palabras clave: Discurso Político; Democracia; Desinformación.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6018/reg.721501>
<https://revistas.um.es/reg>
ISSN electrónico: 2697-0511

1. Introduction

Questions concerning the relationship between democracy and information are almost as old as representative democracy itself. From Walter Lippmann's critique of public opinion in the aftermath of the First World War to contemporary concerns regarding the impact of digital media on democracy, democratic theorists have repeatedly questioned whether democratic self-government depends upon citizens possessing accurate political knowledge. Recent European policy has given this longstanding debate renewed urgency. Over the past decade, the European Union has progressively identified online disinformation as a major threat to democratic resilience, arguing that foreign influence operations, algorithmically amplified misinformation and digital platform vulnerabilities undermine citizens' ability to make autonomous political judgements and thereby threaten the integrity of the democratic process. (Lippmann, 1922; Habermas, 1989; Herwig et al, 2023; Achen & Bartels, 2016).

This worldview is now a core tenet of EU policies to protect democracy. Naturally, this has been heavily influenced by the current geo-political context. Concerns about disinformation surfaced following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and have been reinforced by Russian meddling in the 2016 United States presidential election, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The result is a series of policy frameworks designed to protecting the democratic information environment. The 2020 European Democracy Action Plan, the 2023 Defence of Democracy Package and the European Democracy Shield together reflect a deep-seated conviction that defending democracy requires safeguarding the conditions under which citizens acquire political information and form political preferences. (European Commission, 2020, 2023; European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

The underlying premise is intuitively persuasive. If democratic legitimacy depends upon citizens making political choices based on accurate information, then systematic efforts to distort the information environment constitute a direct threat to democracy itself. Under this view, disinformation is not simply a problem of foreign interference or media policy; it is a fundamental threat to the integrity of the public sphere and therefore democracy itself.

This article argues that such claims should be treated with caution. It advances two related arguments. The first is empirical. Although foreign influence operations, coordinated disinformation campaigns and algorithmically amplified misinformation are well documented, the evidence that these phenomena have materially altered democratic outcomes remains considerably weaker than the contemporary policy discourse would suggest. Demonstrat-

ing that organised attempts at manipulation exist is not the same as demonstrating that they have materially or systematically changed electoral behaviour. Between the production of misleading information and democratic outcomes lie a series of distinct empirical questions concerning exposure, attention, persuasion and behavioural change, each requiring separate evidential support.

The second argument is theoretical. Contemporary European policy rests upon an implicit epistemic conception of democracy in which democratic legitimacy depends upon citizens forming political judgements within an information environment that is sufficiently accurate, pluralistic and free from manipulation. Although rarely articulated explicitly, this understanding bears the fingerprints of Jürgen Habermas conception of deliberative democracy. Yet a substantial body of democratic theory and behavioural political science casts doubt upon whether representative democracy has ever depended upon the existence of highly informed citizens. Beginning with Walter Lippmann's critique of public opinion and extending through Philip Converse, Samuel Popkin and Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, scholars have repeatedly questioned whether ordinary citizens possess either the information or the cognitive capacity necessary to satisfy the epistemic demands often attributed to democratic theory. (Habermas, 1989, 1996; Lippmann, 1922; Converse, 1964; Popkin, 1991; Achen & Bartels, 2016).

These two arguments are closely connected. The democratic significance attributed to disinformation depends not only upon evidence concerning its empirical effects but also upon assumptions regarding how democracy functions. If democracy requires citizens to make carefully reasoned political judgements on the basis of accurate information, then disinformation naturally appears as an existential democratic threat. Conversely, if democratic politics has always operated through heuristics, identities, social affiliations and imperfect information, then the existence of disinformation, while undoubtedly undesirable, may appear less a novel species of threat than a familiar feature of representative politics.

The argument traces the origins and consequences of the EU's preoccupation with the distortive effects of disinformation on the European public sphere. The first section reconstructs the evolution of European Union policy on disinformation over the last decade, demonstrating how concerns regarding foreign information manipulation gradually became integrated into a broader conception of democratic resilience. Rather than simply reviewing policy developments, the section identifies the implicit conception of democratic legitimacy embedded within successive Commission initiatives. The

second section examines two frequently cited examples of online disinformation—the Russian influence operation during the 2016 United States presidential election and the annulment of Romania’s 2024 presidential election—to assess the empirical claims of significant impact on democratic outcomes. The third revisits the classic debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, arguing that contemporary concerns regarding disinformation reproduce questions first posed a century ago about the informational foundations of democracy. The fourth examines the tension between deliberative democratic theory and contemporary behavioural political science through the work of Habermas, Converse, Popkin, and Achen and Bartels. The conclusion argues that while digital technologies have unquestionably transformed the way we communicate in politics (as in other domains), the idea that it has made public opinion easier to manipulate, and therefore is an existential threat to democracy, should be scrutinised more closely.

2. EU Policy Discourse on Disinformation and Democracy

The European Union’s contemporary concern with disinformation did not emerge as a general theory of democratic decline. Rather, it developed incrementally in response to a series of geopolitical, technological and institutional developments that progressively reshaped how European policymakers understood the relationship between information and democracy. What began as an external security concern focused primarily on Russian information operations has gradually evolved into a much broader conception of democratic resilience in which the integrity of the information environment has become central to democratic governance itself.

Understanding this evolution is important because it reveals that European policy has not merely expanded the range of instruments used to combat disinformation. It has also, largely implicitly, adopted a particular conception of democratic legitimacy. Successive policy documents increasingly assume that democratic participation depends upon citizens forming political judgements within an information environment that is sufficiently pluralistic, transparent and free from manipulation. Although rarely articulated in theoretical language, this represents a significant shift in how democratic vulnerability is conceptualised.

From Strategic Communication to Democratic Resilience

The origins of the European Union’s disinformation agenda are usually traced to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ensuing deterioration of the Union’s security environment. In March 2015, the European Council explicitly recognised «Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns» and called for

a coordinated European response. This led to the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force within the European External Action Service (EEAS), whose initial mandate was to improve the Union's capacity to identify, analyse and respond to Russian information activities directed primarily at Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans. (European Council, 2015; European Commission, 2018).

At this stage, the policy problem was understood principally as one of strategic communication. Russian disinformation was viewed as an instrument of hybrid conflict accompanying broader geopolitical competition rather than as a general threat to democratic politics within the Union itself. As Pamment (2020) observes, the initial emphasis lay in improving the Union's capacity to detect and respond to coordinated foreign influence operations rather than regulating domestic political communication. (Pamment, 2020).

The geopolitical context changed dramatically following the 2016 United States presidential election. Allegations concerning Russian interference, together with the subsequent Cambridge Analytica revelations, transformed public understanding of digital political communication. A benign view of social media platforms as neutral channels for information exchange gave way to a darker vision of these platforms as the opaque plumbing of our democratic town hall, facilitating political manipulation on an unprecedented scale. Disinformation consequently moved from the margins of foreign policy into the centre of debates concerning democratic governance. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Information Commissioner's Office, 2018).

The European Commission's 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation reflected this transition. Although retaining a strong emphasis on countering foreign interference, the Action Plan broadened the policy agenda to include cooperation with online platforms and support for fact-checking initiatives. Importantly, however, the document did not yet present disinformation as the defining challenge facing European democracy. Rather, it is represented as one among several emerging vulnerabilities associated with digital transformation. (European Commission & High Representative, 2018).

The European Democracy Action Plan

The publication of the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) in December 2020 represented a decisive pivot in EU policy-making – the first ever policy document that outlined an EU agenda on democratic resilience within the Union. Unlike the 2018 Action Plan which mainly focused on countering foreign propaganda, the EDAP embedded disinformation within a comprehensive strategy for protecting democracy itself. The significance of the document

lies less in its individual policy proposals than in the conception of democracy upon which those proposals rest: (European Commission, 2020).

«For participation to be meaningful, citizens must also be able to form their own judgements—they should be able to make electoral choices in a public space where a plurality of views can be expressed freely and where free media, academia and civil society can play their role in stimulating open debate, free from malign interference, either domestic or foreign.» (European Commission, 2020, p. 1)

In these opening statements, the Commission explicitly links meaningful democratic participation directly to citizens' ability to form autonomous political judgements. Democracy is therefore understood not simply as a procedure for aggregating preferences through elections but as a process whose legitimacy depends upon the epistemic quality of the environment in which those preferences are formed. (European Commission, 2020, p. 1).

This conception continues throughout the document. Digital technologies are said to have created «new vulnerabilities» by facilitating the rapid dissemination of false information, coordinated manipulation and opaque algorithmic amplification. These developments are presented as threats to electoral integrity because they allegedly compromise citizens' capacity for independent political judgement. (European Commission, 2020, p. 1).

Evidence and Assumptions

One striking feature of the evolving policy discourse is the relationship between evidence and causal inference. Successive Commission documents provide extensive evidence that foreign influence operations occur. The EUvs-Disinfo database, national intelligence assessments, platform investigations and reports from cybersecurity agencies document numerous attempts to manipulate online political communication. The existence of coordinated disinformation campaigns by foreign actors is therefore not in doubt, rather the question of democratic effect. (European Commission, 2020; Pamment, 2020).

An early assessment by James Pamment of European disinformation policy is noteworthy in this regard. While recognising the seriousness of foreign influence operations, he observed that «the evidence of harm caused by disinformation and influence operations is patchy, and sufficient evidence for the effectiveness of countermeasures is lacking» (Pamment, 2020, p. 3). He goes on to point out the limited public engagement of documented campaigns: «Russia's scattershot approach to disinformation entails running multiple campaigns simultaneously, with some achieving notoriety while the vast majority of them fail to attract attention from the target audiences or gain trac-

tion» (Pamment, 2020, p. 3). In his view, the concept of disinformation had become increasingly imprecise, encompassing everything from accidental misinformation to sophisticated intelligence operations.

Demonstrating that influence operations exist is analytically distinct from demonstrating that they significantly alter democratic behaviour. Yet policy documents frequently pass from the first proposition to the second while skirting over the intervening causal mechanisms.

This distinction is particularly important because democratic outcomes depend upon a sequence of increasingly demanding empirical propositions. Coordinated campaigns must first exist; citizens must then be exposed to them; exposure must attract attention; attention must produce persuasion; persuasion must alter behaviour; and behavioural change must ultimately influence electoral outcomes. Evidence for the earlier stages of this sequence is generally much stronger than evidence for the later stages.

The Defence of Democracy Package

The Commission's Defence of Democracy Package, published in December 2023, illustrates both the continuity and expansion of this approach. The Communication begins by reaffirming that citizens should be able to «form their own opinions» within an information environment free from interference while placing considerably greater emphasis upon foreign authoritarian regimes as active adversaries of European democracy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine provides the geopolitical backdrop against which democratic resilience becomes increasingly intertwined with European security policy. (European Commission, 2023).

The document identifies covert lobbying, foreign funding, cyber operations, fake research institutes, coordinated social media activity and manipulated audiovisual content as interconnected manifestations of democratic interference. Particular attention is devoted to election integrity, where online disinformation is increasingly discussed alongside cyber security, foreign information manipulation and hybrid threats. While these are real threats that demand a robust policy response, they also illustrate an expanding conception of democratic vulnerability in which diverse phenomena become integrated into a single narrative of information security. (European Commission, 2023, pp. 1–3).

An important conceptual shift also occurs here. Earlier documents generally distinguished between disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), misinformation and hybrid threats. The Defence of Democracy Package increasingly treats these different categories as manifestations of renascent great power politics. As noted in the discussion document prepared for this paper, the distinction between disinformation more gener-

ally and foreign influence operations begins to narrow, with greater emphasis placed upon the latter as the organising framework for policy. (European Commission, 2023).

While understandable from the perspective of policy coordination, this conceptual broadening also risks obscuring important analytical distinctions. Foreign interference, domestic political misinformation, algorithmic recommendation systems and electoral transparency raise different normative and empirical questions. Treating them collectively as manifestations of democratic insecurity may inadvertently encourage stronger causal claims than the available evidence presently supports.

The European Democracy Shield

The Democracy Shield Communication reinforces this development. Conceived broadly as a series of policy measures to shore up European democratic resilience, the centrepiece of the proposal is a new centre to coordinate responses to disinformation campaigns between the EU and its member states. This was prefigured in the priorities that Commission President Von der Leyen outlined at the start of her second term in 2024, where under the heading of ‘protecting our democracy’ she urges the new Justice Commissioner to «step up our fight against foreign information manipulation and interference». (European Commission 2024).

Although the communication referring to both internal and external threats, there is a clear focus on authoritarian regimes (and their fellow-travellers in Europe) employing increasingly sophisticated methods to weaken democratic societies, exploit social divisions and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Digital technologies are portrayed as amplifying these risks through algorithmic personalisation, platform concentration and artificial intelligence, while the Shield itself is explicitly situated alongside the Union’s broader agendas on security, defence and preparedness. (European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

This evolution has not gone unremarked. García-Gutián, Bouza and Haapala (2024), for example, argue that the EU’s post-truth policy framework brings together platform regulation, political communication and democratic participation within a broader institutional narrative of the public sphere. Their analysis suggests that this conceptual architecture helps to justify the Union’s regulatory strategy in the digital field. These critiques do not deny the existence of hostile information operations. Rather, they suggest that as the policy agenda expands, greater analytical precision becomes increasingly necessary.

An Implicit Theory of Democracy

Although democracy is one of the cornerstone values of the EU (enshrined in Article 2 of the founding treaty) promoting democracy as a *policy agenda* – especially within the EU – is a relatively recent development. One merit of this expanding policy agenda however is that has forced the European Commission to articulate a coherent theory of democracy. (Treaty on European Union, 2012, art. 2).

Across successive Commission documents, democratic legitimacy is consistently linked to citizens' capacity to form autonomous political judgements within a public sphere characterised by pluralism, transparency and freedom from manipulation. Protecting democracy therefore becomes inseparable from protecting the epistemic conditions under which political preferences are formed. (European Commission, 2020, 2023; European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

This conception is both intuitively attractive and normatively compelling. Few would dispute that democratic citizens should enjoy access to reliable information or that governments should seek to expose covert foreign interference. Yet the policy discourse also rests upon an implicit empirical and normative assumptions. Empirically, that it is possible to manipulate the information environment in ways that materially threaten democratic outcomes; and normatively, that democratic legitimacy relies on informed citizens making reasoned political choices. In the following two sections we will explore whether these assumptions are correct.

3. Assessing the Democratic Effects of Disinformation: Two Case Studies

The existence of organised and state-directed disinformation campaigns is well documented. It has been a feature of Russian intelligence operations, for example, at least since the Soviet era. However, the concern of democratic institutions is not the existence of false information per se. Democratic politics has always contained rumours, propaganda, selective reporting and deliberate deception. Rather, the question is whether contemporary forms of online disinformation materially undermine the integrity of democratic decision-making. (Rid, 2020).

However, the existence of an influence operation is generally much easier to establish than its political consequences. Demonstrating democratic effects requires evidence across a sequence of increasingly demanding propositions: that coordinated manipulation occurred; that citizens were exposed to it; that exposure attracted attention; that attention changed political attitudes; that these attitudinal changes altered voting behaviour; and that these behavioural changes materially affected the electoral outcome. Evidence for the earlier

stages of this sequence is often compelling. Evidence for the later stages is considerably more limited.

In the following case studies we examine some of the strongest claims that have been made in recent years that online disinformation campaigns have had a material impact on the electoral process. Both involve credible evidence of organised influence operations. The question examined here is not whether interference occurred, but what conclusions can legitimately be drawn regarding its democratic consequences.

3.1 Russian Influence Operations and the 2016 United States Presidential Election

No episode has shaped contemporary understandings of online disinformation more profoundly than the 2016 United States presidential election. The subsequent investigations into Russian interference fundamentally altered how governments, technology companies and scholars understood the relationship between digital platforms and democratic politics. For many policymakers, the election demonstrated that foreign actors had discovered an effective means of manipulating democratic electorates through social media. It rapidly became the reference point for subsequent debates concerning platform regulation, election security and foreign information manipulation, both in the United States and in Europe. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

There is now overwhelming evidence that Russia conducted a coordinated effort to influence the American political environment during the 2016 campaign. The assessments of the United States Intelligence Community, the investigation led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, subsequent Senate reports and a large academic literature collectively document extensive activity by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and associated actors. These activities included the creation of false social media accounts impersonating American citizens, the purchase of political advertisements, the dissemination of polarising political content, the organisation of online communities around divisive social issues and the strategic amplification of existing political tensions. Rather than promoting a coherent ideological programme, many of these activities appear to have been designed to increase distrust, deepen political polarisation and undermine confidence in democratic institutions. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Mueller, 2019; United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

Assessing the effectiveness of these activities is rather more difficult. During the immediate aftermath of the election, public discussion often moved rapidly from documenting Russian activity to assuming substantial electoral influ-

ence. Yet as researchers obtained access to increasingly comprehensive platform data, the empirical picture became considerably more nuanced.

The most important contribution has been a series of large-scale behavioural studies linking verified measures of online exposure to validated survey data. These studies consistently report that exposure to content produced by the Internet Research Agency represented only a very small proportion of users' overall political information environments and was concentrated overwhelmingly among individuals who already held strong partisan commitments. Eady et al. (2023), for example, found no statistically significant relationship between exposure to Russian Twitter content and meaningful changes in political attitudes, partisan identification or vote choice. Exposure was real, but persuasion proved considerably more difficult to demonstrate. (Eady et al., 2023).

These findings are reinforced by the comprehensive review undertaken by Budak et al. (2024) in *Nature*. Surveying the accumulated literature on online misinformation, the authors conclude that three assumptions frequently made in public debate receive only limited empirical support. First, average exposure to misinformation is substantially lower than commonly assumed. Secondly, exposure is concentrated among relatively small groups of politically engaged users rather than being evenly distributed across electorates. Thirdly, existing evidence provides only limited support for claims that such exposure systematically alters political attitudes or electoral behaviour. The review therefore cautions against inferring democratic effects directly from the visibility or scale of online misinformation.

A revealing example concerns Facebook's estimate that Russian-linked content reached approximately 126 million American users. This figure has been widely cited as evidence of the extraordinary scale of Russian influence. Considered in isolation, it is indeed striking. Yet subsequent analyses placed this number within the context of users' overall information consumption. Russian-generated material constituted only a minute fraction of the political content encountered by most users and an even smaller proportion of their total media diets, which continued to be dominated by television, mainstream news organisations and interpersonal communication. The scale of exposure therefore appears considerably less remarkable once evaluated relative to the total volume of political information available during the campaign. It should also be borne in mind that very few of the outputs of the IRA generated exposure on the scale of the Facebook example above. The median number of impressions for all online political material disseminated by the IRA was 199. (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019; Eady et al., 2023).

Whatever the scale of the exposure the broader methodological issue is that public discussion of misinformation frequently focuses upon absolute measures of exposure while paying comparatively little attention to relative exposure. This has an important bearing on the assessment of whether that content occupied a sufficiently significant place within citizens' overall information environments to produce measurable changes in political behaviour. (Eady et al., 2023; Budak et al., 2024).

This point has important implications for interpreting the significance of the 2016 election. The institutional consequences of Russian interference have been profound. The episode transformed public understanding of platform governance, stimulated extensive regulatory reform, reshaped intelligence cooperation and fundamentally altered debates concerning election security. Yet these institutional consequences should not be conflated with demonstrated electoral effects. (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2019).

These methodological concerns should not downplay the significance of Russian interference. Influence operations may seek objectives other than changing votes directly. Increasing political distrust, reinforcing existing polarisation, undermining confidence in electoral institutions or encouraging citizens to disengage from democratic politics may all constitute strategic objectives independent of electoral persuasion. Indeed, documents obtained recently from a Russian agency engaged in influence operations in Europe suggest that the goal is to help Russia «maintain the image of a superpower» on the world stage: «the more Russia participates in active influence campaigns all over the world, the stronger the image of a global Russian power», suggesting that demonstrating the illusion rather than the reality of Russian omnipotence is the real goal of such operations. (OCCRP, 2026).

Measuring such longer-term effects presents additional methodological challenges and remains an important area for future research. Nevertheless, these broader possibilities should not obscure the more specific claim examined here: that current evidence provides only qualified support for the proposition that Russian online disinformation materially altered the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. (Eady et al., 2023; Budak et al., 2024).

3.2 The Annulment of Romania's 2024 Presidential Election

If the 2016 United States presidential election represents the paradigmatic case of foreign online election interference, the annulment of Romania's 2024 presidential election constitutes one of the most challenging contemporary European cases. Unlike the American case, the Romanian election resulted in an unprecedented judicial intervention designed to protect the integrity of the elector-

al process. On 6 December 2024, Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the presidential election, which had been won by political outsider Calin Georgescu, as a result of the declassification of intelligence assessments alleging coordinated foreign interference (assumed to be Russia-lined actors) and extensive manipulation of the online information environment. The decision transformed the national election of what is largely a symbolic role into one of the defining moments of contemporary European debates concerning democracy, digital platforms and foreign information manipulation. (Constitutional Court of Romania, 2024; Venice Commission, 2025).

Colin Georgescu was an independent candidate for the presidency in the months leading up to the election, polling consistently between 3-5%. He had been campaigning on a nationalist, pro-Russian, illiberal platform with no party political infrastructure to support him, declaring zero funding from external sources. His campaign was conducted almost entirely on social media. In the first round of elections held on 24 November 2024, therefore, it was a major surprise when Georgescu surged to nearly 23% of the vote, propelled largely by a viral online campaign on TikTok and Facebook, platforms that have extremely high penetration in Romania society. Tik-tok (Reuters, 2024a, BBC 2025).

The key question is what caused this rapid surge in support. The intelligence reports are vague – some commentators have called the evidence «flimsy» – claiming that Georgescu had help from a Romanian IT specialist to boost his content and that he benefitted from support by a «state player». The evidence base for these claims has never been made public. Senior Romanian politicians have asserted that Russia was behind the surge while also admitting that it is «impossible to prove» and the details would eventually be made public. (Reuters, 2024a, 2024b; FT 2024, Venice Commission, 2025).

Some evidence of coordinated amplification and biased algorithms that would have unduly benefited Georgescu's campaign has been produced by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), international campaign group Global Witness and subsequent media reports. Tik-Tok itself reported having removed 27,000 inauthentic accounts and «and disrupted three covert influence networks with limited reach». (European Digital Media Observatory, 2024; Global Witness, 2024; TikTok, 2025).

However the reasons for the sudden 'virality' of Georgescu's campaign remain unclear to this day. Some allegations of coordination proved unfounded: it subsequently emerged that an online #stabilityandintegrity campaign that was hijacked by Georgescu supporters on Tik-tok was paid for by the centre-right National Liberal Party. (Reuters, 2024b).

The decision by the Romanian Constitutional Court made a number of assumptions that as we have seen are empirically and methodologically dubious. They assume that the surge in support is largely attributable to foreign interference, that this sudden increase in visibility was largely due to coordinated inauthentic online activity and that this visibility changed voting preferences. Alternative explanations - such as that previous polling had underestimated his support, that this was a support from domestic groups with genuine political affinity, that this was a viral surge for an anti-system candidate from voter groups frustrated by years of institutional dysfunction, poor economic performance and political corruption - seem to have been discounted. The existence of a strong levels of support for anti-system candidates was demonstrated by the re-run of the presidential election in 2025, where the far-right candidate, George Simion, received 46.4% of the national vote in the final run-off. (Venice Commission, 2025; Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania, 2025). (Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania, 2025).

Whatever the doubts about the actual impact of attempts to manipulate the election result, the political system itself experienced profound institutional disruption. The Constitutional Court's intervention, the unusually prominent role of declassified intelligence assessments assumed in constitutional decisions and public confidence in electoral administration became the subject of intense domestic and international debate. These developments constitute genuine democratic consequences independently of whether individual voting decisions were altered by online disinformation. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the Romanian case is that the institutional response to alleged manipulation may itself have been more corrosive of citizens' faith in democracy than the manipulation itself, reinforcing anti-establishment narratives among sections of the electorate. In seeking to protect democracy from online manipulation, Romanian institutions may have committed a greater act of self-harm. (Venice Commission, 2025).

4. Is Online Disinformation a New Problem for Democracies? Revisiting the Dewey–Lippmann Debate

Whatever the precise impact of online disinformation campaigns, a broader question arises. Are democracies confronting a fundamentally new problem, or have digital technologies simply altered the way an older problem manifests itself?

Much contemporary policy discourse implicitly assumes the former. The rapid growth of social media, algorithmic recommendation systems and generative artificial intelligence is frequently portrayed as creating an unprecedented democratic environment in which citizens are exposed to levels of

manipulation unknown to previous generations. While digital technologies have undoubtedly transformed political communication, this interpretation risks overlooking a more fundamental continuity. Long before the internet—and indeed before television or radio—democratic theorists were already grappling with precisely the same epistemic question: how can democratic self-government function when citizens possess only limited knowledge of the political world? (Budak et al., 2024).

The most influential statement of this problem appeared in Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922). Writing in the aftermath of WWI, and drawing on his experience of creating propaganda for the US war effort, Lippmann argued that democratic theory had systematically underestimated the cognitive limitations confronting ordinary citizens. Modern societies were simply too large, complex and specialised for individuals to acquire the information necessary to form comprehensive political judgements. Instead, citizens relied upon what Lippmann famously described as «pictures in our heads»: simplified mental representations constructed through newspapers, social interaction, cultural assumptions and selective personal experience. Public opinion was therefore necessarily indirect. Citizens responded not to political reality itself but to mediated representations of it. (Lippmann, 1922).

Lippmann's insight remains strikingly contemporary. Much of what is today described as online disinformation—selective presentation of facts, emotional appeals, political stereotypes, propaganda and attempts to shape public opinion through communication—already occupied a central place in his analysis. The technologies have changed dramatically; the underlying epistemic problem has not. Democratic politics has always depended upon citizens making decisions under conditions of incomplete information. (Lippmann, 1922).

Contrary to the European Union's dogmatic faith in media pluralism and media literacy as an answer to the problems of misinformation and disinformation, Lippmann does not believe we should outsource the responsibility for integrity of public opinion formation: «The newspapers are regarded by democrats as a panacea for their own defects, whereas analysis of the nature of news and of the economic basis of journalism seems to show that the newspapers necessarily and inevitably reflect, and therefore, in greater or lesser measure, intensify, the defective organization of public opinion». (Lippmann, 1922, p. 203).

For Lippmann, this diagnosis had unsettling implications for the self-image of democracy. If citizens inevitably possessed only fragmentary political knowledge, then the classical democratic ideal of government by an informed public rested upon unrealistic assumptions. Modern government in a complex social and political environment increasingly requires specialist expertise and

agencies that can assess, according to objective standards, whether a ruling elite is governing in the public interest: «Outside the rather narrow range of our own possible attention, social control depends upon devising standards of living and methods of audit by which the acts of public officials and industrial directors are measured» (Lippmann, 1922, p. 314). Democracy remained valuable, but not because electorates routinely possessed the knowledge necessary to direct public affairs independently.

John Dewey's response in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) is frequently presented as a rejection of Lippmann's pessimism. In important respects, however, the two thinkers shared more common ground than is often recognised. Dewey did not dispute Lippmann's empirical observation that citizens possessed limited political knowledge or that modern societies presented unprecedented informational challenges. Nor did he deny the existence of propaganda, misinformation or manipulation. The disagreement concerned the implications of these observations rather than their accuracy. (Dewey, 1927).

Where Lippmann regarded citizens' cognitive limitations as justifying a greater role for expertise, Dewey viewed them as reinforcing the importance of democratic communication. Democracy, in his account, should not be understood as a system through which perfectly informed individuals aggregate preferences. Rather, it is an ongoing process of collective inquiry through which societies identify common problems and develop practical responses. (Dewey, 1927).

The solution to imperfect information therefore lay not in reducing democratic participation but in strengthening the institutions that facilitate public learning: education, journalism, civic association, art and open public discussion. Nevertheless, there is an undeniably idealistic, even romantic flavour to the conditions that Dewey lays down for the creation of the «Great Community» (his vision of the ideal form of democracy). For an «organised, articulate Public» to come into being «the highest and most difficult kind of inquiry and a subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive art of communication must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it». (Dewey, 1927, p. 184).

The debate between Lippmann and Dewey echoes contemporary debates concerning online disinformation. The dominant EU policy paradigm reflects an aspiration that citizens should be able to form political judgements within an information environment characterised by openness, pluralism and freedom from manipulation. While Dewey never claimed that democracy required perfectly informed citizens, his defence of democracy rested upon the capacity of publics to learn collectively despite their inevitable epistemic limitations. This resembles closely the deliberative ideal that lies at the heart

of the EU's self-understanding of its democratic legitimacy. (Dewey, 1927; European Commission, 2020).

The historical perspective also places current claims regarding the novelty of online disinformation into sharper context. Political propaganda, organised deception, foreign influence and emotionally charged political communication are not products of digital technology. They have accompanied representative government throughout its modern history. What has changed is the architecture through which these practices are organised and disseminated. Digital platforms undoubtedly increase the speed, scale and traceability of political communication but do not create the underlying democratic problem to which that communication gives rise. (Rid, 2020; Lippmann, 1922).

Dewey and Lippmann's alternative visions of how the public sphere operates in a democracy does mirror alternative visions of how online platforms mediate democratic debate. Dewey's emphasis on democracy as form of collective inquiry into problems of policy and politics is echoed in by early evangelists for the transformative power of online connectivity, while Lippman's focus on the distorting effect of our cognitive and affective biases is mirrored in more the more gloomy and dystopian perspectives articulated so well in Peter Pomerantsov's 'This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality', which argues that the internet has allowed the globalisation of the disinformation techniques that were a feature of Russian politics in the early 21st century as part of the playbook of authoritarian and would-be authoritarian rulers around the world. The aim is not information scarcity, but «censorship through noise», of which targeted disinformation campaigns are one aspect. (Pomerantsev, 2019).

5. The Myth of the Informed Citizen: Normative Ideals and Democratic Reality

Claims in the contemporary policy discourse the novelty and negative impact of disinformation campaigns are empirically contestable, as we have seen. So why has it assumed such a prominent place in the European Union's policy discourse? At the heart of this lies an idealised archetype of the citizen required for the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. (Habermas, 1989, 1996; European Commission, 2001).

The ideal of the autonomous citizen freely adopting opinions within marketplace of ideas that appears in the EU policy literature closely resembles one of the most influential normative conceptions of democracy developed during the twentieth century: Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere and deliberative democracy. Indeed, the turn to more open and accountable EU decision-making that was ushered in by the European Commission's «White Paper on Governance» at the start of the 21st century can be seen as an

attempt to embrace alternative, Habermasian foundations for its democratic legitimacy in the wake of declining voter turnout and rejections of EU treaties in national referenda. Deprived of a properly constituted European *demos* as a foundation stone for legitimacy, the inclusiveness and consultative nature of decision-making, the idea of legitimacy as an *end-point* becomes the regulative ideal. (European Commission, 2001; Føllesdal & Hix, 2006; Schmidt, 2013).

Habermas's contribution to democratic theory lies not simply in emphasising public discussion but in identifying communication itself as the foundation of democratic legitimacy. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and later works on communicative action and deliberative democracy, he argues that political authority derives its legitimacy from processes of public reasoning in which citizens exchange arguments under conditions approximating equality, openness and freedom from domination. Democratic legitimacy therefore depends not only upon electoral procedures but also upon the quality of the communicative processes through which political preferences are formed. Public opinion acquires legitimacy because it emerges through rational-critical debate rather than manipulation, coercion or unequal access to communication. (Habermas, 1989, 1996).

It is difficult to read recent European Commission documents without recognising the affinity between this conception of democracy and the assumptions embedded within contemporary policy. The European Democracy Action Plan repeatedly emphasises citizens' capacity to «form their own judgements» in a public sphere protected from malign interference. The Defence of Democracy Package similarly links democratic resilience to media pluralism, transparency and the integrity of public debate. The proposed European Democracy Shield extends this logic further by treating protection of the democratic information environment as a central responsibility of European governance. The documents clearly embody a conception of democratic legitimacy that closely resembles his understanding of an undistorted public sphere.

While the Habermasian public sphere remains a highly desirable norm, the difficulty arises only when this regulative ideal becomes an implicit empirical description of how representative democracies actually function.

This distinction between normative aspiration and empirical description has long been a preoccupation of behavioural political science. Beginning in the post-war period, scholars increasingly shifted attention away from how democratic citizens ought to behave towards how they actually behave. The results were often unsettling for classical democratic theory. (Converse, 1964).

Philip Converse's seminal essay *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics* demonstrated that ideological consistency and sophisticated policy reason-

ing were largely confined to political elites. Most citizens displayed only limited political knowledge, weak ideological organisation and considerable instability in policy preferences. Rather than evaluating political questions through coherent ideological frameworks, many voters relied upon broad impressions, partisan identities and fragmentary political information. (Converse, 1964)

More than 30 years later, Samuel Popkin's *The Reasoning Voter* offered a more optimistic interpretation of these findings without rejecting their empirical foundations. Citizens, Popkin argued, are neither fully informed nor irrational. Instead, they make effective use of informational shortcuts. Rather than mastering every policy issue, voters rely upon trusted cues, personal experience, party reputations, media signals and social networks to make political judgements under conditions of limited information. Democracy therefore functions not because citizens possess comprehensive political knowledge but because they develop practical strategies for coping with informational scarcity. (Popkin, 1991)

This school of thought has been synthesised and deepened in a recent powerful critique provided by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels in their influential work *Democracy for Realists*. Their critique is directed at what they describe as the «folk theory of democracy»: the widely shared belief that democratic elections work because informed citizens evaluate competing policy programmes and hold governments electorally accountable for their performance. (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

According to Achen and Bartels, decades of empirical research provide remarkably little support for this account. Electoral behaviour is shaped less by careful policy evaluation than by enduring social identities, partisan loyalties, group attachments and retrospective judgements that often bear only an indirect relationship to governmental performance. Citizens frequently know little about public policy, misunderstand institutional arrangements and exhibit limited ideological coherence. Yet democratic systems continue to function with considerable stability. (Achen & Bartels, 2016).

None of this demonstrates that democratic citizens are irrational. Nor does it imply that information is irrelevant to democratic politics. Rather, it suggests that representative democracy places considerably less demanding epistemic requirements upon citizens than many normative theories assume. Political judgement emerges through identities, heuristics, trust and institutional mediation as much as through detailed factual knowledge. (Eady et al., 2023; Budak et al., 2024).

If one adopts the assumptions implicit in the folk theory of democracy, then the democratic dangers posed by online disinformation appear almost self-evident. If electoral outcomes depend upon citizens accurately processing

political information before casting their votes, systematic distortion of the information environment naturally threatens democratic legitimacy itself.

If, however, the behavioural literature provides a more accurate description of representative democracy, the implications become considerably more complex. Citizens do not enter elections as detached information processors continually revising political preferences in response to new factual claims. Political identities, social affiliations and long-standing partisan commitments structure how new information is interpreted long before individual pieces of misinformation are encountered. (European Commission, 2020, 2023; European Commission & High Representative, 2025).

The empirical findings discussed in the previous section fit remarkably well within this behavioural framework. Studies of Russian influence operations during the 2016 United States presidential election consistently found that exposure to Internet Research Agency content was concentrated among individuals who already possessed strong partisan commitments. Similar patterns emerge across studies of vaccine misinformation, conspiracy theories and extremist online content. Rather than transforming previously neutral citizens into committed supporters of particular political positions, online misinformation frequently reinforces existing political identities. Exposure is itself partly a consequence of prior political preferences rather than simply a cause of them.. (Budak et al., 2024; Eady et al., 2023).

The ideal of the informed citizen is best understood - like many myths - as an aspiration rather than a necessary condition of a functioning democracy. It functions as a regulative ideal against which democratic institutions may reasonably be judged.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary debates concerning disinformation are shaped by two questions that are frequently conflated but are analytically distinct. The first is empirical: to what extent does online disinformation materially affect democratic outcomes? The second is normative: what informational conditions are necessary for democratic legitimacy? Contemporary European Union policy increasingly treats these questions as closely aligned. If democracy depends upon citizens forming autonomous political judgements within an undistorted information environment, then protecting that environment naturally becomes central to protecting democracy itself. The integrity of public communication consequently assumes constitutional – indeed existential - significance alongside more traditional democratic institutions such as elections, political parties and the rule of law. This view is compounded by

the European Union's self-understanding of the foundations of its democratic legitimacy. (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021; Budak et al., 2024).

The analysis presented here suggests a more differentiated assessment. The empirical evidence leaves little doubt that organised online influence operations occur. Foreign states, political actors and coordinated networks exploit digital platforms to disseminate misleading information, amplify polarising narratives and manipulate patterns of political communication. Equally, digital platforms have altered the architecture of public communication in ways that create genuine challenges for democratic governance. (Lippmann, 1922; Popkin, 1991; Achen & Bartels, 2016).

What remains considerably less certain is the significance of these developments for European democracy. The evidence reviewed in this article suggests that different forms of democratic harm rest upon different causal claims and therefore require different evidential standards. Harm to the information environment—for example through opaque recommendation systems, coordinated inauthentic behaviour or hidden campaign financing—can often be documented with considerable confidence. Institutional harm, illustrated by the Romanian Constitutional Court's annulment of the 2024 presidential election, is similarly observable through its consequences for public authority, electoral administration and democratic trust. By contrast, demonstrating aggregate electoral effects requires a much more demanding chain of inference linking exposure to persuasion, persuasion to behavioural change and behavioural change to altered electoral outcomes. The current empirical literature provides considerably more limited support for these stronger claims.

Recognising these distinctions also clarifies the relationship between contemporary policy and democratic theory. The European Union's evolving approach to disinformation reflects a conception of democracy in which citizens ought to deliberate within an information environment characterised by openness, pluralism and freedom from manipulation. This aspiration is both normatively attractive and democratically valuable. Yet, as our discussion has shown, democratic theory has long distinguished between normative ideals and empirical descriptions of democratic politics. The aspiration towards an informed citizenry does not necessarily imply that representative democracies have ever depended upon electorates possessing the degree of political knowledge often assumed within contemporary policy discourse.

The emphasis on informational integrity also helps explain why debates concerning disinformation have accelerated as the growth and influence of digital technology has accelerated. Much public debate implicitly assumes that online communication has created an unprecedented capacity for politi-

cal manipulation, but fail to pay attention to another striking development: the degree to which digital technologies have transformed the observability of political communication.

Unlike rumours, pamphlets, broadcast propaganda or interpersonal political discussion, digital communication leaves persistent and measurable traces. Researchers can identify coordinated campaigns, reconstruct information networks, estimate audience reach, analyse patterns of amplification and monitor the behaviour of platforms with a degree of precision unimaginable only a generation ago. The digital public sphere has therefore become exceptionally transparent to researchers, regulators and intelligence agencies. This transformation has generated unprecedented knowledge about attempts to influence democratic debate. But the panopticon does not map the world outside the panopticon

More than an informed citizenry, democracies rely on trusted institutions and Lippmann's independent watchdogs to function effectively and legitimately. The EU's obsession with disinformation may not only be empirically dubious and normatively unnecessary but also – by unintentionally helping to erode the foundations of that trust – be wholly counterproductive.

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