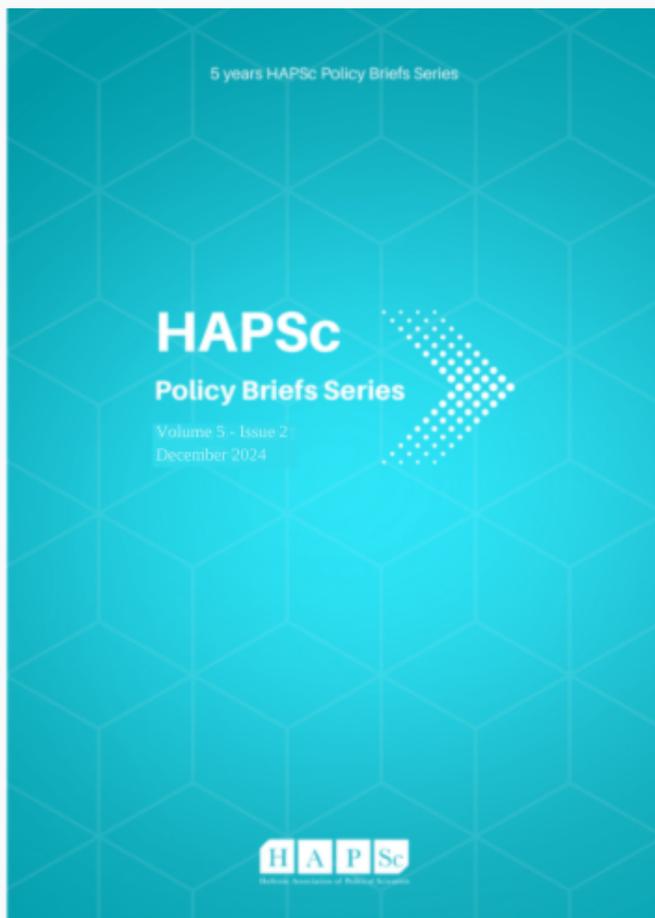


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The Hybrid Warfare of the Digital Age: How Disinformation Destabilizes the World

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The Hybrid Warfare of the Digital Age: How Disinformation Destabilizes the World¹

Daniele Battista²

Abstract

Disinformation is becoming a central concern in the realm of international security, driven by the massive use of information technologies and the widespread availability of digital infrastructures on a global scale. This phenomenon manifests itself through the dissemination of false or misleading information with the aim of manipulating public opinion, destabilizing democratic institutions, and influencing political decisions worldwide. This study examines how disinformation is employed by state and non-state actors as a tool of hybrid warfare, with significant impacts on political balances. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity of a collective response to safeguard stability and international security.

Keywords: Disinformation, International Security, Hybrid Warfare, Social Media, Global Stability.

Introduction

Over the course of two centuries, modern Western societies have undergone significant transformations in the technological landscape. The evolution of communication mediums has spread its influence across every segment of social life, alongside other crucial advancements such as globalization, democratization, and continuous progress in the technical and scientific spheres (Battista & Uva, 2023). The process of social transformation has been closely intertwined with the expansion and sophistication of communication tools, giving rise to a complex network of connections and interactions that permeate the entire social fabric. Digital innovation has played a significant role in redefining the communication landscape, enabling an unprecedented proliferation of information and interactions on a global scale (Salzano et al., 2023). Globalization, as a concurrent phenomenon, has amplified the scale and scope of these changes, fostering ever-closer integration between the world's diverse societies and cultures.

This has triggered a continuous exchange of ideas, values, and lifestyles, tangibly shaping the social and cultural fabric of contemporary Western societies. At the same time, the phenomenon of democratization has played a crucial role in redefining power relations and public participation. Broad access to communication tools, fueled by the democratization of information, has provided an unprecedented platform for the dissemination of opinions and the expression of civil society's voices, contributing to shaping decision-making processes and defining the contours of governance. Thus, the rapid evolution of communication technology, combined with these defining factors, has outlined

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the framework of a contemporary Western society in constant flux. This labyrinthine interplay of social and technological forces has shaped how people interact, acquire information, and actively participate in constructing the social fabric in which they are immersed.

This transformation is closely linked to the pervasive impact of digital technologies on the structure, production, and consumption of media content. The emergence of this digital landscape has not only redefined the communication dimension but has also prompted a profound reconsideration of how conventional media tools interact with the public and adapt to the dynamics of the contemporary digital context. This phenomenon not only translates into an expansion of expressive and informational possibilities but also entails addressing emerging challenges related to information management in a digital environment characterized by a profusion of content and the speed at which it is disseminated. In this perspective, it has emerged as a multidimensional process that involves revising established paradigms due to the pervasive spread of disinformation. W

ithin this framework, the influence of information on daily life stands as a crucial theme, but it also raises concerns about the potential destabilization of democratic institutions and the shaping of political decisions on a global scale. Disinformation, though initially confined to specific niches or small groups, has the potential to spread rapidly thanks to the interconnected nature of digital media and the virality of social media. A single misleading message can trigger a chain reaction, fueling polarization, confusion, and distrust (Battista, 2023). The creation of echo chambers, where information is repeated unchecked, promotes the amplification of distorted truths and can lead to misalignments and international imbalances in political, economic, and social decisions on a global scale.

The Dynamics of Disinformation

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on issues such as disinformation, propaganda, information warfare, hostile information campaigns, and informational disorder, which are often grouped under the popular label of "fake news." These elements have become prevalent across the globe, particularly since 2016, following the outcomes of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the presidential elections in the United States. During these events, the concept of "fake news" was frequently used by then-candidate and later President Donald Trump to refer to mainstream media deemed hostile to his candidacy or presidency (Battista, 2024). The term has increasingly permeated various contexts, from public debates to everyday conversations. However, its improper use and application risk trivializing its significance, reducing it to something inconsequential rather than a serious and important issue.

To better understand the contours of reality, a quick and clear snapshot of the current situation at this specific historical moment is essential. We are witnessing the emergence of a disinformation ecosystem capable of generating cascading shares on social media, compounded by the capacity of online media to confer a semblance of credibility to the news, further increasing its virality. Disinformation, therefore, can manifest in multiple forms depending on the goals pursued and the context in which it is disseminated (Gallo et al., 2022).

In the political sphere, for example, it can be used to manipulate public opinion, delegitimize political opponents, or influence elections and referenda. In the social realm, it can fuel divisions, stereotypes, or conflicts, often exploiting sensitive issues such as immigration, civil rights, or public health emergencies. On the economic front, disinformation can aim to destabilize markets, damage corporate reputations, or manipulate consumer behaviour.

Moreover, the methods of disinformation dissemination vary depending on the channels used. On social media, it can take the form of fake news, memes, manipulated videos, or viral messages, often amplified by algorithms designed to maximize engagement. In traditional media, it can appear as propaganda or distorted narratives promoted by actors with specific interests. Equally significant are the strategic objectives: destabilizing democratic institutions, reducing trust in authoritative sources, creating confusion, or achieving geopolitical advantages (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Disinformation can be targeted at individuals, groups, or entire nations, employing increasingly sophisticated techniques such as deepfakes, data manipulation, and coordinated campaigns.

Understanding the variety of disinformation manifestations is crucial to identifying effective counter-strategies and raising public awareness about the risks it poses. Ideological-political disinformation strategies aim to generate content that elicits an emotional and visual reaction in the audience, emphasizing and exacerbating differences and division. This process fosters feelings of fear and repulsion toward a specific group, framed as a threat to ideologies like nationalism or ethnic and religious identity. The primary promoters of these messages are extremist and ideological groups or those spreading conspiracy theories, driven by strong ideological motivations. The dissemination of such content generally occurs through "private" digital networks, easily accessible to those who share the group's ideological beliefs. The content is designed to follow a continuous cycle that facilitates propagation, aiming to increase the news' visibility and credibility among the public.

The effectiveness of these messages lies in their ability to spread a particular ideology, fuelling conflict between opposing opinions and attacking those who express dissenting views. This group of actors, leveraging hate speech and adopting targeted automated campaigns, exerts a significant

influence on political and institutional perceptions, altering the collective understanding of political and social dynamics (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Hate speech, primarily conveyed through digital platforms, not only polarizes public discourse but also fosters distrust and intolerance, creating deep divisions within societies. Additionally, the use of automated tools, such as bots and content manipulation algorithms, further amplifies the dissemination of extremist messages, bringing forth distorted and falsified narratives that undermine social and political cohesion. On a broader level, these dynamics do not merely influence public opinion or individual national institutions but significantly contribute to destabilizing international balances.

Disinformation campaigns, supported using advanced digital technologies, not only interfere in electoral processes and internal state policies but also affect diplomatic relations and international alliances. The spread of polarizing and false narratives can weaken mutual trust between nations, obstructing constructive dialogue and the process of global cooperation. Ultimately, the combination of disinformation emerges as a powerful tool of hybrid warfare, capable of altering geopolitical stability and threatening international order. This leads to increasing challenges in maintaining the integrity of democratic institutions and global governance.

The Consequences of Disinformation on International Stability

As we have observed, disinformation strategies are taking on a central role in shaping global political dynamics, with profound effects not only on public opinion but also on international stability. A significant example is the interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, where external factors, such as Russian agencies, utilized social media and bots to spread fake news and incite political division (Rossetti & Zaman, 2023). These efforts aimed to undermine trust in democratic institutions, fostering distrust and hostility between opposing political groups. This phenomenon has had a lasting impact on U.S. domestic politics while also creating tensions in international alliances, as accusations of foreign interference damaged relations with various countries. Similarly, Myanmar experienced a dramatic escalation of violence against the Rohingya minority, fuelled by the spread of hate messages on social media that reinforced the narrative of an ethnic "threat." This form of propaganda not only contributed to the country's internal destabilization but also raised international concerns, particularly regarding the responsibility of social media platforms in disseminating harmful content (Kyaw, 2021).

Another evident example occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when conspiracy theories and false information about the virus and vaccines were amplified by automated campaigns on social media. This undermined trust in global health institutions and complicated international efforts to

coordinate responses to the health crisis (Rivas-de-Roca & Battista, 2024). Similarly, in the war in Ukraine, Russia employed disinformation to justify the invasion and alter international perceptions of the conflict. Bots and automated accounts were used to spread false narratives demonizing the Ukrainian government. The consequences have been devastating, not only in terms of internal public opinion but also in influencing the foreign policies of allied countries, contributing to Russia's increasing isolation on a global scale (Gentile, 2023).

These examples clearly demonstrate how the strategic use of hate speech and disinformation campaigns not only divides societies internally but also interferes with geopolitical balances, undermining international cooperation and mutual trust between nations (Battista & Uva, 2024). The uncontrolled spread of polarizing messages through "private" digital networks and the creation of echo chambers, where people are exposed only to content reinforcing their pre-existing beliefs, accelerate the process of social and political fragmentation. This phenomenon not only hinders the building of cohesive societies but also has devastating implications for global governance, as it fuels nationalism, populism, and distrust in international institutions. The ability of such disinformation strategies to influence public opinion and destabilize democratic institutions is a troubling sign of the growing vulnerability of modern democracies, necessitating urgent collective responses to protect international security and preserve global political stability.

Conclusions

In conclusion, disinformation is emerging as an increasing threat to international security, becoming a strategic tool of hybrid warfare used by both state and non-state actors. The widespread use of information technologies and digital infrastructures has amplified the scope and effectiveness of these manipulation campaigns, which aim not only to destabilize democratic institutions but also to influence political decisions globally. The cases examined, such as interference in elections, ethnic violence fuelled by hate messages, and the use of disinformation in international conflicts, highlight the harmful potential of such strategies. The growing social and political polarization, amplified by digital echo chambers, undermines internal cohesion within states and threatens global geopolitical balances. Therefore, a collective response is essential, involving both states and international institutions, to curb the spread of disinformation. This requires a coordinated approach that goes beyond the mere regulation of digital platforms and includes civic education, transparency, and the promotion of truthful and reliable information. Only with a shared commitment will it be possible to safeguard global political stability, protect trust in democratic institutions, and prevent threats to international security stemming from the manipulation of public opinion.

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