The Threat That Disinformation Poses to Liberal Democracies

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INTRODUCTION

"We'll know our disinformation program is complete when everything the American

public believes is false" William Casey (CIA Director, 1981)".

Disinformation is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, "false

information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumours) in

order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth".[1] To clarify, while misinformation

is often used synonymously with disinformation, and is similar, it differs in that

misinformation is the spread of false information, even if unintended. In other words,

misinformation differs from disinformation in that the latter involves the perpetrator

knowing the information to be false and *deliberately* intending to spread it.[2] Accepting

these rudimentary definitions, disinformation has been around since the beginning of

humankind. For example, a simple lie could be considered disinformation as it

intentionally deceives someone to believe something that is not true. Disinformation,

however, is far more complex than the aforementioned definitions. There are instances in

which disinformation does not always involve a largely false narrative. For example, in

1960 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) produced brochures highlighting

real lynchings and other violence committed against African Americans at the hands of

Caucasian Americans.[3] These brochures were created in both French and English and

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[1] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "disinformation," accessed May 1, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation.

[2] Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2018), 7.

[3] Thomas Rid, "Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare," in *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 4.

subsequently distributed to multiple countries in Africa.[4] In this example, the disinformation was entirely true, in that the violence did occur, but was provided without context and in a nefarious manner to dissuade African countries from aligning with western governments (particularly the USA).

Considering its prominence and notoriety in the digital era, state-sanctioned disinformation has a relatively short history. That is not to say that disinformation is limited to a time period as noted above, but that disinformation as an instrument of political influence has a shorter recorded history. It is a general consensus amongst scholars on the subject that state-sanctioned disinformation was conceived by the Russians around 1923.[5] Around this time, Jozef Unszlicht, then the deputy chairman of the State Political Directorate (SPD), a precursor to the KGB, commissioned a special office focused on disinformation campaigns as part of their active intelligence operations. [6] Although there were several goals and intents of this office, its primary purpose was to manipulate foreign intelligence offices by spreading credible but misleading and/or wrongfully contextualized information. The office hoped that this would actively interfere with adversary intelligence collection, as well as sway public opinions. Russia gradually evolved this new capability in the 1950s under the KGB department called 'Dezinformatsiya'[7]. As will be demonstrated in this paper, despite the SPD being succeeded by the KGB, and subsequently the GRU, the practice of disinformation is still

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[4] *Ibid*, 4.

[5] Martin J. Manning and Herbert Romerstein, *Historical Dictionary of American Propaganda* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 82-83.

[6] *Ibid,* 83.

[7] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (London: Sage, 1992), 22.

very active in Russia, so much so that it is now referred to by Russia as "Active Measures".[8]

This paper will explore the extent to which disinformation is a plausible threat to liberal democracies and examine the necessary steps those democracies may have taken to deal with this challenge. It intends to ascertain if disinformation is a credible threat and, if so, determine what liberal democracies are doing to safeguard against it, and analyze if these measures are effective. The research conducted for this paper will demonstrate that, despite growing world instability, including Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022 invasion of Ukraine, North Korean nuclear-capable missile tests, Iran's revitalization of its nuclear program and a major global power competition that we have not seen the likes of since World War Two, a more sinister threat has been lurking in the ethers for over a century. This threat is not an invasion, nuclear warfare, or deadly pandemics; it is disinformation. Disinformation is such an abysmal threat that it has the capacity to erode and destroy the liberal democracies of today. Therefore, this paper will demonstrate that disinformation (both state-sanctioned and other) is not only a real and persistent threat to liberal democracies, but that it is one of the largest threats to liberal democracies affecting it on a political, social and economic level. Further, it will demonstrate that liberal democracies have not taken this threat seriously enough, nor been able to combat effectively to date.

This paper will seek to demonstrate this thesis in two parts. It will first provide examples of disinformation campaigns conducted externally by adversaries, and even

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[8] Rid, "Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare.", 1.

internally by the leaders, agencies, and individuals/groups, to show the real world consequences of disinformation. It will subsequently assess the examples to determine the threat disinformation poses, ultimately reaching the conclusion that disinformation is amongst the largest threats facing liberal democracies, specifically as disinformation erodes the very foundation of democracy. Second, it will provide a general assessment of liberal democratic responses to disinformation, including key vulnerabilities, ultimately concluding that the liberal democratic responses to disinformation is not only insufficient, but that disinformation appears to in some ways paralyze liberal democratic institutions. This section of the paper will also offer ways liberal democracies may be able to shield themselves from disinformation, while also ensuring the freedoms and rights of its citizens, upon which democracy is founded.

THE THREAT

Although disinformation is a threat in general, being that it is often incorrect information or information that is not presented in context, disinformation presents challenges to liberal democracies on a political, social and economic level. Specifically, disinformation has the ability to upend liberal democracies, influence political decisions and agendas, and sow chaos based on mistrust and disbelief. Using historical and recent examples of disinformation, this section will prove the threat disinformation poses by reviewing the actions of the belligerent and subsequently focusing on the result(s) of the disinformation campaign. The result(s) of the disinformation campaign must be analyzed carefully as both the intended and unintended consequences of the disinformation is often more of a threat than the (dis)information itself.

The Political Threat

From a political perspective, disinformation is an ominous threat to liberal democracies. One of the most famous and recent examples of disinformation was during the 2016 United States of America (USA) Presidential Elections. Beginning in 2014, a Russian-linked entity known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA) directly interfered with the election process by "impairing, obstructing, and defeating the lawful functions of the government through fraud and deceit".[9] While the legal indictment[10] spells out the many nefarious ways that the IRA conducted their complex disinformation campaign, it can be summarized as a very robust social media campaign, hacking events, intrusion into the electorate systems and suppression / influencing of the electors. The social media campaign was simple in concept, but sophisticated in design. It targeted specific demographics of the American voter base to sway opinion to vote for Donald J. Trump. Leveraging the rise of social justice movements in the USA, fake groups on social media targeting minorities (African Americans, LGBTQ+ etc…) were fabricated by the IRA to push the Russian-backed messaging that Trump was the best presidential option for them.[11] The hacking of both Hilary Clinton's personal email and her chairperson (John Podesta) was orchestrated and timed by the GRU in order to discredit Clinton's ability to be trusted to hold office.[12] As a result of the hack, the GRU obtained hundreds of thousands of confidential documents and released them via WikiLeaks.[13] While this does not directly meet the strict definition of disinformation, it could have the same effect, since some of the leaked, and subsequently publically published information, could be

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[9] United States vs Internet Research Agency et al., (United States District Court for the District of Columbia 2018).
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*

misinterpreted, even dangerously, without proper context. Finally, the hacking of the

electorate systems by the GRU in 39 states (albeit some believe it affected all states)

demonstrates how disinformation is rarely used in isolation, but is often supporting or

supported by other malicious actions.[14]

In this example, it is commonly believed that the goal of the interference in the

elections was to ensure a pro-Russian government was installed in the USA. If true, it is

reasonable to conclude that the disinformation campaign was successful upon the election

of Donald J. Trump as the President of the USA, owing to his unprecedented friendly

relations with Russia and President Vladimir Putin. However, an alternative theory is that

Russia was indifferent to who was elected, rather they wanted to discredit the US

electoral system and liberal democracies writ large.[15] Regardless of Russia's true

intentions, it is reasonable to conclude that either of these could be true. It is presently

unknown, and may remain that way, whether Donald J. Trump won the election due to

Russian interference. The former director of the CIA and the NSA stated that despite the

Russian campaign being amongst the "most successful covert influence operations in

history", it was unknown what impact it had on the end result of the election, and is

probably "unknowable".[16] However, numerous Republicans including Mike Pence, Mike

Pompeo and Paul Ryan all stated that intelligence agencies had in effect vindicated the

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Young Mie Kim, et al. "The stealth media? Groups and targets behind divisive issue campaigns on Facebook." *Political Communication* 35.4 (2018): 515-541.

[16] Jane Mayer and Evan Osnos, "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump," The New Yorker, September 24, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump.

Russian campaign in that it was not likely to have decided the election.[17] This claim is

disputed and discredited by some legal and political scholars as these American defenders

of the Russian interference were all high-level officials within the Trump administration

with much to lose. For example, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a political scientist, conducted

a political forensic analysis of this disinformation campaign and concluded that the

campaign was persuasive enough to influence American voters to either vote a certain

way or abstain from voting, which clearly had a large effect on the poll results. [18] In her

study, Jamieson notes two key events from the disinformation campaign which turned the

tides on voting; the publishing of Clinton speeches made to investment banks and the

results of Russian disinformation responding to FBI head James Comey's chastising of

Clinton's use of private email servers as "extremely careless".[19] Jamieson contends that

the Russian disinformation campaign was able to seize these two real events, spin them

into out-of-context disinformation, and swing the vote of key ridings in Trump's favour.[20]

This example demonstrates the threat that disinformation poses to liberal democracies by

highlighting how easy it can be to coerce the population. It is reasonable to conclude,

based on the above example, that a foreign adversary can shape and manipulate the

democratic political system through disinformation to be more favourable to an

adversary. In other words, disinformation can interfere in a voter base's ability to

[17] Michael Crowley, "CIA Director Rebuked for False Claim on Kremlin's Election Meddling," POLITICO, October 19, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/19/mike-pompeo-cia-russia-influence-election-243967.

[18] Judy Woodruff, *PBS News Hour*, November 1, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-this-author-says-its-highly-probable-russian-interference-swung-the-2016-election.

[19] Jane Mayer and Evan Osnos, "How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump," The New Yorker, September 24, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump.

[20] Judy Woodruff, *PBS News Hour*, November 1, 2018, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-this-author-says-its-highly-probable-russian-interference-swung-the-2016-election.

understand and interpret information, potentially increasing an otherwise ill-suited candidate's popularity and vote count that may not have been the case had the disinformation not existed. For these reasons, it is clear to see that disinformation can obstruct and undermine democratic processes, especially with regards to leadership, which can have devastating and dangerous consequences, especially within democratic superpowers with nuclear capabilities.

The Economic Threat

From an economic perspective, disinformation has grave consequences to liberal democracies. Russia very actively uses disinformation to pursue its strategic foreign policies, including using this tool to expand its economic reach and control.[21] Russia is known to use aggressive disinformation campaigns to manipulate its way into easing sanctions placed upon it.[22] Further, it uses disinformation to expand its markets in energy and other corporations to extend its global reach.[23] Russia has also been implicated in attempts to use disinformation to devalue other nations' strategic companies in order to take them over at the lowest possible price.[24] Russia does this by creating false narratives surrounding their company of interest, often using disinformation tactics to allege criminal activity, fraud, environmental recklessness and corruption. Once the disinformation is spread to the masses, and specifically targeted at key personnel

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[21] Jacek Borecki. "Disinformation as a Threat to Private and State-Owned Businesses." (Warsaw Institute Review, Warsaw Institute, July 23, 2018) https://warsawinstitute.org/disinformation-threat-private-state-owned-businesses/#:~:text=Russia%20is%20interested%20in%20taking%20over%20%28by%20hostile,to%20reduce%20the%20market%20value%20of%20such%20companies.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

involved with the business and with the government, if accepted, it works to devalue the company and thus ensure they can take it over at a fraction of the original valuation. While the disinformation itself is dangerous in these scenarios, more dangerous is the fact that Russia has, and uses, its ability to manipulate its way into world economies and reduce the value of other nation's strategic companies, costing liberal democracies unmeasurable sums of money. The below table summarizes the extent through which disinformation can impact economics.

Targets of disinformation attacks from an economic point of view		
Political dimension	**Social dimension**	**Economic dimension**
• Elections	• State stability	• Influence on company leadership and decisions
• Economic policy, financial policy, etc.	• Deepening of social/ethnic conflicts	• Limiting investor choice
• Key decision-makers	• Radicalization	• Market value of companies
• Legislation and regulations	• Trust towards the government	• Employees and trade unions
• Investment climate	• Brand opinion	• Foreign cooperation
• Image of the state	• Potential for mobilizing protesters	• Brand
• Economic and geopolitical projects		• Reputation
• The role of the state internationally		

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Figure 1 – Targets of Disinformation Attacks from an Economic Point of View

Source – Warsaw Institute, *Disinformation as a Threat to Private and State-Owned Businesses*

This use of disinformation to manipulate companies in liberal democracies is clearly dangerous. Large businesses have a significant amount of political influence in liberal democracies and are known to lobby the government to shape policies and legislatures in its favour. Understanding the above examples, it is not a stretch to infer

that as more and more businesses in liberal democracies are bought by foreign actors with known disinformation campaigns, they can use these businesses to lobby the government in their favour, up to and including fulfilling their strategic foreign policies. Combining the physical costs of company devaluation through disinformation, as well as the potential for manipulation of liberal democratic foreign policies through these businesses in favour of the adversaries own foreign policies (in this case Russia), it is clear to see the threat disinformation poses on the economics of liberal democracies.

The Social Threat

From a social perspective, disinformation continues to deceive the citizens of liberal democracies, in effect eroding the trust democracies are founded on. During the COVID-19 outbreak, disinformation surrounding the subject was plentiful. While some may argue, and are correct, that the COVID-19 disinformation was initially predicated on misinformation (false information that is unintentionally spread), it became readily apparent that some malicious actors were intent on spreading disinformation. Early on during the pandemic, when governments were still trying to understand the virus and what precautions and preparations were required to take place, Trump immediately dismissed the virus as a "hoax", which clearly was not the case after reports of serious illness and death dramatically increased through what scientists call "waves".[25] Of note, Trump later attempted to clarify his statement.[26] Further, Trump was often cited and referring to the virus as the "Kung Flu" and the "Chinese Virus" as well as inferences about the "Bat Soup" in Wuhan, implying that Trump was inferring the origin of the

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[25] Rem Rieder, "Trump and the 'New Hoax'," FactCheck.org, July 1, 2021, https://www.factcheck.org/2020/03/trump-and-the-new-hoax/.

[26] *Ibid*.

virus, which to this day has not been definitively proven and qualifies as

disinformation.[27] In addition, racist disinformation about COVID-19 spread within

visible minority groups, especially targeting Black people.[28] Studies have proven that

COVID-19 disproportionally affects Black people; however, scientists theorize that the

increased risk of death or serious illness within Black communities is not due to race, but

rather due to medical disinformation, misinformation and conspiracies shared within

those communities.[29] A scholar also points out the fact that due to generational trauma

experienced by Black people, they are less likely to trust the media and government

institutions, thus increasing their susceptibility to disinformation.[30]

In these examples, it is clear that disinformation can translate into the difference

between life and death. While these were not examples of strict state-sanctioned

disinformation, it is imperative to include in this paper as it demonstrates the threat that

disinformation can pose even from internal actors in sowing division and discord. On the

lesser end of the scale using the Trump example, it is clear that disinformation furthered

strains on Chinese-American (and arguably more) relationships. His xenophobic rhetoric

clearly inflamed not only the state of China, but also American-Chinese citizens. Studies

have shown that the Trump rhetoric gave racists and bigots across the United States of

America a platform to spread hate speech and anti-Chinese speech, actions which have

the potential to further divide citizens of a nation and thus erode the foundation of

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[27] Caitlin Ellis, "'China Virus, Wuhan Virus, Kung Flu Virus': Trump Sued for $31M over His Use of Covid Terms," MSN, May 22, 2021, https://www.msn.com/en-nz/news/national/china-virus-wuhan-virus-kung-flu-virus-trump-sued-for-31m-over-his-use-of-covid-terms/ar-AAKhurd.

[28] Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick, "Critical Disinformation Studies: History, Power, and Politics: HKS Misinformation Review," Misinformation Review (Harvard University, September 3, 2021), https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/critical-disinformation-studies-history-power-and-politics/.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*

democracies. On the higher end of the scale, that is actions and reactions that have tangible life and death consequences, the disinformation spread within the Black communities could have contributed to the needless death and unnecessary suffering of many individuals. Disinformation, attributable to Trump again, spread like wildfire within these communities, causing some to drink industrial cleaning solutions, take anti-parasitic medications usually prescribed for horses, and other examples that clearly demonstrated the dangers of disinformation. In fact, in early 2020, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention reported a more than 20% increase in calls about industrial cleaning solution poisoning.[31] It is prudent to note that while Black people are more disproportionately affected, all races are implicit in succumbing to this disinformation. In this particular example, it is clear to see why disinformation is a recipe for disaster when you combine it with visible minorities' general lack of trust in government institutions.

Having illustrated the effects of disinformation from a political, economic and social perspective, it is evident that disinformation poses a tremendous threat to liberal democracies and its citizens. To further illustrate the threat disinformation poses, Thomas Rid substantiates how grave a problem it really is:

> Disinformation operations, in essence, erode the very foundation of
> open societies—not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator.
> When vast, secretive bureaucracies engage in systematic

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[31] Arthur Chang et al., "Cleaning and Disinfectant Chemical Exposures and Temporal Associations with Covid-19 - National Poison Data System, United States, January 1, 2020–March 31, 2020," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 23, 2020), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6916e1.htm., (Introduction).

deception, at large scale and over a long time, they will optimize

their own organizational culture for this purpose, and undermine

the legitimacy of public administration at home. A society's

approach to active measures [disinformation] is a litmus test for its

republican institutions. For liberal democracies in particular,

disinformation represents a double threat: being at the receiving

end of active measures will undermine democratic institutions—

and giving in to the temptation to design and deploy them will

have the same result. It is impossible to excel at disinformation and

at democracy at the same time. The stronger and the more robust a

democratic body politic, the more resistant to disinformation it will

be—and the more reluctant to deploy and optimize disinformation.

Weakened democracies, in turn, succumb more easily to the

temptations of active measures.[32]

Liberal democracies thrive on free speech or freedom of expression (although in some democracies there are limits to this value especially when it comes to hate speech), yet disinformation is able to infiltrate liberal democracies more than any other political system because of this very notion. Disinformation within liberal democracies can be considered in many forms a modern-day Trojan Horse, intent on eroding trust and credibility in democratic government institutions and their leaders. Without trust and credibility, and with increased division sown between races, groups and other entities,

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[32] Thomas Rid, "Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare," in *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 8.

liberal democracies have the potential to collapse under such circumstances. This is why the erosion of liberal democratic values and beliefs through disinformation is such an immense threat. Not only is the threat real and credible, it is also one that democracies have not taken seriously, nor been effective in combatting to date. The next section will dissect examples of liberal democratic responses to disinformation, how they have been ineffective in dealing with disinformation to date, and offer some elementary solutions on how liberal democracies could fight disinformation.

THE INADEQUACY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES TO DISINFORMATION

Liberal Democracies are most vulnerable to disinformation in comparison to other political regimes. While disinformation has a history that has been demonstrated above, it has increased in intensity and reach with the evolution of the internet and the creation of free-sharing platforms like social media.[33] Liberal democracies are especially vulnerable to disinformation because they rely on social consensus to function.[34] This is not to say that all citizens within a democracy need to agree, but that they must have truthful knowledge of matters, a shared common belief grounded in reality, and the ability to change their leaders in lawful elections if the leadership fails on their promises or the reality does not match the messaging. Because of the power electors have over liberal democracies in the form of a vote and the ability to hold their government accountable, it

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[33] Josh A. Goldstein and Shelby Grossman, "How Disinformation Evolved in 2020," Brookings (Brookings, January 4, 2021), https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-disinformation-evolved-in-2020/.

[34] Seva Gunitsky, "Democracies Can't Blame Putin for Their Disinformation Problem," Foreign Policy, April 21, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/democracies-disinformation-russia-china-homegrown/.

is vital that information, including the media reporting of information, is accurate and truthful. To better illustrate this, unlike elected leaders of democracies, leaders of dictatorships do not hold power because their citizens voted them into power and in some cases actually leverage disinformation to retain their ironclad grip on power.[35] This is an important distinction, because it is clear that for liberal democracies to function, truth and transparency become some of the most important values of that particular political system.

Liberal democracies have only recently begun to realize the seriousness of disinformation and have undertaken insignificant measures to combat it without significant impact. For example, democratic governments have openly removed disinformation on social media and some governments have gone so far as to criminalize disinformation.[36] However, this has been met with immense scrutiny as this form of censorship is seen by some citizens as violating freedom of expression, press or the legal ability to peacefully protest the government.[37] With estimates of about 40 percent of the internet being disinformation, it is clear that even if democracies decided to continue censorship that it would be unsustainable owing to the sheer volume of disinformation

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[35] Joshua Kurlantzick, "Dictators Are Using the Coronavirus to Strengthen Their Grip on Power," The Washington Post (WP Company, April 3, 2020), https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/dictators-are-using-the-coronavirus-to-strengthen-their-grip-on-power/2020/04/02/c36582f8-748c-11ea-87da-77a8136c1a6d_story.html.

[36] Tej Heer et al., "Misinformation in Canada - Research and Policy Options." Misinformation in Canada. Evidence for Democracy, May 21, 2021. https://evidencefordemocracy.ca/sites/default/files/reports/misinformation-in-canada-evidence-for-democracy-report_.pdf#:~:text=Disinformation%2C%20a%20subcategory%20of%20misinformation%2C%20is%20false%20information,Canada%20and%20to%20provide%20options%20for%20addressing%20misinformation.

[37] *Ibid.*

available on the internet and the capacity of public servants to screen and remove the

content.[38]

In Canada, a liberal democracy, disinformation is rampant and inadequately

managed. The Canadian governmental agency in charge of combatting disinformation is

the Department of Heritage. However, to illustrate how inadequate this nesting of such a

large portfolio is within the department, disinformation is not even included within the

five core responsibilities of the departmental framework.[39] Canada has given the

disinformation task to a department with an already large portfolio charged with

creativity, arts, culture, heritage, celebration, sport, diversity, inclusion and official

language.[40] Given the fact that this paper has already demonstrated how substantial of a

threat disinformation poses to liberal democracies, it can be argued that giving the

counter-disinformation task to a largely unrelated department demonstrates the lack of

seriousness that Canada has shown in handling this issue. To further demonstrate the

inadequacies in the Canadian response to disinformation, during the COVID-19

pandemic the department was given a meagre $3.5 million dollars in funds to support

organizations in arming Canadian citizens with the tools to navigate disinformation.[41]

Given the plethora of disinformation surrounding COVID-19 and the vaccines, coupled

with the general resistance to vaccines and a substantial percentage of the population who

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[38] Max Read, "How Much of the Internet Is Fake?," Intelligencer (Intelligencer, December 26, 2018), https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/how-much-of-the-internet-is-fake.html.

[39] Government of Canada, "Raison d'Être, Mandate and Role - Canadian Heritage," Canada.ca, March 10, 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/mandate.html.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Government of Canada, "Online Disinformation," Canada.ca, June 30, 2021, https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-disinformation.html.

believed in, and spread, the disinformation surrounding the subject, it is clear to see that the Department of Heritage's efforts had minimal impact on combatting disinformation.

The infamous "Freedom Convoy" that paralyzed Wellington Street in front of the Parliament Buildings in downtown Ottawa further demonstrates the inability of the Canadian Government to effectively manage disinformation. During the protest, the "Freedom Convoy" had, at its peak, amassed approximately 8,000 – 15,000 disenfranchised citizens in an illegal occupation with reports of obnoxious and harassing behaviour, whilst protesting various elements of government restrictions and mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic.[42] While the "Freedom Convoy" protested on the basis of ending vaccine mandates imposed by the Canadian government, however, most of the restrictions were put in place by the provincial governments. Sadly, the protest quickly became a melting-pot for right-wing extremists intent on dissolving the government; a dangerous and rare occurrence in Canada. These actors within the protest clearly were operating under, or influenced by, disinformation as they assumed that the Governor General could overthrow the elected government, despite this not being fact.[43] Further, protestors were observed handing out copies of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in an effort to gain support and sympathy for their cause.[44] In fact, their use of

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[42] Janice Dickson, Marieke Walsh, and Justine Hunter, "Ottawa Police to Implement Hard-Line Approach toward Pandemic-Restriction Protesters," The Globe and Mail (The Globe and Mail, February 5, 2022), https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-ottawa-police-say-more-officers-will-be-deployed-downtown-as-thousands/.

[43] Casey Taylor, "Truck Convoy's Message Muddies the Closer It Gets to Capital," BayToday.ca, January 26, 2022, https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/truck-convoys-message-muddies-the-closer-it-gets-to-capital-4994947.

[44] Peter Zimonjic, "What Many Convoy Protesters Get Wrong about Constitutional Rights and the Governor General | CBC News," CBCnews (CBC/Radio Canada, February 27, 2022), https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/charter-gg-disinformation-civic-awareness-1.6365223.

the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to protest their cause was a case of misinterpretation and selective application of various components for nefarious causes.[45]

While these are just examples of Canada's inadequate response to combatting disinformation, it is a holistically similar approach in comparison to other liberal democratic governments, with minor variations and censorship in some cases.[46] Unless Canada significantly increases its funding and technique to combat disinformation, occurrences such as the "Freedom Convoy" may continue to increase in frequency and intensity.

How Can Liberal Democracies Effectively Combat Disinformation?

Since this paper has demonstrated that liberal democracies have largely been ineffective at combatting disinformation, then it must address what they can do be more effectively. It is clear that censorship, frequently used by authoritarian regimes, is incompatible with the norms and values of liberal democracies. Further, as long as liberal democracies remain committed to ensuring free access to the internet and other mediums of information in their entirety, the task of censoring the internet writ large is a largely insurmountable task. Using a Canadian specific example, the current criminal laws can be expanded to criminalize the creation and spread of disinformation.[47] This, however,

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[45] *Ibid.*

[46] Tej Heer et al., "Misinformation in Canada - Research and Policy Options." Misinformation in Canada. Evidence for Democracy, May 21, 2021. https://evidencefordemocracy.ca/sites/default/files/reports/misinformation-in-canada-evidence-for-democracy-report_.pdf#:~:text=Disinformation%2C%20a%20subcategory%20of%20misinformation%2C%20is%20false%20information,Canada%20and%20to%20provide%20options%20for%20addressing%20misinformation.

[47] *Ibid.*

carries with it other risks, some of which have already been identified, such as the complexities of censorship and how it erodes the foundation of liberal democracies. Further, creating laws within Canada (or any another state for that matter), even if effective for creators and distributors of disinformation domestically, is unlikely to be effective against foreign actors such as Russia and China, who are amongst the largest purveyors of disinformation. For these reasons, it is this author's view that censorship is a largely ineffective mechanism to combat disinformation, and can actually further inflame the problem.

Instead, research has demonstrated that the most effective way to combat disinformation is for governments and other agencies to inoculate the public.[48] This includes, but is not limited to, increasing literacy, providing effective and intuitive fact-checking venues (digital and physical), improved communication of government and other agencies, and other training.[49] This approach, which is centered on the individual, presents other challenges. For example, training and educating the masses is a large, but not impossible task that can be aided by governments and other agencies. For example, increasing literacy initiatives begins in the education systems. Further, training in the identification and use of fact-checking tools can also begin in schooling.

Targeting a large host of disinformation, social media can also be held accountable in its role of enabling the storage and dissemination of disinformation. While social media companies have recently increased their role in combatting disinformation, such as using tools like banner overlays on potential disinformation, the continued spread

[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*

of disinformation on these platforms is concerning.[50] Further, each social media company

that has created a policy to combat disinformation, while similar, differ in their approach.

These inconsistencies can create gaps for exploitation by nefarious actors by proactively

modifying their content to meet the regulations. In addition, there is currently nothing

precluding another company from creating a social media platform in which it is entirely

unregulated. Because governments have largely let social media companies regulate

themselves, and the companies are profit driven verus ethically driven, it is clear to see

why social media companies not only allow, but prioritize high-traffic disinformation to

further increase their own revenue, while largely ignoring the political, economic and

social consequences they are implicit in.

Instead of letting social media companies regulate their own platforms, there are

arguments that governments should create legislation to create consistent regulation.[51]

This is not to be confused with censorship, but to instead force social media corporations

to divulge their highly-secretive and proprietary algorithms to better understand what is

being highlighted, to whom and for what reasons.[52] This is a great first step in

understanding why people are targeted with disinformation, but does not directly address

the digital and physical spread of disinformation. Building on this, another idea is to

legislate that social media companies create banners for users looking at algorithm-

targeted content to explain why the algorithm picked the particular content for the user.

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[50] *Ibid.*
[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Ibid.*

In this regard, it allows the user to understand better their practices, and to become more conscious of their online activities and susceptibility to disinformation.

Short of compete censorship, which this paper has already demonstrated is incompatible with the norms and values of liberal democracies, eliminating disinformation is difficult, if not impossible. Instead, this section concludes that the most effective means to combat disinformation in present-day are to inoculate the public and provide effective tools for fact-checking and identifying disinformation. Further, creating legislation not to censor disinformation on social media platforms, but rather to help educate the user on why they are seeing particular content will further enable the user to identify trends in their content and be more conscious about what may be disinformation. While this will certainly be a large task to undertake by liberal democracies, and will not be an instant solution, over time it should prove to better arm citizens with the knowledge they need to filter disinformation. Further, if successful, it will strengthen the democratic institutions by allowing citizens to regain their common beliefs and values and not be incited into divisive protests or violence spurred by disinformation.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to answer the questions to what extent disinformation is a threat to liberal democracies and to what extent have they taken the necessary steps to deal with this challenge. It intended to ascertain if disinformation is a credible threat, and if so, determine what liberal democracies are doing to safeguard against it, and analyze if these measures are effective. Using various examples of types of disinformation and their consequences weighed against the impact on liberal democracies, this paper demonstrated that disinformation is not only a real and persistent threat to liberal

democracies, but that it is one of the largest threats to liberal democracies affecting it on a political, social and economic level. It also demonstrated how disinformation is addressed by liberal democracies in present-day, and concluded that the response to disinformation by liberal democracies has been wholly ineffective, underfunded and not taken as seriously as this paper purports it should be taken. Finally, this paper offered some solutions for liberal democracies to counter disinformation, albeit they are limited. It offered that censorship is ineffective for liberal democracies due to its clash with the norms and values of such institutions, and instead sought to introduce proactive measures to educate, equip and enable its citizens to better filter disinformation from fact. It also suggested the introduction of legislation to force social media companies to divulge their proprietary algorithms in an effort to allow users to understand better why they are being targeted with particular content and to allow the user to identify trends in their content.

Left unchecked, disinformation leaves liberal democracies vulnerable to fractures within their societies, increased division and extremism, and erosion of the norms and values of which the political system stands for. This can lead to breakdowns in the essential functions of liberal democracies and can even result in their dissolution. Not to be taken lightly, this paper has demonstrated the ominous threat disinformation poses to liberal democracies especially from a political, economic and social perspective. Leaders within liberal democracies must quickly align themselves in the fight against disinformation before it is too late.

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