

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A DRIVER OF ELECTORAL DISINFORMATION

PhD Candidate **Zoltan ZAKOTA**

zzakota@gmail.com

Ștefan cel Mare University, Suceava, Romania

Abstract: Social media plays a crucial role in shaping the flow of information during elections, but it also serves as a powerful channel for disinformation. Platforms like Facebook, X, TikTok, or YouTube enable almost instant dissemination of misleading narratives, conspiracy theories, and manipulated content. Algorithms prioritizing engagement often amplify emotionally charged or polarizing posts, giving disinformation greater visibility than fact-based reporting. Inflammatory ads, cloned news websites and deepfake videos are the most well-known means used to spread disinformation. During election periods, such content can distort public perception of candidates, undermine trust in institutions, and even discourage voter participation. The anonymity and speed of social media make it difficult to trace the origin of false information, while coordinated networks of bots or troll farms can boost the credibility of disinformation campaigns. This creates an environment in which voters may struggle to distinguish reliable sources from fabricated narratives, ultimately threatening the integrity of democratic processes. My paper aims to present the most frequently used disinformation tools in social media and some of the notorious cases when they were used in elections. I analyse the impact of social media platforms on election-related misinformation and the biases generated, with special regard on their ethical consequences.

Keywords: *social media, election, disinformation, public perception, algorithms, biases.*

The nature of disinformation

When looking for a clear definition for disinformation, one can use the “Action Plan against Disinformation”, a joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. (EC, 2018) According to the document:

Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens’ health, environment or security.

Studies on disinformation and misinformation, as well as their social diffusion mechanisms have a quite long history among the attempts of understanding human information behaviour in the era of social media. (Karlova & Fisher, 2013) Nowadays we use the terms disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation, referring to them collectively as

information disorder, just as they were adopted by Claire Wardle. (Wardle, 2020) In the meantime, Wardle and her co-author, Hossein Derakhshan, continued to work on expanding and refining the topic in an attempt to build a model that can be used both for research and practical applications. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

In their conceptual framework of the information disorder, they identify three different types of information, by using the dimensions of harm and falseness:

- ✓ Mis-information: false information is shared, but no harm is meant (false connection, misleading content).
- ✓ Dis-information: false information is knowingly shared to cause harm (false context, imposter content, manipulated content, fabricated content).
- ✓ Mal-information: genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere (leaks, harassment, hate speech).

The model contains three elements of information disorder: the agent, the messages and the interpreters. It also includes three different phases of it: creation, production, and distribution of information disorder, with feedback between the last two phases. Based on their work and utilizing it, numerous guides and manuals have subsequently been published to help navigate social media more safely, such as: (UNESCO, 2018) (UNICEF, n.d.), (Princeton, 2025).

In conclusion, from an operational perspective, we can assert that disinformation refers to some content that:

- ✓ contains verifiably false or manipulated claims (e.g., fabricated news, deepfakes, altered images and/or videos);
- ✓ is disseminated through coordinated or organic channels (e.g., social media platforms, bots, trolls, influencer networks);
- ✓ has the purpose or effect of influencing individual perceptions, undermining trust in institutions, and/or manipulating collective attitudes.

In the context of elections, disinformation refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately created and spread to deceive voters, manipulate political attitudes, or undermine trust in the electoral process and democratic institutions. It typically targets candidates, parties, voting procedures, or election outcomes, and is disseminated strategically, often via social media, coordinated networks, or paid amplification, to influence voter behaviour, suppress participation, or delegitimize results. Unlike misinformation, which may be shared unintentionally,

disinformation is characterized by intentionality, strategic timing (e.g. during campaigns or just before voting), and political purpose.

Social media as a driver of electoral disinformation

The rapid expansion of social media has profoundly transformed political communication, particularly during electoral periods. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram have become central arenas for political debate, campaign messaging, and voter mobilization. At the same time, these platforms have emerged as key drivers of electoral disinformation, enabling the large-scale circulation of false or misleading information intended to manipulate public opinion, undermine trust in democratic institutions, or distort electoral outcomes. Election disinformation has thus emerged as one of the most significant challenges to democratic governance in the twenty-first century, therefore understanding the mechanisms through which social media facilitates electoral disinformation is essential for assessing contemporary challenges to democratic governance. “The spread of disinformation can be traced to growing legitimacy problems in many democracies. Declining citizen confidence in institutions undermines the credibility of official information in the news and opens publics to alternative information sources.” (Bennett & Livingston, 2018)

While disinformation has existed long before the digital age, social media has significantly amplified its reach, speed, and impact. Unlike traditional mass media, social media platforms allow virtually anyone to produce and distribute political content, often without editorial oversight or fact-checking. This structural openness lowers the cost of dissemination and creates fertile ground for manipulative narratives. The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally altered the contemporary information ecosystem, particularly in the political sphere. While social media enables unprecedented levels of participation and access to information, it has also become a central infrastructure for the production and dissemination of disinformation. Disinformation has found fertile ground in social media environments due to their speed, scale, algorithmic logic, and low barriers to entry (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Social media platforms create favourable structural conditions for election disinformation through several interrelated features. First, the low cost of content production and distribution allows individuals and organized actors alike to circulate political narratives at scale. Second, algorithmic amplification prioritizes engagement over accuracy, favouring emotionally charged or polarizing content (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Third, networked virality enables false claims to circulate rapidly across platforms, often outpacing fact-checking mechanisms. Additionally, social media collapses traditional distinctions between journalists, political actors, and citizens. This erosion of gatekeeping allows disinformation to masquerade as authentic political expression. Finally, platform

architectures facilitate microtargeting, enabling disinformation campaigns to tailor messages to specific demographic or ideological groups with little transparency (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). These structural dynamics underpin many of the most notable cases which I discuss below.

Despite these challenges, it is important to note that social media is not inherently misinformative. The same platforms that facilitate disinformation can also support fact-checking, civic engagement, and counter-narratives. Civil society organizations, independent journalists, and electoral authorities increasingly use social media to debunk false claims and provide accurate information to voters. However, research suggests that corrective information often spreads more slowly and less widely than false content, limiting its effectiveness (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). This asymmetry underscores the structural advantage disinformation enjoys within platform ecosystems.

Most commonly used means of disinformation in social media

One of the primary ways social media drives electoral disinformation is through its algorithmic logic. Platform algorithms are typically designed to maximize user engagement by prioritizing content that elicits strong emotional responses, such as anger, fear, or outrage. Research shows that emotionally charged and polarizing content spreads faster and wider than neutral or factual information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Disinformation actors exploit this dynamic by crafting sensational narratives, conspiracy theories, or moral panics that are more likely to be shared, commented on, and amplified by algorithmic recommendation systems. As a result, misleading content can gain disproportionate visibility during election campaigns. The related mechanism of algorithmic amplification, by which disinformation actors exploit to maximize reach is prioritized by social media platforms content that generates engagement, often privileging emotionally charged, sensational, or polarizing material. False or misleading information is therefore structurally advantaged, as it is more likely to provoke strong emotional reactions such as fear, anger, or moral outrage. Empirical studies show that false news spreads faster and reaches more users than truthful information, especially in political contexts (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). Disinformation producers strategically craft content that aligns with these algorithmic incentives, ensuring that misleading narratives travel rapidly across platforms.

A second key driver is the use of coordinated inauthentic behaviour, which involves networks of fake or automated accounts designed to mimic genuine user activity. These accounts, commonly referred to as bots or troll accounts, are used to amplify misleading narratives by artificially increasing their visibility and perceived popularity. Through likes, shares, comments, and reposts, such networks create an illusion of public consensus, making disinformation appear credible and widely accepted. Studies by the Oxford

Internet Institute document how organized social media manipulation has been deployed in dozens of countries, particularly during elections and periods of political instability, in order to influence elections and political debates (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). In electoral contexts, such networks can push specific candidates, discredit opponents, or promote narratives questioning the legitimacy of the vote itself. The appearance of widespread consensus created by these tactics can mislead users into perceiving false claims as socially validated truths. The effectiveness of this method lies not in persuasion through argument, but in psychological cues of social validation.

Social media also facilitates deceptive political advertising and microtargeted disinformation, practices whereby tailored political messages are directed at specific demographic or psychological groups. Using personal data and behavioural profiling, disinformation campaigns can deliver different narratives to different audiences, often invisible to the wider public. The Cambridge Analytica scandal illustrated how personal data could be leveraged to influence voter behaviour through targeted political advertising (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). In electoral settings, such microtargeting raises ethical concerns, as it enables the dissemination of contradictory or deceptive messages without public accountability or scrutiny, through platforms which allow advertisers to target users based on detailed demographic, behavioural, and psychological profiles. While targeted advertising is not inherently deceptive, it becomes a vehicle for disinformation when false or misleading political messages are selectively delivered to specific groups. Such practices undermine transparency and democratic deliberation, as different segments of the electorate may be exposed to contradictory or manipulative narratives without public visibility.

In recent years, another increasingly significant factor has emerged as a powerful and concerning means of disinformation, namely the rise of synthetic media and deepfakes. Advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have made it easier to create realistic but fabricated videos, images, or audio recordings of political figures. In electoral contexts, deepfakes can be used to falsely depict candidates engaging in illegal, immoral, or inflammatory behaviour, potentially influencing voter perceptions before fact-checking mechanisms can respond. Chesney and Citron argue that the persuasive realism of deepfakes poses a unique threat to democratic deliberation, as they undermine the evidentiary value of audiovisual media itself, particularly in low-trust information environments. Even when debunked, such content can leave lasting impressions, reinforcing doubt and cynicism among voters. (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

The transnational nature of social media further exacerbates the problem of electoral disinformation. Platforms operate across borders, enabling foreign interference in domestic elections with relative ease. Investigations into elections in the United States, France, Romania,

Moldova, and other countries have documented how foreign state or state-aligned actors used social media to promote divisive narratives, support certain candidates, or weaken trust in democratic institutions (Senate, 2019) (EEAS, n.d.). These campaigns often exploit existing social cleavages, such as nationalism, identity politics, or economic inequality, thereby intensifying polarization.

Beyond influencing voter preferences, social media-driven disinformation can also target electoral legitimacy itself. Unfounded and false claims of widespread fraud, manipulated vote counts, or corrupt electoral authorities are recurrent themes in online disinformation campaigns. Even when unsupported by evidence, such narratives can erode public confidence in elections and reduce acceptance of legitimate outcomes. Trust in electoral integrity is a foundational element of democratic stability, and sustained exposure to fraud narratives can have long-term corrosive effects on political participation and institutional trust. (Norris, 2014)

Another widely used means of disinformation dissemination is visual manipulation, including memes, altered photographs, and misleading infographics. Visual content is particularly effective on social media because it is easily consumable, emotionally resonant, and highly shareable. Memes, in particular, compress complex political claims into simple, humorous, or provocative images that are rarely subjected to critical scrutiny. According to (Highfield, 2016), political memes function as cultural shortcuts, transmitting ideological messages through familiar visual codes. When combined with false or distorted information, such visuals can shape political perceptions while evading fact-checking mechanisms that focus primarily on textual content.

A further significant method is the creation and dissemination of fake news websites and cloned media outlets. These sites are often designed to closely resemble legitimate news organizations, borrowing visual identity, language style, and layout to gain credibility. Links to such websites are then circulated on social media, where users may not verify their authenticity before sharing. Investigations into European disinformation campaigns, such as the “Doppelgänger” operation, have shown how cloned media sites were used to spread false narratives while impersonating trusted journalistic brands (EU DisinfoLab, 2022). Social media functions as the primary distribution channel for these websites, blurring the boundary between professional journalism and fabricated content.

An increasingly common tactic is hashtag hijacking and trend manipulation. Coordinated groups flood social media platforms with specific hashtags, slogans, or keywords to force them into trending lists. Once a topic becomes visible as “trending,” it gains additional algorithmic prominence and media attention, regardless of its factual basis. This method has been widely used to promote conspiracy theories, discredit electoral processes, or mobilize outrage around fabricated events. As

Freelon and Wells note, trending mechanisms can be strategically manipulated to distort perceptions of public salience and urgency. (Freelon & Wells, 2020)

Finally, influencer-driven and astroturfing campaigns have become prominent means of spreading disinformation, particularly on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. In astroturfing, orchestrated campaigns present themselves as grassroots movements, concealing their organized or funded nature. Influencers, whether knowingly or unknowingly, may amplify misleading narratives to large audiences, lending them an aura of authenticity. The persuasive power of influencers lies in their perceived relatability and trustworthiness, which disinformation actors exploit to bypass traditional gatekeeping structures (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Notorious cases of electoral disinformation carried out through social media

Disinformation, understood as verifiably false or misleading information deliberately created and disseminated to deceive or cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), has been documented across diverse political systems. While manipulation of electoral information predates the digital age, social media has radically expanded its speed, reach, and persuasive capacity. By presenting some prominent examples from the United States, South America, Western and Eastern Europe, I intend to demonstrate how social media has become an indispensable infrastructure for modern disinformation campaigns. Rather than treating these cases as isolated anomalies, the paper argues that they reveal recurring structural patterns: algorithmic amplification, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, emotional polarization, and the exploitation of existing social divisions.

The 2016 United States presidential election

The 2016 U.S. presidential election represents a watershed moment in the study of election disinformation via social media. Investigations by journalists, researchers, and U.S. intelligence agencies revealed extensive online manipulation, much of it linked to the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA). The IRA operated thousands of fake social media accounts that posed as American citizens, activist groups, or news outlets, disseminating divisive political content across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Senate, 2019). Rather than promoting a single ideological position, these campaigns amplified existing social divisions, such as race, immigration, gun rights, religion, while simultaneously attacking Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and undermining trust in democratic institutions. False stories such as the “Pizzagate” conspiracy circulated widely, while targeted advertisements reached millions of users. Importantly, much of this content was designed not to persuade undecided voters directly, but to polarize the electorate and delegitimize

the electoral process. (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018) The 2016 U.S. case demonstrated the strategic use of coordinated inauthentic behaviour, microtargeted political advertising, and algorithmic amplification, establishing a template later replicated in other elections worldwide.

Brexit and the 2016 United Kingdom referendum

The UK's 2016 referendum on European Union membership provides another notable example of social media-driven electoral disinformation. While not an election in the traditional sense, the referendum had profound political consequences and involved widespread digital manipulation. Campaigns on both sides used misleading claims, but investigations highlighted the role of targeted disinformation and opaque online advertising, particularly on Facebook. Investigations revealed the widespread circulation of misleading claims—most famously the assertion that £350 million per week could be redirected from the EU to the National Health Service. While this claim appeared on traditional campaign materials, its viral spread on social media significantly magnified its impact. Researchers and parliamentary inquiries later identified opaque digital campaigning practices, including microtargeted Facebook advertisements and data-driven persuasion techniques (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). Disinformation during the Brexit campaign often framed the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, immigration control, and democratic self-determination. Social media played a critical role in amplifying these narratives while fragmenting public debate into algorithmically curated echo chambers. Besides data-driven microtargeting, concerns were also raised about the involvement of firms such as Cambridge Analytica, which allegedly used harvested Facebook data to influence voter behaviour (Isaak & Hanna, 2018). The Brexit case underscored how social media enables personalized political messaging that escapes public scrutiny, challenging traditional democratic norms of transparency and accountability.

France's 2017 "MacronLeaks" operation

In the final days of the 2017 French presidential election, thousands of internal emails from Emmanuel Macron's campaign were leaked and rapidly disseminated on social media under the hashtag #MacronLeaks. While some of the documents were authentic, analysts and French authorities warned that fabricated materials had been mixed with real ones to sow confusion and suspicion. The operation relied heavily on automated Twitter accounts and fringe online communities before gaining wider visibility. Although the "relatively healthy" French media ecosystem limited its domestic impact, the case illustrated how strategically timed leaks amplified via social media could undermine electoral integrity. (Vilmer, Escorcia, Guillaume, Herrera & Janaina, 2018) The MacronLeaks episode also highlighted the growing role of transnational online

networks, as many accounts spreading the material were traced to foreign actors. The campaign appeared to follow a strategy similar to that used in the United States in 2016: releasing information at a strategically late moment to limit verification and maximize confusion. Automated accounts amplified the leaks using English-language hashtags, suggesting foreign involvement. There was identified the presence of bots that existed during the 2016 US Presidential election campaign period to support alt-right narratives, went dark after November 8, 2016, and came back into use in the run up days to the 2017 French presidential election. This anomalous account usage pattern may suggest the possible existence of a black-market for reusable political disinformation bots. (Ferrara, 2017)

Brazil's 2018 presidential election and WhatsApp disinformation

Brazil's 2018 presidential election marked a shift toward private messaging platforms as major channels of disinformation. Supporters of Jair Bolsonaro used WhatsApp to disseminate false claims about opponents, including fabricated stories accusing rival candidates of criminal behaviour or moral corruption. Because WhatsApp operates through encrypted private groups, monitoring and countering such disinformation proved particularly difficult. Investigations revealed the use of bulk messaging services and illegally funded disinformation networks targeting millions of voters and with factcheckers not being able to debunk every piece of misinformation (Benevenuto & Melo, 2024). Studies show that misinformation circulated within trusted peer networks can be especially persuasive, as users are less likely to question information received from friends or family (Resende, et al., 2019). The Brazilian case demonstrated how social media disinformation can migrate away from public platforms toward semi-private digital spaces, complicating regulatory and research efforts. And it also draws attention to one very harmful aftereffect of using such tools: they tend to persist even after the elections. "[T]he app continued to be used in a governmental operation spreading false and misleading information popularly known in Brazil as the Office of Hatred (OOH)". (Ozawa, et al., 2023)

India's elections and the rise of deepfakes

India, the world's largest democracy, has experienced repeated waves of election disinformation amplified by social media. In recent elections, AI-generated deepfake videos emerged as a particularly notable tactic. These videos depicted political leaders making statements they never uttered, often tailored to specific linguistic or regional audiences. In some cases, deepfakes were used to translate political messages into local languages, blurring the line between legitimate campaign innovation and deceptive manipulation. In others, they spread false or inflammatory claims. Political parties and affiliated networks have used Facebook, WhatsApp, and increasingly TikTok (prior to its ban) to spread misleading

narratives, communal rumours, and doctored images. During national and state elections, false claims about minority groups, opposition leaders, and voting procedures circulated widely (Banaji, Bhat, Agarwal, Passanha, & Sadhana Pravin, 2019) Scholars warn that in a highly polarized and linguistically diverse environment, such tactics can significantly distort electoral communication (Chesney & Citron, 2019).

The 2020 United States election and the “Stop the Steal” narrative

While foreign interference remained a concern in the 2020 U.S. election, domestic disinformation played an even more prominent role. Following the election, false claims that the vote had been “stolen” through widespread fraud spread rapidly across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and fringe platforms. The “Stop the Steal” movement exemplified how social media can facilitate the rapid diffusion of delegitimizing narratives without empirical evidence. Despite repeated debunking by courts, election officials, and fact-checkers, fraud claims persisted and gained traction through algorithmic amplification and influencer endorsement. These narratives culminated in the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, demonstrating the real-world consequences of sustained election disinformation. The case illustrated how social media disinformation does not merely affect electoral outcomes but can destabilize democratic order by eroding shared factual realities.

Romania’s 2024-2025 electoral crisis

Romania provides a striking Eastern European example of election disinformation via social media. During the 2024 presidential elections, TikTok emerged as a central platform for political messaging. Investigations by journalists and state authorities revealed coordinated networks of inauthentic accounts promoting the independent candidate Călin Georgescu, alongside narratives hostile to the European Union, NATO, and democratic institutions. The Romanian Constitutional Court, with an unprecedented decision, ultimately annulled the first round of the election, citing irregularities linked to digital campaigning and undisclosed influence operations. Fake news videos, manipulated media branded as legitimate outlets, and mass comment-spam operations were documented across TikTok, Facebook, and Telegram. Disinformation campaigns often relied on nationalist and anti-establishment narratives, framing mainstream political actors as corrupt or controlled by foreign powers. The Romanian election illustrates how social media disinformation can escalate from symbolic manipulation to institutional crisis. The case is notable for demonstrating that social media disinformation can reach a scale capable of triggering constitutional-level interventions (Romania Insider, 2024; Euractiv, 2025).

Moldova's hybrid disinformation and geopolitical influence

In Moldova, election disinformation through social media has been closely tied to geopolitical competition between pro-European and pro-Russian forces. During recent elections and referenda, pro-Russian networks disseminated false narratives portraying the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, accusing leaders such as President Maia Sandu of corruption, moral deviance, or subservience to Western interests. Deepfake videos, cloned news websites, and Telegram channels impersonating legitimate media outlets played a significant role. International organizations and investigative journalists documented coordinated campaigns linked to Russian information operations, highlighting Moldova as a frontline case of digital hybrid warfare (EEAS, n.d.).

Distortions and biases of electoral disinformation

Electoral disinformation has become one of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary democracies. While false or misleading information has always played a role in political competition, the rise of social media has transformed both its scale and impact. Electoral disinformation today is not merely inaccurate content; it is strategically produced and disseminated to influence political outcomes, manipulate voter behaviour, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Central to understanding this phenomenon are the political and ethical biases embedded in disinformation narratives. These biases shape how information is framed, which values are invoked, and which groups are targeted or delegitimized. Political biases refer to the ideological, partisan, or geopolitical orientations that disinformation campaigns advance, while ethical biases concern the moral framings and value judgments exploited to mobilize emotions such as fear, loyalty, resentment, or moral outrage. From my point of view, electoral disinformation operates through a systematic interplay of political and ethical biases, reinforcing polarization and eroding democratic norms. By examining them, the paper aims to clarify how disinformation functions not simply as falsehood, but also as a form of normative persuasion.

Bias in electoral disinformation does not operate in the same way as bias in traditional journalism. Rather than selectively emphasizing certain facts, disinformation constructs value-laden narratives that align with specific political objectives. Wardle and Derakhshan situate disinformation within the broader framework of information disorder, emphasizing intent, harm, and strategic manipulation. In electoral contexts, bias is rarely neutral or accidental; it is integral to how disinformation achieves political influence. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) Ethical bias, in particular, operates by exploiting widely shared moral intuitions, such as fairness, security, or loyalty, in order to legitimize false claims. Contemporary disinformation thrives in post-truth environments where emotional resonance often outweighs factual accuracy. Political and

ethical biases thus reinforce each other: political goals are pursued through moral framings that resonate with voters' identities and beliefs. (Waisbord, 2018)

One of the most visible forms of political bias in electoral disinformation is partisan bias. Disinformation campaigns often promote one political actor while discrediting opponents through false allegations, conspiracy theories, or selective distortions. The 2016 US presidential election exemplifies this dynamic, with coordinated social media campaigns amplifying content favourable to Donald Trump while spreading damaging misinformation about Hillary Clinton (Senate, 2019). Beyond party politics, electoral disinformation frequently reflects broader ideological biases, particularly along conservative–progressive or nationalist–liberal divides. Issues such as immigration, gender rights, religion, and national sovereignty are commonly weaponized. Disinformation narratives often portray progressive policies as existential threats to national identity or moral order, while conservative actors are framed as defenders of tradition and stability. Marwick and Lewis show how online disinformation ecosystems systematically frame liberal elites as corrupt, immoral, or detached from “real” citizens. (Marwick & Lewis, 2017) These ideological biases are especially effective because they simplify complex political debates into moral binaries: good versus evil, patriots versus traitors, thus discouraging deliberation and reinforcing polarization.

Closely related to ideological bias is populist bias, which frames politics as a struggle between a virtuous “people” and a corrupt elite. Electoral disinformation frequently adopts populist rhetoric, depicting institutions such as courts, electoral commissions, journalists, and academics as enemies of popular will. This bias has been observed across diverse political systems, from the United States and Brazil to Romania and Moldova, (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) Populist disinformation often claims that elections are “rigged,” manipulated, or controlled by shadowy elites. Even when evidence is absent, such narratives exploit ethical commitments to fairness and justice, persuading voters that democratic processes are fundamentally illegitimate. As Bennett and Livingston argue, these narratives contribute to a broader “disinformation order” that undermines trust in democratic institutions themselves, not just individual candidates. (Bennett & Livingston, 2018)

Electoral disinformation also reflects geopolitical biases, particularly in cases of foreign interference. State-linked disinformation campaigns frequently advance narratives aligned with national strategic interests rather than domestic political debates. In Eastern Europe, for example, pro-Russian disinformation has consistently framed the European Union and NATO as threats to sovereignty, morality, and peace, while portraying pro-Western leaders as foreign puppets (EEAS, n.d.). These geopolitical biases are ethically framed through appeals to

patriotism, national survival, and cultural authenticity. By invoking historical grievances or fears of external domination, disinformation campaigns legitimize political positions that might otherwise appear extreme. The ethical power of such narratives lies in their ability to transform geopolitical strategy into moral necessity.

Among the most pervasive ethical biases in electoral disinformation is the fear and security bias. Disinformation frequently exaggerates or fabricates threats, such as crime, migration, terrorism, or cultural decline to justify particular political outcomes. Fear-based narratives are effective because they activate primal instincts related to protection and survival. (Sunstein, 2009) During elections, such narratives often target minority groups, framing them as dangerous or incompatible with national values. This ethical bias legitimizes exclusionary policies while portraying political opponents as irresponsible or complicit in endangering the public. Research shows that fear-based misinformation spreads more rapidly on social media than neutral information, amplifying its electoral impact (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

Another prominent ethical bias involves religious and moral values. Disinformation campaigns frequently frame elections as moral battles over family, faith, or cultural tradition. In many societies, particularly in Eastern Europe and parts of the Global South, pro-European or progressive candidates are portrayed as anti-Christian, immoral, or hostile to traditional family structures. These narratives exploit deeply rooted ethical frameworks, making political choices appear as moral imperatives rather than policy decisions. Moralized disinformation is particularly resistant to correction, because factual rebuttals do not address the underlying value conflict.

Ethical biases related to justice and fairness play a central role in claims of electoral fraud and manipulation. Disinformation narratives often assert that elections are stolen, votes are miscounted, or electoral authorities are corrupt. Such claims exploit voters' ethical commitment to procedural fairness and equal representation. Closely linked is the victimization bias, which portrays certain groups, often the ethnic or cultural majority as oppressed by elites, minorities, or foreign actors. This inversion of victimhood reframes dominant groups as morally justified in rejecting democratic outcomes. Guess and his coworkers demonstrate that repeated exposure to fraud narratives significantly reduces trust in electoral integrity, even when claims are demonstrably false. (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2020) In more extreme cases, electoral disinformation incorporates dehumanizing ethical biases, portraying opponents as enemies, traitors, or existential threats. Such narratives blur the boundary between democratic competition and moral warfare. By denying the legitimacy or humanity of political opponents, disinformation lowers ethical constraints on political behaviour, including harassment, intimidation, or violence. This process of ethical boundary-shifting is

particularly dangerous in polarized societies, as it normalizes hostility and undermines democratic norms of pluralism and tolerance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The cumulative effect of political and ethical biases in electoral disinformation is the erosion of democratic ethics. Elections rely not only on procedures, but on shared normative commitments to truth, fairness, and mutual legitimacy. When disinformation systematically exploits moral values for manipulative ends, it corrodes these commitments. Importantly, the danger of electoral disinformation lies not only in persuading voters to support particular candidates, but in reshaping how citizens understand democracy itself. When elections are framed as moral battles against evil forces, compromise and deliberation become ethically suspect, and democratic pluralism is weakened.

Conclusions

Social media acts as a powerful driver of electoral disinformation due to its algorithmic incentives, low barriers to participation, capacity for coordination and microtargeting, and global reach. These features enable both domestic and foreign actors to manipulate political discourse, distort voter perceptions, and undermine trust in elections. Addressing this challenge requires a multidimensional approach that combines platform regulation, transparency in political advertising, digital literacy education, and sustained support for independent journalism. Without such measures, the role of social media in amplifying electoral disinformation will remain a significant threat to democratic processes in the digital age.

The most commonly used means of disinformation through social media include coordinated inauthentic behaviour, algorithmic amplification, visual manipulation, synthetic media, fake news websites, microtargeted advertising, trend manipulation, and influencer-based astroturfing. These methods are effective not because they rely on sophisticated argumentation, but because they exploit the structural features of social media platforms and the cognitive vulnerabilities of users. Addressing these challenges requires not only regulatory and technological interventions, but also a deeper understanding of how social media environments shape the circulation and credibility of political information.

In many countries, the rise of deepfakes and synthetic media represents one of the most alarming developments in election disinformation. AI-generated videos and audio recordings have been used to falsely depict candidates making inflammatory statements or engaging in illegal activities. Even when debunked, such content can produce lasting reputational damage and erode trust in audiovisual evidence itself. Elections in India, Pakistan, Indonesia, and several European states have already seen the deployment of deepfake materials. The speed at which such content circulates on social media often outpaces institutional

responses, raising concerns about future elections conducted in increasingly “post-authentic” media environments.

Across these cases, several common patterns emerge. First, disinformation campaigns frequently exploit existing social cleavages rather than creating new ones. Second, social media enables both domestic and foreign actors to operate with relative anonymity. Third, emotional resonance, especially fear, outrage, and moral panic is a consistent feature of successful disinformation. Notable tactics include coordinated inauthentic behaviour, visual manipulation, fake news websites, microtargeted advertising, influencer-based astroturfing, and algorithmic exploitation. While contexts differ, the underlying logic of disinformation remains remarkably consistent across political systems.

The most notable cases of election disinformation accomplished through social media demonstrate that the phenomenon is neither episodic nor geographically limited, digital platforms have become central battlegrounds for democratic legitimacy. From the United States and Western Europe to Eastern Europe and the Global South, social media has become a central infrastructure for manipulating electoral discourse, enabling disinformation campaigns that undermine trust in elections, polarize societies, and challenge institutional authority. These cases reveal not only the adaptability of disinformation tactics but also the structural vulnerabilities of contemporary digital platforms. Addressing this phenomenon requires more than content moderation or fact-checking. It demands systemic reforms in platform governance, transparency in political advertising, cross-border cooperation, and sustained investment in media literacy. Without such measures, social media will continue to function as a powerful driver of electoral disinformation, posing enduring challenges to democratic life in the digital age.

Political and ethical biases are not peripheral features of electoral disinformation; they are its core mechanisms. Through partisan, populist, ideological, and geopolitical biases, disinformation advances specific political goals. Through ethical biases, like fear, morality, justice, and victimhood it mobilizes emotions and values that shape voter behaviour and perceptions of legitimacy. Understanding these biases is essential for developing effective responses to electoral disinformation. Technical solutions such as content moderation and fact-checking, while necessary, are insufficient without addressing the underlying moral and political narratives that give disinformation its power. Ultimately, safeguarding democratic elections requires not only protecting information integrity, but also reaffirming the ethical foundations of democratic life.

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