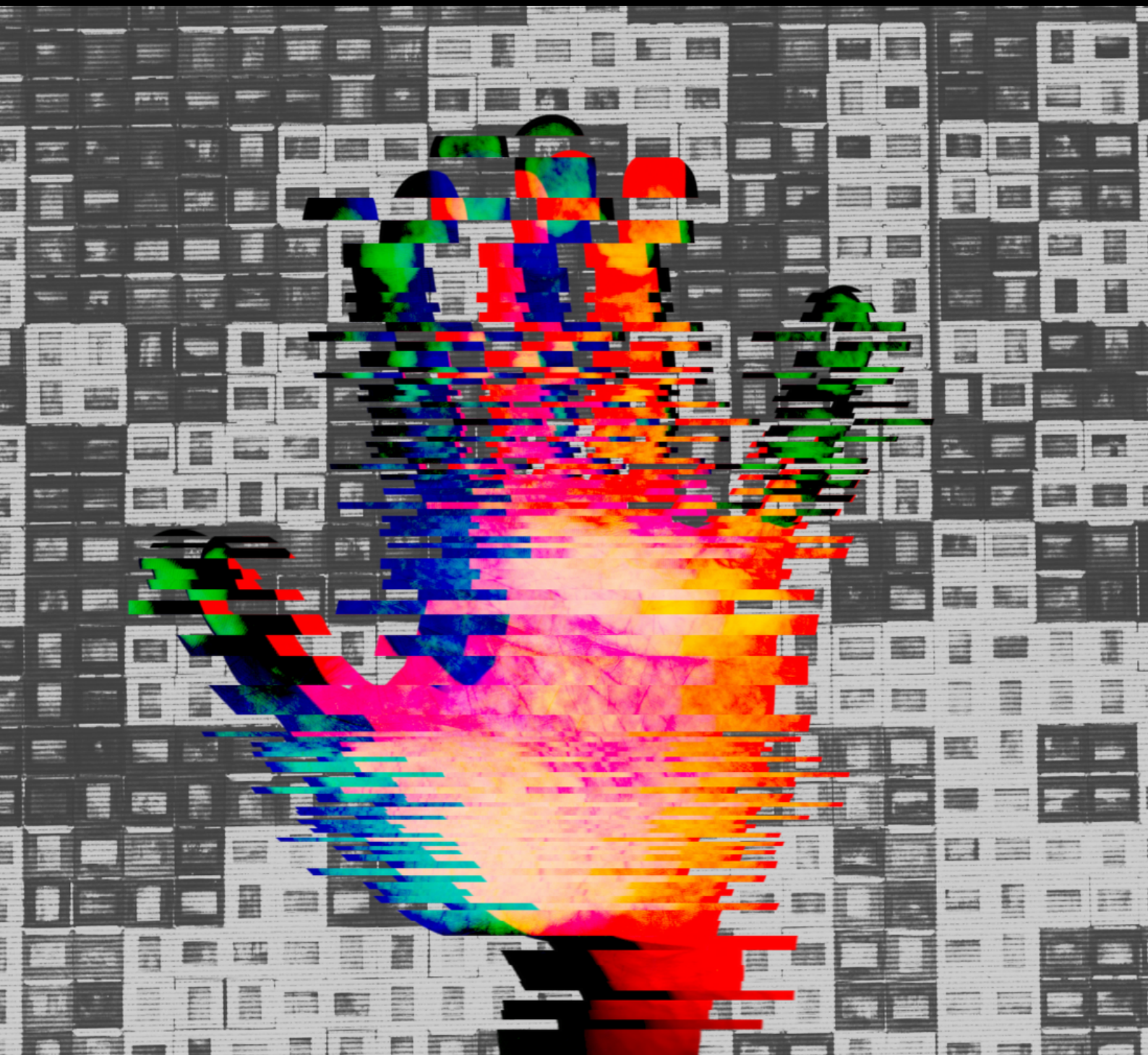# The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital Authoritarianism Around the World

INFORMATION

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Acknowledgements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information manipulation is a common phenomenon and practice in the contexts of the countries selected for this report. Generally, dis/misinformation campaigns in these countries are state-backed and benefit either dominant or competing political actors. Disinformation becomes a tool for the fight for power in a socially polarised context caused by problematic political events (e.g. coups, elections, changes in the government and protest mobilisation). In most cases, disinformation is aimed at compromising political opponents, highlighting the achievements of the political regime or suppressing dissent. The factor that plays a crucial role in these societies is a comparatively high proliferation of the internet and the enthusiasm of the public in using social media, which goes hand in hand with a certain traditional media unfreedom. However, disinformation strategies become not just a tool of operating domestic politics but also a way to establish political influence across borders.

The report has four parts. The first part traces the origins and conceptualisations of information manipulation practices. The second analyses the context in which they are appearing. The third gives an overview of the response to information manipulation. The final part provides a summary and outlines the most recent debate on the topic.

BACKGROUND

Spreading misleading information to shape public opinion is not a new phenomenon, and has been used for a long time by many governments and interest groups. There have been initiatives the world over run by academic, activist and journalist communities who are studying and fighting the spread of problematic content, including propaganda, yellow journalism or hyperpartisan news (Pennycook, Gordon, and Rand). Triggered by the 2016 US elections, the discussion on "fake news" and disinformation entered the broader public discourse, and has been drawing greater interest to the topic ever since (Howard).

A few factors contribute to the intensification of information manipulation across the globe. The first is the global downfall of the public sphere in the information society. The ideal public sphere grants open discussion and the possibility of criticising the authorities, full accountability, transparency, and independence of its actors from economic and state control. These require free access to complete and unbiased information about social processes. Today, most societies, including those considered democratic, cannot provide the conditions to secure such access. The primary cause of this is institutional downfall, where watchdog organisations are not following the public interest and, what's more, can be linked to the commodification of information in the information economy. The lack of institutionalised forums of deliberation where people can participate politically and articulate their interests pushes people to social media, which has become an almost exclusive platform for social and political life.

At the same time, social media platforms created by major IT companies share similar business models that monetise user attention and subsequently contribute to the greater spread of information manipulation techniques (Brandom). Social media have been reported to use algorithms that favour extreme, divisive and emotionally charged content, which often is radicalising and misleading (Bernstein). This fuels disinformation campaigns and, consequently, the circulation of misinformation. Along with the censorship techniques used in illiberal contexts, social media drives authoritarian practices.

The third factor is the approach to data management in the globalised world and the opportunities it brings for a targeted information campaign (Mahdawi). Large sets of personal information are collected and designed to analyse and predict human behaviour patterns. Private companies store enormous amounts of data, allowing them to reach different religious, ethnic and racial groups. Such data is widely available for sale on the open and the black market. Meanwhile, promoted posts and paid ads are the tools of targeted communication available for any actor on social media (Shah). It creates an accessible, cheap and effective way to launch a campaign to spread disinformation (Kozlowska).

At the same time, there is a counter-debate that aims to calm down the discussion around the disinformation spread in different countries. IT professionals who

> *IT professionals who deal with online influence campaigns or marketing report that, on average, the impact of targeted advertising in political and marketing communication is comparatively small on targeted groups*

deal with online influence campaigns or marketing report that, on average, the impact of targeted advertising in political and marketing communication is comparatively small on targeted groups (Edelman). In other words, a targeted advertising campaign can nudge a person who has already decided on something. Still, its capacity is not enough to produce a significant attitude change, including changing someone's political views. Moreover, some researchers suggest that mainstream media that discusses fake news plays a much more significant role in its circulation. In contrast, fake news media outlets reach a comparatively small part of the population (Tsfati et.al). However, the counter-debate is not as vocal as the alarmist vision of the influence of tech on society, that occupies both media and academia (Vinsel).

There are also opposing ideas about the role of the information receiver. Some scholars suggest that it is citizens' place to be responsible consumers of information to sustain a functioning public sphere. This is an understandable claim given that research on the psychology of misinformation highlights that on average people are neither incapable of distinguishing false information from genuine nor willing to share the misleading information (Rand). The primary driver for misinformation spread is lazy thinking — the pattern of thinking that reduces cognitive effort (Weir). This research suggests that people tend to follow their emotions and intuition when consuming and sharing content. Another factor contributing to this is the underlying social nature of online interaction: people make their decisions based not only on the content itself but the metadata of the media item, such as the assumed authenticity of the author of the publication or the number of engagements (Brotherton).

Still, the manipulation of public opinion by informational interference remains a major issue for different countries. Different causes contribute to it: whether degrading public institutions (Caniglia), IT companies' algorithms and business models (Menczer), or just the social nature of human interests (Madrid-Morales et al.). Nevertheless, the launch of many disinformation campaigns is usually motivated by some political interest of various political actors, and the factors discussed intensify the scale of political disruption caused.

METHODOLOGY

The key research question for the Unfreedom Monitor is: "what are the key motives for, methods of, and responses to, digital authoritarianism in selected national contexts?" This part aims to answer this question by observing the cases of information manipulation in the selected countries and worldwide. By analysing media content, digital rights groups' reports and academic studies, this part provides a thematic interpretation of practices of information manipulation, including mis/disinformation and coordinated inauthentic behaviour.
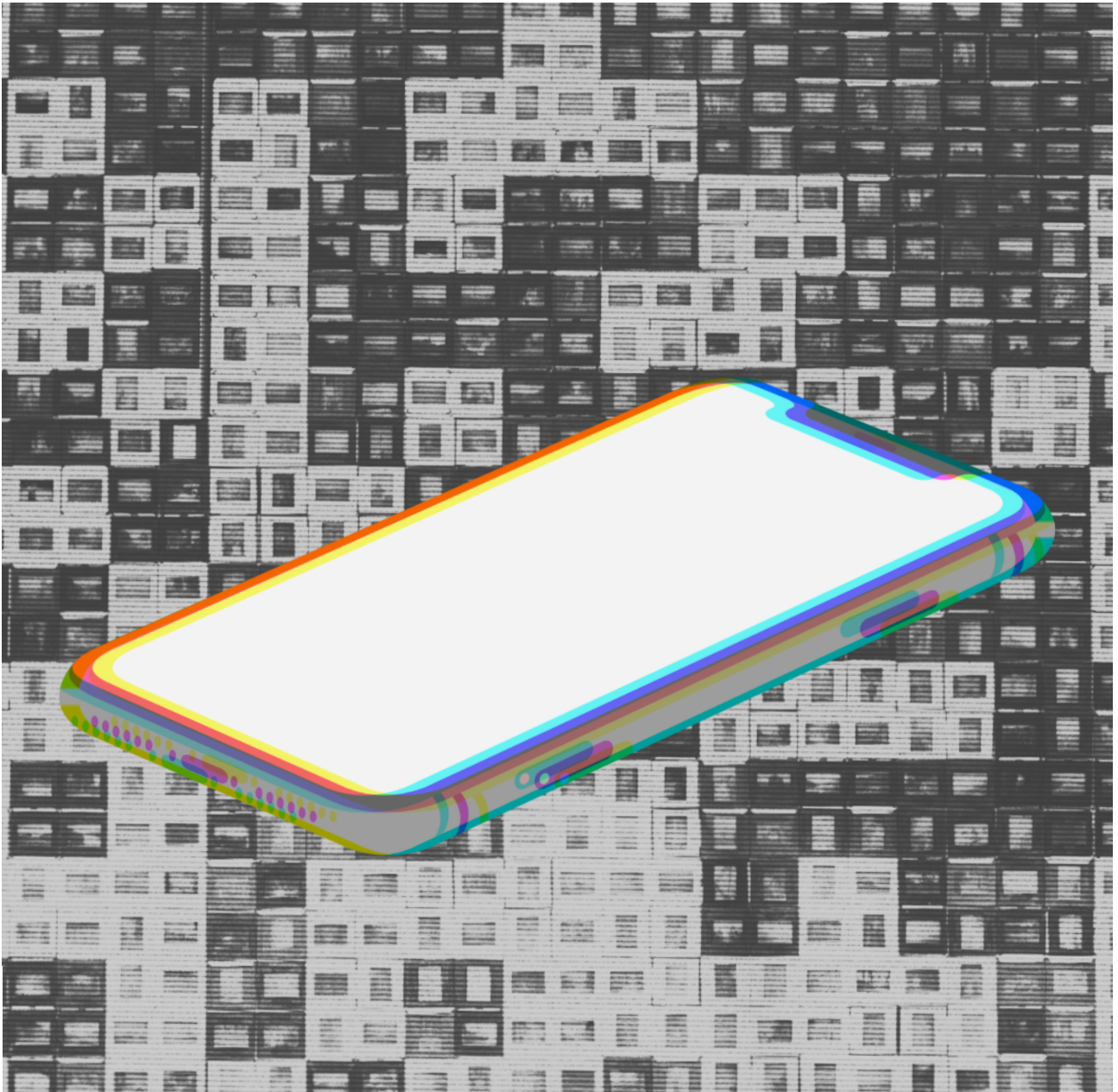
INFORMATION MANIPULATION

DEFINING PRACTICES OF INFORMATION MANIPULATION

There is still a debate around the definition, roots and practical characteristics of disinformation and related phenomena. Some differences can also be identified in organisational policies, as many IT companies rely on these policies in their operations to act on disinformation cases.

The working definitions for disinformation phenomena in the Advox project are user/receiver centred, as the project itself aims to discuss and work with the issue of digital rights violation:

Disinformation: the intentional spread of false, misleading, or biased information to manipulate the perception of the information receiver.

Misinformation: the unintentional spread of false, misleading, or biased information.

Mal-information: the intentional spread of factually correct information presented outside of the context to manipulate the perception of the information receiver and cause harm to a person, institution or state.

Coordinated inauthentic behaviour: coordinated dissemination of information through inauthentic social media accounts of media and/or individuals to manipulate the perception of the receivers of the information.

The discussion on techniques of information manipulation develops from the term "disinformation." The term originates in military terminology and is often attributed to the Soviet "dezinformacia," one of the black propaganda strategies aiming to discredit the opponent via means of communication ("Active Measures: Russia's Covert Geopolitical Operations"). The term was brought into mainstream discussion in 2016 by academics and journalists describing the communication phenomenon around the presidency of Donald Trump, who adopted the discourse of fake news to legitimise his attacks on the media and other opponents.

Disinformation is sometimes considered to be very similar to propaganda, as both aim to influence information receivers to adopt or change their attitude and favour a particular worldview. However, there are some differences between them when it comes to their goals and how they are distributed. Propaganda has a clearer purpose of establishing a certain new worldview, while disinformation aims to disrupt the existing worldview of information recipients. Propaganda can but does not necessarily use false information to create the attitude change while operating with fabricated or deliberately manipulated content. The difference in how they are distributed reflects the greater shift in society, moving from traditional media to social media.

> **Disinformation doesn't just aim to deliver a specific idea — the central operational goal of propaganda — it also uses elements of false information that mimic accurate information to create a disruptive perception of reality for the receiver of the information**

Propaganda is usually distributed top down — from one initial sender to many receivers. Disinformation, as a rule, has multiple senders, each of whom has a small group of receivers, who send it further without the intent to disinform, turning it into misinformation. Also, today, disinformation campaigns launch at a broader communication horizon, where multiple sources produce different types of information as communication messages (including posts, videos, comments, etc.) which the receiver consumes and, based on this information, creates a new disrupted vision of reality. In other words, disinformation doesn't just aim to deliver a specific idea — which is the central operational goal of propaganda — it also uses elements of false information that mimic accurate information to create a disruptive perception of reality for the receiver of the information. Modern disinformation campaigns aim for more nuanced and widely distributed informational and psychological influence. Therefore, disinformation is one of the propaganda techniques established throughout the history of persuasive communication.

Other forms of information manipulation discussed in this report follow a similar dissemination logic, where multiple senders target information receiver(s). The cases of misinformation include the spread of false or misleading information without an intent to harm or when disinformation is spread without being identified as inaccurate. It is often the case that social media platforms appear to be the main instrument for the unintentional spread of misleading information among users to a significant degree.

Mal-information refers to spreading accurate information outside of its context. It strongly resembles the practice of framing, or "basing an event or an issue in a particular field of meaning" (Framing, Communication theory). What distinguishes mal-information from an opinion piece is the intent of using it to cause harm to a person, organisation or state.

Wardle and Derakhshan's report "Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making" (2017) is one of the most influential works that set up definitions for information manipulation practices. The authors outline essential dimensions that characterise information manipulation practices: the use of false information and an intent to cause harm by spreading it. Following this definition, misinformation is the spread of inaccurate content; mal-information, of harmful content; and disinformation refers to distributing false content with the intent to harm. However, these definitions of the practices add a moral component to the evaluation of the practice, mainly when it is essential to define the harm to the receiver of information. This can create complications in using the terminology to evaluate these practices and make policy by setting an imperative for an institutionalised entity with additional criteria for assessing the risk of harm.

Finally, the practice of coordinated inauthentic behaviour is one of the most elaborate informational deception techniques that exists today. It is usually executed by spreading small quantities of information through inauthentic accounts on social media. There are three main types of inauthentic actors that can be involved:

- Bots: inauthentic automated accounts publishing pre-set messages. Usually easy to identify (Hinget).
- Trolls: real people whose work is to disseminate false or misleading information on social media through various accounts (MacFarquhar).
- Cyborgs: a mixture of bots and trolls. Often a bot follows a script written by a real person (Shahid, Wajiha, et al.).

All these accounts can be considered inauthentic, as the person creating online content has a certain goal and does not act for a real person. The goal of posting content and comments contributes to creating an alternate online reality, e.g., support of the content, discussion, articulation of a specific position. There is a clearly blurring line between coordinated authentic and inauthentic behaviour, depending on the type of actors involved. For example, as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, TikTok, a social media platform that circulated user-generated short videos, became one of the leading platforms for merging authentic and inauthentic but coordinated behaviour as a part of an information campaign. In this campaign, popular Russian bloggers were paid to produce content with identical scripts supporting the government's official position on war (Kari). However, the discussion in comments under these posts was flooded with coordinated inauthentic support. At the same time, the platform was taken seriously by different parties in this conflict; as early as the beginning of this campaign, president Biden had a meeting with American influencers as well. Various interest groups have been producing misleading content to advocate for one of the conflict sides. The platform remained one of the places to spread dis/misinformation fueled by the platform algorithm favouring polarising content (Hern).

DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

The fundamental strategy for running a disinformation campaign is to create a digital media ecosystem that can be perceived as organic. It includes creating media outlets, social media pages, and user accounts to disseminate information (follow, share, comment, etc.). The actors' strategies constantly adapt to the measures taken by platforms, activists and regulators to fight disinformation online, making it increasingly more complex to feign authenticity, e.g., using AI to generate profile photos for fake accounts (Goldstein and Grossman). Yet, there are several steps that most social disinformation campaigns follow.

First, media outlets are created to become the original source of information. These media outlets often look very similar or mirror other recognisable established media outlets. Second, social media pages for an outlet are set up, bringing a certain number of followers, including real and fake personal accounts. Depending on the goals and complexity of the disinformation campaign, there could be one or several social media accounts. Third, the ecosystem for news sharing is launched using the coordination of inauthentic behaviours of social media accounts by sharing links leading back to the first content published on the created media outlets and its representations on social media.

In addition to the three types of inauthentic actors (bots, trolls and cyborgs), this information is also circulated by real people who share the content believing it is genuine, and thus creating misinformation.

DISINFORMATION TYPOLOGY: GENRES, STRATEGIES AND CONTENT TYPES

While typologies of disinformation genres may vary depending on the operation specifics of platforms, there is still a certain consensus on what the most widespread genres are. The typology of Reporters Without Borders ("Types of Disinformation Online") defines six genres of disinformation. It may come in the format of satire or parody, where there is no initial intention to harm, but it has the potential to mislead. It could be a false connection where the headlines and visuals don't support the content, but the content is genuine. Misleading, false, and manipulated content alter context and framing to mislead the consumer, while imposter content is content made to look like it comes from a genuine, recognisable source. Finally, there is fabricated content, where entirely new false content is made with the deliberate goal of deceiving.

It is also important to add conspiracy content as a genre of disinformation actively shared on social media, primarily influenced by the socio-political and cultural context and the lack of trust in institutions (Helpren et. al). Conspiracy theories are the type of disinformation that assumes the existence of a secret group that plots to seriously damage the life of a particular local community or a society as a whole. Although the role of conspiracy theories as a type of dis/misinformation has been discussed at earlier stages of internet history in the 1990s, the debate and research became more topical after Trump's presidential success in 2016 (Leal). In early 2017 a bizarre conspiracy theory called QAnon emerged online in the US, and accused the US establishment and the Democratic party of corruption and paedophilia, later bringing thousands of Trump supporters in Washington to question the election results in 2020 (Tollefson). Soon it was revealed to be a man-made campaign aimed at character assassination and social polarisation (Kirkpatrick). However, QAnon's anti-establishment message turned out to appeal to international audiences, including Russia (Jackson), China (Seibt), India (Ram) and Brazil (Estagio), making it one of the few truly successful global disinformation campaigns to date (Codastory).

Strategies or styles of spreading disinformation also vary and depend on an actor's goal. Russian disinformation, which is often used as a foreign policy tool to target post-Soviet and developing countries, will usually spread in a scattered way, aiming to engage in a narrative battle and raising distrust among the population (Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody). The most recent example of such a disinformation campaign was observed by Carl Miller from the British think tank Demos, and he characterised it as "the less researchable and probably more harmful

> *Russian disinformation, which is often used as a foreign policy tool to target post-Soviet and developing countries, will usually spread in a scattered way, aiming to engage in a narrative battle and raising distrust among the population*

activity across all the other social media platforms we can reach." The scholar analysed the inauthentic activity of accounts amplifying a whole range of pro-Russian messages in Asian and African countries and BRICS states (Carl Miller). Several different narratives targeting specific regions have been found. Each narrative was tuned to fit the particular audience by referring to domestic issues but united by the umbrella of anti-NATO, anti-Western, pro-Putin narratives. All accounts were heavily engaged in two pro-invasion hashtags: #istandwithPutin and #IstandwithRussia, while elaborate strategies for developing and maintaining these accounts make them more authentic-looking and more difficult to trace.

The type of content that carries disinformation elements plays a significant role in how platforms, activists, and policy-makers fight it. Most often, the content is produced as text, pictures and videos. Practically, platforms are using their methods to identify and remove it, engaging in an ongoing competition with the creators of misleading content, who elaborate their disinformation strategies in response to regulations created by the platforms. In particular, this is the growing use of AI, as in the creation of deep fakes or using AI to generate more authentic-looking profile pictures for bots.

Another case of hard-to-trace disinformation is circulated in the format of podcasts, which have steadily grown their popularity as a source of information over recent years (Hsu and Tracy). The Joe Rogan controversy — when a famous podcast host endorsed COVID-19 related conspiracy theories — opened a heated debate about the role of podcasts in the disinformation pipeline (Bogle). The audience numbers of podcasts globally is growing steadily. At the same time, detecting and studying disinformation in podcasts is a big challenge. The infrastructure of the podcast industry does not include moderation, and big tech companies like Apple and Spotify are unable or unwilling to make changes that would limit the spread of mis/disinformation. Therefore, in the years to come, podcasts will remain the major source of mis- and disinformation (Wirtschafter).

CONTEXTS FOR INFORMATION MANIPULATION ONLINE: SELECTED COUNTRIES

Information manipulation campaigns occur in both democratic and less liberal contexts. However, most information manipulation online happens in states with authoritarian regimes. The list is not limited to specific countries and can be defined by the spoken language and/or political interests of the initiators of disinformation. Russia, Iran, Myanmar, the US and Ukraine have been running most of the disinformation campaigns on Facebook from 2017 to 2020 (Seldin). Meanwhile, research found that India, the US and Brazil had been the most affected by COVID-19 misinformation (Al-Zaman).

There are several similarities in the context of disinformation spread in the countries studied for this report. Simultaneous social and political polarisation becomes a prerequisite and one of the aims of most disinformation campaigns. Differing from country to country, it makes a country less resilient to misinformation spread. It creates the conditions to deepen the divides that already exist in any society within the self-reinforcing system, fuelled by disinformation from different parties. In the case of Zimbabwe, social polarisation is amplified by misinformation spread by multiple political groups. Moreover, this polarisation is reflected in the media, representing these political interests.

Another factor that, together with social polarisation, is often prominent in societies with a lot of disinformation is populism ("Why Resilience to Online Disinformation Varies between Countries"). Disinformation campaigns aim to appear as grassroots initiatives and look more authentic and convincing. They often follow the underlying populist logic by creating a vision of a political actor, which follows the political demand of the followers, presenting themselves as underdogs to the political establishment, as it was in Brazil with the presidency of Bolsonaro or Vladimir Putin in the case of Russia. Bolsonaro came into power at large by using social media, which provided him with a platform to speak out and accumulate his audience. However, the online space is flooded with false information spread via social media and communication messengers. During his re-election campaign in 2018, a lot of misinformation discrediting his political opponents was circulated online, such as accusations of spreading "gay kits" to promote the idea of homosexuality around children ("Inside Brazil's Dangerous Battle Over Fake News.").

In the observed countries, disinformation campaigns become a tool for fighting for power in divided political contexts. Contested elections and recent government changes become a crucial turning point for the intensification of disinformation spread, as seen in Zambia, Egypt and other countries. It is also the tool of rising protest activity in the cases of Russia and Turkey. However, in most of the cases examined for this report, disinformation is used predominantly in the context of authoritarian consolidation of power.

Moreover, the significant spread of disinformation appears in the proliferation of the internet and enthusiasm for social media use among citizens. At the same time, control over traditional media in these countries is intense and is regularly followed by restrictive internet legislation. Similarly, in many countries, these restrictions are imposed under the narrative justification of protecting national security, family values and national identity.

Finally, the researchers suggest there is growing evidence of the political regimes learning from each other, which can be seen through significant similarities in misinformation tactics, as well as responses to and narratives on disinformation (Kalathil).

RESPONSE

Platforms: lack of expertise and local insight

Major social media platforms develop policies and operational instructions to tackle fabricated content and misinformation. Despite there being no universal strategies to depict and track manipulated media content, IT platforms, including social media, are developing their own solutions that usually depend on platform operations. The standard practices across the platforms are flagging, labelling and removing misleading content, identified by platform guidelines (Parham). Some inauthentic activity can be tracked down by algorithms run on these platforms. However, most misinformation is usually strongly contextual, which means it requires human moderation.

Social media companies have been recently criticised for a bias towards Western countries in their disinformation regulation policies. As reported in 2020, Facebook spent 87 percent of its moderation resources in the USA and Canada (Tworek). At the same time, the company

did not invest in safety protocols in India, which is one of the company's biggest markets and a leader in internet hate speech and violence (Zakrzewski et al). Other problematic regions are also overlooked. For example, the Philippines has massive troll farms running multiple campaigns targeting both people who speak Tagalog and the US domestic market (Mendoza).

Another problem that appears in content moderation is language. There is a greater underlying bias towards tackling disinformation in European languages, particularly due to the translation specifics. In Arabic, many colloquial phrases may be incorrectly translated by AI, or translated literally as having a harsh meaning that is not how it is used idiomatically, weaponising the language, which will lead to the content being incorrectly characterised ("Content Moderation Trends in the MENA Region: Censorship, Discrimination by Design, and Linguistic Challenges."). Moreover, disinformation that comes in different genres is not necessarily identified because of the genre, since it might not be making an obvious call for an obvious action, because it requires context. Once people are susceptible to the presented context, even an approach like labelling disinformation becomes inefficient. (Leibowicz).

Even though, on average, the amount of misinformation circulated is decreasing compared to 2016, the problem remains. Some critics suggest that between the scale of the growing number of social media users, the inevitable latency of the response to disinformation, and the lack of intent from the users and social media companies, eliminating disinformation is almost impossible (McNamee).

States: legislation on "fake news" to control the narrative

The 2017 "UN Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and 'Fake News', Disinformation and Propaganda" suggested abolishing the legislation penalising publishing fake news. In the observed countries the narrative of fake news often becomes the tool of suppressing dissent by imposing a legal responsibility for spreading disinformation. Defining fake and harmful information and executing justice becomes a governmental function that cannot be questioned. In Myanmar, the spread of disinformation intending to "defame, divide an association, alarm the public, or destroy public trust" is punishable by a term of up to 3 years in prison for journalists and authors in media outlets (Aye et al.). Similar legislation is imposed in Egypt where popular social media users can be held accountable for publishing fake news or just the misuse of social media (EuroMed Rights). Russia passed a law on fake news shortly after the war in Ukraine began, punishing criticism of the Russian government's and army's actions with up to 15 years in prison and a hefty fine ("Russia Duma Passes Law on 'Fake News.'). In Brazil, an anti-fake news law from 2020 obliges social media and digital applications to store the communication exchange data, which provides the state with access to citizens' data. Meanwhile, the political establishment in Turkey just threatened the public by introducing its version of a fake news law, imposing legal action over content "incompatible with national and moral values" (24 France).

Declaratory legislation with vague definitions and broad descriptions of the practices becomes the instrument of the narrative war in which the weaponisation of the fake news discourse is happening. This is often the work of activists and critical voices in the

authoritarian society, who are labelled "fake news producers." The discourse on fake news also carries a moralising component, as we see in Russia, Turkey and Brazil, making criticising the authorities practically impossible. Such legislation is a tool of political censorship that has a significant scale effect. Imposing legal liability aims to legitimise the official agenda and compromise dissent, limiting it from further spread by the prosecution of and growing self-censorship among the media and social media users.

Policy recommendations

Hutchings and Tolz of the University of Manchester stress the importance of neutral and consistent policy analysis of disinformation in the international space (Hutchings and Tolz). The scholars analysed the output of the EU-funded think tank that explores and debunks disinformation produced by the Russian state media. They have noted that the think tank in question takes a controversial stance on the content produced by Russian media. EU-Disinfo distorts or misrepresents the content of the Russian media, building associations that the content did not have, even though it is incorrect information. Given the global nature of state-sponsored information campaigns, these misrepresentations provide evidence for disinformation producers that Western or European governments are involved in disinformation themselves, which will significantly reduce any attempts at debunking and fighting disinformation in future.

> *Most policy recommendations suggest that it is essential to improve the quality of the information environment in communities to minimise the damaging effects of information manipulation*

Most policy recommendations suggest that it is essential to improve the quality of the information environment in communities to minimise the damaging effects of information manipulation. For example, the report on the automated tackling of disinformation prepared for the EU parliament came up with recommendations including ("Automated Tackling of Disinformation: Major Challenges Ahead"):

• support for research and innovation on technological responses;
• improving the transparency and accountability of platforms and political actors over content shared online;
• strengthening media and improving journalism standards;
• supporting a multi-stakeholder approach involving civil society

The listed measures influence the system towards creating a more credible information environment. However, the most critical question frequently raised is who defines what is true and false information, with what purpose and under what authorities ("Social Media: Misinformation and Content Moderation Issues for Congress."). Following the observed cases of established digital authoritarianism, the opportunity to heal the information environment under repressive legislation and censorship becomes problematic. Yet, tackling misinformation in developing countries can be done via trusted sources, such as for example, radio hosts (Scire et al.).

Blockchain technology to combat disinformation

One comparatively recent development to overcome the problem of disinformation is using blockchain to detect and mitigate fake news (Qayyum et al.). Blockchain-based systems offer the option of setting up a decentralised mechanism to verify the provenance of media materials and sources of information (such as authors of the content) (Harrison and Leopold). Ultimately, the distributed system can incorporate many actors engaged in information checking for created databases. Such measures will contribute to establishing accuracy and transparency for media content online.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the idea of digital authoritarianism strategies is driven and delivered by modern IT tools, in essence they are similar to propaganda techniques. The tactics aim to legitimise certain narratives by injecting them into the media ecosystem and then repeating them so they become the new common sense for the population. Such an approach is amplified by internet technology, which allows the creation of credible media ecosystems, mimicking real ones and filling them with inauthentic users acting similar to online human behaviour.

Meanwhile, advertising targeting on social media sets up opportunities to run an influential campaign that now stretches beyond the Cambridge Analytica case. However, it is debatable whether targeted communication can achieve attitude change or form an attitude. Instead, the audience must be prepared to change their attitude as a result of what Jacques Ellul (1973) conceptualised back in the 1960s as pre-propaganda: "the conditioning of minds with vast amounts of incoherent information, already dispensed for ulterior purposes and posing as 'facts' and as 'education'."

This term is relevant to today's digitised strategies of information manipulation. As the overview of cases and practices of disinformation show, disinformation campaigns become more sophisticated and dispersed, aiming to prepare the audience to accept a certain point of view. As Jacques Ellul writes, pre-propaganda, "without direct or noticeable aggression is limited to creating ambiguities, reducing prejudices, and spreading images, apparently without purpose." As in spreading disinformation, the primary effect is psychological — creating an alternate picture of reality for the individual.

To summarise, three factors define information manipulation today in the observed countries. First, there is continuous enhancement of disinformation technical abilities to overcome the measures taken by IT platforms and make disinformation look more trustworthy, especially using AI. Second, grand strategies and narratives for disinformation become more complex, as the narratives and tactics are used for an amplified psychological effect, such as creating mistrust, raising doubt, etc. They are used similarly to pre-propaganda and propaganda itself. The third factor remains the underlying traits of human nature, as in lazy thinking, the tendency to consume more emotional content, etc.

There are two main streams of discussion that look into the future of tackling disinformation. The first one suggests that the most promising tool for fighting disinformation is empowering societies through continuous media literacy and overall improvement of the media environment quality. Incentivising high-quality journalism and supporting civil society are a few primary things. Another debate comes with working towards the growing quality of the content circulated on platforms, including social media. Adding to continuous investment in content moderation, another recommendation is to prioritise authentic and high-quality content (Edelman, 2022). Some of the initiatives have already been run by companies, including Google (Gartenberg).

Yet, as the given cases show, eliminating political disinformation in authoritarian countries where information fields remain under state control can be unrealistic. Despite many of the platforms using global social media, which can be regulated according to their own

standards, many countries block existing platforms, limit access with legislative tools, or grow domestic platform alternatives. The practice of disinformation becomes the running tool for developing digital authoritarianism by using digital means to indoctrinate narratives favoured by the state. The discourse on disinformation, at the same time, becomes a tool of the ongoing repression of the freedom of speech, as the states use fake news legislation to silence dissent in countries. However, the development of blockchain technology may empower content creators and digital activists in these countries with opportunities to fact-check independently and incentivise the creation of authentic content.

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