

Disinformation as a Security Threats for democratic Society in Content of Present Antiamericanism and Prorussian narratives¹

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Original scientific paper
UDK 323.266:343.226
316.77:321.7
327
DOI 10.17818/SM/2025/1.1
Paper received: 30. 12. 2024.
Paper accepted: 20. 11. 2025.

Abstract

Disinformation is one of the anti-phenomenon of the modern information society. They are not new, they have been used since ancient times. However, their number has increased rapidly with the growing availability and use of the Internet, the emergence of social media, and the exponential growth of user numbers. In recent years, democratic countries have been increasingly exposed to the deliberate, extensive, and systematic dissemination of disinformation with the aimed at influencing democratic and decision-making processes, as well as the behaviour, actions, and opinions of people. This is also why the authors, using relevant methods of scientific research, deal with the issue of disinformation as a security threat to a democratic society in this article.

Keywords: disinformation, anti-phenomenon, democracy, society, security, *threat*.

Introduction / Uvod

Freedom of expression and the right to information are among the basic values that are enshrined in the relevant legal norms, usually in the constitution, in every democratic society. For example, in the Slovak Republic, these values are enshrined in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which explicitly states in Article 26 par. 1 that "freedom of expression and the right to information are guaranteed" (Constitution of the Slovak Republic, 1992). Similarly, this is the case in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, where Article 38 "guarantees

¹ This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract no. APVV-23-0570 and Contract no. APVV-24-0359 and KEGA 020UMB-4/2025 Theory of conflicts in international relations – structural and cultural causes. Compendium of educational materials for university study programs.

freedom of thought and expression, which includes in particular freedom of the press and other media, as well as freedom of speech and public expression" (Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, 2014). At the European Union level, these values are incorporated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which states in Article 11 par. 1 that: "Everyone has the right to freedom. This right includes freedom to hold opinions and receive information and ideas without interference by public authorities and regardless of frontiers" (European Union, 2007).

Freedom of expression and the right to information are an indisputable and inseparable part of an open democratic society. They depend on citizens' ability to access a wide range of verifiable information in order to take a stand on various political (and other) issues. In this way, citizens can participate in public debates and express their preferences through free and fair democratic political processes. In recent years, democratic processes in many countries have been increasingly undermined by the deliberate, extensive, and systematic dissemination of disinformation, which functions as an anti-phenomenon: rather than fostering informed debate, it distorts public perception, erodes trust in institutions, and weakens the foundations of democracy. This unpleasant fact is very closely related to the increasing geopolitical competition and growing tension between states, especially between the great powers, and to the deterioration of the security environment and the security situation in the immediate and distant surroundings of the EU territory, as well as the rapid development of information and communication technologies, systems and means, the rapidly increasing availability of the Internet, the growing number of social networks and their users, and the growing volume of information spread over the Internet and social networks. This is also why disinformation represents a very rapidly developing threat that requires the adoption of adequate measures and continuous efforts to focus on relevant actors, tools, methods, objectives, and impact, both at the level of the Union and the Member States (Eudisinfo, 2024).

In this context and following the call of European leaders in June 2018 (European Council, 2018a) to ensure the protection of the Union's democratic systems and to set concrete measures to combat disinformation, the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, stated: "A healthy democracy relies on open, free and fair public debate. It is our duty to protect this space and not allow anyone to spread disinformation that incites hatred, division and distrust of democracy" (European Council, 2018b). Vice-President of the Commission for the Digital Single Market Andrus Ansip added: "We must be united and together protect our democracies from disinformation. The fight against disinformation requires a collective effort" (European Council, 2018b).

In this context, it should be noted that both internal entities – operating inside/within democratic states, as well as external entities – operating outside democratic states, which may include state entities (or entities sponsored by state governments) and non-state entities, can be behind disinformation. Several countries actively use disinformation and try to influence processes and activities in democratic societies. The use of disinformation by both state and non-state

actors against the member states of the Union is therefore a growing source of concern across the EU (European Commission, 2018). In terms of external actors, compelling evidence points to Russia in particular. According to the EU Center for Hybrid Threats, the biggest threat to the EU is disinformation from the Russian Federation. They are systematic, well-resourced and their scale is unparalleled compared to other countries. In terms of coordination, levels of focus, and strategic implications, disinformation originating from Russia is part of a broader spectrum of hybrid threats² (European Commission, 2016).

The current High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, said: "Some foreign actors, whether state or non-state, engage in disinformation campaigns and deliberately spread false or misleading information. But this is not a new challenge: disinformation has been with us for a long time. However, with the possibilities offered by the Internet, it is now spreading much faster than ever before, reaching citizens in their homes every day. Some state actors, especially Russia and China, actively participate in these activities and seek to undermine and delegitimize our democratic systems, the freedoms and values on which they are built" (European External Action Service, 2020). In his speech on manipulation of information and foreign interference in February 2023, on the topic of disinformation in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, he said: "In this scenario, Russia uses manipulation of information and interference as a key tool of war against democratic countries. This war is not just about using explosives, bombs, bullets and killing people. It is mainly about people's minds. It's about conquering the spirit, the intelligence, the mind of people" (European External Action Service, 2023).

The above-mentioned social media have become important channels for the spread of disinformation, while sometimes, as in the case of Cambridge Analytica (The Guardian, 2023), the disinformation focuses on specific users. They are identified by unauthorized access to their personal data, which is then misused. Recent evidence suggests that private messaging services are also increasingly being used to spread disinformation. Multiple studies and reports confirm that private messaging services like WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, and Facebook Messenger are increasingly exploited to spread disinformation, often more effectively than open social media because of their encrypted and private nature. Techniques include video manipulation (so-called deepfakes) and falsification of official documents, the use of Internet automated software (bots) to spread and multiply controversial content and discussions on social media, and troll attacks on social media profiles and information

² Definitions of hybrid threats vary. According to the Common Framework for Combating Hybrid Threats, these are various coercive and subversive activities and conventional and unconventional methods (i.e., diplomatic, military, economic and technological) that can be used in a coordinated manner by various state and non-state actors to achieve specific goals without formally declaring war. Usually, the effort is to exploit the target's vulnerability and create confusing situations in order to disrupt decision-making processes. The tools of these hybrid threats can be massive disinformation campaigns and the use of social media for propaganda or radicalization, recruitment, and direct control of supporters (European Commission, 2016).

theft.³ At the same time, however, more traditional methods such as television, newspapers, websites, and chain emails continue to play an important role in many regions. However, the tools and techniques used are changing rapidly, so the reaction to them must not lag behind (European Commission, 2018).

Definition of disinformation / Definicija dezinformacije

Disinformation, like many other terms, is defined in various ways. Currently, there is no single, unified, and generally accepted definition, so the literature contains a relatively large number of definitions that differ primarily according to the industry or area of society in which disinformation occurs or is applied. Despite their varying differences, the common feature of all used definitions is the fact that it is a deliberate modification of the information intended to influence, deceive, or mislead the recipients of this information.

In the EU environment, disinformation is considered to be “false information that is knowingly shared with the aim of causing harm” (European Union, 2019), or “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for the purpose of political, economic or other profit, or intentionally misleads the public with the aim of harming the public interest” (European Commission, 2018). Harm to the public interest includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as the health of citizens, the environment or the security or defence of democratic freedoms, rights, processes, activities, interests, etc.⁴

Definitions found in the relevant dictionaries are quite often used in the Slovak environment. For example, in the Dictionary of Foreign Words, disinformation is defined very briefly as “wrong, knowingly distorted information” (Slovak Dictionary of Foreign Words, 2015). In the Dictionary of the contemporary Slovak language, disinformation is already defined more extensively as “false, deliberately distorted information, the aim of which is to influence a certain group of people, or the entire population” (Dictionary of the contemporary Slovak language, 2015). The Dictionary of media education terms states that “disinformation is deliberately incorrect or

³ Policy and democracy reports: The Forum on Information & Democracy highlighted in June 2025 that private messaging platforms are becoming a blind spot in the fight against disinformation, with governments struggling to regulate them. These apps are used for foreign interference, propaganda, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Academic research (Canada): A 2021 study Private Messaging, Public Harms found that private messaging apps amplify online harms and disinformation, noting that their closed nature makes fact-checking and moderation far more difficult.

Diaspora community study (Harvard Misinformation Review, 2024): Researchers analyzed 450,300 Telegram messages and conducted interviews with diaspora community leaders. They found cross-platform misinformation sharing between Telegram, WhatsApp, and YouTube, showing how encrypted apps serve as testing grounds for disinformation narratives before they spread more widely. Political messaging research (Center for Media Engagement, 2023): Encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Signal are widely used for political misinformation, both in the U.S. and globally. Their design — private groups, forwarding chains, and encryption — makes them ideal for spreading unverified claims.

EU DisinfoLab (2021): Reported that false information spreads largely undetected on Facebook's Messenger and WhatsApp, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because these are considered private spaces, misinformation often evades detection and fact-checking, allowing harmful narratives to circulate unchecked.

⁴ Disinformation does not include inadvertent reporting errors, satire and parody, or biased reporting and commentary that is clearly labelled as such.

distorted information secretly implanted into the opponent's information system with the intention of influencing his activities in the necessary direction" (Dictionary of media education terms, 2020).

To supplement the above definitions, it can be stated that in the Anglophone language environment we can also encounter several definitions of the term disinformation. For example, in the Oxford English Dictionary, disinformation is defined briefly as "deliberately given false information" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021), in the Cambridge English Dictionary as "false information disseminated with the intention of deceiving people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021), and in MacMillan's Dictionary as "false information intended to persuade people to believe to something that is not actually true" (MacMillan's Dictionary, 2021).

It is clear from the above information that the main sign of disinformation can be intentional action, both in the case of the passive form, when messages are intentionally concealed or withheld, as well as in the case of the active form, when the information is actively created or modified according to the stated intention.

To better understand the term disinformation, ensure its correct use, and avoid confusion with similar terms, especially misinformation, it is necessary to explain at least the basic difference between these two terms. While disinformation, as already mentioned above, is a deliberate act intended to mislead, deceive people or convince them to believe something untrue, in the case of misinformation this intention is absent. Although it is incorrect or misleading information, it is not disseminated either systematically or intentionally, nor with the aim of influencing the decisions or opinions of those who receive it. For example, the Human Rights Research Center explains that misinformation is inaccurate information not spread with the intent to deceive, whereas disinformation is deliberately spread to obscure the truth (Nyra et al. 2025). Nevertheless, although it is an unintentional act, misinformation can ultimately have the same effect on the population as disinformation, and thus influence the opinions of the target group based on the false report.

The second concept, which is closely related to disinformation, is propaganda, defined as "the targeted dissemination of biased, misleading information and ideas to promote or support a certain opinion" (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic, 2020). It can also be characterized as "spreading information, facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths or lies for the purpose of influencing public opinion" (Kačmár, 2017, s. 41). A more extensive definition of propaganda and an explanation of the term are provided on its website by Encyclopaedia Britannica. According to it, propaganda represents "a more or less systematic effort to manipulate the beliefs, attitudes or actions of other people using symbols (words, gestures, posters, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins, postage stamps, etc.)" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021). It is the intentionality and relatively high emphasis on manipulation that distinguish propaganda from ordinary conversation or from the free and easy exchange of ideas. Propagandists have a stated goal or set of goals, and to achieve them, they deliberately select facts, arguments, or representations of symbols and present them in ways they think will have the greatest effect. In order to maximize the effect, they may omit or distort certain facts or simply lie and try to distract the reactors (i.e., the people they are trying to control) from everything else but their own propaganda (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021).

In the field of politics, propaganda sets different goals, uses different means that are constantly evolving, and combines them with purposes ranging from political persuasion to public diplomacy. Some media can also be part of propaganda. If they are government-funded or even directly controlled media, one can strongly doubt their objectivity. A typical example of a country with a large share of state-funded media is the Russian Federation. Some Russian media, such as Sputnik and RT, are rated as disinformation media and their news production is often referred to as fake news.

The term fake news can be explained very simply as falsified, fraudulent, or untrue news. This simplistic explanation can lead to various debates, because from the point of view of journalism, a report should always be true and should not be released to the public unless it is verified by several credible sources (Dragomir, 2017). In this context, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the identification of fake news itself can be very difficult. This is because usually a fraudulent, false announcement is communicated in combination with real and verifiable facts in order to appear credible. Fake news can be defined as “news reports that are intentionally and verifiably deceptive and may mislead the reader” (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news is by no means a revolutionary discovery in the field of communication or journalism, it has been around for a very long time, but it entered the deep subconscious of the public mainly in connection with the American presidential elections in 2016 and specifically with the person of Donald Trump. According to Gregor (2018), in the case of fake news, it is “a catchy phrase that refers to intentionally false or misleading information that appears in the media or on social networks”. Currently, this term seems profane, but it is part of the fundamental issue of spreading disinformation and influencing public opinion.

Although the terms fake news and disinformation may seem similar, it is clear from the above definitions that they are different. While fake news is understood as a form, disinformation is understood as a content. While fake news is the designation of a message, media or news report or post on a social network, disinformation is the content part of such a news or post that is false, misleading, or deceptive. In practice, some political figures use the label fake news as an argument against unfavourable news about them or even more broadly against the entire news media whose outputs they do not agree with.

The fight against the spread of disinformation as a security threat to a democratic society / Borba protiv širenja dezinformacija kao sigurnosne prijetnje demokratskom društvu

The basic goal of all disinformation is to try to influence real people. To fulfil this goal, a strategy is needed, which includes a wide range of individual steps that need to be planned in order to achieve the desired success. For the disseminator, it is very important to clearly identify the target group that the disinformation is intended to reach, and to select appropriate content that aligns with the set goal. One of the main elements is the choice of appropriate means to be used for disinformation purposes. (European Commission, 2025). As it was already indicated in the introduction, the primary platform for disinformation today is the Internet, where its spread is mainly mediated by various disinformation websites and social networks.

The importance of this problem is illustrated by the fact that e.g., in the United States, nearly two-thirds of adults get their news almost exclusively from social networks (Gottfried and Shearer, 2020). Moreover, compared to the past, this percentage is constantly increasing every year. Millions of Slovaks and other Europeans have created profiles on the social network Facebook. In recent years, these figures also show a growing trend, and thus an increasing number of interactions take place in the online environment of the Internet.

The Internet has become a huge milestone in communication and information transfer. Burkhard describes it as a truly democratic and honest means of sharing information, as in a way it limits the power of information holders, e.g., media moguls, while controlling the content available on the Internet is difficult, but not impossible (Burkhardt, 2017). Anyone with access to the Internet and the desire to share their thoughts or ideas can do so today. Although it initially required expertise in programming and coding, the market later brought many software tools to enable individuals without special knowledge to create a website and publish or transmit information.

Today, there are millions of actors disseminating information, the volume of which is becoming overwhelming and exhausting. Democratization in the field of information allows everyone to participate, including dubious actors with a biased opinion or a different point of view or with uneducated and limited opinions. Since true news can appear identical to false, biased, altered, or satire, information overload becomes similar to the state of having essentially no information, because one then does not know what information to pay attention to.

Coupled with the countless amount of information we currently face is the fact that people today are unable to understand the things around them. Examples can be technologies and their functioning (how a mobile phone works, what happens to data after uploading to the cloud, how a hybrid engine works, etc.), but also health issues (suitability of vaccinations, side effects of vaccines or specific drugs) or historical facts.

The fight against disinformation is thus increasingly coming to the centre of public discourse, both at the international and national level. International organizations such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance consider the spread of disinformation to be one of the most serious non-military security threats today, and the fight against its spread has become an inseparable agenda of their activities. Both organizations, as well as their member states, are responding individually to this threat. An example is the creation of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (NATO, 2023) at the NATO level or the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (EU, 2023) at the EU level. At the level of technology companies, there are mainly discussions about the responsibility of social networks for spreading disinformation on their platforms. Acceptance of responsibility for the spread of disinformation is indicated by Facebook's decision to take measures to label misleading and false news as disinformation when it is spread on the platform (Jamieson and Solon, 2016).

Disinformation is a security threat that extends beyond the individual impact on the individual consuming the deceptive or misleading information. It can also be identified at the company level. The most significant threats include the negative impact on democratic processes and their distortion in individual countries where disinformation is widespread. This influence can be illustrated in several areas. This presents a challenge for future research.

One of the first negative effects is the increasing polarization of society. This effect is closely related to the growing use of social networks, which are becoming the primary source of information and news combined with the way these platforms operate. Social networks are set up to show their users the most relevant information and messages shared by their closest contacts, and therefore lead to the creation of information bubbles. This kind of entrapment in information bubbles leads to increased polarization of political opinions within society (Mitchell, 2017). Excessive closure in information bubbles, resulting in reliance on news from ideologically homogeneous sources, can in some cases lead to the adoption of extremist views (Warner, 2010).

Another problem associated with disinformation in the online environment is pretending to support online ordinary citizens – the so-called political astroturfing. An analysis of the American mid-term elections and political support for candidates in 2010 in the environment of the social network Twitter and its users showed that some political campaigns, which were presented as spontaneous and coming from ordinary citizens, were organized centrally with the help of social bots, i.e., software-driven fake accounts that look like real people (Ratkiewicz, 2011). The appearance of mass support creates an impression of legitimacy for political campaigns and political candidates who would otherwise likely remain marginal. Thousands of social bots on Twitter have also been identified as supporting Brexit in the campaign ahead of the referendum on whether the UK should remain in the EU (Howard and Kollanyi, 2016).

Another type of political astroturfing is the use of coordinated debaters who comment and share politically motivated articles in the digital environment. This is an issue that is very complicated to study academically and is largely unexplored. Several cases of fake debaters supporting some political parties were mapped in the environment of the Slovak Republic (Struhárik, 2016).

Finally, disinformation has an impact on the political decision-making of individuals. Decision-making processes are always based on available information available to the decision-maker. If disinformation is part of the package of this information, the decision will be influenced. In this case, an analogy can be made with the decreasing number of children vaccinated against measles and the increase in the influence of the anti-vaccination movement.

One of the most striking and highly publicized examples of the spread of disinformation during the pre-election campaign is the example of the 2016 US presidential election, in which Donald Trump won. The website BuzzFeed (2021) analysed all the messages shared by the three largest right-wing and three largest left-wing party pages on the Facebook social network in the seven working days just before the election. He found that while right-wing sites shared up to 38% of news that contained misinformation or a combination of true and misleading news, it was 19% for left-wing portals (Silverman, 2016).

However, mapping disinformation spreaders in connection with the 2016 US presidential election showed that disinformation is not only spread for propaganda purposes. A frequent motive for their spread was the profit from the sale of advertising. BuzzFeed has identified more than a hundred pro-Trump websites based in Macedonia that have been producing and spreading various disinformation. The goal of these sites was to maximize visits to these portals in order to make the

greatest possible profit from the sale of advertising. Their high traffic was ensured by fabricated, deceptive and misleading news regarding the presidential candidates (in favour of Donald Trump and against Hillary Clinton), which achieved the greatest number of views on social networks (Silverman and Alexander, 2016). The production and dissemination of disinformation in favour of then-candidate Trump for the purpose of producing economic and political profit, was also identified in the domestic environment within the USA (Dewey, 2016).

A joint report by US intelligence services – the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) – from January 2017 stated that during the presidential campaign, a huge amount of disinformation appeared on social networks with the aim of discrediting the democratic presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton. The report states that several of these activities were very likely (not 100 percent certain) sponsored by the Russian government (National Intelligence Council, 2017). However, the content of the published email messages of the leadership of the American Democratic Party on the Wikileaks portal also drew attention to several other problems associated with the spread of misleading and deceptive information in the framework of democratic primary elections. Among the most serious was the spread of disinformation this time supporting Hillary Clinton and, on the contrary, undermining the candidacy of Bernie Sanders from the Democratic Party (Shear and Rozenberg, 2016).

Conclusion / Zaključak

There is no doubt about the presence of various forms of deceptive and misleading information – disinformation – in the digital public and private space, including within Slovakia, Croatia and other EU member states, or other advanced democratic countries. A number of mechanisms and tools are used by domestic workers, or Russian, Chinese or other foreign propaganda, either to influence democratic processes or to spread disinformation. The issue of disinformation and its dissemination is a very complicated area in which many different topics are intertwined. The current spread of disinformation via the Internet and social networks is an extremely dangerous threat that can have very adverse consequences for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. Social networks connect us to the world, provide us with a lot of information, but at the same time make us vulnerable. It is therefore very important on the part of democratic states and their competent institutions, including the security forces, to support prevention and education in the field of media literacy and work with information. Increasing awareness of disinformation, improving the ability to recognize and detect it, as well as eliminating its spread as much as possible would certainly mean fewer opportunities for populism, radicalism, extremism, xenophobia, or any influence or division of society based on the dissemination of deceptive and misleading information. The involvement of the relevant institutions of democratic states in this issue is therefore not only desirable, but even necessary. On the other hand, we must all realize that their possibilities are not endless, the state will not solve everything for us, so it is necessary for us to contribute to suppressing the amount, power and influence of disinformation and its spreaders on our actions.

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Dezinformacije kao sigurnosna prijetnja za demokratsko društvo u kontekstu današnjeg antiamerikanizma i proruskih narativa

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Izvorni znanstveni rad
UDK 323.266:343.226
316.77:321.7
327
DOI 10.17818/SM/2025/1.1
Rukopis primljen: 30. 12. 2024.
Rukopis prihvaćen: 20. 11. 2025.

Sažetak

Dezinformacije su jedan od antifenomena modernog informacijskog društva. One nisu nove; korištene su još od davnina, ali je njihov broj drastično porastao s brzorastućom dostupnošću i upotrebom interneta, pojavom društvenih mreža i eksponencijalnim rastom broja njihovih korisnika. Posljednjih godina demokratske zemlje sve su više izložene namjernoj, opsežnoj i sustavnoj distribuciji dezinformacija s ciljem utjecanja na demokratske procese odlučivanja, ponašanja, djelovanja i mišljenja ljudi. Upravo iz tog razloga autori u ovom članku, koristeći se relevantnim metodama znanstvenog istraživanja, bave se pitanjem dezinformacija kao sigurnosne prijetnje demokratskom društvu.

Ključne riječi: dezinformacije, antifenomen, demokracija, društvo, sigurnost.