Democracies Degraded by Disinformation: Lessons From Hungary, the U.S., and the U.K.

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Abstract
Democratic backsliding has been a growing concern globally. The literature on democratic backsliding and the literature on disinformation have grown exponentially, but hitherto developed separately. This paper provides a unique contribution to the existing literature by exploring the interactions between the two phenomena. We present a framework that describes this as a cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding. Through our analysis of disinformation's impact on democracies, we argue that disinformation can accelerate democratic erosion, which in turn can further exacerbate the spread of harmful disinformation. With the cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding as its framework, the paper analyzes three countries that are facing different levels of crisis (Hungary, the U.S., and the U.K.). Hungary was selected as an autocratizing democracy, the U.S. as a democracy facing serious challenges to its institutions, and the U.K. as a liberal democracy managing to contain the disinformation threat. We demonstrate that different levels of democratic backsliding are linked with varied levels of institutional capture by disinformation. In the case of Hungary, we find that disinformation has managed a complete institutional capture in a country with pre-existing issues of democratic backsliding, leading it to be trapped in a vicious cycle within the framework. The U.S. shows partial capture, as it struggles with an unregulated information and media environment, coupled with institutional and media distrust. The U.K. managed to contain the threat of disinformation and avoid democratic backsliding, but remains vulnerable against the threat of the "engagement trap".

Keywords: Disinformation, Democratic Backsliding, Hungary, U.S., U.K.

Introduction

Disinformation poses an acute problem to liberal democracies in particular. This is because liberal democracies rely on institutions such as media, judiciary, legislature, and elections for their healthy functioning (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Beyond the impact on institutions, disinformation poses a threat to democratic norms (Diamond, 2019), which in and on itself is a key national security interest of liberal democracies (Tallies, 2022). Addressing this issue this year is of particular importance considering the fact that 2024 has been called "the election year", in which half of the world's population lives in a country that is holding an election (Koh, 2023). The paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on democratic backsliding and disinformation by presenting the two elements as a cycle. This cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding forms a key framework for our three case studies, namely Hungary, the United States [U.S.], and the United Kingdom [U.K.].[1] This paper argues that the different levels of democratic backsliding manifests in the different levels of institutional capture achieved by disinformation. In other words, we identify institutional robustness as the key to understanding how disinformation is spread. Our preliminary findings show that in autocratizing states like Hungary, disinformation manages a complete capture of the institution. This, we argue, is what left the Hungarian government vulnerable against foreign actors that sought to weaponize domestically produced disinformation in a fragmented society. In states at potential risk of democratic backsliding such as the U.S., there is partial institutional capture due to its domestic political environment. States that have managed to avoid backsliding like the U.K. do not suffer from institutional capture, but remain under threat by specific disinformation tactics such as the "engagement trap".

Literature Review: Democratic Backsliding and Disinformation

Democratic backsliding is an incremental process in which democratic values and institutions steadily erode (Waldner & Lust, 2018), and it is a phenomenon that has weakened the functioning of democracies around the world (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Relatively speaking, Europe had a greater number of countries that underwent some level of democratic backsliding in the last several years (Varieties of Democracy, 2023). While debate continues over the precise measurement of democratic backsliding (Little & Meng, 2024), this paper adopts a relatively broad definition. For this paper, we use the Liberal Democratic Index [LDI] score from the Varieties of Democracy (2023) in categorizing democratic backsliding. While not a perfect measure, the LDI offers a useful tool for international comparison and allows us to categorize the three case studies in terms of their stages of democratic backsliding. As for the three case studies in this paper, Hungary is a textbook case of democratic backsliding (Boese et al., 2022). Hungary, once celebrated as a successful transition to liberal democracy, is now recognized as an electoral autocracy (European Parliament, 2022). The second case study, the U.S., suffers from political polarization and a degradation in trust of institutions. While this has not resulted in the level of democratic backsliding seen in Hungary, an increasing number of studies and indicators suggest the U.S. is no longer a consolidated democracy (Schedler & Bor, 2024). The U.K. differs from the other two case studies as it managed to maintain its standing as a liberal democracy despite the turbulent years caused by Brexit. In short, the three case studies respectively show the different stages of democratic backsliding. Hungary is autocratizing, the U.S. finds itself in a state of institutional distrust, and the U.K. has managed to contain the risk of democratic backsliding.

[1] This is a working paper based on an ongoing research project on disinformation by the authors.

In terms of the literature on disinformation, it has been increasing in volume as well as the number of disciplines involved. A keyword search of "disinformation" on Web of Science (which boasts more than 2.2 billion cited references in its database (Clarivate, 2024)) yields a total of 3,946 publications, of which 23.24 percent was published in 2022 alone. Using the same data, in terms of the subject field, disciplines such as communication tops the chart with the most cited works (Web of Science, 2024). However, political science still makes it to the top five disciplines reflecting the political nature of disinformation (Web of Science, 2024). Despite such growing interest, in large-scale comparative analysis, the political realities of individual states tend not to be the focus of the disinformation research (Zilinsky et al., 2024). This paper attempts to address this gap in literature by focusing on the wider socio-political aspects of each select case studies.

Disinformation is defined as information that has the intent to mislead and increases the likelihood of "*false beliefs*" to form (Fallis, 2015). As to how disinformation works, it is characterized by its ability to spread faster online than the truth (Vosoughi et al., 2018), a fact made acute on social media which operates on the basis of an "attention economy" which deliberately attempts to retain the attention of its audience using sensational content (Williams, 2018). The aim of disinformation is to make people incapable of trusting any information by overwhelming targets with a "firehose of falsehood" (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Disinformation is also not perfect and crafted by pragmatists who prioritize quantity over quality (Rid, 2020). Disinformation is hard to combat for several reasons. Firstly, identifying the source can be difficult. The most egregious kinds of disinformation are confined to the niche with limited reach, but if it manages to overcome this limitation by being picked up and spread by the mainstream media, it can reach a larger audience (Fletcher et al., 2018). Secondly, when the disinformation comes from a trusted source or if it confirms pre-existing biases, people are more likely to believe it (Fletcher et al., 2018). Thirdly, disinformation is not necessarily made up of total lies, but can often contain several small lies, making it harder to debunk (Rid, 2020). This paper will add to this existing literature on disinformation to argue that in democracies, the difference in institutional vulnerabilities also influences how disinformation manifests.

The Cycle of Democratic Backsliding and Disinformation

The authors have developed a framework that reflects the complex relationship between disinformation and democratic backsliding. As noted above, democratic backsliding does not happen instantly, but a result of incremental erosion (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Democratic backsliding also does not happen in a vacuum, but requires actors that become the agents in the process of democratic erosion (Druckman, 2024, p. 6). The process is not necessarily linear (Wolkenstein, 2023, p. 68) and institutions themselves could form barriers or enable democratic backsliding (Gora & de Wilde, 2022). Previous studies have found that disinformation on its own is not necessarily the source of polarization, but it exploits pre-existing political cleavages which result in greater polarization (Lanoszka, 2019). Polarization also requires a trigger, which could come from either institutions or individual actors. For disinformation to spread, it needs both actors to wittingly disseminate it and an environment that enables its spread. Figure 1 attempts to express this relationship between disinformation and democratic backsliding by presenting it as a cycle rather than a one-way causal link.

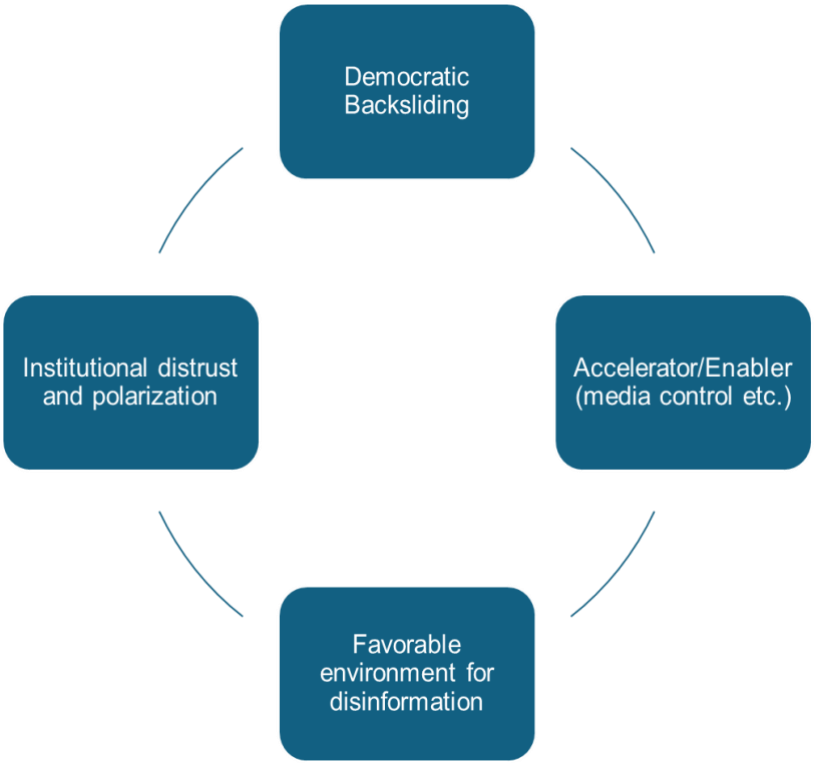

Figure 1: The Cycle of Democratic Backsliding and Disinformation.

The cycle works as a framework to be used in different democratic countries, and we exemplify this by applying it to three democracies that are undergoing different levels of democratic backsliding (Hungary, the U.S., and the U.K.). By applying this framework, we show that the extent and nature of democratic backsliding in a country will have an impact on the role and powers of said country's institutions. The accelerator/enabler consists of factors such as regulations over disinformation (or its lack thereof), the role of media, and the power of political parties. In other words, the accelerators/enablers can shape an environment that makes disinformation easier or harder to spread. For example, social media platforms have helped shape an echo chamber which accelerates the spread of disinformation (Bakir & McStay, 2018). This example highlights how the information space can be unregulated and developed in such a way that creates a favorable environment for the spread of disinformation. On the other hand, countries that have robust liberal democratic institutions have stricter regulations and an independent media, which can obstruct the spread of disinformation.

Such differences will determine whether the environment is favorable for the spread of disinformation or not. This then influences the levels of public trust towards democratic institutions and creates a public discourse that is either highly polarized or more cohesive depending on the spread of disinformation (McKay & Tenove, 2021). Considering the fact that studies have found that disinformation such as fake news damages public trust toward both the government and media (Ipsos MORI, 2019), we argue that disinformation clearly influences public trust toward democratic institutions. Finally, there is a danger that such institutional distrust and polarization could accelerate democratic backsliding by decreasing the perception of electoral fairness and increasing the number of voters who tolerate political violence and authoritarian leaders (Washida, 2021). In short, this cycle shows how disinformation can lead to further democratic backsliding, and in turn that democratic backsliding creates a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.

Using a case study approach, this paper discusses three countries (Hungary, the U.S., and the U.K.) that are at different stages of this cycle and are facing different levels of institutional capture from disinformation. In the case of Hungary, its process of a government-led autocratization has led to the complete institutional capture by disinformation, leading to the rampant use of disinformation within its domestic politics which makes it vulnerable to the threat from external actors who seek to weaponize such domestically produced disinformation. This places Hungary firmly within this cycle of democratic backsliding and disinformation. On the other hand, the U.S. suffers from partial capture of disinformation, as the increase in institutional distrust and unregulated media environment can help disinformation to spread. However, since it is a *partial* capture, the U.S. differs from the case of Hungary in that there is no direct government control of media content as there is in Hungary. The U.K. shows a clear lack of institutional capture due to the lack of polarization as seen in the U.S., and its democratic institutions remain robust compared to that of Hungary. This creates a relatively difficult environment for disinformation to spread, but such advantages may be weakened if the disinformation makes use of the "engagement trap" which is a specific form of disinformation that weaponizes both positive and negative engagement to amplify its spread. The remainder of the paper will present each case study and explore how its domestic political contexts explain its relationship and approach to disinformation.

Hungary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hungary was once celebrated as a successful transition to liberal democracy. However, Orbán's second administration has promoted an "illiberal democracy" by "forging, bending, and breaking" democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, media, and electoral systems, while continuing to receive subsidies and maintaining its membership in the European Union [E.U.] (Bíró-Nagy, 2017; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Pirro & Stanley, 2022).

Hungary's path in democratic backsliding was evident by the Orbán government's successful attempts to curtail media freedom initially through regulatory control and further through ownership control (Culloty & Suiter, 2021). The first Orbán government, between 1998 and 2002, targeted state media, reflecting the media environment of the time, which tended to favor coverage of the ruling party (Bajomi-Lázár, 2003). However, during his second administration, the approach shifted to ownership control to further restrict media freedom. For example, the conservative-leaning TV station and media such as Hir TV and Magyar Nemzet, which were owned by Orbán's close political ally Lajos Simicska, began to succumb under government pressure once Simicska became Orbán's political opponent. Origo was later folded under the Central European Press and Media Foundation [KESMA], a foundation established by Fidesz, the current majority party, in 2018 (Griffen, 2020). Magyar Nemzet was also forced to cease publication in 2018, and in the following year, 2019, the name of the magazine was 'taken over' by KESMA-owned Magyar Idők. It was not just conservative media outlets, but also independent ones that came under political pressure. Origo's editor-in-chief, Gergo Saling, was fired in 2014, and by 2018, Origo also came under the control of KESMA. In 2020, Szabolcs Dull, the editor-in-chief of Index.hu, was also dismissed.

In recent years, these controlled media organizations disseminated disinformation from the Orbán government (Bleyer-Simon & Krekó, 2023). For example, in the 2022 parliamentary election, Hungarian government officials, including the Prime Minister, spread disinformation concerning economic issues and the war in Ukraine. This disinformation

included claims such as “[t]he Left would abolish the utility cost cuts" or "the Left would send weapons and soldiers to Ukraine, thus dragging Hungary into war", which were frequently parroted by formerly independent, conservative as well as liberal media, such as Magyar Nemzet and Origo (Political Capital, 2022). Thus, the lack of media independence has led to these media outlets being used as vehicles to spread disinformation that is supported by the Hungarian government.

Furthermore, some Hungarian-made disinformation has been adopted by other authoritarian regimes overseas (Takacsy, 2023). A prime example of this is the story that ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia are forcefully conscripted to fight in the Ukraine war. This was repeatedly reported by a pro-Orbán media Pesti Srácok (Füssy, 2023), despite it being debunked as disinformation by Ukrainian Espreso TV (Espresso TV, 2023). This news was then picked up by Russian media such as TASS (Takacsy, 2023) and Russia Today (now RT) (Russia Today, 2023). Thus, rather than a simple import and export of disinformation, external actors such as Russia are actively weaponizing an environment that is ripe for disinformation to spread.

Disinformation in Hungary has contributed to growing distrust and polarization, increasing the risk of further democratic backsliding in the country. A survey by the Reuters Institute demonstrated that trust in the media in Hungary has significantly declined over the years, with Hungary now ranking the lowest in public trust toward the media (Szakács & Bognar, 2023). This situation has also exacerbated political polarization. More Hungarians, particularly among conservative Fidesz voters, now believe that "politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil," a Manichean belief (a “us-versus-them, good-versus-evil worldview” (Çinar et al., 2020)) that has grown when comparing the results of 2018 and 2022 (Krekó et al., 2018).

Such high levels of distrust towards Hungary’s democratic institutions has severely weakened its functioning, and this in turn has led to an environment in which disinformation is more easily spread. In short, the government has tightened its control over the media in the process of democratic backsliding, and this has led to the spread of disinformation. Such spread of disinformation has further polarized public discourse and heightened public distrust towards its democratic institutions, which results in further danger of democratic backsliding, leading to a vicious cycle.

The U.S.

The U.S. 's case presents a clear case of the dangers of disinformation when there is pre-existing distrust in public institutions and news media. As of 2023, 59% of Americans had “not very much or no” confidence in the executive branch (J. M. Jones, 2023). The last time a majority of Americans had trust in the government was 2001 (Bell, 2023). Such high levels of distrust embolden actors both foreign and domestic to produce and disseminate disinformation that can further erode trust (Lanoszka, 2019). On the other hand, Americans express a growing distrust of media - 50% of respondents in a 2022 Gallup poll stated they believed news organizations intentionally “mislead, misinform, and persuade the public” (Gallup Inc & Knight Foundation, 2023). When divided by political party affiliation, Republicans distrust news at a significantly higher rate than Democrats (86% vs 29%)

(Brenan, 2022).[2] These trends can push the public to alternative outlets or platforms such as social media where disinformation can spread more quickly due to the lack of fact-checking or other content regulations.

Unlike Hungary, in the case of the U.S., the government does not directly control media outlets and their content. However, the lack of regulations on technology giants certainly serves as an 'accelerator' and 'enabler' where disinformation shared on social media platforms can quickly spread to millions of users. With half of Americans getting their news on social media regularly, these platforms have an immense capacity to influence what information or disinformation reaches Americans (Pew Research Center, 2023).[3] Currently, the U.S. has not established any legislation to make these technology platforms liable for publishing content as the content is primarily uploaded by users i.e. third parties (Brannon & Holmes, 2024). Unlike newsrooms that publish their own content, this means social media companies are not held legally liable for the spread of disinformation on their platforms. As the country where most of the top technology companies are based, it is imperative for U.S. lawmakers to incentivize these companies to take steps to curb the spread of disinformation and inauthentic content on their platforms.

At a time when there is great political polarization in the U.S., divides may only be exacerbated by the lack of public trust in government institutions and traditional media outlets. Still, aside from the tighter regulation of private firms, the public sector must also be engaged to manage the spread of disinformation. Although the federal government may have some distrust baggage with the public, state and local governments still hold a higher sense of trust among their constituents. This makes them ideal actors in rolling out new initiatives such as mandatory media literacy education in public schools and funding fact-checking for local newsrooms and NGOs that can help deliver accurate and reliable news to the public.

The U.S. case shows the complexity of the disinformation challenge when the platforms with accurate information and the federal government who can make sweeping changes are both distrusted. When the federal government does attempt to tackle the disinformation threat such as was in the case with the Department of Homeland Security's Digital Governance Board, it is seen as partisan or dictatorial. Therefore, trusted actors need to step in to prevent further decay of institutional distrust. Such regulatory and local government efforts are crucial forms of intervention to prevent the U.S. from moving further in the cycle of democratic backsliding.

The U.K.

The U.K. differs from the previous two case studies in that it is a democracy that has managed to avoid democratic backsliding. It is thus a democracy that has overcome challenges, such as the political divisions that came to the forefront of British politics during the Brexit debate. The main difference between the U.K. and the other two cases is the fact that its institutions do not suffer from a complete capture by disinformation. Lack of democratic backsliding, a robust media landscape, and a lack of political polarization combined create a tentative shield against the threat of disinformation. Despite this, the U.K.

[2] A Gallup poll published in 2022 found that republicans had "not very much" (29%) or "none at all [trust]" (57%) in mass media. Meanwhile, 19% of democrats expressed having "not very much trust", and 10% "none at all" trust in the media (Brenan, 2022).

[3] As of 2022, public surveys found 50% of Americans consumed news on social media either "often" (17%) or "sometimes" (33%) (Pew Research Center, 2023).

remains vulnerable to the strategic use of disinformation which this paper calls the "engagement trap". This concept draws from both the academic literature on disinformation and empirical findings from the U.K. As such, while the analysis here is that of the U.K., the "engagement trap" has wider generalizability and relevance in other country contexts. As the literature review shows, disinformation is often poorly thought out, poorly targeted, and not very sophisticated (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Rid, 2020). On the other hand, disinformation manages to capture the public if it is closely aligned with pre-existing biases (Fletcher et al., 2018). The "engagement trap", similar to how social media tries to maintain the attention of its audience (Williams, 2018), is a type of disinformation that flourishes under greater attention, regardless of whether the nature of the attention is positive or negative.

The claim that "£350 million per week" which goes to the E.U. would be better served if it is used for the National Health Services [NHS] is a prime example of such disinformation. This claim was made during the 2016 E.U. referendum by the Vote Leave campaign. Even after multiple attempts at debunking this claim, it stubbornly remained in the public consciousness (The Policy Institute, 2018). The major problem with this claim from the perspective of the Remain side was that it used official data. Similar to how it is harder to debunk disinformation which contains multiple small lies (Rid, 2020), disinformation that is based on official data forces opponents into using said data to try and debunk the claim. By trying to challenge the claim by focusing on the actual figure of money going to the E.U., it inadvertently brings the figure to greater focus. By arguing that the figure is closer to "£250 million" (Full Fact, 2017), it actually confirms the pre-existing bias (Fletcher et al., 2018) that millions of pounds are being sent to the E.U.

Incidentally, this tactic continues to be deployed in the 2024 general election campaign, with the Conservative Party claiming that the Labour Party will "raise taxes by £2,000 per working household" if they are elected to office (L. Jones & Whannel, 2024). This figure was claimed to come from "independent Treasury officials" (L. Jones & Whannel, 2024). The comparison between the two claims, which used official data with a twist, was not lost to commentators (Shipman, 2024). Thus, there are still active examples of the "engagement trap" being deployed. While this may seem to lead to the kind of public distrust that occurred in the US, several factors make the U.K.'s case different.

In terms of public trust, the U.K. public shows comparatively high levels of trust towards its public media such as the *BBC*. 61% of British respondents trust the *BBC*. In addition, there is a healthy level of trust in the U.K. government among the public, according to the World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Although during the Brexit debate, the electorate was divided quite neatly between Remain and Leave supporters (Surridge, 2019), the U.K. has not suffered the levels of polarization seen in countries like the U.S. (Boxell et al., 2024). This means the U.K. lacks the kind of institutional distrust that leads to democratic backsliding. Data on the liberal democratic index of the U.K. from V-Dem shows that the U.K. has managed to avoid the kind of democratic backsliding that the U.S., and especially Hungary, have suffered from (Varieties of Democracy, 2023).

In terms of regulatory responses, the U.K. has taken a leading role in developing an international response to the threat of disinformation. In 2022, it banned Russian propaganda sources such as *RT* and *Sputnik* in response to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In 2023, it introduced the Online Safety Act which gives the power to fine global companies that fail to adhere to online content regulations (Online Safety Act, 2023). While at the moment limited to illegal materials (Online Safety Act, 2023), this presents at least an attempt to bring some

form of regulation over online content. In short, out of the three case studies, the U.K. has managed to maintain relatively high levels of public trust, avoid severe polarization, take a leading role in tackling disinformation, and avoid democratic backsliding.

Conclusion

This paper began with a brief literature review on democratic backsliding and disinformation. Based on this, the paper proposed the cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding as a framework to make sense of the different manifestations of disinformation in three select case studies, namely Hungary, the U.S., and the U.K. Through the case studies, we showed that Hungary, which underwent substantive levels of democratic backsliding, is trapped in a vicious cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding. The government tightening its control over the media fostered a more favorable environment for disinformation to spread, and this has bred further distrust among the public. Thus, Hungary presents the most typical example of the cycle of the interlocking relationship between democratic backsliding and disinformation. The U.S. example shows how institutional distrust and an unregulated information and social media environment can inhibit an effective government response against disinformation. Without adequate regulation and further political polarization of the public, Americans will remain acutely vulnerable to disinformation. The U.K. showcases an example of a country that has managed to avoid the entrapment of the cycle, owing to the robust democratic institutions, lack of polarization, and introduction of regulations aimed at tackling the threat of disinformation. However, disinformation tactics such as the "engagement trap" indicate the continued threat of disinformation. Therefore, the cycle of disinformation and democratic backsliding may serve as a useful framework in future studies to assess the vulnerabilities of democracies, and in particular, liberal democracies.

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