Phase II: Introduction to the learning topic

DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY

Deeksha Rana

Arjun Bisen in his article Disinformation Is Drowning Democracy (Foreign Policy) stated how from India to Indonesia to Brazil, democracy is being compromised by domestic disinformation campaigns from political parties seeking to gain an advantage. Public remain ignorant of who is behind the information they are seeing and why the content they view is being artificially amplified. Anonymous pamphlets and rumours are hardly new in politics, but social media has been a force multiplier for such behaviour.

Democratic institutions have not been able to keep up and have instead deferred to tech firms, trusting them to referee online behaviour. In some countries, the rapid spread of online misinformation is posing an additional, physical danger, vandalism, sometimes leading to injury and even death. In a recent episode of opposition against the government in India, there were deliberate campaigns to spread disinformation. A look at some of the key facts related to the issue can help in doing away with such misconceptions.

A survey by The New York Times into disinformation in Indonesia revealed that political parties were using shadow teams, producing and disseminating disinformation through proxies kept at arm’s-length. Groups of freelancers were under-covered who spread falsehoods and religious divides.

Mafindo, an organization focused on combating fake news and improving digital literacy. The penalties for misleading the public should be severe and should come from existing public institutions. Banning online political ads as Google did in Canada might be justified in the short term but is not a healthy long-term solution for platforms which are central to the civic debate. The work of democracy cannot be left to global tech companies alone. That responsibility rests on the public’s shoulders and those of democratic institutions. If they fail to modernize our election regulations, the democratic recession will only continue.
CASE STUDY

DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY

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Fake news and disinformation are real and they are dangerous. Their emergence lays bare the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy in globalized, digitally networked societies. And yet we need to be careful about the conclusions we draw. Joseph Uscinski explores the relationship between conspiracy theorizing and partisanship in the US. Conspiracy theories are all about power and who has it, he writes. The losing side will inevitably accuse the winners of conspiring; Democrats would be convinced that Trump is involved in a grand conspiracy, no matter what evidence was available.

Ben Nimmo, director of investigations at Graphika, a company that specializes in analysing social media, said the growing use of internet disinformation is concerning for the 2020 United States election. A mix of domestic and foreign groups, operating autonomously or with loose ties to a government, is building from the methods used by Russia in the last presidential election, making it difficult for the platforms to police, he said.

Ms Bradshaw said that in the case studies the Oxford team identified, advertising was not central to the spread of disinformation. Instead, she said, the campaigns sought to create memes, videos or other pieces of content designed to take advantage of social networks’ algorithms and their amplifying effects — exploiting the potential for virality on the platforms for free.

The disinformation challenge is about more than authoritarian propaganda or PR techniques. Longstanding vulnerabilities in human cognition, combined with new and emerging technology’s impact on the information environment, allow for bad actors around the world to pursue political gains at the expense of democratic political discourse. The search for solutions must start by recognizing that the challenge is global and structural.

References


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