



Not Your Grandmother's Disinformation

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In 2014, Russia's first invasion of Ukraine drove me to enter the field of disinformation research. Humiliated by the PR failure of its 2008 invasion of Georgia, the Kremlin had been quietly growing its global media influence and information strategy, in an effort that initially attracted little attention from the United States or other Western countries. With Ukraine, Putin was ready: Russia launched a massive disinformation campaign to justify the annexation of Crimea, undermine Western support for Ukraine, and engineer distrust and dissensus both among allies and within individual countries. The effort was intended to weaken transatlantic unity and, crucially, to paralyze our ability to defend our national interests. It was an early taste of what was to come, and I feared (rightfully) that the West was unprepared to confront Moscow's resurgent global ambitions to destabilize the post-World War II democratic order and usher in a new "multipolar" era of authoritarian impunity.

Dezinformatsiya, as it is called in the original Russian, refers to a specific practice of psychological warfare or "active measures" developed by the early Soviet KGB, aimed at weakening foreign adversaries through information manipulation. Under Putin, Russia has resurrected disinformation as a core part of its international intelligence strategy, and presciently adapted the practice, beginning in the early 2010s, to the digital domain. The provenance of the term is important: by historical definition, disinformation is a tool of *foreign* political warfare.

Aside from a handful of Cold War dons and family and friends in Eastern Europe, almost no one I spoke to in 2014 had heard of disinformation. Trump had not yet mainstreamed his "fake news" rhetoric, and panicked prognostications about the advent of a "post-truth world" were almost two years away, pending Brexit and the 2016 election.

Today, disinformation is ostensibly everywhere; a mass infodemic infecting every social media feed, tainting every election, and even arousing political violence. Divorced from its original meaning and Soviet-Russian genesis, it is now also domestic, not just foreign, and its definition seems to expand daily to accommodate the growing list of pathologies that afflict our chronically online life. A vast industry spanning media, tech, and the non-profit sector has sprung up over the last several years to employ a new cadre of researchers, policy analysts, digital experts, fact-checkers, and journalists whose task it is to help dam the flood of lies and conspiracy theories that threaten to drown our democracy.

The problem, however, is that most of this work has been driven by partisan angst—namely the backlash to Trump's victory and the pro-MAGA shift in the GOP. To be more specific, the corroborated fact of Russia's attempted interference in the 2016 election produced an anomaly in U.S. politics: the GOP, which had long been the party more hawkish on Russia and national security, dismissed a blatant foreign attack on the most sacred of our democratic institutions in order to defend the legitimacy of Trump's victory (which, to the best of our knowledge, was legitimate—there is no credible evidence that Russian disinformation decisively swayed the vote). Meanwhile, it was Democrats, reeling from the loss of an election they had expected to cinch and understandably infuriated by revelations of the Kremlin's interference, who took up the mantle against the threat of Russian disinformation—conveniently bypassing the Obama administration's disastrous Russia policy, which had emboldened Putin in both Ukraine and Syria, and opened the door to the Kremlin's broader sabotage efforts against the West.

But in too many instances, congressional Democrats and much of the national media overhyped the impact of Russia's meddling to question the legitimacy of Trump's win, triggering Republicans to rebuff the entire issue as a baseless "witch hunt." In hindsight, it is clear that this speculation and hysteria helped sow the seeds of public distrust about the integrity of the U.S. electoral process, which Trump turbocharged with his "Big Lie" to overturn the 2020 election and instigate January 6.

Furthermore, in response to conservatives' pushback on the question of Russian interference and the conspiracist, nativist rhetoric that dominates the MAGA Right and often aligns with Russian disinformation, Democrats and the broader liberal establishment began to invoke the concepts of dis- and misinformation in significantly broader strokes, to describe just about any political messaging deemed "inaccurate" or "deceptive." Almost everything that questions left-wing orthodoxies, from the COVID-19 lab leak theory, to Hunter Biden's laptop, to skepticism about protracted school closures during the pandemic, is reflexively flagged as "false" or "misleading" and summarily dismissed as right-wing atavism. (Rarely is there any serious *mea culpa* when contravening facts emerge.) The project of "countering disinformation," in effect, has become a moral endeavor for liberals, who have appointed themselves the arbiters of truth and defenders of democracy against the new "fascist" Right.

But in democracies, truth is rarely black and white. As the historian Sophia Rosenfeld explains, “Democracy insists on the idea that truth both matters and that nobody gets to say definitively what it is.” Democracies, in other words, are an epistemic project: one of their fundamental goals is to facilitate the continual and collective pursuit of knowledge—truth—to help us understand our world and improve the way we live in it. For this to be possible, a shared factual and normative baseline is needed, which our current hyperpolarized climate is dangerously eroding. Yet the democratic process by its very nature also entails the balancing of competing understandings of reality, of biases and preferences, on the basis of which people make different judgments about what is “right.” The peaceful coexistence of these different notions of reality is the foundation of a pluralistic society. And crucially, the democratic social contract is predicated on the consensus that we accept the outcomes of elections even when our own side loses, and don’t seek to invalidate the rules of the game.

It was this cardinal code that Russia targeted during the 2016 election. The Kremlin’s ultimate goal was not merely to boost one candidate over another, but rather to instill mass doubt in the integrity of the electoral process, and mutual distrust and antipathy between American citizens. Unfortunately, both Republicans and Democrats took the bait. The current ideological impasse about “disinformation,” and the precedent to question the outcome of an election when it does not favor your side, is just about the greatest return on investment the Kremlin could have imagined.

None of this is to suggest that there are not real problems with the way our digital media landscape has altered our relationship to information and to each other, or normalized a greater degree of manipulation and dishonesty in our politics. A significant portion of our democratic public square is now mediated by the Internet and social media, which are run by companies whose primary objective is to make money, not vitalize democracy. At best, the algorithms that marshal our attention to maximize online engagement are agnostic about facts or truth or civic virtues—at worst, they actively accelerate their degradation. And while panics have accompanied every new development in communications technology throughout history, the digital revolution is unique both for its unlimited production of and access to information, as well as its ubiquity to all aspects of modern life. Under these conditions of extreme information overload, the core democratic assumption that fact-based truth and normative consensus will naturally or inevitably prevail in the marketplace of ideas is obsolete.

The matter of what to do about this digital information disorder in a way that is consistent with democratic principles and free speech is a challenge for smart, non-partisan minds. No reasonable person, Left or Right, believes that our present social and political dysfunctions—the normalization of political manipulation and “weaponized lying,” extreme partisan tribalism, and erosion of trust in government and public institutions—are desirable features of our democracy. Most just see the fault in the other team, not their own.

But this is only one side of the dilemma. The other pertains to the external dimension of democratic security: namely, countering foreign malign influence. Though the progenitor of *dezinformatsiya*, Russia today is hardly the only hostile actor (state or non-state) to weaponize the information domain against democratic interests. In addition, China and Iran form the triumvirate of authoritarian regimes that dedicate substantial resources to the infiltration and sabotage of the United States and other democracies. While these regimes have different strategic objectives, they are united in their rejection of U.S. global leadership and an international order built upon pluralism and democratic values. Disinformation, importantly, represents only a sliver of the full spectrum of authoritarian political warfare, which involves the use of any instrument of state power, covertly or overtly—whether informational, military, intelligence, cyber, diplomatic, economic, or cultural—to influence or coerce a target’s behavior outside of wartime. Deterring these efforts, as well as investing generously into our public diplomacy capabilities in critical regions where Russia and China are successfully competing for influence (Africa, Latin America), should constitute the core of a new bipartisan foreign policy consensus, built on a comprehensive strategic approach that extends beyond individual administrations. There is no mission more important for assuring U.S. national autonomy and democratic security in the 21st century.

The partisan navel-gazing around disinformation has dangerously distracted from this task. Moreover, it has begun to delegitimize the government’s existing work on countering foreign disinformation and malign influence, which remains consistent with its historical mandate. The U.S. government has always been clear that counter-disinformation efforts focus exclusively on foreign adversarial actors, like the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (GEC). Unfortunately, last year’s debacle with the Biden administration’s DHS Disinformation Governance Board, which created the impression that the federal government would begin focusing on “domestic disinformation” (and was promptly shuttered), only solidified right-wing paranoia that government efforts to counter foreign malign influence are mere euphemism for censorship and speech control of American citizens.

In this climate, it is hardly surprising that the GEC has become the latest target of reactionary efforts to stigmatize government work on tackling disinformation and foreign malign influence. Take Elon Musk’s curated release of internal Twitter documents (dubbed the “Twitter Files”), which disclosed non-public communications about Twitter’s content moderation practices prior to Musk’s takeover, in a bid to expose the platform’s alleged bias against conservative viewpoints.

Transparency about content moderation—that is, how social media companies decide what content we see, and how it is ranked—is unquestionably in the public interest. But while the Twitter Files raised some valid questions about bias in the implementation of these policies, they actively misrepresented communication between Twitter and government agencies to suggest that the “Deep State” colludes with Big Tech to censor conservatives in the name of countering disinformation. The GEC, despite its explicit foreign mandate, quickly became the target of disingenuous and factually inaccurate claims of domestic censorship. Elon Musk personally tweeted to some 14 million views: “The worst offender in US government censorship and media manipulation is an obscure agency called the GEC [...] They are a threat to our democracy.” The next day, America First Legal, a MAGA advocacy group launched by senior Trump adviser Stephen Miller, claimed without evidence that the GEC is “being abused and used to censor the American people.” The group previously publicized two lawsuits against the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security, accusing them of “hiding federal collusion with Big Media and Big Tech to censor information and shape public opinion.”

This growing campaign against federal entities tasked with countering foreign malign influence is deeply pernicious and cynical. Endeavoring to undermine the national security imperative to defend U.S. interests from foreign rivals is fundamentally different from opposing domestic “disinformation creep” and moderation bias. It is ironic that even Tucker Carlson, amid last year’s uproar over the DHS Disinformation Governance Board, acknowledged the legitimacy of the GEC and other agencies that are “focused on threats from abroad.”

But this is a taste of what is to come if Democratic and Republican leaders fail to break through the partisan trap. Isolationists on both fringes of the ideological divide, who either tout a nativist “America First” policy that sees no value in supporting the global democratic community, or those who cynically oppose U.S. global leadership on “anti-imperialist” grounds, will increasingly shape the public conversation around foreign policy and America’s place in the world. The resulting paralysis will make us an easier target for foreign adversaries who see an assertive United States as an obstacle to their own power. For those of us who believe that, despite all its blemishes and current political dysfunction, American democracy is worth the fight, resisting these efforts—both at home and from abroad—is a first-order common cause.

To this end, it is incumbent that we restore the distinction between disinformation—that is, attacks from foreign actors—and plain old lying, manipulation, or misinformation, which are par for the course of (ab)normal domestic politics. Conflating the two issues only entrenches partisan gridlock and makes progress on either one impossible. Ultimately, the onus falls upon those who are concerned about *both* issues to reassess their approach, and to ensure that it does not undermine their cause.

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