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A Dangerous Confluence

The Intertwined Crises of Disinformation and Democracies

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Disinformation Project by Early Career Researchers at the Europe
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Foreword

The year 2024 has been dubbed 'the election year' with major elections taking place in countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Taiwan at the start of the year. The influential BJP led by Prime Minister Modi lost their majority in the Indian elections held between April and June, and the ANC lost their majority after a thirty-year reign in the South African elections held in May, bringing seismic changes to BRICS states. In Japan, the LDP and Komeito coalition failed to secure a majority in the elections held in October, presenting a challenging environment for hitherto influential political parties. Additionally, Donald Trump won his second term in office in the United States' Presidential election, held in November. Many of the elections held this election year present historical turning points.

Consequently, the Institute of Geoeconomics created a special website, "[Special Features] Will 2024 Election Change the World? The Crossroads of Democracy" which provides up-to-date analysis of the election results, and explores the potential impacts of political changes to the international order. In conjunction, our Institute has provided commentary to election results around the globe through explainer videos and various publications. In our analysis, we explore how election results dynamically reshape domestic politics, and how this has the potential of presenting geopolitical as well as geoeconomic risks.

This report focuses on and analyses disinformation, which has the danger of distorting elections, a key concern in 'the election year'. What kind of conditions enable disinformation to spread? How does disinformation affect the health of democracies? The historical background of disinformation, the erosion of media freedom, malicious foreign actors threatening a fair and open election, and policy responses are explored in this report using Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom as case studies. Through these case studies, this report shows the ubiquitousness of the spread of disinformation during elections, the threat it poses on democracy, and how to effectively tackle such issues.

The current outlook of democracies remains uncertain. I hope that this report provokes debate over the current state of disinformation and the policy responses in Japan.

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Executive Summary

In 2024, dubbed 'the election year', there is a heightened awareness of the threat of disinformation. Disinformation poses a fundamental threat to the very functioning of liberal democracies through its capacity to polarize societies and sow doubt in public discourse. Given disinformation's ubiquitous presence with the growing use of new technologies, three early career researchers from the Europe and Americas group within the Institute of Geoeconomics (IOG) conducted a six-month research project between January and June 2024 on the relationship between democratic backsliding and disinformation.

This report analyzes three select case studies, Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom, focusing on the current state of disinformation, their policy responses, and the impact of disinformation in each country context. We conclude by analyzing the current state of disinformation in Japan, and provide five policy recommendations for Japan.

<Chapter 1: Hungary>

Media Control and Disinformation

This chapter explores democratic backsliding in Hungary and how media control was strengthened under the administrations of Viktor Orbán. The chapter presents how the Hungarian government gradually increased its control over the media, and how disinformation and conspiracy theories believed to be originating from Russia and Hungary were spread by Hungarian government officials and the media under the influence of the Hungarian government. This chapter presents the concepts of "import" and "export" of disinformation by tracing the process of state control over the media and conducting textual analysis.

<Chapter 2: The United States>

When Distrust Trumps Facts

In the United States, disinformation has a long history with tackling the threat of disinformation from both within and outside since the 18th Century.

Public distrust towards the media and the government is strong and continues to increase in the United States. Such a distrustful and polarized public presents an ideal target for disinformation campaigns.

Disinformation in the United States further exacerbates distrust towards the media and the government, creating hurdles for enacting anti-disinformation policies.

<Chapter 3: The United Kingdom>

The Engagement Trap and Disinformation in the United Kingdom

Compared to Hungary and the United States, the United Kingdom's democratic institutions are arguably in a better position to combat disinformation. The public is less polarized, and its public media maintains its independence and neutrality.

However, as the Scottish and EU referenda showed, even in such countries that enjoy robust democratic institutions, disinformation strategies that are emotionally engaging and fully capture the audience's attention create "engagement traps" which continue to present threats.

<Concluding Chapter: Recommendations for Japan>

Disinformation during Crises

Disinformation campaigns are relatively weak and unconvincing in Japan thanks to strong levels of trust towards the media and a lack of political polarization.

Despite this, Japan has faced a spread of disinformation from both internal and external sources in several instances, including during the Okinawa gubernatorial election in 2018, during natural disasters such as Typhoon Jebi (2018) and the Noto

Peninsula Earthquake (2024), and more recently when the treated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant was discharged. Japan thus cannot remain complacent in its current position and needs to proactively consider policies to combat the threat of disinformation.

Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom all face the threat of disinformation from different positions in terms of their socio-political contexts. Despite their differences, we provide five policy recommendations for Japan based on generalizable findings drawn from the three case studies.

1. Elections and political crises are targeted by malicious actors (both domestic and external) to spread disinformation. There should be greater awareness that disinformation presents a direct threat to democratic institutions and norms (corresponding chapters: Chapters One and Three).
2. To avoid the 'engagement trap', there should be greater efforts made towards including other non-conventional means, such as the use of memes and humor, or an attempt at using the engagement trap itself as an anti-disinformation measure (corresponding chapter: Chapter Three).
3. Japanese government institutions should focus on the degree of political and economic independence of foreign media rather than accepting their reporting at face value (corresponding chapter: Chapter One).
4. Domestic government regulation against disinformation should take international regulations and policies into account, and ensure protections for democratic values including freedom of speech (corresponding chapters: Chapters Two and Three).
5. The Japanese government should provide a framework which ensures that efforts to tackle disinformation are distributed equitably. At present, discussions are dominated by large tech firms and fact-check centers. There should be greater outreach to large news media outlets, print media, as well as regional papers that are likely to struggle due to the limited resources available to them. By expanding the actors involved, it could be ensured that all relevant stakeholders were included in discussions. Debunked disinformation by such organizations should also be compiled in a database to make it easier for consumers to find accurate information. Lastly, if available, media organizations should be encouraged to include URL links in their articles when referring to the original news sources of a story, so that readers can access and verify the original article on their own (corresponding chapters: Chapters One and Three).

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Introduction

With 2024 being dubbed as 'the year of elections', the threat of disinformation has gained pace and so has the frantic search for comprehensive solutions to this problem. The far-reaching impacts of disinformation, from societal polarization to the role of technology in its spread, present substantive challenges to democratic states. Given the urgency of this issue, three early career researchers from the Europe and Americas group within the Institute of Geoeconomics (IOG) conducted a six-month research project between January and June 2024 on the relationship between democratic backsliding and disinformation. Our research consists of three select case studies, Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom due to the relative degrees of democratic backsliding in each, to analyze the current state of disinformation in each country, their policy responses, and the impact of disinformation on the three countries. We conclude the report by outlining the state of disinformation in Japan, and lay out five policy recommendations that may be applied to Japan based on the three main case studies.

Hungary was selected as the country in Europe that has experienced among the most democratic backsliding since 2010, transitioning from a liberal democracy to an electoral autocracy,[1] despite its successful democratization after the collapse of the communist rule. In this chapter, we introduce the example of the Orbán administration and its political party's increasing influence over the media and the resulting spread of disinformation in the Hungarian context. The United States was selected as a major liberal democracy vulnerable to democratic backsliding due to its domestic political environment. A combination of distrust towards institutions and the media, coupled with a lack of regulation of social media platforms, has led to the accelerated spread of disinformation. The United Kingdom was selected as a country which has displayed stronger institutional resilience, despite having been susceptible to similar forces of populism and disinformation during the Scottish Independence and Brexit referendum campaigns. However, despite its relatively robust democratic institutions, disinformation continues to pose a threat through what the chapter calls the "engagement trap". In the final chapter, the authors outline the most prominent recent disinformation campaigns that have spread in Japan, how the state of disinformation in Japan differs from that of the other case studies, and explain how some of the 'lessons learned' in the other cases may provide helpful policy recommendations for Japan.

In the remainder of this chapter, we define the key terms we use throughout this report, particularly disinformation and democratic backsliding, and explain why we focused on these issues. We argue that disinformation poses a threat to liberal democratic countries as disinformation corrupts both the democratic institutions and their norms. We identified three key enablers of disinformation, namely, the lack of anti-disinformation policies, distrust of democratic institutions, and political polarization, to assess how each plays a role in a country's disinformation environment. In

the final section, we outline the structure of this report.

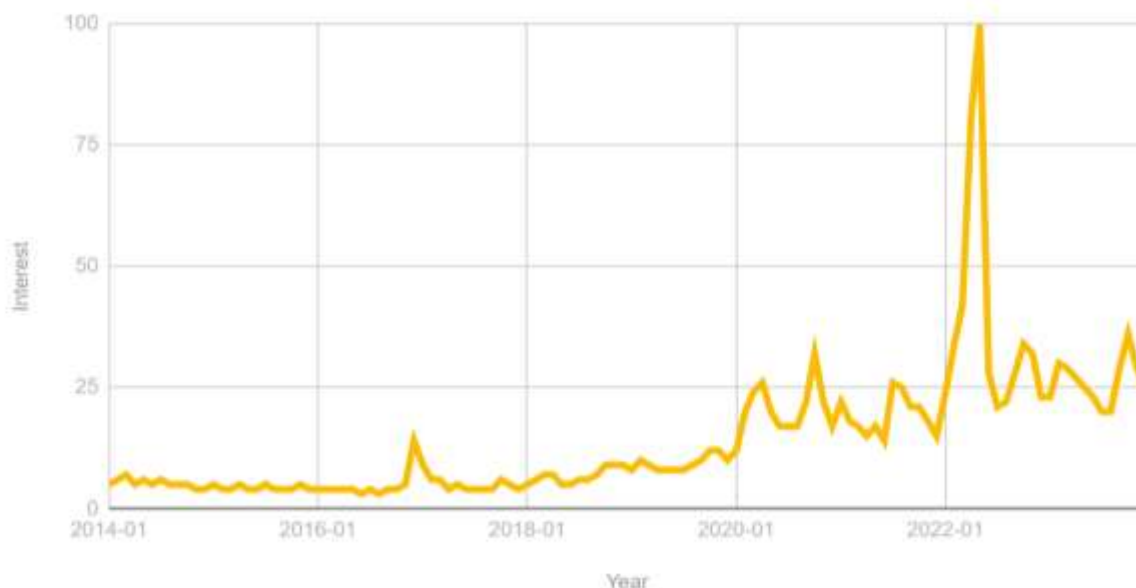
The Definition and Purpose of Disinformation

Problems related to "disinformation", particularly in politics, are far from being exclusively modern issues, and have been especially persistent in certain countries, making it unsurprising that they persist today.[2] The term has gained greater coverage in recent years, and a cursory search on Google Trends shows that its use has grown worldwide since the 2020s (see Figure 1). At the same time, the ubiquity of the term has also led to misunderstandings about what it actually means.

For the purposes of this report, we define disinformation as distinct from other forms of information in that it has the **intent** to mislead people by increasing the likelihood of "*false beliefs*" to form.[3] In other words, even if an individual is not necessarily deceived by the disinformation, the fact that there was an intent to mislead is sufficient for it to be classified as disinformation.

This is in contrast to *mis*information which is often used interchangeably with disinformation. On one hand, misinformation distinguishes itself from disinformation in that it has no clear intention to mislead; on the other hand, part of the information remains categorically false which sets it apart from information.[4] Additionally, disinformation differs from malinformation which intends to target and manipulate the image of certain groups and individuals using factually correct information (examples include harassment and hate speech).[5]

Figure 1: Search queries of the term "Disinformation" worldwide



(Source: Created by the authors using data from Google News Initiative[6])

Table 1: Author's own summary of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation based on intent and content.

	Intent	Content
Disinformation	Intentional	False (or distorted truth)
Misinformation	Unintentional	False
Malinformation	Intentional	Truth, but without context

(Source: Created by the authors)

Table 1 summarizes this distinction between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation by categorizing them based on their intent as well as whether the content is true or false. Thus, the combination of a clear intent to mislead using false or partially false information is what defines disinformation, regardless of whether its consumer is deceived or not. In other words, disinformation is an ideal example of Shakespeare's line "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so".[7]

Disinformation has several key elements that explain its pervasiveness and difficulty to effectively regulate. First, it can spread faster online than the truth.[8] Digital actors including bots can also accelerate the speed at which disinformation spreads more than the people who originally developed the false claim.[9] Cognitively, once misinformation is received and stored in the memory, it can be difficult to replace with correct information, leading to people inadvertently spreading false information even after they have been corrected.[10] Thus, disinformation tries to sow chaos and make people distrustful of the content they see.

The aim of disinformation is not to make people believe in the disinformation itself, but to **confuse or sow doubt**. For example, the RAND Corporation describes the Russian disinformation strategy as the "firehose of falsehood" where people are bombarded with so many lies that they no longer know what to believe.[11] In other words, disinformation does not necessarily require a strategy or consistency. All it takes is high volumes of disinformation to spread even if the content itself might be simple and crude.[12]

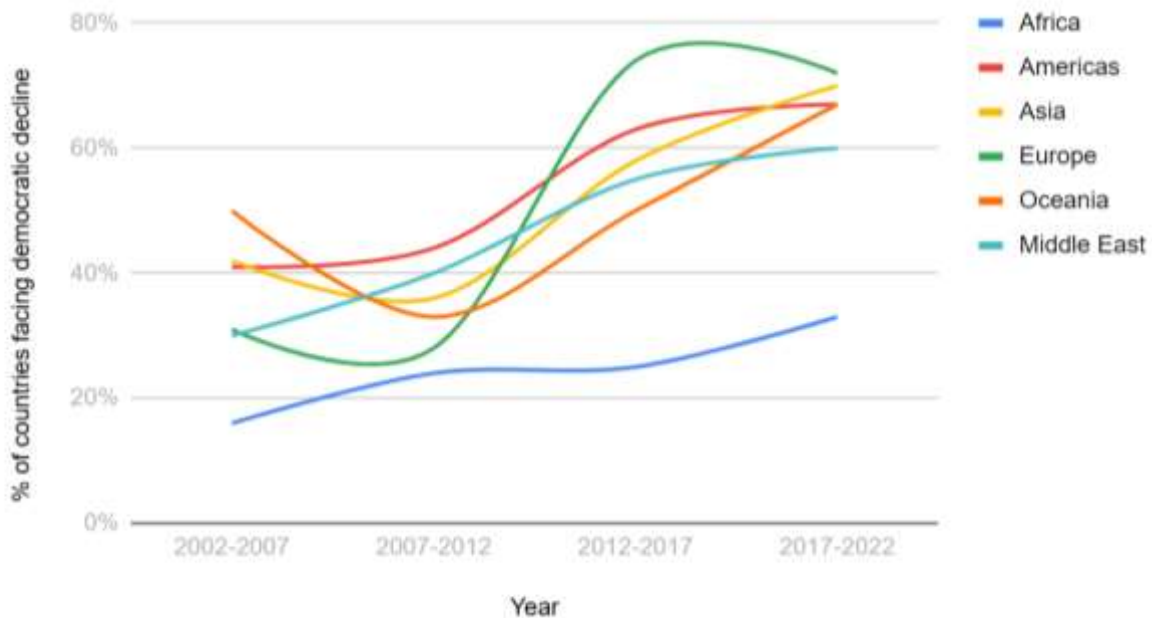
Simultaneously, the content does not necessarily need to be completely untrue. Academics such as Thomas Rid argue that in fact, disinformation could consist of several small lies, making it difficult to say that everything about a claim is false.[13] In sum, this section defines disinformation as a type of information that has the intent to mislead, but one that is not necessarily consistent, and is an ideal tool to sow doubt.

Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding has become "a defining trend in global politics" over the past two decades,[14] spanning across high-[15], medium-[16] and low-income states.[17] As shown in the Liberal Democracy Index of Variety of Democracy Institute, while democratic backsliding was recorded in all regions, Europe has seen particularly alarming levels of democratic backsliding in the last decade (see Figure 2).[18]

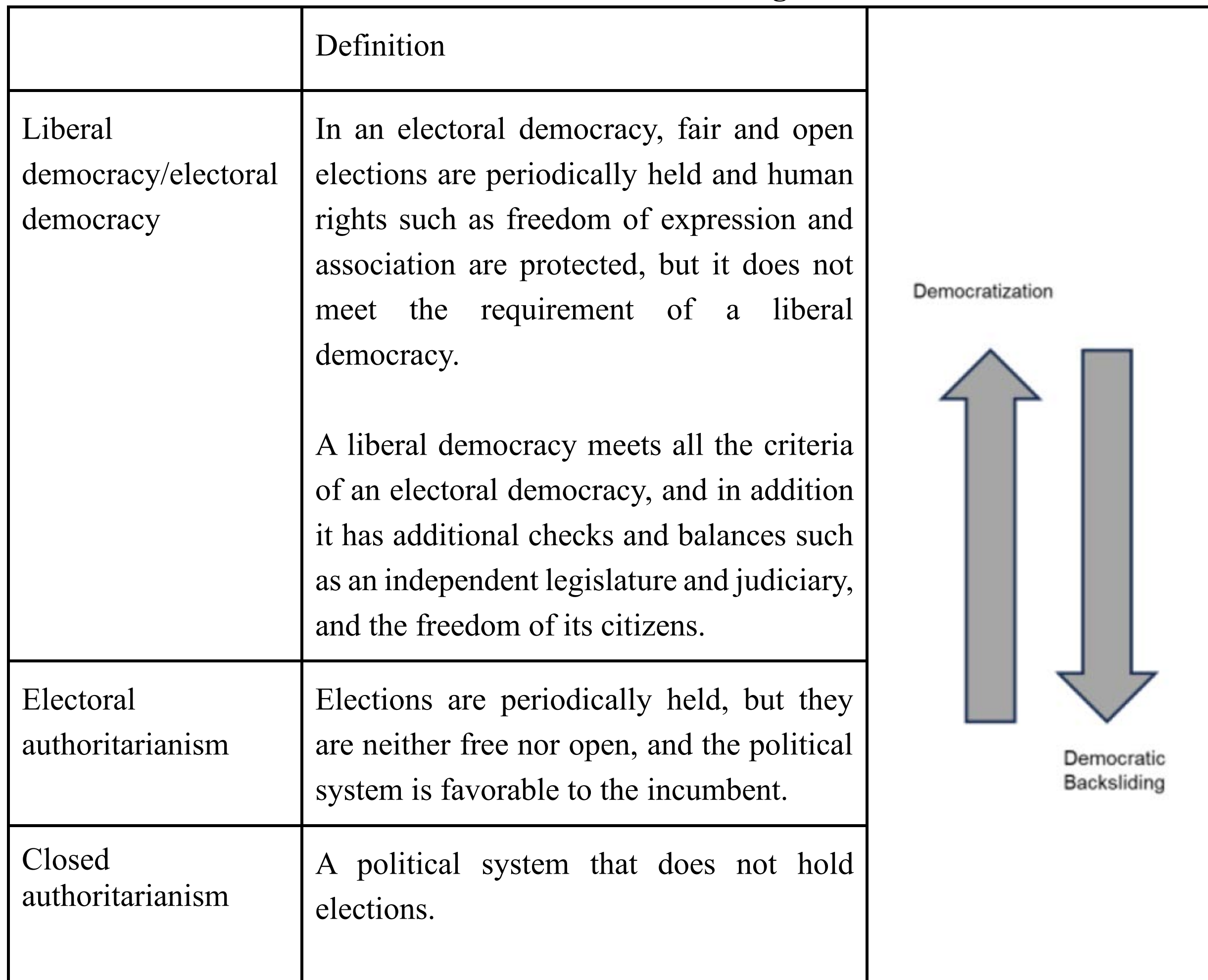
Democratic backsliding typically consists of "a retreat by an incumbent government from democratic values and practices".[19] It does not necessarily happen overnight or through sheer force such as a coup, but is instead a result of a "discontinuous series of incremental actions"[20] that leads to an unintentional but steady erosion of democracy.[21] As shown in Table 2, democratic backsliding happens on a spectrum between closed authoritarian states that do not hold elections and liberal democracies that hold free and open elections with an independent legislature and judiciary.[22] While the partial erosion of democratic practices does not necessarily spell the end of democracy, if the incumbent violates so many of the existing democratic rules, it could, over time, lead to the state being no longer able to fully function as a democracy.

Figure 2: Democratic Backsliding



(Source: Created by the authors using data from V-Dem[23])

Table 2: Political Institutions and Democratic Backsliding



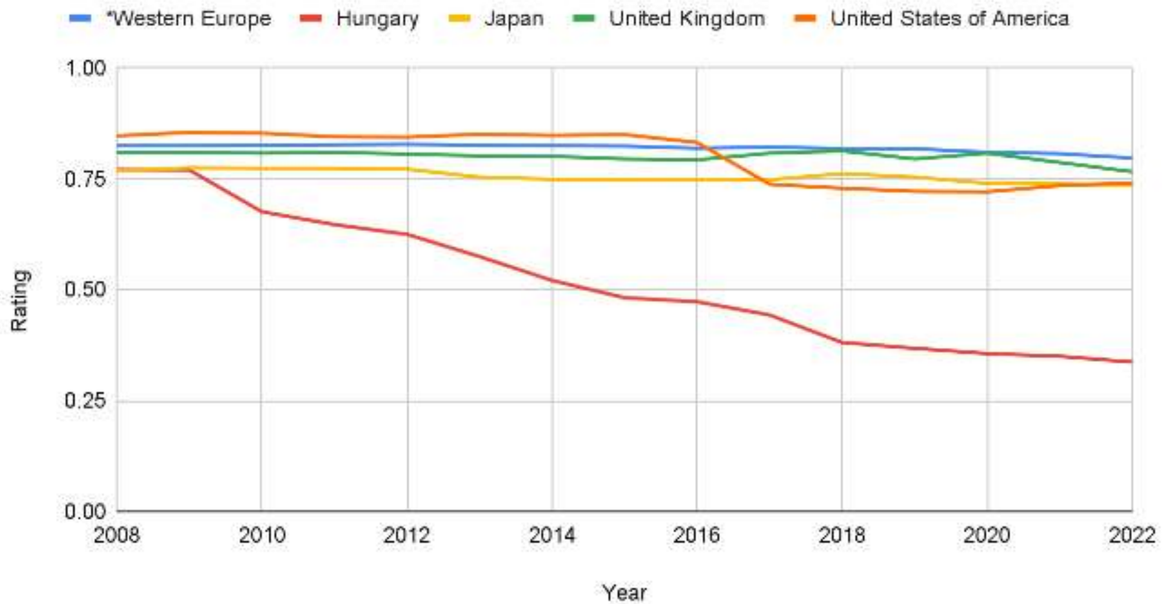
	Definition
Liberal democracy/electoral democracy	In an electoral democracy, fair and open elections are periodically held and human rights such as freedom of expression and association are protected, but it does not meet the requirement of a liberal democracy. A liberal democracy meets all the criteria of an electoral democracy, and in addition it has additional checks and balances such as an independent legislature and judiciary, and the freedom of its citizens.
Electoral authoritarianism	Elections are periodically held, but they are neither free nor open, and the political system is favorable to the incumbent.
Closed authoritarianism	A political system that does not hold elections.

(Source: Created by the authors based on Lührmann & Lindberg (2019), Kasuya (2024) and Nord et al. (2024)[24])

Out of the three case studies selected for this report, Hungary illustrates the clearest signs of democratic backsliding. Figure 3 shows that based on the Liberal Democracy Index, Hungary faced the sharpest decline following the start of the second Orbán government, when electoral reform was introduced and the political and financial independence of the media came under scrutiny, making it one of the top ten countries that has autocratized.[25] The election of Donald Trump has also led the United States to dip based on this measure, and the metrics have hardly recovered since.

While the decline is not as pronounced as in the case of Hungary, the idea that the United States may no longer be considered a consolidated democracy is alarming.[26] Little change is evident for Japan and the United Kingdom, showing the durability of both liberal democracies. However, the Brexit process seriously tested the resilience of the United Kingdom's liberal democratic institutions. Complacency is thus a risk, and therein lies the need for Japan to learn lessons from each case study to better prepare itself for future threats.

Figure 3: Liberal Democracy Index between 2008 and 2022



(Source: Created by the authors based on data from Varieties of Democracy[27])

As discussed, democratic backsliding has occurred measurably on a global scale, including in Europe. Out of the three case studies in this report, Hungary's case stands out as the most severe case of backsliding, but it remains a risk in the United States and is a potential long-term risk in the United Kingdom and Japan. This risk of democratic backsliding is especially pronounced when considering the threat of disinformation, which will be discussed below.

Why Should We Care About Disinformation in an Era of Democratic Crisis?

In Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's "*The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism*", they argue that there are "four arenas" (elections, legislature, judiciary, and the media) that become key battlegrounds for states that exist somewhere between democracy and autocracy.[28] The healthy functioning of all four arenas is what makes or breaks democracies.

Disinformation targets these institutions specifically and has consequential impacts on elections. For example, if it is perceived that the public makes a decision based on mis- or disinformation spread by domestic and/or foreign actors, it could lead to mistrust of election results.[29] A concrete example of this is offered in relation to Brexit, detailed in Chapter 3, concerning the infamous "£350m per week" claim which led to a debate over whether people were tricked into voting for Leave.[30] More broadly, this is arguably already happening, with a survey by Ipsos finding that disinformation and misinformation erodes public trust towards the media (40 per cent of respondents) as well as the government (22 per cent of respondents).[31] Disinformation not only targets elections,

the legislature, the judiciary, and the media, it erodes its norms and presents a real threat to liberal democracies. Additionally, Larry Diamond argues that the mere functioning of these institutions alone is insufficient, and that for a country to be a true liberal democracy, it has to adopt liberal democratic norms.[32]

Benjamin Tallis takes this a step further by arguingthe legislature, the judiciary, and the media, it that upholding and striving for the adoption of such democratic norms is "an interest in itself" for countries. [33] The concept of democratic norms comprises the "unwritten rules relating to the conduct of democracy, and include civility across party lines, acceptance of election outcomes, and tolerance for dissent".[34] One of the dangers of disinformation is that such norms can be eroded. The violent January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol that resulted from former President Trump and his supporters refusing to accept the outcome of the 2020 election is one example of an erosion of such norms and its consequences.

In short, disinformation poses a substantive threat to democracies by attacking both their institutions and their norms. This is why this report focused on three democracies (Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom) in analyzing the threat of disinformation, as well as the potential policies to counter its spread. The final chapter provides an overview of the current situation in Japan and policy recommendations for Japan.

Three Risks of the Spread of Disinformation and Democratic Backsliding

This report has explained what is meant by disinformation and why it poses a significant threat to democracies. This section sets out the framework for this report. We identify three key factors ('enablers') that contribute to the **spread of disinformation and which erode the functioning of democratic institutions**. These 'enablers' include regulatory environment in which disinformation operates, distrust of institutions, and political polarization. Regulatory options against disinformation include content moderation of digital platforms such as those operated by large tech firms. We focus on the existence of checks for false information and a mechanism to delete or flag content if necessary. We follow a traffic light system by using red, yellow, and green to express the different levels of threat as shown in Table 3. Red shows a complete lack of regulations, yellow indicates partial and incomplete regulation, and green means a regulatory environment that is effective at combating disinformation.

Table 3: Risk Factors regarding the Spread of Disinformation and Democratic Backsliding

	Presence or lack of anti-disinformation policy by the government.	Levels of public trust towards the government and the media.	Political polarization levels.
Hungary	High risk: Lack of government-level disinformation regulation. Concerns over media independence.	High risk: Low levels of public trust towards the government and the media.	High risk: High levels of political polarization among the public.
United States	Medium risk: Attempts to introduce regulations against disinformation have been less successful, and at present there is an over-reliance on social media firms to self-regulate.	High risk：Low levels of public trust towards the government and the media.	High risk: High levels of political polarization among the public.
United Kingdom	Low risk: Introduction of regulations such as the Online Safety Act 2023.	Low risk: Relatively high levels of public trust towards the government and the media.	Low risk: Lack of political polarization among the public.

(Source: Created by the authors)

Distrust refers to levels of public distrust towards democratic institutions such as the media and the government. Closely related to the concept of distrust is political polarization. A polarized public is less likely to be trusting, and the more distrustful people are, the higher the risk for further polarization. Disinformation therefore can also accelerate distrust[35] and polarization[36] in the same way the two can accelerate the spread of disinformation. While some level of healthy distrust of the government and media may be important in a democracy,[37] institutional trust is essential for the legislative process to function. In other words, a politically polarized and distrustful public will be skeptical of policies or new regulation put forth by its government.[38] As shown in the case of the United States, there is also the danger of lacking regulations when they are needed.

In the case of Hungary, according to the European Digital Media Observatory's 2020 report, Hungary failed to introduce regulation to tackle disinformation.[39] The European Digital Media Observatory's 2020 report is unequivocal in its criticism, stating that in Hungary, "the government itself is amplifying disinformation".[40] While the European Union as an institution is at the forefront of introducing rigorous and wholistic regulations against digital platforms,[41] there has been a lack of such policies from Hungary.[42] In Chapter 1 we review that traditional Hungarian media outlets

have published disinformation, and arguably politicians at the heart of government have been known to spread disinformation. In Hungary, public trust towards its media is in decline, [43] and the public are bitterly polarized.[44]

The United States suffers from political polarization as well as high levels of public distrust towards the government and the media, [45] which can further exacerbate polarization. [46] This presents a potential obstacle in passing legislation against disinformation as the public will be skeptical of government action. The government does not directly control traditional media outlets, but the public remains skeptical of mainstream news. Additionally, most of the global technology primes and social media platforms are based in the United States, but these firms remain insufficiently regulated, arguably allowing disinformation to continue spreading at an alarming rate. Legislation on this industry will also be difficult to achieve in the near term as long as the issues of institutional distrust and polarization among its public continue.

The United Kingdom differs from the other two case studies in that it enjoys a relatively high level of public trust towards its publicly-funded media[47] and government [48] and it does not suffer from the level of political polarization seen in the United States.[49] It is true that the divide between Remain and Leave at one point became the defining identity in the aftermath of Brexit, [50] but Brexit is no longer a major concern for the public[51] and thus its ability to polarize the public has considerably declined. The United Kingdom, much like the United States, is in the process of introducing regulations against disinformation, and without the problems of polarization and public distrust, it is likely to enjoy a much less bumpy journey, which enables it to have a stronger regulatory environment that has the potential of tackling disinformation.

The situation in Japan is arguably closest to that of the United Kingdom in that its public is less polarized [52] and shows relatively higher levels of trust towards its media. [53] However, in contrast to the United Kingdom, while there are ongoing debates over disinformation policy in committee meetings, there is still a strong aversion to bringing in tougher regulations against disinformation in Japan. The main concern is over greater regulatory control which may result in a clash with freedom of speech, a key right that is protected under the Japanese Constitution.[54]

Report Structure

This report provides three case studies (Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom), followed by an overview of the current state of disinformation in Japan with a conclusion that presents five policy recommendations for Japan based on the findings from the three case studies. The report begins with Hungary, a country facing democratic backsliding we present how step-by-step media control was strengthened. We introduce that disinformation from Russia and conspiracy theories as well as disinformation from Hungary itself is being spread by the media under the control of the government and government officials, which has led to

greater public distrust and polarization in Hungary.

The second chapter analyzes the United States, tracing its history in relation to disinformation. The high level of public distrust towards the government is one of the key vulnerabilities in the current political climate. The polarized nature of political discourse in the United States further imperils its democracy. However, unlike the case of Hungary, the United States still has resources and a top-down willingness to manage disinformation. A multi-pronged approach by trusted actors in the public and private sectors is necessary to prevent disinformation from doing further damage to the country's domestic political environment.

The third chapter on the United Kingdom is an example of a liberal democracy coming out of a crisis created by Brexit. The threat of disinformation looms large, especially the type of disinformation that weaponizes what this report terms the "engagement trap". However, it has also managed to bring itself off of the precipice of the Brexit crisis, and is working to take a leading role in the global fight against disinformation. The chapter argues that one must fight fire with fire, and some of the more successful anti-disinformation tactics are those that can in fact use the "engagement trap" to their advantage.

The final chapter turns to Japan, a country that to this point has received relatively little academic attention in this field. The chapter provides a brief summary of the current state of disinformation in Japan, drawing comparisons with that of the previous three case studies. The chapter differentiates between disinformation during 'peacetime' and disinformation during moments of 'crisis'. Such examples of the former include false claims during the Okinawa mayoral election (2018) while examples of the latter coincide with natural disasters. This distinction is important as the implications of disinformation can change dramatically depending on whether the readership is in 'crisis' mode or not. The timing may also affect how much a government is able to prevent disinformation from spreading on top of the original crisis at hand. While Japan may not face a critical juncture in its democratic identity like some of the other case studies, its recent history in experiencing disinformation during both peacetime and times of crisis makes it unique. While little academic attention has been paid to the issue thus far, Japan has not been standing idly by as the disinformation threat has increased. Steps have been taken to tackle the issue through the government as well as public-private partnerships, which is one of the key strengths of Japan. The chapter concludes by presenting five policy recommendations for Japan.

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Chapter 1 Hungary:

Media Control and Disinformation

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of disinformation in Hungary, highlighting the significant issue of democratic backsliding as described in the introduction.[1] Political gerrymandering has favored the ruling party, and symbolic steps such as forcing the relocation of the Central European University, over it receiving U.S. accreditation have arguably illustrated these shifts as well.

The Viktor Orbán[2] government has been steadily intensifying its grip on state-run, conservative, and independent media through legislative reform and buying ownership of these media,[3] which allows the government to more indirectly and strategically spread its own narrative including disinformation.[4] For example, the "Media Pluralism Monitor", an annual report on European media published by the European University Institute accuses "the governing party" for having "a very strong influence over content production and editorial decision making" in both the public and private media in Hungary.[5] The European Commission's "2023 Rule of Law Report" also expresses concern over the functional, editorial, and financial independence of the Hungarian media.[6]

Furthermore, in 2021, a report commissioned by the European Parliament argued that there has been evidence to suggest that the spread of disinformation in Hungary originate from "government-controlled media".[7] This point is echoed in a 2020 report by the European Digital Media Observatory which argues that the Hungarian government is actively spreading disinformation, and the EU DisinfoLab's report points to the Hungarian government as one of the sources of disinformation in Hungary.[8] Even while preparations are underway in the EU to enact and implement a comprehensive set of regulations against online platforms,[9] Hungarian anti-disinformation policy is far from functional.[10] In Hungary, disinformation is present even within articles from traditional media outlets, and such disinformation is actively spread by politicians in the central government.

This chapter discusses the issues of democratic backsliding and the proliferation of disinformation under the Orbán regime in Hungary. The first section reviews the historical process of state influence over the media amidst the erosion of democracy by the Orbán government. The second section introduces disinformation originating from Russia,[11] and disinformation and conspiracy theories that originate from Hungary that are spread by government officials and state-controlled media. This chapter presents a unique disinformation phenomenon in Hungary which is the "import" and "export" of disinformation. The third section provides an overview of the negative consequences of such disinformation. The European refugee crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war are presented as examples of large-scale disinformation campaigns in Hungary.[12]

Democratic Backsliding: Increased Control over Information Sources Through Media Acquisitions

"Between 2010 and 2020, only four anti-government media outlets disappeared [and the total] number had risen to 48 [from 33] by 2020"[13]

This quote from Bíró András, a researcher at the pro-government think tank, XXI. Század Intézet, attempts to portray the current state of media freedom in Hungary as being free and balanced. Emphasizing the point, Prime Minister Orbán himself once asserted in 2015 that "if you look at the Internet, you can easily see that there is freedom of the press".[14] Yet, Hungary faces a major constraint to its media freedom. The following section will analyze the influence of the Hungarian political party Fidesz led by Orbán, and pro-government

businessmen over the state-controlled, conservative, and independent media.[15]

Step One: Control of the Public Media

Prime Minister Orbán won his first term as prime minister in 1998 by defeating the Socialist Party, eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In his first term, Orbán critiqued the media for what he called its opposition-aligned reporting, arguing that "the media is doing the work of the opposition."[16]

In response, Orbán sought to increase his party's influence over the media during his first term by staffing the National Radio and Television Board (ORTT), the state-run media regulatory institution, exclusively with members of his party in 1999, in contradiction to the balanced representation required under the 1996 Media Law.[17] This attempt ultimately failed as Fidesz was kicked out of power in the 2002 general election when they narrowly lost to the Socialist Party. However, Fidesz solidified its control over the media shortly after forming a government for a second term in 2010. The media law was revised, leading to the appointment of the director of Magyar Távirati Iroda (MTI) as the head of the newly established Media Council (NMHH) which replaced the ORTT and it now oversees all funding allocations.[18]

In addition to changing the Media Law, the Orbán government has used its financial power to buy out media firms.[19] The next section will discuss how the Hungarian government has been able to exert stronger control over Hír TV, a conservative outlet, as well as Origo, a formerly independent outlet.

Step Two: Consolidation and Establishment of Conservative Media

Orbán attributed the narrow 2002 election defeat to "the concentration of media and money on the opposing candidate", which deepened his concern of both traditional print and online media influence.[20]This led Orbán, Fidesz, and pro-government businessmen to strengthen their influence on the media through the establishment of conservative media and merging different media outlets.

Launched in late 2002, Hír TV was established as a conservative TV outlet under the leadership of Borókai Gábor, a government spokesperson during Orbán's first term. By 2004, businessman Simicska Lajos, a key figure from Orbán's first administration that had personal ties to Orbán having been the head of the internal revenue service of the first Orbán government as well as sharing the same dorm with Orbán at university, had acquired Hír TV.[21] This acquisition fortified Fidesz's reliance on Hír TV, which was evident in its exclusive live coverage of substantial anti-Socialist Party government protests in 2006 and Orbán's public speeches which they reported live on several occasions.[22] A Hungarian born journalist, Paul Lendvai argues that to strengthen Fidesz's communication, the first Orbán administration decided to rely on the powerful conservative "media empire" created by Simicska who was personally close to Orbán.[23]

Despite the closeness between Simicska and the Orbán administration, he allowed articles critical of the government to be published. The same was true for Magyar Nemzet, a conservative daily newspaper first published back in 1938,[24] and multiple other conservative media outlets owned by Simicska.[25]

However, the close relationship between the Orbán administration and Simicska's media enterprise began to fracture as the government sought ever-greater loyalty.[26] In the 2014 general election, Fidesz secured over two-thirds of the seats in Hungary's unicameral national assembly with 52.73 per cent of the vote, a victory mainly thought to be secured through electoral gerrymandering.[27] The second Orbán government hinted at introducing a 5 per cent

advertising tax on the media. The Hungarian media's financial situation is fragile, and the media is often financially reliant on advertisement revenue.[28] An introduction of an advertisement tax presents considerable financial burden on the Hungarian media.[29] Simicska harshly criticized this as a "total media war" and "another attack on democracy", [30] severely worsening the relationship between him and Orbán.

As a result, media owned by Simicska increasingly found themselves in considerable financial difficulties, presenting pressure on it as a media outlet.[31] They were labeled 'fake news' by Orbán and subsequently denied interviews with the government.[32]

Deprived of its political access and financial backing, Simicska's outlets were ultimately consolidated under the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), established in 2018 by Orbán and the ruling Fidesz party. KESMA's preamble to its Foundation's Charter states that "the Hungarian written and electronic press has an indisputable role and responsibility in strengthening community cohesion and in laying the foundation for thinking about our common future".[33] Not only Hír TV, but also Magyar Nemzet were ultimately shut down in 2018, and in the following year, Magyar Idők, a publication with strong links to Fidesz and under KESMA's ownership, recaptured "*Magyar Nemzet*" as its new name.[34]

Designated as a "strategic" national asset,[35] KESMA is exempt from monopoly regulations. It now encompasses over 400 media entities, a monumental consolidation of pro-government media under a single entity. This strategic amalgamation represents a deliberate effort to homogenize media narratives, illustrating the Orbán administration's unwavering commitment to controlling the public discourse. As Scott Griffin, the deputy director of the International Press Institute (IPI), points out, "The bundling of pro-government media under one roof removed the risk of 'runaway oligarchs', and… facilitates a coordinated system of censorship and content control among the media involved".[36]

Step Three: Pressure and Takeover of Independent Media

Takeovers to assure government control extended to outlets that were critical of the government as well, such as Origo. Launched in 1998, Origo was once among Hungary's most popular and well-respected online journalism platforms. [37] The Orbán administration, at the cusp of its third term in 2014, started pressuring Origo through its parent company, Magyar Telekom, concerned about its critical coverage of the government. In 2013, amid discussions on new licensing, Lázár János, Secretary of State of the Prime Minister's Office, proposed establishing a communication line between Origo's editors and government officials to Magyar Telekom. That fall, while not explicitly requesting a *quid pro quo* arrangement, Patrick Kingsley, a *New York Times* journalist argued that a media consulting firm close to the Orbán administration signed a contract with Origo to make suggestions about government coverage, ostensibly creating a channel for the government to influence Origo's reporting.[38]

Nevertheless, the press team continued to scrutinize the Orbán administration under the leadership of editor-in-chief Gergő Sáling. In the same year, they also exposed high overseas travel expenses incurred by Lázár János.[39] However, the Orbán administration found such critical coverage unacceptable, and as a result, the pressure on the parent company intensified, leading to the dismissal of Sáling, on June 3, 2014. [40] After his dismissal, according to journalist Orla Barry, there has been a shift in reporting which has become more pro-government.[41] Origo was subsequently acquired in 2015 by a company under the control of two banks aligned with

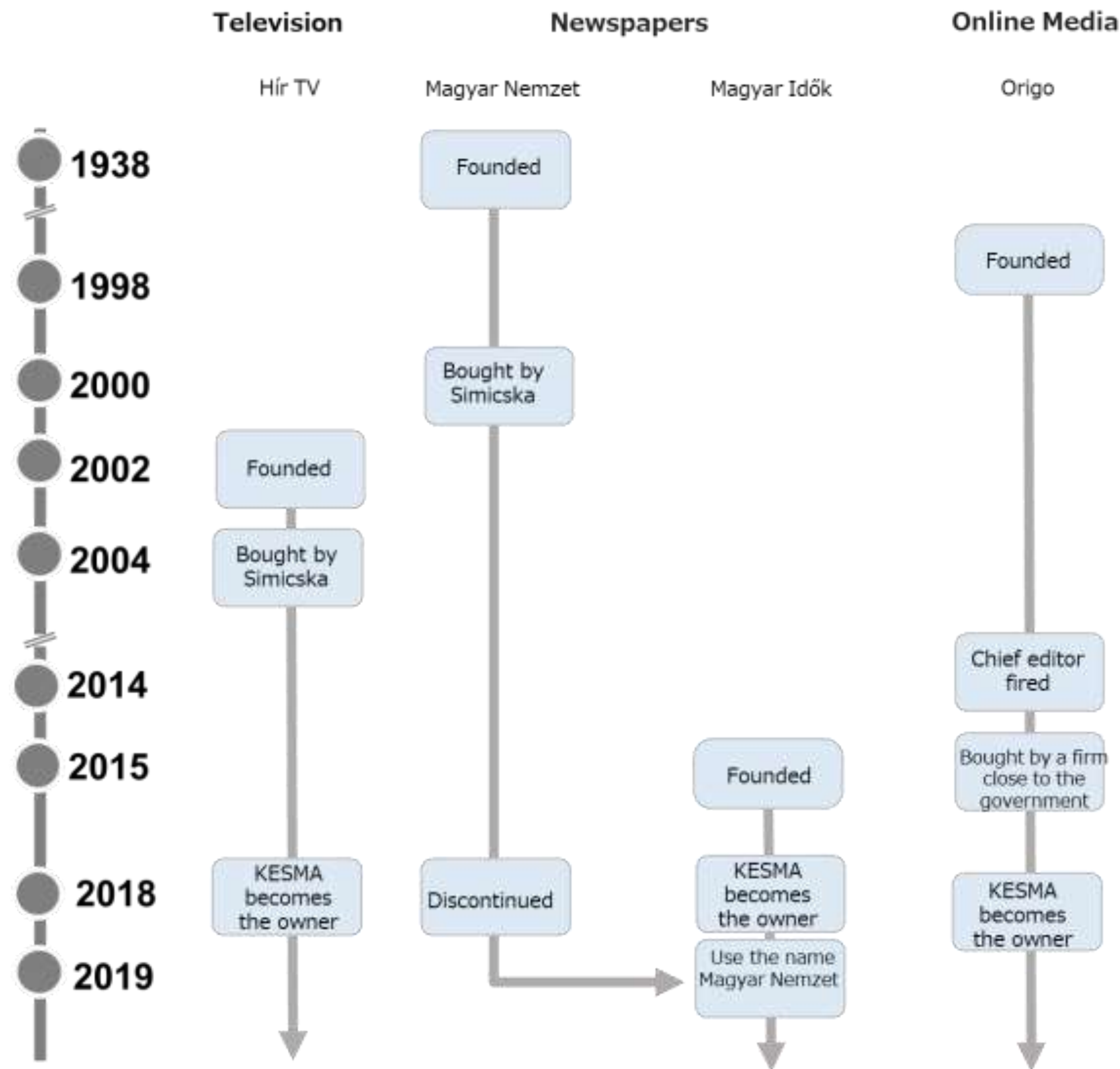
the Orbán administration,[42] and in 2018, it became part of KESMA (Figure 1).

The Orbán government, unlike Russia and China, does not censor its media, and does not apply such heavy-handed tactics. For outlets that are more critical of the government, they are prepared to use political pressure, economic "sanctions", and even outright takeovers. It was precisely in the backdrop of the formation of a media landscape in which only opinions favorable to the government were being reported in the mid-2010's that the refugee crisis started in Europe.

Disinformation Through the Media and Its Impact: The Refugee Crisis

The spring 2015 influx of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and North Africa caused significant turmoil across Europe, with Hungary becoming a crucial transit point along the so-called "Balkan route" from Serbia to Germany. The Hungarian government viewed this to be a national threat and declared a state of emergency in September of 2015.[43]

Figure 1: Major Private Media in Hungary and Its Ownership throughout the Years



(Source: Author)

Amidst this influx, various conspiracy theories and disinformation[44] were floating around regarding the refugees and migrants,[45] including many so-called attacks on Orbán's political opponents such as George Soros who became one of the targets of conspiracy and disinformation attacks from the Hungarian media under the influence of the Hungarian government.[46]

George Soros is a prominent Hungarian-American investor of Jewish background and a vigorous advocate for democracy. He founded the Central European University and the Open Society Foundations, both initially based in Hungary, and both of which were compelled to relocate due to pressure from the Orbán administration. Many right-wing politicians and media in the United States, Russia, and beyond have propagated numerous conspiracy theories against Soros. However, according to journalist Patrick Stickland, to justify their arguments and shore up their support, the Orbán administration has actively leveraged these theories to undermine Soros, who they view as a political adversary due to his criticism against the government over democratic values and human rights issues.[47]

One illustration of this tactic is the peddling of the so-called “Soros Plan”, a conspiracy theory claiming that Soros aims to transport large numbers of migrants to Europe to further his economic interests and weaken national governments. Fidesz has been conducting national polling since 2005 when they were in opposition. Questionnaires are sent by post to all Hungarian households, and respondents are given the option to answer “yes” or “no” to the questions. While the aim of this poll is to gather public opinion, in reality it can be used to promote the government’s position as well as a way to justify government decisions and as a negative campaign tool against their opponents.[48] The “Soros Plan” was put before Hungarians in a government poll conducted in 2017, and in one of the explanations to the questions posed it stated that “Soros has been working for many years to change Europe and European societies. He wants to achieve his goal with the resettlement of masses of people from different cultural backgrounds”.[49] Researchers such as Ágnes Bátory et al. have argued that the Orbán government tried to justify their view that Soros is behind the European Union’s refugee and immigration policy to the public through such questionnaires.[50]

Regarding such campaigns against Soros by the Hungarian government, then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker stated after a European Council meeting in 2018 that “[s]ome of the prime ministers sitting around the table, they are the origin of the fake news”, following this with a direct criticism against Orbán for being one of the spreaders of disinformation.[51]

In addition to conspiracy theories like this one, there was also the spread of disinformation on Soros. For instance, in 2018, *Magyar Idők* reported disinformation claiming that “the European Commission and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) distributed tens of thousands of anonymous bank cards to migrants”, implicating that Soros “participated in financing this”.[52] While it is true that there are programs to provide assistance to refugees via card-based systems, including a Soros-funded MasterCard initiative since 2011 aimed at supplying necessities through pre-loaded cards before the refugee crisis, these programs are unrelated.[53] Misrepresenting these separate efforts as connected served to discredit Soros by implying that EU funds are allowing migrants to help terrorism as its title implied (“A migránsoknak kibocsátott névtelen bankkártyák a terrorizmust segítik” which translates to “Anonymous bank cards issued to migrants help terrorism”).[54] This disinformation was reportedly sourced from Nova24, a conservative Slovenian news

outlet.[55] The Orbán government after expanding its influence over domestic Hungarian news outlets has been turning its focus on helping Hungarian businesses to acquire foreign media, a move that is evident in Slovenia since 2017. Schatz Péter, the pro-Orbán former director of Hungary's Danubius Radio, has been involved in the acquisition of Nova24.[56] The Slovenian conservatives, like the Orbán government are opposed to immigration, and have forged a close relationship with them as a result.

The idea that there is a "uniform negative bias" in the international media reporting that is creating a "long-lasting and unfavourable effect on Hungary's international reputation" has been widely adopted among Hungarian conservatives such as Fidesz.[57] Márton Dunai, a former Reuter journalist argues that the Hungarian conservatives such as Fidesz is trying to heighten their international reputation by strengthening such views to be promoted abroad.[58]

The Russia-Ukraine War: The Import and Export of Disinformation

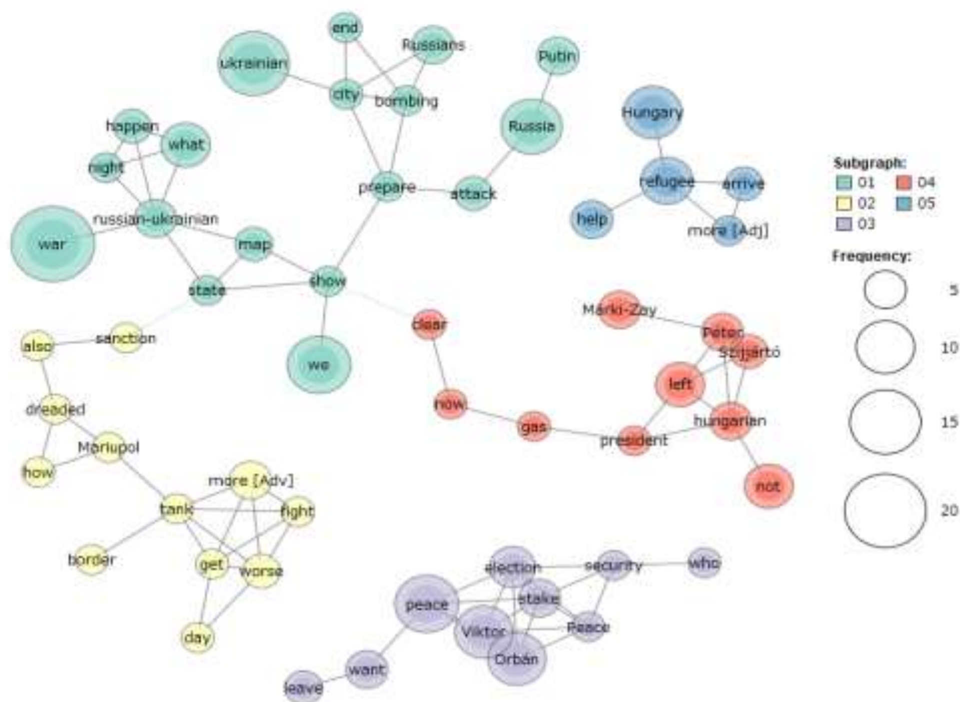
Europe faced several significant crises in the 2020s, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, followed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Despite the Orbán government's official stance against Russia's illegal and unprovoked aggression, which is repeatedly declared in UN general assemblies, the European Council meetings, and Council of the European meetings, its approach has been notably cautious to avoid deliberately provoking Russia since the onset of the conflict. This caution is reflected in the coverage by Hungary's government-aligned media, where pro-Russian narratives and disinformation are notably prevalent.[59]

For example, an analysis of the co-occurrence network (a graphic textual analysis) of coverage from March 2022, prior to the Hungarian parliamentary elections reveals that Origo, once known for its balanced reporting and now under KESMA since 2018, now tends to align with the Orbán administration's narrative, often reporting phrases like "Orbán wants peace" (see Figure 2, Subgraph 3 which is in purple), indicating Origo's transformation into a media outlet that is more aligned with the government.

Looking more closely at the themes that emerged from this analysis, it is clear that within reports from state-controlled media contain disinformation. For example, the criticism lodged by Minister of Foreign Affairs & Trade Péter Szijjártó against the prime ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay is being actively promoted (see Figure 2, Subgraph 4 which is in red), and contains disinformation such as "[t]he Left would send weapons and soldiers to Ukraine, thus dragging Hungary into war" or that "[t]he left would abolish the utility cost cuts".[60]

In addition, on public television channel M1, one guest praised the actions of Russian soldiers as "professional" and stated they "calmly did their job". This guest also compared the Zelensky's administration to Nazi Germany and claimed that Ukraine was developing nuclear weapons, without any evidence.[61] The guest in question was Georg Spöttle, a former West German police officer and a security expert who has become a regular figure on media outlets like Hír TV and *Magyar Nemzet* in recent years. He was also a former analyst at a pro-government think tank, Nézőpont Intézet. The comment by Spöttle illustrates how conservative Hungarian "experts" are spreading Russian government disinformation. While not exclusive to Hungary[62] - the EUDisinfo Lab highlights that the widespread dissemination of such disinformation, especially through state-owned or government-leaning media - it is a phenomenon that is particularly prominent in Hungary.[63]

Figure 2: Ukraine Coverage by Origo from March to April 2022 elections

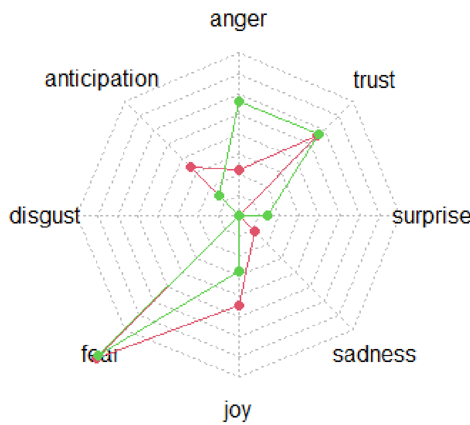


(Source: Author)

A notable aspect of disinformation in Hungary involves the "export" of disinformation to Russian media, thereby adding Hungarian-made veneer of credibility to Russian narratives. An example of this is the unfounded claim of "forced recruitment" of the Hungarian minorities in Ukraine's western Transcarpathian region. In January 2023, the conservative media outlet *Pesti Srácok* (which, while not part of KESMA, supports the Orbán government) published an alleged fabricated story, falsely reporting that a significant number of Ukrainian soldiers and police officers had descended upon the Transcarpathian region, engaging in widespread forced recruitment (called "*kényszersorozás*" in Hungarian) of the region's Hungarian minority population. The report was based on the unsubstantiated rumor that "the operation aimed to conscript tens of thousands from regions untouched by the war's immediate impacts".[64] In response to this report, Ukraine's Espreso TV unequivocally identified it as a disinformation campaign, highlighting that the store, where *Pesti Srácok* claimed the alleged police and military activities occurred, does not exist in the Berehove area mentioned. They furthermore noted that the backgrounds of the individuals interviewed by *Pesti Srácok* were not verified, and their statements were overly emotional, placing doubt on their credibility.[65] Yet this fabricated report was also cited by multiple Hungarian media such as *Magyar Nemzet*, Origo, and the state-run media outlet M1, further sensationalizing fear and anger among the Hungarian public[66] (see Figure 3).

Furthermore, Russian media (such as *TASS*) have echoed the report, replicating the narrative set forth by Hungarian outlets. Dorka Takácsy, a Marcin Król Fellow at the Warsaw-based platform *Visegrad Insight*, commented on the dissemination of the *Pesti Srácok* article, noting its impact and the broader implications for media representation and how disinformation can spread.

Figure 3: Emotion analysis of headlines (data collected between January 22, 2023, when the "forced recruitment" theory was first reported, to February 4, 2023) of Mager Nemzet (red) and Origo (green).[67]



(Source: Author)

> This fabricated story was then picked up by the leading Russian news agency TASS. Interestingly, they took over the novel wording as well, using "принудительный призыв" ("forceful conscription") instead of мобилизация (mobilisation) in Russian. From TASS, this news was republished by many Russian news portals, including the largest ones. Hence, Ukraine was presented to Russian readers as an aggressor and emphasised that ethnic Hungarians, not just ethnic Russians, are victims of their repression (as popular Russian disinformation narratives claim).[68]

The coverage of the *Pesti Srácok* article by the *TASS* news agency had a notable impact, with Russia Today (now RT) reporting on it on January 27, 2023,[69] and Infobrics, the official BRICS information website, describing the "forced recruitment" theory on February 2, 2023.[70] It was also observed that Rossiya Segodnya, another Russian state-owned entity that oversees the *Novosti* and *Sputnik* news agencies, contemplated hiring a Hungarian-speaking editor in the fall of 2022,[71] indicating a significant likelihood that disinformation originating from Hungary could be utilized by Russian outlets in the future.

The Negative Impact of Disinformation

These two examples of disinformation campaigns – the refugee crisis and the war in Ukraine – reflect the significant impact of disinformation in Hungary in two important ways.

One, disinformation in Hungary has helped diminish public trust in the media and contributed to worsening political polarization. In 2016, public trust towards the media declined to 31 percent, and it continued to decline under the Orbán administration so that by 2022, it sunk to 25 percent,[72] even more than the other two case studies considered in the report, the United States[73] (32 percent) and the United Kingdom[74] (33 percent). At the same time, among voters who support the Orbán administration (or to be more precise, those who lean conservative), a slightly higher proportion trust the media at 33 percent.[75] Furthermore, in regards to political polarization, only a quarter of Hungarians agreed with the statement that "politics is ultimately a fight between good and evil" in 2014, but by 2022 this figure increased to 39 percent, strongly suggesting a broader pull towards polarization.[76]

Additionally, the spread of propaganda favorable to Russia and outright disinformation during the Russia-Ukraine war led to greater support of authoritarian regimes such as Russia, while at the same time reducing support for democratic western states such as the United States and EU member states that tried to uphold the rule of law.[77] Fidesz, which prioritizes relations with Russia over the United States, succeeded in increasing their support from 39 percent to 55 percent, while opposition parties which took the opposite view saw

their support decline from 39 percent to 24 percent in 2022.[78]

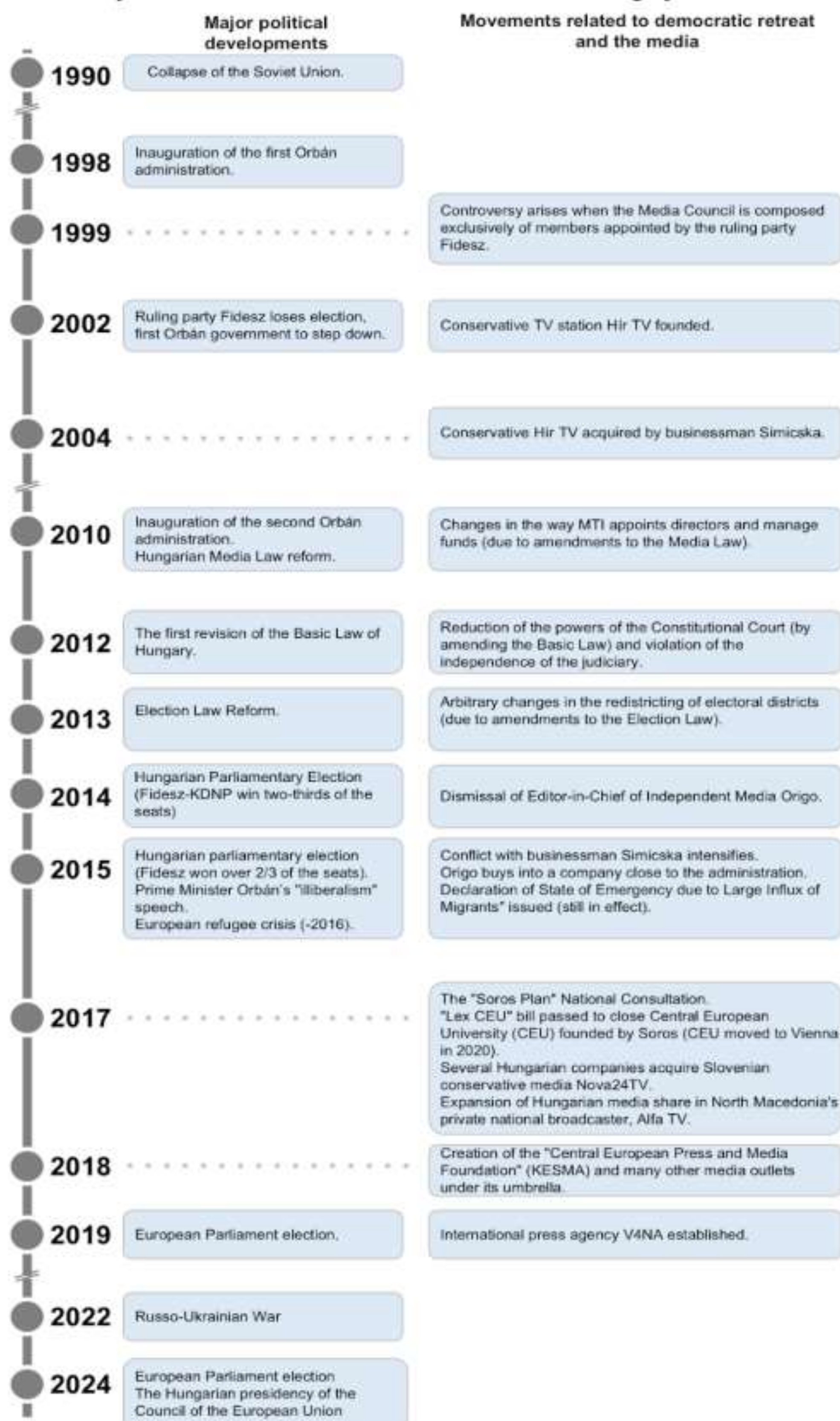
Conclusion

There has been a gradual but steady tightening of media freedom in Hungary since the Orbán administration first assumed office in 1998. The Orbán government intensified its control at the onset of their return to power in 2010, and recent years have witnessed attempts to extend influence over media both domestically and internationally. These trends continue, and the spread of pro-government narratives that can be viewed as disinformation by the Hungarian government and government-leaning media regarding immigrants and Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been made an issue in the European parliamentary election 2024.[79]

This presents an important warning to countries such as Japan to not blindly trust reporting by foreign media. In countries that experience democratic backsliding, there is no guarantee that formerly independent media have maintained their independence, and there may also be nominally independent media that are subject to government control. When disinformation is disseminated from multiple sources, as in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the example of Hungary strengthens the need to account for the political and economic context, as well as the degree of independence of the media.

This chapter has provided an overview of disinformation in Hungary, a country that faces democratic backsliding. The next chapters will explore the potential impact and responses to disinformation in democracies at risk.

Annex 1: Major Political Movements and Disinformation in Hungary



(Source: Author)

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Chapter 2 Disinformation in the United States: When Distrust Trumps Facts

The challenge posed by disinformation in the United States can be described as two interlocked problems. On the one hand, disinformation is rampant and a growing number of Americans believe in claims rooted in disinformation or conspiracy theories. One alarming statistic shows that as of 2023, a third of Americans believe that former President Donald Trump "rightfully won" the 2020 election, another third believe in "Great Replacement Theory" (a belief that elites are conspiring to replace white "native" Americans with illegal immigrants), and one in four Americans believe in QAnon.[1] At the same time, public trust in institutions is at a historic low, and many Americans are skeptical of the federal government's ability to function and operate in the public's best interest.

This paper will explore how these domestic political factors of public sentiment influence the disinformation challenge in the U.S. and its approach to combating it. A skeptical public is the ideal target for disinformation campaigns: nefarious actors both domestic and foreign can exploit their targets to further undermine institutional trust and exploit societal cleavages. This can lead to further political polarization, perpetuating a cycle of distrust, and leading to decay in democratic norms. The following discussion will delineate the American context that created this political and social environment, and argue why a holistic approach involving government, technology companies, and traditional media is necessary to manage this challenge.

The Early Years of American Disinformation:

The 2024 U.S. presidential election will be a unique election for the history books. The race began with two incumbents facing each other off for the second time. Less than a month before the democratic convention, President Biden dropped out of the race to pass the baton to his sitting vice president, Kamala Harris. A key reason of his decision to drop out was the growing criticism from the public that he was "too old" to hold office again - a criticism former President Trump has also faced, though less severely. The announcement came as a shock to many voters, but a shock maybe rivaled only by assassination attempt on Trump a week prior.

Despite the whirlwind of events that have made up this campaign season, many aspects of this election are not new. Modern day election cycles across the globe all face the challenge of disinformation and the United States is no exception, though the issue has existed for centuries.

In the U.S. Presidential Election of 1796, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams went head to head for the presidency after George Washington announced he would not seek a third term. The domestic political environment at the time was perfect for disseminating disinformation. In the years leading up to the election, newspapers had become politicized, not unlike the media landscape of today. The two candidates

instigated smear campaigns against each other, with Adams supporters spreading rumors that Jefferson had "intrinsic character defects" and Jefferson supporters attacking Adams for conspiring to be "King of the United States" by sending one of his children to marry into the British royal family.[2] Neither story was based on any objective truth, but the narratives ran nonetheless.

The United States again faced the challenge of information warfare throughout the following centuries, but during the Cold War the source was a foreign adversary. The Soviet Union devised a number of disinformation campaigns, or "active measures", some of which were acutely damaging to the American public's trust in their own government. One particular campaign, known as "Operation Denver", purported that the United States had developed the HIV/AIDS virus as a biological weapon at a base in Maryland.[3] In 1985, the KGB, seeking to create a favorable opinion of the USSR abroad, tasked East Germany's secret police, the Stasi, and two retired biologists to publish a study to make this claim believable based on "scientific fact." Pamphlets describing this study were distributed at a non-aligned movement summit in Zimbabwe a year later, where local journalists from participant countries picked up the story.[4] Within a few years, documentaries were being made in English interviewing the biologists on their claims, further spreading the story to the anglophone world. With AIDS disproportionately impacting the LGBT community in the United States, and the growing frustration with the stigma and callous government response to the epidemic, many in the United States were ready to believe the government was indeed responsible for creating the virus. Black Americans were also disproportionately impacted, prompting some of them to believe similar conspiracy theories given their existing distrust of the public health system.[5] The Soviets had thus picked a perfect time to exploit the existing distrust in the United States to spread a theory blaming the U.S. government for the virus that many Americans were ready to believe.[6] The University of Chicago found that even decades later, more than one in ten Americans still believed that the U.S. government created HIV and deliberately infected minority groups with the virus.[7]

While these Soviet-backed active measures were a significant part of the conspiracy and information battlegrounds of the Cold War decades ago, the distrust Americans feel towards their government institutions has not dissipated. Rather, distrust in public institutions persists, undermining the ability to fight disinformation today.

The American Context: Distrust, Past and Present

For the American public, the Cold War years was a period of growing skepticism of the government. McCarthyism had suppressed the free speech of leftists and others, which was followed by misinformation throughout the following decade about how the United States was "winning" the war in Vietnam, followed by the political scandals of the Nixon administration.[8]

That skepticism has never really waned, and

Americans have become even more distrustful of their government over the years, according to a Pew Research Center's aggregation of polling data from 1953. When asked in 2023, less than 20 per cent of Americans trusted the government to "do the right thing most of the time."[9] This number has been steady in the last ten years, but it is still a striking statistic in comparison to other times when American politics was turbulent. For instance, during the years of the Watergate scandal, trust in the government to 'do the right thing' was at 36 per cent. Meanwhile, 59 per cent of Americans had "not very much or no" confidence in the executive branch (the President) in 2023, up from 49 per cent in 2022.[10] The last time a majority of Americans trusted the government overall was 2001.[11]

The lack of confidence the public has in its elected government not only affects public messaging and its ability to reach most Americans but also creates an environment that bad actors, foreign or domestic, can exploit. In the introduction, the authors of this report illustrated how the coexistence of an unregulated media environment, a distrust in government, and the persistence of political polarization can exacerbate the disinformation challenge, making it more complicated to tackle. In the case of the United States, the government does not directly control media outlets themselves in the same way that Hungary does, but traditional media outlets are distrusted by viewers nonetheless. This can create an environment in which other, less credible sources and unregulated platforms can compete for views and false information can spread more easily. With a lack of credible, trusted information, and disinformation spreading in its place, Americans' trust in their government is further undermined, and any government effort to counteract the disinformation is deemed untrustworthy itself. The combination of these forces contributed to the dip in the liberal democracy index for the U.S. by 2016, when the American political landscape was ripe with disinformation.

Foreign interference was an acute challenge that affected the 2016 presidential elections. That year, over 30,000 X (formerly Twitter) accounts that were posting about the presidential election were found to be run by Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA), an organization that engaged in influence operations on behalf of the Russian government between 2013-2018. [12] Not unlike their strategy during the Cold War, the Kremlin wanted to use the media to create confusion, chaos, and distrust within its adversary's public, while obfuscating the origin of the claim's source. Instead of using foreign journalists and third countries to spread propaganda through the printed press, Russia relied on social media for the same effect.[13] This served as a wake-up call for the U.S. government to manage foreign meddling in its elections going forward. While foreign actors continued in their attempts to influence American newsrooms, four years later, much of the disinformation was coming from within.

In 2020, President Trump lost his reelection. He had predicted this, not because he believed he would genuinely lack the votes,

but because he believed incorrectly that there was widespread voter fraud in the country designed to disadvantage him. By claiming that the United States had a voter fraud problem that was unfavorable to him and his party since he first won in 2016, Trump was able to preemptively normalize the narrative among his supporters that if he lost an election, it would not be because of a lack of votes, but because of voter fraud.[14] By the time he lost in 2020, his supporters already believed that the election was rigged, and were ready to spread the narrative of election fraud themselves. The same narrative pattern can be seen in the 2024 election. This phenomenon of uncoordinated actors spreading false information, coined "participatory disinformation", differs from intentional, often state-sponsored bad actors, and describes unwitting participants that spread false claims that are favorable to a political figure like Trump.[15]

To add to the confusion and chaos, organizations backing Trump, such as Turning Point USA, had been engaging in coordinated messaging on social media in 2020 to help his campaign by spreading conspiracy theories about his opponent.[16] Through thousands of fake accounts, Turning Point USA would present themselves as liberal voters, targeting other democrats to vote for a third-party candidate that could be "more progressive" than Biden thereby helping Trump win if this support was withheld. The organization's accounts were not always directly calling on voters to vote for Trump; rather, they were working to sow enough confusion in the liberal voter base to not vote for Biden. Individuals and organizations can thus benefit from the public's distrust, either wittingly or unwittingly, to spread disinformation in favor of their preferred candidate.

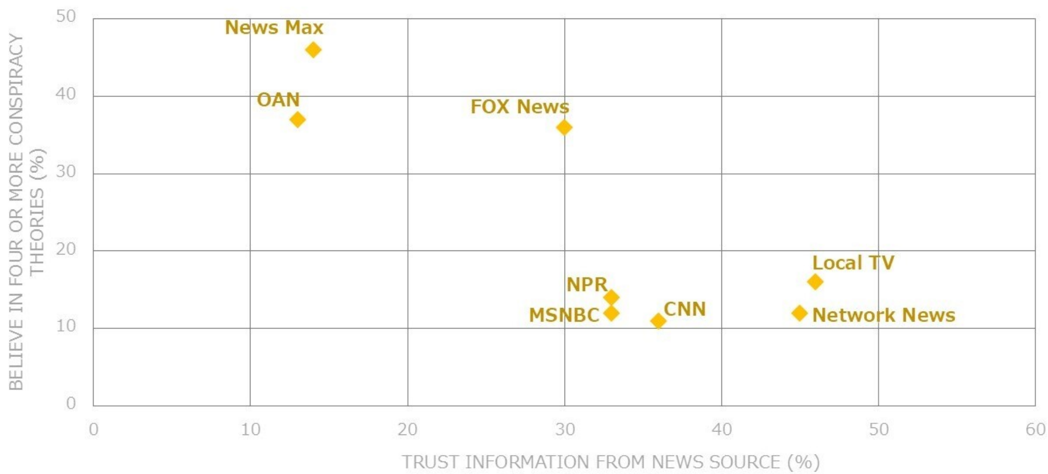
The Challenge for Newsrooms:

In addition to distrust of the government, the United States is also experiencing public distrust of news and media. A Gallup poll from 2022 found that half of Americans say they do not trust national news, especially those who consume news online. 50 per cent of respondents also stated they believed that the news organizations "intend to mislead, misinform, and persuade" the public.[17]

It is clear from both the outlets and viewers that disinformation is overwhelmingly more of a right-wing issue than a left-wing issue.[18] When divided by party, 86 per cent of Republicans say they do not trust the news, while only 29 per cent of Democrats feel the same. However, when Republicans and Democrats are asked whether they trust their preferred news outlets, their levels of trust are the same. In other words, conservatives who watch Fox News trust the outlet as much as liberals who watch NPR or MSNBC.[19] When those same respondents are asked whether they believe in conspiracy theories, more than twice as many conservatives state they do believe in conspiracy theories compared to their liberal counterparts. The number of prominent conservative news anchors and commentators such as Tucker Carlson (formerly Fox News) and Steve Bannon (formerly Breitbart) who create and spread misinformation, but are immensely popular, underscores this point.

Trump himself repeated false or misleading assertions to his Republican base throughout his presidency, including claims about the economy, COVID-19 treatments, and his meetings with foreign officials. The *Washington Post* tallied all of these claims during his time in office and found that Trump averaged 20.9 lies or partial lies per day.[20] It is no surprise that some of these played into the spread and belief of disinformation among his supporters and conservative outlets that repeated these claims.

Figure 1: Trust in News vs Acceptance of Conspiracy Theories



(Source: Created by author using data from YouGov[21])

This imbalance requires journalists to be judicious in their reporting on disinformation, particularly regarding the origins of a false claim or conspiracy theory. What may appear to be foreign disinformation spreading in the United States may actually have originated domestically. For instance, Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican lawmaker, argued against sending additional aid to Ukraine in the fall of 2023, citing an article from a Russian outlet that claimed the Ukrainian President was making personal purchases with the aid money. It may have seemed like Greene was touting 'Kremlin talking points', but this claim in fact originated from Vice Presidential candidate and Senator, JD Vance, over a year earlier. The Russian outlet simply amplified what he had said. Baseless or misleading claims require sufficient scrutiny, but pinpointing the origin of the disinformation is just as important to not overstate the influence of foreign malign actors. Disinformation scholars argue that when foreign influence campaigns are exaggerated, especially by news outlets, it both aids the operative and "fosters a conspiratorial outlook" domestically which further erodes trust in public debate.[22]

Managing Disinformation Through the Spreader & Consumer

While the persistence of distrust in the

government and the existence of disinformation is not new, the current media environment and increased digitalization of news and information have multiplied the effects of disinformation on public trust. Given the number of challenges that further exacerbate the challenge of disinformation, how can the United States better tackle the spread and effects of disinformation?

Education:

One aspect in which the effect of disinformation can be curtailed is on the consumption side. Currently, Americans score relatively low in media literacy compared to their peers.[23] Finland is a valuable example of a country that has also been the target of disinformation but scores much more highly on media literacy. Like the United States, Finland has a history of being targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns, but unlike the United States it has the highest media literacy among OECD countries – media literacy is mandated in public schools and students are taught media literacy starting in pre-school, learning how to decipher fact from fiction early on. Finnish students discuss problems they may encounter in news and media across different subjects, from writing class to health class.[24] Finns also enjoy a high level of trust in their government (61 percent) and news (69 percent), and feel that their government is transparent, making the landscape difficult for bad actors to exploit.[25]

By comparison, only three out of the 50 U.S. states have K-12 media literacy education.[26] A greater emphasis on media literacy in public schools would help Americans better decipher their information intake, but would require increasing public education funding, as well as depoliticizing curricula across the country, both issues which the United States is already struggling to address. At the same time, some effort is being made more recently by providing grants to local libraries and other organizations to offer media literacy education.

Government:

While legislation to curb disinformation is also necessary, the U.S. government finds itself in a difficult spot. According to political scientist Friedel Weinert's "The Role of Trust in Political Systems", trust in institutions is an essential condition for a democratic society to properly function and deliver the expected services to the public, whether it may be information or resources.[27] Because of the existing distrust in the United States, efforts to control disinformation by the government can be seen as controlling information for the public writ large. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security established a Digital Governance Board in April 2022 to "tackle disinformation" that threatens national security.[28] It was paused only three weeks later and quickly disbanded after critics argued that the board was partisan and could undermine First Amendment rights to free speech if its objective was to enforce an "official" version of the truth.

A more effective approach would be for the government to engage in public service campaigns that can relay specific methods or attributes of disinformation that the public should be aware of without focusing on

specific claims. State and local governments, which tend to be more trusted than the federal government, could provide information on how to spot misinformation or other unsubstantiated claims that they may see in media, empowering voters regardless of their political preferences. Trust in institutions is an essential condition for a democratic society's proper functioning to ensure that the public is getting the services that can relay specific methods or attributes of disinformation that the public should be aware of without focusing on specific claims. State and local governments, which tend to be more trusted than the federal government, could provide information on how to spot misinformation or other unsubstantiated claims that they may see in media, empowering voters regardless of their political preferences.

Specific to efforts during election season, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) has been working to institute new rules on AI to create guardrails for its use in political advertisements. Currently, only five states have laws regulating deep fakes in political advertising, meaning federal laws could radically change what ads candidates can use. The FEC indicated that they will announce new guidelines in the summer of 2024, but ultimately announced in September it would enact no new legislation this year.[29]

Finally, the national government should establish deterrent mechanisms for candidate-adjacent organizations that attempt to sway elections through coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) online.[30] Nonprofits in particular should be strictly scrutinized if they are using organizational resources to support a specific candidate. 501(c) status should be revised so that it limits not only direct campaigning but certain forms of coordinated indirect campaigning such as the kind Turning Point USA engaged in.

Press and Media:

As disseminators of news and information, traditional press and media organizations shoulder a great responsibility to fight disinformation. Fortunately, some of the major media organizations have already developed fact-checking mechanisms and created resources to investigate AI-generated deep fakes.

CBS News launched "CBS News Confirmed" to investigate misinformation and inauthentic images and videos. FOX News launched "Verify" earlier this year, an open-sourced tool that allows consumers to verify if the images or articles they find purporting to be from FOX sources are authentic or not. Hearst Communications, a conglomerate that owns a number of local TV stations, newspapers, and magazines, partnered with FactCheck.org to produce segments that combat misinformation for local stations across the country. Local news media in the United States plays a particularly critical role in debunking misinformation and disinformation as it tends to be more trusted than national news; for instance, Americans are twice as likely to trust local news over national news regarding voting information.[31] Funding local news stations is thus imperative to delivering accurate and reliable information to the voting public.

Trusted organizations can also step in to debunk untrue claims, which is especially helpful in a crisis situation. For instance, a lot of misinformation had spread after Hurricane Katrina, so the American Red Cross hired a media specialist to provide factual and resourceful information on online forums and directly engage with forum users to put out any misinformation 'fires' before they further spread. [32] Additionally, U.S. newsrooms have made it commonplace to embed links of original source reporting in related articles, which can help readers know the initial source of a claim and aid in fact-checking efforts.

Timely and reliable fact-checking has become crucial in stopping the spread of disinformation, especially in relation to political campaigns. In this election season, AI-generated video and audio clips of political candidates have already spread. Before the New Hampshire primary in January, voters received thousands of robocalls impersonating Joe Biden urging them not to vote in the primary election and "save [their] vote for November." An investigation by the voice detection company Pindrop Inc was able to identify the audio technology to be from an Eleven Labs voice generator, and reporters were able to trace the call back to a company based in Texas just days later. [33] The FCC subsequently slapped multi-million dollar penalties on those responsible, signaling the gravity of the crime. [34] In addition to AI, malign actors have also resorted to "cheap fakes", using less-sophisticated software to alter the voice or images of candidates. Harris has been the target of such cheap fakes since she has become the top name on the Democratic Party's ticket.

At the same time, as much as it is dangerous for the public to believe that an inauthentic claim or video clip is real, the opposite is equally dangerous. If viewers believe that the information they see can never be trusted because of how believable AI-made content is, they will have fewer sources to go to for accurate and reliable information. This can lead to a kind of 'information nihilism', where people are unable to differentiate between what is true and false, and give up entirely on believing any news. This not only exacerbates distrust in media institutions but can also lead to a disengaged public, creating more distance between a country's institutions and people. Journalists and news companies thus play a critical role in keeping up with new technologies that generate inauthentic content, and debunking false information quickly and reliably.

Tech Giants:

The private sector, namely technology companies, have arguably the most flexibility in instituting policies to counter or remove disinformation. With growing scrutiny from American lawmakers, search engine and social media companies are adopting new ways to detect and manage disinformation as well as AI-generated content.

TikTok, for instance, requires users to label content made with AI as fake, while YouTube bans the use of AI in political advertisements on its platform. Starting this July, Google started generating disclosures whenever

advertisers label election ads as containing "synthetic or digitally altered content" as is required by political advertisers.[35] Although these rules may show some progress, such policies are difficult to enforce, and they are not uniform across companies. X has the least strict policy among its counterparts regarding the use of AI, stating that most content is allowed as long as it is not "significantly and deceptively altered."[36] Meta, on the other hand, established a new policy for the 2024 election season, in which political ads are banned 10 days before an election and manipulated videos and images are subject to fact-checking, but even its own oversight board said the policy was insufficient. Concerns can also mount when technology companies cycle through mass layoffs, often targeting teams that manage inauthentic online content. In the last year alone, X laid off 80 per cent of its trust and safety engineers, as well as more than half of its content moderators, suggesting that managing disinformation on the platform is not a strong priority for them. Lawmakers must incentivize these companies through policy legislation to more stringently moderate content so disinformation does not spread on their platforms.

Legally, technology companies cannot be held liable for content that is posted by a third party according to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which effectively means that a social media platform cannot be treated as the publisher of its online content. Given that this law was passed in 1996 before the modern-day tech giants existed, its provisions are outdated relative to the challenges currently faced.[37] Although other countries such as the United Kingdom have taken steps for companies to be held liable for its content through the Online Safety Act (2023), these laws should not target E2EE (end-to-end encryption) processes that would undermine individual privacy and civil liberties of users. Rather, given that magazines and newspapers in the United States can be sued if they intentionally provide false information, a similar law could be applied to companies such as Meta or X as well, given that more than half of Americans get their news on social media.[38]

Further regulation of web hosts or content delivery networks that technology companies rely on (e.g. Amazon's App Store, Amazon's Web Services, etc.) could further incentivize platforms to control the sharing and spread of misinformation more proactively.[39] AI companies whose technology can be used to create fake content should also face more stringent regulation to prevent the use of clips like the Biden New Hampshire robocall from spreading. While the signing of an accord at the Munich Security Conference in February by major technology companies to adopt "reasonable precautions" regarding AI is a good symbolic step, such commitments need to be binding to have more sway.[40]

Companies can also be more proactive in developing tools that counter disinformation. Anthropic recently introduced "Prompt Shield", a tool that provides voters with unbiased election information that is more comprehensive than a Google search. Prompt Shield functions as an attached tool to Claude, Anthropic's chatbot, and directs users to nonpartisan websites with voting

information.[41] Because many of the existing chatbots including Claude, ChatGPT-4, and Gemini are ill-equipped at providing real time information that prompts them to "hallucinate"' and make up information that is not true, the tool bypasses this issue by simply redirecting to an authoritative source. As actors in the production of disinformation, technology companies have an immense responsibility to not only prevent their tools from being exploited by nefarious actors, but should also feel incentivized to develop tools that support fact-checking and detect disinformation.

Given both the difficulties on both the consumption and dissemination sides of the disinformation challenge in the United States, a multi-pronged approach that involves both public and private sector stakeholders is necessary to tackle this issue. Disinformation cannot be eliminated, but it can be managed with the right policies in a healthy democracy. In a high-stakes election year, the U.S. approach to confronting this issue will not only be consequential for its own future, but in the global fight against disinformation in years to come.

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Chapter 3 The Engagement Trap and Disinformation in the United Kingdom

Introduction

The framework introduced in the introductory chapter may give the impression that the United Kingdom is in a strong position against the threat of disinformation compared to that of Hungary and the United States: it has a relatively strong trust towards its democratic institutions, a less polarized media and public compared to the United States, and a much higher Liberal Democratic Index (by Varieties of Democracy) score than Hungary. In this sense, the United Kingdom is arguably the closest to conditions in Japan, a country that also enjoys relatively high levels of trust towards its institutions.

This chapter asks what kind of disinformation remains a risk in a country, in this case the United Kingdom, that is not suffering from democratic backsliding. However, with public concern on the rise,[1] the United Kingdom's case presents one of the most successful cases of what this chapter terms the "engagement trap" which presents a continuing threat. There is nothing new about the threat of disinformation in the United Kingdom. In the case of the United Kingdom, foreign hostile sources such as Russia, China, and Iran have all been accused of having attempted to interfere with its democratic process,[2] making the threat of disinformation of particular concern for the country. This chapter is divided into two settings, the first sets out some of the key examples of disinformation in the United Kingdom, and with the second focusing on the response to tackling disinformation.

This chapter explores how the United Kingdom's initial response to the use of disinformation in its democratic process (such as elections and referendums) was slower than others such as the United States. This is followed by an analysis of the concept of the "engagement trap" using the "£350 million" claim used during the 2016 EU referendum as an example of a disinformation tactic that successfully utilized this method. It will briefly touch upon the modern use of AI as a disinformation tool in the United Kingdom, and the second section will explore how the government and media responded to the threat. The chapter will also use the example of the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) and their strategy against Russian disinformation in the war in Ukraine as an example of a successful use of the engagement trap *against* disinformation. Findings from this chapter will feed into the policy recommendations in the final chapter of this report.

Dragging Their Feet: Initial Slow Response to the Disinformation Threat

One of the earliest examples of modern foreign disinformation activities in the United Kingdom was the Russian electoral interference during the 2014 Scottish referendum.[3] Here, Russia tried to sow doubt over the validity of the referendum result, a tactic that would be repeated in "at least 11 elections" according to a United States intelligence report.[4] This is a rather crude example of the "engagement trap", which is a disinformation tactic reliant on emotional engagement for the spread of disinformation. It questioned the functioning of one of the key pillars of free and open elections,[5] and tried to widen divisions between the "Yes" and "No" sides by alleging that the vote itself was rigged.

Curiously, when the Intelligence and Security Committee was tasked with investigating Russian interference in the United Kingdom it refrained from analyzing Russian activities in the 2016 EU referendum.[6] To the extent that Russian interference was acknowledged, it was

limited to noting that Russian media operating in the United Kingdom such as *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik* had taken overtly pro-Leave positions in their coverage.[7] In addition to the delays in the publication of this report, observers were furious that the committee was seemingly unwilling to look into the impact Russian interference may or may not have had in Brexit, something which was of considerable public interest.[8] It might have been agreed that it would be less disruptive to publish the findings after the deadline for the withdrawal negotiations, but this fails to explain why the British government decided to avoid a full investigation into the extent of Russian involvement. Whatever the reason behind the decision, it would be of great interest for the current Labour government to open a full investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 EU referendum.

It ultimately took the invasion of Ukraine for the United States, the United Kingdom, and the EU to clamp down on Russian disinformation tactics by removing the licenses of both *RT* and *Sputnik* to operate in their respective countries.[9] Not even the Salisbury poisoning attack which was an assassination attempt against former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal[10] on United Kingdom soil in 2018 prompted such a reaction.[11] The move had an immediate impact on United States tech giants such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube. The tech companies followed the government lead by banning RT from their servers in Europe (globally in the case of Google and YouTube) effectively stifling the flow of disinformation coming directly from the Kremlin. On one level, it is encouraging to see how swiftly these companies acted, but it is also necessary to acknowledge that it took a full-scale invasion for any action to take place.

Concerns remain over the effectiveness of such censorship as Russian propaganda continues to be broadcast in Spanish and Arabic,[12] and these outlets remain operational in Japan. These drawbacks reveal the necessity of having a greater coordinated international response when it comes to tackling disinformation. However, this also provides a tentative model for a government-led policy response that is amplified with the support of the private sector. This is arguably a key example of the importance of striking "the right balance between governments and firms"[13] in which the government is successful in nudging the private sector to follow its lead. In short, the United Kingdom's response to disinformation was initially slow and limited, but as the next will show, the "engagement trap" continues to become more sophisticated, increasing the threat of domestic disinformation.

The Engagement Trap

Use of the engagement trap, which is a relatively sophisticated disinformation tactic, is arguably more reminiscent of old-school disinformation tactics that were used in the Cold War period were characterized by carefully tailored content that strategically targeted small groups.[14] Modern forms of disinformation place greater value on the quantity of disinformation.[15] The United Kingdom is no stranger to the risks of disinformation, and some of the more successful examples show how what this chapter terms the "**engagement trap**" is effectively deployed. The "engagement trap" is defined as a specific disinformation tactic which twists the truth and makes it emotionally engaging to maintain maximum engagement with the aim of spreading a narrative that is beneficial to the perpetrator. This definition is based on numerous previous studies on disinformation that have contemplated how and why disinformation is effective.[16] The current disinformation literature finds that people are more likely to believe disinformation if it comes from a trusted source, if the information confirms their existing understanding of reality, or if the content is emotionally engaging.[17] Social media in general functions on the basis of an "an attention economy",[18] where maintaining

the customer's attention for as long as possible is the priority and thus leading to "moral and emotional" content being created with hopes of becoming viral.[19] People may also be attracted to disinformation as a coping mechanism when they are faced with insufficient information and desires to make sense of reality by filling the gaps in knowledge through myths and hearsay.[20] Studies on conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 also showed that believers are encouraged to conduct their own research, and are referred to as "awake" readers which nudges them into becoming more active and engaged with disinformation.[21] These studies indicate that disinformation has a strong incentive to keep the public engaged in their content. Such reverse use of psychological responses to its own advantage is reminiscent of the so-called "perception hack" which shows perpetrators deliberately exaggerating the extent of their influence to amplify public concern and distrust.[22]

However, the United Kingdom is a robust liberal democracy with generally healthy levels of trust towards its key institutions. In this regard, the United Kingdom's context has some similarities as well as glaring differences to that of the other case studies in this report. As mentioned in the introduction, its Liberal Democracy Index has been consistently high in contrast to the United States and especially Hungary. Its overall media trust is similar to that of Hungary, the United States, and Japan at 33 per cent (in Hungary it is 25 per cent, the United States is 32 per cent, and Japan is 42 per cent).[23] However, this overall low level of trust masks the fact that brands such as the BBC score high levels of trust with 61 per cent saying they trust BBC News which also dominates viewership as well.[24] Additionally, the British media in general is less polarized compared to places like the United States, with a healthy balance between sources that are considered left-leaning and those regarded as right-leaning.[25] Trust towards the government in the United Kingdom is also relatively high. The World Values Survey finds that as of 2017-2022, when respondents were asked to score their trust towards how democratically their government was run, out of 1-10 (lowest to highest level of trust) the United Kingdom had a mean of 6.56 (slightly higher than the global average of 6.25).[26] In short, the United Kingdom shows a healthy level of trust towards the media and government, making it less likely to fall victim to disinformation.

Furthermore, disinformation does not always find it easy to reach its intended audience. For example, a study by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford found that as of 2017, just 3.5 per cent of the online public accessed disinformation websites.[27] There is thus a cap on the number of viewers such websites can reach. The greater problem thus comes from disinformation that manages to become more mainstream, those that can overcome the barrier created by the robust liberal democratic values embodied by the key institutions, and ones that thrive under increased engagement.

In a similar vein, disinformation is likely to be more effective when it targets pre-established ideals. Arguably, there is nobody better to turn to in understanding disinformation than those who create it. As a former Soviet Union intelligence officer, Ladislav Bittman noted, disinformation needs to "at least partially respond to reality, or at least accepted views".[28] An example of this is the claim that the £350 million per week that was sent to the EU should instead have been used for the NHS, which was emblazoned on a bus. This was one of the more successful campaigns from Vote Leave during the 2016 EU referendum. This claim enraged the Remain side, prompting some to call it a Brexit lie.[29] Fact checking websites such as Full Fact offered their verdicts by arguing that according to official data, the amount was closer to "£250 million".[30] The Remain campaign, keen to fight the Leave side on a similar front, brought in the

argument that Brexit would cost the British household "£4,300".[31] However, while the claim made by the Remain side faced ridicule and was labeled "project fear",[32] the "£350 million" claim stuck. Two years after the referendum, despite the highly misleading figures, people still believed the claim to be true.[33]

However, this presents an interesting puzzle. Why was the Remain side's argument so easily brushed aside, while the Leave side's claim was widely accepted? The key to understanding the success of the Leave campaign lies in what this chapter terms the "engagement trap", a form of disinformation which thrives in interaction from its opponents. Just as there is no such thing as bad publicity, when it comes to disinformation, the engagement does not have to be all positive. In the words of Dominic Cummings, who was head of Vote Leave, the "£350 million" claim was intended as "a deliberate trap" to try and drive the Remain campaign and the people running it "crazy".[34] Since the data it used drew from official sources, the Remain side was forced to try and explain the complicated rebate system,[35] something that does not necessarily work within the context of a political campaign which often relies on catchy soundbites.[36] The more the Remain side tried to argue back, the more it emphasized in the public mind what he called the "real balance sheet" of EU membership,[37] thus getting more entangled in the engagement trap.

A New Level of Threat to Democracy

Since the 2016 EU referendum, disinformation has become more sophisticated with a greater arsenal of readily available technology to help spread disinformation, and hence a greater sophistication of the "engagement trap". Concerns over the threat of disinformation were already mounting in July 2024 when the United Kingdom was preparing for a general election.[38] Even before an election was triggered, there were already early indications of how the new AI technology could be used. Coinciding with the start of the Labour Party Conference on 8 October 2023, falsified audio of the Labour Party leader, Sir Keir Starmer, berating a staff member over a tablet was uploaded on X (formerly Twitter).[39] Roughly a month later, another falsified audio clip of London Mayor Sadiq Khan was uploaded on TikTok.[40] In the clip, Khan can be heard to downplay Armistice Day (a day of remembrance of the sacrifices made for the war effort and a call for peace) while heaping praise on pro-Palestinian protests.

The use of AI to manipulate audio and video of politicians is not unique to the United Kingdom. For example, a video of former Prime Minister Kishida spewing "vulgar statements" had been made with the help of AI.[41] The video was taken down by the creator who admitted that it was an ill attempt at humor.[42] While this incident shows how easy and accessible such AI technology has become, the examples of Starmer and Khan differ from this in that it was created with a clear intent to use disinformation to create division within society, by drawing the public into another engagement trap.

The timing of the two audio clips, one before the start of the annual Labour Party Conference and the other before Armistice Day, shows clear political motivation behind the release of the clips. In particular, the second clip of Khan was released in the lead up to a particularly sensitive day for the United Kingdom. Armistice Day, or Remembrance Day, arguably has a similar place in terms of importance and reverence as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Day and Nagasaki Memorial Day in Japan. Far-right protesters including Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (known as Tommy Robinson) who had led the now defunct far-right group the English Defence League were energized to turn up as counter-protestors on the day, leading to nine police officers being injured and more than a hundred arrests made.[43] While it is unclear to

what degree the audio clip had an impact on this, the emergence of both clips promises that such disinformation tactics are here to stay.

Combating Disinformation

In general, there are three types of actors that are considered essential when it comes to tackling disinformation, namely the public sector (including the government and educational institutions), the private sector (large technology firms and the media), and the public.[44] This section explores some of the ways in which the United Kingdom government and media have attempted to address the threat of disinformation. The section will also explore how online grassroots organizations such as NAFO, with members in the United Kingdom and around the globe, have been successful at overcoming the engagement trap.

United Kingdom Policy Response

As previously noted, the United Kingdom was initially slow to react to the threat of disinformation, exemplified by the delay in banning foreign agents such as the *RT* and *Sputnik*, as well as an unwillingness to investigate Russian influence in the 2016 EU referendum. In contrast, the United States acted quickly after the 2016 United States Presidential election in dealing with Russian media. In January 2017 a report on Russian interference in the 2016 United States Presidential election was declassified and it found that media companies such as *RT* to have actively peddled pro-Trump and anti-Clinton disinformation in the United States,[45] resulting in *RT* being registered as a "foreign agent", setting the tone of the United States' response to Russian interference in its domestic affairs.[46] In short, the United Kingdom's response was slower and less far reaching compared to the United States.

This arguably changed in recent years. At the government level, the United Kingdom has been ahead of the curve by introducing legislation that aimed to tackle disinformation. In the process, it also took a central position in leading an international response against its threat. **The Online Safety Act 2023** passed on October 26, 2023, had appointed Ofcom as the main regulator of online illegal activities such as child sexual abuse materials and materials more broadly that could be deemed harmful to children. One of the breakthroughs this legislation achieved was to bring in some regulatory teeth to online activities, threatening companies with either a £18 million fine or 10 per cent of their worldwide revenue if they were found to have failed to comply with the new regulation.[47] The Act has some drawbacks, such as its focus on regulating illegal acts while its ability to regulate gray zones such as misinformation and disinformation remain relatively weak.[48] Questions remain as to how far the private sector could comply with the new regulations such as the requirement for age verification and checking personal messages,[49] and the age-old question over freedom of expression remains a concern.[50] Despite such limitations, the United Kingdom is following in the footsteps of the EU's Digital Services Act (which came into effect on August 25, 2023)[51] as well as its Code of Practice (which was updated in 2022)[52] in trying to hold companies accountable for harmful content online and mitigating risks to its public, a move that would be in the interest of Japan to follow.

The United Kingdom also hosted the first **AI Safety Summit 2023** between November 1 and 2, 2023, bringing in 46 universities and civil society groups, 40 businesses, 28 states, and seven multilateral organizations to address the threats posed by AI.[53] The summit presented an opportunity for stakeholder discussions as well as pressuring companies to submit their AI policies for greater transparency.[54] While the Summit's main focus was not on disinformation, it signals a growing willingness for international cooperation in tackling the issue of frontier technology which could be used

for disinformation purposes. Taken together, the Online Safety Act 2023 and the AI Safety Summit 2023 present a new phase in the fight against disinformation. An obvious route for Japan would be to further accelerate the push towards international cooperation in this field and take on a leading role in shaping the international response to the threat of disinformation.

Not all measures by the United Kingdom are either global or far-reaching as the AI Safety Summit or the Online Safety Act. In terms of combating disinformation through education, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport launched the **Online Media Literacy Strategy in 2021** with an initial budget of £340k on training educators, carers, and librarians on media literacy.[55] In essence, this acted as a stop-gap measure [56] as the government prepares for larger scale regulatory measures. Although this strategy brings in the right stakeholders who deal directly with some of the most vulnerable groups of society (i.e. carers and guardians of the elderly, children and the disabled), the budget is considerably smaller than the task at hand would necessitate. The challenge for the United Kingdom would thus be to ensure that such policies are backed by sufficient funds.

In the case of Japan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications launched a website with educational materials aimed at both the elderly and young people and their carers to improve online media literacy in 2022. [57] Similarly, the Center for Global Communications at the International University of Japan [GLOCOM] also developed educational materials through collaboration with the private sector. [58] However, the public are in general less concerned with the threat posed by disinformation compared to other countries with 53.6 per cent of respondents having never heard of "fact checking" (just 4.8 per cent of United States respondents and 3.4 per cent of Korean respondents had never heard of the word). [59] Thus, Japan needs to take seriously the need for increasing public awareness towards the threat of disinformation, and help them familiarize with the countermeasures that are in place such as fact checking services.

Media and Fact Checks

The previous chapter on Hungary illustrated in detail how a lack of independent media can become a catalyst of disinformation to be shared from the government level. In contrast, news organizations in the United Kingdom are at the forefront of tackling disinformation - providing solutions rather than being the source of the problem. Since those who are most susceptible to kinds of disinformation such as conspiracy theories are encouraged to conduct their own research, [60] one possible counter to this would be to make it easier for people to access the right information. The United Kingdom has already taken tentative steps towards implementing this by introducing the Link Attribution Protocol by the Association of Online Publishers [AOP]. [61] The protocol encourages major media outlets to provide fair attribution to the original source material. While this was originally developed to address the issue of scoop theft and was somewhat limited in scope due to it being done on a participatory basis and the forward link being limited to between media sources, it nonetheless presents a clear pathway towards more transparent use of sources. If implemented effectively, it could also make it easier for readers to access the correct information.

Established public institutions such as the BBC, which enjoys a prominent position on both traditional and internet-enabled TV alongside other public media,[62] is capable of a truly global reach through its BBC Global Services that transmit their news in 42 different languages, allowing it to support not only the United Kingdom, but also other countries in the quest of tackling disinformation. [63] The BBC has a program called Verify (formerly Reality Check) as its

main fact checking service. One key feature of BBC Verify is it allows viewers to submit suggested topics that they want the BBC to check the validity of. By offering the service as demand-based, BBC Verify can ensure to a degree that the topics they decide to verify are of public interest. Simultaneously, this also reduces the burden on journalists to find the topics themselves (a known problem)[64] making the process that much more efficient.

Yet the BBC is also far from being perfect. Its requirement of impartiality means that it is required to provide "ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight and prominence, particularly when the controversy is active".[65] This could sometimes lead to unintentionally giving equal prominence to viewpoints that are not equal in terms of their validity. Such a narrow interpretation of impartiality has been criticized for resulting in the prioritization of balance in terms of the airtime provided than the content of the information, [66] giving undue prominence to views that are more niche, and in some cases providing room for disinformation to spread.

However, arguably one of the greatest issues that fact checking services face is the "engagement trap". The coverage of the disinformation itself, as was the case with the "£350 million" claim during the 2016 EU referendum, may be designed to be most effective when the information is dissected, and the topic remains part of public discussion. Fact checkers have yet to come up with a clear strategy to tackle the problem of disinformation campaigns that are actively seeking engagement. Arguably, the tactic that has been the most effective in dealing with the engagement trap has been the ones that have been successful at utilizing the same tactics.

The Engagement Trap as an Anti-disinformation Tool?

The "£350 million" claim was used to illustrate how the engagement trap could be used as a key disinformation tool. However, this tactic can also be used to combat disinformation. Arguably no other organization has mastered this better than NAFO, the online fighters of Russian disinformation that use memes as their main weapon against disinformation. NAFO was co-created by Matt Moores in May 2022 at first "as a joke" to poke fun at the Russian statements.[67]

Moores listed some of the key strengths of NAFO as being its organic development, effective use of internet culture, and the use of ideas as its unifier.[68] The lack of strategic planning meant that as an organization it is flexible and capable of adapting to a rapidly changing environment. Since the posts rely on preexisting internet culture, [69] members can easily pick up and mimic the style of NAFO posts without much guidance. This is why despite the relative few posts made by the main NAFO account,[70] its reach remains far and wide thanks to fellow "fellas" who have shiba inu dogs as their icons and help post memes and tip offs when they spot a pro-Russian post to ridicule. This is achieved through known shared hashtags such as #NAFOArticle5 (a reference to NATO Article 5's principle of collective defense).[71] NAFO is not the first to tactically use internet culture for political purposes. In 2020, fans of K-pop group BTS made headlines when they succeeded in drowning out the #WhiteLivesMatter which developed in response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. [72] Such use of hashtag (#) hijacking is a unique social media strategy that works within the context of the internet culture on X, which feeds on engagement.

However, unlike the case of K-pop fandom, what unites NAFO is not a group but a shared idea. [73] Without a physical base or an organizational structure, there is no clear target that Russia can attack or infiltrate, making NAFO immune to some of the usual infiltration tactics that have dogged academia, [74] politics, [75] and local

communities.[76] When the Russians do try to infiltrate, NAFO members are quick to warn others, effectively self-policing their activities without the need for external intervention. Such flexibility is unlikely to be replicated by either government agencies, the media, or dedicated fact checking services. In short, the engagement trap can be harnessed into a key tool against disinformation in the right hands. It remains to be seen whether similar movements to NAFO will appear in either the United Kingdom or Japan, but as liberal democracies, they both have the right ingredients for such organizations to flourish.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how disinformation has evolved in the United Kingdom, a country that has hitherto managed to contain the threat of disinformation. In contrast to the previous two chapters, the threat of disinformation manifests within the context of a relatively robust set of democratic institutions. Similar to Japan, it has higher levels of trust towards the government and the media, and a more balanced media landscape, in contrast to the previous two case studies.

However, the chapter has shown that the United Kingdom continues to face an evolving threat from disinformation, from relatively crude initial attempts using social media bots to sow divisions during the 2014 Scottish referendum, to a more sophisticated use of the "engagement trap" during the 2016 EU referendum, and finally the targeted use of AI in spreading disinformation in politically sensitive times. Despite the seemingly slow and unwilling initial response to the threat, the United Kingdom government has been ahead of the curve when it comes to tackling disinformation through international cooperation and toughening regulations. The media and fact checking services in the United Kingdom made headway in terms of debunking some of the disinformation spread online, but they were unable to adequately deal with the "engagement trap". This chapter argued that grassroots movements such as NAFO are a prime example of how the "engagement trap" could be used to discredit disinformation. The United Kingdom currently enjoys relatively robust liberal democratic institutions that can insulate it from disinformation, yet it cannot remain complacent in the face of an ever-more sophisticated threat posed by disinformation from both internal and external forces. The United Kingdom's case shows that despite the challenges, there are existing tools to combat disinformation. For countries such as Japan, actively employing help from grassroots communities may allow it to effectively manage the threat posed by disinformation.

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Research has found that media trust leads to greater engagement with media output which may strengthen lead to greater media literacy. For research on this topic, please refer to the following articles.
Ann E. Williams, 2012, "Trust or Bust?: Questioning the Relationship Between Media Trust and News Attention," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no.1 (2012): 116–131, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2011.651186.; Jason Turcotte, Chance York, Jacob Irving, Rosanne M. Scholl, Raymond J. Pingree, "News Recommendations from Social Media Opinion Leaders: Effects on Media Trust and Information Seeking," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no.5 (September 2015): 520–535, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12127.
Media trust has also been found to improve media consumption as found in this study:

Strömbäck, Yariv Tsfati, Hajo Boomgaarden, Alyt Damstra, Elina Lindgren, Rens Vliegenthart, and Torun Lindholm, "News Media Trust and Its Impact on Media Use: Toward a Framework for Future Research," *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44, no.2 (2020): 139–156, https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2020.1755338.

Research has also found a causation between distrust in the media and belief in fake news (and vice versa):

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Final Chapter: Disinformation in Japan and how to deal with it

This report identified three intertwined factors that lead to the crises of disinformation: the lack of policies against disinformation, public distrust towards the government and the media, and political polarization of the public. These factors resulted in the erosion of democratic institutions and norms. We reached this conclusion by analyzing three countries that faced different levels of democratic backsliding, specifically Hungary (autocratizing), the United States (democratic crisis), and the United Kingdom (crisis contained).

In Chapter One, we looked at Hungary which has arguably experienced the most severe levels of democratic backsliding over the past decade. In Hungary, the Orbán government has been accused of strengthening its influence over formerly independent media through steadily tightening regulations by introducing legislative amendments and purchasing ownership. Additionally, quantitative analysis was presented of how both the disinformation from Russia and disinformation and conspiracy theories from Hungary itself are facilitating both an import and export of disinformation in the case of Hungary.

Chapter Two analyzed the relationship between disinformation and democratic backsliding in the United States. The chapter outlined the history of disinformation in the United States and how both external and internal forces have contributed to the spread of disinformation. With trust in public institutions and media at a historic low, the domestic environment is acutely vulnerable. Distrustful citizens are prime targets of disinformation campaigns and malicious actors from inside or outside the country can strategically target such citizens. To combat disinformation, the chapter argued that a multi-pronged approach including the federal and local governments, the media, major technology companies, and public education must all play a role in reducing the effects of disinformation.

Chapter Three investigated the case of the United Kingdom and how it struggled with the threat of disinformation from both external and internal forces similar to the United States, but has managed to remain resilient to the threat with its relatively low levels of public polarization and a respected and independent media. The “engagement trap”, as exemplified in the “£350 million” claim which was used in the 2016 EU referendum by the Vote Leave campaign, is a disinformation tactic which twists the truth by utilizing emotionally engaging material to maximize engagement that ultimately leads to the spread of disinformation. The “engagement trap” is thus resistant to attempts at fact-checking, and presents a dilemma even for countries with strong democratic institutions. The chapter briefly introduced some of the UK policy responses, and concluded by arguing that grassroots organizations such as NAFO were particularly adept at weaponizing the “engagement trap” by using humor as a tool against disinformation.

Drawing from the findings of these three case studies, we now present four generalizable findings in this chapter. First, it is critical to assess the state of the media by checking its independence through the existence or absence of government regulations. Second, there needs to be a clear distinction made between how disinformation is being spread in times of crises and times of calm. Third, users should check whether they are in danger of being captured by the "engagement trap". Fourth, it is important to understand the degree of public trust towards key democratic institutions (elections, the executive, the judiciary, and the media) as well as levels of political polarization.

In this chapter, we apply the four generalizable findings from above (with a particular focus on the first three) to the case of Japan. We provide a general overview of the current state of disinformation in Japan, with a specific focus on the differences between disinformation spread in times of crisis (natural disaster) and calm (elections). We conclude by presenting five policy recommendations for Japan which we drew from the three case studies and takes into account the unique situation in the country.

Disinformation During Elections and Natural Disasters in Japan

Japanese experts on disinformation generally agree that at present, disinformation campaigns orchestrated by external forces remain relatively limited in both scale and influence in Japan. Ichihara argues that "[p]olitical maneuvering through disinformation has been somewhat restrained thus far in Japan".[1] Kuwahara echoes this sentiment by noting that Japan has yet to experience a serious disinformation campaign from abroad, in contrast to what is happening in the West.[2] Kawaguchi is more assertive in his conviction that there is so far no evidence to suggest that a foreign power has conducted a large-scale and online disinformation campaign during a Japanese election.[3] While they may differ in terms of expression, there is thus a general consensus within the academic sphere that Japan has so far been shielded from organized foreign disinformation campaigns.

This does not mean that the threat of the spread of disinformation does not exist in Japan. Yet, Japan has so far managed to buck the trend by containing the threat of disinformation. One potential reason behind this is the relatively high levels of trust bestowed on the Japanese mass media, in addition to the lack of substantive differences in terms of policy between political party policies. For example, according to the Smart News Media Research Institute, 67 per cent of liberals and 69 per cent of conservatives in Japan trust the media.[4] Another possible reason for the contained threat of disinformation is arguably Japan being a relatively stable democracy. Despite problems such as low levels of citizen participation, Japan is considered one of the most stable democracies in Asia according to the Democracy Index.[5]

To reiterate, this does not mean that there will not be threats of disinformation in the future. First, as mentioned above, public trust towards the media is relatively high, but this is steadily eroding among the younger

generations. The same study by the Smart News Media Research Institute found that trust towards the media is highest among the most senior citizens (those over 60) standing at 81 per cent.[6] Among those aged 40-59 trust is at 71 per cent, and among the younger generation (those under 39) it plummets to just 56 per cent. Second, the fact that political news is consumed as a form of entertainment, especially those that are aired on commercial broadcasting stations, is a unique issue in Japan. There are concerns that in the public eye, there is no clear distinction between investigative journalism and personal news blogs.[7]

As the cases of Hungary and the United States have shown, elections are an ideal time for disinformation and misinformation to spread. In the case of Japan, there were signs of a particularly high volume of disinformation and misinformation during the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election that strategically targeted specific candidates. As noted in the introductory chapter, the spread of disinformation during elections poses the danger of delegitimizing the electoral results, and remain a concern for Japan. Additionally, Japan is a country prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons that have devastating consequences for the communities affected. While disinformation and misinformation are known to spread during disasters, recent years have witnessed cases of foreign actors spreading misinformation during times of crisis.

The following sections are split between times of calm and times of crises and analyze disinformation tactics during each situation. The first section explores the disinformation and misinformation spread during the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election, followed by an analysis of how disinformation and misinformation were spread during natural disasters, and how the Japanese government and the Japanese media responded. In the case of Japan, since the development of policies against disinformation at the national level is still ongoing, unlike the three case studies presented in this report, we focus on the regional level response.

Disinformation Policies in Calm Times: The 2018 Okinawa Gubernatorial Election as Case Study

Gubernatorial elections are held in Okinawa once every four years, but the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election was called earlier than expected following the sudden death of Governor Takeshi Onaga. While then-candidate Denny Tamaki from the Liberal Party led the race with the backing of the "All Okinawa" anti-U.S. military base group (which also supported Governor Onaga). The competition quickly turned into a two-horse race between Tamaki and the mayor of Ginowan City, Atsushi Sakima, who received backing from the Liberal Democratic Party, Komeito, and the Japan Innovation Party. Since a third of the voters remained undecided, the political struggle reached fever pitch.[8]

It also saw the considerable spread of disinformation. For example, there was a survey conducted that purported to be by the *Asahi Shimbun*, a major Japanese newspaper saying that "one candidate scored 52 per cent favorability, while the other received just 26

per cent favorability”. The *Asahi Shimbun* itself denies that such a survey was conducted by them, calling it “a groundless accusation” and stating that “these numbers are not produced by us, and we did not commission any surveys”. Another survey which claimed to have been commissioned by the Democratic Party For the People (DPP) claimed that “one candidate was leading another by 13 points”, but the DPP itself denied the existence of such a survey, stating that “we cannot verify that any survey was done by us, and neither have we given permission for one to be conducted”.[9]

In comparison to the U.S. and U.K. cases, the Japanese mass media rarely includes source links in their articles (a trait it shares with Hungarian traditional media). This poses a serious problem as just 26.1 per cent of Japanese respondents said they made the effort to verify the credibility of information they are either uncertain about or do not trust.[10] This was a much more common practice among Americans (50 per cent) and relatively more British respondents said they would do this (38.2 per cent)[11], indicating that the Japanese are comparatively less likely to search for the original information. However, the difficulty in gaining access to such information is arguably making it more difficult to assess the accuracy of information more generally.

Fake websites such as “沖縄県知事選挙2018.com (Okinawa Gubernatorial Election 2018.com)” were set up with seemingly the sole purpose of attacking specific candidates and have since been taken down. The name of the website itself gave the impression that it was an official resource and at one point it managed to come at the top of the search results and was spread widely on social media. However, aside from the section that shared historical election results, most of the posts on the website were defamatory, especially against Denny Tamaki, describing him as an “anti-Japanese radical left-winger who will lie and use violence” and claimed that “Denny Tamaki is already infringing electoral law”.[12] In Table 4-1, we list all the post titles from this website, which shows how the posts nearly exclusively talk about Denny Tamaki.

Local media such as the *Ryukyu Shimpo* and the *Okinawa Times* created special issues dedicated to investigating the issue of the fake website, conducted fact checking, and made efforts to track the original source of the disinformation.[13] While *Ryukyu Shimpo* journalists visited an address in Tokyo that was listed in the domain information, they were unable to make contact with the owner.[14] The website did not contain any advertisements, and the same individual owned another website called “沖縄基地問題.com (Okinawa Military Base Issue.com)”[15],suggesting that it is unlikely that the website was made to make profit from online engagement (what is known in Japanese as an “impression zombie”), and instead was likely created to achieve a political purpose.

But the experience of local media in this case underscores the difficulty of the disproportionate cost/reward ratio involved in fact-checking work. According to one study, out of the 65 unverifiable claims

collected by the *Okinawa Times*, just two made it to print.[16] One journalist complained that fact checking takes tremendous effort, more than writing a normal news article, and the disproportionate effort entailed brings little reward.[17] This reflects the limited resources local newspapers have at their disposal, not least of all in terms of staff. Discussions during committee meetings organized by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications specifically identified the spiraling costs of trying to verify information online as a problem.[18] The case of the spread of disinformation during the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election and the local media's efforts at debunking them is a prime example of such concerns.

Disinformation may potentially uniquely be destabilizing for democratic institutions in geopolitically sensitive places like Okinawa. It is evident from this case that closer cooperation is needed not just between social media platforms and fact checkers (as was the case between Hearst Communications and FacCheck.org as mentioned in Chapter Two), but also between local media and NGOs, where greater cooperation will lead to a better pooling of resources.

Table 1: List of post titles from "沖縄県知事選挙 2018.com [Okinawa Gubernatorial Election 2018.com]".

Original Japanese	English Translation	Original Japanese	English Translation
【翁長知事死去】翁長知事死去により蠢く基地反対派。またもや「オール沖縄」という虚構を喧伝する沖縄メディアの罪	Death of Governor Onaga: The death of Governor Onaga strengthens the anti-base calls. Once again, the Okinawa media is guilty of propagating the "all Okinawa" fiction.	辺野古反対で、なぜ沖縄は大損失するのか！	Why does Okinawa lose so much from opposing the Henoko military base?
【沖縄知事選挙】翁長知事音声テープで急浮上した後継候補玉城デニー氏とは？	Okinawa Gubernatorial Election: Who is Denny Tamaki, the man who suddenly emerged as a successor candidate in the tape of Governor Onaga?	城間幹子那覇市長、知事選回避。市長だけでも維持したい崩壊寸前のオール沖縄	Naha Mayor Mikiko Shiroma dodges the gubernatorial race. All Okinawa on the verge of collapse, desperately trying to hold on to at least the mayor.

【はじかさ〜沖縄】平気でウソを吐く反基地活動家と沖縄メディア、それを支える共産党と社民党	Shame on you Okinawa: The anti-base activists and the Okinawa Media that spew lies with impunity, and the Communist Party and Social Democratic Party that supports them.	安室奈美恵さん曰く「愛される沖縄であること」	According to Namie Amuro, "Be the Okinawa that is loved".
故・翁長知事利用イベント 8. 11県民大会に「な、な、7 万人の大ウソ！」	The August 11 citizens' rally uses the late Governor Onaga. "The great lie of the 70,000 crowd!"	翁長雄志知事の次男、迷言かく語りき。	The second son of Governor Onaga Yuji makes bizarre comments.
翁長氏音声テープに疑義の声！謎が深まる「オール沖縄」内部事情	Doubts arise over audio tape of Mr. Onaga! The mystery deepens on the inner working of "All Okinawa"	翁長知事を追い詰めた後継なきオール沖縄の無策！	"All Okinawa" the group without a plan or a successor, drove Governor Onaga to the brink.
「オール沖縄」という虚構	The fiction of "all Okinawa"	現沖縄与党の正体は反社会的勢力だ！	The opposition in Okinawa is an antisocial group!
安室奈美恵をも政治利用する沖縄左翼の醜態	The abomination that is the Okinawan left that even uses Namie Amuro for political purposes	玉城デニーは違法容認派の危険人物だ！その 2	Denny Tamaki, a dangerous man that allows law-breaking! Part 2
壊し屋と共産主義者が沖縄を滅ぼす！？	Will demolishers and Communists destroy Okinawa!?	玉城デニー氏、献金問題！	Donation issues and Denny Tamaki!
玉城デニーは小沢傀儡県政とな	Under Denny Tamaki will	玉城デニー氏と豪華別荘の関係！	Denny Tamaki and his luxury villa.

る！？	Okinawa become a puppet of Ozawa!?		
玉城デニー氏の背後に蠢く反日左翼勢力と結託する謝花喜一郎副知事の闇と罪！	The darkness and crimes of Vice Governor Kiichiro Jahana, the man who colluded with the anti-Japanese leftist forces that are behind Denny Tamaki!	現沖縄与党は「埋め立て撤回するする詐欺師」だ！	The current ruling party in Okinawa are fraudsters who will stop the landfill base project!
玉城デニーさん、早くも選挙違反開始！	Denny Tamaki already committing election violations!	翁長県政を冷静に評価してみた!!	A sober assessment of the Onaga administration.
「環境保護」で「沖縄破壊」翁長氏後継候補の説明責任！	"Destroying Okinawa" through "protection of the environment". Accountability needed for the successor candidate of Onaga.	実は誰も引き継いでいない「故・翁長知事の遺志」	No one is in fact inheriting the will of the late Governor Onaga.
翁長氏死去。弔い選挙で沖縄を狂わす！	Death of Onaga sparks an election in his honor, leading to chaos in Okinawa!	玉城デニーは違法容認派の危険人物だ！	Denny Tamaki, a dangerous man that allows law-breaking!
普天間返還を阻むのは移設反対派！	The return of Futenma is barred by those opposed to the relocation!		

(Source: Author)

Figure 1: Word cloud of the post titles from the "沖縄県知事選挙 2018.com [Okinawa Gubernatorial Election 2018.com]".

(Source: Author, based on "沖縄県知事選挙 2018. com")

Disinformation During Crises: The Noto Peninsula Earthquake and Typhoon Jebi

Japan is prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes and typhoons, and it has a long history with the spread of disinformation- and misinformation during such times of crisis. In the recent earthquake on the Noto Peninsula in January 2024, disinformation was circulated claiming that gangs of foreign robbers were at large was widely spread online.[19] There is also evidence to suggest that such disinformation is being spread by foreign accounts.[20] These efforts are usually made with the goal of making a profit, which in turn means that they often target accounts that have more than 500 followers on X (formerly known as Twitter) and posts with more than five million viewers within three months.[21]

Disinformation that is circulated after a natural disaster is not a problem which is exclusive to Japan. Audiences in Taiwan were targeted in 2018 when the Kansai International Airport was forced to close down as it was flooded by Typhoon Jebi and a tanker collision with a connecting bridge, resulting in around 8,000 people finding themselves temporarily stranded at the airport. Disinformation began to circulate claiming that Chinese citizens were being given priority and being rescued by buses provided by the Chinese consulate. The disinformation included strong praise towards China and harsh criticism against Taiwan, even leading to Su Chii-cherng, the representative of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Osaka, committing suicide. Troublingly, Taiwan's news media were slow

to respond to the spread of disinformation, with Taiwan FactCheck Center taking 15 days to debunk the disinformation, around the time when they were having active collaboration with a Japanese NGO over disinformation.[22] While it remains unclear where the disinformation came from, some have argued that it may have originated from mainland China[23] given that it was first circulated in mainland China before it reached Taiwan, and how it was spread just a month before Taiwan's local elections. In response, Taiwan FactCheck Center, which was at first intended to be a temporary establishment, was quickly made permanent.[24]

Table 2: Disinformation during the closure of the Kansai International Airport.

Disinformation	Fact[25]
A bus organized by the Chinese Consulate in Osaka was sent to the Kansai International Airport, to prioritize the rescue of the stranded Chinese customers. Taiwanese customers who wanted to get on the bus said they wanted to get on if they saw them as Chinese.	The Kansai International Airport issued buses to send Chinese customers from Osaka-fu Izuminosano City. From there they changed into buses that were issued by the Chinese Consulate in Osaka and were taken to the Osaka City center. No comments were issued regarding Taiwan.

(Source: Author, based on Watanabe (2024))

<Column> Pub Talk and Ryukyu Independence: the Chinese Disinformation Swirling around the Treated Waters from Fukushima

Talks of Ryukyu independence have a long history. Ever since the Ryukyu-Han was abolished on March 27, 1879, and the annexation of Ryukyu (to be made the Okinawa Prefecture), there have been rumblings of Ryukyu independence across some quarters. Most of the Ryukyu independence talks center around questions over whether or not it is right to become independent, and what will happen if it is to go ahead with such plans.[26] As it were, at present these talks are mere pub talks, and there is yet to be a serious movement for independence. However, there are some that argue that such talks over Ryukyu independence have been used by China to divide public opinion in Japan.

Influence operation is defined as "limiting information to manipulate or confuse understanding and judgements of the target country into acting in a way that is beneficial to them".[27] For example, a report published by the Public Security Intelligence Agency argued that China is getting in touch with organizations and researchers who research the Ryukyu independence movement, and that China has published multiple essays that are sympathetic to the cause.[28] One such article was an editorial piece published in the *Global Times* in August 2017, titled "How Ryukyu should not be called Okinawa: Questions over where

Ryukyu belongs". Such arguments that claim that Okinawa's position remains an "unresolved issue" coincided with the publication of articles such as "Activating the Ryukyu issue to pave the way for changing the official position" (from the *Global Times*),[29] and "Return the Diaoyu Islands to China, the time has come for a renegotiation of Ryukyu" (*People's Daily*),[30] that were published at a time when the Senkaku Island debate was accelerating. The Public Security Intelligence Agency warns that such articles are part of a wider Chinese scheme to foster public opinion in Okinawa that is favorable to China and create divisions within Japan.[31] More recently, on May 13, 2023, during a meeting with the LDP, a former Chinese military official challenged participants by asking "Ryukyu is originally a Chinese territory, but how would you feel if it were to declare independence?".[32] On May 26, 2023, Yang Bojang the head of Japanese Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences commented at a forum held in Japan that "We need to review the San Francisco Peace Treaty [which returned Okinawa to Japan]".[33] In the following month then newly sworn in Xi Jinping emphasized the historically deep ties between China and the Ryukyu, which was the first time he spoke out on the topic since coming into power.[34] There is nothing new about Okinawa's vulnerabilities against Chinese disinformation campaigns. In a 2018 report by RAND, it was pointed out that resentment towards the United States' military base in Okinawa presents possible vulnerabilities against Chinese information operations.[35] While the focus in the past has been that of spreading favorable popular and academic narratives on China, there has been new large-scale disinformation campaigns on social media such as the ones on the release of the ALPS-treated water.[36]

Given that the IAEA and the scientific community agree that the impact of the release of the ALPS-treated water is limited, TEPCO took the decision to release the ALPS-treated waters from August 2023. The Chinese embassy in Japan press office issued comments on the Chinese government's position regarding the ALPS-treated water on its website.[37] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by issuing a statement titled "Response to comments made by the Chinese government regarding the ALPS-treated water discharge into the sea" and argued that the Chinese claims lacked factual as well as scientific evidence.[38] See Table 3 below for the actual comments made by both sides.

Regarding the release of the ALPS-treated water into the sea, there were social media posts that contained disinformation such as the claim that 20,000 fish intended to China were instead sold to Taiwan, or that Japan donated money to the IAEA, and that the radioactivity levels in the treated water exceeded standard levels. Chinese state-owned media actively sent out paid advertisements on social media sites that proclaimed the dangers of the treated water in not only English and German, but also in Khmer (language native to Cambodia) which indicates its desire to spread the information both internationally as well as in Asia more specifically.[39]

Table 3: Disinformation and factcheck related to the release of the ALPS-treated water from Fukushima.

An example of China's claim.[40]	An example of the response by the Japanese government.[41]
Why does Japan push back against the idea of an international framework with other stakeholders?… At present, other countries and other international organizations are not present on the ground operations of the IAEA's international monitoring. This makes it difficult to call it an international effort and it lacks transparency. If Japan is confident in the safety of the treated water, it should allow third parties to monitor and actively support more international long-term monitoring that includes more stakeholders.	The IAEA's assessment included the contributions from the Analytical Laboratories for the Measurement of Environmental Radioactivity (ALMERA) as well as other research institutions from the U.S., France, Switzerland, and South Korea. While it was the IAEA which took a leading role, it was an international and objective assessment involving third parties. Between November 7 to 14, 2022, in addition to the experts from the IAEA Marine Environment Laboratories, experts from Finland and South Korean research institutions visited Japan to collect samples and check the treatment process.

(Source: Author, based on explanations of Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Japan and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Japan tried to combat these disinformation claims on social media by using both its Japanese and English social media accounts. It used hashtags such as #STOP 風評被害 (#STOPtheRumors) and #LetTheScienceTalk, which were accompanied by explainers of the lithium concentration standard levels using graphs and videos as well as images and bullet points of research findings in an attempt to tackle the issue. In addition, it tried out new campaigns such as using #BeautyofFUKUSHIMA to advertise Fukushima and its food.[42]

As mentioned in Chapter Three, organizations such as NAFO have tried to tackle the threat of disinformation by making fun of Russian disinformation regarding Ukraine through the use of memes and humor. #BeautyofFUKUSHIMA is an example of positive posts on a social media platform being used as a diplomatic tool. This is of particular importance considering how negative content tends to dominate social media.

Policy Recommendations

The three case studies described in this report provide crucial insight for the Japanese government and media for developing an effective policy response against disinformation. In this section, we provide five policy recommendations developed based on a case study approach of Hungary, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

[General Policy Recommendation]

1. **Wider acknowledgement of the serious threat to democratic institutions and norms posed by disinformation. In particular, awareness that both domestic and foreign actors will try to spread disinformation during elections and times of political crises in hopes of destabilizing democracies** (corresponding chapters: Chapters One to Three).

As the United States (Chapter Two) and Japan (Chapter Four) show, election periods are a particularly vulnerable period for democracies as foreign governments as well as domestic groups and individuals may try to spread disinformation. While much of the focus is on national elections, local elections can also be targets of such attacks. As Chapter One showed, the spread of disinformation can occur during international crises such as the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. However, it can also be spread during domestic crises such as earthquakes and typhoons as this chapter discussed. While the common disinformation tactic is to target specific politicians or political parties, during domestic crises this could be done for commercial purposes as well as political purposes. Regardless of motivation, such disinformation tactics lead to polarization and erode public trust towards key democratic institutions such as elections, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media.

2. Conventional fact checking is insufficient to **avoid the "engagement trap"**. There should be greater openness towards different kinds of strategies such as the **use of memes and humor** to **weaponize the "engagement trap"** may be needed (corresponding chapter: Chapter Three).

Chapter Three defined the term the "engagement trap" as a "disinformation tactic which twists the truth and makes it emotionally engaging to maintain maximum engagement with the aim of spreading a narrative that is beneficial to the perpetrator". The chapter argued that while fact checking is essential to tackling disinformation, it also carries the danger of unwittingly amplifying the disinformation itself. This is why it is important to try to weaponize the "engagement trap" by using memes and humor, in the manner of grassroots organizations such as NAFO. Additionally, this chapter argues that #BeautyofFUKUSHIMA is another example

of the use of positive hashtag campaigns.

[Policy Recommendation for the Government]

3. The Japanese government should not take reporting from foreign sources at face value, but instead **assess the position of each source against the context of the source country, including the levels of press freedom and any political or economic motivations behind it.** For example, the politics division within embassies should improve their ability to gather data and perform analysis and consider publishing parts of their findings to the public as a way of tackling disinformation (corresponding chapter: Chapter One).

Chapter One argued that Hungarian media is increasingly under the influence of the Hungarian government, which presents a potential risk of the spread of disinformation. This is a common problem in countries that face democratic backsliding. There is no guarantee that media outlets once renowned for their independence may be able to maintain that independence, and even those that may at first seem independent may not necessarily be so in practice. The Hungarian case exemplifies the importance of considering the political and economic background of the media itself, but to make such assessments institutions such as embassies will play a critical role given their strong knowledge of the countries where they are located. As others have argued,[43] the political divisions within embassies could help gather and assess data and publish at least parts of their analyses to help educate the public on the democratic conditions of given countries with the goal of debunking the spread of disinformation related to those countries.

[Recommendations on Anti-disinformation Policies during Crises for the Government]

4. Government regulations against disinformation should also assess policy changes abroad. While anti-disinformation policy needs to be pragmatic and ensure freedom of expression, there should be considerations of the broader impact of disinformation on **personal safety and democracy** (corresponding chapters: Chapters Two & Three). In particular, **the government should work towards the swift introduction of the prominence rule to allow for the public media to be given priority coverage on tv and social media in anticipation of an influx of disinformation during crises**. They should additionally consider placing a temporary limit on accessing such media (corresponding chapter: Chapter Three).

As argued in Chapters One and Two, the spread of disinformation can lead to public distrust towards the government and the media, thus risking the erosion of democratic

norms. While discussions over anti-disinformation policy are inevitably a balancing act with the value of freedom of expression, these discussions should be broadened to include considerations of potential threats to personal safety and democracy itself. Public anxiety during natural disasters and international crises can create environments especially receptive to disinformation. As Chapter One demonstrated, crises such as the Russia-Ukraine War can lead to the spread of disinformation at an organizational level. We argue that one solution may be to introduce something similar to the United Kingdom's prominence rule, which prioritizes the reporting of trusted sources such as public media in TV. This policy could be extended to other platforms such as social media, something that Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications is already considering.[44] Additionally, concerns over the spread of disinformation through foreign state-controlled media should lead to at least some consideration over restricting access to it as was the case in the United Kingdom following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see Chapter Three).

[Build a Framework against Disinformation in Government, Newspapers, and Fact Check Organizations]

5. To improve the reliability of information, the government should establish a framework that enables **society as a whole to bear the costs of debunking disinformation** (corresponding chapters: Chapters Two and Three).

➢ 5-1 In addition to large tech firms and fact checking groups, there should be a framework that includes not only **major media firms and major press, but also local media and press that may have limited resources**.

➢ 5-2 To make verification easier, each organization targeted by disinformation should **provide and disseminate a database that provides a summary of debunked disinformation**.

➢ 5.3 **The media should provide the URLs of original sources** in their reporting where possible.

While it is widely acknowledged that large tech firms and fact checking groups will play a leading role in ensuring the spread of reliable information and providing fact checks, as the example of the BBC Verify in Chapter Three indicated, large media firms will particularly play a critical role in offering fact checks. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter Two, there are cases in which local print media are more trusted than national ones. In Japan, local media particularly play a key role in reporting on local elections and natural disasters. Based on this, local media as well as major media firms should be actively incorporated in the formation of a framework dealing with disinformation. Such a framework should focus on effectively utilizing fact checking tools being developed by media in the United States and United Kingdom, as well as by social media

providers.[45] There should be a further focus on expanding the database of fact checks, making it accessible not only to experts but also regular citizens. Following the introduction of the Link Attribution Protocol in the United Kingdom, there needs to be greater effort to add the URLs of original sources in media reporting, making it difficult to create fake polling data as was the case in Okinawa, and to help improve the transparency and reliability of information.

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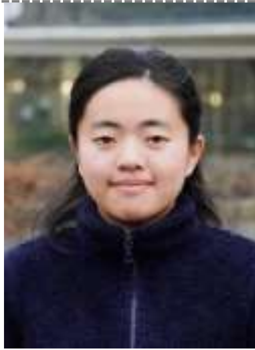

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Institute of Geoeconomics

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The Institute of Geoeconomics (Europe & Americas) analyzes European states in both Western and Central Eastern Europe as well as the American continent. Our focus is on the political and economic situation of these regions and the Liberal International Order (LIO) which has been led by the West. We are particularly interested in researching about (i) the LIO, (ii) the influence of domestic political change to the LIO (such as our special feature on the 2024 election year), and (iii) the relationship between democratic backsliding and disinformation.

Will 2024 Election Change the World? The Crossroads of Democracy：
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The Liberal International Order (LIO) Project

In the face of intensifying competition between the U.S. and China and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, how should the Indo-Pacific nations, led by the U.S. and Japan, and the European Union (EU) countries form a free and open international order that abides by the rules? How should they protect shared values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law?

In the first stage of the LIO project, we presented our policy recommendations regarding domestic governance, constitutional reform, the role of the media, and contributions to the international order, in order for Japan to maintain and develop the LIO in the region.

Following the completion of the first stage which focused on Japan’s role in the Asia Pacific, in the second stage we analyzed how Japan, the EU, and the US could maintain and develop the LIO in the Asia Pacific and the world more broadly, as well as how they could promote democratic rules-based norms. We published our research findings in “The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order” (August 6, 2020, Toyokeizai) and “The Transformation of the Liberal International Order” (October 25, 2023, Springer), respectively.

Disinformation Project by Early Career Researchers at the Europe and Americas Group of the Institute of Geoeconomics

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