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Authors

Chambers, Simone
Kopstein, Jeffrey

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Wrecking the public sphere: The new authoritarians' digital attack on pluralism and truth

Simone Chambers | Jeffrey Kopstein

Department of Political Science, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, California, USA

Correspondence

Simone Chambers, Department of Political Science, University of California, Irvine, 5229 Social Science Plaza B, Irvine, CA 92697, USA.

Email: sechambe@uci.edu

We live in an age of big data, capable of microtargeting and manipulating us, algorithmic curation that systemically fails to up-rank truth, and surveillance capitalism that profits from propaganda. The complexity and reach of the new information ecosystem appear overwhelming and unmanageable at times—the task of control and regulation always one step behind technological innovation. Contrast this picture to another. On January 6, 2021, at 4:10 p.m. EST, one person was deplatformed from Twitter. This had an enormous ripple effect felt around the world, especially in levels of disinformation circulating about Covid-19 and U.S. election results (Alba et al., 2021; Jhaver et al., 2021). So here we have two competing, or at least at first sight competing, narratives that replicate the old dichotomy between structure and agent. The first narrative focusses on systemic, technological, and impersonal forces working behind the scenes to dominate and exploit us for profit. The second narrative is tied to bad actors exploiting a neutral technology for nefarious purposes. Both narratives have a grain of truth to them, but the first narrative is getting more attention and we think that it leads to an unwarranted techno-dystopian defeatism.¹ In this paper, we revive a version of the second narrative—the bad actor narrative.² Thus, our first claim is that the dangers to democracy posed by new information technology have more to do with political bad actors intentionally targeting democracy than with either the technology itself or the economic forces driving the developments and expansion of that technology.

What are these political forces? New authoritarian forces are the bad actors to be worried about. By new authoritarian forces we mean groups, leaders, or parties that seek to promote authoritarian, autocratic, or patrimonial regimes “within” the framework of constitutional democracy (Hanson & Kopstein, 2021). We can get some purchase on the proprietors of digital platforms who, for the most part, understand they must balance the demands of democracy with the goals of profit. Platforms do not set out to undermine democracy—in fact, many are quite idealistic about the positive contributions to public life—even if some of the design choices they have made for the sake of profit have indeed undermined democracy. New authoritarians, by contrast, do set out to undermine and weaken democracy. It used to be that authoritarian states focused on civil society and the suppression of social movements. This of course still goes on. But authoritarianism has gone virtual. Now what is important is information and communication—not so much controlling or suppressing that information—(although that too still happens) but rather undermining the very function of information in a democracy. A great deal of the democratic backsliding and decline in established constitutional democracies has occurred without the violation of civil liberties (Poland, Hungary, and Serbia are good examples of this). Rather than physically attacking or arresting political opposition, the “playing field” is tilted primarily in the



public sphere. And this can be done under the banner of free speech (Hasen, 2022). Wrecking the public sphere is the new authoritarian strategy that in some places has replaced the direct suppression of civil society. Thus, the second claim defended in the paper is that the internet has opened up possibilities for authoritarians and autocrats to flourish and gain power within constitutional democracies because they can effectively wreck the public sphere rather than suppress the public sphere.

In what follows we begin with a discussion of the public sphere, its role in democracy, and the threat that disinformation poses to that role. We then discuss some strategies to address information disruption especially in the form of algorithmic and platform regulation. Here, we suggest that the picture looks less bleak than commonly thought. At a minimum, we maintain, it is too soon to fully embrace techno-dystopian defeatism. We then turn to the problem of bad actors and the new authoritarianism and suggest that this problem is much more serious.

1 | DEMOCRACY AND THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The public sphere performs three important functions in democracy.³ The first function—opinion formation—is to facilitate the circulation of information used by citizens to form their political opinions and take positions on public matters. The second is what we call the accountability function. Here, the public sphere is home to pluralistic debate, criticism, challenge, and contestation that ideally holds power to public account. The third function we identify as a responsiveness function. In this regard, the public sphere is home to, or ought to be home to, spaces, platforms, and venues in which the public can articulate and communicate claims, demands, and interests, to which democratic states and representatives ought to respond.⁴ The opinion formation function has lexical priority in this picture. If citizens have no information or highly unreliable information upon which to form judgements, then this in turn undermines accountability and responsiveness. We have articulated these functions in ideal terms. No public sphere perfectly performs them, and all liberal democracies suffer from various pathologies and weaknesses in this regard. Nevertheless, we maintain that a necessary (but of course not sufficient) condition of democracy is a public sphere that is capable of minimally performing these functions. In what ways is the new digital landscape undermining them? There are usually two interconnected problems associated with the new digital landscape that are said to threaten the democratic role of the public sphere. The first is the migration of bad civil society online (Chambers & Kopstein, 2001, 2021; Davey & Ebner, 2017; Lamoureaux, 2019). The fear here is that online communication will become ever more uncivil, polarized, and draw more people into antidemocratic groups, by sending them down extremist and conspiracy rabbit holes. The second problem is the circulation of disinformation and sinking levels of trust in sources of information (Bennet & Livingston, 2018). These two problems are not separate of course. People get sucked into QAnon because they believe the fabricated stories of pedophile rings in the halls of Congress.

But in this article, we focus on disinformation. Political extremism is a serious problem, but disinformation is in some ways the more challenging problem. Platforms like Facebook (FB) and YouTube have pursued aggressive moderation policies regarding violent, racist, and extremist content that have reduced extremist activity on their platforms (Watts, 2022). So far, attempts to migrate to alternative platforms have also faced hurdles (e.g., Google's refusal to support the Parler app). The algorithmic vortices that lead people to ever more violent or extreme sites to keep their attention have come under a great deal of scrutiny and we are seeing design modifications. Platforms have not been as vigilant and aggressive as some would like and there is still a great deal of opacity in the way platforms deal with extremism (Silverman et al., 2022). But platforms claim to be addressing the problem and at a minimum this has led to a sustained push by journalists, nongovernmental organization (NGOs), and government inquiries to hold them to account on their relationship to political extremism. Finally, the evidence is mixed at best that social media creates extremists as opposed to giving them an accommodating home (Asimovic et al., 2021; Bor & Petersen, 2021). Of course, an accommodating home is a serious problem, and democracies will need to redouble their efforts to expose the dark places on the web. But widespread disinformation can and will have a broader negative effect on democracy than bad civil society finding new digital meeting places.

We are also not primarily concerned with incivility and trolling in online communication. The central function of social media in the public sphere is not as a venue for debate and deliberative exchange where civility and respect are essential but rather as a source of information. For example, of the billions of FB users around the world, the vast majority are consumers rather than producers of information. The nastiness in Twitter exchanges is not undermining democracy in the same way that, in the United States, disinformation about voter fraud is.

The lack of civil deliberation on many social network platforms is unfortunate but again not as serious as if the platforms made it impossible to access reliable information and basic facts.

Social media appears to be disrupting the healthy circulation of information in the public sphere in two ways. The first is that some people argue we are not getting the same information—this is often referred to as the problem of technologically induced echo chambers and filter bubbles. The second is that social media spreads unreliable and false information.

We argue that it is the second problem that is the more pressing problem.

The function of the public sphere is not to produce a common will but to facilitate the pluralist exchange of opinion, arguments, claims, and demands about collective problems or salient concerns that then inform accountability and responsiveness. If echo chambers created a fractured and unconnected information mosaic, it would be impossible to have shared “topics” of conversation. But there is growing evidence that we are not in a centrifugal spin where our information sources are ever more isolated from each other (Bruns, 2019; Guess et al., 2018).

A forceful example that we still share topics of conversation via social media can be seen in the recent George Floyd protests in the United States. The United States has seen a vociferous and contentious debate about police restructuring and criminal justice reform. This topic is on the national agenda in a way that it was not prior to George Floyd’s murder, despite the fact of having been a serious and pressing problem for many years. The protest movement and subsequent public debate was sparked by the sharing of videos and reports of the events that took place on May 25, 2020, on a street in Minneapolis. There is no debate about what happened or “that” it happened; there is debate about what it means and what we should do about it. Here, we have a shared topic that can be the focus of collective (heated, partisan, and polarized for sure) public debate about “what is to be done?”

Contrast this to the insurrection of January 6, 2021. One would think that the events are as indisputable as the murder of George Floyd, but survey data show that a significant number of Republican respondents believe that Antifa was responsible for the insurrection or that it was in response to a clearly stolen and fraudulent election result (Ipsos, 2022). This is dysfunctional. It is not possible to have a “debate” about whether it was Antifa or Trump supporters who carried out the insurrection because the first is clearly and simply false. In this situation, the question of “what is to be done?” cannot even get off the ground.

Many of the people who believe that Antifa was responsible for the insurrection are no doubt caught in information echo chambers. But focusing on echo chambers as a technological problem of information curation designed to maximize profit often suggests a false symmetry in information pathologies. All social media users receive curated information, but not all social media users are equally targeted with misinformation or susceptible to falsehood. Citizens who find themselves in pernicious echo chambers shielding them from the possibility of correcting false beliefs are often the target of misinformation strategies and campaigns designed by political elites and not necessarily the victims of systemic features of social media platform algorithms (Starbird et al., 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that in the aggregate, people’s digital information ecosystems are more porous than we have thought (Burns, 2019). On the one hand, homogeneity of political information consumption correlates with political knowledge and activism, implying that isolation is an information consumption “choice” and not a systemic effect (Guess et al., 2018). On the other hand, homogeneity also shows up more on the right and intensifies as the consumer’s views are more extreme (Sindermann et al., 2021). This too suggests that it is more than algorithmic curation at work. Although disinformation is not evenly spread among citizens or social media users, it does affect all citizens and threatens the three functions of the public sphere.

Disinformation is part of a disorder that includes misinformation, bad information, malinformation, no information, and sometimes too much information.⁵ All democracies suffer from certain levels of information disorder. The

internet did not invent conspiracy theories, manipulation, or propaganda. But the speed, volume, and reach of digital communication—in short, amplification—appears to be escalating and intensifying information disorder in unprecedented ways. We identify four ways information disorder undermines opinion formation and by extension accountability and responsiveness.

First, information disorder affects citizen competence. Here, the worry is that citizens do not have the information to make minimally informed judgments. There is a large body of research that suggests citizens generally have a hard time reaching minimal levels of competence independent of the digital revolution (Barabas et al., 2014). But this research is contested, often by questioning what constitutes minimally competent and/or what specialized knowledge citizens need to be minimally competent. We need not enter this debate. As John Sides has recently noted “underlying these debates is a shared sense that the quality of citizens’ decision-making depends in part on whether those decisions are grounded in facts of some kind” (Sides, 2021). Everybody is worried about further erosion of competence no matter where one starts on the scale of citizen knowledge.

A second problem, intensified in the digital age, is uncertainty about the trustworthiness of information sources. Even citizens who are not caught in echo chambers or in the grip of partisan driven cognitive biases are concerned about accessibility to truth. Survey after survey across all liberal democracies show that citizens, especially since the revelations of fake news and information disorder of 2016, are worried about access to the truth (Edelman, 2021; Watson, 2019). Uncertainty about access to facts can, on the one hand, impede the formation of any political judgments, and on the other hand, may induce a retreat to “trusted” sources that may in turn lead to partisan echo chambers.

A third problem arises when citizens are confident that they do have sufficient information to make competent political judgments, but this information is false and resistant to correction. Here, false information, for example false beliefs about Corona virus, may inspire calls for accountability and responsiveness that can potentially skew public policy in dangerous ways.

The dangers of false information for democracy are doubled when the substance of that information are false claims about democratic procedures themselves, for example, the belief voter fraud is rampant or the claim that Trump really won the election.

Finally, a fourth problem is the potential erosion of trust between citizens. Here, citizens worry (some are convinced) that large segments of the population do not have the information needed to make minimally informed decisions. Even staunch supporters of democracy with access to fact- and evidence-based information will lose confidence in democracy if they think that large numbers of their fellow citizens are in the grip of delusion or brain washed by propaganda.

2 | THE GOOD NEWS: KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION AND PLATFORM SELF-REGULATION

It is worth pausing and reflecting on how new all this is. FB⁶ was launched in 2004 but many internet experts say that new media landscape and domination of social media did not take hold until 2012, only 10 years ago (Vaidhyathan, 2018). The alarm bells, however, really started going off across the globe in 2016, only 6 years ago (Freelon & Wells, 2020). And in some ways, the cycle of alarm over the changing public sphere is a familiar one. This occurred during the print revolution, the advent of broadcast media (radio and television), and now once again as the internet displaces the earlier two forms of mass communication. A mood of pessimism regarding the flood of emotions and superficiality accompanying those earlier changes is as old as the public sphere itself. Even so, it is worth remembering, we are at the front end of the latest structural transformation of the public sphere.

2016, especially the US election but also Brexit and other political events across the globe, shocked even the most detached observer and consumer of media. The revelations about fake news, disinformation campaigns, Russian bots, microtargeting, voter suppression, the amplification of crazy conspiracies theories, the role of Cambridge Analytica,

and the complete failure of most platforms even to know what was going on, let alone step in as they were raking in profits, all this and more added up to a crisis moment. In the immediate aftermath of 2016, there was a certain amount of techno-dystopian defeatism about what this meant for democracy. Post-truth was the 2016 word of the year and we saw a great deal of alarm and despondency about the competence of citizens in a digital age. But something else also began to take hold in 2016.

There has been an astonishing and unprecedented explosion of institutes, centers, programs, think tanks, NGOs, academic studies, and research devoted to assessing and studying the new digital landscape across all domains from the humanities to the hardest of hard sciences. Money and resources have poured in from public and private sources to support work and research in this area with particular concern for the epistemic crisis of the digital public sphere. The flood of research and study has been paralleled by an equally constant stream of discussion and reflection in the popular press disturbed by post-truth. In some respects, William Kornhauser's warning in 1959 of the isolated individual subject to manipulation seems to have come to pass. But in other respects, the push back has been formidable. Surveys show citizens across the ideological spectrum and indeed across the globe are concerned with truth and trust in information (Watson, 2019). One Pew Center study found "that the vast majority of adults say that Americans' level of agreement on the basic facts about issues and events is a problem. Fully 85% of adults say this is at least a moderately big problem, including 42% saying it is a very big problem" (Rainee et al., 2019). There is a near-universal acknowledgment that were the public to lose access to trusted sources of truth or fact, this would be a total disaster for democracy.

We cannot review all the research pouring out of every university, think tank, center, and institute nor all the initiatives to oversee and regulate the new information ecosystem. We do note that one already sees significant changes in levels and type of disinformation between 2016 and 2020. FB has recently released a study showing that the United States is the top target of disinformation campaigns on FB (Meta, 2021). Between 2017 and 2020, FB took down 217 "coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) networks and disinformation campaigns." These originated from Russia, Iran, and internally in the United States. "Inauthentic networks" are bad actors (both state and non-state) who seek to hide their real identity as the source of information and news. Parallel to this, each month hundreds of FB pages and Instagram accounts are closed when linked to CIBs. The report suggests that we are getting better at identifying and uncovering such networks. The "we" referred to in the report is composed of a "robust civic infrastructure including cyber firms and academic networks" that are sharing technology and data. FB itself may be reluctant to come clean about the impact of its past implication in the practices of bad actors, but civil society and state, and local governments have chipped away at the power of Big Tech, paving the way for what may be big changes in the years to come (Anderson & Rainie, 2021). Inauthentic networks dominated the 2016 "fake news" crisis. We have gotten very good at uncovering these as well as exposing bots as amplifiers of misleading information (Allen et al., 2020). But as we sketch out below, the 2020 misinformation campaign had a different profile than 2016.

Algorithmically curated filters are being subject to ever more transparency and publicity. Practices of up-ranking more radical or sensational material to keep users' interest have been exposed and in the last few years meaningfully altered. Big tech is slowly approaching its own "big tobacco" moment, with the exposure not only of its algorithms, but the fact of its own (covered up) internal research demonstrating the potentially pernicious effects of their platforms (Smith, 2022). The exposés mostly tell the same story. A series of *Wall Street Journal* articles in late summer 2021 revealing the internal research of FB and Instagram on political radicalization, body image among girls and young women, and the "whitelisting" exemptions of celebrities from community guidelines (with the effect of spreading bad content to larger groups of followers) were but the latest instance of the pressure big tech faces to reform (Horwitz, 2021). Transparency legislation has been proposed in the U.S. Senate with former FB employees offering technical assistance at the drafting stage (Smith, 2022). The legislation is designed to give law makers and researchers access to the black box of algorithm information curation as a precursor and foundation for regulation.

We do not want to overstate the role of social media platforms as either uniquely good or bad in this story. Between 2016 and 2020, there has been a significant readjustment (what we will call self-regulation) on the part of social media platforms like Twitter, FB, and YouTube in response to the growing problem of misinformation. We would not say that this is the result of civic mindedness but rather four types of pressures. The first is the worry about real regulation.

Social media platforms do not want to be regulated or subject to a reclassification as “publishers,” and so they want to show that they can handle the problem (and they do acknowledge that disinformation “is” a problem) and do not need the state to step in. They have launched several initiatives: Hugely expanded fact checking operations, crowd sourced authentication algorithms like “Birdwatch,” publicized oversight ethics committees, revamping privacy safeguards, review and enforcement of community standards, content moderation, and some move to discuss and make transparent information curational algorithms; these are some of the developments since 2016 in a scramble to project the appearance of responsiveness. It is certainly to some extent a public relations rear guard action but the level of scrutiny and concern from so many sectors of society suggests that some of this activity is making a difference even if the motivation is not civic but profit oriented.

The second pressure on platforms comes from users and public shaming campaigns. It is not at all clear that FB is too big to fail. The digital market moves fast. TikTok has passed FB as the most downloaded app in 2021 and has overtaken YouTube in video streaming metrics.

WhatsApp (a messaging not a social media app but a powerful misinformation tool nonetheless) is much bigger than FB. These are just some of the biggies now, but the digital market has hundreds of platforms connecting people via information on social networks, and every year more and more enter the fray. Peloton, the exercise bicycle, has a social network in which users share information. The point is that consumer pressures and a lot of unhappy users have spurred all major platforms to appear to be addressing questions of misinformation as well as privacy.

The third element pushing platforms to address issues of disinformation is the internal pressure from employees. Many of those companies have recruited people who do not fit the standard corporate profile. Both Twitter and FB have seen internal pressure to step up and become better corporate citizens. Despite tough nondisclosure agreements, disgruntled employees, from lowly design engineers to the top executives, have been exposing questionable decisions and unethical design choices in the way the platforms curate information or fail to enforce their own standards. “We are knowingly exposing users to misinformation that we have the processes and resources to mitigate,” said a 2019 memo by FB researchers. In an internal response, an executive who headed up FB’s Civic team (a unit that focused on political and social discourse on the platform) noted: “One of the fundamental reasons I joined FB is that I believe in its potential to be a profoundly democratizing force that enables everyone to have an equal civic voice... So having different rules on speech for different people is very troubling to me” (Horwitz, 2021). Finally advertising dollars and corporate support are not immune to bad citizenship and failures to self-regulate.

But even if these pressures are nudging platforms into better practices, self-regulation is not the answer. The power and problem of self-regulation was on full display at 4:00 p.m. on January 6, 2021. Jack Dorsey’s decision to deplatform Trump was right and probably as important as calling in the national guard in avoiding more violence and bloodshed after January 6 (Dwoskin & Timber, 2021). It is quite mind boggling, however, to think of a private citizen sitting on an island in French Polynesia having the power to thwart an insurrection, a coup attempt, or whatever January 6 was all about. The response to the assault on Congress has been wide-scale exclusion from social media of those thought to have instigated and incited violence. But the decisions to deplatform have taken place in corporate boardrooms rather than in legislative bodies or state regulatory agencies. Although many have defended these decisions as important short-run responses to threats against democratic institutions, given the centrality of social media for political communication this yields too much power to corporations.

But even without strong or coherent state regulation in the United States, the 2020 U.S. election saw a decrease in fake news (understood as inauthentic actors masquerading as legitimate news outlets to spread lies and conspiracies) and social media embedded disinformation campaigns. This was due in part to government policing, the engagement of science and technology, a demand for more transparency in the algorithms that curate information and news, and finally a user base that has become more aware of the possibility, indeed likelihood, of disinformation getting into one’s news feed (Chambers, 2021; Pennycook et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there were still alarming levels of disinformation in the 2020 election. But rather than the algorithms and hidden trolls doing the heavy lifting, in 2020 disinformation was elite driven with Donald Trump and Fox news—a network news source not a social media platform—playing outsized roles (Dwoskin & Timber, 2021). Of course, Trump’s lies were amplified by Twitter and many FB users passed on Fox

news items. But this suggests that Twitter and FB are megaphones for lies and not destroyers of truth. The ability to get a handle on and control over the sort of disinformation circulating in 2016 but not in 2020 points to the role of bad actors positioned in places of political power pursuing antidemocratic agendas.

3 | THE BAD NEWS: BAD ACTORS AND THE QUESTION OF ASYMMETRY

We have argued that knowledge and research combined with transparency and regulation have the potential to bring some of the systemic causes of information pollution under control. In this case, human agency can press back against technological structures. One might think therefore that an even more efficient strategy would be to track down bad actors and deplatform them. Go to the source. It is more efficient to track down one person who can reach millions rather than to chase down millions of messages as they speed through the internet, and fact check and correct as they spread. And deplatforming Trump seems to confirm this assessment. This has been a strategy for fighting hate and extremist groups, and this approach will most likely continue and intensify. But it is not clear that it is or can be an effective strategy regarding disinformation. Trump was not deplatformed for telling lies, he was deplatformed for fomenting violence and extremism. The result has been a tremendous decrease in disinformation, but this is a side effect, and in any case has become a game of whack-a-mole between platforms and malign actors. Once deplatformed, bad actors search out new platforms and although they face formidable collective action and coordination problems, the larger the group of those deplatformed, the more likely they are to stumble upon a new method of mass communication.

Legal recourse through defamation or libel lawsuits can have only very small impact on disinformation as the cases that could fall into this category are few and far between.

Furthermore, they will run up against free speech concerns. Indeed, the common argument against a policy of seeking out and shutting down the purveyors of disinformation has been the issue of free speech. But we may need to look at it in another way. The most serious threat to democracy coming from the digital public sphere is from agents who explicitly and knowingly seek to undermine the public sphere's three democratic functions: as a resource of opinion formation, as a platform of critical accountability, and by extension as a venue for responsiveness. Although technology and science can expose the manipulation of information and law may regulate and occasionally punish misbehavior, ultimately this is a political fight. Voting Trump out of office was the decisive action, not deplatforming. Indeed, it is questionable whether Twitter and FB would have deplatformed Trump at all if he had won the 2020 election but continued to spread lies about Covid-19 and incite civil unrest directed against his opponents.

These considerations point to bad actors determined to disrupt the three democratic functions of the public sphere, as a far thornier problem than that of the technology itself. We turn now to the means, strategies, and tactics used to wreck the public sphere and by extension undermine democracy in our current era. These tactics exploit digital communication, and one might want to go so far as to say that the digital landscape is a boon to authoritarians within democracy. But these strategies are chosen by agents, intent on undermining democracy, and not the result of impersonal technological imperatives.

The strategies we canvass below are all very familiar by now. But they are no longer the exclusive tools of foreign powers; they are also the tools of domestic forces within democracies that seek to weaken democracy.

3.1 | Frontal attacks on democracy

Perhaps the most obvious attack on democracy over the past several years in the United States has involved active attempts to corrupt the voting process. Some of these are frontal attacks on the franchise by, for example, purging voter rolls, making it difficult and onerous to vote, and hobbling GOTV campaigns in ways great and small (such as making it illegal to provide water to voters waiting in long lines). To this one could add various attempts to have legitimate

ballots thrown out or go uncounted. Most shocking, of course, has been the use of violence to stop the certification of elections at the local and national levels.

Less dramatic but no less important, however, has been the concerted reputational damage done to voting and elections in general through misinformation and disinformation mediated by the public sphere. In fact, voter suppression and election challenges carry force because of the mendacious public narrative claiming voter fraud where there is none. It is the latter that legitimates the former. A year after the 2020 presidential vote, tens of millions of Americans continued to believe the election was stolen. This belief was the direct result of an elite-driven misinformation campaign (Benkler et al., 2020) that does more damage to the democratic order than demand for voter ID laws or stricter absentee or mail-in ballot rules.

In mass democracies, the legitimacy of elections depends crucially on the belief in the integrity of the voting process, and this belief is mediated by the public sphere. Elections are institutions and depend on all three functions of the public sphere, most importantly public opinion regarding their procedural integrity. Enemies of democracy know this and set out to wreck the public sphere and manipulate public opinion regarding elections in general rather than directly disenfranchise people.

The misinformation and disinformation campaigns that constitute a frontal attack on the legitimacy of the democratic process have come from abroad and at home. Some are large and sustained but many are relatively small-scale intrusions by bad actors to sow doubt and uncertainty about democratic procedures. These have been termed “perception hacks.” For example, in 2020 FB took down a disinformation campaign, originating in Iran, that spread the false rumor that Iran had succeeded in hacking into the U.S. voting machines and could manipulate the outcome (Stubbs, 2020). Also, in 2020 a Russian group appeared to try to hack into voting machines. The attack never had a chance but official reports of the successful thwarting of the attack only introduced more uncertainty in the public mind about the security of voting machines. Coming from Iran and Russia, there appears only one obvious purpose of such a perception hack: it is to weaken democracy by diminishing the confidence in the democratic system, perhaps keeping people away from the polls and sowing doubt about electoral outcomes.

But why would domestic agents also engage in similar campaigns to undermine confidence in voting? Why would Americans have an interest in undermining and sowing doubt about the democratic system? The 2020 election and its aftermath witnessed Trump and his supporters employ such tactics. Here, the tactics were incessantly and loudly repeated lies about state-level corruption of mail-in ballots, illegal ballot harvesting or voting by dead people, supposed barring of Republican poll watchers in “Democrat-run cities,” accusations of ballot “dumps,” and falsified counts by machines that had supposedly been tampered with by a company with links to Venezuela or, perhaps most bizarrely, by satellites controlled by an Italian defense firm that somehow manipulated vote totals. None of these claims held up in court but Trump and his allies continued to assert them over a year after the election in an attempt to undermine belief in the integrity of the process itself.

The short-term goal was to put the outcome of the 2020 election in doubt especially as it became more and more likely that Trump would lose. The long-term aim was the very same as that of Iran and Russia, however, to undermine U.S. democracy. This might seem melodramatic. But in the United States, states have used fabricated fear of election fraud and interference to call for “redos” of electoral outcomes they do not like, to suppress the vote from urban areas, and to thwart the will of the voters altogether by disempowering public bureaucracies that certify the vote (Hasen, 2021). This is a disinformation campaign that is extremely difficult to address with technological fixes or algorithmic regulation. This is a political problem.

3.2 | Destabilization through polarization

Bad actors not only directly attack democracy by undermining faith in democratic procedures, but they also indirectly attack it by seeking to destroy trust and any modicum of unity among citizens. Why does this matter? Half a century ago the early students of totalitarianism, such as Arendt and Kornhauser, pointed to the increasingly isolated individual as

the raw material of totalitarianism. What they did not anticipate was that authoritarians did not need to overthrow democracy to undermine it. They could generate isolation, if not at the individual level, then at the group level, through tactics designed to exacerbate cleavages and intensify what social scientists now call “affective polarization”—the tendency for partisans to dislike and distrust those from the other party. As Druckman et al. note, affective polarization is “one of the most striking developments of twenty-first century politics” (Druckman et al., 2021, p. 28).

Our point is that polarization is not primarily a by-product of technology but an effective strategy of authoritarians who seek to solidify and heighten the bond between leader and follower and cut off their following from outsiders. One primary tactic is the use of malinformation. Malinformation (akin to malware) is information that might very well have some truth to it, but it is used to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country. The point is best illustrated with an example. Redfish is a Russian-funded social media venture, based in Berlin producing English language content for Americans that showcase protests, racial inequalities, and political violence in the United States and other stories designed to divide the American electorate. This is not straight-up disinformation. Redfish does not promote stories about events that do not occur, but instead pushes incendiary stories designed to heighten and pour fuel on the divisions of American society. The site does the same for other countries, emphasizing what the site’s proprietors deem to be the issue most likely to exacerbate existing cleavages. The goal, as one analysis put it, is to “drive debate to the extremes” (Barnes & Goldman, 2020). Redfish is not a particularly well-concealed influence operation, as several of its journalists have been employed by the Russian state television network (RT) and it never runs critical stories on Russia, but it remains elusive as its sources of revenue and political direction are hard to pin down.

In the hands of Russia, Redfish’s purpose is to destabilize American and other democracies in the hope of weakening them on the global stage. But this has also been a deliberate strategy of Trump and other populist authoritarians within electoral democracies.

As Alonso and Câmara have argued, polarization is an effective strategy for reducing the probability that adherents or those harboring doubts will cross the aisle to support one’s opponent. It drives voters in the middle to pick a side, while at the same time mobilizes the base. Rather than simply arguing in favor of limiting immigration, Trump promised to “build a wall.” In the United Kingdom, rather than renegotiating the terms of association with the European Union, Boris Johnson promised a permanent “Brexit” (Alonso & Câmara, 2016). Trump abandoned any rhetoric of unity and regularly appealed to language and lies that heighten polarization and division. Polarization is deployed to some extent to keep “the base” on an emotional high of outrage. But polarization more generally is the friend of authoritarianism because it makes the compromises necessary for effect democratic governance less likely.

Although Trump misread the odds in 2020, the general logic of polarization destabilized democracy by driving discourse to the extremes. Students of polarization have offered very few “solutions,” but most acknowledge that moving political discourse back to less polarized ground requires careful and unglamorous work of engaging those driven to extremes. To the extent there is one, the fix must be political rather than technological.

3.3 | Propaganda

By propaganda we mean “communication designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes or preferences in order to obtain behavior compliant with political goal of the propagandist” (Benkler et al., 2018). Manipulation is also a difficult term to define. It almost always involves some form of a counterfactual: to influence someone’s belief in such a way that if they had full information or could reflect or knew the true intention of speaker, they would not have adopted that belief. For now, we do not need an airtight definition to identify a tactic of misinformation that aims to manipulate citizens through information mobilization.

Classic studies of totalitarian propaganda stressed a top-down ideologically clear message that followers believed in, either to overthrow democracy or to secure authoritarian rule. Modern political propaganda is different. It seeks less to generate obedience through compelling visions than to shift the focus of loyalty from institutions to individual leaders.

Autocrats or would-be autocrats, for example, as Guriev and Treisman (2019) maintain, have increasingly refrained from ruling by force or ideology but attempt to convince the public that they are competent. “Only I can fix it,” is how Trump memorably put it.

But how can would-be autocrats and modern patrimonial leaders get the people to believe this? Drawing on the experience of a range of countries, Guriev and Treisman show how autocrats or patrimonial leaders, even within nominal democracies, can invest in propaganda, attempt to shut down independent media, or silence informed members of the elite by cooptation or censorship. “The key to such a regime... is the manipulation of information. Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe—rationally but incorrectly—that they are competent and public spirited” (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Such leaders use their popularity not to smash democracy but to hollow it out until it becomes a sham democracy (Müller, 2022). This strategy rests on the existence of a gap in political knowledge between an “informed elite” and the public that must be sustained and widened. Would-be autocrats invest in propaganda in order to widen this gap; good propaganda is expensive, however, and the more informed the public, the harder it is to use as a strategy.

3.4 | Noise/chaos/disorder/uncertainty

Some people have suggested that information chaos is an “emergent property of ubiquitously connected always wired society over which we have no control” (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 37). We follow scholars who question that diagnosis and instead suggest that chaos is frequently a planned strategy of agents seeking to disrupt information with noise, rubbish, and sheer volume. Jason Stanley points to the strategy of RT, Russia’s propaganda network, and their slogan “Question More.” On the surface, such a slogan suggests an openness to many points of view and seems to be promoting the traditional journalistic goals of objectivity and knowledge. “But the Russian spin doctors and media strategists discovered long ago that when you open the information space to every kind of conspiracy theory, you destroy reality” (quoted in Illing, 2019). This is the distinctive nature of modern propaganda as purveyed by authoritarians to render fuzzy the line between reality and unreality rather than imposing some coherent ideological truth. The tactic is to drown journalists and the public with noise. In this way, the ideal of journalistic objectivity is turned against itself, inducing mainstream outlets to show “the other side,” rendering uncertain what is the truth to begin with.

Lisa Wedeen showed how this worked in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian government did not expect the people to believe its lies but attempted, frequently successfully, to clutter the public space. The idea was for the government and its supporters to muddy up narratives just enough so that it becomes difficult to know what to believe (Wedeen, 2019). Donald Trump’s advisor and chief ideologist, Steve Bannon, followed the Russian and Syrian playbook for wrecking the public sphere. In an interview in 2018, he said, “The Democrats don’t matter. The real opposition is the media. And the way to deal with them is to flood the zone with shit” (Lewis, 2018). The intention is to generate a level of cacophony so that it is impossible to sort out truth from untruth, much less deliberate about the best path forward.

The intentional flooding of the public sphere with contradictory and confusing information is a staple of Russia’s Internet Research Agency that, according to the U.S. Senate Select Subcommittee on Intelligence report on Russian interference in the 2016 election, created a number of false websites that purported to be related to Black Lives Matter—“Black Matters,” “Blactivist,” and “Black Guns Mater”—with the goal of sowing confusion and distorting public discussion (Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, 2019, p. 45). White extremist groups in the United States and abroad did the same with their promotion of “antifa” terrorists, QAnon with its invocation of George Soros, and Donald Trump with his remarkable stream of lies, half-truths, or simply bizarre theories about the protests. The intended effect was to distort the signal of news in a sea of noise. Bots and fake accounts may have amplified the distorting effect, but they did not create it or initiate it.

3.5 | Fake fake news

Even before Bannon said the quiet part out loud, revealing his view of the press as the “real” opposition and his intention of “flooding the zone” with confusion, Trump had taken to labeling legacy media “fake news” and later turned to dubbing journalists as “enemies of the people.” In a rally in Kansas City in July 2018, Trump told his followers “Stick with us. Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news....What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening” (Cillizza, 2018). The goal in all of this was not to imprison or physically harm journalists (although labeling them as “enemies” did create this risk) but to retain power by undermining public confidence in any information or reports critical of those in power. It is a strategy formally compatible with democracy but designed to hollow out the conventional mechanisms by which public opinion takes shape.

What we are calling “fake fake news,” then, is the rhetorical and partisan attack on real facts, fact-based journalism, opposition, and pluralistic contestation with the accusation that it is all fake news and misinformation. This narrative aims at undermining the reliability of public information and depicts the press as corrupt and biased and journalists as evil and vindictive.

We see this very clearly on Fox News which maintains a running negative commentary on CNN’s and the New York Times’ coverage of everything. Here is a news outlet exerting a great deal of energy not on reporting the news, not even on reporting fake news, but rather on undermining the credibility of others to report the news. A typical example of this genre is a story from September 24, 2021 “NY Times stealth-edits report saying AOC faced ‘powerful’ pro-Israel ‘lobbyists and rabbis’ on Iron Dome vote” in an attempt to discredit NY Times reporting on the Congressional debate on U.S. aid to Israel. Rather than report on the story, the point of the posting is primarily to sow doubt about the credibility of legacy news sources. Virtually every day one can find similar stories on the Fox News and Newsmax websites.

Over time, mainstream outlets have responded with their own stories of hypocrisy and subpar journalism among the purveyors of fake fake news in an attempt to discredit their detractors, pointing to the vaccination status of journalists peddling false information about COVID-19 and vaccines and the use of bogus “expert” opinion, for example. Such tactics, however, do not entirely solve the problem. Those wrecking the public sphere rarely feel constrained to respond and, in some ways, the mutual accusations of bad faith are the point of the exercise—to undermine public trust in the objectivity of journalism and render it another form of entertainment. A federal judge in 2020 ruled in favor of Fox News in a defamation lawsuit using precisely this argument, maintaining that no “reasonable viewer” could take Tucker Carlson seriously (Sheth, 2020).

The attempt to destroy the legitimacy of mainstream media and shut down all criticism takes direct aim at the second democratic function of the public sphere: democratic accountability. This tactic seeks to reduce all public communication to partisan bias. Under these circumstances, there are no facts, only opinions, to paraphrase Arendt. It is now difficult to use the term “fake news” as it has been so thoroughly coopted by authoritarian discourse to undermine general trust in public information and criticism.

3.6 | Asymmetry

There is a final dimension to our claim that disinformation is more of a political problem than a technological one. Misinformation spreads unevenly among groups in the population regardless of their use of social media and other digital technologies. Osmundson et al. (2021) found that Republicans are more likely to share fake news than Democrats (although affiliates of both sides engage on this). What differs is the news sources available to partisans on different sides of the political spectrum. The authors surveyed 2300 Americans (obtaining, among other things, party ID) and received permission to scrape respondents’ Twitter feeds over a 1-month period in 2018–2019, obtaining 2.7 million tweets that could be matched with the survey results. They find that “In a highly polarized political climate, Democrats

and Republicans both search for material with which to denigrate their political opponent, and in this search, Republicans are forced to seek out the fake-news extreme in order to confirm views that are increasingly out of step with the mainstream media. Seen from this perspective, the spread of fake news is not an endogenous phenomenon but a symptom of our polarized societies—complicating our search for policy solutions” (Osmundson et al., 2021).

In poll after poll in the United States, large numbers of Republicans agree that election fraud is a major concern despite there being no credible sources backing this up (Byler, 2021). Few Democrats share that belief. These polling data reflect what we knew almost immediately after the 2016 election. More disinformation was, and still is, circulating on the right than the left (Guess et al., 2020). Studies show that although the media landscape has dramatically changed in the digital age, the mainstream media ecosystem is still governed by traditional norms of truth telling, fact-checking, professional journalism, and minimum levels of civility (Benkler et al., 2018).

Furthermore, for many people digital literacy, nudging, and accuracy cues make them more vigilant and less susceptible to false information (Chambers, 2021). And everybody, even those who do seem to believe falsehood, says that truth and accuracy are important. Nevertheless, there is a significant portion of the American population that lives in a right-wing media ecosystem that “exhibits all the characteristics of an echo chamber that radicalizes its inhabitants, destabilizes their ability to tell truth from fiction, and undermines their confidence in institutions” (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 383). Not polarization then but radicalization accounts for this asymmetry. Polarization involves the belief that having one’s opponent come to power (or stay in power) would be worse than any other outcome. Under these circumstances, politics move from being ideologically driven to being identity driven in the sense that party affiliation takes on an emotional, combative dimension that sometimes looks more like rabid fandom than commitment to any policy agenda (Mason, 2018). Radicalization takes place when the determination to exclude the opposition from power is so intense that one is willing to “bend the rules, ignore norms, and pursue strategies that would have seemed off limits” at normal times (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 109). Democrats are polarized but, so far, they have not been radicalized to the same extent as some Republicans regarding the norms of democracy, including the norms of truth and accuracy in the public sphere.

Almost everyone now acknowledges this asymmetry of disinformation in the American public sphere (Benkler et al., 2018; Hasen, 2022) and the weaponization of disinformation by authoritarian regimes. But scholarship (especially empirical scholarship) is still dominated by a type of both-sides-ism that talks generally about polarization, partisanship, and the technological threat misinformation in an effort to appear scientifically neutral. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a political movement born in and sustained by the new digital public sphere. Certainly, disinformation and conspiracy theories circulate in these groups and some elements have moved in the direction of destructive radicalism. But all empirical evidence suggests that in the 10 years of activism of this group and even in the face of glacial change and a frustrating lack of responsiveness, BLM has not been epistemically compromised by the new digital eco system.

The summer of 2020 saw the largest popular protest in the history of the United States. Far from citizens in silos, an estimated 20 million Americans from across the United States came out in solidarity with the cause of racial justice. These protests were overwhelmingly peaceful with property destruction and economic disruption amounting to a small fraction of what right wing groups have caused with fewer people and in a shorter time period. Disinformation is a right-wing problem. We want to suggest that one reason why it is a right-wing problem is that we have moved past culture wars. Many elements on the right no longer care about mobilizing majorities around issues that they will sometimes win and sometimes lose elections, but instead now embrace an antidemocratic ideology that targets the democratic system.

4 | CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the digital information explosion has had and will continue to have profound effects on democracy. From campaign strategies to national security, no corner of our political world is immune from the impact of changing communication technology. We have experienced and witnessed mostly negative effects (Hasen, 2022). Both

academic and popular analyses have been mostly a gloom and doom narrative with a certain amount of nostalgia for the lost gatekeepers of the past. There are voices of optimism and hope that see some innovative potential for democracy in the digital age (Forestal, 2021; Landemore, 2021). But we do not share that optimism and hope. Our new digital ecosystem poses very serious, potentially devastating dangers, for democracy. But we have argued that those dangers can be traced back to political actors who exploit the new technology, not to make money, but to undermine democracy.

In some ways, what we are facing today is a familiar and old authoritarian tactic of seeking to weaken the power of information, fact, and criticism—which is to say the power of citizens to hold state actors to account. But they have new weapons and unprecedented access through our new digital public sphere. The speed, volume, and reach of digital communication is unprecedented—so, yes, technology is part of the problem. We should document these problems and expose and challenge abuses within the digital public sphere. But as we have tried to argue here, the solution will involve more than technical regulation. No amount of platform content moderation will be able to fully thwart disinformation campaigns undertaken by a powerful elite.

A vibrant well-functioning public sphere is anathema to authoritarianism. The digitalization of the public sphere has meant that authoritarians do not need to directly suppress the public sphere. They can instead wreck it so that it is more difficult for all of us to engage in it. What this in turn has meant is the blossoming of serious authoritarian threats within democracies. Hiding behind the charade of free speech and pointing to votes and majorities, these agents do not have to engage in brute suppression; they can be effective through disinformation tactics. Many of these tactics are unstoppable through regulation and transparency. These are not algorithms controlling our lives, these are political agents with agendas. It is the man and not the machine that we need to worry about.

NOTES

¹We borrow this term from Cohen and Fung (2021).

²For a similar argument, see Faris and Donovan (2021).

³We use the term public sphere to refer to a sphere of political communication that stands between civil society and the state. Following Habermas, we understand this sphere to be “wild,” unstructured, and contain multiple forms of political communication (Habermas, 2009). Communication is highly mediated and disaggregated and ranges along a vast multidimensional continuum from everyday talk to formal deliberation and includes a growing number and variety of digital platforms. Furthermore, the broad unstructured public sphere contains multiple sub-publics.

⁴Notice that we do not suggest that the broad public sphere is, ought to be, or could be home to high-quality ideal deliberation in a narrow sense. Such deliberation requires institutional structures and design not present in the broad public debates.

⁵The difference between misinformation and disinformation is that the latter is an intentional strategy by an agent to deceive for a purpose, while the former is false or unreliable information circulating in the public, but which cannot easily be tied to an agent’s strategic agenda. Mal-information is information that may be accurate but is introduced into the public sphere to sow discord and division.

⁶In October 2021, Facebook, the corporation, changed its name to Meta creating distance between itself and the social networking platform. In this paper, we retain the name Facebook.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Simone Chambers is Professor and Chair of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine. She is a political theorist who teaches and writes about democratic theory, critical theory, and the public sphere.

Jeffrey Kopstein is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine. He teaches and writes about comparative politics and antiliberal tendencies in civil society.

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