Disinforming Democracy:
The Manifested Power of Manipulation

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29.03.2021

Main Points:

- A group of pro-Trump protesters stormed the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021. This occurrence is a result of persistent disinformation where conspiracy theories became a reality for the protesters, who were enabled to take action against a securitized threat.
- Individuals responsible for pushing conspiracy theories have had their voices amplified through authoritative media outlets and high-ranking officials, including Donald Trump.
- The dynamics focused on spreading, legitimizing and exploiting disinformation create a novel and escalating security risk of formidable potential at a global scale.
- Actions like censoring will result in merely pushing relevant groups into more distant corners of the Internet, showcasing an equally formidable versatility in response.

Preface: Controlling One's Own Reality

On January 6th 2021, the US Capitol building was breached for the first time in over 200 years, this time not by the British, but by angry protesters that sought to prevent the certification of Joseph R. Biden as the 46th President of the United States.[1] Among the outcomes of this riot, seven people died (5 in the riot, 2 by suicide),[2] many US officials were put in danger, including then-Vice President Mike Pence,[3] and Nancy Pelosi's laptop was allegedly at risk of being sold to Russia.[4] This riot was preceded by a rally held at the White House by Donald Trump, where visual descriptions of resistance were vocalized towards the attendees, including notions that without fighting, there "would not be a country [for them] anymore".[5] The damage and location of the riots emphasize that disinformation can harm national security regardless of its location or strength.

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[1] Holpuch A. (2021), "US Capitol's Last Breach Was More Than 200 Years Ago", available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/06/us-capitol-building-washington-history-breach

[2] Emma C., Ferris S. (2021), "Second Police Officer Died by Suicide following Capitol Attack", available at: https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/27/second-officer-suicide-following-capitol-riot-463123

[3] Pramuk J. (2021), "Graphic New Footage Shows Mob Breaking into Capitol, Pence and Romney Rushing from Danger", available at: https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/10/trump-impeachment-new-video-shows-capitol-riot-romney-and-pence-evacuating.html

[4] Associated Press (2021), "Woman Accused of Helping Steal Pelosi Laptop, Plotting Sale to Russia, Freed from Jail", available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/woman-accused-helping-steal-pelosi-laptop-plotting-sale-russia-freed-n1255153

[5] Savage C. (2021), "Incitement to Riot? What Trump Told Supporters Before Mob Stormed Capitol", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/10/us/trump-speech-riot.html

To explore this ability, an understanding of how disinformation is accepted is essential. Psychologically, in times of great uncertainty, the mind seeks to find solace in clarity and justification of the situation it finds itself in. People would seek out information to make sense of their circumstances, led by a "drive to casual understanding" that focuses not only on the "cause" of an event, but also on the "reasons" it happened to create a sense of control over their lives.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic and the related phenomenon of relying more on social media to stay in touch with other people have created perfect conditions for instilling uncertainty.[7] Because of this, more people risk being exposed to disinformation on social media, which results in conspiracy theories being accepted due to this need to keep perceived control over one's own lives. Social media is particularly equipped for spreading disinformation, as observed in the example of the misidentification by 4chan users of the perpetrator of Charleston's 2017 car attack, which relied on visual content to spread their theory before official identification contradicted their claims.[8]

Disinformation is not limited to the obscure corners of the Internet. On the contrary, it can be used by various bigger or even mainstream media outlets which have an interest in sharing so-called "clickbait" to compete for large number of views, with the extent of such shares being occasionally on a par with "professional news": a concept called "trading up the chain".[9] As visual content is prone to less criticism than text,[10] disinformation can appear as a decisive solution to people's subconscious need to seek simple, reason-focused explanations for the world around them. **The US Capitol rioters have been subjected to large amounts of audiovisual and text-based disinformation, appearing particularly credible if shared from a source they perceive as trustful, such as then-President Donald Trump.** Taking as an example the campaign to overturn the 2020 election alone, Trump spearheaded the campaign that sought to claim that Joe Biden "stole the election" from the nation since

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[6] Ichino A. (2018), "Superstitious Confabulations", Topoi 39, p. 203-217, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-9620-y

[7] Koeze E., Popper N. (2020), "The Virus Changed the Way We Internet", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html

[8] Krafft M. P., Donovan J. (2020), "Disinformation by Design: The Use of Evidence Collages and Platform", Political Communication (37:2), available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1686094

[9] Freelon C., Wells C. (2020), "Disinformation as Political Communication", Political Communication (37:2), p. 145-156, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755

[10] Hameleers M. et al. (2020), "A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies? The Effects and Mechanisms of Multimodal Disinformation and Rebuttals Disseminated via Social Media", Political Communication (37:2), p. 281-301, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1674979

November 4th 2020, using the advantage he had before the mail-in ballots arrived as one of the many arguments for his claims.[11] **For Trump's supporters, this may as well have been the working justification to the uncertainty they felt after he lost.** While this narrative was supported by voters, politicians and some news outlets, within the scope of this paper, QAnon will be a subject of a case study and as such will be analyzed through the lenses of how disinformation can be spread and inflict damage.

The Dynamics of Disinformation: QAnon and Spreading Conspiracy Theories Online

The ability of QAnon followers to spread their theories online, via text or audio-visual content, as well as their ability to be shared by other media qualify them as a phenomenon notable enough to be a facilitator for understanding the damage of disinformation. The online spread of their theories has led a large group of people to encounter their content at least once, thus amplifying their impact and reach across the Internet. Yet, while their involvement in the US Capitol riot will be explored, it must be noted that not all those who support Trump are part of QAnon, with the movement being perceived only as a section of his supporters overall.

QAnon is a movement based on a shared belief in the conspiracy theory (and its variations) that the world is led by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles and that Donald Trump is secretly waging a war against it.[12] Donald Trump, in response, did not acknowledge the theory but praised its believers' appreciation for him,[13] and defended them on occasions, calling them "people who love [the US]".[14] QAnon's relation to Trump, as well as its theories, became a recurring pattern that led its followers to participate in the US Capitol riots.[15] Furthermore, not only did their participation, ability to contribute to the process of pre-

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[11] Buchanan L. et al. (2021), "Lie After Lie: Listen to How Trump Built His Alternate Reality", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/09/us/trump-voter-fraud-election.html

[12] Wendling M. (2021), "QAnon: What Is It and Where Did It Come From?", available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/53498434

[13] Associated Press (2020), "Trump Praises QAnon Conspiracists, Who 'Like Me Very Much'", available at: https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-08-20/trump-praises-qanon-conspiracists-appreciates-support

[14] Miller Z. et al. (2020), "'These Are People Who Love Our Country': Trump Praises QAnon Conspiracists", available at: https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/politics/president-trump/these-are-people-who-love-our-country-trump-praises-qanon-conspiracists/2576603/

[15] Rubin O. et al. (2021), "QAnon Emerges as Recurring Theme of Criminal Cases Tied to US Capitol Siege", available at: https://abcnews.go.com/US/qanon-emerges-recurring-theme-criminal-cases-tied-us/story?id=75347445

planning or make calls to action[16] secure them greater media exposure, but also put the spotlight on their potential to cause harm to state institutions if left unchecked.

However, controlling or countering its spread of disinformation is easier said than done. For example, QAnon has echoed Trump's narrative that there were "illegal" mail-in ballots in key state Georgia — a theory that was debunked.[17] Equally, their leading theory about a military takeover in the US or mass arrests against the satanic cabal was disproven.[18] Yet, discrediting their theories proves to have a limited effect on its followers.[19] While the inauguration left some of the QAnon followers in a state of confusion, there are strong calls to double down on their beliefs.[20] This persistence in the face of a contradicting reality is evident in the perception of other Trump voters; in January 2021, three-quarters of them revealed that they believe he won the election.[21] All of these examples of skepticism are also echoed by the aforementioned misidentification of the Charleston attacker, where 4chan boards and followers questioned the legitimacy of the posters' theory, but it persisted nonetheless.[22] Yet, since fact-checking is considered an effective way in fighting disinformation,[23] it is worth arguing that fact-checking alone is a necessary but slow counter-tactic. Such resilience proves that the deconstruction of disinformation will not always result in ending its influence; merely weakening the faith of some believers and reinforcing that of others. This resilience, when complemented by widespread sharing on social media, turns disinformation into a phenomenon that is extremely hard to control. **In light of the fact that much disinformation spread before the riot itself, and the fact that the participants believed such lies which encouraged them to storm the Capitol building, the potential, long-term threat these narratives pose should**

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[16] Kuznia R. et al. (2021), "Extremists Intensify Calls for Violence Ahead of Inauguration Day", available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/08/us/online-extremism-inauguration-capitol-invs/index.html

[17] Spencer H. S. (2020), "Bogus QAnon Claim that Mail-In Ballots Are Illegitimate", available at: https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/bogus-qanon-claim-that-mail-in-ballots-are-illegitimate/

[18] Reuters (2021), "Fact Check: No Evidence to Support QAnon Claims of Mass Arrests, Military Takeover, Illegitimacy of Biden's Presidency or Trump's Return to Power", available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-qanon-military-theories-idUSKBN29R1ZA

[19] Rose J. (2020), "Even If It's 'Bonkers,' Poll Finds Many Believe QAnon And Other Conspiracy Theories", available at: https://www.npr.org/2020/12/30/951095644/even-if-its-bonkers-poll-finds-many-believe-qanon-and-other-conspiracy-theories

[20] Rogers K. (2021), "What Comes Next for QAnon Followers", available at: https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-comes-next-for-qanon-followers/

[21] Pew Research Center (2021), "Biden Begins Presidency With Positive Ratings; Trump Departs with Lowest-Ever Job Mark", available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/01/15/voters-reflections-on-the-2020-election/

[22] Krafft M. P., Donovan J. (2020), "Disinformation by Design...", online.

[23] Hameleers M. et al. (2020), "A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies?...", online.

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not be underestimated in the future, particularly if they are used by widely trusted authority.

The people following QAnon should not be identified by stereotypes: they originate from wide-ranging backgrounds, including lower or middle class; there are also highly educated people **and even US House of Representatives members, such as Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, among them.**[24] From the "QAnon Shaman", who played a major role during the Capitol riot,[25] to a Harvard-educated "digital soldier" spending her time supporting Donald Trump,[26] the impact conspiracy theories can have on various demographic groups has few limitations. In September 2020, a Civiqs poll discovered that over 33% of Republicans believe at least in some of the QAnon theories,[27] while another one in February 2021 discovered that Republicans have the smallest percentage of people not seeing themselves as QAnon supporters (50% versus 93% among Democrats).[28] While the accuracy of these online polls can be debated, this implies a high probability for Trump's supporters to agree with QAnon narratives. Given the online nature of QAnon, people following such theories may seek to join groups online and amplify their beliefs by sharing online content, creating "epistemic bubbles" and "echo chambers".[29] Since people of virtually any background can share the content quickly, which is psychologically more difficult to be skeptical of,[30] such threads can quickly expand and become more credible when reinforced by other users. Eventually, through "trading up the chain", this content would be shared by mass media as well as by journalistic outlets with similar political inclinations, thus reaching even greater and more varied audiences.[31] **Donald Trump was seen sharing QAnon conspiracy theories on his**

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[24] Levin S. (2020), "QAnon Supporter Marjorie Taylor Greene Wins Seat in US House", available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/03/qanon-marjorie-taylor-greene-wins-congress

[25] Sky News (2021), "Trump Supporter Riots: Horn-Wearing 'QAnon Shaman' Jake Angeli Arrested and Charged", available at: https://news.sky.com/story/trump-supporter-riots-horn-wearing-qanon-shaman-jake-angeli-arrested-and-charged-12183494

[26] Roose K. (2021), "A QAnon 'Digital Soldier' Marches on, Undeterred by Theory's Unraveling", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/17/technology/qanon-meme-queen.html?searchResultPosition=1

[27] Civiqs/Daily Kos (2020), "Report: Americans Pessimistic on Time Frame for Coronavirus Recovery", available at: https://civiqs.com/reports/2020/9/2/report-americans-pessimistic-on-time-frame-for-coronavirus-recovery

[28] Civiqs/Daily Kos (2020), "Are You a Supporter of QAnon?", available at: https://civiqs.com/reports/2020/9/2/report-americans-pessimistic-on-time-frame-for-coronavirus-recovery

[29] Nguyen C. T. (2020), "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles", Episteme 17 (2), p. 141-161. available at: doi:10.1017/epi.2018.32

[30] Hameleers M. et al. (2020), "A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies?...", online.

[31] Freelon C., Wells C. (2020), "Disinformation as Political Communication", online.

now-suspended Twitter account,[32] which reached millions of people and served as a form of legitimizing QAnon theories, enabling them to intensify their efforts as they would see Trump's retweeting as an acknowledgement of their "truth".

Non-believers tend to alienate themselves from QAnon followers, and vice versa.[33] Moreover, non-affiliated Trump voters may face prejudice over their votes and deepen partisanships as a result.[34] This ultimately pushes them towards groups with mutually shared beliefs, polarizing them and rejecting factual discourse. Through this marginalization, not only would QAnon receive more followers, but they would be less prone to reject their disinformation-based reality due to prior hostility from non-believers. Retaining new followers is also made easier by antagonizing the media,[35] as new and old followers would choose alternative channels of information to support their beliefs, thus deepening their involvement with such groups.

In equal measure, high-ranking figures may exploit such theories and empower their followers' beliefs enough to seduce crowds to act in a self-serving fashion. Considering their position and reach, one may interpret these attempts as political rhetoric; yet, various radicalized followers — within QAnon or other groups — may interpret this differently. There are multiple accounts of QAnon followers carrying forth an attack enabled by their beliefs, marking the movement as a possible security threat before the Capitol storm.[36] The founder of Oath Keeper, a far-right group of former and current members of the US military and police, was accused by the Justice Department of coordinating parts of the siege.[37] These attacks were based on pre-established radical beliefs. Waging disinformation campaigns on these groups and combining them with narratives which may be interpreted as calls to action can result

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[32] Nguyen T. (2020), "Trump Isn't Secretly Winking at QAnon. He's Retweeting Its Followers.", available at: https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/12/trump-tweeting-qanon-followers-357238

[33] Roose K. (2021), "A QAnon 'Digital Soldier'...", online.

[34] The New York Times The Daily (2021), "'What Kind of Message Is That?': How Republicans See the Attack on the Capitol", online podcast transcript, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/podcasts/the-daily/trump-supporters-biden-transition-capitol-riot.html?action=click&module=audio-series-bar&pgtype=Article&region=header&showTranscript=1

[35] Vernon P. (2018), "Trump's Press Bashing Reaches a Critical Mass", available at: https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/trump-press-violence.php

[36] Amarasingam A., Argentinó M. A. (2020), "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?", CTCSentinel, 13:7, p. 37-42, available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/the-qanon-conspiracy-theory-a-security-threat-in-the-making/

[37] Polantz K. (2021), "Oath Keepers Founder Directed Capitol Rioters on January 6, Justice Department Says", available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/09/politics/oath-keepers-capitol-riot-justice-department

in these groups resorting to defend constructed realities with force. In addition, Biden's promise of unity may fall on deaf ears, as pro-Trump followers, from QAnon or not, may not recognize President Biden as a figure of authority due to continuous efforts to undermine the legitimacy of his victory in the 2020 election.[38] **This rejection of truth is a success of disinformation that will continue to harm US domestic politics, and it sheds light on the unique resilience and potential mass manipulation of facts can have in damaging national security.**

The Damage of Disinformation: A Persistent Security Threat

When it was becoming clear that Trump was losing the election, the long-prepared campaign to claim electoral fraud fully manifested.[39] But, more importantly, the "stop the steal" campaign would be filled with disinformation targeted at supporters, with the intent of making them reject the result, through the presentation of false evidence regarding voter fraud.[40] While this pushed many to support this movement, it also pushed others to take extreme action, such as armed protesters gathering at Michigan's Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson's home.[41] Various conspiracy theories were pushed by Trump, his team and affiliated media in an attempt to keep the White House.[42] The length of any disinformation campaign positively correlates with the impact it has on the public, which can often tune in to this rhetoric, creating a base where one can escalate towards achieving their goals. **Yet, despite failing to prevent the certification, Trump never conceded defeat and vowed he and his movement would be back.[43]**

While the damage caused by the Capitol riot is vastly documented, a special consideration must be made over the sheer possibility of further damage. The Capitol break-in occurred during a US Senate meeting, which, coupled with bland security efforts, left many

[38] Pew Research Center (2021), "Biden Begins Presidency With Positive Ratings...", online.

[39] Victor D. (2021), "Takeaways on Trump, Voter Fraud and the Election", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/us/politics/voter-fraud-disinformation.html

[40] Rutenberg J. et al. (2021), "77 Days: Trump's Campaign to Subvert the Election", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/31/us/trump-election-lie.html

[41] O'Kane C. (2020), "Dozens of Armed 'Stop the Steal' Protesters Threaten Michigan Secretary of State Outside Her House", available at: https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michigan-protest-jocelyn-benson-secretary-of-state/

[42] Rosenberg M., Rutenberg J. (2021), "Key Takeaways from Trump's Effort to Overturn the Election", available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/01/us/politics/trump-election-results.html

[43] Mercer D. (2021), "Donald Trump Vows 'We Will Be Back' As He Leaves White House After Four Years as President", available at: https://news.sky.com/story/donald-trump-leaves-the-white-house-after-four-years-as-president-12193425

high-ranking officials exposed to the physical risks posed by the protesters. Of all the threats, special attention should be paid to the safety of the Vice President Pence who had a so-called "nuclear football" 30 meters away from rioters[44] who claimed they wanted to "hang" him.[45] In case of the rioters reaching Pence, there would be a chance they could not only harm him, but also risk acquiring the nuclear codes. While the launching procedures may prevent them from being effective or feasible for being sold to foreign actors, the optics of the US losing its nuclear codes to an angry mob while a new commander-in-chief was being certified would greatly damage the US' credibility in the world. This risk is only further augmented by the fact that some protesters had combat training and the riots showed signs of being planned in advance.[46] Cementing the very potential of disinformation as an intangible security threat, or at least a platform for increasing other security threats, especially when it involves people who have previously received combat training.

The post-riot response was to censor social media activities of the protesters and radical groups involved and issue hundreds of arrest warrants. However, their success in storming the Congress is a proof of various radical organizations' capabilities and it will be used as part of recruitment campaigns.[47] Despite the extensive censorship efforts made to control the ability of these groups to spread their ideology online,[48] **this will only result in the followers looking for alternative ways to communicate and pursue their goals.** The shutdown of Parler,[49] a social media website where far-right members used to gather, which is part of the campaign to silence their discourse, would ultimately force these members to seek alternatives and

[44] Borger J., (2021) "Mike Pence's 'nuclear football' was potentially at risk during Capitol riot", Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/12/mike-pence-nuclear-football-capitol-riot

[45] Pengelly M. (2021), "'Hang Mike Pence': Twitter Stops Phrase Trending After Capitol Riot", available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/10/hang-mike-pence-twitter-stops-phrase-trending-capitol-breach

[46] Perez E., Prokupecz S. (2021), "Investigators Looking into Planning of Capitol Riot", available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/10/politics/capitol-riot-investigation/index.html

[47] The New York Times The Daily (2021), "Is More Violence Coming? Social Media Platforms Have Raced to Bar Organizers of the Attack on the Capitol. Will That Make a Repeat Less Likely, or Just Harder to Prevent?", online podcast transcript, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/podcasts/the-daily/capitol-attack-social-media-parler-twitter-facebook.html?action=click&module=audio-series-bar&region=header&pgtype=Article

[48] Hart R. (2021), "Twitter Has Removed More Than 70,000 Accounts Linked to QAnon Conspiracy Since Capitol Riots", available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/roberthart/2021/01/12/twitter-has-removed-more-than-70000-accounts-linked-to-qanon-conspiracy-since-capitol-riots/?sh=3ad57caa3be3

[49] Khalili J. (2021), "Parler 'May Never Return' After AWS Shutdown", available at: https://www.techradar.com/uk/news/social-media-platform-parler-may-never-return-after-aws-shutdown

establish communities in encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram or Signal, which would make it more difficult to track them due to the apps' inherent privacy features.[50]

This marginalization will not only cause greater difficulties in finding them, but also result in their consolidation as communities with shared beliefs and motives, eventually becoming more exclusive groups. Radical, violent extremist groups can begin to use disinformation as a basis for convincing others to join them. As mentioned in the introduction, this operation can become particularly effective considering the high degree of uncertainty among people, who may be more keen to accept disinformation narratives as an answer for their existential needs.[51] These groups can escalate towards organizing further violence, seeing their acts as part of fulfilling a mission that aligns with their reality.[52] The groups which participated in the US Capitol storm can even use their "success" in the riots as a foundation for legitimacy and feasibility of their acts, thus encouraging other ones. In case of such violence occurring, the activity in these groups can also intensify and amplify mutual disinformation, especially if the forum activity is more emotionally-driven.[53] Finally, as alt-right movements rely more on online communities, countering their actions becomes more complex due to geographic location, diverging legal frameworks, and logistics.[54] **The dynamics of online disinformation, including its creation, spread and effects, have a unique potential for actors to reinforce and act on their beliefs under the cover of encryption and member vetting, despite possible growing skepticism and continuous debunking.[55]**

From a geopolitical point of view, disinformation is a tool that can weaken actors' power internationally, for instance by altering internal affairs to align it closer to the perpetrator's needs at the victim's expense. Since the effectiveness of disinformation may

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[50] Hart R. (2021), "Twitter Has Removed More Than 70,000 Accounts...", online.

[51] Rottweiler B., Gill P. (2020), "Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-Efficacy, Self-Control and Law-Related Morality", Terrorism and Political Violence, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288

[52] Rousis G. J. et al. (2020), "The Truth Is Out There: The Prevalence of Conspiracy Theory Use by Radical Violent Extremist Organizations", Terrorism and Political Violence, Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1835654

[53] Baele S. J. et al. (2020), "The 'Tarrant Effect': What Impact Did Far-Right Attacks Have on the 8chan Forum?", Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2020.1862274

[54] Hodge E., Hallgrimsdottir H. (2020), "Networks of Hate: The Alt-Right, 'Troll Culture', and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online", Journal of Borderlands Studies (35:4), p. 563-580, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2019.1571935

[55] Krafft M. P., Donovan J. (2020), "Disinformation by Design...", online.

increase due to its longevity, foreign actors may be incentivized to devote their time to increasing efficiency in the long term. An example of a foreign actor spreading disinformation is the Internet Research Agency, a Russian organization which supported Donald Trump's campaign back in 2016.[56] **The agency used a multi-platform approach that ranged from using both humans and bots to generate considerable traction of pro-Trump content on Reddit, Twitter and more. They also experimented with various content to measure reactions, a technique called "trail ballooning".[57] Bots accounted for more than 25% of the retweets about Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which resulted in a significant contribution to creating a narrative that would be appropriate to his base.[58]**

The US Capitol riot, being a product of continuous disinformation which led to violence, has also caused damage to the US' reputation internationally, a perspective echoed by Ukraine's President Zelensky.[59] The riots attempting to prevent a peaceful transition of power, undermining the cornerstone of a supposedly inspiring democratic system around the world, led to the condemnation from various allies and placed international contenders such as China and Russia advantageously. In the future, the US will see weaker efficacy in its soft power exertions, while various authoritarian regimes use the event to consolidate their positions domestically by claiming illegitimacy of the US' democracy. **Internationally, United State's reputation as a "beacon of democracy" is severely tarnished by the unrest, and thus its soft power could be undermined, with states now having the opportunity to relate to this event next time the US attempts to promote democratic ideals or influence certain regions in the world.[60]**

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[56] Lukito J. (2020), "Coordinating a Multi-Platform Disinformation Campaign: Internet Research Agency Activity on Three US Social Media Platforms, 2015 to 2017", Political Communication (37:2), p. 238-255, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1661889

[57] Lukito J. (2020), "Coordinating a Multi-Platform Disinformation Campaign...", online.

[58] Marlow T. et al. (2021), "Bots and Online Climate Discourses: Twitter Discourse on President Trump's Announcement of US Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement", Climate Policy, p. 1-13, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1870098

[59] Swan J. (2021), "Exclusive: Ukraine's Zelensky Calls Riots 'Strong Blow' to US Democracy", available at: https://www.axios.com/ukraine-zelensky-capitol-riots-axios-hbo-f223c6d4-1aee-4779-a26d-f5f0eefb90f2.html

[60] Reuters (2021), "World Shocked by Trump Supporters' Attack on US Democracy", available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-international-reaction-f-idUSKBN29B2VS

Conclusion

The potential of disinformation to cause confusion, chaos and violence can be observed in many places around the world, and the US Capitol riot should be studied further through these lenses. The construction of an alternative reality based on disinformation, which is believed by many people and promoted or legitimized by entities in reputable positions, has severe and lasting consequences, ranging from manipulating domestic politics to the undermining of any state's position in the world. The capacity of disinformation to prompt people to take action in defense of a constructed reality has the real potential to become a serious security threat or to contribute to other threats, and it is a tool that has enough benefits to be used endlessly in the future. By taking many forms, and being amplified by either domestic or foreign actors, **not only will disinformation incite anger but also do real damage if relentlessly persisted upon. Knowing that this dangerous phenomenon is here to stay, perhaps it is worth concluding that the lifeblood of any democracy is its people, yet it is disinformation that can manipulate people against their own democracy no matter where it is.**

Recommendations for the European Union

- The fragmentation of the EU is a potential goal extensive disinformation campaigns aim to achieve across member states that showcase limited trust in the bloc. The EU must identify which members are most vulnerable to anti-EU disinformation and prepare to take counteraction in the form of raising awareness of the benefits and continuing achievements of the EU, while also promoting fact-checking as a first step towards preventing disinformation from entrenching in the populations of the member states.

- The EU's image as a bureaucratic institution and its complex political mechanisms are an inherent weakness since disinformation campaigns will use simplistic theories that would attract people easily. In one of potentially many attempts, the EU should try to connect with its citizens further through increased education campaigns as well as researching innovative ways to explain the EU's inner workings and operations to educate the citizens.

- Establishing of EU regulation intended to strengthen the fight against disinformation campaigns, both domestic and foreign, particularly online, as a stronger impetus to suppress misleading information that could lead to violence. Furthermore, establishing legislation that would promote the cooperation of member states would increase cohesion across the bloc.

- Cooperation with NATO institutions, especially StratCom, is necessary for raising awareness of disinformation as a security threat, as well as for combating it through different methods, including fact-checking and showcasing the legitimacy of the Alliance and the Union. Additionally, NATO and the EU should cooperate and treat disinformation as a novel tool used by international contenders who seek to undermine the bloc, and use their respective resources as part of a comprehensive strategy to counter this phenomenon.

- Establishing a dedicated, centralized EU headquarters focused on three mission strands: promoting the EU, educating its citizens about the bloc, and fighting conspiracy theories and disinformation can go a long way in helping people become resilient to information manipulation.

- Given the involvement of various national parties in sowing disinformation for personal political gain in the US, any action taken by the EU to combat disinformation on a continental- or Member States-scale should be designed to resemble anti-corruption agencies, working in an independent, non-political manner.

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