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WHY DOES DISINFORMATION SPREAD IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISINFORMATION, INEQUALITY, AND THE MEDIA

Hannu Nieminen

In principle, liberal democracy is about an equal right to decision-making and presumes a public sphere, equally open to all. However, in practice, this normative ideal, articulated, among others, by Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey, is farther away today than ever since WWII. The "real" public sphere, distinguished from its ideal, is harmed by conflicting and divisive interests, often presenting themselves in the form of information campaigns targeting the most vulnerable groups of society. The information offered is often labelled as disinformation, i.e. information that is misleading or purposefully false. However, this article claims that we must distinguish between different uses of the concept of disinformation. Although disinformation campaigns are increasingly harmful for democracy, the label of disinformation can be used to silence necessary critical voices and movements in society, thus promoting a public sphere based on a forced consensus. This article focuses on current European developments, although there are references to the developments in other continents as well. It is based on a review of recent research publications and public policy documents about different aspects of disinformation and inequality.

KEYWORDS inequality; disinformation; information disorder; social media platforms; elite media; middle class

Background

> The pervasive feeling that democracy has delivered unfair outcomes has undermined confidence in democracy and led some to conclude that alternative systems might produce better results […] economic and political inequality have grown so extreme that many are rejecting democracy. This is fertile ground for authoritarianism, especially for the kind of right-wing populism […].
>
> Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel laureate in economics, university professor at Columbia University and former chief economist of the World Bank, *The Guardian*, Friday, 1 September 2023.

Liberal democracy, in principle, is about an equal right to decision-making, i.e. every citizen must be guaranteed to have a voice concerning matters of common interest. It

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presumes a public sphere, equally open to all, where "something approaching public opinion can be formed" through public debate (Habermas 1974/1964, 49; see also Habermas 1962/1992; Dewey 1927/2016). In practice, however, this normative ideal is farther away today than ever since WWII because of increasing inequality and social polarisation. Today, the reality of the public sphere, distinguished from its ideal, is increasingly harmed by conflicting and divisive interests, often presenting themselves in the form of disinformation campaigns that target the most vulnerable groups of society.

All major European institutions have called upon their member states – as well as all stakeholders, including the corporate world and civil society organisations – to join the fight against disinformation (European Commission 2018, 2022; European Parliament 2022; OSCE 2017). This article focuses on the relationship between public concern over disinformation and the increasing levels of inequality experienced globally (Savage 2021; Chancel et al. 2023). The basic argument put forward here is that the dynamics of growing inequality also increase popular discontent and distrust towards political and economic power holders, which, on its part, creates room for vulnerability to all kinds of dis- and mis-information, such as rumours, fake news, hate speech, etc. Therefore, the question is, "To what degree can this vulnerability be seen as intentionally deployed by dominating elites to divert public attention from resolving inequalities and other power imbalances by projecting threats caused by disinformation – i.e. thwarting critical public discussion about the power relations maintaining inequalities?"

From the viewpoint of democratic theory, disinformation, or deliberately spreading false information, most often relates to disagreements about policy goals. By spreading misleading information, opponents aim to increase their influence and power to control and change policies. The problem with disinformation is not that it is based on policy disagreements, as disagreement is an elemental part of liberal democracy; however, disagreements serve democracy only as far as they are based on values that are shared by all parties of the democratic polity (European values as codified by the European Union, see European Union 2012). What makes European governments so alarmed about disinformation is that some of the actors seem to use it not only to challenge democratic policies but also to deny even the core values of European democracy.

The first part of this article presents a short review of the "conventional wisdom" on disinformation, i.e. how the concept is usually defined and interpreted. In the second part, this aspect is criticised and challenged by suggesting that the solutions offered for fighting disinformation constitute merely reactive measures that do not offer an effective remedy to the effective circulation of disinformation. The third part of the article discusses the multicrisis situation we are faced with at present and how it might correlate with the spread of disinformation. We are experiencing consistent growth in inequality simultaneously with major changes in the sphere of the media. How are these processes related? The fourth part of the paper outlines five different types of political reactions linked to the crisis tendencies outlined above. Finally, the concluding section presents suggestions for further research as well as several policy recommendations.

Conventional Wisdom on Disinformation

Although there is no official definition of disinformation, it can essentially be defined as "false information spread in order to deceive people" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023a). It is

frequently contrasted with related concepts, such as misinformation, which denotes "wrong information, or the fact that people are misinformed", but does not indicate purposefulness (ibid.). A recent neologism is the word "malinformation", which occurs "when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere" – in other words, the spreading of actual information with a malicious purpose (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017; Cambridge Dictionary 2023b). Together, these three terms – disinformation, misinformation and malinformation – are referred to as information disorder (ibid.).

In addition, disinformation is closely related to the more traditional concept of propaganda. Sometimes, they are used as exchangeable terms (e.g. Kandel 2020), and the difference between them is often difficult to observe; however, disinformation seems to be linked more to the digitalised communication environment, whereas propaganda refers more to traditional communication media (Bauer et al. 2021). Some related but less frequently used terms include psychological warfare, soft power and hybrid warfare (see Surowiec 2017; Splidsboel Hansen 2017).

Three main groups are usually mentioned when discussing who the actors are that spread disinformation. The first group comprises hostile foreign governments (e.g. Russia and China); the second group comprises domestic right-wing populist politicians and their supporters (e.g. Trump and the Brexit campaign) and the third – and no less important – group comprises social media platforms (e.g. X, previously known as Twitter, and Facebook) (See European Commission 2018; Bennett and Livingston 2018). The main threats that disinformation poses to European democracies can be divided into two main categories (e.g. European Commission 2018; Bauer et al. 2021):

- Disinformation increases general distrust in societies, leading to polarisation – for example, in issues related to politics, ideology, religion, ethnicity and sexuality – and creating a platform for moral panic and social instability.
- Disinformation aims to delegitimise the status of democratic institutions and public authorities – for example, by intervening in parliamentary and other elections and undermining the validity of expert knowledge and the truthfulness of quality news media.

The cases that are usually mentioned in this regard include disinformation campaigns related to the U.S. presidential elections in 2016, the UK Brexit campaign in 2016, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2022, the climate change and environmental crisis and the 2022 Russian invasion of and ongoing aggression in Ukraine (see Bauer et al. 2021).

Which main instruments are used to prevent the dissemination of disinformation? According to the literature, there are two main orientations with different tool packages. The first orientation understands disinformation in terms of a power struggle against "Them" or the "Other" as an enemy. Enemy information must be blocked and censured before it reaches "our" vulnerable population, which requires that we must be able to control the information and monitor its content. This requires different regulatory means (statutory, co- and self-regulation) and devising technological solutions to block unwanted communication (algorithmic protection) (European Commission 2018, 2020).

The second orientation involves targeting the reception of and response to disinformation. First, the best protection against disinformation is education: people have to be educated to identify and resist false and untrue information, and the key instrument to

achieve this is media education and critical media literacy (see European Commission 2023a). This should be complemented by fact checking, which includes monitoring the veracity and factuality of the news before it is made public (e.g. IFCN 2023; META 2023). Successful fact checking results in false news being debunked – that is, publicly declared to be "fake news" (Popat et al. 2018).

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

As mentioned above, the concept of information disorder, covering dis-, mis- and mal-information, has gained increasing popularity both in policy documents and academic research (Monsees 2023; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Although information disorder is a catchy term, it can lead to conceptual difficulties. Suggesting a deviant and unacceptable state of affairs, information disorder seems to presume that there exists, or has existed, a normal and acceptable information order. What it is meant to be is left unclear, which means that the closest point of reference is the status quo – in other words, the information order built on "legacy" media (usually denoting traditional news media and quality journalism). However, there is a plethora of critical media and communication research questioning the democratic qualities of the present legacy media and the information order that it represents (Lichter 2017; Bennett 2016). In the absence of an analytical definition of information disorder, there is a danger of giving the legacy media an unintentional blank endorsement.

Other contested concepts include media education and, closely related to it, media literacy. There is a risk attached to treating media audiences and users as victims in need of tutelage and education (regarding problems in defining media literacy, see Potter 2022). From this viewpoint, people are regarded as vulnerable to disinformation because they suffer from a cognitive disorder or "knowledge gap" that must be corrected or cured by media literacy (education) (Wei and Hindman 2011). The problem is how to avoid paternalism and an overtly pedagogical approach when dealing with – and even intervening in – people's everyday behaviour and personal matters, such as their daily media diet and the content consumed.

A certain scepticism is directed towards the practices of fact checking and debunking, too. There are two kinds of questions. First, as fact checking is about seeking and interpreting unverified or false kinds of information, there is always a danger that this can turn into censorship, judging not only false facts but also "wrong" opinions. Another problem is whether the legitimacy of fact checking is denied, as is the case with Trump: even if his lies and those of his campaign managers are publicly exposed and debunked, he continues accusing the fact checkers of political and ideological bias and continues spreading falsehoods about the "Big Lie" (Jacobson 2023).

Similarly, the concepts of hybrid warfare and cyber security are regarded as problematic (see European Commission 2020, 2023b; European Parliament 2017). Hybrid warfare relates to conflicts characterised by "the use of a range of different methods to attack an enemy, for example, the spreading of false information, or attacking important computer systems, as well as, or instead of, traditional military action." (Cambridge Dictionary 2023c). Although many methods and instruments that are used to counter disinformation are public knowledge and openly promoted and discussed, there is a limit to openness and publicity when dealing with external threats against a particular country or organisation. Hybrid warfare requires the deployment of effective cyber security measures, defined as

"things that are done to protect a person, organisation, or country and their computer information against crime or attacks carried out using the internet" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023d). The question that arises here is the extent to which it is legitimate to keep not only the external threats to people but also the means for their defence and protection out of the public domain? To what extent can governmental secrecy be justified in the name of the public interest? (Council of Europe 2021; Bilal 2020).

Arguments: How Inequality and the Media Contribute to Disinformation

It seems clear that the reason why we appear so concerned about the spread of disinformation is the policy that, in the name of democracy, produces and enhances social, economic and cultural inequalities and injustices, thus creating fertile ground for (or even inviting) anti-democratic and racist political movements and their disinformation. From this, it follows that the ruling elites' concerns about disinformation are in direct relation to the level of experienced and expected inequality in society and the general feeling of injustice that inequality generates within society.

One means of trying to understand the present discourse on disinformation is to study it within its historical framework. This discourse has taken place in the midst of multiple mounting crises (the turbulence of the global economy and finances, the health crisis, military aggression and wars, the climate crisis, immigration and refugee crises, increasing domestic fragility in Europe and the US, etc.). Although these crises have led an increasing number of people to suffer in different ways, there is also a widely shared feeling that members of elite groups (politicians, economic and financial managers, trade union leaders, etc.) have abandoned or even benefited from the crises (Petras and Veltmeyer 2012).

Popular reaction to the neoliberal policies that have promoted inequalities has been uneven. The traditional left – political parties, labour unions as well as other traditional mass organisations – has not been able to create effective resistance, and this has cleared the way for a right-wing populism that benefits from the polarisation and destabilisation of the status quo (see Orenstein and Bugarič 2022; Bonanno 2019). The rise of the right-wing parties in Europe and Trumpism in the US has created a permanent atmosphere of political crisis. In this regard, developments in some European Union (EU) and NATO member countries – in particular, Hungary and Poland (until autumn 2023)[1] – are used as warning examples (Ponczek 2021; Csaky 2021). Public discourse becomes saturated with the permanent state of alarm and a division between "us" and "them" domestically (against right-wing populists), regionally (EU vs. Poland and Hungary) and globally (the West vs. Russia and China).

In general, efficient crisis management requires strong, decisive leadership and unequivocal public messages (see Bures 2020). To moderate the pressures from contradictory claims, leaders should both expose and address the origins of crises and offer a cure for those suffering from them. In the present crisis situation, top elites seem to avoid both these requirements; instead, they follow an alternative course of placing the blame on "the Other" – not the neo-liberal rule and increasing inequality – but the forces behind disinformation that foment discontent and distrust: right-wing populism, Russia and China and social media platforms (Coombs 2015; Brundage 2023). What the elites fear is the prospect of popular discontent turning into claims for the redistribution of income and wealth as well as social reforms (see Edgecliffe-Johnson, Fortado, and Fontanella-Khan 2019; Albertus and Menaldo 2014).

Consequently, the argument develops as follows: the more the inequality, the more the discontent, and the more the discontent, the more the vulnerability to disinformation; then, the more the discontent and disinformation, the more the ruling elites need instruments to control and discipline the popular mood. Then, the following question emerges: To what extent can the European panic over disinformation be interpreted as the ruling elites' response to increasing popular discontent?

As a result of the dynamics created by neoliberal policies and their inability to propose solutions to mounting crises, the distance between top elites and "the rest" of the population has widened.[2] As this gap relates to all main areas of public life – political, economic, social, cultural and so forth – it effectively creates barriers between the main social groups, who live separated lives, unable to understand each other's life circumstances (Hovden 2023; Exley 2023). However, the middle classes constitute a deeply divided category.[3] Due to the decline in their social status, increasing sections of the middle classes (both traditional and new middle classes, including small employers) increasingly feel that they are being treated unfairly in relation to their expectations and promises (Im et al. 2023; Remes 2019; Vaughan-Whitehead 2016; Savage 2015a). There is a direct relation between these feelings and the mounting distrust in the powers that be: the government, the media, science and large corporations (Hosking 2019; Hamilton and Safford 2021).

Do the Media Still Have a Mediating Function?

Naturally, there is nothing new about social and political discontent and dissatisfaction with the government and the economy. However, in the long period since WWII, social and political discontent has not usually attacked democracy as a political system and a set of values (see van der Meer 2017). What is different today is the direct challenge to both democratic institutions and fundamental democratic values posed by right-wing populist movements and their political parties. This challenge is in open defiance of the legitimacy of the judiciary, parliament and public authority in general – even when posed by parties that constitute the government (see USA, Hungary, Poland and European right-wing movements) (Quilter-Pinner et al. 2021).

To protect the status quo and the power relations thus far achieved, crisis management by elites requires uniformity of communication and conformity of action (Coombs 2015; Brundage 2023). To defend themselves against mounting public discontent and distrust, they require information that supports the elites' position and exposes the falsities and untruths of the counter-information (dis-, mis- and mal-information). Therefore, the significance of legacy media – or traditional quality news media – and their trusted expert sources increases (e.g. Majid 2023; EBU 2022). In addition, there is a proliferation of unverified pieces of information challenging "official" truths, aimed at serving the disappointed and the silenced (e.g. campaigns against COVID-19 vaccination, QAnon and the Illuminati networks) (e.g. Boberg et al. 2020).

It is obvious that the media have been unprepared for the crisis mode of communication. Traditionally, news journalism has faced different expectations that it had to balance, including the economic interests of publishers, the willingness of politicians and other sources, the trust of audiences and the professional integrity of journalists. Today, these expectations are being tested, perhaps more than at any other time since WWII, and in the following ways:

- Diminishing advertising income and rising production costs create pressure on news journalism to follow the rules of "clickbait" journalism (Lischka and Garz 2023), which means downplaying traditional news values in favour of topics that are emotionally most appealing to the widest audience.
- Due to the crisis mode of public communication, politicians and expert sources seldom deviate from "official" information, which is sanctioned by the political elite (with the exception of opposition sources, who are deemed partisan and unreliable).
- As a result of this media transformation, news media, and especially "hard news", now have increasingly fewer active followers – readers, listeners and watchers.
- In this conflictual situation, journalists are in the process of redefining their professional integrity and identity – specifically in terms of updating their journalistic values in the age of platforms and algorithms (Baron 2023; Bauder 2018).

How do the abovementioned aspects reflect on the role and function of news media? As we have noted, the consumption of news is already divided between those whose news diet is satisfied by free online offerings – the news services of social media platforms and headline news by the media houses, for example – and those who require "hard" news for their profession and for their social status – that is, members of elite groups in important political, economic and administrative positions. As hard news, i.e. political, economic/financial and cultural news, usually relates to the activities of these elites, society and the news media world reflect, to a great degree, the lives and concerns of privileged elites in contrast to the rest of the society (Schulz, Howard, and Nielsen 2019).

As has been established, the media tend to follow and support governmental policy during a major crisis, as a crisis is considered threatening to vital national interests. However, this applies only as long as the government's public message is unambiguous; as soon as rifts occur within the governmental coalition or the government's position seems to weaken, the elite consensus becomes strained and contested (on "indexing theory", see Bennett 1990; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2006). Recent examples include post-pandemic disagreements about the correct response to COVID-19 and the grudging unanimity of Western support for Ukraine in its defence against the Russian invasion (see Ward, Lynch, and Courea 2023; Haiko 2023).

The result is that elite or "trusted" media follow the government (as long as its message is unambiguous) (Johansson and Nygren 2019). Simultaneously, the need for public unanimity leaves opposition voices without effective public channels. This, on its own part, has opened the way for the proliferation of "alternative" sources that challenge and question the "official" truths and promote conspiracy theories (e.g. Ordway 2017; Herasimenka et al. 2023). In both cases, the functional logic of the digitalised and "platformised" information and communication environment seems to favour the model of communication from above (the "one-step flow of information"; Bennett and Manheim 2006), leaving the media user (or member of the audience) with the option only to support, resist or ignore the information, with little or no real opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue/deliberation with information providers.

Focus on Cases and Vulnerable Groups

The main argument of this article is that the general alarm over disinformation is a panic reaction against the multiple crises that threaten the status quo in the Global

North and that the main source of disinformation is the increasing inequality that creates grounds for discontent, which is further exploited by populist right-wing political movements and parties. This is not to deny that disinformation in its different forms, including mis- and mal-information, is a social, political and cultural problem. However, instead of a general alarm, this article proposes that we need to adopt a more analytical and nuanced approach to address disinformation and its root causes.

Accordingly, we propose a four-dimensional approach that focuses on the following: the most vulnerable groups, the main cases of disinformation, the countries most at risk and the root causes of disinformation.

1. *The most vulnerable groups*. Instead of a general panic about the effects of disinformation, should we not concentrate on the groups that are found to be the most vulnerable to its influence? There is inadequate analytical discussion about the real or verified effects of disinformation as such, although there is evidence of the effects of specific disinformation campaigns – in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. We know that the groups most vulnerable to the influence of disinformation generally include all those who are in danger of social and economic decline as well as those who personally feel the consequences of social injustice and unfairness. In each case and issue, should we not focus on groups that are most vulnerable just in relation to these aspects?
2. *The main issues*. Instead of suspecting all communication and information as potential "fake news", potentially hazardous and in need of fact checking and verifying, should we not concentrate on the main issues and cases that give cause for concern? As already mentioned above, in the numerous sources that deal with the problems of disinformation, five main cases and issues are mentioned: elections (e.g. U.S. presidential elections and the Brexit referendum), health threats (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic), wars and military threats (e.g. Russian and Chinese cyberwarfare) and cultural minorities (e.g. refugees and LBGTQ + people). Each of them has specific issues that should be studied, and in many cases, these issues are already being studied and analysed specifically instead of being bundled together under the umbrella concept of disinformation (or "information disorder").
3. *The countries at risk*. Instead of treating all EU member countries, for example, as potential targets of external and internal disinformation campaigns, should we not concentrate on the countries and societies which are most influenced and targeted? According to a 2018 Eurobarometer report (Eurobarometer 2018), in most European countries, most people are confident that they are able to identify fake news; however, there are countries in which concerns about fake news are very high. This is the case in the Baltic countries – in particular, where Russian hybrid warfare and disinformation are felt in people's daily lives.
4. *The root causes*. Instead of offering individualistic and reactive solutions to fight disinformation, such as media literacy and fact checking, and finding ways to effectively control social media content, should we not focus on addressing the root cause of disinformation, which is escalating social, political and economic inequality as well as the structures that are promoting it? In the words of Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, disinformation "is a symptom of the range of global diseases we face, one of which is systemic inequality, where deep-seated discrimination, increasingly fragile institutions, loss of trust in governance structures and

limited rule of law threaten stability and peaceful co-existence" (Bachelet 2022). To fight disinformation effectively, deep-seated social reforms, redistributive social policies funded by progressive taxation, restriction of the vast global power of a few digital monopolies and other measures aimed at establishing a more equal and democratic global society are required.

Five Types of Social Reactions to Disinformation

Above, we introduced the category of the most vulnerable groups as one of the areas that require further critical analysis to understand the dynamics of disinformation. In the following section, we examine the social and political reactions to disinformation more closely. Our aim here is to explain the social and political dynamics that together create fertile ground for disinformation to flourish and for the most vulnerable groups to emerge. There are two guiding arguments that are based on recently published research: first, in the course of the neoliberal era in which inequality has steadily increased, top elites – political, economic and cultural – have become isolated from the rest of society and developed an attitude of distrust of representative democracy (Kantola and Vesa 2023); second, much of the recent appeal of the radical right can be explained by the fear of a decline in status among the growing ranks of the middle classes (Im et al. 2023).

For further discussion, we place these two findings – the isolation of top elites and the declining status of the middle classes – within a wider framework with other political reactions and their social basis. We propose a typology of five broad groups based on what we know of their attitudes to parliamentary democracy: *the distrusting elites*, *civic activists*, *conformists*, *sceptics* and *retributionists*. These categories are derived from a variety of sources, primarily from sociology, political science and media and communication studies (see Hovden 2023; Im et al. 2023; van der Meer 2017; Savage 2015a, 2015b; Tiihonen 2021).

- *Distrusting elites*: Top elites, characterised by their wealth and social standing, live lives that are increasingly isolated from the rest of society (Hovden 2023). They subscribe, either consciously or by default, to the ideology of free-market liberalism, which is reflected in their distrust of parliamentary democracy and includes the conviction that inequality is justified by economic and fiscal realities. In their aversion to representative democracy, they prefer private lobbying to public dialogue or public relations campaigns to promote their political interests (Kantola and Vesa 2023). Politically, they support conservative-liberal parties. For their media diet, they prefer quality newspapers and journals (Kantola 2020; Kantola and Kuusela 2019; Kuusela and Kantola 2023).
- *Civic activists*: Activists do not trust traditional politics; instead, they emphasise themes and methods of "life politics" (Kavaliauskas 2011), endorsing extra-parliamentary movements and expressive actions. As their politics are heavily influenced by ethical and moral considerations (frequently referred to as "identity politics") (Heyes 2020; de Moor 2015), they are often engaged in various rights-based movements, including the rights of LBTQ + communities, environmental issues, animal rights and so forth (see Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021). Civic activists come primarily from the educated and professional middle classes; in politics, they exhibit green-left sympathies. Their media diet is very versatile but is concentrated on quality news media, both in print and online. For political mobilisation, they use social media platforms with professional competence.

- *Conformists*: People in this group are generally satisfied with the status quo, although they can be critical of certain or many particular aspects (e.g. health services, public transport and the power of big corporations). They trust in parliamentary democracy (at local, national and regional levels) to be able to correct major grievances. They support welfare policies and universal services, and they want to avoid open social and political confrontations (see Mauk 2021; Sirovátka, Guzi, and Saxonberg 2019). In politics, conformists usually support middling parties (centre-left and centre-right). They enjoy a diverse media diet, consuming primarily traditional media – both quality and popular press, both public service media and commercial television but fewer online news services. Moreover, they are active users of social media platforms in their everyday social communication.
- *Sceptics:* The members of this group are enduringly suspicious not only of social elites but also of parliamentary democracy. For some, this is at least partly inherited as part of the traditional working-class experience, according to which social injustice is always inherent in a capitalist system. Despite their scepticism, for them, representative democracy represents the best alternative for change and a legitimate way to change the power balance. In politics, sceptics generally support left-leaning or social democratic parties. However, an increasing tendency among sceptics is political passivity and withdrawal (Bertsou 2019; Baghramian and Panizza 2022). In their media use, sceptics primarily favour non-political content, as found in popular press and commercial television. Moreover, they have adapted to the services of social media platforms for their everyday news and social communication.
- *Retributionists (or cynics)*: Retributionists are disappointed in parliamentary democracy, as – despite the promises of equality and universality of public services – they feel betrayed by elites, both in politics and in economics and finance. The members of this group come from the middle classes, with entrepreneurial, professional and – increasingly – technological backgrounds. Common to all of them is a decline in social mobility due to present misfortunes (bankruptcies, redundancies, etc.) increasingly resulting from the digitalisation of production and administration (Lu 2020; Derndorfer and Kranzinger 2021). Having no experience of collective action, they experience injustices personally; for them, representative democracy does not offer a solution; instead, democracy is seen as part of the problem and structurally corrupt (Jones-Jang, Kim, and Kenski 2021). This has led retributionists to seek solutions from non-democratic movements; in politics, they tend to support right-wing populist parties. Their media diet is divided between popular media (popular press and commercial television) and "alternative" online news media. In social communication, they skilfully deploy social media platforms (Hatakka 2019).

If we accept this characterisation of the five groups as valid, even heuristically, how do we interpret the future dynamics between these different groups? In other words, where is this leading us today? Two critical observations seem to have arisen from the evidence. First, top elites' distrust of representative democracy and the populist right's anti-democratic attitudes appear mutually reinforcing, leading to an aspiration for strong leadership or even inviting more authoritarian political rule (see the developments in Hungary and Poland) (see V-Dem 2023; Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). Second, although a large majority of the populations in European countries still belong to the groups that defend parliamentary democracy, the danger is that their political representatives might

sacrifice democratic values when – aiming at political power and governmental positions – they seek support from populist parties (see the examples of Sweden and Finland; Novus 2023; Sullivan and Pihlajamaa 2023). Experience demonstrates that coalitions between traditional political parties and right-wing populists result in the former being held hostage to the populists' political strategy, resulting in a majoritarian democracy in which the rights of minorities are endangered.

Concluding Thoughts

This article began by contrasting the Habermasian and Deweyan ideal of the public sphere with its "real" form, which is today more divided than perhaps ever since WWII. The main argument has been that behind this division is the increase in inequality in its different forms – social, economic, political and cultural. The claim is that there is a direct connection between the increase in inequality and the escalation of disinformation: the more the inequality, the more the vulnerability to disinformation and the more the ruling elites need instruments to control and discipline the popular mood. To better understand and resist disinformation, we should divide the discourse on disinformation into two levels: disinformation campaigns against democracy and disinformation discourse as a disciplinary instrument. In the first instance, we have experienced disinformation campaigns in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic and several election campaigns, for example. These are real issues and threats against liberal democracy. However, the reactions of many public authorities and international organisations seem exaggerated, resulting in non-focused public campaigns on disinformation. Our conclusion is that these responses have been motivated, at least partly, by the fear of growing public discontent with neoliberal policies that promote inequalities.

The discourse on disinformation is based largely on a few generally accepted assumptions. One is that disinformation, in its different forms, originates from three main directions: hostile foreign governments, domestic right-wing populist actors and social media platforms. The second assumption is that disinformation must be fought on two fronts: primarily, it must be stopped before it enters our media and reaches our society (regulation and algorithmic protection); however, when it cannot be stopped, its effects must be minimised by measures such as fact checking and media and information literacy, among others. The problem with this conventional wisdom is that it neglects the core source of disinformation and its potential efficiency, namely increasing inequality and mounting popular discontent.

The role of the news media in countering the effects of disinformation is restricted by the multi-crisis situation in which we are living. This requires traditional news media to follow the governmental line of public communication, which enhances national security and unity. Once again, working against openness and diversity of opinion creates fertile ground for alternative voices and distrust in the news media. For journalists, the situation is confusing, as news journalism has traditionally aimed to balance the economic interests of publishers, their collaboration with politicians and other sources, the trust of their audiences and the professional integrity of journalists. This balance has been destabilised, and there is no clear answer as to how a new balance might be established and between which interests and values.

An analysis of political reactions in most EU countries to recent developments in both global and domestic politics reveals two worrying dynamics. First, top elites' distrust of representative democracy is today joined by the populist right's anti-democratic attitude; together, they are mutually reinforcing and leading aspirations for strong leadership, as observed in Hungary or Poland. Second, the danger is that democratic political forces will compromise their values when, fighting for power, they seek alliances with right-wing parties, as observed in Sweden and Finland, leading to a majoritarian democracy and endangering the rights of minorities.

Instead of a wide-ranging discourse of panic when it comes to disinformation, a more critical approach is proposed: one that includes the following four levels of analysis:

- We should focus more consistently on the core issues and problems that are the subjects of disinformation, such as elections, health threats, wars and military threats and hate speech against minorities.
- We should concentrate more on the groups that are most vulnerable to the influence of disinformation, especially people who are experiencing or are in danger of social and economic decline and who personally feel the injustice and unfairness of the policies promoting their troubles.
- We should devote attention to countries that have the most potential as targets for both external and domestic disinformation campaigns; obviously, this not only includes countries and societies on the Eastern and Southern borders of Europe but also – as we have experienced – traditionally strong European democracies, such as the UK and Germany.
- We should do much more to address the main cause of disinformation, which is escalating social, political and economic inequality. This requires radical re-orientation and major reform of the present European social and economic policies, as well as rigorous measures to establish a more equal and democratic global society.

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NOTES

1. The change of the government in Poland in late 2023 promises significant changes in both Poland's domestic and international policies.
2. In the UK's NS SEC classification, the elites consist of the occupational class 1 "Higher managerial and professional class". See Savage 2015b.
3. In the UK's NS SEC classification, middle classes cover occupational groups 2–5, from "Lower managerial and professional" to "Lower supervisory and technical" occupational classes. See Savage 2015b.

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