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# A Brief History of the Disinformation Age

*Information Wars and the Decline of Institutional Authority*

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Much attention has been focused in recent years on growing levels of disruptive communication – "fake news," disinformation, and misinformation – in contemporary democracies. Media organizations and social media platforms in many nations are circulating conspiracies, manufacturing "alternative facts," inventing imagined incidents, or blaming political opponents for real ones. By the time President Donald Trump reached his 1,055 day in office (December 10, 2019), he had misled or lied to the American people 15,413 times.[1] In one stretch prior the 2018 midterm elections, he averaged thirty false or misleading statements *per day*.[2] Undaunted by news reports of his habitual dissembling, Trump greeted the reports with the blanket retort of "fake news." Despite Trump's unprecedented role as "outliar-in chief," the mainstream press in the USA could not do much more than keep a running tally of his daily mendacity. Such mainstreaming of disinformation lends legitimacy to its proponents, and spreads confusion among the good burghers who cannot comprehend what is happening to their country.

In the argument that follows, we define disinformation as intentional falsehoods or distortions, often spread as news, to advance political goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis.[3] Different nations have their own versions of these problems, perhaps led by the USA and Brexit-era Britain, but versions of these problems exist in other democracies around the world. For example, large volumes of disruptive propaganda about immigrants and climate change have been produced by the Alternative für Deutschland party and its followers in Germany.

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There are also "illiberal" democracies, including Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, where disinformation supports a transition to more authoritarian regimes with overt press censorship and the suspension of basic rights and legal processes. Though our account is focused on the United States, we sketch a framework based on declining institutional authority that invites comparisons to other national cases and traces the roots of disinformation through several historical eras.

These ruptures in shared political reality undermine basic norms and communication processes on which democracies depend for policy-making, conflict resolution, acceptance of outcomes, and general civility. What explains these developments? How did facts become unhinged from important public policy debates and assessments of the worthiness of political leaders? Citizens still anchored by established democratic institutions often find these developments hard to fathom and more than a little unsettling.

We argue that a crisis of legitimacy of authoritative institutions lies at the heart of our current disinformation disorder. In a well-functioning public sphere, institutions anchor public debate in a mix of competing political goals and values, authoritative evidence claims, and norms and processes for communicating and resolving disagreements. Yet, those norms of reasoned debate between competing viewpoints have given way to wilful distortion and reckless prevarication that disrupt the basic functioning of democratic public spheres. For every fact that seems key to discussing important issues such as immigration or climate change, opponents are ready with alternative facts that distort perceptions of problems and solutions. Institutional arenas designed to articulate and resolve political differences through reasoned debate based on evidence are disrupted and fail to provide the gatekeeping roles that once kept politics bounded by a more or less shared set of institutional norms and processes. How did this happen? First, we will examine some of the conventional explanations that are currently circulating in society, and then offer a broader model of democratic disruption.

CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR DISINFORMATION

The origins of these developments remain poorly understood, though several standard explanations are heard on talk shows and the conference circuit. Many observers put the lion's share of blame squarely on social media.[4] There is, of course, good reason for this. Facebook and

YouTube, perhaps more than other platforms, have gamed algorithms to monetize animus and rage.[5] Yet as reasonable as concerns about this are, this account does not explain why the demand for disinformation has grown, or how selected content circulating on social media often becomes amplified in legacy media, despite fact checking and other flags raised by news organizations. While blaming social media addresses one element of a larger problem, this account misses the breakdown of institutional authority which has undermined trust in official information. In particular, putting the spotlight on social media alone, misses deeper erosions of institutional authority which involve elected officials – traditionally among the most prominent sources of authoritative information – themselves becoming increasingly involved in the spread of disruptive communication.

Despite these deeper issues, many suggestions about restoring reason and order in distressed public spheres emphasize fact-checking, media-literacy initiatives, or policies requiring media giants such as Facebook and YouTube to police content. Though generally well intentioned, these approaches are unlikely to produce the desired results, in part because growing numbers of citizens want to believe alternative facts that appeal to the deeper emotional truths and feelings of political and economic marginalization. Moreover, it is unlikely that elected officials supported by such followers would regard efforts to regulate their communication on social media as anything but censorship.

Nonetheless, the common-sense focus on fact-checking and correcting individual belief in improbable information, makes it understandable that many explanations emphasize individual cognitive processes. Some people are understood to be particularly susceptible to disinformation. Indeed, for some there appears to be a demand for emotionally soothing, if factually unsound narratives. Conspiracy theories and vitriolic content engage those vulnerabilities and use them to manipulate and deceive receptive populations. Other observers claim that conservatives, who circulate more of this kind of content, are motivated by a primordial fear of disorder.[6] More circumspect claims suggest only that there are discernible patterns in individual responses to new information. Those patterns reveal the effects of different information-processing styles, associated with varying demographic details (age, education, race, etc.) and contingent conditions.[7]

Many experiments have found a human tendency to privilege information aligned with prior beliefs. This is often referred to as confirmation

bias. Disconfirmation bias or motivated skepticism describes the same concept from the other direction. Together, both tendencies lead to polarization. To protect existing beliefs, individuals tend to seek out reasons to dismiss or avoid engagement with information that is disconfirming of prior beliefs, while seeking out emotionally soothing truths that confirm convictions. Some have even speculated that information at odds with existing beliefs is mentally reversed and understood in terms that are aligned with prior beliefs. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler found that a perverse "backfire effect" occurs when efforts to correct factually unsound beliefs leads to a deepening of convictions.[8] As happens with laboratory-based experiments, this finding failed to find support in subsequent experiments. Ethan Porter and Thomas Wood, for example, found little evidence for the presumed deepening of convictions found by Nyhan and Reifler.[9] Eventually, all four scholars came together around a single experiment that found that the backfire effect is indeed elusive, though people still stick with their deeper political convictions, irrespective of whether any given bit of information is factually sound. Trump supporters, as it turns out, take him seriously but not literally.

As interesting as these evolving research insights might be, their focus on isolated individuals asked to discern truth from fact – in real time, on a broad range of topics – seems a poor fit with either the political nature or the scale of the problem. Looking at how individuals process (dis)information seems to fit better with fact-checking and media-literacy approaches than with broader systemic explanations. Moreover, a key assumption of the individual effects research literature seems to be that people are operating in relative isolation. Yet even at the individual level in the social media age, people are not isolated information processors. They look for trusted information from their social networks and often participate in the production and distribution of large volumes of disruptive content.

Our point here parallels similar criticisms of framing research offered decades ago. For example, James Druckman and Kjersten Nelson's observations about the limitations of experimental research on framing effects, applies equally well to individual-level research about disinformation:

Analysts have documented framing effects for numerous issues in various contexts. Nearly all of this work uses surveys or laboratory experiments where individuals receive a single frame and then report their opinions, without any social interaction or access to alternative sources of information. Study participants thus find themselves in a social vacuum, receiving frames and reporting their opinions with no possibility to discuss the issue at hand.[10]

The application of an experimental research paradigm that stretches back to mass-media effects research half-century ago, seems out of synch with the current era of more interactive and differently cued and shared information. This seems a case of trying to fit old political communication models to a much different political, social, and technological era.[11] And, as noted above, many of these demand-side approaches circle back to recommendations to simply educate people about detecting and avoiding disinformation. In addition to avoiding the question of why so many people easily exchange facts for deeper emotional truths, support for fact-checking also rests on the assumption that errors occur episodically in an otherwise functioning information order. This understanding simply does not square with the industrial-scale production of broad and sustained disinformation narratives that define so much of the global political landscape. The propagation of misleading content is not a bug, it is a feature, as Facebook's refusal to correct wilful lies in political ads underscores. In this environment, relying on fact-checking and media-literacy campaigns seems rather futile, and is likely to appeal most to those who do not need them.

Other popular explanations point to the well-documented efforts of the Russians and other foreign governments to disrupt elections and amplify social conflicts in Europe and the United States.[12] Based on these concerns, international organizations from NATO to the EU have sought to uncover and counter various foreign sources of disinformation. In addition to international organizations, the recent period has witnessed an explosion in the number of research centers and institutes in Europe and the United States devoted to disinformation research. Each project maps episodes of foreign influence in Western democratic politics. Yet despite these concerted efforts, it remains unclear how hackers, bots, and sock-puppets – human-directed accounts using assumed identities – can be prevented from spreading fabrications, especially when they amplify widely available state propaganda channels such as RT and Sputnik. Even more challenging is the fact that *foreign* disinformation often amplifies narratives promoted by prominent *domestic* sources (or the other way around), including Fox News in the US, the most popular domestic 24 hour news channel. For example, during the historic impeachment process in 2020, Trump and his defenders claimed – contrary to broadly available evidence from investigations by state security agencies – that the hacking of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Clinton campaign emails in the 2016 election originated in Ukraine and not from Russia. This was an obvious lie, as his Republican Party defenders in Congress

certainly realized, along with his political advocates on Fox News. Trump and his disinformation chorus also claimed that a computer server at the heart of the DNC hack had been spirited away to Kyiv by a shady Ukrainian cybersecurity company. There was never a single server physically present at the party headquarters, and the security company was actually located in California. The conspiracy theory paralleled Russian state propaganda designed to draw away critical attention from the Kremlin's interference in the US 2016 election.[13]

Our concern is that these and other popular understandings of disinformation problems, along with the related solutions, tend to focus on the *symptoms* and not on the *causes* of contemporary communication disorders. Locating the trouble in social media, confused citizens, or with foreign governments, fails to explain the deeper origins of the problem. Our account draws on a broader examination of decades of capture and erosion of governing institutions by wealthy interests and aligned political elites, unable to sell their actual agendas to the public without increasing levels of disinformation. This disruptive communication is spread through think tanks, corporate deception, partisan political organizations, election campaigns, and by government officials inclined to spin and distort their truth claims to promote otherwise unappealing policies and actions. Both legacy and social media communicate these alternative realities to and from publics, who complete the disinformation circuit by spreading it, and by voting for politicians who confirm it. In the process, growing numbers of citizens withdraw support and confidence in public institutions and responsible officials who produce more trustworthy information. This set of problems did not just happen suddenly. In the next sections we look at some of the historical origins.

## A DEEPER INSTITUTIONAL EXPLANATION

In this accounting, our current post-fact era is best explained by the systematic weakening of authoritative institutions of liberal democracy. For decades, conspiracy theories and hateful and crackpot ideas have circulated on the fringes of society. In most earlier cases, they were held in check by institutional vetting and gatekeeping. Even the McCarthy Red Scare during the 1950s seemed an episodic exception to the rule, which ended when the Senate censured the Republican Senator from Wisconsin after he attacked the Army. In the more recent impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump, the Senate trial did not admit witnesses or

evidence, as the Republican majority deemed additional evidence unnecessary for the foregone conclusion of a pro-Trump verdict.

In the past, more responsible parties, trusted press institutions, and more functional election and institutional processes resisted bringing conspiracies into the center of politics. When large majorities of the population trusted parties, governments, and institutions at higher levels, unhinged ideas were not given traction in mainstream media. The current information disorder is the result of the erosion of liberal democratic institutions, especially those involved in vetting political claims according to the authority of evidence, and in accordance with established processes and norms. While there are few, if any, absolute truths in politics, assessing the plausibility and potential corruption of political actions is aided by such institutional gatekeepers as: independent judiciaries that adhere to rules of evidence and precedence in reaching decisions, peer-reviewed science, professional journalism that faces reputational costs for inaccurate reporting, and apolitical civil services that promulgate and enforce regulations according to best available practices and scientific evidence. Also among these institutions are political parties that are meant to organize and articulate collective demands and grievances according to the interests and goals of their constituencies.

When these institutions operate with high levels of public confidence, they produce information that is generally trusted and kept within the bounds of recognized social values, political norms, and conventional understandings about what is and what is not acceptable. Political debates are meant to hinge on contested interpretation of facts, or facts contextualized differently by competing values, but not on alternative facts. However, decades of corrosive political and economic pressure have eroded public confidence in these institutions. For example, as ideologies and competing views about regulating markets, or the role of government in providing social welfare, have faded, once distinctive political parties have turned to branding, product marketing, and strategic communication techniques to win votes.[14] In Europe, even parties such as the German Greens have drifted in neoliberal directions (e.g., pro-growth and market-based policy), favoring "green growth" and business-friendly policies in order to position themselves to enter government and gain shares of state support. Comparable disconnections between traditional party principles and voters also characterized the "Third Way" British Labor Party under Tony Blair, the Schroeder Social Democrats in Germany, and the Clinton Democrats in the United States in the 1990s. Similar changes in many

nations have ushered in an era of what Colin Crouch has called "post-democracy."[15]

Even greater institutional drift and values erosion has occurred in the US Republican Party. In the early 1960s, the party leadership soundly rejected fringe radicals like the John Birch Society and its mix of fervent anti-Communism and bizarre conspiracy theories.[16] In recent years, however, the party has embraced conspiracy theories and disinformation as a governing philosophy. Repeated so often, such theories have become tropes: climate change is a hoax; tax breaks for billionaires produce trickledown benefits for the poor and middleclass; and deregulation spurs innovation. As one recent account of the resurgence of the John Birch Society noted, "The Society's ideas, once on the fringe, are increasingly commonplace in today's Republican Party." As one contemporary Bircher in Texas noted, "State legislators are joining the group." Furthermore, the John Birch Society was reported to have common cause with "powerful allies in Texas, including Senator Ted Cruz, Representative Louie Gohmert and a smattering of local officials."[17] This vignette illustrates a much broader phenomenon. Institutions once able to vet truth claims, institutions that once defined a more cohesive public sphere, have fractured, leaving an epistemological vacuum filled by citizens who feel lost in a world spinning – and being spun – out of control.

## FROM SPIN TO DISINFORMATION

In this view, much of the disruptive communication we witness in contemporary democracies began in the growing emptiness, or what Murray Edelman called the banality, of mainstream political discourses.[18] The stretching of political credulity has grown over several decades as popular leverage over parties has shifted away from such mechanisms as labor movements on the left, and toward the greater influence of corporate business interests over economic and social policy. As a result of broad changes in both global and national economies over the last half-century, along with business pressures to shield economic choices from voters, the center-left and center-right parties in many democracies have lost touch with their traditional voters.

In our view, information credibility in democracies depends on authoritative sources offering a resonant mix of value positions, supported with varying degrees of evidence and reason about why those

positions make sense and how they could actually happen. When public confidence erodes due to lying, deception and a steady diet of spin and banal rhetoric from once credible authorities, the result is a decline in public trust in the information produced by those official sources, and in the press that carries their messages. This rupture of communication spheres – bounded by the interplay of citizens, parties, press, and public institutions – opens up communication spaces for ever-greater departures from conventional political reason and established civic norms. Put simply, as the legitimacy and credibility of authoritative institutions erodes, citizens are left adrift and in search of emotionally affirming alternative facts.

The preponderance of this transgressive, reason-bending communication stems largely from the radical right. From the Tea Party and, later, the Trump-inflected Republicans in the United States, to the Alternative für Deutschland party in Germany, the Sweden Democrats, or the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain that was displaced by a radicalized Conservative Party under Boris Johnson, a host of new or reinvented radical-right parties have adopted nostalgic, reactionary visions that support emotional nationalist agendas. These agendas attack elite "deep state" and "globalist" institutions with conspiracy theories, and widen social divisions with racism, religious hatred, alarming stories about migrants, and other exclusionary discourses. Later in the chapter, we discuss why disinformation tilts to the right, and why so many similar themes appear in different democracies.

Media and communication technologies do, of course, play a role in the process. With today's multimedia and international communication flows, there are ready supplies of disruptive information at hand and international political networks to coordinate its use. The rise of digital platforms and social media make it possible to reach large numbers of people, and to cross national borders with content that is far harder to monitor than that of legacy print and broadcast media. These flows of deception, propaganda, and divisive speech are proving difficult to regulate within traditional norms and laws about free speech. The regulatory challenges stem, in part, from the volume, speed, and opacity of social media networks, and, in part are due to the claims by movements and elected parties that such communication is legitimate.

Such disruptive communication inevitably enters mainstream public spheres that were once bounded by institutional gatekeepers. The

dilemma is that when large publics become detached from conventional norms of reasonable discourse, and elected politicians abandon facts that prove inconvenient to policy objectives, the rising volume of disinformation becomes impossible for the conventional press to ignore. After all, the things that elected officials say must be reported, and the positions of prominent parties cannot be ignored. As a result, citizens in many democracies today have choices between large competing alternative public communication spheres, each one engaged in the struggle to define the very norms of inclusion, rights, tolerance, and other protections that make liberal democracy different from other brands of politics. These struggles have become highly disruptive to the normative orders that make democracy a place where citizens can disagree reasonably and tolerate their differences.

### EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ORIGINS: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC MANAGEMENT

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed the American empire facing a variety of political challenges, from radical labor movements pitted against ruthless robber barons, to the specter of socialism spreading from Europe. European elites and intellectuals such as Carl Schmidt and Friedrich Hayek were engaged with similar concerns from a European perspective. The fears on both side of the Atlantic were amplified by the Russian Revolution and general political instability in Europe following World War I.

In this period, elites discussed strategies for the responsible management of popular passions to prevent further disruptions of political and economic systems, particularly in the United States, which had escaped the worst ravages of World War I and its aftermath. The idea of "managing" public opinion emerged from communication strategies used to shape public impressions of events such as the Ludlow, Colorado massacre in which armed guards of mine owner John D. Rockefeller, Jr., along with national guard troops, fired into an encampment of striking miners and their families. Ivy Lee, who was hired to burnish Rockefeller's grotesque public image presaged a much later era of alternative facts by asking, "What is a fact? The effort to state an absolute fact is simply an attempt to give you my interpretation of the facts."[19]

Perhaps the greatest communication success of all was selling the US entry into World War I. Woodrow Wilson had been elected president on the promise to keep the United States out of the war, but the battlefield misfortunes of allies led Wilson to form the Committee on Public Information to develop a sweeping propaganda campaign to enter the war and "Make the World Safe for Democracy." Credit is often given to Edward L. Bernays, a member of the CPI, for producing the formal justification for the uses of what was then called propaganda to manage unruly democratic societies. In his classic work, *Propaganda,* in 1928, Bernays reflected on the pioneering communication strategies used to pacify public protest against the war: "It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind."[20]

No sooner had the idea of a democracy-friendly propaganda been born than the Nazis thoroughly discredited the concept. This prompted Bernays to practice his own art by renaming the field with his book *Public Relations,* in 1945.[21] He now called the fledgling science of opinion-molding, the "engineering of consent."[22] The creation of public impressions was, for Bernays, the heart of the democratic governing process: "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country …. The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society."[23]

Even for some of the early practitioners, the idea of engineering consent raised serious moral questions. For example, Walter Lippmann, who was a leading public intellectual and an advisor to presidents, wrote classic works such as *Public Opinion* (1922) and *The Phantom Public* (1925), in which he worried about the fragile status of truth and transparency when power was narrowly held and unwisely used.

For the next century, major battles over the problem of power, public perception, and deception centered around the balancing of business interests for open markets and minimum government regulation, against the public interests of workers, families, consumers, and other groups in society. In Europe, as early as the 1920s, the International Chamber of Commerce pioneered a multinational strategy for lifting government restrictions on markets, trade, and capital flows. However, those efforts were disrupted by the rise of social democratic parties and the many post World War I instabilities associated with depression, fascism, and

war. Popular democratic movements and elections often challenged business agendas. The business excesses leading to the Great Depression in the United States were pushed back by social reform governments led by Franklin Roosevelt and the Democrats in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, elite resistance to democratic regulation of business persisted even during the Great Depression, as discussed by Naomi Oreskes, Eric Conway, and Charlie Tyson in this volume. With the support of the DuPont fortune, for example, the American Liberty League was formed in 1934 with the aim of undermining the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal.[24] Among other New Deal policies, DuPont opposed child labor protections as violations of the sanctity of families to decide. These were not popular ideas in an era of sweeping social and economic reforms, and Franklin Roosevelt was reelected president in 1936 with the largest landslide since 1820.

Until the later decades of the twentieth century, the managed communication frameworks that supported, and were supported by, democratic institutions held up rather well. Between the end of World War II and the 1980s, relatively coherent communication flowed between parties and voters, aided by an emerging mass media carrying relatively authoritative political messages to a large "captive public."[25] Trust in the institutions of press and politics was high, with the exception of episodes such as the Watergate scandal of the Nixon administration, which was rectified by journalistic and congressional investigations that produced rebounds in institutional trust levels. However, there were other strains in the credibility of official communication, including wars in Vietnam and Iraq, that were sold and conducted through official deceptions that strained the credibility of official government information. Adding to what became called a public "credibility gap" were various corporate deceptions such as tobacco company claims that cigarettes did not cause cancer, chemical company claims that pesticides and other toxics were safe, and other episodes of outright lying from businesses.

A shift from such episodic to more systemic deception began to emerge as growing networks of neoliberal economists and libertarian business interests continued to promote free-market economics and limited government, but found conventional public relations and lobbying inadequate to the task. Those networks envisioned the production of ideas through think tanks and academic disciplines to sell otherwise unpopular programs to politicians, parties, journalists, and voters. This neoliberal movement became organized during the 1950s, and became operationally

successful when a set of historical opportunities presented themselves during the 1970s.

## MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY: THE WEAPONIZATION OF IDEAS FOR LIMITED GOVERNMENT

Beginning after World War II, a network of prominent public intellectuals and economists from Europe and the United States gathered around the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek to explore the "crisis of civilization" created by oppressive government. The aim was to develop strategies to promote a utopian vision for reorganizing societies around free markets, which were thought to be arbiters of truth in the allocation of social values. The initial meeting in 1947 included Karl Popper, Michael Polanyi, Milton Friedman, and Ludwig von Mises (who stormed out of the meeting, proclaiming "you're all a bunch of socialists").[26] Much of the initial funding came from Credit Suisse. More recent funders include the Koch and DeVos foundations. That network named itself the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) after its early Swiss meeting place overlooking Lake Geneva. Over the course of the two next decades, the MPS developed plans to spread a utopian political and economic philosophy variously termed libertarian capitalism or "neoliberalism."[27] The core strategy involved the spread of aligned think tanks to promote limited government and free-market thinking among publics, politicians, and in public policies. At the time of this writing, the MPS website explains that despite their differences in philosophy, most members "see danger in the expansion of government, not least in state welfare, in the power of trade unions and business monopoly, and in the continuing threat and reality of inflation."[28]

The core aim of this elite movement was to limit the capacity of government (and voters) to regulate business and markets. While this international network of academic, political, and business elites remains relatively small in number, their agenda has been greatly amplified by thousands of affiliated think tanks and political organizations promoting the privatization of public assets and the rolling back of state regulation of markets. The first MPS aligned think tank was the still influential Institute of Economic Affairs founded in 1955 by MPS member Anthony Fraser, a wealthy businessman who went on to develop the international Atlas Network of aligned think tanks discussed below. IEA was influential in Margaret Thatcher's rise to power, and in designing cuts in the UK public sector, while promoting public sector and labor wage austerity. More

recently, IEA was active in the Brexit campaign, and in promoting the so called "hard Brexit" option on grounds that the only way to break ties with the oppressive regulations of the European Union and create truly free markets was via a kind of shock therapy.[29]

This emerging theory of the subordination of governments to markets would eventually put this movement of academics, public intellectuals, politicians, and business elites squarely up against the challenge of popular democratic opposition that, as noted above, had defeated other pro-business agendas following the Great Depression. The evolved networks of national level think tanks, charitable foundations, and political organizations thus developed political strategies to limit the counteractions of workers, consumers, environmentalists, and other democratic publics deemed hostile to business interests and market solutions. Indeed, a key area in which the neoliberals departed from earlier laissez faire economics was in coming to accept the necessity of using government to engineer markets to benefit business competition, and then to limit the capacity of governments to reverse that engineering through popular democratic processes.

To preview future developments in this history, we will see that after some initial successes during the 1980s and 1990s in selling voters on market freedoms, the gap between rhetoric and policy outcomes eventually became harder to sell. This eventually resulted in efforts by politicians and organizations aligned with the US variant of the neoliberal movement to deploy more direct strategies to undermine popular representation mechanisms, ranging from unbalanced voter redistricting, to restrictive voter registration and identification laws. These strategies added to the disinformation wars; with voter restrictions sold through fabricated evidence or unsupported claims of voter fraud, while gerrymandering was defended with dubious claims of preserving natural communities of interest or protecting state level political prerogatives. All along the way, increasingly implausible rationales became necessary to justify such policies. Disinformation became diffused by politicians whose election funding came from sponsoring interests, and thus entered the journalistic mainstream, echoed by the growing supply of "experts" from aligned think tanks and political organizations.

While many and perhaps most business interests continued to play by democratic rules, the growing networks of organizations affiliated with MPS saw democracy itself as a problem. As a result of the political organizations created to limit both popular understanding and participation within still existing democratic nations, disinformation became

systematically produced and then introduced by affiliated politicians into daily institutional life and reported in the mainstream press. The eventual result has been to undermine the authority of those institutions and set in motion a series of unfortunate events, such as the recent and largely unintended rise of radical right-wing movements and their attendant disinformation networks.

In an early sign of this reordering of democratic and economic priorities, members of the MPS networks expressed high regard for the economic policies of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s. This was particularly true among key US advocates for placing markets above politics, including luminaries such as Nobel economists James Buchanan and Milton Friedman, and Hayek himself. The Chilean government received economic advice from various MPS aligned economists, including the so-called "Chicago Boys" representing the University of Chicago brand of economics. Milton Friedman himself, pronounced the new economy under the dictatorship, "The Miracle of Chile." The prescriptions advanced by neoliberal economists were baked into Chile's constitution, something that remained true decades after Pinochet's departure from power.[30] This view made it clear that the freedom component of the neoliberal vision was concentrated in market relationships, not civil liberties, although the public rhetoric later produced by think tank networks in democratic nations promised that market solutions to public problems would deliver increased individual freedom from burdensome government.[31]

Milton Friedman attended the first meeting of the MPS in 1947 and became its first non-European president in 1970. He joined the advisory board of the American Enterprise Institute in 1956 and helped steer the venerable conservative think tank toward a neoliberal agenda. He would go on to win a Nobel Prize, and advise leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher on social and economic policy.

While Friedman and the other Nobel Laureates associated with MPS were among the key influencers, it was Hayek who set in motion the utopian vision that would eventually precipitate a clash with democratic institutions. As a young economist in Vienna, Hayek had watched the unmanageable chaos of democracy in Europe between the wars and concluded that it would be impossible sell his utopian vision on its own terms to broader publics. He counseled the core network to operate on the basis of a "double truth." As described by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plewhe, "Hayek hit upon the brilliant notion of developing the 'double truth' doctrine of neoliberalism – namely, an elite would be tutored to

understand the deliciously transgressive Schmittian necessity of repressing democracy, while the masses would be regaled with ripping tales of 'rolling back the nanny state' and being set 'free to choose.'"[32] Over the next seventy years, this political idea network has grown through the funding of think tanks, academic schools of thought, and political organizations, that served, in Hayek's phrase, as "secondhand dealers in ideas,"[33] to retail his utopian vision to publics through politicians and the press.

Although this movement took different forms in different nations, much of the central vision in the United States can be found in an early strategy memo produced for industrialist Charles Koch by Richard Fink, then a young economics PhD student. Koch was the son of John Birch Society cofounder, Fred Koch, and at the time of this writing, ranked among the ten wealthiest individuals in the world. He was influenced early on by Hayek, and joined MPS in 1970, and has since provided funding for a number of affiliated MPS organizations, primarily in the US. Among these, he cofounded the Cato Institute in 1977 as an early US branch of the Atlas Network of affiliated think tanks. Koch and the Cato Institute refer to their variant of the Hayek vision as libertarianism. Koch was thus receptive when Fink proposed funding an academic program in Austrian economics (which would later become the Mercatus Center at George Mason University).[34] Fink, who would go on to become executive vice president of Koch Industries and president of the Koch foundation, wrote a memo titled "The Structure of Social Change," which drew inspiration from Hayek, and treated the manufacturing of ideas and ideology like the production of commodities:

Universities, think tanks, and citizen activist groups all present competing claims for being the best place to invest resources. As grant-makers, we hear the pros and cons of the different kinds of institutions seeking funding. . . . Many of the arguments advanced for and against investing at the various levels are valid. Each type of institute at each stage has its strengths and weaknesses. But more importantly, we see that institutions at all stages are crucial to success. While they may compete with one another for funding and often belittle each other's roles, we view them as complementary institutions, each critical for social transformation . . . .

The higher stages represent investments and businesses involved in the enhanced production of some basic inputs we will call "raw materials." The middle stages of production are involved in converting these raw materials into various types of products that add more value than these raw materials have if sold directly to consumers. In this model, the later stages of production are involved in the packaging, transformation, and distribution of the output of the middle stages to the ultimate consumers. Hayek's theory of the structure of production can also help us understand how ideas are transformed into action in our society.[35]

As Nancy MacLean points out (in this volume and elsewhere), free-market libertarian policy preferences were never popular with broader publics. During the 1960s, many Americans embraced a vision of social and economic rights protected by government, albeit with divisive conflicts surrounding African Americans and other minorities. This tide of support for government protections resulted in a crushing defeat of the first economic libertarian presidential candidate. In 1964, Barry Goldwater won only six states: his home state of Arizona and five states of the Deep South of the old Confederacy. As MacLean explains, "The regional concentration of his vote pointed to a larger truth about the Mont Pelerin Society worldview. As bright as some of the libertarian economists were, their ideas made the headway they did in the South because, in their essence, their stands were so familiar." She continues, "White southerners who opposed racial equality and economic justice knew from their own region's history that the only way they could *protect their desired way of life was to keep federal power at bay*, so that majoritarian democracy could not reach into the region."[36]

While free-market libertarians struggled to convince popular majorities to embrace anti-government economic policies, aligned politicians were more successful in promoting the belief that the federal government gave unearned advantages to domestic racial minorities, and later, to immigrants. In his first run for president in 1976, Ronald Reagan mixed libertarian anti-regulation rhetoric with racist dog whistles that included a tale about a "welfare queen" who took advantage of the hardworking American taxpayer. In speeches across the country, Reagan claimed that she "used 80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running $150,000 a year."[37] Reagan promoted images of bureaucrats who helped African American "welfare queens" cheat the system.[38] Later on as president, he evoked howls of laughter and outrage among conservatives and the growing ranks of blue collar Republicans with famous lines such as his litany of the nine most terrifying words in the English language: "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."[39]

Racial dog whistles became all the more pronounced by the time Reagan's vice president ran for the presidency himself in 1988. George H. W. Bush's campaign manager Lee Atwater teamed up with Floyd Brown to make one of the most outrageous political commercials in US campaign history. The Willie Horton advert claimed Democratic candidate Governor Michael Dukakis had allowed a brutal killer out on a weekend

furlough. While temporarily free, Horton raped a woman. If the same advert were produced by the Russian Internet Research Agency today, it would be labelled disinformation. Even though Dukakis was not responsible for letting Horton out on a weekend furlough, voters believed he was. The disinformation skills honed in the 1980s were on display three decades later when Floyd Brown and his son were revealed to be running a series of extremist websites pumping out eye-grabbing, sometimes racist content, in part to engage the faithful and in part to generate advertising revenue.[40]

While racial hostility powered by disinformation helped fuel white working- and middle-class anti-government sentiments, the volume was later ramped up by right-wing talk radio, and, since the turn of the last century, Fox cable news. As Reece Peck has observed, Fox found rhetorical and performance formats that abandoned reason and evidence to selectively brand anti-government and pro-business thinking for working-class audiences.[41] Behind the scenes of Fox, the political operations of media mogul Rupert Murdoch also suggest that forces well beyond the MPS have been involved in stirring a populism born of confusion.

Indeed, the rise of the radical right was in many ways an unintended or accidental outcome of MPS activities, but it appeared to be more part of the plan in Murdoch's empire. Murdoch media operate on three continents and helped propagandize the early rise of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, while playing more recent roles in the Brexit disinformation campaign in the United Kingdom. In his native Australia, Murdoch media helped elect Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who pronounced climate science "crap" and led the overturning of the national carbon tax in 2014.[42] More recently, Murdoch media successfully promoted the rise of Scott Morrison to prime minister. Morrison once brought a piece of coal into parliament to denounce climate science and to advocate digging up more of the toxic fossil fuel.[43] And Murdoch columnist Andrew Bolt attacked Greta Thunberg, a leader of the children's movement Fridays For Future, as suffering mental disorders that intensified unnatural fears of climate change.[44]

## THE MAKING OF A POLITICAL MEDIA MONSTER

Fanning the flames of hatred and division in society has turned out to be a dangerous game, creating something akin to political Frankenstein monsters in many nations. Such results reflect the basic contradiction in the neoliberal project: people would not buy it on its own terms. But the growing uses of disinformation about race, religion, rights, climate

science, and other topics have resulted in large movements and parties that are not easily managed, and not sure to stay within the lines of the original political strategies. Indeed, Donald Trump was far from the preferred candidate of the Koch brothers and their political organizations in the 2016 election, but they later managed to shape and to benefit from many of his policies, if not his trade wars. Although surely not envisioned by many of the original libertarian MPS leaders, or perhaps even by later promoters in the United States, the growing importance of right-wing populist media and the movements and parties it has mobilized have enabled at least partial alignment with the libertarian anti-government agenda, with continuing areas of friction such as trade wars and government welfare for ethnic nationals, or so-called "welfare nationalism."

In its current forms, one can see the historical progression of media formats that offered popular voice to increasingly aggressive right-wing party politics. In the United States, politically divisive media have long fanned hatred of government, and attacked mainstream journalism as having a left-wing bias. Early right-wing stereotypes branded the establishment press as the "liberal media" and the "lamestream media." From there, it is not much of a stretch to today's charges that the mainstream press is the real source of "fake news," and to "lying press" echoes from the past.

Consistent with the underlying ideas that government should be limited, and that markets should become the arbiters of truth and social justice, we also see the deregulation of the responsibilities of media as part of this story. For example, the development of partisan media with few obligations for veracity or civility was aided in the United States by Reagan-era communication policies which killed the fairness doctrine in 1987. This essentially lifted the requirement for balance in political programming. A decade later, President Clinton supported telecommunications deregulation that further concentrated ownership, weakened community programming, and brought even more right-wing content into households. The fact that deregulation of media ownership and content guidelines gained bipartisan support is another indicator that the free-market agenda increasingly captured politicians on both the left and right.

To offer a sense of the audience reached by mass-produced disinformation, right-wing media personality Rush Limbaugh had around 20 million listeners at his peak in the 1990s, and some 13 million at the time of writing, when he was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer (after years of denying the risks of smoking). More than a dozen websites producing

a mix of partisan news and disinformation each attract a million or more unique visitors per month. The overall right-wing US audience may be as large as 30 to 35 percent of the adult population. It is also worth considering that Facebook may be the largest purveyor of right-wing media content and disinformation in the world today.

Despite the social divisions and political outrage stirred by politicians on the so-called "New Right" in the 1970s, it is not clear that leaders such as Reagan or Thatcher would have risen as far, or as fast had it not been for historic opportunities created by events well beyond their command. As noted above, the political tides of democracy in both the United States and Europe through the 1960s ran against the idea of subordinating government (and democracy) to business and markets. As often happens in history, the intervention of unexpected events created opportunities for once marginalized ideas to gain access to circles of power, and fundamentally change the character of public communication in the United States and other democratic societies.

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THE GREAT REALIGNMENT: FROM KEYNESIAN
TO FREE-MARKET ECONOMICS

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From the Great Depression through the 1960s, much of the democratic world embraced the ideas of Keynesian economics, which was often credited with reversing the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression. The postwar era was a time of high economic growth and relatively equitable sharing of productivity compared to earlier and to more recent eras of capitalism. Government spending counted for relatively high proportions of GDP in most developed nations, and the risk of too much state deficit spending was held in check by a novel international monetary system agreed upon at meetings in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1944. At the core of that system was the regulation of international financial exchange through a gold standard, with an International Monetary Fund set up to bridge short-term imbalances of payments. The world currency was the US dollar, and the United States participated in reconstructing much of the postwar economy. Labor unions were strong, and interests of labor and business were balanced through various arrangements in different nations.

Beginning in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, a number of unforeseen historical factors intruded into this relatively prosperous picture. In particular, the United States fell into an international payments crisis due to

heavy debt loads from the Vietnam War abroad, and the Great Society program at home, and ended up unable to redeem massive foreign debt at the set price of gold. In 1971 Richard Nixon pulled the US out of the gold standard, and, following repeated runs on the dollar by currency speculators and creditors, the United States devalued the dollar, and the Bretton Woods system collapsed in 1973. On top of this, a perfect storm of economic crisis was created when a previously moribund Arab oil cartel sharply increased the price of petroleum, and embargoed sales to the United States and other allies of Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, sending another shock through the world economy.

This moment spelled opportunity for neoliberals who were positioned to feed new policy initiatives to rising conservative politicians such as Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States. Both were long fans of Hayek and were courted by MPS think tanks and idea peddlers such as Milton Friedman. It is ironic that Milton Friedman had quipped in 1965 that "we are all Keynesians now,"[45] a line often attributed to Richard Nixon who later made a similar remark when removing the United States from the gold standard. Friedman's quip was part of a more nuanced view that the old regime might be coming to an end. His star rose further with his explanation of the lethal economic combination of "stagflation" (stagnant growth and inflation) that burdened the world economy in the 1970s, a pairing not easily explained by Keynesian models.

Key members of the neoliberal network were by that time well positioned to feed policies and public talking points to a new generation of politicians who would go on to lead a great political realignment. As noted earlier, Thatcher drew on the Institute for Economic Affairs, the prototype MPS think tank created by Hayek associate Anthony Fisher, who started the rollout of the Atlas global network that at the time of this writing numbers 483 affiliates in 93 nations. In 1977, Fisher cofounded the Manhattan Institute in the United States with George Casey, who managed Reagan's successful 1980 presidential campaign, and later became his CIA director.

The earlier blueprint of the Fink memo was now being realized in several ways: in the coordinated development of political strategies to guide policy agendas, in researching and drafting model legislation, and in packaging such products in communication terms that suited audience tastes for lower taxes and more consumer freedom. Early visions of managed democracy based on public relations now became full-service policy design shops that fed experts to the press as well as legislative

hearings, and helped with staffing government agencies and political offices. The creation of aligned political organizations, often chartered as tax-exempt legal charities, enabled money to flow to advocacy causes and political campaigns, and to blur the sourcing of those funds, as Jane Mayer reveals in her discussion of the weaponization of philanthropy in her book *Dark Money*.[46] The mix of money, multi-leveled political organization, and strategic communication helped elect growing numbers of politicians, who, in the 1980s and 1990s, sold the free-market (and lower taxes) political agenda with variations of the simple and initially appealing utopian vision that "free markets make free people."

However, as the free market model spread to other nations through international trade agreements; national labor markets were disrupted as manufacturing jobs moved to cheaper sites of production. Unions were weakened and wages stagnated. Fiscally conservative politicians used business downturns to impose austerity policies and public user fees as permanent conditions. Businesses with options to move elsewhere gained increasing influence in national politics.

In this period dating from the 1990s, societies changed fundamentally as modern-era federations of civic organizations which had aggregated interests through parties and interest networks fell away, and more people were, in Robert Putnam's classic phrase, "bowling alone."[47] The academic literature of this era focused on the breakdown of modern social structure and the rise of personalized identity management in societies with less social support provided by traditional structures of class, religion, family, or profession.[48] This was the brave new world of Margaret Thatcher's proclamation "there is no such thing as society." The civic structures of the modern era were replaced by more individualized market experiences entailing heightened personal risk, and less stable careers and lifestyles than earlier generations. In short, Thatcher, like other free market fundamentalists, thought of society as one vast market of individual winners and losers. So-called "millennial" citizens constructed flexible social identities and managed career mobility through the social networking technologies of the Internet. This precipitated a communication shift toward political marketing and spin at the very core of our democracies. As a result, any chance of meaningful public communication was weakened.

All of these changes led to greater voter instability and a more compressed political spectrum as traditional political parties, both left and right of center, were drawn toward market policies. These disruptions in traditional voter alignments – along with parties losing memberships and

becoming more extensions of the state than civil society organizations – resulted in a hollowing out of parties and electoral politics.[49] This precipitated a communication shift toward political marketing and spin that further weakened the meaningful public communication at the core of democracies.

### THE HOLLOWING OF POLITICS AND THE AGE OF SPIN

Since the 1990s, mainstream parties and public officials in most of the developed OECD democracies have been pressured by global trade regimes and leveraged by domestic business interests to adhere to the tenets of privatization, market deregulation, welfare cuts, and public sector austerity. As a result, under the leadership of Blair in the United Kingdom, Schroeder in Germany, and Clinton in the United States, among others, there was a gradual rightward movement of center-left parties. This limited government capacity – whether on the center-left or center-right – to solve growing domestic problems. The result was a dramatic disconnection between parties, elections, and meaningful voter representation on issues that majorities of citizens cared about, particularly in areas of health, education, social welfare, and other public sector programs.

The erosion of representative governance varies from country to country, but it has become pronounced in many OECD nations. Recent comparative research shows that the electoral representation of specific issues in developed democracies declines dramatically moving down the economic ladder, particularly with regards to social welfare policies.[50] Given the diminishing levels of credible representation for growing numbers of citizens, it is not surprising that public confidence in political institutions has declined steadily over this period. These declines in institutional trust have been accompanied by declining trust in the mainstream press, which carries the pronouncements of officials from those institutions.[51] At the time of writing, trust in European governments and political parties averaged below 40 percent, according to Eurobarometer polls conducted by the European Union.

This "hollowing out" of parties and elections cut traditional voter blocks adrift and left them understandably skeptical about any political offers.[52] As a result, mainstream parties and neoliberal think tanks found it harder to sell their ideas to publics without resorting to saturation marketing, press spin, and the invention of claims and attacks driven by political necessity.[53] The levels of untruth and inflammatory content in

political messages during this period varied from country to country depending on the relative health of party-voter relations, and national laws governing political and electoral speech, among other factors. In the United States, the strange equation of money and free speech resulted in relentless and ever more expensive political marketing, with few of the restraints found even in commercial product advertising (think of the "swift boater" attacks on John Kerry in the 2004 election; the anti-Obama "birther" movement championed by talk radio, social media, and Donald Trump throughout much of the Obama presidency; or the decades of coordinated attacks on climate science by think tanks and the Republican Party).

As officials adopted more extreme discourses to gain attention and damage opponents, mainstream journalists were hard-pressed to ignore (or editorialize about) that content without being accused of liberal bias. In the United States, the professional press norm of balance often led to the inclusion of science-skeptic views from politicians or "experts" provided by think tanks funded by the oil industry and related interests, resulting in growing bias in allegedly objective news reports.[54] In this and other areas, the mainstream news gates opened to a flood of dubious information and shouting pundits. During this time, one increasingly heard prominent elected officials proclaim that climate science was a hoax (e.g., US Senator James Inhofe, chair of the Committee on Environment and Public Works), or that feeding poor children would create dependency on government (e.g., former US House Speaker Paul Ryan), among other positions inconsistent with known facts. More recently, the fire hose of lies from Donald Trump may have been bad for democracy, but it has been good for the news business. To their credit, many prominent news organizations began to document Trump's lies, as they were too frequent and too blatant to overlook. However, such reporting simply produced volleys of fake news accusations from both sides.

Although the political spectacle may be good for television ratings, the growing signs of institutional corruption have grown as rhetoric and political outcomes became harder to reconcile. This has further stigmatized government for many citizens, leading many on the right to blame the deep state and other conspiracies for the problems. At the same time, observers who point out the role of money, think tanks, or politically oriented "charitable organizations" as underlying sources of democratic corruption and related communication distortion, have often been subject to political attacks from other elements of this political movement such as watchdog groups on the lookout for "liberal" biases in legacy media and the academy.

Given the growing chaos and instability of everyday politics, it is clear that the volume of spin and disinformation has not worked well to convince citizens of much beyond the conclusion that politics seems broken. The idea of PR imagined a century earlier as a set of tools to manage the perceptions of publics led by responsible elites, has crashed against the reality of irresponsible elites determined to engineer democracy itself against unhappy majorities. Beyond the confusing communication that fills the news, radical right politicians and networks of political support organizations have begun redesigning government, at both state and federal levels, to limit the capacity of citizens to challenge austerity, welfare, and public service cuts, and other aspects of the free-market regime. The recent period in the United States has witnessed sweeping electoral redistricting and voter-suppression laws, government bureaucracies populated with "public choice" advocates, and a pipeline of judicial nominees schooled in fundamentalist free-market principles. The overall impact has been to undermine the capacity of citizens to use democracy to strike a better balance between business, markets, and social welfare.[55]

## ATTACKS ON THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Today there are a number of wealthy libertarians bidding for political influence, with disagreement on goals and tactics, and many other actors such as the Murdoch family agitating from other directions. However, it is clear that in the United States, much of the vision, funding, and coordination for the democracy redesign project have come from the Koch network. The decades-long project of funding university research centers, think tanks, charitable foundations, astroturf political groups, training public servants, and screening and funding political candidates, has consolidated into what journalist Jane Mayer calls "The Kochtopus."[56] This Kochtopus has been directly or indirectly involved with a variety of political initiatives, including:[57]

- Killing restrictions on political spending by corporations and the rich. This was realized by the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision that essentially lifted limitations on political donations.
- Suppressing the voting rights of students, people of color, the elderly, and others who tend to oppose Republican policies and candidates.

- Undermining labor unions, as furthered by the 2017 Supreme Court decision in the *Janus v. AFSCME* case.
- Eliminating the right of consumers, workers, and others to sue corporations, forcing them instead into corporate-controlled arbitration.
- Eliminating the social safety net including food stamps, jobless benefits, Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid.
- Eliminating regulations that protect people and the environment from corporate abuse.
- Gerrymandering voting districts.
- Packing courts with pro-corporate judges, and staffing executive agencies, particularly during and after the Trump transition.
- Undermining confidence in science and sowing confusion about climate change, the environmental damage done by extractive industries, and the health effects of tobacco, sugar, and other consumer products.
- Undermining the legacy and credibility of news media, from Vice President Spiro Agnew's now quaint "nattering nabobs of negativism," to out-of-touch liberal elites, and purveyors of fake news.

These developments have come a long way from Ronald Reagan's symbolic attacks on big government. Indeed, it is these more recent impairments of democratic processes that have turned Reagan's words into a self-fulfilling prophecy. All of this has created understandable loss of trust in governing institutions and the press and opened the gates to even higher volumes of disinformation that further threaten the democratic production of credible communication.

## DISINFORMATION AND THE FUNCTIONING OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

How would we know if all of these related political and communication strategies are having clear effects on the defining qualities of democracies? The sweeping corrosion of democratic institutional foundations is hard to summarize empirically, beyond specific elements such as the earlier-mentioned research on declining electoral representation. Using a broad set of sixty indicators, a report by *The Economist* in 2018 listed the United States in twenty-fifth position among 167 nations in the rankings of democratic health, down from seventeenth place when the same study was conducted in 2007. Over this period, the United States has been reclassified from "full" to "flawed" democracy.[58]

Among the challenges facing public communication in light of such developments is the problem of what to call democracies that no longer function properly. In particular, how do we reconcile even rudimentary definitions of democracy with outcomes that increasingly favor wealthy elites over average citizens. As daily spin becomes less credible, and the Internet ever more accessible, there is stiff competition over how to understand such matters. Few public authorities or journalistic information brokers are able to referee the information chaos as it spills out of previously recognized political bounds.

These information dilemmas became more pronounced following the global financial collapse of 2008, in which deregulated banking and financial markets issued unstable loans and sold dubious financial products that resulted in a global crash in which millions of people lost homes, jobs, and retirement security. This crisis coincided with the rapid rise of social media, which provided platforms for the spread of disinformation that challenged official communication. Above all, an enormous unintended outcome of all of the careful political work that led to decades of sweeping government deregulation was the rapid rise of disruptive radical right-wing movements following the crisis. These developments included: the Tea Party in the United States (which, along with the election of Donald Trump have transformed the Republican Party), the Sweden Democrats, Alternative für Deutschland, and the Italian Five Star Movement, among others. In addition, a number of existing radical right parties grew in influence during this period, including: the Austrian Freedom Party, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the UK Independence Party, the French National Front, Polish Law and Justice, and the Danish People's Party. Those movements not only spread high volumes of disinformation, but they present threats to the neoliberal order with populist, anti-globalist politics, and interestingly selective attacks on elite economic rule.

## A LEGACY OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: RIGHT-WING MOVEMENTS AND EMOTIONAL TRUTHS

The questions of how the sweeping economic crisis at the end of the first decade of this century happened, and what to do about it, triggered global protest on both left and right. It is interesting to note that the left has taken a very different path than the right, and one not as fully associated with disinformation or democratic disruption.[59] On the right, digital and social media were filled with rapidly spreading rumor and conspiracy theories.

Those media spheres were not embedded in the traditional press systems that helped connect government and publics in modern postwar democracies. In particular, radical right media often attacked the mainstream press, and rejected official pronouncements and journalism in favor of rumor, conspiracy and alternative facts.

These alternative media networks often acted as political organizations, mobilizing angry publics around emotionally charged themes, including: global economic conspiracies (and sometimes Jewish banking conspiracies); the ills of globalization and multiculturalism and related threats to white nationalist identity; fears of immigrants and refugees; the dangers of Islam; departures from traditional gender roles; and the so-called deep state, among others. The financial crisis, coupled with the spread of social media, helped bring these seemingly unrelated themes out from the social margins, endowed them with conspiratorial connectivity, and echoed them around the world, taking root in different national right-wing formations.

Over the decade following the financial crisis, the number and size of radical right movements and parties in many democracies grew. As the movements grew, so did the media platforms that fed them a steady supply of disinformation. In the process, as discussed further below, those disinformation networks acted as mechanisms for separating the politics and communication of discontent from the more conventional partisan or oppositional exchanges and debates that define healthy democratic public spheres.[60] The radical right in many nations has moved from counter publics trying to become part of the legitimate public sphere, to transgressive publics trying to transform those spheres into illiberal democracies.

While the spread of radical right populism is not ideally aligned with the libertarian capitalist agenda that partly and inadvertently triggered it, there are some resemblances to earlier generations of libertarian conservatives in terms of racism and exclusionary politics. As noted earlier, much of the nationalist right agenda is not cleanly aligned with the ideals of free market visionaries, but many "hard right" nationalist Brexit leaders opposed intrusive EU regulations in national markets, and received counsel from that venerable neoliberal think tank, the IEA. Another friction point involves many radical right populist movements and parties favoring "welfare nationalism," with public benefits reserved for "real" or "true" citizens to the exclusion of immigrants. For example, a right-wing Italian government formed in 2017 proposed a national minimum income, which set it at odds with the European Central Bank over fiscal matters. Public welfare of any sort is not easy to reconcile with the

economic libertarian doctrine. As a result, the current political challenge for elites trying to guide the neoliberal movement is to try to steer these fractured politics toward useful electoral outcomes, often with disruptive appeals based in conspiracy, hate, and racism.

Such efforts to manage right-wing populism to advance the core free-market, limited democracy agenda, include such breathtaking stratagems as the Koch network's successful support for the Tea Party merger with the Republican Party.[61] That movement continues to be mobilized by disinformation and emotional identity appeals from Facebook campaigns, Fox news programming, and many other media platforms. This eventually yielded the Trump presidency, which exposed new frictions between the neoliberal movement and the political monsters it had created. Those frictions, in turn, require more creative management of disinformation and the democratic process.

The idea of economic libertarian or neoliberal elites managing the political monster of radical right populism may seem both an unlikely prospect and an unholy alliance. However, racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and/or Christian and traditional family values deliver votes, often resulting in few conflicts with the core economic agenda. Perhaps more importantly, there is also a shared convergence point: authoritarian or illiberal solutions for various social and political problems of democracy. For these and other reasons, it reveals little about contemporary radical right politics to call them "populist."[62]

Whether appealing to racism, threats to nationalist identities, or deep state conspiracies, disinformation feeds demand for emotional, hyperpartisan truths. This demand for emotional, rallying communication is met with a mix of volatile information produced online, often in interaction with politicians echoing and inserting politically coded language or "dog whistles" in mainstream news media. The logic of this communication interfaces well with election campaign communication, and enables resulting governments to implement the free-market state engineering discussed earlier.

Some of the disinformation that feeds disjointed politics is produced by grassroots networks ranging from 4chan discussions to Alex Jones' Infowars rants. More often, the amplification and strategic targeting of the disinformation comes from more prominent sites, funded in some cases by the same wealthy elites who backed the think tanks, politicians, and deceptive political marketing operations discussed above. In the United States, well-produced information sites such as Breitbart (partly funded by Robert Mercer) stabilize the grassroots social networks and

amplify weaponized information that is targeted to achieve various objectives. Other radical right media have attracted a host of wealthy political backers, including the Daily Caller (Foster Friess and the Koch Foundation), Fox (Rupert Murdoch), Sinclair Broadcasting (Julian Sinclair Smith), and YouTube's PragerU (fracking billionaires Dan and Farris Wilks), just to mention a few. In this mix, broadcasting continues to be important. Local newspapers and television stations have atrophied or died as advertising revenue has been siphoned off by online platforms, and conglomerates like Sinclair Broadcasting distribute cookie-cutter content with a conservative, pro-business spin to affiliate stations all over the country.[63] These media channels are not always in alignment, but in many cases, they operate as networked political organizations capable of responding to external threats or promoting shared interests.

Shaping the flow of disinformation further guards against any of these movements or parties threatening business interests. And the drift toward authoritarianism promises a deeper subordination of democratic institutions. A turn toward "managed democracy" of the Russian variety, or "illiberal democracy" as in Hungary is emerging as a pattern developing cross-nationally on the right.[64] Given the disruption of traditional press and political institutions and the tilt toward hybrid models of authoritarian democracy, it is not surprising that foreign disinformation has entered national public spheres, either overtly in forms such as RT, or covertly via hackers, trolls, sockpuppets, and bots. Although tracing the money is even more difficult in Europe than in the US, investigations have variously linked US billionaire Robert Mercer and Russian funding to the UK Brexit campaign, along with a central role for IEA.[65] Also in Europe, when successful parties gain seats in parliaments, state funding is secured that can go toward political information sites and party think tanks.

And so, lacking public support for more openly stated economic policy preferences, free-market libertarians have again formed unholy alliances, much as they did in earlier eras when their support was thin. These alliances of convenience may include white nationalists who are also deeply antagonistic toward government, though for different reasons.[66] There is growing evidence that similar alliances are being forged in nations as diverse as the United States, the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, and Sweden.[67]

Perhaps the most important characteristic of these disinformation networks is that they attack the most basic communication logic of democracy: the principle of reasoned debate and engaged partisan opposition. These networks tend not to be located in the traditional left/center/right

mainstream media sphere, as shown by Benkler, Faris and Roberts in their analysis of the media flows in the 2016 US elections. What they term "network propaganda" on the right does not operate as an oppositional partisan sphere that is responsive to competing ideas, but as an asymmetrical sphere operating via different information logics in which more extreme information circulates more widely, with the result of disrupting conventional politics and communication.[68] And so, the United States has developed a large alternative public sphere that is, at best, disruptive, and at worst, hostile to the basic principles of liberal democracy and reasoned discourse. In many ways, this can be understood as an opportunistic extension of the discontents created by earlier efforts to limit democracy in pursuit of unpopular policies.

## CONCLUSION

None of these historical developments follows neatly from any single causal source. However, there are common themes and currents running through the narrative, such as the historical bending of public communication to serve business imperatives that have grown increasingly at odds with public preferences and public interest standards of health, consumer safety, or environmental sustainability.[69] These distortions of communication have grown greater as unpopular social and economic policies have been introduced in many democracies. Such distortions of domestic communication have been compounded by deceptions surrounding foreign entanglements, as in cases of US deceit about wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the United Kingdom doctoring intelligence about Iraq, Dutch deceptions involving Afghanistan, or the German government's lack of transparency in the Balkan wars.

Beyond these episodic factors, the role of systemic crises such as the breakdown of the world economic order in the 1970s, created opportunities for the entry of radical ideas into national politics. These dynamics of disinformation have been further animated by recent economic, environmental, and refugee crises. Even the Covid-19 pandemic became polarized in some countries, as in the United States, where wearing masks and social distancing became contested. All of these factors have created unintended consequences such as the growth of radical right movements and parties, with their own production of high volumes of dubious information which has further destabilized democratic communication.

From this analysis, it follows that stemming the flood of contemporary disinformation is unlikely to be aided by regulating social media, fact-

checking, or improving media literacy. Our analysis suggests that solutions lie in *repairing the basic functioning of democratic institutions themselves*. This may be easier to imagine if we allow ourselves to think more critically about democracy in its present condition. All along the way as this story has unfolded, there has been a tendency to minimize, normalize, or otherwise fail to see the systemic nature of key developments, such as:

- Allowing charity laws to be abused by partisan organizations (in the United States and United Kingdom).
- Allowing obscene amounts of money into politics through campaign finance and dark money political organizations (particularly in the United States).
- Failures to monitor and address the disconnection between traditional parties and citizens (many nations).
- Failures to monitor or address the declines of electoral representation (many nations).
- Accepting stealthy and false political marketing as free speech (led by the United States, but of concern in many nations).
- Allowing the micro targeting of citizens by social media companies using massive databases of highly personal information (many nations).
- Lax reporting of lobbying and political finance (many nations).
- Failures to innovate journalism formats that have lost public credibility (many nations).
- Difficulties regulating the basic business models of social media companies that enable the monetization of deceptive communication (most democratic nations).

As this mix of intentional and collateral damage to democracy has grown, the number of unpleasant political, economic, and social side effects has also multiplied. This results in growing communication credibility problems. Beyond the myriad ground-level examples such as climate change skepticism, or conflating crime, terrorism and immigration, we may also want to focus on big picture communication challenges, such as the question of what you call democracies no longer functioning as such? Although the name "democracy" continues to be applied to these variously diminished polities, the term "post-democracy" may be more appropriate, as developed in the analysis of Colin Crouch.[70]

We do not wish to wax nostalgic about earlier democratic public spheres that have always privileged certain groups and values over others.

However, the present situation involves formerly marginalized antidemocratic tendencies that are now attaining large-scale circulation. We propose that this is due, in part, to mainstream political parties and public officials becoming less authoritative as sources of information and even abetting some of the problems, while the press that carries their messages has naturally lost credibility in the bargain.

The erosion of institutional processes that offered better political representation and clearer communication, and the resulting corrosion of norms and boundaries on reasoned public debate, have left growing numbers of citizens angry, disillusioned, and seeking alternative information. This seems to us to be the crux of the current era of disinformation. In this view, the answers to restoring evidence, reason, and respect for various civic norms lie in repairing public institutions that have been damaged by information warfare intended to limit the ability of people to regulate their own social and economic affairs. The solutions involve finding ways to restore more representative and responsive parties, elections, and government, and to reinvent a press that may help develop and tell that story.

## NOTES

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