

The Role of Disinformation in Migration: Case Studies of the United States and Sweden

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Abstract: Fake news, junk news, disinformation, and countermedia are distinct from similar terms like misinformation due to their intentionality to mislead. Disinformation has existed for centuries, but its forms today in the information age are especially dangerous with the possibility of high levels of amplification on social media. The characteristics of democratic elections – such as in the United States 2016 presidential election – may very well be changed by the increase in and specialization of echo chambers filled with like-minded individuals and often also disinformation. These echo chambers result in increased polarization with little resolve and many countries confused as to what is the solution to fighting disinformation. Mitigation strategies are possible and necessary for individuals and countries to win the so-called information war.

Keywords: Disinformation, misinformation, fake news, migration, immigration, United States of America, Sweden

Introduction

Fake news and disinformation dominate social media or at least are perceived to. These now ever present issues seem to be a recent invention of the information age, although both have existed since the start of humanity in various forms⁷⁵⁵. In fact, the 1896 American presidential election

⁷⁵⁵ Richard Stengel, *Information Wars: How We Lost the Global Battle Against Disinformation & What We Can Do About It* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2019), 3.

spawned perhaps one of the first written and widely circulated forms of actual fake news in the creation of the newspaper known as *The Commoner*. In the wake of his defeat in the presidential election to William McKinley, William Jennings Bryan chose to create *The Commoner* to go against the mainstream media, which he deemed as biased and unreliable. The creation of the newspaper's biased and misleading content caused newspapers throughout the United States to raise concern over the blatant lies and fake news *The Commoner* spread⁷⁵⁶. Eventually this turn of the century fake news subsided, but in recent years there has been a reemergence in the discussion and spread of fake news and disinformation similar to Jennings Bryan's early twentieth century newspaper.

What is new about today's disinformation is the way it is able to be increasingly weaponized through the internet and social media to become a new form of warfare. Information warfare is beginning to be combined with traditional warfare to create asymmetric conflicts like the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea⁷⁵⁷. Russian trolls used social media in Ukraine and state controlled news like RT to mobilize dissent and create an image of western interference in any anti-annexation protests. While for many westerners this type of asymmetric warfare was unimaginable, the Russian Federation had become quite skilled in propagating and spreading disinformation from its Soviet past and present commitment to continue to influence local and far-away issues⁷⁵⁸. Foreign and domestic sources are both capable and willing of achieving their goals—to mobilize, to disorganize, and to confuse—through the use of disinformation. The political nature of the lion's share of disinformation focuses on salient issues, which may cause interference in democratic elections and may affect state policy negatively.

This paper presents an overview about the phenomenon of disinformation. Two case studies have been analyzed with the special focus on the

⁷⁵⁶ Adrienne Lafrance, "How the 'Fake News' Crisis of 1896 Explains Trump", *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2017, accessed August 13, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/the-fake-news-crisis-120-years-ago/513710/>.

⁷⁵⁷ Yevgeniy Golovchenko, "Using Social Network Analysis to Understand Disinformation on Social Media", Sage Publications Ltd., 2019, accessed August 7, 2020, doi:10.4135/9781526498632.

⁷⁵⁸ Stengel, *Information Wars*, 145.

issue of migration, in order to demonstrate how the use of disinformation can jeopardize stability and security of democratic states.

Previous Research and Theory

Fake news today exists with an entirely different meaning than it was originally intended in the recent past. Prior to circa 2015, fake news existed merely to describe political satire like *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*⁷⁵⁹. An Israeli study found that exposure to comedic fake news caused increased cynicism in the surveyed individuals as the comedic portrayals of politicians were viewed as fairly accurate. When this exposure to comedic news was combined with higher levels of hard news like factually based newspapers and television programming, the surveyed individuals were able to be somewhat less cynical as the fake news portrayals of politicians were judged more accurately based on the characteristics and behaviors of the real politicians from their hard news exposure⁷⁶⁰. Although this previous knowledge of fake news and its effects are able to be better understood through this previous research, the new version of this term is still young with its difficulty to track and often inability to establish causation and not simply correlation.

The current definition of fake news – understood as “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke”⁷⁶¹ – emerged in 2014 with Craig Silverman as he was researching disinformation at Columbia University. When beginning his career at BuzzFeed⁷⁶², he started to use the term

⁷⁵⁹ Regina Marchi, “With Facebook, Blogs, and Fake News, Teens Reject Journalistic ‘Objectivity,’” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 36, no. 3 (July 2012): 253, accessed August 7, 2020, doi:10.1177/0196859912458700.

⁷⁶⁰ Meital Balmas, “When Fake News Becomes Real: Combined Exposure to Multiple News Sources and Political Attitudes of Inefficacy, Alienation, and Cynicism,” *Communication Research* 41, no. 3 (April 2014): 442, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650212453600>.

⁷⁶¹ Cambridge Dictionary definition of the term “fake news,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pl/dictionary/english/fake-news>, accessed December 15, 2020.

⁷⁶² “About BuzzFeed,” <https://www.buzzfeed.com/about>, accessed December 15, 2020.

in his work. By early 2017, the term was adopted and used by American president Donald Trump to describe CNN and their coverage on his presidency⁷⁶³. Over time, this term has shifted and is now used by politicians and the general population to describe certain types of news, especially news which one does not agree with. Using this politically charged term often leads to polarization⁷⁶⁴. Due to the politicization of the term, some scholars are electing to shift from the term fake news to instead call this phenomenon countermedia. According to Hopp, Ferrucci, and Vargo, the term countermedia more accurately defines this phenomenon as the news in question is more often than not news with some limited truth present. The content in countermedia, aside from the “grain of truth”, is designed to be politically charged by presenting news with a distinct narrative. Countermedia’s goal is to push a particular narrative and interpretation, making the denotation of fake news, countermedia, and disinformation essentially the same⁷⁶⁵.

Aside from these three essentially equivalent words, there must be a clear distinction between the terms misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. These terms exist on a spectrum with misinformation and malinformation being the two extremes and disinformation lying somewhere in the middle. Malinformation describes the release of personal information with the intent to harm⁷⁶⁶. Often at times the issue of releasing information is simply due to its purpose to blackmail a person, but it can be used, for example, politically with an attack on a particular politician.

⁷⁶³ Andrew Beaujon, “Trump Claims He Invented the Term ‘Fake News’ – Here’s an Interview With the Guy Who Actually Helped Popularize It”, *The Washingtonian*, October 2, 2019, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2019/10/02/trump-claims-he-invented-the-term-fake-news-an-interview-with-the-guy-who-actually-helped-popularize-it/>.

⁷⁶⁴ Anthony J. Gaughan, “Illiberal Democracy: The Toxic Mix of Fake News, Hyperpolarization, and Partisan Election Administration”, *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy* 12, no. 3 (2017): 75, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://scholarship.law.duke.edu/djclpp/vol12/iss3/3>.

⁷⁶⁵ Toby Hopp, Patrick Ferrucci, and Chris J Vargo, “Why Do People Share Ideologically Extreme, False, and Misleading Content on Social Media? A Self-Report and Trace Data-Based Analysis of Countermedia Content Dissemination on Facebook and Twitter”, *Human Communication Research* (May 2020): 2, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/hqz022>.

⁷⁶⁶ Shawn Walker, Dan Mercea, and Marco Bastos, “The disinformation landscape and the lockdown of social platforms”, *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 11 (August 2019): 1532, accessed August 8, 2020, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2019.1648536.

The other two terms, misinformation and disinformation, both cover inaccurate claims. However, misinformation lacks the intentionality of disinformation. Disinformation is the “intentional distribution of fabricated information to advance political narratives.”⁷⁶⁷ This intentionality is what makes disinformation, countermedia, and fake news so dangerous.

Today disinformation is increasingly used in an online environment, as shown in the 2016 American presidential election⁷⁶⁸. All social media sites provide internet users – domestic and international actors, the opportunity to create disinformation and share it online, whether it be for profit or for personal gain⁷⁶⁹. The 2016 American presidential election saw a high volume of disinformation from domestic actors and Kremlin-backed trolls. Interestingly however, a significant amount disinformation originated from a small city in Macedonia, where locals worked to sensationalize and plagiarize American alt-right media into new content, which was then promoted on Facebook for profit as opposed to personal investment in the victory of Trump⁷⁷⁰. The reasoning for attention to and interaction with these sensationalized, unbelievable stories was not necessarily due to the Americans steadfast belief in these stories. Rather, as Hermida discusses, social media is simply “an expression of identity”, and sometimes these identities are accidentally or intentionally expressed with disinformation⁷⁷¹. For some people, articles containing disinformation may be viewed as entertaining or even shocking, while for others, they “confirm” what one “always knew.” This explanation exemplifies echo chambers⁷⁷² ability to flourish on social media⁷⁷³.

⁷⁶⁷ Walker, Mercea, and Bastos “The disinformation landscape”, 1532.

⁷⁶⁸ Laura Asperholm Hedlund, “Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation: A case study of the 2018 Swedish national elections” (PhD diss., Swedish Defence University, 2019), 2019, 10, accessed August 4, 2020, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1324745/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁷⁶⁹ Gaughan, “Illiberal Democracy”, 60.

⁷⁷⁰ Emma Jean Kirby, “The city getting rich from fake news”, *BBC News* online, December 5, 2016, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-38168281>.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Ammol Rajan, “Do digital echo chambers exist?”, *BBC News online* March 4 2019, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-47447633>.

⁷⁷³ Alfred Hermida, “Alfred Hermida Discusses Social Networks and Misinformation”, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2019, accessed August 7, 2020, doi:10.4135/9781526492210.

Echo chambers are becoming increasingly common and perhaps even more specialized to a person's particular beliefs on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter⁷⁷⁴. A 2017 study of 783 Facebook and Twitter users, consisting of a nearly even male/female representation of U.S. citizens, 18 years or older, were selected to participate in a study about sharing disinformation online, defined in this study as countermedia for the validity of the partially true but skewed content. The individuals were also asked to rate themselves on a political scale of one to seven, with one being the most liberal and seven being the most conservative. The study found that the majority of shares of countermedia were on Facebook, with 1,152 posts being shared by the participants. Only 129 instances of disinformation, again from the same group of individuals, were shared on Twitter⁷⁷⁵. Although most of the participants did not share any countermedia, the study found those identifying themselves as extremely liberal or extremely conservative (those classifying themselves as a one or a seven) shared disinformation the most. On Facebook, the most conservative individuals shared 26% of the countermedia with the most liberal sharing 17.5%. These statistics showed on Facebook 22.97% of the participants shared 43.4% of the total countermedia shared. While this study is not conclusive on the spread of disinformation on social media concerning elections or politics, it does show an increased rate of sharing disinformation by hyper-partisan individuals⁷⁷⁶.

Mainstream Media Distrust and Disinformation about Migration

The role of mainstream media has been rapidly changing since the advent of the internet and social media. Mainstream media is no longer able to serve as a "gatekeeper" with the ability to prevent misleading or untrue news⁷⁷⁷. Today almost anyone can create and share content such as ama-

⁷⁷⁴ Hopp, Ferrucci, and Vargo, "Why Do People Share Ideologically Extreme", 18.

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10–15.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18–23.

⁷⁷⁷ Gaughan, "Illiberal Democracy", 59.

teur journalists. This enables individuals to serve as whistleblowers and to cover important events and developments that may be ignored by mainstream news outlets. At the same time, it allows anyone to post false and misleading content on social media without the need to gain permission from a media outlet or authority figure. This was exemplified in the lead up to the 2016 American presidential election, whereby disinformation alleging a high amount of voter fraud was allowed to spread⁷⁷⁸. A study by Silverman on behalf of BuzzFeed confirmed this and noted the rise of fake news versus mainstream media shared on Facebook⁷⁷⁹ in the days leading up to American 2016 presidential election. He discusses how the type of news—fake and mainstream—shared on social media about the American 2016 presidential election shifted between February 2016 until election day in November, whereby fake news eventually outpaced mainstream media shortly before and on election day⁷⁸⁰. Although causation cannot be established, the findings do suggest that the decrease of the share of mainstream media and increase of the fake news may have had a political influence on voters.

While fake news represents one threat, the lack of media freedom to publish content freely serves as another. Recently the Freedom House has reported a general global decline in media freedom in recent years, posing a significant threat to democracies, especially for emerging ones such as in Africa and Asia⁷⁸¹. Despite the United States receiving the highest and best possible score for media freedom, many Americans have increasingly grown skeptical of mainstream news in the past few years, calling for the rise of alternative news sources and an increase in reliance on the social media to locate these sources. In 2018, *Gallup* carried out a survey reporting that 41%

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁷⁹ Craig Silverman, “This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News on Facebook”, *BuzzFeed News*, November 16, 2016, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook>.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Sarah Repucci, “Media Freedom: A Downward Spiral”. *Freedom House*, 2019, accessed August 7, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downwardspiral>.

of the respondents trusted the media – Democrats more than Republicans and Independents⁷⁸². Despite this seemingly low number, American trust in the mass media has actually increased. In 2016 for example, only 32% of Americans trusted mainstream media, a record low for this survey⁷⁸³. These numbers show a serious divide in the trust in the mainstream media, most starkly when comparing Democrats and Republicans, with 69% of the former and only 15% of the latter trusting in the mass media in 2018. Although the exact cause is unknown, partisan politics and a view of a lack of representation of conservative viewpoints in mainstream news certainly may play a large part in Republican mistrust of mainstream media.

The reason for Republican mistrust in the media may be connected to political ideology and politicians such as President Trump who use divisive policies e.g. the border wall as well as “Muslim ban” rhetoric⁷⁸⁴. While North America and Europe have varying degrees of right-wing populism, political parties and politicians subscribing to this ideology are present in a number of these states. Germany’s Alternative for Germany party, Sweden’s Alternative for Sweden party, the United States’ President Trump, Poland’s Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party, and Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro are just a few examples⁷⁸⁵. These examples are by no means exhaustive, but they do show a few notable examples of the spread of right-wing populism in North America, Europe, and even Latin America. In general, these parties are built on the concept of a past with cultural homogeneity and/or economic success with an “us vs. them” mentality. The “them” can be anything from elites, Muslims, individuals

⁷⁸² Megan Brenan, “Americans Trust in Mass Media Edges Down to 41%”, *Gallup* online, September 26, 2019, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267047/americans-trust-mass-media-edges-down.aspx>.

⁷⁸³ Art Swift, “American’s Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low”, *Gallup* online, September 14, 2016, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

⁷⁸⁴ Jessica Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement is Close to Collapse. That Was Trump’s Plan”, *The New York Times*, July 28, 2020, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/opinion/us-refugee-resettlement-trump.html>.

⁷⁸⁵ BBC News, “Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide”, November 13, 2019, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006>.

of a different race or culture, migrants and even the media itself⁷⁸⁶. This builds a battle that must be fought to protect “us” from an adversary. Often at times alt-right populist politicians and parties choose multiple and often interconnected battles for change in policy and practice. An excellent example is the United States, which combined “them” to include all migrants, especially Muslims and those from Hispanic and Latino backgrounds⁷⁸⁷. Alt-right populist parties and politicians, especially when they heavily push anti-immigrant policy, enjoy support from their international counterparts, especially Russia due to the divisiveness of these issues⁷⁸⁸.

Migration has proven to be a particularly salient, alt-right populist area of interest due largely in part to the 2015 European migration crisis and the assumed influx of Mexican and other Latino migrants to the United States. The amplification of politicized information on migration is of particular use to Russian trolls and international alt-right organizations to push partisan politics with immigration’s divisiveness⁷⁸⁹. The issue of migration can further be linked, although falsely, to an increase in migration leading to a rise in crime and terrorism causing a divisive stance⁷⁹⁰. Despite the misleading nature of many facts associated with supposed problems arising from migration, they are still able to spread and be widely believed. A call for citizens to react to “save their country from the other” has the potential to be particularly salient in mobilizing voters and individuals by perceiving migrants as a threat to the citizen’s way of life, culture, and religion. Viewing and labelling migrants as “the other” can extend through generations of family members built in the original host country⁷⁹¹.

⁷⁸⁶ Asperholm Hedlund, “Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation”, 6.

⁷⁸⁷ Thomas Greven, “The rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States”, *Friederich-Ebert-Stiftung* (2016): 1–6, accessed August 8, 2020, https://www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf.

⁷⁸⁸ Jonathan Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden: International Influence Campaign in the 2018 Swedish Election”, (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2018), 5, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Smearing-Sweden.pdf>.

⁷⁸⁹ Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, 9.

⁷⁹⁰ Magdalena Crisan, “Migration in the Kremlin’s Disinformation War”, *Bulletin of “Carol I” National Defence University* 8, no. 3 (September 2019): 9, accessed August 8, 2020, ProQuest.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Additionally, many migrants come from politically and economically unstable environments in which they are unsafe physically and/or economically⁷⁹². These conditions can translate into initial economic instability in their new host country. Migrants are also subject to hate crimes resulting in injury or even death. After a wave of terrorist attacks in early 2016 and a call from then candidate Trump for the Muslim immigration ban, California State University “found that hate crimes against American Muslims were up 78 percent over the course of 2015.”⁷⁹³ The amount of uncertainty for migrants is concerning in every country. The United States has long been held as a welcoming country for immigrants⁷⁹⁴, especially when considering the United States was originally, what then U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy called “a nation of immigrants” in the title of his 1958 book⁷⁹⁵. Disinformation in the United States and internationally threatens the entrance of some of the world’s most vulnerable populations into host states, and even once admitted, there is not a guarantee of safety. While the use of disinformation on migration serves to stop migration, it has at the same time exacerbated the suffering of potential migrants with today’s many humanitarian crises with violent conflicts and wars in their homelands⁷⁹⁶.

Case Studies: The United States of America and Sweden

While many Americans still consider the United States as a “nation of immigrants”, there is a growing number of those who do not, calling for decreased immigration and a border wall. Similarly, Sweden until 2015, was regarded as a country welcoming refuge for migrants, receiving the fourth

⁷⁹² Eduardo Porter and Karl Russell, “Migrants Are on the Rise Around the World, and Myths About Them Are Shaping Attitudes”, *The New York Times*, June 20, 2018, accessed August 15, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>.

⁷⁹³ Eric Lichtblau, “Hate Crimes Against American Muslims Most Since Post-9/11 Era” *New York Times*, September 17, 2016, accessed August 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/hate-crimes-american-muslims-rise.html>.

⁷⁹⁴ Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement”.

⁷⁹⁵ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

⁷⁹⁶ Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement”.

highest number of asylum requests of the OECD countries, following the United States, Germany and Hungary⁷⁹⁷. Today however, the Migration Policy Institute reports that Sweden has taken a more restrictionist policy with the newly elected, nationalist, and anti-immigration government (2018)⁷⁹⁸. The United States has also followed “restrictionist policies following both 9/11 with even more now under the Trump administration, ranging from the Muslim ban to decreased refugee quotas⁷⁹⁹ and a recent attempt to drastically decrease the number of international students studying in the U.S. in July 2020 which was struck down⁸⁰⁰.”

The United States

During Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, he heavily emphasized his anti-migrant sentiments⁸⁰¹ as well as his concern for election fraud resulting from undocumented migrants voting in elections⁸⁰². As a solution to both of these problems, Trump campaigned on populist concepts like “building the wall”, with the wall being along the U.S. border with Mexico in addition to increased deportation⁸⁰³. Almost immediately upon officially becoming the president of the United States, Trump issued his first executive order in January 2017. This executive order was clearly anti-migrant, as it halted the settlement of Syrian refugees, discontinued admission of refugees approved for resettlement, and created the Muslim ban which

⁷⁹⁷ “Inflows of asylum seekers”, OECD International Migration Database and labour market outcomes of immigrants, OECD, accessed September 21, 2020, <http://www.oecd.org/els/mig/keystat.htm>.

⁷⁹⁸ Admir Skodo, “Sweden: By Turns Welcoming and Restrictive in its Immigration Policy”, *Migration Policy Institute*, December 6, 2018, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-turns-welcoming-and-restrictive-its-immigration-policy>.

⁷⁹⁹ Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement”.

⁸⁰⁰ Nick Anderson and Susan Svrluga, “Trump administration backs off plan requiring international students to take face-to-face classes”, *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2020, accessed August 17, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/ice-rule-harvard-international-students-rescinded/2020/07/14/319fdae0-c607-11ea-a99f-3bbdff1af38_story.html.

⁸⁰¹ Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement”.

⁸⁰² Gaughan, “Illiberal Democracy”, 58.

⁸⁰³ Noland D. McCaskill, “Trump promises wall and massive deportation program”, *Politico*, August 31, 2016, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-arizona-227612>.

denied entry for citizens from seven Muslim majority countries⁸⁰⁴. This executive order and later cap on refugee admission from 110,000 under the Obama administration to 45,000 in 2017 under the Trump administration broke from the American government's post World War II tradition of welcoming refugees into the United States⁸⁰⁵.

President Donald's Trump's first executive order's focus on migrants—specifically refugees and Muslims—was the first attempt to fulfill his campaign promise of anti-migrant policy⁸⁰⁶. While in office, Trump continues to generate false information and knowingly improbable ideas⁸⁰⁷, such as his idea to relocate undocumented migrants to so called “sanctuary cities”, which are cities choosing to often not comply with assisting Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials with information about potentially undocumented immigrants. Such a transfer, according to Homeland Security, would be impossible due to the high cost and complexity of such a program⁸⁰⁸. Although some unfounded claims do come directly from President Trump, others continue to be generated on social media, even after the 2016 election ended. A recent example from 2018 originated from a post by Twitter user Mike Allen showing a picture of injured and bloodied Mexican police officers. The caption explained this harm was caused by “the caravan”, a term used by Trump to describe asylum seekers from central America seeking refuge in the United States⁸⁰⁹. This post exemplified simultaneously an anti-caravan, pro-Trump, and pro-military interven-

⁸⁰⁴ Goudeau, “Refugee Resettlement”.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁶ Miriam Valverde, “Trump’s travel restrictions survive Supreme Court, fall short of promised Muslim ban”, *PolitiFact*, November 14, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/trumpometer/promise/1401/establish-ban-muslims-entering-us/>.

⁸⁰⁷ Carole McGranahan, “An anthropology of lying: Trump and the political sociability of moral outrage”, *American Ethnologist*, 44, no. 2 (2017): 245, accessed September 21, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12475>.

⁸⁰⁸ Calvin Woodward and Hope Yen, “AP FACT CHECK: Trump’s misleading rhetoric on immigrants”, *AP News*, April 29, 2019, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/fb21a03e4d2246b1926830e-8def6e999>.

⁸⁰⁹ Dan Evon, “Were These Mexican Police Officers Brutalized by Members of a Migrant Caravan?” *Snopes*, October 22, 2018, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/mexican-police-caravan-photos/>.

tion at the U.S./Mexico border. The truth behind this image has nothing to do with a “caravan” and is in fact a picture from a 2012 student protest in Mexico City⁸¹⁰. This is an excellent example of disinformation in the form of misrepresentation by combining the politically charged caption with the unrelated images.

As a combination of the Trump administration’s anti-migrant stance and fear of election fraud, there have also been attempts on the campaign trail and during his presidency to draw a connection between the two to create a convenient narrative to pursue a political goal. This interconnection supposes that undocumented immigrants vote in elections and skew the vote in favor of the Democratic party⁸¹¹. In 2019, Trump alleged on Twitter thousands of non-citizens voted in Texas elections due to a report published by the Texas Election Commission⁸¹². The Tweet additionally called for increased voter identification laws for elections on the fear that many undocumented immigrants and non-citizens regularly vote in elections. Although the claims made in the Tweet originate from a study, the information used was taken out of context and transformed into a form of disinformation, which journalists later debunked. Alexa Ura explained this report simply flagged voters for citizenship checks, meaning they were not citizens when they applied for and received their state identification cards or driver’s licenses⁸¹³. However, as she points out, non-citizens with green cards or other identification documents, are entitled to become naturalized, and then be eligible to legally vote.

Additionally, Trump spread disinformation and fueled prejudice amongst his supporters about refugee resettlements. Trumps first executive order for example, encouraged a halt to refugee resettlement under the assumption the current process does not vet refugees thoroughly enough

⁸¹⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹¹ Alexa Ura, “Texas officials flag tens of thousands of voters for citizenship checks”, *The Texas Tribune*, January 25, 2019, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://www.texastribune.org/2019/01/25/texas-flags-tens-thousands-voters-citizenship-check/>.

⁸¹² Donald J. Trump, Twitter Post, January 2019, 8:22 a.m., accessed August 13, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1089513936435716096>.

⁸¹³ Ura, “Texas officials flag”.

to keep Americans safe. This assumption however is unfounded given that refugees are thoroughly vetted through a process that can take two years or more starting with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and then again through a thorough vetting process with multiple American governmental agencies, including law enforcement, national security, and intelligence agencies⁸¹⁴. Additionally, the call for the border wall and the necessity of additional law enforcement along the southern border ignores the way the majority of undocumented immigrants arrive in the United States. For the seventh year in a row, the Center for Migration Studies has found visa overstays as the main reason for newly undocumented immigrants. As the Center shares, 62% of newly undocumented immigrant cases are from visa overstays and only 32% of them from illegal border crossings. This finding raises doubts about the need for a border wall and military deployment at the southern border and rather highlights the necessity for increased scrutiny in the Department of State visa approval policy⁸¹⁵.

Sweden

Although Sweden has been receptive of and is a host to a large number migrants, the issue of migration has become a contentious issue in Swedish politics⁸¹⁶. Following the reception of 156,460 asylum requests in 2015, some political parties used this as evidence of a migration crisis in Sweden⁸¹⁷. The two political parties most notable for spreading this idea and fueling fears are the Swedish Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD) and Alternative for Sweden (Alternativ för Sverige, AfS), known for their anti-immigrant beliefs, the AfS being the most extreme⁸¹⁸. While it is not uncommon for political parties to play upon some facts to further

⁸¹⁴ Goudeau, "Refugee Resettlement".

⁸¹⁵ Richard Gonzales, "For 7th Consecutive Year, Visa Overstays Exceed Illegal Border Crossings", *NPR*, January 16, 2019, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/16/686056668/for-seventh-consecutive-year-visa-overstays-exceeded-illegal-border-crossings>.

⁸¹⁶ Birdwell et al., "Smearing Sweden", 9.

⁸¹⁷ OECD, "Inflows of asylum seekers".

⁸¹⁸ Birdwell et al., "Smearing Sweden", 14.

their own political agendas, alt-right parties often manipulate and distort information that is presented in a similar style and format to that of traditional journalism so as to cause confusion and make it difficult for readers to determine what is real or fake news⁸¹⁹. Instead of using the term disinformation, “junk news” is more prevalent in Sweden, although both terms are equivalent – denoting the intention of using misleading news. A study by the Oxford Internet Institute also found that Swedes interact more with “junk news” than other European countries⁸²⁰. Not only is Sweden one of the highest consumers of “junk news” in Europe, it also shares more fake news on Twitter than many other countries, on average eight out of ten times more, most of which are of Swedish origin⁸²¹.

Unlike many countries from Europe and the western world, Sweden has managed to avoid foreign interference and meddling in elections, or so it so far appears. In the 2017 German federal election for example, evidence emerged suggesting that Russian bots were used to spread disinformation, but no such evidence was ever found in Sweden’s 2018 elections⁸²². That is not to say however the Swedish alt-right is entirely isolated from communicating with international alt-right media. One of the starkest examples is the political party Alternative for Sweden, representing a simple alteration to the name of its German equivalent Alternative for Germany. In spite of the apparent connection between the two groups, they remain minimal. This is also the case of European and American alt-right movements that lack coordination and any internationally backed amplification campaigns of disinformation⁸²³.

Despite the lack of coordination between AfS and other alt-right groups, there still has been considerable interest in Sweden amongst international alt-right groups. Although Sweden avoided Kremlin-backed news sources or other alt-right group from meddling in its election by injecting

⁸¹⁹ Asperholm Hedlund, “Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation”, 12.

⁸²⁰ Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, 11.

⁸²¹ Asperholm Hedlund, “Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation”, 4.

⁸²² Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, 12.

⁸²³ Ibid., p. 26.

disinformation, there existed a disinformation campaign about Sweden for external audiences⁸²⁴. Social media outlets for example portrayed Sweden as “a country in crisis on the verge of a civil and ethnic war”, an assumption drawn from the influx of Muslim migrants to Sweden by alt-right media sources⁸²⁵. The idea that Sweden’s homogeneity was “ruined” circulated despite any evidence to prove this was the case. Even the American broadcast news channel Fox News focused on this supposed issue which was then picked up by President Trump in 2017⁸²⁶. The goal of this smear campaign of disinformation about Sweden was established by Russian-backed media and the alt-right to encourage the emergence of an “anti-liberal” and “anti-migrant” society and policies in Europe and North America⁸²⁷.

Even documentaries emerged out of the international campaign to smear Sweden and spread disinformation about its alleged migration problems. Ami Horowitz’s YouTube mini-documentary “Stockholm Syndrome” gained quite a lot of attention after it was posted to YouTube in December 2016, with some claiming the video sparked Trump’s infamous 2017 comment about “last night” in Sweden⁸²⁸. After the release of the documentary, the majority of the Swedes that were either in the film or filmed the documentary came out and criticized the heavily edited footage. Two policemen interviewed in the documentary also stated that their answers were heavily edited and taken out of context to give the impression that police responses were weak to the supposed increase of violence by migrants⁸²⁹. One of the cinematographers, Emil Marczak, confirmed that

⁸²⁴ Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, p. 16.

⁸²⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸²⁶ Rick Noack, “Sweden has no idea what Trump meant when he said, ‘You look at what’s happening... in Sweden’”, *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2017, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/02/19/sweden-has-no-idea-what-trump-meant-when-he-said-you-look-at-whats-happening-in-sweden/>.

⁸²⁷ Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, 17.

⁸²⁸ Noack, “Sweden has no idea”.

⁸²⁹ Hugo Lindkvist, “He filmed the police interview that Trump saw: the material was not edited ethically”, *Dagens Nyheter*, February 23, 2017, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/he-filmed-the-police-interview-that-trump-saw-the-material-was-not-edited-ethically/>.

many of Horowitz's questions were manipulated to establish causation between the refugees and a rise in crime⁸³⁰. This attempt to establish a link and release the information in English clearly shows the goal of the entire campaign was to smear Sweden as the creation of disinformation to support an anti-migrant and anti-refugee narrative for the rest of the western world.

Conclusion

Disinformation is an increasingly large adversary in the information age with its ability to stem from a Russian troll factory with non-stop content production or even from a fourteen-year-old in his parent's basement. Anyone can create disinformation to spread on social media, and many may prove to be quite good at it. Its spread is concerning, and its political impact on issues like migration could have lasting impacts to the implosion of government policy and programs. Disinformation resulted in the Trump administration's attack on the American refugee resettlement program that has severely damaged refugee quota caps that could take years to restore and raise again. Without the proper tools to combat the issue of disinformation, the damage to policies and polarization in the years to come could be nearly irreversible.

The 2016 American presidential election showed a worrying creation of a "toxic mix", consisting of the spread of fake news, average broadcast news audiences above 60 years old, and the spread of both good and bad information on the internet that may have the ability to undermine even the strongest democracies⁸³¹. Today, this "toxic mix" continues with little mitigation. Mitigation to the issue of disinformation under a democratic system at times can be viewed as a violation of Freedom of Speech and the First Amendment, and maybe such speculations are correct in certain cases. Nevertheless, mitigation should be attempted. While there are many solutions to combatting disinformation, the most credible avenues

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ Gaughan, "Illiberal Democracy", 64.

to attempt mitigation are an increase in the availability of fact checking websites, increased research into disinformation detecting Artificial Intelligence (AI), and lastly the introduction of media literacy into curriculum.

The information war against disinformation cannot be simply won by countering every piece of disinformation with the facts directly; instead, it is essential to continuously publish factual information through reliable channels beyond mainstream media⁸³². Mainstream media is most often a source of factual information, but there is a profit motivation to create the most interesting and clicked through stories. It is important for more fact checkers to emerge and to find ways to encourage their use as objective sources. Using fact checkers helps to empower individuals to take disinformation into their own hands to read the facts and choose for themselves how to interpret information. With these fact checkers, it is important to promote their objectivity to prevent them from becoming politically polarized and exacerbating issues. In the future, a fact checker could be artificial intelligence or AI which detects false information. AI can be trained to analyze content using certain key words as well as to distinguish between human networks versus bot networks and use this information to promote facts and disprove or remove disinformation.⁸³³ This advancement would have the ability to stop disinformation from spreading as quickly, but this will only be possible when the AI is able to have an extremely high accuracy level and not remove the content of individuals.

Media literacy for citizens of all ages is essential for a functioning and healthy democracy in the information age. An excellent example is Estonia, which has introduced digital citizenship into school curriculum with a “Lifelong Learning Strategy”⁸³⁴. This curriculum encourages students to be ready in being able to succeed in work and study in today’s digital world. The combination of encouragement to be ready for future career and educational opportunities with an additional emphasis on critical analysis skills allows for students to be ready to also analyze and determine

⁸³² Stengel, *Information Wars*, 172–173.

⁸³³ Stengel, *Information Wars*, 300.

⁸³⁴ Birdwell et al., “Smearing Sweden”, 36.

information to be true, misinformation, or disinformation⁸³⁵. This lifelong education will hopefully remain with students in these types of programs for life, eventually creating a society in which the majority of the population is able to think critically and dissect information for truthfulness. With educational programs, an increase in fact checkers and fact checking technology, it is hopeful that one day polarizing issues such as migration can be analyzed and bipartisan agreement can once again become possible.

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 37.