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Disinformation: theoretical framework and policy responses in the European Union

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Over the past decade, disinformation has emerged as one of the most salient security and governance challenges confronting democratic societies. The accelerating evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the proliferation of social media platforms, and the increasing sophistication of artificial intelligence (AI) tools have dramatically expanded the scale, speed, and complexity of information flows. In this environment disinformation has become a pervasive instrument of political influence, societal destabilization, hybrid warfare and military operations.

The AI4Debunk project has developed a theoretical framework for understanding disinformation, particularly in the context of European Union (EU) policymaking. This article synthesizes key elements of that framework, focusing on the definitional contours of disinformation, its structural components, mechanisms of diffusion, societal impacts, and the EU's institutional responses.

Defining disinformation

The conceptualization of disinformation varies across scholarly, governmental, and institutional contexts. A recurring definitional element is the intentional nature of such activities. Disinformation is not merely inaccurate information but deliberately crafted and disseminated content intended to deceive and cause harm.

EU institutions have adopted a functional definition: “verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm,” where public harm includes threats to democratic processes, public health, security, and the environment. NATO's formulation further emphasizes the emotional dimension, noting that disinformation often seeks to evoke anger, fear, or disgust to override rational deliberation.





Analytical framework: disinformation threads

The AI4Debunk framework conceptualizes disinformation not as isolated falsehoods but as *threads*—interconnected elements that operate across multiple platforms and modalities, mutually reinforcing one another to create an appearance of credibility and consensus. The framework identifies six principal analytical dimensions:

Context: the historical, cultural, political, social, economic, and global circumstances within which a narrative is embedded.

Content: the explicit and implicit messages, linguistic and visual elements, and rhetorical strategies deployed.

Sources: the originators and disseminators of the content, including both primary authors and secondary amplifiers.

Credibility: stylistic, visual, and structural features designed to simulate legitimacy (e.g., forged logos, pseudo-official documents).

Target audience and engagement: the demographic or ideological constituencies targeted, and the mechanisms by which engagement is generated.

Impact: the measurable or inferred consequences for public opinion, institutional trust, political stability, or policy outcomes.

This multidimensional approach enables a systematic assessment of both the content and operational ecosystem of disinformation across different cases.

Case analysis – applying theoretical framework

To test the applicability of the proposed disinformation threads framework for analysing case studies, the AI4Debunk project examined four cases illustrating different elements of disinformation:

French Farmers Against Ukrainian Farmers

The manipulation of a protest video along with the falsification of a respected media outlet's logo and the fabrication of quotes attributed to a prominent French syndicalist, illustrates how disinformation can be weaponized to undermine public support for Ukraine in its ongoing conflict with Russia. The broader implications of this case are clear: disinformation campaigns like this one are designed not just to deceive individuals, but to influence public opinion and, by extension, political decision-making in the West. By fostering division and scepticism about support for Ukraine, Russia aims to weaken the EU's unified stance and reduce the resources dedicated to Ukraine's defence.

No More Wind Power in France

This case exemplifies a disinformation campaign aimed at manipulating public opinion in Bulgaria to promote anti-EU and anti-renewable energy sentiments. This false narrative misrepresents a decision by French authorities to modify wind turbine noise measurement protocols as a complete ban on wind power in France. The disinformation aligns with the interests of pro-Russian and fossil fuel advocates in Bulgaria, who are resistant to the EU Green Deal and renewable energy policies, particularly wind energy.

This disinformation targets Bulgarian audiences, particularly Eurosceptics and nationalists, using emotionally charged false headlines to stir opposition against the EU's climate policies.

Ukraine as a Western Colony

The case reveals how Russia uses disinformation to frame Ukraine as a pawn of Western powers, portraying the country's alignment with the EU and NATO as manipulated rather than a sovereign choice. This narrative appeals to pro-Russian, nationalist, and anti-Western audiences by fostering distrust of the West and suggesting that Ukraine's geopolitical direction is dictated by foreign interests. Such messages are strategically deployed to diminish Ukraine's autonomy and to justify Russia's aggression as defensive rather than expansionist. By framing the West as manipulative and exploitative, the disinformation seeks to erode trust in Western institutions and leaders, complicating diplomatic efforts and potentially reducing international support for Ukraine.

Ukrainian Refugees

By exploiting existing social tensions, prejudices, and fears related to immigration in Europe, Russian narratives aim to undermine support for Ukrainian refugees and, by extension, weaken Western solidarity with Ukraine. These fabricated claims about Ukrainian refugees are part of a larger strategy to erode public and political backing for Ukraine. This case highlights how disinformation can manipulate sensitive topics like immigration to serve broader political agendas, in this instance, to weaken European support for Ukraine and bolster Russia's standing in the conflict.

EU institutional responses and limitations

The EU has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to address disinformation, combining legislative, collaborative, and educational initiatives: Action Plan Against Disinformation (2018) enhanced detection, rapid alert systems, and member-state coordination; European Democracy Action Plan (2020), which proposes measures to safeguard electoral integrity, increase transparency in political advertising, and strengthen media literacy; Digital Services Act (2022), intended as regulatory obligations for large platforms to mitigate systemic risks, improve transparency, and address illegal content; European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) – a networked collaboration effort among fact-checkers, academics, and journalists; AI Act – the first EU-wide regulatory framework for AI, mandating transparency for AI-generated content and prohibiting certain high-risk applications. Additionally, the Code of Practice on Disinformation engages platforms in voluntary commitments to demonetize false content, label automated accounts, and prioritize credible information sources.

Despite institutional advances, several limitations persist, such as: fact-checking limitations, while effective in correcting specific falsehoods, it may have limited reach and, in some cases, trigger “backfire effects” among ideologically committed audiences; self-regulation shortcomings – voluntary platform compliance is inconsistent, particularly regarding political advertising transparency and cross-border enforcement; risk of overreach exists in cases when counter-disinformation measures, if perceived as censorship, can be exploited to further erode public trust.



Conclusion

The disinformation phenomenon represents a multidimensional challenge that transcends traditional distinctions between domestic and foreign policy, security and civil society, and online and offline domains. The AI4Debunk framework offers a systematic basis for analyzing disinformation threads, elucidating both their structural components and their operational logic.



However, effective mitigation demands a whole-of-society approach: coordinated action by governmental institutions, private platforms, media organizations, and citizens themselves. The objective is not solely to debunk individual falsehoods but to strengthen societal resilience — cultivating media literacy, fostering critical engagement, and maintaining transparency in the information ecosystem.



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