



Disinformation in the global election



NASK



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Unmasking Disinformation in Electoral Campaigns Across the Globe

According to The Global Risks Report 2024 created by the World Economic Forum, disinformation will become the most serious global threat within the next two years. A key factor in the rise of this threat is the elections in the world's largest democracies, such as India, Mexico and the United Kingdom, and the recent elections in the United States. The 2024 vote comes at a time of growing economic and geopolitical uncertainties, war in Ukraine, and conflicts in the Middle East. These events create fertile ground for the spread of false information that can be used to destabilize countries and influence electoral processes.

The 2024 super elections could not only have domestic consequences for individual countries, but also affect global trade, security and financial stability. Disinformation used by authoritarian states can lead to the exacerbation of international conflicts, the introduction of sanctions or cyber attacks, which can further destabilize the whole societies and regions.

This report delves into the complex landscape of disinformation by examining five distinct countries spread across four diverse continents. Case studies include Taiwan, Senegal, Mexico, South Africa, and the United States, each offering unique insights into how disinformation manifests globally. Three of these nations belong to the Global South, which is particularly susceptible to the strategic influence of Russian information operations. Taiwan stands out as a significant focal point, relentlessly targeted by China's sophisticated information campaign that employs cutting-edge technology to shape narratives. Furthermore, we provide a comprehensive analysis of electoral disinformation in the United States in the run-up to the election, highlighting the unique challenges and strategies. By exploring these varied examples, the report aims to illuminate the far-reaching impacts of disinformation and the intricate web of global influences at play.

Disinformation frequently exploits recurring themes that resonate with audiences, yet there is a notable lack of in-depth analysis regarding how these themes are specifically tailored to suit different societal contexts. Presented comprehensive research reveals that narratives possess a remarkable ability to adapt; they can morph and localize to align with the distinct cultural, social, and political characteristics of various regions societies. By meticulously examining global trends and patterns, we gain valuable insights into the mechanisms that facilitate the rapid adaptation and widespread dissemination of harmful messages in specific regions. A narrative or persuasive technique that proves effective in one country can often be seamlessly transferred and modified to manipulate the sentiments and beliefs in another.

Recognizing and addressing this phenomenon is crucial. Raising public awareness about the methods of disinformation is essential, as only an informed society can cultivate the resilience and critical thinking skills necessary to counteract these insidious messages and protect the integrity of their information landscape.

Magdalena Wilczyńska,

Managing Director of Cyberspace Information Protection Division

Election Disinformation in the Mexican Election in 2024

Author: *Vladimir Chorny*

Introduction

Mexico held the most extensive electoral process in its history this past 2 June 2024, where not only the presidency was elected but also an entire renewal of the congress (128 Senate seats and 500 Legislative seats in the lower chamber) and several local and State charges, such as that for governor in the States of Chiapas, Mexico City, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Morelos, Puebla, Tabasco, Veracruz and Yucatán. This "super electoral year" encompassed the election of more than 19 thousand public charges in the three levels of government (Municipal, State-local and Federal).¹

The president in charge, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), is the leader of the political party MORENA ("Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional") and has been ruling Mexico since 2018. The now elected and first female president in Mexico's history, Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, who took office on 1 October, was the former governor of Mexico City (2018-2023), also from MORENA, and was presented as the candidate through a coalition integrated by this political party, the "Partido Verde Ecologista de México" (PVEM) and the "Partido del Trabajo" (PT). The main competitor against Claudia Sheinbaum – Xóchitl Gálvez Ruíz – was proposed by a coalition of opposition parties consisting of the "Partido Acción Nacional" (PAN), the "Partido Revolucionario Institucional" (PRI) and the "Partido de la Revolución Democrática" (PRD). The political party "Movimiento Ciudadano" (MC) presented Jorge Álvarez Máynez as a third alternative. Due to the political context and electoral preferences, the actual competence was between the first two candidates, leaving Álvarez Máynez without a real chance of winning.

1 INE. "Elecciones 2024". Accessed 3 September 3 (2024a). <https://ine.mx/voto-y-elecciones/elecciones-2024/>.

After the election, Claudia Sheinbaum received an overwhelming majority of votes, resulting in 59.76% of the votes, while Xóchitl Gálvez received only the 27.46% of the votes, and Álvarez Máynez, 10.32% of the votes². Even with the enormous difference in results, the months before the election were full of media attacks between the candidates, and different disinformation trends were directed against the currently elected President Sheinbaum.

The election of Claudia Sheinbaum continue to extend the widespread approval that AMLO had when he was elected president. A little bit unexpectedly (for the massive number of votes and its difference with López Obrador), Sheinbaum had 35.5 million votes in the presidential election, 5 million more than AMLO in the 2018 election.³ The amount of votes is fundamental not only for the social support for her incoming government but for legislative integration in the Congress, where given the electoral law in Mexico, MORENA (and its allies) will have the super-majority (two-thirds of the legislators present in each chamber) to change the Constitution.⁴

After the final assignation of seats by the electoral authority, the final number of legislators of the political parties is as follows: In the Lower Chamber, consisting of a total of 500 legislators: MORENA, 236 seats; PVEM, 77 seats; PAN, 72 seats; PT, 51 seats; PRI, 35 seats; MC, 27 seats; PRD, 1 seat. The government coalition finished with 364 seats. In the Senate: MORENA, 60 seats; PAN, 22 seats; PRI, 16 seats; PVEM, 14 seats; PT, 9 seats; MC, 5 seats; PRD, 1 seat.⁵

2 Ibidem.

3 Lorena Arroyo. "Sheinbaum, la presidenta más votada en la historia reciente de México", *El País*, 03 June 2024. <https://elpais.com/mexico/elecciones-mexicanas/2024-06-03/datos-sheinbaum-la-presidenta-mas-votada-en-la-historia-de-mexico.html>.

4 Raziel, Zedryk. "El INE aprueba que Morena y sus aliados tengan mayoría calificada en la Cámara de Diputados", *El País*, 23 August 2024. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2024-08-23/el-ine-aprueba-que-morena-y-sus-aliados-tengan-mayoria-calificada-en-la-camara-de-diputados.html>. This overwhelming power closes the Presidency of AMLO without criticism. By the time this work is presented (20 September 2024), the AMLO's government will have already passed a Constitutional reform on Judicial Power that strikes the core of its independence and is a clear move to diminish the division of power in Mexico, mainly by controlling the election of judges (not only from the Supreme Court but in the whole country) by the executive power, establishing mechanisms of control that obliterate judicial independence, and removing the actual Supreme Court integration in favour of the concentration of power. But the anti-democratic facet of this power comes not only against the balance and counterbalance of powers of the State; by now, the government will have also approved another Constitutional reform that eliminates the historic control of the military under civil commands, and institutionalises the militarisation of the State from the Constitution.

5 The final numbers of the presidential election were: Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo: 35,924,519 votes; Xóchitl Galvez Ruíz: 16,502,697 votes; Jorge Álvarez Máynez: 6,204,710 votes. See: INE. "Votos por candidatura". Accessed 6 October. <https://computos2024.ine.mx/presidencia/nacional/candidatura>.

Social platforms and the use of the Internet to express opinions and disseminate information are nowadays fundamental in Mexico. According to the MX Internet Association, over 100 million people are Internet users (representing 84% of the population over six years of age), most accessing the Internet through smartphones. More than half get informed of news and political life through the primary Internet platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. As a complement, the candidates and other subjects used messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, to create channels for disseminating information or disinformation.⁶

Disinformation landscape in Mexico

Disinformation in Mexico is not a new issue, and it has a long history that can be traced back to before the Internet was the ideal media for disseminating misleading content. Traditional media in Mexico have long presented false information to disinform the public, not only in electoral contexts but in general.⁷ In different forms, the media have worked to confuse the public in different contexts, whether it is the case to deviate attention from the economic politics of a government or to cover a mass violation of human rights through the killing of students by the army, Mexico has a long story of the manipulation of truth. Notwithstanding, the arrival of the Internet in general and social media in particular has opened new ways to play the game of fake news in different and more pervasive ways.

In this scenario, more than one responsible subject is involved in disinformation. On one side, it is clear that some of the most important actors are the political parties and governments that use traditional and social media access to disseminate information to exacerbate their actions or attack their political rivals. Governmental authorities are regularly involved in disinformation on different agendas related to high social conflict in vulnerable areas, such as those related to local communities facing the government against infrastructure projects or where the army commits human rights violations. Another side of disinformation comes from private corporations working directly to disseminate false

⁶ Andrea Barenque. "Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape", *The Blue Owl Group*, August 2024, pp. 11-13. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>.

⁷ Edgar Corzo Sosa (Coord). "Reporte sobre las campañas de desinformación, <Noticias falsas (Fake News)> y su impacto en el derecho a la libertad de expresión", *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos*, 2019. <https://www.cndh.org.mx/documento/reporte-sobre-las-campanas-de-desinformacion-noticias-falsas-fake-news-y-su-impacto-en-el>.

information on different topics (mostly related to elections but not only). Private corporations working on public relations have created tendentious or false information and have shared it on the Internet, winning thousands of dollars in these campaigns. In many of these cases, there is a collaboration between these corporations and others that proportionate botnet services to grow the reach of the information shared. The use of fake accounts reaches not only user accounts but also copies, impersonations of media pages to confuse the public and make them believe that the news they are reading comes from a legitimate media source.⁸

On the other hand, various subjects work against disinformation in different arenas. For example, the media has strongly organised themselves in Mexico to create networks of fact-checkers and to deploy permanent areas of their news to dismantle false information and to communicate with their audiences about this. Other relevant actors in this sense are organisations from civil society and academia engaged in different fields affected by disinformation, such as those working with immigrants or helping vulnerable communities somehow confront the State. Finally, in the last few years, given the increasing use of disinformation in electoral contexts, the electoral authorities have been fundamental in countering disinformation, mainly but not limited to electoral campaigns, and they have considered disinformation as a general problem for Mexican democracy.⁹ Electoral authorities have been working closely with social media platforms and other Internet intermediaries such as Meta or Google, who have deployed programmes to counter disinformation in different ways in the last years.

Problematically, the general context of disinformation served as a breeding ground for electoral disinformation in the last election. Mexico's presidential election of 2024 took place in a polarised electoral context. Claudia Sheinbaum, the presidential candidate from the government party (MORENA), arrived on election day as a clear favourite to win. The opposition candidate, Xóchitl Galves, was presented as an alternative to her and the government of AMLO's politics and approach.

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- 8 Lorena Ríos, Juan Gómez, Estefanía Cervantes, Alba Alemán. "Cartografías de la desinformación en México. Perspectivas desde el periodismo". Article 19, November 2022. <https://articulo19.org/cartografias-de-la-desinformacion-en-mexico-perspectivas-desde-el-periodismo/>.
- 9 Central Electoral. "Necesaria colaboración entre instituciones, academia y sociedad civil para combatir la desinformación", INE, 21 March 2018. <https://centralelectoral.ine.mx/2018/03/21/necesaria-colaboracion-entre-instituciones-academia-y-sociedad-civil-para-combatir-la-desinformacion/>.

AMLO's government pushed forth a communication strategy to stress the social polarisation between those who support the government (the so-called "Fourth Transformation" or "Cuarta Transformación") and those who supposedly stand in an anti-popular position "against the people's interests and needs".¹⁰ In this narrative, the continuation of the "Cuarta Transformación" and the "will of the people" therein contained depended on the election of AMLO's successor and the discipline of the decisions made by the government, with little or no space for criticism from within, and apparent disrespect for external criticism from the outside, especially of that coming from human rights organisations, groups of victims, the feminist movement and independent journalists and media.¹¹

In the face of this context, the political opposition did everything they could in the communicational space to cast doubt on Claudia Sheinbaum, who was the most attacked candidate (even when disinformation tactics were deployed against all of the presidential candidates), including using and disseminating fake news against the official candidate related not only to her origins but also to her political positions, her religious beliefs and the politics related to religion and the government's relation with drug cartels.¹²

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- 10 Andrea Barenque. "Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape", The Blue Owl Group, August 2024. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>; Elías Camhaji. "La polarización toma México", El País, 05 March 2023. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-03-05/la-polarizacion-toma-mexico.html>; Anna Lagos. "Elecciones México 2024: Desinformación, IA y el reto de la democracia en un país polarizado", WIRED, 20 August 2024. <https://es.wired.com/articulos/elecciones-mexico-2024-desinformacion-y-el-reto-de-la-democracia-en-un-pais-polarizado>.
- 11 Carlos Maldonado. "López Obrador señala a las feministas de querer "afectar" su Gobierno y las califica de 'conservadoras'", El País, 29 September 2021. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2021-09-29/lopez-obrador-acusa-a-las-feministas-de-querer-afectar-su-gobierno-y-las-califica-de-conservadoras.html>; Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna. "En busca del antídoto contra la polarización de AMLO", The Washington Post, 28 July 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2022/07/28/amlo-periodista-enfrenta-reportera-palero-polarizacion-reyna-haydee-ramirez/>; CNN Español. "López Obrador critica al Centro Prodh por defender a acusados en caso Ayotzinapa. La organización le responde sobre encubrimiento al Ejército", 14 December 2023. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2023/12/14/lopez-obrador-centro-prodh-ayotzinapa-ejercito-orix/>; Olivia Vázquez Herrera. "Centro Prodh responde a AMLO: "Sus juicios de valor y descalificaciones obedecen a su encubrimiento del Ejército", infobae, 14 December 2023. <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/12/14/centro-prodh-responde-a-amlo-sus-juicios-de-valor-y-descalificaciones-obedecen-a-su-encubrimiento-del-ejercito/>; Aristegui Noticias. "AMLO acusa a Frayba y Centro Prodh de 'magnificar' violencia en Chiapas", 22 April 2024. <https://aristeguinoticias.com/2204/mexico/amlo-acusa-a-frayba-y-centro-prodh-de-magnificar-violencia-en-chiapas/>; Syndy García. "Elecciones presidenciales en México: Las desinformaciones y los ataques en redes del proceso 2024", Voz de América, 30 May 2024. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-las-desinformaciones-y-los-ataques-en-redes-del-proceso-2024/7636345.html>; Manuel Alejandro Guerrero. "Contexto de la desinformación y elecciones 2024", El Sol de México, 08 June 2024. <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/analisis/contexto-de-la-desinformacion-y-elecciones-2024-12052975.html>; Ebbaba Hameida. "El cerco a la libertad de prensa, legado de López Obrador: señalamiento, descalificación y desinformación", Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, 01 June 2024. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240601/cerco-libertad-prensa-legado-lopez-obrador-senalamiento-descalificacion-desinformacion/16120050.shtml>.
- 12 Syndy García. "Elecciones presidenciales en México: Las desinformaciones y los ataques en redes del proceso 2024", Voz de América, 30 May 2024. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-las-desinformaciones-y-los-ataques-en-redes-del-proceso-2024/7636345.html>; Anne Vigna. "Au Mexique, la candidate de gauche Claudia Sheinbaum visée par une campagne massive de dénigrement sur le réseau X", Le Monde, 08 May 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/05/08/au-mexique-la-candidate-de-gauche-claudia-sheinbaum-visee-par-une-campagne-massive-de-denigrement-sur-le-reseau-x_6232152_3210.html.

Most of the false content disseminated in the electoral campaigns was directed against Claudia Sheinbaum because she was the favourite candidate for the presidential chair. Even when the primary medium for sharing disinformation was social platforms (such as X - formerly Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook), the government used public spaces to share misleading information with the intent to lie about public matters and to attack political opponents (or “enemies of the people” in AMLO’s terms). The public conferences of the president held daily (called “Mañaneras”) were used to present a narrative where the social groups, institutions and media who sympathised with the government were the “good” citizens, and those who were critics of the government were “the evil” anti-popular groups against the so-called “Cuarta Transformación”¹³. A common phrase used by AMLO in this space that can be taken as a reflection of the use of disinformation against the criticism of his government was “I have other data” as a response in which he repeatedly denied material facts and empiric evidence of violations of human rights, wrongdoings of the government and other conduct related either to corruption, illegality or accountability in general.¹⁴

Main narratives of disinformation related to the election

Disinformation on electoral information and electoral institutions

Disinformation in the last Mexican presidential elections was not limited only to candidates. On the contrary, both the process for voting on the electoral day and the institutions in charge of the organisation were systematically attacked and delegitimised in various ways.

¹³ Syndy García. “Elecciones presidenciales en México: Las desinformaciones y los ataques en redes del proceso 2024”, *Voz de América*, 30 May 2024. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-las-desinformaciones-y-los-ataques-en-redes-del-proceso-2024/7636345.html>

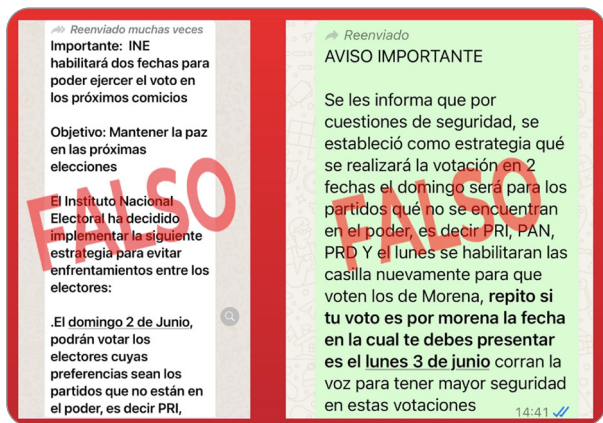
¹⁴ Ebbaba Hameida. “El cerco a la libertad de prensa, legado de López Obrador: señalamiento, descalificación y desinformación”, *Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240601/cerco-libertad-prensa-legado-lopez-obrador-senalamiento-descalificacion-desinformacion/16120050.shtml>



Source: verifica.efe.com¹⁶

One of the narratives that confused voters was how everyone should mark the paper voting ballots. The false information related to this tried to make voters err in how they manifested their intention and elect their preferred candidate. Furthermore, there was also a false claim alleging that the special pens provided by the Instituto Nacional Electoral to mark those ballots were defective and could be erased (erasable ink), so they either told voters to mark the ballots with another (non-legitimate) marker or make them believe that there was fraud coming in.¹⁵

Another narrative was disseminated through WhatsApp, and it consisted of a message where, supposedly, the INE (“Instituto Nacional Electoral”) was informing that the election was going to be held in



Source: aristeguinoticias.com¹⁸

two days instead of in one (02 June was the only day for the election). In the messages shared, sometimes it was alleged that “due to safety reasons”, the INE added a second day to vote and that while the first day (02 June) was for the electors supporting the opposition coalition (PAN-PRI-PRD), the second day (03 June) was for all MORENA supporters. This message aimed to suppress the vote for MORENA.¹⁷

15 Andrea Barenque. “Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape”, *The Blue Owl Group*, August 2024, pp. 11-13. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>; EFE Verifica. 2024. “Desinformación y falsedades en las elecciones mexicanas”, 30 May. <https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-y-falsedades-en-las-elecciones-mexicanas/>. For a video explaining this disinformation trend and the responses from the electoral authorities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoS0w9F-hTY&t=1s>.

16 An example of disinformation about nullity of ballots. According to the message, crossing out several boxes makes the vote invalid, but that is not true – in Mexico a citizen can cross out several boxes, as long as they belong to parties that have launched a joint candidacy. Source: EFE Verifica. 2024. “Desinformación y falsedades en las elecciones mexicanas”, 30 May. <https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-y-falsedades-en-las-elecciones-mexicanas/>.

17 Aristegui Noticias. “¿Dos fechas para ir a votar? ¡Falso! El único día es el 2 de junio”, 01 June 2024. <https://aristeguinoticias.com/0106/mexico/dos-fechas-para-ir-a-votar-falso-el-unico-dia-es-el-2-de-junio/>.

18 An example of false messages disseminated through WhatsApp. The message says that the election would be held over two different days, asking for a vote for MORENA on the second day (which was not the election day). Source: Aristegui Noticias. “¿Dos fechas para ir a votar? ¡Falso! El único día es el 2 de junio”, 01 June 2024. <https://aristeguinoticias.com/0106/mexico/dos-fechas-para-ir-a-votar-falso-el-unico-dia-es-el-2-de-junio/>.

This point is essential for the political context and the polarised climate in general, since the history of the country has been marked with strong collective trauma against electoral fraud, mainly because of the presidential election of 1988, where there were widespread reports of fraud and the electoral reporting system “fell”, meaning that the computer counting system failed, stopping to report the results on time and, by the time it did, giving as a winner the candidate of the political party in power. This “ghost” of electoral fraud was revived in the presidential election in 2006, in which the actual president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was defeated among widespread allegations of electoral fraud. Disinformation on this topic was intended to create distrust among the citizens and stress the attacks made by AMLO against the electoral institutions.

The government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador sustained and deployed a narrative of distrust against the INE. AMLO repeatedly expressed false claims about the impartiality of this institution and also about the integrity of the electoral process.¹⁹ Even when the allegations against the integrity of the INE and the elections as a whole did not come only from the government (the other campaigns of disinformation issued accusations of possible fraud orchestrated by the government), the reach and scope of the attacks made by AMLO had wider repercussion in the public debate.



Source: x.com²⁰

An example of disinformation directed against the INE from another front is the narrative that immigrants are used as an electoral strategy to win the election, which was supposedly an action taken by the government but also involved the legitimacy of the institution in charge of organising the elections. Published in X, TikTok and Facebook, this false information was related to an alleged over-registering of immigrants

¹⁹ Andrea Barenque. “Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape”, *The Blue Owl Group*, August 2024, p. 17. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>.

²⁰ In the screenshot, a conversation between two X users who shared false information about the use of migrants as an electoral strategy and claimed that this was common behaviour on the part of the government.

from Central America (4.7 Million), supposedly brought to Mexico by the government using its social programmes to have them vote for MORENA in the Federal elections.²⁰ In this case, the disinformation trend

in X reached thousands of interactions in different parts of the country and was replicated several times. This urged the INE to publicly state the false character of the information in different media. In these cases involving the work of the electoral authorities, the INE made a full analysis and provided an excellent example of how to present complete information to inform the public against false information.²¹

El INM nacionalizó migrantes y el INE les dio credenciales de elector y AMLO les dio tarjetas de bienestar para comprar su voto. Por eso hubo 5 millones más de votos para Claudia. Esto no sólo es un fraude electoral, sino una traición a México. Una razón más para anular

El INM nacionalizó migrantes y el INE les dio credenciales de elector y AMLO les dio tarjetas de bienestar para comprar su voto. Por eso hubo 5 millones más de votos para Claudia. Esto no sólo es un fraude electoral, sino una traición a México

Clave/INE	Estado	Elecciones de Gobernador en 2024	Población Mayor	Lista Nominal	Pct Exceso	Exceso
1	Aguascalientes	1	1,047,206	1,297,184	6.8%	49,878
2	Baja California	1	2,766,849	3,917,232	18.0%	440,383
3	Baja California Sur	1	614,634	613,595	-0.2%	-1,039
4	Campeche	1	742,219	694,609	-6.4%	-47,610
7	Chiapas	1	3,839,608	4,003,927	4.3%	164,319
8	Chihuahua	1	2,780,182	3,082,310	10.9%	302,128
9	Ciudad de México	1	7,093,226	7,514,513	11.6%	421,287
5	Coahuila	1	2,328,275	2,435,665	3.5%	82,390
6	Colima	1	587,667	584,939	-0.5%	-2,727
10	Durango	1	1,324,668	1,397,538	5.5%	72,870
11	Guanajuato	1	4,420,712	4,831,242	9.3%	410,530
12	Guerrero	1	2,803,824	2,642,759	-5.7%	-161,065
13	Hidalgo	1	2,247,047	2,386,302	6.2%	139,255
14	Jalisco	1	6,125,499	6,035,341	-1.5%	-90,158
15	México	1	13,640,278	14,726,178	8.0%	1,085,900
16	Michoacán	1	1,353,499	1,448,719	7.1%	95,220
17	Morelos	1	1,517,116	1,649,605	8.5%	132,489
18	Nayarit	1	933,065	955,646	2.6%	22,581
19	Nuevo León	1	3,813,969	4,066,097	5.2%	252,128
20	Oaxaca	1	2,899,457	3,116,660	7.0%	217,203
21	Queretaro	1	4,692,384	4,974,643	6.0%	282,259
22	Quintana Roo	1	1,714,439	1,899,053	10.8%	184,614
23	San Luis Potosí	1	1,321,546	1,460,063	10.5%	138,517
24	Sonora	1	2,606,660	2,185,460	-6.3%	-421,200
25	Sinaloa	1	2,324,555	2,369,615	1.6%	45,060
26	Tlaxcala	1	2,281,275	2,260,889	-0.9%	-20,386
27	Tabasco	1	1,854,303	1,811,505	-2.3%	-42,798
28	Tamaulipas	1	2,652,031	2,848,971	7.1%	196,940
29	Tlaxcala	1	1,004,039	1,042,687	3.8%	38,648
30	Veracruz	1	6,196,076	6,080,509	-1.9%	-115,567
31	Yucatán	1	1,707,760	1,766,072	3.4%	58,312
32	Zacatecas	1	1,156,181	1,265,939	9.5%	109,758
TOTAL Nacional			93,365,153	98,329,591	5.3%	4,964,438

Source: centralelectoral.ine.mx²²

The use of deepfakes against Claudia Sheinbaum

In the last elections, the favourite candidate to win the election, Claudia Sheinbaum, was attacked with different campaigns of disinformation, but a common characteristic of the main attacks was the use of deepfakes in videos where the candidate supposedly appeared sustaining issues related to a stereotyped vision of the left party in Mexico. In one of the videos, MORENA's candidate was accused of intending to close the "Basílica de Guadalupe", one of the most important churches in Mexico. This case presented an edited video where the candidate appeared with Satanic symbols behind her and promised that in case of winning the presidency, they would close several churches as a measure against the Catholic faith. The basis for this disinformation was the argument that Sheinbaum was a Jew, so she had a secret agenda against the Catholic faith.²³

20 INE. "FALSO que el INE hubiera entregado 5 millones de credenciales para votar a personas naturalizadas con fines político-electorales", 21 June 2024. <https://centralelectoral.ine.mx/2024/06/21/falso-que-el-ine-hubiera-entregado-5-millones-de-credenciales-para-votar-a-personas-naturalizadas-con-fines-politico-electorales/>.

21 INE. "FALSO que el INE hubiera entregado 5 millones de credenciales para votar a personas naturalizadas con fines político-electorales", 21 June 2024. <https://centralelectoral.ine.mx/2024/06/21/falso-que-el-ine-hubiera-entregado-5-millones-de-credenciales-para-votar-a-personas-naturalizadas-con-fines-politico-electorales/>.

22 In the screenshot, another account using a supposed list where the number of immigrants that were legalised to vote in the election appeared. Source: INE. "FALSO que el INE hubiera entregado 5 millones de credenciales para votar a personas naturalizadas con fines político-electorales", 21 June 2024. <https://centralelectoral.ine.mx/2024/06/21/falso-que-el-ine-hubiera-entregado-5-millones-de-credenciales-para-votar-a-personas-naturalizadas-con-fines-politico-electorales/>.

23 Syndy García. "Elecciones presidenciales en México: Las desinformaciones y los ataques en redes del proceso 2024", Voz de América, 30 May 2024. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-las-desinformaciones-y-los-ataques-en-redes-del-proceso-2024/7636345.htm>; David Klepper. "Los tópicos sexistas y la desinformación campan por Internet mientras México se alista para votar", Los Angeles Times, 01 June 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2024-06-01/los-topicos-sexistas-y-la-desinformacion-campan-por-internet-mientras-mexico-se-alista-para-votar>.

In that same video, it was established that Sheinbaum was planning to abolish private property. The allegation was part of a broader strategy of disinformation from the opposition parties, consisting of creating fear in the electorate based on a supposed communist profile from the government (never sustained in politics nor discourse). The video disseminated on May 2024 was an edit of another where she explained that the news about closing churches was fake.²⁴ In this case, the video was disseminated on most social media and had more than 4,300 impressions.²⁵ This questioning was standard from the right-wing political opposition, mainly represented (but not limited to) in the PAN. The narratives described were spread despite the fact that, besides its social politics of a redistributive character, the government of AMLO remained a conservative character in many aspects.

This was not the only case of a deepfake used against Sheinbaum. In the run up to the elections, a video generated with AI appeared, where the candidate was inviting voters to invest their money in a fraudulent financial platform. This video intended to damage the candidate's image while using her credibility to increase the reach of the scam in a coordinated manner.²⁶ As explained further, in the context of gender disinformation narratives (point e), this kind of publication appealed to the stereotypes associated with the incapability of women in politics and the supposed participation of Sheinbaum in fraudulent financial activities. The deepfake videos disseminated in the campaign were first distributed on YouTube and then used through social media accounts such as Facebook and X. Though there is no clear information on their total impressions, they usually reached thousands of impressions before being countered or refuted.

24 For a note countering this false news where the video can be seen, see: Melina Barbosa. "Circulan video montajes de Claudia Sheinbaum diciendo que cerrará iglesias cuando gane la presidencia", verificado, 29 May 2024. https://verificado.com.mx/claudia-sheinbaum-cierre-de-iglesias-presidencia/#google_vignette.

25 AFP. "Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México", El Economista, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

26 Andrea Barenque. "Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape", The Blue Owl Group, August 2024, p. 17. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>; Anna Lagos. "Elecciones México 2024: Desinformación, IA y el reto de la democracia en un país polarizado", WIRED, 20 August 2024. <https://es.wired.com/articulos/elecciones-mexico-2024-desinformacion-ia-y-el-reto-de-la-democracia-en-un-pais-polarizado>. In this sense, coordinated operations to scam people are a common problem found in various countries. See: Debunk.org. "The large-scale scam attack also exploits well-known Lithuanian and foreign personalities. Part II", 23 November 2023. <https://www.debunk.org/the-large-scale-scam-attack-also-exploits-well-known-lithuanian-and-foreign-personalities-part-ii>.

The “anti-socialist/populist” character of Xóchitl Gálvez and her stereotyped ignorance to rule

A case of false content against the right-wing candidate Gálvez consisted of an altered video where she supposedly appeared using a Mexican flag upside-down. One of the disinformation strategies against her was her capacities and considerable ignorance.²⁷

Another common piece of disinformation was the allegation that Gálvez was planning to eliminate the social programmes established by AMLO's government. Fake news relating to this topic consisted of old videos of this candidate or videos taken out of context, where the information was manipulated in a way that seemed to support the allegation.²⁸

In this case, the disinformation narrative intended to create an opposition to one of the fundamental components of the social and economic politics developed by AMLO's government (that had had a lot of positive consequences in the image and electoral approval of the government). Since these programmes have benefited around 30 million families and are consubstantial to the actual social and political context in Mexico, disinformation directed against Xóchitl Gálvez tried to cause fear in voters and discourage them from voting for the opposition. This narrative was particularly supported by the government, which circulated advertisements claiming that opposition candidates oppose social programmes and that voters must choose MORENA to ensure their continuation.²⁹

27 Diana Soto. “¡Falso! Xóchitl no ondeó la bandera de México con el escudo al revés”, *El Sabueso (Animal Político)*, 15 May 2024. <https://animalpolitico.com/verificacion-de-hechos/desinformacion/xochitl-no-ondeo-bandera-invertida>.

28 AFP. “Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México”, *El Economista*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

29 Andrea Barenque. “Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape”, *The Blue Owl Group*, August 2024, p. 17. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>.

Another case of this “anti-popular” character of Xóchitl Gálvez was exploited through audio that was shared through X, Facebook and TikTok, where she supposedly could be heard saying: “Poor people don’t have their own ideas; they will only go to try to attack me because poor people don’t have a proper thought, that’s their problem. I almost don’t speak about them in my speeches. I don’t give them a minute, honestly”. This audio resulted from an edited video from Gálvez where her declarations were taken out of context to attribute this position and contrast it with the populist face of the government.³⁰



Source: verifica.efe.com³²

This last disinformation intent was disseminated on TikTok, Facebook and X, reaching thousands of impressions and used by different accounts where users used the video to state that the candidate was racist and classist.³¹

Mainly disseminated through X, an image of the candidate Álvarez Máynez, where he appeared sustaining antisemitic expressions and expressions denying the Holocaust, was presented as proof of him being close to a supposed tradition of leftist anti-Jews.³³ Since religion has always been an essential point of reference for the electorate in Mexico, Álvarez Máynez was attacked by his opposition under this argument.

Jorge Álvarez Máynez as a Holocaust denier and a disrespected candidate

Mainly disseminated through X, an image of the candidate Álvarez Máynez, where he appeared sustaining antisemitic expressions and expressions denying the Holocaust, was presented as proof of him being close to a supposed tradition of leftist anti-Jews.³³ Since religion has always been an essential point of reference for the electorate in Mexico, Álvarez Máynez was attacked by his opposition under this argument.

30 EFE Verifica. 2024. “Desinformación y falsedades en las elecciones mexicanas”, 30 May. <https://verifica.efe.com/desinformacion-y-falsedades-en-las-elecciones-mexicanas/>.

31 Daniela Gastón Allen. “La candidata mexicana Xóchitl Gálvez no dijo que <Los pobres carecen de ideas propias>”, efeverifica, 08 May 2024. <https://verifica.efe.com/candidata-mexicana-xochitl-galvez-pobres-carecen-ideas-propias/>.

32 An example of a publication of the false information on TikTok, where a user uploaded a video of Xóchitl Gálvez. Source: Daniela Gastón Allen. “La candidata mexicana Xóchitl Gálvez no dijo que <Los pobres carecen de ideas propias>”, efeverifica, 08 May 2024. <https://verifica.efe.com/candidata-mexicana-xochitl-galvez-pobres-carecen-ideas-propias/>.

33 Syndy García. “Elecciones presidenciales en México: Las desinformaciones y los ataques en redes del proceso 2024”, Voz de América, 30 May 2024. <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-las-desinformaciones-y-los-ataques-en-redes-del-proceso-2024/7636345.html>.

Dissemination of decontextualised videos to create disinformation was common in this election. The strategy of disinformation consisted of using videos in a false context – materials from the past were used in reference to current events, either to cast doubt on a candidate's legitimacy or to attribute facts unrelated to them.

In the case of Álvarez Máynez, a video where he was running from a group of people who were angry at him, yelling him “traitor” and “corrupt”, was shared on different social media to state that the people in the video were chasing him for reasons related to the 2024 election. Though the video was real, it was from the year 2021, when the candidate had a lower charge within the political party that presented him as the presidential candidate and where that anger was mainly directed against a public officer from that party and his support for it.³⁴



Source: chequeado.com³⁵

Even though, in this case, the video was real and not edited, the point of this disinformation narrative was to use it in a false context to cast doubt on the candidate's social support and generate speculation about any supposed act of corruption in his past as a public servant. In this case, even when it is not clear the reach of the publication, the video was uploaded to YouTube and then shared on different social media, or in some cases, it was directly uploaded to Facebook and X by users sharing the disinformation trend (reaching all social platforms used regularly in this election).

34 [Chequeado. "Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon", Factchequeado, 03 June 2024. https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/.](https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/)

35 *In this case, you can see both publications, that of 2021 and the one of 2024, using the same video where the information was manipulated and misleading. Source: chequeado. "Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon", Factchequeado, 03 June 2024. https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/.*

The gender dimension in the fake news phenomena

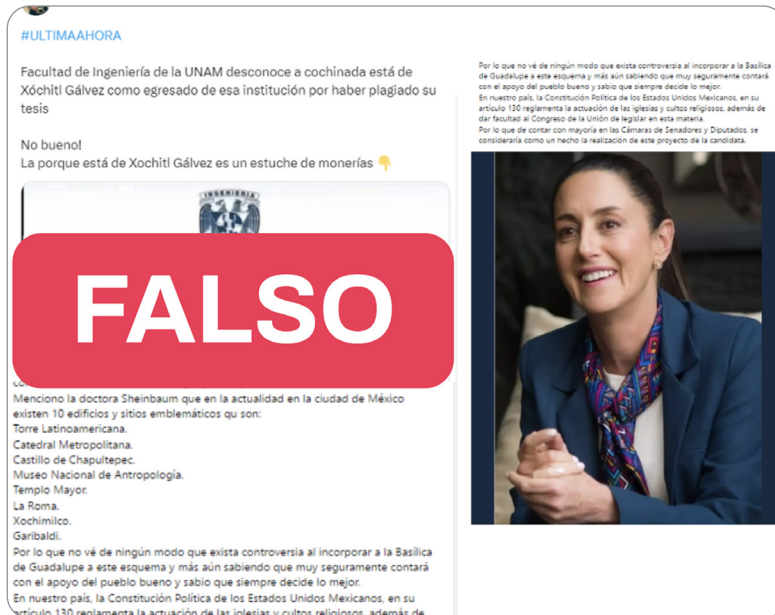
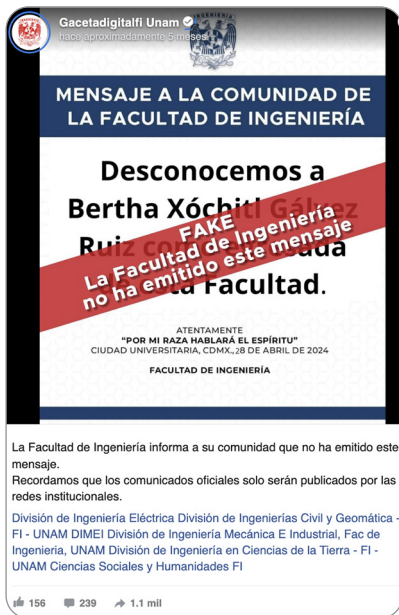
One coincidence in the last presidential election was the gender bias in disseminating disinformation. For both of the leading candidates (Sheinbaum and Xóchitl Gálvez), there were different moments when their intellectual capacities were cast in doubt using fake news to allege that they were weak, incapable or ignorant, replicating gender stereotypes against women.³⁶

These stereotypes are typical in Mexican society and were part of the “polemic” related to the first election ever where a woman was to be elected to be the presidency of the country. Friné Salguero, a gender specialist from the “Instituto Simone de Beauvoir” said that in the case of disinformation related to this, “the purpose is to exclude and dissuade women participating in the public sphere. Sadly, that is a reflection of the Mexican Society”.³⁷ As an example, in the presidential elections, both of the female candidates were attacked using the stereotype of being ignorant and lacking sufficient intelligence to fill the spot. In this case, the “coincident” narrative was that both had lied about their university degrees, doing some sort of corruption act to obtain them.³⁸

36 AFP. “Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México”, *El Economista*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>; David Klepper. “Los tópicos sexistas y la desinformación campan por Internet mientras México se alista para votar”, *Los Angeles Times*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2024-06-01/los-topicos-sexistas-y-la-desinformacion-campan-por-internet-mientras-mexico-se-alista-para-votar>; chequeado. “Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon”, *Factchequeado*, 03 June 2024. <https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/>.

37 AFP. “Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México”, *El Economista*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

38 TRT Español. 2024. “Guerra de desinformación envuelve las elecciones presidenciales en México”, AFP, 25 May. <https://trtespanol.com/america-latina/guerra-de-desinformacion-envuelve-las-elecciones-presidenciales-en-mexico-14927092>.



Source: chequeado.com³⁹

Daniela Mendoza, general director of “Verificado” explains that the type of disinformation directed against the female candidates was sometimes very different to those directed to male candidates: misogynistic narratives have characterised this election as one with a brutal sexist character, where the female candidates are attacked for being women, insulting them in relation with how they (physically) look like, how they speak or how they dress.⁴⁰ In the same way, María Calderón (lawyer and researcher from the “Mexico Institute”) considered that disinformation against the female candidates was directly related to their gender, a clear difference from that directed to male candidates.⁴¹

39 The first image is the publication on Facebook about plagiarism by candidate Xóchitl Gálvez, supposedly reported by the faculty of engineering from the National University of Mexico (UNAM). The second image is the publication from the faculty of engineering of the UNAM, where they counter the misleading information and clarify the falsehood of the publication. Source: David Klepper. “Los tópicos sexistas y la desinformación campan por Internet mientras México se alista para votar”, Los Angeles Times, 01 June 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2024-06-01/los-topicos-sexistas-y-la-desinformacion-campan-por-internet-mientras-mexico-se-alista-para-votar>; chequeado. “Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon”, Factchequeado, 03 June 2024. <https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/>.

40 VerificaRTVE. 2024. “La desinformación en México durante la campaña de las elecciones presidenciales”, Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, 29 May. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240529/desinformacion-mexico-campana-elecciones-presidenciales/16123707.shtml>.

41 David Klepper. “Los tópicos sexistas y la desinformación campan por Internet mientras México se alista para votar”, Los Angeles Times, 01 June 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2024-06-01/los-topicos-sexistas-y-la-desinformacion-campan-por-internet-mientras-mexico-se-alista-para-votar>.

It is worth mentioning that, in this matter, “Gender Political Violence” became relevant and was at the centre of the disinformation campaigns and the attempts from institutions and platforms to counter it. This phenomenon was a clear obstacle for the female candidates because they were subjected to these attacks within the general context of misogyny within Mexican society.⁴²

As part of its work within the electoral context, Meta also launched an initiative to counter online gender violence. “Voto contra la violencia” was a campaign consisting of a series of videos in which relevant women from Mexico's public life shared information and recommendations to counter online violence and support the victims. The campaign also enforced a narrative about the relevance of women's participation in the elections and the barriers to their equal participation.⁴³

In gender disinformation trends, the common procedure was to publish false information and then try to increase its reach through user accounts that fell for false information, but bots were also used to coordinate the dissemination of misleading information, mainly on Facebook and X.

Main channels of spreading disinformation related to the election

The dissemination of disinformation on social media platforms is dominant in Mexico. Undoubtedly, the main arena for the spread of disinformation during the last presidential election was platforms where users frequently engaged in discussion and where political discourse and public communication increasingly appeared. Platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok were fields for exploiting false or misleading content and attacking all the candidates.

To contextualise the importance of digital platforms in Mexico, by March 2024, more than 90 million people used Facebook, more than 83 million used YouTube, more than 74 million - TikTok, more than 44 million were on Instagram, and more than 18 million used X, to name only some of the leading digital platforms where disinformation was

⁴² Anna Lagos. “Elecciones México 2024: Desinformación, IA y el reto de la democracia en un país polarizado”, WIRED, 20 August 2024. <https://es.wired.com/articulos/elecciones-mexico-2024-desinformacion-ia-y-el-reto-de-la-democracia-en-un-pais-polarizado>

⁴³ Andrea Barenque. “Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape”, The Blue Owl Group, August 2024, p. 22. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>; NUM. 2024. “Acciones contra la desinformación en tiempos electorales”, Naciones Unidas México, 23 May. <https://shorturl.at/YQ39A>.

present. In Mexico, at the beginning of 2024, there were around 105 million Internet users (around 85% of the total population) and 90.2 million social media users (70%).⁴⁴

However, there is more to consider when we address disinformation strategies. According to the latest report of the "Asociación de Internet Mx", of all the Internet users in Mexico, 96% are active on WhatsApp, and 40% are active on Telegram. The relevance of this data comes from the fact that many disinformation narratives and fake news proliferating in the presidential election were deployed through messaging apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp.⁴⁵

Disinformation agents used social media platforms and messaging apps to disseminate false or misleading information, but another relevant source and placeholder for disinformation came from the government's official media transmissions. The "Mañaneras" of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was one of the main places to communicate fake news, deny criticism based on evidence and attack the government's political adversaries based on fake, partial or manipulated information. The issue of information flow between government information shared on "Mañaneras", digital platforms and messaging apps is often raised by fact-checkers.

Even when, in the beginning, the conferences presented by the president served as a new and exciting exercise for accountability and open interchange with independent journalists and the media, the "Mañaneras" rapidly deformed into a platform for propaganda (most of the time) and for attacking those groups that AMLO considered as "the bad", holding a clear posture of "friend-enemy" against all of those who criticised the government or that presented independent investigations, data or research that showed failure from the side of the government. In this space, it was not weird seeing the president using the platform to attack his political adversaries and other political parties and, in some cases, to create or increase the reach of fake news, such as that of Xóchitl Gálvez removing social programmes if winning the presidency.⁴⁶

44 Simon Kemp. "Digital 2024: México", Datareportal, February 24, 2024. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-mexico>; Mario Silverio. "Las redes sociales más usadas en 2024", PrimeWeb, April 25, 2024. <https://www.primeweb.com.mx/redes-sociales-para-empresas>.

45 Karina Rodríguez Peña. "El número de usuarios de Internet en México aumentó 5.25 en 2024", CIOEdiworld, May 20, 2024. <https://iworld.com.mx/20-estudio-sobre-los-habitos-de-usuarios-de-internet-en-mexico-2024/>.

46 Marcos Martínez Chacón. "Ola de noticias falsas de cara a las elecciones de México de 2024", Los Ángeles Press, 26 August 2023. <https://losangelespress.org/elecciones-mexico/ola-de-noticias-falsas-de-cara-a-las-elecciones-de-mexico-de-2024-20230826-6324.html>; Ebbaba Hameida. "El cerco a la libertad de prensa, legado de López Obrador: señalamiento, descalificación y desinformación", Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, 01 June 2024. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240601/cerco-libertad-prensa-legado-lopez-obrador-senalamiento-descalificacion-desinformacion/16120050.shtml>.

It can be concluded here that, at least from the governmental side of disinformation, the main channel was the “Mañaneras” of former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. By 2022, AMLO had presented 682 conferences with an approximate duration of 108 minutes each. Even when disinformation in this public programme was not happening all the time, it is clear that the programme as a whole was part of a new model of political communication designed by the government to control the public agenda “on its own terms” and with the recurring strategy of presenting misleading or false information. By 31 August 2021, AMLO had claimed more than 61 thousand false or misleading declarations in this programme, according to the independent consultant SPIN.⁴⁷ In this case, all the “Mañaneras” were broadcast publicly and transmitted through the official YouTube channels of the government; thus, besides its daily broadcasting, much of that information was held on the Internet. On AMLO’s channel, the complete list of the “Mañaneras” consists of 1,389 videos with a total number of 1,020,916 views.⁴⁸

The most common techniques and methods of disinformation

One of the techniques used for disinformation in Mexico is artificial intelligence (AI) in creating fake news. Fact-checkers such as El Sabueso documented the use of deepfakes in video and audio in this election. In conjunction with this, there were documented cases of anonymous accounts on social platforms that created profiles similar to those of known media, intending to impersonate real media to share fake news (with an injection of money to increase the reach of the accounts).⁴⁹

Using bots to support or dismiss specific information was also a way in which the environment of disinformation was reinforced in the months before the election. Automatised accounts were systematically used to increase the reach of fake news, which is not new; the most interesting point is that the campaign teams from the parties contending for the

47 Kevin Zapata Celestino. “Las ‘mañaneras’ de AMLO y los abusos de la comunicación presidencial”, Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias, 2022. <https://ceey.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Zapata-Celestino-2022-Premio-MEY.pdf>.

48 The official channel of AMLO can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRnIRGar-296KtVL0R6MEbpwJzD8ppA>.

49 In the election, AI was used both for creating and countering false or misleading information. Many subjects, such as digital platforms, used AI to identify and stop disinformation trends. Meta, Google and other platforms developed tools to analyse the contents on their platforms and help the public to differentiate false from truthful information. As an example, Meta generated watermarks for the videos and photos generated with AI, intending to have more transparency and meaningful information for users. See: Anna Lagos. “Elecciones México 2024: Desinformación, IA y el reto de la democracia en un país polarizado”, WIRED, 20 August 2024. <https://es.wired.com/articulos/elecciones-mexico-2024-desinformacion-ia-y-el-reto-de-la-democracia-en-un-pais-polarizado>

presidency were behind these bots. Public resources are funding defamation in this sense, according to the directors of two of the most important fact-checkers in Mexico, "Verificado" and "Animal Político".⁵⁰



Another way was to distribute audio through WhatsApp and attribute it to significant politicians from MORENA. Using a message in WhatsApp, where it was stated that the audio was from the then president of MORENA, Mario Delgado, one audio corresponding to another person was disseminated from WhatsApp to other social media platforms to then be shared thousands of times.⁵¹

Source: univision.com⁵²



Source: univision.com⁵²

50 VerificaRTVE. 2024. "La desinformación en México durante la campaña de las elecciones presidenciales", Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, 29 May. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240529/desinformacion-mexico-campana-elecciones-presidenciales/16123707.shtml>.

51 Lissy de Abreu. "Es falso que el presidente de Morena sea quien habla en ese audio sobre una nueva Constitución en México que suprimiría la propiedad privada", ElDetector, 26 May 2024. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/presidente-morena-audio-constitucion-propiedad-privada-falso>. In the audio, one could "hear" Mario Delgado, the then president of the political party, speaking about a new Constitution to be created by the government in which the right to private property was to be eliminated. In that case, the audio was real, not from Mario Delgado but from another unrelated person. See also: chequeado. 2024. "Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon", 03 June. <https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/>.

52 Both images are examples from the text disseminated via WhatsApp where it was established that Mario Delgado was stating false information on behalf of MORENA. Source: Lissy de Abreu. "Es falso que el presidente de Morena sea quien habla en ese audio sobre una nueva Constitución en México que suprimiría la propiedad privada", ElDetector, 26 May 2024. <https://www.univision.com/noticias/presidente-morena-audio-constitucion-propiedad-privada-falso>.

Another disinformation strategy was to use old materials that were out of context and establish them as if they were about the election to make people believe that the video's content was happening at that time. The narrative here intended to leverage conspiracy theories about electoral fraud in Mexico and used information about facts that happened in 2018 and had already been used as disinformation in 2021.⁵³

There was also a case where disinformation actions combined impersonation of media with the use of ads to spread and increase disinformation. By doing this, malicious actors tried to create and leverage inauthentic news sites, taking advantage of Facebook and Instagram's ad libraries. In these cases, the accounts stole the reference images of the original media accounts, copying the logo or the name of a recognised media outlet but changing it or presenting it as if it were the official account. In this way, disinformation accounts were presented as reliable websites and disseminated advertisements but spread fake information; in some cases, they do this even by using the pages of recognised fact-checkers.⁵⁴

The main candidates' teams used fake polls to win the presidency at different moments of the election. In these cases, the campaign teams used non-legitimate polls to share them on the Internet through bots or legitimate user accounts or polls created by firms specialised in the elaboration of polls but that used misleading or false information to reach the results, all intending to manipulate the votes of the electorate.

53 The video was claiming fraud in favour of MORENA. The video was real, but from 2021, and consisted of robbed ballots from a local election in 2018, something that was duly reported to the authorities and was legally handled to avoid any risk of fraud. The INE and the electoral local institute communicated this fact through the news and official accounts on different platforms. See: chequeado. "Elecciones en México 2024: qué noticias falsas circularon", 03 June 2024. <https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/elecciones-en-mexico-2024-que-noticias-falsas-circularon/>.

54 Daniela Mendoza (from Verificado) explains: "They create a whole website of a supposed recognised media outlet, or they clone its identity and say, for example, that Verificado published a poll giving the advantage to determine candidate". On its side, Daniel Moreno, general director of "Animal Político" said that: "we have documented millions of spending in advertising, websites invented, passing as legitimate media, but that have support from any of the candidate's teams", meaning that fake news such as polls were disseminated by the campaign teams of all of the three candidates to disinform and discourage the opposition votes. See: VerificaRTVE. "La desinformación en México durante la campaña de las elecciones presidenciales", Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española, 29 May 2024. <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20240529/desinformacion-mexico-campana-elecciones-presidenciales/16123707.shtml>.

As established in the previous chapter, the government intentionally took measures to facilitate State propaganda and articulate this aim with other strategies that implied degrading adversaries (so conceived by AMLO) and discrediting credible sources of information such as media and civil society organisations. In many cases, the use of State propaganda was directed to distract the attention of the public from the failures of the government in matters related to public safety and human rights violations; in other cases, the intention was to divide sectors of civil society that once supported the government but were then critical to it.

The potential engagement of external actors

The presidential elections in Mexico presented situations where it was alleged that agents from other countries were potentially involved. Reports from the US Department of Justice state that Russian agents used AI-generated content, social media advertisements and user accounts to influence audiences in Mexico in the electoral context and beyond.⁵⁵ On the eve of the presidential election, different experts in cybersecurity considered there was the risk that the electoral authority, the INE, could be attacked by foreign hackers willing to interfere in the electoral process (mainly by DDoS attacks, which was the principal attack registered by the authority) or to steal private information from Mexican citizens to commit financial fraud. Some specialists publicly stated that the possible hackers intervening in the electoral context were from Russia, North Korea, China, the USA, the UK and Israel.⁵⁶

Some journalists in Mexico have expressed concerns about RT (formerly Russia Today), suggesting that its coverage of Mexican politics during the elections may have been part of a broader propaganda effort by the Russian government to influence an outcome favourable to Russia. According to this view, the ruling MORENA party was seen as a

55 US DOJ. "Justice Department Disrupts Covert Russian Government-Sponsored Foreign Malign Influence Operation Targeting Audiences in the United States and Elsewhere", Office of Public Affairs, 04 September 2024. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-disrupts-covert-russian-government-sponsored-foreign-malign-influence>. This news was denied by the Russian Embassy in Mexico. See: Embajada de la Federación de Rusia en los Estados Unidos Mexicanos. "Sobre la 'injerencia rusa' en las elecciones mexicanas", 12 January 2024. https://mexico.mid.ru/es/noticias/sobre_la_injerencia_rusa_en_las_elecciones_mexicanas/.

56 Christopher Calderón. "Elecciones en México, bajo amenaza de cibercriminales", El Financiero, 31 May 2024. <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/elecciones-mexico-2024/2024/05/31/elecciones-en-mexico-bajo-amenaza-de-cibercriminales/>.

potential ally that could balance US interests in the region. RT has been accused of spreading disinformation related to the election, including conspiracy theories based on false or misleading information. However, these claims have not been definitively proven.⁵⁷

On the other hand, misleading information related to foreign intervention in the Mexican elections was detected and countered in the case of false news stating the participation of the Venezuelan government. In this case, there was the claim that Nicolás Maduro would participate in the Mexican election and be present in several important public demonstrations, but those allegations were false and lacked real significance and seriousness.⁵⁸

The measures introduced to counteract disinformation

Mexico has a solid autonomous institutional framework related to the elections. For decades, building legitimate electoral authorities has been one of the most relevant democratic advances in a country marked by a history of fraud and by the centralisation of power on executive power. Notwithstanding, the last elections were witness to a clear intent from the government to attack that legitimacy and cast doubt on the work of the National Institute of Elections (INE). This intent was part of a widespread polarisation strategy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who tried to create a climate of distrust and lack of criticism from outside of its political movement. This action manipulated the public debate against different sectors, not only the counterbalance institutions (the INE and the Judicial Power) of power against the executive power, but also against civil society, the media and independent journalists from different sectors. This climate of control of information and negation of criticism based on evidence related to the violence of the country (not only by the drug cartels but also and especially

⁵⁷ Some critics say these claims reflect a biased interpretation of Russian influence. In response, Andrey A. Zemskiy, a spokesman for the Russian embassy, denied any involvement of the Russian government in funding or directing RT's Mexico-related communications campaigns. See: Perla Pineda. "¿RT será el canal oficial electoral en México?" *El Economista*, February 26, 2024. <https://www.economista.com.mx/internacionales/RT-sera-el-canal-oficial-electoral-en-Mexico-20240226-0139.html>; Pablo Hiriart. "Putín, con todo en las elecciones de México", *El Financiero*, January 11, 2024. <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/opinion/pablo-hiriart/2024/01/11/putin-con-todo-en-las-elecciones-de-mexico/>.

⁵⁸ Daniela Martínez. "Falso que Maduro viene a México para las elecciones, el video es de 2021", *El Sabueso*, May 20, 2024. <https://animalpolitico.com/verificacion-de-hechos/desinformacion/falso-maduro-viene-para-elecciones>.

by the deployment of the military in many aspects of public life), the systematic violations of human rights in different States of the country and possible acts of corruption led to fertile soil for disinformation.⁵⁹ This landscape was used by all political parties to “play the game” of disinformation and attack each other.

In this polarised social climate, the institution in charge of organising the elections, the National Institute of Elections (INE, “Instituto Nacional Electoral”) started a public campaign against disinformation on social media and about the electoral process. “Certeza Electoral” (Electoral Certainty) is a multidisciplinary observatory dedicated to identifying disinformation and countering it with verified information based on evidence.⁶⁰ As a part of this project, the INE created an X account, @CertezaINE, where the determination of fake news was expressed and shared to counterbalance the disinformation trends on X.⁶¹

The total number of “communications” from “Certeza Electoral” reached 63 publications where the INE shared relevant information related to the elections and the acts of disinformation; 28 publications where the fake news was corrected and spotted for the users of different social media; 21 clarifications to news that were incomplete or partial (but that were not necessarily fake news); 9 traffic and visual materials that were produced to inform users and citizens in general; 1 chatbot that was prepared for users that wanted to know about the certainty of different news (“Inés verifica” or “Inés te responde”),⁶² which reached more than 200,000 active conversations with users; 6,940 questions for the veracity of different news; and almost a million and a half bot responses to users interacting with it.⁶³

In this last chatbot case, the INE agreed with Meta that they would use this bot as a part of a joint collaborative project to be deployed in the election. This collaboration agreement was Meta’s active policy to fight against disinformation. Meta also collaborated with “Movilizador”, an organisation from civil society, to launch “Soy Digital”, an edu-

59 A report from Reuters stated that the general credibility of the news by the Mexican population dropped from 49% to 36% in 2023. At least part of this decrease of credibility is related to the strategy of AMLO to attack the media and to establish an “alternative truth” about the political life in Mexico Manuel Alejandro Guerrero. “Contexto de la desinformación y elecciones 2024”, *El Sol de México*, 08 June 2024. <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/analisis/contexto-de-la-desinformacion-y-elecciones-2024-12052975.html>.

60 INE. “Certeza Electoral 2024”. Accessed on 01 September 2024. <https://centralectoral.ine.mx/certeza/>.

61 AFP. “Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México”, *El Economista*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

62 In this case, any people could add the WhatsApp number given by the INE or follow a link on the INE’s website to go to the chatbot and then make any request about a news in order to determine its veracity *El Economista*, 01 June 2024. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

63 INE. “Estos son los datos de las acciones contra la desinformación, implementadas en las Elecciones 2024”, *Central Electoral*, 19 July 2024. <https://centralectoral.ine.mx/2024/07/19/estos-son-los-datos-de-las-acciones-contra-la-desinformacion-implementadas-en-las-elecciones-2024/>.

cative programme oriented to develop critical thinking related to the ways people consume information online, and with a clear intention to counter disinformation.⁶⁴ In collaboration with media such as "Animal Político" and "Reuters Mexico," Meta downgraded posts containing misinformation, limiting their distribution and preventing reaching a wider audience. When the media determined that a communication was fake news, Meta labelled the content and notified users about its veracity when they wanted to share the disinformation narrative.⁶⁵

Efforts like Meta's are part of a broader compromise from corporations working on the Internet to take action against AI-generated disinformation. Contributing to election integrity has become a policy within several relevant platforms and corporations (in this case, TikTok and Microsoft also signed the agreement). The agreement incorporates compromises on AI transparency, algorithm auditing and cooperation with fact-checkers.⁶⁶

Google, for its part, prepared a campaign centered on the topic of transparency. Through the "Transparencia México" initiative, it published a report related to political advertising in the search engine. It then established a regulation where any agency willing to publish electoral ads must undergo a verification process and report who paid for the ad and the budget allocated. It also took different actions related to sharing information about political options, the electoral process, essential information about the candidates, the election day and many other relevant details proceeding from official sources.⁶⁷ In the fact-checking dimension, Google trained around 500 journalists and journalism students in fact-checking capacities to be part of "Latam Chequea", an initiative working to counter disinformation in the elections. As a fact-checking complement to its automatised products, Google adapted "Gemini", its AI chatbot, to impede users from asking questions about elections and redirect them to the search engine instead.⁶⁸

64 Meta. "Presentamos programa contra la información falsa rumbo a las elecciones 2024 en México", 07 February 2024. <https://about.fb.com/latam/news/2024/02/presentamos-programa-contra-la-informacion-falsa-rumbo-a-las-elecciones-de-2024-en-mexico/>; NUM. "Acciones contra la desinformación en tiempos electorales", Naciones Unidas México, 23 May 2024. <https://shorturl.at/YQ39A>.

65 Andrea Barenque. "Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape", The Blue Owl Group, August 2024, p. 22. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>.

66 AI Elections Accord. "A Tech Accord to Combat Deceptive Use of AI in 2024 Elections", 16 February 2024. <https://www.aielectionaccord.com/#:~:text=This%20accord%20seeks%20to%20set,with%20their%20own%20policies%20and>

67 Andrea Barenque. "Addressing Disinformation in a Politically Polarized Landscape", The Blue Owl Group, August 2024, p. 23. <https://www.blueowlgrp.com/er24-mexico>.

68 Fernanda González. "Elecciones en México: las big tech se alistan para combatir la desinformación durante la jornada electoral", WIRED, 28 May 2024. <https://es.wired.com/articulos/elecciones-en-mexico-las-big-tech-se-alistan-para-combatir-la-desinformacion-durante-la-jornada-electoral>.

TikTok took measures to limit content related to promoting public officials or candidates, limit monetisation and even ban paid political advertising. It also prohibited, within its community norms, the use of political content generated by AI to prevent and counter disinformation.⁶⁹ In the months before the election, besides having meetings to collaborate with electoral authorities, TikTok also had various meetings with civil society organisations specialised in promoting and protecting digital rights on the Internet to discuss the different policies of content moderation they would deploy in the electoral context.

On the other hand, different media outlets have also organised various projects to fight against disinformation. One of these cases was the digital media channel "Animal Político", which has had the project "El Sabueso" ("the hound", a reference to a police dog who can detect fake news) for years now. "El Sabueso" has participated in different elections by fact-checking and detecting fake news (correcting them and signalling the subjects responsible for them).⁷⁰ El Sabueso started its work as a fact-checking agency within Animal Político in 2015, operating with three journalists; nowadays, it works with 18 journalists who dedicate part of their work to disinformation tasks. In this election, El Sabueso also deployed a chatbot ("VerifiChat") to allow any person to send content to the journalistic team so they could evaluate if it was fake news or not.⁷¹

The case of "Verificado" is also a great example of a media working against disinformation. As an agency working on fact-checking and countering fake news, Verificado has been one of Mexico's most influential media for detecting and dismantling disinformation narratives. This media worked closely not only with the INE but also with social platforms such as Meta and with other national and international press working on disinformation to cover the Mexican election prior to the election day, the day of the election and the post-election period to analyse the scope and consequences of the fake narratives in the country.⁷²

69 Diego Valverde. "TikTok Measures Against Disinformation in Mexico's 2024 Elections", Mexico Business, 15 April 2024. <https://mexicobusiness.news/tech/news/tiktok-measures-against-disinformation-mexicos-2024-elections>.

70 El Sabueso. 2024. "Desinformación", Animal Político, Accessed on 02 September. <https://animalpolitico.com/verificacion-de-hechos/desinformacion>.

71 NUM. "Acciones contra la desinformación en tiempos electorales", Naciones Unidas México, 23 May 2024. <https://shorturl.at/YQ39A>.

72 Verificado. "Las desinformaciones que marcaron la jornada electoral en México 2024", 04 June 2024. <https://verificado.com.mx/desinformaciones-que-marcaron-jornada-electoral/>.

Another media outlet, this time from the international Agencia France-Presse, established AFP Factual as a webpage with the same objective of fighting disinformation in the Mexican elections. This project has cooperation agreements with the main social platforms, such as Google, Meta and TikTok, and collaborates with them to detect and correct fake news.⁷³

Without a doubt, a good practice against disinformation in the last election was the collaboration between platforms, civil society and organised media to counter fake news, particularly online. In Meta's case, for example, a collaborative web of independent fact-checkers was built to interact within the platform and analyse news to signal users when a piece of information was "fake, partially fake, modified or without enough context".⁷⁴

Conclusions

Mexico's presidential election is a good case for analysing widespread disinformation and the countermeasures against it. As explained above, the disinformation narratives were multifaceted, coming from unrecognised websites and accounts and orchestrated by the government in different forms. In a polarised context, the organisation and collaboration of the media, independent journalists with interests in fact-checking, the electoral authorities (especially the INE) and digital platforms worried about the proliferation of fake news were fundamental to counter disinformation, create narratives of information, digital education and contrast the statements from the government that were wrong or unfounded.

Even when this affirmation can be taken as preliminary, and more evidence-based studies are needed, it seems clear that one of the effects of disinformation in the Mexican case is the degradation of public debate due to the concentration of time, money and attention in matters that were either false or based in misleading information from

73 AFP. "82.565 migrantes naturalizados podrán votar en las elecciones de 2024 en México, no 4,7 millones", AFP Factual, 15 May 2024. <https://factual.afp.com/doc.afp.com.34RP8PT>; AFP. "Fake news que circularon sobre las elecciones 2024 en México", El Economista, 01 June 2024. <https://www.economista.com.mx/politica/Fake-news-que-circulan-sobre-las-elecciones-2024-en-Mexico-20240531-0086.html>.

74 Animal Político. "INE y Meta se alían para combatir la desinformación en el proceso electoral de 2024", 07 February 2024. https://www.animalpolitico.com/verificacion-de-hechos/te-explico/ine-meta-desinformacion-elecciones-2024?rtbref=rtb-upgroajjdv2tlylorjv_1714188876489.

each of the candidates and the main topics from the election (instead focusing on substantive proposals and government plans and political platforms). A visible result is also the evident erosion and discrediting of some fundamental institutions for a healthy democracy, such as the electoral referee (the INE), the media (especially critical independent media and journalists) and an essential part of civil society critical to government projects (just to mention two of greater importance, the feminist movement and NGO's working on human rights matters). In the first case, looking for responsible subjects is a bit harder, not for lack of involvement in disinformation actions but precisely the other way around: many parties involved in the election, if not all, used and abused disinformation (the extent of that and the specific financing methods related to these disinformation campaigns are still to be explored, which is relevant for public information). In the latter, special mention must be paid to the government strategy -or propaganda communicational strategy- on the insistence on polarisation and delegitimisation of "counterbalance" actors in the public arena.

The increasing use of the Internet in Mexico (in terms of access) is a double-edged sword that interacts with the complex phenomenon of disinformation. Many people obtain news through social media, while the digital education needed to identify fake news and disinformation narratives is still developing and insufficient. AI-generated disinformation exacerbates this problem due to the advanced technologies that allow deepfakes in video and audio in a way that makes it harder for everyday users to distinguish between legitimate information and fake news.

This panorama should not be only an alarm to those worried about the state of democracy and the rights to access information in Mexico but also a reminder of the need for appropriate regulations compatible with the Inter-American System of Human Rights, for the adequate framework of responsibilities of public officials, the duties of digital platforms and the democratic regulation of AI.

Election Disinformation in Senegalese Election in 2024

Author: Samba Dialimpa Badji

The political landscape

In March 2024, Senegal elected a new president of the republic in the person of Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye. This election marks the third change of power that takes place through the ballot box, thus contrasting with what is generally done in certain West African countries, where coups are the main mode of accession to power. In this sense, Senegal has always been considered a beacon of democracy and an island of stability in a sub-region which is the scene of multifaceted crises.

However, this stability did not prevent the country from experiencing moments of political crises like the one it went through between 2021 and 2024. The crisis started in 2021 with an accusation of rape brought by an employee of a massage parlour against the main opponent at the time, Ousmane Sonko. His summons by the courts provoked several days of demonstrations which were violently repressed by the police and left around ten people dead, some of whom were shot.¹ His arrest and trial in 2023 also provoked violent protests with more than 20 deaths¹.

Later convicted in a defamation case, Ousmane Sonko was deemed ineligible for the presidential election, for which he was replaced by Bassirou Diomaye Diakhar Faye, the future winner of this election.

As soon as he took power, the new Senegalese president wanted to put a pan-Africanist mark on his actions. His first move was to change the name of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of African Integration and Foreign Affairs. His first visits were reserved for neighbouring countries – Mauritania, Gambia, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea.

¹ "Sénégal : un an après la mort de 14 manifestants, les familles réclament justice », Amnesty International, 3 March 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2022/03/senegal-un-an-apres-mars-2021-les-familles-reclament-justice/>

Bassirou Diomaye Faye also volunteered to reconcile the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) with Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, which left the sub-regional organisation to create their own bloc called the Alliance of Sahel States. The big question concerns the relationship with France, the former coloniser, with whom Senegal has always maintained close diplomatic ties. New president and his Pastef party have always claimed that they want a new approach in relations between the two countries for a “win-win” relationship, particularly on the economic level. Even if he declared that there would be no radical break between the two countries, Bassirou Diomaye Faye has still not made an official visit to France. However, he went to Paris twice to participate in conferences. There were no signs of change in diplomatic relations with Russia, even though Moscow launched the Africa, Russia and Eurasia Chamber of Commerce and Investment in Dakar in July.²

On 12 September, President Diomaye Faye dissolved the National Assembly, paving the way for the organisation of early parliamentary elections on 17 November.

With these early elections, he says he wants to have a majority in the National Assembly, which was until then dominated by the former ruling party and its allies, to be able to properly apply its policies. Before its dissolution, the National Assembly was dominated by the party of former President Macky Sall, the Alliance for the Republic (APR) and its allies in the Benno Bokk Yaakaar coalition (Benno Bokk Yaakaar means United in Hope in Wolof, the most spoken language in Senegal).

These elections will undoubtedly reshape the Senegalese political landscape, as most of the historical political parties which have dominated the political scene since the country's independence are in the process of disappearing or merging into new entities. Senegal was ruled for 20 years, from 1960 to 2000, by the Socialist Party, then from 2000 to 2012 by the Senegalese Democratic Party, a historic opposition party founded in 1974. Both parties had no candidate for the 2024 presidential election. Likewise, the political parties of the historic Senegalese left, such as AJ/PADS, LD/MPT and PIT, no longer have the influence they had in the past.

2 „Coopération Russie – Sénégal : La Chambre de commerce et d'investissement Afrique, Russie et Eurasie installée à Dakar”, Emedia, 24 July 2024, <https://emediasn.cooperation-russie-senegal-la-chambre-de-commerce-et-dinvestissement-afrique-russie-et-eurasie-installee-a-dakar/>

The disinformation landscape

Disinformation in Senegal has different dimensions, affecting different spheres, as illustrated by the examples introduced in the chapter. One concerns the case of a young Senegalese dancer who was murdered in his room in a neighbourhood in the suburbs of the capital, Dakar, in August 2024. Immediately after the announcement of his death, social media influencers, particularly on TikTok and Facebook, began spreading all kinds of rumours and theories about his assassination. When the police announced the arrest of a suspect, some of these influencers published a photo of an individual, falsely accusing him of being the killer.³

Another episode related to the spread of false information occurred one month earlier, when individuals and entire families went to occupy houses built as part of a real estate project. People who thought that these houses belonged to a government real estate project say they learned that the President of the Republic had announced that any homeless family could occupy them. The rumour about this supposed announcement by the Senegalese president was relayed and widely shared via WhatsApp.⁴

The two examples cited above perfectly illustrate the leading role of social media in the propagation of false information in Senegal. A 2021 Afrobarometer study indicates that social media users are considered to be among those who spread false information the most.⁵ The same study cites politicians, journalists and media, as well as members of government, among those spreading false information the most.⁶ Afrobarometer is a research network based in Ghana and conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, the economy and society.

3 SAIKOU SEYDI (@Saikouseydi1), „Depuis ce matin, des tiktokeurs exposent la photo de mon petit frère pour dire que c'est le présumé meurtrier de Aziz Dabala. Nous avons porté plainte. Lui c'est Ousmane Diaio, il n'est pas allé à Touba et on le (sic) l'appelle pas Modou. C'est un étudiant. @bathiedrizzy @Noo_IDcard", Twitter (now X), 29 August 2024, <https://x.com/Saikouseydi1/status/1827458277728202963?t=RFS59lbU8Jlc2B2CLTKPw&s=19>

4 Azil Momar Lô and Souleymane Diassy, „Au Sénégal, l'affaire « ubbi dëkk » ou quand la désinformation trouve un terreau fertile dans les urgences sociales”, Africa Check, 13 August 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/blog/au-senegal-laffaire-ubbi-dekk-ou-quand-la-desinformation-trouve-un-terreau-fertile-dans-les-urgences-sociales>

5 Mamadou Abdoulaye Diallo, “AD451: Les Sénégalais souhaitent un accès sans restriction aux réseaux sociaux, mais déplorent les fausses informations et les discours de haine”, Afrobarometer (2021). <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad451-les-senegalais-souhaitent-un-acces-sans-restriction-aux-reseaux-sociaux-mais/>

6 Mamadou Abdoulaye Diallo, “AD451: Les Sénégalais souhaitent un accès sans restriction aux réseaux sociaux, mais déplorent les fausses informations et les discours de haine”, Afrobarometer (2021). <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad451-les-senegalais-souhaitent-un-acces-sans-restriction-aux-reseaux-sociaux-mais/>

Disinformation is thus gaining momentum in the country thanks to digital platforms such as Facebook, X, YouTube and WhatsApp. One of the common practices is to take extracts in video or audio format from television or radio programmes to share on messaging platforms like WhatsApp, often taking facts out of context, thus leading to the creation of disinformation.⁷ On the other hand, traditional media often report in the form of articles on social media, without carrying out the necessary verification on the veracity of the alleged facts. Therefore, false information can follow a continuous cycle, starting from a rumour which starts by word of mouth, before arriving on WhatsApp, where it is shared from user to user, to land on a social media platform like Facebook or Twitter and subsequently end in some traditional media.⁸ This phenomenon then provides that information with a credible appearance, thus facilitating its spread.

Main narratives related to the election

The voter fraud narrative

The narrative on voter fraud is a recurring narrative in every election in Senegal.

This narrative was pushed with rumours and false claims alleging manipulation of the electoral register. One of the false claims that circulated a lot during the electoral period was that of the artificial swelling of the electoral population in the north of the country, the region of origin of former President Macky Sall. For example, an infographic shared via WhatsApp and also on X presents false data on the number of registered voters in the region of Ranerou in the north of the country. According to this infographic, the number increased from 24,315 in 2019 to 193,718 in 2024. After verification, it turns out that the number of voters in 2024 is 27,396.⁹ The results of the vote in the north of the country have always been a source of controversy since Macky Sall came to power. The electoral administration is often accused by some opposition leaders of inflating the number of voters in the area to increase Macky Sall's score.¹⁰

7 Assane Diagne, "Les médias à l'heure de la désinformation sur l'Internet", *State of the Newsroom – Senegal* (2023).

8 Samba Dialimpa Badji, *L'écosystème des fausses informations au Sénégal. Une vue d'ensemble* (Accra: Centre for Democracy and Development, 2022).

9 „Elections présidentielle de 2024 au Sénégal : des allégations sur la carte électorale de Matam vérifiées, Africa Check, 23 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/presidentielle-senegal-2024-carte-electorale-electeurs-matam-ranerou-pikine-dakar-desinformation>

10 Adjia Khoudia Thiam, „Controverse autour du nombre de votants au Fouta : les jeunes de Bby de Podor parlent de manipulation, Actusen, 3 August 2022, <https://actusen.sn/controverse-autour-du-nombre-de-votants-au-fouta-les-jeunes-de-bby-de-podor-parlent-dune-manipulation/>

Another false allegation concerned the supposed existence of fictitious polling stations. This came about when an electoral expert claimed that the electoral map had at least 826 winning offices.¹¹ In a tweet,

he gave the example of a municipality of Dakar which, according to him, had the most fictitious polling stations.¹² The Minister of Interior later published a press release to provide details and explain why the electoral expert's allegations were false.¹³



Post presenting false data on the number of registered voters in the region of Ranerou in the north of the country,

Source: x.com

This narrative was mostly pushed by opposition leaders and their supporters. Most of the accounts engaged in this narrative are normal social media users usually supporting opposition parties and not known to be engaged in disinformation campaigns previously. Furthermore, there is no indication that the campaign was coordinated.

The narrative on electoral fraud was the subject of significant engagement, particularly on social media. For instance, the post about fictitious polling stations, published on 16 March, got 48.5 k views and was retweeted 259 times. Despite the reaction of some Twitter (now X) users indicating that they knew some of these polling stations because they had voted there, the false statement continued to circulate, amplified mostly by accounts belonging to opposition supporters. This narrative did not have a widespread consequence probably due to the fact that the candidate of the former ruling party did not win the election. However, it contributed to increasing suspicion about the electoral process.

11 Ndiaga Gueye, „Sénégal – Présidentielle 2024: une carte électorale avec d'au moins 826 bureaux de vote fictifs, 1856 non localisables et 1998 abris provisoires. Au moins 2 359 587 électeurs impactés, Domu Kajoor, 12 March 2024, <https://domukajoor.org/senegal-presidentielle-2024-une-carte-electorale-dau-moins-826-bureaux-de-vote-fictifs-1856-non-localisables-et-1998-abris-provisoires>

12 Domukajoor (@domukajoor), „#Presidentielle2024 Commune Parcelles Assainies (Dakar) 1ere commune avec le plus de bureaux de vote fictifs: 34 bureaux de vote avec 19104 électeurs Source potentielle de faux procès-verbaux de résultats. Les 22 BV du Lieu de vote « Ecole Unité 14 » dupliqués à «Ann. Djinda Thiam»", Twitter (now X), March 16, 2024, <https://x.com/domukajoor/status/1768950101731397789?mRf31mH-LpKAgx-Hs1hcq&s=03>

13 Aminata Sarr, „Supposés bureaux de vote fictif, modifications du fichier électoral : La DGE parle « d' affirmations erronées », Seneweb, 20 March 2024. https://www.seneweb.com/news/Politique/supposes-bureaux-de-vote-fictifs-modific_n_436070.html

Allegations of electoral fraud in preparation came amid current events. They occurred in a context where the opposition parties denounced the attitude of the Ministry of the Interior and the General Election Directorate which, according to them, did not respect the provisions of the electoral code. They criticised the General Election Directorate for not having made the electoral register available to them in time.

The judiciary corruption narrative

Another narrative was directed against the judicial system, more particularly electoral justice. As an extension of the narrative targeting the electoral administration, the allegations against the justice system aimed to support the thesis of electoral fraud in preparation. Allegations against the judiciary came to a head when two Constitutional Council judges were accused of being corrupted by the ruling party's candidate, Amadou Ba, to rule out another candidate, Karim Wade, son of former President Abdoulaye Wade.¹⁴

This was followed by the publication on YouTube of an unauthenticated audio clip supposed to be a conversation between the candidate Amadou Ba and two judges of the constitutional council, to whom he allegedly gave instructions to reject the candidacy of Karim Wade.¹⁵

14 „Karim Wade et le Pds accusent deux juges du conseil constitutionnel de corruption”, Xalima News, 21 January 2024, <https://www.xalimasn.com/karim-wade-et-le-pds-accusent-deux-juges-du-conseil-constitutionnel-de-corruption/>

15 „URGENT : Karim Wade partage une vidéo accusant Amadou Ba de corruption sur des juges du Conseil Constitutionnel”, Senenews, 13 March 2024, https://www.senenews.com/actualites/urgent-karim-wade-partage-une-video-accusant-amadou-ba-de-corruption-sur-des-juges-du-conseil-constitutionnel_487828.html

This narrative was primarily pushed by the Senegalese Democratic Party (Parti Democratique Senegalais, PDS in French) and its supporters who used it to call for the resumption of the electoral process and support the idea of postponing the presidential election. The YouTube channel

which published the unauthenticated audio was launched on 31 January 2024, ten days after the first accusations against the magistrates, and had only six subscribers at the time of publication of the recording.¹⁶

The content linked to this narrative has seen significant engagement, in particular with the supporters of the Senegalese Democratic Party who pushed this narrative with the aim of obtaining the resumption of the electoral process and the supporters of the other parties who rejected these accusations. Most of the accounts that were active around this narrative were those of political leaders and simple social media users.



Post sharing an audio recording allegedly proving the corruption of two Constitutional Council judges,

Source: x.com

The main consequence of this narrative was that the accusation against the two judges of the Constitutional Court was used by the President of the Republic as a pretext to postpone the presidential election, initially scheduled for 25 February 2024. He asked the National Assembly, dominated by his party at that time, to vote a law postponing the election until 24 December. The law was finally deemed illegal by the Constitutional Council, allowing the election to be held on 24 March 2024.

16 "URGENT: Karim Wade partage une vidéo accusant Amadou Ba de corruption sur des juges du Conseil Constitutionnel". Senenews, 13 March 2024. <https://www.senenews.com/actualites/urgent-karim-wade-partage-une-video-accusant-amadou-ba-de-corruption-sur-des-juges-du-conseil-constitutionnel.487828.html>

The narrative to discredit political rivals

Another group of election disinformation activities consisted of narratives aimed at discrediting political rivals. Such narratives were used by all parties against various candidates. For example, a media outlet published a story questioning the citizenship of one of the candidates – Khalifa Ababacar Sall – suggesting that he is not eligible to run in the elections.¹⁷ Senegalese law does not authorise people who are not exclusively of Senegalese nationality to run in the presidential election. Obviously, these rumours were false, since the person concerned had renounced his French nationality in 2015.¹⁸

Another candidate who has been targeted by this narrative is Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the current Senegalese president. In an audio recording that circulated on social media (X and Facebook), one can hear a voice, presented as that of a businessman close to him, saying that Bassirou Diomaye Faye is not fit to be president, and that discouragement has spread to his party. Even if the author could not be identified, the fact-checking organisation Africa Check was able to determine that it was not the businessman's voice.¹⁹

Another strategy to discredit some candidates was accusing them to be under foreign influence. For instance, Amadou Ba, the candidate of the former ruling coalition, was targeted by accusations of being under France's influence.²⁰ For instance, the organisation in Paris of a seminar between the French and Senegalese governments in December 2023, a few months before the presidential election, had been interpreted by part of the opposition as a bias on the part of France for the ruling party's candidate.²¹

17 „Khalifa Sall est-il toujours français?“, Direct News, 22 February 2024.

18 Mor Amar, „Khalifa Sall, candidat à la présidentielle de 2024 au Sénégal, n'est plus français depuis fin octobre 2015“. Africa Check, 25 March 2024. <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/senegal-election-presidentielle-2024-candidat-khalifa-sall-nationalite-francaise-retiree-en-octobre-2015>

19 SaytuSEN2024 (@SaytuSEN2024), „L'Alliance SaytuSen2024 a contacté l'architecte Pierre Goudiaby Atépa, présenté comme l'auteur de ces déclarations sonores“, Twitter (now X), 23 March 2024, https://x.com/SaytuSEN2024/status/1771645298378424758?ref_src=twrc%5Effw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1771645298378424758%7Ctwgr%5Eff6890b65d80f888b311d39ca942d165b286792d%7Ctwcon%5Es1.&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fafricacheck.org%2Ffr%2Fpresidentielle-senegalaise-de-2024

20 TLR-tv, „#Sénégal: le Premier ministre #Amadou #Ba serait-il le candidat de la France en 2024 au Sénégal?...“, Facebook, 19 September 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/TLrenaissance/videos/s%3%A9n%3%A9gal-le-premier-ministre-amadou-ba-serait-il-le-candidat-de-la-france-en-2024/1006356277183484/>

21 Abou Sy, „La France interpellée sur la visite éclair d'Amadou Ba“, Senepus, 12 December 2023, <https://www.senepus.com/politique/lopposition-parle-dingerence>

The other party targeted by these accusations is the Pastef party of current President Bassirou Diomaye Faye. The party was initially accused of being an Islamist party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood,²² a narrative that emerged long before the presidential election and was pushed by some French media.²³ In addition, Ousmane Sonko, the leader of the Pastef party, was accused of receiving USD 20 million from Qatar.²⁴

This narrative was mostly pushed by political actors and their supporters. It has also seen the involvement of some media and media commentators.

Publications around this narrative have shown relatively timid engagement. For example, on X, the audio recording of Diomaye Faye was republished 51 times, mainly by accounts supporting the candidate of the former ruling party, Amadou Ba. Most of the 64 responses came from supporters of Bassirou Diomaye Faye questioning the authenticity of the recording. The article on the nationality of Khalifa Ababacar Sall was republished by three websites

There were no widespread consequences that came out of this narrative. Furthermore, there is no indication that this narrative had any impact on voters' choice. However, it may have been a source of distraction by obscuring debates on more serious subjects.

The narrative on the destabilisation of the country by occult forces

This narrative was mainly used by the ruling party and the government against the opposition, especially the party of the current president. The objective was to establish within public opinion the idea that certain opposition leaders, in particular those of Pastef, were aiming to destabilise the country. Thus, after having decided to postpone the presidential election scheduled for 25 February, former President Macky Sall suggested during an interview with the American agency AP that "organised forces" were going to take the country if the opposition refused to talk.²⁵ This statement was in line with a campaign of at least

22 Abdoul Hamidou « Diouldé » Kane, „Conspiration islamiste et vague de violences au Sénégal: Echec à 'l'harmattan' du Sahel, Leral, 29 February 2024, https://www.leral.net/Conspiration-islamiste-et-vague-de-violences-au-Senegal-Echec-a-l-harmattan-du-Sahel-Par-Abdoul-Hamidou-Dioulde-Kane_a362443.html

23 Etienne Cassagne, „Proche des Frères musulmans et soutenu par la gauche française: Ousmane Sonko, l'opposant qui agite le Sénégal”, Marianne, 1 August 2023. <https://www.marianne.net/monde/afrique/proche-des-freres-musulmans-et-soutenu-par-la-gauche-francaise-ousmane-sonko-l-opposant-qui-agite-le-senegal>

24 „Le député Matar Diop accuse Ousmane Sonko de financements Qatari: Aminata Toure évoque une « tradition » politique sénégalaise, aDakar.com, 11 December 2023, <http://news.adakar.com/h/144481.html>

25 Coumba Kane, „Sénégal: le pouvoir met en garde contre des 'forces organisées' qui menaceraient la sécurité du pays”, Le Monde, 12 February 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/02/12/senegal-le-pouvoir-met-en-garde-contre-un-risque-de-coup-d-etat-l-opposition-denonce-un-chantage_6216127_3212.html

two years relayed by part of the Senegalese media and targeting the Pastef party. The party was accused of plotting with “occult forces” to sow seeds of chaos in the country. Thus, several newspapers wrote articles on their front pages using the expression “occult forces”, relaying accusations without evidence made by members of the government and the ruling party. For example, in March 2023, some media published stories according to which two groups called “Commando Pastef” and “Force Occulte” were preparing to organise attacks in Dakar.²⁶ Furthermore, the police during a press conference at the same period falsely presented videos purporting to show unknown individuals shooting at demonstrators.²⁷ A fact-checking work carried out by some media like the French television channel France 24 showed that, in reality, the shooters, dressed in civilian clothes, were with the police.²⁸

There were also accusations of collusion between the Pastef party and an independence rebel group (MFDC) from Casamance, Ousmane Sonko's region of origin in the south of the country.²⁹

These accusations of attempting to destabilise the country led to the banning of the Pastef party by the Minister of the Interior who accused it of having “frequently called its supporters to insurrectional movements”. The dissolution was later reversed following the adoption of an amnesty law just before the presidential election.

Many actors were engaged in this narrative, starting with government officials, as seen with the example of the national police press conference cited above. Some media outlets, such as Le Soleil or L'Observateur, were also involved in the amplification of this narrative.

Very little engagement was noted on social media. This is certainly due to the fact that this narrative was mostly pushed through traditional media. Many articles have been published over the last three years on the supposed relations between Pastef and the Muslim Brotherhood.

26 „Graves révélations sur des projets d'attentats”, Seneweb, 27 March 2023, https://www.seneweb.com/news/Societe/laquo-commando-de-pastef-raquo-les-grave_n_405571.html

27 „Suivez la conférence de presse de la Police nationale”, posted 4 June 2023 by Seneweb. YouTube. 00:16:24. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA3pP3Tq61U>

28 „Sénégal: des nervis armés ont-ils sévi lors des récentes manifestations?”, posted 7 June 2023, by France 24, YouTube. 00:06:17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK4m3iCt5TE>

29 Cheikh Moussa Sarr, „L'un des projets de Pastef est la continuation de la guerre perdue par le MFDC”, Senepius, 9 July 2023. <https://www.senepius.com/politique/lun-des-projets-de-pastef-est-la-continuation-de-la-guerre-perdue>

The major consequence of this narrative was the dissolution of the Pastef party. In addition, many party officials had been arrested and imprisoned or fitted with electronic bracelets for several months before being released following the vote on the amnesty law a few weeks before the presidential election.

Fake opinion polls

This narrative consisted of publishing false polls supposedly representing the voting intentions of Senegalese voters. The technique consisted of producing graphic visuals showing the photos of candidates accompanied by percentages of votes and sharing them on social media. For example, on 19 March, an X account (Luka Malle) published an infographic of a poll allegedly placing Bassirou Diomaye Faye ahead of other candidates.³⁰ According to the infographic, this opinion poll was conducted by an entity called "Centre d'études politiques internationales". After verification, the fact-checking organisation Africa Check did not find any centre with this name and that such poll does not exist.³¹

According to Jeune Afrique, a Pan-African news magazine based in Paris, the author of the publication on the unauthenticated poll in favour of candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye hides a satellite propaganda account of the Russian private military company Wagner.³² In 2023, All Eyes On Wagner, a project investigating open source intelligence on Wagner's activities, also linked the same account to the Russian armed group. This account is a "person who does not exist, but is even cited in Wagner's Russian media", said All Eyes On Wagner in an article published on its website.³³

Before the case described above, other alleged opinion polls were circulating. According to one of them, the advantage was held by former Prime Minister Amadou Ba, candidate of the ruling coalition, and according to another - by the former minister and former mayor of

30 Luka Malle (@MalleLuka), „Selon le Centre d'études politiques international, le peuple du #Sénégal favorisera Bassirou Diomaye Faye lors de la prochaine élection présidentielle. Faye, candidat d' @SonkoOfficiel,

31 Azil Momar Lo, Vladez Onanina, „Présidentielle de 2024 au Sénégal: attention, ce prétendu sondage diffusé sur les réseaux sociaux n'est pas authentifié”, Africa Check, 22 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/articles/senegal-election-presidentielle-mars-2024-bassirou-diomaye-faye-faux-sondage-desinformation-manipulation-20240322>

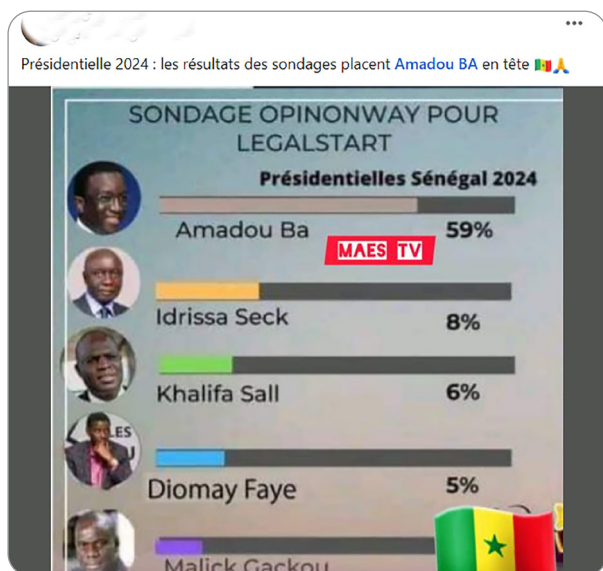
32 Mehdi Ba, „Présidentielle au Sénégal : en l'absence de sondage, les fake-news fleurissent”, Jeune Afrique, 19 March 2024, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1549246/politique/presidentielle-au-senegal-en-labsence-de-sondages-les-fake-news-fleurissent/>

33 „La chasse continue”, All Eyes on Wagner, 3 August 2023, <https://alleyesonwagner.org/2023/08/03/la-chasse-continue/>

Dakar, Khalifa Ababacar Sall. For example, to make the “survey” placing Amadou Ba in the lead credible, the creators of the infographic indicated that it had been carried out by an institute called OPINONWAY, which could suggest that it is the institute of French surveys and marketing, Opinionway. It turns out that it was an impersonation, as the vice-president of Opinionway said that his institute never did such a poll.³⁴ Furthermore, it appears that it was a coordinated operation since the infographic was published on Facebook on the same date by seven different accounts, some displaying the photo of candidate Amadou Ba on their profile.

Other publications which seem to be part of a coordinated operation are those which relate to another poll placing the candidate Pape Djibril Fall in the second round. It was made simultaneously by 15 accounts on Facebook.³⁵ However, it was a gross forgery, since it gave three candidates qualified for the second round, which is not possible in the Senegalese electoral system.

It should be noted that Senegalese law prohibits the publication of political polls during electoral periods.



Most of actors engaged in sharing false polls were accounts linked to supporters of candidates. It is not sure if the candidates concerned were directly involved in the fabrication of the fake polls. In addition, one account, which shared one fake poll, has been identified as linked to the disinformation network of the Russian Private military company Wagner.

Post sharing an audio recording allegedly proving the corruption of two Constitutional Council judges,

Source: x.com

³⁴ Faysal Arnold Bukary, „Présidentielle de 2024 au Sénégal: un faux sondage donne Amadou Ba en tête des intentions de vote”, Africa Check, 20 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-mars-2024-senegal-faux-sondage-amadou-ba-desinformation-20240320>

³⁵ Faysal Arnold Boukary, „Sénégal: un faux sondage sur l'élection présidentielle prévue le 24 mars”, Africa Check, 21 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-mars-2024-senegal-faux-sondage-amadou-ba-diomaye-faye-pape-djibril-fall-desinformation-20240320>

These fake surveys were mainly shared on Facebook. Some publications seem to have been made in a coordinated manner, like that which was made by around 15 accounts on Facebook. This narrative does not seem to have had any major consequences.

Main channels of spreading disinformation related to the election

The private messaging application WhatsApp is undoubtedly the most used and popular digital platform in Senegal. According to World Population Review, there are 5.2 million WhatsApp users in the country.³⁶ In addition, the fact that it is a closed platform makes it difficult to measure the extent of the disinformation circulating there. Still, WhatsApp remains a platform that facilitates the circulation of disinformation, particularly through groups.

According to the DataReportal 2024 report, Facebook is the most used social network in Senegal with 3.35 million users.³⁷ This platform is widely used for the spread of disinformation. An analysis of fact-checking articles published during the election period shows that some of the false content detected comes from Facebook. Instagram, with 1.20 million users, and LinkedIn, with 1.10 million members, rarely appear as sources of disinformation. X, with 259,900 users, and YouTube, which has 3.71 million users, are also used to spread disinformation, especially when it comes to shares from other platforms.³⁸

As an example, the account @ababacarDoucou4, with 7,163 followers on X and which is very active in sharing content aimed at discrediting Bassirou Diomaye Faye and his party members, had shared a video clip of a TV interview in which Ousmane Sonko was accused of having received USD 20 million.³⁹ The same video clip was also shared on TikTok⁴⁰ the same day with exactly the same message by an account named abdoulahidiouf (17,000 followers).

36 „WhatsApp users by country 2024”, World Population Review, (2024), <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/whatsapp-users-by-country>

37 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-senegal>

38 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-senegal>

39 sagacité Sagacité (@AbabacarDoucou4), „Ousmane Sonko a reçu 20 millions de dollars provenant de Qatar. 12 milliards FCFA des Qatari pour renégocier les contrats pétroliers et gaziers”, Twitter (now X), 5 December 2023, <https://x.com/ababacarDoucou4/status/1731852438364135480>

40 ABDOULAH DIOUF (abdoulahidiouf), „Ousmane Sonko a reçu 20 millions de dollars provenant de Qatar. 12 milliards FCFA des Qatari pour renégocier les contrats pétroliers et gaziers”, TikTok, 5 December 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@abdoulahidiouf/video/7308990574382599430>

TikTok is a social network that is gaining ground in Senegal. According to data from the Israeli marketing company Start.io, the platform has 450,200 users, mainly young people. 98% of users are between 18 and 34 years of age.⁴¹ In 2023, TikTok was suspended for several months. The government considered that it was “the network favoured by malicious people to spread hateful and subversive messages threatening the stability of the country”.⁴² According to a fact-checking specialist, TikTok is now playing an increasing role in spreading disinformation.⁴³ The platform is characterised by its ease of use and its virality, especially since a video published on TikTok can then easily be reproduced and shared on other digital platforms.⁴⁴

An analysis of articles published by the fact-checking site Africa Check during the election period shows that almost all social media platforms were used to spread disinformation. This can be explained by the fact that content published on one platform is often taken up and shared on others. Most of the accounts identified in these articles are not known to be involved in spreading disinformation over the long-term, even if they were doing so during the electoral period. One of these accounts is the Facebook page “En Direct de Pikine”, a page with 141,000 followers created in 2019. This is one of the accounts that published the fake survey on Amadou Ba impersonating Opinionway. An analysis of the content generally published by this page suggests that it rather seeks to create engagement and that disinformation may not be its primary motivation.

However, other accounts, like the Facebook page KAYZ FOF PAGE, have been involved in the spread of disinformation for a long time. The page, which has 122,000 followers, was created in 2020. Most of the content consists of videos in which the owners talk about various topics while constantly spreading false information. Other very active Facebook pages, such as ANITA TV and Sonko Rek, stand out more for political propaganda and the spread of partisan and biased information. ANITA TV (50,000 followers) and the account Anita Diop, which

41 <https://www.start.io/audience/tiktok-users-in-senegal>

42 „Sénégal: la suspension de TikTok par le gouvernement considérée comme une entrave à la liberté d'expression et d'information”, Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2 August 2023, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/fr/derni%C3%A8res-actualit%C3%A9s/senegal-la-suspension-de-tiktok-par-le-gouvernement-consid%C3%A9e-comme-une-entrave-%C3%A1-libert%C3%A9-d-expression-et-d-information/>

43 Interview with a fact-checking specialist conducted online, 8 September 2024.

44 Mahtarus, „L'affaire Aziz Dabala: comment TikTok alimente la désinformation?”, Socialnetlink, 26 August 2024, <https://www.socialnetlink.org/2024/08/26/laffaire-aziz-dabala-comment-tiktok-alimente-la-desinformation/>

appears to be associated with it, publish content favourable to the former ruling party and denigrating the opposition. As for the Sonko Rek page (107,000 followers, with photos of Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Ousmane Sonko as profile pictures), it publishes negative content on the former ruling party.

The most common techniques and methods of disinformation

Various disinformation techniques and methods were used during the election period. This can range from misleading information to fabricated information. Misleading information can sometimes surround existing narratives. This was the case when a claim about the summoning of two judges from the constitutional council by the anti-corruption body was spread and widely commented on social media. This claim was born out of the narrative on the corruption of two judges by one of the candidates. This technique of leveraging on existing narratives (T0003) was widely used during the election.⁴⁵

Distorting facts is another common disinformation technique during the election. According to the DISARM framework, this consists in changing, twisting or exaggerating existing facts to construct a narrative that differs from reality (T0023). This was the case during a rally organised by the candidate of the former ruling party Amadou Ba in the north of the country. Around 10 Facebook accounts shared a video suggesting that the rally had brought together a huge crowd. It was actually a video dating from 2021 showing a visit by former President Macky Sall to the north of the country, but it was now placed in a false context.⁴⁶

The technique of fabricated content has also been widely used. For example, false polls, stating this or that candidate the winner of the election or qualified for the second round, were published using graphic visuals shared on social media and other platforms such as WhatsApp.

⁴⁵ SaytuSEN2024, *Rapport d'activités de la coalition SaytuSEN2024*, (Dakar, SaytuSEN2024).

⁴⁶ Faysal Arnold Boukary: „Présidentielle de 2024 au Sénégal: faux cette vidéo ne montre pas la caravane d'un candidat dans le nord du pays”, Africa Check, 19 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-mars-2024-senegal-video-amadou-ba-fouta-faux-desinformation-20240319>

In the same vein, false newspaper headlines can be cited. The technique involved sharing on social media PDFs impersonating (T0099) existing newspaper front pages with fake headlines. One document, impersonating *Le Quotidien*, one of the biggest daily newspaper in the country, displayed the photo of the head of the Muslim religious community, called Mouride, accompanied by the title “The influential religious guide Serigne Mountakha Mbacké has clearly spoken out against the proposal of presidential candidate Diomaye Faye to move the Senegalese capital to Ziguinchor”.⁴⁷ This false front page was part of a campaign to discredit Bassirou Diomaye Faye after he made a statement a few days earlier saying that the city of Ziguinchor, in the south of the country, should have been the economic and cultural capital of Senegal. Some of his political rivals, notably supporters of the former ruling party, had distorted his remarks by claiming that he said that the capital had to be moved to Ziguinchor.

A new trend that is gaining momentum in terms of disinformation, and which was observed during the presidential election, is the use of the dissemination of audio recordings (T0088). These are generally audio recordings of unknown origin with baseless claims. In addition, they are recorded “in national languages (especially in Wolof, the most spoken language in the country) shared on WhatsApp, which makes it possible to reach a large audience generally consisting of people with little education and limited digital literacy, making them vulnerable to manipulation”.⁴⁸

Another method worth mentioning is widely used by new media personalities who are becoming more and more popular on television channels and web TV. These new personalities, whether they are “chroniqueurs” (these are tv and web tv commentators) or influencers, offer a mixture of analysis, verified, tendentious and false information, so that it is often difficult to verify their veracity. One example is the former journalist Cheikh Yerim Seck, regularly invited to television channels. He is one of those who fuelled the rumour that Ousmane Sonko received USD 20 million from Qatar.⁴⁹

47 Faysal Arnold Boukary, „Sur Internet, une fausse une du journal sénégalais « Le Quotidien » du 20 mars 2024”, *Africa Check*, 20 March 2024, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/presidentielle-senegal-2024-diomaye-faye-khalife-mouride-capitale-ziguinchor-le-quotidien-fausse-une-20-mars-2024>

48 Interview with a fact-checking specialist conducted online, 8 September 2024.

49 sagacité Sagacité (@AbabacarDoucou4), „Ousmane Sonko a reçu 20 millions de dollars provenant de Qatar. 12 milliards FCFA des Qatari pour renégocier les contrats pétroliers et gaziers”, *Twitter (now X)*, 5 December 2023, <https://x.com/ababacarDoucou4/status/1731852438364135480>

The potential engagement of external actors

To date, there are no clear signs of wide foreign influence in Senegal. However, there are some indications that foreign actors linked to Russia are involved in the spread of disinformation in the country.⁵⁰ It is also worth mentioning a case from the past concerning the 2019 election - it was established long after that outside entities were involved, and former President Macky Sall had used the services of an Israeli influence agency for his election campaign.⁵¹ This shows that it is sometimes a long process to reveal such interference.

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, West Africa is the region most targeted by disinformation, with almost 40% of disinformation campaigns documented in the continent. About half of these attacks have a link to Russia, which "has flooded the Sahel with disinformation since 2018 with 19 campaigns directed against Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger".⁵²

However, during the electoral period, there was fairly minimal interest from pro-Russian accounts, functioning like bots on social networks that revolve around the military juntas of the Sahel. This interest came after the election, with regular criticism against the new Senegalese president for not showing immediate interest in getting closer to Russia or not announcing a sudden and radical break with France. Furthermore, just after the election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye, an American influencer, Jason Hinckle, followed by more than 2 million people on X, made a series of publications on Senegal, falsely claiming in one of them that "the new Senegalese president breaks relations with France and establishes closer relations with Russia".⁵³ However, there is no evidence that these tweets are an action coordinated by Russian influence networks.

50 „Mapping a Surge Disinformation in Africa”, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 13 March 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

51 Momar Dieng, „Macky Sall, client africain de « Team Jorge »: le soupçon d'une élection 2019 fabriquée et emportée refait surface, Impact, 16 February 2023, https://www.impact.sn/Macky-Sall-client-africain-de-Team-Jorge-le-soupcon-d-une-election-2019-fabriquee-et-emportee-refait-surface_a36943.html

52 „Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa”, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 13 March 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

53 Jackson Hinckle (@jacksonhinckle), „SENEGAL'S NEW PRESIDENT will BREAK OFF ties with FRANCE and establish closer ties with RUSSIA”, Twitter (now X), 28 March 2024, <https://x.com/jacksonhinckle/status/1773369454401056981?s=48>

The comparison with the other elections

Since 2021, Senegal has experienced a serious political crisis, with episodes of violence followed by deaths, a situation which has further polarised the political landscape with a political debate marked by deep divisions. Like all crisis situations, this one has increased the spread of false or misleading information. In this context, the legislative elections of July 2022 were held. At that time, the disinformation trends observed later, during the 2024 presidential election, were already visible. During the 2022 election, the technique of impersonating newspaper front pages was widely used to the point of alarming defenders of press freedom. For instance, Reporters Without Borders thus described the technique as dangerous and could easily deceive social media users, and its West African bureau director argued that "it is liable to impact the democratic debate and harm the media that are victims, by damaging their reputation and even putting their journalists in danger".⁵⁴

Other disinformation techniques include the use of manipulated or decontextualised videos and pictures, false and baseless claims, as well as the manipulation of electoral statistics. In the absence of quantitative studies, it is difficult to compare the extent of disinformation between the two elections.

Compared to the 2019 presidential election, a greater circulation of false information online has been noted. This is linked to factors such as the growth of access to the Internet and social media. The increase in access to digital platforms means that people are increasingly exposed to online disinformation. Secondly, technologies, including artificial intelligence, mean that content can be easily created using available platforms. With the participation of others, such as TikTok, it can then be disseminated and also amplify disinformation. For instance, "between 2019 and 2024, the use of TikTok has significantly increased in Senegal. And that is an accelerator of disinformation"⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ „Senegalese newspaper front pages hijacked for political propaganda purposes”, Reporters Without Borders, 29 July 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/senegalese-newspaper-front-pages-hijacked-political-propaganda-purposes#:~:text=The%20five%20newspapers%20whose%20front,Sud%20Quotidien%20and%20Le%20Quotidien>

⁵⁵ Interview with a fact-checking specialist, 8 September 2024.

The measures introduced to counteract disinformation

There was no initiative at the level of the State and public institutions for the State against disinformation. All major initiatives have been taken by societal organisations and media organisations. The most prominent has been SaytuSen2024, an initiative of media and civil society platforms that focus on electoral issues with a certain sensitivity to the risks that disinformation can have in an electoral context. This was a coalition which brought together a fact-checking organisation (Africa Check), four media outlets (La Maison des Reporters, Setanal Média, Enquête, Ouestaf News), a journalism school (Ejicom) and two civil society organisations (Sénégal Vote and Divan Citoyen). This coalition set itself the objective of tackling the spread of disinformation related to the 2024 presidential election.⁵⁶ This was done through the publication of fact-checking articles and media literacy videos.⁵⁷

The American NGO National Democratic Institute (NDI) also initiated a programme to combat disinformation in elections. Started in 2023, the programme involved carrying out different activities in the country in partnership with various media and civil society organisations.⁵⁸ These activities included raising awareness among young people about disinformation and its consequences, as well as training journalists, bloggers and online influencers on information verification techniques.

Another initiative was that of the NGO Oxfam. As part of its programme “Waajal election” (“Preparing the election” in Wolof, the most spoken language in Senegal), Oxfam organised a panel on the theme of disinformation during the electoral period, as well as training in fact-checking intended for journalists.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ „Sénégal – lancement de #SaytuSEN2024, une alliance de vérification des faits autour de la présidentielle 2024”, [Press Release], Africa Check, 28 November 2023, <https://africacheck.org/fr/fact-checks/blog/communiqué-de-presse-saytuSEN2024-election-presidentielle-senegal-alliance-verification-factchecking-medias-contre-desinformation>

⁵⁷ SaytuSEN2024, Rapport d'activités de la coalition SaytuSEN2024, (Dakar, SaytuSEN2024).

⁵⁸ NDI, „Overview”. <https://www.ndi.org/sub-saharan-africa/senegal/>

⁵⁹ Ousmane Goudiaby, „Présidentielle 2024: Oxfam en croisade contre la désinformation en période électorale”, Sud Quotidien, 17 January 2024. <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/presidentielle-2024-oxfam-en-croisade-contre-la-desinformation-en-periode-electorale/>

Conclusions

The 2024 presidential election was heavily marked by disinformation. In fact, this was a continuation of what was observed during the 2019 presidential election and the 2022 parliamentary elections. There is increasingly in the political landscape a more assertive desire to influence the public through false information and greater technical performance to reinforce beliefs in this false information. However, there is nothing to say that this disinformation could have influenced the choice of voters. Either way, it contributed to creating suspicion about the electoral process and undermining confidence in institutions. Unfortunately, the fight against disinformation is not a priority for the public authorities, since no initiative was taken by the government in this direction during the electoral period. Furthermore, the few organisations involved in the fight against disinformation do not have sufficient resources to initiate large-scale actions.

The SaytuSEN2024 project, which brought together 8 organisations, including the media, civil society organisations and a journalism school, was interesting but was too small-scale of an initiative to be able to have a real impact. However, it can serve as an example for future initiatives in the fight against disinformation.

Election Disinformation in South African Election in 2024

Author: Tadeusz Michrowski

Political landscape

South Africa is a flawed democracy but significantly more democratic than its neighbours (except for Botswana) and is on par with some of the EU countries. It is considered to have some of the strongest checks and balances systems on the continent.

¹This makes it a unique country for its region, as it shares some of the problems and strengths with both Western and African countries.

Still, it is worth mentioning that a growing number of South Africans believe that the country is moving in the wrong direction (85% in 2022, 46% in 2011), and they express their dissatisfaction with democracy (between 60% and 70% since 2021, 39% in 2011), while the trust in the country's state institutions is low (in 2023, 32% trusted national government, and 33% trusted the parliament). These are in line with the general trends in the main democracies over the last few years.²

The South African political landscape is dominated by the ruling South African Congress (ANC) and two parties that separated from it: Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), as well as the main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA). EFF and MK are clearly anti-Western, DA is pro-Western, and the ANC aligned itself more with the anti-Western camp in the recent years but remains a party with varied interests. What is also worth noting, the South African president, who shares constitutional powers with parliament, is elected by the parliament. The general election is, in a sense, a "take-it-all" event.

1 Paul Nantuya, "Lessons from South Africa for Holding Leaders Accountable", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, access 15.09.2024. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/lessons-south-africa-holding-leaders-accountable/>

2 A growing number of South Africans believe that the country is moving in the wrong direction (85% in 2022, 46% in 2011), and they express their dissatisfaction with democracy (between 60% and 70% since 2021, 39% in 2011), while the trust in the country's state institutions is low (in 2023, 32% trusted national government, and 33% trusted the parliament). These are in line with the general trends in the main democracies over the last few years.

The ANC won the 2024 South African election but, for the first time in history, lost the independent majority in the parliament. Until then, it was mostly the ANC's internal faction's clashes that decided the country's political direction, less being the results of general elections.

The ANC was in power as a party widely seen as one representing the interests of black South Africans due to its roots as a liberation movement. That effect was strengthened by the large number (at some point over one million)³ of members of the ANC. Economic stagnation, high unemployment, the inability of the state to provide basic services and corruption and party state capture made the ANC lose voters. In the 2019 general election, it received 57.5%⁴ of votes, a trend falling since 2009. In 2024, it received 40.2% votes and lost the independent majority.⁵

The ANC wants to continue the politics of balancing Russia and China vs. the West, which often means challenging the latter. Its politicians intend to develop the idea of South Africa as a champion of the Global South and its region. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, South Africa took a pro-Russian stance, though especially at the beginning, the reactions were mixed within the government. As a wide political front, the ANC remains flexible, and its policies will depend on intra-party politics and the politics within the ruling coalition. As South African politics remained largely entrenched in the ethnic perception of interests rather than programmes, it was parties that split from the ANC that captured the votes it lost. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) appeared in 2013 as a populist party, self-described as radical, leftist and anti-capitalist⁶, led by Julius Malema, former (and expelled) leader of the youth wing of the ANC. It is a party radically opposed to the USA and the West, criticising French and US presence on the continent and supporting Russia. It perceives itself as Pan-African, championing the idea of the United States of Africa, similar to the Soviet Union. After the election, the EFF remained in the opposition, receiving a rather steady 9.5%.⁷

3 Paddy Harper, "Existential crisis — ANC membership drops by more than one third in five years", *Mail & Guardian*, access 15.09.2024, <https://mg.co.za/politics/2022-12-18-existential-crisis-anc-membership-drops-by-more-than-one-third-in-five-years/>

4 2019 election results, IEC, access 15.09.2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/home/NPEPublicReports/699/Results%20Report/National.pdf>

5 2024 election result, IEC, access 15.09.2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/>

6 EFF Founding Manifesto, access 15.09.2024, <https://effonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Founding-Manifesto.pdf>

7 2024 election results, IEC, access 15.09.2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/>

Another party hoping to capitalise on the outflow of voters from the ANC was uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), led by former ANC leader and president, Jacob Zuma. A pro-Russian party, allegedly created with the help of the GRU,⁸ a black nationalist party with many postulates close to the EFF, it received 14.6% of votes⁹ and remained in the opposition.

The main opposition is the Democratic Alliance (DA), a pro-Western, liberal party hailing from the Western Cape province where it rules. It is often seen as representing the interests of white and/or affluent South Africans. With 20.8%¹⁰ in the 2019 election and 21.8% in 2024¹¹, the DA was unable to capitalise on the outflow of voters from the ANC. The DA aimed at remaining a strong enough partner for the ANC, since the more radical Zuma wing split from the It became part of the new government and will probably bring more liberal and pro-Western changes into politics.

The 2024 South African elections saw the further growth of small parties and independent candidates (all together: 70; South Africa has no electoral threshold). The trend of declining voter turnout continued, as well as the decline in the percentage of registered voters. 58.6% of those registered cast their votes in the 2024 general election, a percentage getting lower in each election since 2009 when it was at 77.3%¹². The estimate of voter registration, as a percentage of voting age population, dropped from over 80% in 2014 to roughly 67% in the 2024 election.¹³

8 Andre Pienaar, "Jacob Zuma, the MK Party, and the Kremlin's GRU", National Security News, access 15.09.2024 <https://nationalsecuritynews.com/2024/02/jacob-zuma-the-mk-party-and-the-kremlins-gru/>

9 Ibidem

10 2019 election result, IEC, access 15.09.2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/home/NPEPublicReports/699/Results%20Report/National.pdf>

11 2024 elections result, access 15.09.2024 IEC, <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/>

12 Victoria O'Reagan, "The big no-vote: over 11 million registered voters did not cast ballots in 2024 polls", Daily Maverick, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-07-the-big-no-vote-over-11-million-registered-voters-did-not-cast-ballots-in-2024-polls/>

13 Seth Thorne, "Over 13 million eligible voters in South Africa not registered for the 2024 elections", access 15.09.2024, BusinessTech <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/758143/over-13-million-eligible-voters-in-south-africa-not-registered-for-the-2024-elections/>

Disinformation landscape in the country

To understand the disinformation landscape in South Africa, it is worth noting that with 12 official languages, and at least 35 in total, as well as the amount of the population that speaks no or only basic English, mapping disinformation happens mostly within the English-speakers bubble.

It is also important to consider the unique social context of the country. In The Economist ranking, South Africa scored high (on par with the UK) on political participation, though particularly low on political culture, creating a landscape of society with citizens vastly participating in political activity but with that activity lacking the proper control and even turning violent.¹⁴ This leads to paradoxes: like LGBTQ support parades marching undisturbed through the same communities in which, at night, groups of men break in into houses of women considered homosexual with a belief that a group rape would make them heterosexual. The ease of self-organisation of South Africans makes disinformation more dangerous when the communities start to act based on that disinformation. Moreover, the political discourse in the country is very identitarian: black, coloured and white populations often perceive their interests as conflicting and are especially susceptible to be incited against one another. It is easy to play on the fear of revenge for apartheid (i.e. disinformation around the real numbers and reasons behind the so-called farm murders; the false “white genocide” narrative) or fear that white population is trying to achieve with capital what it used to achieve with force (narratives around the DA realising only whites interests), as well as various ideological leanings (from Marxist to racist-neo-Nazi). There is a number of historical and cultural references that enable this: i.e. the Dubul’ ibhunu (“kill the Boer”) song is a part of anti-apartheid heritage still sung today, which antagonises the Afrikaans speaking population. Much of this disinformation builds upon strong, divisive sentiments.

The disinformation comes from local actors, especially big political parties, like the MK or EFF, but also from a number of smaller political entities (parties and individual candidates, as the latter can run for parliament), as well as various political, interest and even religious groups.

¹⁴ The Economist Democracy Index 2023, Economist Intelligence Unit: 10, access 15.09.2024, https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf?version=0&mkt_tok=NzUzLVJJUS00MzgAAAGVOB2gvFzc8vRMV0hJQKXjeAEFlr8Spnl97LUNI5WYw-KQnRcP5DpcSa6XT8v-qeuf_r1B0IDv5FPTDVH1hkWkBK1_cCDKt5_bh3Zev1v14b0v-Q

Both Russia and China are interfering in the infosphere of South Africa. Among others, Russia noted the successful #IStandWithPutin, #IStandWithRussia campaign around the invasion of Ukraine,¹⁵ and China used fake accounts to amplify its diplomats' social media posts sharing Chinese state media articles.¹⁷ China state companies own stakes in Independent Media, owner of the IOL outlet, the fifth most popular online publisher in South Africa.¹⁸

What stands out in the disinformation context is the fact that the South African Broadcast Service, a national public broadcaster, maintains the strong trust of 57% of those surveyed.¹⁹ This is significantly higher than the British BBC it was modelled upon. The general trend between 2019 and 2022 in South Africa was that of growing trust in the news in general.²⁰ Public media remains an anti-disinformation actor, while general freedom of press is considered falling but still high, even by Western standards.²¹ During the election process, the media and their analysis were fair and credible.²² The South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is also an active actor in countering disinformation. All of this makes South Africa a country that – in many ways – adheres to Western democratic standards of countering disinformation and rises significantly above other countries of the region.

Despite these efforts, South Africa, in general, remains fertile ground for disinformation. One of the biggest economic inequalities and education inequalities in the world,²³ often going along ethnic lines with over half the population living in poverty,²⁴ mean that tools to counter disinformation remain in the grasp of a relatively limited number of citizens, while high Internet and social media use allow simple disinformation to spread effectively. Mistrust in institutions, ethnic tensions and disappointment with politics is easily harnessed by creators of disinformation.

15 Paul Nantulya, "China's Strategy to Shape Africa's Media Space", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Documented Disinformation, Campaigns in Africa", access: 15.09.2024, https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Africa_Center_disinformation_documentation_4_26_22.pdf; Centre for Information Resilience, "The #IStandWithPutin & #IStandWithRussia campaign in South Africa", access: 15.09.2024, <https://www.info-res.org/post/the-istandwithputin-istandwithrussia-campaign-in-south-africa>

17 <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/china-strategy-africa-media-space/>

18 Freedom House, "Beijing's Global Media South Africa", access: 15.09.2024, Influence, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>

19 *ibidem*

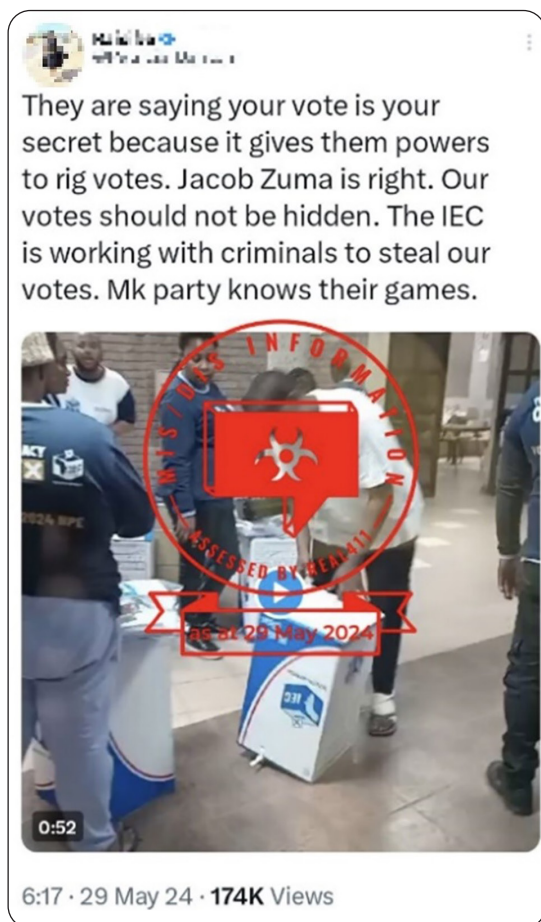
20 Chris Roper, "South Africa", Reuters Institute, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/south-africa#:~:text=Between%2019%20and%202022%2C%20trust, jointly%20with%20BBC%20in%202021>.

21 World Press Freedom Index 2024, Reporters Without Borders, access 15.09.2024, <https://rsf.org/en/index>

22 Media Performance Review, Media Monitoring Africa: 12, access 15.09.2024 https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MPR_Report_120724.pdf

23 "Some Children are More Equal than Others: Education in South Africa", Right to Education, access 16.09.2024, <https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/some-children-are-more-equal-others-education-south-africa>

24 SoNA-in-Numbers - 2024, South African Government, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.gov.za/news/sona-numbers-2024>



An X post that reached almost 175 thousand views claiming that the IEC is using secret ballots to claim that voting is being rigged at the cost of the MK party.

An X post claiming falsification of votes in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, published by Duduzile Zuma, the MK leader's daughter, got over 600,000 views, and another post, by a different account and in a different province, over 1.5 million views.³² There were disinformation narratives different kinds tracks of that disinformation: some claimed that the ANC and DA "paid" for election rigging,³³ others suggested that some votes were not counted,³⁴ or even that the CIA was involved.³⁵ It purposefully focused on KwaZulu-Natal, the province where the MK had the biggest support: there was already an outburst of violence related to support for Zuma a few years earlier, as well as in the Western Cape, where the DA was in power.

A number of the little-known accounts participating in that narrative started to be more active around the time the narrative began to appear and ceased or suddenly slowed down posting in the weeks after it.

This provoked commentary from the Chief Electoral Officer, who called it "a clearly orchestrated effort to say these elections can't be free and fair before they even happen". The MK issued an official statement regarding the claimed "mismanagement" of elections.³⁶ Before and after the elections, there were cases of people (at least, in one case, MK supporters) trying to forcefully enter warehouses where the ballots were stored.³⁷

The aim of the narrative was to undermine the election process and the belief in the sense of participating in it. 2024 saw the historically lowest voter turnout. Furthermore, since South Africa disallows exit-polls,³⁹ this

³² <https://x.com/MoyaProf/status/1796567579739193637>

³³ Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/4U9J8D0E>

³⁴ Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/8SGG9U1S>

³⁵ Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/5RIIZN8S>

³⁶ Superlinear, @superlinearza, 02.06.2024, <https://x.com/superlinearza/status/179544112292970889>

³⁷ South African Government News Agency, "IEC confirms attempted unauthorised entry at its Gauteng warehouse", access 15.09.2024, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/iec-confirms-attempted-unauthorised-entry-its-gauteng-warehouse>; Natasha Marrian, "IEC to act against MK Party over invasion of storage facility", News24, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.news24.com/news24/politics/political-parties/iec-to-act-against-mk-party-over-invasion-of-storage-facility-20240527>

³⁹ Electoral Act 1998, Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, section 109, access 15.09.2024, https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/act73of1998.pdf

created further chaos before the final results were published. This narrative created grounds for many other narratives that appeared during the elections.

The ANC-DA coalition is manufactured by obscure forces

Just after the elections and before the final results, disinformation claimed the ANC had been paid 150 million rands to create a coalition government with the DA. The story appeared on various social media, most prominently on WhatsApp, with fake credibility coming from its supposed source: the web page of Mail & Guardian (though it was

never published there).⁴⁰ The payee was supposed to be the South African family of billionaires, the Oppenheimers. The supposed reason for the deal: the perpetuation of interests of big business at the cost of regular South Africans.

Although this particular piece of disinformation was also classified as “satire”, it was symptomatic of a whole trend claiming that there are secret groups that want to influence the coalition outcome.

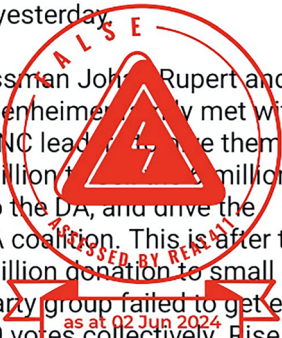
This disinformation appeared at a crucial time: when the ANC was already in coalition talks. It was an attempt to pressure the ANC against talks with the DA as the main partner and push it towards seeking an MK+EFF partnership. It played cleverly on the opinion of the ANC as corrupt and the sentiments of South Africans: racial (distrust, especially between conservative white and far-left black community) and anti-capitalist (perception that the current form of capitalism created economic inequalities, and the DA remains a champion of it). In the case of the “150-million rand” piece of disinformation, the amount was not accidental: it was the well-known sum of debts of the party at the end of 2023.⁴¹

BREAKING NEWS: The ANC has been sold for R150-million!

by News Reporter

JOHANNESBURG: After failing to get an outright majority in the elections, the ANC-DA coalition is a foregone conclusion based on the secret deal closed yesterday.

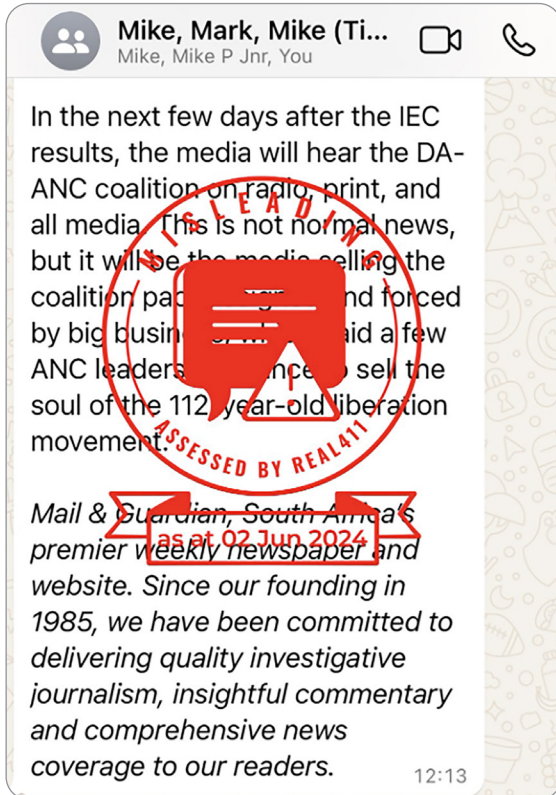
Businessman John Rupert and the Oppenheimer family met with a few ANC leaders to give them R150-million to give them million votes to the DA, and drive the ANC-DA coalition. This is after the R100-million donation to small multi-party group failed to get even 100,000 votes collectively. Rise Mzansi, Action SA, BOSA, and the rest of the Oppenheimer parties lost badly in the elections despite the big donations.



A WhatsApp message claiming that businessmen paid the ANC for a coalition with the DA in a secret deal. The amount corresponds with the amount that the ANC was known to be previously in debt for. The names of famous billionaires are mentioned. The story is falsely signed as a “News Reporter”.

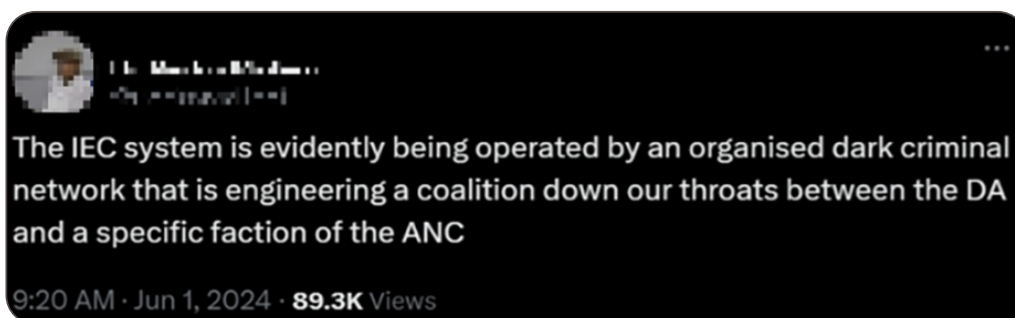
40 Rebecca Davis, “Disinformation nation — a concerted campaign to destabilise SA post elections”, Daily Maverick, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-02-disinformation-nation-a-concerted-campaign-to-destabilise-sa-post-elections/>

41 Siyabonga Sithole, “Saved by the deal: ANC’s R150 million Luthuli debt almost marked the ANC’s worst year”, IOL, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/saved-by-the-deal-ancs-r150-million-luthuli-debt-almost-marked-the-ancs-worst-year-qb171a8a-7e93-4141-8503-25591a75cef1>



A WhatsApp message claiming that the upcoming coalition talks (natural, given the expected results) will be pushed by the media as a part of the “selling-out” the the ANC. The story is falsely signed as coming from “Mail & Guardian”, one of South Africa’s top news outlets.

There were a number of high-reach social media accounts, especially on X, where some posts reached hundreds of thousands of views. Even mainstream media, to some point, pushed the false “sellout” narrative, including the IOL, a top online outlet reaching 390,000 readers daily.⁴² Even so, the exact scope of the narrative is hard to measure. It was built upon the genuine reservations of many ANC followers that the DA-based coalition means an end to the party’s leftist roots. Eventually, it did not affect the final outcome: the ANC-DA coalition happened. There may have been a slight impact on the size of the coalition: with 11 parties, the number of them, especially the smaller parties, was higher than the ANC needed to effectively rule, but this helped with the legitimisation of the new government as a wide coalition.



An X post claiming that a “dark criminal network” is behind the possibility of the ANC-DA coalition, with almost 90 thousand views.

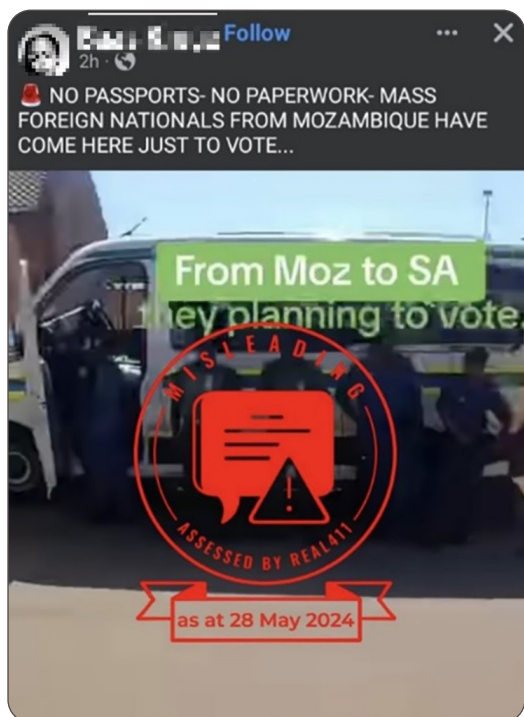
⁴² Bizcommunity, “Biggest news publications in South Africa”, [https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/opinion/elections-2024-we-told-you-so-ramaphosa-naspers-and-the-rise-of-the-anc-da-coalition-4ff74ce6-3f86-4873-9bb9-2c637d1ef211](https://www.bizcommunity.com/article/biggest-news-publications-in-south-africa-479069a#:~:text=IOL%2C%20South%20Africa's%20second%2Dlargest,and%2013%20million%20page%20views;Lindiwe Matlali TikTok account, access 15.09.2024, 7392181409990872326; “ELECTIONS 2024: We told you so! Ramaphosa, Naspers and the rise of the ANC-DA Coalition”, IOL, access 15.09.2024, <a href=)

The looming migration and the fake migrant votes

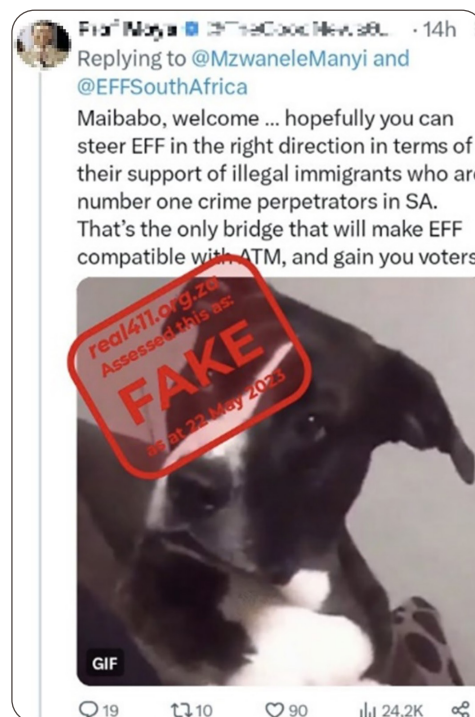
South Africa is a relatively attractive country for migration, with around 3 million migrants⁴⁵ coming mostly from neighbouring Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as well as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and other sub-Saharan countries. South Africa also hosts around 250 thousand refugees but has a no-camps policy - refugees live freely with citizens.⁴⁶

This, together with perceived weakening economy and high unemployment, created an environment susceptible for disinformation related to anti-migration narratives.

This disinformation narrative claims that immigrants are responsible for crimes, straining the health service and taking jobs away from South Africans. Since the mid-2000s, the country has seen several outbursts of violence against migrants.



A post claiming that undocumented Mozambique nationals are coming to South Africa to participate in elections.



An X post in which an unbased statement of foreigners being responsible for most crimes in South Africa appears in relation to EFF pro-migrant policies.

45 Migration Data in SADC, Migration Data Portal, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/southern-africa#:~:text=An%20estimated%202.9%20million%20migrants,of%20education%20and%20better%20opportunities>.

46 UNHCR, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/countries/south-africa#:~:text=Unlike%20Namibia%20and%20Botswana%2C%20South,environment%20of%20mixed%20population%20flows>.



An X post disseminating fake information about the supposed crime committed by foreign nationals.

One of the main disinformation actors is a xenophobic organisation Operation Dudula (“Dudula” means “force out” in Zulu; before the 2024 general election, the movement turned into a political party and ran in the provincial part of elections but with no success⁴⁷). Often called a vigilante group, it operated for years and is responsible for attacks on migrants and businesses owned by them. Through its social media, it claimed before the elections that the EFF party would bring foreign nationals into South Africa and try to use them to forge elections. A set of accounts related to Dudula also shared content presenting Africans from other countries as animalistic and uncivilised.

Accounts like that of Operation Dudula were possibly more cautious during the elections due to cases of South African courts sentencing those inciting hatred. In 2023, a member of the movement was sentenced with a 100 thousand rands fine or three years imprisonment for inciting violence.⁴⁸

Hence, when shortly before elections a lot of disinformation appeared, it was mostly spread through, e.g., WhatsApp and was often hard to map and attribute.

In one of these appears a video of two women chased through the street and beaten heavily by a group of men. The voice-over claimed that the situation is happening in Nigeria, and the two women were attacked because of being from South Africa. Fact checking proved that it was a video from Uganda and almost certainly had nothing to do with South Africans. The video was aimed at inciting hatred and violence towards other African nations and migrants, and the video also aimed to create the impression of South Africa falling apart,

47 IEC, access: 15.09.2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/home/NPEPublicReports/1335/Results%20Report/National.pdf>

48 Kaveel Singh, “WhatsApp voice note leads to conviction of Operation Dudula member who incited violence”, News24, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/whatsapp-voice-note-leads-to-conviction-of-operation-dudula-member-who-incited-violence-20230901>

The main channels of this narrative were WhatsApp and X, and “xenophobia” was the 3rd most popular tag among the disinformation complaints on the Real411 page for the three months leading up to the election day. Dozens of individual X posts gathered tens and even hundreds of thousands of views each. The circulation on WhatsApp remains obscure, but in the past, this was Dudula's main platform for disinformation. The whole narrative goal was to sow dissent, present the ANC as a party that destroys the country and to grow black nationalism that benefited the MK and some smaller parties.

Hellen Zille, Gaza and the independent Western Cape

There was a lot of disinformation targeted at the DA, with much of it focused on its prominent politician (and past leader), Helen Zille. Among this was a narrative that the DA is fighting to secede the Western Cape province from South Africa (with the help of the CIA)⁴⁹, that she is against black leadership⁵⁰ or even that the DA will give the Western Cape to “Zionists”.⁵¹



A fake letter from the US government to Helen Zille in which the supposed US government supports the independence of the Western Cape as a counterbalance to, among others, Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

This was aimed at both creating a sense of rage against the DA and fear of its policies, especially among the black voters, as it fought for the votes of more liberal black South Africans. Other goals were to destabilise the country around the elections and, again, hit the credibility of the possible post-election coalition. It did not focus on Zille only, as other leaders, also from the ANC, were often attacked, but Zille remains an interesting point: the narrative focused on a politician with a strong past record but not the leader in 2024. Similarly, Thabo Mbeki, a former president from the ANC, was the target of another disinformation campaign. Another point was the antisemitism linked to it: Helen Zille has Jewish roots, and the narrative tried to capitalise on the anti-Israel sentiment

49 Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/19bsqh35>

50 Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/W4654XPU>

51 Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints-view/9JPE0RRW>



A disinformation piece claiming (and circulating for at least a few years before the election and re-emerging around it) that the DA's Helen Zille regrets promoting black leadership in the party.

related to this country's actions in Gaza. South Africa is a major force in an attempt to hold Tel Aviv accountable, while the DA remained the main choice for the country's relatively small (1.6%) Muslim community.⁵²

Despite the obvious crisis of trust in the ANC, the DA gained only 1% of votes in comparison to the 2019 general elections. This suggests distrust of black voters, which could have been partially increased by this narrative. The narrative was most present on X, TikTok and WhatsApp. It often intermingled with other false narratives (especially "election rigging"), and on TikTok, it was mentioned by hundreds of posts, often with a low (few to several thousand) number of views each.



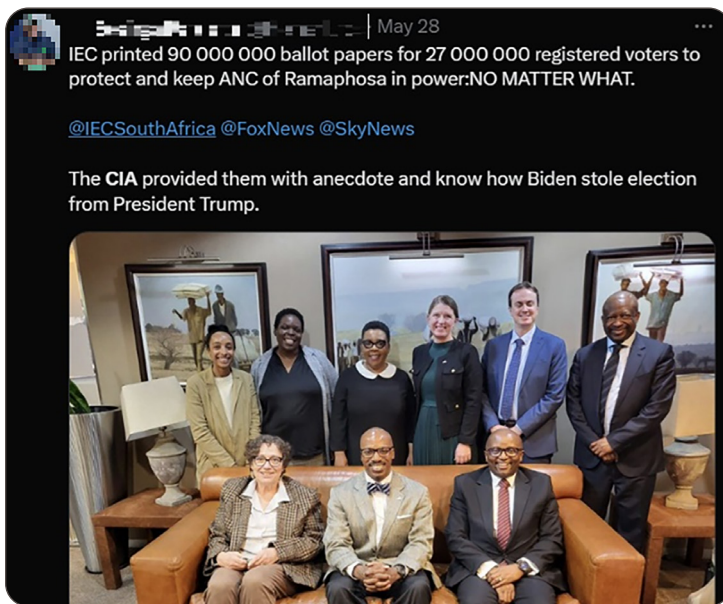
An X post saying that real estate companies that are "Zionist" are working for illegal immigration to South Africa and benefiting from it.

52 Ilham Rawoot, "South African Muslims Didn't Vote for Pro-Palestine Parties. Why Not?", Novara Media, access 15.09.2024, <https://novaramedia.com/2024/06/11/south-african-muslims-didnt-vote-for-pro-palestine-parties-why-not/>

The CIA at play

The suggestions of the American Central Intelligence Agency interfering in South African politics, especially against the MK, was a popular narrative before and after the elections, and it mixed with some other narratives mentioned before.

First, the idea of secession of the Western Cape was related to a fake letter from the CIA. The Agency also appeared in the context of supposed meetings with IEC members,⁵³ a claimed CIA plan to assassinate Zuma, as well as the deputy president of South Africa, and even its involvement in a conspiracy to start a war in KwaZulu-Natal because of the MK's chances to rule in the province.⁵⁴ Narratives of election rigging by the CIA or the US government also appeared.



An X post claiming: 1. Printing more ballots in order to rig elections, 2. The method came from the CIA that affected the result of elections in the US.



An X post using a photo from a meeting with US embassy staff as "proof" that the CIA will take part in rigging the election in South Africa.

53 Sesinga Mavikithi, @themankhosi, 29.04.2024, <https://x.com/themankhosi/status/1785021170338693387>

54 Kirsten Cosser, "South Africa, don't fall for fake headline claiming the CIA will start a war in KwaZulu-Natal and frame Zuma's uMkhonto", Africa Check, access 15.05.2024, we <https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/south-africa-dont-fall-fake-headline-claiming-cia-will-start>

This conspiracy narrative was openly targeting the West and the US and played on anti-colonial sentiments. It was spread mostly by accounts clearly supporting the MK, even faking a newspaper front page in doing so. Some of the individual posts had hundreds of thousands of views across X and Facebook. This was not a new narrative, but it gained significant momentum, as well as a new spin around the elections.

Its aim was similar to some of the others: sow distrust in the ANC and fear of the DA in power (for the benefit of the MK and possibly the EFF and smaller actors), as well as to increase anti-Western and anti-US sentiments in the long term.

The CIA and the US interference narrative appeared on X, TikTok and blog posts to which other platforms linked. High reach X accounts, like that of Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, perpetuated that narrative, giving it, in effect, a reach of millions of views in total, with some of the individual posts passing 150 thousand views.

Main channels of spreading disinformation related to the election

The main social media platform for disinformation was X. 68% of complaints confirmed as disinformation by the Real411 fact check page came from X, followed by TikTok at 15%, WhatsApp at 8%, Facebook at 6%⁵⁵ and other platforms below 5%. Of 26 million social media users, WhatsApp (93.9% of active social media users), Facebook (88.4%) and TikTok (73.6%) were the most popular, while X (55.1%) was in 6th place.⁵⁶ The discrepancy between these positions comes at least partially from lenient X policies on deleting and countering disinformation and the fact that WhatsApp remains hard to analyse.

Some of the very popular accounts in the country spread disinformation ahead, during and after the election.

55 "Interim report presented to the Electoral Commission of South Africa by Media Monitoring Africa", Media Monitoring Africa, access 15.09.2024, https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/240531-MMA-Real411-interim-elections-report-AS_edits-clean.pdf

56 Katherine McInnes, South African Digital & Social Media Statistics 2024, Meltwater, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.meltwater.com/en/blog/social-media-statistics-south-africa>

Julius Malema, leader of the EFF and the 10th most popular user of South African X, used his account only to counter the narratives of elections rigging,⁵⁷ and yet supported it in some of his speeches.⁵⁸

It was EFF supporters' accounts, like that going by the name Sentletse,⁵⁹ that pushed the rigged elections narrative.⁶⁰ With almost 300 thousand followers, it was by far the account with the highest number of followers from the top disinformation accounts, and it engaged in the disinformation activities long before elections.⁶¹ It also posts pro-Russian and anti-Israeli messages, but the account's relatively low performance, given the number of its followers, seems to indicate that it did not partake in organised disinformation operations.

Among the most influential social media accounts are the X and TikTok accounts of Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of the MK leader and former president Jacob Zuma. Duduzile regularly posted and reposted content alleging rigged elections. Her activity on X mostly consists of this and political messages related to the MK and Jacob Zuma. On TikTok, much of the content was similar. Her channels are long known for disinformation, being among the most prominent propagators of the #IStandWithPutin campaign supporting Russia amid its invasion of Ukraine.⁶²

Another account sowing disinformation was the official account of the MK,⁶³ which afterwards changed its name. It was one of the two top (next to Duduzile Zuma-Sambudlas) accounts spreading the stolen elections narrative.⁶⁴ It also spreads other disinformation, like the anti-vaccine narrative.

57 Hanno Labuschagne, "Top 10 South African Twitter users — excluding Elon Musk", Mybroadband, access 15.09.2024, <https://mybroadband.co.za/news/internet/454032-top-10-south-african-twitter-users-excluding-elon-musk.html>

58 Bulelani Nonyukela, "Malema changes tune on vote rigging as elections loom", TimesLive, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2024-04-23-listen-malema-changes-tune-on-vote-rigging-as-elections-loom/>

59 Sentletse, @Sentletse, <https://x.com/Sentletse>

60 Sentletse, @Sentletse, 01.06.2024, <https://x.com/Sentletse/status/1796806175658279356>

61 Sentletse, @Sentletse, 11.12.2024, <https://x.com/Sentletse/status/1734137640327233643>

62 Siyabonga Sithole, "I stand with Putin, and I'm not paid for it, says Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla accused of pro-Russia disinformation campaign", IOL, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/i-stand-with-putin-and-im-not-paid-for-it-says-duduzile-zuma-sambudla-accused-of-pro-russia-disinformation-campaign-cbaee18c-a89e-4a34-8c3e-d7bc4df9677d>

63 uMKHONTO WESIZWE Info Centre, @MKParty_InfoGuy, https://x.com/MKParty_InfoGuy

64 Superlinear, @superlinearza, 02.06.2024, <https://x.com/superlinearza/status/1795441112292970889>

The relatively low-follower accounts (tens of thousands) that were the most active and gained the highest reach, may indicate use of the echo-chambers. Such were the accounts related to the MK. Local specialists, especially Kyle Findlay from the think-tank Murmur Intelligence, noted the possibility of artificial amplification of some of the accounts and the use of service of “paid influencers” to disseminate disinformation.

A very effective channel of disinformation was the account called Prof Moya.⁶⁵ It published and republished most of the mentioned disinformation narratives. On election day, it posted messages in which terms like “stop the count” emerged. The account appeared at the beginning of 2023, with clearly anti-migrant, anti-ANC, pro-Trump and pro-Russia messages but, initially, to little reach. With around 20 thousand followers, it is far behind the biggest South African X accounts, and yet it amassed high reach with the key disinformation posts. Its post of the rigged elections in the Western Cape gathered over 1.5 million views, and another about the CIA plan of starting war in KwaZulu-Natal gained almost 200 thousand views.

The most common techniques and methods of disinformation

The DISARM Framework was used to analyse the most popular disinformation techniques and methods.⁶⁵ The disinformation infested and capitalised on some of the main lines of polarisation in the society and leveraged existing narratives (T0003). One: the idea that South Africa is not an effectively managed country. The popular sentiment of things getting worse (e.g. economy, safety) and the ruling party being corrupt and clinging to power at all costs has been employed into the narrative of the election rigging. Two: the idea that different ethnic groups in South Africa have different, conflicting agendas, and the white population remains privileged. This was used to add to the narratives the thought that the white population would try to defend its supposed interests via illegal and shady means. Three: the sentiment that migration and migrants are a negative force in South Africa was used to push the narrative of vote stealing by non-South Africans who were supposed to vote to distort the election result.

⁶⁵ Prof Moya, @MoyaProf, <https://x.com/MoyaProf>

⁶⁵ In brackets is the original numbering of tactics or techniques from the DISARM Framework, <https://disarmframework.herokuapp.com>.

It also amplified existing conspiracy theories (T0022.001) or, partially, created new ones (T0022.002). One: that the collective West, especially the US and its intelligence agency, interferes in the internal politics of South Africa. Two: that "Zionism" or Israeli influence has a similar role, at least in the Western Cape. Three: that there is a secret agenda of South Africa's richest families, especially the Oppenheims and Ruperts. This was used to strengthen the narratives, and offer specific culprits, creating a false sense of logic (a particular group is responsible for this or that because it is in their interest).

There were a number of smaller narratives within the wider "rigged election" narrative that seem to have been developed as new ones (T0082). The stolen ballots, the involvement of IEC, the particular tactics of pointing at preparations of the supposedly stolen votes or even the idea that after elections there were warehouses full of the uncounted votes were new.

The concept that load-shedding and lack of electricity would be used for distorting the result of elections, as well as the late-night clues to some electoral commissions on the election day, were typical examples of disinformation appearing as a response to the current crisis and were breaking news (T0068).

Some of the above-mentioned were also often competing narratives (T0004) that created the sense of a different, massive information flow (T0019) that - in effect - strengthened and created synergy around the main narratives. e.g. some narratives were for the benefit of the EFF (the votes were supposed to be stolen from them), others were against it (the EFF used migrants to steal votes), but the bottom line was that the disinformation about vote stealing was coming from all sides.

Content creation consisted of:

- fake documents (like the CIA letter to Helen Zille) (T0085.002)
- inauthentic news articles (like the changed “The African Perspective” article that, in the fake version, claimed there was a plan to start war in KwaZulu-Natal) (T0085.003)
- distorting facts (e.g. showing the state's anti-disinformation actions as an attempt to ensure the victory of the ruling party, posting content showing preparations at voting stations with interpretations that it was a preparation for forging results, etc.) (T0023)
- using factual material with disinformation as a comment (a photo of IEC officials with a comment that it comes from a meeting with American intelligence)
- re-using existing content (some of the conspiracy narratives) (T0084)
- and others

Troll accounts were almost certainly used to multiply disinformation (T0049.001), and the legitimacy was further established by the fact that leaders of the EFF and MK, and the smaller parties, even some of their official accounts (T0100, T0100.001), pushed the disinformation narratives (especially election rigging). The engagement of official accounts needs to be stressed, as it gave credibility and a mainstream voice to those narratives.

Interestingly, the severity of the content seemed to reflect the level of content moderation of a given platform. X saw more straightforward and aggressive disinformation than TikTok or Facebook, where it was often milder.

The accounts around the MK were extremely effective in creating echo chambers (T102.002) - reaching amounts of views of accounts with a similar number of followers rarely achieved. Local specialists raised the issue of possible artificial amplification of some of the accounts and the use of the service of “paid influencers” - high-reach accounts that offer their services, like attacking a particular party, to the highest bidder.⁶⁶ Sharing was incentivised through appealing to the receivers' responsibility: the content “needed” reposting so everyone would “know the truth”.

⁶⁶ Linda Van Tilburg. “Zuma's MK Party Used Gupta-Era Tactics in South Africa Election Disinformation Campaign”, National Security News, access 15.09.2024, <https://nationalsecuritynews.com/2024/07/zumas-mk-party-used-gupta-bots-for-disinformation-in-southafricas-elections/>; Tabela Timse, Kyle Findlay and Aldu Cornelissen, “Influence-for-hire trend is distorting public discourse, poses threat to foundations of democracy”, Daily Maverick, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-05-26-influence-for-hire-distort-public-discourse-threatens-democracy/>

Clickbait (T0016) was a widespread practice of microtargeting, and the 2024 general election saw a wave of content that was very effectively crafted in that regard. There was also localised content (T0101), especially for KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, as well as content targeted at smaller geographic areas (e.g. mentioning particular communities where voting irregularities were supposed to happen).

The disinformation managed to seep into traditional media (T0114.002), especially the web page IOL,⁶⁸ which is a mainstream news portal reaching millions of South Africans.

Some of the mentioned tactics, especially in Kwa-Zulu Natal, mirrored those from 2021, when unrest started after the arrest of Jacob Zuma.⁶⁹

Lastly, as a side note, political killings should be mentioned. South Africa saw a number of assassinations ahead of the elections. These seemed in line with the general safety issues in the country and the activity of organised crime groups often aggressively active in local politics, but the possibility of the involvement of disinformation agents in some of these cannot be excluded.⁷⁰

The potential engagement of external actors

The most probable external engagement came from Russia, as it was identified mapped a few months before the election,⁷¹ and South Africa already had its wave of disinformation related to the #IStandWith-Putin Ukraine-invasion-related campaign, vastly supported by MK and EFF politicians.

Three of the main parties: ANC, EFF and MK, have shown interests aligning with Russia and the BRICS block in general; therefore, Russian influence tactics had some nuance to it, and the differences are important to understand the disinformation agenda.

68 Rebecca Davis, "Disinformation nation — a concerted campaign to destabilise SA post elections", *Daily Maverick*, access 15.09.2024,

69 Muhammad Hussain, "MK Party's disinformation campaign echoes July 2021 unrest tactics", *News24*, access 2024, <https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/in-depth-mk-partys-disinformation-campaign-echoes-july-2021-unrest-tactics-20240604>

70 Katharine Houreld, "Political killings rock South Africa as it heads into elections", *The Washington Post*, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/05/27/south-africa-election-anc-killings/>

71 "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, access 15.09.2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

First, the ANC has been financed by Russia in the past⁷² and showed some support for Moscow.⁷⁴ That should be seen as a political (and partially ideological) calculation of a non-homogeneous political front that sees benefits in challenging Western dominance with the help of Russia (and BRICS). Alternatively, the benefit may come from balancing the world powers and leveraging South Africa's negotiating position (getting more from the West), also by showing a readiness to challenge the collective West.

Second, the EFF clearly showed open support for Russia and Putin, as it is close to their anti-imperialist agenda, while the USSR's history in Africa is in line with the party's far-left ideology.⁷⁵ It is clearly an openly pro-Russian and pro-Putin party. If the MK did not exist, the EFF would be Russia's main choice of support.

Finally, the MK was, allegedly, created with the help of the GRU.⁷⁶ This claim remains contested, but the MK saw the strongest direct support related to disinformation. This, and the fact that some of the disinformation related to it contained openly anti-Western sentiments, suggests that Russian operations centred around the MK, especially against the DA. The anti-Israel and anti-Western narratives, especially in the CIA-related part, could come from China as well. There has been no proof of China's disinformation interference in the 2024 general election, but its previous activities with the use of bots and campaigns targeted at South Africa and the region have been described.⁷⁷

In a relatively favourable environment where Russian disinformation already thrives, Moscow could focus on destabilising the country and on attacking the DA (the DA shows clearly pro-Ukrainian positions, and its leader went for a fact-finding mission to the country in the spring of 2022). The goal was: getting the MK (alternatively the EFF, or both) into the ruling coalition; second: weaken the ANC enough so that the party leaders would have to be more flexible to rely on foreign support.

72 Kate Bartlett, "South Africa's ANC Received Big Donation from Russian Oligarch-Linked Firm", Voice of America, access: 15.09.2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/south-africa-s-anc-received-big-donation-from-russian-oligarch-linked-firm-/6994504.html>; The Economist, "How a Russia-linked mine may keep the ANC in power", access: 15.09.2024, <https://www.economist.com/middleeast-and-africa/2024/05/16/how-a-russia-linked-mine-may-keep-the-anc-in-power>

74 Queenin Masubi, "Fikile Mbalula heads to Moscow for forum on combating Western 'neocolonialism'", Daily Maverick, access: 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-02-14-fikile-mbalula-heads-to-moscow-for-forum-on-combating-western-neocolonialism/>

75 Emmanuel Wanjala, "I would arm Russia since its fighting imperialism – Malema", The Star, access: 15.09.2024, <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2023-05-24-i-would-arm-russia-since-its-fighting-imperialism-malema/>

76 Andre Pienaar, "Jacob Zuma, the MK Party, and the Kremlin's GRU", National Security News, access: 15.09.2024, <https://nationalsecuritynews.com/2024/02/jacob-zuma-the-mk-party-and-the-kremlins-gru/>

77 Erika Kinetz, "Army of fake fans boosts China's messaging on Twitter", AP News, access: 15.09.2024, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-china-europe-middle-east-government-and-politics-62b13895aa6665ae4d887dcc8d196dfc>; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa", access: 15.09.2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/#Data>

Election-rigging related narratives, proven to be pushed by Russia in other countries, also suggest external interference. Usually, political fighting in South Africa focuses on issues related to ethnic tensions, land and capital ownership, immigration and economic disparities. These issues existed with similar, if not more, force in 2024. All main parties were strongly polarised, and a possible change in the constitution appeared in the discourse. The choice of the election-fraud narrative partially misdiagnoses the South African society. It focused on the past violent results of the country's vivid political engagement without taking into consideration that the same engagement results in the high penetration of society by people with political experience on different levels. In effect, the narrative tried to incite the same group that had a good general understanding of the election process. The groups more susceptible to this narrative, on the other hand, may have not possessed sufficient self-organisation abilities.

The measures introduced to counteract disinformation

Before the 2024 general election, the South African government recognised the risk of disinformation and ran campaigns to counter it.

For few years now, South Africans possess tools to counter and flag disinformation, including ones recommended by the government.⁷⁹ The South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), in cooperation with Media Monitoring Africa, created a unique service, Real411, where users can submit suspected misinformation or disinformation and get it fact checked.⁸⁰ The IEC also regularly countered disinformation and published information related to it, as well as information related to media freedom and independence, on its social media channels. On the election day, IEC officials responded to multiple questions on disinformation narratives and were well-prepared to debunk any claims appearing.

79 "Disinformation resources for elections", South African Government, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.gov.za/news/disinformation-resources-elections>

80 Real411, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.real411.org/complaints?page=1>

It is especially the Real411 service that deserves to be mentioned. It provides piece-by-piece analysis of each disinformation post or claim, also working as a proof archive. It allows easy analysis of particular trends in different times during elections on various platforms (i.e. helping with pinning the moment when Julius Malema started to support the rigged elections narrative in his speeches or how the US interference narrative gained momentum around coalition talks).

A number of think tanks and companies, like Murmur Intelligence, Institute for Security Studies for Africa and Media Monitoring Africa, have been reporting on different disinformation campaigns consistently for a long time, and many of their conclusions are echoed in this analysis. During the election, they regularly described mechanisms of spreading disinformation, flagged the accounts responsible and provided insights into tactics of dissemination. After the elections, they provided reports describing trends and discourses around the disinformation in the elections. This also happened in the past, which probably positively affected the efforts to counter disinformation around the 2024 election, and these documents will help in designing future measures.

Main media outlets, like Daily Maverick or News24, published regularly on the topic of disinformation and influence campaigns, as well as think tanks. Daily Maverick published in-depth investigations on disinformation campaigns and stories on how to fact check doubtful claims, helping the public brace for the surge in this.⁸¹

The IEC actively sought partnership on disinformation combating efforts with social media platforms a year before the elections.⁸⁴ Meta launched an Elections Operations Center dedicated to South Africa,⁸⁵ and this may be the reason why Facebook has seen a relatively low spread of disinformation. Similar measures were undertaken by TikTok and Google.⁸⁶

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- 81 Rebecca Davis, "Disinformation nation — a concerted campaign to destabilise SA post elections", Daily Maverick, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-06-02-disinformation-nation-a-concerted-campaign-to-destabilise-sa-post-elections/>, William Bird and Thandi Smith, "Real411 is ready to process your complaints about election misinformation and disinformation", Daily Maverick, access 15.05.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-05-05-2024-electionstackling-misinformation-disinformation/>, Karen Allen, "SA's 2024 elections must be strongly prepared for flurry of online influence and disinformation", Daily Maverick, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-03-18-sas-2024-elections-must-be-strongly-prepared-for-flurry-of-online-influence-and-disinformation/>
- 84 "IEC partners with social media giants", South African Government News Agency, access 15.09.2024, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/iec-partners-social-media-giants>
- 85 Fatimah Quadri, "Meta takes action against misinformation ahead of South Africa elections", FactCheckHub, access 15.09.2024, <https://factcheckhub.com/meta-takes-action-against-misinformation-ahead-of-south-africa-elections/>
- 86 "TikTok Reinforces Commitment to Platform Integrity with Key Initiatives Ahead of South Africa Elections", TikTok Newsroom, access 15.09.2024, <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/en-africa/zaelections>, Abongile Mashele, "How Google is Supporting Election Integrity in South Africa", Google Africa Blog, access 15.09.2024, <https://blog.google/intl/en-africa/company-news/how-google-is-supporting-election-integrity-in-south-africa/>

There were no significant measures of countering disinformation from X or WhatsApp. WhatsApp did not offer significant measures due to the encryption of messages and the structure of the service, and at the time, the South African X did not offer the community a service that would allow users to counter false information from the bottom up.

Conclusions

Disinformation during elections was omnipresent and - at least to some extent - reached most of the voters and provoked direct actions by media, the state and the non-governmental sector.

Clearly, most of the disinformation effort focused on the MK and were to the benefit of that party. It was a typical disinformation approach not unique for South Africa but not tailored well to resonate with South Africans. Nevertheless, the disinformation stirred chaos right before, during and after the elections. Some disinformation narratives remain in the South African public sphere.

The main goals of disinformation were not achieved, as the MK is not in the government, the ANC formed a coalition with the liberal and pro-Western DA, and the country remained peaceful before, during and after the 2024 general election. The chaos never turned into large-scale violence, which was mostly due to effective measures from state, non-state actors and the media, as well as the leading role of the IEC in creating synergy for these efforts.

Russia has a very strongly presence with its influence in South Africa, and considering the election result, the intensity of this presence may remain high.

Election Disinformation in Taiwan's 2024 Election

Author: Joanna Nawrotkiewicz

Political landscape

Since the island's democratisation in 1996, Taiwan's semi-presidential, multi-party system has been dominated by two political forces: the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). These parties differ significantly in their views on Taipei's identity and its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The KMT, which ruled Mainland China before 1949 and led Taiwan during its authoritarian era, has traditionally emphasised its connection to Chinese heritage. While the KMT once supported the idea of reunification with China, generational shifts within the party have altered its stance. Today, the KMT no longer actively pursues reunification but continues to advocate for peaceful engagement and dialogue with the PRC to maintain stability across the Taiwan Strait. This pragmatic approach is aimed at reducing tensions without directly challenging Beijing's claims.

In contrast, the DPP, which emerged in the late 1980s in opposition to KMT's authoritarian rule, promotes a distinct Taiwanese identity and seeks to preserve Taipei's sovereignty, but also without direct confrontation with China.¹ The DPP's rise to power in 2016 signalled a growing identity shift on the island.¹

The recent rise of the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), founded in 2019, adds complexity to this landscape. The TPP offers a pragmatic alternative to both the KMT and DPP, focusing less on cross-strait relations and more on domestic issues such as governance and economic development. The TPP's rising popularity, especially among younger voters, reflects growing frustration with the traditional focus on Beijing in Taiwanese politics.²

1 Allison Meakem, "Taiwan's Biggest Parties Diverge on China," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/02/01/2024/taiwan-elections-president-dpp-kmt-china/>, "NCCU-Taiwanese / Chinese Identity," Election Study Center, July 8, 2024, <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>.

2 Lillian Ellis, "Youth TPP Support Explained: A Shift from China to Domestic Economic Concerns," *Global Taiwan Institute*, August 6, 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/08/2024/youth-tpp-support-explained/>.

In 2024, Lai Ching-te secured a historic third presidential term for the DPP, with Hsiao Bi-khim, former representative to the US, as the vice president. Despite this win, the DPP failed to secure a parliamentary majority, leading to a likely need for cooperation with the TPP to govern effectively.³

Disinformation landscape in the country

In 2024, the V-Dem Institute ranked Taiwan as the top global target for foreign disinformation campaigns for the eleventh consecutive year.⁴ Taipei's unique geopolitical position makes it a primary cognitive warfare target from the PRC. China actively seeks to undermine the island's democracy and reshape its political landscape to align with Beijing's interests. These efforts have been ongoing at least since Taiwan's democratic transition in 1996 and have become so ingrained in society that they are often dismissed as "background noise", despite having serious implications for the island's political stability and democratic processes.⁵ Taipei is also frequently seen as a testing ground for Chinese disinformation tactics that are later applied in other countries.⁶

China's influence operations have evolved significantly over time. Initially, Beijing focused on shaping public opinion by promoting a positive image of the Chinese government. This included pushing pro-unification narratives, portraying Taiwanese citizens as "compatriots", and highlighting a shared national identity between Taiwan and China.⁷ However, after the DPP won the 2016 elections and adopted a more assertive stance on Taipei's sovereignty, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) approach became more aggressive. In 2019, Taiwan's National Security Bureau reported that the PRC had begun using cognitive warfare techniques similar to those employed by Russia during the annexation of Crimea, aiming to confuse and manipulate public perception.⁸

3 Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan's 2024 Elections: Everyone's a Winner—and a Loser," *Brookings*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/taiwans-2024-elections-everyones-a-winner-and-a-loser/>.

4 Yang Mien-chieh and William Hetherington, "Taiwan Most Affected by Disinformation," *Taipei Times*, 25 March, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/25/03/2024/2003815440>.

5 Edward J. Bass, *Chinese Election Interference in Taiwan* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 2.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Kendrick Chan and Mariah Thornton, "China's Changing Disinformation and Propaganda Targeting Taiwan," *The Diplomat*, 19 September, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/09/2022/chinas-changing-disinformation-and-propaganda-targeting-taiwan/>.

8 Li Yanmou, "Eluosi bingtun Kelimiya fanban guo'an ju jie Zhonggong caokong wanglu shuijun gong tai si da shoufa" [Copying the Russia's annexation of Crimea. The National Security Bureau reveals the four major methods used by the CCP to control the Internet forces to attack Taiwan], *Yahoo Xinwen*, 2 May, 2019, <https://ynews.page.link/63xZ>.

Currently, the CCP is developing increasingly sophisticated online tactics to disrupt Taipei's political environment. These campaigns are becoming more attuned to Taiwan's local context, shifting away from direct cross-strait issues and focusing on exploiting internal partisan and generational divides. The CCP's disinformation strategy blends elements of truth with falsehoods and spreads them rapidly, making verification a time-consuming and challenging task.⁹ Disinformation campaigns tend to spike around elections, increasing by up to 40%.¹⁰

As the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections approached, the most prevalent disinformation narratives included scandals involving DPP politicians, criticisms of government inefficiency, undermining trust in the US stoking fears of war, and accusations of vote or media fraud. Further analysis of these disinformation tactics is provided in the sections below.

Main narratives related to the election

Personal attacks on politicians

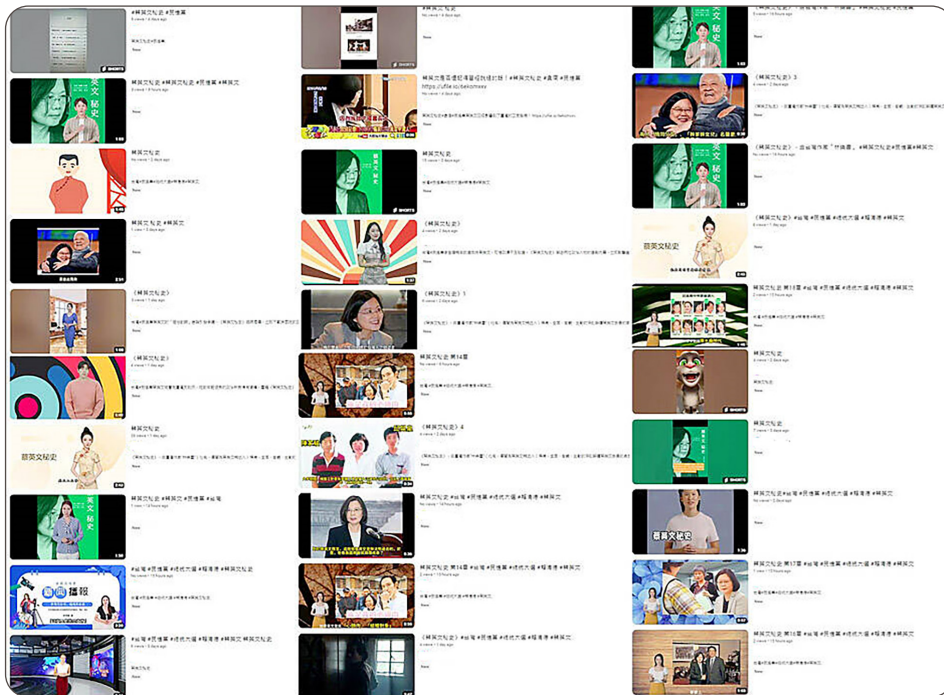
A central disinformation strategy leading up to the 2024 elections involved fabricating controversial stories about key DPP politicians. The timing of these campaigns was coordinated to intensify in the days leading up to the election, maximising their potential impact.

One of the recurring themes was a narrative about an alleged "sex culture" within the DPP. A significant example was the spread of a 300-page e-book titled Secret History of Tsai Ing-wen, which falsely claimed that then-President Tsai had engaged in sexual relationships to advance her political career. This e-book later served as a script for AI-generated news-like videos. Using pornographic deepfakes, AI was also used against DPP male politicians Luo Chi-cheng and Hung Sun-han.¹¹

9 Taiwan AI Labs, "2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report," 31 January, 2024, <https://ailabs.tw/wp-content/uploads/31/01/2024-Taiwan-Presidential-Election-Information-Manipulation-AI-Observation-Report-2.pdf>.

10 Angela Köckritz, "In a Savvy Disinformation Offensive, China Takes Aim at Taiwan Election," MERICS, 14 December, 2023, <https://merics.org/en/report/savvy-disinformation-offensive-china-takes-aim-taiwan-election>.

11 He Zhixin, "Luo Zhizheng shuai juan xing'ai yingpian 7 nian qian ceng yu zhuli shang mo tie" [Luo Zhizheng was involved in a porn video where he had sex with his assistant 7 years ago], Yahoo Xinwen, 3 January, 2024, <https://ynews.page.link/fQ9iv>; Zhang Lina, "You you yisi huaqian xingjiaoyi zaojia yingpian wailiu! Hong Shenhan ji fa shengming: Pian zhong nanzi bi wo shou tai duo" [Another most likely fake video of paying for sex leaked! Hong Shenhan issued an urgent statement: The man in the video is much thinner than me], Yahoo Xinwen, 8 January, 2024, <https://ynews.page.link/cwAzz>.



Screenshots of AI-generated videos spreading the “Secret History of Tsai Ing-wen” narrative massively uploaded on YouTube.

Source: Tsai Yung-yao and Jonathan Chin, “China Is Posting Fake Videos of President: Sources”, *Taipei Times*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/11/01/2024/2003811930>.

As the election week approached, other older rumours re-emerged, such as the false claim that Lai Ching-te, the then-vice president and presidential candidate, had an illegitimate child. This narrative, which originally surfaced in 2015, followed a pattern of other similar accusations—such as in 2020, when the same false claims were made about Tsai Ing-wen, former president Lee Teng-hui, and Han Kuo-yu, the current president of the Legislative Yuan.¹²

There were also other kinds of rumours aimed at discrediting the candidates; Lai was falsely accused of fraud, and deepfake videos were created showing both Lai and Tsai promoting cryptocurrency.¹³ Additionally, an old claim resurfaced alleging that Hsiao Bi-khim still held US citizenship, challenging her eligibility for office.¹⁴

12 IORG, “Zhen de jia de! 2024 Xuan qian LINE yaoyan paihang bang” [Real or Fake! 2024 pre-election LINE rumor rankings], 12 January, 2024, <https://iorg.tw/en/da/66>.

13 Ibid; Zhong Guangzheng, “Zhongshi baodao Lai Qingde mai jiami huobi? Diaocha bumen: Zhongguo jia xunxi ganrao daxuan” [“China Television” reports that Lai Ching-te sells cryptocurrency? Investigation Department: China’s disinformation interfered with the election], *Radio Free Asia*, 27 November, 2023, <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/htm/tw-information-11272023045816.html>.

14 Zhai Sijia, “Lan zhui Xiao Meiqin guoji zhengyi. Luwei: Cong wei fangqi Zhonghua Minguo jii” [Li Dawei accuses Hsiao Bi-khim of nationality controversy; Green Party legislator: she has never given up on Republic of China nationality], *CNA*, 5 December, 2023, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202312050097.aspx>.

The primary goal of these disinformation campaigns was to erode public trust in DPP politicians and weaken their chances in the election. This disinformation gained significant traction due to the involvement of networks like the Chinese fake account operation known as “Spamouflage” or “Dragonbridge”. Two of the most popular cases included “The Secret History...” and Lai’s illegitimate child narratives. “The Secret History...” appeared in over 2,000 posts on X and at least 490 videos on YouTube, with the e-book being downloaded more than 27,000 times.¹⁵ The rumour about Lai’s illegitimate child was mentioned nearly 20,000 times across various social media platforms, with a peak of 13,000 mentions just one day before the election, coinciding with the publication of an article in “China Times”, a Taiwan-based newspaper known to have connections with the CCP’s Taiwan Affairs Office.¹⁶

Government inefficiency

Disinformation campaigns in Taiwan have also targeted the government’s perceived inefficiencies. These false narratives blend domestic and international issues, strategically undermining the DPP and portraying the government as corrupt and incompetent. In 2023, one of them led to Agriculture Minister Chen Chi-chung’s resignation.

Among the most sensitive issues manipulated by these campaigns is food safety. Longstanding anxieties surrounding US pork imports laced with ractopamine—a controversial feed additive—were once again reignited through disinformation in the 2024 pre-elections period. Although a 2021 referendum rejected reintroducing a ban on the product, false narratives alleging unsafe pork and mislabelling of US imports as Taiwanese resurfaced, portraying the government as negligent in protecting public health.¹⁷ These claims were amplified by troll groups, which used fake accounts to stoke anti-government sentiment and attack DPP politicians. They operated in Facebook groups such as “I Approve the Recall of the MP Who Supports Pork Imports with Ractopamine” with 3,400 members.¹⁸

15 Doublethink Lab, “Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan’s 2024 National Elections,” Medium, 14 August, 2024, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/artificial-multiverse-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-in-taiwans-2024-national-f3e22ac95fe7>; Albert Zhang, “As Taiwan Voted, Beijing Spammed AI Avatars, Faked Paternity Tests and ‘Leaked’ Documents,” The Strategist, 18 January, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/as-taiwan-voted-beijing-spammed-ai-avatars-faked-paternity-tests-and-leaked-fake-documents/>.

16 Zhang, “As Taiwan Voted, Beijing Spammed AI Avatars, Faked Paternity Tests and ‘Leaked’ Documents.”

17 Li Wei-Ping, “Where Has the Pork Gone? The Disinformation Narratives Targeting Food Safety During the 2024 Taiwanese Presidential Election,” Taiwan Factcheck Center, 11 December, 2023, <https://ffc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/9972>.

18 Taiwan AI Labs, “2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report.”

Immigration policies also became a target for disinformation. A rumour falsely claimed the government accepted 100,000 Indian migrant workers and linked it to rising crime, playing on xenophobic fears of sexual assault and theft.¹⁹ These narratives were propagated across Twitter and supported by at least 39 troll accounts, stirring public unease and exploiting racist stereotypes.²⁰ The disinformation campaign also advocated for cooperation with mainland China as a “solution”, framing it as a way to avoid these fabricated threats.



Suspicious accounts posting comments under an Radio Free Asia X post suggesting that collaborating with mainland China is a better solution than bringing in Indian workers.

Source: Radio Free Asia (@RFA_Chinese), "【印台深化关系 激怒中国?】台湾和印度正进行 #劳工转移 谈判。若该协议最终达成,台湾可以雇用多达十万名印度劳工,缓解 #台湾劳动力不足问题。目前,中印和中台都处于紧张关系状态,该协议有可能激怒北京""["India and Taiwan deepen relations and anger China?" Taiwan and India are engaged in #labor transfer negotiations. If the agreement is finally reached, Taiwan can hire up to 100,000 Indian workers to alleviate #Taiwan's labour shortage problem. With relations currently tense between China, India, and Taiwan, the deal risks angering Beijing.], X, 12 November 2023, https://x.com/RFA_Chinese/status/1723487554731725274

19 IORG, "10 Wan Yindu yi gong rang Taiwan biancheng xing qin dao ke panding wei zixun cao nong" ["100,000 Indian migrant workers turned Taiwan into a sexual assault island" can be judged as information manipulation], 24 November, 2023, <https://iorg.tw/en/eval/21>.

20 Ibid.

International disinformation narratives further complicated the situation. One claimed Tsai Ing-wen had announced a \$200 million aid package to Israel, while another alleged that Taipei was secretly supplying rockets to the country.²¹ These falsified reports were made more convincing by using screenshots mimicking legitimate news outlets such as the Washington Post and Radio France Internationale.²² Pro-China media outlets, particularly through platforms like Douyin, TikTok, and YouTube, helped amplify these fabricated stories, linking Taiwan's government to controversial decisions.

Suspicious of the US and Cross-Strait War Probability

As efforts to improve cross-strait relations and the image of the PRC faltered, disinformation creators shifted their focus to portraying the island as a pawn in US-China geopolitics. These concerns became more prominent leading up to Taiwan's 2024 elections.

Between 2021 and 2023, IORG identified 84 US-sceptic narratives circulating on social media.²³ By 2024, the stories intensified, emphasising fears of conscription, Taipei's military inadequacies, and uncertainty about US commitment in a conflict with China.²⁴ The disinformation was tied to broader ambition as portrayal of the US as unreliable ally, connecting to issues such as the Ukraine war, or misplaced economic policies.²⁵ US scepticism became a leading topic on LINE, with 10,826 posts fact-checked.²⁶ Additionally, Taiwan AI Labs found that 25% of disinformation content promoted an imminent Chinese military threat, while 14.3% accused the US of manipulating Taiwan into confrontation with Beijing.²⁷

21 Taiwan FactCheck Center, "Cuowu - wang chuan zongtong fu guanwang jietu Taiwan tigong yise lie 2 yi meiyuan junshi yuanzhu?" [Error - a screenshot of the official website of the Presidential Palace was circulated online claiming Taiwan provides Israel with US\$200 million in military aid?], 26 October, 2023, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/9824>.

22 Ibid.

23 Yu Chihhao, *US Skepticism Narratives and Where They Come From*, IORG, 8 August, 2023, <https://iorg.tw/en/a/us-skepticism-238>.

24 Hallie Stern, "Deep Fakes and Disinformation in Taiwan," Blackbird.AI, 17 September, 2024, <https://blackbird.ai/blog/deep-fakes-and-disinformation-in-taiwan/>.

25 Ho-Chun Herbert Chang, Austin Horng-En Wang, and Yu Sunny Fang, "US-skepticism and transnational conspiracy in the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*, 20 May, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-144>.

26 Ibid.

27 Chen-Ling Hung et al., "AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan's Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election" (Thomson Foundation, 13 January, 2024), https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/media/268943/ai_disinformation_attacks_taiwan.pdf.

A Taiwanese official warned that these disinformation efforts might serve as a “false flag” to justify future Chinese military action, pointing to incident of false claims of Taiwan developing bioweapons in 2023, which coincided with increased PRC army exercises.²⁸ Major political actions viewed as anti-China were also met with large-scale military drills, such as after the DPP's electoral victories.²⁹

After the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian war in October 2023, malicious actors seized the opportunity to manipulate Taiwanese audiences by presenting the horrors of war, using selective narratives about battlefield scenes and civilian casualties. These stories were crafted to provoke fear and foster a desire to avoid conflict, positioning unification with China as the path to peace. The narrative framed the choice starkly: “war” (associated with continued Taiwanese independence) versus “peace” (linked to positive relations or unification with the mainland). Similarly, the KMT adopted campaign slogans like “vote for the DPP, and young people will go to the battlefield”, echoing the CPP propaganda that equated Taipei's independence with the military conflict, thereby furthering the aims of the disinformation campaign.³⁰ These slogans gained significant traction, with the message of young people going to war being 16 times more popular than narratives promoting peace.³¹

28 Eric Cheung, “Taiwan Faces a Flood of Disinformation From China Ahead of Crucial Election. Here's How It's Fighting Back,” CNN, 16 December, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/15/12/2023/asia/taiwan-election-disinformation-china-technology-intl-hnk/index.html>.

29 Kelly Ng and Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, “China Holds Military Drills Around Taiwan as ‘strong Punishment,’” BBC, 23 May, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqv29gqpn1o>.

30 Li Wei-Ping, “Inciting Anxiety About the Looming War - the Disinformation Narratives About the Possible Taiwan Strait Crisis During the 2024 Taiwanese Presidential Election,” Taiwan FactCheck Center, 27 November 2023, <https://ffc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/9931>.

31 Ibid.



A Facebook post uses a misleading video, unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to suggest that unification with China is the way to avoid the war's dire consequences

Source: Li Wei-Ping, "When foreign disinformation comes to town – How disinformation about the Israel-Hamas war has evolved in Taiwan," Taiwan FactCheck Center, 30 October 2023, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/9832>.

Vote rigging

The vote-rigging disinformation campaign seeks to undermine trust in the electoral process, mainly targeting the Central Election Commission (CEC) and democratic institutions. In this regard, nearly half of the manipulated content analysed by the Taiwan FactCheck Center recycled false claims from past elections, indicating the persistence of these tactics.³⁴ Common allegations include ballot box stuffing, vote-counting machine tampering, and invisible ink manipulation.³⁵ False claims also suggested that overseas Taiwanese faced additional voting requirements, and one extreme rumour alleged US forces were remotely controlling Taiwan's election data to benefit the DPP.³⁶

The effects of disinformation are difficult to measure; however, trust in the US fell from 45% in 2021 to 34% in 2024, with scepticism particularly high among younger Taiwanese.³² Still, support for unification with China remained low at 11.8%, while nearly half of the population supported the island's independence.³³ This suggests that while a significant portion of Taiwanese people continue to favour their independence, growing distrust in the US as a reliable ally complicates the island's security outlook in the face of increasing Chinese threats.

32 Tessa Wong, "Taiwan Election: China Sows Doubt About US With Disinformation," BBC, 8 January, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67891869>.

33 Chung Li-hua and Jonathan Chin, "Poll Shows 48.9% Support Independence," Taipei Times, 4 September, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/02/09/2023/2003805648>.

34 <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10316>

35 Doublethink Lab, "Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan's 2024 National Elections"; Li Wei-Ping, Ho Wai-An, Pouxì 2024 nian Taiwan zongtong daxuan xuanju zuo piao bu shixunxi [Analysis of false information on voting in the 2024 Taiwan presidential election], Taiwan Factcheck Center, 20 February, 2024, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10316>.

36 Doublethink Lab, "Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan's 2024 National Elections"; Li Wei-Ping, Ho Wai-An, Pouxì 2024 nian Taiwan zongtong daxuan xuanju zuo piao bu shixunxi [Analysis of false information on voting in the 2024 Taiwan presidential election].

Both YouTube and TikTok played key roles in disseminating these claims. YouTube had at least 429 videos on vote-rigging, combined with over 1.56 million views, while at least 489 TikTok videos on this topic garnered over 1.66 million views.³⁷ The videos, for example, showed selectively edited footage of election workers to suggest “errors” in the system. However, while YouTube videos featured a mix of opinions, only accusations of fraud dominated on TikTok.³⁸ TikTok influencers, who usually focused on fashion or beauty content, before polling day posted videos with nearly identical scripts and materials.³⁹ Channels created shortly before elections and posting only such content contributed significantly, too.⁴⁰

This narrative was also spread by other players outside of these platforms. For example, Alisasa, who has 1.25 million YouTube subscribers (@alisasa_official) and 583,000 Instagram followers (@goodalicia) on

elections day posted an Instagram story with unverified content that falsely accused election officials of misconduct.⁴¹ Another case include the TPP press conference, when shortly after the elections, the party politicians shared already debunked videos of vote miscounting, using these false claims to call for stricter adherence to voting regulations.⁴²

The Central Election Commission responded to the disinformation by reporting 25 cases of individuals to law enforcement for spreading false rumours about vote-rigging.⁴³ Many of the misleading TikTok and YouTube videos have since been deleted⁴⁴.



A Facebook post sharing a YouTube video about alleged vote rigging, posted in the ‘Election Reform’ group, which has 7.3 thousand members.

Source: Fei Linyun, “有綠的可以解釋一下嗎?” [Is there a DPP voter willing to explain this?], Facebook, 17 January 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1352250512068563/posts/1354385915188356/>.

37 IORG, More “Rigged Election” Rumor Videos on TikTok than YouTube 7 Days Before and After Taiwan Election Day, 23 January, 2024, iorg.tw/da/67.

38 Ibidem.

39 Doublethink Lab, “Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan’s 2024 National Elections”

40 IORG, More “Rigged Election” Rumor Videos on TikTok than YouTube 7 Days Before and After Taiwan Election Day.

41 Chen-Ling Hung et al., “AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan’s Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election”

42 David Klepper and Huizhong Wu, “How Taiwan Beat Back Disinformation and Preserved the Integrity of Its Election,” AP News, 29 January, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-election-china-disinformation-vote-fraud-4968ef08fd13821e359b8e195b12919c>.

43 Zheng Honda, “Aili shasha shele zaoyao zuo piao ai gao? 25 An yi yisong jian diao! Zhong xuan hui qin jie weihe bu keneng you weifa zuo piao” [Is Alisasa sued for spreading rumors about making votes? 25 cases have been reported! The Central Election Commission explain why there is no possibility of illegal voting], Business

44 IORG, More “Rigged Election” Rumor Videos on TikTok than YouTube 7 Days Before and After Taiwan Election Day; Taiwan AI Labs, “2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report”.

Corrupted media

During the 2024 elections, Taiwan's traditional media were also targeted by portraying them as being controlled or censored by political authorities, particularly the government. This narrative suggested that important events, such as protests or negative news about the DPP, were deliberately concealed. The objective was to erode trust in Taiwan's media and democratic institutions, pushing citizens toward alternative, and often less reliable, sources of information. This strategy fostered division and distrust, potentially influencing voting behaviour.

For example, a December 2023 Facebook post falsely alleged that Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC) ordered TV stations to suppress coverage of a protest outside a Lai Ching-te's office.⁴⁵ In reality, the NCC does not have the authority to impose such restrictions on media coverage, and, additionally, various outlets reported on the protest.⁴⁶



A Facebook post sharing a YouTube video about concealing firemen protests and discouraging voting for Lai Ching-te.

Source: Taiwan FactCheck Center, "Cuowu - wang chuan xiaofang yuan chongzhuang Lai Qingde zongbu, NCC guiding dianshi bu bo?" [Wrong - There is a rumour on the Internet that Firefighters crashed into Lai Ching-te's headquarters, but NCC stipulated that the TV should not broadcast it?], 28 December 2024, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10040>

⁴⁵ Taiwan Factcheck Center, "Cuowu - wang chuan xiaofang yuan chongzhuang Lai Qingde zongbu, NCC guiding dianshi bu bo?" [Wrong - There is a rumour on the Internet that Firefighters crashed into Lai Ching-te's headquarters, but NCC stipulated that the TV should not broadcast it?], December 28, 2024, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10040>; Li Wei-Ping, "The events the Taiwanese media did not let you know" — The disinformation alleging "censorship" in Taiwanese media during the 2024 Taiwanese presidential election, Taiwan Factcheck Center, January 8, 2024, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10125>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Disinformation often urged people to “uncover the truth”, as seen in articles about the Israel-Hamas conflict with eye-catching titles like, “The truth Taiwanese don’t know—see what Israel and the US have done”. Pro-China content spread through platforms like YouTube, where channels positioned themselves as the exclusive source of “truth”, while some outlets promoted themselves with slogans like “Click for the truth”.⁴⁷

Taiwan is particularly vulnerable to such disinformation. In 2024, only 33% of Taiwanese trusted the news most of the time—up 5% from the previous year but still the second lowest in the Asia-Pacific region.⁴⁸ Most of Taiwanese use YouTube (46%), Line (41%), and Facebook (39%) for the news, which often manipulate the information through oversimplification or generalisation.⁴⁹

Main channels of spreading disinformation related to the election

Disinformation related to Taiwan's election has been widespread. According to Doublethink Lab, 496 distinct channels were identified, with social media accounting for 78% of disinformation content.⁵⁰ Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok, and LINE—some of the island's most popular platforms—were the primary avenues for spreading misleading narratives.

With its 17 million users, Facebook, and similarly, X, with 4.5 million users, played a central role in disseminating false information.⁵¹ At least two Chinese large-scale troll networks like Spamouflage operated on both of these platforms, flooding the space with disinformation through newly created fake accounts (made believable by AI-generated avatars and content) or stolen account credentials.⁵² For example, a Taiwan AI Labs analysis revealed that 30.62% of the troll activity targeted

47 Hallie Stern, “Deep Fakes and Disinformation in Taiwan.”; <https://thetruthjournal.org/>

48 Jono Thomson, “Survey Finds 33% of Taiwanese Trust the News,” 4 July, 2024, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5898359>.

49 Jono Thomson, “Survey Finds 33% of Taiwanese Trust the News”; IORG, “2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo” [2023 Overall Research Results], 19 January, 2024, <https://iorg.tw/en/tr/2023>.

50 Doublethink Lab, “Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan's 2024 National Elections”.

51 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2024: Taiwan,” DataReportal, 23 February, 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-taiwan>.

52 Albert Zhang, “As Taiwan Voted, Beijing Spammed AI Avatars, Faked Paternity Tests and ‘Leaked’ Documents.”

Tsai Ing-wen, and Lai Ching-te's page received 9.50% of its attention.⁵³ On X, Spamouflage also boosted narratives like "The Secret History of Tsai Ing-wen". Despite Meta's Q3 2023 report highlighting X accounts involved in coordinated Chinese disinformation, only one of seven of them was suspended.⁵⁴

YouTube, Taiwan's most popular platform with 19 million users, was another major disinformation hub.⁵⁵ Taiwanese users spend an average of two hours daily on YouTube, making it fertile ground for AI-generated videos pushing false narratives.⁵⁶ Except for the official CCP channels present on the platform, content farm channels promoting CCP propaganda were also rampant, often featuring repetitive thumbnails and titles, suggesting automated production processes.⁵⁷ In addition to new accounts, some of the existing YouTube channels—like those focusing on finance, science, and lifestyle—joined the disinformation efforts. Channels such as Teacher Li Yongle (@TchLiyongle), normally dedicated to scientific knowledge, shared politically charged disinformation about Japan's nuclear waste, which garnered 305,000 views before being deleted.⁵⁸ There are also Taiwanese accounts posting political content that inadvertently contribute to spreading disinformation, such as BitKing (@bitking888) or Jason Lee on Taiwan (@jasonleetaiwan).⁵⁹

TikTok, with over 5.5 million users in Taiwan, played a crucial role as well.⁶⁰ Interestingly, older users were just as active as younger ones, and KMT supporters were more likely to use the platform than the general public.⁶¹ This user base also tended to show greater favourability toward China and a higher susceptibility to manipulated narratives, highlighting how TikTok and its Chinese counterpart Douyin shaped political identity and influenced voters.⁶²

53 Taiwan AI Labs, "2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report."

54 Taiwan AI Labs, "2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report"; Albert Zhang, "As Taiwan Voted, Beijing Spammed AI Avatars, Faked Paternity Tests and 'Leaked' Documents."

55 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Taiwan," DataReportal, 23 February, 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-taiwan>.

56 IORG, "2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo" [2023 Overall Research Results].

57 IORG, "Fudao he feishuipai fang qianhou huayu zixun huanjing guancha" [Chinese Information Environmental Observation Before and After Fukushima Nuclear Wastewater Discharge], 25 October, 2023, <https://iorg.tw/da/51>.

58 Ibid.

59 IORG, "2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo" [2023 Overall Research Results].

60 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2024: Taiwan," DataReportal, 23 February, 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-taiwan>.

61 IORG, "2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo" [2023 Overall Research Results]

62 Ibid.

LINE, Taipei's leading messaging app with over 12 million users, also played a pivotal role in the disinformation landscape.⁶³ However, LINE's closed messaging system made it difficult for fact-checkers to track and counter the spread of false information in real-time, allowing rumours to gain traction in private chats.

Beyond social media, websites and forums contributed to hosting disinformation. Platforms like Zenodo and ufile.io were used to distribute documents containing false information, which were later shared on social media. Low-profile news sites also published fake news articles that mimicked legitimate sources. These disinformation ecosystems blurred the lines between fact and fiction for voters.

The most common techniques and methods of disinformation

Disinformation in Taiwan's election landscape is becoming more sophisticated, blending traditional and advanced tactics to sway public opinion. A Doublethink Lab analysis of 24 incidents during the pre-election period in 2024 revealed 127 different methods employed to manipulate public perception.⁶⁴ Key strategies include leveraging existing narratives or conspiracy theories (T0003, T0022), which are tailored to reinforce pre-existing biases and fears among different segments of society. These tactics often downplay Taiwan's institutional strengths and exploit existing societal vulnerabilities like fears over food safety, housing, or security (T0083). By capitalising on concerns already present in society, these campaigns magnify their impact.⁶⁵

Disinformation campaigns operate on both long-term strategic timelines and reactive, event-driven tactics. Some narratives are seeded well in advance of elections to manipulate public opinion over time, while others evolve rapidly in response to current events. For instance, the issue of Japan's nuclear waste disposal was manipulated in real-time to stoke public fears and anxiety (T0068). On the other hand, recurring issues like national security and sovereignty are consistently rein-

⁶³ "LINE Pay: Why It's Popular in Taiwan, How It Became the Most Popular Payment Service in the Taiwanese Market, and the Company's Challenges in Going Public," LY Corporation, 4 July, 2024, <https://www.lycorp.co.jp/en/story/04072024/linepaytw.html>.

⁶⁴ Doublethink Lab, "Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan's 2024 National Elections".

⁶⁵ Jude Blanchette et al., "Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation. Lessons From Taiwan," January 2021, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210127_Blanchette_Age_Disinformation.pdf.

roduced, ensuring that public attention remains focused on narratives favourable to foreign actors. By continuously adapting to the news cycle, disinformation agents can sustain a controlled flow of misleading information and keep the public engaged with manipulated content.⁶⁶

Social media platforms, as described above, play a central role in the spread of disinformation, with malicious actors creating or hijacking accounts and fan pages (T0104.001, T0007, T0011). These accounts often embed themselves within existing or new 1) politically aligned echo chambers (T0092.003); 2) local community groups (T0101), focused on local current affairs; 3) special interest groups that discuss niche topics; and 4) audiovisual entertainment groups.⁶⁷ On those, disinformation is amplified by coordinated likes, shares, and hashtags (T0015).⁶⁸ These trolls flood the information space (T0049), commenting early on media content to manipulate platform algorithms (T0121) and guide the narrative by repeating key talking points. Troll groups' activities are higher by up to 25 times more than regular users.⁶⁹ Between January 2023 and 2024, PRC-affiliated troll accounts were responsible for over 731,000 posts, primarily during typical working hours in Beijing.⁷⁰

A common technique involves posting disinformation on one platform and then spreading it across others to maximise reach. For instance, false accusations against DPP politician Chao Tien-lin were first posted by fake fan pages and later amplified using memes and Apple's Memoji avatar app and voice-modifier tools (T0086.001, T0087). The same method was used in a fabricated video targeting Cheng Wen-tsan, which was later spread by PRC state media, Chinese app Weibo influencers, and anonymous accounts across multiple platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and the PTT forum (T0092, T0105.002, T0106). This tactic ensures disinformation seamlessly spreads across different media ecosystems, making it difficult to contain.

One of the most dangerous trends is the use of AI-generated content, particularly deepfakes (T0086.002), which convincingly mimicked real political figures like Lai Ching-te, Tsai Ing-wen, US House Representative Rob Wittman, or even Xi Jinping.⁷¹ AI tools such as ByteDance's CapCut

66 Chen-Ling Hung et al., "AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan's Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election".

67 Doublethink Lab, "Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan's 2024 National Elections".

68 Ibid.

69 Taiwan AI Labs, "2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report"

70 Ibid.

71 Li Wei-Ping, "Seeing Is Not Believing—deepfakes and Cheap Fakes Spread During the 2024 Presidential Election in Taiwan," Taiwan FactCheck Center, 25 December, 2023, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10025>; Li Wei-Ping, "Seeing is not believing (part II) - AI videos spread during the 2024 presidential election in Taiwan," Taiwan FactCheck Center, 19 February, 2024, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/10309>

are also being used to create virtual anchors that read from synthesised scripts, spreading disinformation more easily (T0085.001, T0087). For instance, 3.5% of the top 200 videos retweeted on Facebook were suspected to have been generated using text-to-speech (T0085.001), underscoring the growing role of AI in shaping public perception.⁷²

Despite the rise of sophisticated AI-driven content, cheap fakes (T0087.003) remain common.⁷³ These low-effort tactics, like photo-shopped images, fabricated documents, and misleading videos, continue to distort public opinion.⁷⁴ For example, a misleading video re-circulating false claims of election fraud had a significant impact, despite being created with simple editing techniques. Cheap fakes are especially effective at reinforcing existing doubts and fears, giving disinformation an air of legitimacy.

Real political figures also become agents of disinformation, sometimes unknowingly. The most prominent case involved narrative about Lai Ching-te's illegitimate child, which were circulated by the KMT figures (T0010).⁷⁵ Similarly, KMT politicians shared on Facebook a false claim that the White House had plans to “destroy Taiwan” (T0010), further fuelling disinformation narratives (T0010).⁷⁶

The potential engagement of external actors

Disinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan use advanced methods to hide their origins, making them hard to trace or counter. However, the content of these campaigns aligns closely with China's strategic goals, and strongly suggest possible state involvement. For instance, a Taiwan AI Labs analysis found a 42.6% overlap between narratives promoted by malicious actors and official Chinese media between September and December 2023.⁷⁷

⁷² Chen-Ling Hung et al., “AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan's Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election”.

⁷³ Li Wei-Ping, “Seeing Is Not Believing—deepfakes and Cheap Fakes Spread During the 2024 Presidential Election in Taiwan.”

⁷⁴ “Disinformation: Building Digital Resilience,” United States Institute of Peace, 12 January, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/01/2024/disinformation-building-digital-resilience>.

⁷⁵ Chen-Ling Hung et al., “AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan's Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election”.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Chen-Ling Hung et al., “AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan's Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election”.

Researchers often link these campaigns to Chinese authorities through IP analysis of disinformation-spreading accounts.⁷⁸ Doublethink Lab traced 23% of the observed data back to the PRC, involving the CCP officials, PRC organisations, and both central and local media, including Hong Kong outlets.⁷⁹ The Spamouflage troll accounts network, which has confirmed ties to Chinese law enforcement, Chinese MFA, and the United Front, was also involved in disseminating disinformation.⁸⁰ Alongside state actors, nationalist groups like the “little pinks” and the Diba troll group likewise reinforced the CCP’s narrative.⁸¹

The language used in disinformation also offers clues about its origins. Disinformation targeting Taiwan often blends traditional and simplified Chinese characters, a mix uncommon among native Taiwanese speakers, who primarily use traditional characters.⁸² Word choices also reveal regional differences. For example, Chinese would use the word “bao’an” (保安) for “security” while Taiwanese prefer “baoquan” (保全).⁸³

A clear trend in 2024 disinformation campaigns, also aligning with the PRC’s views, is anti- DPP. In the five weeks leading up to the election, Lai Ching-te was the most mentioned figure on the CCP-controlled media platforms and popular social media outlets like Facebook, YouTube, Weibo, and Douyin.⁸⁴ Articles in the CCP media outlets referenced the DPP more frequently than the KMT and the TPP.⁸⁵ TikTok content favoured the KMT and TPP while attacking the DPP and Lai.⁸⁶ However, attacks on the KMT and TPP were also present, suggesting that the PRC’s broader goal was to weaken Taiwanese democracy and diminish trust in politicians overall.⁸⁷

78 Eric Cheung, “Taiwan Faces a Flood of Disinformation From China Ahead of Crucial Election. Here’s How It’s Fighting Back,” CNN, 16 December, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/15/12/2023/asia/taiwan-election-disinformation-china-technology-intl-hnk/index.html>.

79 Doublethink Lab, “Artificial Multiverse: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Taiwan’s 2024 National Elections”.

80 Albert Zhang, “As Taiwan Voted, Beijing Spammed AI Avatars, Faked Paternity Tests and ‘Leaked’ Documents.”

81 Jude Blanchette et al., “Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation. Lessons From Taiwan.”

82 Nick Monako, Melanie Smith, and Amy Studdart, “Detecting Digital Fingerprints: Tracing Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan,” August 2020, https://legacy.iff.org/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/ourwork/Detecting_Digital_Fingerprints_-_Tracing_Chinese_Disinformation_in_Taiwan.pdf.

83 Ibid.

84 IORG, “2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo” [2023 Overall Research Results].

85 Ibid.

86 Chen-Ling Hung et al., “AI Disinformation Attacks and Taiwan’s Responses During the 2024 Presidential Election”.

87 Ibid.

Comparison with other elections which took place in the same year

Before the 2024 national elections, Taiwan's most recent significant elections were the 2022 local elections for regional offices. Comparing the disinformation tactics between these elections and the 2024 national elections reveals both consistency and evolution. Despite differences in scope—local versus national elections—they shared common disinformation themes: claims of vote tampering, defence-related rumours, scepticism toward the US, attacks on individual politicians, and general distrust of the media.⁸⁸

One of the consistencies across both elections is the involvement of state-controlled propaganda, nationalist online groups, and disinformation farms. Familiar tactics persist, such as amplifying conspiracy theories, creating fake accounts on mainstream platforms, and targeting echo chambers to spread falsehoods. However, these strategies have grown more sophisticated, reflecting the increasing complexity of disinformation campaigns.

A significant change in 2024 is the rise in AI-generated content. This includes virtual news anchors, AI-generated voices in video compilations, and deepfakes. The rapid advancement of AI technology, combined with its low cost and efficiency, has made video-based disinformation easier to produce and distribute. As a result, video disinformation became much more prominent in the 2024 election than in previous years.

The Taiwan Information Environment Research Center also observed a trend toward the decentralisation of Chinese propaganda in the 2024 elections. In 2022, CCP state media primarily initiated or supported information manipulation campaigns.⁸⁹ However, in 2024, the CCP shifted to amplifying narratives from Taiwanese opinion leaders that aligned with its propaganda rather than directly starting the campaigns. This method, which involves using local voices to "criticise Taiwan with Taiwan", allows China to strengthen its own narratives while distancing itself from the content's traceability.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Taiwan Factcheck Center, "Elections-Triggered Disinformation on the Rise as Elections Near," 4 October, 2022, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/8244>; "Li Wei-Ping, [TFC Disinfo Detector] a Brief Review of Disinformation Spread During Elections in Taiwan, 2020-2022 (Part I)," Taiwan Factcheck Center, 13 November, 2023, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/9763>.

⁸⁹ Yang Kuang-Shun, "What Lessons Can Taiwan Share With the World on Election Interference?," Brookings, 11 June, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-lessons-can-taiwan-share-with-the-world-on-election-interference/>.

⁹⁰ IORG, "2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo" [2023 Overall Research Results].

The measures introduced to counteract disinformation

Taiwan has created a sophisticated system to counter disinformation and foreign interference in elections, combining specialised units, legal reforms, technology, media literacy, and collaboration with civil society.

The government created various specialised entities, such as Big Data and Public Opinion Task Force and Cognitive Warfare Research Centre under the Ministry of Justice, which consolidate expertise from various areas to quickly counter disinformation.⁹¹ Every government ministry has also set up teams to respond swiftly to disinformation, crafting counter-narratives to minimise harm.⁹² This approach is a part of unique “humour over rumour” approach. Government “meme warfare” teams respond to false narratives with humorous and concise content, usually within 60 minutes.⁹³ These efforts have been particularly effective, often outpacing the spread of disinformation. Facebook has noted that government corrections frequently reach more users than the original false content.⁹⁴

Over the years, the government has also enacted series of legal measures, including public media accountability, criminalising online misinformation, imposing penalties for deepfakes, and banning foreign political donations and disinformation.⁹⁵ Taipei has also banned Chinese apps such as TikTok and Douyin on government devices, citing national security risks.⁹⁶ Other steps include banning Chinese media platforms like iQIYI and Tencent Video from the general market, though concerns remain about their effectiveness, as disinformation can still spread via YouTube and Twitch.

91 Chien Li-chung and Jason Pan, “Research Center Set up to Combat Cognitive Warfare,” *Taipei Times*, 18 January, 2024, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/19/01/2024/2003812310>.

92 Linda Zhang, “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan,” *Army University Press*, September–October 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Zhang-Disinformation-Campaign/>.

93 Blair Maddock-Ferrie, “Learning From Taiwan to Tap Into NATO’s Largest Arsenal: The Meme Vanguard,” *Medium*, 16 April, 2022, <https://medium.com/centre-for-international-and-defence-policy/learning-from-taiwan-to-tap-into-natos-largest-arsenal-the-meme-vanguard-3f654fd0d1ec>; Jude Blanchette et al., “Protecting Democracy in an Age of Disinformation. Lessons From Taiwan.”

94 Aaron Huang, “Chinese Disinformation Is Ascendant. Taiwan Shows How We Can Defeat It.,” *Washington Post*, 10 August, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/10/08/2020/chinese-disinformation-is-ascendant-taiwan-shows-how-we-can-defeat-it/>.

95 Linda Zhang, “How to Counter China’s Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan.”

96 Keoni Everington, “Taiwan Bans TikTok From Public Sector Devices,” *Taiwan News*, 6 December, 2022, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/4741706>.

However, not all measures have been successful. The Digital Intermediary Services Act, inspired by the European Union's Digital Services Act, aimed to regulate online platforms, but its implementation was suspended due to public concerns over potential overly censorship.⁹⁷ A broader ban on Chinese apps, like TikTok, also remains unpassed, despite them being a crucial disinformation dissemination channel.

Audrey Tang, the first Minister of Digital Affairs of Taiwan (2022-2024), has supported media literacy as a key tool for combating disinformation. In 2023, Taiwan's Ministry of Education released the Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper, emphasising the importance of media literacy for all age groups.⁹⁸ The paper focuses on educating the public about cyber safety, identifying misinformation, and understanding short-form videos, with special attention on teenagers. Taiwanese schools included media literacy curriculums, while public campaigns aim to improve the broader population's ability to recognise and respond to false information.⁹⁹

Collaboration between the government and civil society is central to the island's disinformation strategy. The Disinformation Coordination Team consists of both government and civil society representatives, overseeing the identification and countering of disinformation across platforms.¹⁰⁰ Common initiatives such as Cofacts, a fact-checking platform launched in 2017, allow users to verify claims and crowdsource responses within popular messaging apps.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also play a critical role. Organisations like the Taiwan FactCheck Center, MyGoPen, Doublethink Lab, Fake News Cleaner and many more actively debunk false information. Fake News Cleaner, in particular, focuses on educating older citizens, who are often more vulnerable to misinformation, by hosting outreach events in temples, churches, and parks.¹⁰¹ In 2024, Taiwan's fact-checking community launched the "Election Rumor Playbook" to address election-related reoccurring disinformation. This playbook was a proactive effort to prevent false information from gaining traction during elections.

97 Yu-fan Lei, "Digital Transformation: Taming the Digital Realm: Global Content Moderation Practices," Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 8 October, 2023, <https://www.freiheit.org/taiwan/taming-digital-realm-global-content-moderation-practices>.

98 William Hunt, "Media Literacy Education: Taiwan's Key to Combating Disinformation," Global Taiwan Institute, March 5, 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/03/media-literacy-education-taiwans-key-to-combating-disinformation/>.

99 Linda Zhang, "How to Counter China's Disinformation Campaign in Taiwan."

100 Shih-Shiuan Kao, "Taiwan's Response to Disinformation: A Model for Coordination to Counter a Complicated Threat" (The National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2023), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr93_taiwan_sep2021.pdf.

101 Huizhong Wu, Mario Ritter Jr. and Caty Weaver, "In Taiwan, Civic Group Combats False News With Patience," Voice of America, April 7, 2024, <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/in-taiwan-civic-group-combats-false-news-with-patience/7552311.html>.

The private sector has also joined the fight against disinformation. A notable example is the Auntie Meiyu app, developed in collaboration with the messaging platform LINE. The app, once installed, automatically scans and verifies information in chats, helping to prevent the spread of false information within social groups. With over 300,000 users, the app has become a significant tool in Taiwan's disinformation battle.¹⁰²

Conclusions

The 2024 Taiwanese elections were targeted by an organised disinformation campaign, originating primarily from the PRC. Chinese efforts were highly strategic, exploiting societal fears and fostering doubts about the integrity of politicians, the government, cross-strait relations, the electoral process, and the reliability of the media. By employing both traditional and increasingly sophisticated methods, such as AI-generated content, deepfakes, and the rapid dissemination of disinformation on popular social media platforms, these campaigns effectively spread falsehoods.

Despite the significant challenges posed by these disinformation campaigns, Taiwan's government and civil society have proven largely resilient through innovative countermeasures. These include real-time fact-checking, humour-based counternarratives, and efforts to enhance media literacy among the public. However, growing distrust in traditional media and democratic institutions remains a concern, especially given the PRC's long-term goals of undermining societal trust, deepening social divisions, and creating informational chaos.

Further actions are necessary. Given the high susceptibility of TikTok users to disinformation—research shows that users of this platform are more likely to believe pro-China narratives—Taipei should consider proactive measures to limit TikTok's influence.¹⁰³ This could include stricter

102 "Auntie Meiyu, Your Trusted Fact-checking Confidant," n.d., <https://www.checkcheck.me/en/>; David Klepper and Huizhong Wu, "How Taiwan Beat Back Disinformation and Preserved the Integrity of Its Election," AP News, January 29, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-election-china-disinformation-vote-fraud-4968ef08fd13821e359b8e195b12919c>.

103 IORG, "2023 Zongti yanjiu chengguo" [2023 Overall Research Results].

regulations concerning its role in spreading disinformation and possibly limiting or banning the application altogether. Additionally, collaboration with other social media platforms to improve content moderation and accountability is essential to curb the spread of disinformation.

The tactics observed in Taiwan are often adapted for use in other democracies facing similar threats. Therefore, the international community should closely monitor the island's evolving information landscape and apply the lessons learned to safeguard democratic processes globally. By doing so, democracies can develop comprehensive strategies to counteract disinformation and protect the integrity of elections worldwide.

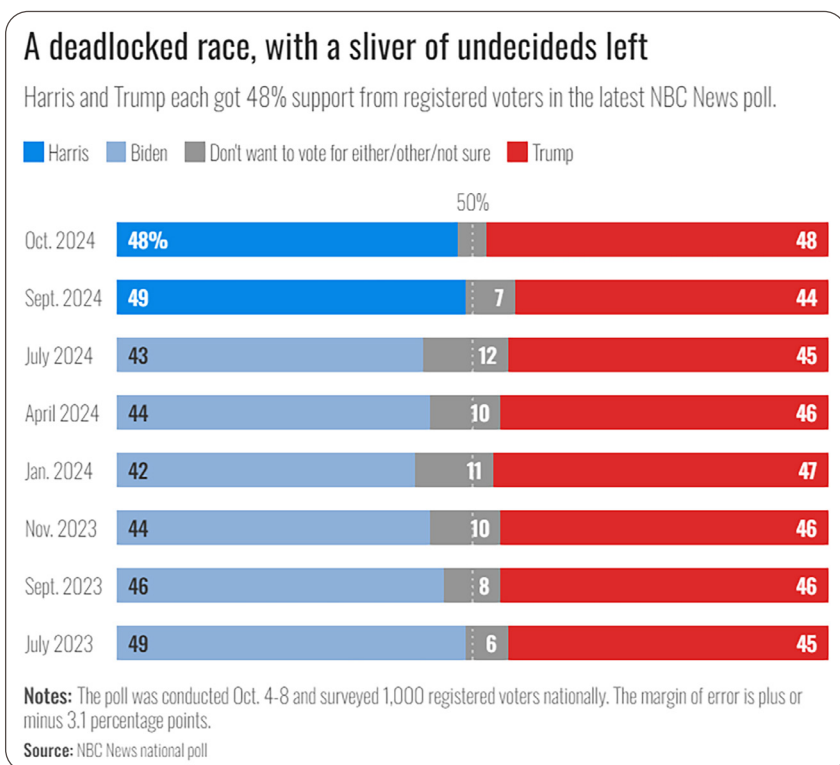
Pre-election Disinformation in the USA

Author: Kamil Mikulski

Political landscape

The US is a parliamentary republic with a dominating position of the president. Historically, it developed a two-party system, where Democrats rival the Republicans over legislative and executive powers. The nearest presidential elections will take place on 5th November 2024, and the leading candidates are Kamala Harris (for Democrats) and Donald Trump (for Republicans).

Harris is vice-President in the administration of the current president Joe Biden, while Trump was a US president in years 2017-2021 and is now running for re-election. Following the recent publication by NBC News, US voters are undecided, almost equally split between both of the candidates.¹



¹ Murray, Mark. "“Dead heat”: Trump pulls even with Harris in NBC News poll." NBC News. Last Modified 15.10.2024. Accessed 15.10.2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/dead-heat-trump-pulls-even-harris-nbc-news-poll-rcna174201>.

There is a similar division in the American Congress. In the House of Representatives, Republicans have majority (220 vs 212), but in the Senate, Democrats (sided with 4 independent Senators) have the advantage over Republicans (51 vs 49). Both sides of US society appear to be almost evenly divided, inspiring the voters of either of the parties to mobilise against their competitors. The US political landscape is particularly open for grassroots citizen engagement, both on the ground and online. The campaign penetrates traditional and social media and uses both internal and international politics to advance the cause of either of candidates.

It is also characteristic that various media and celebrities openly support candidates of their choice, adding up to the democratic struggles. As the subjects invested in the presidential campaign do not always resort to playing fair, the intersections between domestic and foreign actors sometimes become blurred. There is no doubt though that apart from the US citizens, there are also foreign actors interested in putting forward the candidate that best aligns with the foreign policy of their country. This study explores the caveats of disinformation surrounding the US elections, the actors involved (both domestic and foreign) and the techniques they employ.

Disinformation landscape in USA

USA is one of the countries where monitoring and countering of election-linked disinformation was engrained into its institutional foundations² on both state and local levels. After the country saw attempts to influence its presidential elections in 2016³, the US began a campaign for election integrity and bolstered its capability to address this growing threat. In 2019, the US Department of Justice published the so-called Mueller's report, providing an extensive investigation into the Russian attempts to manipulate US voters⁴.

² Ohlin, Jens David. "A roadmap for fighting election interference." (2021): 69-73.

³ Ohlin, Jens David. "Did Russian cyber interference in the 2016 election violate international law." *Tex. L. Rev.* 95 (2016): 1579.

⁴ Mueller, Robert S. 2019. *Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election*. edited by US Department of Justice.

In the aftermath of the 2016 elections, US social media platforms began releasing large dataset comprising trolls, bots and examples of mis- and disinformation and shared its proprietary data with researchers and CSOs. This data became a cornerstone of contemporary understanding of information influence operations and triggered unprecedented cooperation between all three sectors.

The rise of generative AI and proliferation of social media platforms paired with encrypted channels changed the US disinformation landscape for the worse. Social media platforms and news outlets found themselves unable to police their users' involvement or to keep up with malicious actors armed with generated content and operating increasingly sophisticated botnets. Coordinated inauthentic behaviour enabled astroturfing and manipulation of the information space, and monetisation-focused algorithms further eroded the ecosystem. Even though these observations are true globally, it is in the US where major social media companies have their seats and where they develop their products.

At present, the US disinformation landscape depicts a polarised society operating in an information space polluted by fringe media. Disinformation is present on both sides of the political spectrum (reportedly disproportionately targeting communities of colour⁵), and foreign actors support either of the two candidates for the office of the US President in line with their foreign policy goals. Following the Microsoft Threat Analysis Centre's (MTAC) reports, Iran appears to support Harris over Trump⁶, while Russia backs Trump and China collects intelligence⁷.

In this difficult landscape, the US upholds a complex system of institutional and societal checks that attempt to limit the damage caused by malicious actors and to protect citizens' right to fair elections, free from foreign interference.

5 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/15/disinformation-about-us-elections-targets-communities-color>.

6 MTAC. 09.08.2024 Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. <https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf>.

7 Smith, Brad. "Securing US Elections from Nation-State Adversaries." MTAC. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/18/securing-us-elections-from-nation-state-adversaries/>.

Main narratives related to the election

In the context of US elections, the American information space is dominated by several meta-narratives, each of them comprising various, more granular, narratives. The five narratives outlined in the paragraph below were reconstructed from social media posts surrounding the topic of elections (the dataset)⁸.

- Presidential candidates enabling (or being supported by) **uncontrolled and illegal immigration**. This narrative is more frequently weaponised against Harris;
- **Equating the victory of either of candidates with end of American democracy** and the looming threat of dictatorship or authoritarian rule. This narrative more frequently targets Trump; however, there is a non-negligible number of voices accusing Harris of the intention to introduce a communist regime;
- **Accusation of fraudulent behaviours concerning the electoral process**, i.e. stealing or manipulating the election results. This narrative visibly targets both candidates and often materialises with accusations of Trump not honouring the election results or liberal forces "stealing" the elections;
- **Weaponisation of igniting and polarising social issues, in particular abortion**. This narrative is used to mobilise younger female voters (pro-Harris) and conservative/traditionalist constituencies (pro-Trump);
- **Threats of economic collapse and war in case of a candidate's victory**. Although this narrative resembles the narrative concerning American democracy, it goes significantly further and likely appeals to a different type of audience.

⁸ The initial dataset for the topic of elections was collected between 05 August and 07 October 2024 with the use of the Osavul threat intelligence tool and amassed approx. 116 k original posts.

Illegal immigration

The illegal immigration narrative emphasises antisocial behaviours perpetrated by so-called illegal migrants at the expense of US citizens. The main goal behind the narrative is to lay the blame on policy failure, to accuse its backers of the preference of illegal migrants over US citizens and law-abiding immigrants (emphasising lack of patriotism) and to associate a candidate with an unpopular social group. The overarching goal is to undermine popular support for a candidate by framing them (mostly anti-Harris) in siding with aliens rather than citizens.

This divisive narrative is readily played not only by Trump-supporting foreign actors but also by his domestic supporters and notable actors involved in its distribution, such as ImMeme0⁹ (574 k followers on X) and @TulsiGabbard¹⁰ (former congresswoman, 2.8 m followers on X).

Outside of domestic or accounts of indeterminate provenance, the narrative also caught the attention of foreign actors. According to the MTAC study, the narrative was perpetuated by Russian and Chinese accounts¹¹. Paradoxically, the illegal immigration narrative attracted less attention (75 posts and garnered 3.6 m views) than the remaining narratives (outlined below).

Tyranny and dictatorship

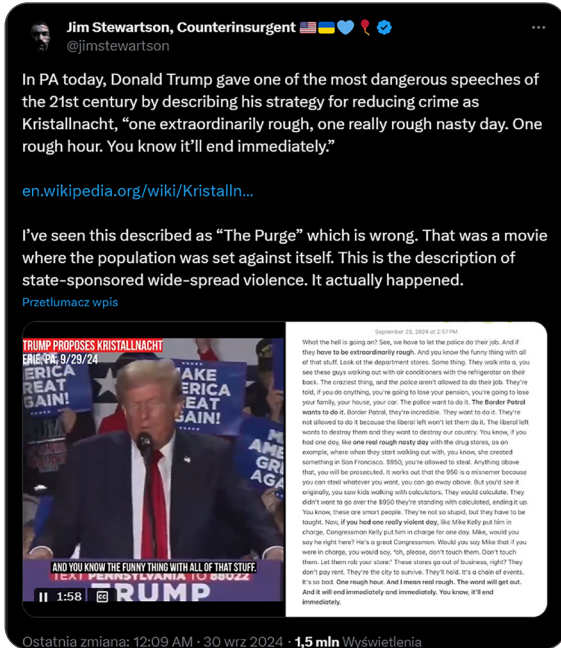
This narrative links the victory of either of the candidates with an inevitable descent into tyranny or a dictatorship. This narrative comprises several exemplary forms including the threat of political repressions (including imprisonment or physical violence), censorship and limitation (or abolishment) of civil liberties or dissolution of the rule of law. The accusations of looming tyranny are usually targeted at Trump, fuelled by his public utterances, such as the need for 'one really rough nasty day' to reduce crime levels in the US. Infrequently, the narrative also targets the Democrat candidate, accusing Harris of the intention of replacing American democracy with communism.

⁹ <https://archive.ph/pvsYD>

¹⁰ <https://archive.ph/IWKOD>

¹¹ More later in the document, in the subsection dedicated to foreign agents' involvement.

This narrative strives to instil fear that a potential loss in the presidential campaign will inevitably result in the end of American democracy. Fearmongers primarily speak to the segment of the audience interested in upholding the status quo. The rationale follows the logic according to which the change will be for the worse.



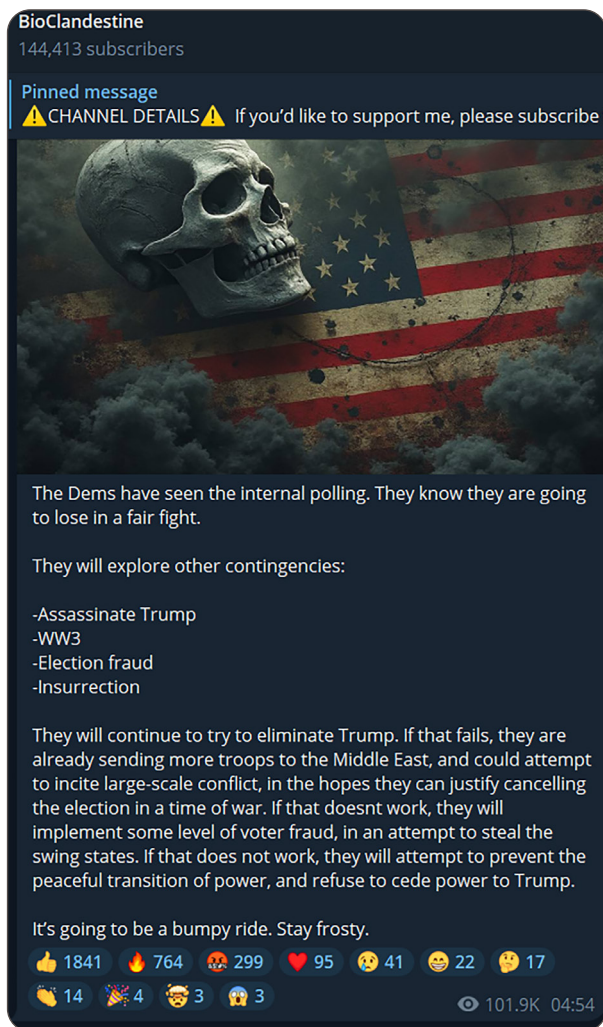
Source: <https://x.com/jimstewartson/status/1840514348340650133>



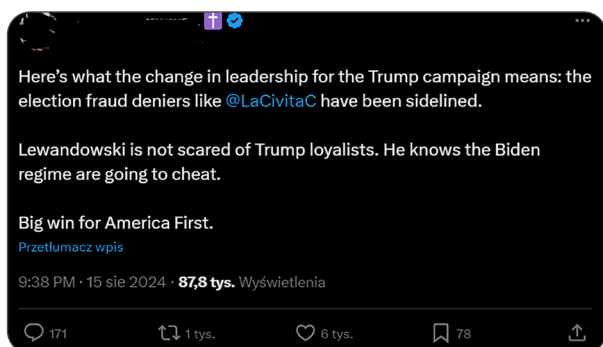
Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1836267345926558022>

The narrative equals the potential victory with repressions and politically-inspired violence. Some of the accounts expressing it directly call to stop the undesired candidate from winning and overtly call for violence. The consequences can be dire. The most relevant actors belong to the now defunct Tenet Media company¹².

12 <https://web.archive.org/web/20240906003928/https://www.tenetmedia.com/>



Source: <https://t.me/bioclandestine/3912>



Source: <https://x.com/UpinCT/status/1824301596173291546>

Electoral fraud

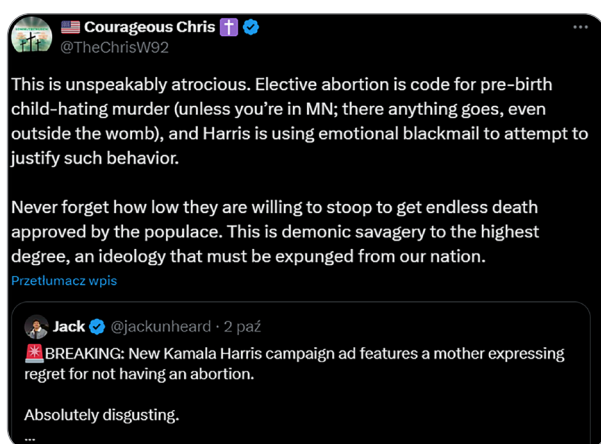
This narrative presents in two main exemplary forms. The first form accuses the other side of laying the groundwork for (or engaging in) meddling in the election process. The second asserts that the loser will refuse to recognise the election results and calls for vigilance and electoral scrutiny. Functionally, the latter sub-narrative resonates with the “approaching tyranny” narrative and sometimes presents in parallel.

The main goals of this narrative are to further polarise the American society. The narrative attempts to delegitimise the opposing candidate and their supporters, as well as to mobilise one's own constituencies. Both of these forms play into the hand of the candidate that the perpetrators are rooting for. A side effect of the electoral fraud narrative is undermining public trust in state institutions and the democratic processes, as they are depicted as intrinsically corrupt.

These actors comprise notable Telegram channels such as BioClandestine (114 k observers), Amir Tsarfati (587 k), Project Veritas (287 k), The General (125 k).

Abortion and other social issues

In the context of US presidential elections, domestic political forces resort to various divisive social issues to attack political opponents and to mobilise their own constituencies. One such issue is abortion, readily used by both sides of the political spectrum. The narrative manifests in two main versions. The first accuses Trump of intentions to further restrict access to abortion, in line with the expectations of the most radical segment of his constituency. The second is targeted at Harris and equals abortion with infanticide.



Source: <https://x.com/TheChrisW92/status/1841554288847245500>

The main goal differs depending on the political alignment. For traditionalist and conservative voters, it creates ammunition against 'pro-abortion' Harris. For supporters of Harris, it creates an instrument to win the votes of liberals and younger women (who could have supported more progressive candidates and might not show up for Harris at the ballots).

Similarly to other narratives, the abortion narrative polarises and delegitimises opponents, labelling them as 'women-haters' or 'baby-killers'. Pro-Harris forces appear to have the upper hand in the abortion narrative, forcing Trump and his supporters to become defensive and first try to tone down the significance of the topic of abortion in the rundown to elections and then to declare no wish to introduce a country-wide abortion ban.

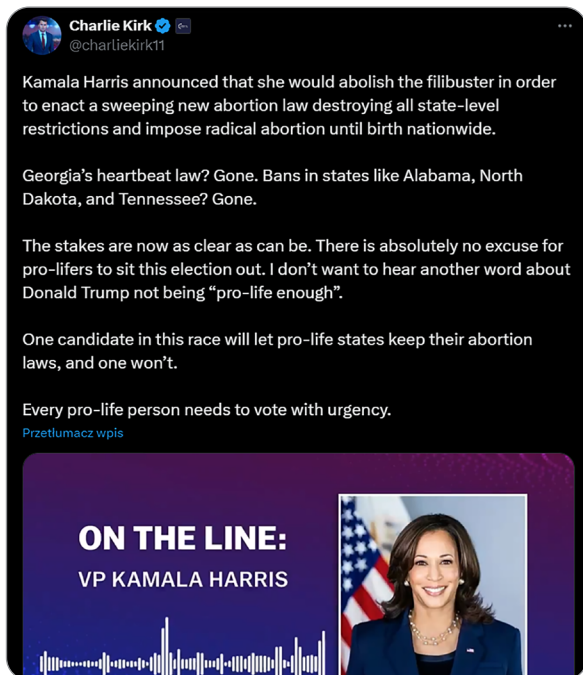
Examples of actors engaged in spreading this narrative encompass @DefiantlyFree¹³ (458 k observers), Charlie Kirk¹⁴ (173 k subscribers), ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter¹⁵ (198 k subscribers), @5dme81¹⁶ (66 k observers). In the dataset, this narrative accounted for 5,683 messages during the studied period.

13 <https://x.com/DefiantlyFree/status/1826007400249438654>

14 <https://t.me/CharlieKirk/16228>

15 <https://t.me/PepeMatter/20474>; Pepe is an Internet meme, sometimes used by the alternative right.

16 <https://x.com/5dme81/status/1822814001291489738>



Source: <https://x.com/charliekirk11/status/1838973633324310703>



Source: <https://x.com/5dme81/status/1822814001291489738>

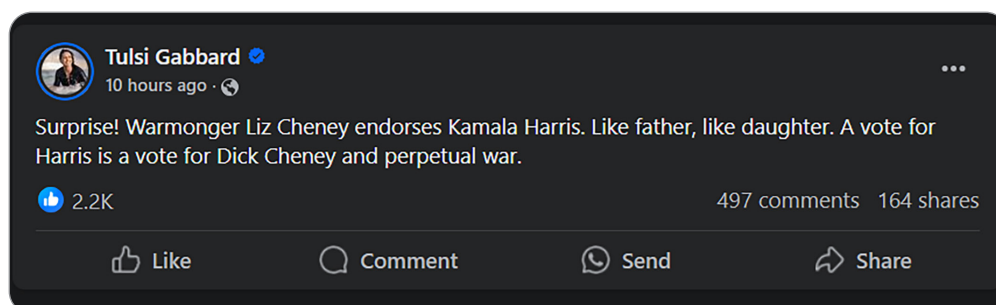
Fearful warmongering

This narrative is characterised by its manipulative character in the guise of pacifism and political responsibility. The 'fearful' warmongers do not appear to be wishing for war – in the typical sense of the term 'warmonger'. Instead, they present themselves as a peaceful and insightful and claim the intention to avert war. The narrative appeals to voters by falsely conditioning the outbreak of war (or even WWII) with the victory of a candidate. It can also manifest inversely, where the victory of that candidate will prevent this looming threat.

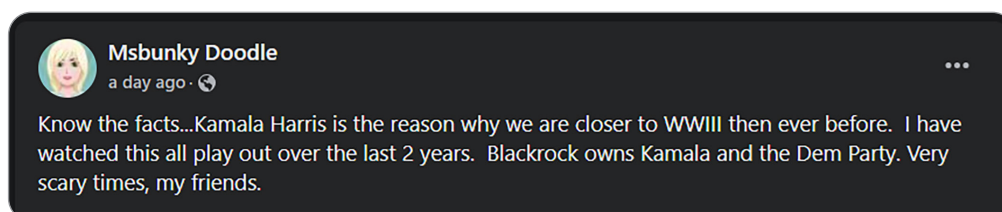
The main goal of this narrative is to manipulate its audience into supporting a 'pro-peace' candidate and to dissuade them from voting for a 'pro-war' candidate. Outside of this general ramification, the meaning of war depends on the exemplary form. In some instances, malign actors prophesise the outbreak of WWII, in others they blame the Biden-Harris administration for war in the Middle East and in Europe. Finally, some accounts accuse Trump of the will to abandon NATO and then drag the US into war without the support of its allies.

The main consequences of this narrative are suffered by pro-Harris forces, as she represents the continuity of Biden's foreign policy. As vice-President, she is viewed as institutionally responsible for US political failures and the worsening global security environment. Smaller in size, yet still observable, is the segment suspicious towards Trump, especially in the light of his promises to resolve the issue of the Russian invasion on Ukraine.

This narrative has been permeated by 581 separate actors, of which about 30 have been previously associated with influence operations working on behalf of a third state or marked as inauthentic.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/TulsiGabbard/posts/pfbid0325uP8nNehEN6apuAkXPgqpwNdntLAjjiN8y71AMV2rs2GAAk1GftwykuC9fSy2zkoI>

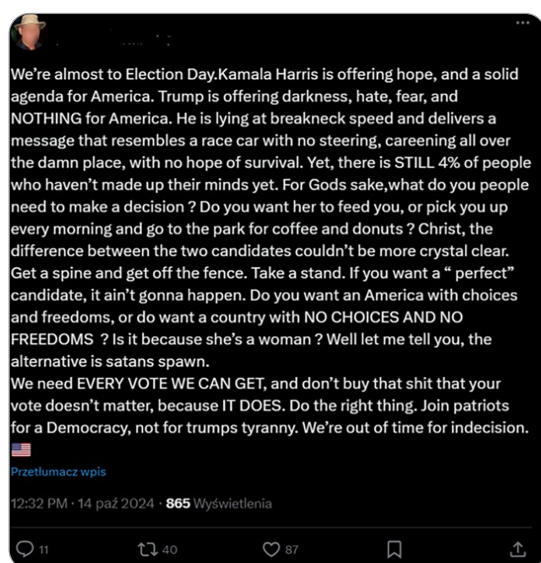


Source: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02RaQkUVM4TxK2UDN3FEbTJKR5856mS8Xm8h1ZU5RDmwygmDoyHMrRBjaXggEEkpVbl&id=100088450489755

Main channels of spreading disinformation related to the election

The US elections witness a sizeable amount of disinformation, half-truths and other manipulative behaviours coming from both domestic and foreign actors. There is no doubt regarding the fact that these two categories intertwine and draw from one another. Similarly, domestic actors sometimes act in ill faith or in line with the interest of foreign actors. They are also being deliberately targeted, and there should be little surprise that the most influential accounts comprise politicians, politically-driven celebrities and media accounts. The majority of actors present in the dataset were active on X (6,818) and Telegram (1,219). Much less represented were web resources (WWW) and Facebook (40). Especially the latter appears to result from technical constraints and the comparatively smaller data availability on Facebook (following the closure of the CrowdTangle service) in comparison to X and Telegram. According to Pew Research Center¹⁷, Facebook remains the most popular American social media platforms (68% of respondents) compared to X (22%).

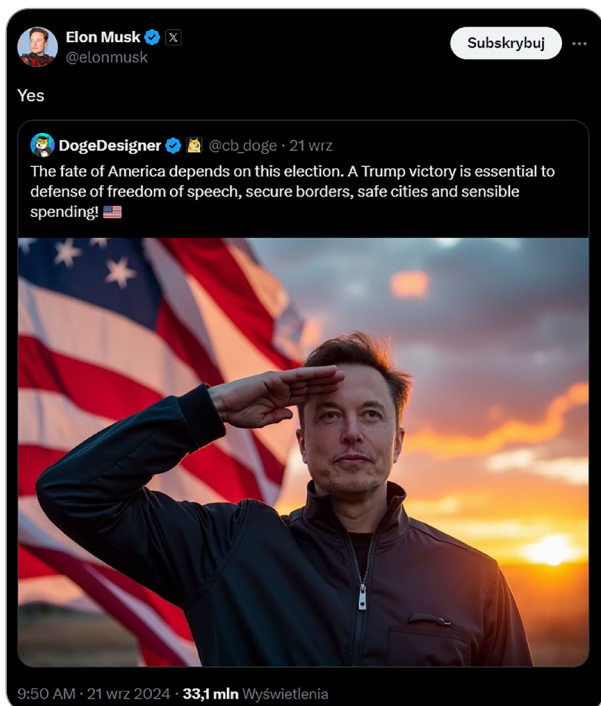
The dataset, however large (~114 k posts), constitutes only a research sample. Within that sample, the biggest accounts represent a fraction of the whole dataset. Their significance draws not from the number of instances they resurfaced in the feed but rather from their potential reach and influence (captured inter alia in the Breakout Scale, see Step 6 of influence escalation).



Source: x.com

Although some of the biggest influencers are represented in the dataset (Elon Musk, Donald Trump), the majority of disinformation instances seem to rest with medium and small accounts. In terms of raw numbers, this observation would also plausibly hold true for the generalised American information space. Some of the examples of such posts below:

17 Gottfried, Jeffrey. "Americans' Social Media Use." Pew Research Center. Last Modified 31.01.2024. Accessed 15.10.2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>.



Source: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1837398954750681094>

One of the most influential belongs Elon Musk¹⁸, openly siding with the former US president, Trump. His partisan activity is particularly visible in the dataset, also due to the enormous outreach he enjoys on his proprietary platform X.



Source: <https://x.com/bennyjohnson/status/1828418791585304761>

Benny Johnson¹⁹ (2.8M observers), a right-wing influencer reportedly secretly funded by Russian state media employees²⁰.

18 <https://x.com/elonmusk>.

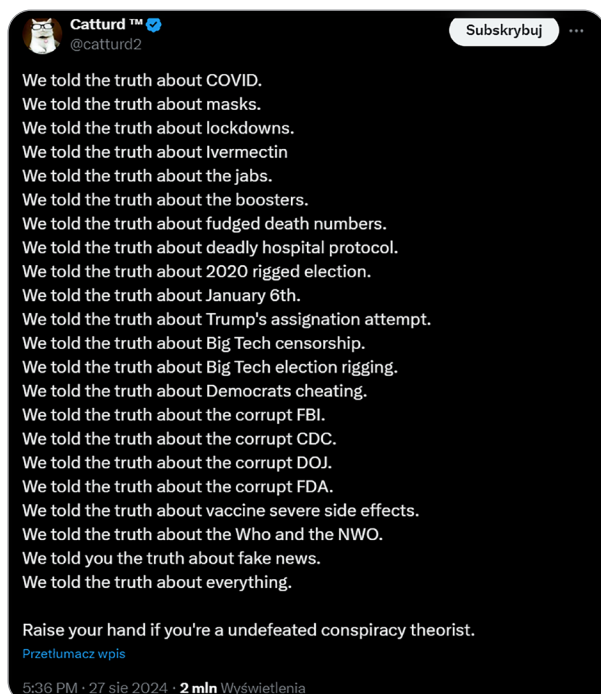
19 <https://x.com/bennyjohnson>.

20 <https://apnews.com/article/russian-interference-presidential-election-influencers-trump-999435273dd39edf7468c6aa34fad5dd>.



The Trump Train²¹ (528k observers)

Source: https://x.com/The_Trump_Train/status/1834339649617313828



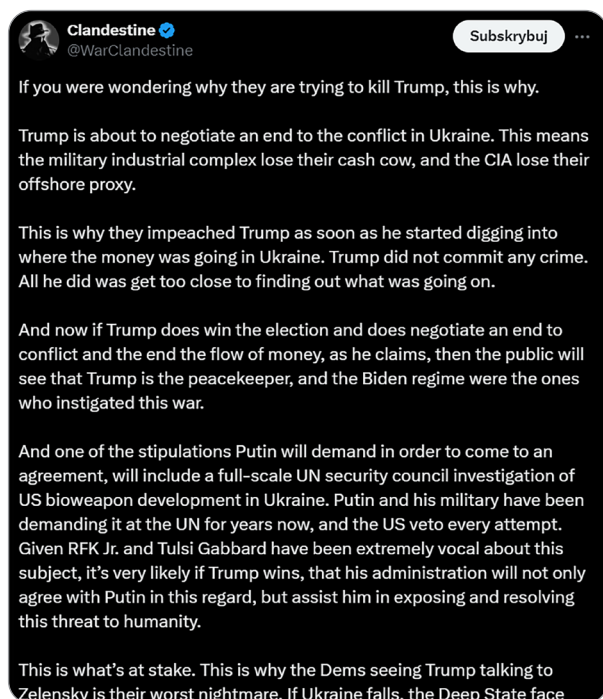
Another example is the QAnon-involved account²² nicknamed Catturd²³ (2.9M observers).

Source: <https://x.com/catturd2/status/1828456662761373802>

21 https://x.com/The_Trump_Train.

22 Smith, Brad. "Securing US Elections from Nation-State Adversaries." MTAC. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/18/securing-us-elections-from-nation-state-adversaries/>.

23 <https://x.com/catturd2>.



Last example is Clandestine²⁴ (574k observers) – likely a Russian asset. The account history mentions secret US biolabs in Ukraine.

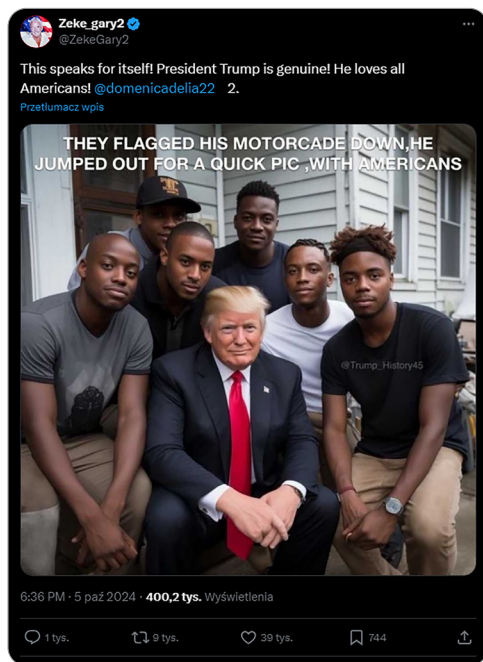
Source: <https://x.com/WarClandestine/status/1839696097553621428>

The most common techniques and methods of disinformation

Information and influence activities are often researched using tailored frameworks, such as the ABCDE model, developed by James Pamment. The model captures inter alia behaviour patterns expressed by malign actors (represented in an abbreviation as the letter B). These are further broken down into TTPs: Tactics, Techniques and Procedures²⁵, collated later in the DISARM Red Framework. Both primary and secondary data sources surrounding the US elections provide many examples fitting into the said collection. Some examples are given below.

²⁴ <https://x.com/WarClandestine>.

²⁵ Buccino, Sara. "The Kill Chain model of disinformation." FERMI. Last Modified 22.02.2023. Accessed 06.10.2024. <https://fighting-fake-news.eu/articles/kill-chain-model-disinformation>.



Source: <https://x.com/ZekeGary2/status/1842604881909301590>

Scarecrow Deepfake

One of the techniques used during the pre-election period in the United States is the dissemination of doctored images and other manipulated audiovisual materials. This technique, marked in the DISARM Red Framework as Technique T0086.002: Develop AI-Generated Images (Deepfakes), presented itself inter alia in the form of generated images, such as showing Trump posing with black voters²⁶. Although many researchers fear the potential impact of the widespread use of deepfakes, generative AI is not viewed as a game changer for the 2024 US presidential elections²⁷.

Foreign tacit sponsorship of partisan media

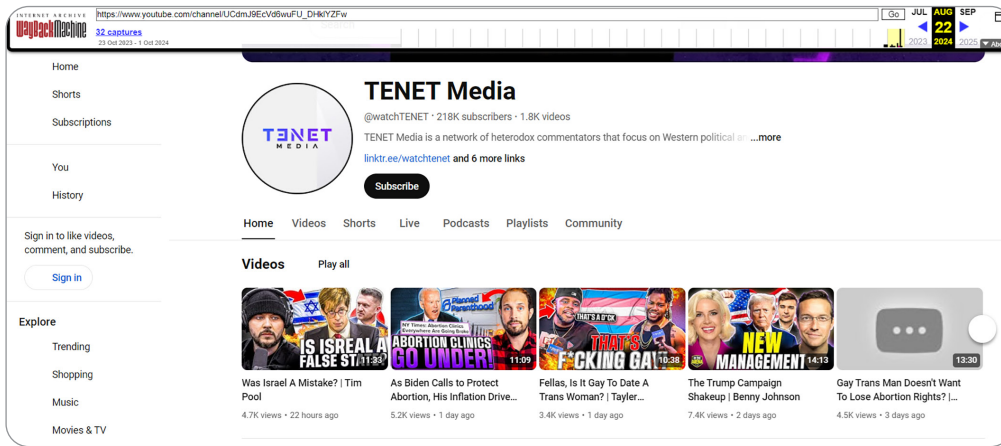
In September 2024, the Associated Press commented on a recent criminal case against two RT (a Russian state-affiliated media company) employees, Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva²⁸. Reportedly, Kalashnikov and Afanasyeva engaged in a cover funding of Tenet Media, a US-based company, with a view of electoral interference on behalf of Trump. Tenet Media actively supported the former president and provided a platform for right-wing politicians. The company was to receive approx. \$10 m for creating content on YouTube and TikTok in English language. In line with the AP findings, Tenet Media produced about 2 k videos that jointly received 16 m views.

Under the DISARM Red Framework, the techniques employed by malign agents in that case could be classified as: T0130.001: Conceal Sponsorship; T0085: Develop Text-based Content; T0093.001: Fund Proxies; T0087: Develop Video-based Content.

²⁶ Spring, Marianna. "Trump supporters target black voters with faked AI images." BBC. Accessed 06.10.2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68440150>.

²⁷ Seldin, Jeff. "AI not a US election gamechanger yet, officials say." VOA News. Last Modified 11.09.2024. Accessed 06.10.2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/ai-not-a-us-election-gamechanger-yet/7780093.html>.

²⁸ Eric Tucker, Matthew Lee, and David Klepper. "With charges and sanctions, US takes aim at Russian disinformation ahead of November election." Associated Press. Last Modified 05.09.2024. Accessed 06.10.2024. <https://apnews.com/article/russia-justice-department-election-foreign-influence-4888f4bfc61e46173101060ad0321d2f>.



Source: A Wayback Machine snapshot of the Tenet Media YouTube channel (now defunct): https://web.archive.org/web/20240822195126/https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdmJ9EcVd6wuFU_DHkiYZFw.

Resurfacing Doppelganger

The leaked data from a Russian Social Design Agency (SDA) revealed the involvement of the so-called Doppelganger operation²⁹ in electoral interference in the US presidential elections. The officials reported seizing 32 Internet domains used for dissemination of disinformation via a network of false websites mimicking legitimate media. These domains were propagated by bogus media personas. In DISARM, these techniques were caught under the following labels: Technique T0090.001: Create Anonymous Accounts; Technique T0098: Establish Inauthentic News Sites; Technique T0049.007: Inauthentic Sites Amplify News and Narratives; T0099: Prepare Assets Impersonating Legitimate Entities.



Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/us-news/story/us-presidential-elections-2024-russia-fake-sites-iran-china-cyber-world-ai-2594402-2024-09-05>

In the wording of the affidavit released by the US Department of Justice, the tactics used by the SDA involved the use of influencers, AI-generated content, paid social media advertisements and using manufactured social media personas³⁰. DISARM Red Framework covers these techniques as: T0100.003: Co-Opt Influencers; T0086.002: Develop AI-Generated Images (Deepfakes); T0018: Purchase Targeted Advertisements; T0090.001: Create Anonymous Accounts.

29 US Department of Justice. 2024. Affidavit in support of seizure warrant in the Doppelganger foreign malign influence campaign.

30 US Department of Justice. 2024. Affidavit in support of seizure warrant in the Doppelganger foreign malign influence campaign.

The Microsoft Threat Analytical Center attributed several techniques to Russian actors, such as laundering narratives through scandalising videos, fake journalists and non-existent whistleblowers, as well as amplification of disinformation through a network of inauthentic news sites³¹. The list of techniques used by malign agents are: T0128.004: Launder Information Assets; T0097.102: Journalist Persona; T0049.007: Inauthentic Sites Amplify News and Narratives; T0049: Flooding the Information Space.

The potential engagement of external actors

The involvement of external actors has been signalled in other sub-chapters within this study. US authorities, the private sector and CSOs revealed attempts of election interference conducted by Russia, China and Iran. Although the external actors were present in different communities and engaged on all sides of the political spectrum, it can be observed that Russia supports Trump, Iran backs Harris, and China collects intelligence.

The international intelligence community has documented attempts of electoral interference attributed to Iran. Following the Microsoft Threat Analysis Center's intelligence report of 9 Aug 2024, Iran has engaged in cyber influence operations using APTs such as Sefid Floor or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-run group Mint Sandstorm³². According to Microsoft, Sefid Flood specialised inter alia in impersonating social and political activist groups in a target audience to stoke chaos, undermine trust in authorities and sow doubt about election integrity. This group's operations may go as far as intimidation, doxing or inciting violence targeting political figures or social/political groups³³. Adding to the MTAC, OpenAI released a few Iranian-linked fringe media websites used by the Storm-2035 group to influence elections. The list contains the following domains: niothinker[.]com, savannahtime[.]com, evenpolitics[.]com, teorator[.]com and westlandsun[.]com³⁴.

31 MTAC. 09.08.2024 Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. <https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf>.

32 MTAC. 09.08.2024 Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. <https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf>.

33 MTAC. 09.08.2024 Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. <https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf>.

34 OpenAI. 2024. "Disrupting a covert Iranian influence operation." Last Modified 16.08.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://openai.com/index/disrupting-a-covert-iranian-influence-operation/>.

In a different note, the MTAC signalled the involvement of Russia-attributed APTs Ruza Flood (known from Doppelganger), Storm 1516 and Storm-1841 (Rybar) in interference with the US presidential election³⁵. Reportedly, the three actors were invested in a range of malicious behaviours including narrative-laundering and manufacturing artificial news channels on Telegram (Storm-1841 is attributed to run Topic do Jour, Blood Meridian and TEXASvsUSA)³⁶.

While Russian actors appear to have a preference for immigration-linked disinformation (see: Narrative 1), Chinese propaganda is said to streamline pro-Palestinian disinformation. Earlier in 2024, Taizi Flood was attributed to hundreds of accounts inciting pro-Palestinian protests at US universities³⁷.

The data collected in the dataset adds a few additional examples to the abovementioned.

Source Name	URL	Followers	Country Affiliation	Source/Authority
RFA	http://rfa.org	3.4 m	China	Its website
dnronline.com	http://dnronline.com	279 k	Russia	Detector Media
Bellum Acta - Intel, Urgent...	https://t.me/BellumActaNews	96.6 k	Russia	University of Zurich, University of Oxford
Afshin Rattansi	https://twitter.com/afshinr...	62.8 k	Russia	Official Account
Rachel Blevins	https://twitter.com/RachBle...	51.9 k	Russia	Twitter labelling
InfoDefenseENGLISH	https://t.me/infodefENGLAND	33.4 k	Russia	DFRLab
Rachel Blevins	https://t.me/rachblevins	8.73 k	Russia	Hamilton Dashboard
Press TV	https://t.me/presstv_iran	1.97 k	Iran	Hamilton Dashboard
Oriental Review	https://t.me/Oriental_Review	1.18 k	Russia	Wikipedia
RT News International	https://t.me/rtnewsintemat...	671	Russia	Wikipedia
Afshin Rattansi	https://t.me/afshinrattansi	563	Russia	Hamilton Dashboard

35 Smith, Brad. "Securing US Elections from Nation-State Adversaries." MTAC. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/18/securing-us-elections-from-nation-state-adversaries/>.

36 Smith, Brad. "Securing US Elections from Nation-State Adversaries." MTAC. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/18/securing-us-elections-from-nation-state-adversaries/>.

37 Smith, Brad. "Securing US Elections from Nation-State Adversaries." MTAC. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/18/securing-us-elections-from-nation-state-adversaries/>.

Comparison with other elections that took place in the same year

Earlier in 2024, Europe also experienced an onslaught of information influence activities during the elections to the European Parliament. Especially well-documented is the so-called Doppelganger operation, under the premises of which the Russian propaganda apparatus spoofed legitimate media and attempted to influence European voters. In the leaked documents³⁸, partially declassified by Americans on 4th Sept 2024, Doppelganger was attributed to Moscow-based Social Design Agency overseen by Ilya Gambashidze.

According to VSquare³⁹, the Russian operatives rooted for the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group at the European Parliament level and – nationally – for corresponding right-wing parties from the European big five⁴⁰. The SDA's involvement is especially evident in the leaked internal recruitment video⁴¹, where the agency boasts of setting up artificial think-tanks to advance its cause.

The table below shows a comparison of main elements differentiating foreign influence operations targeting the US presidential campaign and elections to the European Parliament in 2024.

Target entity	US	European Parliament
Foreign agents' involvement	Russia, Iran, China	Predominantly Russia
Countering	All three sectors	All three sectors
Main narratives	Tyranny, illegal immigration, WWII, identity politics	Illegal immigration, dictatorship of Brussels and the European Commission
Presumed main goal	Influence the US voters to elect their preferred candidate. Trump – for Russia and China, Harris – for Iran.	Increase the number of far-right MEPs who are viewed as a political force friendly to Russia.
Examples of accounts	TEXASvsUSA	Voice of Europe ⁴²

38 US Department of Justice. 2024. Affidavit in support of seizure warrant in the Doppelganger foreign malign influence campaign.

39 Martine Laine, and Anastasiia Morozova. "Leaked Files from Putin's Troll Factory: How Russia Manipulated European Elections." VSquare. Last Modified 16.09.2024. <https://vsquare.org/leaked-files-putin-troll-factory-russia-european-elections-factory-of-fakes/>.

40 Comprising France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland.

41 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGF7-siZ9ac>.

42 Irish, John. "European election: How the EU says Russia is spreading disinformation." Reuters. Last Modified 03.06.2024. Accessed 02.10.2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/european-election-how-eu-says-russia-is-spreading-disinformation-2024-06-03/>.

Russia's influence on the EP elections is uncertain. What can be observed is that the right wing in the European Parliament appears to be stronger, yet this is not immediately evident judging from the makeup of political groups. The new parliament witnessed a strengthening of the ECR and dissolution of the ID⁴³.

The measures introduced to counteract disinformation

Disinformation-curbing efforts of state authorities and public institutions

The US Department of Justice published materials revealing the engagement of the Social Design Agency disrupting the course of the Doppelganger Operation in the rundown to US elections⁴⁴. The release was a part of the 'name & shame' activity undertaken by the US government, targeted at Russian electoral interference. In line with these efforts, a Department of State body, the Global Engagement Center (GEC), took action against foreign agents on the grounds of their covert activity through RT, Sputnik and their parent company, Rossiya Segodnya⁴⁵.

In its recent report, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reflected on the state of play of its cooperation with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The DHS noted that the overall focus shifted towards protection of election infrastructure from physical and cyber threats, inadvertently reducing the overall capability to counter election-linked disinformation. Among other factors, the institutions highlighted that the level of cooperation with social media platforms was visibly reduced in comparison to the post-2022 period. The DHS called for development and implementation of a *risk-based national strategic plan to strengthen the security and resilience of the Nation's election infrastructure*⁴⁶. The report provides a good example of vulnerability-mapping and self-reflection.

⁴³ Khimiak, Anton. "European Parliamentary Elections 2024: Russian Disinformation in Action." Ukraine Crisis Media Center. Accessed 02.10.2024. <https://uacrisis.org/en/european-parliamentary-elections-2024-russian-disinformation-in-action>.

⁴⁴ US Department of Justice. 2024. Affidavit in support of seizure warrant in the Doppelganger foreign malign influence campaign.

⁴⁵ US Department of State. 2024. Alerting the World to RT's Global Covert Activities.

⁴⁶ Cuffar, Joseph V. 2024. DHS Improved Election Infrastructure Security, but Its Role in Countering Disinformation Has Been Reduced. edited by Office of Inspector General.

Earlier in 2024, the federal US Election Assistance Commission extended election security funds to cover the use of generative AI for disinformation. States can access these funds, among others, to promote AI-linked voter education and to promote technology to counter disinformation⁴⁷. In addition to nation-wide initiatives, election integrity is also protected at the state level. To exemplify, the North Carolina State Board of Elections (NCSBE) compiled a note on election-linked disinformation and misinformation, listing out its own initiatives. Following the summary, the NCSBE engaged in a range of educative activities, such as the weekly Mythbuster series, sharing fact-checked information and tips to netizens on reporting mis- and disinformation⁴⁸.

Private sector and CSOs in countering disinformation

The role played by private sector entities in the information space is diverse:

- social media companies provide platforms enabling information exchange;
- media (such as news outlets) act as content creators and information brokers;
- other companies provide solutions facilitating content creation, tools for researchers and analysts, etc.

Neither social media platforms nor news outlets live up to the tasks listed above, which has become an increasingly pressing issue in the context of the approach elections. On 18 September, Google, Adobe, Microsoft and Meta were summoned to appear before the US Senate Intelligence Committee and testify on the issue of curbing election-linked disinformation. According to the *Wired*⁴⁹, the public hearing was only partially successful. Meta agreed to remove Sputnik and RT from Facebook, and the tech companies pledged to address the risks posed by generative AI by labelling and watermarking content. Unfortunately, X (formerly: Twitter) CEO Elon Musk did not show up before the Committee. The other missing social media platform (albeit unsummoned) was TikTok.

⁴⁷ NACO. "U.S. Election Assistance Commission expands use of election security funds to include countering AI-generated disinformation." Last Modified 27.02.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://www.naco.org/news/us-election-assistance-commission-expands-use-election-security-funds-include-countering-ai>.

⁴⁸ NCSBE. 2024. "Mis- and Disinformation." Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://www.ncsbe.gov/about-elections/election-security/combating-misinformation>.

⁴⁹ Dell Cameron. "US Senate Warns Big Tech to Act Fast Against Election Meddling." *Wired*. Last Modified 18.09.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://www.wired.com/story/senate-hearing-with-us-tech-providers-on-election-threats/>.

Microsoft Threat Analysis Center remains one of the most advanced and specialised bodies engaged in identification and exposure of operations of influence. On top of MTAC's reporting on Russian involvement in the US information space, the Center exposed Iranian networks campaigning on behalf of Harris⁵⁰. Iranian efforts were also disrupted by OpenAI, the foundation developing ChatGPT⁵¹.

Civil society organisations usually engage in non-formal education, research or fact-checking. The most recognisable being Countering Disinformation, a consortium of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Countering Disinformation engages in capability building, bolstering societal resilience against disinformation, developing sector-wide norms and standards, supporting election management bodies and identification of election-linked disinformation.

Conclusions

The disinformation landscape in the US, as was described in the beginning of this study, makes up a challenge that American institutions and the general public must address. In spite of limited cooperation on the side of large social media platforms, US institutions, the media and the civil society are making enormous efforts to reduce the damage caused by disinformation.

The documented existence of foreign interference, described in respective subchapters of this study, is met with efforts to bolster societal resilience against disinformation, fact-checking and content take-downs. The size and efficiency of disinformation, especially in the context of national elections, remains an under-researched topic.

⁵⁰ MTAC. 09.08.2024 Iran steps into US election 2024 with cyber-enabled influence operations. <https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/final/en-us/microsoft-brand/documents/5bc57431-a7a9-49ad-944d-b93b7d35d0fc.pdf>.

⁵¹ OpenAI. 2024. "Disrupting a covert Iranian influence operation." Last Modified 16.08.2024. Accessed 07.10.2024. <https://openai.com/index/disrupting-a-covert-iranian-influence-operation/>.

The negative impact of increasingly more polarised voters is perhaps the most characteristic for the US elections beginning from 2016. With the more and more widespread use of generative AI, it has become harder to identify and expose foreign influence, especially with the mass involvement of domestic actors.

The most important lesson taken from the US presidential election so far, as well as from the elections to the EU Parliament described in the relevant subchapter, is perhaps the importance of education and enhancing societal trust in public institutions. Only citizens that are well-equipped in critical thinking by formal and non-formal educators, supported by trustworthy institutions acting on behalf of the common good, are able to withstand foreign interference and manipulation. In particular, this report acknowledges the actions of the US authorities and civil society in this respect.

Comparison of the Main Narratives

Election fraud

The narrative appearing in all 5 countries described (in different forms) was the one suggesting potential electoral fraud. These raised accusations against the authorities responsible for the organisation and conduct of the elections. Apart from the most obvious accusations, such as manipulation during vote counting or ballot box stuffing, there were also accusations of providing voters with pens with disappearing ink or artificially increasing the population of voters in a given region.

The potential for public uptake of this kind of disinformation can be variably grounded. For example, in Senegal, where it was alleged that the voter register in a particular part of the country was being manipulated, this was not the first time this kind of disinformation narrative was raised. These accusations, now as before, were made against the camp of former President Macky Sall and referred to the part of the country from which the politician comes. The repetition of the message about election rigging and the ways in which it allegedly occurs has also occurred in Taiwan, where allegations of artificial stuffing of ballot boxes with votes or manipulation of the vote count were also present in previous elections. The example of Mexico, on the other hand, shows that disinformation actors have exploited historical traumas related to the election rigging process. One of the main elements feeding into the possible belief of Mexican citizens about attempts to manipulate election results is the events of 1988, when there were widespread reports of fraud and the computer system counting the votes failed.

Unsubstantiated accusations are also being made to convince the public of potential electoral fraud on the part of political opponents. Such a situation was observed in the US, where it was Donald Trump's supporters who suggested that there would be attempts at manipulation by the 'Biden regime' to prevent the former president from sitting in the White House again. In this case, the disinformation actors did not focus on how the potential falsifications would occur, only that (in their view) they would certainly happen.

The strength and threat of such false claims can be demonstrated by the fact that South Africa had its historically lowest voter participation rate in 2024. The election rigging claim was the most significant and popular of the disinformation narratives there.

US interference and takeover of the country by unspecified forces

The message of a potential threat from the involvement of the US or other forces was also a significant element of electoral disinformation in 3 of the 5 countries described. Only in Mexico and US were such theses not identified as relevant during the 2024 electoral processes.

In Taiwan and South Africa, theses were promoted that the US was involved in supporting specific sides of the political scene in these countries in order to bring about armed conflict. In South Africa, this would be a CIA-inspired civil war fought over the province of KwaZulu-Natal. In Taiwan, the result of US influence would be a war with China due to the strengthening of Taipei's independence movements.

It is worth mentioning that the use of the theme of conflicts involving the US in the campaign in this country has been noted. It has been suggested that the potential escalation of fighting in the Middle East (with the involvement of the US military) or the unleashing of the WWII could serve to control the political situation in the US.

A different direction was taken by disinformation actors in Senegal. While they admitted to suggesting interference by forces to manipulate the election results, these were not clearly defined. There were reports of 'organised forces' or 'occult forces' that would begin to operate to bring chaos to the country in the event of one party losing.

Main distribution platforms for disinformation content on social media

Looking at the overall picture of disinformation narratives in the 5 countries described, the most popular platforms were Facebook and X. For example, in South Africa, 68% of reports confirmed as disinformation came from X. It is worth noting here, however, that despite this platform's significant contribution to the spread of false messages, it is not the service that has the most users in the countries in question. It is often overtaken in this respect by Facebook, which dominates these statistics, or TikTok and YouTube. The situation is similar in the US. Although Facebook remains the most popular social media there, the

main channel for spreading disinformation is X. It can be assumed that such results of X, as far as the presence of disinformation content is concerned, are due to the service's lenient policy with regard to the removal of such messages.

Also worth noting is the involvement of disinformation actors on TikTok. In South Africa, it was the second most used source for promoting false content, while the Senegalese government found it to be 'the network preferred by malicious people to spread hateful and subversive messages that threaten the country's stability'. Breaking the stereotype that TikTok is a platform for the young is also an interesting issue. The example of Taiwan has shown that it is used by both younger and older participants in social media discourse.

WhatsApp is also an important but difficult medium to analyse. In Mexico, 96% of internet users actively use this app. In Senegal, it is the most popular social media platform with more than 5 million active users. The fact that it is an encrypted correspondence tool and the fact that it operates in closed audiences makes it decidedly difficult to show the full picture of how disinformation content is spread there. Breaking up these kinds of private, airtight information bubbles could be one of the biggest challenges in the fight against disinformation in the next election processes around the world.

Telegram also appeared in some of the analyses on platforms. It may seem interesting to note that this is the platform that ranked second in terms of promoting disinformation content in the US. This may be indicative of the strong involvement of pro-Russian activists in the presidential race in Washington.

Mention should also be made of YouTube, which is the most popular platform in Taiwan and has played an important role there in promoting disinformation content. The service has provided fertile ground for videos generated by artificial intelligence to promote false theses. In addition, the platform is a breeding ground for propaganda from the Chinese Communist Party. The Line app, which is popular in Asia, has also emerged in the context of Taiwan. However, the similar premise and functioning of this platform as WhatsApp makes it difficult to track the content appearing there and to counter the spread of false information there.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The main trend observed was attempts to delegitimise the authorities when a particular political option won. This would be done by suggesting that the electoral process was manipulated, resulting in the falsification of voting results. It can be hypothesised, based on the observation of disinformation narratives during the electoral process in Taiwan, Mexico, USA, Senegal, South Africa, Poland and numerous European Union countries, that the 'fraud election' trend is the main one or one of the main ones present in the 2024 electoral processes.

These had different bases, in Mexico, for example, the fear of electoral fraud was built on historical events when there were distortions in the final results of the vote. In Senegal, the narrative of voter register tampering, already used in earlier elections, was used. In Taiwan, on the other hand, it is a long-term process, also widely present in previous elections, and driven by the Chinese power apparatus, whose aim is to locate there a power that will put an end to the independence movement in Taipei. By contrast, in the USA, he uses this as a general slogan and frames it as the only option for the potential defeat of one of the candidates.

This kind of narrative is very dangerous because it can infect voters in a number of ways. The first, and main one, is that in which the democratic legitimacy of the party that is the target of such attacks is stripped away in advance, in case it wins. This can provide the basis for movements to negate all actions and guidelines of the state administration. This is particularly dangerous from the perspective of the stability of society and the state after a potential change of power following an election. The second danger from the disinformation trend about allegedly rigged elections is the impact on turnout. An example of this was evident in South Africa, where the most heavily promoted disinformation narrative in the context of the elections was that they were rigged. It can be assumed that this was one of the reasons why 2024 saw the historically lowest voter participation in the country.

Due to the fact that such narratives verge on conspiracy theories, it is hard to realistically combat them. It is possible to show the actions of disinformation actors from different countries, point out their goals, as well as their patterns of actions and behaviour, but it is up to the viewer to decide what convinces them more. The mere information that there is no evidence and no basis for the claim that a particular electoral process was manipulated can be perceived by the proponents and promoters of such a disinformation narrative as further evidence of electoral fraud and give fuel to claims that the current government will not show that it was illegally elected. In light of the popularity of the observed trend, it can be assumed that it will continue to be present in the next upcoming elections around the world in 2024 and 2025.

The examples of all countries have shown that the primary and most important line of defence against disinformation is an informed civil society. Good cooperation with platforms can also be an important element, but with this aspect much depends on their goodwill and interpretation of the rules of procedure.

The more widespread the knowledge among citizens about what disinformation is, what means are used by disinformation actors and how it spreads, the more effectively it can be fought. In order to widely and effectively educate citizens on this issue, the involvement of state institutions is essential. The involvement of NGOs can also help create public resilience to disinformation.

To sum up, the basic recommendation, and the conclusion of the above analyses, is the need to create broad civic awareness on the issue of disinformation. The basic pillar of such activities should be state institutions, and, where possible, the involvement of NGOs as well as the platforms themselves.



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