DISINFORMATION AND THE PROBLEM OF CREDIBILITY IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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ABSTRACT

The problem of disinformation is widely seen as a threat to democracy. Scholars, journalists, and civil society organizations have quickly developed tools to track and counter various forms of disinformation, but efforts to strengthen democratic institutions in the digital age are far less coordinated. In some cases, these efforts are built on outdated assumptions about the role of truth in democratic participation. In this article, we argue that the threat that disinformation poses to democracy is less about the undermining of truth, and more about limiting access to forms of information necessary for collective efforts to democratize political power. We develop our argument by discussing the ways that this threat has reoriented theoretical, practical, and normative assumptions about the nature of democracy and democratization. We draw on our research on the field of international democracy promotion to inform this discussion. International democracy promotion is one of the few areas that has directly worked on the problem of disinformation. The organizations in this field, some of which grew from Cold War-era propaganda and information campaigns, have histories of building the type of trust in democratic processes that disinformation campaigns often aim to undermine. As the experiences of democracy promoters show, establishing the legal legitimacy of democratic institutions does not guarantee that people will trust in them. In an online world, trustworthiness requires forms of credibility that are more intimately connected to people's everyday lives. For democracy promotion experts, building this credibility has been a problem due to factors that are unique to the field. As a result, over time these experts have developed responses to anti-democratic information campaigns meant to attack their credibility and the credibility of democratic reforms. By outlining how democracy promotion organizations have coordinated international anti-disinformation efforts, this article outlines some of the challenges that disinformation poses to democracy based on the experiences of professionals in this field.

INTRODUCTION: DISINFORMATION AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

T rue and accurate information is widely seen as crucial to the functioning of democratic processes such as free and fair elections and political organizing. In recent years, these processes have been threatened by the rise of disinformation online, most often defined as intentionally misleading information. Whether it has come from information campaigns carried out by authoritarian and corrupt leaders or from the polarization of the public sphere, the presence of disinformation is usually interpreted as an indicator of democratic backsliding in both established and newer democracies.[1] To address this global problem, research centers have sprung up to identify and track disinformation online, and the "fact-checking" beat has created a new sub-genre of professional and citizen journalism.[2] In many ways, this reaction comes from the perception that disinformation is a threat because it shatters the shared sense of truth and reality that underpins democratic civil society. We argue, however, that the threat disinformation poses to democracy has less to do with shared truth, and more to do with *access* to information. For leaders or groups looking to consolidate different forms of political, economic, and social power, disinformation acts to short-circuit the flow of information that is necessary for collective efforts to democratize these types of power or to fight corruption. Thus, the purpose of most disinformation is not to deceive, *per se*, but to attack the credibility of activists, political opponents, rival states, or democratic institutions. As we argue below, this threat has far-reaching consequences and has reoriented many key theoretical, practical, and normative assumptions about the nature of democracy and democratization.

Our argument draws on research we have conducted mapping and analyzing the professional practices that make up the field of international democracy promotion.[3] This field is made up of organizations headquartered in wealthy democracies that develop and fund a range of programs focused on electoral monitoring and assistance, parliamentary training, judicial reform, and civil society support. Such programs require public trust, but historically these organizations have found themselves working in political contexts where people are mistrustful of attempts to promote Western-style democracy. Especially in the early years, Cold War logics framed this version of liberal democracy, which championed the spread of global capitalism, and lead to many critics associating democracy promotion with "Western Imperialism." This critical perception was not unfounded. In the early 1980s, the first U.S. democracy promotion organizations took over some of the pro-democracy propaganda efforts from the U.S. Information Agency intended to counter Soviet disinformation.[4] However, as Western powers started to move many of their strategic information operations out of the shadows, pro-democracy programs moved away from relying on propaganda and towards a model grounded in the logic of international aid. Establishing arms-length organizations for democracy promotion, which is how the field is organized today, was one way to put a legitimate face on these efforts.[5]

Because of this questionable history, democracy promotion organizations from the United States and Western Europe had to continuously reinvent their messaging and practices to gain credibility as allies in democratic change rather than as simply promoters of Western foreign policy goals. This has meant that organizations in this field have built expertise generating public trust in

democracy, a form of expertise that is increasingly relevant to those concerned with the threat disinformation poses to democracy. It is not a coincidence, then, that democracy promoters have recently begun to coordinate and support international civil society responses to the threat of disinformation, and the field is now one of the main sources of international coordination on this issue.[6] Our recent research on the field reflects this shift in both the funding priorities of democracy promotion organizations as well as the specific programs we have observed in our research, such as Holthaus' recent work in Tunisia.[7]

The broader goal of our argument is to bring some clarity to recent debates about the range of phenomena labelled "post-truth politics" and the apparent global crisis of democratic legitimacy.[8] The term "post-truth" is often used as an umbrella category describing misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and other forms of "problematic information" online.[9] However, in the years immediately following the Brexit referendum and the Trump election in 2016, a number of prominent Western commentators claimed that these campaigns' willingness to embrace lies and half-truths indicated a new era of politics based on emotion rather than reason. This perspective was flawed for two main reasons that are relevant to the following argument. First, as many quickly pointed out, framing the problem in terms of a new era of post-truth reflects a mistaken form of liberal idealism that underestimates the importance of emotion in previous political eras and overestimates the rational nature of politics.[10]

There is also a long history of disinformation and misleading campaigns even in the most established democracies. Secondly, and more importantly, these commentaries about a new post-truth era blamed technology, specifically social media platforms, for degrading the quality of political discourse. There are multiple complex problems created by social media platforms that are designed to sell advertising, but we argue it is inaccurate to claim that social media has caused a degradation of political discourse. Instead, we view social media platforms as tools which have many possibilities both for democratic activists and for authoritarian or corrupt leaders. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum through social media and was, in many ways, a response to legacy media failing to accurately represent the experiences of Black communities. In this case, the "truth" that was broadcast on the evening news did not reflect the reality in American cities, and activists using social media could better communicate this reality.

What the advent of social media has made clear is that the political relevance of particular facts or versions of the truth can be contested. In this sense, disinformation cannot be reduced to a single problem that can be solved by promoting truth over lies. Instead, we approach it as a symptom of interconnected problems related to power and inequality that confront democracies of all types. What is unique about the present situation is the degree to which malign actors have learned to use social media to target the formal legitimacy of democratic institutions, which might otherwise mitigate inequality and protect against the consolidation of political power.

The fact that disinformation often explicitly targets the credibility of political actors working for democratic transparency, social and economic justice, or human rights promotion presents three crucial challenges to contemporary approaches for promoting democracy. The first challenge is theoretical; it raises the question of what types of trust are required to make democratic

institutions, such as electoral systems or public health campaigns, effective when the authority of these systems is regularly questioned online. The second challenge is practical; it relates to the types of information strategies that have been most effective at developing democratic resistance to disinformation campaigns. The third and final challenge is a reiteration of the crucial normative questions that have always been at the core of debates about democracy. These questions relate to which democratic rights or forms of social justice political communities prioritize, such as how to balance free expression with anti-hate speech regulations. Considering these challenges in the context of international democracy promotion, with all its historical complexity, is an especially useful way to understand the threat posed by disinformation. As suggested above, these challenges raise as many questions about how people access political information as they do about the truth or accuracy of this information.

THEORETICAL CHALLENGE: DEFINING TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

Aside from a few key exceptions, governments are not able to block access to information to the degree that they could in previous generations. For most networked societies, the challenge now is sorting through the noise to find the most trustworthy information. This makes the question of trust central to contemporary democratic politics. However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the role of trust in democracy was also one of the most popular subjects in Western social and political theory. Globalization was making political life in rich democracies more complex; scholars asked whether the versions of empire and hegemony that seemed to accompany the immense power of global capital would undermine the possibility for collective self-governance.[11] For example, in an ever more interconnected world, would people be able to adapt to a more generalized form of trust in democratic institutions or would they retreat to a more particularized trust focused on nationalism, ethnicity, or religion?[12] Similarly, some scholars worried that this interconnection, combined with technological advances, might alienate citizens from their local communities and impoverish civic life. Robert Putnam framed this problem in the classical communitarian language of civic association and public trust and extended it to argue that trust in a community could be measured as a form of social capital.[13] While some criticized Putnam's American-centric approach to understanding trust and democracy at the time, his argument was part of a much broader effort to elevate the concept of "civil society" as an important component of political life.

Today, arguments about civil society as a source of collective trust have shifted significantly. One of the central assumptions of Putnam's American-centric version of social capital theory is that networks of reciprocity provide a strong foundation for democratic governance; such networks increase the capacity of citizens to ensure the public accountability of political leaders through mechanisms like public protest and other negative feedback.[14] The problem with this assumption is that not all communities have equally democratic demands. While Putnam supposed that collective forms of entertainment, such as bowling leagues, were a good proxy for reciprocity and community support, there are many communities today that form on social media which provide networks for people who want to protest vaccines or hold rallies in favor of white nationalism.[15]

In some ways, social media has made associational culture too efficient, such that a given politician only needs to respond to the desires of the loudest and most politically powerful networks and can easily reject otherwise popular policies without fear of political consequences. A second and related reason social capital theory offers a limited understanding of trust is that it assumes an overly homogenous notion of civil society. Democracies with the type of "civic cultures" valued by these theorists have always been good at marginalizing and oppressing minority communities who had very good reasons to mistrust local and national governments. If anything, the social media era has revealed that if trust is a public good, its democratic effects are unequally distributed.

A theory of democracy focused on "civil society" also became popular among democracy promotion organizations starting in the late 1990s. As the experiences of post-Soviet countries showed, the limitations of top-down models of democratization that focused primarily on elections prompted a turn toward a "new paradigm" of projects meant to support bottom-up civil society initiatives.[16] However, the effect of this new interest in civil society aid was not that large international donors gave up any control over funding priorities to grassroots activists. Instead, this focus on local NGOs created a process by which funding was directed to those organizations that could effectively write grant applications, usually in the language of the donor, as well as file project reports and maintain transparent accounting practices related to donor funds.[17] This led to a proliferation of local NGOs that had professionalized and devoted resources to maintaining funding relationships rather than building grassroots support. Scholars from the Global South referred to this process as one of "NGOization," whereby civil society organizations became bifurcated into modern NGOs, which received the bulk of international aid funding, and traditional or grassroots NGOs, which were member-driven and received little international funding.[18] These modern NGOs also tended to avoid politically contentious projects and therefore produced a depoliticizing effect by engaging in what Theda Skocpol describes as "advocacy politics."[19] The problem is that advocacy politics replaces organizing with an approach to political problems that relies on interventions by experts on behalf of affected communities.

In the recent history of democracy promotion, projects have often involved civil society interventions that could be categorized as advocacy politics and required a generalized trust in the benevolence and expertise of wealthy donors. While many of the program staff we have spoken to in our research process acknowledge the importance of partnering with local organizations and avoiding a top-down approach to democracy aid, the bifurcation of professional and traditional civil society organizations throughout the Global South can create an extra layer of distrust. From this perspective, democracy programs need to build a form of local credibility that goes beyond generalized trust. Building credibility in the contemporary media environment is no easy task, especially if a program does not draw on grassroots organizing and instead adopts priorities that conform with donor demands. Credibility has long been a concern for scholars in a range of fields, but contemporary studies more commonly focus on media credibility, which can include questions about the credibility of a source, of a medium, or of a message.[20] Disinformation campaigns can effectively target any of these three forms together or separately. For example, Zeynep Tufekci explains how the Turkish government uses disinformation to undermine democratic challengers

by simultaneously denouncing both political opponents and Twitter in general before engaging in Twitter campaigns, intending to flood the discourse with confusing and misleading messages.[21] For activists demanding democratic reforms, social media can be a powerful tool to scale political messages. However, as Tufekci points out, authoritarian governments figure that further reach comes with less secure claims to credibility. In this context, trust in democracy is diffused throughout complex information networks. In networks flooded with poor quality information, building credibility requires more subjective appeals and deeper connections.

PRACTICAL CHALLENGE: FACT-CHECKING IS NOT ENOUGH

In his modern history of disinformation, Thomas Rid suggests that the sheer amount of information available to the average smartphone user means that contemporary forms of disinformation are much less predictable or measured than the active measures of the Cold War period.[22] For communications security scholars like Rid, disinformation should not be understood as the work of master manipulators planting specific false or misleading news stories, but as imprecise and often unsophisticated efforts that, while possibly initiated by a particularly skillful hack and leak operation, most often take unpredictable and contingent paths to becoming amplified and entering the broader political discourse. One reason for this is that the noisy information ecosystems already contain vast amounts of *mis*information—rumors, conspiracy theories, suspect health information, etc.—that are shared not out of malicious intent, but because it is entertaining or confirms pre-existing biases.[23] In an online ecosystem where a single meme or story might have multiple ambivalent meanings, what might seem like coordinated political campaigns may rely on networked amplification effects generated by both "trollish" behavior and reactions from traditional media sources.[24]

The "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory exemplifies a complex network in which misinformation is often a product of collective participation rather than a single political actor fooling or misleading unsuspecting users. This conspiracy theory developed after followers of the broader QAnon conspiracy theory mined and connected disparate pieces of information from an email trove from Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign chair's personal account that were published on Wikileaks. Participants identified awkward references to "pizza" as a code indicating that high-ranking members of the party were running a child sex-trafficking ring out of a Washington, D.C. pizzeria. The original leak may have come from Russian malign actors, but enthusiastic participants in a collective online phenomenon imagined and spread stories about the pizzeria. Pizzagate, the broader conspiracy built around QAnon, and the subsequent #StopTheSteal campaign are useful examples for discussing the global challenge of disinformation; they show that wealthy established democracies are vulnerable to the anti-democratic effects of disinformation, and that the truth of these stories was, in many ways, besides the point.

This presents a practical problem for those working to counter disinformation. Fact-checking, by itself, does not significantly affect political forms of disinformation. As a number of sociologists have pointed out, misinformation and conspiracy theories are not spread by people who are simply uninformed; for many, misinformation can tap into "deep cultural narratives," or

the stories that people use to make sense of their lives and social contexts.[25] Misinformation can therefore feel true because it is interesting, exciting, or even a product of what believers see as critical thinking and research.[26] From this perspective, if misinformation feels true because it speaks to social anxieties or aligns with peoples' political identities, combating misinformation may not simply be a problem of education. As democracy promotion organizations have found out, legitimate information sources often cannot compete with the more informal networks on social media.

An example from Holthaus' field research on electoral assistance in Tunisia illustrates this point. In 2019, a range of democracy promotion organizations, including the EU's electoral assistance body, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and others, endeavored to enhance the quality of the Tunisian parliamentarian elections. These groups noted that online campaigning was going to be especially important for this election. Tunisia has a population of about 11 million people and there were about 7 million registered Tunisian Facebook accounts at the time. A huge Tunisian diasporic community of about 1 million people was also active on Facebook, both searching for information and commenting on the campaign. The EU program supported the hiring of local Tunisians as "social media experts" to account for the importance of online campaigning and to track online trends, although it was clear that EU staff eyed this work with skepticism.[27] Most importantly, however, the electoral assistance program lacked a mechanism to transfer information gathered from the evaluation of online campaigns into any sort of proactive response. For this reason, the evaluations of the social media experts were minimized in the EU reports. As a joint report on the election from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Republican Institute (IRI) later noted, the problem of disinformation was primarily addressed by a website meant to track and counter campaign-related disinformation initiated by the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) and the Tunis Afrique Presse (TAP).[28] This effort, however, occurred later in the campaign and was separate from the EU's assistance efforts, which were underdeveloped and ineffective compared to the Tunisian media initiative.

This example highlights the practical difficulty that organizations face in the field of democracy promotion. In this case, program staff anticipated that social media engagement would be important during the campaign, but they could not develop the type of credible media responses that local media organizations could generate. This is because the HAICA and TAP had a much greater ability not only to evaluate the information ecosystem, but to engage in a way that would be meaningful to Tunisians. An assistance model built around hiring social media experts to extract information from the online discourse and translate it for the donor organizations was at a major disadvantage in terms of both speed and flexibility. The dynamics of this case can generally apply to other efforts to counter disinformation because it indicates the limits of centralized responses to political narratives that evolve and spread in real time. This is a practical problem for efforts to promote the credibility of democratic institutions but, in many ways, it is also a normative problem.

NORMATIVE CHALLENGE: EXTREMISM AND OPPRESSION ARE THE REAL THREATS

As a recent report submitted by the Center for Law and Democracy to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression makes clear, responses to the problem of disinformation are varied and not always compatible with democratic rights. [29] In Myanmar and Thailand, government-backed anti-disinformation groups have targeted political dissidents, and even spread their own disinformation. In democracies such as Mexico and India, disinformation initiatives housed within government agencies have raised questions about the impact on freedom of expression. For autocratic leaders, the rhetoric of disinformation and fake news are floating signifiers that can be used to silence critics or attack the credibility of external actors.[30] Partly because of this symbolic openness, most democratic governments have avoided direct regulation of disinformation and instead pressured social media companies to develop and enforce content moderation policies on misleading information. Taken together, this range of responses suggests that the problem of disinformation is like a mirror of a political system. Dealing with the problem and the threat it poses to the credibility of democratic institutions requires an assessment of the types of disinformation that are most damaging as well as developing strategies that reflect a government's democratic priorities. This process, by definition, is a political and normative exercise.

Over the past few years, some clear trends have emerged in the types of disinformation that are most damaging. In the now infamous case of the Internet Research Agency's (IRA) disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, some of the most common narratives pushed by IRA accounts were faux calls for social justice using the language of Black Lives Matter activists. [31] Some of these narratives included critiques of the Hillary Clinton campaign. However, researchers found that the goal seemed to be sowing what the antagonists regarded as social discord. On one level, this seemed to be a misunderstanding about the nature of political discourse in the United States, where contentious debate is often thought of as a feature of a healthy system. However, this was also instructive for scholars of disinformation because it typified political narratives that were the most effective vehicles for misleading information—narratives that speak to the deepest forms of inequality and injustice in a political community.

In this sense, the IRA was copying attention-hacking and media manipulation strategies that, in the U.S. context, could be traced back to the development of the alt-right.[32] This included the coordinated online attacks and trolling used in explicitly misogynist campaigns such as "Gamergate," a coordinated harassment campaign of prominent women in the gaming community, where disinformation was identified as a tool to spread online hate. Likewise, the IRA's targeting of Black communities was related to what media scholars, such as Deen Freelon, have identified as a phenomenon of "digital blackface," which entails "Black impersonation for disinformation purposes" and operates as a "manifestation of anti-Black racism regardless of the perpetrators' intentions."[33] In these cases, the questionable veracity of the messages was far less important than the fact that these were new strategies for spreading misogyny and racism. Disinformation campaigns are thus often effective when they engage with painful and polarizing issues around marginalization and historical tragedies. Such campaigns can frustrate collective efforts to work

towards justice and undermine pro-democracy advocates trying to generate broad support (or generalized trust) for democratic processes. This is especially the case if the democracy advocates are outside of the targeted political community.

Democracy promotion organizations are starting to take note of this relationship between disinformation and the targeting of marginalized groups. For example, the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project, which maps civil society organizations working on issues of dis- and misinformation, released a report on the Romanian election outlining the social media reach of the far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). [34] The AUR had fared surprisingly well in the election relative to expectations, but an analysis of their social media accounts suggested that the leader of the AUR had a far greater reach than any other politician. According to the report, the AUR was a key disseminator of disinformation related to the election, but they generated popularity on Facebook and other platforms through both nationalist narratives about outside threats, especially Hungary, and by promoting sexist, racist, and homophobic material. In this sense, the disinformation was embedded in extreme political narratives. The mainstream press actively denounced these narratives, though this may have helped encourage the popularity of the content. For democracy promoters, these types of media monitoring projects are becoming more important for electoral assistance work. While the general approach of these organizations has been to avoid engaging in debates concerning traditionally marginalized groups in a particular country, disinformation campaigns thrive when they can exploit the ambivalence toward extremist politics. To fortify democratic institutions against disinformation therefore requires a normative approach that identifies extremism and is unafraid to amplify the voices of groups that have been traditionally marginalized.

CONCLUSION: A NEW DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY?

Throughout its history, the field of international democracy promotion has had a credibility problem. The idea of wealthy countries pursuing exploitative foreign policy objectives in one moment and then lecturing a government about the virtues of democracy and fairness in the next was always a hard sell. At the same time, the recent struggles that wealthy democracies have had with malign information campaigns creates new ground for building solidarity with partners in the Global South. According to many of the people we have talked to in this field, the examples of Brexit and the Trump presidency have made it clear that "we're all in the same boat" when it comes to disinformation. The fact that organizations in this field have recently prioritized the problem of disinformation is an indicator of how important access to good information is to the contingent and slow work of building and maintaining democratic institutions. Disinformation is not a new problem, but it has recently presented some new challenges to traditional assumptions about democracy. In an information ecosystem in which the realities of economic and social inequalities are clear, building democratic legitimacy through a generalized trust in existing institutions will not always work. For many who feel excluded from or ignored by these institutions, media narratives that speak to their fears and anxieties often are more effective. In this sense, the best way to fortify democracy is to address the deep inequalities that exist in every

society. A public sphere that tolerates and even justifies these inequalities is bound to create avenues for malign actors to exploit these fears and anxieties.

NOTES

1   See Anna Lührmann, et al., "State of the World 2018: Democracy Facing Global Challenges." Democratization 26, no. 6 (August 18, 2019): 895–915. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1613980.

2   This includes academic centers that have adopted a focus on disinformation, such as Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, as well as state funded projects such as the European Digital Media Observatory.

3   Michael Christensen, "Interpreting the Organizational Practices of North American Democracy Assistance." International Political Sociology 11, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 148–65. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olx013; Leonie Holthaus, "Is There Difference in Democracy Promotion? A Comparison of German and US Democracy Assistance in Transitional Tunisia." Democratization 26, no. 7 (October 3, 2019): 1216–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1618832.

4   While the US approach to democracy promotion was modelled on the German foundation system, the early years of the NED and its affiliate organizations were marked by what Thomas Carothers called a "heavy handed anti-communist programming," the legacy of which almost sank the NED in the mid-1990s. See Thomas Carothers, "The NED at 10." Foreign Policy, no. 95 (1994): 123. https://doi.org/10.2307/1149427.

5   In the United States, this field was built around the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its affiliate organizations associated with each political party (the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute) as well as the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Centre and the Center for International Private Enterprise. Other organizations engaged in elections monitoring and political party assistance including many based in Germany, the United Kingdom and Northern Europe are also considered part of the field; for a history of the field see: Nicolas Guilhot, The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

6   Thomas Carothers, "Look Homeward, Democracy Promoter." Foreign Policy, January 27, 2016. https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/27/look-homeward-democracy-promoter/.

7   Holthaus op. cit.

8   Claudia Aradau and Jef Huysmans, "Assembling Credibility: Knowledge, Method and Critique in Times of 'Post-Truth.'" Security Dialogue 50, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 40–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010618788996.

9   For a breakdown of the various definitions of problematic information see Caroline Jack, "Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information." Media Manipulation Initiative. New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017.

10   Rhys Crilley, "International Relations in the Age of 'Post-Truth' Politics." International Affairs 94, no. 2 (March 1, 2018): 417–25. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy038.; Jedediah Purdy, "Normcore." Dissent Magazine, 2018. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/normcore-trump-resistance-books-crisis-of-democracy.

11   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. 2000. Empire. Harvard University Press.

12   Mark E. Warren, Democracy and Trust. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

13   Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. The conceptual framework was actually developed in Putnam's earlier work in Italy (Robert D. Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993.), which was written in the tradition of American communitarianism from Tocqueville to David Reisman's Riesman's The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character. Studies in National Policy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950; as well as Gabrial A. Almond and Sidney Verba's The Civic Culture; Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1963.

14   For a critique of this element of social capital theory see Matthew R. Cleary and Susan Stokes, Democracy and the Culture of Skepticism: The Politics of Trust in Argentina and Mexico. Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

15   For example, research on parent groups and vaccine hesitancy illustrates this point, especially Jennifer A. Reich, Calling the Shots: Why Parents Reject Vaccines. NYU Press, 2016.

16   Marina Ottaway and Theresa Chung, "Debating Democracy Assistance: Toward a New Paradigm." Journal of Democracy 10, no. 4 (1999): 99–113. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1999.0070.

17   See Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion. Carnegie Endowment, 2000.

18   Dean Chahim and Aseem Prakash, "NGOization, Foreign Funding, and the Nicaraguan Civil Society." VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 25, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 487–513. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9348-z.; Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, eds. NGOization: Complicity,

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19   Theda Skocpol, Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

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21   Zeynep Tufekci, Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017. Tufekci suggests that the Turkish government's reaction to the 2013 Gezi Park protests was to threaten to ban Twitter publicly, but then engage in a strategy that was "more a campaign of persuasion and questioning of credibility than one of creating a Turkish equivalent of China's "Great Firewall" (2017: 244).

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23   The Data & Society Research Institute produced a number of useful reports outlining the various forms of "problematic information" circulating online after the 2016 US presidential election. See Jack op. cit.

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27   Holthaus op. cit.

28   https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/tunisia-6.pdf.

29   https://www.law-democracy.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UN-SR-on-FOE.CLD-Submission-Disinformation.Mar21.final_.pdf.

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