

Sharing is not Always Caring

Digital Democracy as a Cultivating Space for Transparent and Active Participation

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Hyacinth, per tradition, concludes her lunch break with a peak into the digital environment she's artfully cultivated for herself

over the years of active and passive engagement across a variety of platforms, publishers, and people. Aside from her active and voluntary engagement with financial news, integral to her career in investment banking, or the news shared by her closest circle of friends and family, these small social media snapshots inform her conception of and facilitate her connection to international news and geopolitics. Compared to her parents, who prefer established and traditional print and broadcast media, Hyacinth's outlook seems worlds apart. She recalls a recent World Economic Forum survey results from 2022 that found that not only do 72% of users in the European Union seek their news online, but a surging number of younger users rely on social media as their first and primary source. It's a generational shift that may herald a larger societal transformation, she ponders. Can this more interconnected world remain cohesive? "It's a fast-paced environment", she smiles "Especially in the world of finance."

Her passive swiping and scrolling pauses as she hesitates over a provocative and sensational title that immediately catches her attention, heightening her sensations - and she clicks "share" with a sense of satisfaction. The news article acutely resembles the most prominent independent national news provider - sharing its sterile-yet-modern aesthetic that is favored by newsrooms the world over. As if that wasn't enough to convey a cache of credibility, the article was shared on the news feeds of several of her closest, most trusted friends. As Hyacinth returns back to her busy day feeling good about her swift, active, low-cost citizenship engagement, what she does not (yet, or may never) realize is that the news article is a carefully-tailored information piece prepared, perhaps by a local organization or a global actor specifically to deceive individuals like Hyacinth. The perfidious webpage and news article might be removed in due time, but the damage is done - to Hyacinth's



Photo: Paul Martinet

attitude or beliefs and to the attitudes and beliefs of all those she may have inadvertently exposed to it.

Let us take a step back and start at the beginning, clarifying how the digital environment impacts states and their citizens. As the impacts of digitalization on our society can be seen across various social and cultural disciplines -including economics, governance, politics, and education- it is indispensable to examine jointly the opportunities and challenges that digitalization presents to our society. Concerning opportunities, the digital revolution has expanded growth and development in the above-mentioned sectors exponentially. From a perspective of access to information and education, increased informational accessibility, producibility, and accountability contributed to a more level informational playing field, with the potential to increase the availability of educated human capital worldwide. The presence of an interconnected information environment has eroded the previously constraining temporal and geospatial limitations, causing the world to resemble a global village, as media theorist Marshal McLuhan pointed out.

If understanding and addressing disinformation is a method of remedy for the wound, then fostering a proactive approach through education and societal discourse provides for a healthy democratic immune system.

Such seismic changes in access to information, however, present challenges. The inhabitants of this global village must navigate an overflow of information that makes comprehension more demanding or even overburdening. We are at the centre of every story publishable, but it is harder for us to feel centred

among them. Equally important are the challenges of disinformation and misinformation. This pervasive development undercuts informational integrity and hinders our ability to leverage a set of common principles, facts and truths that are essential to the productive exchange of information.

While we seek answers to these challenges, the digital environment continues to grow and evolve whether or not we are prepared for what comes next. The rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence is a case in point. Digital transformation is not a distant future, but our current reality. And we better be equipped for it.

Why is addressing Disinformation only the tip of the iceberg (and how do audiences perceive persuasion)

Disinformation and misinformation present a distinct threat to the development of personal attitudes and beliefs of citizens and to the health of the democracies in which they participate. Governments, non-governmental organizations, factcheckers and other stakeholders provide an important line of defense, with innovative educational programs and information sharing practices. The inoculation theory developed by William Mcguire in the 1960s draws comparisons between the biological resilience against a virus one experiences upon exposure to a vaccine and the resilience against manipulation tactics when exposed to counter-measures. For the "inoculation process" to kick in and build resilience to persuasive messages, one must first be aware of the threat, followed by a refutational pre-emption, bolstering the tools, and motivation to actively defend positions, attitudes and values. Awareness of risks that disinformation entails, selecting credible information among a variety of sources followed by critical assessment of trustworthiness, its message and po-

tential aim, or correcting non truth with a response at times where values and beliefs that form the foundation of our democracies are at stake, can provide for resilience building on an individual and societal level. As the productive exchange of information is the lifeblood of any democratic society, immunity to a harmful virus promotes the health of the democratic corpus.

Nonetheless, identifying foreign perpetrated information narratives and highlighting their danger remains on the reactive side of action, the defense. Ultimately, it is up to every citizen and stakeholder who digests received information to proactively exercise critical thinking and act based on their judgment. Supporting a healthy information environment through media literacy and (dis)information literacy can have a decisive impact on individuals' thinking and actions by providing tools and skills that allow a more proactive citizenship and sound decision-making. If understanding and addressing disinformation is a method of remedy for the wound, then fostering a proactive approach through education and societal discourse provides for a healthy democratic immune system.

The harmful effects of disinformation are a destabilizing force within our democracies

What is at stake

A reactive focus on the effects of disinformation tends towards confrontation. Disinformation can destabilize communication among structures, diminish trust in institutions and society, and exacerbate social cleavages. In short, the harmful effects of disinformation are a destabilizing force within our democracies. Democracy, drawn from the Greek word demokratia, referring to demos (the people) and kratein (to govern), lays out the terms clearly. Individuals govern and disinformation's corrosive capacities hinder that fundamental principle. Furthermore, in the midst of varying methods of defin-

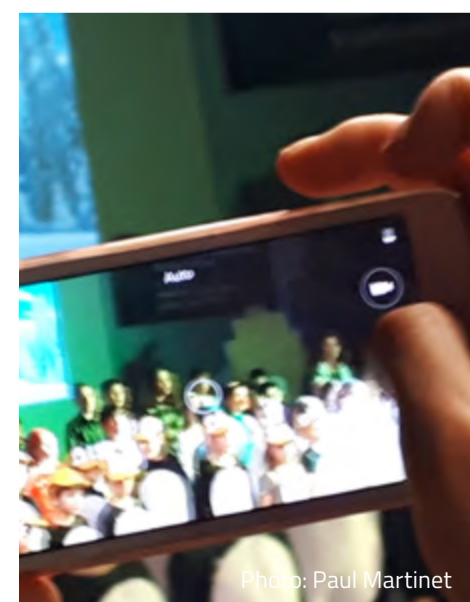


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Individual responsibility in active citizenship must be paired with a whole-of-society approach

Using the term, “democracy can be defended on the basis of reaching one or more of the following basic values and benefits: equality, freedom, moral development, public interest, private interest, societal benefit, the fulfilment of wishes and effective decisions” as outlined by David Held. Whereas disinformation in the short term strives towards creating confusion and disagreement, and in the long term destabilizes processes and cooperation among stakeholders. That is why a strong foundation for active citizenship must be predicated on championing the opportunities of informational integrity and informational engagement presented in the digital era, all while overcoming the challenges presented by it, including disinformation.

The way forward

The only path forward is if everyone sweeps their own doorstep and joins forces to address this common challenge. Individual responsibility in active citizenship must be paired with a whole-of-society approach, where

every piece of the collective puzzle contributes to the collective societal resilience. The governments and main institutional actors must build on transparency, active engagement and supported dialogue with citizens to reach societal agreement and better policies for all. Citizens, non-governmental organizations and youth associations need to challenge one another and share their needs and vision with the state, who can then enact structural change for the benefit of the demos. Media, the third branch of democracy, must continue providing verified information to the public and must increase vigilance in their work as guardians of the checks and balances, which is why free and independent media is pivotal for democracy. Academia needs to provide support through innovative and impactful research, whereas the private sector must adjust products based on a collective agreement on ethical principles. Together, all stakeholders can provide an intricate balance of knowledge, skills and credibility. Cooperation in addressing the shared challenges to amplify the shared opportunities can encourage the development of healthy and engaged active democracies in the digital era. ■

The EDDE Approach to Promoting Democratic Resilience

The European Digital Diplomacy Exchange (EDDE), a project jointly administered by the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs’ Office of Press and Public Diplomacy and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP), strives to identify strategies for building democratic resilience in the digital era through communications and engagement between governments and their citizens.

The commitment to strong communications is a commitment to a strong citizenry. A concerted rededication to this principle is all the more important in the digital era - in which the invention and proliferation of digital information communication technologies significantly, and perhaps forever, altered the model by which we conceptualize the productive exchange of information between and among individuals. Such a consequential shift necessitates a shift in institutions and their practices, like public diplomacy and public affairs in order to remain relevant and to maintain the social contract between citizens and their governments.

The European Digital Diplomacy Exchange was launched in 2017 to build and bolster the digital strategic communications and counter-disinformation capacities of partner governments in a manner that resulted in the systematized adoption of the policies, procedures, and practices necessary to leverage digital channels effectively for government

communications. Importantly, it did not aim to do so through simple instruction, but through the development of a network of practitioners that could continue to jointly develop and exchange novel solutions and best practices to common challenges that arise through operating in a fluctuating and often unfamiliar digital information landscape.

It is a testament to the program’s original vision and subsequent evolutions that, even after seven years of work, EDDE’s efforts cannot be more timely or more relevant. In many ways, the same concerns that spurred EDDE’s launch seven years ago remain concerns currently.

For some, digital technologies are a source of optimism. They have an exceptional capability to connect our world, bringing news, events, experiences, and, most importantly, people closer together than previously possible. For others, digital technologies are a source of pessimism. They have an unrivalled capacity to obscure truth, create competing realities, and fracture communities along ideological, political, and social cleavages.

EDDE believes that both can be right simultaneously, but that all of us, as government communicators, have a critical role in determining whether digital communications technologies become something beneficial or detrimental to democratic resilience globally.

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