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The democratic process depends fundamentally upon access to objective information, a fair and unbiased press and media, political candidates and leaders speaking truthfully, and social norms privileging evidence, expertise, and rational decision-making. However, recent major elections have been plagued by the presence of misinformation and accusations of election interference, perpetrated by domestic and foreign parties alike. As a result, the basic foundations of democracy have been shaken to their core as misinformation and fearmongering are used to manipulate electoral processes. This panel considers how we have arrived at this troubling point and how we might escape from it.

### **How does misinformation, disinformation, and election interference differ from traditional political campaigning?**

Whereas misinformation simply refers to false information, disinformation refers to false information that is deliberately spread with the intent to mislead an audience. While both have been present in elections for decades, they are now being used at a much larger scale by both domestic and foreign actors to interfere in elections. In the U.S., this rise in interference can be attributed to a growing reliance on social media as a news source, as well as the effect of heightened political polarization allowing claims about political rivals to be received, and repeated, without critical or appropriate scrutiny. Misinformation and disinformation campaigns are one of four ways that election interference typically occurs. First, an actor can interfere with an election by attacking the election infrastructure itself. This includes tactics such as penetrating the voting system and the voter databases. Second, it can also be accomplished by attacking a political campaign – for example, by leaking confidential emails to the public. Third, an actor can interfere with an election by disrupting state institutions or media organizations to create chaos. Fourth, as discussed above, misinformation and disinformation can be mobilized as strategic tools to affect electoral processes.

Misinformation and disinformation campaigns have not affected all democracies equally. In contrast to the U.S., for example, Japan has not been significantly affected by misinformation or disinformation. There have been no documented incidents of foreign interference in Japanese elections in recent years. This is partly because elections in Japan are highly regulated under the Public Office Election Act which dates back to the 1950s and [severely limits](#) what parties, candidates, and individuals can do during an election campaign.

### **Is election interference a form of digitalized warfare, as some commentators are suggesting?**

Foreign actors can create and spread disinformation online to influence election outcomes. In this sense, election interference can be understood as a new, digitalized form of warfare intended to weaken political rivals in various ways. For instance, it can be used to suppress a particular block of voter turnout to increase the chances of a certain candidate winning. It can also be a tactic to create division, to breed distrust, and to undermine confidence in democratic institutions and in the electoral process. For example, [Russia interfered with the 2016 U.S. election](#) by spreading disinformation on Facebook, so as to polarize and divide the U.S. and to undermine its position on the global stage.

The use of misinformation and disinformation to interfere with elections is a multidimensional issue. From one perspective, because most misinformation and disinformation is now distributed online, it is a cyber security issue. At the same time, it is a psychological issue, because of how it plays on, and manipulates, the emotions and group dynamics that are deeply-rooted in the psyche of nations and their citizens. Misinformation and disinformation campaigns do not rely on rational arguments per se, but rather on emotive ones. As such, they cannot easily be countered by facts or statistics, so simply debunking misinformation may be ineffective because it does not affect the emotional motivations driving the behavior of a citizen. For this reason, overcoming this problem is also educational issue. Education in media literacy can improve people's ability to understand how mass communication works and how misinformation and disinformation are used strategically by others. Additionally, it is a technological issue, because of the importance that social media algorithms and artificial intelligence have in amplifying misinformation and disinformation. Lastly, it is a democratic issue. Free speech is a primary concern to many people, particularly to Americans. This includes the right to share opinions and theories, which makes it difficult for democratic governments to control the spread of misinformation and disinformation. But if it is not controlled somehow, it can undermine the democratic process.

### **Where are misinformation and disinformation campaigns targeting U.S. elections coming from?**

There is a tendency to focus on foreign interference in elections, particularly since the 2016 U.S. election, but domestic sources are also creating, promoting, and amplifying misinformation and disinformation, [particularly with regards to the 2020 election](#). For example, [Donald Trump has used misinformation and disinformation](#) to shed doubt on the validity of mail-in ballots, to undermine confidence in the electoral process, and to convince people that the election result is illegitimate. Because many people are less skeptical of domestic sources, it can be particularly difficult to determine whether information originating domestically is true.

In Japan, citizens are less susceptible to this kind of interference – domestic and foreign. This is partly due to the stability of their political system, since, apart from a few brief interludes, the Liberal Democratic Party has been in government in Japan since 1955. Additionally, there are no significant ideological ruptures among voting demographics in Japan, which makes it difficult to influence elections there through attempts at polarizing voting blocs. Finally, the emotionality towards politics that misinformation and disinformation campaigns employ, is not, for the most part, present in Japan. This contrasts with the high levels of political

polarization in the U.S. which make American elections an easier target for both domestic and foreign actors to manipulate.

### **What are governments doing to combat misinformation and disinformation campaigns?**

In light of the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election, the U.S. government took several measures to protect the 2020 election from foreign interference. In 2017, election infrastructure was designated as [critical infrastructure](#), and in 2018, the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) was established. The same year, Donald Trump signed an [executive order](#) to impose sanctions in the event of foreign interference in U.S. elections. Leading up to the 2020 election, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) informed social media [platforms such as Facebook of fake accounts](#) created by Russian operatives. The NSA and its military cyber operators also targeted Russian spies and undertook cyber campaigns against them. The U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) [briefed candidates](#), parties, and congressional intelligence committees. Additionally, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) launched a campaign called [#PROTECT2020](#) to improve media literacy and to teach voters how to identify misinformation. The full extent of measures taken by security agencies, however, is unknown because much of their work is classified. Some governments, [like the Finland government](#), have taken it a step further and invested in media literacy throughout the educational system, but the U.S. government has not yet taken this step.

The more time a government takes to address misinformation and disinformation campaigns, the more people these campaigns reach, and the more credibility they can garner. It is therefore important to be proactive as early as possible. Governments (and technology companies) should get in the habit of anticipating topics such as elections and protests, as these events are likely to be targets of disinformation, and so governments should prepare to respond to attempts at (online) manipulations immediately. Though election interference has not yet been a problem in Japan, the government has still begun to [consider measures](#) to combat possible misinformation and disinformation in the future.

### **Are democratic societies resilient enough to withstand these campaigns?**

The amount of information available to the electorate, and the facility with which it can access that information, has never been higher. When the electorate is exposed to an abundance of misinformation or disinformation disguised as information, it is not able to make fully informed voting decisions. Thus, misinformation and disinformation campaigns undermine democracy. On social media, the “news” to which a user is exposed is built by algorithms. These algorithms learn from what users have liked in the past, making it easy to play to their biases. The U.S. is an increasingly politically polarized country which makes Americans particularly susceptible to what is called ‘confirmation bias’: the tendency to believe information that confirms your beliefs, whether or not it is true. Ingrained biases make voters susceptible to misinformation and disinformation campaigns that use flawed logic to appeal to their deep-seated emotions and thought patterns. Countries that rely less on social media as a news source are less vulnerable to these campaigns. While [a study conducted in 2018](#) found that around 43% of Americans use Facebook as a news source, Japanese people still get most of their information about politics from traditional mass media. Traditional news sources are not driven by algorithms, which makes them inherently more resilient when dealing with misinformation and disinformation.

To improve the resilience of democratic societies, the media plays an important role in debunking conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation and disinformation. This year, [Facebook banned political advertisements](#) in the week leading up to election day in the U.S. and put warning labels on or removed content seeking to undermine the election. It also prevented candidates from declaring victory before the outcome had been verified. However, Facebook does not fact-check politicians, even when they

make false claims. Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, has similar policies. It has [third party fact-checkers](#), and it labels false or misleading content and makes it harder to find. But like Facebook, it does not fact-check politicians. Twitter, on the other hand, labels any content that is misleading and will not spread it. For example, Twitter put warning labels on several of [Donald Trump's tweets](#) regarding the election. It also takes down content that violates its [civic integrity policy](#), especially if it seeks to undermine the peaceful transfer of power. YouTube [removes posts that are false or misleading](#) about key election information, such as where to vote. However, misinformation and disinformation are harder to control on YouTube because a lot of its content is livestreamed. Tik-Tok entered into [fact-checking partnerships](#) and aims to block manipulated content. Pinterest [banned all political advertising](#) in 2018.

Though some form of global governance would be helpful in combatting misinformation and disinformation campaigns, an international convention or treaty is unlikely to happen anytime soon. It is possible, however, that some countries will collaborate to set up comparable regulatory structures to manage these campaigns.

### Recommendations for Policy Makers

1. Compare and contrast the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, and then work with the government to develop a societal approach to misinformation and disinformation in relation to elections.
2. Make media literacy an integrated part of education, starting at a young age, to promote individual responsibility and ensure that young people have the skills to be able to evaluate information and make reasonable choices based on that information.
3. Work with allies across borders to create a harmonized regulatory approach to dealing with global companies, as well as an international bill addressing misinformation and disinformation.

