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Digital Disinformation Trends in Latin America:
Organisation, Goals, and Policy Pushback

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DIGITAL COOPERATION WITH GLOBAL PARTNERS POLICY STUDY

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About the Digital Transformation Lab (DigiTraL)

GIGA's Digital Transformation Lab (DigiTraL) is funded by the Federal Foreign Office and analyses the political drivers and real-world consequences of the digital transformation taking place around the world. The Global South in particular is an important actor in and shaper of this transformation. In the first phase (2021-2023) of the project, the focus was on digital diplomacy and on analysing the question of what new opportunities, challenges and instruments the digital transformation offers for German foreign policy. The second phase (2024-2025) concentrates on analysing the opportunities that digitalisation offers for Germany's cooperation with global partners. Central questions include: Where do individual countries and regions in the Global South stand with regards to digitalization? Where are the points of contact for (tech) partnerships with Germany? Where are new developments arising (e.g. emerging threats from digital disinformation, related reactions, and interventions in the Global South)? What cooperative relationships exist in the field of digitalization in the Global South, and how can the German government and other actors in Germany best respond to this? The current phase of DigiTraL is headed by Dr. Iris Wieczorek, Senior Research Fellow at the GIGA Institute for Asian Studies.
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Abstract

The topic of digital disinformation in Latin America has gained significant traction in recent decades as polarisation increases in the region, trust in institutions erodes, and the arrival of digital propaganda to countries including Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica, and Mexico threatens the democratic dialogue. This report provides a general overview of the trends of digital disinformation in Latin America, focusing on five country case studies facing digital disinformation campaigns in the last several years: Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. The study analyses in depth in each case the level of organisation of digital disinformation campaigns, their goals and means, and finally, the level of government pushback in each country. The findings highlight the importance of fostering fact-checking initiatives from civil society, strengthening trust in media, increasing pressure on social media platforms, and escalating the scrutiny of digital marketing companies and political parties as well as punishing them for their engagement in disinformation campaigns. The final section provides some policy recommendations as well as ideas for possible collaboration partners between Germany / the European Union and Latin America on this topic.

Policy Recommendations

- Establish formal cooperation channels between the EU and Latin American institutions – particularly judiciary and electoral institutions – to discuss a code of conduct vis-à-vis disinformation campaigns similar to the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022). This could provide a starting point for the judiciary in Latin America to help actors participating in elections to self-regulate, identify violations, and build on the policy pathways against disinformation already in place in the region, such as in Argentina and Costa Rica.
- Establish cooperation between the EU/German legislative branches and Latin American legislative branches to promote the creation of aligned regulations that increase scrutiny on new actors of disinformation – digital marketing companies and analysts, for example – to establish a legal backbone to prosecute disinformation actors, including political parties that break current norms on fair campaigning. The European Commission's Defence of Democracy Package for 2023 could serve as a backdrop for cooperation, especially in countries that have already developed honest legislative proposals to combat digital disinformation, such as Brazil.
- Provide technical and economic assistance through the "digitalisation and democracy" sections of the EU Global Gateway Initiative to increase the capacity of electoral bodies and courts to identify, track, and prosecute disinformation campaigns during elections. This includes not only the provision of digital literacy training for staff and the population but also

training prosecutors and other actors of law and order on techniques and technologies to identify the source of disinformation campaigns. As a model for support, the Defence of Democracy Package (2023) could be used.

- Promote the creation of cooperation channels between Latin American and European fact-checking initiatives and independent media to restore the "information order." This includes increasing the access of independent media to non-political funding and the protection of journalists and other information-providing institutions from political harassment and state-sponsored disinformation. The EU's European Media Freedom Act of 2024 provides a good legal framework for cooperation with other countries to strengthen the independence and protection of the press. Creating alliances between fact-checking institutions in Europe and those in Latin America could also provide not only more technical support to Latin American fact-checkers but also increased legitimacy and institutional support to those platforms that have been functioning primarily through independent initiatives by NGOs and journalists.
- Promote cooperation between Germany/the EU and Latin American countries to push social media platforms to reduce channels of disinformation. Legislative but also diplomatic coordination to pressure social media companies such as Meta or X to reduce channels for spreading disinformation – as seen in the sections on Venezuela and Brazil – can increase the chances of receiving responses from these platforms, particularly when speaking of smaller Latin American countries that are just starting to see the arrival of organised disinformation such as Costa Rica.

Outline

1 Disinformation Trends in Latin America: A Region with "Devaluated Information"

The issue of a disinformed society has always been present in Latin America and has been a major challenge in the democratic development of the countries in the region. The arrival of digital media – particularly social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), YouTube, WhatsApp, etc. – has been, at least in the political discourse, considered a major catalyst of disinformation, as it provides an un-mediated and high-choice information environment (Garrett 2019). Social media usage has been positively associated with exposure to political misinformation (Jones-Jang et al. 2021).

Disinformation can be defined as the intentional spread of false information with the goal of manipulating public opinion or causing harm (Lazer et al. 2018). Therefore, it does not refer to unintentional spreading of rumours – that would be defined as misinformation – but is part of a political project (Santana and Mitozo 2024).

Even if disinformation has always existed, through social media false content tends to spread faster and more effectively, particularly in regard to political issues (Aguila Sánchez and Pereyra-Zamora 2022; Peters et al. 2022). These social media spaces can expose citizens to false information, provocative messages, and insults, which can reinforce radicalism and partisanship (Raderstof and Camilleri 2019). Studies from Latin America show that people who consistently use social media tend to be more tolerant and supportive of democracy in theory but less satisfied with their own country's democracy relative to people that do not consistently use social media (Lupu et al. 2020: 166).

Santana and Mitozo (2024) argue that the arrival of social media has permeated democracies, producing "an informational disorder" characterised by the institutionalisation of falsehood and the promotion to high places of power of individuals that brand themselves as superheroes through digital social media use (p. 89).

Nevertheless, despite the amount of policy attention that social media has created as a "global threat to democracy" (Shao et al. 2018), there has been no solid evidence from academic studies that the presence of social media influences the accuracy of citizens' beliefs, whether in developed markets such as the US (Garrett 2019) or in developing markets (Valenzuela et al. 2024). This might have to do with the fact that the acceptance of disinformation is not due to a latent irrationality in the population but catalysed by the context the disinformation is produced in (Siles González et al. 2021).

This contextual variables for disinformation have been heavily discussed in academia. According to Zimmerman and Kohring (2020), countries with high restrictions on freedom of press, low trust in government institutions, and systematic disinformation tend to catalyse the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns.

As disinformation tends to have a political objective, it is unsurprising that politicians and state actors are one of the principal actors engaging in it. Disinformation gives political players the capacity to contact their audience and the power to influence their views, harass opponents, and in the worst cases, attack human right supporters and journalists, something known as "computational propaganda" (Lewis and Marwick 2017; Woolley et al. 2018). Particularly regarding state-sponsored propaganda, disinformation can also be used to support policy-dismantling measures and to disguise or obfuscate consequences of policy decisions by creating confusion and division (Santana and Mitozo 2024).

The compilation by Freelon and Wells (2020) shows that disinformation mostly originates from governments and political parties as a way to sway citizens' decisions during elections;

this aligns with the fact that states are one of the few actors with enough resources, personnel, and expertise to carry out organised cyber operations (Ingram 2020). This is understood by the public in the world: according to the Digital News Report of 2020, 40 per cent of the people worldwide are concerned about disinformation coming from the government, politicians, and political parties (Newman et al. 2020); that statistic is 10 per cent higher in the Latin American countries studied in the report.

The rise of digital disinformation in Latin America is obvious. Since 2012 digital disinformation campaigns have been carried out with the help of bots and organised trolls in major democratic countries such as Argentina (Ceron et al. 2021; Crettaz 2019; Echeverría et al. 2024; Lupu et al. 2020; Suárez 2022), Brazil (Albuquerque and Matos 2022; Ceron et al. 2021; Ozawa et al. 2023; Santana and Mitozo 2024, 2024; Santos 2021), and Mexico (Aguila Sánchez and Pereyra-Zamora 2022; Echeverría 2023; Iida et al. 2024; Lupu et al. 2020; Molina 2022; Valenzuela et al. 2024), particularly in times of elections and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Countries in the region that have devolved into more populist/authoritarian regimes have also harnessed the digital media for disinformation, as seen in the cases of Cuba (Morales et al. 2023; Pérez and Gámiz 2024), Venezuela under Maduro (Beaton 2021; Berwick 2024; Torrealba and Viloria 2024), and El Salvador under Bukele (Luna 2019; Lupu et al. 2020). These governments rely on both legacy and digital media to discredit opponents – political opposition, civil society organisations, independent media – legitimise their rule, shift blame on policy mistakes, and enforce populist narratives (Fukuyama 2022).

The rise in digital disinformation – and the severity of its impact – is not equal across Latin American countries, nor is it directly correlated to access to the internet. In Latin America, the share of social media usage varies among countries, and it is more common in the affluent Southern Cone than in relatively poor Central America, where levels of mobile phone ownership and home internet access are lower (Lupu et al. 2020: 162). Countries with extremely high levels of internet access in the region such as Uruguay and Costa Rica have seen relatively timid and unorganised outbreaks of disinformation campaigns in recent years, while countries with low or even deteriorating access to internet and purchasing power (such as Venezuela and Nicaragua) have seen the rise of organised bot and troll armies with government support and digital disinformation campaigns.

As Garret (2019) and Valenzuela et al. (2024) write, only access to social media does not seem to equate to increased susceptibility to disinformation.

What, then, promotes digital disinformation if not the means through which it is transmitted? Some variables that heavily influence the presence of disinformation include the public's general trust in institutions (Humprecht et al. 2020; Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero 2014), the level of polarisation in society (Barberá 2020; Humprecht et al. 2020; Lupu et al. 2020; Ribeiro et al. 2017), and the presence of populist tactics in politics (Humprecht et al. 2020). All these variables feed into and are fed by digital disinformation, and all three variables are solidly present in major Latin American countries.

Under democratic theory, useful information is vital for electoral decision-making, and the free exchange of information is necessary in order for the people both to make decisions based on prospective results and to learn from the results of previous decisions in order to adjust their reasoning for the next election (Dahl 2000; Santos 2021; Strömbäck 2005). The right to access information from different sources is one of the fundamental rights in democracies and a necessary piece for its correct functioning, lest they be susceptible to framing (ibidem).

Downs (1957) argues that information uncertainty – such as that created in environments with low trust in institutions – leaves voters susceptible to dubious information. This means that trust in the institutions that provide information and handle the elections becomes crucial (Przeworski 2019). In Latin America, years of poor governance and high corruption has eroded the trust in democratic institutions, making the trust of it low in the region, and even lower among social media users (Lupu et al. 2020).

Ensuring the flow of trustworthy information has in Western countries traditionally been the job of the press, which has been considered as an independent actor from political forces, under what Schudson (2001) called "the objectivity norm." Under an ideal democratic model, misinformation and disinformation would be weeded out and checked by information produced professionally by the independent press, giving the population a safe anchor of information to rely on. Nevertheless, Latin American press does not enjoy the reputation of objectivity, as state media is considered under political pressure by politicians due to its dependence on government budgets (see for example: Echeverría 2023), while private media has been characterised as acting in collusion with political and economic forces in several countries of the region (Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero 2014).

The press in Latin America has always struggled to keep itself afloat economically, largely relying on public funding and government contracts to survive. Furthermore, the transition to digital media has only further eroded the viability of professional journalism – not only in Latin America but around the world; professional journalism has often been replaced by more entertainment-based content and attention-seeking news, which is easier to monetise (O'Malley et al. 2014). For this reason, only 19 per cent of people in major Latin American countries believe media to be independent from political influence (Suárez 2022), and media trust fell an average of 14 per cent in Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina between 2017 and 2024, to 34.75 per cent (Newman et al. 2017, 2024). In all cases, trust in media fell, with Brazil losing 17 per cent in media trust in that period.

Furthermore, with the arrival of computational propaganda, the amount of unreliable information has multiplied; knowledge of the voters' wishes and desires being used to manipulate debates becomes a threat to democratic dialogue (Santos 2021: 431). Polarisation has been associated in recent research with the creation of echo chambers, which then catalyse the propagation of disinformation among like-minded people (Barberá 2020; Ribeiro et al. 2017). Polarisation makes citizens less willing to engage with their political counterparts, and more susceptible to accepting information uncritically if it aligns with their views. The creation of these echo chambers, which insulate extremists and ideological content from critical rebuttal, are considered a major threat to one of the democratic process of deliberation (Cinelli et al. 2021).

Polarisation is a major issue in Latin American politics, the problem only having increased in the last decade. Looking at the V-Dem indicator for societal polarisation in 2023, most Latin American and Caribbean countries covered by the index (19) scored as countries showing "serious societal polarisation," with five scoring as "moderately polarised" and only one scoring high enough to be considered only polarised on key issues (V-Dem dataset 2024). The trend has also been towards greater polarisation, as average regional scores on polarisation have worsened between 2012 and 2023. We see the same trend towards polarisation in several OECD countries, so it is not exclusive to Latin America, but the region's average score is worse than those of OECD countries by a significant margin.

Finally, populism has generally been considered a major catalyst of polarisation (Flew 2021), disinformation (Suárez 2022; Waisbord 2018), discreditation of legitimate institutions (Suárez 2022) and, of course, institutional dismantling (Curato and Fossati 2020). Populism goes hand in hand with disinformation, because disinformation is a necessary tool to boost polarisation and suspicion, contributing to the "us"-vs.-"them" mentality characteristic of populist discourses (Echeverría et al. 2024; Flew 2021; Suárez 2022). In Latin America, populist leaders have been known to go out of their way to discredit discerning voices, including official institutions, but particularly independent media (Amado 2016). Populism is also linked to institutional erosion, as populist government legitimation does not come from its adherence to the rule of law and the protection of its citizens (Sargent 2008) but from executing "the will of the people," underlining the connection between the leader and the voters (de la Torre 2016).

Latin America has seen a rise in populist leaders since the early 2000s, with populism from the left embodied in the examples of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Alberto Fernández in Argentina, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, as well as right-wing populists such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Álvaro Uribe in Colombia, and most recently Nayib Bukele in El Salvador (Suárez 2022). This is unsurprising: the origins of populism are, to authors such as Panizza (2005), inherently linked to the Latin American context starting in the 1930s and ending in the 1960s, with the arrival of presidents such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (Panizza 2005).

The mix of the three variables – polarisation, lack of trust in media, and high incidence of populist leaders and parties – creates the perfect environment for digital disinformation to proliferate in Latin America. Nevertheless, even as many countries in Latin America had been suffering from disinformation, there are significant differences between them on three general dimensions: (1) the level of organisation of disinformation campaigns, (2) the goals and means of the disinformation campaigns, and (3) the amount of government pushback against them. These are three variables which will determine the final effect of disinformation on the currently polarised democracies in the region.

Disinformation is by nature organised, as it is an intentional dissemination of false information to sway public opinion or cause harm, but the level of organisation of such campaigns varies greatly, from isolated issue-groups creating disinformation campaigns against a specific government policy, to fully institutionalised and publicly funded disinformation offices such as the Brazilian "Office of Hatred" (OOH) under Jair Bolsonaro (Santana and Mitozo 2024), the initiatives to fight "infodemics" in Argentina under Fernández (Echeverría et al. 2024), and the "Troll Army of the Revolution" under Nicolás Maduro (Puyosa 2021). The higher the level of organisation and the more legitimate the source of it, the higher the likelihood the campaign will succeed in swaying public opinion and promoting a disinformation ecosystem.

The goals of the disinformation campaign are also relevant. Some political parties rely on disinformation to delegitimise their opponents during election campaigns, known as "political lynching" or "political beating," as has been traditionally the case in Mexico (Echeverría 2023). Nevertheless, direct attacks on democratic institutions have not been the focus of digital discourse. In other contexts, the goal of the disinformation campaigns is not only to delegitimise the opponent, but also to cast doubt on the reliability of the democratic institutions and processes, as was the case in both the election campaigns and presidency of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. During his presidency, Bolsonaro's apparatus used digital disinformation as a tool to

seize and delegitimise institutions to concentrate power around himself, which opened the door to undemocratic events such as the events of 8 January 2023 in Brazil.

Finally, the level of government pushback to digital disinformation can represent a key inhibitor or catalyser of the phenomenon. Legislative and judicial responses to digital disinformation in certain countries have been significant – in Brazil, they helped tame the disinformation campaigns during Bolsonaro's term (Albuquerque and Matos 2022; Santana and Mitozo 2024; Santos 2021). Meanwhile, countries such as Mexico have little appetite for fighting digital disinformation because it is considered – at least tacitly – part of the political toolset during election campaigns (Echeverría 2023). Finally, it is also possible for public institutions to join in on the disinformation spree and even quash any attempts at fact-checking by the independent media, as has been the case in backslid democracies including Venezuela (Beaton 2021).

The goal of this study is to understand in depth, via these three dimensions, digital disinformation as a threat throughout Latin America. The first chapter composes the theoretical foundations and the general trend in the region. The following chapters will cover five countries with different levels of digital disinformation: Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. On the basis of these cases, the threats of digital disinformation in the region will be explained, the tactics of digital disinformation will be classified, and policy responses across countries to the phenomenon will be gathered. The final chapter will provide policy recommendations for cooperation opportunities between Latin American states and the European Union to fight digital disinformation.

2 Venezuela: State-Sponsored Disinformation with Regional Reach

Level of organisation: high (state-sponsored and institutionalised)
Goals and means: social control and suppression of informational channels; propaganda; virtual beatings and harassment campaigns against dissidents, media, and civil society; cyberwarfare tactics; organised cyber-troops; censorship
Pushback: civil society and independent media, social media platforms

The Venezuelan case, particularly since the arrival of Nicolás Maduro to the presidency (2013–present) is the most extreme regional representative of a disinformation ecosystem orchestrated by a government apparatus. Venezuela is currently one of the countries with the highest levels of polarisation (V-Dem dataset 2024) and the lowest trust in government institutions and printed media – 19 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively, according to Latinobarómetro 2025). The deterioration of information ecosystems in Venezuela started with the arrival of President Hugo Chávez Frías (1999–2013), but it completely broke down with the arrival of Nicolás Maduro.

As of 1998 Venezuela had enjoyed of a healthy private informational environment composed of a concurrence of newspapers (124), radio stations (375), and TV media channels (14), with which the Venezuelan government worked under a cordial agreement that the media had the duty to expose government/politicians' mismanagement and corruption (Torrealba and Viloria 2024). However, the state media suffered from lack of funding and outdated technology, with funding to the public media sector at less than 1 per cent of the GDP at the time (ibidem). In this context, the media became a major whistleblower that helped undermine the legitimacy

of the mainstream political parties, paving the way for outsiders to challenge the political duopoly that Democratic Action (Acción Democrática, AD) and the Social Christian Party (Partido Socialcristiano, COPEI) enjoyed.

The arrival to power of Hugo Chávez Frías – a political outsider and antagonistic figure, particularly towards the private sector – heralded Venezuela's informational ecosystem beginning to suffer from increasing government encroachment, as part of the administration's objective of achieving "communicational hegemony," in the words of the Ministry of Communication (Torrealba and Viloria 2024). During the years of the Chávez administration, he consolidated power under the executive branch and obtained control over the informational landscape and paved the way for the use of social media as a tool of social control, from which Maduro was later able to profit (Beaton 2021).

Chávez increased the levels of funding for national media (Puyosa 2021) and flooded the informational diet of Venezuelans with daily presidential messages in his "aló presidente" broadcasts, during which he denigrated and intimidated critical media outlets with populistic narratives, withdrawing public advertising to them to defund them (Ozawa et al. 2023; Suárez 2022; Torrealba and Viloria 2024). During his administration, the telecom company CANTV was nationalised (Puyosa 2021), and public media channels were funded and created to function as propaganda, such as TeleSur (Puyosa 2021).

He also sewed the initial institutional fabric that allowed for an increase in censorship, such as the 2004 law on social responsibility of broadcasting (RESORTE) – which would be reformed in 2010 to include the internet – the monopolisation of the imports and distribution of printing paper to reduce circulation of printed newspapers critical of his government, and the active withdrawal of broadcasting licences to particular TV and radio channels, the most important example being the TV channel RCTV in 2007 and 36 radio stations in 2009 (Puyosa 2021; Torrealba and Viloria 2024).

Nevertheless, it was the arrival of Maduro to power which completely brought full digital authoritarianism into the Venezuelan context through online disinformation campaigns, censorship, surveillance, internet shutdowns, phishing attacks, and online persecution (Beaton 2021).

Maduro took the helm of a country that was weakened by years of economic mismanagement under Chávez as well as plummeting international oil prices, high levels of insecurity, the presence of disorganised crime and violence in the country, and a political opposition much better organised than the one Chávez faced in 2006 (Renzullo N 2024). Furthermore, Maduro, unlike Chávez, was not popular among the population, which further undermined his capacity to rule without obstruction. After he came to power, a set of popular protests started in 2014, which were repeated from 2015 to 2018, and from 2019 to 2021 as his government responded with repression to demands for democratisation (Beaton 2021).

For this reason, Maduro's regime focused its efforts on crafting an apparatus of repression capable of suppressing popular uprisings, producing a system of social control that would quash protests and misinform citizens regarding the situation in the country, which led to increasing uncertainty (Beaton 2021). The digital sphere, used more every day by Venezuelans due to the communicational hegemony achieved by the Chávez administration on mainstream media and press, would become a key component of that apparatus, and digital freedoms were gradually curtailed.

Some practices of Chávez were continued by Maduro: he continued purchasing and nationalising critical news outlets and channels – among the most important were the TV channel

Globovisión and the newspapers *El Universal* and *Últimas Noticias*; he continued the practice of closing radio stations – around 300 radio stations were closed between 2013 and 2022; and he enacted new legislation "against hatred" that criminalised "hate speech" with prison for up to 20 years and allowed the blockage of websites (Torrealba and Viloria 2024). Nevertheless, this was also enhanced by a coordinated strategy of digital disinformation with armies of bots and hired trolls, with multiple troops of around 500 hundred people sometimes with formal training in disinformation tactics (Bradshaw and Howard 2021).

Coordinated by the Ministry of Communications and the Ministry of Interior, the Venezuelan government under Maduro deploys trolls and bots in social media – particularly on X (formerly Twitter) – to share pro-government propaganda and artificially boost its narrative, harass political opponents and dissidents, and influence online discussions (Beaton 2021; Berwick 2024; Puyosa 2021). The Venezuelan government was a pioneer in the use of bots as far back as 2010. Maduro's official Twitter handle, for example, had around 6,000 bot accounts that shared his content systematically, making him the third-most retweeted public figure in 2014 (Beaton 2021).

The full strategy of digital disinformation of the Venezuelan government became known in 2017 through a leaked document written by the Ministry of Interior and Justice titled "The Bolivarian Revolution's Troll Army" (Puyosa 2021). Focused on Twitter again, it explained that troll armies would be divided into five teams: (1) pro-government, (2) neutrals, (3) opponents, (4) distractions, and (5) fake news. The first two teams oversaw the direction of the online debate on political topics. As part of the propaganda strategy, the Ministry of Communications would provide the content through a "hashtag of the day" on its Twitter account, which would then be shared by anonymous accounts, boosting the hashtag (Berwick 2024). For example, in 2020, hundreds of trending hashtags came out of the Ministry and were retweeted by bots but also hired troll accounts, making the monitoring functions of Twitter less capable of detecting the artificial boosting, as the accounts exhibited human behaviour (Berwick 2024; Torrealba and Viloria 2024). A study by Probox showed that 90 per cent of 200 million tweets on political issues in the Venezuelan twitter were boosted by the Ministry (Marin and Da Silva 2023).

Another duty of theirs included promoting misinformative narratives exaggerating the importance of the American sanctions enacted on Venezuela by the US from 2017 to 2019, spreading conspiracies about external coup attempts and assassination attempts on Nicolás Maduro, praising government policies, and executing smear campaigns on dissident institutions, individuals, and politicians to erode their legitimacy and promote an environment of informational uncertainty (Beaton 2021; Torrealba and Viloria 2024).

The opponents team oversaw infiltrating opposition social media groups and creating division among the different factions, making any alternative to Maduro's regime seem inviable (Puyosa 2021). In this category we could also include the use of accounts to impersonate opposition figures and portray them as liars and tricksters (Torrealba and Viloria 2024). The final two teams oversaw deviating online discussions towards non-political topics. Some examples include the sharing of images of Venezuelans enjoying the beach during times of protests to portray an image of peace to audiences (Beaton 2021).

The troll armies are composed of Venezuelan citizens that share the government propaganda in exchange for monetary compensation, and they also include public workers from different ministries forced to also engage in troll activity. The Digital Forensics Research Laboratory (DFR Lab) found that the government would put the names of "patriotic tweeters" that achieved the daily sharing quota into a raffle to receive two or three US dollars during elections,

the equivalent of a minimum wage (Puyosa 2021). These bad actors used social media to suppress information and images from the 2014 protests and to keep the population uncertain regarding the situation of the country, in addition to discrediting protesters by creating false claims and images portraying the demonstrations as violent (Beaton 2021).

These disinformation and algorithmic suppression campaigns were accompanied by increasing surveillance and persecution of dissidents in social media. The most common surveillance tactic was the creation of the "Card of the Fatherland" (Carnet de la Patria), used to provide economic assistance to Venezuelans but also to survey purchases, medicine usage, and social media and voting behaviour, as well as to collect other sensitive data from citizens such as their location and other basic information about their lives (Beaton 2021; Puyosa 2021). In the words of Beaton (2021), "the Fatherland Card thus creates a centralised database that allows the regime to access citizens' online activity without needing to monitor each social media platform individually, increasing the regime's social media surveillance capability" (p. 35). Furthermore, this card was used to blackmail public workers and people dependent on government assistance to go to pro-government rallies and vote for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV) – Maduro's party – either with the promise of economic bonuses or under threat of losing their jobs (Puyosa 2021).

The government supported Maduro's disinformation campaigns with authoritarian tactics such as limiting access to the internet for citizens through electrical blackouts and blocking websites that criticise the government, phishing attacks and Domain Name System (DNS) poisoning attacks to identify dissidents and steal their information, and the persecution – and sometimes even execution – of individuals that criticise the government online.

The Venezuelan government has consistently used the deteriorating electricity and internet infrastructure to curtail citizens' access to their only source of information not influenced by the state. In Venezuela, access to electricity declined significantly between 2014 and 2019, with blackouts and electricity-shedding measures affecting most of the country. The city of Caracas, heavily prioritised due to its political and economic importance, also started suffering electricity issues, the most severe being the national-level blackout of March 2019, which lasted for months in several of the country's states.

These infrastructure-based restrictions were accompanied by a systematic blocking of websites by the Venezuelan telecommunications agency CONATEL: in 2014 alone there were 1,000 sites blocked by the Venezuelan government for being critical of the government. Newspaper websites that provided coordination capacity to the opposition were blocked, in addition to social media channels and websites belonging to individuals or organisations documenting human rights abuses during the protests (Beaton 2021). This practice was repeated in the years following, with opposition newspapers and news online channels, streaming services, and even social media pages of dissidents being blocked by the government to eliminate access to information and cripple coordination efforts of opposition leaders to the population (Beaton 2021; Puyosa 2021). The internet freedom monitor Netblocks identified 40 cases of temporary blockage of social media sites during 2019 (Berwick 2024).

Beyond blocking sites, starting in 2015 the government's cyberwarfare tactics against online media became more sophisticated: for example, the state executed 10 DDoS attacks between March and June 2017 against media outlets, in some cases critically damaging their infrastructure and forcing them temporarily offline (Beaton 2021). Later in 2019, the government would go further and engage in phishing attacks through DNS poisoning of opposition website URLs, redirecting dissidents to fake websites created by the government aimed at

stealing their information, the most notable example being the poisoning of the URL for the website "VoluntariosxVenezuela," created by the opposition in 2019 to gather recruits and provide humanitarian aid to Venezuelans (Beaton 2021; Puyosa 2021).

Finally, it is important to understand that the entire government apparatus, including the judiciary, was weaponised, carrying out persecution campaigns of citizens that posted against the government on social media, sometimes resulting in not only their arrest but also their execution (Beaton 2021). Some examples include the arrest of Pedro Jaimes Corrillo in 2019 for sharing the route of Maduro's presidential plane on Twitter; the 2014 doxxing of 27 opposition activists on Twitter by Delcy Rodriguez, the communication minister at the time; and the arrest in October 2014 of six citizens for propagating images and memes about the death of a parliamentarian of the PSUV.

With the mainstream media completely co-opted by the Venezuelan state and the judiciary and legislative branch also under its control, the only two actors that could exert pushback were the platforms and the independent online media. For example, Twitter clamped down on Maduro's bot army in January 2019, deleting almost 1,200 bot accounts associated with Venezuelan state-backed disinformation and propaganda campaigns (Beaton 2021; Berwick 2024). Also, particularly after 2014, the creation of fact-checking initiatives grew significantly, with examples such as Cocuyo Chequea, Venezuela Verifica, Cazadores de Fake News, and Cotejo being a few of them (Moreno Gil et al. 2021).

3 Argentina: Populism and Smear Campaigns

Level of organisation: medium (temporary cyber-troops during election campaigns, disinformation from state institutions during crises)
Goals and means: propaganda; virtual beatings and harassment campaigns against political opponents, media, and civil society
Pushback: civil society and independent media, reduced pushback by government institutions

Argentina is a country that has all the components to foment disinformation in its political sphere, as a country with strong polarisation (V-Dem dataset 2024) and relatively low levels of trust in both the government (21%) and the media (33%) (Edelman Trust Institute 2024). This was a major trend in the country during the governments of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), and Alberto Fernández (2019–2023). Furthermore, the use of social media for political campaigning has been growing in Argentina since 2010, with the elections of 2012, 2015, and 2019 seeing strong social media activity particularly from right-leaning candidates such as Macri (Echeverría et al. 2024; Lupu et al. 2020).

The level of polarisation in Argentina has been worryingly high since before 2012, and it has been listed as the most polarised country in the region consistently over the last 10 years, including countries that have fallen into heavy democratic backsliding or fully reverted into authoritarianism such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia (V-Dem dataset, 2024) despite still being considered an electoral democracy (Echeverría et al. 2024). This has a lot to do with the tactics employed by the consistently powerful Peronist party, that usually emphasises an "us" versus "them" narrative and portrays itself as the only trustworthy actor in the landscape, a tactic typical of populist governments (Echeverría et al. 2024: 157). The polarisation of Argentina grew to the point that during the elections of 2019 – which brought the Peronist party

back to power after one term as opposition – the two major party coalitions represented 88 per cent of the votes, something that had not been seen since 1983 (Molina Cañabate et al. 2020).

A major factor behind this polarisation is the insecure informational ecosystem that Argentina suffers under, where secrecy regarding public affairs and data, as well as lack of transparency in the political system, are problems that have persisted since the times of the military rule in the country (Echeverría et al. 2024). Argentina presents a mosaic of a fairly organised state-sponsored disinformation efforts supported by mainstream media and social media, utilised principally for elections purposes through virtual beating and smear campaigns against political opponents – and in some cases fact-checking and civic groups – and algorithmic suppression tactics (Crettaz 2019; Echeverría et al. 2024; Lupu et al. 2020; Molina Cañabate et al. 2020).

When looking into which actors tend to engage in disinformation, the state and particularly individual politicians stand out as principals, using this tactic as a way to artificially increase support for their messages in social media, suppress messages of their opponents, and criticise those opponents in smear campaigns (Bradshaw and Howard 2021). There are also some cases of businesses engaging in disinformation, such as Cambridge Analytica, whose CEO admitted to carrying out an "anti-Kirchner campaign" during the presidential elections of 2015 (Molina Cañabate et al. 2020). The Argentinian state, just like Venezuela, has constructed a propaganda apparatus supported by government institutions, state media, and social media activists to discredit both critics from independent media and political opponents (Suárez, 2022). This is catalysed by the fact that government advertisement presents the main source of income for most media organisations (Crettaz 2019), particularly the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which there was a 20 per cent and 71 per cent increase in government advertising in 2020 and 2021, respectively (Shahbaz and Funk, 2020).

There has also been a systematic attempt to suppress free press through legislation, such as 1) the Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual of 2009 that establishes an institution to monitor the media; 2) the creation in 2020 of a government observatory (Nodio) to "fight hate speech" during the pandemic – despite research showing that it was closer to a censoring institution to use against media and civil society that exposed state-sponsored disinformation regarding the (mis)management of the COVID-19 pandemic (Echeverría et al. 2024); and 3) the 2022 presidential recommendation from Fernández to regulate social media and eliminate hate speech – including critics to his administration (Suárez 2022). It is important to acknowledge, however, that organised cyber-troop activity in Argentina is rare, as explained in the *Global Disinformation Order* report of 2019. In their report, Bradshaw and Howard (2021) categorise Argentina as a state with minimal cyber-troop activity, comprised of small staffs of 30 to 50 people being paid on a temporary basis to engage in disinformation campaigns, along with the existence of automated accounts. The most common use of digital disinformation in Argentina could clearly be seen during the 2019 presidential elections, where both parties engaged in exaggerations, false victory claims, and falsities regarding their promises, connections, and actions (Lupu et al. 2020; Molina Cañabate et al. 2020).

During the campaign – reduced to a race between Mauricio Macri as incumbent and the Peronist candidate Alberto Fernández as Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's surrogate – Molina Cañabate et al. (2020) catalogued and categorised the different types of disinformation found on social media. Among those were fake declarations regarding the successes of the Macri administration in the fight against narcotics or in mobility policy – meant to support his candidacy – and posts regarding the mismanagement of his social policies – designed to reduce his

popularity. The Peronist candidate Fernández also experienced both types of disinformation campaigns, either connecting his candidature to popular figures to support him, or spreading lies about his vice-presidential candidate, Cristina Kirchner, having a hidden daughter with Down Syndrome. Lupu et al. (2020) highlight the importance of WhatsApp during the 2019 presidential campaign in spreading misinformation: the Macri campaign heavily relied on networks of WhatsApp groups activists – over 300,000 members – to spread information specially targeted by types of users.

The victory of Peronism in 2019 and the sudden arrival of the COVID pandemic catalysed not only the use of disinformation by the state but also the weaponisation of the law against media and civil society. The government of Alberto Fernández (2019–2023) engaged in disinformation campaigns during times of crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic particularly, his administration engaged in suppression and disinformation to defend the health policies enacted (Echeverría et al. 2024). The Fernández government went against recommendations by the scientific community during the COVID pandemic and unnecessarily extended the lockdown times, as well as engaging in populist narratives and antagonistic claims using disinformation instead of scientific data (Echeverría et al. 2024). Journalists and opposition members were attacked and labelled as "going against public health" when they criticised government policies and when they engaged in initiatives to provide reliable information about the country's situation (Echeverría et al. 2024). The vaccine campaign was also filled with misleading claims by the government regarding the numbers of vaccinated individuals and the success of the vaccination rate (Echeverría et al. 2024).

Most of the pushback to digital disinformation seen in Argentina comes not from politicians and state institutions – who seem to have adopted the use of disinformation as a valid campaign tool, as seen in the Mexican case – but from civil society organisations, the media sector, and individuals. One example of this pushback is the fact-checking initiative "Reverso," coordinated by the organisations Chequeado, AFP Factual, First Draft, and Pop-up News Room in 2019 to fight disinformation during the presidential elections. This initiative received ample support from media and companies – including platforms – operating on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Molina Cañabate et al. 2020). Chequeado in Argentina is important to highlight: in existence since 2010, it was the first fact-checking portal in the region and was built with the purpose of verifying political discourses (Ceron et al. 2021: 47), although doubt was cast about the legitimacy of the institution after it was disclosed that it was headed by the spouse of a mayor with ties to one of the major parties (Lupu et al. 2020). Individuals also played a major role in fact-checking, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and the information suppression of the Fernández administration; through Twitter accounts, citizens with specialised knowledge alerted their fellow citizens to inconsistencies in the government data regarding COVID-19 deaths and tests (Jacob and Amado 2021).

Finally, there were two initiatives by politicians and the government to counter disinformation. First, during the 2019 election race, the candidates, political parties, press associations, platforms, and the highest electoral body of the country signed a "digital ethics compromise" to fight disinformation on social media (Carballo 2019), although that did not stop both sides from engaging in it. The second was the creation by the government in 2019 of a fact-checking body within the National Electoral Body (Lupu et al. 2020).

4 Brazil: Institutionalised Digital Disinformation Ecosystem under Bolsonaro

Level of organisation: high (state-sponsored and institutionalised)
Goals and means: institutional discreditation; casting doubt on electoral processes; virtual beatings and harassment campaigns against politicians, judiciary, legislative, media, and NGOs
Pushback: significant civic, legislative, and judiciary pushback; executive compliance at the federal level but pushback on state level

Brazil has suffered one of the fastest deteriorations in the region when it comes to the spread of disinformation. A country that enjoyed a significant level of trust in independent media (61% in 2012) and the government (85% in 2011) (Edelman Trust Institute 2012), as well as only medium levels of polarisation (V-Dem dataset 2024), suddenly suffered a combination of government scandals, a slump in commodities prices that slashed economic growth and, consequently, the rise of right-wing disinformation campaigns.

By 2018, during the presidential elections that saw the rise of right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro, polarisation had significantly increased, and trust in independent media and the government have plummeted (to 43% and only 18%, respectively) (Edelman Trust Institute 2018). It is in this context that disinformation campaigns by Jair Bolsonaro took place, explaining the significant grip his digital disinformation strategy had on the country. It is important to distinguish that the level of organisation, the goals and motivations of the disinformation campaigns, and the amount of government pushback to digital disinformation in Brazil were different before and after the arrival of Bolsonaro to the presidency, but the conditions for said development were there before it.

By 2018, the deterioration of trust in media had given rise to the increasing importance of social media in political life: political candidates used Facebook and WhatsApp as major campaign tools by that year (Lupu et al. 2020: 161-162), and social media information predominated as the source of most content in political support groups during the campaign (Santos 2021). Even though political candidates in Brazil had used computational propaganda since 2010, the 2018 elections saw the rise of organised disinformation campaigns, and later the institutionalisation of such campaigns under the Bolsonaro administration (Ozawa et al. 2023).

The Bolsonaro disinformation apparatus was built starting in the electoral year of 2018 through the use of social media and massive private online-messaging campaigns – purchased from private marketing companies – through WhatsApp for a large-scale operation of disinformation, particularly during the second round of the election (Santana and Mitozo 2024: 95). This would imply irregular electoral funding, illegal under Brazilian law (Santos 2021). These disinformation campaigns were created not only with the aid of companies. Bolsonaro's campaign team was also providing money to people to spread content and create a "virtual activist movement" (MAV) to infiltrate groups and spread pro-Bolsonaro disinformation (Nemer 2019). Studies from several authors show that the level of engagement in social media of right-wing disinformation campaigns was significantly higher than it was on the left, which hints at an organised effort (Echeverría et al. 2024).

During the election campaign, the Bolsonaro disinformation apparatus focused on three main strategies and goals: (1) undermining political rivals through character assassination campaigns, (2) delegitimising traditional journalism through parallel information channels in social media, and (3) discrediting the electoral process through rumours and false polling data.

The use of virtual beating campaigns to undermine political rivals is common around Latin America, and in some countries it has become an implicitly legitimate political tool during elections (see sections on Mexico and Argentina). The Bolsonaro campaign focused on discrediting his main rival, the candidate from the incumbent party, Fernando Haddad, by relying on disinformation campaigns hinting at connections of his party to the Venezuelan government – which by that time had already devolved into authoritarian practices – and on rumours that Haddad had participated in a campaign giving baby bottles with penis-shaped tops, among other things, in a "gay kit," as part of a campaign against homophobia; this was a distortion of a 2004 educational campaign enacted by the Ministry of Education under the PT administration (Lupu et al. 2020; Ozawa et al. 2023). A second and more insidious form of disinformation was its constant delegitimisation of traditional media outlets by relying on social media as a source of information and – after his inauguration – describing news outlets as being in collusion with "the left" and spreading fake news (Santana and Mitozo 2024).

Distrust of the electoral process was one of the key – and most dangerous – aspects of Bolsonaro's disinformation campaign, and it included rumours that the machines were rigged by Venezuela's government in favour of his opponent Fernando Haddad, the PT candidate (Lupu et al. 2020: 164; Santos 2021). Another major disinformation campaign involved the disinformation channel Pesquisa Eleitoral 2018, which consistently rated Bolsonaro as likely to win during the first round with 60 per cent of the votes, fuelling the narrative of electoral fraud if Bolsonaro had lost (Santos 2021: 96). The attack on the electoral process would return during the presidential election campaign in July 2022, when the Bolsonaro administration gathered 70 ambassadors to Brazil from foreign nations to cast doubt on Brazil's electoral system and requested that the federal police launch an inquiry into hacking to interfere with the system in 2018 (Echeverría et al. 2024: 140). These offensives represented a major attack on the electoral process in Brazil, undermining trust in the electoral institutions and legitimising violent responses such as the events of 8 January 2023, when rioters invaded and vandalised the Presidential Palace, as well as the buildings of the National Parliament and the Supreme Federal Tribunal (Echeverría et al. 2024).

During the 2018 elections, most pushback came from news outlets and civic fact-checking organisations. This included a BBC report from 2017 that showed that fake profile armies on social media were used in Brazil in the 2014 elections; a report published in October 2018 by *Fohla de S. Paulo* regarding the link between the Bolsonaro campaign and the purchasing of mass-messaging packages on WhatsApp (Santana and Mitozo 2024); and, most importantly, the creation fact-checking agencies – which did most of the effective work against disinformation during the campaign – such as Projeto Comprova, created specifically to disprove fake news during the 2018 elections (Santos 2021), and Agencia Lupa (Moreno Gil et al. 2021).

Since electoral propaganda is regulated in Brazil – including internet propaganda since the amendment of the regulation in 2009 – there were judicial actions against disinformation during the campaign, but in most cases, judges preferred to allow disinformation to exist unless proven blatantly false to avoid influencing the electoral campaign and curtailing freedom of speech and access to information (Santos 2021).

After the inauguration of the Bolsonaro administration, the level of organisation as well as the goals and means of digital disinformation campaigns morphed. Between 2019 and 2022, disinformation campaigns were institutionalised through an office informally dubbed the "Office of Hatred" (OOH) generally linked to the Bolsonaro family, located on the third floor of the Presidential Palace. The OOH oversaw computational campaigns in favour of the Bolsonaro

administration and allies and against their critics on WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs (Arbex and Uribe 2019; Monari et al. 2021). In other words, there was during Bolsonaro administration a coordinated disinformation ecosystem, supported by the federal government structure (Avritzer et al. 2023; Santana and Mitozo 2024).

The change in the goals was also clear: they stopped being issue-focused and became a means to defend actions of government agencies and of people connected to Bolsonaro (Ozawa et al. 2018: 5). The focus of the campaigns was to defend the Bolsonaro administration's policies and claims vis-à-vis the COVID-19 crisis (Ricard and Medeiros 2020) and to attack media outlets and journalist reporting on corruption, deforestation, and links between the Bolsonaro administration and militias (Nemer 2020). The OOH became a tool of perpetual campaigning for the Bolsonaro administration, as well as a tool to discredit three major sources of pushback during his term: the media outlets, the state administrations, and the judiciary. This was particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the pandemic, disinformation by the Bolsonaro administration exacerbated the health crisis in the country and blame was shifted to local and regional governments as well as the Supreme Court for not allowing the federal government to take over regional governments (Arretche 2022), a clear case of obfuscation with political goals. The study of Ceron et al. (2021) shows that disinformation regarding the COVID-19 crisis and vaccines was bigger in Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela than in other countries of the region (Ceron et al. 2021: 47).

Discrediting was a common tactic also used against journalists and mainstream media. A consolidated distrust in journalism, strongly associated with the informational struggle on the COVID 19 crisis, can be confirmed with the significant drop in media trust suffered by Brazil between 2017 and 2024 (Newman et al. 2024). Although during the campaign Bolsonaro relied on social media to spread disinformation, during the COVID pandemic the source of news changed from social media towards journalistic websites with questionable credibility (Goulart Massuchin et al. 2021; Santana and Mitozo 2024).

Since the Bolsonaro administration's disinformation campaigns targeted public institutions such as state governments and the judiciary, the pushback against it was significantly stronger than during the 2018 campaign. To start, private pushback expanded from only fact-checking initiatives and journalism: big platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter deleted information that went against health guidelines even when shared by authority figures such as Jair Bolsonaro (Walter et al. 2020). Nevertheless, Santos (2021) points out that Meta[1] did not undertake all the measures necessary to reduce disinformation spreading on WhatsApp; a petition 10 days before the second round of the 2018 elections published in the *New York Times* by three important academics and journalists in Brazil requesting it reduce the amount of forwarded messages, restrict broadcastings, and limit the size of groups on the platform was ignored (p. 438-39).

In addition, there was considerable legislative and judicial pressure on OOH measures. Between 2019 and 2022, there were 62 legislative proposals to tackle disinformation, most of which focused on topics such as disinformation on health (e.g. COVID-19) and government-controlled disinformation. Some proposals aimed to criminalise disinformation practices (Anastácio 2024: 3). None of the 62 initiatives – whether proposed by parties supporting or in

1 Santos (2021) uses the name Meta here referring to Facebook. Facebook became a company owned by Meta in 2021.

opposition to him – were approved, evincing the polarisation on the topic. There were also two inquiry committees in the National Congress that attempted to tackle fake news and disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic propagated by the federal government (Santana and Mitozo 2024: 94).

Finally, there was significant pushback from the judicial branch, as it was a target of attack by the Bolsonaro administration. In 2020 a demonstration of citizens demanding a civil–military intervention of the legislative and judicial branches – which could be interpreted as a call for a military intervention into these branches in favour of the executive – led to a judicial inquiry on the connection between these movements and the federal government, and another inquiry on anti-democratic militias was opened by Justice Alexandre de Moraes in 2021, which pointed to strong evidence between the Bolsonaro apparatus and organised criminals engaged in destabilising activities (Santana and Mitozo 2024: 99). In October of that year, the Moraes inquiry concluded that the organised destabilisation operations were caused by the OOH (p. 100).

5 Mexico: Disinformation as a Legitimate Electoral Campaign Tool

Level of organisation: medium (temporary cyber-troops during election campaigns, disinformation from state institutions against independent media)
Goals and means: propaganda; virtual beatings and harassment campaigns against political opponents, media, and civil society
Pushback: civil society and independent media

Unlike Brazil, trust in the Mexican government has been low since 2012 (35%), and polarisation is relatively high, although trust in media was on par with Brazil's levels at the time (65%) (V-Dem dataset 2024; Edelman Trust Institute 2012). Nevertheless, in Mexico trust in media in Mexico fell to 48 per cent by 2018, and trust in government to 28 per cent, while polarisation levels remained relatively unchanged (V-Dem dataset 2024; Edelman Trust Institute 2018). Digital disinformation in Mexico is catalysed by 3 major conditions explained by Echeverría (2023): (1) a general lack of trust in traditional media in the country, (2) citizen's dependency on social media for information, and (3) political acceptance of disinformation as a legitimate campaign tool.

Although in Latin America in general trust in independent media is low (see section 1), Mexico has suffered from a historical mistrust of media. In Mexico, journalism has normally been linked to the governments in power, first as a propaganda machine for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) – that had ruled Mexico since the end of the Mexican civil war for 71 years uninterrupted – and later as support apparatuses for transition governments. Mexico's mainstream media has been systematically marginal to public space, underfunded and fragmented, censored during times of crises, and used as a propaganda machine to discredit government opponents, which only solidifies the people's perception of government-media collusion (Echeverría 2023: 337-40).

Furthermore, written press never got a solid foothold in Mexico, and Mexicans transitioned from being heavily dependent on television – whose channels comprised a discredited duopoly of channels aligned with politicians' interests (Echeverría 2023) – to relying on social media for news. By 2024 around 79 per cent of Mexicans obtained their news online (64% when looking

only at social media – compared to a 39% for TV and a measly 18% for printed press) (Newman et al. 2024). By 2021 trust in social media for news was three times higher than in any other country in North America or Western Europe (Newman et al. 2021).

In Mexico, there are no permanent disinformation troops, but political parties and private contractors engage in organised disinformation campaigns on a non-permanent basis that execute virtual defamation campaigns, or "virtual beatings," content amplification, artificial support boosts, and suppression campaigns (Bradshaw and Howard 2021). Governments and political candidates in Mexico sponsor these operations, as they are at least implicitly considered a legitimate way of electoral campaigning, which creates a structural condition of disinformation that is difficult for citizens to avoid (Echeverría 2023: 335). Digital disinformation campaigns can be traced back to 2012 with e-activists and bots being employed to artificially increase numbers of followers, amplify support for candidates, or engage in algorithmic repression and "virtual lynching" campaigns against opponents to generate reputational damage (Echeverría 2023: 334).

Despite polarisation being a historical problem in Mexico, perceptions of political polarisation increased significantly after the election of the first left-wing president in the history of Mexico: Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Coppedge et al. 2021). His arrival to the presidency would also catalyse the use of social media for disinformation campaigns.

The elections of 2018 saw a huge amount of disinformation campaigns carried out via trolls, bots, and cyborg accounts sponsored by and against all candidates with a new intensity that was not seen before. Some examples of these disinformation campaigns included allegations that López Obrador was funded by Venezuela and Russia or that the pope spoke against him, that the PAN candidate Ricardo Anaya supported Trump's proposal to build a wall between Mexico and the US and that he was involved in a money laundering scandal; all this was achieved through social media including most prominently Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp (Lupu et al. 2020: 163). According to Iida et al. (2024), the money laundering disinformation campaign was proven to have hurt Anaya's chances in the race. The accusation was corrected after the end of the elections.

Even as disinformation goals stayed the same – discrediting political opponents and critics – the end of the 2018 elections did not end disinformation practices. The study of Aguila Sánchez and Pereyra-Zamora (2022) shows that during the 2020/21 COVID crisis in Mexico, politicians and the media disseminated disinformation regarding the handling of the COVID crisis. There were also significant attacks by President López Obrador on journalists' critiques of his administration, which he mainly carried out via mainstream media such as his morning broadcasting segments known as "Mañaneras de la Verdad" (Newman et al. 2024). In this sense, disinformation was crafted with the typical goals of boosting the popularity of the sponsor of the disinformation and discrediting its critics and opponents.

The Mexican state's response to these disinformation campaigns is regularly inaction, with some outlier exceptions of prosecution, digital literacy campaigns, and fact-checking attempts (Echeverría 2023: 340). There is no comprehensive policy to tackle disinformation in Mexico. Pushback against disinformation mainly came out of the media and the civil society sectors: a group of over 80 media outlets created for the 2018 elections the Verificado 2018 project, supported by foundations, civil society, universities, and social media platforms (Lupu et al. 2020: 165). During the elections, the project Verificado debunked false stories in both traditional and social media. It is considered the most extensive initiative to counter disinformation and prevent misinformation in the region in recent years.

6 Costa Rica: Disinformation as a Growing Threat but Facing Public and Policy Pushback

Level of organisation: low (temporary cyber-troops during election campaigns with no signs of automation)
Goals and means: virtual beatings and smear campaigns against political opponents
Pushback: civil society and independent media, mainstream political parties, executive and electoral branches

Costa Rica is one of the most stable democracies in the region, and that shows in its numbers regarding societal polarisation, trust in government, and trust in media. Trust in media sat at a comfortable 66 per cent in 2012, and trust in the government in 2013 was at 41 percent in Costa Rica (Layton, 2013; OECD, 2016). Despite Costa Rica enjoying a significant level of internet penetration (almost 90% by 2023) and social media usage (73% by 2020) (Kemp 2020; Tellier 2024), this has not had the significant effect on political disinformation seen in the countries analysed here.

As will be explained, even though Costa Rica has seen the arrival of digital disinformation campaigns in recent years, particularly by extremist right-wing parties with the aid of private marketing agencies, the effect of these campaigns has been diminished by three major variables: (1) the lack of sophistication of the disinformation campaigns, (2) mainstream political parties' strong rejection of using disinformation as an election strategy, and (3) a clear – yet not judicial – pushback effort from the media, civil society organisations, and government institutions.

Costa Rica started using social media in political campaigning during the elections of 2014, but by that time only two of the five main parties had an explicit digital campaign strategy (Romero 2015). But by 2018, political parties and politicians started to engage in disinformation campaigns with the support of contractors, strategists, and marketing companies to produce harmful online rhetorics (Bunse 2021). Costa Rican cyber-troops are home-grown and home-made, and include politicians, businesses (marketing companies), and civil society actors; nevertheless, these cyber-troops lack the level of organisation and insidiousness seen in cases such as Brazil or Mexico. Facebook and Twitter were the prominent platforms, and even if there are human trolls, automation of disinformation campaigns has not taken hold (Bunse 2021).

Explained by Bunse (2021) in interviews with experts, there is little to no automation in Costa Rican disinformation campaigns, and the Costa Rican Supreme Electoral Institution (TSE) has found no evidence of active bot networks on space such as Twitter swaying public opinion. The main sponsors of disinformation in the Costa Rican context are politicians, particularly two non-mainstream right-wing parties that have never reached power: the PIN and the PRN/NR, which – similar to the Brazilian case – mainly rose to popularity in opposition to same-sex marriage, a major issue during the 2018 campaign (Bunse 2021). This is a general trend in the Costa Rican disinformation context: most disinformation campaigns are issue-based – such as same-sex marriage, education, and immigration – and intended to discredit politicians or government policies.

Several private firms have been linked to disinformation campaigns through advising and marketing contracts, as was the case of former president Guillermo Solís' digital campaign advisor Iván Barrantes, who was paid USD 190,000 to manage the digital campaign of the

PAC in the elections of 2014 (Bunse 2021). Barrantes was then appointed as special advisor to the president, but public pushback about it led to his resignation. Discourse regarding the corruption of the political system as a whole or the democratic elections process are scarcer and normally driven by one candidate.

Despite the low level of organisation, politicians and private companies are not the only ones that engage in digital disinformation: civil society groups and individuals are also present. Some examples given by Bunse (2021) are the false claims from the questionable news portal *Diario la Carta* spread by the secretary-general of the Costa Rican National Association of Public and Private Employees (Asociación Nacional de Empleados Públicos y Privados, ANEP), which he used to mobilise his base to strike against the government. Later he would also mobilise secondary-school students with the aid of the National Educators Association regarding claims that the minister of education, Edgardo Mora, wanted to introduce gender-neutral bathrooms and create a "diversity day" to advocate for homosexual relations between children. This campaign succeeded and Mora was finally forced to resign.

The other example was in August 2018, when a group posted in their social media a series of faked photographs of an influx of Nicaraguan immigrants in the country, which led to an anti-immigration protest of 400 people in the capital San José, with 44 people arrested in the process (Artavia 2018; Artavia and Solís 2018). The fake photos were then exploited by various political parties to spread xenophobic audio of the protest, and a PRN legislative advisor even used them in Congress as evidence to criticise the current government's immigration policy (Bunse 2021).

Bunse's (2021) study clearly explains the goals, tactics, and main actors of disinformation campaigns in Costa Rica. Just as with the example of Mexico, Costa Rican cyber-troops focus especially on discrediting campaigns and virtual beatings of political opponents, as well as boosting the popularity of their sponsors during electoral campaigns. These tactics are typical of disinformation ecosystems that have not yet crossed into discrediting institutions and democratic processes, as we have seen in Brazil.

Most politicians in Costa Rica currently have social media managers and sometimes engage in discrediting campaigns or disinformation against their political opponents. But, as mentioned above, the main parties engaging in disinformation campaigns are the right-wing parties PIN and PNR/RN, and both parties have attempted to spread populist narratives and disinformation. These actors have been proven to rely on illegal data acquisition, biased polls, news from questionable sources or wrongly attributed to reputable ones, and discrediting campaigns to spread disinformation and sway public opinion in favour of their narrative.

The most prominent case linked to the PRN happened during the 2018 presidential elections, when the campaign manager of the candidate Fabricio Alvarado was linked to the fraudulent publication of six unrepresentative polls before the run-off which showed the PRN candidate in the lead (Bunse 2021). The polls were made by the private company Opol Consultores, which published the polls in their outlet and were subsequently shared and spread by the PRN on social media and given to the press with claim that they were independent polls. Even though the PRN denied connection with the company, Opol Consultores disclosed the contract after Alvarado refused to pay an invoice of USD 31,000.

Another case of disinformation linked to the PRN involved a tactic akin to one described in the section on Brazil: the PRN illegally obtained 3.9 million mobile numbers and other data from 2.5 million voters to spread political propaganda during the run-off presidential elections, which was uncovered by a thorough investigation by the newspaper *La Nación* (Arias Renata

2019). According to the investigation, the PRN sent over 6 million text messages with propaganda in March 2018 alone (ibidem). This news led to significant backlash from mainstream political parties and the population against the PRN (Bunse 2021).

On the other side, the candidate for the PIN in 2018, Diego Castro, has been considered Costa Rica's most populist candidate in recent years, dubbed "the Trump of the tropics" due to his populist discourses and his attack on the Costa Rican electoral processes (Grosser 2018). An avid user of social media, he has spread disinformation to discredit political parties and even democratic institutions, such as the announced charges he filed against the Costa Rican TSE for "allowing electoral fraud" – no evidence exists that he truly filed such a charge (Madrigal 2017).

The level of pushback from platforms, civil society, academia and the government in Costa Rica to digital disinformation has been significant, if only focused on digital education and the rejection of disinformation practices, and not on the judicialisation of it. In Costa Rica there have been fact-checking institutions at least since 2018, with initiatives such as "No Coma Cuento" by the newspaper *La Nación* and "No Se Vaya Pollo" by *La Teja*, both created right before the elections in February 2018 as preventive measures, as well as other initiatives created later that year after the end of the elections such as "Doble Check" from Costa Rica University (Siles González et al. 2021: 29). There have also been several publications by universities on the topic of disinformation and its implications for Costa Rica (Barrantes et al. 2024; Salas and Siles 2023; Siles González et al. 2021). There has been a significant growth in interest on the topic of disinformation in the country since 2018, not as much due to disinformation campaigns during the elections than to three main media-related issue-based events: (1) the student protests that led to the stepping down of Education Minister Edgar Mora in 2019, (2) the legislative and media discussions of fake news as a threat to democracy, also in 2019, and (3) the healthcare system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020 (Siles González et al. 2021). These events created in the national imaginary the awareness that disinformation can represent a threat to democracy. Platforms such as WhatsApp also worked to slow the dissemination of information with a revision of their mechanics, such as the reduction of the forwarding function from 250 to 20 contacts in 2018 and then down to five in 2019 (Bunse 2021).

Finally, while the government has responded, it has focused on education campaigns and digital literacy as a tool to reduce disinformation without reducing free speech. In Costa Rica there are law projects that try to tackle digital disinformation and hate speech, but as of 2022, the government has not engaged in online censorship (Suárez 2022: 7). Nevertheless, as privately hired digital marketing agencies and researchers during campaigns are not obligated to register with the election's authority, tracing the resources spent on cyber-troops is difficult and mainly gatherable through anecdotal evidence and isolated instances of investigative journalism (Bunse 2021). This is one reason the Costa Rican government does not rely on the judiciary to combat digital disinformation.

Two major government institutions have fought disinformation through fact-checking and education strategies: the TSE and the Ministry of Communications (Bunse 2021; Zúñiga 2019). The TSE has fought disinformation campaigns through three main pillars: (1) digital literacy, (2) communication, and (3) fast response to disinformation campaigns (Bunse 2021: 11-12). A fourth pillar attempted to create a major alliance of civil society, government, and (social) media platforms to fact-check disinformation with the support of Meta, but the fragmentation of fact-checking initiatives made it harder to create collaboration (Bunse 2021). Another government

initiative was created in July 2019 by the Ministry of Communications after a disinformation campaign that falsely claimed that the VAT would be raised by 3 per cent, creating popular backlash. The platform, known as Gobierno Aclara, focused on debunking content on social media and sharing its fact-checking exercises through websites and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Zúñiga 2019).

7 Conclusions

Overcoming digital disinformation is a difficult problem that large, industrialised countries are still struggling with. The complex interplay of institutional mistrust, political polarisation, and populism combined with the rise of immediate and unmoderated information creates a paradox for democratic countries: maintaining unmoderated freedom of speech on these platforms leaves the ground open for disinformation campaigns to become increasingly sophisticated and weaken trust in institutions for political gain, while increasing restrictions on social media could harm one of the fundamental rights of democracy.

Nevertheless, the case studies show that there are ways for governments, media, and civil society organisations to work together to stop disinformation without sacrificing freedom of speech. Three main directions of cooperation can be distinguished: (1) strengthening the capacity of state institutions to prosecute and punish actors involved in disinformation campaigns, (2) heightening cooperation between government and media to urge social media platforms to strengthen their control and reduce opportunities for the spread of disinformation, and (3) increasing support for independent media to pursue fact-checking initiatives and make the information landscape safe again.

One of the major gaps in the case studies is the lack of sufficient oversight of political parties and private companies/consultants engaging in digital disinformation campaigns and illegal propaganda practices in elections, as seen in the case of Brazil with Bolsonaro or the right-wing parties in Costa Rica during the 2018 elections. Santos (2021) emphasises that there is no legal mechanism in Brazil to identify and punish political parties that engage in practices that threaten democracy, as is the case in Germany. The same problem is pointed out by Bunse (2021) for the case of Costa Rica, where marketing companies and strategists who work on disinformation strategies are not required to register during elections.

Nevertheless, we do have a significant level of scrutiny on the use of legacy media for political purposes, with some countries having strict rules on transparency, usage, and airtime vis-à-vis campaigns. This sends a clear message: regulating social media as a tool for political campaigning does not represent a direct attack on democratic values, but a necessary condition to ensure that political debate stays true to said values. Working together to increase scrutiny of sponsored political content and shed light on private-led disinformation campaigns is crucial to reducing the capacity of the organisation and the sophistication of computational propaganda.

Second, it is important to make a coordinated effort to force social media platforms to better control disinformation campaigns and reduce the avenues for computer-based propaganda. Measures such as Meta's to reduce the possibility of massive information-sharing on WhatsApp in the case of Brazil and Costa Rica, or Twitter's to suppress bot armies in the case

of Venezuela, have been shown to have a positive effect on cleaning up the information landscape. European governments have already increased their regulatory pressure on these platforms through the Digital Services Act of 2023.

Finally, one of Santana and Mitozo's (2024) key policy recommendations is to restore "information order." This necessarily includes restoring trust in independent media in countries suffering from disinformation. Cooperation between fact-checking institutions and electoral institutions – as in Costa Rica – can increase resources to combat disinformation campaigns during election periods and beyond and limit the ability of disinformation actors to continue to influence public opinion.

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