

Chapter 21: Anti-Immigration Disinformation

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Abstract: Anti-immigrant disinformation plays a central role in populist and far-right discourses, but it remains a complex object of study. In addition to the definitional challenges posed by disinformation, populism and far-right extremism, it can be difficult to disentangle the intricate overlap of factors that enable the promotion of anti-immigrant disinformation and render audiences receptive to it. To understand these dynamics, this chapter outlines disinformation as a process that engages different actors, platforms, and audiences. It provides an up-to-date analysis of the diverse range of actors who promote anti-immigrant disinformation, explores how platform structures enable anti-immigrant manipulation tactics, and, finally, it contextualises audience receptivity in terms of attitudes towards immigrants and social change. Ultimately, we suggest that efforts to counter anti-immigrant disinformation require multiple overlapping actions that reduce exposure to disinformation while also addressing more deep-seated issues surrounding the crisis of legitimacy within democracy and declining trust in institutions.

Introduction

There is a long, global history of anti-immigrant disinformation and such narratives have come to the fore again in recent years. Although this chapter primarily focuses on Europe and the US, anti-immigrant disinformation is not limited to these regions. It also animates populist and far-right discourses in Africa (Kerr, Durrheim and Dixon 2019), Asia (Ramos 2020); and South America (Saad-Filho and Boffo 2020). Anti-immigrant disinformation is strongly associated with the ideology of exclusion and nativist supremacy that underpins right-wing populism and far-right extremism (Bajomi-Lázár 2019; Mudde 2019). Similarly to these ideologies, definitions of disinformation suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity. Populism is typically defined for its 'thin centred' ideology, which sets the homogeneous nation-state against threatening outgroups (Mudde 2019). While a nativist superiority is always implied in populist

messaging (Mudde 2019), it is made explicit by far-right actors who designate immigrants, and often specific subgroups of immigrants, as enemies of the nation. Thus if populism has a ‘mercurial nature’ (Stanley 2008: 108) so too does disinformation.

Current definitions are broad (see Tandoc et al. 2018) encompassing content that is entirely fabricated, decontextualized, or propagandistic in intent (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Consequently, while some instances of ‘fake news’ are absurd and easily disproven, determining what is true or false is not as straightforward in many cases. Social and political issues, such as immigration, pose particular difficulty because the interpretation of facts is rarely objective or absolute (Coleman 2018: 157). For example, consider debates about the relationship between immigration and crime. This is a topic of longstanding and ongoing academic debate (see Ousey and Kubrin 2018) quite apart from its treatment by sensational media outlets and by populist and far-right actors.

Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that anti-immigrant disinformation plays a central role in ‘digital hate culture’ (Ganesh 2018). To understand these dynamics, in what follows we outline anti-immigrant disinformation as a process that may be analysed in terms of actors, platforms, and audiences. So called ‘bad actors’ create and push anti-immigrant disinformation, different media platforms facilitate the distribution and promotion of this content, and, finally, the disinformation gains impact by finding receptive audiences who are willing to engage with it. Understood in this way, we may summarise key trends that drive anti-immigrant disinformation and consider a range of measures that may help to counteract it.

Anti-Immigration Actors

Those who create disinformation are often called ‘bad actors’ based on their intention to deceive or manipulate the public. However, the nature of bad actors is multifarious. They may represent individuals, social movements, states, or organisations; their primary motivations may be ideological, social, or financial; their campaigns may be isolated or coordinated; and their target audiences may be specific groups of voters or more general publics. All of these factors are at play in anti-immigrant disinformation to varying degrees. In particular, anti-immigrant disinformation is associated with a wide range of right-wing populists, far-right extremists, and alt-right influencers (Hope Not Hate 2019). Although these actors share a common opposition to immigration, they are ideologically diverse in many respects (see Carter 2018; Davey and Ebner 2017; Holt et al. 2020). As a detailed discussion of these ideological differences is beyond the scope of this chapter, we focus here on recent evidence of anti-immigrant disinformation by the far-right, populist politicians, and the alt-right in Europe and the US and on the role of media actors in the promotion of anti-immigrant disinformation.

The advent of the web enabled far-right extremists to develop geographically distant communities (Meddaugh and Kay 2009) while the subsequent development of social media created opportunities for more personal communication strategies (Törnberg and Wahlström 2018). For these far-right communities, anti-immigrant disinformation bolsters community cohesion (Törnberg and Wahlström 2018) and is a means of promoting anti-immigrant attitudes among the wider public (Ekman 2019). In other words, anti-immigrant disinformation serves different functions and is packaged for different audiences across different platforms (see section below for detailed discussion).

In recent years, there is evidence of increased transnational cooperation among these communities (Avaaz 2019; Davey and Ebner 2017). For example, Avaaz (2019) found

evidence of transnational coordination among the far-right ahead of national elections in Germany and France. Similarly, there is evidence of a coordinated campaign against the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). Proponents of this campaign were responsible for almost half of the most popular YouTube videos about the GCM and falsely claimed the GCM required states to outlaw criticism of immigration (ISD 2019). In their Twitter analysis of far-right activity in France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, Froio and Ganesh (2018) found that coordination coalesced around the issue of Muslim immigration, which was commonly framed as a threat to Europe's security, economy, and culture. On this basis, the authors concluded that Islamophobia is the "transnational glue of the far-right" (Froio and Ganesh 2018: 19). More recently, far-right groups have also exploited the Covid-19 crisis to circulate disinformation about immigrants and Muslim immigrants in particular. A recurring theme accuses immigrants of defying isolation measures to reinforce the nativist narrative that migrants do not belong in the nation (Culloty 2020; Parveen 2020).

In many countries, high-profile political actors have normalised anti-immigrant disinformation (Crandall et al. 2018), often in compliance with sympathetic media outlets. For example, Hungary's immigration levels are low, but Prime Minister Viktor Orbán consistently characterises immigrants and pro-immigration 'elites' as major threats to the state (Bajomi-Lázár 2019; Kiss and Szabó 2018). This disinformation campaign has been aided by the government's control over media outlets (Bajomi-Lázár 2019). In the US, Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign generated fears about Mexicans "swarming" over the southern border and promised to "build a wall" to protect the integrity of the state. Although Trump's rhetoric was largely directed at Mexicans, media outlets such as Breitbart extended the fear mongering to include Muslims (Benkler, Faris and Roberts 2018; Kamenova and Pingaud 2017). In the UK, pro-Brexit rhetoric focused heavily on immigration from Eastern Europe and the Middle

East. Legal EU immigration was frequently confused with asylum seeking as the Vote Leave campaign stoked up fears of an imminent arrival of millions of Turks (Ker-Lindsay 2018) and the right-wing press amplified these views (Holbolt 2016; Morrison 2019). Thus, the emphasis on immigration from predominately Muslim countries provides common ground between the far-right and right wing populists.

Elements of the news media have long been accused of providing negative coverage of immigration and legitimising anti-immigration political action (Philo et al. 2013). The news media are also predisposed to use fear as a framing device in news stories about immigration (Yadamsuren and Heinström 2011). Consequently, news stories about refugees and immigrants tend to focus on crime, public unrest, and violence resulting in a perpetual flow of ‘bad news’ about immigrants and refugees (Philo et al. 2013). As such, the news media provide right-wing populists and the far-right with stories that can be repurposed and de-contextualised to emphasise their own agenda (Ekman 2019).

In terms of promoting false claims about immigration, the so-called ‘alt-right’ are perhaps more influential on social media; not least because their disinformation tactics and racist messaging are more ambiguous and less overt than those of the far-right (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Hartzell (2018: 8) characterises the alt-right as the “youthful, intellectual, pro-white” faction of the far-right, which acts as a bridge between “mainstream public discourse and white nationalism”. Overall, the diversity of the actors responsible for anti-immigrant disinformation creates different points of exposure for audiences and different rhetorical strategies and tactics through which disinformation is packaged. As Fekete argues (2014), contemporary media facilitate a process of ‘cumulative racism’ as anti-immigrant disinformation travels from the fringe to the mainstream and back again. Nativist, racist and xenophobic narratives which were

previously marginalised on fringe far-right websites - where people had to actively seek them out - now reach a wider audience on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Ekman 2019; Farkas et al. 2018). It is to these platforms and audiences that we now turn.

Digital Platforms and Disinformation Tactics

The infrastructure of platforms facilitates anti-immigrant disinformation in many ways. Engagement metrics incentivise attention-grabbing, low-quality content and these metrics can be manipulated by bad actors who piggyback on trending content and use false accounts and automated “bots” to inflate the popularity of content (Shao et al. 2018). Moreover, micro-targeting services and recommendation algorithms define users by interests with little regard for whether these interests are extremist (Angwin, Varner, and Tobin 2017). More generally, platforms enable disinformation to travel at an unprecedented speed and scale. Törnberg and Wahlström (2019) argue that social media provide multiple opportunity mechanisms for anti-immigrant disinformation including discursive opportunities to exploit topical issues; group dynamic opportunities to strengthen community ties; and coordination opportunities to target different audiences. In this context, some argue that social media platforms have given rise to a digital hate culture (Ganesh 2018) augmented by the coordinated action of anonymous and automated accounts (Phillips 2015; Zannettou et al. 2018).

As noted above, the far-right use different platforms for community building and targeting wider audiences. The segmentation of the far-right’s online activity is partially a response to pressure from internet service providers (ISPs); as ISPs removed technical support from platforms known to foster extremist ideologies, activity moved to new platforms with strict free speech policies (Zannettou et al. 2018). Consequently, anti-immigrant disinformation

campaigns are coordinated on these lesser known online platforms and the messages are then disseminated to a wider audience on popular platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Davey and Ebner 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2017).

Platform affordances also facilitate the online manipulation and disinformation tactics of the far-right and the alt-right. These activities broadly revolve around four tactics: appropriating existing hashtags (Jackson and Foucault Wells 2015); decontextualizing news stories (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017); the use of memes (Ekman 2019); and automated bots (Avaaz (2019). In a detailed analysis of Twitter activity, Graham (2016) identified key disinformation tactics that enable anti-immigrant actors to direct their messages to a wider, mainstream audience. Actors utilise ‘piggybacking’ and ‘backstaging’ manipulation tactics to infiltrate trending topics while the ‘narrating’ tactic inverts the meaning of trending topics to re-frame the original meaning through irony.

This process of appropriating existing hashtags has also been characterised in terms of ‘hijacking’ (Jackson and Foucault Wells 2015) and the promotion of ‘critical counter-narratives’ (Poole et al. 2019). For example, during the 2016 US presidential election far-right activists routinely used the hashtag #StopIslam in conjunction with pro-Trump and anti-Clinton hashtags as part of a broader effort to normalise an anti-immigration narrative and to introduce anti-immigrant disinformation into the election campaign (Poole et al. 2019). Other studies have identified the use of this manipulation tactic in relation to the refugee crisis (Siapera et al. 2018) and Brexit (Green et al. 2016). These hashtag campaigns support the formation of ‘affective’ (Papacharissi 2015) or ‘ad hoc’ (Dawes 2017) publics that facilitate the circulation (Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017) and fermentation (Farkas et al. 2017) of far-right narratives and attitudes. While the ad-hoc publics created by hashtag campaigns tend to be

short lived (Poole et al. 2019; Dawes 2017), they have a ‘liminal’ power to disorientate and confuse public debate (Siapera et al. 2018).

De-contextualisation is another simple but effective disinformation tactic (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). By omitting key explanatory factors, adding textual amendments, or adopting different naming standards, a relatively neutral story can be transformed into one that is imbued with racist or anti-immigrant disinformation (Ekman 2019). In contrast to ‘fake news’ that is entirely fabricated, these disinformation stories contain nuggets of truth that are corroborated by mainstream news sources. As noted, decontextualisation tactics are challenging in the case of immigration because there is ongoing dispute about how to establish facts and interpret statistics (Ousey and Kubrin 2018).

To appeal to a broader, younger audience, anti-immigrant actors also make extensive use of memes, music videos, jokes, and irony (Beran 2017; Luke 2016; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Nagel 2017). Ekman (2019) outlines how these manipulation tactics result in the gradual normalisation of previously unacceptable utterances; utterances that dehumanise immigrants and even designate them as legitimate targets of violence. The participatory culture of digital media is central to the success of this tactic. For example, Marwick and Lewis (2017:4) found that memes often function as image macros that are engineered to ‘go viral’ by conveying far-right ideology through humour.

As with disinformation generally, automated bots and fake accounts are frequently used to inflate the popularity of anti-immigrant disinformation. Avaaz (2019) investigated far-right disinformation on Facebook ahead of the European parliament elections. In response, Facebook removed 77 pages and 230 accounts from France, Germany, Italy, Poland Spain and

the UK. Facebook estimated that this content reached 32 million people and generated 67 million ‘interactions’ through comments, likes, and shares (Aavaz 2019). Across the countries, fake and duplicate accounts artificially inflated the popularity of anti-immigrant disinformation. In some cases, Facebook pages were deceptively branded as lifestyle content to attract followers and then switched abruptly to a focus on immigration.

While platforms have made some moves to counteract extremist content, the European Commission’s Assessment of the Implementation of the Code of Practice on Disinformation¹ in May 2020 found that the platforms’ self-regulatory response is beset with a lack of uniform implementation and, consequently, progress is uneven. It is likely that platforms will come under increasing pressure to address this issue. However, we suggest that addressing disinformation is not simply a matter of targeting the actors who create it and the platforms that facilitate it: audiences are a central part of the equation.

Receptive Audiences

Audiences are arguably the most important element of the disinformation process because disinformation only gains impact if people are willing to believe, endorse or share it. Crucially, repeated exposure to anti-immigrant disinformation can have an impact quite apart from any bias on the part of the individual (Fazio et al 2015). Thus, reducing overall exposure to anti-immigrant disinformation is a crucial countermeasure. However, as noted above, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish anti-immigrant disinformation from criticism or opposition to immigration more generally. This is further complicated by the fact that certain

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/study-assessment-implementation-code-practice-disinformation>

segments of the public are concerned, rightly or wrongly, about immigration and its implications.

Although it is difficult to make any causal connection between anti-immigrant disinformation and public attitudes towards immigrants, evidence suggests that digital media/digital platforms are a key point of exposure to extremist ideas (Hamm and Spaaij 2017; McCauley and Moskalenko 2011). In a study of social media conversations across 28 European countries over a one-year period, Bakamo Social (2018) identified five major immigration narratives. A resounding anti-immigrant stance was evident across the online conversations with varying levels of intensity in individual countries. The humanitarianism narrative (49.9%) concerned moral obligations to support refugees, but included arguments for and against humanitarianism. The security narrative (25.9%) focused on the threat of immigration in terms of immigrant crime and terror attacks while the identity narrative (15.3%) concerned the threat of immigration to social cohesion and the traditional identity of European countries. Finally, the economic narrative (8%) and the demographics narrative (1%) focused on issues of sustainability.

At the country level, identity narratives were most prevalent in Germany, the Netherlands and Slovakia while security narratives dominated in Hungary, Poland, Estonia and Austria. Identity and security narratives also subverted discussions of humanitarianism. For example, in France the humanitarian narrative was undermined by those questioning whether refugees were genuinely in need of assistance while in Spain the humanitarian narrative was subverted by concerns that left-wing politicians would prioritise the needs of migrants over Spaniards. Consequently, those advocating humanitarianism were characterised as a threat to the welfare of European countries (Bakamo Social 2018). Within the national security narrative, anti-

immigrant attitudes and disinformation is entangled in broader arguments about multiculturalism and the supposed decline of national identity (Juhász and Szicherle 2017)

In this regard, anti-immigrant attitudes and the appeal of anti-immigrant disinformation has been contextualised in relation to patterns of economic and social change and the decline of traditional party systems (Horgan and Haltinner 2015; Schain 2018). For example, across Europe and North America, the decline of working-class communities is linked to alienation and opposition to immigration (Gusterson 2017; Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016). In this context, bad actors frame immigration as an economic threat by arguing that immigrants depress wages and increase the tax-burden for ‘native’ citizens (Horgan and Haltinner 2015).. In other words, while disinformation and manipulation tactics play a key role in the communication strategies of anti-immigrant actors, it is important to recognise the real or perceived grievances that makes these views appealing to segments of the public.

Another key backdrop to these developments is the crisis of legitimacy within democracy (Bennet and Livingston 2018) whereby trust in democratic institutions has declined in tandem with the rise of digital media and the flourishing of alternative information sources. Moreover, the anti-immigration actors identified above actively promote distrust in the mainstream media, particularly regarding immigration reporting (Andersson 2017 cited in Ekman 2019). This declining trust reflects growing political polarisation (Suiter and Fletcher 2020) as well as growing use of social media for news (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019). As such, it is important to recognise that a wide range of factors and circumstances overlap to provide fertile ground for actors seeking to exploit public tensions and concerns about immigration. Moreover,

addressing these issues extends far beyond the problem of disinformation and how to counter it.

Conclusion

Anti-immigrant disinformation is a complex object of study given the definitional challenges and the overlap of factors that enable the promotion of disinformation and render audiences receptive to it. The network of actors that push anti-immigrant disinformation are strikingly diverse. In many respects, anti-immigrant disinformation is part of a culture war in which an ecosystem of actors (far-right, alt-right, populist and conservative) reinforce a common opposition to a pluralist worldview. The design of each platform gives rise to distinct forms of participation, which makes it difficult to operationalise a consistent set of indicators (Crosset, Tanner, and Campana 2019) and the speed of change - with disinformation tactics evolving in response to countermeasures - makes it difficult to develop a reliable method of data collection (Marwick and Lewis 2017).

In terms of counteracting anti-immigrant disinformation, more research is needed to understand what makes different audiences receptive to anti-immigrant messages. Research shows that the negative framing of immigration can affect public attitudes and voting behaviour. However, quite apart from any bias on the part of the individual, repeated exposure can increase perceptions of credibility over time (Fazio et al 2015). Thus, reducing exposure to disinformation and providing more supports to help audiences evaluate online content appear to be key for mitigating disinformation (Schleicher 2019). Various regulatory, legal, educational, and technological measures have been proposed to counteract disinformation, but to date we know little about the effectiveness of these measures in general and in the context

of anti-immigrant disinformation specifically. In this regard, as with social media research generally, researchers are impeded by a lack of quality data from the social media platforms.

Proponents of critical thinking and information literacy argue for the importance of strengthening the capacity of individuals to evaluate content (Schleicher 2019). This is often accompanied by calls for technological approaches that filter out extremist content or flag disinformation. However, research remains limited and there are contradictory findings about the effectiveness of these approaches. It is likely that countering disinformation and helping audiences evaluate online content will require more systematic action. In this regard, Janda and Víchová (2019) call for a ‘whole of society approach’ that rests on cooperation between technology companies, governments, civil society organisations and individuals.

It is clear that the regulatory environment has failed to keep pace with the rapid evolution of digital platforms and their use for political campaigning and propaganda (Jones 2019). However, the regulatory debate is often distorted by far-right activists who claim freedom of expression as a defence for the promotion of extremist agendas (O’Hagan 2018). As Jones (2019:50) argues, “freedom of expression does not entail that there must be no restriction of online political content; rather, that any restriction must be properly tailored.” Thus, the major challenge for countering far-right and extremist disinformation rests on the wider issue of establishing normative frameworks for the online environment.

Finally, the proliferation of anti-immigrant disinformation requires attention from mainstream media and politicians in terms of how immigration is discussed and reported. While the online environment is flooded with disinformation, mainstream news media remains highly influential. It is vital that these outlets offer audiences a comprehensive and accurate

understanding of issues relating to immigration and avoid platforming extremist views for sensational coverage. In other words, there is no magic bullet to counter anti-immigrant disinformation. It requires a ‘whole of society’ approach that engages top-down approaches to regulating and monitoring the information and security environments as well as bottom-up approaches to everyday media practices at organisational and individual levels.

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