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# Probing the paradox: are governments fighting or fueling disinformation?

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Over the past decade, disinformation has been the subject of intensive analysis, with researchers examining it from a multitude of perspectives. Among the chief architects of disinformation are governments, which often find themselves playing a double-edged role: both fueling the fire with propaganda and manipulative narratives while simultaneously crafting laws and regulations to combat disinformation. This article seeks to unpack a paradoxical dynamic where governments straddle the line between instigators and regulators of disinformation. Drawing insights from cross-country comparative studies, it delves into the interplay between the independence of public and state-controlled media and key factors like democratic quality, media freedom, and public integrity, in nations that have adopted anti-disinformation legislation. The findings unveil that such laws, which frequently curtail press freedom, are predominantly championed by authoritarian regimes or flawed democracies, wielding them as instruments of censorship. What sets alarm bells ringing, however, is the ripple effect of these practices, which are making inroads into countries known for their strong democratic foundations and well-established traditions of media freedom.

## KEYWORDS

disinformation, misinformation, state media, government, media freedom, editorial independence, fake news

## Introduction: the art of conjuring realities out of thin air

In 2013, Romanian public radio journalist Radu Dobrițoiu initiated a project to create a documentary focusing on the Romanian military's first post-World War II battle. The film recounted the remarkable bravery of a Romanian infantry battalion commanded by General Nicolae Ciucă during the 2004 battle of Nasiriyah in Iraq. General Ciucă detailed the sudden and intense assault launched by a local militia and vividly described the sight of "fireballs passing" in front of their positions during the fierce combat (Marin, 2021). Despite the daunting circumstances, he reported that the Romanian forces successfully navigated the conflict without any casualties, though they did incur some "material losses" (Marin, 2021). Over time, General Ciucă rose through the ranks to occupy significant roles in government, eventually becoming Romania's minister of defense and later prime minister.

Ciucă's professional legacy, particularly his purported heroics in the renowned battle in Iraq, eventually proved to be entirely fabricated. In 2022, a Romanian journalist revealed that a substantial part of his doctoral thesis had been plagiarized (Șercan, 2022). Additionally, it was uncovered that his alleged involvement in the battle of Nasiriyah, as portrayed in the documentary, was completely false. The actual battle occurred a year prior, featuring the US

2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade and Iraqi forces. While Ciucă had indeed been deployed in Iraq at the time, he had no role in the battle, contrary to his claims.

But rather than experiencing public disgrace or potential demotion, Ciucă's political career advanced unscathed. To make matters more questionable, Dobrițoiu, the journalist behind the documentary, was later appointed as an advisor in Ciucă's defense ministry.

While astonishing, this anecdote is far from being a rare or isolated case. High-ranking officials fabricating stories and avoiding retribution have, unfortunately, become increasingly common.

Politicians and government leaders frequently resort to disinformation and propaganda for personal gain. Whether through minor fabrications or elaborate schemes intended to weave completely untrue narratives, such tactics are often used to ensure political influence or sustain power (Lovell, 2007; Buccioli and Zarri, 2013; Osborne, 2014; Cox and Levine, 2010; Mathiesen and Fallis, 2016).

However, the issue of disinformation is far broader than individual misconduct. When dishonesty transitions from isolated acts by specific officials into a systematized approach whereby state institutions build their communications around deception, manipulation, or outright lies, the problem expands vastly. Under these circumstances, state machinery is co-opted to propagate narratives that primarily benefit those in authority, undermining the interests of the general public and creating a dangerous imbalance in the communication ecology.

Over the past few decades, social media has provided authorities with a direct channel to communicate with the public (Graham and Avery, 2013; Wukich and Mergel, 2015; Kavanaugh et al., 2011). However, a significant portion of such communication still occurs through traditional and digital media, including broadcasters, print outlets, and online platforms. As a result, controlling and influencing the editorial direction of the media remains a key priority for most of the world's governments.

But governments play a dual role in managing disinformation. On one hand, they are key disseminators of false information, while on the other hand, they craft and enforce anti-disinformation policies that can stifle press freedom and discourage critical journalism.

This article intends to explore this dual role of the state in managing disinformation—an ironic situation where governments claim to fight disinformation while actively spreading propaganda through state-controlled or captured media.

To do so, the author analyzed empirical data comparing governmental influence on the media and the types of anti-disinformation measures implemented. The research further investigates how these measures affect independent journalism. Additionally, the analysis incorporates data from several third-party indices to uncover patterns linking this dual behavior—using disinformation both as a practice and a justification to target independent journalists—to factors like the strength of democracy, the state of media freedom, and levels of public integrity and transparency.

As such, the study addresses the following central research question:

*RQ1:* How are governments using disinformation and the rhetoric of its prevention to build more sophisticated propaganda-driven media systems?

## The contribution of this study to the literature about disinformation

The relationship between disinformation and politics has been extensively analyzed, with many studies highlighting a robust link between populism and disinformation. This connection is particularly evident among right-wing populist leaders, who often promote false narratives aimed at undermining established knowledge and democratic structures (Hameleers and Minihold, 2022). Additionally, it is increasingly common for politicians to discredit critical media by branding them as sources of “fake news,” a strategy that diminishes public confidence in journalism while allowing these politicians to avoid accountability (Egelhofer et al., 2022; Ross and Rivers, 2018). In periods of crisis, such actions can harm society by devaluing expert insights on critical issues and response strategies (Pérez-Curiel et al., 2022). When government officials and politicians disseminate disinformation, the consequences can be profound, contributing to societal distrust, deepening polarization, and obstructing access to essential political knowledge (Deluggi and Ashraf, 2023).

When examining the role of governments as sources of disinformation, much of the academic discourse has concentrated on its propagation by authoritarian regimes, with Russia frequently cited as a notable example (Clem et al., 2023; Morkūnas, 2023; Wenzel et al., 2024; Van Raemdonck and Meyer, 2024).

Nevertheless, the issue extends far beyond Russia, presenting a far more complex and pervasive challenge. The forms and consequences of disinformation differ across nations, yet a common thread persists: the exploitation of political power structures that rely on disinformation and propaganda to shape public discourse and manipulate citizens. This practice is often amplified through repressive regulatory frameworks designed to silence state critics and is complemented by government-controlled or government-coordinated propaganda outlets. Although manipulative communication tactics are not a novel concept, the emerging ecosystem of state-driven propaganda appears to be growing in scale and influence, even encroaching upon nations traditionally characterized by robust and independent media landscapes.

The phenomenon of fake news has been explored extensively from a variety of angles across numerous fields, drawing on diverse areas of expertise. Within the area of social sciences, questions such as who falls prey to fake news, why the victims of disinformation are susceptible to it, and how it impacts them have been extensively researched (Altay et al., 2022; Batailler et al., 2022; Guadagno and Guttieri, 2021). Scholars have also delved into the complicated link between disinformation and trust in media (Hameleers et al., 2022) while highlighting the crucial role of media literacy in spotting and tackling fake news via a range of behavioral interventions (Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Dame Adjin-Tetty, 2022; Hameleers, 2022; Alonso García et al., 2020).

Moreover, a wealth of research has zeroed in on assessing credibility markers (Bhuiyan et al., 2020; Brashier et al., 2021; Lanian et al., 2021) alongside investigating the influence of social media platforms in amplifying disinformation. The massive reach of major social media networks has, in fact, turned them into double-edged swords—profoundly effective at spreading falsehoods far and wide (Ng et al., 2022). In several nations, this wave of disinformation has been weaponized as a political tool, shaking the foundations of democracies by undermining legitimate leaders, propping up

authoritarian regimes, and sparking political turmoil and violence (Frenkel and Alba, 2021).

Moreover, the study of fake news has expanded beyond social studies to encompass a wide range of disciplines, including economics (Clarke et al., 2020), psychology (Roozenbeek et al., 2020) or climate change (Treen et al., 2020), among others.

In today's high-speed, digitally driven world, the proliferation of disinformation, which in essence, involves the deliberate dissemination of falsehoods aimed at deceiving or swaying public opinion (Kapantai et al., 2021), has grown into a widespread and multifaceted issue. While such tactics are hardly a novel concept, the advent of the internet and the ever-expanding influence of social media have poured fuel on the fire, dramatically amplifying its reach and impact. As a result, societies across the globe are grappling with a challenge both complex and urgent.

Disinformation is by design misleading, crafted with the express purpose of pushing a specific agenda (Fallis, 2015). It is calculated and cunning, often blending fact with fiction to lend an air of plausibility. The endgame is clear: to shape public opinion, sway political landscapes, or sow division among communities (Bennett and Livingston, 2020).

The fallout from disinformation is vast and far-reaching. It casts a long shadow over individuals, communities, and the bedrock of democracy itself. Exploiting pre-existing divides, it deepens societal rifts, chips away at trust in public institutions, and threatens to undermine democratic frameworks. During public health emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic, the dissemination of untruths about vaccines and treatments has yielded life-altering consequences (Gottlieb and Dyer, 2020). Beyond that, spin and fabricated narratives carry the dangerous potency to ignite violence, amplify hatred, and stir chaos, leaving communities to pick up the pieces in their wake (Horowitz, 2019).

Over the past 10 years, debates have taken place among civil society, governments, tech corporations, and academics about strategies to tackle the thorny issue of disinformation (Phippen et al., 2021). In response, a range of measures has been rolled out. Governments, for instance, have championed policy initiatives to hold social media platforms accountable for the content they host, alongside demands for improved transparency about the origins of information and the funding behind political advertisements—factors widely regarded as key in the war against disinformation (Bouza García and Oleart, 2024).

The tech industry, too, has taken a larger role in combating disinformation, with social media giants ramping up investments in sophisticated tools and strategies for content moderation to curb the proliferation of falsehoods. Adjustments to platform algorithms have sought to give credence-focused information a leg up while dialing down misleading material (Wagner et al., 2021). On another front, civil society has rolled out a suite of initiatives aimed at sharpening media literacy by equipping the public with the tools to dissect information and distinguish fact from fiction. Fact-checking organizations have mushroomed as well, with many dedicating hefty resources to dismantling misinformation by delivering rigorously verified content (Arcos et al., 2022).

With all these key players ostensibly pulling out all the stops to shine a light on and mitigate disinformation, one might reasonably hypothesize that the prevalence of false narratives has waned or, at the very least, that public awareness about it has improved.

This article sets its sights on analyzing the role of one particularly major actor in the fight against disinformation: government. The analysis herein centers on a troubling trend of increasing state control over media ecosystems, where governments wear two hats—acting simultaneously as propagandists, spreading disinformation through state-run media, and as policymakers, crafting regulations that ostensibly combat disinformation but are often deployed as weapons to silence independent journalism.

## Methodology

The primary data source for this analysis originates from the State Media Monitor, a project developed by this article's author.<sup>1</sup> This initiative assesses three core factors influencing the independence of state-run and public service media: financial structure, governance/ownership, and editorial freedom.

The State Media Monitor employs a methodology drawing on document analysis (including budget plans, legal frameworks, corporate filings, annual reports, and internal codes such as ethics guidelines, regulations, and editorial norms), semi-structured interviews (with journalists and media specialists), and content analysis.<sup>2</sup> Data is gathered yearly from 170 countries and used to classify state and public service media based on a taxonomy called the State Media Matrix,<sup>3</sup> structured around the project's three essential criteria as outlined above.

The classification framework identifies seven models varying in their levels of financial, governance, and editorial independence. Focusing solely on editorial independence for differentiation, state and public media can be grouped into two broad categories. The first category consists of government-controlled media, encompassing the Matrix models SC, CaPu, and CaPr (see Appendix Table 1). The second category represents outlets independent of government influence, which include the models ISFM, ISE, ISM, and IP (see Appendix Table 1).

The research for this article primarily relies on insights from the State Media Monitor to evaluate the extent of governmental influence over the media. Using the State Media Matrix, the author devised purposely for this article a classification system dividing countries into three categories based on the degree of government interference with the media: state-controlled (where media outlets are entirely or predominantly under state influence, acting largely as propaganda tools), partly state-controlled (where some government-administered media outlets maintain a degree of editorial freedom), and independent (where public service media operate with mechanisms ensuring their independence from the government).

The second stage of the analysis for this article focuses on determining the levels of government media control in countries that have enacted anti-disinformation legislation. To achieve this, data on 78 countries that implemented anti-disinformation initiatives, as

1 See the entire research results and media profiles in the State Media Monitor at: [www.statemediamonitor.com](http://www.statemediamonitor.com).

2 The State Media Monitor methodology can be accessed at: <https://statemediamonitor.com/methodology/>.

3 The taxonomy can be accessed at: <https://statemediamonitor.com/2022/05/typology/>.

compiled by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023) were analyzed. This dataset, regarded as the most comprehensive resource on anti-disinformation policies to date, was created in two phases. The first consisted of a review of existing databases on state responses to disinformation, followed by a systematic content analysis of scholarly articles, think tank reports, news coverage, and proposed legislation from 178 different nations and territories to highlight additional examples and gather data.

Finally, the third part of this article integrates findings from the first two stages with various indices from third-party organizations to assess democracy quality, media freedom, and governmental transparency in countries with anti-disinformation laws. These assessments relied on tools such as Freedom House's Global Freedom index<sup>4</sup> and The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index<sup>5</sup> (to evaluate democratic quality), as well as Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index<sup>6</sup> (for media freedom), and Transparency Index and Public Integrity Index,<sup>7</sup> and Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>8</sup> (for public transparency and integrity).

## Discussion: is anti-disinformation legislation a sign of authoritarianism?

The government's sway over the media landscape has undergone a profound transformation since the BBC—the world's first national broadcaster—came into existence over a century ago. Of late, there has been a clearcut drift toward tighter government grip on the media sector, particularly when it comes to national public and state-affiliated media outlets. These entities, being heavyweight content producers with far-reaching influence on audiences, are often regarded as major sources of information.

The most recent findings, released in September 2024, from the State Media Monitor study, run by the Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC), reveal that over 84% of the 601 state-run media companies from 170 countries included in the research lack autonomy in editorial decisions. Instead, they commonly function as mouthpieces for government propaganda (Dragomir, 2025). Collectively, these state-controlled and public media outlets oversee nearly 7,000 media assets, spanning television and radio stations, print platforms, news agencies, and online news portals.

Globally, the state-controlled (SC) model, which covers media entities wholly owned, managed, and editorially controlled by governmental authorities, remains the dominant system. As per the analysis conducted by the State Media Monitor, roughly 65% of all public and state-backed media outlets across 170 nations operate under this structure. A significant number of these entities act as

channels for stoking disinformation and peddling propaganda narratives, blurring the lines between journalism and state messaging.

When analyzed alongside data from the CIMA report (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023), State Media Monitor data show that regulations ostensibly designed to address disinformation are predominantly found in nations with state-controlled media systems. Between 2011 and 2022, researchers from CIMA pinpointed 105 laws enacted under the banner of tackling “misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (MDM),” with a majority (91 in total) introduced between 2016 and 2022. A significant surge in these regulations was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 36 new MDM laws emerging during this period (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023).

Notably, over 90% of countries implementing anti-disinformation measures (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023)<sup>9</sup> fall under the categories of state-controlled or partly state-controlled media systems as defined in the State Media Monitor project. This demonstrates a link between such legislation and the broader agenda of strengthening governmental control over the media (see Appendix Table 2).

When factors such as the quality of democracy, media freedom, and public integrity are folded into the analysis, a number of obvious patterns come to light (see Appendix Table 2). One of the most revealing findings is the correlation between authoritarian regimes and their grip on state-controlled media. Among the 302 state and public media outlets analyzed, almost two-thirds operate under the firm fix of an authoritarian regime. Remarkably, this figure climbs to more than 73% when “flawed democracies,” as categorized by the Democracy Index, are included. On the flip side, only two-thirds of the 26 state and public media outlets enjoying editorial independence are based in what the Democracy Index classifies as “full democracies.”

To a certain degree, this discovery comes as no great revelation, given that these nations are historically marred by authoritarian leanings, which extend their grip to the media landscape. Unsurprisingly, only seven authoritarian regimes in our sample managed to secure spots among the top 100 in the latest Press Freedom Index. Take Russia, for example: its government wields the media as a blunt instrument of propaganda. As per an analysis by the State Media Monitor, “as the international information war continues to intensify, faced with substantial criticism in the media, particularly from Western sources, the Russian-based media outlets have come under increasing pressure to align themselves with the directives of the state authorities in Moscow.”<sup>10</sup>

Latin America tells a parallel story, with nations such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua standing out as bastions of state dominance, where major media outlets operate under the iron fist of government control.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Asia earns the undesirable distinction of housing some of the most draconian censorship structures on the planet. Countries like China, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam wield power over their respective media organizations with an extreme

4 See the index at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/> (hereafter *Democracy Index*).

5 See the index at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/> (hereafter *Democracy Index*).

6 See the index at: <https://rsf.org/en/index> (hereafter *Press Freedom Index*).

7 See the Transparency Index and Public Integrity Index at: <https://corruptionrisk.org/integrity/#ipi> (hereafter *Transparency Index and Public Integrity Index*).

8 See the index at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023> (hereafter *Corruption Perception Index*).

9 The analysis in this article covers 75 of the 78 countries with anti-disinformation laws researched by CIMA as the State Media Monitor project does not include three of those countries, namely Eswatini, Guinea and Vanuatu.

10 See Regional Overviews: Eurasia in State Media Monitor: <https://statemediamonitor.com/2023/10/eurasia/>.

11 See Regional Overviews: Latin America and the Caribbean in State Media Monitor: <https://statemediamonitor.com/2023/10/latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>.

degree of centralization. Chinese state-run outlets do not stop at domestic influence; they cast their messaging far and wide, a pattern often criticized as Beijing's attempt to export propaganda beyond its borders.<sup>12</sup> Turning to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the region paints an equally sobering picture of government overreach. Alarming, 96% of its 86 media outlets operate under the influence of state authorities, paving the way for flagrant editorial manipulation that leaves little room for journalistic independence.<sup>13</sup>

The term “hybrid regimes,” as defined by the Democracy Index, refers to nations where electoral malpractices are rampant, effectively disqualifying them as free and fair democracies. Within our sample, over 20% of state-controlled media originate from countries classified in this category. An exception to this trend is Côte d'Ivoire, a West African nation with a population of around 28 million, which boasts a state-run media outlet that maintains its editorial independence. Generally, countries in the hybrid regime classification enjoy a slightly higher degree of media freedom. Nevertheless, only 11 of these nations in our study manage to secure a spot within the top 100 rankings of the RSF Press Freedom Index.

That said, it is essential to bear in mind that hybrid regimes are affected by instability and show a marked proclivity toward authoritarian governance, which profoundly shapes their media environments. Take Morocco, for example—a nation designated a hybrid regime in the Democracy Index. In recent years, its government has tightened its grip on media by consolidating various media firms into a dominant state-controlled conglomerate, signaling clear inclinations toward authoritarianism. Consequently, prominent television networks such as 2 M and Medi1TV, along with Medi1 Radio, have now been integrated under the umbrella of Morocco's public broadcasting entity, SNRT.<sup>14</sup>

Our analysis has uncovered another significant correlation: the relationship between the Press Freedom Index and the degree of independence in public and state-run media. Notably, most of the editorially independent, state-administered media outlets included in this study operate within nations that occupy top positions in the RSF Press Freedom Index. This strongly underscores the important role that a robust and independent public media system plays in fostering a healthy national news ecosystem. Exemplary nations in this regard include Denmark, Canada, Costa Rica, France, Australia, Moldova, Taiwan, and the United States.

Additionally, a link has been unearthed by the analysis between public integrity and media independence. Editorially independent state media tend to prevail within the upper echelons of the Public Integrity Index—namely the top six countries—hinting at a deep-rooted respect of governing authorities for the independent public service media sector in those nations. Moreover, the connection between the independence of state-administered news outlets and perceived corruption is similarly telling. Independent public and state media are most commonly found in nations with low corruption levels, such as

Denmark, Canada, Australia, France, the United States, and Taiwan. Yet, there are significant exceptions to this trend, the outliers being countries like Singapore and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Despite achieving solid rankings on the Corruption Perception Index, these two nations exercise significant control over their state-sponsored media, which appears at odds with the broader pattern.

The findings outlined in this article paint a clear picture of an intensifying global trend: the rise of more sophisticated and effective state-controlled communication systems. Governments are increasingly consolidating their grip on a growing propaganda apparatus, while simultaneously overhauling regulatory frameworks to suppress critical, independent media under the guise of combating disinformation. The CIMA report (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023) reveals that anti-disinformation laws often cast a long shadow over independent media, exerting a chilling effect on press freedom. These legislative tools are predominantly wielded by authoritarian regimes plagued by entrenched corruption, poor records on press liberty, and a chronic lack of public accountability and transparency—strongly suggesting they are specifically engineered to facilitate repression and bolster propaganda efforts.

What raises a deeper alarm is the spread of such anti-disinformation laws to nations traditionally celebrated for their respect for press freedom and democratic values. While over 43% of the countries enacting these laws are authoritarian by nature, troublingly, similar statutes have been introduced in nations categorized as “full democracies,” according to the Economist Democracy Index. These democratic countries in our sample—Canada, Australia, Costa Rica, Greece, France, Denmark, and Taiwan—are now part of this growing trend, flipping the script on the idea that only autocrats manipulate such legal mechanisms.

While in certain full democracies these newly enacted laws do not appear to undermine democracy or threaten media freedom, in others they raise concerns about a potential drift toward authoritarian practices. Take Denmark, for instance—legal measures introduced in 2019 criminalize the spread of disinformation that “aids or enables” foreign state actors in influencing Danish public opinion. However, no tangible evidence suggests that these provisions have been used to curb the independence of the nation's public media or imperiled press freedom (Levush, 2019). Conversely, in Costa Rica, the amendment of the country's Criminal Code in 2012 by way of Law 9,048 drew sharp criticism from activists for creating stipulations that could threaten internet freedom (Avila, 2012). Further developments only exacerbated the erosion of media independence in the country. In recent years, allegations of censorship have grown louder at SINART, Costa Rica's public broadcasting service, with critics lambasting the outlet for allegedly becoming a mouthpiece for President Rodrigo Chaves (SINART, 2024). These troubling trends culminated in the downgrading of SINART from an independent media classification to a government-controlled designation in the 2023 State Media Monitor.

In summary, governments' manipulation of the concept of disinformation to align with their policy-driven crackdown on independent media carries profound and far-reaching repercussions—not just for the press and the communication landscape, but for society at large.

A central consequence of weaponizing disinformation as part of a government's control strategy is the gradual erosion of public trust in news media outlets and other sources of information. When authorities distort facts to serve their agendas, it eats into the credibility of the media and fosters a deeply skeptical public mindset, which inadvertently menaces the reputation of news organizations.

12 See Regional Overviews: Asia in State Media Monitor: <https://statediamonitor.com/2023/10/asia/>.

13 See Regional Overviews: Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in State Media Monitor: <https://statediamonitor.com/2023/10/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena/>.

14 See Regional Overviews: Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in State Media Monitor: <https://statediamonitor.com/2023/10/middle-east-and-north-africa-mena/>.

Furthermore, silencing dissenting voices through regulatory measures has a chilling effect on freedom of speech and expression that cannot be overstated. When individuals and organizations operate under the fear of reprisal for challenging official narratives, it curtails open dialog, throttling the flow of democratic discourse. This has the ripple effect of suppressing the diversity of opinions, which threatens societal pluralism in its truest sense.

As the media and communication landscape became highly interconnected on a global scale, the reach of propaganda is set to breach more borders, infiltrating diverse societies and posing significant risks to democracy, which thrives on a free and independent press. An ever-growing number of authoritarian regimes are joining the ranks of established players with dominant international media operations, such as China and Russia, to influence public discourse and steer narratives. This only complicates an already complex global information ecosystem, muddied by disinformation and manipulation.

## Conclusion

The repercussions of disinformation have been the subject of intensive study over the last few decades, with increasing scholarly attention devoted to the instrumental role governments play in crafting and disseminating false narratives as a deliberate tool of propaganda.

This article set out to investigate the strategies employed by governments to manipulate public discourse through disinformation, unveiling a recurring blueprint of state-driven narrative control. This pattern reveals how governments simultaneously propagate falsehoods and wield the label of “disinformation” as a weapon to silence dissent, often operating with little to no accountability. Through vast state-run media empires designed for propaganda and legislation ostensibly intended to mitigate disinformation, governments create an atmosphere of intimidation that discourages independent, critical journalism.

In light of these dynamics, this paper underscores two key insights worth dissecting.

Firstly, the trends explored here expose the hypocrisy behind anti-disinformation laws, which are frequently less about curbing disinformation and more about muffling opposing viewpoints. The outcome is a media ecosystem characterized by dueling streams of propaganda, where governments amass extraordinary powers to legislate, regulate, and enforce as they see fit—leading, in many cases, to outright censorship.

Secondly, there is a dire need for research that delves deeper into the ways in which governments actively perpetrate disinformation. Much of the existing research fixates on external actors like Russia or China, while insufficient attention is paid to the precise methods employed within other political contexts. Addressing this research gap is critical for reframing the narrative on disinformation, shifting it away from the accidental virality of fake news toward a consideration of the calculated, systematic, and state-sanctioned

disinformation campaigns that strike at the heart of our civic discourse.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

MD: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1429741/full#supplementary-material>

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