

The invisible war

An attack on our citizens and our democracies



[Version française de ce document](#) - [Executive Summary](#)

Disinformation is not just a threat - it is an insidious, war-like assault targeting our minds and our values.

Recent electoral campaigns in Romania and in France reveal alarming signs: covert manipulations, coordinated social media campaigns, and the growing role of artificial intelligence in spreading disinformation. *These threats are not a distant possibility—they are already reshaping our democracies from within.*

“Have we already lived through our last truly free election ?”

This question, once unimaginable, confronts us today. Citizens of all backgrounds and convictions must now recognize the gravity and urgency of the challenges before us.

What we face is akin to war—not a war for territory, but a battle to safeguard the democratic and republican heritage that unites and honors us as citizens. *Now is the time to rally around this heritage, for we must protect it.*

For further exploration of these topics, see the 'Appendices and Sources' section.

Historical reminders: from disturbing premises to invisible campaigns

2016: the emergence of disinformation

*“Denouncing false information
is not enough to neutralize it.”*

In 2016, the US presidential elections marked a turning point : disinformation still required significant resources, such as expensive troll farms or skilled political consulting firms, like Cambridge Analytica. These tools exploited voters' personal data to spread targeted messages that polarized public opinion and deepened social divisions. *While these maneuvers were exposed and widely condemned, they did not ultimately challenge the legitimacy of the election results.*

In the case of Brexit, the slogan [“We send the EU £350 million a week – let's fund our NHS instead”](#) quickly denounced as erroneous, nevertheless had a profound impact on the public debate.

In 2017, during the French presidential debate, a document presented live claiming that Emmanuel Macron held an offshore account in the Bahamas, was revealed to be falsified. This example, often cited as an attempt at disinformation during the campaign, shows how unverified information can quickly interfere in the public debate, whether relayed by candidates or their supporters on social networks.

These examples mark the beginning of the widespread use of disinformation as an electoral weapon. These manipulations, though still detectable at the time, were already posing unprecedented challenges to our democracies.

2024: the year of resounding successes

*“In 2024, disinformation has reached a new stage,
with unprecedented successes.”*

- **Romania (November 2024)** : during the Romanian presidential election, the pro-Russian independent candidate Călin Georgescu made spectacular progress. In June 2024, he was credited with less than 1% in the polls. At the beginning of November, it reached 7%, according to [Ziare.com](#), eventually securing 23.94% of the votes in the first round of November 24 (source: [El Pais](#)). This meteoric rise was attributed to an intensive campaign on Tik Tok, which was able to mobilize a large electorate in record time.
- **France and the United States**: during the French legislative elections and the American presidential election, Anti-establishment parties and movements achieved remarkable results, well beyond the figures which we could have imagined a few years ago. These results reflect real discontent and aspirations of citizens seeking change, driven by criticism of elites or unmet social demands. However, these aspirations have sometimes been amplified or exploited by disinformation campaigns, as detailed below.

2024: the year of “stealth” campaigns

*“We now only see the tip
of a much more dangerous iceberg.”*

The tip of the iceberg: a lure to distract us

False images generated by AI, like those of [supposed Taylor Swift fans supporting Trump](#), or crude rumors such as [“Haitians eat our dogs and cats”](#) in the United States, are easy to detect.

However, they serve a strategic function: diverting public attention to superficial subjects, thus masking much more sophisticated disinformation campaigns.

It is a distraction intended to obscure the larger threat.

The bottom of the iceberg: well-oiled and efficient operations

These “invisible” campaigns exploit social networks such as TikTok and messaging services such as Telegram. Unlike previous methods, they no longer require expensive “specialists” like Cambridge Analytica, but are accessible to ordinary users equipped with easy-to-use tools.

In Romania, a handful of Internet users manipulated opinion using simplified guides, documented in this [page Reddit](#), which shows “handling for dummies” type instructions.

In France, disinformation campaigns, frequently linked to pro-Kremlin actors, targeted the 2024 legislative elections. As illustrated in the report [Ten minutes to midnight on Putin's clock](#) (David Chavalarias, CNRS), these campaigns have notably exploited sensitive topics, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and debates on Islamophobia, to polarize public opinion and weaken the Republican front. Thousands of memes and viral posts accused political and public figures of colluding with ‘globalist elites,’ exploiting stereotypes to deepen divisions. See the “Appendices and Sources” section for more details on this report.

With simpler tools and a global reach, disinformation has become an accessible yet terrifyingly effective weapon. Our democracies, ill-prepared, are struggling to counter these escalating challenges.

Disinformation: a war that does not speak its name

“Our democracies are attacked, victims of a war without weapons, but very real.”

Disinformation is a silent but formidable tool of warfare.

Widespread use by authoritarian parties and states

Authoritarian parties and states fully exploit disinformation tools to serve their interests.

Russia has been using these tools for years with increasing success. *In recent weeks, these maneuvers have likely intensified as retaliation for recent agreements between the United States, Europe, and Ukraine, allowing the latter to use weapons on Russian territory. This intensification could partly explain the “Romanian surprise”.*

Elon Musk and Donald Trump did not hesitate to use false images and rumors during the American presidential campaign. However, these blatant manipulations are only the tip of the iceberg, likely masking much more subtle and massive actions.

In the USA, a threat to the truth

In the United States, the fight against disinformation may soon be hampered. Donald Trump has threatened [legal action against media and digital giants](#) if they persist in their fact-checking and moderation efforts. With his return to power expected in January 2025, he will have a free hand to turn these threats into reality, ushering in an era where truth-telling and exposing falsehoods could be penalized.

Future pressure from the USA, on a global scale

The repercussions of this ‘new truth’ are likely to extend far beyond the United States.

Threats to NATO

Trump, newly elected, and Elon Musk, his future leader of the Department of Government Efficiency, have recently adopted a tougher stance toward Europe. Future Vice President J.D. Vance suggested that Washington might withdraw its support for NATO if sanctions are imposed on X (formerly Twitter) [for violations of the Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#).

Elon Musk, a key figure in this administration, also responded sharply to NATO’s criticism of disinformation spreading on his platform ([L’Orient-Le Jour](#)).

Elon Musk, a key figure in the administration, [also reacted sharply to a senior NATO officer’s criticism](#) of the way moderation is handled on X.

Moderate parties and democracies trapped by their ethics

Citizens and parties attached to democratic values hesitate to adopt the same strategies as their adversaries as their opponents, out of respect for the principles of transparency and integrity. Let us remember the words of Michelle Obama: “[When they go low, we go high](#)”.

While admirable, this posture can disadvantage those adhering to ethical rules when faced with opponents who do not hesitate to employ aggressive or controversial tactics and means to achieve their objectives.

Regulate without denying democracy?

Regulating information circulating on social networks poses a dilemma for democracies: how to counter these manipulative actions, while respecting the principles of freedom of expression?

Some democracies, [such as Finland](#), rely on media education to strengthen the resilience of citizens, but these isolated efforts struggle to counter a global and coordinated threat.

When billionaires and their media play with our democracies

In the USA, Elon Musk reportedly used his platform, X (formerly Twitter), to amplify messages favorable to Donald Trump. A [scientific study](#) from the Queensland University of Technology shows that after his support for Trump in July 2024, the visibility of his publications jumped [138% and retweets 238%](#), suggesting algorithmic adjustments to highlight his messages and those of his political allies ([article in French](#)).

In France, Vincent Bolloré has in the past mobilized his [media empire to influence the presidential election](#). The CNews and C8 channels have regularly received fines following [dissemination of false information](#). During the 2024 legislative election campaign, the french radio Europe 1 was also criticized for its [mishandling of pluralism and honesty regarding electoral news](#). These practices, supported by large-scale media resources, raise deep concerns about their influence on the democratic debate.

The Chinese approach

China, while far removed from the democratic model, serves as a striking example of an authoritarian state implementing drastic measures to secure its digital borders and shield its citizens from external influences.

- **The "Great Firewall"** restricts access to foreign sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Google) while monitoring Chinese users' communications.
- **Limiting Screen Time for Teens** : measures have been introduced to limit the time of smartphone use among minors (source: [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com))
- **Tiktok is not accessible in China**, where it was replaced by a version adapted to the Chinese market, called Douyin (source: [nytimes](https://www.nytimes.com))

This authoritarian approach underscores the stark contrast between the tools employed by non-democratic regimes and the ethical challenges confronting open societies.

Manipulations in the age of AI

“The objective of an AI dedicated to manipulation: convert and mobilize.”

The advantages of AI

There is something fascinating about modern AI: they are capable of learning on their own, without us having to explain to them the logic behind what they need to understand. As [Geoffrey Hinton](#), one of the pioneers of modern AI, put it: “as soon as it gets really complicated, we don’t actually know what’s going on, any more than we know what’s going on in our brain.”

AI offers promises of remarkable progress—in fields as diverse as medicine, finance, agriculture, and even combating climate change—but also poses significant risks, particularly when used without safeguards.

They have in abundance what we only have in limited resources: time for reflection, discussion, and transmission of information.

They can:

- **“Think” and decide at unprecedented speed** : AIs can make decisions thousands of times faster than humans. In disinformation campaigns, they can design and adapt messages in real time to maximize impact.
- **Transmit information at speeds billions of times faster than humans**, whether to real or artificial actors (this ratio corresponds to the speed ratio between spoken language and network communications used by AIs).
- **Create tailor-made content instantly** : realistic images, emotional videos or sophisticated websites — everything can be generated on demand. These creations adapt perfectly to target groups, exploiting their emotions or beliefs to influence their opinion.

Unlike humans, AIs never forget. They can analyze and reuse each interaction to refine their strategies and predict behaviors.

Note: the ability to generate images indistinguishable from reality has been possible since February 2019: see the site [“this person does not exist”](#).

AI for Persuasion and Mobilization

AI is programmed to achieve specific “goals” set by their human creators.

When used for disinformation, their role extends beyond mere manipulation—it focuses on persuading and mobilizing.

A first objective: to persuade without arousing doubt

The primary objective of a disinformation AI is to persuade citizens while leaving no trace of manipulation. The aim is for targets to feel genuinely convinced, without suspecting they have been influenced.

A second objective: convinced citizens who will carry the message!

A second objective is to convert citizens into active advocates who voluntarily relay the message to others.

Echo chambers initially artificial, and full of “life”

AI can generate an ecosystem of fake personalities across platforms like social networks, online news sites, and forums, creating the illusion of a vibrant, dynamic debate around previously controversial topics.

This strategy encourages the adoption of disseminated ideas by giving targets a sense of belonging to a group with shared interests.

Over time, more and more real individuals join these communities, enhancing their credibility and broadening their influence.

Alpha Persuade: The Ultimate Persuasion AI

The parallel with AlphaGo

AlphaGo, a groundbreaking AI designed to play Go, surpassed the world champion using a fascinating methodology.

Its *objective* was straightforward: become the best Go player possible. Its *rules* were simply the rules of Go.

AlphaGo was not given *any prior strategic information, nor any database of the best known moves*. It was simply taught the rules, then played billions of games against himself, developing its own strategies.

The result? AlphaGo became virtually unbeatable, achieving its goal with extraordinary efficiency. To achieve this, we only had to teach it the rules of the game and its objective.

Alpha Persuade: an AI system for persuasion

Let's imagine a similar AI: its *objective* would be to convince its interlocutors to adopt a specific opinion, and its *rules* would be to know how to hold convincing debates (which Conversational AIs are already doing very well).

To train, this AI would play against itself: an instance would train to convince, while another would resist, simulating a skeptical and analytical human interlocutor. Each “game” would allow Alpha Persuade to refine its arguments, its emotional tactics and its logical strategies.

Over time, this system could surpass human abilities in persuasion by an extraordinary margin.

Its potential applications, ranging from advertising and lobbying to radicalization and large-scale political manipulation, are as appealing as they are dangerous.

This concept of a persuasion-focused AI stems from the 2023 conference “[The AI Dilemma](#)”, where speakers warned about advanced AI systems manipulating at scale and posing tangible risks to democratic institutions.

AI Action Summit 2025 in Paris

The AI Action Summit (AI) will be held in Paris on February 10th and 11th, 2025. This event will convene heads of state, researchers, businesses, and international organizations to address the responsible use of AI, global governance, and trust in these technologies (elysee.fr).

Elon Musk's participation could be beneficial, recalling that in March 2023, he [co-signed an open letter](#) advocating for a pause in the development of powerful AI systems, citing profound risks to society and humanity. However, it could also be counterproductive, because he has shown a certain complacency towards manipulations on his platforms, even going so far as to [relay false images and rumors](#) himself.

Conclusion

“We risk quickly losing this war which does not speak its name.”

Our democracies face incessant waves of disinformation. These offensives are orchestrated by foreign influences and sometimes by national media actors. They are often amplified by AI and exacerbated by growing religious tensions.

Ill-prepared to face a threat that is both global and insidious, moderate democracies struggle to protect themselves without compromising their fundamental principles.

Have we already had our last truly free elections?

The question deserves to be asked, and it now worries a growing portion of the population!

The latest elections in Romania, France and the USA do not sweep away this fear; on the contrary, they even seem to strengthen it. It is likely that manipulation campaigns, which have become invisible and sophisticated, will now weigh heavily on our elections.

What to do

Know we are facing acts of war and say it clearly

The first step is to explain that we are engaged in a war, digital and unarmed, but very real.

Addressing this issue openly would make citizens aware of the risks of manipulation conveyed by social networks and messaging applications, which have become essential to our modern lives, and controlled by foreign powers, whose interests do not always coincide with ours.

Reclaim our digital sovereignty, at the European or French level

Digital sovereignty transcends political divisions and is a national concern: protecting our data and preventing foreign powers, whether corporations or states, from being able to influence our democratic choices is a priority shared by all .

Should we continue to trust messaging and social networks hosted in countries like the USA or China?

Regarding TikTok (a Chinese company), an increasing number of people rely on this platform as their primary source of information. However, the lack of transparency about how content is moderated raises serious concerns. TikTok's CEO was summoned by the European Parliament after Călin Georgescu's unexpected presidential victory in Romania, raising concerns about the platform's influence on the election (source: [Romania Insider](#)).

As for the USA, and therefore almost the entire rest of our digital lives, the question arises now that Donald Trump and his team have expressed their desire for control over these corporations. What will happen to our personal data hosted on these platforms in this context?

To protect our democracies, we will likely need to consider a combination of three approaches: *create European alternatives, regulate foreign players more strongly, and ban the most problematic platforms.*

Mobilize citizen vigilance

Defending our democracy and institutions is a shared duty that rises above political divides. Whatever our opinions, we all have an interest in preserving a balanced public debate and electoral choices free from manipulation.

We must regain collective pride in our democratic values, our way of life, and our institutions.

Although imperfect, these institutions are fundamental pillars of our freedom. Recognizing their value and that they need to be defended with passion is essential in the face of the threats that await us in the short term.

Fiercely defend media plurality

Protecting media pluralism is essential for a healthy democracy. This involves measures against media monopolies, strengthening the sanctions available to regulators such as ARCOM to combat disinformation, and active support for credible and independent media, guarantors of an informed public debate.

Educate and mobilize citizens

It would be urgent to launch awareness campaigns to strengthen citizens' critical thinking and resistance to disinformation.

We can draw inspiration from wartime efforts: as then, let's encourage our citizens to be wary of messages of unknown origin. Even relayed by loved ones or well-known personalities, they could mask intentions hostile to our values and our way of life.

It would perhaps be advantageous to find suitable slogans: as in Great Britain, we said “[Careless Talk Costs Lives](#)” during the Second World War.

Appendices And Sources

The AI Dilemma

[Alpha Persuade](#) was mentioned in the 2023 conference titled “[The AI Dilemma](#)”.

An overview of recent progress and challenges in AI

A document that I wrote in November 2023. It may already be somewhat outdated, but gives a good overview of the speed of progress in the field of AI.

See [An overview of recent progress and challenges in AI](#),

Ten minutes to midnight on Putin's clock

The report [Ten minutes to midnight on Putin's clock](#), led by David Chavalarias, analyzes Russian interference strategies observed during the 2024 French legislative elections. These strategies include techniques like astroturfing, meme warfare, and exploiting social media to spread polarizing narratives. These campaigns aim to weaken the Republican front, normalize the far right and promote a transition to an illiberal democracy. The report highlights the exploitation of sensitive societal issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or debates on Islamophobia. These are used to further polarize public opinion and weaken resistance to the far right.

GANs and the generation of realistic content indistinguishable from reality

The approach - where two algorithms compete - has demonstrated its efficacy since 2019. See in particular “[this person does not exist](#)”, a website capable of generating indistinguishable fake human faces.

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