Antecedent Conditions of Disinformation in Mexico. A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract. Disinformation is a pervasive force in contemporary political communication. Nonetheless, its strength and characteristics are deeply situated by historical and conjunctural political factors of each country. Mexico is one of the Latin American democracies with more acute disinformation operations and flows. This paper describes such scenario and analyses three general categories of antecedent conditions, political elites, news media and citizens, to explain why disinformation is so pervasive. Media is underfunded and discredited by the public, whereas public media is weak and lacks credibility. Citizens are highly dependent of social media for their news consumption, and lack the abilities to identify misleading information. And politicians are characterized by populist and polarizing rhetoric, a tradition of deception against Mexican citizens, and their unwillingness to regulate or enforce any measures against disinformation, of which rip ample benefits. We conclude by recommending empirically and theoretically furthering this framework in order to better understand disinformation in non-consolidated democracies.

Keywords: Disinformation · Misinformation · Mexico · political communication

1 Introduction

Rather than a mere buzzword, disinformation is a pervasive force in contemporary political communication. While the dust of the "twin traumas" (Anstead, 2020) of the United States election of 2018 and Brexit in the United Kingdom has settled down, the COVID 19 crisis and the Ukraine war triggered widespread and sophisticated disinformation operations worldwide, reminding us that the menace is more pressing than ever.

The damage and responses to the issue, however, vary. In developed nations, the first wave of disinformation led to new regulation and scrutiny by the authorities, which seemed to tame its perils. Nonetheless, in underdeveloped and less democratic countries, the issue might only worsen. An international comparison carried out by Humprecht (2019) found that in countries where public service broadcasting and confidence in government and the media are strong, there is less disinformation. However, Humprecht left the question open as to what happens in nations where freedom of the press and internet penetration are low. This assumption suggests that in countries characterized by

a combination of underdevelopment and low levels of democratic rule, disinformation may thrive. This might be the case in Mexico.

Disinformation can be understood as all forms of false, inaccurate, decontextualized or misleading information intentionally designed, presented, and promoted to cause public harm or private gain (de Cock Buning, 2018). It is mainly produced by misleading websites, satirical websites, highly partisan outlets and, crucially, social media platforms, where political actors issue false or decontextualized statements (Humprecht 2019).

Disinformation aims to disrupt the established political order by arousing distrust and cynicism towards political actors, the media and democracy itself, incite hostility and cultivate divisions and even conflict between social groups (Mourão & Robertson, 2019; Ingram, 2020). In the end, it constitutes a threat to the stability and sovereignty of nations, groups and individuals who need reliable information to discern what is good to their best interests and govern themselves democratically (Miller & Vaccari, 2020).

The powerful agents that promote disinformation include foreign countries, terrorist groups, interest or pressure groups, organized crime, and significantly, states that are prone to manipulate public opinion. Indeed, many studies (Freelon & Wells, 2020) confirm that disinformation primarily originates from governments and political parties that orchestrate extensive operations of collective deception during elections and non-electoral periods, aiming to manipulate citizens for their own objectives. States are powerful disinformation sponsors since they have ample resources, technology, personnel and expertise, and are able to leverage non-state actors as proxies (Ingram, 2020).

However, the success of these operations depends on the local conditions in which they are carried out. For example, disinformation is more frequent and harmful in countries with low trust in politicians and the media, high polarization, and extensive social media exposure (Humprecht et al., 2023). These conditions, coupled with factors such as low accountability or citizens with limited access to accurate journalistic information and a greater susceptibility to misinformation, are present in Mexico, our case study. While the existence of a deceptive state is not new in the Mexican context, digital technologies undoubtedly enhance the scope and impact of disinformation.

The goal of this text is to explain what makes Mexico a fertile ground for political disinformation. Firstly, we survey the scale of disinformation operations in the country by describing their nature, intensity, and pernicious interference in democratic electoral processes. Secondly, we analyze the factors that promote this phenomenon, classifying them into three categories: those related to the traditional news media, those involving citizens and their characteristics and scope, and those associated with the actions or inactions of the Mexican State, particularly the government, the congress, and the political parties. In line with the work by Humprecht et al. (2019, 2020, 2023) and Valenzuela et al. (2022), we adopt a complex and multifactorial understanding of disinformation, recognizing that it arises from citizens who are susceptible or careless in their information consumption, media outlets that struggle to disseminate accurate information, and politicians who are either eager to deceive the public or passive in enforcing legal sanctions to prevent it.

2 Scale of Disinformation in Mexico and Democratic Consequences

A quick survey of some statistical indicators and anecdotal evidence shows the scope of the phenomenon in the country. On the one hand, Mexico stands out as the fourth country, among a sample of forty-three nations from around the world, in which people are exposed to false news (43% of the population), only behind Malaysia (44%), Greece (44%) and Turkey (49%), and a long way from the United States (31%) and the United Kingdom (15%) where recent operations of disinformation in elections or plebiscites have shocked domestic and international public opinion (Newman et al., 2022). This is related to the intense circulation of fake news during the campaigns, such as the one detected in the 2018 elections through Facebook, information portals created purposefully to misinform, Twitter accounts, WhatsApp chains and YouTube channels, implemented by and against all the competing political parties (Rodríguez -Cano, 2018).

Also, bots (automated accounts) and trolls (manually operated fake accounts) have been documented at least since the 2012 presidential election, specifically through the so-called "E- activists" (activists operating for the then candidate Enrique Peña Nieto) and with the circulation of stigmatizing stereotypes such as "peñabots" (followers of the candidate Enrique Peña Nieto) and "pejezombies" (followers of Andrés Manuel López Obrador) (Barcenas & Donnovan, 2016; Liceaga, 2016). The use of bots during the 2012 campaigns was detected since the pre-campaign, when there were abrupt increases in followers on certain candidates' networks, and it continues to this day. For example, in a single day the candidate of the Nueva Alianza party, Gabriel Quadri, increased his Facebook and Twitter accounts by more than 60,000 subscribers (113%), Josefina Vázquez Mota of the PAN increased by 19% (90,000) and Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI) did the same with 40,000 subscribers, 8% more (Observatorio-Electoral, 2012). Such operations have been detected in each federal electoral cycle and in the local ones.

In turn, journalists, academics, and civil society organizations have documented practices of "attention hacking", that is, the artificial amplification of support for controversial government initiatives through botnets, which create a false universe of supporting followers. This often occurs simultaneously with the deployment of dirty campaigns against candidates, a phenomenon known as "character assassination" (negative and fake slant without source identification). Its objective is to generate reputational damage, diminishing the credibility of a certain candidate and, consequently, their chances of being elected. The fundamental feature of these strategies is the great resemblance of the pieces of information to journalistic notes from prestigious media, or to official documents, which makes them indistinguishable to the ordinary citizen.

Lastly, there have been operations of algorithmic repression, that is, the shutting down of hashtags about opinion trends or social movements, as a way of undermining or deactivating them. In the case of the movement in favor of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa, the unifying hashtag #YaMeCanse was hacked as it gained strength. Hence, it had to be replaced by the hashtag #YaMeCanse2 which, in turn, given its disabling, was replaced by the #YaMeCanse3.

It is known that governments, at the federal and state levels, are the main sponsors of these operations, as well as their victims. For example, in the last federal elections of 2021, at the same time that rumors circulated that the National Electoral Institute was concocting electoral fraud against MORENA through the distribution of erasable

ink or the delivery of voter credentials to Central American migrants, false information circulated that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador suffered a stroke instead of the COVID disease that actually occurred, or that the UN revealed that his government had not purchased vaccines against that disease. Despite their falsehood, the effectiveness of these operations to make these messages credible stands out: a study by Valenzuela, Muñiz y Santos (2022) found that 18%, 14%, 12% and 19% of their national sample believed these rumors, respectively.

Several of these tactics had been going on for decades and were slowly perfected by a regime that coerced freedom of expression in public opinion, which it subtly tried to manipulate. However, the pressing issue of this repertoire of deception practices is its rapid acceleration in the digital environment, as the connectivity and dependence of the Mexican public towards digital information gradually grow and such practices become more sophisticated over time. Thus, disinformation seems to be a structural condition of the information environment, to the extent that it is difficult for citizens to evade it and for political or media actors not to consider it as a resource that they can use in their favor or against which they can defend themselves. As a systemic and non-spontaneous feature of politics, it begins to interfere in the conventional development of electoral and non-electoral processes, as explored below.

3   Disinformation and Malfunction of the Epistemic Dimension of Democracy

The consequences of misinformation go beyond momentary confusion or disappointment. They undermine citizens' right to know by providing individuals and the public with inaccurate, false, or misleading information, diminishing their ability to understand reality and act effectively upon it (Christians, Glasser, McQuail & White, 2009). However, at a democratic level, disinformation can weaken the sovereignty of citizens and their ability to govern themselves.

These consequences are based on the assumption of a close link between the democratic regime and accurate information and knowledge. Democratic elections are an act of individual and collective decision between political options. The foundations of said decision can be both retrospective - how a certain political option did when it came to power - and prospective -what it proposes to do when it comes to power. In the former, citizens need reliable information on the administration, its performance and its integrity, to decide whether to ratify the person or political party in office, or remove them. In the second case, they need reliable information regarding, at least, the relevance of the proposals regarding public problems, their feasibility and technical soundness, the credentials of the candidate who proposes them and their degree of integrity, which increases her likelihood of carrying them out successfully. Thus, citizens can equip their vote with elements of judgment and make a reasoned vote that best suits their interests (Dahl, 2000; Strömbäck, 2005).

The democratic need for useful information for electoral decision-making was historically assumed by the press and professional journalism, as modern democracies in the West matured, to the extent that it constitutes the foundation of the "social contract" between citizens and journalism (Schudson, 2001). However, the dominance of

professional journalism and corporate news media has eroded as digital disruption has undermined the economic viability of outlets, many of which have closed their doors, and largely increased the supply of entertainment and social content, reducing the amount of news in their media diet (O'Malley, Brandenburg, Flynn, McMenamin, & Rafter, 2013).

In an ecosystem where professional journalism is no longer the dominant model for the circulation of reliable information, misinformation grows and interferes with the link between information and free and sovereign electoral decisions (the epistemic dimension of democracy). Based on falsehoods, the retrospective electoral decision could be informed by an induced perception of either disastrous or impeccable performance by the government in power; the prospective decision could be tinged with the automatic discrediting of proposals or their elevation, as well as battered or artificially extolled reputations.

Anyhow, by means of these perceptions, individuals and groups could cast a vote manipulated by this information and oriented to the service of particular interests, instead of their own. In this way, the power of individuals to govern themselves is diluted by such operations.

4   Why is Mexico a Fertile Ground for Deception?

The pervasive production and distribution of disinformation in Mexico, in its own terms but also in comparative terms with other countries, indicates a rather structural than a temporary issue, a feature of the national information ecosystem, as we mentioned previously.

Consequently, it is pertinent to unravel the underlying mechanisms that promote this phenomenon and that have helped stabilize it. As in any complex and multifactorial communication phenomenon, we highlight three sets of factors or conditions prior to disinformation: those that concern the characteristics of the audiences, those of the media system, and those that correspond to the political system.

4.1   Audience and Citizenship Factors

Mexican citizens have gone from a high dependence on television as a public information channel to social media. Both circumstances are problematic with respect to the ideal of the informed citizen, that is, one who makes decisions based on an informed and reasoned judgment, rather than on sentiment or prejudice. Regarding the television antecedent, a reading base of the written press never consolidated in Mexico (Trejo, 1992). This would have allowed citizens to deepen and contrast public events, or interpret them through opinion journalism. It is a persistent and pernicious deficit; the scarce studies of media effects in Mexico demonstrate that reading the press is consistently correlated with greater learning about the public and attitudes favorable to participation, such as political interest or trust (Aruguete & Muñiz, 2012).

Additionally, broadcasting for a long time was a monopoly or duopoly whose editorial line was aligned with the politicians rather than the public interest (Echeverría & Bañuelos, 2017). Such ties were so strong, that it is safe to say that the television era was the embryonic stage of the broader phenomenon of disinformation. Lacking elements of

fine processing of information, or media literacy, Mexican audiences could well enter the era of disinformation without criteria for discernment or defense against it.

This condition did not improve when social media became the main source of news for Mexicans. The latest Reuters measurement indicates that 84% of audiences consume information through online channels and 64% through social networks, compared to 44% that do so through television and barely 22% through print media. Regarding the consumption of news through social media, and within a sample of forty-three countries, only Malaysia is above Mexico (64%), and above Latin Ameri-can countries such as Argentina (60%) or Brazil (52%), far from consolidated democracies such as South Korea (25%) or Japan (9%) (de Cock Buning, 2018).

Although the preference for online sources could include professional news media, the fact that 64% do so through networks is challenging for two reasons: first, be-cause these media are intertwined with entertainment content and socialization inter-faces, news consumption could be of an inadvertent type (without intending it) or of low attention (such as when one looks askance at the headlines without delving into the rest of the pieces). Hard users of social media are less knowledgeable about public affairs, less critical, and, hence, more vulnerable to disinformation. Additionally, their users are more likely to react affectively to misleading information and share it impulsively (Humprecht et. al, 2023).

And second, because these media are the central objective and resource of disinfor-mation agents, given that their main properties, such as anonymity, visibility mediated by purchase, or the profiling of users vulnerable to certain types of information, are resources that facilitate deception operations (Jerit & Zhao, 2020).

4.2   Media System Factors

The counterpart of the misleading information is that which is produced and veri-fied professionally, that is, the one that is in charge of generating traditional journal-ism. However, for the latter to counteract the former, it must be credible. Low trust in the media enhances selective exposure, the use of alternative sources (such as fake news sites) and the rejection of "official explanations" about some events (Cordonier et. al, 2021). Nonetheless, Mexican journalism has a historically complicated relationship with its audiences. By constituting the propaganda arm of the one-party regime for decades, and the docile advertising apparatus of the first governments of the transition, the news media have been viewed with suspicion and mistrust by audiences, associated with particularistic rather than the public interest.

This historical distrust has not improved in recent years. Quite the contrary, and helped by the denigration and stigmatization of the current populist government, trust in the news media has experienced a sustained decline, declining 12% from 2017 to 2021 to settle at only 37% in 2022 (no better than 35% of trust in the news that is observed in social networks). In Latin America only, Chile (36%) and Argentina (36%) show less mistrust, while Colombia, Peru (40% each), and Brazil (54%) stand out in the region (de Cock Buning, 2018).

In a normatively desirable scenario, the information diet would be balanced be-tween social media and professional media (written or audiovisual), and users would have the chance of contrasting the information and verifying it first-hand from reliable

sources. But in a situation like Mexico, in which written information has never developed primacy over audiovisual information, journalistic information sources have diminished credibility, and the ecosystem where information is received is subjected to powerful demands for attention from other stimuli and intertwined by sophisticated deception operations, citizens are more vulnerable to them.

For their part, the news media have undergone dramatic transformations in the last five years, and their decentralization in shaping public opinion is another factor that contributes to the problem of disinformation. The main change in the industry corresponds to the business model driven by digital disruption. Citizens can access news information for free on the Internet, either through the web or social platforms, so they no longer have to pay for the information they consume, as in the traditional model of the press. On the side of advertisers, which also applies to broadcasting, they have disinvested in traditional media and transferred their resources to digital media, which is much cheaper and has greater market segmentation power. Most of that investment is not in the news media but in social media platforms, which have much higher traffic.

This significant reduction in funding for journalism has, on the one hand, forced the closure of several companies and, on the other, placed those that remain in com-plex dynamics of competition and polarization. For the former, the news media have become more aggressive to capture the attention of users (Baym, 2008). Not only do they use strategies to "hook" attention from users with sensational information (called clickbait) but the incessant rhythm of information production typical of the Internet makes them make mistakes, inaccuracies, or lack adequate contextualization of the information they produce, contributing that way to unverified information flows.

Regarding the problem of polarization, the media face an increasingly polarized public that demands information adjusted to their points of view. Consequently, the same media have moved to extreme ideological poles. The aforementioned precariousness of the industry is related to this, given that polarized audiences, although less voluminous than moderate ones, have greater loyalty to the media with which they agree. It makes more business sense to maintain a limited but faithful audience, than a large but volatile one. Said media polarization, consequently, intensifies the ideological bias of the information (already in itself a structural problem of the information media) and sometimes there is a shift towards radical positions of the extreme right or left, which tend to produce disinformation more frequently and are justified by their radicalism.

These problems occur in several Western democracies, but particularly in Europe, they have been partially alleviated through a public media system capable of moderating the negative economic effects of journalistic digitization, distributing knowledge that makes people more critical of false information, as well as forging a solid bond of trust with audiences over decades (Humprecht, 2019). In these countries, the public media are strongholds of well-funded and credible journalism that fights effectively against disinformation with professionally verified information (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). In Mexico, this public media system is practically marginal in the public space and, in a certain sense, inoperative in relation to previous ideas, for various reasons.

First, it has historically been poorly financed by successive governments for decades, in terms of infrastructure and coverage, largely to prevent it from becoming a major competitor to private networks colluding with power. Second, the public broadcasting

spectrum is widely fragmented between federal and state, government, university, and community television and radio stations, whether cultural, social, or religious. This disperses the underfunding they receive and makes it difficult for them to participate meaningfully in the public conversation. Third, its operation lacks mechanisms that guarantee its autonomy. Public broadcasting is often subject to arbitrary management in its budgeting and management by local governments, in such a way that they end up being characterized as governmental entities, which produce pro-government information at the service of the government in turn, instead of public entities, at the service of the public interest. Public media with dispersed funding, which is pro-government and not credible, are unable to counteract, in editorial and credibility terms, the enormous flow of public misinformation.

4.3   Political Factors

The last component that explains the rise of political disinformation is some aspects of the political system. Among them, we highlight a populist government, growing political polarization, timid regulatory responses by the Mexican State, and a solid "tradition" of deception by the political class.

The rhetoric of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is qualified by the Global Populism Database of Harvard University as one of the most populist in the hemi-sphere, with a score of 0.96 on a scale of 2, only surpassed by Paraguay and Vene-zuela, on a par with Nicaragua (the latter two authoritarian countries). It is higher than the famous populist cases of US President Donald Trump (0.78, on said scale) and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (0.50). Populist governments are associated with more emotional, polarized, and inflammatory discourse against elites or certain groups, as well as sticking to popular beliefs to create identification. Along the way, the accuracy of the data pales; accountability, and the validation of popular prejudices or superstitions are promoted. Since they present themselves as arbiters of the truth, populist governments often vilify producers of specialized knowledge, such as scientists or journalists, for competing with their positions. This ends up disavowing the sources that provide protection against disinformation (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021).

Additionally, populist rhetoric tends to polarize by stigmatizing certain groups and simplifying social antagonisms. The anecdote of the Mexican president invoking religious stamps to protect himself from COVID, in the midst of an official campaign against the health emergency, illustrates the fact that populist governments are usual-ly at the forefront as agents that generate disinformation.

Associated with this, political polarization among citizens, and not only among the elites, has increased significantly in Mexico, particularly since the arrival of the cur-rent government, although it began to rise in 2016. According to the V Dem project (Varieties of Democracy) from the University of Gothenburg, Mexico presents a higher level of polarization than the United States, with an accelerated increase that went from -.05 in 2018 to 1.32 in 2021. In addition to the fact that populism "drags" the media towards ideological poles, as we described above, it has consequences for certain individual attitudes prone to disinformation. Indeed, an individual involved in an ideologically polarized position holds strong attitudes and is also affectively polarized: not only does he strongly disagree with the opposite pole, but She generates negative emotions towards

his ideas and his person. As a result, they are more likely to believe the information that fuels their animosity, regardless of its validity, and share it impulsively, even knowingly (Humprecht et al., 2021). As this practice multiplies exponentially, the organic quality of digital disinformation is accentuated, that is, when the community itself is in charge of reproducing false information, far from its original issuers.

Another structural factor in the phenomenon is an old cultural characteristic of the Mexican political class, its inclination to misinform voters. This practice is accompanied by others such as clientelism -delivery of benefits in exchange for votes- or coercion, and comes from an authoritarian trait that seeks to manipulate voters, asymmetrically conceived as instruments to reach power, instead of persuading them to win their vote, under an understanding of citizens as rational entities with sovereignty in the democratic game (Serra, 2016).

That being said, there is a long "tradition" and repertoire of deception practices by the political class towards citizens. The intervention of the press in moments of crisis, as in the massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968, the propaganda uses of television in certain public policies (the Solidarity program of the President Carlos Salinas), the factious use of it to dis-credit certain opponents (like the impeachment of the then governor López Obrador), the fabrication of live television acts of justice, exemplify the persistent collusion between the media and the government against citizens. Academic and civil society reports periodically report the massive transfer of government resources to the news media so that they favorably bias their coverage of their sponsor, either governments or parties, and serve as instruments of attack on their opponents (Article 19, 2021).

In this context, the disinformation of politicians towards citizens is a logical extension of a historical practice of political elites, only now more pervasive and powerful as a result of digitization: disinformation affects not only media audiences, but any person who uses the internet, that is, a good deal of Mexicans.

Finally, the State's inaction on the problem is a relevant factor. Some isolated actions stand out as outliers. Agreements have been signed between some authorities, such as the National Electoral Institute, and platform owners such as Google or Me-ta, to detect disinformation operations and educate voters during elections, in a basically self-regulatory model that relies on the social responsibility of the platforms. Sentences have also been executed by the Supreme Court of Justice against certain actors for defamation on social networks or improper or misleading promotion of candidates. And campaigns and training for electoral officials have been promoted strategically to face this problem. However, there is no comprehensive public policy regarding the problem, with early education in digital literacy or severe sanctions against disinformation platforms and agents (extremist parties, pressure groups), such as those that exist in countries like Germany, which vigorously persecutes the dis-course of hate in the digital space, or Australia, which forces platforms to support independent journalism (Dobber, Fathaigh, & Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2019).

Here is an additional difficulty enclosed in a paradox: if politicians are the ones who generate the most disinformation and benefit from it, what incentives would they have to combat it? A kind of omertá, or impunity pact, is configured, where all the actors involved implicitly agree on the advisability of executing and patiently observing these operations, without the will to stop them, because all as a whole would be affected by it.

In short, it is a complex problem that involves various actors and their logic, of which we mention at least platforms, media, politicians, and citizens. These are conditions that occur at the federal level and are reproduced—and sometimes intensified— at the subnational level, where levels of democratic development are limited and media markets are precarious. Its extension and structural depth come from deep historical roots linked to features of the Mexican political and media systems, as well as local and global contemporary catalysts, that strengthen its permanence and deepen its repercussions.

5 Concluding Remarks

Knowledge is a public good that makes democracies functional, allowing citizens to get involved in processes of accountability and informed voting. The opacity of governments interrupts the first process, reducing citizen control over their performance. On the contrary, disinformation clouds the judgment of citizens in their decisions and political lives or misleads them against their genuine interests.

This essay confirms the depth of this phenomenon, which is proposed as a structural feature of the Mexican information ecosystem. It explores various factors that make Mexico fertile ground for political deception: a high citizen dependence on social networks in the consumption of information, the inaction of the State, political polarization, a populist government, and a historical trajectory of the political class that is prone to use deception as a resource to gain power. As is notorious, the diversity and complexity of each dimension, especially when they are articulated with each other, places disinformation as a long-term and deeply rooted issue. Unfortunately, the main agent that could tackle it, the state, has few incentives to do it, since it is one of the main sponsors of disinformation operations.

More empirical research is needed to gauge the scope of each dimension, and more theoretical work would help to understand the workings of each proposed dimension and their relationship. However, our framework is useful to understand disinformation beyond the affordances of digital technologies and to look for specific factors in non-consolidated democracies where information as a public good is compromised.

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