When Media Worlds Collide: Using Media Model Theory to Understand How Russia Spreads Disinformation in the United States

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Abstract
Ever since the 2016 U.S. elections, disquiet about the role of Russian propaganda in the U.S. media system has grown into outrage and fear. How has one authoritarian state been able to wreck so much havoc in the U.S. media system? The answer lies in a relatively small area of political communication scholarship: the study of national media models. Scholars ranging from Fred Siebert to Paulo Mancini have eloquently articulated how closely media systems reflect their national political systems and cultures. While this debate has remained mostly academic, it now holds the key to understanding (and trying to control) the vulnerabilities to disinformation in the U.S. media ecosystem. This paper pushes back against the idea that media literacy of the audience is the critical problem in combatting 'fake news' created as disinformation by other countries. The U.S. media audience has not fundamentally changed in the past two decades. What has changed in the way in which media is supplied to the American public, notably the decline of traditional news, the fragmentation of the information space online, the rise of news distributed within trusted circles via social media platforms, and the flooding of the U.S. news supply with both foreign and domestic disinformation. In thinking about the role of Russian propaganda as one central challenge to the U.S. media system, it is clear the affordances of the Russian media system strongly favor the ability of Russia to exploit the U.S. media sphere. Under the Russian media system, journalists are considered mouthpieces for political interests and mold information to support those in power, unfettered by the U.S. ideal of media in service to the public or a greater truth. The U.S. media cannot completely ignore these messages, but must expend precious resources refuting or attempting to find some sort of impossible 'balance' between disinformation and actual news. Nor can the mainstream U.S. media counter with its own disinformation, as this violates American media ethics. This paper will discuss evidence from the 2016 U.S. elections to showcase the role Russian disinformation has played in undermining the U.S. media system and how it has dovetailed with other challenges to the supply of information to U.S. citizens. The paper also will suggest possible solutions to the issue of Russian disinformation, with an emphasis on how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter should acknowledge their essential role in preserving the free media system and significantly increase their efforts to help the American audience to identify disinformation.

Keywords: Russia, disinformation, media systems, media models, Facebook, elections

Key points

- News standards and media systems vary significantly from country to country. There is no international norm on what media should do and be. Instead, media systems are linked to national political cultures and systems.
- Free media systems are rare.
- Concern about media literacy is good, but it's not the *audience* that's changed in the past two decades, it *how information is delivered*. What has changed in the way in which media is supplied to the American public: the decline of traditional news, the fragmentation of the information space online, and the rise of news distributed within trusted circles via social media platforms, and the flooding of the U.S. news supply with both foreign and domestic disinformation.
- The United States has a libertarian or liberal model in which the news media work in the service of the citizen. The burden is on the audience to judge the quality of news. There are clearly problems with this, notably there is compelling evidence that Trump supporters do not trust or consume mainstream news.
- Russia has a neo-Soviet system in which the media work in service to state interests. The Russian audience is aware of this, but attempts to glean news from competing interests (although opposition is mostly muzzled now).
- While we have often considered whether the internet can help or hurt democratizing efforts in authoritarian states, we need to start looking at how authoritarian regimes can use the online sphere to undermine democratic media systems.
- Russian disinformation efforts can take advantage of a free media system in the United States, which puts more burden on the citizens to figure out what is news and what is disinformation.
- U.S. journalists and media outlets are left at a disadvantage when foreign or domestic actors use the U.S. media to willfully misinform or propagandize the public. Our key defense for the free press – the knowledgeable audience – is overwhelmed. We need to remember that there is not a direct correlation between the democratic quality of messages and actual reception of these messages as audience beliefs and interests vary.
- Social media platforms have enabled and accelerated the collision of national media models, both by allowing foreign propaganda to hide in plain sight as well as funneling news distribution into information cocoons for many Americans.
- Previous experience and studies, including on Russians, would suggest that media literacy training is only of limited use.
- Social media sites are now critical disseminators of news in the United States and they need to stop pretending they have a very limited responsibility toward the U.S. audience.
- We need social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to adhere to national media models and standards in the United States by separating news from disinformation. If not, prominent social media companies become active agents in the destruction of democracy from both domestic and foreign influences. Social media platforms need a much more robust system of labeling, filtering, and controlling information labeled as news on social media sites.

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Introduction

We are so used to thinking about the internet as a global phenomenon that it is easy to overlook the fact that we have not one international internet, but rather a system of national internets that differ radically in character. Moving beyond the discussion of the ability of the internet to challenge repressive regimes, we need to consider the opposite question: How do repressive regimes subvert the free media systems of other countries by invading their digital information spaces? Russia has given us an excellent example of this in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. To fully understand the scope and scale of this disinformation, we need to consider the different ways that media function in the two countries. Russia has an authoritarian "Neo-Soviet" media system (Oates 2007) in which media work in the service of the Kremlin. The United States, despite recent challenges, still has a libertarian media system that attempts to work in the interest of creating an informed citizenry. This paper will argue that in a globalized disinformation war, a repressive media system has significant advantages inserting disinformation into a free media system. The challenge for the United States is countering disinformation while adhering to the ideals of free speech and relying on citizens to make their own information choices. This paper argues that while media literacy is valuable, the more significant issue lies in the role that online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play in news distribution in the U.S. media system.

What do we mean by media system?

Different countries do not share the same ideals about the role that the media should and does play in their political systems. This is a point that is often overlooked in the political communication literature for two principal reasons. First, many studies are carried out within a single country, which makes it unimportant to consider cross-national media norms. Second, there is relatively little theoretical work that addresses the difficult task of generalizing typologies of media systems in widely divergent political systems. While Siebert et al. (1963) set the stage with their four models of the press more than 50 years ago, their typology of media systems as libertarian, socially responsible, authoritarian, and Soviet communist are criticized as both outdated and artifacts of the Cold War. Hallin and Mancini (2004) published the definitive work on more modern typologies in the West, constructing three models reflecting the Western European tradition and history. In their Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal models, Hallin and Mancini demonstrate how political institutions and culture shape the character of national media systems. Given the recent focus on the media as a political institution, it's often hard to remember that Hallin and Mancini were instrumental in highlighting that media systems could be defined and discussed as linked to particular political systems.

Despite this important work, lingering problems about generalizable theories and models of the media in comparative perspective remain. In particular, critics note that key work such as Hallin and Mancini's work only deal with Western democracies and Siebert et al. are mired in Cold War ideology rather than based on empirical studies. It is commendable that Hallin and Mancini expanded their work (2011) to look at different regimes and regions, but even stretching media models across democracies is difficult. For example, although Hallin and Mancini group the British and American media under their Liberal Model, there are significant differences between the media systems in the two countries. In particular, Britain has a large and influential public broadcaster funded by taxpayers while the U.S. has no major media sector funded by the public. The British media system is also oddly divided, with high standards and regulation in public broadcasting but a popular tabloid industry that has practiced disinformation for decades. The problem with the fit of

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specific models aside, work on media models can obscure the fact that most of the time the media are not free. For example, Freedom House estimates that only 13 percent of the world's population live in a country with a free media (Abramowitz 2017). This would suggest that a far more urgent task would be to develop generalizable models about non-free media – or to concentrate the discussion on how to preserve the dwindling resource that is free media.

Western or non-Western, free or not free, there *is* a common thread that runs through major studies of media systems: Media systems both reflect and are a reflection of national political systems. As I have discussed in earlier work (2008), rather than attempting to equate entire systems, it can be useful to consider different segments of a media system separately to compare elements across national boundaries. Three key elements in a national media system can be defined as 1) factors that affect news production; 2) the content itself; and 3) the audience. The news production system suggests that influence on news – what eventually becomes media content – starts with the national political system and the cascades through a set of filters: media norms, media laws, media outlets, and finally through the nature of journalistic professionalism in a specific country. It is these journalists, at the end of a system that has shaped their opportunities for reporting the news, who directly produce content. While my students have rightly critiqued this model over the years for presuming linearity, leaving out the factor of audience-driven news production, and failing to account for how some issues (particularly war) are covered much the same way by vastly different media systems, it is still useful to reflect on how closely media systems are wedded to national political systems. The model also was constructed when it was still relatively rare for people to get their news online and social media essentially didn't exist. However, a key point to this model was attempting to compare not entire media systems, which is enormously difficult, but to equate specific factors within the systems.

The explosion of the internet, of course, significantly challenges the idea of a relatively tidy flow of news as shaped by factors ranging from the political environment through media outlets to the practices of journalists in specific countries. Key changes wrought by the digital sphere are:

1. The decline of traditional news due to falling revenues, as advertising shifts to online platforms such as Google and Facebook (which do not produce news) and subscriptions plummet. This is demonstrated by the dwindling number of professional journalists in the United States, which makes it even harder to create quality news to compete for increasingly fragmented audience attention.[1] In addition to challenges in the supply of news is the decline of the traditional media outlets as gatekeepers in an attention economy as online actors now directly communicate with audiences.

2. The fragmentation of the information space as the online sphere allows unfiltered voices, many of them posing as 'news' outlets for political or financial reasons (or perhaps both). This has led to the rise of propaganda-as-news, i.e. actors using an appearance of an online 'news' format to promulgate non-mainstream disinformation. For many, this blurs the distinction between quality journalism outlets and disinformation sites;

3. Many people now access news more by the recommendations of their peers than external quality markers of the information itself. The many-to-many communication lines afforded by online social media platforms foster the spread of information and disinformation alike. The gatekeepers are increasingly social media companies as so many Americans get their

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[1] According to the Pew Research Center, the number of people employed in newsrooms dropped 23 percent in less than 10 years, falling from 114,000 in 2008 to 88,000 in 2017. See Greco (July 30, 2018).

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news through these portals. According to the Pew Research Center, two-thirds of Americans report that they got at least some of their news on social media, increasing by five percent from the year before.[2] However, as social media platforms encourage like-minded people to stay within information bubbles, disinformation can become extremely resonant within these relatively closed and trusted communication circles (Benkler et al., March 3, 2017). When combined with propaganda-as-news, it becomes very challenging for citizens to seek or believe balanced information;

4. Foreign propaganda can now 'hide in plain sight' in the U.S. media system, crafting disinformation into sites that look like some type of American media outlet in the online sphere.

While all the factors listed above are important in terms of understanding challenges to a national media model, the single most important factor concerning the argument advanced in this paper is the challenge to domestic media systems from global information flow. A key example of this is the role of transnational information in popular revolts such as the Arab Spring. While the audience is almost always most attuned to its own national media, in times of crisis the audience may shift its attention to media produced from outside of the national news production system. This could be a shift in attention to traditional media reports coming from non-national sources, such as the way in which Al Jazeera and CNN were able to inform citizens in countries with non-free media through the Middle East about the revolts in neighboring countries. There is also citizen journalism that is amplified by social media, such as the "We are All Khaled Said" Facebook page that was central to mobilization in Egypt during the Arab Spring (Khamis and Vaughn 2012Even countries such as China with strong internet controls allow the audience to consume media from beyond its borders. This is in part because of the difficulty of completely filtering out foreign sources and still having a functional internet, but also because countries such as China and Russia remain relatively confident of the loyalty of their subjects and the power of their domestic propaganda.

Until a few years ago, the ability of citizens to consume media from outside of the national news production system had been considered generally a good thing for democracy. Much of the scholarly literature on the role of the internet focuses on its liberating qualities, ranging from the rise of #BlackLivesMatter to challenge traditional news gatekeepers (Lee 2017) to how citizens could become more involved in journalism (Bruns 2010). The more optimistic hopes were leavened by concerns over a lack of civil discourse as well as the way in which the audience was becoming increasingly fragmented in information "cocoons" (Sunstein 2008). In terms of thinking about the internet as a globalizing force for democracy and enlightenment, much of the discourse was dominated by a norm toward "liberation technology" (Diamond 2010), although there were rising concerns that authoritarian regimes were better at using the internet to track and deter dissent than activists were at using digital communication tools for liberation (Morozov 2012).

While the debate about whether the internet is a tool for democratization or repression continues, the point that concerns us here is the intersection of the global nature of the online sphere with the national internet system. As evidence from reports such as Freedom of the Net suggest,[3] any universal affordances of the online sphere are significantly shaped by national norms, laws,

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[2] Shearer, Elisa and Jeffrey Gottfried. September 6, 2017. *News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Available online at http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/. Last accessed August 17, 2018.

[3] Produced by the NGO Freedom House, see https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-net.

platforms, cultures, and economies. While there is not room here to discuss at length, the focus has generally been on how state actions affect digital opportunities for political discussion and mobilization for citizens within their own countries. Aside from discussions of cyber-attacks and cyber-terrorism, in general there has been little discussion about how repressive state actions affect the role of the internet in democratic countries.

In other words, when we've talked about the authoritarian possibilities of the internet, we've focused a great deal of energy on how national governments repress their own citizens in the online sphere (with actions ranging from censorship to monitoring comments). I am arguing here that Russia, which has been relatively effective in using the online sphere to suppress free speech in its own country, has developed useful ways to attack democratic media systems in other countries such as the United States. Russia (as will be discussed below) carries out a range of activities designed to use the openness of the U.S. internet sphere to wage information warfare. It's not about whether they are taking down websites or probing our digital infrastructures to shut down power plants;[4] rather, the Russian main strategy is to plant disinformation in the open online system in the United States. In effect, Russia hides its disinformation in "plain sight," taking advantage of the lack of oversight on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The potential power of Russian disinformation is amplified both by U.S. politics in the Trump era and the logics of online communication. In the next section, I will discuss the specifics of the media systems in the United States and Russia that enable the Russian disinformation war against the United States.

The U.S. Media System

In comparing Siebert et al. with Hallin and Mancini's model of the American media, we can see that there are significant differences. Siebert et al. conceptualized the American media as distinct from the European tradition, particularly by the absence of state funding or direct oversight of the media sector. Siebert et al. defined the American press as libertarian, with a broad tolerance for conflicting information and a dependence on the audience to choose among this information. As almost all of the U.S. media are commercial organizations, the Libertarian Model conceives of a quality media as a survival of the fittest in the marketplace as the consumers will judge what is best. Siebert et al. conceived of European media, including the British media, as having a Social Responsibility model in which the media outlets (often directly or indirectly allied with the state) would choose to lead the public 'from above' by emphasizing certain information and choosing not to report on destabilizing issues or events. In contrast, Hallin and Mancini saw significant convergence between the British and American models, perceiving liberal values about press freedom as a more important characteristic than the fact that the British system deviates from the American system in some significant ways.

The U.S. media system is distinguished by its lack of formal structures, i.e. it has no state-run media sector and no universal law on media. In part, this is because the United States has relatively little regulation in general when compared with European countries. However, it also reflects a historical norm in the country that media should be kept deliberately distant from the state, a standard that dates back to the rejection of British control of the media in the American Revolution. Although

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[4] Russian cyber attacks in Ukraine have been accused of shutting down power grids in Eastern Ukraine and hacking critical Ukrainian websites, see https://www.wired.com/story/crash-override-malware/ and https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/02/15/russia-behind-malicious-cyber-attack-ukraine-foreign-office/ (both last accessed August 17, 2018).

U.S. newspapers have their roots in serving as megaphones for political parties and other interests, commercial norms took over in the late 19ᵗʰ century, with the firm notion that the media 'product' should reflect unbiased or balanced information so to have wide appeal to an audience (Hanson 2011). That is not to say that media in a capitalistic system do not reflect elite opinions or attempt to reinforce existing power relationships. There has been extensive scholarship on the way in which the U.S. media has failed in its mission to inform citizens, ranging from a growing tendency to frame elections as a 'horse race' and fail to invoke adequate policy discussion (Patterson 2016) to suspicions that capitalistic voices choke off meaningful discussions about deep inequalities in the country (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Studies have examined unfair media framing, including due to race (Downing and Husband 2005). In times of war, the U.S. journalists often act more as mouthpieces for the state than as unbiased reporters (Entman 2003).

Thus, criticism of the U.S. media system had been robust and constant, even before the explosion of online content and the significant decline in traditional media revenue in the past two decades. The demise of media outlets has been particularly difficult for U.S. journalism, because media outlets have carried the main role in transmitting and upholding U.S. ideals of journalism given the lack of a large state media sector, national laws protecting journalism, or a national journalists' union (all factors in other countries). While the U.S. still has a strong educational system and tradition for its journalists, it can be difficult for journalists to find and keep steady, well-paying employment. At the same time, the authority of traditional journalists has been challenged by online content, particularly content that panders to extremist views. What is left, according Hearns-Branaman, is a "fetishistic disavowal" of journalistic objectivity: While journalists readily admit that objectivity is   impossible, it is still important for them to strive toward the goal of objectivity (2013, p. 21).

To return to the idea of media models and the importance of the national political environment, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is a powerful protection for a free press. Interestingly, First Amendment rights are often not discussed when writing about the journalism profession and not every court case protects journalists. American journalists also must deal with a range of more personal and localized issues in carrying out freedom of speech, ranging from obstructionist officials, lies, deceit, lack of capacity to pursue investigative stories, poor pay, and lack of support from media owners for journalism that attacks business or political bases. In addition, in the era of Fox News there is increasingly a norm at some media outlets that discourages a rational discussion of the issues confronting Americans (Morris 2005, Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2007). Yet, the expectation of free speech permeates both journalistic and citizen culture in the United States, providing more protection than just a "fetishistic" norm toward objectivity.

The Russian Media

I have addressed media norms in Russia in previous work (Oates, 2006, Oates 2007, Oates 2013). To summarize, the contemporary Russian media system evolved from the Soviet era, in which the media were a part of the state apparatus. The explicit role of the media was propaganda – to propagate the tenets of Communism to the masses so that they could understand and play their role in society. There was no concern with truth or even information; indeed, the Soviet media played an active role in suppressing any criticism of the Soviet system or leaders. At the same time, the Soviet media distributed disinformation about capitalism, leaving generations of Soviet citizens at least somewhat convinced that their standard of living and life in general was superior to that of the decadent West. The authoritarian nature of social control in the Soviet Union meant that dissidents were not only silenced, but they were also often arrested, involuntarily committed to mental

hospitals, sent to prison camps, or executed. At the same time freedom of speech was destroyed, the Soviets worked hard to produce positive stories about Communism, with constant reference to victory in World War II, Soviet military prowess, heroic workers, and the general superiority of Soviet industry. These narratives were not seriously questioned in public until a policy of glasnost, or transparency, was implemented by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s. This policy led to a period of increasing criticism of Soviet society from a range of Soviet media outlets until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

The fall of the Soviet Union was broadly interpreted as a victory for free speech and democracy. However, neither took root in Russia, the largest successor state to the USSR. Although there were by then varied opinions and coverage in the Russian media, this coverage remained tied to the idea of media in service to particular political and economic factions hence it is "neo-Soviet." There was no development of the idea of media in service of democracy in a broad sense or to public service specifically. Russian media, then and now, serve specific political interests or factions. Bribery is common, as is intimidation (Khvostunova N.D.). In focus groups in 2000, Russian citizens expressed the view that this was the only practical situation for the media, as objectivity could not possibly exist (Oates 2006). It was deemed better to know the political source of the information and be able to weigh it against information from opposing forces rather than allow one outlet to try to 'balance' the information for the audience.

It's interesting to note that the Russian Constitution also guarantees free speech, but this is not enforced because the court system works in the service of the state, not in the service of the citizen. It's also important to point out that there are talented and dedicated journalists in Russia, many of whom are doing the best they can and often writing about important issues. There are some media outlets that continue to challenge the Kremlin line, although they are systemically targeted or muzzled by the Kremlin (through threats, manufactured tax issues, or even intimidation, arrest, or violence against journalists themselves). The internet has afforded more freedom of speech, although Russia has several measures to make sure the internet can serve as an instrument for surveillance rather than a place for free speech.[5] In the United States, violence and state coercion against journalists is on the rise in the Trump era but is not (yet) considered normal; in Russia, attacking journalists is normal and expected.

Clash of (Media) Civilizations

If we accept that Russians have always considered the media a political weapon while Americans have clung to the ideal that the media is a public service, it is easy to see how Americans are at a disadvantage in a globalized information war. Now that the online sphere makes it easy for foreign actors to post information, pose as media outlets, or even pretend to be American voices online, the American system is asymmetrically more vulnerable to foreign disinformation. In part, we have done this to ourselves because of the nature of the free press – traditionally, it has been up to the audience to decide what news to consume and whether to believe it. But that assumed that there was some kind of standard of quality, or at least national direction, of the news provided. In the internet age, it would seem that the U.S. libertarian model of the media serves as an excellent carrier of disinformation.

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[5] See the Freedom on the Net 2017 report from Freedom House, available here: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017 (last accessed August 20, 2018).

There are several ways in which the U.S. media system enables Russian disinformation, specifically:

1. The U.S. Constitution essentially bans censorship, even when information is known to be untrue. Nor can you pursue libel against an individual in the U.S. system, unless you can prove that the purveyor of the information knew that the information was incorrect and that the information caused you harm. Public figures cannot bring libel suits. While all of this is designed to protect the flow of information, it also protects disinformation.

2. The U.S. media system continues to be in crisis. Just when U.S. journalists need to produce the most compelling news and fend off attacks against their profession, they have the fewest number of people to do it. As the United States lacks significant state funding for media or an accrediting body for journalists,[6] professional norms and standards have generally been upheld by elite media outlets. As media outlets and even entire media companies have shut down or filed for bankruptcy, the core institutions supporting the profession have imploded. The free-market model of news, a central element to the Libertarian Model has collapsed, while state-run news systems in other countries are much less subject to these market pressures.

3. Online platforms such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter extend the U.S. conception of freedom of speech. This is simultaneously politically correct as well as highly cost-effective for the companies, who by passing the information essentially unfiltered to the audience absolve themselves of responsibility for that content. While all online platforms have rules that ban some content, these rules are easily elastic enough to allow for foreign propaganda (most rules are concerned with obscene material or terrorism).

4. The division of much (albeit not all) of the U.S. audience into filter bubbles that support conspiracy theories and magical thinking are a particularly good vector for foreign propaganda (Benkler et al., Starbird 2017). By finding specific audiences that are open to denying fact-based journalism, foreign propaganda outlets can easily spread disinformation. It is particularly effective for the segment of the audience that is disengaged from mainstream U.S. journalism.

5. Russian propaganda is not at all interested in facts and, given the Russian media that works in service only of political interests, will lie consistently and continuously. Facts are ignored through a series of tactics. This is useful for denying specific facts – such as refusing to admit that a Russian missile shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 or that the seizure of the Crimean Peninsula was illegal -- but even more useful for undermining the institution of the media in general. If you can destroy the power of the media to connect citizens to political institutions, then you can destroy democracy.

6. Russian propaganda parallels tactics used in the Trump campaign and White House. Both during the campaign and in the White House, Trump has consistently lied, even contradicting public comments he made previously.[7] It is difficult to say whether this is a specific tactic Trump pursues due to personal conviction or a long campaign to destroy the power of the press in the United States. Because the U.S. President denigrates the press, this strategy starts to become normalized, making the job of Russian media outlets such as RT

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[6] Such as exist for lawyers or doctors, for example.

[7] The Washington Post has identified 4,229 false of misleading that Trump has made in 558 days, averaging about 7.6 a day, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2018/08/01/president-trump-has-made-4229-false-or-misleading-claims-in-558-days/?utm_term=.47c8899d2411, last accessed August 17, 2018.

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and Sputnik much easier as they consistently distribute disinformation under the banner of 'news.'

What about the audience?

A useful variable that is not explicitly a part of the U.S. and Russian media models discussed so far in this paper are the expectations and understanding of the role of the media on the part of the national *audience*. Audience is a variable that is under-explored in many models of media systems, yet understanding the audience is crucial. Historically, the expectations of the American audience have been that the media will serve the needs of public, act as a watchdog on politicians, and be supported by disinterested corporate ownership. This final category of corporate ownership and interests has been of grave concern to media audiences and analysts alike (Herman and Chomsky). Since the Trump campaign and election in 2016, the discourse surrounding the role of the media in the United States has shifted, in particular by a significant drop in Republicans who believe that news organizations keep politicians from doing things they shouldn't (i.e. the watchdog role of the press).[8] Despite the partisan divide in trust in the media, there appears to be little evidence that Americans feel that the media should not be working to inform citizens. Russian citizens have a very different expectation of the media, generally perceiving media outlets as working in the interests of those who own and/or control the outlet (Oates 2006). They have no expectation that the media would work in the interest of the citizen; rather, they remain hopeful that they can glean useful information and some approximation of the true state of affairs by gathering information from media outlets representing different interests. As interests have been increasingly consolidated around the Kremlin, media variation in Russian media outlets has become increasingly pro-Putin, anti-West, and propagandistic.

A key vulnerability to media freedom in the United States lies in the audience. At the heart of the U.S. media system is the belief the audience controls the media through attention to quality journalism. Many studies, not least Herman and Chomsky, have suggested this is a dangerous delusion. However, it is a philosophy that drives the American definition of good journalism and is the reason that Americans generally reject the idea of state-run media. While the state could be co-opted by political forces, runs the argument, the audience will serve as a constant bulwark against co-optation of the media. As research by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) shows, audiences generally are not attentive to important civic news, such as economic and political information, unless there is a significant crisis or political event within a country. The Liberal Media philosophy about news and beliefs about the audience, it turns out, were easy to believe before news truly become audience-driven in the internet age. Now that information is stratified and monetized much more specifically, it is clear that relying on the audience to choose (and fund) political journalism will not work.

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[8] In a Pew Research Center survey in 2017 survey found that 89 percent of Democrats felt that criticism from news organizations keeps political leaders from doing things that should be done, but only 42 percent of Republic respondents felt the same way (see Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell. May 10, 2017. *Americans' Attitudes About the News Media Deeply Divided Along Partisan Lines*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, available online at http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/09144304/PJ_2017.05.10_Media-Attitudes_FINAL.pdf and last accessed August 20, 2018). This was the largest gap between Democrats and Republicans on this attitude from 1985, according to the report.

Scholarly studies aside, news use patterns show that there is not a central belief for all Americans about how or where to get news. A study by the Pew Research Center in January 2017 showed that while Clinton supporters used a range of traditional news sources, Trump supporters overwhelmingly relied on a single source (Fox News).[9] While 40 percent of Clinton voters listed CNN, MSNBC, Facebook and local television as their main campaign news source, 40 percent of Trump voters listed Fox. Trump supporters also are more likely to get news from websites that are markedly more partisan and less likely to adhere to historical U.S. journalistic standards (Benkler et al.). The delicate balance between what journalists felt was important and what people wished to consume was broken. Indeed, it may have been broken long before (it may have been that people stopped paying attention to political news for most of the time long ago) but this became painfully and economically obvious to traditional media outlets by the 2016 elections. At the same time, a range of actors was using specific features of the internet, such as click bait and trolling, to actively misinform citizens in the pursuit of monetary or political gain (or both).

The experience of the Russian audience serves as a valuable lesson in terms of putting expectation on citizens to support a free press. Glasnost was broadly misinterpreted as freedom of the press by Western observers, although later studies provided compelling evidence that the media never shifted from a role as political cheerleaders rather than a democratic institution working to inform and empower citizens. In fact, the majority of Russian citizens responded to a survey in 2001 saying that they preferred the media in Soviet times over that during glasnost or under President Boris Yeltsin (Oates, 2006). During focus groups to discuss what would seem a puzzling affection for Soviet propaganda, Russian citizens reported that they felt overwhelmed and disempowered by the avalanche of negative news under glasnost and in the early days of the new Russian state under Yeltsin. This undermined their pride in their country and left them feeling deeply worried for their future. Indeed, they had every reason to be so, as the collapse of the Soviet Union brought unemployment, poverty, and the end of the social safety net for many. When asked directly, most of them rejected the idea that the media could possibly close the gap between elites and the masses. Rather, they looked to the media for a sense of national direction and purpose, often resenting journalists for highlighting, or even possibly causing, further erosion of national authority. In this same way, it seems that some U.S. citizens also are giving up on the uncertainty of democracy and choosing to support autocratic rule. Those who denigrate the media are judged by liberals as ignorant, but those who critique the media may in fact have made what is to them a reasoned, pragmatic decision that they prefer an autocracy to the messiness of American democracy. Viewed through this lens, the problem is not one of media 'literacy': these individuals are not going to be enlightened because they have made a very *conscious* decision, reinforced by their own trusted circle and specific media consumption choices.

Russian Disinformation in the 2016 Elections

The 2016 U.S. elections provided an excellent opportunity for Russia to practice digital disinformation. While the United States generally views the media as an institution that serves citizens, Russia has more than 100 years of experience at using the media to disempower and propagandize its subjects. The internet allows Russia to deploy these tactics on citizens in countries

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[9] See Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel and Amy Mitchell. January 18, 2017. Trump, Clinton Voters Divided in Their Main Source for Election News. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Available online at http://www.journalism.org/2017/01/18/trump-clinton-voters-divided-in-their-main-source-for-election-news/. Last accessed August 17, 2018.

with free media systems. In particular, foreign actors can buy social media ads or simply use the virtually unregulated environment of platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to carry out their disinformation tactics. The massive amount of information that is possible to harvest about individuals allows foreign states to target selected American citizens and social media groups extremely effectively. This was made evident by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which demonstrated the ease with which one can access and manipulate social media data to craft and target disinformation. Of course, social media platforms were designed to help advertisers rather than foreign-state propaganda, but it happens to do both (particularly as Facebook failed to enforce its own rules on individual data protection during the 2016 elections). Overall, the nature of online communication ushers in a new era of efficacy in changing hearts and minds. In the wake of fears about the role of propaganda in creating the Nazi regime, U.S. social scientists investigated the role of the media in elections just after World War II (Berelson 1954.) They found that the news media was much less important than a trusted circle of family and friends in terms of influencing political views. Social media now combines the powerful element of trusted circles with news -- and disinformation.

There are other aspects of the hybrid media system that expedite the spread of foreign propaganda into free media systems. The hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) describes the way that online sources can promote and react to information in traditional media outlets, creating an interdependent information ecology with the traditional media. Russian propaganda outlets such as RT and Sputnik could pose as "news" organizations, even after they were labeled as foreign agents by the U.S. government. There is nothing to stop RT from having a website in English that is designed to look like a news outlet, particularly given that websites can be hosted in Russia and most users would not notice or care. It should be noted that much of the content on RT and Sputnik is straight news (albeit often with an anti-Western slant). However, on specific issues such as reporting on NATO, the war in Ukraine, Putin, and corruption of Kremlin elites, there is a significant amount of disinformation. There are also vitriolic op-eds that often repeat or attempt to create anti-Western conspiracy theories on RT.

How does the evidence of the Russian disinformation campaign play out in 2016 given the elements above? Although there has been enormous media interest in the Russian ads and fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter, the ads are only one part of a hybrid strategy that embraces three key elements: 1) social media advertising driven by targeting analytics provided to all advertisers of major online platforms; 2) creation of disinformation in English that is marketed as news by Russian outlets; and 3) finding and creating alliances with disaffected Americans on both ends of the political spectrum. The Russian efforts were helped enormously by the political crisis in both politics and media engendered by the 2016 campaign, in which conventions about civility and core American democratic values were challenged by Trump and his followers.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of Russian disinformation given the unusually high amount of disinformation (both generated by Trump and circulated by Trump supporters) in the election. While the evidence of social media manipulation is the most visible, there were many other aspects to the attack on U.S. political communication.[10] This included Russian hacking of Democratic email accounts, contact with the Trump campaign, funding of U.S. activists, disinformation promoted by

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[10] See the report of the Office of the Directorate of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections,* published on January 6, 2017, available at https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf (last accessed August 17, 2018).

Russian 'media' outlets such as RT, and a 'fog of disinformation' in denying any of this activity.[11] There were also useful allies for the Russians, notably Wikileaks, in providing the hacked emails from the Democratic National Committee in the final days of the 2016 campaign.[12] However, what was unique and interesting about the 2016 elections was not only the presence of Russians posing online as U.S. fellow citizens, but the way in which Russia demonstrated the vulnerability of the free media system in the United States. This system, now heavily reliant on essentially unmoderated online platforms, is an excellent vehicle for disinformation. Thus, the critical question is not whether the Russian disinformation won or lost the election for Trump. Instead, Russian disinformation and the subsequent revelation of the problem suggests that U.S. media can no longer perform its crucial function in sustaining democracy.

Facts and Figures on Russian Interference in the 2016 U.S. Elections

The Russian interference on social media is a particularly clear example of the vulnerability of a hybrid media system to online manipulation. In May 2018, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee released more than 3,500 Russian-funded political ads that were run on Facebook from 2015 through 2017. This did not include unpaid content (such as people posting or responding to content). Many analysts and observers were somewhat baffled by the content that appeared to support both sides in the election (although the pro-Trump material appeared to be more popular).

In an analysis of Russian political advertising on Facebook, Kim (August 5, 2018) hypothesized that even pro-liberal ads worked against the democratic system. She found that ads aimed at African-Americans or others likely to be anti-Trump were initially relatively unpolitical in nature and aimed more at group solidarity. However, as Election Day neared, the ads turned from group identity to vote suppression, such as by urging African-Americans to either abstain from voting or vote for a third candidate: "Our analysis also indicates that overall, the volume of seemingly non-political ads was roughly twice as large as the number of political ads run between February and July 2016. However, non-political ads drastically dropped after the primaries were over and replaced by political ads" (Kim, p. 5). More research by Kim et al. (2018) suggests that "digital media has become the stealth media for anonymous political campaigns" (p. 1). In other words, the nature of online platforms allows a wide group of actors to violate U.S. election law, which requires that all paid election advertising identifies the sponsor of the ad. Kim et al. analyzed five million paid ads for divisive issue campaigns on Facebook from September to November 2016 and found many groups did not file reports with the Federal Election Commission. One of the six "suspicious" groups were identified as Russian. Most worryingly for the democratic media system, the volume of hot-button ads sponsored by groups that did not register with the FEC was four times larger than the volume of ads from groups registered with the FEC (Kim et al.). The research also found that these campaigns targeted battleground states such as Pennsylvania and Washington. This research demonstrates how Facebook created a space in which federal law regarding election campaign was not enforced, opening up opportunities for foreign actors and others that wished to subvert the U.S.

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[11] A well-referenced guide is here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_Russian_interference_in_the_2016_United_States_elections (last accessed August 17, 2018).

[12] See Raphael Satter, Jeff Donn, and Chad Day. November 4, 2017. Inside Story: How Russians Hacked the Democrats' Emails. *U.S. News and World Report*, online at
https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-03/inside-story-how-russians-hacked-the-democrats-emails (last accessed August 20, 2018).

political system. Facebook and other social media companies have announced measures addressing improper political advertising, but the nature and volume of online advertising mean it needs to be an ongoing and concerted effort. Kim et al. conclude "that media ecology, the technological features and capacity of digital media, as well as regulatory loopholes … and the FEC's disclaimer exemption for digital platforms contribute to the prevalence of anonymous groups' divisive issue campaigns on digital media."

Kim et al.'s research suggest the Russian Facebook messages ultimately supported the Trump campaign. More to the point, the Russian-sponsored Facebook content was interested in sowing dissent between Americans, specifically by encouraging protestors on both sides of the political spectrum to appear in the same place at the same time. This tactic suggests that Russians don't really understand the nature of protest in democracy, i.e. that it is a normal and important part of democracy. In the few cases in which this type of conflict did appear, the footage could be used by foreign or domestic actors who want to support a "chaos of democracy" narrative.

In January 2018, Twitter released updated figures on Russian activity in the 2016 U.S. elections, expanding the number of users notified about being exposed to material from the Internet Research Agency (IRA). The company sent notices to about 1.4 million Twitter users who "directly engaged during the election period with the 3,814 IRA-linked accounts we identified, either by Retweeting, quoting, replying to, mentioning, or liking those accounts or content created by those accounts" in addition to those who were following the IRA accounts when they were suspended. While commendable, this action highlights a significant problem of the online sphere: As you still can remain anonymous on Twitter, you merely have to become better at hiding your origins and masking your intentions to continue to spread disinformation. It's commendable that Twitter lists in the report plans for further action against disinformation, including investing more in machine learning to "help us detect and mitigate the effect on users of fake, coordinated, and automated account activity"; limiting the ability to users to perform coordinated actions across multiple accounts, and augmenting its development process. This stops short of the real problem: social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook do not merely host information, they create a new type of powerful, networked information. If the Libertarian Media model can survive, that information needs to be curated and presented to the audience in ways that allow them to make immediate, clear choices between information and disinformation. While Twitter has been active in weeding out "bad actors" to a degree, in its current state it still remains a particularly useful place to spread disinformation.[13]

All of this has raised concerns about micro-targeting voters and, arguably, this debate is good for democracy. However, merely revealing how this works and doing little to address the fundamental problem of the data-mining and disinformation micro-targeting on social media is not helpful. Even social scientists who have studied media effects on voting for decades struggle with understanding how social media micro-targeting may have affected turnout or vote choice in general, much less

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[13] Google is also a key information node in the digital media ecology, but there is not room here for an in-depth discussion of the role of search in elections (please see Trevisan et al. 2018). Google reported that accounts believed to be connected to the Russian government bought $4,700 worth of search and display ads. For a discussion, see Wakabayashi, Daisuke. October 9, 2017. *Google Finds Accounts Connected to Russia Bought Election Ads. New York Times.* Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/technology/google-russian-ads.html (last accessed August 17, 2018).

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how specific Russian micro-targeting had an effect. However, it's still a big propaganda win for Russia as they appear powerful and possibly effective at manipulating an election as well as undermining trust in American democracy in 2016.

Overall, did the Russians carry out a successful disinformation campaign in 2016? In terms of specifically shifting the vote from Clinton to Trump, there is limited evidence. In swing states with very narrow margins, a handful of votes may have mattered a great deal, but Trump's lead over Clinton was large enough to suggest that the Russians did not 'win' the election for Trump. On the broader point of undermining democracy, the Russians did manage to demonstrate – thanks particularly to the intensive news coverage of their activities in the United States – the vulnerabilities of the U.S. media system to foreign interference. The Russians drove home the message that the U.S. media system is in crisis, both through their specific actions to distribute disinformation but even more through the publicity surrounding their efforts. The visibility of their interference made citizens, internet companies, and government painfully aware of these issues, which ultimately could be good for a free press.

Finally, there is a worrying convergence between narratives promoted by the Russians via their English-language outlets such as RT and narratives promoted by far-Right propaganda sites such as Breitbart. Both pose as "news" but routinely distort information to the point it becomes disinformation. Alt-Right sites are doing the job of Russian propagandists for them by distorting reality, manufacturing information on political opponents, creating dangerous conspiracy theories, and attacking the institution of the free press. In alt-Right disinformation sites, Russia has found a perfect vehicle through which to amplify its attacks on democracy. It's understandable why Russians would do this, but somewhat puzzling what the end game of the U.S. disinformation sites may be. And while some elements of the far Left in the America showed sympathy for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the current support by the alt-Right for Russia is so baffling that it deserves a much more in-depth and empirical assessment that can be offered here.

The Embattled American Audience

As discussed above, the audience serves as the pivotal element in the Libertarian Model of the media. There can be a wide range of opinions, misinformation, and even disinformation, but the Libertarian Model dictates it is better for the audience to sort through the information from below than it is to attempt to control the information flow from above. It is difficult to tell how attentive citizens were to important news in the pre-internet age, but in the internet era we know there are significant problems of both trust and attention (as outlined above).

This has led to calls for increased media literacy. As someone who has taught media literacy to college students, media literacy is useful but not a magic bullet. Media literacy is not a skill that can be taught quickly; rather, it is more of a philosophy that arises from a deeper understanding of the principles of democracy and a free press. To use the media as a vehicle to contribute to society, citizens must accept the role of the free press within the democratic society as well as their own responsibilities as citizens. They must adhere to the ideals of tolerance and informed debate. This means a far deeper set of skills that are imparted through both a lifetime of education and civic norms. A pro-Trump conspiracy theorist who believes that Democrats are engaged in pedophile rings and does not consume mainstream media is not going to fundamentally change beliefs after a media literacy course.

It is not that Americans have become less educated and knowledgeable about democracies over the past decade, it is that the media diet they are offered has changed. At the same time, social media allows us to see much more clearly what Americans consume, share, and appear to believe. We cannot be sure how much of the American disaffection with the mainstream media is recent and how much simply was hidden from view before the advent of social media. However, like the Russians in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, we need to accept that some citizens are genuinely disenchanted with the media and do not accept the role of the media in stimulating civic debate. Rather, they seem to seek a media that defines winners and losers, allowing them to feel validated for choices and ceding their right to be informed for a right to be led.

Much of the problem (and solution) is on the supply side of information and rests primarily with online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, who have until very recently abdicated any responsibility for informing the public. This is understandable, in that clinging to the argument that they are platforms rather than information providers essentially frees them from responsibility for that content. Their reluctance to police their platforms also dovetails with the Libertarian Model of the media, which dictates that media control must lie in the hands of the consumers, rather than the producers, of news. However, this is an incorrect and narrow interpretation of the Libertarian Model. Despite its reliance on the consumer as the ultimate arbiter of the value of information, the Libertarian Model assumes that the dominant information providers are mainly producing news, rather than misinformation or even disinformation. Thus, while news consumers need to make decisions about what information to believe and how to deploy it in their civic lives, they are making choices from professional news. In the new hybrid media environment, not only are sources frequently producing propaganda disguised as 'news', the consumers are often self-selected into information bubbles or cocoons that gives them little exposure to a balanced set of sources. Again, it is not that American consumers have suddenly lost their ability to assess information; rather it is that they are being overwhelmed with disinformation because of the structure of information in this online era.

This means that the only way to solve the problem is to help citizens distinguish between information and disinformation. The ability to do this asymmetrically lies with online platforms, who need to ascribe to the model of the media at play in the United States by clearly distinguishing information from disinformation. While social media companies have made the argument that their intervention will damage free speech, this is not a question of censorship. Rather, it is an issue of labeling and filtering. Just as any company will provide information on its projects, such as nutrition labeling on food,[14] social media companies need to label disinformation and filter it from information. There already are a range of conversations about how to do that and social media companies are starting to engage with the issue, not least due to political pressure and threats of regulation. However, I'd like to offer some specific suggestions.

What Online Platforms Could Do to Preserve U.S. Media Freedom

1. **Label news.** It is relatively easy to identify media outlets that ascribe to the U.S. journalistic values and create a 'white list' of news outlets. If the source is not on the list, then it isn't labeled news. It still leaves open the problem of filter bubbles and people who have lost trust either in particular media outlets or in the media altogether. There are issues about how to

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[14] I owe this insight to the Credibility Coalition, https://credibilitycoalition.org/ at the Misinfocon (https://misinfocon.com/) meeting in August 2018 in Washington, D.C. See

determine the list and what factors count toward good journalism, but it's at least a step toward helping the consumer. Consider the analogy of prescription and over-the-counter medication – they are of great value to consumers, but you need warning labels to use them safely.

2. **Label disinformation from foreign countries**. Some of this is done already by novel initiatives, such as the Hamilton 68 project that tracks a network of online content relevant to Russian messaging themes.[15] Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have the ability to blacklist or downgrade sites and sources.[16] Given they are corporations and not governments, they can do this without any passage of legislation, etc. The same terms of service that gives online platforms ownership of all material and activities of its users essentially gives them a dictatorship of information control. They should choose to use it to preserve the U.S. media system, in particular given they have benefited so much from the harvesting of their users' information for commercial gain. It may be impossible to continue with the same level of anonymity on platforms such as Twitter, but I would argue this is a necessary evolution in protecting the U.S. libertarian media system.

1. **Move to the next generation of promoting information over disinformation in the online sphere**. Computational linguistics, specifically natural language processing, makes it possible to find disinformation relating to specific keywords or narratives, as it travels in the online sphere. This type of tracing and tagging of disinformation narratives could serve as a powerful tool for the U.S. audience (or even for social media platforms to stem or limit some narratives).

This paper suggests that while there are problems with both the way in which information is presented and with the audience, it is far easier to fix the information problem rather than the audience problem. While training millions of people in media literacy is no doubt a good thing, it's a blunt instrument in terms of guarding against disinformation. What RAND has termed the "firehose of falsehood" (2018) of Russian disinformation can only be turned off by those at the social media companies. After all, you can't expect the Russians to stop using this excellent conduit for targeted disinformation and you can't expect the audience to have skills to navigate through it to get proper information overnight. Social media platforms have enabled and accelerated the collision of national media models, both by allowing foreign propaganda to hide in plain sight as well as funneling news distribution into information cocoons for many Americans. We need social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to adhere to national media models and standards in the United States or, indeed, in any country where there is a free media. If not, prominent social media companies become active agents in the destruction of democracy from both domestic and foreign influences. Social media platforms need a much more robust system of labeling, filtering, and controlling information labeled as "news" on social media sites.

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[15] See the project at https://dashboard.securingdemocracy.org/.

[16] I will leave aside a discussion of Google here, which might be somewhat unfair as Google has been more transparent and arguably more pro-active about weeding some disinformation from its site. The comparison of search engines and social media platforms regarding relative roles in disinformation is too large for a discussion in this paper.

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