

Democracy at Risk: Confronting Disinformation and Voter Suppression

Interview of Human Rights First's Associate Directors of Democracy Protection, [Hanah Stiverson](#) and [Elizabeth Yates](#).

Democracy in the United States is an ongoing project rather than an established state of being. Historically, many in our nation have been left out of this project, but equally, many have fought over the decades to be included and to include others.

The current iteration of the antidemocratic movement has grown in recent years to include an authoritarian and fascist underbelly that is working to damage our democratic processes — such as free and fair elections, harm our communities — including immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+ students and educators, and roll back our rights — such as reproductive freedom, equitable public education, and more.

Disinformation is the deliberate spread of misleading or biased information (as opposed to misinformation, which is not necessarily deliberate), and poses considerable danger to a democracy that relies on trust in elected officials. This danger is multifold. Widespread disinformation can decrease citizens' trust in the electoral process, or other democratic institutions. Disinformation can also seed dangerous false beliefs that influence decisions from voting on critical issues, to educational policies or materials, to critical public information like public health data.

Identifying disinformation requires both media literacy and access to trustworthy, unbiased sources of information. This is a complex issue that experts in this field continue to struggle with considering the speed that disinformation is spread in our current online media landscape. It is an uphill battle that requires collaboration between experts, media, and elected officials.

The media, both social, journalism, and more, play vital roles in the health of our democratic systems. Historically, the media has been used to manipulate or control societies under authoritarian and fascist regimes. A free press is a cornerstone of a flourishing democracy, and unfortunately our current media landscape is under threat. To be clear, freedom of speech does not mean freedom to harm, misinform, or disempower, on any privately-owned platform. However, both social media platforms and traditional press are now being attacked or taken over by a growing antidemocratic and authoritarian movement that weaponizes the call for “freedom of speech” to spread conspiracy theories, violent and bigoted rhetoric, and more.

A secondary concern is the impulse to feed into spectacle. Unfortunately, rising authoritarianism provides unending opportunity for that. Professional media must toe a cautious line between reporting on the dangers posed by this movement, and resisting the promotion of dangerous rhetoric and tactics just for the sake of views.

Democracy requires full voter freedom, and the strategies being deployed that restrict access to polls, disseminate voter disinformation, and damage our electoral systems are evolving rapidly. Technology and social media are tools like anything else. In the 1930s and 40s radio and print media were used to spread fascist rhetoric, as well as to combat it. The same is true today, albeit at a much more rapid pace. However, a vital difference is how global social media platforms are and what content is allowed to thrive on people's feeds. While this isn't unique to our contemporary era, there are still practical concerns about the speed in which technology can be utilized. (505 words)