FROM KGB TO GOP AND AFD: DISINFORMATION STRATEGY IN TWO LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES

By

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AUTHORS DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Vincens Gruber, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics, and Society, declare herewith that the present thesis titled *From KGB to GOP and AFD: Disinformation Strategy in Two Liberal Democracies* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in the bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how disinformation has been adapted by right-wing actors within democratic societies deriving from a comparative analysis of two cases – Donald J. Trump's Republican Party (GOP) and the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) – the thesis introduces the theoretical concept of *Strategic Internalisation* to describe how Kremlin-style disinformation techniques have been restructured for domestic political gain, challenging the traditional threat models focused on foreign interference. The thesis provides a theoretical and historical overview of its conceptual lineage from the Soviet Union to contemporary disinformation, outlining the applied comparative qualitative methodology. Presents an in-depth analysis of the GOP and AFD, respectively examining their use of Narrative Saturation, Emotional Identity-Based Framing and Institutional Delegitimisation in their political communication. Additionally, it will comparatively analyse both convergences and divergences in how disinformation is internalised in both cases. Finally, it will conclude by reflecting on the implications for democratic resilience, particularly the need for structural responses that go beyond fact-checking or media literacy. Overall, this thesis focuses on how disinformation is embedded in the mode of contemporary right-wing politicians in liberal democracies rather than on disinformation as a foreign interference threat.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFD	Alternative für Deutschland *(Alternative for Germany)*
AI	Artificial Intelligence
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDC	Centres for Disease Control and Prevention *(USA)*
CISA	Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency *(USA)*
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency *(USA)*
EU	European Union
FSB	Federal Security Service *(Russian Federation)*
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GOP	Grand Old Party (*Republican Party, USA*)
GRU	Main Intelligence Directorate *(Russian Federation)*
KGB	Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti *(Committee for State Security, USSR)*
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RT	Russia Today
U.S./USA	United States / United States of America

INTRODUCTION

The symbolic and functional aspects of deception within governance and conflict are no modern phenomena, reflected in classical philosophy, military theory and myth. Aristotle offers one of the proto definitions of disinformation and conceptualised it as the intentional dissemination of information designed to mislead its recipient (Aristotle 2002). Plato acknowledged the role of recipients as useful idiots, individuals who unknowingly spread falsified information and stressed the importance of critically evaluating text (Plato, 2002). In The Art of War, Sun-Tzu positions deception as a core method to weaken adversaries without direct confrontation: "All warfare is based on deception"(Tzu 2011, 48). The myth of the Trojan horse symbolises this ancient lineage as a narrative that persists into the 21st century, both as a metaphor for dishonest gifts and malware alike. Throughout time, historical perspectives acknowledge that deceiving adversaries through intentionally spreading altered, out-of-context, or false information is an effective strategy.

Modern political context in liberal democracies is characterised by a reappearance of this logic in the form of disinformation. Unlike propaganda in its broader sense, disinformation does not necessarily aim for persuasion, belief or consistency. As Hollingsworth (2023, 69) argues, its function is plausibility rather than facticity, its aim not to convince but to disorient, destabilise epistemic coherence and to overstimulate and erode the foundation of democracies, blurring the distinction between truth and untruth. Simply, it aims to undermine the perception of a shared reality (Shultz and Godson 1984).

This project traces the migration and adaptation of disinformation from its origins in the Soviet Union to its contemporary deployment by right-wing actors in the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany. By comparatively analysing the GOP led by

Donald J. Trump and the AFD as case studies, it aims to identify how a historically external-facing strategy has been adapted from the domain of foreign policy to domestic politics.

The development of disinformation as a strategic tool of Soviet and Russian domestic and foreign policy is well-known. In 1923, Stalin publicly declared the press to be the "Party's sharpest and most powerful weapon" (Stalin 1923), highlighting the centrality of media as a transmitter of party ideology to Bolshevik statecraft. This emphasis matured into a systematic doctrine under the Committee of State Security (KGB), in which disinformation was institutionalised in departments such as K1, whose total focus lay on propagating disinformation (Hollingsworth 2023). The Soviet Political Dictionary states that disinformation refers to intentionally spreading "false or provocative information" (2023, 62). A leaked KGB training manual elaborates this definition by framing it as "strategic deception aimed at misleading the enemy concerning the basic questions of state policy" (CIA, 1980, quoted in Hollingsworth 2023, 62). Shultz and Godson (1984, 34–36) add that disinformation constitutes a central element of Soviet *active measures*, which are covert (i.e. concealed or unofficial channels), or overt (i.e. unconcealed or official channels) operations aimed at destabilising adverse political entities, elites or mass audiences, resulting in the distortion of "the target's perception of reality. … to strengthen allies and weaken opponents and to create a favourable environment for the achievement of the Soviet foreign policy objectives" (1984, 2). As Bryjka et al. (2025, 59–60) recapitulate, the operational synergy of active measures is not accidental but essential, as all components reinforced and amplified social, political and institutional instability in the target.

The number of resources put aside for active measures during the Soviet Union indicates its central standing in foreign policy and strategy, continuing even after the fall of the Soviet Union, as discussed by Paul and Matthews (2016), Shultz and Godson (1984), and Giles (2016). By the mid-80s, the estimated annual budget for these strategies in the Soviet Union

amounted to approximately \$3.63 billion and employed around 15,000 individuals (Hollingsworth 2023, 62–63). Hollingsworth (2023, 69) states that disinformation was not intended to change or persuade individuals of a new reality, instead "instil[ling] a sense of plausibility" among recipients, leading to disorientation and the destabilisation of a shared reality as a concept altogether.

Revolutions in digital technologies have transformed the methodology and magnitude of disinformation operations. While disinformation's core characteristics and logic are rooted in the Soviet Union, its modes have evolved. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2018), these revolutions led to propagandists rapidly spreading information on decentralised digital platforms that lack traditional gatekeeping mechanisms present in most media institutions. This, combined with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), is discussed by Bryjka et al. (2025), who stress that the rise of AI, particularly widely accessible tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, large-scale bot networks and generative audiovisual content, has significantly enhanced the capacity for fully or partially automated disinformation production at scale. They also acknowledge the potential of AI tools in detecting and countering digital disinformation, but emphasise that they currently serve predominantly as accelerators of disinformation (2025, 73–74).

If classical disinformation is characterised by its aim to exploit structural vulnerabilities of adversaries, what we observe in contemporary liberal democracies is a mutation of that strategy: a strategy that is no longer exogenous but appropriated, adapted and instrumentalised into domestic political competition, similarly as in the early years of the Soviet Union. This shift, from external to internal, is what this thesis investigates through the theoretical lens of *strategic internalisation*. In other words, the uptake of disinformation strategies, originally designed to subvert foreign adversaries, is now repurposed to navigate domestic conditions of epistemic fragmentation, partisan media and institutional delegitimisation.

As mentioned above, this thesis traces the migration and adaptation of disinformation from its origins in Soviet active measures to its contemporary deployment by right-wing actors in the United States of America and the Federal Republic of Germany. By comparatively analysing the GOP led by Donald J. Trump and the AFD as case studies, it aims to identify how a historically external-facing strategy has been strategically internalised from the domain of foreign policy to domestic politics.

Empirically, this project focuses on two political entities operating in different but comparably polarised democracies: the Republican Party (GOP) in the United States of America and the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) in the Federal Republic of Germany. Intersecting rationales lead to the case selection, namely, (1) their central role to the rise of populist discourse in their respective countries, (2) their consistent engagement with disinformation-adjacent rhetoric and (3) their operation within contrasting legal and media ecosystems, allowing a more careful comparative assessment of how disinformation strategies are internalised rather than just replicated. The two cases are anchored from 2015 to February 2025, marked by digitised political spectacle and cultural polarisation. This thesis explicitly does not position either case as a channel of Russian influence. Instead, they are viewed as actors who tactically use disinformation as a political communication tool.

Security-oriented approaches to the study of disinformation emphasise foreign interference as the principal threat vector (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018), from which this thesis approach departs. As external actors such as the Russian Federation continue their efforts by targeting Western democracies (Paul and Matthews 2016), this thesis foreshadows that disinformation tactics are enacted by domestic politicians operating in the US and Germany. For example, Trump's first presidency illustrates the institutionalisation of disinformation from within the executive branch, his rhetorical style characterised by contradiction, provocation and repetition align with concepts like the "firehose of falsehood" developed by Paul and

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Matthews (2016, 7): typified by the rapid and repetitive transmission of partial truths, half-lies and fabrication, across diverse channels, ignoring inconsistencies, with the overall goal to overwhelm audiences, degrading attention and ultimately undermining the epistemic stability of the public sphere.

Theoretically, this thesis depends on three disinformation strategies that can be identified across Russian operations and the communication of the GOP and AFD.

1) Narrative Saturation ("firehose of falsehood"): As identified by Paul and Matthews (2016), this strategy involves a high rate of multi-channel and low consistency messaging.

2) Emotional Identity-Based Framing: Narratives that exploit polarisation, leveraging identity markers such as race, religion, gender, and national origin to trigger and foster "in-group" solidarity against the constructed "out-group" threats (Paul and Matthews 2016b; Mudde 2004).

3) Delegitimisation of Institutions: Narratives focused on undermining the epistemic legitimacy of institutions such as journalism, science and the judiciary, reducing public trust and framing those institutions as conspirators aligned against the 'in-group' (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Faris et al. 2016).

Both cases are identified to apply each strategy domestically, while the GOP's advantage lies in the institutional platform of the presidency, allowing the blend of state authority with disinformation strategy. In contrast, the AFD, which operates from the political periphery, heavily relies on alternative digital media ecosystems such as Telegram, coded rhetorical strategies and proximity to conspiracy-oriented counterpublics. Nevertheless, both demonstrate the domestication of disinformation, a phenomenon where foreign-origin techniques are rearticulated within democratic states to serve party-oriented agendas.

The thesis proceeds as follows: Section 1 provides historical and conceptual foundations of disinformation and a critical literature review, synthesising relevant theoretical, historical and

empirical contributions; Section 2 outlines the methodological framework of a comparative case study design; Section 3 and 4 will focus on the GOP and AFD, presenting case specific contexts; Section 5 conduct a comparative analysis extracting cross-case patterns and divergences; Section 6 will conclude by synthesising findings, reflect on both implications and avenues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation of this thesis by: distinguishing key terms (disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, and propaganda); presenting the intellectual and operational lineage of disinformation from the Soviet Union to the contemporary; and situating the GOP and AFD within a comparative discursive framework shaped by their convergent communication strategies with the aim not to simplify contextual differences but to delineate strategic similarities across case-specific contexts. The thesis's scope necessitates a broad review of an interdisciplinary body of literature spanning political science, communication theory, history, and strategic studies. As the epistemology of disinformation crosses disciplinary boundaries and national contexts, so must the conceptual toolkit employed to study it.

Terminology

This thesis faces issues of semantic ambiguities present in both academic and public discourse on disinformation by drawing on definitions developed by scholars such as Wardle and Derakhshan (2018); Cull et al. (2017); Bryjka, Chłoń, and Kupiecki (2025) who each offer distinctions based on intent, origin and factuality.

In Bryjka et al. (2025, 63) disinformation is understood as the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information with the explicit intent to cause harm, mislead or to achieve or support a specific political, military or economic policy. Misinformation is discernible by lacking the intent component, but its content is still characterised by not finding a basis in factuality. Malinformation, according to Bryjka et al. (2025, p. 63), constitutes informational lies that are intended to harm by exploiting real or faulty information to stigmatise a particular social group and often includes hate speech, which is similar to definitions by Wardle and Derakhshan (2018).

Propaganda, according to Cull et al. (2017, 17), involves both persuasive and deceptive messaging and can be subdivided into three categories: White propaganda represents information that is from a known source, i.e. an online advertisement targeting enemy soldiers to drop their arms and is generally easy to spot; Black propaganda constitutes information intentionally crafted to deceive while being transported through so-called black channels that refer to fake or infiltrated news outlets, radio stations or social media profiles, increasing the difficulty of being spotted; and Grey propaganda which is characterised by stemming from an "uncertain or anonymous source" (2017, 17), published through channels not officially related or funded by the propagandist (Cull et al. 2017). It is important to note that disinformation strategies can incorporate all three, especially in hybrid information operations exemplified by non-state and state actors intersecting.

Historical Context

In 1949, the Soviet political dictionary defined disinformation as "the dissemination of false or provocative information" (Hollingsworth 2023, 62) , providing one of the earliest official definitions. By the mid-20th century, disinformation had become institutionalised within the KGB and its special bureau K1, which was tasked with designing campaigns to "unmask the anti-Soviet activity of foreign circles" (62), destabilise adversarial institutions, and influence elites and mass audiences alike (Hollingsworth 2023). Procedurally, Soviet disinformation was characterised by being a part of active measures, a hybrid doctrine combining covert (i.e. forgeries) and overt (i.e. state propaganda) campaigns to spread confusion, diminish trust, and rupture social unity among targets (Shultz and Godson 1984). They define this doctrine as a combination of operations "intended to distort the target's perception of reality … to strengthen allies and weaken opponents and to create a favourable environment for the achievement of Soviet foreign policy objectives" (1984, 2).

Succeeding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, active measures persisted and were adopted, reformulated and updated by the successor of the KGB, the FSB and affiliated entities such as the GRU (Darczewska et al. 2017). New technological capabilities, particularly the rise of the internet and social media, led to a methodological shift. This shift included integrating state-run media (i.e. Russia Today), social media manipulation (i.e. via automated bots), and digitally enabled forgery. Additionally, these operations are no longer centralised in a specific agency but rather diffused across a network of influence infrastructure, including private firms and shell NGO's (Darczewska et al. 2017; Paul and Matthews 2016). Contemporary disinformation strategies are characterised by being a vast, mostly unregulated network of propagandists which conduct operations in line with domestic and international policy to benefit the Russian Federation and its "corrupt political groups around (and including) Putin" (Cull et al. 2017, 68). These international policy goals are often accompanied by the intended pollution of the information environment, sowing confusion and doubt among the targets (Giles, 2016). These changes are touched upon by Casero-Ripollés et al. (2023, 3) who argue that, in contrast to Soviet strategies, the Russian Federation's disinformation strategy heavily relies on vehicles such as social media platforms and fringe conspiracy and media outlets. Recent examples of Russian disinformation have been employed during the assault on Ukraine since 2014 and the 2016 US presidential election, integrating and combining modern technologies such as bots and AI with state-run outlets such as RT with Soviet doctrine (Paul and Matthews 2016; Neudert, 2017). Portraying the intersectional nature of contemporary Russian disinformation campaigns.

Cases' Historical Context

The Federal Republic of Germany provides a unique case for the study of disinformation due to its centrality within the European Union and its historical familiarity with systematic information manipulation, both from a perpetrator's and a victim's perspective

(Neudert 2017, 7). From Hitler's reign, whose government held total authority over the national media apparatus, to the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) deployment of psychological destabilisation through the Stasi (GDR's secret police), Germany's political environment has long been entangled with the strategic control over narratives (Neudert, 2017).

Russian disinformation campaigns in Germany align with previously mentioned strategies and channels, while continuously innovating and are acknowledged by the German state (Darczewska et al. 2017). Public recognition of the threat of disinformation is reflected in empirical data from a BBC World Service study (Cellan-Jones 2017, quoted in Wardle and Derakhshan 2017, 12) stating that 51% of Germans perceive false digital content as a national threat.

The AFD, while not a Russian proxy and in contrast to Trump, a party on the political periphery, has been repeatedly scrutinised for its discursive convergence with Russian narratives (Sutterová and Kopeček 2024). Elshehawy et al. (2022) documented thematic overlaps between AFD messaging and those found in the Russian state medium RT Deutsch, in themes such as Euroscepticism, anti-immigrant sentiment and distrust in media institutions. However, their study did not extend into a systematic analysis of Russian disinformation and its parallels to AFD public communication. This thesis addresses that gap by investigating the strategic internalisation of disinformation practices within the AFD's communication.

In contrast to the AFD's peripheral nature as political opposition, the GOP under Donald J. Trump symbolises a qualitatively distinct instantiation of disinformation: one in which such strategies are institutionalised from within the executive branch of the US government. His presidency marks a discursive break from the history of US political communication, not simply in tone or content but in orientation. Rather than dealing with disinformation as exceptional or foreign, Trump integrated half-truths and complete fabrications into his political apparatus.

Paul and Matthew's (2016) "firehose of falsehood" model – characterised by rapid, high volume, low-consistency messaging – finds its paradigmatic manifestation in Trump's communication style, which is amplified by social media platforms and media institutions. In addition to the firehose of falsehoods communication style, Trump continuously deployed institutional delegitimisation and amplified fringe conspiracy theories that often originated from conspiracy forums and broadcasters. Examples of this include his nonstop attacks on the judiciary, labelling adverse media outlets as "fake news" and the framing of core democratic institutions as part of a conspiracy against him or labelling them as corrupt altogether often utilising ad hominem attacks such as "sleepy Joe", "crooked Hilary" or attacks on him as "witch hunt"(Froehlich, 2020). This aligns with the term "epistemic crisis" coined by Benkler et al. (2018), which describes the gradual dismantling of a shared baseline reality, which can result in increasingly difficult democratic accountability processes.

Research Gap

Much of the previously conducted research has primarily conceptualised disinformation as a foreign policy tool of authoritarian states such as Russia, China, and Iran (Paul and Matthews 2016; Hollingsworth 2023; Giles 2016; Rid 2020; Nikoula 2023). Additionally, Paul and Matthews (2016) analysed the operational features of contemporary Russian-backed campaigns but treated domestic actors as passive or amplifiers of Russian narratives.

Furthermore, research is often restricted to a national case context. In themes such as election interference and media manipulation, extensive research has been conducted, but focused on national context (Elshehawy et al. 2022; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017), highlighting a lack of comparative studies analysing how similar disinformation tactics are employed across national borders and diverse legal, institutional, and media ecosystems. This thesis addresses this gap as it employs a qualitative comparative case study design considering

both divergences and convergences in the deployment of disinformation by the AFD and the GOP. Moreover, literature has also significantly focused on detecting and categorising disinformation (Tucker et al. 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018; Bryjka, Chłoń, and Kupiecki 2025). Although essential, this approach often lacks a thorough analysis of disinformation as an instrument of governance and opposition.

To address this gap, this project introduces the theoretical lens of '*Strategic Internalisation*', referring to the adaptation of disinformation techniques, created for adversaries of the Soviet Union (Shultz 1984), into a routine tool of domestic politics. *Strategic Internalisation* is here defined as a theoretical lens to understand how disinformation, initially designed for foreign policy by the Soviet Union, adapted by the Russian Federation, is selectively adopted by domestic actors in liberal democracies for political gain. This contrasts with traditional purposes of disinformation, which targeted adversarial states, elites or mass audiences (Shultz and Godson 1984; Hollingsworth 2023) as this thesis argues that these strategies have drifted to being domestically applied by political actors such as the AFD or GOP, reframing disinformation as a structural feature of AFD and GOP rethoric, in either the ruiling or opposing political context. Thus, *Strategic Internalisation* reframes disinformation as a structural feature of contemporary right-wing rhetoric in Germany and the U.S. and diverges from the notion that disinformation is a tool of foreign influence and acts as a tool within public communication. This approach aligns with the logic of 'network propaganda' and 'epistemic crisis' (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018), which identifies a shift insofar that information is produced, distributed and received in digital political environments.

This leads to the positioning of disinformation not merely as a cognitive threat but as a structural challenge within democratic processes. In sum, this project aims to add on to already existing research in four respects: (1) theoretically as it introduces *Strategic Internalisation* as

a theroetical lens to understand how foreign-derived disinforaiton strategies are domestically deployed by democratic actors; (2) it's comparative methodology provides a side-to-side analysis of the U.S. and Germany case; (3) perspectvly it shifts focus from the content of disinformation to its use and application in political operations; and (4) empirically it utilises party communication, speeches and social media posts as data ranging from 2015- February 2025 to map the applfication of disinformation across two distinct but similar political cultures. This approach aligns with other research that reframes disinformation as an adaptive tool of domestic political campaigning and governance (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This project adopts a qualitative comparative case study design (George and Bennett 2005) to investigate the parallels between Russian disinformation tactics and two political entities in two liberal democracies, and how they may have internalised and adopted these strategies for domestic application. The framework grounds itself in rhetorical and content analysis (Reisigl and Wodak 2005; Fairclough 1995), focusing on how language, narrative structure and symbolic framing might contribute to epistemic destabilisation, institutional delegitimation and identity-based polarisation. This model allows for a case and context-specific approach, which acknowledges the diverse institutional, media and legal environments while maintaining sensitivity to local contexts.

The rationale behind the case selection was driven by applying a "comparative" approach (Lijphart 1971) focusing on three main features: (1) Ideological Proximity: Both AFD and GOP have occupied the political right in their respective spectrums and have employed anti-elite, identity-based discourse (Moffit 2016); (2) Disinformation Adjacency: Both political entities have been empirically linked to narratives linked to Russian disinformation (Paul and Matthews 2016; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018); (3) Systemic Contrast: Diverse media and institutional structures allow for a context-bound analysis of discourse adaptation (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Additionally, their divergent positions, the GOP as incumbent vs the AFD as oppositional, allow insight into the potential dual utility of disinformation. Politically relevant text from 2015 to February 2025, including speeches, social media posts, and aligned media content, composes the data enabling a content analysis.

This project aims to answer the research question "How do right-wing politicians in Germany and the United States of America strategically internalise Kremlin-style

disinformation strategies in their domestic communication, and in what ways do narrative saturation, emotional identity-based framing, and institutional delegitimisation function within these distinct ecosystems?". As mentioned above, the study identifies three disinformation strategies that will act as vectors, namely:

1) Narrative Saturation ("firehose of falsehood"): identified by Paul and Matthews (2016) this strategy involves a high rate, multi-channel and low consistency messaging.

2) Emotional Identity-Based Framing: Narratives that exploit polarisation, leveraging identity markers such as race, religion, gender, and national origin to trigger and foster "in-group" solidarity against the constructed "out-group" threats (Mudde 2004; Paul and Matthews 2016).

3) Delegitimisation of Institutions: Narratives focused on undermining the epistemic legitimacy of institutions such as journalism, sciences and the judiciary, reducing public trust and framing those institutions as conspirators aligned against 'the people' (Fairclough 1995; Reisigl and Wodak 2005).

CASE I: GOP UNDER DONALD J. TRUMP

By examining Trump's and his administration's rhetorical output and discursive strategies, this section analyses how Kremlin disinformation strategies were recalibrated to meet domestic goals, which illustrates the logic of strategic internalisation not as ideological convergence with Russia but as a functional adaptation driven by domestic conditions, incentives and institutional contexts. His presidency symbolises a turning point in U.S. politics as tactics associated with adversarial entities, i.e. Narrative Saturation, Emotional Identity-Based Framing and Institutional Delegitimation, were operationalised from within the executive apparatus.

During his first presidency, Donald J. Trump's communication style can primarily be characterised by communication described in Paul and Matthews (2016) the "Firehose of Falshoods" model, exhibiting high volume, low-consistency messaging intended not to persuade but to overwhelm audiences and destabilise epistemic coherence. Over 30,000 false or misleading claims were recorded during his first term, averaging 21.9 per day, evidence of his communication style (Kessler et al. 2021). These false or misleading claims were disseminated via speeches, press briefings, executive social media accounts and appearances on media outlets. Froehlich (2020) describes this as part of a wide-ranging 'disinformation-misinformation ecology' in which outlets such as Fox News co-produced and legitimised Trump's narrative by enabling the spread of false or mispresented information without fact-checking (Ognyanova et al. 2020). This ecology aims to cultivate confusion and resentment, amplifying emotional and ideological divisions.

Trump's rhetoric consistently exploits identity politics and emotional appeals, which is exemplified by the continuous use of phrases like 'built the wall', 'radical left lunatics', 'witch hunts', 'russia hoax' and the racialised 'China virus' or 'true American', who generously frame

the political opponent as an existential threat often along regional, ethnic or religious lines (Ognyanova et al. 2020). This emotional satisfaction is not accidental but foundational to his rhetoric. It aligns with Paul and Matthews' (2016) emphasis on the emotional volatility of disinformation and with Benkler et al.'s (2018) work on 'network propaganda', referring to a systematic construction of reality through actively charged ideologically aligned cues. This rhetoric produced a reality in which the 'real Americans' of Trump's base were juxtaposed against an elite, multicultural and conspiratorial (i.e. the notion of the 'deep-State') 'out-group'. This positioning fed into the broader structure of social dominance orientation and authoritarian predispositions (Pettigrew 2017), which functioned as a psychological enabler of epistemic closure, eroding a shared reality.

Perhaps one of the most prominent elements of Trump's rhetoric are his continuous assaults on institutional authority. The press was repeatedly labelled as "the enemy of the American people", a phrase he employed to delegitimise the standing of journalists within the U.S. (Ross and Rivers 2018; Grynbaum 2017). Judicial independence was also challenged by Trump, referring to judges whose rulings were countering his policies as 'Obama Judges', which led to a public rebuttal from Chief Justice John Roberts (Liptak 2018). Additionally, during COVID-19, he continued undermining the expertise of federal agencies such as the CDC by publishing contradictory public health recommendations (Gollust, Nagler, and Franklin Fowler 2020). These examples are not isolated cases but part of the over 30,000 false or misleading claims Trump conveyed during his first term (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2021).

The Delegitimisation of Institutions climaxed in Trump's post-2020 election narrative, which centred on non-factual claims of widespread voter fraud (Thomsen 2022). Despite the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) assurance that the 2020 election was secure and accurate (Easterly 2024), Trump continued reiterating these claims in public

settings, including media appearances, social media posts and rallies (Sherman 2024). These claims are argued to be a principal motivating factor of the January 6 2021, Capitol insurrection, which the Select Committee (2022) identified as the violent apex of an orchestrated campaign against the election.

This case illustrates that under Trump, disinformation was not peripheral or exceptional but became a mode of governance. This governance was normalised through presidential authority, and primarily focused on Narrative Saturation, exemplified by his over 30,000 false or misleading claims; Emotional Identity Framing, as exemplified by his continues use of phrases like "built the wall", "radical left lunatics", "wich hunts" "russia hoaks" and the racialised "China virus"; and the delegitimisation of instAsions which climaxed in the January 6 insurection. The section substantiates that strategic internalisation, in the U.S. context, reflects the domestication of disinformation. This challenges the traditional framing of disinformation as an external threat as it positions it as being entrained within the U.S. political landscape.

CASE II: AFD

Contrasting the U.S. case, in which disinformation is propagated from within the executive branch of governance, the German context presents a form of strategic internalisation from outside the executive branch, the opposition. The Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) has, since its founding in 2013, consistently operated outside of governmental authority, yet has developed a communication strategy that has adapted to the constraints of the German media environment. Building on the already presented trifactor framework, Narrative Saturation, Identity Based Framing and Institutional Delegitimisation, this chapter aims to trace how the AFD has instrumentalised the deployment of disinformation as a tool for political gain. Particular focus lies on the role of digital counterpublics, the performative construction of in-group identity and the undermining of consensus-producing institutions such as journalism, the sciences and the judiciary. It is important to note that at the time of this writing, the AFD is classified as a suspected threat to democracy [Verdachtsfall], allowing the German Domestic intelligence Service (Verfassungsschutz) to conduct investigations into the party and its affiliated entities. These ongoing investigations are, for now, inaccessible to the public (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2025).

The German state is set out to resist extremism, which is reflected in, for example, that public broadcasting is state-funded but legally isolated from political interference, hate speech laws and media regulations are strict, and trust in institutions such as the press remains high (Neudert 2017) Yet, Neudert argues that legislation in Germany has primarily focused on the symptoms of disinformation and fails to draft a regulation that combats disinformation at the root (Neudert 2017). Despite restrictive laws against the spread of extremism and hate speech, according to Lanius (2017), the AFD continuously spreads tropes such as "Lügenpresse" [lying press], frames immigration as a threat to society and portrays the political elite and

institutions as conspiratorial. These themes have become vectors of disinformation in the German case. Another key characteristic of the German case is that AFD's dependence on alternative media is underlined by an increasing chance of voters deciding for the AFD when subject to alternative media affiliated with populists (Müller and Schulz 2021). These alternative media outlets act as stages for content inadmissible in traditional outlets, increasing the risk of radicalisation (Bundesamt für Verfassungschutz 2025). Müller and Schulz (2021) also conclude that the AFD states false or simplified tropes in their political manifestos.

Narrative Saturation has become one of the central AFD communication strategies. As mentioned above, this strategy does not seek coherence or truth but focuses on high volume and emotional intensity, which was exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenon is documented by several studies (Moline 2022; Grassmuck, Thomass, and Carlson, 2023). Moline (2022) provides insight into the contradictory nature of the AFD's communication during COVID-19, which was characterised by a continuous flow of contradictory and emotionally charged language that aligns with the "firehose of falsehood" model (Paul and Matthews 2016). Message amplification through a multitude of digital and print platforms is outlined by Grassmuck et al. (2023) and characterised by the lack of checks present in those media. Sutterová and Kopeček (2024) provide insight into the shifting rhetoric of the AFD and how they rely on Narrative Saturation to maintain attention on the party. Together, they underline the systemic content strategy of the AFD, which is not anchored in ideology or program but is designed to overwhelm the audience with repetitive and emotionally charged messages. The results of this strategy are reflected by the findings of Leuker et al. (2022), which link high reception of online misinformation among AFD voters with the party's narrative repetition. Overall, the goal of creating consistent doubt among recipients can be successful within the German context.

Consistent with the populist playbook (Sutterová and Kopeček 2024), the AFD constructs a symbolic binary between the moral and righteous 'in' and inferior 'out-groups'. This symbolic binary is characterised by fear, anger and indignation against the 'out-group' often consisting of Muslims, the establishment, fake news and 'EU tyranny', and the 'ingroup' as the only salvation to the imminent threat of the 'outgroup' (Lanius 2017, 95) which is also reflected by Sutterová and Kopeček (2024). In sum, the AFD is employing emotionally charged identity framing to reposition itself as the only solution to a never-ending list of threats, exploiting the imagined boundaries between the in-group and out-group. These frames are primarily communicated through channels outside the traditional media landscape (Müller and Schulz 2021). Additionally, Lehmann and Zehnter's (2022) analysis of the AFD's pandemic communication reveals that issues like migration were replaced with an emphasis on health policy and frames of German leadership as authoritarian (Lehmann and Zehnter, 2022). Thus, Emotional Identity-Based Framing rhetoric was applied before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The AFD's communication strategy is also underlined by consistent attacks on institutions, which include public broadcasting corporations, facilitating conspiratorial narratives and framing them as state-controlled propaganda machines (Elshehawy et al. 2022). The judicial system also faces stark criticisms as rulings that decide against AFD, including its classification as a potential threat to democracy [Verdachtsfall], are framed as politically motivated (Neudert 2017). During COVID-19, they repeatedly downplayed the risk of infection and actively contradicted institutional advisories such as lockdowns and vaccines (Leuker et al. 2022). Moreover, Leschzyk's comparative study on misinformation underscored that AFD supporters tend to reject information from official or institutional sources and favour 'alternative facts', creating a parallel epistemic community distrustful of conventional institutional authority (Leschzyk 2021).

The German case affirms that affective disinformation does not require institutional authority vested in governmental offices, such as the U.S. executive, to be politically effective. This notion aligns with scholars like Moline (2022), who underline that parties on the periphery can establish alternative media ecosystems that function like propaganda.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This section is focused on the qualitative comparative analysis of the U.S. and German cases employing a "comparative" (Lijphart 1971) approach design to assess how the aforementioned Russian style disinformation strategies have been recalibrated to fit domestic contexts in the U.S. and Germany. Even though these contexts are characterised by significant differences regarding the position of power (executive in the U.S. vs opposition in Germany), both illustrate the strategic internalisation of disinformation in three key communication vectors: Narrative Saturation, Emotional Identity-Based Framing, and Institutional Delegitimisation, affirming that disinformation can be a politically functional strategy in democratic contexts.

Narrative Saturation is a central component in both cases, albeit through different means. In the U.S. Case, Trump's position as President allows for the dissemination of information from the centre of American institutional authority, the President's office. From within this authority, he has made more than 30,000 false or misleading claims during his first term alone, often relying on a multitude of channels and platforms including press briefings, social media accounts (both official ones and unofficial, i.e. the white house profile vs his personal Truth Social account), and legacy media like Fox News (Kessler et al 2021; Froehlich 2020).

Contrasting the German case, the AFD adopted a Narrative Saturation strategy from the political opposition. Grassmuck et al. (2023) demonstrate the role of digital counterpublics on platforms such as YouTube and Telegram to flood the information environment with emotionally charged and contradictory messages, particularly during COVID-19. Moline (2022) demonstrates this through the parties' contradictory messaging concerning health policy, which shifted rapidly from not acknowledging the severity of the virus to comparing vaccine mandates with Nazi-era atrocities. This flexibility is also reflected by research

conducted by Sutterová and Kopeček (2024), who argue that the narrative of the AFD is not ideologically coherent and relies on continuous readjustment to fit the contemporary narrative.

Trump's rhetoric consistently exploits identity politics and emotional appeals, which is exemplified by the continuous use of phrases like 'built the wall', 'radical left lunatics', 'witch hunt' 'Russia hoax' and the racialised 'China virus' or 'true American', who generously frame the political opponent as an existential threat often along regional, ethnic or religious lines. This emotional satisfaction is not accidental but foundational to his rhetoric. It aligns with Paul and Matthews' (2016) emphasis on the emotional volatility of disinformation and with Benkler et al.'s (2018) work on "network propaganda", referring to a systematic construction of reality through actively charged ideologically aligned cues. This rhetoric produced a reality in which the "real Americans" of Trump's base were juxtaposed against the elite, the multicultural and the conspiratorial (i.e. the notion of the 'deep state' or 'the swamp') 'out-group'. This positioning fed into the broader structure of social dominance orientation and authoritarian predispositions (Pettigre 2017), which functioned as a psychological enabler of epistemic closure, eroding a shared reality. Hence, both cases demonstrate identity framing within their respective national contexts.

Similarly, the AFD heavily relies on narratives that fuel the notion of a threatened German identity. According to Lanius (2017), the party constructs a binary between the righteous, real Germans and the corrupt system, often framing migration as an existential threat, utilising racialised narratives that make migration a form of cultural invasion. This is also reflected by Sutterová and Kopećek (2024), who observe a shift in narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic, from migration to depicting vaccine and lockdown mandates as authoritarian. This adds to findings by Lehmann and Zehnter (2022) that show that the AFD framed those politics as violations of civil liberties.

Trump delegitimises state institutions in the form of attacks directed at the judiciary ('Obama judges'), the press ('enemy of the American people'), and scientific bodies such as the CDC during COVID through contradicting their mandates. Most notably, his continuous rejection of the 2020 election result contradicts the findings by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, which found no evidence for those claims (CISA 2020).

The German case demonstrates a lack of executive power but mimics this strategy from the opposition. Elshehawy et al. (2022) add that conspiratorial rhetoric targets institutions. Additionally, the AFD heavily relies on alternative media to transport its messages (Müller and Schulz 2021).

While Trump is weaponising the control over the office of the Presidency, the AFD is utilising alternative channels to exploit institutional distrust, hence actively delegitimising institutional authority. Overall, although differing in their context, the goal of both entities remains the same: eroding trust in institutions responsible for arbitrating truth. This can be identified as the core difference: Trump, from within the institutional power vested in him by the office of the presidency, is spreading falsehoods, while the aide from a position of opposition has no access to the channels Trump has.

Despite inherent positional asymmetries presented in the two cases, both the GOP under Trump and the AFD have effectively adopted Kremlin-style disinformation logics. Their use of Narrative Saturation, Emotional Identity-Based Framing, and Institutional Delegitimisation presents not a passive mimicking of Russian strategies, but a context-dependent application to fit local realities. Trump illustrates how disinformation functions within democratic institutions, while the AFD shows that oppositional actors can achieve similar ends from the opposition. The insight illustrated here is that once perceived as an external or foreign threat, disinformation now constitutes a political strategy aiming for epistemic destabilisation when analysed through the theoretical lens of Strategic Internalisation.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated that disinformation, a concept historically understood as an external threat originating from actors like the Russian Federation, rooted in Soviet era active measures (Shultz and Godson 1984; Hollingsworth 2023), has evolved into a strategy applied by political actors in liberal democracies. It describes this through the theoretical lens of Strategic Internalisation, which aims to capture this transformation as it describes the deliberate adaptation of external-facing disinformation strategies by right-wing populist actors operating from within liberal democracies. This thesis does not argue for ideological affinity between the GOP under Trump, the AFD and the Russian Federation, but argues that Kremlin-style strategies have been adopted for political gain in each context. A qualitative case study design has been employed to analyse three vectors of disinformation strategies present in both cases, namely: (1) Narrative Saturation (Paul and Matthews 2016); (2) Emotional Identity-Based Framing (Mudde 2004; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018); and (3) the Delegitimisation of Institutions (Ross and Rivers 2018; Elshehawy et al. 2022).

The U.S. case of the GOP under Donald J. Trump represents the deployment of those strategies from within the executive branch. During his first term, he made over 30,000 false or misleading claims (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2021), which were repeatedly amplified by partisan media outlets (Froehlich 2020; Ognyanova et al. 2020), disseminated through both official channels, such as press briefings and alternative platforms, such as Truth Social. Trump's rhetoric heavily relied on charged slogans such as 'witch hunt', 'fake news', and 'China virus' that fused identity politics with epistemic destabilisation (Pettigrew 2017; Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). His continued attacks on the judiciary (Liptak 2018), public health institutions (Gollust, Nagler, and Franklin Fowler 2020), and the 2020 election result

(Easterly 2024) illustrate how disinformation was not only present in his administration's public communication but institutionalised through the presidency as a governance strategy.

AFD represents a divergent case, mainly characterised by its lack of institutional power due to its status as an oppositional party and Germany's tightly regulated media and legal ecosystem (Neudert 2017). Despite this, the party has utilised disinformation through alternative media ecosystems like Telegram or YouTube (Müller and Schulz 2021). During COVID-19, the AFD shifted their narrative rapidly from denial, minimisation and comparisons to totalitarian regimes, which constitutes an approach mirroring Paul and Matthews' "firehose of falsehoods" model characterised by high volume inconsistent information output (Grassmuck, Thomass, and Carlson 2023; Paul and Matthews 2016).

In the German case, identity framing marks the construction of a binary classification of 'real Germans' and the culturally and politically constructed 'Other', often focused on migrants, elites, and institutions. These frames were reconstructed during the pandemic and included the construction of a narrative that framed the government as an authoritarian threat to individual liberty (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022). Attacks on public broadcasters and the judiciary, framing them as biased or conspiratorial when contradicting the party's agenda, are evidence for institutional delegitimisation (Neudert 2017; Elshehawy et al. 2022). The strategy's success is backed by research concluding that AFD supporters systematically distrust public institutions more than the general population (Leuker et al. 2022).

Despite the showcased differences, both cases illustrate convergent disinformation strategies: Trump's executive position enables him to spread disinformation from within the centre of institutional authority; the AFD, on the other hand, relies on digital counterpublics to circumvent institutional oversight and disseminate their communication through alternative pathways such as YouTube or Telegram. These findings affirm that disinformation functions not only as a cognitive disruption but as a political tool for gain, aiming for the fracturing of

epistemic coherence, a consolidation of partisan identity and the undermining of institutional legitimacy (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

This thesis contributes to existing research in four key areas: (1) Theoretically, as it introduces strategic internalisation to describe the domestication of disinformation strategies originally conceptualised for foreign subversion; (2) Empirically, as it documents the use of those strategies in two anatomically distinct democracies from 2015- February 2025; (3) Methodologically, as it applies a comparative qualitative design to case dependent convergences and divergences; and (4) Normatively as it reframes disinformation as a domestic threat embedded within liberal democracies rather than a outward looking tool for international policy achievement.

The implications of the findings are significant as they diverge from researchers tracking disinformation as a foreign tool of interference (Paul and Matthews 2016; Darczewska et al. 2017) and join others in arguing that disinformation now constitutes a tool of domestic politics within the U.S. and. Germany (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017). Responses to this new context could include furthering structural resilience against disinformation in both cases, focusing on institutional protections for press freedom and mechanisms to restore the public's trust in democratic arbiters of truth.

Further research could expand this thesis by focusing on the role of AI in scaling the production and dissemination of digital disinformation and analysing the long-term effects of epistemic fragmentation on democratic processes and trust in the institutions conducting those processes.

This thesis does not claim representativeness. Its core limitations include: linguistic divergency (Wodak et al. 2009), referring to the limitations of analysing discourses in two different languages, Algorithmic opacity (Gillespie 2019) referring to the lack of transparency of social media platforms in concerning the content curation on their sites, making it almost

impossible to find out what users see in their feed, and it being bound by a strict temporal frame which excludes post-February 2025 developments. The thesis acknowledges the nature of studying the phenomena of disinformation as a non-neutral act. Instead of viewing disinformation as foreign or external, it treats it from a political standpoint, analysing the potential application in domestic, case-specific contexts. Finally, the *strategic internalisation* of disinformation represents a shift in democratic politics in the U.S. and Germany. Formally an instrument of foreign policy developed and updated by the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, it is now a mode of rhetorical governance in the U.S. and a tool for oppositional mobilisation in Germany.

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