

# Embedded political disinformation: A seven-dimension framework in the generative AI Era

La desinformación política integrada: siete propiedades en la era de la IA generativa

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**ABSTRACT:** Digitalization, the erosion of institutional trust, political polarization, and the rise of post-truth politics have amplified the presence and impact of disinformation. This article aims to comprehensively characterize recent transformations in political disinformation and identify their main implications for political communication and democracy. To this end, it draws on data from a quantitative content analysis of 662 pieces of disinformation verified by fact-checking organizations during the 2024 US presidential election and the European Parliament elections. The analysis is complemented by secondary sources on the electoral use of generative artificial intelligence. The results identify seven interrelated properties of contemporary political disinformation. It is permanent, as it transcends electoral periods; extended, due to the diversity of actors involved; participatory, given its decentralized production; emotional, due to the predominance of negative affect; erosive, because it undermines the foundations of democracy; territorialized, as it adapts to different geographical contexts; and generative, due to the possibilities for automation, sophistication, and personalization that artificial intelligence provides. Together, these properties point to the emergence of embedded political disinformation, understood as intentionally misleading communication that has shifted from an episodic conception, conceived mainly as a tactic applied in specific circumstances, to a strategic configuration in which falsehoods are recurrently integrated into the practices, dynamics and actors of political communication, generating adverse effects on the foundations of liberal democracy.

**Keywords:** disinformation, embedded political disinformation, political communication, elections, post-truth, democracy, generative AI.

**RESUMEN:** La digitalización, la crisis de confianza institucional, la polarización y la posverdad han amplificado la presencia y el impacto de la desinformación. Este artículo tiene como objetivo caracterizar exhaustivamente las recientes transformaciones de la desinformación política e identificar sus principales implicaciones para la comunicación política y la democracia. Para ello, se utilizan datos de un análisis cuantitativo de contenido de 662 piezas de desinformación verificadas por agencias de fact-checking durante las elecciones presidenciales de Estados Unidos y las elecciones al Parlamento Europeo de 2024. El análisis se complementa con fuentes secundarias sobre el uso electoral de la inteligencia artificial generativa. Los resultados identifican siete propiedades interrelacionadas: es permanente, porque trasciende los períodos electorales; extendida, debido a la diversidad de actores involucrados; participativa, debido a su producción descentralizada; emocional, por el predominio de la afectividad negativa; erosiva, porque degrada las bases de la democracia; territorializada, porque se adapta a diferentes contextos geográficos; y generativa, debido a las posibilidades de automatización, sofisticación y personalización que proporciona la inteligencia artificial. Esto da forma a la desinformación política integrada, entendida

como una comunicación intencionalmente engañosa que ha pasado de una concepción episódica, concebida principalmente como una táctica aplicada en coyunturas específicas, a una configuración estratégica en la que las falsedades se integran recurrentemente en las prácticas y dinámicas de los actores de la comunicación política, generando efectos adversos en los fundamentos de la democracia liberal.

**Palabras clave:** desinformación; desinformación política integrada; comunicación política; elecciones; posverdad; democracia; IA generativa.

## 1. Introduction

Information disorders constitute one of the major challenges facing contemporary societies and democratic systems. This concept encompasses a range of disruptions to communication processes and flows, such as information overload, manipulation, deception, distortion, and the misinterpretation of facts (Arce-García *et al.*, 2024). Among these, disinformation is particularly consequential, referring to false or misleading content that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose of causing public harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Although disinformation is not a new phenomenon and has been present across different historical periods (Ferrández-Mas & Puentes Rivera, 2025), its prominence has increased exponentially in the last decade (Salaverría & Cardoso, 2023). The 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit campaign are widely regarded as key turning points in this transformation (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Digitalization has fundamentally reshaped the production, circulation and consumption of disinformation, altering its speed, reach, and impact (Waisbord, 2018). Furthermore, it is framed within a sociopolitical context characterized by a breakdown of trust in political institutions and conventional media. Therefore, it has a strong potential to undermine democratic processes.

Its use has acquired a strategic and strongly partisan character and has become a frequently used tool in the dynamics of political communication, despite its harmful effects on democratic health. This has led to the formation of a ‘disinformation order’ (Bennett & Livingston, 2018) in which the use of falsehoods is politically motivated and pursues specific objectives such as the (de)mobilization of the electorate, the fostering of social division and political polarization, the promotion of populism, social destabilization through the spread of distrust, the delegitimization of democratic processes and mechanisms, and the advancement of radical political agendas, among others (Salaverría-Aliaga *et al.*, 2026; Pérez-Curiel & Baptista, 2025; Pérez-Curiel & Rivas-de-Roca, 2022). Therefore, disinformation has become an increasingly central phenomenon in the study and practice of political communication.

In this context, a new form of disinformation has emerged, with notable differences from the past and whose characteristics are still being fully and systematically established. Its study has garnered significant attention from academic research, which has identified a number of its peculiarities, albeit mostly in isolation (López-López *et al.*, 2023). Its multifaceted nature and complexity mean that few studies offer a holistic approach to integrating and compiling these qualities in a comprehensive way. Rather, we have multiple pieces of a puzzle that need to be put together to gain a global understanding of this phenomenon.

Consequently, this article aims to comprehensively summarize the main attributes and properties of contemporary political disinformation to determine its social and democratic implications. To this end, we will use data from research on the attributes of false content circulating during the two major campaigns held in 2024: the US presidential election and the European Parliament elections (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2025; Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026; Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). The research technique employed is quantitative content analysis of a sample of 662 pieces of false information verified by fact-checking agencies. In the case of the US, the sample was compiled through Politifact, an independent, non-profit fact-checker affiliated with the Poynter Institute. In the case of the European Union (EU), the Elections24Check database

was used, a project of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCNSN) with support from the Google News Initiative, which provides data from 52 fact-checking agencies in 20 EU member states. Inter-coder confidence reached 0.91 according to Scott's Pi formula, based on the analysis of 100 messages (16.07% of the sample). For artificial intelligence (AI), data on the impact of this technology on election campaigns, extracted from secondary sources (IPIE, 2025), were employed.

## 2. Contextual framework: polycrisis, dissonance and post-truth politics

The emergence and consolidation of this new form of political disinformation is situated within a context marked by a profound transformation in the public sphere. Its rise is rooted in the context of 'polycrisis', characterized by the confluence of various independent crises that intertwine, overlap, and reinforce each other, generating a greater impact than the sum of each (Morin & Kern, 1993). The first relates to the technological changes stemming from digitization and the rise of social media, which have led to a surge in disintermediation. Not only can any user produce and disseminate content, including falsehoods, but traditional journalism and media have lost their monopoly on information and much of their social authority. The weakening of these intermediaries and the personalized communication offered by digital platforms make it difficult to establish filters that organize and regulate information flows and help citizens distinguish truth from falsehood (Habermas, 2022) in an environment characterized by the chaotic information landscape (Innerarity, 2022). We are in a context dominated by information overload and the consolidation of an unedited public sphere (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), in which the absence of institutional controls fosters the mass circulation of disinformation and transfers much of the responsibility for distinguishing truth from deception on citizens themselves.

This scenario generates an epistemic instability in which 'truth' can no longer be guaranteed by a single authority, such as science, democratic institutions, and/or journalism (Dahlgren, 2018). These traditional entities have lost their authority to declare what is true or reliable due to increased public distrust and the emergence of actors who, through disinformation, attempt to challenge the social construction of political reality by presenting 'alternative facts', such as influencers, populist and far-right politicians. This not only generates an increase in the circulation of false content but also makes it more difficult to curb its effects. The result is an epistemic vulnerability (Labarre, 2025), making citizens disoriented and defenceless in the face of an onslaught in political falsehoods. People are not only more exposed to lies and hoaxes, but their trust in both the authority of central institutions in the public sphere and the value they place on information has been weakened (Labarre, 2025). This increases the potential of disinformation to damage people's ability to make sound political decisions based on truthful information.

These changes also coincided with the effects of the Great Recession, the 2008 international financial crisis triggered by the bursting of the subprime mortgage bubble in the US. This process led to a collapse of the news media's business model due to the drop in revenue caused by the collapse of advertising investment, resulting in mass layoffs, staff reductions, and a significant increase in precarious working conditions in the sector (Starkman, 2014). Consequently, both investigative journalism and the media's capacity to combat disinformation were severely diminished, creating a more favourable environment for the spread of false information.

Third, in recent decades, a crisis has spread in the social value of information (Casero-Ripollés, 2014). This process is based on the sustained increase in public distrust of the media, often motivated by the perception of its political bias. This, coupled with the overabundance of content, has led a significant portion of the population to place increasingly less value on journalistic information. News has become a commodity, a standardized, abundant product with almost no cost and easily replaceable by multiple sources. Consequently, it is not only losing its economic

value but also its ability to capture public attention and, therefore, its social relevance. The fact that people are increasingly assigning less importance to news translates has created 'news avoiders', who consciously choose not to actively consume journalistic information (Villi *et al.*, 2022). The international average across 48 countries worldwide is projected to reach 42% in 2026 (Egan *et al.*, 2026), representing a significant increase from the 29% recorded in 2017. Within this context, journalistic information is losing its role in shaping public opinion and public debate. This reduction in the social value placed on news leads to a loss of journalism's social legitimacy, diminishing its influence as a mediator and interpreter of reality for society and its social support, thus weakening its ability to combat disinformation.

Finally, the fourth crisis in this context is that of liberal democracy. By 2025, the number of global democracies had regressed to 1978 levels, with the world having more autocracies (92) than democracies (87) (Nord 77 2026). Liberal democracies, the most advanced form, have fallen from 45 in 2009 to just 31 in 2025, causing the percentage of the world's population living under this type of regime to drop from 17% in 2005 to 7% in 2025 (Nord *et al.*, 2026). Some of the factors explaining this complex scenario include the expansion of populism, the growth of far-right political options, the stagnation of the middle class, increased political disaffection, and the crisis of political representation, among others. However, the rise of post-truth politics and the impact of political polarization stand out.

Post-truth politics refers to the situation in which appeals to emotions and personal beliefs prevail over objective and rational facts (McIntyre, 2018). It involves a deliberate distortion of reality aimed at shaping public opinion and influencing social attitudes by activating confirmation bias. Citizens pragmatically consume and accept information that confirms their ideological prejudices, discarding information that contradicts them. This leads to a crisis of enlightened modernity because a utilitarian logic takes hold, where lying is normalized because it is effective and profitable in political terms (Nicolás Marín, 2019). Therefore, post-truth politics establishes a symbiotic relationship with disinformation, since factual events cease to be relevant and can be replaced by 'alternative facts' that adapt reality to beliefs through deception and falsehoods.

One of the effects of post-truth politics is the creation of political communities of adherents who uncritically share beliefs. The prevailing dynamic leads these groups of citizens to deepen social divisions. This results in the formation of increasingly extreme ideological blocs with little contact between them. People in these 'information silos' view the opponent as an enemy, making consensus increasingly difficult and relegating moderate positions to the margins. This leads to political radicalization and an inability to establish communicative dynamics across social, political, or ideological differences (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Political polarization thus emerges, with a strong affective component since emotions are one of its main drivers. Disinformation fits perfectly into this environment, as it seeks to reinforce confirmation bias and, consequently, polarization by resorting to falsehoods that are often emotionally charged. The constant use of divisive narratives, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories weakens the social fabric and fragments the audience into isolated communities (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). This deepens the crisis of liberal democracy because it facilitates the emergence of a fringe democracy that legitimizes populist or authoritarian leaders who, once in power, proceed to dismantle democratic controls and mechanisms (Boccia Artieri *et al.*, 2025).

The convergence of this polycrisis scenario has created a context where disinformation can circulate more easily and have a greater potential impact. Thus, a dissonant public sphere is emerging (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018), characterized by its profound instability, volatility, and structural fragmentation (Palau-Sampió & López-García, 2025). This represents a break with the normative ideals of a public sphere geared toward deliberation, consensus oriented toward the common good, and mutual understanding, all of which are guaranteed through public communication based on rational arguments, free expression, and the pursuit of truth (Habermas, 2006). In response, a dissonant communicative dynamic is emerging, based on the systematic violation of fundamental democratic norms such as civility, tolerance, inclusion, freedom of expression, and reasoned debate (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). In this context, an

anti-liberal communication style emerges (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024) that promotes and amplifies actors, visions, and attitudes openly hostile to liberal democracy and reinforces the exclusion of the other (Štětka & Mihelj, 2024). In this scenario, disinformation becomes a strategic element that exacerbates these dissonances, connects with post-truth politics, and reinforces political polarization.

### 3. Attributes of the new political disinformation

Analyzing the properties of the false information disseminated during the 2024 campaigns, particularly the US presidential and European Parliament elections, reveals the main features of this new form of political disinformation. These features are embodied in seven attributes that allow us to assert that disinformation is permanent, extended, participatory, emotional, erosive, territorialized, and generative. Below, we analyze these characteristics, which provide a comprehensive definition of this phenomenon, one of the main challenges for democratic societies.

#### 3.1. Permanent disinformation

One of the first elements that allows us to establish the distinctive features of political disinformation today is analysis of the temporal evolution of the dissemination of false content during election campaigns. Several previous studies have established that the circulation of falsehoods during these periods increases as the election date approaches (Magallón-Rosa, 2019; Molina-Cañabate and Magallón-Rosa, 2021) or when relevant campaign events such as electoral debates occur (Baptista & Gradim, 2022; Domalewska, 2021).

However, one of the previously unidentified characteristics of disinformation is its spread beyond election day (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2025). In this regard, it has been observed that the dissemination of false content does not stop with the end of the elections but rather extends beyond them. In fact, in the 2024 European Parliament elections, 20.16% of the falsehoods circulated after the polls closed (Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2025). In the case of the US, 18.2% of the disinformation spread after election day. Although the volume of false messages disseminated before election day is quantitatively greater, it is significant to note that their spread does not cease immediately afterward.

The dissemination of political disinformation thus takes on a structural character, since it is not limited to a specific period, such as an election campaign, but extends over time with varying intensities, yet with hardly any interruptions. This suggests that we are witnessing the emergence of a disinformation cycle that assumes the characteristics of a permanent campaign (Blumenthal, 1980) and which we could call permanent disinformation. In this context, the use of false content in political communication ceases to be a limited tool, an exceptional use, and becomes a constant and continuous means of shaping both debate and public opinion.

#### 3.2. Extended disinformation

Historically, disinformation has been used primarily by governments as a weapon of war to destabilize other countries or political opponents. Although its first organized and systematic uses occurred in the early 20th century by the Bolshevik political police (Rodríguez Andrés, 2018), the modern conception of disinformation was perfected by the KGB after World War II and integrated as an offensive instrument within Soviet foreign policy (Bittman, 1985). However, currently, while its governmental use as a tool of hybrid warfare remains fully relevant, the main novelty is that its use has become extended among a broad range of actors. Not only do political leaders and parties resort to false content in their communication strategies, but social actors do so as well.

An analysis of the identities of those who spread disinformation during the 2024 US presidential campaign reveals a wide range of actors involved. Not only did candidates, parties, and other politicians contribute to the spread of falsehoods, but other actors, such as anonymous users (which includes only the profiles of ordinary citizens, excluding bots) and influencers, also participated, particularly intensely. In fact, these latter two actors circulated the largest volume of disinformation during the 2024 US elections, at 39% and 16% respectively (Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). In the case of the European elections, anonymous users accounted for 38.3% and influencers for 7.3%.

These data reveal that the dissemination of political disinformation is not the sole domain of any one type of actor, but rather that the strategic use of this type of content in political communication has broadened. This has led to an expansion of disinformation, as any social actor can now participate in the production and dissemination of political falsehoods. Something that was once exclusive to a select few has become accessible to the vast majority, thanks to the ease offered by generative AI and social media, allowing anyone to create and circulate fraudulent messages. This causes the participants in the disinformation flow to diversify and potentially expand, increasing the complexity of this phenomenon.

The analysis of disinformation disseminators reveals two further features. First, the spread of disinformation is no longer undertaken secretly and opaquely, but openly and brazenly. In 90.9% of false messages identified in the US elections, the source could be identified (Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). In contrast, the figure was 80.6% in the case of the EU elections. This may be because, in the context of post-truth politics, where a significant portion of the population values beliefs more than factual information, political and social actors perceive that the use of lies carries a reduced political cost if they align with these belief systems. This opens the door to their extensive use, without fear of public backlash, beyond the legal consequences.

Secondly, the spread of false content has extended to all political actors, regardless of their ideology, albeit with varying degrees of intensity. In the 2024 US presidential campaign, 72.7% of the hoaxes with an identified source were circulated by Republican politicians, while 21.7% came from Democratic Party members (Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). Thus, the use of falsehoods has expanded across the entire political spectrum, albeit with varying degrees of application. This reveals that the use of disinformation is becoming established as another tool within political communication strategies, despite its negative effects on democracy.

### 3.3. Participatory disinformation

The prominent role of anonymous users and influencers in spreading disinformation during election campaigns has significant implications. The most relevant relates to the implementation of the participatory disinformation model (Starbird *et al.*, 2023). The dissemination of false content has become a collaborative and organic process involving conscious agents and multitudes of unwitting participants. Political elites establish a general narrative based on a frame, such as, for example, falsely claiming that mail-in voting fraud occurred due to government interference. Following this, ordinary citizens mobilize to contribute and amplify supposed evidence through their experiences that corroborate this disinformation frame by disseminating content that reveals practical, yet misleading, examples of problems with mail-in voting, supposedly proving fraud. In doing so, they attempt to lend authenticity to increase the potential impact of their messages. For their part, influencers take the narratives of political elites, adapt them, and expand them to amplify the false narrative among broad segments of the public, including their followers. Additionally, they collect and consolidate hoaxes produced by ordinary citizens, grant them political legitimacy, and place them at the centre of digital public discourse. In this way, they act as bridges capable of connecting the different parts of the disinformation circuit and thus reinforcing the reach and impact of false content (Prochaska *et al.*, 2023).

This suggests that the spread of political disinformation stems from decentralized collaborative work (Bösch, 2026). Rather than being based on a controlled and perfectly orchestrated

process, it tends toward a dynamic of improvisation where, starting from a shared purpose (for example, attacking the government and questioning the validity of elections in the case of falsehoods about mail-in voting fraud), adaptation takes hold. Therefore, it responds to the logic of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), since disinformation campaigns are articulated through the participation of diverse actors in the exchange of personalized false content, but without the need for a traditional organizational structure; instead, they operate within a context of more fluid, open, and non-hierarchical forms. This causes some ordinary citizens who amplify false narratives not to do so with a conscious intention to lie, but genuinely accept these falsehoods, as they correspond with their political beliefs, and become unwitting co-producers of disinformation (Starbird *et al.*, 2023; Bösch, 2026).

Ordinary citizens and influencers, who previously occupied a marginal position in the public sphere dominated by the media and politicians (Habermas, 2006), now assume a new prominence in the disinformation landscape. Their role as intermediaries for political elites in the dissemination of false content positions them as surrogate digital organizations (Bennett and Livingston, 2025). In this way, they operate as decentralized political actors who, through their participation in the flow of disinformation, function as a connective faction to try to influence the agenda and strategies of traditional political parties and lead them toward greater ideological radicalization (Knüpfer *et al.*, 2025).

### 3.4. Emotional disinformation

Emotions have become an increasingly relevant element of politics (Marcus *et al.* 2000). Their importance has extended their use to all areas of political communication, including disinformation. Consequently, the presence of emotions in false political content is high. Using data from the 2024 US presidential election and the European Parliament elections, 80.7% and 41.1%, respectively, of the disinformation was emotionally charged (Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026). Despite the difference between the two campaigns, these percentages reveal the close interconnection between emotions and disinformation in the political sphere.

The type of actor most likely to include emotions in their false content is anonymous users, who, considering both the 2024 US and EU elections, accounted for 44.3% of emotionally charged falsehoods (Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026). However, influencers are the most prone to using emotions in hoaxes, as 90% of their false messages are emotionally charged.

The use of emotions in political disinformation is also characterized by the predominance of negative emotions (Gutiérrez-Coba & Rodríguez-Pérez, 2023), such as anger, sadness, guilt, and disgust, among others. In the 2024 US and EU campaigns, 73.5% of emotionally charged falsehoods contained negative emotions (Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026). When citizens experience extreme negative emotions, they tend to become cynical and distrustful of democratic institutions and traditional media, avoid news consumption, or seek refuge in alternative and conspiratorial media (Kont *et al.*, 2026).

Disinformation is configured as an emotional weapon (Loveless, 2020). It uses emotions to generate cognitive and behavioural reactions and responses. Its importance lies in the fact that it guides how citizens understand the world and affects decision-making and political behaviour (Graf *et al.*, 2024). An individual's emotional state dictates how they consume political information (Marcus *et al.*, 2000). Therefore, the combination of emotions and falsehoods in the political sphere has various consequences.

First, emotions in disinformation contribute to reinforcing pre-existing beliefs, as they are a key element in activating confirmation bias (Loveless, 2020). In line with post-truth politics paradigms, citizens are more likely to believe falsehoods that align with their existing beliefs. Thus, negative emotions, especially anger, foster the radicalization of citizens and increase political polarization, which leads to the division of society into extreme and irreconcilable ideological blocs (Webster *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, in the case of the 2024 US and EU campaigns, anger was the most prevalent emotion in the false content disseminated during the elections, at 14.6% (Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026).

Secondly, the use of emotions in political disinformation is a catalyst for virality. Negative emotions drive users to share false content on social media (Corbu *et al.*, 2021). In this way, the presence of negative emotions broadens the reach of disinformation. In fact, extreme, polarizing, and divisive messages, such as some political falsehoods, trigger an emotional reaction in users, which is subsequently amplified by digital platforms – because algorithms prioritize content that generates the most interaction –, pushing citizens toward ideologically extreme positions. This creates a polarization loop where emotions lead to a greater spread of political disinformation (Marino *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, emotionally charged false content can lead to less analytical cognitive responses and a reduction in critical thinking (Barfar, 2019). Although it does not distort supposed objectivity, it can pose a potential threat to democracy when it forms the sole basis of judgment (Morán Roa, 2022).

### 3.5. Erosive disinformation

Traditionally, the use of disinformation has been geared toward attacking political opponents, resorting to falsehoods to discredit or stigmatize them (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2018). However, in the last decade, within the context of post-truth politics and political polarization, a new use has emerged: the destabilization of the political system and the erosion of the foundations of democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). False content attempts to influence public debate to artificially alter, through lies, public opinion and citizens' perceptions of the functioning of democratic mechanisms, creating a widespread climate of confusion, cynicism, and institutional disengagement (Bennett & Livingston, 2025). Its aim is to generalize disappointment, weariness, and distrust toward values such as tolerance, equality, freedom of expression, and pluralism (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024) and toward central processes of liberal democracy such as elections, the rule of law, political participation, accountability, and public deliberation. The intention is to generate discontent that weakens popular support for democracy and allows for the advance of autocracy.

One of the main pieces of evidence demonstrating that disinformation seeks to erode democracy is its focus on questioning electoral integrity. This concept refers to compliance with legal norms and international standards that ensure elections are conducted with sufficient democratic guarantees of quality, political equality, and legitimacy (James & Garnett, 2026). Calling the electoral system into question means accusing it of malpractice such as fraud in the voting process, violations of electoral laws, vote counting scams, or manipulation of results, among other forms of misconduct or negligence. Generating doubts about electoral integrity leads to a denial of the validity of one of the main pillars of democracy. Therefore, disinformation is focused in this direction.

In the 2024 US and EU election campaigns, 25.6% of false content undermined electoral integrity by calling it into doubt through lies. While this total volume is limited, it can play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the quality and legitimacy of this essential democratic process. Previous research has shown that public perceptions of fair elections are internally constructed, bear little relation to reality, and are influenced by partisanship and conspiracy theories (Bowler *et al.*, 2015; Edelson *et al.*, 2017). This suggests that, when combined with divisive political dynamics based on post-truth politics and political polarization (Borah *et al.*, 2025), false narratives of distrust in electoral integrity can have a potentially significant impact on the public, regardless of their quantitative limitations. Negative emotions play a key activating role in this process. Given that these types of harmful emotions are present in 80.8% and 64% of the falsehoods that question electoral integrity in the US and European elections respectively, it is reasonable to assume that the delegitimization of elections through disinformation can be articulated as one of the elements that, gradually and subtly, lead to democratic backsliding.

Additionally, further evidence that false political content aims to erode democracy is that democratic institutions are targeted by disinformation in 11% of cases in 2024 US elections

(Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026) and in 11.29% in the 2024 EU elections. When hoaxes question electoral integrity, 36.4% of false messages target democratic institutions in the US, while this percentage is 26% in the EU. In these latter elections, 40% of such falsehoods originated from far-right parties. These data reveal that political falsehoods seek to destabilize and delegitimize the foundations of democracy, attacking those who guarantee citizen participation, respect for political rights, the rule of law, and the identification and effective resolution of urgent problems of public interest. Disinformation seeks to exacerbate epistemic disruption (Pawelec, 2022), attempting to reduce the authority of democratic institutions and generalize social distrust in them. In this way, it sows scepticism to erode representative democracy and its mechanisms, with the aim of altering the political order and fostering the rise of autocratic regimes (Bennett and Livingston, 2025).

Finally, the traditional tactic of discrediting opponents through disinformation remains prevalent in the political arena. Fake attacks on political adversaries were present in 64.6% of the disinformation disseminated during the 2024 elections in the US and the EU. In fact, in the US campaign, candidates were the target of falsehoods in 38% of cases. Furthermore, in 35% of instances where a candidate was the target of disinformation, it originated from another candidate (Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). In the 2024 European elections, far-right parties were responsible for 23.62% of the disinformation attacks on political opponents.

These data demonstrate that through fake attacks, disinformation also seeks to damage the reputation of the political adversary, generate hostility, and demobilize the vote of their supporters (Pawelec, 2022). By destroying the foundation of shared realities and eroding mutual respect among citizens with opposing views, democratic deliberation is significantly hampered (Pawelec, 2022). False content portrays the political opponent as an enemy or an existential threat, laying the groundwork for transgressive actions or justifying violence (Bennett & Livingston, 2025). The attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, fuelled by Donald Trump's repeated and unfounded accusations of electoral fraud to undermine the victory of his rival Joe Biden (Hoffman *et al.*, 2025), exemplifies the effects of this type of destabilization caused by fake attacks.

Consequently, through a combination of disinformation attacks on political opponents, questioning of electoral integrity, and attempts to discredit institutions, disinformation operates as a powerful threat to democratic institutions.

### 3.6. Territorialized disinformation

Although the digital environment seemed to promise the elimination of the effect of geography on communicative and social dynamics (Cairncross, 1997), the territorial component remains a structural and determining factor in shaping political and democratic dynamics (Arthur and Williams, 2019; Casero-Ripollés *et al.*, 2020). The varying configurations of political systems, political cultures, political polarization, communicative and media systems, and the predominant type of information consumption, among other aspects, establish important differences that impact the characteristics of political disinformation. This means that this phenomenon depends on the geographical context in which it occurs, which introduces important nuances and adaptations to its general characteristics (Humprecht, 2019; Dragomir *et al.*, 2024).

One area where territorial differences are evident is in the topics of disinformation. These reflect the national political agenda and the characteristics of public debate in each region (Cazzamatta, 2025). For example, countries that have placed immigration at the centre of public discussions in recent years, especially due to the prominence of far-right political actors, exhibit a greater presence of falsehoods related to this issue. Based on data from the 2024 European Parliament election campaign, the countries where the most immigration-related disinformation circulated were France, with 35.3% of the total, and Belgium, with 23.8%. Meanwhile, given its historical energy dependence, Eastern Europe suffers from a high volume of environmental

disinformation designed to politicize and undermine European climate policies (Sánchez-del-Vas *et al.*, 2026). As a reflection of this, in Poland the topic that concentrated the largest amount of disinformation disseminated in the 2024 EU elections was climate change with 16.9% of the total.

Another element in which significant differences in disinformation are recorded depending on the geographical context is the emotional component of the falsehoods. In the 2024 US presidential election, 80.7% of the disinformation contained some emotional component, compared to 41.1% in the European case (Córdoba-Cabús *et al.*, 2026). This difference amounts to 39.6 percentage points. The likelihood of finding emotion in the false content disseminated during the 2024 campaign was approximately six times higher in the US than in EU. However, despite this disparity, when the false messages contained emotions, negative emotions were more prevalent in the EU than in the US. In the EU campaign, 86.27% of the emotional disinformation was negative, compared to 69.21% in the US. For example, anger reached 31.37% in the EU, while in the US it stood at 19.54%. These data reveal that disinformation has a greater emotional charge in the US than in the EU, but, in the latter case, when emotions are used, a more negative repertoire is employed.

Finally, the structure of the political system also introduces significant differences in the actors involved in the dissemination of disinformation. The centralized presidential nature of the US political system gives candidates a prominent role in election campaigns. This impacts the spread of disinformation, as these actors were responsible for disseminating false content in 16% of cases in the 2024 US presidential elections (Córdoba-Cabús & Casero-Ripollés, 2026). In contrast, the parliamentary and supranational nature of the EU, which combines a community level with the maintenance of some national sovereignty, means that leading candidates, or Spitzenkandidaten, have less relevance in the overall elections of the different EU member states. Consequently, these actors are responsible for disseminating false messages in only 2.8% of cases in elections to the European Parliament. The configuration of the political system generates, in this respect, a difference of 13.2 percentage points.

Despite the existence of common patterns, the presence of these differences in themes, emotions, and actors reveals that disinformation is territorialized. The characteristics of false political content are conditioned by the geographical context. This means that it is adapted to a specific country or region based on the configuration of its political and communication system. This territorial connection contributes to reinforcing its impact on citizens. Consequently, to combat disinformation, it is necessary to design tailored public policies that are adapted to each country or region (Humprecht *et al.*, 2023).

### 3.7. Generative disinformation

Finally, generative artificial intelligence (AI) offers opportunities for political disinformation by making it easier to produce falsehoods and hoaxes, increasing their scale and their sophistication, making them harder to detect, reducing their production cost, and allowing anyone to create this type of content (Wack *et al.*, 2025; Spitalé *et al.*, 2023). The World Economic Forum, in its 2026 Global Risks Report, ranked the adverse outcomes of AI, particularly disinformation, as the fifth most serious risk the world will face in the next 10 years (WEF, 2026). In fact, its use has increased significantly, with 80% of countries holding elections in 2024 reporting incidents involving generative AI during the campaigns, 69% of which were malicious (IPIE, 2025).

The applications of generative AI for electoral disinformation can be summarized in two main areas. First, this technology offers new opportunities to quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively produce deepfakes that merge, combine, replace, and overlay expressive components, such as text, audio, images, or video, to create fabricated messages that appear legitimate (Maras and Alexandrou, 2018). These are synthetic, hyper-realistic, and digitally manipulated content designed to depict political actors saying or doing things that never happened. Their high level of sophistication makes it very difficult for ordinary citizens to distinguish between what

is authentic and what is false (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2020). Their creation is increasing rapidly. According to DeepStrike data, the number of deepfake files shared online increased from approximately 500,000 in 2023 to an estimated 8 million in 2025, representing an annual growth rate of nearly 900% (Khalil, 2025). An analysis of election campaigns held worldwide in 2024 found that in 90% of cases, generative AI was used to create deepfake content (IPIE, 2025). One of the main uses involves the false representation of political actors or relevant figures whose identities are usurped (García-Marín *et al.*, 2026).

The use of deepfakes can lead to the emergence of 'information nihilism', consisting of the erosion of public trust in the information environment. Faced with the increased difficulty of discerning between authentic and false information due to the sophistication of generative AI, people react by doubting the credibility of any type of content. Therefore, this phenomenon entails a generalization of disbelief based on the suspicion that (almost) all the information surrounding us is potentially false and seeks to lie us. The reaction is a refusal to search for and seek to identify the facts, given the impossibility of verifying their truth and as a self-defense mechanism against uncertainty and suspicion, following Nietzsche's concept of passive nihilism. In this scenario, it is easier for false content to pass itself off as real and for authentic information to pass itself off as false.

Secondly, generative AI allows for the collection, processing, and interpretation of vast amounts of data and information from digital platforms and social media, enabling a detailed understanding of citizens' preferences (Battista, 2024). This allows for the creation of psychological profiles that aim to identify an individual's character, behaviour, and likely interests based on the compiled data about that person (Duberry, 2023). Thus, a potential voter is associated with a personality type, allowing for the prediction of their response and behaviour to specific types of information, effectively imposing mass social surveillance (Saura-García, 2024). This technology represents an advance in audience micro-segmentation, enabling the individualized adjustment of content delivery to meet demand (Rubio Núñez *et al.*, 2024). In this way, messages can be optimized and tailored to the needs, interests, and ideological perspectives of each individual, maximizing their impact. Therefore, disinformation can be tailored to the specific characteristics of very small groups of people who share common traits. This increases its potential impact by precisely targeting the characteristics of potential recipients. Furthermore, the production and dissemination of false content can be automated, increasing its accuracy, reach, and scale (Duberry, 2023). This can lead to the fabrication of a synthetic public opinion that simulates democratic consensus instead of being built upon rational arguments (García-Marzá & Calvo, 2024). However, micro-segmentation is difficult to detect. In fact, an analysis of the use of generative AI in the 2024 election campaigns only detected this type of activity in 4% of cases (IPIE, 2025).

#### 4. Conclusions: the emergence of embedded political disinformation

Political disinformation is undergoing a profound structural transformation. It has shifted from operating primarily as a situational resource, limited to specific political moments, to becoming a strategic, recurring, and increasingly integrated component of the practices, dynamics, and actors of political communication. This normalization of political falsehoods has not only increased quantitatively but also qualitatively. Disinformation now goes beyond producing and circulating isolated misleading information used to win elections and seeks to establish a dissonant communicative order that promotes institutional cynicism and destroys the foundation of shared political realities necessary for the functioning of liberal democracy (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024), thus undermining the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere oriented toward deliberation, understanding, mutual comprehension, and the common good (Habermas, 2006).

Political falsehoods are structured around seven interconnected properties. This constitutes the embedded political disinformation, a permanent, extended, and distributed form of

intentionally misleading communication that becomes integrated in the everyday practices of political actors, digital intermediaries, and citizens. It operates through emotional, territorial, and technological logics, generating cumulative effects of democratic erosion. Its structural conditions are its permanent, extended, and participatory nature. The mechanisms that enhance its circulation and effectiveness are emotionalization, territorial adaptation, and the sophistication introduced by generative AI. This converges on its main effect: increased political polarization and a weakening of public trust in democracy, a scenario that fosters autocratization.

Furthermore, its use creates a paradox. Far from penalizing its promoters and disseminators, the spread of false content is losing its political consequences. The post-truth politics context, in which ideological beliefs become the guiding principle of citizens' political perception and behaviour (McIntyre, 2018; Nicolás Marín, 2019), is fostering an uncritical acceptance of this form of disinformation by the public. As a result, resorting to hoaxes in the political sphere, despite the harmful consequences for democratic health, is not being punished by voters, which is increasing its use.

Finally, considering its prospects, the incorporation of generative AI can accelerate embedded political disinformation and exacerbate vulnerabilities in democratic systems, already weakened by the erosion of rational-critical discourse and the lack of a shared reality among citizens. From this perspective, information disorders may enter a new phase in which political falsehoods become a persistent and adaptive manipulation, leading to democratic backsliding (Schroeder *et al.*, 2026). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the properties of this embedded political disinformation to formulate responses and design public policies that anticipate risks and foster resilience, acting as a bulwark against democratic erosion.

## 5. Contribution

The author confirms that he is solely responsible for the following: conception and design of the research, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the results, and preparation of the manuscript.

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