

Global Governance Confronts the Onslaught of Disinformation

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My presidential address is an attempt to connect two themes: my own work in the field of global governance and the theme of the 2023 APSA Annual Meeting, “Rights and Responsibilities in an Age of Mis- and Disinformation.” Most work on disinformation focuses on domestic-level politics.¹ However, I would argue that it also presents a major challenge to global governance, and research on disinformation on the international level deserves greater attention.

Disinformation in many forms has a long history in international politics. Consider, for example, false flag attacks. False flag operations are attacks carried out with the intention of having an adversary take the blame for them. There are numerous proven or potential false flag attacks in the current Russian war in Ukraine, for example the attacks on the Nord Stream pipelines carrying natural gas from Russia to Western Europe. Other notable examples include episodes during the outbreak of the Russo-Finnish War in 1939, and frequent attacks along the disputed Kashmir border between India and Pakistan.

Some types of disinformation present a challenge to global governance. I link this to a twin challenge to global governance, growing domestic economic inequality in the core countries of the liberal international order. In the end, I will turn to the question of the responsibilities of global governance institutions and those who support them in the face of disinformation and will suggest a possible new research agenda.

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Political Science Research on Disinformation

While there is a substantial amount of interesting and rigorous work about disinformation, the development of this research area is uneven. On the one hand, we have a very good understanding of why people believe disinformation even in the face of credible counterevidence. This phenomenon has strong psychological foundations, as individuals are driven by a desire to believe statements that are consistent with their prior beliefs or ideology. However, beyond this, we don't have a strong sense of who is most responsible for spreading disinformation, or, perhaps more importantly, how to correct it. While the field has many interesting studies, there is a lack of cumulative knowledge.

Is disinformation today more prevalent than ever? Skeptics might argue that disinformation has always been with us, and they have a point. For example, there is a long history of information warfare in the security context. We know that state leaders often lie for strategic advantage. Underlying these facts is liberalism's commitment to freedom of speech, especially in the U.S. context.² This commitment means that government does not regulate speech to combat disinformation. Instead, we rely on a battle of ideas to reveal the truth, which can allow disinformation to spread. Additionally, disinformation remedies may themselves be illiberal. As discussed later, the U.S. government objected to World Health Organization (WHO) staff who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, called on governments to shut down disinformation about the virus. The United Nations has also recognized this tension, noting that “approaches that seek simple solutions to this complex problem are likely to censor legitimate speech that is protected under international human rights law. Such overbroad restrictions are likely to exacerbate societal ills and increase public distrust and disconnections, rather than contribute to the resolution of underlying problems.”³

However, I would argue that social media has exacerbated the spread of disinformation. It has greatly enhanced the speed with which information, truthful or not, spreads.

It has enabled “flooding” as a strategy, in which actors spread so much contradictory information on social media that many are left wondering what to believe. In addition, in the social media age we see a lack of trust and communication between different peer groups, but rapid peer-to-peer sharing of information that is trusted. All these factors seem to have increased the breadth and penetration of disinformation compared to the pre-social media age.

To begin linking research on disinformation to global governance, let me provide some examples of the types of disinformation that international organizations (IOs) face in different issue areas. Consider first the security area. As mentioned, false flag attacks have occurred throughout history to gain a strategic advantage in crisis situations. In the contemporary era, Russia has expended great effort to spread disinformation to destabilize NATO members, for example, during election periods. It is interesting that Russia is not using this weapon to directly attack NATO as an institution, instead choosing to target individual NATO members. It is also not obvious that this tactic has done anything to enhance Russia’s soft power.

In the economic realm, IOs rely on solid information about domestic economies to carry out their work. However, this work is threatened when governments provide distorted statistics to international economic institutions. Martínez (2022) uses night-time light measurements, which should be highly correlated with GDP growth. He finds that autocracies exaggerate their GDP growth by 35% on average. Wallace (2016) finds that the Chinese government promotes disinformation in the public data it releases, and manipulates the numbers with the highest visibility, including certain elements of GDP. To the extent that authoritarian leaders rely on providing economic growth as the basis of their legitimacy rather than free and fair elections, they are sorely tempted to manipulate these data.

IOs working in the public health area have always faced the huge task of combatting disinformation during public health crises. Examples include disinformation spread during the AIDS crisis (did the Soviet Union create the virus to undermine the West?) and obviously during the COVID–19 pandemic. Finally, another major and highly dangerous example comes from the environmental issue area, where disinformation about the causes and consequences of climate change creates an existential crisis for humanity and other living creatures.

The Liberal International Order Is Threatened by Disinformation

Building on these examples, let me now turn to drawing the link between the spread of disinformation and global governance. My approach to studying global governance falls under the heading of “institutionalism.” This approach argues that the institutions of global governance can improve information conditions on the international

level. Improved information conditions, in turn, facilitate international cooperation to promote global welfare. Institutions can improve information conditions in several ways. By specifying norms and rules, they create common expectations among states, for example about appropriate and expected behavior. By promoting extended interactions among states, institutions can help to develop trust. IOs often provide monitoring (for example, monitoring compliance with international agreements) and scientific expertise. All of this allows states to avoid the kind of worst-case-scenario planning that they might think necessary in the absence of good information about behavior and intentions.

By global governance, I refer to the networks of institutions, formal and informal, that shape international interactions. I am particularly focused on the Liberal International Order (LIO) (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021). The LIO is based on the principle of multilateralism, by which the rules established by IOs in principle apply equally to all members of an IO (Ruggie 1992).

If one of the main functions of IOs is to improve information conditions, clearly the spread of disinformation undermines the institutionalist perspective. Adler and Drieschova (2021) examine how populist leaders engage in “truth subversion practices” aimed at the LIO. Populist leaders use these practices not just to spread specific nuggets of disinformation, but to undermine Enlightenment values that support the LIO, such as using reason to arrive at the truth. Some examples Adler and Drieschova provide of truth subversion practices include flooding (discussed earlier); double speak, in which leaders provide different information to different audiences; and false speak, or just plain lying.

Disinformation and truth subversion practices undermine core institutions of the LIO. These include institutions such as democracy, markets, and multilateralism. All rely on widespread acceptance of common facts. Institutions struggle to function when that foundation is eroded. Let me now turn to the example of the WHO confronting the tidal wave of disinformation during the COVID–19 pandemic.

As the linchpin of the global health regime, the WHO found itself in the position of needing to address disinformation challenges. The WHO is defined by two capacities. The first, which is fairly well developed, is its functional capacity. This refers to its role on the ground during public health emergencies, collecting information, distributing medicines, and so on. The second is a policy capacity. This is more limited, as revealed during the pandemic, and newer, being tied to the 2005 International Health Regulations. The WHO’s initial response to the pandemic was cautious—perhaps too cautious—and primarily informational. It provided little in the way of policy guidance, other than well-worn cautions against implementing travel restrictions as they may do more harm than good.

The crisis also revealed politicization within the WHO and surprising flaws in its functional capacity.

In response to disinformation during the pandemic, the WHO used some standard approaches to combat it, as well as trying out some new approaches. For example, it developed a web page devoted to correcting disinformation and tried putting some chatbots in social media apps. The WHO is now in general highly focused on what it refers to as “infodemics” and provides several resources for those interested in learning how to combat disinformation about public health. In contrast to the U.S. commitment to free speech, some WHO staff have called for more government regulation of medical information during public health crises. As this case indicates, IOs increasingly need to address issues related to disinformation and are struggling with learning how to do so.

How Domestic Inequality and Disinformation Reinforce One Another

International economic institutions (IEOs), such as those created at Bretton Woods in 1944, were an elite effort to enhance global welfare after the horrors of the Great Depression and World War II. The economists and politicians involved in creating IEOs, such as John Maynard Keynes representing the UK and Harry Dexter White representing the United States, knew that globalization would create domestic economic dislocation, as domestic producers faced greater international competition that threatened jobs and entire industries. However, they left it up to individual national governments to address such dislocation. The assumption that they would do so was labeled by Ruggie (1982) the “compromise of embedded liberalism.” Within the core of the LIO, embedded liberalism prevailed until the 1970s, as governments took steps to compensate losers from globalization and to support adaptation to international economic competition.

Under embedded liberalism, government use of loopholes in international agreements and other compensation mechanisms was not seen as “cheating” but as appropriate domestic intervention. However, by the 1970s neoliberal ideology and changes in the international economic and technology limited the reach and effectiveness of such government intervention and brought growing economic inequality in the core of the LIO. For example, during the interwar period income inequality in the United States was high, with the top 1% of earners taking home over 20% of national income, while the bottom 50% of earners took home less than 15%.⁴ By 1970 the income distribution showed far less inequality, with the bottom 50% taking home over 20% of income, and the top 1% less than 11%. However, by 2021 income inequality had nearly returned to the levels of the interwar years, with the top 1% earning nearly 20% of income, and the bottom 50% less than 14%.

This rising domestic inequality has left many individuals in the core of the LIO feeling marginalized. Extensive research in political science shows that such marginalization has powerful political effects. For example, Solt (2008) shows that higher income inequality suppresses political participation among all but the most affluent. Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth (2021) and Flaherty and Rogowski (2021) also link economic inequality to populism and the backlash against globalization. Marginalization and political polarization in turn create a demand for disinformation that populists have been meeting and exploiting. Adler and Drieschova (2021) argue that marginalization has created a demand for disinformation that populists have filled.⁵ Thus, the LIO’s blind spot about domestic inequality and the disinformation challenge are closely intertwined.

Implications

Given the rising challenge of disinformation to global governance, what are the responsibilities of global governance institutions and those who support them? IOs have been under pressure to enhance transparency for years. The truth subversion challenge should accelerate those efforts. Pushing IEOs to more directly consider domestic inequality when engaging with countries could also be of benefit.

The WHO example illustrated how an IO might try more directly to educate the public. Although it was flown largely under the radar screen of political science work on IOs, in fact all major IOs devote significant resources to their public diplomacy/external relations departments.⁶ These offices generally are not noted in the organizations’ founding documents, but are typically created soon after the IO is established. For example, the World Bank created a Public Relations Department in 1947, just a year after it became operational. This office has been through many changes and iterations, being renamed the Office of Public Relations in 1953; the Office of Information in 1955; the Information and Public Affairs Department in 1968; and the External Affairs Department in 1988. We know a great deal about the internal workings of IOs, such as their dispute resolution procedures, leadership selection processes, decision-making processes, and so on. Given the centrality of IOs to today’s disinformation environment, learning more about what their public affairs offices do, why they do it, to whom they speak, and what effect it has is an important research agenda.

Another area of concern for those who support the LIO is to be more aware of “rent extraction” activities and to work to limit them. Rent extraction occurs when powerful states bend IOs to their own private purposes, such as rewarding friends and punishing adversaries. This can occur through the exercise of informal influence, such as exerting pressure on IO staff to direct resources to certain countries or turn a blind eye to allies who are out of

compliance. It can occur when powerful states use IOs to do their “dirty work,” using them to make side-payments or to punish in ways that it would be difficult to get through a domestic legislative process. These rent extraction efforts undermine IO’s day-to-day routines and efforts to perform their stated functions. Taken to an extreme, they could hollow out IOs entirely and further undermine public confidence in them. Responsible behavior toward IOs requires limiting such rent-extraction efforts. Overall, as with domestic institutions such as elections and public health agencies, international institutions and global governance are threatened by disinformation. The 2023 APSA annual meeting had numerous theme panels that focused on rights and responsibilities in an age of mis- and disinformation. It is my hope that scholars will build on the research showcased there to lead to a deeper and more solid understanding of the role of disinformation in politics, including in the realm of global governance.

Notes

- 1 Note that I will use the term disinformation, although most of the arguments would also apply to misinformation. Misinformation refers to false information that is spread unintentionally, while disinformation is spread with the intent to mislead. Experts also study malinformation, which is the spread of truthful information with the intent to harm, usually by moving information from the private to the public realm.
- 2 It is worth bearing in mind that attachment to freedom of speech, extending to an absolutist right to free speech, is not held as strongly in many other core members of the liberal international order as in the United States.
- 3 <https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation>, retrieved November 15, 2023.
- 4 www.wid.world, retrieved October 12, 2023.
- 5 See also Hameleers 2020.
- 6 For some recent work on this topic, see Hillebrecht and Read 2023 and Dumdum 2023.

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