

# Regulating Disinformation and Big Tech in the EU: A Research Agenda on the Institutional Strategies, Public Spheres and Analytical Challenges

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## Abstract

The growing influence of social media platforms, and the disinformation that circulates in them, has transformed the public spheres. How to deal with disinformation is an open normative, empirical and political question in contemporary democracies. In this article, we outline an agenda on the institutional strategies pursued in the European Union (EU), the normative understandings of the public sphere that such strategies imply, and the analytical challenges to undertake this line of inquiry. We argue that there is an emerging competition in the EU field of disinformation – constructed by actors coming from different pre-existing fields, such as journalism or foreign policy – not only to define what is ‘true’ from what is ‘fake’, but also to determine the sort of the public sphere and democracy we ought to strive for. This perspective allows us to anticipate which actors might be empowered (or disempowered) depending on how disinformation is addressed in regulatory terms.

**Keywords:** Big Tech; disinformation; European Union; public policy; public sphere

## Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms has deeply impacted the functioning of the public spheres, as it has influenced processes of mediated political communication. Common negative points raised are that this transformation has empowered anti-democratic national and foreign actors, eroded the business model of traditional media companies and heavily altered consensus-seeking processes (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Freelon and Wells 2020). One of the issues of this disruption that has been picked up by the European Union (EU) from a regulatory perspective is the disinformation that circulates in social media platforms. The global regulatory influence of the EU seemingly makes it a suitable terrain for political action on disinformation, but regulation itself entails its risks of internet surveillance, capture by powerful stakeholders and empowerment of actors proclaiming rather than arguing what is true (Farkas and Schou 2019; Michailidou and Trenz 2021). This research agenda explores the construction of disinformation as a threat and object of regulation in the EU, rather than its actual impact in either the public sphere or public policy. Despite the entrenchment of disinformation as a political issue in both the EU and the United States, public authorities on both sides of the Atlantic have

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until recently been reluctant to regulate technology companies in general and social media companies in particular (Rone 2021). This reflects both the political power of Big Tech companies and the shallowness of the supposed policy consensus.

In fact, how to deal with disinformation is an open normative, empirical and political question in all liberal democracies. The research note addresses the EU regulatory response to post-truth politics as a contribution to the study of the impact of post-truth on the field of practice of EU internet regulation (Cioffi et al. 2022; Monsees and Lambach 2022). However, far from being an issue for discussion in specialised policy communities, we argue what is at stake in the field has important consequences for the internal market and democracy, and is thus of critical importance for scholars of European integration. The regulation of social media platforms and other strategies to empower truth sayers (Farkas and Schou 2019) not only has economic and political costs, given the regulatory influence capacity of Big Tech companies (often referred as GAFAM, an acronym for Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft) lobbyists, but also implies competing understandings of democracy, and the principles upon which such regulation is constructed (e.g. free speech vs. fact-based debates). As a result, this article contributes to fill in the research gap, but also to policy discussions about the implications of the EU's response to disinformation challenges. This is a timely endeavour given that the rules of the game of this new regulatory field are currently being negotiated, and decisions taken in this legislative period are likely to shape a decade of public policy.

There is a wide literature on the phenomenon of disinformation and 'fake news', but we know relatively little about the specific ways in which different actors compete at the level of EU public policy to regulate it, as well as its normative implications. Existing approaches have focused on macro-level explanations, such as geopolitics (Szostek 2020; Wagnsson and Hellman 2018) and market power (Cioffi et al. 2022; Monsees and Lambach 2022), or intra-institutional dynamics (Datzer and Lonardo 2023). Approaches that have focused on non-institutional actors have focused on either large communities (Ördén 2019) or on Big Tech companies (Bank et al. 2021; Tarrant and Cowen 2022; Wolfs and Veldhuis 2023). We argue that far from a consensus on possible solutions, this incomplete knowledge reflects not only a research gap but also an insufficient policy debate. As Julia Rone (2021, p. 179) has argued, 'there is a consensus that there is a problem, but there is neither consensus nor clarity about what exactly the problem is'. Further research alone cannot clarify this lack of consensus.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, we aim to build new knowledge about the policy field where the policy options are discussed as a first step to foster policy and institutional analysis that encompasses more open normative questions. Our constructivist theoretical assumption is that EU regulatory politics happen in a densely populated social space – the field of European power in the understanding of Bourdieu (Georgakakis and Rowell 2013). This perspective situates the position of actors in this field as key to understand policy contents, frameworks and goals. The consensus that there is a 'problem' is what constructs the field and draws actors into it. Within this field, actors compete to situate their respective 'solutions' as more plausible than its alternatives. It has already been empirically established that there are struggles between different policy communities (free internet activists or Big Tech lobbyists, journalists, foreign policy officials and think tanks) to define the best

<sup>1</sup>We are particularly grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

way to combat disinformation from a regulatory perspective at the European level (Tuñón Navarro et al. 2019), which is closely related to different ways of defining what disinformation is and where it comes from. However, there are relevant questions around how this process takes place.

The research note advances a research agenda analysing different regulatory strategies to fight disinformation in response to the ongoing disruptions of European public spheres in the field of practices in the EU digital ecosystem (Monsees and Lambach 2022). In particular, we ask the following: *How does the rooting in said field of practice – including their normative assumptions about the public sphere – influence European (EU and national) strategies to fight disinformation?* This is a relevant question insofar as the involvement of the EU in this field has attracted attention, but even approaches that explicitly seek to understand regulatory decisions do not empirically analyse the origins of the agenda, the role of different coalitions of actors or the very definition of the issues.

We assume that collective action matters in the making of regulation in this field and that the actors' understanding of the public sphere, in line with their habitus (ideas, interests and trajectory), will influence the type of regulation that they put forward as a strategy to combat disinformation. Thus, we see a competition not only to define disinformation and how to combat it, but also to define what is the best public sphere model and democracy we ought to strive for. The regulation of disinformation – and more generally, of online speech and content – is a specific development in the broader field of EU digital policies. As other internet regulation agendas, it is tied to the ongoing geopoliticisation of internal market regulation, as well as Big Tech companies and new technologies such as artificial intelligence. It also builds upon a delicate balance between non-hierarchical governance, transnational regulation and member states' competences, with a direct encroachment upon significant differences in balances of values between member states.

The research note is structured as follows. After this introduction, we discuss the institutional strategies that have been identified in regard to the regulation of disinformation, and how these options are linked to different normative conceptions of democracy and the public sphere. After that, we advance the analytical challenges that might arise from our research agenda and argue that a field theory perspective operationalised through network analysis indicates a promising way forward. Last, we outline possible ways forward for such a research agenda.

## **I. Institutional Strategies in the EU Field of Disinformation: The Dispute to Regulate the Public Sphere**

The global nature of technological companies such as Google or Facebook has situated the EU as a central regulatory actor in the field of disinformation, mirroring the action of the EU in other regulatory debates on transnational internet issues such as data protection or infrastructure (Broeders et al. 2023). This explains that lobbying efforts by tech companies have been oriented towards the EU level, the political space in which the dispute to regulate disinformation and the public sphere is unfolding. In their endeavour to protect their advertisement-based business model, social media companies have played a crucial role in shaping how to define disinformation policies at the EU level, and have done so through both 'pre-emptive' and 'conflictual' co-operation (see Rone 2021). On one hand, Big Tech lobbyists co-operate closely with policy-makers to shape legislation,

preempting policy-makers from questioning their business model; on the other, they use their communicative and economic power to challenge political actions that undermine their dominant position.

Whilst public and policy agendas about ‘fake news’ have featured prominently at the national level across different EU member states, member states have responded differently (including by not acting upon the issue). Existing literature points out significant differences in how democracies have dealt with disinformation. Farkas and Schou (2019) identify four types of political responses to disinformation. First, ‘Moralizing, Condemning’ refers to the practice of *de facto* excluding non-democratic forces from political life (*cordon sanitaire*). Second, ‘Policing the Truth’ refers to the active prosecution of disinformation. This is the field that has seen more regulatory action and according to Helm and Nasu (2021) can essentially consist in rapid the removal of disinformation by judicial or administrative bodies, as well as the criminalisation of wilful disinformation (the option that these authors consider strikes a better balance between legal guarantees and safeguards and effectivity). This is the response that both France and Germany have adopted at the national level, albeit focusing on different manifestations of the threat and using different tools. Even though there is no convincing overall explanation for the diversity of regulatory responses across different types of systems, some researchers hypothesise that the type of media system prevalent in each polity anticipates one kind of regulation (Humprecht 2018; Magallón Rosa 2019). Third, ‘Technological Solutionism’ refers to a certain self-regulatory optimism that new IT tools will contribute to the solution almost by fiat. This appears as a particularly risky strategy, as it points towards a potential privatisation of regulation and/or censorship, where digital giants will act as sole gatekeepers. This reminds us that self-regulation is also a form of regulation. Fourth, ‘Re-establishing Centers of Truth-Making’ refers to practices such as regaining trust in institutions, factchecking, empowering scientists and digital alphabetisation.

Whilst the regulatory debate on disinformation has been mostly discussed as a ‘bug’ of the rise of Big Tech platforms, there have also been recent contributions that emphasise the systemic role that Big Tech platforms play in (undermining) the deliberative functions of the public sphere (Habermas 2022; Kuehn and Salter 2020; Patberg 2023). Disinformation from this perspective could be understood as a ‘feature’ of the market-oriented functioning of social media platforms, a logical consequence of the corporate power of these companies (Oldenbourg 2022) whose primary goal is the maximisation of profit. Calls have been made to break up the ‘capitalist monopoly’ of these companies (Fuchs 2021) as a first step towards bringing about ‘digital socialism’ (Morozov 2019) or ‘platform socialism’ (Muldoon 2022).

One of the results of the national differences and the centrality of the EU for transnational activism is that different policy streams have converged in regulatory proposals in ‘Brussels’. Ördén (2019, p. 422) focuses on the security values threatened by the online ecosystem and finds four possible remedies that have been discussed in different EU fora: strategic communication, censorship, media literacy and media pluralism. This suggests that the EU has essentially explored alternatives to ‘police the truth’ and ‘re-establish centres of truth making’ in Farkas and Schou’s terms, considering strategic communication as a way of affirming truth-making in response to foreign actors. Ördén also found a clear distinction in policy preferences and attitudes to risk, with the Internet community and the security/defence one sharing a procedural vision of the need to protect a digital space

through continuous management, whereas the media and education community emphasises content pluralism and viewpoints amongst citizens, with protection consisting in citizens' ability to produce their own judgement.

The EU has been very active in discussing different regulatory possibilities, and the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) are the most recent examples. Both the DSA and the DMA operate as a 'package' that aims to regulate the digital market in which social media platforms operate. In regard to disinformation, rather than defining processes to determine what is 'true' from what is 'fake', these initiatives attempt to make companies more transparent and responsible for the content that circulates in them and the algorithms that prioritise it. Existing approaches have analysed the role of Big Tech GAFAM lobby pointing out different degrees of success upon the DMA (Bank et al. 2021; Tarrant and Cowen 2022; Wolfs and Veldhuis 2023). Other studies have similarly analysed the differences in national mobilisation that have created unusual coalitions on issues such as copyright protection (Heermann 2023) or focused on the EU regulatory response to the economic disruption brought about by digitalisation (Cioffi et al. 2022), whereas the foreign dimension of external online threats (from terrorist radicalisation to disinformation, including cyberattacks) has been regularly covered (Szostek 2020; Wagnsson and Hellman 2018).

The originality of our conceptual approach is to conceive and investigate the regulation of disinformation in the relational context of the different approaches of the EU to the online ecosystem (see Gorwa 2019; Rone 2021). This responds to our sociological and theoretical–normative approach. First, we conceive the EU digital ecosystem as a field of practices that bridges different knowledges, stakes and professional approaches. For example, Ördén's (2019) policy communities working on civic education, strategic communication, media pluralism and economic regulation are not isolated but influence each other. Not only does each policy community have but there is also there is a competition between the different approaches to become the dominant one.

Second, normative understandings of democracy are at play in the contest to address disinformation from the regulatory perspective of EU public policy. The social construction of disinformation (Farkas and Schou 2018), together with other online risks, as a 'threat to European democracies' is a powerful political frame. This can be used as a spearhead of EU regulation of digital markets, such as in the case of the DSA and DMA, but may also justify censorship or a transformation of the public sphere towards more dialogic positions such as pro or anti-EU. The potential negative consequences in democratic terms require an understanding of the complex interrelated connection to debates in the public sphere where regulatory, political and communicative innovations not only affect each other but also transform the overall democratic 'ecosystem'.

## II. Analytical Challenges: A Field Theory and Network Analysis Perspective

Previous research has emphasised that post-truth politics is a socially constructed notion, and the struggles to regulate it develop within an emergent field of practice (Baisnée and Pouzadoux 2022; Michailidou and Trenz 2021). This research agenda intends to deepen this notion by situating this transnational field of practice within the broader EU political field and developing testable expectations of how and why it has developed.

We understand the concept of a 'field' from the relational perspective of political sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and neo-institutionalism (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) as a delimited and autonomous space of relatively stable positions and relationships, in which actors compete for social goods and resources produced in the field itself. Field theory combines the emphasis on agents and structure, assuming that the field is the result of the action of the actors and that their strategies are strongly influenced by the structural properties of the field, such as its relative position compared to other actors and the available resources originating from it. This perspective is helpful to understand what is at stake for the different actors in the EU field of disinformation. In this case, what is at stake is the definition of the method and the most qualified actor(s) to help distinguish what is true from what is false. Understanding the actors' strategic behaviour is a first step to gain knowledge about the EU's policy, before considering the effects on the public sphere and democracy more broadly. The constructivist inspiration of field theory suggests that whatever is at stake in the regulation of disinformation may either fall short or go beyond the said EU regulation. For example, one of the risks emerging in the disinformation field is to re-empower proclamatory visions of truth, along the re-establishment of centres of truth-saying discussed above, over those based in debate and the public sphere (Michailidou et al. 2023). Our emphasis on systemic views of democracy and the connection between the public sphere and the institutions highlights the importance of the relationship between journalism, politics and the public sphere.

A key element of this process is the model of media and politics (see Hallin and Mancini 2004), given that the structure of the media market (strong public-service broadcasting vs. market-dominated media) or the type of democracy (consensus vs. majoritarian) heavily influences the extent to which disinformation is adopted as a regular feature of the national public sphere. In consequence, Italian politics is more vulnerable to disinformation strategies than its Finnish counterpart. In this way, disinformation is part of a broader process of political transformation of the public spheres that needs an equally political understanding of the debate (Michailidou and Trenz 2021, pp. 1341–1342). Thus, national media systems are unequally vulnerable to disinformation, and the degree and type of vulnerability of the system are highly likely to affect the national preferences for regulation of Big Tech platforms and disinformation.

In this context, our theoretical understanding of the conditions that lead to EU regulation is the following. First, there are different pre-existing European fields of practice (journalism, international security and Big Tech) that are affected by the emergence of the new transnational field of disinformation. Second, the establishment of the field responds to external shocks to the field, such as the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and Ukraine in 2022, or the Cambridge Analytica scandal (which followed the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, both in 2016). The establishment of post-truth as a threat to which the EU must respond encourages actors from other pre-existing fields to attempt to establish the rules of the game, politicise or depoliticise issues and formulate policy proposals. This agency is shaped by structure at the micro-level, as material interests and beliefs shape each other (internalised in the form of habitus); macro-level through the structural attribution of competences, facilitating some types of policy responses rather than others (for instance, market regulation-inspired approaches are more likely than education ones); and meso-level, such as the distribution of resources within the field.

The result of this approach is that we conceive that actors that often see themselves as relatively distant such as political activists, digital platforms, journalists, foreign policy officials and institutional experts actually are working on connected issues and increasingly co-operating and competing with each other. It is thus a changing object of study on which it is difficult to derive testable hypotheses deductively from theory and literature. However, the policy mix elaborated throughout the von der Leyen Commission period (2019–2024), field theory and existing studies allows us to formulate some general expectations.

First, we only expect a dramatic change in policy as a result of speech acts responding to designated geopolitical risks, such as the banning of Russia Today and Sputnik in 2022. This expectation follows from Ördén's (2019) finding of the basic agreement between the security and digital economy communities. As the EU is increasingly concerned about its role in a changing world, economic policies traditionally viewed as part of a (neo)liberal regulatory paradigm are oriented to serve geopolitical goals, and internet regulation policies have not been an exception to this trend (Broeders et al. 2023; Monsees and Lambach 2022). This has enhanced the convergence of policy views and communities that had traditionally different priorities. Our reading is that the emergence of the field responds to an external security shock, and this makes disinformation a discursive threat to be addressed – rather than, for instance, a regrettable by-product of a more diverse information environment. With this policy mix in force, security actors stand at a distance from regulatory politics to carry out monitoring and surveillance policies in the strategic communication approach, with exceptional recourses to censorship (Ördén 2019, pp. 427–429). For instance, Datzler and Lonardo (2023, p. 760) have shown how disinformation is perceived amongst policy-makers as such an entrenched security threat to be fought via regulatory tools that the Russia Today and Sputnik 'sanctions are so different from the other instruments adopted by the EU in this context that an official suggested they should not even be considered as part of disinformation policy'. Interestingly, possible exceptional responses may break preemptive co-operation (Rone 2021) with a combination of new policy tools such as outright banning with traditional policy language such as competition policy or data protection (Broeders et al. 2023).

Second, the domination of the internet control policy suggested by Ördén (2019) has only been strengthened by the DSA/DMA and the political advertisement regulation under discussion. The proposed European Media Freedom Act and eventual future programmes for digital alphabetisation may introduce marginal changes, but we expect this domination relation to be maintained. This may be surprising considering that the DSA/DMA package tends to be seen as a backlash against digital platforms after Brexit and the Cambridge Analytica scandal. What we imply is not that the DSA/DMA was the preferred regulatory option of Big Tech (Tarrant and Cowen 2022), but that the package consolidates market regulation in the post-truth policy mix. In doing so, very large platforms have been recognised as key players in an increasingly autonomous field of practice of digital governance. As argued by Cioffi et al. (2022, p. 829), 'EU regulatory politics with respect to platform firms and markets has begun to pivot away from competition policy in favour of more comprehensive regulation'. The field has been established as a result of an external shock, but digital platforms start in a dominant position. In relation to risks related to, but not limited to post-truth politics, the DSA/DMA package establishes the need for platforms to have a risk assessment plan, for which platforms, Commission and other signatories have adopted the 2022 code of practice. This code of

practice on disinformation confirms Rone's (2021) argument about preemptive collaboration, since it places GAFAM leaders at the helm of policy design with policy-makers and willing civil society to shape legislation. Resistance to preemptive collaboration may come from civil society such as free internet activists putting forward proposals to break up Big Tech companies and/or create communitarian alternative platforms (such as the cases of Mastodon or Bluesky, which have seen a large influx of users after Elon Musk bought Twitter).

Third, we expect the 'rules of the game' emerging from policy stabilisation to be relatively longstanding, since the establishment of the field is the most likely context for innovation. In this sense, the most likely dispute is whether the field dynamics will respond to preemptive collaboration or see a mobilisation of traditional policy tools as a result of either civil society pressure 'from below' or geopolitical responses. We summarise in Table 1 the main expectations in relation to the main fields of practice being involved.

We take field theory not only as an analytical lens but also as a methodological framework (see Oleart and Bouza 2018). From this perspective, the fundamental question is to trace the way in which actors compete for positions in the field. However, the objective is not to map and analyse the field per se, but to explain its effects on emerging regulation. A promising way forward to address the methodological challenges that arise from this perspective is a combination of process tracing and network analysis. The study of the consultations of the European Commission and of the monitoring of the transnational activities of the main professional associations could be the main object of analysis, combined with interviews. Specifically, the approach will focus on the institutional agenda and demands by actors, studying the emergence of claims, the chronological continuity, adoption by other actors, transformation and eventual disappearance of said claims. Network analysis allows us to map the field, analysing resource sharing and agency patterns. We can also mobilise social network analysis to map the co-operation and competition networks of actors attempting to influence the debate to combat disinformation at the EU level.

This type of approach has been already partially mobilised in this direction (Oleart and Bouza García 2022; Tuñón Navarro et al. 2019, p. 253). There are certainly limitations to this application of field theory, given that actors are required to be innovative and adaptive in order to consolidate the emerging EU field of disinformation. Recent regulatory projects driven by the EU, such as the DMA, the DSA, the European Democracy Action Plan or the European Media Freedom Act can provide a rich empirical focus. The goal of such an analytical and methodological perspective is to draw causal connections between different case studies and map the different coalitions built around them in order to establish the EU disinformation field's members and borders. The regulatory agenda is defined across time, and the orientation requires (1) an analysis of the problems identified in each regulatory process, (2) the causal connection between the problems identified in a regulatory process and the policy follow-up (for example, the responsibility of social media platforms for the dissemination of disinformation and their obligation to disclose their content prioritisation strategies), (3) the connection with the mobilisation of actors and their influence strategies, and (4) elucidation of the public sphere and democracy conceptions underlying the different regulatory approaches.

To be sure, whilst this methodological proposal is targeted at the regulation of disinformation at the EU level, the approach outlined can be mobilised to analyse ongoing



Table 1: Expectation of EU Public Policy Preferences to Tackle Disinformation Based on the Field of Practice and Interests of Actors.

<i>Field of practice</i>	<i>EU public policy preferences</i>	<i>Interests</i>	<i>Actors</i>
Security/ defence	Disinformation defined in broad terms (inc. narratives) as part of 'hybrid warfare' strategies. Need to co-ordinate actors and policies to control information environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raise awareness of hybrid threats amongst policy makers, including at the national level</li> <li>- Ensure resources for monitoring and ability to steer EU strategic communication</li> </ul>	Institutional: EEAS (EastStratCom), EUISS
Media and communication	Use EU law to establish new journalistic regulations at EU or national level. Obtain recognition for specific contributions of professional journalism to democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protect media business model from social media</li> <li>- Attempt EU support for new business models</li> </ul>	Federations of journalists; public broadcasters; federations of media companies
Education	Serious limitations due to EU lack of competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognise the importance of education in the fight against disinformation</li> <li>- Demand new EU action in the field of citizenship education</li> </ul>	Teachers trade unions (ETUCE); life-long education
Citizens' rights	Concerns about disinformation on political participation and its regulatory effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limit internet companies' market power</li> <li>- Promote new forms of de-centralised communication</li> <li>- Enshrine new rights</li> </ul>	Access Now, European Consumer Organisation (BEUC)
Digital economy	Preference for self-regulation. Limited ability to resist regulations to be used strategically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Avoid regulatory 'burdens' to maximise profits</li> <li>- Protect reputation</li> <li>- Maintain market openness and keep current risk burden of proof for new products</li> </ul>	Large platforms (GAFAM), new technology smaller initiatives (AI), eventually state-backed national champions

regulatory processes in EU member states and beyond the EU. Furthermore, whilst we have focused on the political phenomenon of disinformation, this research agenda can also be applied to the regulation and governance of 'speech' more broadly – for instance, when discussing the distinction between 'hate' speech and 'harmful but legal' discourse. There may be further methodological challenges, but discussing all of them is beyond the scope of this research note.

### III. A Research Agenda: Tracing the Disputes in the EU Field of Disinformation

The research note has intended to disentangle the plurality of potential democratic responses to disinformation and the complex relations between these responses and the actors involved in this dispute. Conceptually, we have developed the relationship between regulations and narratives put forward by the actors involved in this political struggle. This is a helpful perspective that allows us to anticipate which actors might be empowered (or disempowered) depending on how disinformation is defined and what normative understanding of the public sphere and democracy lies behind it. Analytically and methodologically, we advance a field theory perspective to trace the way in which the struggle to define and address from a regulatory viewpoint disinformation in the EU unfolds. Whilst there is a consensus that disinformation is a ‘problem’ that ought to be addressed, there is a struggle in terms of the way in which disinformation is defined and conceived by different actors. We suggest that both material interests and the normative model that actors have of the public sphere, and democracy more broadly, influence the type of regulation that they put forward as a strategy to combat disinformation. Thus, we do see a competition not only to define and fight disinformation in the context of broader stakes about the EU internet model but also to define contemporary democracy and the public sphere.

This research agenda contributes to reflect on the significance of the various phenomena subsumed under the caption of post-truth politics for liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe. It nuances the understanding of disinformation and post-truth politics as ‘an existential threat to liberal democracy’ insofar as it is a contested floating signifier (Farkas and Schou 2018; Lewandowsky et al. 2017) that is closely connected to ongoing reconfiguration processes of the public sphere. Two key questions in this regard are (1) to what extent the possibility of a shared epistemic understanding of ‘truth’ in democratic debate is possible and (2) how to combine a reliance on private companies (and a business model oriented towards targeted advertising) as the infrastructure of the public sphere with democracy.

In sum, our research agenda seeks to renew the debate on disinformation in political communication, and combines a perspective on the public spheres with the analysis of EU regulatory policy. As a starting point, we assume the multifaceted character of democracy in the age of social media, and argue that it can only be fully understood through a variety of disciplinary approaches. Consequently, our research agenda spans a wide range of social scientific disciplines, such as political science, European studies, political sociology, international relations and political communication. We argue that from the academic world, we would do well to question how and who defines disinformation, what political implications at the regulatory level the different definitions have, and towards which normative model of the public sphere and democracy those regulations lead us.

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