American Democracy Under Threat: Misinformation and Disinformation on Social Media. A case study of Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets in the context of the 2021 Capitol siege

Auteur : Van Rickstal, Cécile
Promoteur(s) : Herbillon, Marie
Faculté : Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Diplôme : Master en communication multilingue, à finalité spécialisée en communication économique et sociale
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Université de Liège
Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département Médias, Culture et Communication

American Democracy Under Threat: Misinformation and Disinformation on Social Media

A case study of Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets in the context of the 2021 Capitol siege

Mémoire présenté par VAN RICKSTAL Cécile en vue de l'obtention du grade de Master en communication multilingue à finalité spécialisée en communication économique et sociale

Promotrice : Prof. Herbillon Marie

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Abstract

Since Donald Trump came to power in 2017, the debate about the consequences of mis- and disinformation on social media has continued to grow. This thesis aims to discuss the impact of online mis- and disinformation on American democracy with the help of a case study of Donald Trump's tweets between 3 November 2020, which was the day of the election, and 6 January 2021, which was the day of the Capitol storming. This thesis presents four mechanisms that show how Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets contributed to the assault on the U.S. Capitol. First, online polarisation, second, the spread of mis- and disinformation on Twitter, third, Donald Trump core supporters' news ecosystem, finally, Trump's rhetoric on Twitter. The findings contribute to the building of the theory according to which mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy.

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Introduction

In 2010, the *Journal of Democracy* published an article about social media titled "Liberation Technology."[1] Seven years later, the same journal printed an article entitled "Can Democracy Survive the Internet?"[2] As illustrated here and observed in another work about social media, political polarisation, and political disinformation,[3] society's view of social networks has evolved. Throughout the previous decade, as exemplified by the first title, interactive platforms were conceived as valuable tools for global democratisation.[4] They were understood to extend the possibilities of digital activism and comprise a new form of protest. While this might still be the case today, as illustrated by the headline of the second article, an alternative view on those platforms has emerged in recent years: social networks may constitute a threat to democracy. Whether it is the media, the public, politicians, or scholars, many individuals are concerned about the impact of social media not only on fragile democratic systems but also on longstanding democracies. After Donald Trump assumed power of the U.S. government in 2017, a specific concern about the effects of social networks on democracy has gained momentum: the spread of misinformation and disinformation. As Martin Jay explains in his book *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics*,[5] the use of lies in politics is not a new phenomenon; however, the extent to which the 45th president of the United States used them was unprecedented. Indeed, various studies have demonstrated that the rate at which Trump shared false information exceeded that of any of his predecessors.[6] While a number of studies claim that the impact of online mis- and disinformation on democracy is overstated,[7] other experts debunk this statement by explaining that the consequences for democracy are considerable and

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[1] Larry Diamond, "Liberation Technology", *Journal of Democracy*, n°21, July 2010, pp. 63-89.
[2] Nathaniel Persily, "Can Democracy Survive the Internet?", *Journal of Democracy*, n°28, April 2017, pp. 63-79.
[3] Joshua A. Tucker *et alt*. "Social Media, Political Polarization and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature", *Hewlett Foundation*, March 2018.
[4] Melissa Spinner, "The Effects of Social Media on Democratization", *CUNY Academic Works*, 2012.
[5] Martin Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity. On Lying in Politics,* Virginia*,* The University of Virginia Press*,* 2012.
[6] Skjeseth, Heidi Taksdal, "All the President's Lies. Media Coverage of Lies in the US and France", *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper University of Oxford*, 2017.
[7] Victor Jack, "Fake It 'Til You Make It': The Overstated Effect of Misinformation on Democracy", *Cambridge Journal of Political Affairs*, 2020.

that online mis- and disinformation affect democracy in different ways.[8] It is true that it is difficult to measure the real impact of mis- and disinformation on democracy, as most of the research on the subject is extremely recent. Greater investigation must occur to really understand the extent of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, there is no doubt social media and the content circulating on these platforms play a role in today's democratic system.

This thesis investigates the impact of mis- and disinformation on American democracy by focusing on a specific actor spreading false information – Donald Trump – on a given social network – Twitter – during a specific period – between 3 November 2020, which was the day of the election, and 6 January 2021, which was the day of the Capitol storming. To do so, we have conducted a case study about Donald Trump's dissemination of mis- and disinformation and how this has contributed to the Capitol insurrection.

This thesis asks the following question: In what way did Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets contribute to the storming of the United States Capitol?

To answer this question, in the first chapter, we present the theoretical premises by explaining the theory-building process-tracing method used in the context of our case study. We also define the key concepts of misinformation and disinformation, democracy, as well as the idea of mis- and disinformation as a threat to democracy. We then present the framework of our case study and briefly retrace the sequence of events from election day to the Capitol storming to provide greater understanding regarding the context of our case study.

In the second chapter, we present our case study, which is divided into four different elements, each of which is a mechanism to explain how Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets have contributed to the Capitol storming. First, we discuss online polarisation, a phenomenon that leads Twitter users to interact mostly with people who share their beliefs. Second, we analyse how mis- and disinformation spread on Twitter.

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[8] Spencer McKay, Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy", *SAGE Journals*, July 2020. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1065912920938143 (Accessed 26 April 2021).

Third, we explore the concept of news ecosystem which refers to the system formed by the different sources used by a group of people to obtain information. In the context of our case study, we focus on the system of sources used by Trump's supporters and the role played by Twitter in this system. Finally, we investigate Donald Trump's rhetoric on Twitter and how he addressed his supporters.

In the final chapter of this work, we present observations about our case study and then discuss how our case study is linked to the idea of American democracy being under threat because of online mis- and disinformation.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Premises

1.1 Theory-Building Process-Tracing Method

As explained earlier, the aim of this thesis is to discuss in what way Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets contributed to the storming of the United States Capitol. The objective of this work is therefore not to prove that his tweets played a role in the Capitol riots but rather to discuss in what ways this kind of mis- and disinformation encouraged some of Trump's supporters to storm Capitol Hill, which is a symbol of American democracy. The causes of the deadly event on 6 January 2021 are diverse, and there is no doubt that mis- and disinformation are among them. Most experts studying mis- and disinformation have declared that this event was not surprising to them, and they have linked it to the mis- and disinformation that occurred during Trump's mandate and throughout his presidential campaign. Jennifer M. Grygiel, an assistant professor of communication at Syracuse University, and an expert on social media declare the following: "What happened this week is the product of four years of systematic propaganda from the presidency."[9] While referring to Kolina Koltai, a researcher on trust information systems at the University of Washington, one journalist states that "considering the vast amount of disinformation and misinformation that led up to the 2020 election and following, she and fellow work colleagues who track and research disinformation didn't find the violent actions as a surprise."[10] This work therefore assumes that mis- and disinformation contributed to the event and seeks to investigate how this occurred using the theory-building process-tracing method.

The process-tracing method is a methodology that focuses on the mechanisms linking a cause to an outcome. Concretely, as explained in an article from the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, "The researcher engages in both a thorough soaking and probing of the empirics of the case and a far-reaching search in the theoretical literature to gain clues about potential mechanisms that could link a cause

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[9] Kari Paul, "Four Years of Propaganda: Trump Social Media Bans Come Too Late, Experts Say", *The Guardian*, January 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/07/donald-trump-facebook-social-media-capitol-attack (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[10] Kerri Miller, Kelly Gordon, "How Years of Disinformation Led to an Insurrection at the Capitol", *MPR News*, January 2021. https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2021/01/12/how-years-of-disinformation-led-to-an-insurrection-at-the-capitol (Accessed 26 April 2021).

and outcome together."[11] In this study, rather than trying to prove that element A participated in the development of event B, we focus on the different mechanisms which lead element A to participate in the development of event B.

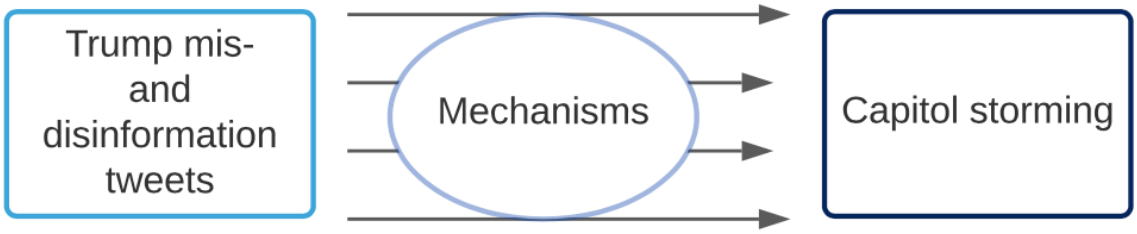

Figure1

These mechanisms "are not causes but are causal processes."[12] This is illustrated in Figure 1, where causal processes are represented between cause and outcome. The causal processes are thus the four mechanisms we explore and analyse in our case study. When combined, these mechanisms link a cause to a consequence. In other words, the four mechanisms in our case study allow us to show how Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets led to an event like the capitol.

It should be noted that a single mechanism would not be enough to bring a cause to a consequence. It is because there are several of them and they occur simultaneously that they lead to a consequence.

The aim of the theory-building process-tracing method is to outline a study case which contributes to the construction of a more general theory. It is not possible to generalise a theory from a single process-tracing case study. Indeed, a range of case studies are needed: "Comparisons across cases make generalisation possible because we can then claim that, as a set of other cases are causally similar to the studied one, we should expect similar mechanisms to also be operative in these cases." This work aims to participate in the construction of a theory by proposing a case study that could later be compared with other case studies with a view to gesturing towards generalisation.

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[11] Derek Beach, "Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, January 2017. https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-176 (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[12] *Ibid.*

In the framework of this thesis, we seek to participate in the construction of the theory "mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy".

The first step of the theory-building process-tracing is to define the key theoretical concepts. As this work focuses on Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation to participate in the theory of mis- and disinformation impacting democracy, it is important to clarify the terms misinformation and disinformation, as well as to discuss the concept of democracy and its link with information. We then introduce the framework by explaining why this work focuses on the platform Twitter used by specific actor Donald Trump during the period between election day and 6 January 2021. Once the key concepts and framework are defined, we move to the second stage of our method, which is the development of a descriptive narrative of our case. Afterwards, we focus on the case study, which develops around four different mechanisms (outlined below) that we explain based on research, literature, and news articles that elaborate on this matter. We then see how they apply to the subject of our case study. The idea is to research these mechanisms with a view to seeing how they developed in the case of the mis- and disinformation tweets of Donald Trump impacting the storming of the Capitol. We then conclude by considering how this case study can be linked to the theory that "mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy."

We have thus decided to consider four main mechanisms. The first mechanism focuses on polarisation taking place on platforms such as Twitter. This phenomenon leaves users interacting online mainly with people sharing their opinion. The second mechanism considers why mis- and disinformation spread so abundantly online and precisely how these kinds of information travel on Twitter. These first two sections provide greater understanding of the function of Twitter and how its design can lead to certain consequences regarding the spread of false information. The third mechanism focuses on how Donald Trump's core supporters obtained information during the election and how this impacted their belief in the narrative of an electoral fraud. The last mechanism explores Trump's rhetoric on Twitter and how it played a crucial role in the spread of mis- and disinformation about election fraud.

We defined these four mechanisms after extensive reading so that we were able to draw on a wide range of sources such as press articles, academic and scientific research, as well as official reports. This thesis does not claim that only the four

mechanisms that are detailed in the rest of the work could be evoked for the case study. However, these four mechanisms, in addition to being relevant, were mentioned in the various sources examined. Enough information was therefore available to engage with these topics, an important argument given that the theme of online mis- and disinformation is still quite new.

1.2 Definition of Key Concepts

1.2.1 Misinformation and Disinformation

We refrain from using the terms “fake news” because this expression is repeatedly used in public discourse to describe different phenomena and has become an unclear concept. In a recent work,[13] researchers have identified three different uses of the phrase “fake news”. The first use described in the study is “the fake news genre,” which refers to the initial meaning of “fake news” as a genre of political satire. It has since evolved to be used by journalists to describe made-up news articles. This use of the term implies that “fake news” is generated intentionally. The second use is “the fake news label,” which refers to some people labelling the media as untrustworthy. This is a use that has been developed in large part due to Donald Trump, who repeatedly undermined the credibility of the media, which he called the “fake news media”. The third use is the “empty buzzword”, which refers to the fact that the term is often used to discuss something incorrect or debatable. This explains why the concept of “fake news” is considered by some scholars as a “fluid descriptor”[14] or a “floating signifier.”[15] Rather than employing the term “fake news,” which lacks a stable meaning, we decided to use a framework developed in the Information Disorder Report from the Council of Europe. In this report, Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan propose three different concepts that vary depending on two elements: intention to harm and falseness. The three concepts are the following:

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[13]Jana Laura Egelhofer *et al*. “From Novelty to Normalization? How Journalists Use the Term ‘Fake News’ in their Reporting”, *Journalism Studies*, n°21, 2020, pp.1323-1343.
[14] M. Carlson, “Fake News as an Informational Moral Panic: The Symbolic Deviancy of Social Media During the 2016 US Presidential Election.” *Information, Communication & Society,* n°19, 2018, pp.1879–1888.
[15] J. Farkas and J. Schou, “Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood.” *Javnost - The Public, n°* 25, 2018, pp.298–314.

- "Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant."[16]
- "Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm."[17]
- "Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere."[18]

In another article,[19] Dr Claire Wardle proposes the illustration observed in Figure 2 to gain a greater understanding of how the three concepts differentiate.

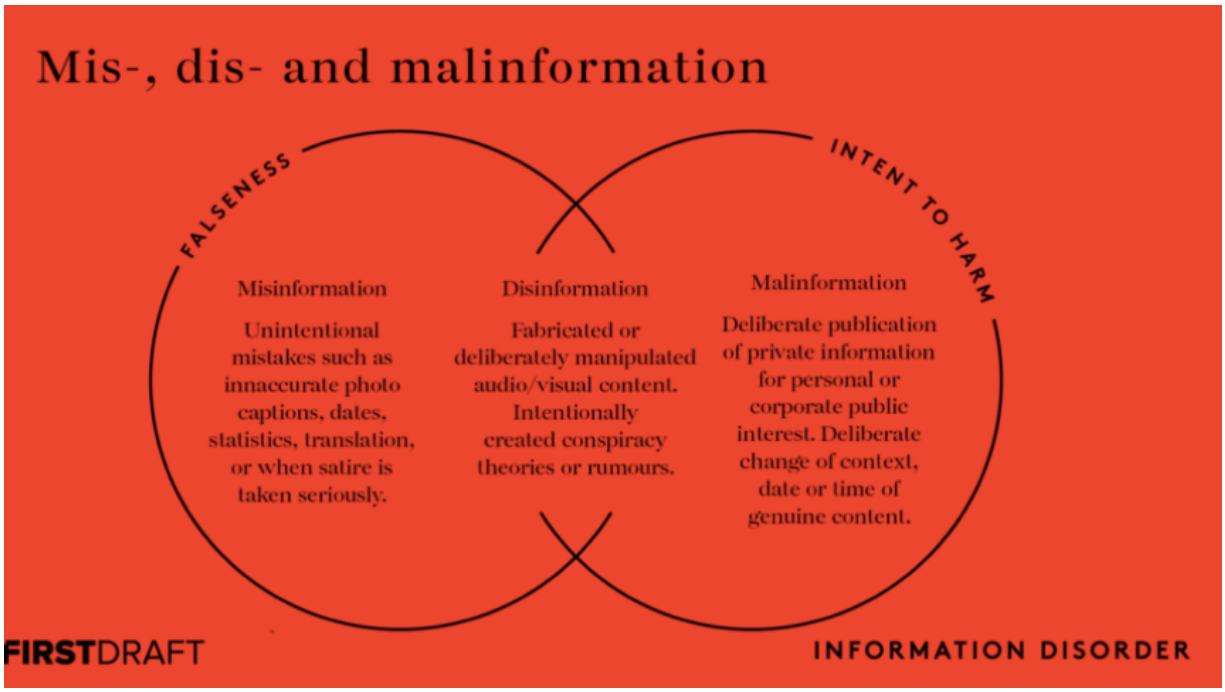

Figure 2

The main difference between malinformation and the two other concepts is the authenticity of the information. Both mis- and disinformation refer to factitious information, whereas malinformation is about genuine information. What malinformation has in common with disinformation is the intention to harm, which is non-existent in misinformation. It should also be noted that disinformation is often motivated by an economic or political objective. This offers a greater understanding of

[16] Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, "Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking", *Council of Europe Report*, September 2017.
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Claire Wardle, "Information Disorder: The Techniques We Saw in 2016 Have Evolved", *First Draft*, October 2019. https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/information-disorder-the-techniques-we-saw-in-2016-have-evolved/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).

how these three concepts differ from each other depending on whether the intention to harm exists and on the truthfulness of the information.

As can be seen in the research question, in the context of this work, we only refer to mis- and disinformation. Our interest lies in the spread of false and misleading information, which explains why the concept of malinformation is not relevant in this thesis.

In this framework, the difference between misinformation and disinformation is clear, which is not always the case in the public debate. Indeed, both terms are often used without having been clearly defined beforehand. As illustrated in Figure 3, it is therefore possible to see one term or the other appearing in newspaper headlines about claims of electoral fraud by Donald Trump. Sometimes, one term is used in the title of an article, and the other in the rest of the text.

Newspaper	Headline
The Financial Times	"Conspiracy and Disinformation: America's New Politics"[20]
PBS News Hour	"When Election Disinformation is a Domestic Threat"[21]
Brookings	"The Role of Misinformation in Trump's Insurrection"[22]
The Washington Post	"A Year of Election Misinformation from Trump, Visualized"[23]

Figure 3

An explanation for this can be located in a report by the Election Integrity Partnership (EIP), which analyses the online mis- and disinformation in the context of the 2020

[20] Hannah Murphy, "Conspiracy and Disinformation: America's New Politics", *The Financial Times*, November 2020. https://www.ft.com/content/c30796ca-060d-42c0-b8e0-64e401e5193d (Accessed 28 April 2021).
[21] Judy Woodruff, William Brangham, "When Election Disinformation Is a Domestic Threat", *PBS News Hour*, November 2020. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/when-election-disinformation-is-a-domestic-threat (Accessed 28 April 2021).
[22] Darrell M. West, "The Role of Misinformation in Trump's Insurrection", *Brookings*, January 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/01/11/the-role-of-misinformation-in-trumps-insurrection/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[23] Philip Bump, "A year of Election Misinformation From Trump, Visualized", *The Washington Post*, February 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/11/year-election-misinformation-trump-visualized/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).

elections.[24] In the appendix section of the work, different definitions are presented including the concept of misinformation, which is defined as follows: “information that is false, but not necessarily intentionally false. Misinformation is at times used as an umbrella category for false rumors, disinformation, and other types of false and misleading information.”[25] This reveals that misinformation is sometimes used as a general term, which also includes the notion of disinformation. This might explain why “misinformation” is sometimes used by the media to talk about false information that should actually be labelled “disinformation” because of the author’s intention to harm.

For years, there was no consensus on a definition of disinformation among scholars, but this seems to be changing, as Wardle and Derakhshan’s definition cited above is gradually taking hold in the scholars’ community.[26] If this definition allows one to have a better understanding of the difference between misinformation and disinformation, it still poses a problem because it is sometimes complicated to determine if the author of a piece of misleading information was motivated by an intention. As Caroline Jack explains in her work *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*, “It is often difficult, however, to prove the actor’s intent. In public discourse, misinformation is thus used more frequently than disinformation.”[27] This could be another reason why some media use the term “misinformation” instead of “disinformation”. Furthermore, the line between misinformation and disinformation can be blurry, and a piece of information can be identified as disinformation but later as misinformation, depending on the perception of truth users hold when they share it. If an agent shares a piece of disinformation that is reshared by other users who are convinced that what they are sharing is the truth with no intent to harm, then what they share becomes misinformation. Dr Claire Warlde explains,

> When disinformation is shared it often turns into misinformation. Misinformation also describes false content, but the person sharing doesn’t realise that it is false or misleading. Often a piece of

[24] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, “The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election”, *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Samuel Spies, “Defining Disinformation”, *Social Science Research Council*, April 2020. https://mediawell.ssrc.org/literature-reviews/defining-disinformation/versions/1-1/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[27] Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information”, *Data & Society*, n°3, 2017.

> disinformation is picked up by someone who does not realise it's false, and shares it with their networks, believing that they are helping.[28]

This demonstrates that misinformation and disinformation are interconnected and that just because a certain message is considered disinformation does not mean it will always be disinformation. What was originally considered disinformation can be considered misinformation depending on who shares it and with what intentions.

In the case of Donald Trump, his lies were most certainly part of a strategy, but it is difficult to say all his messages containing false information were consistently written with the intention to cause harm. As presented through the course of this work, many experts choose to speak of "mis- and disinformation" rather than just one or the other. In view of the direct link that mis- and disinformation can share, we focus our analysis on both concepts.

1.2.2 Democracy and Information

Democracy is defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary* as follows: "the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves."[29] This definition describes the belief modern democracies are built on, but since this work focuses on the current state of American democracy, we also consider a definition described in a report by A. Bechmann and B. O'Loughlin,[30] who propose a description of the term "democracy" that is concrete and close to the current reality of what a democracy is and that also refers to the importance of debate and information:

> Democracy is a deliberative and participatory process of collective authorization and action. Parties and candidates offer manifestos which citizens can discuss in public and private before deciding for whom to vote. Through news media reporting and personal experience citizens can then follow and evaluate the elected party's performance, deliberate this, consider rivals' proposals, and then, at the next election, vote accordingly. Democracy is a looping circuit of

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[28] Claire Wardle, "Information Disorder: The techniques We Saw in 2016 Have Evolved", *First Draft*, October 2019. https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/information-disorder-the-techniques-we-saw-in-2016-have-evolved/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[29] "Definition of Confirmation Democracy", *Cambridge dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/democracy (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[30] Anja Bechmann, Ben O'Loughlin, "Democracy and Disinformation: A Turn in the Debate*", KVAB Thinkers' Report*, 2020.

> accountability through time (Warner, 2003). It requires public and private spaces for informal discussion. Various institutions or 'organs' of democracy like parties, unions, community social hubs and news media enable and sustain those spaces of participation (Bryce, 1888). Those spaces collectively are often conceived as 'the public sphere' (Habermas, 1962). The quality of information citizens receive in that public sphere becomes critical since this is the basis on which deliberation, judgment and action rest. (Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1921)[31]

Information has consistently played a key role in democratic societies because it allows citizens to hold their government accountable, to participate in the decision-making, as well as to debate. The underpinnings of democracy rest on informed citizen participation. The news media is one of the bodies that allows the debates cited in the definition above. It can be observed that throughout history, news has been used by people in power to influence the population. The authors of the "Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News" essay focus on new mass media, which have consistently been used as precious tools to persuade citizens. The study presents, for example, the important role of radio under Franklin D. Roosevelt to convince people to support the New Deal[32] or how George W. Bush used "canned news," content prepared in advance by the administration, which was then broadcast on local channels and presented as news when in fact these were fabricated stories to convince the population to support the invasion of Iraq. There is thus nothing surprising in seeing social media being manipulated by people in power. The difference between these media, however, is that in the 21st century, radio and television have had a unifying effect, whereas today's social networks tend to intensify polarisation.[33] What this thesis try to explore is how social media poses some specific threats to democracy because of certain characteristics proper to this new kind of media.

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[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Lance E. Mason *et alt*. "Media Literacy, Democracy and the Challenge of Fake News", *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, n°10, 2018, pp.1-10

[33] Richard Heinberg, "2020: The Year Consensus Reality Fractured", *Resilience*, December 2020. https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-12-18/2020-the-year-consensus-reality-fractured/ (Accessed 29 April 2021).

1.2.3 Mis- and Disinformation as Threat to Democracy

In order to make observations regarding our case study, we notably use a work by scholar Chris Tenove in which he describes three threats posed by online disinformation. The first threat he identifies is "disinformation as a threat to self-determination,"[34] within which self-determination refers to citizens' ability to rule themselves without any external domination. Disinformation can thus impact self-determination by making it impossible for citizens to make decisions without interference. As explained by Chris Tenove, this is a threat generally posed by foreign actors trying to interfere with ongoing elections. Since this thesis focuses on Donald Trump as a spreader of mis- and disinformation, we do not use this identified threat in our analysis. The second threat identified is "disinformation as a threat to accountable and representative government,"[35] which refers to how disinformation can impact electoral integrity. Elections are regularly organised to enable citizens to make decisions depending on the current context and to hold their government accountable for the decisions it has made. Disinformation can impact this process, for example, by targeting a candidate, which would prevent a fair competition from taking place, by presenting false claims about where or how to vote, or by spreading false claims about election issues. In the third threat, he discusses how much disinformation can circulate online and how this can impact the way citizens are informed. He describes this as "disinformation as a threat to democratic deliberation,"[36] which refers to the necessity of citizens being informed to allow legitimate public decision-making, and how disinformation can undermine the quality of the information. It can also "discourage citizens from engaging with high-quality sources of information."[37] We will use these last two threats in order to be able to discuss our case study in the context of the theory that "mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy."

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[34] Chris Tenove, "Protecting Democracy from Disinformation: Normative Threats and Policy Responses", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, n°25, 2020, pp. 517-537.
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] *Ibid.*

1.3 Framework

To address the issue of the impact of mis- and disinformation on democracy, we decided, as explained in the methodology section, to conduct a case study. We chose to focus on Donald Trump's account on the Twitter social network between election day and the Capitol storming. It seemed important to define a precise temporal framework, as well as to focus on a specific social network and a specific actor disseminating mis- and disinformation, in order to provide a precise, delimited analysis and to avoid an overly broad topic. The topic of the threat of mis- and disinformation had already been chosen before the 2020 election, and it was during the weeks after 3 November 2020, when Donald Trump started tweeting relentlessly about election fraud, that the idea of working on Donald Trump and Twitter emerged. After the Capitol attack, it seemed to us that a case study on this topic made sense. Because the Capitol is a symbol of American democracy, indeed for 230 years American deliberative democracy has occurred in this building. The people who protested there on 6 January 2021, were overwhelmingly motivated by the idea of fighting against the alleged voter fraud that had been denounced for weeks by Donald Trump and his close circle. This direct attack by some Donald Trump supporters after months of misleading tweets appeared as a relevant event to study in the context of our main topic.

This section demonstrates why the case study focuses on the social network Twitter, the spreader of mis- and disinformation Donald Trump, and the period between election day and the Capitol storming.

1.3.1 Social Network: Twitter

The choice to focus on Twitter for the case study is motivated by two main reasons. First, it is a platform that has been the subject of various research works. Social networks are still new tools, and although studies on the subject are becoming more and more numerous, it is still a fairly recent subject, as is the dissemination of false information online. The data available to scientists and researchers on social networks like Twitter is limited. For example, limited information is provided on topics such as algorithms. However, Twitter, unlike other platforms, provides some access to data through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). These are applications that allow

access to data from a certain platform.[38] For example, an API can be used to find all tweets on Twitter that mention a certain word combination. Therefore, even if data about Twitter is limited, it is still possible to access a certain amount of information, which explains why it is one of the most studied social networks. A considerable number of sources were thus accessible regarding the platform.

Second, since Barack Obama, social networks have been used as a tool by the American presidency. Indeed, social networks were an integral part of his presidential campaign, allowing him to raise funds, find volunteers, but also convince an electorate.[39] Then, as president, he inaugurated the use of networks such as Twitter, by tweeting the first message on the presidential account @POTUS.[40] The social network has therefore been an integral part of the White House's communication tools for years. Nevertheless, if Barack Obama used this network as an additional tool to the other means of communication established by his predecessors, Trump decided from the beginning of his mandate to ignore these codes. Trump has not used Twitter as an additional tool to other means of communication but has made it his main tool of communication. For years, American presidents had communicated through the White House press briefing by the press secretary.[41] Donald Trump broke the decades-long ritual without holding these press briefings for more than a year.[42] The presidential daily messages were simply posted on Twitter. This social network is therefore interesting because in addition to having become a complementary tool for presidential communication, under Trump, its use was taken to extremes as the main communication tool.

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[38] Camille Siegel, Arun Dorairajan, "What Is an API?", *API Friends*, October 2020. https://apifriends.com/api-management/what-is-an-api/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[39] Jennifer Aaker, Victoria Chang, "Obama and the Power of Social Media and Technology", *Stanford Business*, 2009. https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/case-studies/obama-power-social-media-technology (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[40] Ian Bogost, "Obama Was Too Good at Social Media", *The Atlantic*, January 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/did-america-need-a-social-media-president/512405/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[41] RSF reporters, "Death of the Daily Press Briefing: How the White House Is Closing the Door on the American People", *RSF Reporters Without Borders*, March 2020. https://rsf.org/en/news/death-daily-press-briefing-how-white-house-closing-door-american-people (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[42] Michael D. Shear, "How Trump Reshaped the Presidency in Over 11,000 Tweets", *New York Times,* November 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-presidency.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).

1.3.2 Mis- and Disinformation Spreader: Donald Trump

As president of the U.S., Donald Trump used Twitter in an unprecedented way. From the beginning of his mandate, he tweeted daily. His longest absence from the social network amounted to two days. He tweeted an average of 18 tweets per day.[43] The frequency of his tweets and retweets only increased throughout his presidency.[44] According to Statista, in 2020, he was the world leader with the most followers on Twitter, as can be observed in Figure 4.[45]

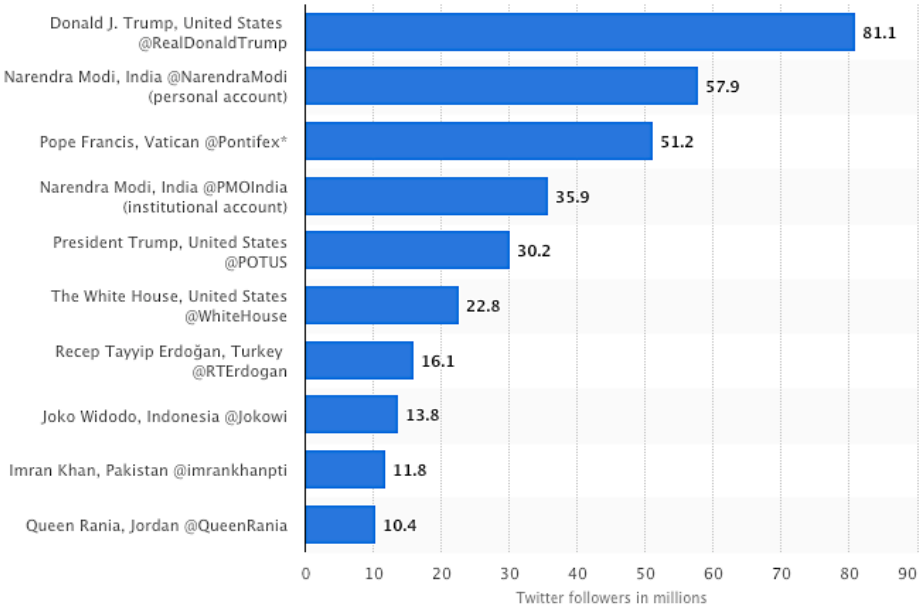


Figure 4

In addition to posting tweets daily, as well as having an impressive number of followers, Donald Trump also spread a lot of misleading information on his Twitter account. Indeed, among his most popular tweets are abundant misleading messages about distrusting the media. Out of his ten most popular tweets, four are false

[43] Maegan Vazquez "Donald Trump's Presidency by the Numbers", *CNN Politics*, December 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/18/politics/trump-presidency-by-the-numbers/index.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] H. Tankovska, "World Leaders With Most Twitter Followers 2020", *Statista*, January 2021. https://www.statista.com/statistics/281375/heads-of-state-with-the-most-twitter-followers/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).

statements about alleged election fraud.[46] Donald Trump, as the president of one of the world's largest democracies, not only shared mis- and disinformation tweets, but also tweeted about different conspiracy theories regarding topics such as COVID-19 or global warming. Former president Trump is himself at the centre of a conspiracy theory named QAnon, according to which "President Trump is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping pedophiles in government, business and the media."[47] Donald Trump never denounced the conspiracy theory, regularly providing very vague statements about it and even retweeting multiple times messages from QAnon affiliates. Conspiracy theories also played a large role in the Capitol assault, but as this work focuses on mis- and disinformation, we do not discuss the subject further. However, it is important to mention this, as it is also part of the content that Donald Trump shared on Twitter.

More than simply being a source of mis- and disinformation, Donald Trump was described as a "driver of consensus breakdown."[48] As explained by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, human beings build their perception of reality through feedback from people they judge trustworthy. The idea is that human beings understand a reality to be true when many people agree on it. He states in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity,* that "Knowledge resides in consensus, rather than in any transcendent or objective relationship between a knower and that which is to be known."[49] Of course, the presence of a consensus does not necessarily mean that something is true, but it allows one to construct a perception of reality. Describing Donald Trump as a "driver of consensus breakdown," Richard Heinberg discusses how the 45th president was able to make his supporters believe in an alternate reality with which he won the election. He explains that certain Americans are "so alienated from the consensus that

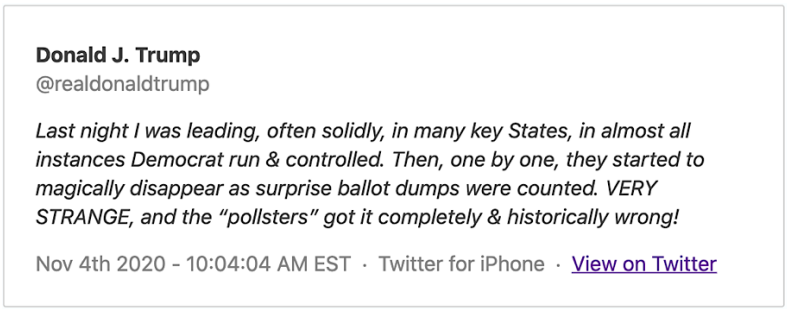
[46] Nate Rattner, "Trump's Election Lies Were Among His Most Popular Tweets", *CNBC*, January 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[47] Mike Wendling, "QAnon: What Is It and Where Did It Come From?", *BBC News*, January 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434 (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[48] Richard Heinberg, "2020: The Year Consensus Reality Fractured", *Resilience*, December 2020. https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-12-18/2020-the-year-consensus-reality-fractured/ (Accessed 29 April 2021).
[49] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991.

they prefer to believe obviously fabricated lies rather than to acknowledge demonstrable proof."[50] Trump contributed to causing a fracture in the consensus.

Because, as the person in power of a democracy such as the U.S., Donald Trump used Twitter in unusual ways, was followed by a considerable audience, and was a source of online mis- and disinformation causing a fracture in the consensus reality, it is interesting to focus on his account in the context of our work to understand the impact he had on the unfolding of the Capitol storming, and more generally, on the U.S. democracy.

1.3.3 Donald Trump's Tweets Between Election Day and the Capitol Storming

During the night of 4 November 2020, Donald Trump claimed victory by declaring from the White House, "Frankly we did win the election."[51] The following day, he posted 18 different tweets about the fact votes should not be cast once the polls were closed, or about the election being stolen, and about votes for Biden being "strangely" found in different states. He claimed the following, for example:



From then on, Donald Trump continued to tweet relentlessly day after day making allegations about voter fraud. For example, in the 20 days following the election night, Donald Trump published 550 tweets, and three quarters of them were accusations

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[50] Richard Heinberg, "2020: The Year Consensus Reality Fractured", *Resilience*, December 2020. https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-12-18/2020-the-year-consensus-reality-fractured/ (Accessed 29 April 2021).
[51] [AFP News Agency]. "We Did Win This Election: Trump Says Despite Several States Still to Be Called | AFP", *YouTube* (November 2020). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fvV6_PRT0U (Accessed 26 April 2021).

about the election results.[52] Donald Trump's tweets posted between November 2020 and January 2021 are mostly false accusations regarding the election. As Sam Woolley, director for propaganda research at the University of Texas, explains, "Since the November election, Trump has turned to Twitter as the core platform for spreading disinformation about the election."[53] Donald Trump's tweets about election fraud only ended once his Twitter account was permanently suspended after the Capitol storming event. On the day of the event, Trump was still tweeting accusations of fraud.

This period is therefore interesting since it represents a specific time during which Trump extensively tweeted false information. This moment only ended after an event shook the United States, putting pressure on social networks to take more drastic measures than those that had already been taken. Different experts have spoken of the Capitol storming as a tangible consequence of the lies that had been spread almost continuously by Donald Trump and his entourage.

1.4 From Mis- and Disinformation About Electoral Fraud to the Capitol Storming: Descriptive Narrative

One of the first times that Donald Trump communicated about the danger of mail-in ballots and possible fraud with this system was on 7 April 2020. He claimed that "mail ballots are a very dangerous thing for this country, because they're cheaters."[54] Two months later, on 4 June 2020, the Trump campaign team sent an email using militarised language, asking supporters to join the Trump Army.[55]

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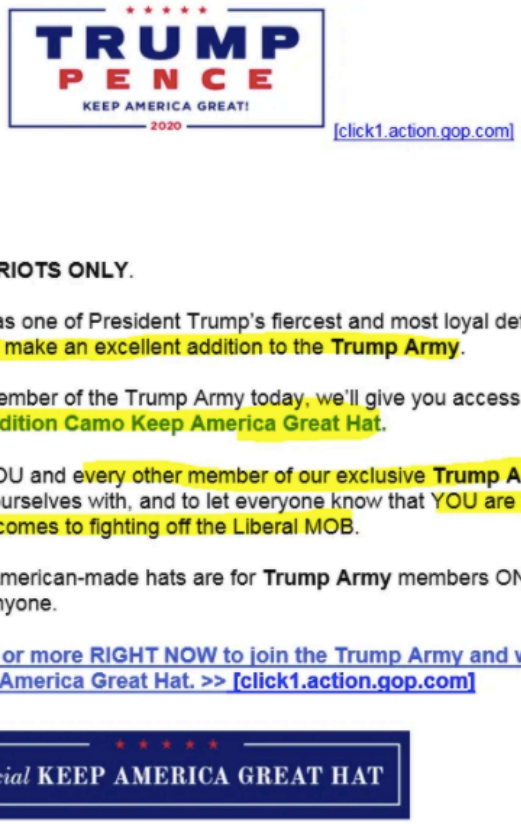
[52] Karen Yourish, Larry Buchmann, "Since Election Day, a Lot of Tweeting and Not Much Else for Trump", *New York Times*, November 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/24/us/politics/trump-twitter-tweets-election-results.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[53] Nate Rattner, "Trump's Election Lies Were Among His Most Popular Tweets", *CNBC*, January 2021. https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/13/trump-tweets-legacy-of-lies-misinformation-distrust.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[54] Jane C. Timm, "Trump Pushes False Claims About Mail-in Vote Fraud. Here Are the Facts", *NBC News*, April 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-pushes-false-claims-about-mail-vote-fraud-here-are-n1180566 (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[55] Dan Evon, "Is Trump Army Fundraising Email Real?", *Snopes*, June 2020. https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-army-fundraising-email/ (Accessed 26 April 2021).

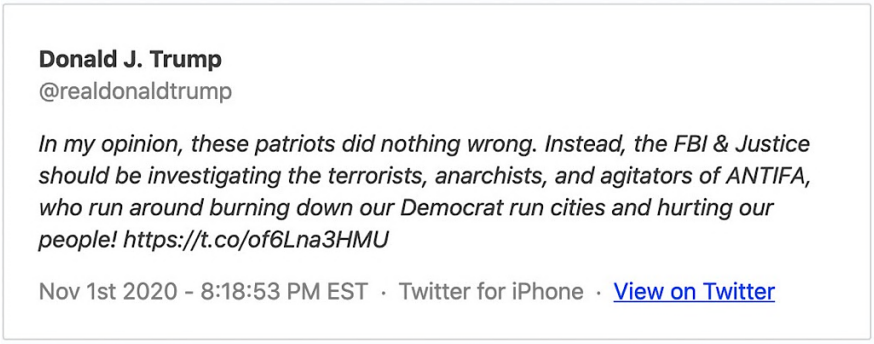


Addressing Trump supporters as "patriots" is a recurring theme in tweets from Trump and his entourage, an idea we explore in the fourth mechanism of our case study.

One month and half later, on 19 July 2020, Donald Trump suggested in an interview on Fox News he might not accept the results of the election and questioned the integrity of mail-in voting.[56] Later on, in September, the former president did not commit to a peaceful transfer of power during a White House press conference, declaring: "Get rid of the ballots and you'll have a very peaceful – there won't be a transfer, frankly. There will be a continuation."[57] On 29 October 2020, Donald Trump

[56] "Transcript: 'Fox News Sunday' Interview With President Trump", *Fox News*, July 2020. https://www.foxnews.com/politics/transcript-fox-news-sunday-interview-with-president-trump (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[57] Michael Crowley, "Trump Won't Commit to 'Peaceful' Post-Election Transfer of Power", *New York Times*, September 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/us/politics/trump-power-transfer-2020-election.html (Accessed 26 April 2021).

posted a praising tweet about some of his supporters who swarmed a Biden bus driving on Texas highway saying, “I LOVE TEXAS.”[58] He then tweeted,



He wrote this tweet in response to the FBI opening an investigation. He defended his supporters, calling them “patriots”. On 4 November 2020, Donald Trump falsely claimed victory while votes were still being counted in different states. In the following days, some of his supporters mobbed different vote-counting centres.[59] Four days later, Biden was declared the winner of the election, and dozens of lawsuits were launched by Trump’s team.[60] On 19 November 2020, attorney Rudy Giuliani gave a news conference, during which he supported Donald Trump’s claims about electoral fraud.[61] Many might remember this news conference because of the “die-hair incident”, as black hair dye appeared to be running down the attorney’s face.

A few weeks later, on 1 December 2020, the Georgian politician Gabriel Sterling asked the following of Donald Trump: "Stop inspiring people to commit potential acts of violence. Someone’s going to get hurt. Someone’s going to get shot. Someone’s going to get killed."[62] Eighteen days after this demand, Trump tweeted about 6 January 2021,

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[58] ABC News reporter, “Donald Trump Praises Supporters Who Surrounded Joe Biden Campaign Bus on Texas Highway”, *ABC News*, November 2020. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-02/trump-praises-supporters-who-surrounded-biden-bus-on-highway/12838766 (Accessed 27 April 2021).
[59] Steve Inskeep, “Timeline; What Trump Told Supporters for Months Before They Attacked”, *NPR*, February 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[60] *Ibid*.
[61] “Giuliani Spouts Baseless Claims at Press Conference”, *CNN politics*, November 2020. https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2020/11/19/giuliani-trump-campaign-legal-team-presser-post-election-sanchez-dnt-vpx.cnn (Accessed 6 May 2021).
[62] Stephen Fowler, “Someone’s Going to Get Killed: Ga. Official Blasts GOP Silence on Election Threats”, *NPR*, December 2020. https://www.npr.org/sections/biden-transition-updates/2020/12/01/940961602/someones-going-to-get-killed-ga-official-blasts-gop-silence-on-election-threats (Accessed 27 April 2021).

the day of the official counting of the electoral votes: "Big protests in D.C. on January 6. Be there. Will be wild!"[63] He tweeted different messages promoting a rally, notably on 27 December 2020 when he wrote, “See you in Washington, DC, on January 6th. Don’t miss it. Information to follow”[64] and on 1 January 2021 when he declared, “The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C. will take place at 11:00 a.m. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!”[65] From there on, Trump and his allies continued encouraging their supporters to arrive in Washington on 6 January. That day he tweeted, “The States want to redo their votes. They found out they voted on a FRAUD. Legislatures never approved. Let them do it. BE STRONG!”[66] During his speech, he declared, "You’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong."[67] At 2:24 p.m. on the same day, Donald Trump tweeted a message as the first rioters entered the Capitol, denouncing former Vice-President Pence for not respecting his demand to disrupt the count. At 4:17 p.m., Trump tweeted a video in which he kept claiming election fraud but asked his supporters to “go home.”[68] At 6:01 p.m., Trump posted a tweet justifying the attack, not blaming the rioters: "These are the things and events that happen, when what he falsely called an election victory is stolen. Go home with love and in peace, remember this day forever!"[69] Five people lost their lives during the Capitol assault, including a police officer. On 7 January 2021, Donald Trump’s Twitter account was suspended for 12 hours. One day later, it was permanently suspended after Trump tweeted, *“*The

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[63] Steve Inskeep, “Timeline; What Trump Told Supporters for Months Before They Attacked”, *NPR*, February 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[64] “Trump Appeals to Supporters Again: See You in Washington on January 6th, Don’t Miss It”, *6Park News In*, December 2020. https://6park.news/en/trump-appeals-to-supporters-again-see-you-in-washington-on-january-6th-dont-miss-it-stop-stealing-elections-epoch-times.html (Accessed 28 April 2021).
[65] Steve Inskeep, “Timeline; What Trump Told Supporters for Months Before They Attacked”, *NPR*, February 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[66] David Woodward, “AP FACT CHECK: Trump’s False Claims, Fuel on a Day of Chaos”, *AP*, January 2021. https://apnews.com/article/ap-fact-check-donald-trump-a98d72c0ccde16fa900e6053a4599cab (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[67] Brian Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech, a Key Part of Impeachment Trial”, *NPR*, February 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[68] *Twitter, Sky News*. https://twitter.com/skynews/status/1346932697470533633?lang=en (Accessed 26 April 2021).
[69] Steve Inskeep, “Timeline; What Trump Told Supporters for Months Before They Attacked”, *NPR*, February 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/08/965342252/timeline-what-trump-told-supporters-for-months-before-they-attacked (Accessed 26 April 2021).

75,000,000 great American Patriots who voted for me, AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, will have a GIANT VOICE long into the future. They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!" and "To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th."[70] A week after the suspension of most of his online accounts on social media, Donald Trump faced the second impeachment procedure of his mandate on 13 January 2021. The first impeachment procedure had occurred in December 2019 on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. The trial concluded with Donald Trump being acquitted. It should be noted that this first impeachment procedure is not related to the second one. Donald Trump was the first U.S. president to be impeached twice. Regarding the second procedure, 232 representatives voted to impeach Trump, among whom were 10 Republican representatives, making it the most bipartisan impeachment in U.S. history. One hundred ninety-seven representatives voted against impeachment. Donald Trump was charged with "incitement of insurrection."

[70] "Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump", *Twitter blog*, February 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html (Accessed 5 May 2021).

Chapter 2: Case Study

Our case study focuses on the four mechanisms identified as causal processes linking Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets to the event of the Capitol siege. The first mechanism is "online polarisation". It explores how polarisation takes place online and separates groups according to their opinion. The second is "news and information ecosystem". It investigates how the way Trump's supporters inform themselves lead them to believe in an alternate reality. The third is "spread of mis- and disinformation on Twitter". It analyses how mis- and disinformation circulate online despite measures to fight it. The last one is "Donald Trump's rhetoric". It studies Donald Trump's rhetoric on Twitter and how he was able to effectively address his electorate.

2.1. Online Polarisation

The first mechanism of the case study focuses on online polarisation and how the phenomenon takes place on Twitter, leading people mainly interacting with users sharing their opinion.

The contemporary American electorate shares widely different opinions on various significant issues, such as gun, politics, climate change, and immigration. A diversity of political views has invariably been a reality in the United States as in many other democracies, but as claimed by Matthew Levendusky, over the last 20 years, ideological thinking has been more tightly connected to partisanship than it was before.[71] The United States faces a great political polarisation as Democrats and Republicans are increasingly ideologically divided. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center Report,[72] from 1994 to 2004, Democrats have progressively moved to the left as Republicans have moved to the right. The study reveals the overlap between the two parties becoming smaller as the decades have passed. The same study also concludes that this polarisation has been partly caused by increasingly negative views

[71] Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservative Became Republicans*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.
[72] Michael Demock, "Political Polarization in the American Public, Washington", *Pew Resarch Center*, 2014.

from each opposing party regarding the other. Indeed, in 1994, 16% of Democrats declared themselves as having very unfavourable opinions about the opposite party, while 17% of Republicans had very unfavourable opinions about Democrats. In 2014, these percentages respectively reached 38% and 43% as can be observe in Figure 5.[73]

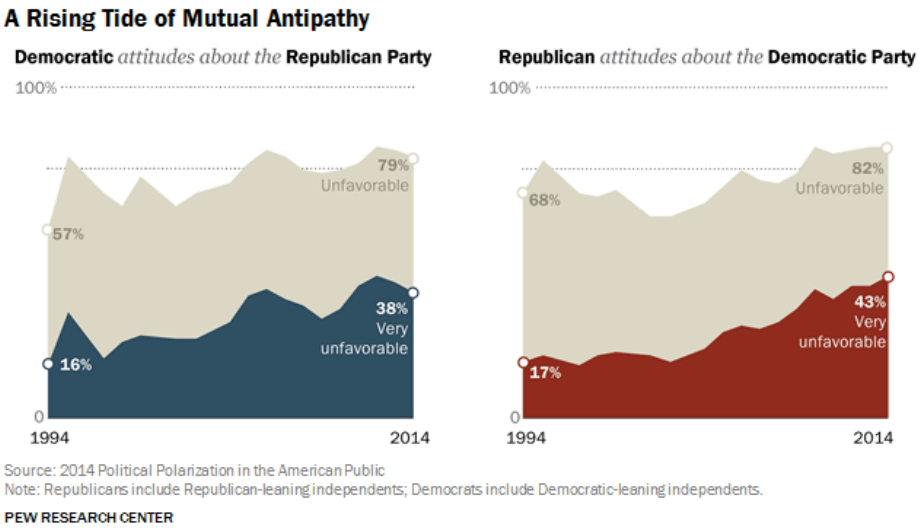

Figure 5

Polarisation is therefore not only regarding societal issues about which the American population may have different opinions but also about the feelings that two groups of different political orientation have towards each other. Some experts speak of affective polarisation, which refers to "the extent to which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own."[74] This affective polarisation is not without such consequences as the spread of mis- and disinformation. Indeed, as explained in a report on social media, political polarisation, and political disinformation, "Negative perceptions of certain groups may also enhance belief in false information about those groups."[75] Different causes are explored regarding this increasing affective

[73] "Political Polarization in the American Public", *Pew Research Center*, June 2014. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/ (Accessed 10 May 2021).
[74] Levi Boxell *et al.* "Cross-country Trends in Affective Polarization", *National Bureau of Economic Research*, January 2020.
[75] Joshua A. Tucker *et al.* "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature ", *SSRN Electronic journal*, March 2018. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3144139 (Accessed 21 April 2021).

polarisation happening in the U.S., such as "the deepening of racial divisions",[76] "the rise of partisan cable news",[77] and "the rise of the internet and social media as sources of political information".[78] Internet and social media as sources of political information are thus explored as a potential cause of so-called affective polarisation. They are also analysed as a cause for political polarisation in general, but whether internet and social media cause political polarisation is complicated to prove, as one could argue that a certain polarised situation already existed previously, and social media only worsened the problem. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that polarisation does take place online and has repercussions on the circulation of mis- and disinformation. To better understand how online polarisation takes place, it is important to consider the concepts of echo chamber, filter bubble and algorithm.

2.1.1 Self-Selection by Users: Echo Chambers

When addressing online polarisation, one must consider echo chambers, a theory that is directly linked to the confirmation bias psychological concept. As defined in the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term conformation bias corresponds to "the fact that people are more likely to accept or notice information if it appears to support what they already believe or expect".[79] The term echo chamber refers to the fact that an individual will more likely interact online with someone sharing similar opinions, which is a phenomenon closely related to the confirmation bias concept defined above. Echo chambers seem present on different social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. A 2021 Twitter experiment organised by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) demonstrates the likelihood of people self-selecting in partisan "echo chambers".[80] Indeed, according to the study, people tend to follow an account if it mentions a common partisan bond. As stated in the MIT article, "Twitter users are

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[76] Levi Boxell *et al.* "Cross-country Trends in Affective Polarization", *National Bureau of Economic Research*, January 2020.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] "Definition of Confirmation Bias", *Cambridge dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/confirmation-bias (Accessed 22 February 2021).
[80] Peter Dizikes, "How Shared Partisanship Leads to Social Media Connections", *MIT News*, February 2021. https://news.mit.edu/2021/partisanship-social-media-echo-chambers-0211 (Accessed 22 February 2021).

three times more likely to follow other Twitter accounts they are aligned with in political terms, showing how much partisan identification itself drives social groupings."[81] This behaviour is the same for Republicans and Democrats according to Professor David Rand, co-author of an article explaining the study's results. He declares, "There was no difference between Democrats and Republicans in this, in that Democrats were just as likely to have preferential tie formation as Republicans."[82] The results of the study regarding the likelihood of following people sharing the same political views are thus similar for both parties.

In 2019, a model that visualises echo chambers on Twitter[83] was created and used to illustrate the polarisation occurring on Twitter about controversial issues, such as the Obama Care, abortion, and gun control. (Figure 6)

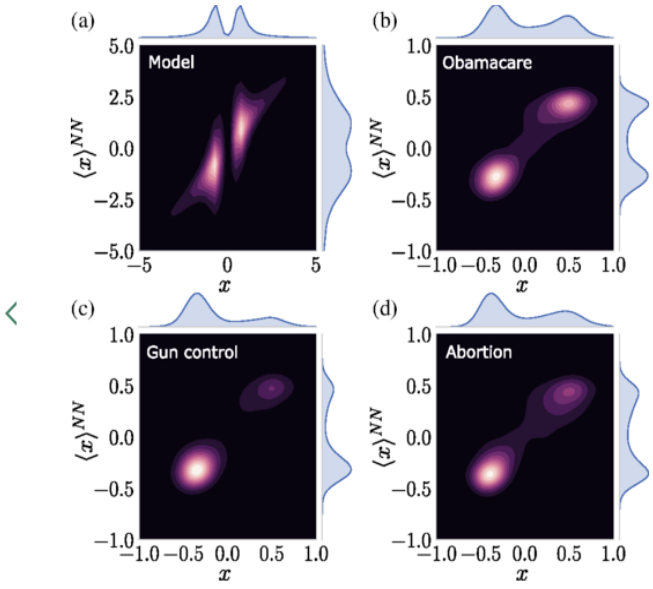

Figure 6

The results of the study indicate the existence of echo chambers on Twitter and how this polarises the discussion. This is relevantly explained in an article from *Inside Sciences*:

[81] *Ibid.*
[82] *Ibid.*
[83] Fabian Baumann *et al.* "Modeling Echo Chambers and Polarization Dynamics in Social Networks", *Physical Review Letters*, n°124, 31 January 2020.

> Their data shows the extent to which people choose to echo only the tweets of those who share similar beliefs with them. In other words, liberals (toward the left side of the graph) tend to interact mostly with liberal neighbors (toward the lower end of the graph), and conservatives with conservatives.[84]

The researchers of this model further clarify that if a controversial issue is discussed, echo chambers cause the polarisation of the discussion, and people only echo tweets of persons sharing their mindset. On the matter of gun control, for example, such polarisation is clear, as the model is formed by two distinct circles with no link between them. It is thus the most controversial topics that cause the greatest polarisation on Twitter.

The polarisation provoked by these echo chambers does not mean there is no communication between two persons sharing different perspectives on Twitter. As explained in an article written in the context of the 2011 Fifth International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media,[85] to understand the interaction between two opposite sides on Twitter, there is a distinction made between the mention network and the retweet network. A mention on Twitter is the use of the symbol @ followed by the Twitter username of someone to tag that person on a tweet, while a retweet is the fact of sharing an existing tweet. The mention network demonstrates a certain diversity of ideology contrary to the retweet network. As stated by M.D. Conover,

> We demonstrate that the retweet network exhibits a highly modular structure, segregating users into two homogenous communities corresponding to the political left and right. In contrast, we find that the mention network does not exhibit this kind of political segregation, resulting in users being exposed to individuals and information they would not have been likely to choose in advance.[86]

Nonetheless, as exposed in the conclusion of the article, this diversity of opinion exhibited in the mention network is not enough to overcome the phenomenon of online polarisation:

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[84] Yuen Yiu, "Visualizing Twitter Echo Chambers", *Inside Science*, March 2020. https://www.insidescience.org/news/visualizing-twitter-echo-chambers (Accessed 22 February 2021).
[85] M.D. Conover *et al.* "Political Polarization on Twitter", *Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research*, January 2011.
[86] *Ibid.*

> They very rarely share information from across the divide with other members of their community. It is possible that these users are unswayed by opposing arguments and facts, or that the social pressures that lead to group polarisation are too strong for most users to overcome.[87]

Thus, even though there is still some communication, it is limited, and it does not prevent polarisation from taking place.

Another important element to consider when discussing echo chambers is that they can be used by actors disseminating false information with the will to cause damage. It is true that both misinformation and disinformation can circulate in the chambers. However, since disinformation implies someone's willingness to cause harm, it can be assumed that the chambers are used to propagate a message among a certain group of people more likely to believe it. This is explained in the report on information disorder from the Council of Europe: “Agents who are creating disinformation understand that, when people consume and share these messages, they will be doing so increasingly from inside these echo chambers, with no one to challenge the ideas.”[88] Echo chambers are a strategic tool for agents to spread false information.

After exploring political polarisation, how it occurs on Twitter, and the role of echo chambers, different central elements emerge and are relevant when studying how Twitter contributed to the event of the storming of the Capitol: first, the idea that Democrats and Republicans are increasingly ideologically divided; second, the fact that polarisation happens on Twitter through echo chambers and the tendency for users to follow those who have a common partisan bond; third, the fact that polarisation occurs when controversial issues are raised; and finally, the fact that echo chambers are willingly used by agents creating disinformation. This leaves people with an almost total lack of exposure to thoughts different from their own on important matters. The Capitol storming was in large part motivated by controversial topics such as the election fraud. It is easy to imagine the discussion polarised on Twitter, leaving some people mainly interacting with those who share their point of view on the vote

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[87] *Ibid.*
[88] Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking”, *Council of Europe Report*, September 2017.

rigging. As a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory explained in an article in the *New York Times*, "The violence was the result of people operating in closed social media networks where they believed the claims of voter fraud and of the election being stolen from Mr. Trump."[89] She later added, "This is a demonstration of the very real-world impact of echo chambers." Because echo chambers do impact the "real world" in ways such as this, they should be closely analysed. They are a mechanism that occurs online but whose consequences are also visible outside social networks. The internet is no longer viewed as a tool that might bring people coming from all kinds of backgrounds together. As stated in a *Wired* article,

> The global village that was once the internet has been replaced by digital islands of isolation that are drifting further apart each day. From your Facebook feed to your Google Search, as your experience online grows increasingly personalized, the internet's islands grow farther apart.[90]

Discussing polarisation through the concept of the echo chamber allows us to better understand this idea of people drifting apart, but as can be seen in the quote above, the idea of online experience becoming more and more personalised is also important. Thus, we now consider the notions of filter bubble and algorithm, which also contribute to this online polarisation.

2.1.2 Personalised Experience: Filter Bubbles and Algorithm

To gain an even greater understanding of American political polarisation and how it occurs online, it is crucial to mention the notion of the algorithm. Although people choose what accounts they follow on Twitter and who they interact with on the platform (which as we have stated above, tend to be accounts sharing a similar ideology to theirs), it is important to consider the role of filter bubbles and algorithms, as well as the notion of personalised experience.

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[89] Kate Conger *et al.* "Twitter and Facebook Lock Trump's Accounts After Violence on Capitol Hill", *New York Times*, January 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/06/technology/capitol-twitter-facebook-trump.html (Accessed 22 February 2021).
[90] Mostafa M. El-Bermawy, "Your Filter Bubble Is Destroying Democracy", *Wired*, November 2016. https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/ (Accessed 10 April 2021).

Echo chambers, as described above, develop depending on the self-selection of certain platforms, websites, or accounts by online users. However, when discussing online polarisation, there is another important concept: the filter bubble. The concept refers to "a situation in which an internet user encounters only information and opinions that conform to and reinforce their own beliefs, caused by algorithms that personalize an individual's online experience."[91] As explained by Dr Richard Fletcher from Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, filter bubbles – unlike echo chambers – do not develop depending on self-selection but depending on an algorithm which selects for the users the information that is presented to them.[92] This means the platform creates a personalised experience for each user. The algorithm chooses which information certain users will encounter based on their online behaviour, meaning what they like, share, and search. These filter bubbles develop in many social media, and the individuals who manage these platforms seem aware of this fact. For example, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey publicly claimed, "I think Twitter does contribute to filter bubbles, and I think that's wrong of us, we need to fix it."[93] As different experts argue, if the extent to which filter bubbles contribute to online polarisation is still unclear, it is undeniable that they represent a problem that requires repair.

More closely considering Twitter's algorithm, it is continuously evolving, as the platform aims to improve it to boost user engagement. At the beginning, tweets were presented on the feed in reverse-chronological order, but since 2017, it is possible for users to choose between two options to organise their feed. The first one is "Later Tweets", which allows people to read the tweets posted by the persons they follow. The second is "Top Tweets", which, as claimed by Twitter, shows the tweets that "you are likely to care about most, and we choose them based on accounts you interact with most, tweets you engage with, and much more."[94] According to Twitter, "Top

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[91] "Definition of Filter Bubble", *Oxford Language*, https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/ (Accessed 17 May 2021).
[92] Dr Richard Fletcher, "The Truth Behind Filter Bubbles: Bursting Some Myths", *The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/truth-behind-filter-bubbles-bursting-some-myths (Accessed 7 April 2021).
[93] Christina Farr, "Jack Dorsey: 'Twitter Does Contribute to Filter Bubbles' And 'We Need to Fix It'", *CNBC*, October 2018. https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/15/twitter-ceo-jack-dorsey-twitter-does-contribute-to-filter-bubbles.html (Accessed 5 May 2021).
[94] "About Your Twitter Timeline", *Twitter*, https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/twitter-timeline (Accessed 22 February 2021).

Tweets" are shared depending on different factors such as recency, which depends on when the message was first tweeted; relevance, which refers to the fact that some keywords of a certain tweet correspond to the tweets a user usually reacts to; and engagement, which depends on how many times the tweet was shared and if it received much reaction.

In fact, it is quite difficult to discuss Twitter's algorithm, as little information is provided by the platform on the matter. For instance, in Twitter's above definition of "Top Tweets", one does not know what "much more" truly means, as it is an abstract notion. The same goes for the parameters influencing the ranking of those top tweets – as for example with the parameter "recency" – because we do not know if "recent" refers to some minutes, some hours, or some days ago. Mark MacCarthy, a professor at Georgetown University in the graduate school's communication, explains in an article how necessary it is for platforms to be more transparent about their algorithms for professionals to conduct research on the risks they present. He states in this article,

> It is widely thought that these algorithms make it too easy for like-minded people – even racists and terrorists – to find each other on these platforms. Outsiders suspect that the algorithms are tuned to maximise user engagement – regardless of content – in the service of the advertising business model the platforms have chosen. [95]

To find solutions to the problems created by the platforms, it is therefore necessary for researchers to have access to information that is unfortunately often limited. Algorithm Watch is a non-profit research organisation that advocates for more transparency regarding algorithms. In an article written in the context of their Governing Platforms Project,[96] a work that aims to offer recommendations to the EU to fight the negative effects of social media, they insist that information on platforms' algorithms is necessary to better understand the scale of the risks posed by online polarisation and disinformation. The non-profit research organisation qualifies algorithms as opaque

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[95] Mark MacCarthy, "How Online Platform Transparency Can Improve Content Moderation and Algorithmic Performance", *Brookings*, February 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/02/17/how-online-platform-transparency-can-improve-content-moderation-and-algorithmic-performance/ (Accessed 22 February 2021).

[96] "Putting Meaningful Transparency at the Heart of the Digital Services Act: Why Data Access for Research Matters & How We Can Make It Happen", *Algorithm Watch*, October 2019. https://algorithmwatch.org/en/governing-platforms-final-recommendations/ (Accessed 5 May 2021).

"black-boxes", which in computing science refers to "a system for which we can only observe the inputs and outputs, but not the internal workings."[97] As explained in one Algorithm Watch article, private companies have a considerable impact on the digital public sphere, but without access to their data, it is difficult for watchdogs and researchers to generate evidence of the collective influence of the different platforms.[98] As stated in the report, "Large parts of our media and communications infrastructure are governed by algorithmic systems, and we need better tools to understand how these systems are impacting our democracies." These tools can only be elaborated if more information is made accessible.

While access to information about algorithms (including that of Twitter) is quite restricted, some studies do reveal the impact of algorithms on online polarisation. The findings of the study "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Comparative Analysis"[99] suggests that social media using algorithms may amplify the development of echo chambers. People are self-selecting echo chambers (as previously presented), and algorithms contribute to the development of these chambers that prevent users from reading about position different from their own on a certain controversial matter. According to Eli Pariser, "the danger is that increasingly you end up not seeing what people who think differently see and in fact not even knowing that it exists."[100] This means that even if someone wants to see posts from people sharing a different position, it would be complicated because of the algorithm. This is directly linked with the concept of the filter bubble presented above, as they form depending on an algorithm that selects which type of information will appears on a user's feed.

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[97] Dallas Card, "The 'Black Box' Metaphor in Machine Learning", *Towards Data Science*, July 2017. https://towardsdatascience.com/the-black-box-metaphor-in-machine-learning-4e57a3a1d2b0 (Accessed 5 May 2021).
[98] "Putting Meaningful Transparency at the Heart of the Digital Services Act: Why Data Access for Research Matters & How We Can Make It Happen", *Algorithm Watch*, October 2019. https://algorithmwatch.org/en/governing-platforms-final-recommendations/ (Accessed 5 May 2021).
[99] Matteo Cinelli *et al.* "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Comparative Analysis", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, January 2021.
[100] "The Reason Your Feed Became an Echo Chamber — And What to Do About It", *NPR*, July 2016. https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/07/24/486941582/the-reason-your-feed-became-an-echo-chamber-and-what-to-do-about-it?t=1614530622023 (Accessed 22 February 2021).

In addition to impacting online polarisation, Twitter's algorithm seems to promote more emotive tweets. As illustrated in Figure 7, a graphic created through an experiment[101] enacted by *The Economist* compares two types of newsfeed on Twitter: a chronological newsfeed and an algorithmic feed.

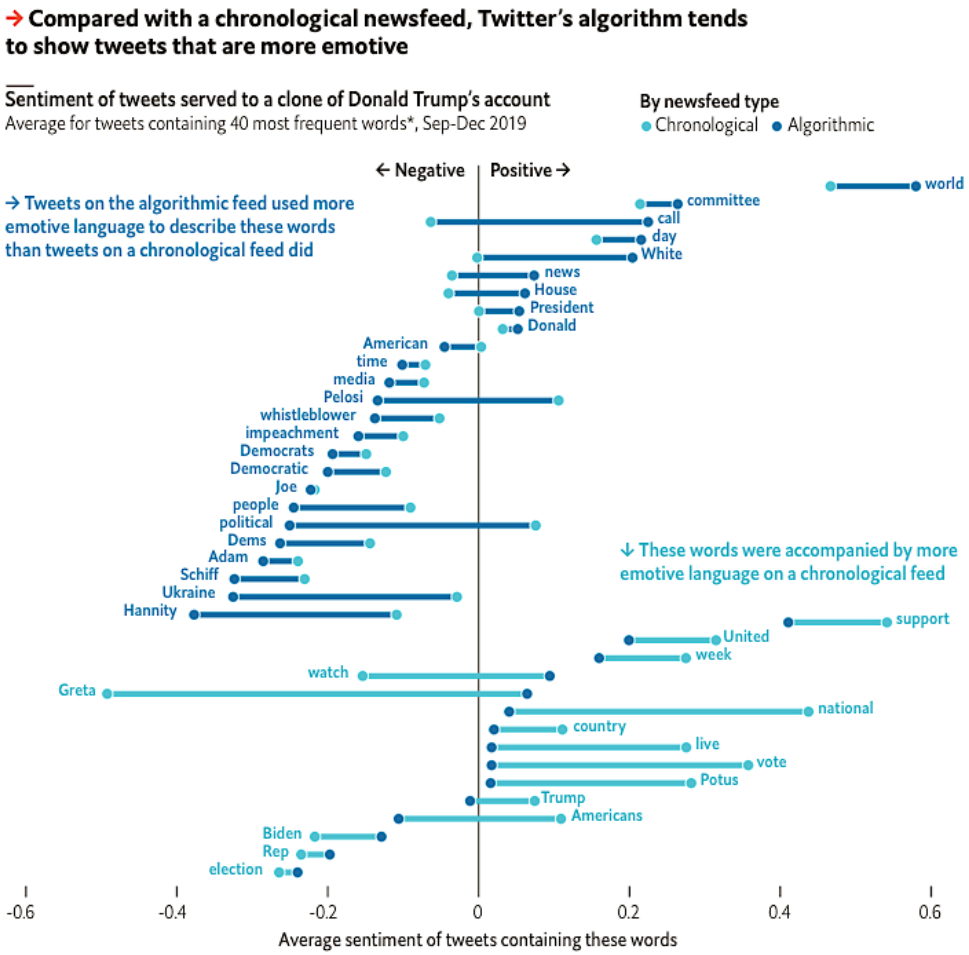

Figure 7

As can be observed, the algorithmic feed tends to present more emotive tweets than the chronological feed. As explained in an article in *The Economist*,[102] the experiment came to an end due to a change on the Twitter platform that broke the bot put in place for the research, and the author concluded the article by declaring:

[101] "Twitter's Algorithm Does Not seem to Silence Conservatives", *The Economist*, August 2020. https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/08/01/twitters-algorithm-does-not-seem-to-silence-conservatives (Accessed 01 March 2021).
[102] *Ibid.*

> However, if an algorithmic penchant for sensationalism has remained, then Twitter may be amplifying and profiting from misleading tweets, rather than removing them. Its business is serving ads to 330m users, even if that means grabbing their attention by showing them exactly what they want to believe.[103]

In a 2019 *CNN* article, journalist Olivier Darcy discusses the impact of Twitter's algorithm and how it sometimes tends to promote extreme political rhetoric, disinformation, and conspiracy theories.[104] This might partially be explained by the fact that the algorithms customise content for each user by combining two forms of personalisation of content. As explained in a report from Algorithm Watch, the first form of personalisation is "explicit or user driven personalisation",[105] which is based on data related to personal interests. Thus, in the specific case of Twitter, this refers to the accounts a certain user follows. This type of personalisation does not actually require an algorithm, but platforms almost always use one because it allows a more precise personalisation. The second form of personalisation is "implicit or algorithmic personalisation". With this, it is necessary to have an algorithm, and it is based on behavioural data (such as location, links clicked on, and comments).[106] The consequence of these forms of personalisation of content is that they impact the type of information that reaches users and, above all, political information. In the context of our study case, this "political information" could be identified as the claims about electoral fraud. As revealed in the next section, Twitter tried to instigate measures to fight the spread of mis- and disinformation about electoral fraud. One of these was to remove tweets about electoral fraud from the recommendations of its algorithms. Nonetheless, a report by the EIP about the mis- and disinformation during the 2020 election states that due to the "opaque nature of platforms' ranking algorithms, we were not able to directly detect actions like 'downranking'".[107] Evaluating how Twitter was able to disable its algorithms that use personalisation of content is complicated.

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[103] *Ibid.*
[104] Olivier Darcy, "How Twitter's Algorithm Is Amplifying Extreme Political Rhetoric", *CNN Business*, March 2019. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/22/tech/twitter-algorithm-political-rhetoric/index.html (Accessed 1 March 2021).
[105] "Are Algorithms a Threat to Democracy? The Rise of Intermediaries: A Challenge for Public Discourse", *Algorithm Watch*, October 2019. https://algorithmwatch.org/en/governing-platforms-final-recommendations/ (Accessed 6 April 2021).
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, "The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election", *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).

Some experts believe that Twitter's algorithm impacted the unfolding of the Capitol storming. Some have explained that it did indeed promote a certain type of content and that this is directly linked with the violence that happened during the Capitol attack. For example, Tarleton Gillepsie, who is an associate professor in the department of communication at Cornell University, asserts the following: "[Mr] Trump and others were able to hijack the circulation of reliable facts and legitimate opinion, and to craft an alternative reality that was easily available online, turbocharged by algorithms that reward virality."[108] In the same line of thought, Jason Aten, a columnist specialising in technology, discusses Twitter's responsibility regarding the Capitol storming and affirms, "This is what happens when people are constantly fed inflammatory content that reinforces their extreme beliefs through an algorithm designed to do exactly that."[109] Even if there is a lack of certain information to confirm this, it seems quite plausible that Twitter's algorithm increased the circulation of tweets about electoral fraud.

Even though limited information is accessible regarding Twitter's algortihm, it appears to play a role in online polarisation. The algorithm tends to present the content that it considers each user will engage with. Moreover, there is some evidence that the algorithm sometimes promotes certain types of content considered more emotive or even misinformative. These elements allow one to greater understand what kind of impact Twitter's algorithm might have had regarding the storming of the Capitol.

This section allowed to understand how the political polarisation that has been taking place for decades in the U.S. also happens online. By studying the concepts of echo chamber, filter bubble and algorithm, we showed how users tend to be isolated online and interact with people sharing their opinion.

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[108] James Purtill, "Storming of US Capitol and Donald Trump's Twitter Ban Will Be 'Tipping Point' for Social Media Regulation, Experts Say", *ABC News*, January 2021. https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2021-01-13/capitol-storming-trump-ban-tipping-point-social-media-regulation/13052092 (Accessed 1 March 2021).
[109] Jason Aten, "Twitter and Facebook Should Have Seen This Coming", *Inc.*, January 2021. https://www.inc.com/jason-aten/twitter-facebook-should-have-seen-this-coming.html (Accessed 1 March 2021).

2.2 The Spread of Mis- and Disinformation on Twitter

The second mechanism of the case study focuses on how mis- and disinformation circulates on Twitter and discusses the different measures taken by the platform to fight this phenomenon.

2.2.1 False News Travelling Faster Than the Truth

Mis- and disinformation only represent a small proportion of the content shared on social media. Nevertheless, this kind of information travels fast, and even faster than the truth, one study says.[110]

A study led by three researchers at MIT demonstrated that false news appears to be more novel than true news.[111] This idea of novelty was explored by the study as the reason why false news travels more significantly than real news. The study used information theory and Bayesian decision theory to explain this phenomenon. These theories refer to the fact that "novelty attracts human attention, contributes to productive decision-making, and encourages information sharing because novelty updates our understanding of the world."[112] By being surprising, novel information not only attracts attention but is also valuable because it provides considerable support in the decision-making. Novel information is also a content that people likely share because it makes them appear as detaining an exclusive piece of news. The conclusion drawn from the MIT study is thus that falsehood propagates faster, further, deeper, and more broadly than true stories and that an explanation for this could be the novelty behind false news.[113] As stated in the article explaining the results of the research, "Falsehood also reached far more people than the truth. Whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people, the top 1% of false-news cascades routinely diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people."[114] The research also determined that

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[110] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online", *Science*, n°353, March 2018.
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] Laurent Itti, Pierre Baldi, "Bayesian Surprise Attracts Human Attention", *Vision Research*, n°49, 2009, pp. 1295-1306.
[113] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, "The spread of True and False News Online", *Science*, n°353, March 2018.
[114] *Ibid*.

false political news tended to become more viral and reach more users than any other types of false stories.[115]

In addition to the novelty, another interesting element to consider to better understand why false information travels so far on the internet is the fact that mis- and disinformation affect our emotions. Indeed, a message containing mis- or disinformation often causes the reader to feel emotions such as rage, anger, or indignation. This triggers an emotional reaction that causes the user to act. Typically, this action is sharing the post or commenting on it, which contributes to the dissemination of mis- or disinformation.[116] This is a phenomenon that can be observed regarding tweets about electoral fraud. In discussion of the last mechanism about Trump's rhetoric on Twitter, we further analyse how his tweets containing mis- and disinformation were written to provoke emotions such as anger among his audience.

2.2.2 Twitter as a Vector of Mis- and Disinformation

Now, to focus more closely on the platform at the centre of this thesis, it is interesting to consider an article studying the case of Twitter as a vector of disinformation.[117] In this piece, Professor R. Chamberlain explores Twitter as a social network which develops on the basis of follower/followed relationships, to see how it impacts the propagation of disinformation. Information spreads on the platform thanks to retweets from users. According to R. Chamberlain, this system of networks is problematic because if a certain user shares a piece of information on Twitter and one of their followers contests the content of this tweet by declaring it to be false, the followers of the first user do not see the refutation in their feed. Disinformation spreads quite effectively on Twitter because even if a person decides to react to it, the followers of the user sharing the original tweet are not exposed to the reaction of the other user. It should be noted that in his work, R. Chamberlain focuses on "disinformation". As we presented earlier, the concepts of "disinformation" and "misinformation" are different,

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[115] *Ibid*.
[116] Kathryn Kranhold, "Social Media in 2020: A Year of Misinformation and Disinformation", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 2020. https://www.wsj.com/articles/social-media-in-2020-a-year-of-misinformation-and-disinformation-11607712530 (Accessed 19 April 2021).
[117] P.R Chamberlain, "Twitter as a Vector for Disinformation", *Journal of Information Warfare*, n°9, 2010, pp.11-17.

as the latter refers to sharing false information without an aim to cause harm, whereas the former is clearly motivated by the intention to harm. Nonetheless, his work appears to be relevant for studying both mis- and disinformation since he focuses on Twitter as a vector and studies the platform through its different networks. Thus, even if R. Chamberlain focuses on disinformation in the context of his work, with the network system discussed being proper to Twitter, this analysis could therefore also apply to misinformation content. Even if the author of the tweet had no intention of causing harm, this does not change the fact that the rest of their online community does not see a possible rebuttal of their followers. To better understand this phenomenon, R. Chamberlain proposes an illustration[118] that can be seen in Figure 8 which represents the spread of disinformation through a Twitter network. The black bubbles represent people who have disbelieved or ignored the content of the tweet.

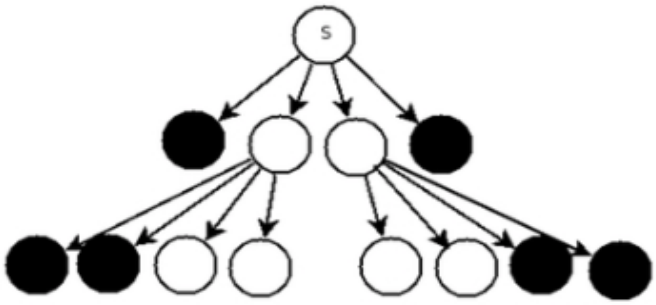

Figure 8

Figure 8 assumes a 50% rate of disbelief and a 100% rate of retweeting among believers.

What can be observed in this representation is that even if some people did not believe the information originally shared, the information kept spreading. With more and more studies denouncing the spread of mis- and disinformation, online platforms have been urged by experts to take actions to limit this phenomenon.

2.2.3 Measures to Fight Mis- and Disinformation on Social Media

In the last few years, social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter have begun work to fight mis- and disinformation after being pressured by many lawmakers, researchers, and officials. In 2018, for instance, Facebook, Google, and Twitter

[118] *Ibid.*

committed to the "Code of Practice on Disinformation of the EU",[119] agreeing to provide reports every month on their actions implemented to reduce mis- and disinformation within the context of the European election. Nonetheless, in 2019, the EU concluded the platforms needed to do more,[120] considering that although actions such as Twitter's ban of political ads from its platform represented some progress, this was not sufficient. Platforms are often criticised for taking insufficient measures, as posts and tweets containing false stories and misleading information continue to flourish on the web. As to why Twitter allows users with millions of followers who tweet messages with mis- or disinformation to remain on the platform, different arguments are proposed. Several explain that the platform does not want to censure tweets that produce engagement.[121] Some claim it is about freedom of speech,[122] while others argue that it is in the public interest.[123] The last argument was presented by Twitter to justify why they were not deleting tweets from some government officials, such as former President Trump, who was followed by more than 88 million users. As the company stated, "Locking or removing tweets by an elected world leader would hide important information people should be able to see and debate."[124] It is an actual policy of the platform called "public interest exceptions", which consists of keeping certain tweets that would normally be deleted if they were not coming from a government official.[125]

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[119] European Commission, "Code of Practice on Disinformation". https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/code-practice-disinformation (Accessed 8 March 201).
[120] Elizabeth Schulze, "Facebook, Google and Twitter Need to Do More to Tackle Fake News, EU Says", *CNBC*, June 2019. https://www.cnbc.com/2019/06/14/facebook-google-twitter-need-to-do-more-to-tackle-fake-news-eu-says.html (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[121] Kari Paul, "'Four Years of Propaganda': Trump Social Media Bans Come Too Late, Experts Say", *The Guardian*, January 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/07/donald-trump-facebook-social-media-capitol-attack (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[122] Peter Ives, "Why 'Free Speech' Needs a New Definition in the Age of the Internet and Trump Tweets", *The Conversation*, January 2021. https://theconversation.com/why-free-speech-needs-a-new-definition-in-the-age-of-the-internet-and-trump-tweets-152919 (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[123] Daniel Citron, "It's Time to Kick Trump Off Twitter", *The Slate*, January 2020. https://slate.com/technology/2021/01/twitter-kick-off-donald-trump.html (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[124]Alison Durkee, "Jack Dorsey Keeps Finding New Reasons to Defend Hate Speech on Twitter", *Vanity Fair*, April 2019. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/04/jack-dorsey-ilhan-omar-defend-hate-speech-twitter (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[125] "About Public-Interest Exceptions on Twitter", *Help center Twitter*. https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/public-interest (Accessed 8 March 2021).

2.2.3.1 Labelling Tweets

After growing criticism regarding Twitter's behaviour towards Trump's tweets, the company decided for the first time in May to label two of the former president's tweets, which were baseless accusations of voting fraud. The label indicated "get the facts about mail-in ballots" with a link to a page created by Twitter containing different sources of news articles on the matter. This decision to label the tweets arose from new policies that were implemented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated in Twitter's policies,

> In March, we broadened our policy guidance to address content that goes directly against guidance on COVID-19 from authoritative sources of global and local public health information. Moving forward, we may use these labels and warning messages to provide additional explanations or clarifications in situations where the risks of harm associated with a tweet are less severe but where people may still be confused or misled by the content.[126]

According to Twitter, these labels allow users to "make informed decisions" about what they read on the platform. Next to labels, warnings can also be applied to tweets. The platform established a classification of tweets[127] considering the propensity for harm and the type of information (misleading information, disputed claim, or unverified claims) to justify in which case it would use a label, which does not hide the tweet but proposes a link to a page containing information or a warning which hides the tweet from a user until they click on it. As can be observed in Figure 9, only misleading information with severe propensity for harm is subject to removal.

[126] Yoel Roth, Nick Pickles, "Updating our Approach to Misleading Information", *Twitter Blog*, May 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2020/updating-our-approach-to-misleading-information.html (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[127] *Ibid.*

Misleading Information	Label	Removal
Disputed Claim	Label	Warning
Unverified Claim	No action	No action*
	Moderate	Severe
Propensity for Harm		

Figure 9

Another important factor to note is that tweets with labels are still retweetable. According to Twitter, they are de-amplified through the recommendation systems, but nothing keeps a user from retweeting the message even if it is labelled as misleading information. Furthermore, as presented in the previous section discussing algorithms, it is difficult for experts to clearly understand how efficient the platform has been to de-amplify content and disable algorithms. Concerning tweets with warnings, it is not possible to like them, retweet them, or reply to them; only quoting them is possible, which means users can only share the tweets if they add a comment to it. This update of Twitter's approach to misleading information came after years of criticism about the way the platform handled its users' tweets.

Regarding the labels, different studies have proven them useful, such as research led by the *Association for Psychological Sciences*,[128] which reveals that warnings were effective if they were mentioned before the mis- or disinformation was encoded by a certain person. However, a 2010 study[129] demonstrated the labels were causing a "backfire effect", meaning that instead of making people question the falsehood of a piece of information, warnings could make people even more convinced of the truth of

[128] Stephan Lewandowsky *et al.* "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing", *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, n°13, September 2012, pp.106-131.
[129] Nyhan B, Reifler J, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions", *Political Behavior*, n°32, June 2010, pp.303-330.

a misleading statement. Nevertheless, other studies[130] [131] have found the "backfire effect" to be non-existent. Moreover, research from MIT has revealed that establishing warnings can lead to people more easily believing other misleading information. Indeed, the lack of a warning on a certain piece of mis- or disinformation could cause people to think it is true, as no warnings indicate the contrary.[132] Another important element to consider is the time it takes for a platform to label content. To see how this applies to our study case, it is interesting to observe information from the already mentioned report of the EIP about the mis- and disinformation during the 2020 election which states that:

> For example, Twitter permitted a number of Trump's misinformation-riddled tweets to go unlabeled for several hours after they appeared on his timeline. Between the time of posting and the label's application, Trump's tweets were retweeted quote tweeted, and shared tens of thousands of times.[133]

This demonstrates that by not consistently being able to rapidly detect tweets that require being labelled as mis- and disinformation, Twitter leaves the possibility for this content to spread.

Hence, scholarship does not provide a clear conclusion regarding the effectiveness of labels. Even without a consensus on the matter, most experts agree that labels are not sufficient to fight the spread of mis- and disinformation, especially in the context of the 2020 election, because labelled tweets could still be retweeted and travel through the platform. Claire Wardle is the director of *First Draft News*, a project that aims to fight the spread of mis- and disinformation and she claims the following: "If we are to consider the reasoning behind this, it's not a belief that this will change anyone's

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[130] Wood T, Porter E, "The Elusive Backfire Effect: Mass Attitudes' Steadfast Factual Adherence", *Political Behaviour*, n°41, December 2017, pp.35–163.
[131] Clayton *et al*. "Real Solutions for Fake news? Measuring the Effectiveness of General Warnings and Fact-Check Tags in Reducing Belief in False Stories on Social Media", *Political Behaviour*, n°42, 2020, pp.1073-1095.
[132] Peter Dizikes, "The Catch to Putting Warning Labels on Fake News", *MIT News*, March 2020. https://news.mit.edu/2020/warning-labels-fake-news-trustworthy-0303?fbclid=IwAR07bRU9Q01PLu6F2MMrIamHcClVWxCFkfs74A3uDrLLgRkQplEBWXiUCfc (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[133] *Ibid*.

minds, it's to provide necessary context to a tweet that should be taken down."[134] This opinion is shared by Dipayan Ghosh, who is the co-director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Digital Platforms & Democracy Project. He declares, "These kinds of labels have a very limited, marginal impact on influencing the opinion of the people who consume that content."[135] Therefore, even if labels add a certain context to a misleading tweet, this does not appear to be sufficient to solve the problem of mis- or disinformation spreading on the platform.

2.2.3.2 Deplatforming

In the weeks following the announcement of the election results, during which Donald Trump continued to circulate false information about electoral fraud, and even more so after the storming of the Capitol, another solution to fight mis- and disinformation was evoked by several experts and finally applied by Twitter in mid-January after the attack on Capitol Hill: deplatforming. Experts such as Professor in Law, Danielle Citron, who specialises in free expression and civil rights law at the University of Virginia, expressed her concern about Trump's Twitter account and how it should be suspended: "The president should not be permitted to continue tweeting. His presence on the site is no longer tenable. I would have suspended his account long ago, given how harmful he has been to public health and our democracy."[136] In November, a civil-rights organisation and a watchdog group wrote a letter to warn about the danger of Trump's election fraud tweets, stating that those tweets could have consequences such as "sowing uncertainty about the voting and election process and potentially inciting violence against civil servants or others."[137] This reveals that some specialists believed it would have been necessary to take such measures even before the events of the Capitol storming happened.

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[134] Julia Carrie Wong, "Twitter Labels Trump's False Claims With Warning for First Time", *The Guardian*, May 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/26/trump-twitter-fact-check-warning-label (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[135] Catherine Sanz, Catherine Thorbecke, "What Social Media Giants Are Doing to Counter Misinformation This Election", *ABC News*, October 2020. https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/social-media-giants-counter-misinformation-election/story?id=73563997 (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[136] Daniel Citron, "It's Time to Kick Trump Off Twitter", *The Slate*, January 2020. https://slate.com/technology/2021/01/twitter-kick-off-donald-trump.html (Accessed 8 March 2021).
[137] Katie Canales, "A Civil-Rights Organization and a Watchdog Group Are Demanding That Jack Dorsey Suspend Trump's Twitter Account Over Violations of Its Civic-Integrity Policy", *Business Insider France*, November 2020. https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/suspend-trump-twitter-account-letter-demands-jack-dorsey-2020-11 (Accessed 10 March 2021).

Deplatforming is a new concept that does not have a clear definition yet. In an article, the *Merriam Webster* defines it as "the attempt to boycott a group or individual through removing the platforms (such as speaking venues or websites) used to share information or ideas".[138] The article further indicates, "Please note that this word is, as mentioned previously, still quite new, and therefore may be, as lexicographers have been known to say, of fluid meaning and application."[139] On the website *Lexico*, it is defined as follows: "The action or practice of preventing someone holding views regarded as unacceptable or offensive from contributing to a forum or debate, especially by blocking them on a particular website."[140] In this work, we discuss deplatforming in reference to Twitter suspending a user account because of harmful tweets being posted. In the last few years, Twitter has suspended different accounts because of violations of its policies. In 2018, Alex Jones, who used to share conspiracy theories on social media, was banned definitively from Twitter for "abusive behaviour". The suspension resulted in Jones losing a great part of his influence. Indeed, according to an analysis by the *New York Times*,[141] he lost half of his audience in less than three weeks. Deplatforming appears to be quite efficient to fight the spread of mis- and disinformation. Even if the research community only recently begun to investigate the issue, there is evidence that deplatforming certain political figures or certain content is beneficial. As explained by Jeremy Blackburn, an assistant professor of computer science at Binghamton University, "Platform banning can reduce growth of new users over time, and there is less content produced overall."[142] Yet as many

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[138] Merriam Webster, "The Good, The Bad, & The Semantically Imprecise", October 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-good-the-bad-the-semantically-imprecise-08102018 (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[139] *Ibid.*
[140] "Definition of Deplatforming in English", *Lexico*, https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/deplatforming. (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[141] Jack Nicas, "Alex Jones Said Bans Would Strengthen Him. He Was Wrong.", *New York Times*, September 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/04/technology/alex-jones-infowars-bans-traffic.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Ftechnology&action=click&contentCollection=technology&region=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=sectionfront (Accessed 24 March 2021).
[142] Jeremy Blackburn, "Does Platforming Work to Curb Hate Speech and Call for Violence. 3 Experts in Online Communications Weigh in", *The Conversation*, January 2021. https://theconversation.com/does-deplatforming-work-to-curb-hate-speech-and-calls-for-violence-3-experts-in-online-communications-weigh-in-153177 (Accessed 9 March 2021).

experts warn, nothing stops users from migrating to other websites or forums.[143] Some experts believe less people will follow Trump's online activity but that this smaller group of people will be more extreme.[144] One study revealed that a group of people who migrated to another website "showed increases in signals associated with toxicity and radicalisation, which justifies concerns that the reduction in activity may come at the expense of a more toxic and radical community."[145] In addition to this potential contribution to radicalisation, many specialists claim deplatforming is only a short-term solution because it creates "a shock" causing disorientation[146] without solving the basic problem.

Another concern about deplatforming is the harm it causes to the First Amendment. Some people are against banning users from platforms, arguing it is a violation of freedom of speech. However, the law is clear on this point: deplatforming someone is not illegal and does not represent a violation of the First Amendment. As Andrew Geronimo, director of the First Amendment Clinic at Case Western Reserve's law school clarifies, "The First Amendment constrains government power, so when private, non-governmental actors take steps to censor speech, those actions are not subject to constitutional constraints."[147] Platforms are legally protected by Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act that keeps them from being held legally responsible for what people publish online. Additionally, as A. Geronimo simply sums up, this "allows websites to remove user content without facing liability for censoring constitutionally protected speech."[148] If deplatforming does not violate the First Amendment, it still has some troubling aspects such as the fact that private companies

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[143] Brad Honigberg, "Why Deplatforming Just Isn't Enough", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, February 2021. https://www.csis.org/blogs/technology-policy-blog/why-deplatforming-just-isnt-enough (Accessed 24 March 2021).
[144] David Ingram, "Does 'Deplatforming' Work? Trump's Most Extreme Fans Will Find Him, Research Says" *NBC News*, January 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/does-deplatforming-work-trump-s-most-extreme-fans-will-find-n1253906 (Accessed 28 April 2021).
[145] Will Bedingfield, "Deplatforming Works, But It's Not enough to Fix Facebook and Twitter", *Wired*, January 2021. https://www.wired.co.uk/article/deplatforming-parler-bans-qanon (Accessed 10 April 2021).
[146] *Ibid.*
[147] Aja Romao, "Kicking People Off Social Media Isn't About Free Speech", *Vox*, January 2021. https://www.vox.com/culture/22230847/deplatforming-free-speech-controversy-trump (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[148] *Ibid.*

have the power to silence a prominent figure on websites used daily by the American population.

Hence, Twitter's decision to ban Donald Trump from its platform in the aftermath of the Capitol storming was legal and justified by "the risk of further incitement of violence."[149] This decision was a major move for the platform and involved financial consequences. The first day after the ban on Trump, Twitter's shares fell by as much as 10%.[150] This could be a reason for platforms to fear banning certain users.
Different persons from the tech industry to the media industry believe that the business model needs to change because currently, big tech companies profit from disinformation and emotional content, which creates greater engagement, as previously presented, than other types of content. Roger McNamee, an American businessman who invested in Facebook in the early years of the company – but who is now convinced it represents a danger for democracy – states, "That business model is the problem. It's the amplification of dangerous content that I would like to restrict."[151] This illustrates why deplatforming is only an initial solution and that more needs to be done to solve the problem in the long term.

It is worth noting that after Twitter's ban on Donald Trump, misinformation online concerning vote rigging was reduced by 73 %,[152] while mentions of the "fight for Trump" hashtag tumbled by 95%.[153] Nevertheless, as Kate Starbird, disinformation researcher at the University of Washington, declared, "Together, those actions will likely significantly reduce the amount of online misinformation in the near term. What

[149] "Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump", *Twitter Blog*, January 2021. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[150] Paul R. La Monica, "Twitter's Stock Falls After Trump's Account Is Suspended", *CNN Business*, January 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/11/tech/twitter-stock-trump-account-suspended/index.html (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[151] [CNBC]. "Experts On How Facebook and Twitter May Change After Trump Bans," *YouTube* (15 January 2021). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6UXMuhi7RE (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[152] Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Misinformation Dropped Dramatically the Week After Twitter Banned Trump", *The Seattle Times*, January 2021. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/misinformation-dropped-dramatically-the-week-after-twitter-banned-trump/ (Accessed 9 March 2021).
[153] Lexi Lonas, "Election Misinformation Dropped 73 Percent Following Trump's Suspension from Twitter: Research", *The Hill*, January 2021. https://thehill.com/policy/technology/534587-internet-misinformation-dropped-73-percent-following-trumps-suspension-from (Accessed 9 March 2021).

happens in the long term is still up in the air."[154] Therefore, deplatforming only appears a short-term solution.

After observing how mis- and disinformation happens on Twitter, it becomes clear that false news, especially false political news, travels faster and reaches more users than reliable information. The network design of Twitter intensifies this phenomenon by making it impossible for all followers of a certain user to see rebuttal about mis- and disinformation of other followers. With many studies denouncing the problem of the spread of mis- and disinformation online, platforms have been urged by experts to implement actions. As discussed, different measures were enacted, but many consider that much more must be done. Due to policies such as "public interest exceptions" on Twitter, some political officials are still able to propagate false stories without seeing their tweets removed. Furthermore, even if the platform started to label President Trump's tweets following a reform of their approach to disinformation, the effectiveness of these labels is still being discussed, and most experts agree that labelling President Trump's tweets was not be enough to fight the spread of mis- and disinformation on Twitter regarding election fraud.

This allows for greater understanding regarding how false stories travel on Twitter, and how election fraud claims propagated through the platform. Donald Trump's tweets about electoral fraud reached many users not only because he was followed by 88 million users before being banned from Twitter but also because his messages shared on the platform presented all the elements necessary to quickly travel and among numerous users. Indeed, they were mis- or disinformation, which travel faster; they were false political stories, which are the type of false stories that travel the most; and they came from a government official, which means his tweets were not deleted by Twitter. Even if many of his tweets were labelled or contained a warning, users were still able to retweet them, or at least quote them, which means Donald Trump's tweets could still travel online. A recent study on voter fraud claims on Twitter revealed that out of the 10 most retweeted tweets containing election fraud claims between 23

[154] Craig Timberg, Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Misinformation Dropped Dramatically the Week After Twitter Banned Trump", *The Seattle Times*, January 2021. https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/misinformation-dropped-dramatically-the-week-after-twitter-banned-trump/ (Accessed 9 March 2021).

October and 16 December 2020, nine were tweeted by Donald Trump.[155] Of those nine tweets, eight were labelled, and one was left without either a label, or a warning.[156]

2.3 Information and News Ecosystem

Through the concept of news ecosystem, the third mechanism of the case study discusses how some of Trump's supporters informed themselves regarding the 2020 election

The concept of the information ecosystem is still evolving, and there are different definitions of this term. In the context of this work, we refer to it as the idea of studying information systems as complex systems that evolve and whose elements are related. Knute O. Berger explains in an article that "looking at the systems we create as living, breathing entities – systems which can be made healthy or unhealthy in large measure by our own interaction with them – is important."[157] This is thus the application of an environmental metaphor to reflect the complexity of a certain system, an idea that is also explained by Peggy Holman:

> Just as nature's ecosystem is a community of living organisms - plants, animals and microbes - interacting with nonliving components in their environment -air, water and soil, a news and information ecosystem consists of the interactions amongst its organisms - journalists, the public, journalism educators, media reformers, and others - in their environment - organizations, associations, the Internet, mobile devices.[158]

In this definition, the author has chosen to identify the "news and information ecosystem" thus pairing "news" and "information". It should be noted that authors generally choose to use only one of those terms and discuss either about the "news ecosystem" or the "information ecosystem". Because these concepts are still quite new

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[155] Anton Abilov *et al*. "Voter Fraud 2020: a Multi-modal Dataset of Election Fraud Claims on Twitter", *Cornell University*, January 2021. https://arxiv.org/abs/2101.08210 (Accessed 9 April 2021).
[156] *Factbase*, https://factba.se/biden/topic/twitter (Accessed 10 May 2020).
[157] Knute O. Berger, "Putting the Promise of the Information Age Into Perspective», *The Ecology of Media*, n°23, 1989, p.12
[158] Peggy Holman, "Mapping the News and Information Ecosystem", *Journalism That Matters*, October 2013. https://journalismthatmatters.org/blog/2013/10/16/mapping-the-news-and-information-ecosystem/ (Accessed 31 March 2021).

and not precisely defined, it is difficult to clearly present them as two different concepts with two different meanings, which is why in this work, we use both terms interchangeably. The Democracy Fund, a non-profit organisation, presents this definition of a news ecosystem:

> A news ecosystem, like a natural ecosystem, is made up of networks of interdependent parts. A news ecosystem consists of anchor institutions (newsrooms, universities, libraries, government agencies), infrastructure (ownership, access to broadband, media training), and networks (informal information networks, platforms, people).[159]

The similarities are clear between this definition and those cited above, comparing a certain system to an ecosystem whose elements interact with one another, which justifies the choice to use these terms interchangeably. With respect to these definitions, when discussing news ecosystem, it is important to analyse the way people inform themselves, their relationships with the media, and how the information sources they use interact with one another.

In the United States, according to research by Gallup,[160] trust in the media began to decline in the 1990s. After 2005, it dipped to 47%, and it has not risen since. As can be observed in Figure 10, there is a clear partisan divide regarding trust in the media.[161] As Democrats' trust in the media is rising, Republicans' trust is decreasing. According to the same work, in 2020, 73% of the Democrats declared that they trust the media while only 10% of the Republicans did. These tendencies reflect the political polarisation the U.S. faces, which has already been discussed.

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[159] Michelle Flowers, "What is a News Ecosystem?", *Democracy Fund.* https://ecosystems.democracyfund.org/what-is-a-news-ecosystem/ (Accessed 31 March 2021).
[160] Megan Brenan "Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media", *Gallup*, September 2020. https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[161] *Ibid.*

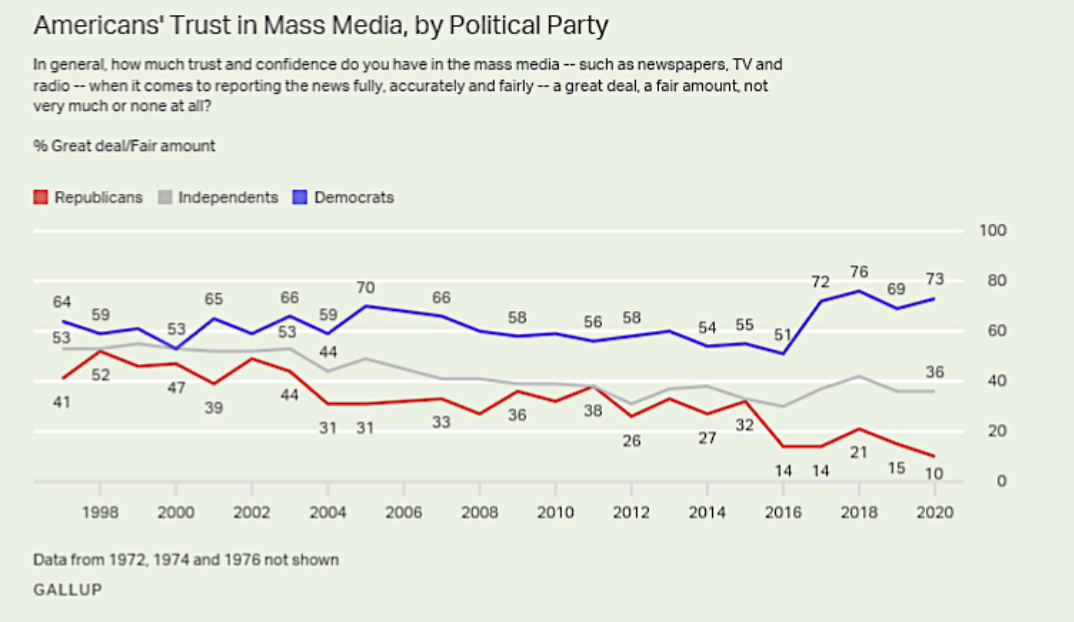

Figure 10

If we take a look at what kinds of sources American people use to be informed, television is the first choice for most people. However, according to the Pew Research Center, its use is in decline.[162] After television come news websites, radio, and social media. Since 2017, print newspapers as a news source have been overtaken by social media. It is worth noting that news diets vary significantly depending on the age of the person. For example, those who are older than 65 years access 81% of their news from television and only 8% from social media,[163] while people who are between 18 and 29 years old access 16% of their information from television and 36% on social media.[164] Even if only 39% of American people believe news on social media to be accurate,[165] according to the Pew Research Center, 53% of them declare that they gain news from social media either "often" or "sometimes",[166] and 18% admit they rely on social media for political news.[167] It is important to stress that it is not because an

[162] Elisa Shearer, "Social Media Outpaces Print Newspapers in the U.S. as a News Source", *Pew Research Center*, December 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/ (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[163] *Ibid.*
[164] *Ibid.*
[165] Matt Southern, "59% of US Adults Do Not Trust News on Social Media", *Search Engine Journal*, January 2021. https://www.searchenginejournal.com/59-of-us-adults-do-not-trust-news-on-social-media/392316/ (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[166] *Ibid.*
[167] Amy Mitchel *et al.* "Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable"*, Pew Research Center*, June 2020.

increasing number of people access information through social media that older media such as television are disappearing. As scholar Gunn Enli explains in one of her studies,[168] emerging media are changing the media landscape, which means people do not acquire news in the same way they did before, but older media are still part of that landscape. As she exemplifies, today, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are an important tool during a campaign, but this does not mean that other tools (such as TV debates, rallies, and advertising) are not used anymore.

While declining trust in the media is not a new phenomenon and has been occurring for decades, the rise of social media as a source of information is quite recent. In 2013, 27% of the public was using social platforms to access news. Seven years later, this tendency has increased to 48%.[169] This percentage does not precisely align with the one from the Pew Research Center. The percentage of people being informed via social media varies from one study to another, but the average is generally around 50%.

According to some experts, the fact that social media are becoming new sources of information is not without consequences regarding media trust. As Kristy Roschke, an expert in media literacy, explains, the American information ecosystem is noisier today because there is an overload of choices when locating sources to access information, and this can be overwhelming.[170] She explains that all news can look the same online and it is sometimes complicated to "separate fact-based news outlets from others", which leads people to "lump it all together" and convince themselves the media cannot be trusted.

Through considering the increasing distrust in the media amongst Republicans and the growth of social media as a news source, one can begin to understand how

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https://www.journalism.org/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/ (Accessed 18 March 2021).

[168] Gunn Enli, "Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election", *European Journal of Communication*, n°32, February 2017, pp.50-61.

[169] Adam Satariano, "Republican Distrust of News May be Helping Election Misinformation Spread", *The New York Times*, November 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/technology/republicans-distrust-news-media.html (Accessed 18 March 2021).

[170] Charlie Leight, "Public Distrust in Media, Helping the Public Understand How News Works", *Newswise*, January 2020. https://www.newswise.com/articles/public-distrust-in-media-helping-the-public-understand-how-news works (Accessed 18 March 2021).

Americans tend to inform themselves. A majority of Republicans distrust the media, and a growing number of Americans are informed through social media. It is now crucial to consider how Republicans were informed in the context of the 2020 elections. According to a study from the Pew Research Center, 27% of them relied on Donald Trump for information.[171] The same study revealed that those relying on the former president were more likely to believe in the possibility of election fraud; indeed, 60% of them were not at all confident about mail-in ballots. What many experts explain is that these supporters have been part of a specific news information ecosystem, which is isolated from mainstream media. As Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute, explained, "People on the right have lost faith in the news media. It has created a certain environment where a significant part of the American public feels alienated from established news media, but they still want information and seek it out."[172] According to Nielsen, this environment makes it easier for politicians such as Donald Trump to spread mis- and disinformation. This idea is shared by Claire Wardle who states, "For Trump supporters, his Twitter feed, and the tangled web of disinformation that informs it, became their news source of choice. Their media habits evolved so that the professional media no longer played any part in their day-to-day lives."[173] These core supporters do not access their information from mainstream media but generally from sources such as Trump's social media posts and public statements, alternative pro-Trump networks such as One America News Network (OANN),[174] and pro-Trump websites. In some of his tweets, Trump clearly asks his supporters to access information from these kinds of sources:

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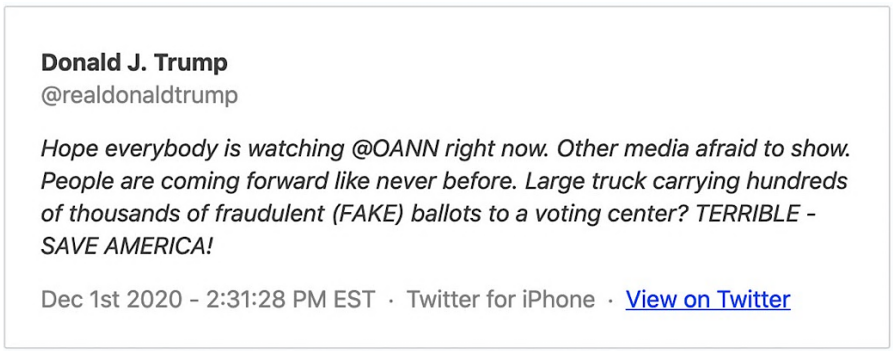
[171] Mark Jurkowitz, "Republicans Who Relied on Trump for News More Concerned Than Other Republicans About Election Fraud", *Pew Research Center*, January 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/11/republicans-who-relied-on-trump-for-news-more-concerned-than-other-republicans-about-election-fraud/ (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[172] Adam Satariano, "Republican Distrust of News May Be Helping Election Misinformation Spread", *The New York Times*, November 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/12/technology/republicans-distrust-news-media.html (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[173] Claire Wardle, "The Information Ecosystem That Led to the Capitol Attack", *The Boston Globe*, January 2021. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/08/opinion/misinformation-campaign-that-led-capitol-attack/ (Accessed 10 May 2021).
[174] William Turvill, "The New Trump Bump: How Newsmax CEO Christopher Ruddy and Far-Right Outlets Are Taking on Fox News", *Press Gazette*, January 2021. https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/the-new-trump-bump-how-newsmax-ceo-christopher-ruddy-and-far-right-outlets-are-taking-on-fox-news/ (Accessed March 2021).



In this tweet, Donald Trump indicates OANN is a trustworthy source to access information from by presenting "other media" as not doing their job.

As Claire Wardle explains, an information ecosystem is being composed of different parts, so it is not only Trump's Twitter, of course, that constitutes this complex evolving system. Sources such as hyperpartisan blogs, conspiracy and hyperpartisan news stories, and Donald Trump's declarations as well as those from his family and other politicians are also included. The consequence of such an ecosystem is that people who are part of it tend to believe in an alternative version of reality.

2.3.1 Trump's Core Supporters' Information Ecosystem

2.3.1.1 Narratives About Electoral Fraud and Their Main Spreaders

As presented above, the news ecosystem of Donald Trump's core supporters led them to believe an alternative reality in which their favourite candidate secured an election victory but was not officially declared winner because of a fraud. They trusted that this fraud prevented an accurate vote count and gave most votes to the Democrat candidate who should have been declared defeated.

In the report from the EIP studying the mis- and disinformation during the 2020 election,[175] the focus is placed on the electoral fraud narratives. As explained in the work, mis- and disinformation concerning electoral fraud went viral by

[175] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, "The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election", *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).

decontextualising some real events and reconstructing new narratives around them. For example, some photos of dumpsters full of mail-in ballots went viral on the internet with people sharing them to prove certain votes were not counted. These photos were proven to be portraying empty electoral envelopes dating back from 2018.[176] The photo itself was not fake, but the context presented by certain people online was. Before, during, and after the 2020 election, there was not one but numerous narratives that reinforced one another and became viral. The narratives around the 2020 election evolved throughout this period. First, they were focused on mail-in voting and how this system could lead to fraud. However, from 3 November, they started focusing on vote counting as the hashtag #StopTheSteal spread on social media. Different pieces of mis- and disinformation, such as narratives claiming that some votes for Biden had been cast by dead persons[177] or that Trump could sue his way to the election victory,[178] spread online. As explained in the research, the cumulation of all these narratives travelling around the same news ecosystem led to some supporters feeling a need to act to save the democracy that they believed was in danger.

According to the report, there were two types of sources of mis- and disinformation that helped construct these narratives: top-down, which refers to mis- and disinformation shared by powerful figures, and bottom-up, meaning the mis- and disinformation came from ordinary users to be then amplified by influencers and political elites. This indicates that participants of the information ecosystem we are depicting were not only a passive audience receiving information; but they also participated in the narratives by sharing posts to prove the election was stolen. The fact that users shared mis- and disinformation about an electoral fraud coming from both influencer/political elites and ordinary users can be explained thanks to a work called “Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem: Detection, Mitigation and Challenges”,[179] in which the authors states that because today’s online ecosystem is

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[176] Reuters Staff, “Fact Check: Photos of Electoral Mail Disposed in California Show Empty Envelopes From 2018, Not 2020 Mail-in-ballots”, *Reuters*, September 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-ballots-disposed-idUSKBN26K2LM (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[177] Robert Farley, “Thin Allegations of ‘Dead People’ Voting”, *Factcheck*, November 2020. https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/thin-allegations-of-dead-people-voting/ (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[178] Sam Levine, “Trump's Longshot Election Lawsuits: Where Do Things Stand?”, *The Guardian*, November 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/10/donald-trump-longshot-election-lawsuits (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[179] Amrita Bhattacharjee *et al*. “Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem:

packed with information from so many different sources, users tend to use cognitive shortcuts – also called heuristics – leading them to make incorrect judgements. There are different types of heuristics, notably the reputation heuristic, which refers to the fact that a user will likely judge a piece of information to be credible if shared by a recognised source, and the endorsement heuristic, which alludes to the idea that a user tends to believe something shared by a trusted acquaintance. Thus, a platform user is prone to share information from politicians as well as from ordinary users. In addition to these two types of heuristics, there is also the self-confirmation heuristic, which references the idea that a user tends to approve sources that share their point of view. This clearly links with the concept of echo chambers we have discussed in the first section. Echo chambers are also part of this information ecosystem we are depicting, but as Claire Warlde explained in an article in the *Boston Globe*, "An information ecosystem is more than just a partisan echo chamber, or one friend who watches Fox disagreeing with another who watches CNN."[180] Echo chambers do play a role in these ecosystems, but it is necessary to also consider other actors who participate in it such as platforms, politicians, influencers and even ordinary users. As revealed in the definitions of information/news ecosystem previously presented, the elements composing the system can be organisations, institutions, and platforms, as well as people.

Even if both ordinary users and politician/influencer elites participated in the information ecosystem we are describing and helped spread the different narratives we have evoked, it is interesting to more deeply consider the latter. They can be recognised thanks to the blue-check mention, which is a sort of blue badge indicated on their profile (Figure 11) by which Twitter attests they are, as stated on the platform's website, "authentic" and "of public interest".[181]

Detection, Mitigation and Challenges", *arXiv*, October 2020, pp.15-16.

[180] Claire Wardle, "The Information Ecosystem That Led to the Capitol Attack", *The Boston Globe*, January 2021. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/01/08/opinion/misinformation-campaign-that-led-capitol-attack/ (Accessed 28 April 2021).

[181] "About Verified Accounts", *Help center*. https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/about-twitter-verified-accounts (Accessed 8 April 2021).

Figure 11

A diversity of people and organisations can obtain the blue-check mention such as government officials, political candidates, brands, non-profit organisations, journalists, athletes, activists, or influential individuals.[182] As Twitter states, to be verified, your account should be "notable and active".[183] This system of blue-check accounts also appears on other social platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook. It is interesting to focus on them because these blue-check accounts were the main spreaders of electoral fraud narratives. As stated in the EIP research, "The primary repeat spreaders of false and misleading narratives were verified, blue-check accounts belonging to partisan media outlets, social media influencers, and political figures, including President Trump and his family."[184] This report reveals the problem with those spreaders is that they often share each other's posts and end up forming a network. If a certain narrative enters the network, it quickly travels amongst the different followers of those blue-check accounts.

With a greater understanding of the type of narratives that were shared and by whom they were spread, the focus can shift more specifically to one of the sources of the

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[182] *Ibid*.
[183] "Help Us Shape Our New Approach to Verification", *Twitter Blog*, November 2020. https://www.google.com/search?q=who+gets+the+blue+tick+on+twitter&oq=who+gets+the+blue+check+&aqs=chrome.3.69i57j0i13j0i22i30l3j0i390l2.9471j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (Accessed 8 April 2021).
[184] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, "The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election", *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).

ecosystem we are describing, which is the platform that is at the centre of our work: Twitter.

2.3.1.2 Twitter's Role in the Ecosystem

Twitter was part of the ecosystem described by many experts such as Claire Wardle, but it was not the only platform crucially acting in the spread of narratives. The ecosystem was formed by numerous platforms. Each of those presenting specific features were used in a certain way by spreaders to amplify their narratives to the maximum effect. The EIP report uses the term "cross-platform dynamics" to discuss the interactions between mainstream platforms such as Facebook, or Twitter, alternative platforms like Parler, but also chat platforms such as WhatsApp. As can be observed in Figure 12, the interaction between the platforms allowed the dissemination of narratives.[185] For example, if a post was deleted from a mainstream platform, it was then shared on alternative platforms, and the piece of mis- or disinformation could keep spreading.

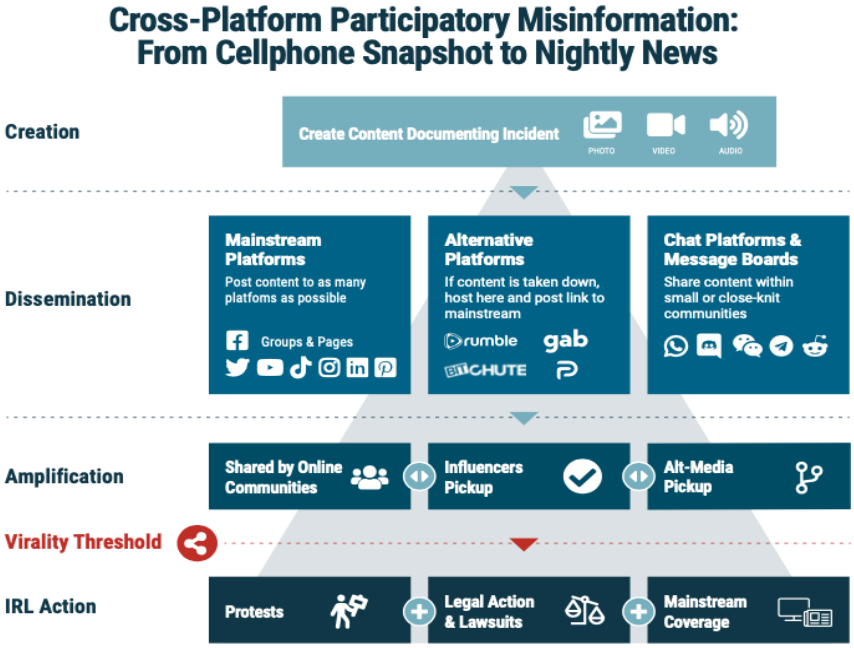

Figure 12

[185] *Ibid.*

As we have already stated, each platform was used in a specific way. Facebook was, for example, used to reach a massive audience and to create groups on the platform where users could share stories about election fraud and organise actions against it. The most famous group was STOP THE STEAL, which reached more than 300,000 members in a day.[186]

Regarding Twitter, the report explains that "a primary role was to provide a place to draw attention to content such as news articles, videos, and livestreams hosted elsewhere in the media ecosystem".[187] There were particularly numerous cross-posts between Twitter and YouTube, for example. Twitter was thus used as a space to share content from other platforms and amplify its audience. Another important feature concerning Twitter is the fact that some influential users with large audiences were able to share a certain piece of mis- or disinformation that was then reshared by their followers. The latter are not only ordinary users but also influential users, such as politicians or journalists, who have themselves large online communities. These followers, both ordinary users and influential users, reshared the content on Twitter but also on other platforms, revealing again the importance of Twitter in these cross-platform dynamics. Thus, Twitter provided a space for disconnected narratives coming from different platforms to be linked with one another.

To illustrate this phenomenon, the EIP report uses the example of the "Dominion narratives". These narratives are named "Dominion" after the company supplying election technology in the U.S. Various narratives claiming irregularities with the Dominion voting machines began to circulate during the voting days in different counties. The narratives began to be disseminated initially in online conversations. At that stage, the narratives were not linked together, and each concerned a specific county. Then videos were posted on YouTube. The narratives were spread on platforms such as Parler and Reddit, but also on the mainstream platforms of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. What is important to note is that each individual

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[186] Makena Kelly, "Facebook Shuts Down Huge 'Stop the Steal' Group", *The Verge*, November 2020. https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/5/21551551/facebook-stop-the-steal-group-misinformation-election-2020 (Accessed 18 March 2021).
[187] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, "The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election", *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).

narrative posted on the different platforms was always accompanied by the same Twitter hashtags #dominionvotingsystems and #dominionsoftware.[188] These hashtags led to the different narratives being linked together on the Twitter platform. As explained in the EIP report, gradually the different narratives that concerned local counties eventually formed a national story.

Having gained a more significant understanding of Twitter's role in the information ecosystem that leads people to believe false narratives, it is interesting to consider some spreaders of that platform. As mentioned above, blue-check accounts played an important part in the spread of narratives. The EIP report studied the "21 most prominent repeat spreaders on Twitter" (Figure 13) in the context of the spread of mis- and disinformation around electoral fraud, and 15 of them were blue-check accounts. As explained by Dannagal Young, political psychologist and associate professor at the University of Delaware, the danger with these influencers is that people tend to be less critical toward the information they share.[189] Because of these influencer's prominent status – be it journalist, president, or politician, users do not necessarily take the time to question what they read, an idea we have already exposed when evoking the reputation heuristic.

[188] *Ibid.*
[189] Fergal Gallagher, "Why Millions Don't Trust the Election Results, Despite No Evidence of Widespread Fraud: Experts", *ABC News*, November 2020. https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/millions-trust-election-results-evidence-widespread-fraud-experts/story?id=74258192 (Accessed 8 April 2021).

Rank	Account	Verified	Incidents	Tweets w/ >1000 Retweets	Followers	Retweets in Incidents	Left or Right
1	RealJamesWoods	True	27	36	2,738,431	403,950	Right
2	gatewaypundit	True	25	45	424,431	200,782	Right
3	DonaldJTrumpJr	True	24	27	6,392,929	460,044	Right
4	realDonaldTrump	True	21	43	88,965,710	1,939,362	Right
4	TomFitton	True	21	29	1,328,746	193,794	Right
6	JackPosobiec	True	20	41	1,211,549	188,244	Right
7	catturd2	False	17	20	436,601	66,039	Right
8	EricTrump	True	16	25	4,580,170	484,425	Right
9	ChuckCallesto	True	15	17	311,517	117,281	Right
10	charliekirk11	True	13	18	1,915,729	232,967	Right
11	marklevinshow	True	12	10	2,790,699	90,157	Right
11	cjtruth	False	12	27	256,201	66,698	Right
11	JamesOKeefeIII	False	12	64	1,021,505	625,272	Right
11	prayingmedic	False	12	26	437,976	57,165	Right
15	RichardGrenell	True	11	12	691,441	143,363	Right
15	pnjaban	True	11	14	208,484	58,417	Right
17	BreitbartNews	True	10	11	1,647,070	38,405	Right
17	TheRightMelissa	False	10	31	497,635	73,932	Right
17	mikeroman	False	10	10	29,610	128,726	Right
17	robbystarbuck	True	10	15	204,355	65,651	Right
17	seanhannity	True	10	22	5,599,939	96,641	Right

Figure 13

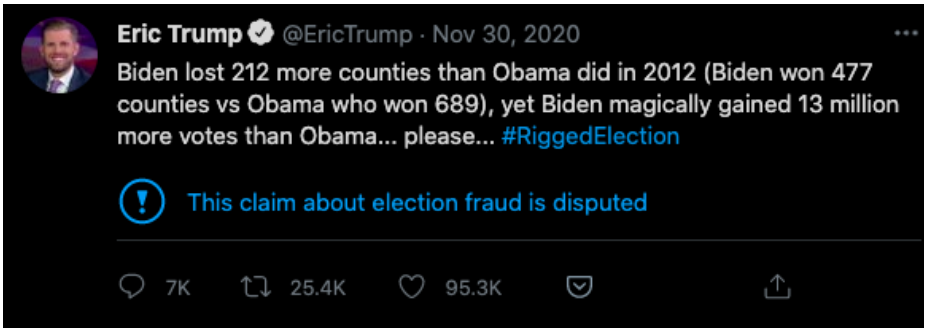
A solid example of a narrative being spread thanks to blue-check influencers on Twitter is the story of ballots supposedly found in a ditch in Greenville, Wisconsin.[190] The Wisconsin Election Commission denied there had been any Wisconsin ballots disposed of. One Minnesota ballot in a ditch was reported, but it appears that no major fraud operations had taken place there.[191] Nonetheless, the narrative of an unsafe and unsecured vote-by-mail system was propagated quite early by Eric Trump, Donald Trump's son, who retweeted an article from the far-right news website *Gateway Pundit* known for sharing conspiracy theories. After this, other users started sharing the narrative with hashtags such as #DemocratsAreCheaters. This narrative was greatly decimated by blue-check accounts, as can be seen in the example below of a tweet from influencer Chuck Callesto, who counts more than 256.2K Followers:

[190] Graig Graziosi, "Mail Dumped in Ditch, Pushed by White House as Evidence of Voter Fraud, Did Not Contain Wisconsin Ballots", *The Independent*, October 2020. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election/wisconsin-ballots-donald-trump-voter-fraud-2020-election-b748599.html (Accessed 7 April 2021).
[191] Alice Reid, "Authorities Release Photos of Mail, Including Ballots, Found in Ditch Last Year", *NBC 26*, February 2021. https://www.nbc26.com/news/local-news/authorities-release-photos-of-mail-including-ballots-found-in-ditch-last-year (Accessed 8 April 2021).

As we are focusing on Donald Trump's tweets in the context of this work, it is interesting to note Donald Trump's account "realDonaldTrump" is fourth in the ranking of the 21 most prominent repeat spreaders on Twitter, while his sons Donald Jr. and Eric Trump are respectively third and eighth. The report reveals that Donald Trump and his family heavily participated in the amplification of false claims on Twitter as well as on other platforms. The EIP even states that "perhaps the most important role the Trump inner circle played was to seed and perpetuate the prevailing narrative—the general notion of a rigged election."[192] If we take a look at, for example, Donald Trump Jr.'s Twitter feed and his posts back in the period during which the former president made repeated claims about electoral fraud, he retweeted many of his father's tweets as well as other influencers' tweets claiming electoral fraud. He also wrote several mis- and disinformation tweets, as can be viewed in the example below:

[192] Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, "The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election", *The Election Integrity Partnership*, March 2021. https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069 (Accessed 18 March 2021).

In his tweet, he mentions his father's account, which allows anyone reading this tweet to click on it and directly visit Trump's feed. The same kind of tweets and retweets can be observed in the feeds of other family members, such as Eric Trump, whom we have already mentioned. He wrote different tweets claiming rigged elections such as the one below:



He also retweeted posts written by blue-check influencers, such as Mark Meadow who has more than 863.6 thousand followers on Twitter:

This illustrates how Trump and his inner circle were able to disseminate mis- and disinformation by sharing the same tweets and also the importance of blue-checked influencers.

To further understand the information ecosystem of American people, we investigated how they inform themselves, and we saw the opposite tendencies between Democrats and Republicans regarding media trust. We also discovered how social media are gaining more importance as a source of information and how this new source of information impacts media trust amongst Republicans, which has been decreasing for

decades. When focusing on how Republicans received their information during the 2020 election, we recognised that a notable portion of them relied on Trump, and many were not confident about the mail-in ballots. This, according to experts, is due to a certain information system they were part of, which led them to believe in narratives about electoral fraud and to distrust mail-in ballots. By studying the narratives, we observed that first, these narratives evolved throughout the election campaign, which led to the hashtag #StopTheSteal. Second, we discussed two different types of narratives: bottom-up and top-down, which allowed us to understand that ordinary users as well as political influencers participated in the spread of the narratives. Through examining heuristics, we were able to explain why people tended to share mis- and disinformation from both ordinary users and blue-check influencers. We then focused more precisely on these blue-check accounts, as they were the largest spreaders that formed a network in which narratives were travelling quickly and reaching many followers.

After having gained a broader understanding of the narratives and who shared them, we decided to focus on a specific actor of the information ecosystem: Twitter. We studied its role in a cross-platform system, in which each platform was used for a specific purpose. Twitter was a place where users amplified mis- and disinformation coming from various platforms. Numerous isolated narratives have been linked together by being shared on Twitter. With this view on Twitter, we then focused on its most important spreaders, and with no surprise, blue-check accounts represented the major top spreading accounts. Amongst those spreaders we found Donald Trump and his sons: Donald John Trump Jr. and Eric Trump.

Thanks to this section, it has been possible to study the type of information ecosystem that some of Trump's supporters were part of. Twitter was not the only actor of this ecosystem, as other sources such as alternative pro-Trump networks and websites also played an important part in it. Additionally, Twitter was not the only platform that participated in the ecosystem, as it was part of a cross-platform dynamic. Nonetheless, the platform played a specific role which had real consequences in the construction of the narratives about rigged elections. There were a lot of spreaders, ordinary users as well as blue-check accounts, and Donald Trump was part of the top five of the most important spreaders on the platform. As the Capitol storming was in large part

motivated by the desire to act to “stop the steal”, it is quite easy to see how this ecosystem led some Trump supporters to believe in the vote rigging, which led to the widespread anger that gave rise to the event on 6 January 2021.

2.4 Donald Trump’s Rhetoric on Twitter

The last mechanism of the case study focuses on how Trump expressed himself on Twitter by studying his rhetoric.

As we have established previously in this work, during his mandate, Donald Trump used Twitter as a means of presidential communication. For four years, the former president used the platform to share his side of the story as well as to express or defend his position on important matters, never hesitating to share polemical content, something he already did as a candidate for the presidency in 2016. When running for office against Hillary Clinton, his way of communicating was unprecedented. In a study comparing Donald Trump’s and Hillary Clinton’s use of social media during the 2016 election campaign,[193] Gunn Enli concluded that unlike previous candidates and Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump did not use a professional social media strategy. According to this scholar, he based his strategy on a controversial use of social media, especially Twitter, which she identifies as an “amateurish style” in opposition to “professional style”. As she explains, this was not a lack of strategy, it was only a less formal use of social media which proved to be quite effective as this amateurish style allowed him to appear more authentic to his audience. Another effect of this amateurish style was that Donald Trump’s tweets circulated a lot and were debated in all the media. Once elected president, he did not change this strategical use of social media. Throughout his four years of presidency, he posted a lot of messages on his social media accounts, particularly on Twitter. Many of his tweets included mis- and disinformation, which eroded his supporters’ trust in the democratic institutions and the media. Actually, his first tweet as a president containing misleading information was shared on his sixth day in office and referred to election fraud:

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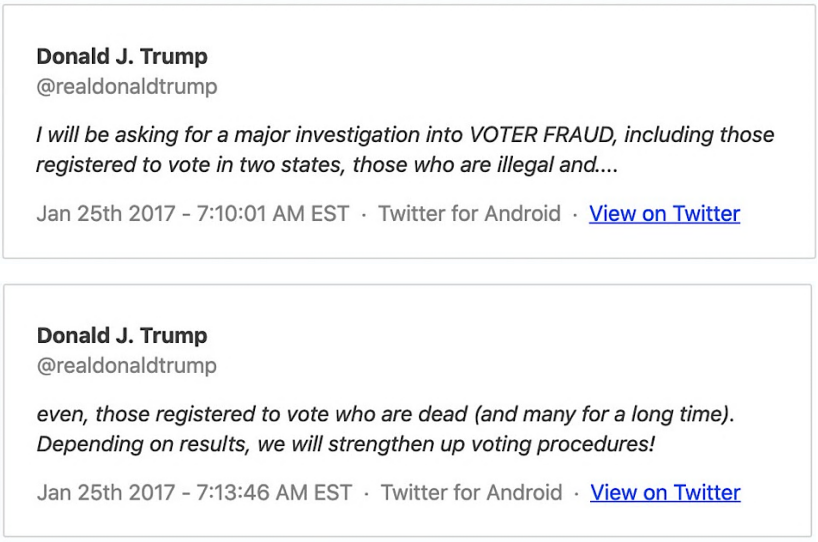
[193] Gunn Enli, “Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election”, *European Journal of Communication*, n°32, February 2017, pp.50-61.



Electoral fraud is one of many different topics – including criminality, immigration, and environment – Donald Trump has lied and tweeted about during his mandate. While the topics addressed by the president varied, the way he tweeted about them did not. A lot of experts have explored Donald Trump's tweets by studying his rhetoric. These studies make it possible to understand that Donald Trump's tweets were not only words flickering across a platform and that, unlike what some advised years back, we should not "just ignore" them.[194] Indeed, those tweets were part of a real communication strategy put in place by the then president and had real-life consequences.

2.4.1 Donald Trump's Rhetoric: Focus on Ethos and Pathos

Donald Trump's rhetoric has often been described as a "post-truth" rhetoric. "Post-truth", as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary,* refers to "a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts."[195] The 45th president's rhetoric is thus said to be based on emotional rather than rational arguments. To gain a better understanding of Donald

[194] Jeet Heer, "The Case for Taking Trump's Tweets Seriously", *The New Republic*, March 2017. https://newrepublic.com/article/141233/case-taking-trumps-tweets-seriously (Accessed 3 March 2021).
[195] "Definition of Post-Truth", *Cambridge dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/post-truth (Accessed 18 April 2021).

Trump's rhetoric on Twitter, it is interesting to explore it through the lens of the Aristotelian principles. According to Aristotle, to produce a persuasive message, three factors are necessary: first, ethos, which refers to credibility and means the person delivering a message should be trusted by their audience – this credibility results from the speaker's personality and their ability to appear as a respected authority figure;[196] second, Aristotle points to an appeal to emotion, also known as pathos, which means that to make people more receptive and ready to take action, a speaker must appeal to an audience's feelings and emotions; finally, there is the necessity to appeal to logic and reason, referred to as logos, which has to do with the coherence of the message.[197] An article written by Anthony F. Arrigo, associate professor specialised in Rhetoric and Communication of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, shows how the former president's rhetoric is infused with these Aristotelian principles.[198] According to the author of the article, Trump is really skilled when it comes to ethos and pathos.

Regarding ethos, Aristotle thought a way to appear credible to an audience was by seeming to share their desires and prejudices. That is exactly what Trump did, not only in his political speeches but also on his Twitter. He developed a strong relationship with his supporters and identified with them by "reflecting their values and grievances".[199] This can be illustrated by this specific tweet:

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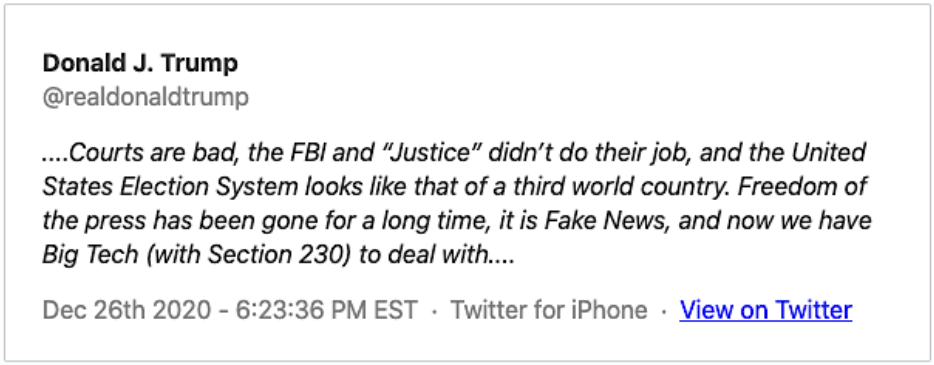
[196] "Les Trois Registres de la Persuasion Ethos/Pathos/Logos", *Sciences Po Bibliothèque*. https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:dO9-KS9gEBUJ:https://www.sciencespo.fr/bibliotheque/sites/sciencespo.fr.bibliotheque/files/pdfs/Ethos.Pathos.Logos%2520V2.doc+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=be (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[197] Mike Baker, "Aristotle's Three Modes of Persuasion", *Alto University School of Business*. https://mycourses.aalto.fi/pluginfile.php/148423/mod_resource/content/2/Aristotles%20three%20modes%20of%20persuasion.pdf (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[198] Anthony F. Arrigo, "What Aristotle Can Teach Us About Trump's Rhetoric", *The Conversation*, December 2018. https://theconversation.com/what-aristotle-can-teach-us-about-trumps-rhetoric-107761 (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[199] *Ibid.*



This tweet was effective to a certain audience, not because Trump exposed irrefutable proof that the FBI and Justice did not do their job or that freedom of the press is not existent, but because with those claims he was reflecting certain grievances that were shared by some of his supporters. The image he reflected was that of an authority figure who could judge the work done by the FBI, justice, or the media. When writing this kind of tweets, his focus was directed to a certain part of the population and he tried to find out what was going to be triggering for them. As stated by Arrigo, "The closer he gets to hitting the sweet spot of that specific audience, the more they like him and find him credible."[200] One important thing to note about ethos is that what will appear as credible to someone will not necessarily to someone else. When he was making those statements, he knew many would not agree with him, but this was not important as he was targeting only a certain audience, namely his core supporters. On Twitter, Donald Trump was not only good at appearing credible, but he was also skilled when it came to appealing to emotions. A daily strategy used by Donald Trump when tweeting was the way he appealed to his followers' anger to subsequently redirect it to actors he viewed as enemies, such as mainstream media, social media, certain political figures, or the FBI. Anger is defined by Aristotle as "an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge."[201] As he explains, anger is felt by someone because of something done by another person.[202] Anger is thus personal, and because it is personal it is hardly refutable. As stated by Joanne Freeman, professor at Yale, anger "makes the political personal and the personal political."[203] This is

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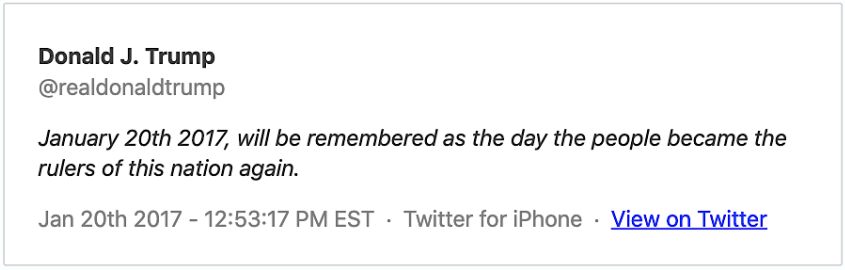
[200] *Ibid.*
[201] Rhetoric by Aristotle, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.2.ii.html (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[202] *Ibid.*
[203] Joanne Freeman, "Trump and the Politics of Anger", *The Atlantic*, October 2018. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/trump-and-politics-anger/573556/ (Accessed 3 April 2021).

something Donald Trump seemed to have understood as he ignited a war against the establishment, which he pursued during his mandate. This anger redirected towards actors such as the media can also be observed in his tweets about election fraud:

This tweet is actually a good example of the two Aristotelian principles Trump excels in: by talking about the "fake news suppressed media", he provoked anger among his supporters, which they directed toward the media – a mechanism that corresponds to pathos. But he also presented the media as not credible, and he established his authority, as if he only was capable of delivering the truth, which corresponds to ethos.

This anger against the media was part of the global anger directed against the American establishment, which Trump blamed as the cause of many problems during his presidency. Scholar Nadia Urbinati talks about an antiestablisment rhetoric[204] through which Donald Trump presented himself as a knight that would "take the country back,"[205] implying that before him, nobody defended the interests of the American people. It is actually something he stated clearly in a tweet in 2017:



[204] Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism", *Annual Review of Political Science*, n°22, 2019.
[205] *Ibid*.

By saying “the people became the rulers” and using “again” he was transmitting the idea that the country was not ruled by the people anymore, but by a category of rulers who were only thinking of their own interest, and that this would change thanks to him.

To better see the extent of this antiestablishment rhetoric, it is interesting to take a look at what Michael Humphrey, assistant professor of journalism and media communication at the Colorado State University, identifies as five recurrent themes in Donald Trump’s communication:

1. The true version of the United States is beset with invaders;
2. Real Americans can see this;
3. I (Trump) am uniquely qualified to stop this invasion;
4. The establishment and its agents are hindering me;
5. The U.S. is in mortal danger because of this.[206]

The term “invaders” referred to in the first theme can be associated with different actors that Donald Trump categorised as dangerous. As Humphrey states, invaders can be China, Black Lives Matter protesters, immigrants, the FBI, etc.[207] Regarding the specific case we are focusing on, we could identify those invaders as being Democrats that were trying to steal the power illegally, helped by some Republicans who were supposedly poorly managing the election and to whom Trump referred with the pejorative term “RINO” (Republican in Name Only). This can be observed in the following tweet:

[206] Michael Humphrey, “I analyzed All of Trump’s Tweets to Find out What He Was Really Saying”, *The Conversation*, February 2021. https://theconversation.com/i-analyzed-all-of-trumps-tweets-to-find-out-what-he-was-really-saying-154532 (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[207] *Ibid.*

In this tweet, Donald Trump identified “the RINOS” as guilty of allowing the other party to supposedly cheat. The Democrats were portrayed as thieves trying to change the election results. Both “RINOS” and Democrats were therefore identified by Donald Trump as threatening the integrity of the election, which is why they clearly fall into this category of "invaders" defined by Humphrey. These two groups of people corresponding to the "invaders" appeared in many of trump's tweets. Another example can be read below.

Donald Trump repeatedly presented Democrats and “RINOS” as a threat to what Humphrey identifies as the “true version of the US”. In this case, the “true version of the US” defended by Donald Trump referred to a country where he would be recognised as the official winner of the election.

Regarding the second theme, the idea of “real Americans” can be explained by the fact that in many of his tweets Donald Trump talked about people defending his claims of rigged election as “the great people” or the “good patriots”. As we have already evoked in the introduction, Donald Trump and his inner circle often alluded to his core supporters as “real patriots”. As can be seen in the retweet bellow, Donald Trump presented Richard Hopkins, a postal worker who had made allegations about ballot tampering, as a “brave patriot” because of his allegations about electoral fraud.

In this tweet he also mentioned the idea that a growing number of persons were trying to prove the election was rigged. Those are the ones the Republican candidate considered as the "real Americans".

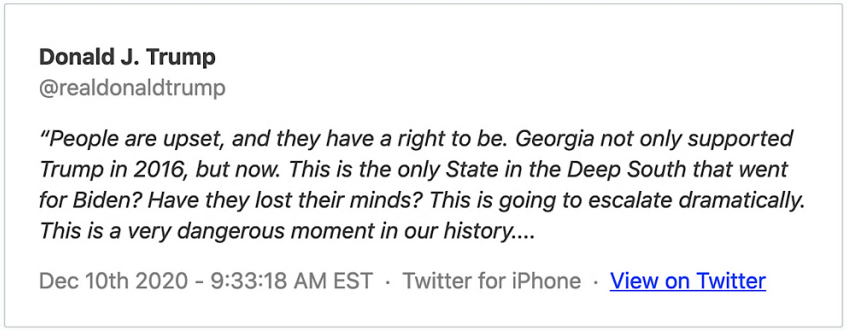
Now with respect to the third theme, the idea that only Trump was qualified to stop the "invasion" refers to the fact Donald Trump presented himself as the one that would expose election fraud. This idea of Trump being almost a saviour can be observed in many of his tweets about electoral fraud:

Donald Trump presented himself as a hero who continued to fight even though everybody, even some Republicans, seemed to turn their back on him.

About the fourth theme, the idea of establishment hindering Trump is a feature of his rhetoric we have already identified above. As we explained, he presented actors such as social media, mainstream media, or certain political figures as actors ligating against him. Humphrey thus identifies what Nadia Urbinati calls antiestablishment statements as a recurrent theme evoked by the former president.

By saying “Big Tech” and the “Fake News Media” refused to report the real facts, he was trying to convince his supporters that they were all unifying against him. In addition, he manipulated the concept of freedom of the press by falsifying its meaning. The concept of freedom of the press precisely implies reporting real facts, based on evidence. In this tweet, Donald Trump seemed to deny that freedom of the press is valuable.

In the last theme Humphrey engages with talks about the idea of “mortal danger” for the US. This theme repeatedly appeared in Trump’s electoral fraud tweets as he clearly stated the country was under great threat.



By using the terms “dangerous moment in our history”, he presented the situation as being so threatening it could lead to a moment of such great importance it would enter the history books.

Humphrey concludes that put together, those five themes create a certain storyline in which only Trump can protect the American people against the establishment, which is a threat to the country. This shows that regarding the principle of pathos, he appealed not only to anger, but also to fear. Regarding the principle of ethos, as we already stated before, he presented himself as a credible source by undermining the credibility of other sources. To take a closer look at this aspect of Trump’s rhetoric, it is interesting to discuss a study that examined how Donald Trump used Twitter as a storyteller and show how the former president used a delegitimisation tactic: “Delegitimization is a discounting tactic intended to invalidate critical viewpoints by calling into question the legitimacy of those who author or spread such viewpoints.”[208] To illustrate this we can look at this tweet we have already mentioned:

[208] B. Monahan and R.J. Maratea, “The Art of the Spiel: Analyzing Donald Trump's Tweets as Gonzo Storytelling”, *Symbolic Interaction*, January 2021. https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.540 (Accessed 3 April 2021).

We see that by attacking those actors, he was trying to explain why "real figures" were not exposed and presented himself as the real source of information. Because they were critical toward his claims of election fraud, he tried to delegitimise Big Tech and the media.

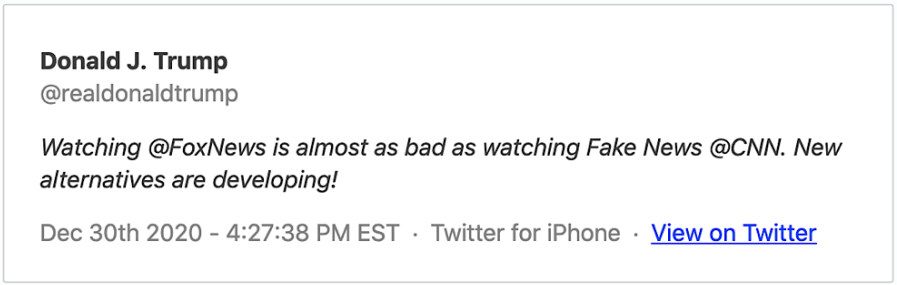
Another tweet that also illustrates that delegitimisation tactic is the following:

By attacking the Supreme Court using adjectives such as "weak", "incompetent" or "corrupt", the then president was trying to make them appear less credible, which eroded people's trust in the democratic institutions – a point of view shared by Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers in an article about the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the tweets of President Trump that states the following:

> One of the most consistently noted themes of Trump's tweeting habits refers to his persistent attacks on the institutionalized mainstream media and the use of pejorative labels such as "fake news" and "fake media" as well as other adjectives expressing untruthfulness, deployed as an

attempt to deter the public from trusting media reports, especially those critical of his presidency, and in turn to position himself as the only reliable source of truthful information.[209]

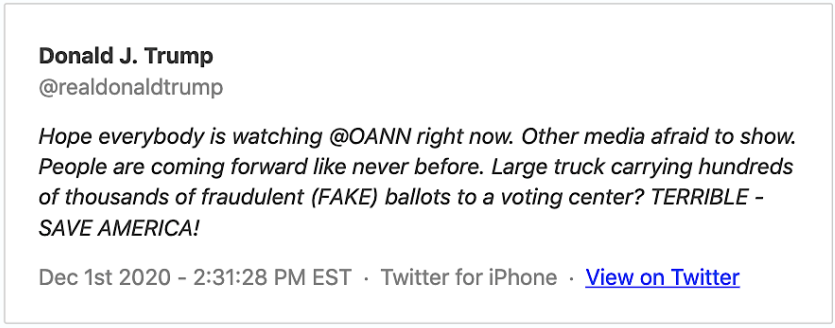
In his tweets about electoral fraud, Donald Trump did indeed attack any actor being critical to his claims in order to present himself as the only reliable source. He even turned his back on his once favourite network, Fox News. The symbiotic relationship he shared with Fox News during his mandate came to an end when the network did not support the idea of an electoral fraud.[210] He clearly stated on his tweets the end of his relationship with Fox News as can be exemplified by the following tweet:



The fact he compared Fox News with CNN is significant. During his time in office, Trump always used CNN as an example of "fake news media". Thus, the comparison was very calculated. He compared Fox News to the media that embodied the image of untrustworthy media he built up during his mandate.

He called his supporters to watch the far right, pro-Donald Trump cable channel OANN, as can be seen in the following tweet:

[209] Andrew S. Ross and Damian J. Rivers, “Discursive Deflection: Accusation of ‘Fake News’ and the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump”, *Social Media + Society*, n°4, April 2018, pp. 1-12.
[210] Aaron Rupar, “Fox News’s Post-Trump Identity Crisis, Explained by an Expert”, *Vox*, December 2020. https://www.vox.com/22187529/fox-news-post-trump-identity-crisis-matt-gertz-oan-newsmax-media-matters (Accessed 3 April 2021).



Through this first part of the section, we have seen that Trump excels regarding Aristotelian pathos and ethos. We have studied how he developed a close relationship with a particular part of his audience that we called his "core supporters". By focusing on them, he tried to find what would make them react by sharing their grievances. This helped him to appear credible and establish his authority, something he even further developed by undermining his opponents' credibility. We have also seen how good he was at appealing to his audience's emotions by sharing tweets conveying anger and fear that he would then redirect towards his opponents. With an antiestablishment rhetoric, he was able to share anger and fear with his supporters while presenting himself as a kind of heroic figure fighting against a threat.

2.4.2 A Closer Look at Trump's Language

"Rhetoric" is defined as "the art of speaking or writing effectively."[211] Now we have taken a first look at how Trump's rhetoric was infused with Aristotle's principles, it would be interesting to get an insight into how he uses his language in his tweets to "write effectively" and how the different strategies used can be linked to the two principles of ethos and pathos we have discussed in the previous part.

The first characteristic of Trump's language on Twitter that becomes apparent quite quickly after reading some of his tweets is the simplicity and limitation of his vocabulary and syntax. Different studies have shown Donald Trump to have a really limited vocabulary. In a 2018 analysis assessing the first 30,000 words expressed by each president, Donald Trump obtained the worst result with a vocabulary similar to that of

[211] "Definition of Rhetoric", *Merriam Webster*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric (Accessed 3 April 2021).

a mid-fourth grade.[212] The level of vocabulary used in his tweets was quite similar, as its complexity was proven to be the one of a fifth grade.[213] Trump repeatedly used a certain set of words which are often monosyllabic, such as “great”, “bad”, “sad”, “weak”, or “nice”.[214] If this may make one sneer, this limited working vocabulary was actually a quite effective communicative strategy. As the author Sam Leith explains, this strategy allows the speaker to reach a wide audience, insofar it is not complicated to understand the speaker’s statements.[215] Indeed, some linguists analysed Trump’s language thanks to the Fesch-Kincaid formula, which determines “the level of difficulty in understanding information,”[216] and concluded that “since Trump uses a more simple language, it makes it more accessible to the general public, and it can be understood by approximately 10% more American adults. Reaching a bigger span of the audience than the other candidates.”[217] In addition to reaching a wider audience, by using short words, simple syntax, and limited vocabulary, Trump also conveyed honesty, with messages that appeared less politically oriented and more informal.[218] Those tweets with simple grammatical structures led his readers to see honesty in his messages. They generally ended up feeling emotions rather than reflecting on different highly structured arguments. There are thus different reasons why simple vocabulary and syntax prove to be quite effective when it comes to convincing a certain audience. As journalist Amanda Hess recalls, marketing materials are generally easily understandable for sixth graders,[219] which shows that simplicity is known to be successful, even if it can appear as ridiculous to some. It should also be noted that

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[212] Nina Burleigh, “Trump Speaks at Fourth-Grade Level, Lowest of Last 15 U.S. Presidents, New Analysis Finds”, *Newsweek*, August 2018. https://www.newsweek.com/trump-fire-and-fury-smart-genius-obama-774169 (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[213] Peter Dreier, “’Smart’ Trump Speaks with Vocabulary of Fifht-Grader (at Best)”, *The National Memo*, May 2021. https://www.nationalmemo.com/smart-trump-vocabulary-fifthgrader (Accessed 5 May 2021).
[214] Sam Leith, “Trump’s Rhetoric, a Triumph of Inarticulacy”, *The Guardian*, January 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/donald-trumps-rhetoric-how-being-inarticulate-is-seen-as-authentic (Accessed 15 May 2020).
[215] *Ibid.*
[216] O. Kayam, “The Readability and Simplicity of Donald Trump’s Language”, *Political Studies Review*, n°16, 2018, pp. 73-88.
[217] *Ibid*.
[218] *Ibid.*
[219] Amanda Hess, “How Trump Wins Twitter”, *Slate*, February 2016. https://slate.com/technology/2016/02/donald-trump-is-the-best-at-twitter-heres-why.html (Accessed 3 April 2021).

many of the short words he used pertain to an emotional lexicon, for example, “sad” was often used by Donal Trump and so was it in his tweets about electoral fraud:

This can be qualified as a use of pathetic evidence, which refers to the fact that in his tweets, Donald Trump used pathos as a mode of persuasion and thus expressed emotion with the aim to transmit it to his audience.

The second characteristic we address regarding Trump’s language on Twitter is his use of what scholar Enli calls “authenticity markers.”[220] Enli identifies different elements as authenticity markers, one of them being the use of capital letters. As she explains: “Capital letters are often used to emphasise one’s sincerity, spontaneity and engagement, offering the speaker an air of authenticity.”[221] Capital letters can be seen in a large part of Donald Trump’s tweets, and so, in his tweets about electoral fraud. Henry Giroux explains lower-case words are generally used for an informative purpose, whereas the upper-case are translating a more “emotional state of mind and a clear call to action.”[222] There are, for example, different tweets in which Trump called his supporters to “fight”, writing the word in capital letters:

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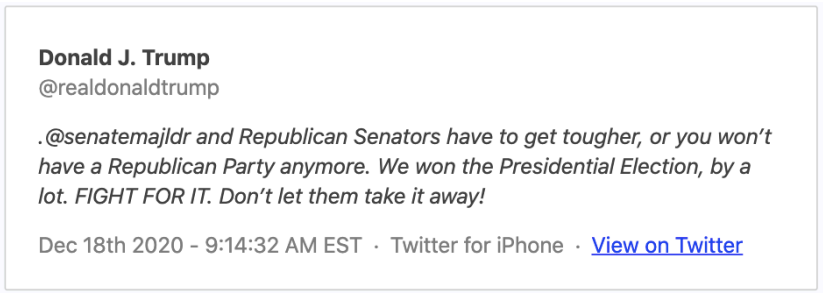
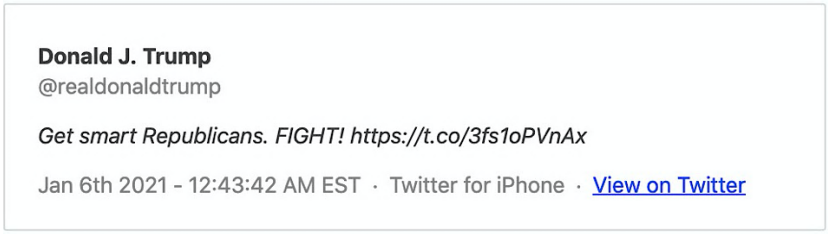
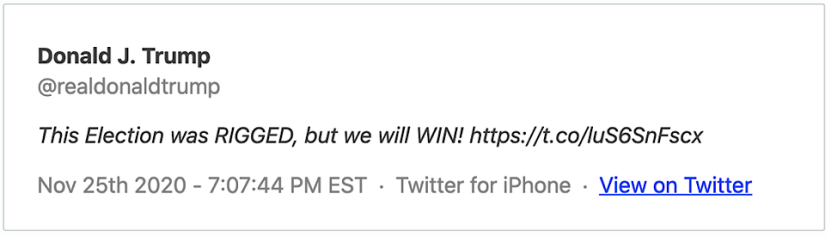
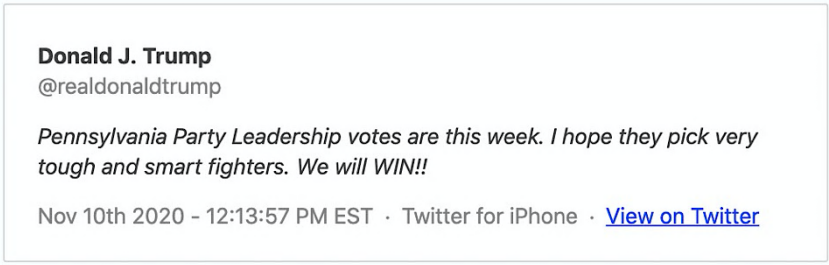
[220] Gunn Enli, “Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election”, *European Journal of Communication*, n°32, February 2017, pp.50-61.
[221] *Ibid.*
[222] Tiago Rodrigues da Costa, “Emotional Politics: Trump’s Twitter Shows Evidence of Illiteracy, Angry Rhetoric and Authoritarianism”, *Medium.com*, May 2019. https://medium.com/@tiagocostaphoto/emotional-politics-trumps-twitter-shows-evidence-of-illiteracy-angry-rhetoric-and-69b146b02fd2 (Accessed 3 April 2021).

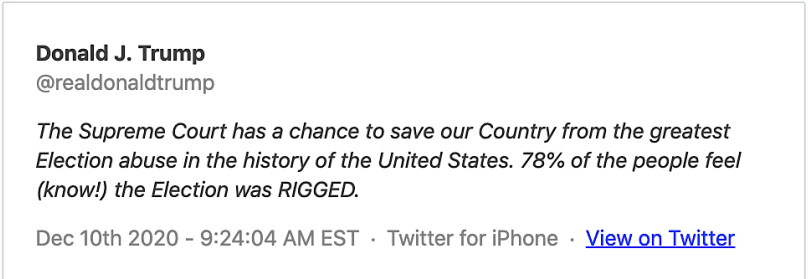




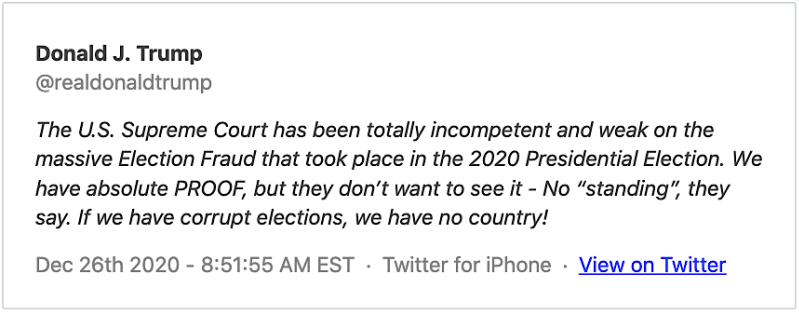
The former President often mixed both low-case and upper-case, which allowed his audience to see where he was putting the emphasis. Upper-cased words used by Donald Trump were the words he wanted the reader to remember and think of. He often used capital letters for words such as “rigged”, or “win”, as can be observed in the three following tweets:





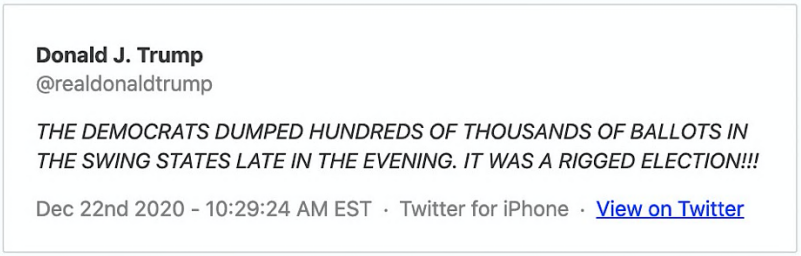


However, if some words were more often used with capital letters than others, they were not necessarily always upper-cased. Yet, as stated above, when being in capital letters, those words were the ones that stood out when reading these tweets:



Here he emphasised the word "proof", which is not insignificant, because much of the criticism Trump received was about the fact that he did not base his claims on any evidence. Writing "proof" in capital letters was a way for him to insist on the fact he did have some. This is again a way for him to appear more credible.

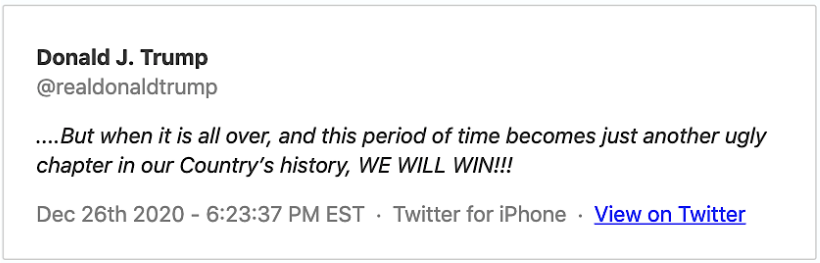
Trump also posted tweets fully written with capital letters, which clearly conveyed anger:



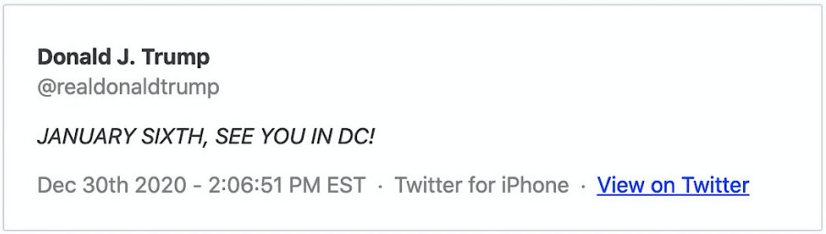
We can see this use of capital letters as another use of pathetic evidence which means he relied on pathos as a mode of persuasion. In this tweet, we also see he emphasised his claim with three exclamation marks, which represent another element Enli identifies as an authenticity marker. A 2016 analysis of Donald Trump tweets showed that 76% of the latter contained exclamation marks.[223] There were some words he particularly enjoyed exclaiming, such as "America", "nice", "sad", "people", "win" or

[223] Zachary Crockett, "What I learned Analyzing 7 months of Donald Trump's Tweets", *Vox*, May 2016. https://www.vox.com/2016/5/16/11603854/donald-trump-twitter (Accessed 3 April 2021).

“bad”. As can be seen in the following tweet, he did not hesitate to use more than one exclamation mark and often used them with upper-cased words.



He also used exclamation mark with tweets fully written with capital letters as illustrated bellow:

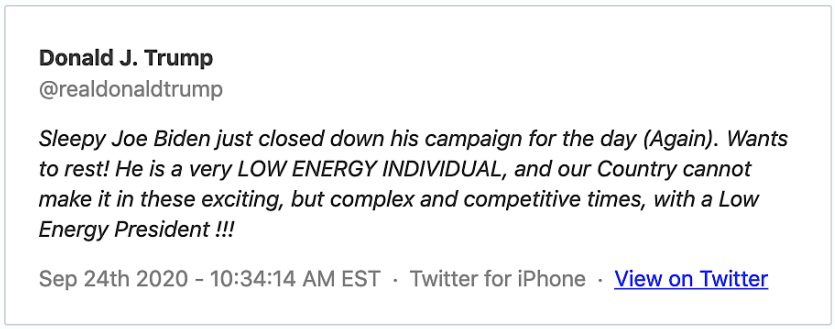


Here with both capital letters and exclamation mark we can observe he used pathetic evidence to call to action.

The last authenticity marker stated by Enli is the use of insults. Studies have shown Trump’s offensive remarks contributed to high rates of retweet.[224] When it came to insults, Trump had some preferences for certain words such as “fake”, which was the most common insult word, but also, “dumb”, “loser”, or “weak.”[225] Trump also exceled at finding degrading nicknames he repeatedly used towards his opponents. This use of nicknames was yet another strategy for Trump to undermine his opponents’ credibility. To better understand the use of insults and nicknames we can study two types of argument: *ad hominem* and *ad personam. Ad hominem* arguments are used

[224] Brian L. Ott, “The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, n°34, December 2016, pp. 59-68.
[225] Michael Tauberg, “Analyzing Trump’s Tweets, a Data-Based Analysis of Trump’s Language on Twitter”, *Medium.com*, October 2018. https://medium.com/swlh/analyzing-trumps-tweets-5368528d2c90 (Accessed 3 April 2021).

to make the opponent appear less credible, whereas *ad personam* is an attack directed against the person based on subjective features.[226] When Trump called journalist Chuck Todd "sleepy eyes Chuck Todd" in his tweets, he built his insult on the journalist's appearance. It was a direct attack based on subjective criteria, which corresponds to *ad personam* argument. But when Trump called Joe Biden "sleepy Joe" in his tweets, he did not refer to appearance but more to his physical and mental health. Donald Trump often portrayed his opponent as weak, and too old to take on the role of president. Trump repeatedly referred to him as being "tired", "low in energy" and "weak".



Trump emphasised the terms "low energy individual" thanks to the use of capital letters, as seen previously. Various concerns, even within the Republican Party, had been raised about Joe Biden's advanced age when he decided to run as a candidate, and Donald Trump tried to attack him by weaponising his age.[227] Using the nickname "sleepy Joe", Trump tried to present Biden as a candidate who was unable to take on the responsibilities of a leader. He tried to undermine his credibility, which is why this can be seen as an *ad hominem* argument.

We have now seen the three elements Enli identifies as authenticity markers: capital letters, exclamation marks, and insults. They are either used separately or associated in a same tweet. As stated by Brian L. Ott, "These stylistic practices reinforce the

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[226] "La Différence Entre Attaques « Ad Hominem » Et « Ad Personam »", *Contrepoints*, April 2014. https://www.contrepoints.org/2014/04/16/162992-la-difference-entre-attaques-ad-hominem-et-ad-personam (Accessed 3 April 2021).
[227] "Will Calling Joe Biden 'Old and Mentally Weak' Be a Winning Strategy for Donald Trump?", *Chicago Sun Times*, July 2020. https://chicago.suntimes.com/politics/2020/7/8/21317821/joe-biden-old-mentally-weak-donald-trump (Accessed 3 April 2021).

negative sentiment of his tweets and heighten their emotional impact, which is, in turn, reflected in the intense emotion of his followers, a phenomenon scholars refer to as 'emotional contagion'."[228] Using those authenticity markers allowed Trump not only to appear more authentic to his audience, but also to trigger emotions among his supporters.

Trump's language has proven to be very simple, both in terms of vocabulary and grammatical structure. Far from being a clumsy way of expressing himself, it represented a real strategy. It allowed the former president to address a very large audience and to convey a certain impression of honesty. These simple words, this limited vocabulary, this uncomplicated syntax left his readers with a feeling after reading his tweets rather than a deep reflection on a complex argument. His use of authenticity markers such as capital letters, exclamation marks or insults allowed him not only to appear authentic through his tweets – indeed, one could almost hear his voice when reading his posts, as they are so faithful to his way of expressing himself – but also to convey a certain emotional state and a call to action. What we can observe is that authenticity markers used as pathetic evidence as a way to undermine his opponents' credibility on Twitter allowed him to appear more authentic, honest, and credible. Furthermore, this was done to appeal to people's emotions, which illustrates once again how he excelled regarding Aristotle's ethos and pathos.

As illustrated through the two parts in this section, that Donald Trump's tweets do not look professional or presidential. Nonetheless, this does not mean his strategy was not effective. This is exactly what we attempted to demonstrate. Many people supported and continue to support Trump because he did not sound presidential. Rather he appeared authentic to them.

[228] Brian L. Ott, "The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, n°34, December 2016, pp. 59-68.

Chapter 3: Observations

After analysing the four mechanisms, a central observation can be established: a certain part of Donald Trump's electorate was more inclined to believe Donald Trump's allegations of electoral fraud than the rest of the population. This is partly explained by the polarisation that occurs online, by the mis- and disinformation that circulate on social media, by the fact that these supporters were part of a news ecosystem where such information circulated continuously, and by the fact that Donald Trump knew how to address them. All the mechanisms evoked in our case contributed to people believing in electoral fraud, even leading some to be willing to engage in action. After this main observation, three other elements can be observed in order to better understand the links between the mechanisms that demonstrate how a certain population believed the election was stolen and decided to act by going to the Capitol on 6 January 2021. First, this specific group of people who believed the allegations of electoral fraud and can be identified as Donald Trump's core supporters were isolated online, interacting mainly with people sharing their perspectives. Thus, they ended up believing this alternate reality. Second, these core supporters were led to distrust the electoral system as well as journalists, the Congress, and even the FBI – in short, any actor denying the hypothesis of electoral fraud. Finally, emotions played a key role in these mechanisms and drove these supporters to act.

3.1 Isolation

As explained in the first mechanism about polarisation, the U.S. is amid political polarisation that has been growing for decades. This is now also visible online, notably on Twitter, and especially regarding controversial topics. If it is challenging to prove social media caused polarisation, we recognise that echo chambers and personalised content intensify the phenomenon on Twitter. This polarisation, aided by echo chambers and algorithms, isolated certain people from users who do not think the way they do.

This isolation of Trump's core supporters can also be observed via the news ecosystem we depicted through discussion of the third mechanism. Indeed, this section has revealed that beyond consistently interacting with people who share their

beliefs, supporters also avoided accessing information from mainstream media. They preferred alternative sources such as the hyper-partisan network OANN or other pro-Trump websites. Trump's core supporters were also informed through Twitter. When it comes to believing a certain piece of information, the same section has revealed that even if both ordinary and blue-check users could appear as trustworthy sources, blue-check users were central in the dissemination of mis- and disinformation regarding electoral fraud. Indeed, with their many followers, once a blue-check user shared a certain post, it often circulated among hundreds, even thousands, of followers who reshared the same post on their own profile, creating a network which allowed a certain information to travel around Twitter and even other platforms due to the cross-platform dynamic. This allowed circulation of different narratives that reinforced one another. The circulation through retweets can also be linked to what we presented regarding the second mechanism about the circulation of mis- and disinformation on Twitter. Indeed, we have seen that this social network is composed of a system of networks wherein if a person refutes a piece of information through sharing it with a message underlining its falsity, this post is not seen by the people following the user who wrote the original message. This system of networks would thus reinforce the isolation already observed through polarisation on Twitter as well as within the news ecosystem.

A final element regarding the isolation of Trump's core supporters is the way Trump rhetorically addressed them. By sharing their grievances in his tweets, he was able to develop a close relationship with them. As we stated in discussion of the last mechanism about Trump's rhetoric, the former president knew many people would disagree with him, but this did not matter because he was targeting a specific part of the audience.

Trump's core supporters were thus isolated and not exposed to differing points of view because of online polarisation and also because of the news ecosystem they helped encompass. The network-based design of Twitter may have reinforced this isolation, and the fact that Donald Trump targeted a particular audience in his tweets also contributed to this phenomenon. This isolation led them to be in an alternate reality, which corresponds to the idea evoked in the introduction of Donald Trump being a driver of consensus breakdown. As explained by Richard Heinberg, Donald Trump's

supporters became alienated from consensus. He states, “Individuals find themselves not just disagreeing on politics or religion but living in different and directly conflicting mental universes”.[229] This illustrates how isolated Trump’s core supporters were. The consequence of loss of consensus in a society is that it becomes difficult to solve problems, as people evolve in different realities.[230] Indeed, there is a loss of social trust, which complicates cooperation between the members of a society.[231] The four mechanisms thus allow observation into how Trump’s core supporters are isolated online, and how this can impact the U.S. democratic society. Indeed, by being isolated online, Trump’s core supporters did not access quality information and as we have seen through the work of Chris Tenove, low quality information is a threat to democracy, which he identifies as “threat to democratic deliberation”.[232]

3.2 Distrust

As presented in the third mechanism about the news ecosystem, trust in the media is declining among Republicans. Nonetheless, we also noted that among Trump’s core supporters, distrust has also grown regarding the U.S. voting system. This distrust was something Donald Trump expressed in his tweets as he constantly undermined the credibility of the media, the mail-in ballots, and the counting of the votes. Through an analysis of his tweets, we have recognised that Trump mastered the Aristotelian principle of ethos: being able to present himself as an authoritative figure and trustworthy source by undermining the credibility of the media. He was not only trying to lead his supporters to distrust the media, but also to distrust any actor trying to contest his claims of electoral fraud. By making online statements, Donald Trump directly attacked any person or organisation challenging his version of the facts. He presented himself as the person capable of delivering “the real truth.” He also used authenticity markers such as capital letters or exclamation marks to convey honesty

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[229] Richard Heinberg, “2020: The Year Consensus Reality Fractured”, *Resilience*, December 2020. https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-12-18/2020-the-year-consensus-reality-fractured/ (Accessed 29 April 2021).
[230] *Ibid.*
[231] *Ibid.*
[232] Chris Tenove, “Protecting Democracy from Disinformation: Normative Threats and Policy Responses”, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, n°25, 2020, pp. 517-537.

and appear, once again, as a trustworthy source. Thus, he led his core supporters to distrust the media and the electoral system.

Distrust can be further discussed in the context of online polarisation. Polarisation is strongly marked by partisan views and occurs among controversial issues. As mentioned with the first mechanism, it is therefore likely that this lack of trust in different actors and institutions, such as the electoral system, was a polarising topic and that the core supporters of Donald Trump were being in echo chambers sharing this distrust. False claims about the media reinforced the distrust among core supporters, and as discussed with the second mechanism about the spread mis- and disinformation on Twitter, lies can circulate quickly and broadly on Twitter. This distrust was also observed with the third mechanism about news ecosystem, as it was at the heart of the different narratives about electoral fraud. The four mechanisms thus allow one to recognise how distrust contributed to Trump's core supporters believing in electoral fraud narratives. The fact that the elections results were undermined, leading people to believe in electoral fraud narratives, can be linked to the threat identified by Chris Tenove as "threat to accountable representative government."[233] Regarding this threat, Chris Tenoves discusses election issues as an example to how online disinformation can represent a risk for electoral integrity.

3.3 Emotions and the Desire to Take Actions

With the second mechanism, Twitter is presented as a fertile ground for mis- and disinformation. The reason used to explain this phenomenon is that first, mis- and disinformation are more novel than other information and thus provoke surprise, and that second, they generally encompass more emotive information. As explained in the first mechanism about online polarisation, Twitter's algorithm itself tends to promote more emotive tweets because they convey more engagement. This emotive side of mis- and disinformation generally pushed people to take action. This desire to act was also observed alongside the different narratives in the third mechanism, which led supporters to be willing to act for democracy and fair elections.

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[233] *Ibid.*

Donald Trump used emotions when he addressed his core supporters through Twitter. For example, he used an amateurish style when tweeting, which conveyed a certain honesty to his supporters. This honesty allowed him to transmit certain emotions to his audience. By using, for example, an emotional lexicon as an emotional mode of persuasion, he expressed emotions with the view to transmitting them to his supporters. Using tools such as authenticity markers allowed him to transmit emotions and a clear call to action with tweets containing capital letters or exclamation marks. He was capable of transmitting fear and anger via different stylistic practices, which motivated a heightening of the emotional impact of his tweets. This transmission of emotion to his followers was even described by some as “emotional contagion.”

Through analysing the four mechanisms, it is clear that emotions are a precious tool in a call to action. Indeed, emotions led people to be willing to act, which demonstrates why it is an important element to consider in the context of the violence that took place in the symbol of the American Democracy.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to discuss the impact of mis- and disinformation on American democracy through a case study focused on Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets posted between election day and the Capitol storming. The objective has been to answer this question: In what way did Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation tweets contribute to the storming of the Capitol? In seeking an answer, we analysed four different mechanisms.

The first mechanism concerns online polarisation. In the section discussing this, we first recognised that political polarisation has been a reality in the U.S. for decades. Some experts even talk about "affective polarisation" because unfavourable opinions regarding the opposite party have grown among both Democrats and Republicans. Polarisation occurs online and is intensified by the presence of echo chambers on Twitter, which leads users to mainly interact with people sharing their opinion because they choose to follow persons with a similar mindset. Online polarisation happens above all regarding controversial issues, which is why it was important to focus on this phenomenon in the context of the spread of narratives about election fraud. It was also important to evoke this concept because, as we have stated, it is a useful tool for actors willing to circulate disinformation. We then investigated other concepts, such as filter bubbles and algorithms, which, unlike echo chambers, do not depend on user selection but on the personalisation of the user's experience by the platform. Although little information is available about Twitter's algorithm, we were able to observe that it has an impact on online polarisation by encouraging the development of echo chambers and filter bubbles. In addition, we noted that Twitter's algorithm tends to promote emotional content and even misleading tweets, as they produce more engagement. Due to the lack of information about Twitter's algorithm, we noted it is complicated to evaluate its impact on the spreading of mis- and disinformation about election fraud. Twitter assured they could prevent this kind of information from circulating on the personalised content of users' accounts, but experts have claimed that algorithms increased the circulation of tweets about rigged elections.

This section has therefore broadened understanding of how the political polarisation that the U.S. has faced for decades gradually began to be present online. In the context of spreading mis- and disinformation about electoral fraud, which is a

controversial topic that polarises the country, it was important to consider the phenomena which occur on Twitter. Twitter is thus a network that generate a certain polarisation, reinforced by echo chambers and the personalisation of the user's experience. Thus, through considering this mechanism, we have concluded it plausible that such a polarisation occurred regarding electoral fraud on the network, and that this, as we noted in our observations, contributed to the isolation of Trump's core supporters, as well as to their distrust of the mainstream media.

The second mechanism regards the spread of mis- and disinformation on Twitter. Through the section that considers this aspect, we first determined that false information travels faster, further, deeper, and more broadly than real news because it is more novel than real news and because it is emotive. We also noted that because of its network-based construction, Twitter does not allow users to see rebuttals to the mis- or disinformation shared, an idea we evoked in our observations as this may have intensified the isolation of Trump's core supporters. Second, we discussed the different measures enacted by the platform to fight the circulation of mis- and disinformation. We examined labels and warnings but were unable to determine how effective they are. Indeed, while various studies have attested to their effectiveness, others have presented elements (such as a possible backfire effect or too long of a time lapse between the publication of false information and its labelling by Twitter) as flaws that refute the effectiveness of the labels. While there is no consensus on their effectiveness, most experts agreed that these labels are not sufficient to stop mis- and disinformation. We discussed another possible solution being deplatforming, which has been demonstrated as effective but only in the short term, as it does not address the problem in depth and cannot prevent migration to other platforms, which can lead to radicalisation.

This section has been useful towards understanding how fast mis- and disinformation can travel on Twitter and how it was possible for tweets such as Donald Trump's mis- and disinformation to keep circulating, even with measures such as labels. As Donald Trump was only suspended after the Capitol storming, he was able to continue tweeting narratives about electoral fraud for months before being stopped.

The third mechanism centres on the concept of the news ecosystem. Through this section, we observed how American people informed themselves and, more precisely, how Trump's supporters have informed themselves. We recognised their lack of trust in mainstream media sources and how they have accessed information through sources such as hyper-partisan websites, Trump's social media accounts, and pro-Trump networks. Those using Donald Trump as a trustworthy source of information were likely to believe the rigged elections claims. Furthermore, we observed they were actually part of a certain news ecosystem, which led them to believe the narratives of electoral fraud. We discussed how these narratives evolved, and how both ordinary and blue-check users played a role in circulating them. We then focused on Twitter's role in this news ecosystem, and we recognised its existence as part of a cross-platform dynamic, in which each social network was used for a specific purpose. Twitter was mainly used to amplify content from other platforms. In addition to this, blue-check Twitter accounts also participated greatly in the dissemination of electoral fraud narratives. We closely considered Donald Trump as well as his family as being super spreaders of those narratives on Twitter.

This section has allowed for greater understanding regarding how isolated from mainstream information Trump's core supporters have been and how they were led to believe that an actual electoral fraud had occurred. The fact that these people believed in that alternate reality clarifies first, why they were willing to act to and protest about this and second, how isolated they were, two things we noted in our observations. We also understood better the role played by Twitter and why it was relevant to focus specifically on this platform, as it contributed greatly to the dissemination of narratives.

The fourth mechanism concerns Trump's rhetoric on Twitter. We first investigated how Trump excels when it comes to two of the Aristotelian principles of pathos and ethos. Indeed, Trump was able to appeal to emotions in his tweets, which made his audience more receptive to act. He also presented himself as a trustworthy figure. We have discussed the fact that he targeted a certain portion of his audience in his tweets, which once again demonstrates how his core supporters were isolated. We analysed how he undermined the credibility of the media and the credibility of any actor trying to debunk his claims about electoral fraud. This has further revealed his skills regarding ethos. To erode people's trust in American institutions, the media, and the

electoral system, Trump appealed to his audience's emotions, notably with anger and fear, an idea that we illustrated with the antiestablishment rhetoric. Second, we focused on his use of language on Twitter. Donald Trump's vocabulary was revealed to be simple and limited. We noted this was an effective strategy because a large audience could understand it, and it conveyed honesty. We also noted that Donald Trump used an emotional lexicon and authenticity markers, which allowed him to not only share messages that appeared less politically oriented, but also to transmitted emotions to his audience. His stylistic practices allowed him to reinforce the emotional impact of his tweets, leading his audience to be willing to act based on Trump's appearance of authenticity and honesty. This section has helped to clarify how Donald Trump's rhetoric was charged in emotions but also how he undermined his opponents to appear more credible, which are both aspects evoked through our observations about emotions and distrust.

These four mechanisms have allowed us to make some observations, the main one being that there was a specific group of Trump's supporters who were likely to believe Trump's claims of electoral fraud and take action. From this main observation, we were able to discuss three elements that allowed us to see how these four mechanisms presented as distinct are linked to each other. Indeed, we observed that they led to the online isolation of core supporters, reinforced their distrust, and brought emotions into play.

This case study was intended to contribute to the theory that "mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy." By studying these four mechanisms, we have revealed that Donald Trump's tweets about election fraud were more than just messages. By being posted on a platform such as Twitter, they contributed to online polarisation. Furthermore, as fake stories travel faster than real ones, claims of voter fraud are bound to travel quickly, despite the various measures in place. These tweets were also part of a particular news ecosystem within which Donald Trump was a major participant. This is important because this ecosystem led many people to believe electoral fraud narratives and to be in an alternate reality. Finally, Donald Trump was able to target a particular audience by writing tweets that were extremely effective through sharing their grievances.

In conclusion, this case study demonstrates that what happens online on a social network like Twitter can have real and tangible consequences. Online mis- and disinformation about electoral fraud drove the most extreme Trump supporters to participate in the Capitol insurrection. Violence can thus result from such false and misleading messages, as well as a decrease in people's trust in democratic institutions. Indeed, repeated claims about "fake-news media" and a "rigged election" undermined the credibility of the electoral system, and of any actor defending the integrity of the election. These claims also pushed certain people in America to be angry and protest – some violently.

As shared in the first chapter, mis- and disinformation can be a threat to electoral integrity, notably through the spread of false claims regarding election issues. Through this case study, we determined Donald Trump repeatedly undermined the credibility of election results, which corresponds with Chris Tenove's identification of a threat "to accountable and representative government." Furthermore, we observed that mis- and disinformation impact the quality of information citizens receive. Through existing in a certain news ecosystem, and distrusting the mainstream media, Trump's supporters' access to high-quality sources of information was compromised. This aligns with the identified threat "to democratic deliberation."

This thesis has also demonstrated how online mis- and disinformation can shape one's perception of reality. Mis- and disinformation create an alternate reality, and the mere fact that a person at the head of a democracy was one of the principal contributors to its construction without being stopped demonstrates weakness in the system. Donald Trump's tweets contributed to a consensus breakdown in the U.S., which impacts social trust and makes it harder for society to solve problems because people live in different realities.

Through this case study, it appears quite clear that online mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy. Nonetheless, as the methodology demands, we would need to conduct other case studies to make generalisation. This case study contributes to the construction of the theory that "mis- and disinformation represent a threat to democracy" without generalising about this theory. We believe more research needs to be conducted on that matter.

In the context of this work, four mechanisms were analysed in a case study. However, other elements could be explored. It would, for example, be interesting to look at other social networks that were part of the cross-platform dynamics mentioned in this work. Research could also be done on the role of certain conspiracy theories in the circulation of disinformation. The group QAnon, for example, has been involved in the dissemination of disinformation about electoral fraud.

If some experts claim the danger of mis- and disinformation regarding democracy is overstated, we, like Claire Wardle, believe it is time to become aware of the challenges that online mis- and disinformation pose to democracy.

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