

Flooding the zone: the authoritarian strategy of epistemic disruption

Discussion paper

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide a better understanding of the strategy of epistemic disruption pursued by national, radical-right and far-right populist movements (collectively, “NAPO”). The argument is that this strategy and the tactic of discourse saturation (“flooding the zone”) contribute to radical uncertainty that makes people willingly submit to authoritarian certainty. This strategy is sustained by an eco-system consisting of aligned media, oligarchs and their corporations, religious alliances, transnational networks and, in particular, by social media and technological platforms optimized for outrage. NAPO actors not only abuse the freedoms offered by democratic frameworks but put democracy in jeopardy. Understanding their strategies and tactics is essential for designing countermeasures and for strengthening democratic resilience, or better: for democratic renewal.

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1 The issue

In “this age of radical uncertainty” democracy is in jeopardy. The decline of democracy and rule of law standards in many countries and regions goes hand in hand with a surge or resurgence of national, radical-right and far-right populism (collectively, “NAPO”).

NAPO parties, movements and leaders (“NAPO actors”) not only exploit anxieties, fears and confusion that individuals and societies are faced with, but in fact – through a strategy of epistemic disruption – produce radical uncertainty and accelerate epistemic collapse. Reality itself is contested and subjective “truths” and alternative realities grounded in emotions, beliefs and grievances are advanced.

Disinformation and the tactic of discourse saturation – also made known by Steve Bannon as “flooding the zone with shit”¹ – are core elements of this strategy. The aim is (a) to flood and overwhelm media and the public with a constant stream of scandals, claims and distractions regardless of truth that media, fact-checkers or critics and opponents are not able to catch up with, and (b) to define the public discourse in this manner.

This strategy of epistemic disruption is instrumental to the authoritarian agenda that NAPO actors are pursuing: where societies cannot rely on shared facts and reality, trust media and democratic institutions or engage in reasonable public discourse, they may be prepared to “escape from freedom”, that is, to trade freedom for submission to authoritarian rule as Erich Fromm concluded in 1941.² The collapse of factual truth is a precursor to totalitarianism as Hannah Arendt warned in 1951.³ Or “post-truth is pre-fascism” as Timothy Snyder noted in 2018.⁴ And indeed, indicators of democracy, political freedoms and the rule of law show significant declines where NAPO-governments are in power.

The strategy is effective as demonstrated by the success of the MAGA movement in the USA. In Europe, despite repeated fact-checking and debunking, parties such as Rassemblement National (RN, France), Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Germany), FIDESZ (Hungary), Law and Justice (PiS, Poland), Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR, Romania) or Social Democracy (SMER, Slovakia) continue to command significant electoral support, in some cases attaining or maintaining power.⁵ This trend is particularly striking in regions that only a generation ago emerged from authoritarian rule, such as Czechia, Germany (Eastern “Länder”), Hungary, Poland, Slovakia or Romania.

Understanding these strategies and their tactics is essential for designing more effective countermeasures and for strengthening democratic resilience, or better: democratic renewal.

2 The argument

- 1 While democracy and rule of law standards are declining⁶ – even in countries so far considered to be stable democracies or in countries that escaped from autocracy only a few decades ago – national, radical-right and far-right populism is rising. As

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/16/media/steve-bannon-reliable-sources>

² Fromm, Erich (1941): *Escape from Freedom*. New York.

³ Arendt, Hannah (1951): *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York.

⁴ Snyder, Timothy (2018): *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*.

⁵ Examples are also found in other parts of the world, Brazil, India or Philippines for instance.

⁶ See the Rule of Law Index of the World Justice Project <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>
WJP Rule of Law Index | Global Insights

noted by International IDEA in its report on “The Global State of Democracy”, democracies “are under strain, with unprecedented global declines in judicial independence, press freedom and electoral integrity”. This takes place in the “current global climate of radical uncertainty, exemplified by political developments in the United States”.⁷

- 2 People perceiving radical uncertainty or existential insecurity may seek to “escape from freedom” by submitting to authoritarianism or by conforming to collective ideologies.⁸ Contemporary societies – not only but also in liberal democracies – are again faced with numerous challenges contributing to “existential insecurity” that makes people more willingly trade freedom for authoritarian certainty. These range from economic insecurity and cost of living (“affordability”) crises to challenges related to globalization, migration and shifts in values; distrust in elites and democratic institutions, media and science; wars and global pandemics; social fragmentation; or technological change, including anxieties regarding the impact of artificial intelligence.
- 3 These challenges are accompanied by epistemic crises or collapse, that is, a situation where a shared framework of factual truth and reliable knowledge erodes and where citizens no longer agree on what are facts, evidence, expertise or credible authority.⁹ Without truth, reason, deliberation and trust in institutions (including in results of elections), deliberative public discourse – that is, a rational exchange of ideas, arguments and information among citizens in the public sphere to develop solutions and achieve results for the common good of society, to obtain democratic legitimacy and to hold leaders accountable – is not possible.
- 4 NAPO leaders, parties and movements not only exploit anxieties and real grievances of people but contribute to radical uncertainty as a matter of strategy. In response to such existential uncertainty, NAPO offers:
 - authoritarian certainty as a psychological escape;
 - simplistic and emotionally resonant narratives addressing economic insecurity;
 - mass ideology and group think that help individuals adapt to external expectations;
 - a sense of belonging and identity around nationalism, ethnicity or traditional culture.
- 5 “NAPO” is used here as a provisional term for national, radical-right or far-right populist parties or movements that combine (a) populism (defending “the people” against “the corrupted elite”), (b) exclusionary nationalism or nativism (holding that states should be inhabited only by members of the native group, and that non-native elements (immigrants, minorities) and cosmopolitan elites are threats) and (c) authoritarianism (an emphasis on law and order, strong leadership and conservative traditional values together with anti-pluralism and scepticism towards

⁷ See International IDEA (2025): The Global State of Democracy 2025.

<https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move>

⁸ Fromm, Erich (1941): Escape from Freedom. New York.

⁹ <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/our-epistemological-crisis-2021-04-22>

See also former US president Barack Obama in 2021: “If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what’s true from what’s false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn’t work. And by definition our democracy doesn’t work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis.”

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-obama-fears-for-our-democracy/617087/>

democratic institutions and checks and balances that obstruct the “general will of the people”) with (d) post-truth politics¹⁰ or a strategy of epistemic disruption.¹¹

6 The strategy of epistemic disruption involves, inter alia:

- a mix of radical constructivism and relativism. Constructivism is based on the assumption that there is no “objective reality” but that each person combines sensory stimuli and memory to construct a subjective “reality”. Therefore, describing a situation or development based on “objective facts” makes little sense and is resistant to fact-checking. There is no single truth, and politics is a matter of beliefs and emotions. Radical relativism also claims that there are no universal truths, values or common ground, only subjective perspectives, and any fact or truth can be denied. Similar to cult-like groupings, truth is what the movement, party or its leader say it is;
- tactics such as (a) denial of facts, science or legacy media as fake, opinions or narratives; (b) the construction of identity, in particular of “the real people” vs. “the elite”, migrants, cosmopolitans and other “enemies of the people”; (c) discourse saturation (“flooding”) through constant and high-volume social media posts – often contradictory – spreading mis- and disinformation, fear and conspiracy theories; (d) the creation of narratives and myths, and (e) framing the narrative through stories that are not necessarily based on facts but that shape what followers perceive as real. In this way, NAPO movements are creating constant distractions and are setting the agenda and dominating the headlines of the public discourse;
- deploying this mix of relativism and constructivism as a political strategy not only to create confusion, anxiety and radical uncertainty but to break a foundation of democracy, namely, a shared reality. If everything is constructed or relative, people fall back on identity with and loyalty to the movement and a leader having the monopoly on truth.

7 NAPO movements typically represent leader-centric, personalized structures that revolve around particular political leaders with a strong personal brand. However, their strategy of epistemic disruption is sustained by an eco-system consisting of aligned media, oligarchs and their corporations, religious alliances, transnational networks and, in particular, by social media and technological platforms:

- a Media “synergies”: NAPO leaders, movements and parties tend to be backed by media corporations providing the infrastructure for, and supporting and amplifying NAPO ideology as well as dis- and misinformation. Social media are particularly conducive to NAPO because they permit “direct”, unfiltered communication, by-pass establishment media, serve as echo-chambers, thrive on mis- and disinformation and are optimized for outrage and emotion.¹² Social media furthermore permit circumventing rules on political

¹⁰ [Post-truth politics - Wikipedia](#)

See also Newman, Saul/Conrad, Maximilian (eds.) 2024: Post-truth Populism. A new Political Paradigm. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-64178-7_2

¹¹ According to Kai Hirschmann, the concept of “national populism” not only combines populism, nationalism, anti-globalisation and cultural racism, but also “radical constructivism” (Hirschmann, Kai (2017): Der Aufstieg des Nationalpopulismus. Wie westliche Gesellschaften polarisiert werden. Bonn, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung).

¹² On 1 December 2025, it was announced that “rage-bait” was selected as the Oxford Dictionary “word of the year”.

finances and campaigns or other rules that “legacy” media are subjected to. And finally, they facilitate information operations that interfere with democratic processes. Such interference or the spreading of disinformation is facilitated by “technical” choices,¹³ but political preferences of their owners may also play a role, raising concerns about “tweaking” of algorithms. Social media platforms are not necessarily neutral technical tools used by NAPO actors but may in some instances be agents of NAPO.

- b Oligarchs: NAPO movements often receive substantial financing from wealthy individuals or corporations, or are even led by extremely wealthy persons. It is paradoxical that movements claiming to defend the interests of the “ordinary man” against the “corrupted elite” are bankrolled by oligarchs and corporate interests, that is, the elite. Oligarchs supporting NAPO receive a return in investment in the form of policies that serve their own interests, that increase inequality and that leave low-income populations worse off.
- c Religious alliances: A number of churches and religious movements are either explicitly or implicitly aligned with NAPO movements, in particular with respect to issues like nationalism, migration, gender, abortion and the defence of Christian or traditional values. Christian churches and movements share a common agenda with NAPO with respect to Christian nationalism, defence of moral traditions (“family values”, opposition to abortion, anti-LGBT), and anti-immigration combined with Islamophobia. NAPO benefits from this authoritarian symbiosis in terms of legitimacy and mobilization at the grassroots, while religious movements and institution gain political influence and protection.
- d Foreign support: Russia has been interfering with elections and democratic processes in favour of NAPO not only in the USA but also in Europe and elsewhere not only through cybercrime and information operations, but also financially, through civil society and religious channels, and other support to NAPO and radical actors. However, foreign support to NAPO movements is not limited to countries and regimes hitherto considered adversaries. The MAGA movement, including aligned media, foundations, think tanks, religious networks and donors have extended their reach and are supporting like-minded movements abroad, including in Europe. The US National Security Strategy, published in December 2025, makes “cultivating resistance to Europe’s current trajectory within European nations” by supporting far-right movements in Europe official policy.

- 8 The strategy is also successful because NAPO actors are exploiting a fundamental paradox that social media create for systems of representative democracy: social media are not only permitting “direct” democracy but are also fuelling populism.¹⁴

<https://edition.cnn.com/2025/12/01/world/rage-bait-oxford-word-of-the-year-intl-scli>

¹³ Such as levels of identity verification, automated account detection, detection of coordinated inauthentic behaviour or bot-fuelled content amplification, removal of fake accounts, etc.

¹⁴ Note: Concerns of populism, nationalism and mis- or disinformation by demagogues threatening democracy have been raised ever since democracy was invented in ancient Greece some 2500 years ago. Many thinkers ever since have been cautious regarding systems of direct democracy. Concerns included tyranny by a majority suppressing minority rights, factions capturing powers, populists mobilising the masses based on passions and momentary emotions and disinformation, or simple slogans replacing differentiated solutions to complex challenges.

Modern liberal democracies are, therefore, representative democracies where people elect representatives as their intermediaries to deliberate, prepare and vote on laws and exercise power. The power of these

Social media enable politicians to take populist short-cuts, that is, to bypass parliaments, their own parties and checks and balances to claim a direct mandate from “the people”; to spread disinformation faster than corrections are possible; to feed echo chambers amplifying like-minded views, thus increasing polarization and shrinking the space for compromise; and to replace reasoned parliamentary reflections and deliberations to solve complex challenges with impulsive outrage. In short, while social media permit more democratic participation, they help bypass the protections of representative democracies against populism and may serve as a wrecking ball against the foundations of representative democracy.

It is no surprise that the “success” of NAPO movements is due to a large extent to their mastering of platforms such as Twitter/X or TikTok. Established political parties, media and democratic institutions are at pain competing with a populist strategy making use of social media and similar platforms for their strategy of epistemic disruption. Paradoxically, established political parties are perceived as formal and hierarchical while NAPO movements present themselves as participatory and democratic.¹⁵

Under the guise of “free speech”, NAPO movements reject measures to regulate platforms and to counter disinformation, hate speech and similar that interfere with their strategy of epistemic disruption.

- 9 The strategy deploys methods of political psychology and propaganda that makes people receptive to disinformation and outright falsehoods. Messaging (a) is high-volume and multi-channel and is thus more persuasive and suggesting wider endorsement; (b) is rapid, continuous and repetitive, turning first impressions into familiarity and acceptance; (c) makes no commitment to objective reality and truth, and is undercutting perceptions of reality; (d) is not committed to consistency with contradictions enhancing confidence by suggesting consideration of different perspectives.¹⁶
- 10 NAPO actors not only abuse the freedoms offered by democratic frameworks but put democracy in jeopardy. They are pushing boundaries, are corroding liberal norms and foster a slide towards authoritarian, autocratic or fascist forms of governance. Surveys on human rights and rule of law standards show significant declines in countries while NAPO movements are in power.

NAPO actors in power work to weaken or doing away with democratic institutions and guardrails, from removing or replacing independent judges and oversight bodies, to exercising control over academia and media, and controlling elections. They weaponize justice systems for populist persecutions of political opponents, journalists, academia, civil society organizations and other critical voices.

NAPO movements pursue strategies for regime change that are often insidious and not always visible to and understood by the public at large. NAPO actors in parliament or power systematically destabilize and undermine the existence and

representatives and of the majority is constrained by constitutions, independent courts and rule of law principles.

¹⁵ See the reflections by Elad Nehorai: “the Democrats lost because they were less democratic than the fascists”. <https://eladnehorai.substack.com/p/21st-century-fascism-is-democratic>

¹⁶ This argument is based on [The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It | RAND](#)

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legitimacy of institutions of pluralist societies (from media to education, courts and cultural institutions). Questioning the “political neutrality” of democratic institutions serves as an all-purpose weapon in this context. Culture (superiority of national culture), politics (nativism, national identity) and the economy (nationalism) are their battlefields. Issues are emotionalized and negative stereotypes are communicated aggressively through social media.¹⁷

At a minimum, this erosion of democratic norms, processes and institutions results in democratic backsliding. It may also lead to illiberal democracy (a system that keeps the form of electoral democracy, but erodes the substance of liberal democracy, that is, the rule of law, separation of powers, minority rights, free media). Or as a consequence of the strategy of epistemic disruption – aimed at removing a shared reality and trust in media and democratic institutions – it could result in a collapse of democracy and in outright authoritarianism, fascism or totalitarianism.

- 11 The use of artificial intelligence will further fuel NAPO and epistemic disruption. In 2000 and 2004, segmentation and data-driven micro-targeting of voters helped George W. Bush become president of the USA. From 2013 to 2018, Cambridge Analytica acquired personal data for psychographic segmentation and micro-targeting to influence and manipulate voters, inter alia, in US elections and the UK “Brexit” referendum. Modern AI-driven persuasion models are going much further in terms of continuous and dynamic political messaging, emotional framing and cognitive mapping, in blurring the lines between facts and fiction, in manufacturing opinions and “consensus” or in terms of automated amplification of NAPO narratives through inauthentic accounts, avatars, bots or “tweaked” algorithms. The fact that powerful and extremely wealthy leaders of tech companies (“broligarchs”) are supportive of NAPO is highly problematic.¹⁸

3 Conclusion

To summarize the above:

- The rise of national, radical right, and far-right populism – collectively termed here NAPO – puts democracy in jeopardy. While NAPO may still be operating within democratic frameworks, NAPO movements are corroding democratic norms and institutions, and they pave the way for authoritarian or autocratic forms of governance.
- This rise goes hand in hand with – and is caused to a large extent by – radical uncertainty perceived by people in many societies. NAPO movements not only exploit but contribute to such radical uncertainty through a strategy of epistemic

¹⁷ See the example of Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland (AfD):

Frankenberg, Günter/Heitmeyer, Wilhelm (eds.) (2025): *Autoritäre Treiber eines Systemwechsels – Zur Destabilisierung von Institutionen durch die AfD*. Frankfurt/New York.

<https://www.campus.de/buecher-campus-verlag/wissenschaft/autoritaere-treiber-eines-systemwechsels-18654.html>

¹⁸ A vast share of social media and AI platforms is controlled by a rather small number of companies, and these companies, in turn, are controlled by a small number of chief executives, majority share-holders or investors holding enormous power. It would seem to be paradoxical that persons driven by what is a rather elitist and cosmopolitan “[Silicon Valley ideology](#)” tend to support NAPO. The likely reasons are that they share hostility to government and regulation, value the disruption of traditional elites, champion freedom for innovation without ethical or legal constraints, because platform populism is good for business and because in this manner they gain political power and influence.

disruption. Their strategy is successful in that it makes people willingly trade freedom for authoritarian certainty. And it is particularly subversive. The collapse of factual truth is a precursor of totalitarianism (as Hanna Arendt has observed).¹⁹

- This strategy is based on the concept that reality, knowledge, and meaning are actively built by human minds and societies, while facts and objective truths are of limited or no relevance and can be doubted or denied. Those who have the ability to construct or shape shared meanings, that is, a shared reality, also have the power.
- The approach is to “flood the zone” with a constant stream of falsehoods, scandals, claims and distractions regardless of truth that media, fact checkers and critics are not able to catch up with, and to set the agenda and define the public discourse in this manner.
- The strategy of epistemic disruption is sustained by a transnational ecosystem comprising in particular owners or controllers of social media platforms, oligarchs, religious institutions, influencers and disinformation networks as well as foreign powers. What unites them is not a coherent ideology but a shared utility in dismantling pluralism, eroding trust in democratic institutions, and normalizing authoritarianism for their own political and economic benefit and to the detriment of the people that NAPO actors claim to speak for.
- The use of artificial intelligence is further amplifying the erosion of trust in democracy and epistemic collapse. The fact that owners and executives of major tech companies are among the main supporters of NAPO movements is highly problematic. Again: where people are not only influenced but rely on social media and information technology, including AI, to understand reality, those who control such platforms and their algorithms have the means to shape realities.

The implications of all of this for counter strategies and measures aimed at protecting democracy and fundamental rights require further analysis, debate and action. Some pointers for further reflection:

- Expanding and rendering more effective measures to counter disinformation, fact-checking and pre- or debunking falsehoods. Such measures may not necessarily reach those that are already members of NAPO-cults but can prevent more people from joining.
- Further protecting elections and other institutions, processes and systems that are critical for democracy against interference through cybercrime and information operations (including Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference, FIMI) based on lessons learned in recent years.
- Regulating platforms and holding them accountable for failures and non-compliance through enforcement.²⁰ The more platforms disregard guidance on self-regulation and shed content moderation, fact-checking and other guardrails, the

¹⁹ Arendt, Hannah (1951): *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York.

²⁰ In the European Union, in particular with the Digital Services Act, the General Data Protection Regulation and the new EU Regulation 2024/900 on political advertising that became applicable in October 2025. These regulations are likely to inspire legislation beyond the European Union (“Brussels effect”).

more they need to be regulated.²¹ Regulations and their enforcement are in particular needed to mitigate new risks to democracy caused by artificial intelligence.

- Increased emphasis on researching and exposing the authoritarian agenda of NAPO movements and their insidious ways of delegitimizing and dismantling institutions of democracy.
- Exposing the eco-system that sustains NAPO and ensuring transparency of actors and financial sponsors – and their vested interests – that are supporting populist movements claiming to speak for the regular people while, de facto, increasing inequality and fostering oligarchy.
- Reforming rules governing political parties, elections and election campaigns – including in particular rules on political financing – that were created for an “analogue” world, and adapting them to the digital environment.

But this is not enough. The need for comprehensive, whole-of-society approaches has been recognized. In 2025, European organizations launched initiatives to counter authoritarianism and democratic backsliding and strengthen democratic resilience, that is, the European Union’s “Democracy Shield”²² and “EU Strategy for Civil Society” and the Council of Europe’s “New Democratic Pact”²³. Aims include rebuilding trust in democratic institutions, boosting citizens’ engagement, ensuring free and fair elections, protecting independent media and pluralism, and others. “Safeguarding the integrity of the information space” and holding platforms to account while protecting the freedom of expression, will be of particular importance.

Proposals have also been made by scholars specifically “addressing epistemic collapse and renewing democracy” through a “coordinated framework that strengthens verification, deliberation, and accountability across society”.²⁴

Further reflection and action are needed. It is not sufficient to protect democratic institutions and processes and to strengthen their resilience in their current form. While the core principles of democracy remain the same, institutions and processes of democracy must be renewed and adapted. Innovative solutions are needed to strengthen trust in democracy as the political system that can perform and deliver for the common good also in the digital age.

²¹ Reactions to such measures by some NAPO actors confirm that countering disinformation and holding platforms accountable are perceived as threats to their strategy.

²² https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2660

²³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/new-democratic-pact-for-europe>

²⁴ See Higgins, Eliot/Martin, Natalie (2025): Verification, deliberation, accountability: A new framework for tackling epistemic collapse and renewing democracy. DEMOS. [VDA Epistemic-Security paper October.pdf](#)