

Deep State Conspiracism and/as Disinformation: A Journey to the Heart of Democracy's Truth Crisis

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This article explores deep state (DS) conspiracism's ambiguous relationship with disinformation. Applying cross-cultural discourse analysis and genealogical methods to the divergent valorizations of DS narratives, the study shows how they portray it variously as disinformation, misinformation, sinister actuality, mythological truth, and conceptual tool, arguing this inconsistency impels us to relocate disinformation from a universalist realm of false content to a contingent world of reciprocal political meaning making and outlining a more epistemologically robust approach to the truth-democracy relationship.

Keywords: deep state, conspiracism, disinformation, discourse analysis, democracy

Deep State, Democracy, and the Disinformation Abyss

True to his 2024 presidential campaign promises, Donald Trump followed his decisive victory with swift action to "dismantle the Deep State" and, invoking free-speech principles, defund counter-disinformation activities (Gedeon, 2025, para. 1). The sanctioning by democracy's global figurehead of conspiracy theories and disinformation, its perceived nemesis, was welcomed by anti-establishment insurgents, autocrats, and, in diluted form, mainstream-right politicians across Europe, where deep state (DS) narratives gained new footholds. For many, America's president was "at war with the truth" (Ellison, 2024, para. 15), democracy apparently hurtling into an epistemological abyss, embracing an untruth antithetical to it, and redispersing that untruth to the discursive and geopolitical peripheries that spawned it.

This article challenges such accounts, notwithstanding their consonance with settled democratic values, by elucidating DS's perplexing relationship with disinformation. Applying genealogical and discourse analytical methods to the divergent valorizations and distinctive metaconspiratorial function of DS discourses, I show how they portray it variously as disinformation, misinformation, sinister actuality, symbolic truth, and conceptual tool. I argue that this inconsistency impels us to relocate disinformation from

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a universalist realm of false content to a contingent world of political meaning making that is dynamic, reciprocal, and dialogic. By relating the shifts to cultural, discursive, geopolitical, and temporal border migrations, and pinpointing the U.S.-Russia axis galvanized by “Russia-Gate” as constitutive of DS’s contested status, I trace its complex, self-renewing journey to and from its Trumpian apotheosis point. I clarify this point’s significance for an enduring truth-telling democracy/lying autocracy mythology (Ellul, 1965; Lippman, 1922), epitomized in mainstream responses to Russia-Gate, outlining an egress from the abyss and a pathway to a more robust approach to the truth-democracy relationship.

Trump’s twin target—DS itself and counter-disinformation actors naming it a false narrative—reflects a single mission; disinformation analysts are complicit in a “DS conspiracy” against democratic liberty. Those analysts have alternatively interpreted conspiracy theories as disinformation, assigned them to the affiliate misinformation category, or merely sidelined them. This ambivalence reflects conspiracism’s fluctuating reception (from baneful reality to fantastical falsehood; between disinformation and misinformation). Meanwhile, counter-disinformation’s own contrasting connotations combine democratic bulwark with state repressor, the latter assuming both antiseuritization left and anticancel-culture right variants. DS’s distinctive hermeneutic value crystallizes in these conundrums. First, Trump’s weaponization of its capacity to foreground the modern state’s opacity propels it to the heart of the democratic “crisis.” Second, the potency of its status shifts and instability within counter-disinformation typologies highlights the invertible values of the epistemology underpinning both mainstream political descriptions of the crisis and its populist exploitation (Trump flips fanciful DS “conspiracies” into electorally validated “truths”).

To unravel the conundrums, I explore DS’s migrations (across boundaries of truth status, time, discourse, language, geopolitics, and media space) and the meanings each peregrination accords it. By explicating the cross-border dynamic sustaining DS narratives, I link their contingent meanings to democracy’s performative notion of truth and to the need for clearer articulations of the latter’s relationship with facts, knowledge, and belief. I address three questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How does DS’s trajectory explain its dual function as a global media constant and a source of new, local meanings, whether calqued or as affiliated notions?*
- RQ2: What are the relationships between DS as an umbrella concept and explicit referential term, trope and (putatively) concrete reality, and political heuristic and explanatory master narrative for disinformation purveyors and counter-disinformation actors?*
- RQ3: How can attention to DS’s ambiguous epistemological status and discursive mobility reframe broader understandings of democracy’s “truth crisis”?*

Conspiracism in Context

Deceptive practice taxonomies feature conspiracy theories inconsistently and with minimal explication. When included, they sometimes feature as a variant of narrative-based disinformation promulgating unfounded rumors (Makaia, 2022). Elsewhere, their unverifiability and the genuine, if

irrational, suspicions motivating them fail disinformation's deliberate falsification criterion, placing them at its nexus with misinformation (Misinformation vs Disinformation, 2025).

Conspiracy theories themselves have an extensive, expertly surveyed literature (Butter & Knight, 2018), covering their pathological (Hofstadter, 1995) and societal (Uscinski & Parent, 2014) origins, the political and populist affiliations of their advocates (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), their epistemological merits (Dentith, 2014) and flaws (Keeley, 1999), narrative logic (Butter, 2021), and dissemination modes (Stano, 2020). Their precise articulation with disinformation, however, remains a blind spot, which I fill by focusing on conspiracism's conceptual malleability, rejecting analyses inspired by "crippled epistemology" condemnations of it (Popper, 2002), along with popular accounts consigning it to a world of bad actors and gullible dupes (Spring, 2024). Instead, I emphasize the "conspiratorial mode's" centrality to everyday discourse (Borenstein, 2019, pp. 30–53) and its role in uncovering nontransparent governance (Fenster, 2008).

Regarding DS specifically, Berg (2023) traces left-right political appropriations of its tropes. Bergmann (2024) summarizes their prominence as political insurgency tools. Tuters and Willaert (2022) interpret notions of an elite plot against democratic freedom as a master narrative—an all-embracing metaconspiracy. Rather than instantiating a generalized conspiracism, DS is the Hegelian "member" that devours its own "species." Moreover, its lurid intimations of diabolic machinations involving figures foreign to the authentic "people" epitomize the othering function driving all conspiracism, but also, as Debord (1989) argues, counter-disinformation's own accusatory logic (enabling DS to subsume not only its own species, but the larger genus including it as an object of study). Thus, the Freudian slip in frequent abbreviations of "conspiracy theories" to "conspiracies" betrays a tension between implicit criticism of and indulgence in conspiracism (those branding anti-DS warriors as conspiracists regularly highlight the latter's implication in a suspected Russia-Gate conspiracy).

Trump intuitively DS's multilayered othering effects, as do Kremlin-affiliated actors who borrow its narratives for foreign manipulation purposes, while referencing them as a sincere, if misguided, explanation for Western antipathy to Russia. DS links domestic and foreign targets of disinformation narratives in a circular process. Alien intrastate forces converge conceptually, sometimes empirically, with external states, making DS theories expedient to domestic and foreign exponents alike, but also to counter-disinformation operatives. MAGA fans revile "un-American" DS plotters; the Kremlin condemns their "anti-Russian" hatred. For disinformation analysts, this malign misappropriation indicates antidemocratic populist collusion with Putin, an accusation that reconfirms Kremlin suspicions of America's Russophobic DS.

The latter examples reveal how DS highlights the contextuality of all disinformation discourses and the meaning shifts that disinformation practices undergo as they cross temporal, linguacultural, and geopolitical borders (Tolz et al., 2025). They also illuminate the epistemological cul-de-sac into which conventional concepts of disinformation lead. The onus on positivist disproof—Trump's DS paranoia lends his outlandish claims to evidence-led takedowns—encounters disinformation's entanglement with political meaning making. A 2020 Ipsos poll records 54% of Americans "very concerned about . . . false information," yet 40% believing "a DS is working to undermine Trump" (Ipsos, 2020). By providing a multidimensional

history of DS conspiracism (RQs 1–2) that explains the complexity of its relationship with disinformation (RQ3), I account for such paradoxes and their political implications.

From Genealogy to Epistemology

I address RQ1 through a genealogy targeting significant points in a tortuous, nonlinear journey. This informs my approach to RQs 2–3 by clarifying DS’s multifaceted discourse status as concept and term, narrative and master narrative, trope and reality, and by showing how such complexity exposes the consequences of treating DS as disinformation and as a specific assault on democratic “truthfulness.”

With time for only one DS frontier, I eschew rigidly chronological interpretations of its winding path. Since the U.S. populist (domestic)/Kremlin (foreign) othering axis drives DS discourse’s association with disinformation, I first establish its generation at the intersection of anglophone and Russian contexts. I then survey coverage of Kremlin-linked DS content by counter-disinformation units, especially the European Union’s East Stratcom Taskforce (ESTF), which consolidated DS’s disinformation status, highlighting key moments in its cross-border dynamic. Prompted by a single ESTF database entry, I present my core genealogy via historical DS occurrences in key national language corpora (American English, Russian, French), together with relevant numerical data and source details. Finally, I delve deeper into DS’s multicultural journey, prioritizing the critical anglophone-Russophone nexus, then switching from U.S. to UK examples. The conclusion assembles my cross-sectional mosaic of the discursive arenas and usage contexts fostering DS allegations, clarifying the implications for democracy’s perceived truth crisis.

I scrutinize my material through three complementary lenses from qualitative discourse analysis. First, addressing the sociocultural negotiation of DS meanings within communication acts, I interpret discourse as communicative practice “which constructs social identities, social relations and the knowledge and meaning systems of the social world” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 12). I prioritize lexicon and genre choices (a political speech with persuasion purposes functions differently from an allegation othering a specific “elite” and from a tweet coded to rally an online community), discourse type (DS paranoia can operate through metaphoric comparison or constative assertion), and level (it serves alternatively as concept, narrative, and master narrative). I identify dialogic features discernible at the microlevel, where DS allegations address the other’s voice polemically (the allegation undermines political legitimacy claims), preemptively (by anticipating counter-allegations criticizing evidence-free DS hysteria), or for authentication (the term’s far-right currency valorizes it).

Secondly, at the macrolevel, the dialogic dynamic mirrors Lotman’s (1990) five-stage account of intracultural development driven by cross-cultural exchange, which clarifies local variance in DS narratives and their resistance to universalization:

1. The texts from the outside keep their “strangeness” . . . They hold a high position in the scale of values.

2. Both principles—the “imported” texts and the “home” culture—restructure each other . . . The “new” is . . . interpreted as an organic continuation of the old, which is thus rehabilitated.
3. The idea takes hold that “over there” these ideas were realized in an “untrue” . . . form and that “here” . . . they will find their true heartland.
4. The imported texts are . . . dissolved in the receiving culture.
5. The receiving culture . . . changes into a transmitting culture and issues . . . a flood of texts directed to . . . peripheral areas. (Lotman, 1990, pp. 146–147)

Thirdly, because the truth in question is an antitruth (“disinformation”), yet via its concealment rhetoric, resists empirical disproval, DS, conceptually and discursively, embraces epistemological tensions, discussion of which (RQ3) is informed by political philosophy (Arendt, 1968; Grossberg, 2018) and propaganda theory (Ellul, 1965; Lippmann, 1922). I stress the need to differentiate facts from knowledge and truth as a transcendent authority and to appreciate the insight that democrats balk at the “despotic character” of irrefutable truths brooking no dissent (Arendt, 1968, pp. 227, 241).

The “Truth(s)” About DS

Growing fears of a shady DS elite coalesced definitively around Trump’s 2016 presidential bid, triggered, as Gatehouse (2024) documents, by reciprocal liberal suspicions of the Russia-Gate conspiracy. Traveling rapidly eastward, they were echoed by Kremlin propagandists, hybridized with a separate “global elites” conspiracy featured in Russia’s depictions of Ukraine as an instrument of U.S.-led DS operatives. Remigrating westward, DS acquired an unambiguous false status; the ESTF disinformation database alleges over 400 Russia-attributed instances, providing an explanatory gloss and graphic associating DS with a supremely mendacious Kremlin (Figure 1). Prominent in the nonstate-affiliated EU Disinfo Lab disinformation glossary, it was also labeled a leading COVID-19 conspiracy by CNN and the BBC.



Figure 1. ESTF's DS graphic (EU vs Disinfo, n.d.).

Counter-disinformation examples surged after Russia-Gate. Hamilton 68—a U.S.-affiliated counter-disinformation unit—observed in 2018 that of the 113 articles most shared by a Kremlin-linked Twitter network pushing #DS hashtags as an online community-building tactic, 38% directly promoted DS (Schwartz, 2018). Kremlin war propaganda reduced Ukraine to a tool of sinister, U.S.-coordinated forces, often expressed without reference to DS, whose conceptual umbrella function, however, earned it a lengthy new ESTF rebuttal. Similarly, the liberal-leaning *The Hill* misrepresented Putin's 2019 state-of-the-nation speech attacking American elites as an explicit critique of DS, a term Putin avoided (Burke, 2019), having earlier applied DS frames to a book about Putin's influence on Trumpism, lacking any mention of DS (Wise, 2018). *Le Monde's* assessment of Russia's Ukraine war disinformation, meanwhile, showed how QAnon celebrations of Putin as a DS scourge and liberator of Ukraine from its DS captors instrumentalize term-to-concept transgression for populist agendas (Audureau, 2023). DS's multidirectional concept-term confluences thus inform related geopolitical migrations.

DS's mutable status transcends the Trump-Putin axis. It was previously invoked by archcentrists battling recalcitrant governmental apparatuses. While Blair reportedly lambasted the United Kingdom's DS in 2010, before Trump toxified the term, his albeit less sensationalist rhetorical intention nonetheless complicated the theory's tarnished reputation. When Macron reused it in 2019 (Endeweld, 2020), Trump's literalist absurdities were already familiar. Macron could, however, claim he was exploiting DS as a trope for real obstacles.

The DS phenomenon confirms how a story's status as disinformation ("untrue"), conspiracy theory ("unverified"), plausible plot, or valid conceptual tool shifts across boundaries of time, language, cultural and geopolitical context, media space (mainstream/marginal), and discursive function (term, meme, concept, constative allegation, explanatory narrative, master narrative, rhetorical trope). Border crossings determine whether/when the story becomes, or ceases being, "false," reaffirming the imperative to rethink counter-disinformation principles, my guiding aim henceforth.

Emergence and Transcultural Variation

A representative 2021 ESTF database item provides my cue (EU vs Disinfo, 2021). It identifies a Kremlin-affiliated publication's false claim that post-war America ceded power to ex-Nazi criminals, who formed a covert DS that sought world dominion in a mission preventable only by a revitalized USSR (EU vs Disinfo, 2021, paras. 1–2). The ESTF item is accompanied by a standard rebuttal noting that evidence is lacking, that the "secret liberal elites" idea "informs multiple Kremlin conspiracy narratives," and that DS normally references anglophone elites, characterized as "crypto-fascists," to signal Russian civilization's Soviet-inspired moral superiority (paras. 3–6).

Here, as elsewhere, DS is elided with a "global elite" narrative assigned by ESTF to a separate category. Moreover, the U.S. link conveniently corresponds to the media environment in which DS paranoia attained prominence and to America's hegemonic status. ESTF's summary reveals the importance of attributing to grand conspiracy narratives origins sufficiently cryptic to render them nondisprovable, yet ESTF's assertion that evidence is lacking is doubly tautologous (state secrecy necessarily entails withheld evidence; conspiracism invariably prioritizes circumstantial or corroborative clues over documentary proof). The Soviet references confirm how international conspiracies are inflected with locally resonant narratives.

Strikingly, the single story referenced in the entry targets "the West's move toward digital fascism" (Baranchik, 2021, para. 1). The article (from a Russian government-hosted website) begins by describing widespread fears over personal data access. It expands to include forced vaccinations and degenerate "gender ideologies." The last sentence contains one fleeting reference to "*glubinnoe gosudarstvo*" (DS) as a characterization of the "crypto-fascists" responsible for these ills. Notably, the article is an op-ed replete with rhetorical flourishes: "So, what's going on in the world? You can't call it anything other than crypto-fascism . . . What is it, if not ideology? . . . So, who is behind all of this?" (paras. 6–11). Moreover, the author distances himself from the historical conspiracy theory, deploying the qualifying phrase "there is a version of events according to which" (*est' versii*; para. 11). The article is thus doubly bracketed, as a polemic less answerable to impartiality standards than a news report and as an account attributed to another party, albeit approvingly. This, together with DS's use as a belated conceptual reference point—not a core,

demonstrable deception—undermines the item’s disinformation status and the direct link made between that status and DS.

Since relevant ESTF database entries showcase the encounter of Russian media space with the anglophone environment from which DS narratives seemingly emerged, a historical overview of the term’s occurrence in the respective national language corpora precedes my closer reading of its cross-cultural journeys. A search for DS within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) generated 286 results dating to 1991. However, all six pre-2000 instances reference patients in mentally detrimental “deep states.” Of nine instances occurring between 2000 and 2010, most cited medical conditions. I will revisit the homonymic duality of “state” in some European languages. Here, I observe only that all three political instances reflect Turkish uses of DS, confirming that the American reports were consciously translating the term, often with skeptical commentary. In one example, the journal *International Affairs* noted that in Turkey, “each day the media probes what is euphemistically referred to as ‘DS’ and seeks to expose the vast network of corruption” (Kasaba & Bozdogan, 2000, p. 19). DS’s function as a euphemism for societal corruption indicates how, yet to penetrate anglophone consciousness, it was assimilated to adjacent concepts for comprehension (Lotman’s stage 1). Between 2011 and 2016, COCA’s DS instances overwhelmingly involved the political phenomenon. Now, Turkish examples are supplemented by references to political speeches in the Middle East and Pakistan. Still, however, the term features solely in the reported speech of foreign others.

A 2014 Iranian example from the *Christian Science Monitor* shows how, after traversing the Middle East, DS was infiltrating U.S. right-wing circles: “The Iranian journalist explains . . . ‘People speak of the “Deep State” in Turkey. I think we have one of our own here.’ And like the Republicans . . . in the US, whoever talks tough . . . can steal the agenda” (Peterson, 2014, para. 22).

From 2017 to 2019, DS instances spiked, with 164 (over half) occurring in this period, which followed Trump’s populist weaponization of the term. Many appeared on Fox News or other alt-right media outlets, whose COCA coverage, however, is sparse. Unsurprisingly, therefore, an equal number of post-2016 DS references reflect mainstream media critiques of the term (*Mother Jones*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Daily Beast*, NBC, and CNN). Moreover, during 2017–2019, the conspiracy entered the disinformation zone, as in this *Mother Jones* claim:

The right-wing disinformation machine began cranking out . . . its DS conspiracy theory, claiming the former vice president was part of a government cabal that cooked up a supposedly phony Trump-Russia scandal to keep the . . . celebrity from gaining the White House. (Corn, 2019, para. 1)

Crucially, then, the propulsion of DS narratives to the forefront of U.S. right-wing mythology, and their acquisition of disinformation status among U.S. progressives, was simultaneous and reciprocal. The process was, as illustrated, powered by controversies surrounding the purported relationship between DS’s primary advocate, Trump, and a Russian state of Cold War deception lineage. A COCA-listed Fox News instance illustrates how the Russia dimension provides the axis on which contrasting treatments of DS conspiracism turn (a legitimate concern about Russia-related obsessions distracting voters from the

"true" internal threat to America; disinformation masking antidemocratic Trump/Putin collusion). In her opening monologue, the show's host characterized the Russia-Gate controversy engulfing Trump as a DS concoction (Ingraham, 2019).

ESTF's umbrella notion of DS, enabling it to generate 400+ examples, is belied by the meager presence of explicit DS accusations within Russia's media environment. Searches of its National Language Corpus for 2017–2022 revealed 23 instances, all concerning news reports or commentaries on American usages, with the Russian translation (*glubinnoe gosudarstvo*) in quotation marks. Even Kremlin sources such as *Izvestiia* used awkward formulations like "the so-called 'Deep State'" (*tak nazyvaemoe 'glubokoe, ili glubinnoe gosudarstvo'*). The connection between awareness of the term's foreignness and the conviction that it designates a reality, interculturally transposable and distinct from local formulations, is instructive, as is the lack of evidence that it has spread to domestic Russian media, other than in reports on U.S. developments. Thus, DS usage traceable, according to ESTF, to Russian state actors are attributed primarily to anglophone Kremlin proxies or Russian-affiliated foreign-language broadcasters.

No Russian media elaborations invoke the native, but divergent, term "state-within-a-state" (*gosudarstvo v gosudarstve*); a discrete entity within a larger isomorphic structure differs conceptually from a subversive group closeted at a structure's core. Russia's National Corpus features significantly more "state-within-a-state" examples. Many of the 83 instances date to the 19th century, covering novels, philosophical writings, political treatises, and both dissident and pro-state media outlets. Meaning variation vastly exceeds that for DS, suggesting that "state-within-a-state" is an adaptable trope, not a description of concrete forces undermining elected authorities; many examples are in quotes or preceded by the qualifier "a kind of" (*svoego roda*), underscoring the concept's figurative status. Just as DS entries do not reference "state-within-a-state," so the latter avoid mentioning DS. Nonetheless, a 2018 BBC radio program about DS indiscriminately fused the concepts when analyzing Russian usages (Aaronovich, 2018).

Although full cross-national comparison is inhibited by differences in corpus source bases, broad patterns emerge. For example, the French translation of DS (*état profond*) is well-embedded in the language. The French web corpus (Fr TenTen) alone generated 10,099 occurrences. Of these, most reference the political phenomenon, though *état profond*'s longstanding psychological meaning in French and English suggests that homonymic duality eased the newer political meaning's entry into European languages. French conspiratorial usages reflect three stages: those associated with translations of, or reportage on, the term's spread among Trump supporters; those from 2018–2019, when mainstream French newspapers debated Macron's putative French DS; and 2019–2024, when alt-right French media began promoting the notion. In 2020, a French conspiracy blogger attributed the "plandemic" to big pharma and the global DS, marking the narrative's full assimilation (Cristalain, 2020).

Significant Milestones

I now highlight milestones in DS's infiltration of specific political cultures. DS's most salient ideational precursors date to the 1960s, when notions of the CIA as America's "invisible government," first mooted by Wise and Ross (1964), fueled both the left's growing moral resentment at U.S. imperial overreach and nascent conservative critiques of big government's untrammelled power. U.S. scandals, including

Kennedy's assassination, Vietnam War-related narco-trafficking, and, subsequently, suspicions about 9/11's authenticity, were accompanied by a new lexicon of "parastate," "para-politics," and "shadow" or "clandestine" government, targeting the U.S. state's covert operations from both left and right perspectives. Thus, the affiliated term "military-industrial complex," often wrongly ascribed to a 1961 Eisenhower speech, originates in an earlier left-leaning sociological work detailing the interwoven interests of U.S. military, political, and corporate elites (Wright Mills, 1959). As further evidence of this conceptual nexus's persistent ideological pliability, progressive journalist Bill Moyers' 1987 "secret government" exposé of the Iran-Contra scandal emerged coterminously with Reaganite narratives decrying the sinister workings of the federal government and influenced by the ultra-conservative John Birch Society, whose extreme Cold War paranoia Reagan had spurned to facilitate his antigovernment agenda's entry into the mainstream.

DS, which became the master signifier of this semiotic complex only in the 21st century's second decade, originated as a calque on the Turkish *derin devlet* (literally "deep state"). First used in the 1970s, *derin devlet* drew on widespread assumptions that Turkey was "established by individuals who had helped form a 'state-within-a-state' during the late Ottoman Empire" (Gingeras, 2019, para. 4) and was prone to intrastate conspiracies. DS's pristine Turkish meaning thus already incorporates elements of the state-within-a-state notion with which some Western commentators later conflated it. President Erdogan capitalized on DS's newfound global currency when responding to the attempted 2016 coup against him. The term travelled to the anglophone world via American academic Peter Scott, who attended a 2006 international conference on parapolitics and shadow governance, where a Norwegian scholar, Ola Tunander, analyzed clandestine terrorist attacks in Cold War Italy through a DS lens (Gingeras, 2019, para. 15). Scott, who had already conceived his 1993 book, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK*, within DS's conceptual scope, wrote two further books applying Olander's usage to America, first within a broader critique of its "second order government" (Scott, 2007, p. 162), then more overtly as the titular concept encapsulating the latter notion's symbolic meaning (Scott, 2014). This later iteration was readapted for Alex Jones and Steve Bannon's anti-establishment insurgency, spreading throughout a far-right ecosystem obsessed by a "liberal elite" bent on "destroying America" (Gingeras, 2019). Thus, DS's achievement of master signifier status reflects (i) its metaphorical potency, (ii) its expediency to the ascendant MAGA movement, (iii) its infusion with latent Cold War associations (its function as a dialogical riposte to fears of Russia's designs on fallible democratic leaders, amplified by its adoption as a Kremlin "disinformation" narrative), and (iv) its capacity to subsume the ideological heterogeneity of its precursors (a heterogeneity that, as I show, later resurfaces).

The period when DS "liberal establishment" conspiracies began circulating was transitional. They gained momentum in the American right-wing ecosystem, whose reach extends to mainstream Republicanism (Peck, 2018), and were adopted by QAnon as a metanarrative to unify allegations of clandestine pedophile rings, Democratic plots to install a Clinton dictatorship, and, later, fears of state-instigated COVID-19 restrictions. Concurrently, respectable scholars still applied the term analytically to multiple national contexts, including military power in Greece, where the locally familiar *parakratos* ("parastate") was translated by academic and former Greek minister Yannis Varoufakis as "Deep Establishment" for a context in which he was targeting nonstate, EU-wide structures (Varoufakis, 2017); enduring Thai army influence; the overthrow of Morsi's Egyptian government; and Pakistan's intelligence apparatus. By now, the two usages (conspiratorial/analytical-conceptual) were in dialogue, as in an article from the respected website *Vox*, claiming that DS is real, just not as Trump imagines it:

We have . . . powerful organizations like the FBI and the CIA . . . mak[ing] up what . . . people mean by “deep state,” and . . . they need aggressive oversight . . . The problem is the term has become a . . . way of signaling a conspiracy for which there . . . isn’t any evidence. (Illing, 2020, para. 11)

Indeed, in accounting for the popularity of American DS narratives, Olmsted and Willmetts (2024) cite justifiable historical concern about government secrecy. In the 2010s, as America entered Lotman’s fifth, “transmission” stage, DS narratives were further validated by European center-left politicians. The defamiliarizing novelty of terms like “DS” in many languages, combined with awareness of their rapid global circulation, accords them semiotic fluidity. Detached from the transparency associated with native use, they become prone to figurative or conceptual applications, especially when, like “DS,” the original term is already a spatial metaphor (lakes, not states, generally qualify as “deep”). When Macron used “*état profond*” in 2019 to critique resistance to his efforts to reset relations with Russia, his gesture was associated with his desire to break with “*une forme de néoconservatisme importée en France depuis dix ans*” [a form of neoconservatism imported into France over the last 10 years], signaling awareness of the term’s foreign origins (Endeweld, 2020, para. 2). Macron’s startling words nonetheless sparked a yearlong press debate. Here, however, unlike for Macron, “*état profond*” remained in scare quotes, with numerous discussions of its provenance and French salience.

In Britain, mainstream appropriations appeared without foreignizing scare quotes. Steve Hilton, adviser to Prime Minister Cameron, claimed Blair warned him of a DS conspiracy involving civil servants obstructing his reform program. The claim’s source does not clarify if Blair used “DS” explicitly or if Hilton, an American, retrospectively applied it to Blair’s warning (“David Cameron’s former director,” 2018). Later, the United Kingdom’s political right, influenced by Trump, reappropriated the term to bolster its assault on British institutions (extending Blair’s usage to judges, mainstream media, and academia). Boris Johnson, his adviser Dominic Cummings, and television presenter Dan Wootton all issued DS allegations between 2017 and 2020. Even subsequently, when DS usage had become entangled with disinformation and conspiracism, the earlier, more justificatory stance remained current on Britain’s center right. The two perspectives clashed in a 2022 *Spectator* op-ed entitled “The DS is no conspiracy” (Sewall, 2022).

In 2018, mainstream European DS fascination’s high-water mark, journalist David Aaronovich hosted BBC Radio’s earlier-cited investigation of DS. A minority of the eminent contributors expressed skepticism about the notion’s utility, yet none deemed it disinformation. Aaronovich (2018) concluded that in certain conditions, the idea is “plausible . . . even necessary” (00:34:27). Indeed, DS’s allusiveness enabled it during this timeframe to leave the realm of accusatory polemic and acquire positive connotations. With playful intent, the U.S.-based podcast “Deep State Radio” features respectable academic and journalistic contributors exploiting the semantic associations between “deep” and “profound” with “deep analysis” of U.S. political power and an exposure of its “scary” aspects (Rothkopf, 2017). Analogously, the Ukrainian DeepState Telegram channel, launched well before Russia’s 2022 invasion, pursues “deep explorations” of the hidden reasons behind global political events. Since the invasion, it has provided reliable intelligence on a conflict begun by a state accused of proliferating DS disinformation narratives about its cause.

DS critiques of U.S. events specifically were, indeed, by 2022 common among Kremlin propagandists. In 2021, Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of *Russia Today* (RT), explained on a prominent propaganda talk show, “‘Deep state’ is a well-stirred soup (*solianka*) of clans and family cliques (*semeistvennosti*) on which rest the foundations of Congress, but also private . . . organizations consisting of state strong men (*siloviki*) and ‘IT geniuses’ percolating through it” (“Simonyan,” 2021, para. 1). Illustrating Lotman’s stage 1, Simonyan cites the English term with its Russian translation. Moreover, her references to “clans” and *siloviki* likewise translate DS into terms comprehensible to citizens familiar with Russian informal power structures.

DS’s global/local dynamic is complex. Local instantiations gain explanatory power from perceptions of the phenomenon’s transnational salience. Conversely, articulations of a global DS are authenticated with localized imperialist lineages. A 2022 Sputnik story catalogued by ESTF describes a British imperial DS project traceable to the establishment in 1891 of the secretive (still extant) “Roundtable” and linked, in this example, to Blair’s purported influence on Kazakhstan (EU vs Disinfo, 2022). An earlier iteration accuses Britain’s Roundtable Movement and Fabian Society of infiltrating the United States early in the 20th century, shaping American imperialism in their image, driving U.S. Cold War hostility toward the USSR, and establishing the malign “Anglo-Saxon” power axis. Versions of this theory extend beyond “Kremlin disinformation.” Parmar’s (2007) scholarly article links UK think tank Chatham House to the nexus of covert forces behind the “Anglo-American Alliance.”

Russian DS usage multiplied, approaching Lotman’s fourth “dissolvement” stage, when Trump reassumed office. Celebrating his victory, pro-Putin philosopher Aleksandr Dugin praised him for fighting a “global DS,” which, rather than America or the West, constitutes Russia’s true enemy (Dugin, 2025); here, in a further global-local intertwinement twist, a previously U.S.-specific DS is strategically universalized to fit Russia’s Ukraine narrative. Between December 2024 and June 2025 alone, leading state-aligned outlets RIA Novosti, TASS, Lenta.ru, NTV, Gazeta.ru, and RBK published 25 pieces mentioning DS. Despite the translation difficulties, it had long begun mutating from a tool targeting foreign adversaries into a potential discursive weapon against Russia’s overbearing state machine. Dialogically preempting such subversive translations and using the term’s foreignness to restructure domestic populist narratives (Lotman’s stage 3), notorious Putin-whisperer Vladislav Surkov claimed in 2019 that Russia had no DS, but rather a “long state” and a “deep people” (*glubinnyi narod*; Surkov, 2019, para. 23). Later, Evgenii Prigozhin, leader of an attempted anti-Putin coup, sabotaged Surkov’s anticipatory strategy, claiming in a manifesto launched before his doomed revolt that he was confronting the *glubinnoe gosudarstvo* apparatus controlling Putin (Prigozhin, 2023). Ironically, Prigozhin was himself in 2022 namechecked at a European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR Group in the European Parliament, 2022) conference subtitled “Russia’s DS, Society and Foreign Assets in the War Against Ukraine.”

Throughout the war, ESTF consistently misidentified DS allegations as Kremlin disinformation narratives, despite the allegations often originating with U.S. actors and despite them conflating U.S.-specific DS speculation with wider narratives about secret global elites. ESTF thus mirrors the conceptual blurring of the term’s scope practiced by pro-Kremlin actors to cover activities that lack correspondence to its direct meaning and are less likely to attract discrediting conspiratorial labels.

After 2016, contrasting examples of DS narratives proliferated, encompassing intimations of literal clandestine plots, their dismissal as disinformation, and conceptual rationalizations under the DS umbrella of both diverse plots believed to be real and conspiracy theories dismissed as false by disinformation and counter-disinformation practitioners, respectively. In 2018, an elite Paris research institute reported ESTF to the European Ombudsman, alleging unevidenced Russian DS conspiracy mongering, and in the same year, the Dutch parliament demanded action against the unit for misrepresenting Dutch media articles as disinformation (Schulz, 2018). Mirroring such reversals, counter-disinformation units linked to intelligence services have been branded DS tools. In 2023, conservative, non-Trumpist website *The Federalist* condemned Russia-focused Hamilton 68 as a DS ploy "to launder bogus intel into the government's policy-making narrative" (Mangold-Lennett, 2023, para. 4).

However, the meaning of many DS citations reflects their positioning in relation to the U.S.-Russia axis across which the narrative's status as disinformation/the "hidden truth" is negotiated, hence the connection to Russia-Gate accusations that Trump colluded in Kremlin efforts to sabotage Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The U.S. far right and its media facilitators linked both Clinton's campaign and the post-2016 Russia-Gate investigation to an American DS plot. Accordingly, Russian state propaganda co-options of DS narratives merely reconfirmed the theory's status among mainstream liberals as malign disinformation.

Two UK prime ministers, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, domesticated the narrative for British audiences well after Trump's claims that DS stole the 2020 election, positioning themselves as disruptors of establishment consensus (Johnson as a rule-breaking people's champion, Truss as a warrior against faceless Treasury officialdom). By touting Trumpian conspiracy theories, these unconventional politicians reinforce their upstart brand, enrapturing their base while riling their critics. First, Johnson, on resigning in 2022, warned of an antipeople DS plot to reverse Brexit. A year later, his successor blamed her ignominious demise on the DS, issuing her initial accusation to far-right U.S. activists. Illustrating the cultural translation process, Truss adopts an American term on U.S. soil to convey her argument in locally comprehensible language: "Truss was interrupted and asked to explain the meaning of 'quango.' She replied: 'A quango is a quasi-non-governmental organization. In America, you call it the administrative state or the deep state'" (Smith, 2024, para. 8). In the United Kingdom, she reused it with disruptive intent, where DS provided an umbrella concept in her post-resignation book about the forces preventing her from "rescuing" Britain (Truss, 2024).

Despite Truss's use of a widely ridiculed notion connected to Trump and, implicitly, to the pariah suspected of facilitating his presidency (Russia), her embrace of the crude distortions of U.S. political discourse paradoxically revived the debate around DS's analytical value, prompting the left-leaning *New Statesman* to designate the concept "useful" while dismissing Truss's use of DS as "silly" (Dunn, 2024). Even critics of Truss's DS conspiracism conceded she had highlighted genuine British failings. In the quality press, the debate generated articles decrying the Conservative Party's pathological descent into paranoia, which, in turn, attracted letters objecting that hidden elites do manipulate British state machinery, albeit not those that Truss meant.

This new British controversy's scope broadened to include other narratives originating in the U.S. far-right ecosystem. Truss's successor, Rishi Sunak, cited the "15-minute City" myth when criticizing

Labour's "eco-zealotry." The DS conspiracy, of which 15-minute city fears are a subset, exists in understated versions referring to actual pro-environment policy positions rather than unevidenced intent to shackle citizens. However, boundaries between political polemic and conspiracy mongering are fine, like those between evidence and speculation, illustrating the fluidity with which narratives simultaneously cross multiple borders: from one culture to another, from the peripheries of discursive space to the mainstream. Developing deHaven-Smith's (2006) judicious identification of discrete "State Crimes Against Democracy," a notion that avoids DS's hypostasizing of an entire apparatus, post-2016 anglophone scholarship features pleas for DS's entire removal from the disinformation sphere (Coady, 2023) and an effort to legitimize it by suggesting the phenomenon is "real," but "not monolithic" as the far right maintains (Hellinger, 2019, pp. 221–264).

Despite uncertainty over DS logic's status, Truss's enthusiasm for it was assailed as evidence of her insanity, underscoring how disinformation allegations perform democracy's sacrosanct commitment to a "truth" defined in polemical, binary terms. The Labour Party labeled her interventions damaging to our democracy and the Conservative Party as "the political wing of the Flat Earth Society" (Dinnen, 2024, para. 2). Months into the new Labour government's tenure, senior Conservatives were regularly accusing it of complicity with the "administrative state," presaging future loops in DS's twisting arc, mapped here only in outline.

Escaping the Abyss

My RQs addressed the abyss of epistemological contradictions that DS conspiracism discloses. Two concerned its trajectory across linguacultural, geopolitical, and media space boundaries (RQ1) and between concept and term, figurative trope and constative assertion, heuristic tool and explanatory master narrative (RQ2). In answering them, I stressed how border crossings provided DS with the origins of its political potency as both conspiratorial "truth" and insidious "untruth" (the Trump-Putin axis). They also drive changes in DS's meaning and enable it to renew its resonance as polemical critique and index of deceptive intent or paranoid fantasy.

DS's genealogy is nonlinear. Its core meaning oscillates among literal readings uncovering specific, clandestine actors manipulating the state from above (Trump's version); conceptual or metaphorical interpretations of intangible institutional brakes hampering elected governments (Blair, Macron); and associative notions linking DS rhetoric with particular group identities and capable of being used phatically by conspiracists to mark their mutual affiliation (the #DeepState hashtag) or performatively by counter-disinformation units to delegitimize actors guilty of confected, antidemocratic paranoia (DS as Kremlin disinformation).

Projected onto these crossings are further traversals. DS allegations shift logical categories: from conspiratorial narrative to deceive gullible dupes (or, conversely, express hidden truths) to master narrative available to disinformation purveyors and counter-disinformation actors alike as an umbrella for multiple versions of those same hidden truths/conspiratorial fictions (DS's intranarrative "everything is connected, nothing is accidental" logic migrates recursively to the metanarrative level: Guided uniformly by DS

operatives, all conspiracies, too, appear to be connected and none accidental). Finally, DS conspiracism travels bidirectionally between mainstream and marginal discourses.

Truss's case illustrates the self-correcting mechanism by which DS narratives replenish themselves. Their corrosion by Trump's scandalous malfeasance (including his treacherous turn to Putin) facilitated rather than hindered Truss's desired disruption; secondary disinformation iterations often have this dialogic dimension, embracing the anticipated outrage they generate or turning earlier uses against their original advocates (Prigozhin's claim that Putin represents the very DS his regime had linked to Western elites simultaneously rebuffs Western portrayals of Prigozhin as an archetypal DS operative; Surkov's dialogically anticipatory "deep people" trope). Here, too, disinformation status aids intercultural translation. However, the post-Truss debate included rational contentions that Britain's DS is more empirically "real" than Trump's. Retranslating them as fiscal policy's unspoken power over UK governance, the *New Statesman* deems Truss's complaints reasonable (Dunn, 2024, para. 1). This second, corrective move illustrates the intercultural translation process's third stage when imported ideas acquire their true home "over here."

Addressing RQ3's concern with the wider implications for disinformation studies, my analysis furnishes tentative foundations for a future rethinking of approaches to disinformation's role in the democracy-truth crisis. First, examples of routine disinformation and conspiracy theory allegations pervading mainstream democratic debate confirm that politics invariably involves insincerity and deception. Grossberg (2018) argues that "the difference between bias and lies is a historical construct and the line varies with the context" (pp. 124–125). Arendt (1968), who was committed to democracy, acknowledges that politicians bend the truth to build support for specific, often worthy, causes. The journey of DS conspiracies from the disinformation ecosystem's margins to mainstream politics and back illuminates the difficulties that arise when we separate truth-based democratic discourse from authoritarian/populist disinformation, a gesture critiqued by Ellul (1965), who, never doubting democracy's superiority, posited propaganda as "intrinsic" to it, and by Lippman (1922), who presciently savaged the performative myth of democracy's fourth estate as the guarantor of "truth however unprofitable the truth may be" (p. 320).

Moreover, elaborate typologies differentiating disinformation, propaganda, conspiracism, and misinformation remain enmeshed in the language of political practice and muddled by vernacular usage. "My" exposés of cover-ups become "your" unfounded conspiracy theories, "their" state propaganda, "our" public diplomacy. Proper scrutiny of problematic assertions requires a metalanguage free of the toxifying lexicon of polemical (counter)claims. This apparatus should recognize that as democracy does not merely embody post-Enlightenment reason, so, contrary to Popper's (2002) rationale for the term "conspiracy theory," contemporary conspiracists are Enlightenment's beneficiaries as well as inheritors of pre-Enlightenment obscurantism. Rosenfeld (2018) shows how democracies historically valued affect-driven "wisdom of the crowds," not just rational expertise (p. 28). Equally, modern conspiracism, with its focus on meticulous "research into" obscure connections, relies on both irrational fear and reason-driven unmasking of new information. This is why its logic resembles that of journalists like Gatehouse (2024), who, ironically, traces DS's tangled roots to "a real conspiracy," and why intrepid investigators like him are habitually labeled conspiracists by their targets (p. 258).

Consequently, rebuttals of DS conspiracies and other narrative forms of disinformation cannot rest on faith in their antithesis. What constitutes valid information (not unfounded rumor) is determined by credible, unambiguous evidence. However, multiple evidence types are invoked both by conspiracy theorists, including DS obsessives, and by their unmaskers. Neither Trump's clandestine Moscow visits nor Clinton's association with pedophile Jeffrey Epstein transcends circumstantial evidence of the opposing conspiracies to which their equally passionate accusers tie them. Such clashes of evidence categories typically unfold in the court trial, whose hybrid reliance on expert witnesses, professional advocacy, and the institutionalized crowd wisdom of 12 good men and women of the jury reconfirms that dichotomies pitting empirical reason against populist affect capture neither conspiracy theories nor the truth-based governance systems they threaten.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that facts never exist in a raw, unprocessed state separate from their manifestation as knowledge, truth, and belief. As Arendt (1968) recognized, they are formulated in specific discursive and communicative contexts. Similarly, rather than agglomerations of mute facts, semioticians define information as "new *meaning*" whose value-neutral status renders disinformation subsumable into its antithesis (Scarantino & Piccinini, 2010). This paradox confirms that "dis-information" is an inadequate vessel for much of the narrative-based material filling it, explaining why conspiracism drifts disconcertingly in and out of it. Content analyses enumerating recurrences of "key words" betraying DS conspiracism's presence, characteristic of disinformation studies, belie their diverse meanings, including reasoned critiques of modern bureaucracy. Rational models of disinformation presuming a flawed information system should be substituted by epistemologically granular paradigms sensitive to usage contexts and the dynamic dialogism pervading all political meaning making (Hutchings, 2024). Thus, the significance and truth status of public narratives and assertions are neither fixed nor universal, varying according to the political cultures in which they circulate (contrasting interpretations of Russia-Gate), their differing ideological inflections (COVID-19 lockdowns as good science or state overreach), temporal and geopolitical variance (anti-net zero advocacy as climate denialism, legitimate contestation of stale consensus, or opposition to hypocritical Western restraint on Global South aspiration), and their performative function (reciprocal disinformation allegations as political polemic).²

This is no relativistic denial of reality, which instead correlates to Lacan's order of the real (the sensual realm preceding language acquisition, accessible via its traces within the imaginary and symbolic orders). Information and facts must, meanwhile, be distinguished from knowledge, as the societal consensus that validates information, and from truth—the elusive quality that accords knowledge transcendent weight. Etymologically, "truth" connotes "trust," not facticity; normative value, not scientific rationality. Far from spurning affect, truth embraces it, exceeding empirical veracity and demanding passionate commitment: Christians aspire to feel the moral force of Christ's biblical destiny as "the Way, *the Truth* and the Life" (John 14:6); court witnesses swear a truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth oath, whose iterative structure and ritualistic function confirm its nonrational, incantatory force. This counterbalances the compulsion inflecting democracy's absolutist claims to truth without negating their ethical authority. Equally, it demands subtler approaches to fantastical narratives adopting non-epistemic modalities. QAnon's foundational, yet outlandish, DS pedophile ring claims are traceable to a U.S. gamers' "Live-Action Role Play" prank

² This approach echoes Harsin's (2024) critique of post-truth politics.

(Gatehouse, 2024, p. 131). Rather than endorsing false realities, such conspiracy theories posit mythological events unfolding “in an imaginary universe that . . . *symbolizes* . . . the real world” (Young & Boucher, 2022, p. 15; emphasis added) and recalling gnostic belief systems (Robertson & Amarasingam, 2022). However, the still-hegemonic association of DS conspiracy theories with “disinformation,” while reflecting justifiable concern about their populist currency and links to Kremlin messaging, occludes such subtleties. In narrowing the discursive parameters of public debate, this articulation forecloses legitimate critiques of state securitization, such as Melley’s (2012) argument that popular fictionalizations of government secrecy emasculate civic objections to it and Bratich’s (2008) analysis of how neoliberal hyperrationality generates “conspiracy panics.”

Belief in democracy requires an aspirational higher truth situated beyond our knowledge horizon in the imaginary universe of the symbolic, yet capable of accommodating pluralistic contestations of the hyperrational. Acknowledgment of this truth indicates a route out of the epistemological abyss into which Trump seemingly catapulted democracy and the primary lesson of our journey across DS’s intersecting borders.

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