Securitization of disinformation in the UN Human Rights Council

Case of securitization or politicization?

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Summary

This thesis addresses speech acts on the subject of disinformation as a threat at the United Nations Human Rights Council in its 47th, 49th and 50th sessions where the matter was discussed. By combining securitization theory and qualitative content analysis with a method of examining speech acts through specific variables, it is possible to examine if this was a case of securitization or politicization and if the process was a success or a failure. The findings suggest that there were two instances that could be regarded as securitizing acts. A part of the audience accepted disinformation as a threat. However, the lack of supranational power of the Council, failure to unilaterally depict disinformation as an existential security threat, lack of exceptional measures and disagreements between representatives caused obstacles for the process. Thus I argue that disinformation was not securitized but quasi-successfully politicized in the Human Rights Council and that the discussion revealed geopolitical tensions within the organization which can make decision-making difficult also in the future.

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1. Introduction

Disinformation is a phenomenon that has gained increasing salience in world affairs during the recent years. Awaken by societal distress caused by efforts and effects by internet troll farms, tactical leaks to manipulate foreign elections and targeting journalists in a form of smear campaigns, states and international organizations have begun to note this scourge that has been amplified by modern day technologies (Jensen, 2018:115, Jeangené Vilmer, 2019:3, RFS, 2023). Disinformation campaigns have sometimes been labeled as parts of hybrid influence operations or hybrid warfare which indicates the seriousness of the matter (Hoekstra & Jongema, 2016:37). Some actors on unit and regional level have made urgent securitization efforts to frame disinformation as a security issue and initiated projects to counter it, perhaps most notably the EU’s East Stratcom Task Force (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017:33-34). Because in today’s world the effects of disinformation easily exceed state boundaries due to social media, the topic is of high relevance to the field of international relations. Thus, this paper strongly disagrees with some authors that understate the importance of disinformation merely due to an alleged lack of proof of its significant influence (Gerrits, 2018:20-21). A popular framework to address the issue within the field of international relations has been securitization theory but partly due to structural issues, there is shortage of system-level analysis on the issue. Attempting to fill this gap, this paper investigates how disinformation was addressed in the United Nations Human Rights Council during its 47th, 49th and 50th sessions by utilizing securitization theory and qualitative content analysis. This paper will answer to the research question of how has disinformation been addressed in the Human Rights Council and what does the process imply regarding difficulties the organization is facing in its decision-making? I argue that by utilizing the aforementioned tools in the analysis it is possible to state that disinformation was not securitized but quasi-successfully politicized while noting that the process will likely enjoy limited success in the future due to inherent structural problems within the Council and the lack of supranational power of the organization. The existing literature on securitization holds a strong selection bias towards successful securitizations (Ruzicka, 2019:365). This paper will contribute to the literature on securitization of disinformation and more specifically to the variety of studies where the securitization process was incomplete or not successful. Moreover, this paper will approach securitization of disinformation from a system-level perspective, both utilizing and developing the existing theoretical framework. New technologies including huge social media companies such as Twitter and Facebook allow
information spread faster than ever before and as existing research has shown, lies spread faster than truth (Vosoughi et al, 2018:5). Due to the fact that these companies have grown global and multinational the threat of disinformation has also globalized. As pointed out by Irene Khan, “disinformation is a global phenomenon, spread by technology which is transnational, affecting issues which are global. Thus, the solutions must too be global, rooted in universally recognized principles of human rights and promoted through a multidimensional, multi-stakeholder approach” (United Nations, 2022, 11:32 – 11:55). This indicates that the Human Rights Council is a valid place to hold system-level debate on the matter and in this vein, it becomes an interesting subject of inquiry.

The foundation of this thesis is inspired by and based on the report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which was presented by Irene Khan on the forty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council. The report presents disinformation as a “threat to human rights, democratic institutions and development processes” (United Nations, 2021:1). Due to the rhetoric that was used and in the light of existing literature on securitization, this speech act can be regarded as a securitizing move. The 47th session is followed by two other sessions where disinformation was addressed. Drawing a connection to the purpose of this thesis, it is important to note that securitization does not have to be successful to hold analytical value. In fact, failed or incomplete securitization can reveal elements in organizations that come in useful when assessing the given organization’s purpose, functionality and development. Thus, in the context of this paper, even when disinformation is not successfully securitized, the theoretical framework combined with the selected methodology enables a functional critical evaluation on how disinformation was addressed in the Human Rights Council. Securitization theory offers tools that allow placing into spotlight issues that traditional theories would overlook – in this case it means being able to regard disinformation as a plausible security threat and non-traditional entities as referent objects.

This paper will begin with a section combining literature review and theory where it will be assessed how traditional international relations theories have unsuccessfully tried to grasp the concept of disinformation. After this, securitization theory will be introduced, since it has been the main framework utilized to study disinformation within the scope of international relations. The paper will then proceed to the method-section which will elaborate the way how the tools addressed in the literature review can be utilized to study disinformation on system level. First, relevant key concepts are explained, after which the section will elaborate how qualitative
content analysis and certain variables can be combined to understand the speech acts under review. This will be followed by the analysis section which is divided into sub-chapters in accordance with the variables addressed in the method section. Lastly, after the analysis, a section will be dedicated to concluding remarks based on the findings.

2. Literature review and theory

This section of the thesis will introduce the currently available, relevant literature regarding disinformation, international relations, securitization theory and securitization of disinformation upon which the argument of the paper is built. It begins with a quick outline of how scarcely disinformation has been addressed within traditional international relations theories or “grand theories” while creating an overview to address securitization as the most fruitful theoretical framework. The second part of the section focuses on how securitization of disinformation has been studied on unit-level. The third sub-heading includes an evaluation of system-level analysis and the importance of studying failed or partially successful securitization. These themes will be followed by a conclusion that will lead to the method section.

2.1 Theoretical approaches from traditional international relations theory to securitization

Traditional international relations theories, most notably realism and liberalism, have been seen as inefficient in capturing the effects of technological revolution and security issues that might accompany it (Eriksson, Giacomello, 2006:235-236). The problem among these schools is that in those rare occasions, when disinformation is addressed, it is not incorporated into the list of issues that can be regarded as valid security threats. One reason for this is the narrowness of analysis in the case of, for example, Realists, who tend to focus on the international structure and emphasize merely material factors, whereas liberals emphasize cooperation and international integration (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2006:228-232). Even though some liberals (most notably Josephy Nye) have briefly touched the concept of disinformation and propaganda, it cannot be stated that liberalism’s contribution in studying and analyzing disinformation or other similar issues could be regarded as significant (Eriksson & Giacomello, 2006:231). In fact, more comprehensive theoretical tools can be located within other theories
that emphasize the social world over material one. Here, the attention turns to security studies and securitization, a sub field of international relations.

A significant portion of literature addressing the topic of disinformation within the scope of international relations is built around securitization theory, a theoretical framework originating within Copenhagen School. Here, security is inherently about survival and it is constructed around perceived threats and referent objects (Buzan et al, 1998:21). The approach has been increasingly popular among scholars in recent times (Ruzicka, 2019:367). In essence, securitization theory focuses on certain discursive processes through which a specific issue is being pictured as a security threat, elevating it from a more traditional political process into a matter that requires more urgent action, thus enabling policymaking that would otherwise not been possible (Buzan et al, 1998:23). In addition to the perceived threat, the other main pillars in the securitization process are referent objects, securitizing actors and functional actors (Buzan et al, 1998:36). Referent objects are those entities that the the securitizing actors aim to protect from the perceived threats (Buzan et al, 1998:36). These issues can basically be anything but “in practice the constraints of facilitating conditions mean actors are much more likely to be successful with some types of referent objects than with others (Buzan et al, 1998:36).” Referent objects can be principally divided into sectors. According to Buzan, these five sectors are military, political, economic, societal, and environmental (Buzan et al, 1998:7-8). Thus, they expand the scope of possible understandings of threats which enables disinformation to be studied within the scope of international relations. In this paper, the main referent objects are initially understood as human rights, democratic institutions and development processes, which places the locus of the inquiry on the political sector. In fact, it has been directly stated that human rights qualify as a systemic referent object, specifically at the political sector (Buzan et al, 1998:141). Securitizing actors are those who present the given threat to the referent object by declaring it in a securitizing act or move (Buzan et al, 1998:36). They must declare the act to functional actors i.e. an audience that “can significantly influence decisions in the field of security” (Buzan et al, 1998:36). The power that the securitizing actor wields over the audience influences the level of success of securitization. Successful securitization happens when the securitizing actor and audience reach a consensus where an issue is a security threat of existential nature and requires urgent action, allowing “breaking of rules” in order to tackle the threat (Balzacq, 2016:496, Buzan et al, 1998:25 - 26). It is noteworthy here that all scholars do not agree that the countermeasures must be “exceptional” for the audience to consider them to be securitization (Floyd, 2015:681 – 682). This paper
adheres to the former assumption in order to draw a clear line between securitization and politicization.

### 2.2 Successful securitization on unit and sub-system level

Securitization of disinformation has been studied using various methodologies and mainly on unit and regional levels of analysis. This thesis will attempt to analyze the issue on system-level while utilizing elements from other studies focusing on other levels of analysis. A good starting point is Trithara’s unit-level study which assesses securitization of disinformation in the United Kingdom. It focuses on how disinformation was securitized by the DCMS (Westminster’s Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee) reports (Trithara, 2020, pp. 2). The research design of the study first defines disinformation as concept and proceeds picturing the context of the actors that are disseminating it (Trithara, 2020:8-10). Furthermore, the DCMS reports are analyzed by highlighting the specific securitizing speech acts that can be found from the report (Trithara, 2020:10-17). The article also addresses the responses of the audience to whom the securitizing acts are directed, in this case the UK government and Facebook to measure how successful the process was. Here it is important to note, that Trithara accepts speech acts as securitizing moves even though the word ‘security’ is not actually mentioned in the quotes. In another example, Jackson approaches the topic by assessing Canadian government’s reaction to foreign disinformation campaigns by combining tools from securitization theory with qualitative discourse analysis. In the paper Jackson investigates how, over the years, new elements have been introduced as viable security threats, including disinformation (Jackson, 2022:2). Taking a slightly differing approach, Taylor addresses threats posed by false information by applying theories of mimesis and ontological security on securitizing discourse addressing deepfake – a form of false information where videos of, for example political figures, are altered sometimes in humorous but potentially malicious manner (Taylor, 2020:5). Disinformation, which presents itself in a form of deepfake videos, according to some speakers is a menace for democratic institutions such as election system and the sense of reality within the nation and its allies (Taylor, 2020:5). Taylor’s approach combines three distinct theoretical elements with qualitative analysis to assess the subject. The securitizing speech is divided into categories in order to draw a picture of in which ways different actors have aimed to portray disinformation as a national security threat (Taylor, 2020:6). Again, the word ‘security’ is not mentioned in any of the speech acts but the nature of the threats is enough to label discourse as an securitizing act which points to that there are different approaches to
the question of whether the word ‘security’ needs to be heard in order to portray something as a security threat (Balzacq et al, 2016:495).

The cases mentioned above focus on disinformation as a foreign weapon but the audience to which the securitizing move is directed is on unit level. Unlike this paper, they do not address disinformation on a system-level although the threat is projected from outside. An example of a study on same subject and with a theoretical framework located higher than unit level is offered by Ünver & Kurnaz, who address securitization of disinformation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by utilizing quantitative content analysis. The study, published recently in February 2022, is conducted by extracting specific keywords from NATO’s social media stream and the organization’s official documents (Ünver & Kurnaz, 2022:6-7). They use a method called “structural topic modeling (STM) – a text analysis approach that finds ‘topics’ in an unstructured corpus based on covariate information.” (Ünver & Kurnaz, 2022:7). In other words, they code their content using certain keywords to search for patterns in describing disinformation as a security threat. A partly similar approach will be utilized also in this paper - the idea to distinguish themes based on keywords is similar although the method to collect data and analyze it is different. Moreover, I will draw on the conceptualizations of securitization acts mentioned earlier – the word security does not need to be uttered if the threat is stated clearly enough. This will be further elaborated in the method section.

2.3 Failed securitization and securitization on system-level

Looking at the previous examples on unit and regional level, they all touch the same subject as this paper, but they still lack a strong contribution to any larger debate regarding the topic of securitization of disinformation. They do offer methodological directions but the debate itself is located elsewhere – in this instance among the literature of failed or unsuccessful securitizations. To begin with, Ric Neo has studied fake news and disinformation in Asia. As noted by Khan, the term fake news is closely associated with disinformation and is worth noting in this section (United Nations, 2021:3) Neo addresses how fake news was securitized in Malaysia and then de-securitized afterwards, referring to a process called counter-securitization (Neo, 2021:317 - 318). The study examines how the public played an important role in the securitization process - in this case the public was the audience for securitization (Neo, 2021:322). The study applies discourse analysis and combines it with a survey within the audience to measure the success of securitization. Like other qualitative studies on
securitization, it includes a section, where texts and speeches are critically reviewed in the light of relevant concepts from securitization theory (Neo, 2021:320 – 324). The audience’s response is measured by an inquiry regarding the government’s persuasiveness with the securitizing move (Neo, 2021:326 – 329). Moreover, with its focus on counter-securitization, Neo’s research contributes to a growing variety of research on failed securitizations. It refers to Ruzicka’s notion that there is no reason to place emphasis on successful securitizations over failed ones (Ruzicka, 2019:365 – 366). Ruzicka addresses that the selection bias towards successful securitization is inscribed into the very foundations of the theory itself (Ruzicka, 2019:367 – 368). This is also acknowledged by Buzan: “security analysis is interested mainly in successful instances of securitization” (Buzan et al, 1998:39). Referring to this inherent quality, the developers of the theory state that measuring successful securitizations is the only way to examine the full extent of the securitization process if (Ruzicka, 2019:367). However, this creates a queer field of inquiry, where cases are selected only according to their outcome and not by the initial securitizing acts, or speech acts, and their contexts (Ruzicka, 2019:369 – 370).

The concept of disinformation has not yet been studied in the context of the United Nations. Furthermore, it has not been studied as a system-level threat at all - rather on unit and sub-system level (for the latter, see for example Ünver, Hamid Akin and Kurnaz, Ahmet, Securitization of Disinformation in NATO Lexicon: A Computational Text Analysis, 2022). In fact, even securitization itself has rarely been studied on system-level. One explanation could be the primacy of those referent objects that are located on the unit level – traditionally within the nation-state (Buzan et al, 1998:36). This is not to say that securitization of disinformation could not be studied on system level – a correct methodological framework just has to be found and developed. As addressed by Buzan, entities such as democracy and international society can indeed qualify as system-level referent objects (Buzan et al, 1998:38 – 39). However, when securitization is examined on system-level, it can be useful to begin with the presupposition that the odds for the securitization process to succeed are low. A study of system-level securitization process was done by Dewi, who studied the failed securitization of climate change at the United Nations Security Council. Dewi finds in his work that securitization of climate change failed because the securitizing actors were not able to persuade the audience to establish necessary measures to counter the threat (Dewi, 2020:179). It was mentioned that some actors, namely Russia, downplayed the threat and saw climate change as an opportunity to push their own economic interests in the Arctic region (Dewi, 2020:178). It is important to
mention that although this particular study does not address disinformation, the same method can be also utilized to assess securitization of disinformation in the Human Rights Council. Citing Dagmar Zakopalova’s work on securitization processes in international institutions, Dewi employs a step-by-step model that begins with identifying the securitizing act itself and the proceeds to assess the audience’s response and the actions that follow using several variables. Following a spectrum of categories, securitization can be then deemed as successful, failed, politicized or something in between (Dewi, 2020:172 – 174). ¹These categories will be further elaborated in the methodology section of this paper, and it will be one of the essential building blocks when seeking an answer to the research question.

2.4 Concluding remarks of the section

A feature that stands out in the literature on securitization of disinformation is that even though the concept is increasingly under scrutiny, the subject lacks coherence and a strong debate, excluding the notions regarding the selection bias towards successful securitizations. This could partly be due to the fact that disinformation has only recently began to gain salience within the realm of international relations. However, there are elements that are often shared – one being the fact that disinformation can mean multiple different things depending on the context and that it is intentional and malicious in nature. On one hand it can be understood as foreign efforts to undermine a rival state’s internal social coherence, on the other it can be a tool to incite violence within a unit, exacerbated by incompatible business models used by social media companies. Thus, understanding of the complex nature of disinformation is essential in analyzing how it is being governed. The literature on disinformation places the focus mainly on unit and regional level. Thus, United Nations, as a system-level organization, has not been under investigation in the context of securitization. It is undoubtedly likely that the process of securitization of a given issue would happen more effortlessly in an organization such as the EU or NATO than in the United Nations but these notions do not give any value to the importance of failed securitization. It could be argued that addressing failed securitization can in fact be more useful in many ways than proving that securitization has been successful – studying failed securitization offers a way to locate problems in organizational structures, ¹Here it must be mentioned that the original work of Zakopalova is not currently available online, but the method is so clearly and thoroughly elaborated in Dewi’s paper, that it can be utilized in this thesis. The reference in Dewi’s paper is: Zakopalova, Dagmar. “Contextualizing the Process of Securitization: Construction of Security in the United Nations”, MA Thesis, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (2012)
understand them and perhaps this way even find ways to formulate remedies for them. As a conclusion, it is important to acknowledge that the lack of system-level debate on securitization of disinformation guides this thesis to look for methods elsewhere and utilizing them in the context of disinformation. The existing literature addressing securitization, both on unit and system-level, emphasize the preference of employing qualitative analysis regarding the securitizing move and audience’s response. This thesis will use Dewi’s method in analyzing the success of securitization process and utilizes elements and conceptualizations from other existing research on the subject to supplement this approach. These will be further elaborated in the following methodology section.

3. Methodology and concepts

This section of this paper will introduce the methodological framework in order to answer the research question of how disinformation was addressed in the Human Rights Council. I will begin building the necessary framework by establishing a firm conceptual foundation on the concept of security threats and disinformation based on the already existing literature. This is followed by a review on the content from which data is extracted, how it is extracted and collected. After this, a methodological system, combining qualitative content analysis and Dewi’s variables will be presented. Lastly, before proceeding to the analysis section, I will review the relevant caveats, limitations and ambiguities that might raise critical questions regarding the theoretical and methodological choices.

3.1 Concepts

Before collecting data and elaborating the analysis itself, a clear picture of the concepts that are examined should be established (Halperin & Heath, 2019:169). In this context, this means the need to build a firm understanding of security and a security threats before it is useful to look at the data more thoroughly. In other words, within the limits of this thesis, what do we mean when we are talking about security and disinformation? In short, this paper relies on the theoretical framework, which contends that security is something that is collectively constructed – as written by Balzacq: “securitization is successful when the securitizing agent and the audience reach a common structured perception of an ominous development” (Balzacq, 2011:12). It is also important to maintain a grasp on some other qualities, such as that security
is essentially about survival and that securitization could not only be about agreement but also policy change (Buzan et al, 1998:21, Balzacq et al, 2016:499). However, there is no actual definition or a gold standard for the term ‘security’ which means that it is possible to expand the concept outside of the traditional boundaries of merely for example military issues. This paper builds on these assumptions to measure the success of securitization, applying the idea onto referent objects located in the political sector.

The concept of disinformation must also be elaborated further here. Since there is no global agreement on what disinformation is, it becomes a highly context-dependent and fluid research subject. Indeed, disinformation has been conceptualized in multiple various ways across disciplines and studies. It is important to note that disinformation must be strictly distinguished from other types of information that are being disseminated - it thus cannot be merely understood as false information. For example, Jowett & O’Donnell address disinformation as a form of propaganda: “false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015:28). Gerrits approaches the concept further: “the deliberate spread of false or unbalanced information by foreign states (or relevant non-state actors) with the primary objective to confuse and mislead, to sow disagreement and discord among parts of the population in other countries” (Gerrits, 2018:4-5). The European Commission characterizes disinformation as “false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm” (European Parliament, 2018). The main unifying elements in the literature that addresses disinformation seems to be the maliciousness and intentionality. It is important that disinformation must be clearly detached from other types of false information – from satire to propaganda and misinformation. As an example, if information is false but not intentionally and/or maliciously disseminated, it must be labeled as misinformation – information that is false but spread unknowingly and unintentionally (Cummings & Kong, 2019:188 – 189). Drawing on these notions, this paper will conceptualize disinformation as knowingly disseminated false information with malicious intentions. It can be a process inside of a community or it can be a part of a hybrid influence operation towards another country.
3.2 Collecting data for qualitative content analysis

The first step in performing qualitative content analysis is selecting the documents and references from where the data is collected. This paper will analyze specific documents and recorded discussions in the United Nations within the Human Rights Council that address disinformation as a threat. There are two documents and three recorded sessions that are selected as content, and they can be generally split into two parts. The first part of content begins with a report on disinformation, presented for the Human Rights Council in 2021. The document was assembled for the agenda of the 47th session of the United Nations Human Rights council (A/HRC/47/25) and it specifically addresses the effects of disinformation on human rights and state institutions. This is followed by a recorded discussion on the topic between actors in the Council in order to assess the audience’s response to the matter. The discussion takes place on the same occasion where the securitizing act is initiated. Together, these form the first combination of securitizing act and the audience’s response. Here it is important to note that the initiative and discussion on the 47th session contributed to the United Nations General Assembly resolution on disinformation later the same year. That resolution is not included in the analysis here, since this paper focuses on discussions specifically within the Human Rights Council. The second part of content is an initiative for a draft resolution by a coalition led by Ukraine in the 49th session of the Council in 2022. In this initiative, disinformation is again presented as a threat and it is followed by a short discussion and adoption of the resolution. With this mandate, a multi-stakeholder, high-level panel discussion on the threat of disinformation was held later in the year of 2022 including state and NGO delegates, experts, and a representative of Facebook. The resolution serves as a cornerstone for the discussion on the 50th session and thus this session is also regarded as a part of the audience’s response. However, the resolution is not included as part of the audience’s response, but it is included in the analysis. All of the aforementioned discussions are recorded on video.

The time frame of the selected content begins from the forty-seventh session of the Human Rights Council in June 2021 and ends on the fiftieth session in 2022. From within this range, certain themes are searched for, where disinformation is addressed as a threat and how it is conceptualized by different actors. In the context of qualitative content analysis, this can be addressed as the coding process (Halperin & Heath, 2017:349 – 350). To measure compatibility with securitization theory, I will specifically search for sentences where words ‘disinformation’
and ‘threat’ can be found together. In addition, I will search for other plausible instances where disinformation is presented as a threat in some relatable way, for example associated with words such as ‘menace’ and ‘danger’. Moreover, I will see if the words ‘security’ and ‘existential’ are connected to these word combinations or if the same meaning is conveyed in some other relatable way. Lastly, I will search for referent objects or in other words, what are the specific subjects that need protection from threats. This will be done by making a categorization of referent objects based on those sentences in the audience’s response where the words ‘disinformation’ and ‘threat’ were mentioned. I will include a categorization of different referent objects perceived by the audience, as it was done in Neo’s paper in Malaysia’s case (Neo, 2021:328). These combinations of words together with the perceived referent objects will form themes that are used to help understand how disinformation has been addressed in the Human Rights Council and how it reflects with the process of securitization. This paper is not only interested whether these words appear in same sentences – it will also examine how they are used in these sentences. The details that will be searched for within the material should be based on the definitive concepts within securitization theory. From ontological angle, the data itself should consist of clues and notions – phrases and specific words that carry a meaning. These notions are assessed as ‘clues’ because they are treated as parts the social reality. This reality is shaped by the inter-subjective political dialogue, initiated by the securitizing actor which in turn possesses the ability to change the social world. Thus, these specific words and phrases shape the social space by wielding a certain level of influence or power within it. Thus, the ontological standpoint leans towards scientific realism where “reality consists of unobservable elements as well as observable ones” (Halperin & Heath, 2017:35).

The data was collected manually by reading the material thoroughly and by watching and listening to the recordings of the discussions online, highlighting and cataloguing the words and themes that were elaborated above. All of the data is accessible for free on United Nations’ website which offers a wide variety of recordings of meetings and documentation on resolutions, draft resolutions and background assessments in multiple languages. On the website, the videos of the Council’s sessions are even divided into sub-headings based on the topic under discussion and even the videos of meetings are divided into speakers. Thus, finding the relevant discussions has been made relatively simple and easy.
3.3 Analyzing data, combining methods and validity

After the data has been gathered, its construct validity must be assessed i.e. “to examine how well the measure conforms to the theoretical expectations by examining the extent to which it is associated with other theoretically relevant factors” (Halperin & Heath, 2017:171). For example, do the speech acts, represented by the securitizing actor, conform to the given characteristics that would imply that the given speech act would be a securitizing act? If they do, what are presented as the referent objects and do the securitizing acts include mentions of functional actors i.e. actors that have a significant capacity to influence the course of events regarding the perceived threat (Buzan et al, 1998:36)? Moreover, disinformation must be presented as existential to the referent object(s) (Buzan et al, 1998:23 – 24). The chosen referent object must also be theoretically legitimate and in accordance with securitization theory. There needs to be a securitizing actor, a securitizing act and an audience (functional actor) that is able to use its power to securitize the issue. Finally, the audience should be in position to “break the existing rules” or be able to act accordingly in the name of security. Answers to these questions will be answered in the analysis section but some insights can already be offered here. As it has been addressed earlier in this paper, the referent objects (human rights, democratic institutions and development processes) do qualify as system-level referent objects. Furthermore, because the audience in this case consists of representatives of member states, there are no obstacles for addressing the Council as an audience with the potential of implementing the suggested securitization itself. This also will be further clarified in the analysis.

3.4 Combining qualitative content analysis with a selection of variables

Because this thesis addresses the whole process from the very first speech act where disinformation is presented as a threat to the high-panel discussion that was later mandated, the qualitative content analysis is combined with an analytical framework that follows the same system-level analysis of securitization in the United Nations as Dewi with the issue of climate change in the UNSC, as addressed in the literature review. Qualitative research of securitization often contains a section where the relevant data is critically reviewed by combining in-text quotations and performing qualitative content analysis. This paper will utilize the same approach. Here, securitization process is analyzed further by examining the speech and texts through variables that measure the applicability of the theory and most importantly, the success
of the process. There are five variables, some of which containing also complementary dimensions. These are catalogued below:

1. The securitizing move, or securitizing act, is the very foundation of the process. Here, the securitizing actor presents the proposal to treat a subject as a threat to a referent object. However, this paper addresses this variable differently than in Dewi’s approach. Before labeling the speech acts it is necessary to approach the content objectively. Instead of assuming that the act is a securitizing act, it is necessary to critically analyze whether the way how disinformation was addressed can indeed be considered a securitizing act. If the quality of the process does not fill the criterion to be securitization, then the next steps that are elaborated below should be regarded as more or less failed or merely politicization (Dewi, 2020:173).

2. Diagnostic success measures the securitizing actor’s ability to persuade their audience with their proposal. It is accompanied by diagnostic positional power and diagnostic performance power. The former measures “the speaker’s influence the collective identification of security problems in their socio-political community” (Dewi, 2020:173). In other words, it means the extent of power that the securitizing actor holds in relation to other around them in the given context. The latter signifies the ability to perform the act itself or the expertise that the speaker holds to persuade others (Dewi, 2020:173).

3. Prognostic success focuses on the audience and its ability to agree upon the proposal. It is closely related to intercoder reliability which means “the extent to which different coders, each coding the same content, come to the same coding decisions” (Halperin & Heath, 2017:173). In this instance the coders would be members of the audience who either support, oppose, abstain or vote against the motions that the securitizing actors are proposing within the limits of the selected content. Prognostic success is accompanied by prognostic positional power and prognostic performative power. The former stands for the speaker’s ability or expertise in policymaking to influence the audience on the proposal (Dewi, 2020:173). The latter signifies towards the text itself, measuring “the compatibility of texts in conceptualizing the policies to be taken” (Dewi, 2020:174).

4. Motivational success measures the audience’s response to the securitization move. More specifically, it measures the proposal’s importance and extent of actions to be taken. It is accompanied by motivational positional power and motivational performative power. The
former stands for the extent of influence that the securitizing actor has over the audience, to successfully deliver the proposed policy or suggestion. The latter indicates the extent of how well the speech act’s nature reflects with the motivation of the audience in assessing the given topic. This variable holds a certain level of significance because it highlights whether the audience agrees to assess issue as a safety or a security concern and the motivation to take things further (Dewi, 2020, pp. 174).

5. Success of securitization is the last variable and it measures the overall process of securitization from failed securitization to successful of securitization (Dewi, 2020:174 – 175). Between these, there are four levels on which the securitization can occur. The levels are elaborated below:

1. Failed securitization
2. Politicization
3. Latent securitization
4. Low success of securitization
5. Medium success of securitization
6. High success of securitization

Failed securitization refers to a result where a securitizing move was initiated but the process failed to produce the preferred political actions. Politicization, on the other hand, suggests that an issue was politicized and not securitized, depending on the initial “securitizing act” or the audience’s response. This means that measures were taken but they do not fill the criterion in to be addressed as securitization. If an issue was politicized, the initial move does not need to be assessed as a securitizing act. Latent securitization happens when an issue was agreed by the audience as an existential threat, but no countermeasures were taken. Low success of securitization requires, that an issue was declared as a “security concern” and “standard countermeasures” are taken (Dewi, 2020:174). Medium securitization has happened when the audience has perceived the issue as a security concern and existential threat and moderate measures are taken. Finally, high success of securitization refers to same audience’s conclusion as with medium securitization, but “exceptional countermeasures” were performed (Dewi, 2020:174). After the data has been extracted from the selected content, the securitization of disinformation in the United Nations will be placed somewhere within the spectrum by applying the aforementioned variables in the analysis. The qualitative content analysis a helpful
tool when combined – if disinformation is clearly framed as a threat and an existential security issue and steps are taken to counter it, the process is successful. On the other hand, if disinformation is merely pictured as a threat to the referent objects but not in an existential manner, without speaking of security, politicization and lower levels of success should be considered. After reviewing the question of how securitization occurs, there is also an opportunity to assess what the process implies regarding the decision-making capability of the organization and what could be expected in the future.

3.5 Possible caveats and limitations

Examining disinformation on system-level through the lens of securitization theory has its caveats and limitations. First, it must be acknowledged that the Human Rights Council is not a traditional system-level security actor, such as the United Nations Security Council. Moreover, it is not an actor that wields direct decisive power over nation-states or other actors. It is simply a platform of cooperation that gives directions based on international rules and norms. Thus, one could ask if the United Nations is a valid subject for securitization at all. The securitizing act itself is not enough to fulfill the requirements of securitization. As addressed by Balzacq, the audience “has a direct causal connection with the issue and has the ability to enable the securitizing actor to adopt measures in order to tackle the threat” (Balzacq, 2011:9). It is reasonable to assume that the securitizing act would make little difference if the audience is not capable of implementing the required measures or at least taking the initiative further. So does the Human Rights Council wield the necessary authority, to be aligned with securitization theory? The answer to this lies within the nature of the referent objects and the multi-stakeholder response that is needed to counter disinformation. Disinformation is not necessarily a state-propagated phenomenon. Because the threat is projected on human rights and a global, multi-stakeholder response is requested, this makes the Council a plausible securitizing actor, even though the main units to bear the responsibility are the member states and social media companies. This feature will be further analyzed later on in the prognostic success-variable of the research design.

The relevance of external environment that surrounds the debate over disinformation is worth mentioning here. This refers to the extent of which a securitization process happens outside of the institution. The securitizing move creates an effect on the surface that is more or less significant depending on the strength of the initial event. This implies that if the securitization
is (or is not) successful, its effects could be studied further on unit-level and among individuals, like it has already been done. In theory, the securitization of disinformation in this context would be successful if also the citizens behind the represented countries in the audience would adopt the agreement on defining disinformation as a threat. However, this thesis will be limited in analyzing the effects of the given speech act within the institution and the selected audience. In this instance, expanding the scope of inquiry would not only be outside of the limits of this paper but also methodologically difficult. On system-level, due to structural variance and complexity, the larger audience is very dispersed and can hardly be further analyzed as a single entity. Thus, placing the Human Rights Council as a point of reference offers a way to create plausible generalizations on the matter.

The research conducted in this paper avoids selection bias by including the entirety of available statements regarding the securitization of disinformation in the Human Rights Council. It does not overlook those opinions that have the capacity to fail the securitization process. The Council consists of representatives from multiple cultural and political backgrounds and have differing opinions. A situation where the data selection would focus specifically only on certain parts of the audience does not come true here. This paper inquiry accepts the possible failure of securitization process, thus avoiding the caveat of choosing merely successful processes of securitization and choosing the topic based on the securitizing move itself. Lastly, it is worth mentioning that many of the speeches in the Human Rights Council are delivered through a translation in English which means that some words might ‘get lost in translation’. This paper accepts this and utilizes the English translations as valid content from where data can be extracted.

4. Analysis

This section of the paper will analyze the data by applying the analytical variables to assess the success of securitization. It will be divided into sub-headings that assess each variable in turn. First, initial plausible securitizing act will be analyzed objectively, from the angle of the selected theoretical concepts, measuring its applicability as a securitizing move. The following parts will measure the audience’s response and the level of influence of the initiative on the audience. The first variable examines the discussion through the lens of diagnostic success. This will be followed by prognostic and motivational variables. In the last part, the success of
securitization will be measured, which will lead to the conclusion remarks of the paper. Within these themes, analysis of the coding the language addressing disinformation will be included. The analysis will address three separate events where disinformation as a threat was addressed and two documents that are connected to these events. Each sub-chapter will chronologically proceed from 47th session to 49th and finally to 50th. Here it is important to note, that the coding, which was elaborated in the previous section, will mostly happen within the first two variables. After examining the process through all the variables, the paper will then form concluding remarks based on the collected data.

4.1 The securitizing acts

This part will analyze two potential securitizing acts. The first initiative to be analyzed here is a report assembled from statements by various stakeholders and presented by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan. It was presented to the audience on the 47th session of the Human Rights Council and it is accompanied by Khan’s speech that initiates the discussion. The first question to be asked is, how was disinformation presented in the report and Khan’s speech at the beginning of the discussion? Taking a glance at the content shows that securitization theory indeed is a valid framework to address the text. The report begins by establishing the main referent objects (i.e. those subjects that need protection from the perceived threat) in the summary section: “In the present report, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression examines the threats posed by disinformation to human rights, democratic institutions and development processes” (United Nations, 2021:1) The referent objects are further specified in the victims-section: “Disinformation poses a threat not only to the safety of journalists but also to the media ecosystem in which they operate” (United Nations, 2021:5). Even though the report does not directly cover the issue of state-propagated disinformation campaigns against other states, it does touch the issue of meddling in elections (United Nations, 2021:2). Noting the famous conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic it addresses that “disinformation has been detrimental to efforts to control the pandemic, endangering the rights to health and life, as well as people’s trust in public information and state institutions.” (United Nations, 2021:10). Here the word ‘threat’ is not used but it can be assumed that ‘endangering’ something can be compared to that of something is being ‘threatened’. The word existential is not mentioned in the report. The word
security appears four times. It does not appear with the word disinformation but with a connection to referent objects. For example, when mentioning terrorist organizations’ means to spread false information and narratives, the report states that “the security dimensions and the excessive responses by States to them add to human rights concerns” (United Nations, 2021:4). Thus, here human rights issue is depicted as a security issue. When it comes to Khan’s speech where she presents the report for the Council, the word ‘threat’ does not appear, nor do the words ‘existential’ or ‘security’ (United Nations, 2021, 01:55 - 11:20).

The report and its rhetoric lay the groundwork for further discussion and it already presents the issue specifically as a threat to the given referent objects: human rights, democratic institutions and development processes. Of these referent objects, the first two get most of the attention in the report and also later in the discussion. Looking at the referent object of human rights, under the international law, individuals have a right to express their opinions and receive information without being targeted by efforts of manipulation (United Nations, 2021:6-7). Disinformation is a malicious independent variable in the individuals’ information flow and thus it is seen as a threat to their fundamental human right. Same logic applies especially to the safety of journalists – when the environment is such that journalists become targets of disinformation campaigns for telling the truth, it creates a threat to them that can at worst threaten their lives (United Nations, 2021:5). Moreover, the threat to democratic institutions is presented as disinformation’s ability to negatively impact trust in institutions in health sector and elections. For example, the coronavirus pandemic showed the harm that disinformation can cause globally – conspiracy theories were sowing mistrust towards health authorities which caused notable turbulence worldwide within communities, seriously harming the officials’ efforts to fight the pandemic (Murphy et al, 2022:44 – 45). Another example of how disinformation would form as a threat to democracy would be the way how Donald Trump weaponized the distrust towards government by famously disseminating claims of election fraud in the 2020 US election (Fried & Harris, 2020:527 – 528).

The second securitizing act to be under review here is found in the forty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council. It consists of ten speeches that address the initiative. The purpose of the act was to adopt a resolution, initiated by Ukraine and some other liberal democratic stakeholders, mainly from among Western countries. This resolution would mandate a high-level panel discussion on disinformation. Again, disinformation as a threat to referent objects seems to be the dominating rhetoric: “If adopted, this initiative will inspire and contribute
further joint efforts in this council and it calls UN institutions aimed at countering the challenge of disinformation threatening all our societies” (United Nations, 2021, 00:27 – 03:23). When comparing to the discussion on the 47th session, the move to address disinformation here seems to have taken a slightly different approach. The referent object is initially established as “society”. This, in a way, specifies the protected entity under which the other referent objects are placed. In other words, if disinformation is a threat for example to human rights and democratic institutions as it has been addressed before, it is a threat to the society. The proposal, as it was with Mrs. Khan’s report, calls for a global, human rights-based response to tackle the issue. Thus, it seems that this move to act upon the threat of disinformation is rhetorically similar to the report addressed by Khan earlier. The discussion on 49th session was significantly shorter than on the 47th session, possibly because the previous session already had already set the direction for assessing the topic. The audience in this case can be regarded both in the 49th session and in 50th session where the high-panel discussion was held. The audience’s responses will be reviewed in the following sub-chapters of the section.

4.2 The variable of diagnostic success

The 47th session in the Council saw a comprehensive debate after the initiative to securitize disinformation. The audience’s response here consists of 80 statements by states, including a statement by the European Union and statements by non-governmental organizations, addressing the report on disinformation. The respondents are nearly unanimous in condemning dissemination of disinformation in this session. In some instances, the fact that the actor agrees with the report is not addressed in detail but is implied in their statement. Almost all speakers on the list regard the matter as important. A part of the audience agree that disinformation is a threat and refer specifically to the human rights framework, often with a notion on freedom of expression and opinion. Some countries do not mention the word ‘threat’ but use other words for the same issue, such as ‘risk’ and ‘danger’ or ‘endanger’. Overall, it seems that the Special Rapporteur’s move to address disinformation seems to be able to resonate well within the audience. Some members of the audience develop the concept further, such as the address by the European Union where the representative addresses disinformation also as “foreign information manipulation” (United Nations, 2021, 12:00 – 12:15). Canada also emphasizes disinformation’s foreign quality by referring to ‘foreign threats to democracy’ (United Nations, 2021, 21:50 – 22:03). During the whole discussion, the word threat is mentioned with the word disinformation overall twenty-two times. The word existential does not come up. The word
security is mentioned only two times, by the European Union and Australia (United Nations, 2021, 11:39 – 13:17 and 26:19 – 27:52). Many European countries that speak in the discussion align themselves with the EU’s statement.

Russia initially agrees with the special rapporteur as it recognizes it as a topic of significance but takes the opportunity to attack the European Union, releasing allegations of Western hypocrisy, referring to ‘media shutdowns’ without elaborating further on it (United Nations, 2021, 1:45:52 – 1:47:28). Moreover, some representatives disagree with the report and make accusations that some countries are utilizing human rights framework to spread disinformation in their countries in order to destabilize their governance. For example, Syria addresses, that disinformation is not a symptom of societal distress but rather a tool to cause it (UN, 2021, 52:27 – 52:38). China answers: “some countries fabricate and spread information for political purposes, under the pretext of human rights in an attempt to make excuses for interfering in other countries’ internal affairs” (UN, 2021, 18:16 - 18:46). These statements probably refer to those notions where these countries have been under scrutiny regarding human rights violations. In this case, truth is seen as disinformation, and it is labelled as foreign manipulative efforts. In this context these statements are paradoxical since they present the issue as a threat while the existence of their political systems rely on suffocated and closed information environment. It can be assumed that countries that are ruled by authoritarian regimes benefit from a closed and restricted information spheres where disagreeing voices are silenced. This erodes the credibility of their statements during the discussions.

The 49th session saw an initiative by a coalition of countries, led by Ukraine, to push forward a draft resolution for a high-panel discussion on disinformation. It was adopted “without a vote as orally revised” during the session and through the decision it was decided that the dialogue would continue later in the council’s fiftieth session in a high panel multi-stakeholder discussion regarding disinformation (United Nations, 2022, 23:12 – 23:48). A summary of the resolution was created that depicts the discussion on disinformation on the 49th session. In this paper the words disinformation and threat appear together only two times (United Nations, 2022). The combination of these two words is more prevalent in the discussion itself. For example, joining the initiative, France used securitizing rhetoric on disinformation on behalf of the European Union: “The European Union shares the opinion of the authors that disinformation is a threat to democracy and has a negative impact on human rights” (United Nations, 2022, 03:40 – 06:40) India also agreed to the proposal: “It is a considered submission
that a goal of fighting the menace of disinformation, hate speech and violence on social media” (United Nations, 2022, 06:40 – 08:05). Some opposing statements were again given by China: “We oppose some countries fabricating and spreading false information for political purposes, slandering other countries under the shield of human rights, interfering in other countries’ internal affairs” (United Nations, 2022, 15:45 – 18:00) and Venezuela: “We are worried about the biased nature of this resolution where it claims to question sovereign right of states to introduce regulation that they regard necessary to safeguard their independence and territorial integrity” (United Nations, 2022, 20:51 – 23:14) Both opposing quotes could be regarded as examples of how these countries see combating disinformation as a breach to their internal status quo. Moreover, they resemble those statements that were heard in the previous session. Human rights are again presented as means for ‘some’ countries to spread disinformation to meddle with their internal affairs.

The 50th session of the Human Rights Council included a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder high panel debate on the negative effects of disinformation on human rights. The event was initiated by the draft resolution adopted in the 49th session. The discussion consisted of 39 speakers including representatives of states, NGOs and a representative of Facebook. Disinformation was mentioned together with the word threat 15 times during the discussion, including two instances where the word ‘threat’ was replaced by the word ‘risk’ and ‘disinformation’ with ‘misinformation’ (United Nations, 2022). Moreover, the word ‘security’ was mentioned five times, including the word ‘insecurity’ (United Nations, 2022). The word ‘existential’ was not mentioned at all. This implies that the debate did contain some elements of framing the issue as a security risk and that the ‘securitizing’ actor was able to influence the audience, especially since almost the whole audience welcomed the initiative to assess the issue. The representative of Facebook did not depict disinformation as a threat.

There are multiple different referent objects that were addressed by the audience during the discussions. In the 47th session, the audience addressed 13 different referent objects. The most popular were human rights, development processes and democratic institutions, as they were addressed by the Special Rapporteur. Moreover, international rules-based order and health were other referent objects worth mentioning that were addressed, outside of the scope of the initial securitizing move. In the 49th and 50th session the most often mentioned referent objects were human rights, democratic institutions and society. 11 referent objects were mentioned altogether. Taking together all speeches by the audience from all three sessions at the Human
Rights Council, human rights and democratic institutions were the most frequently addressed referent objects (both were addressed as a threat 19 times), followed by development processes (9 times), society (5 times) and rules-based international order (3 times). Here it is important to notice that there were instances where disinformation was treated as a referent object by ‘reading between the lines’ but because the word threat was not mentioned, these mentions did not make it to the categorization. Moreover, none of the mentions below present disinformation as an ‘existential’ threat. There were only a few instances during the discussions when this happened and then the word ‘threat’ was not used. The data below shows, which referent objects are most significantly under threat by disinformation, as perceived by the audience. It can be seen that human rights and democracy are most often perceived to be threatened by disinformation and that development processes were not addressed as a referent object on the 49th and 50th sessions and was replaced as the 3rd most frequent referent object by society.

47th session: Which referent objects does disinformation threaten?

49th and 50th sessions: Which referent objects does disinformation threaten?

All data extracted from speeches at the 47th, 49th and 50th sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 2021 & 2022

4.3 The variable of prognostic success

Looking at the issue through the variable of prognostic success shows that the delegates speaking at the Council present a multitude of proposals regarding how the issue should be tackled. As the president of the Council notes at the end of the 50th session, it is a ‘topic of high
interest to all delegations’ (United Nations, 2022, 1:51:28 -1:53:52). In all sessions, many delegates emphasize the quality of human rights framework in the response and there was a multitude of proposals that were introduced within discussions. Many speakers suggested creating laws that allow free flow of information and restricting the freedom of opinion and expression only when the narrative at hand is at odds with the international law. Relating to this, another recurring theme of prognostic nature was that states should stop exploiting disinformation laws in order to silence political opponents domestically. It was also widely acknowledged that the issue must be addressed in the Human Rights Council and that further multi-stakeholder discussions and debates are required in the future due to the complexity of the issue. Moreover, there was generally no disagreement over the fact that the social media companies should take more responsibility in tackling the threat or challenge of disinformation, although there were some exceptions: Cuba did bring up its suspicions that the country, namely the United States, where the social media companies are resided are utilizing these technologies to oppress other countries (United Nations, 2022, 49:32 - 51:32).

In sum, from the angle of prognostic variable, the three discussions addressed here offer not only solutions but also more questions. The 49th session proposed a resolution regarding disinformation and the initiative succeeded. However, the Human Rights Council is a platform for cooperation and delegates emphasize that the responsibility of tackling disinformation belongs to the member states. Many of them ask at the end of their statements, what kind of recommendations could the board give to them in order to create more effective policies to tackle the threat. This highlights the fact that the Council does not create policies, but its discussions serve as guidelines for policy-making domestically in the member states. This answers to the question of ‘who can do what’ in the name of security which is an essential dimension from the angle of securitization theory. The security actor in this context is not the United Nations but the nation-state.

4.4 The variable of motivational success

Khan’s initiative in the 47th session seems to motivate action successfully, although the aspect of existential security risk seems to be missing from the speech. Even though disinformation is clearly presented as a threat, the urgency of the matter is not clearly conveyed, the security aspect is not directly emphasized and some important aspects of disinformation, such as state-sponsored disinformation campaigns against other states are left out of the analysis. Regardless
of this, the initiative is able to motivate discussion in which for example the European Union addresses that “the spread of misinformation, disinformation and foreign information manipulation has serious consequences” and continues to frame the issue as a security risk (United Nations, 2021, 11:39 – 13:17). Germany addresses the threat of disinformation as “significant” (United Nations, 2021, 27:52 – 29:24). Maldives takes a step further and even presents the issue as an existential risk as it blames that disinformation “can destroy the very fabric of society” (United Nations, 2021, 57:08 – 58:24). Also, Greece addresses disinformation as a “severe public threat” (United Nations, 2021, 1:11:03 – 1:12:25). This suggests that some actors see the issue as more serious concern than others, even in an existential way. Here it is good to keep in mind that as the literature review showed, some countries have already gone through efforts to securitize disinformation.

The motivational performative power in the initiative for draft resolution in the 49th session supplements what the securitizing act was missing in the 47th session. Disinformation is framed also as a part of “hybrid influence operations” which can refer to hybrid warfare or grey zone warfare. This brings in a security aspect to the discussion, which in turn creates a strong incentive to elaborate it further. However, no particular urgency was emphasized although a statement was made by the France in the discussion that the matter is urgent from the angle of human rights (United Nations, 2022, 03:40 – 06:40). In fact, this was the only notable time when the word ‘urgent’ was used during the discussion, with the word disinformation. The initiative was strong enough for the draft resolution to be accepted and the high panel discussion in the next session to be held. The 50th session saw an escalation regarding the topic where the speakers were increasingly accusing each other of disinformation campaigns. The element of hybrid operations was more present in this session than before, and thus the security aspect was more prominent. Disinformation was accepted by the audience as a matter of grave concern, but it can be still stated that the council did not unanimously frame it as a security issue of great urgency.

4.5 Success of securitization

Going back to the spectrum that measures success of securitization from failed to politicization and successful, the discussions on disinformation place the topic between politicization and latent securitization in the Human Rights Council. The securitizing moves do not emphasize a strong security aspect and thus they are lacking power. When it comes to the responses by the
audience, only a relatively small portion of speakers have addressed disinformation specifically as a threat to security. However, disinformation has been issued as a threat of great concern that requires action. Human Rights Council itself does not possess power to create laws or policies that would allow it to overrule the power of the nation state although it can create resolutions and initiatives that can motivate action within the member states. Creating efficient and urgent countermeasures within the Council however is not possible - the responses will be carried out on the unit level or sub-system level within actors like the European Union or NATO (as the literature mentioned earlier shows, some countries and transnational organizations such as the United Kingdom, Malaysia and the European Union have already made efforts to securitize the issue and have created tools to counter it). Even though both initiatives to assess disinformation were welcomed by the audience and the discussions withheld elements of latent securitization, it is safe to argue that disinformation in the Human Rights Council was merely politicized and not securitized. Going back to the spectrum on the success of securitization, the issue is not directly depicted as an existential threat and there can be countermeasures but they’re not necessary. Based on the discussions, it will be up to the members to decide whether they see disinformation as a threat to themselves and as the literature review shows, some of them already have done so. The dialogue in the Human Rights Council acts as a guideline for further policies which can indeed be the best way to address the phenomenon on a system level. All this conforms with securitization theory, which describes politicization as “means to make an issue appear to be open, a matter of choice, something that is decided upon and that therefore entails responsibility” (Buzan et al, 1998:29).

Taking together the textual data collected from the content, disinformation is initially presented as a threat to human rights, democratic institutions and development processes but also to various other referent objects that were not assessed within the securitizing moves but were addressed by the audience, such as the international rules-based order. This signifies the importance of the topic to the audience. The threat is often posed as serious, requiring further multilateral discussions. However, the security aspect remains quite latent especially in the 47th session because initially this dimension is not strongly highlighted in Khan’s report or in the discussion that follow. Even though the audience in the sessions does lean toward a consensus that disinformation is a serious threat or a challenge, it becomes clear that the audience is divided into blocs. Democracies address the dangers of disinformation to democratic institutions while representatives of authoritarian regimes accuse others by utilizing disinformation as a weapon to alter their domestic politics. Thus, disinformation certainly is
unanimously seen as a threat, but the referent objects vary, depending on the governance system. It is also noteworthy that the context around the debate on disinformation changed over time. Whereas the 47th session was held remotely due to the coronavirus pandemic, the 49th and 50th sessions were marked by increasing anxiety over disinformation campaigns run by Russia. In the first session many speakers emphasized public health and directly blaming others by name was at least partly avoided, in the following sessions faces behind masks were revealed. The Western bloc, led by Ukraine blamed Russia for managing hybrid warfare through disinformation campaigns. Quite ironically, Russia blamed the European Union and West in general for shutting down its media channels in the West since these channels have been recognized as tools of Russian hybrid warfare (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017:773 – 774). Moreover, Pakistan took the opportunity to frame disinformation campaigns run by India as a national security threat (United Nations, 2022, 1:27:41 - 1:29:56). Syria blamed the United Kingdom for causing a national security risk for spreading disinformation (United Nations, 2022, 1:03:03 - 1:05.09). In other words, the discussion on disinformation in the Human Rights Council turned into a geopolitical battleground where representatives of states blamed each other for disinformation campaigns and repressive policies for various different reasons.

One of securitization theory’s main assumptions is, that there must be a securitizing act and that the audience toward which this act is aimed “must agree with the claims made by the securitizing actor” (Balzacq, 3022:8). Both instances of initiating discussion on disinformation could be addressed as securitizing moves. As addressed by Neo, citing Wæver, securitization can fail for three main reasons. Firstly, the audience does not repeat the proposed speech act. Second, the securitizing actor does not wield enough power over the audience and third, “the conditions historically associated with a threat are absent” (Neo, 2021:319). Here it is clear that the first of these notions becomes the biggest obstacle for securitization in this context. Moreover, according to Buzan, the securitization process is more likely to be successful if the actors that form the security complex (in this case the Human Rights Council) are relatively similar to one another and thus are able to respond to the perceived threat in a relative unison, even though it is acknowledged that there are issues that can potentially be answered on the system level as well as the world changes (Buzan et al, 1998:36). The level of variety among speakers in the Human Rights Council is high which makes agreeing upon certain issues difficult. Especially when looking at the main referent objects of human rights, democratic processes and the rules based international order, it became impossible for the Council to unanimously agree upon the measures. It is somewhat absurd and paradoxical that some
countries in the Human Rights Council see the referent objects themselves as threats to their own systems. For this part, the findings are in accordance with securitization theory. During the sessions that were addressed, disinformation was politicized but not unanimously. The measures that were introduced were not dramatic enough to fill criterion for successful securitization.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shed light on how disinformation was addressed in the Human Rights Council by examining it through the lens of securitization theory. Moreover, the success of the process was to be measured by utilizing variables, highlighting different aspects of the discussion, in order to understand the nature of decision-making in the Council. In the beginning of the paper, I argued that disinformation was politicized and not securitized, with a notion that the Council lacks the necessary internal coherence which can become an obstacle to successful decision-making. The analysis reveals that disinformation indeed is a complex phenomenon that has been around for a long time but that has been exacerbated by digital technologies, opening new possibilities for states to use information as a weapon both domestically and on international level. This was illuminated by the discussions at the Human Rights Council, where the concept was brought into a system-level discussion. The rhetoric by the securitizing actors can be regarded as securitizing moves, especially in the light of existing literature where disinformation has been addressed in security context. As the data shows, a significant portion of the audience depicted disinformation as a threat to various different referent objects, most notably human rights, democracy, development processes and society. The audience complemented the securitizing moves by establishing also some new referent objects such as the rules-based international order that qualify as systemic referent objects according to securitization theory. The variables of diagnostic, prognostic and motivational success highlighted that there was a high consensus among speakers that disinformation is a significant topic to be addressed, with many complementing the initial moves by agreeing that disinformation is a threat and proactively presenting various suggestions for further policy-making. Even though this was the case, the process hardly fulfills the requirements to be regarded as securitization because the securitizing actor does not possess enough power to coerce the audience to do something that they would not otherwise do. Although the audience
widely accepts disinformation as a threat in all discussions and welcomes the two initiatives as significant, the security aspect and the existential nature of the threat of disinformation remains latent. Thus, following the spectrum addressing the success of securitization, disinformation was merely politicized. Moreover, the politicization in the Council faces difficulties due to the fact that disinformation is understood in various ways by different representatives – reflecting the political diversity within the Council. Due to this diversity, unanimous decisions regarding human rights and democracy becomes impossible because paradoxically, some undemocratic countries that sit in the Council in fact see human rights itself as a threat their respective political systems. The problem is similar as with the failed securitization of climate change in the United Nations Security Council – where some countries see a threat, some see an opportunity. The lack of unanimity is not a problem, since it is a nearly unavoidable, fundamental quality in a democratic institution – disagreement is natural. The problem lies within the Council as an institution which itself is democratic but holds multiple un-democratic members.

Even though the securitization was not successful, and disinformation was just politicized, analyzing the matter through the lens of securitization theory offers a functional way to understand the subject and its complexity. The failure to present disinformation as an existential security threat on system level affirms securitization theory’s assumption which suggests that the process is more likely to be successful on unit level and regional level where the internal societal coherence can be higher. In this regard, the discussions highlight the nature of the Human Rights Council as merely a forum where representatives of different countries can maintain a framework where issues can be discussed but which has no actual supranational power. Moreover, the discussion offers a snapshot of the geopolitical structure of the international system and its development from the year 2021 to 2022: a world divided into blocs of democratic and un-democratic countries, first in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the Russia’s unprovoked and unlawful full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. In this picture, disinformation is an independent variable, highlighting the boundaries between these blocs, creating various threats to different actors, emphasizing the digital revolution through social media that is sometimes even being weaponized as a part of hybrid warfare operations. Even though disinformation especially can be both seen as a cause and an effect, it has become clear that the international society has just begun to understand the severity of the phenomenon. Its increasing salience is a symptom of a world that is quickly
changing and with the development of new technologies, facing threats that have never been seen before at this scale.

6. Bibliography


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