

Entry title: Misinformation and Disinformation

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Abstract

This entry provides a comprehensive discussion of misinformation and disinformation within political communication. It explores the historical context and evolving nature of these phenomena, from ancient rhetorical techniques to modern digital propaganda. The entry delves into the definitions and distinctions between misinformation, which is false information spread without malicious intent, and disinformation, which is intentionally fabricated to deceive. It reviews research on the exposure and effects of false information, highlighting its impact on public trust, democratic institutions, and societal polarization. Additionally, the entry discusses the use of content analysis to reveal common topics and presentation strategies in misinformation campaigns. Comparative research underscores significant regional differences in resilience and response strategies. Finally, the entry identifies current research gaps and emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies to develop effective interventions. By addressing these aspects, this entry contributes to a deeper understanding of misinformation and disinformation in political communication.

Keywords: Misinformation, Disinformation, Public trust, Interventions, Media literacy

Mis- and disinformation are closely related phenomena that have become a pervasive and consequential presence in the realm of political communication (Freelon & Wells, 2020) .

With the proliferation of social media platforms and the seamless dissemination of information facilitated by digital technologies, false or misleading content now has the capacity to rapidly propagate and exert a profound influence on public opinion and policy-making processes.

In today's interconnected world, access to a wealth of information has both opportunities and challenges. While access to diverse sources of news and opinions can enrich public discourse and promote democratic participation, it has also given rise to a concerning phenomenon: the widespread diffusion of mis- and disinformation. False or distorted narratives, whether intentionally crafted or inadvertently shared, can spread across social media networks, news outlets, and public discourse, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to distinguish fact from fiction. Moreover, the consequences of mis- and disinformation can be far-reaching and impactful, which highlights the importance of addressing this issue in political communication research.

This entry provides a comprehensive overview of disinformation and misinformation in political communication research. It explores the historical context and definitions of these phenomena, followed by research on exposure and effects, content and producers, as well as international comparative research. Additionally, it discusses the existing research gaps and limitations within this field. Finally, the entry concludes by summarizing key insights and emphasizing the ongoing relevance of addressing misinformation and disinformation in political communication research.

Historical context

Mis- and disinformation have been present in political communication throughout history, taking various forms and evolving with technological advancements (Benkler et al., 2018).

False information has been used as a tool of persuasion for thousands of years. In ancient Greece and Rome, orators used rhetorical techniques to sway public opinion and gain support for their causes. Religious texts were also used to promote specific political agendas during the Middle Ages. The development of modern forms of mass communication in the 19th century, such as newspapers and political pamphlets, enabled the dissemination of political propaganda on a large scale (Stanley, 2015). For example, during World War I and II, governments used propaganda to manipulate public opinion and support the war efforts. Later, the advent of radio and television in the 20th century enabled the use of political advertising to influence public opinion. In recent decades, the rise of the internet and social media has facilitated the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation on a global scale, with little regulation or oversight (Vese, 2022).

Definitions of the phenomena

Misinformation, disinformation, fake news, propaganda, and other related terms are commonly used to describe related phenomena in political communication. However, there is often ambiguity in how these terms are defined and distinguished from one another, which limits generalizability and comparability of research in this field. Nevertheless, the following uses of the terms can be found in the literature (Wardle, 2018):

Misinformation refers to inaccurate or misleading information, but not necessarily intentionally false. This can occur for various reasons, such as a lack of knowledge or misunderstandings. In political communication, misinformation can be spread through multiple channels, such as social media, news media, and political advertising.

Disinformation, on the other hand, is intentionally false or misleading information with the intent to deceive. Disinformation is often spread for political purposes, such as influencing an election or public opinion. It can be distributed through channels similar to misinformation but is distinguished by its intent to deceive.

Fake news refers to news stories that are completely fabricated and presented as if they were true. This type of mis- and disinformation often appears on social media and can be spread rapidly due to its sensationalist and attention-grabbing nature. However, the term "fake news" is often used in a broader sense to refer to any news story perceived as biased or inaccurate, leading to confusion and ambiguity in its definition (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Propaganda refers to the use of media to influence public opinion and promote a specific political agenda. Propaganda can take various forms, such as political advertising, news media, and public relations campaigns. However, the distinction between propaganda and other forms of mis- and disinformation can be ambiguous, as propaganda can contain both accurate and inaccurate information (Guess & Lyons, 2020).

The ambiguity in defining and distinguishing these concepts has significant implications for research in political communication (Wardle, 2018). Studies use different definitions and measures of mis- and disinformation, leading to inconsistencies in findings and hindering generalizability and comparability. Additionally, using these terms in political discourse can create confusion and undermine trust in the media and democratic institutions (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Research on Exposure and Effects

Research into exposure to mis- and disinformation showed significant effects on individuals and society (van der Linden, 2022). Studies have found that misperceptions are prevalent in many countries, with individuals reporting exposure to mis- and disinformation on a regular basis (Hameleers et al., 2020). These misperceptions can have significant consequences, such as reducing trust in democratic institutions and increasing polarization.

Research has also shown that exposure to mis- and disinformation can lead to a range of negative effects, including a decrease in knowledge, a shift in attitudes, and changes in behavior (Berlinski et al., 2021)). For example, exposure to mis- and disinformation can lead

to a decrease in trust in news media and other sources of information and a decrease in trust in democratic institutions. Additionally, misinformation and disinformation exposure can increase polarization and undermine democratic discourse (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Finally, strategies for combating mis- and disinformation, such as fact-checking, debunking, and other interventions, have shown promise in reducing the spread and effects of mis- and disinformation, but further research is needed to determine their effectiveness and scalability beyond the Global North (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). To combat misinformation, intervention must address cognitive, social, and affective barriers (Ecker et al., 2022). In addition to fact-checking and debunking, various interventions have been explored to counteract the spread and effects of misinformation- and disinformation. Common correction approaches include fact-checking, logical fallacy corrections, and undermining misinformation plausibility or source credibility. The effectiveness of fact-based corrections may vary based on factors such as source credibility and format of the correction (Ecker et al., 2022). Prebunking seeks to help people recognize and resist misinformation proactively while debunking addresses specific misinformation after exposure (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). Inoculation approaches can help build resistance to misinformation by highlighting misleading persuasive techniques and threats (Van Der Linden, 2022). By equipping individuals with the necessary tools to assess information critically, these interventions seek to enhance digital literacy and empower individuals to navigate the complex information landscape.

The effectiveness of strategies such as fact-checking or prebunking is context-dependent, and more research is needed to understand better which strategies work best across different parts of the world and in specific situations. Additionally, the effectiveness of corrections can vary among different types of misinformation and across various audiences, making tailored correction strategies to specific circumstances and target audiences necessary (Ecker et al., 2022).

Ongoing research efforts are examining the best practices for implementing these interventions, evaluating their long-term effectiveness, and exploring innovative approaches to address the evolving challenges posed by misinformation- and disinformation. Combating misinformation and disinformation requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach involving various stakeholders, including researchers, fact-checkers, media organizations, educators, and policymakers.

Research on Content and Producers

Studies have found that misinformation often focuses on polarizing and controversial topics, such as politics, immigration, and social issues (Brennen et al., 2020). Mis- and disinformation are often presented in sensational and attention-grabbing ways, such as through clickbait headlines and misleading images (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Mainstream media play an important role in the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation, both by covering and reporting on such false claims and by potentially contributing to the spread of false information among their audiences through their coverage (Tsfati et al., 2020). The producers of mis- and disinformation vary widely and can include individuals, organizations, and foreign actors. Studies have found that foreign actors, particularly state-sponsored actors, play a significant role in the spread of mis- and disinformation (Kim et al., 2018). Current research aims to understand the topics and forms of presentation used in mis- and disinformation to help develop effective fact-checking and debunking strategies.

Internationally Comparative Research

Extant research suggests significant differences across countries in the prevalence and effects of mis- and disinformation. For instance, countries characterized by lower levels of societal polarization, greater trust in democratic institutions, and robust news media may exhibit greater resilience to mis- and disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). Conversely, in countries like Brazil and

India, where political polarization is high, mis- and disinformation campaigns can have a more significant impact on public opinion due to deep-rooted historical divisions (Rossini et al., 2023; Zeng & Chan, 2021). Furthermore, comparative research has explored commonalities and differences in strategies for combating mis- and disinformation across countries. For example, Western democracies often emphasize fact-checking and debunking as primary approaches. In contrast, countries in the Global South may place a stronger emphasis on educational initiatives and platform alterations to counter the spread of false information (Blair et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, more research is needed to assess the effectiveness of correction strategies in combating mis- and disinformation, especially in regions like the Global South, where unique social norms, identities, and historical contexts may influence the impact of misinformation and the success of corrective measures (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

Throughout history, mis- and disinformation have been present in different forms, evolving alongside technological advancements and societal changes. The rise of social media and information communication technologies has significantly amplified the spread and impact of mis- and disinformation, posing challenges to democratic processes and public trust in institutions.

Research on mis- and disinformation has yielded valuable insights into its prevalence, effects, and potential solutions. Studies have explored the prevalence of misperceptions and self-reported exposure in various countries, revealing the pervasive nature of mis- and disinformation in contemporary political communication. Furthermore, research has examined the effects of exposure to mis- and disinformation on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, highlighting its negative consequences on democratic discourse and public opinion. Content-analytic research has shed light on the topics, forms of presentation, and producers of mis-

and disinformation, providing important insights into the strategies used to manipulate and deceive audiences. Finally, international comparative research has helped identify country-specific differences and similarities, enabling cross-cultural understanding and the development of context-specific interventions.

However, the field of mis- and disinformation research faces significant gaps and limitations. Ambiguities in definitions and the absence of standardized measures hinder comparability and generalizability across studies. Furthermore, the predominance of research conducted in Western contexts limits our understanding of the nuances and dynamics in different regions of the world. Another limitation is the lack of standardized measures for mis- and disinformation, making comparisons across studies difficult. Addressing these gaps and limitations requires continued interdisciplinary research collaboration, methodological advancements, and a commitment to cross-cultural understanding. Efforts should focus on developing standardized measures, conducting research in diverse contexts, and exploring the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for combating mis- and disinformation.

In conclusion, understanding the complex nature of mis- and disinformation is essential for safeguarding the integrity of political communication and democratic processes. By building upon existing research and addressing research gaps, research can develop evidence-based solutions to mitigate the negative impact of mis- and disinformation, promote media literacy, and foster an informed and engaged citizenry.

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