

Lisa Ginsborg  
Paula Gori *Editors*

# Disinformation

A Multi-Disciplinary Analysis

 Springer

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# Introduction

Disinformation, as it is often repeated, has always existed. What has changed in the last years is the speed, reach and impact of its spread. As such it has the potential to have a strong impact on democratic processes, including undermining trust in institutions, media and electoral processes. While in the past it was seen by many as something that would concern mainly elections, both the Covid-19 pandemic and recent conflicts have shown that the phenomenon and its impact may go well beyond elections. At the same time, many aspects of disinformation remain unknown both in relation to its spread and impact and what may be effective policy responses. Who and how are we to determine what counts as trustworthy information is one of the trickiest questions for modern societies to answer. At the same time tackling disinformation is an urgent and complex challenge and requires a multidimensional approach.

The field of disinformation studies has blossomed in the last decade, but at the same time has shown a number of limitations and has in the last years been facing its own crises, including polarising discourses and attacks on academic freedom which are becoming worryingly prominent in the current political landscape (Pasquetto et al., 2024). On the one hand, the often-criticised a-historicism of the field of disinformation studies and the recognised need to ground its understanding in history, society and culture (Kuo & Marwick, 2021) have been an inspiration for the present edited book. On the other hand, the catchphrase of a multidisciplinary approach to fully understand the phenomenon of disinformation, also in policy circles, and the imperative of a multi-stakeholder response to the problem have been foundational starting points for this endeavour. The book aims to concretely unpack the question of what different disciplines may actually bring to understanding and responding to disinformation and remind us that different policy responses are always grounded in different explanatory angles of what disinformation is and how it may be most appropriate to tackle it. A comprehensive understanding of the information ecosystem, its actors, technologies and regional variations must start by looking at the phenomenon of disinformation and any possible responses from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The purpose of this book is precisely to have



this unique approach and to bring together scholars and experts from different sectors and disciplines.

The book starts from the key premise that understanding disinformation requires a thorough analysis of the information ecosystem including what fuels disinformation, its impact, and any potential strategies for addressing it. The fundamental premise, that only through a comprehensive understanding of the disinformation phenomenon—as well as the information environment itself, while taking into account all its local specificities—would allow us to respond adequately, can by no means be resolved by this book. Many questions remain unknown, and access to platform data for research purposes and greater data literacy for the research community remain central stepping stones towards better understanding disinformation. At the same time this book aims to serve as a reference source on the multifaceted problem which is referred to as mis- and disinformation in all its complexities and ramifications. What emerges most forcefully from the collected chapters is the element of complexity. Such complexity should be a guiding light for future studies and policy responses. The risks of misguided responses in the current highly politicised landscape of transnational governance are too high.

## Exploring Disinformation from Different Disciplinary Perspectives

The first part of the book, which serves as the foundation for other sections, offers the most glaring illustration of such complexity. While starting from some seminal studies in the field (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), each chapter defines disinformation differently, based on the specificities, areas of inquiry and ultimate aims of each discipline.

Starting from an introduction to the socio-political context in which disinformation may sit (De Vreese and Farooq, “Disinformation and its Sociopolitical Context”), the book aims to include an analysis of disinformation from different disciplinary perspectives including philosophy, social psychology, economics, international law, data science, anthropology, political science and history. Whether we differentiate between *false* and *falsified* information which aims to manipulate the public debate to answer fundamental epistemological and legitimacy questions (Innerarity, “A Philosophy of Disinformation”), how we understand the *economics of disinformation* and the *disinformation economy* (Manganelli and Del Mastro, “Disinformation Economics”), and the psychological mechanisms that lead individuals to believe false information (Delouvee and Wagner, “Manipulating Minds: The Psychological Underpinnings of Misinformation”) matter to unpack such complexity. At the same time, unless we understand which methods and tools for automated-disinformation detection currently exist in computational approaches and how they may be improved (Walter, “Detecting Misinformation and Disinformation in Digital Media”), how different categories of disinformation may

be classified under international law in full respect of human rights standards (Ginsborg, “International Human Rights Law and the Legal Regulation of Disinformation”) and the history behind conspiracy theories (Grotle Rasmussen, “From The Protocols to Pizzagate (and Beyond...): Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation in US History”), we may be missing important parts of the puzzle to better understand and respond to the complexity of the disinformation problem. Part I of the book aims to highlight the fundamental role a multidisciplinary understanding of disinformation can have in understanding the trends, tools and techniques, but also why our brains share content irrationally under certain circumstances such as fear or anger, as well as understanding disinformation from a user perspective. It is about calculating the economics behind disinformation, interpreting large data sets, but also about the impact on democratic processes, the role of communities in conspiracy theories and the historical processes which shape varying social contexts. The book aims to explore frequently discussed areas of enquiry including the two-way influence between trust in institutions and disinformation, namely disinformation creating mistrust in institutions and a general mistrust in institutions favouring the spread and impact of disinformation (Giglioli, “Disinformation and Trust in Media and Institutions”) and how disinformation is related to the world of news production and journalism (Riedl, “Journalism and Disinformation”). The book also delves into more unexplored disciplinary territories, such as the anthropology of disinformation and what an interpretative exercise that attempts to foreground the phenomenon within specific cultural contexts, rational motivations, social pressures, power plays and technological networks may teach us (Polleri, “Anthropology and Disinformation”) also about why and how we should respond to disinformation and possible questions surrounding the effectiveness of each approach. Further disciplinary angles should further be considered, while concerted efforts to bring the disciplines together and allow them to speak to each other are urgently needed.

What is key, and what also emerges from this book, is that while multidisciplinaryity is one of the answers, it is not sufficient per se if it does not go through the integration of the different disciplines. This element is not always present in research, where there is a tendency towards silos or clusters around certain fields, typologies of studies and methodologies. We would like thus to invite to reflect on the creation of Labs, which could attract the different disciplines and ensure their integration. They would need a centralised budget which would reflect the research design and needs. With a commonly defined research agenda, those Labs would provide research direction, coordination and integration. We see this as an opportunity to ensure that researchers from the most distant fields (including, but not limited to: economists, political scientists, neuroscientists, lawyers, psychologists, engineers, data analysts, programmers, communications specialists, historians, sociologists, pedagogists) have a common space where to collectively achieve and integrate their findings. This would also allow researchers from a wide range of disciplines beyond data science to make sense of some of the insights gained from analysing trends in data at scale.

## Understanding the Complexities of Disinformation

If disinformation can be understood only through its complexities, the elaboration of effective solutions must take them into account. The second section of the book aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the information ecosystem, the different processes, technologies and actors involved in the spread of disinformation. It aims to provide answers to key questions ranging from the underlying factors and causes of disinformation to the impact of disinformation itself.

As emerges from the chapter by Darius and Urquhart, investigating such complexity starts with the identification of the actors, messages, incentives and techniques of disinformation campaigns (“Informational Power and Disinformation: Actors, Messages, Incentives, and Techniques of Disinformation Campaigns”). Understanding the economic incentives behind online disinformation and the highly complex relationships between business models, advertising and disinformation in the online space (Joris and Stasi, “Follow the Money: Understanding Economic Incentives Behind Online ‘Disinformation’”), or uncovering the role of foreign influence operations and their proxies as a soft power tool used by a state to exert power vis-à-vis another state or society (Tiilikainen, “Foreign Influence Operations and Their Proxies”) are some of the paths down which investigating disinformation in all its ramifications has taken us. The complexities of disinformation do not only relate to their focus, but also to the technologies behind it. Artificial Intelligence (AI), for example, can be used to spread disinformation and also to produce it, especially generative AI (Krack and Dutkiewicz, “Generative Artificial Intelligence and Disinformation”). The importance of understanding technology also relates to the platforms on which disinformation is spread, and this becomes even more complicated with cross-platform operations, as emerges from the Chapter by Nijmeijer and Kermer (“Uncovering Networks of Cross-Platform Information Operations”).

Complexity also relates to the fact that such a global phenomenon touches different thematic fields which each have their specificities. The book includes chapters on specific disinformation themes such as health (Wilhelm and Purnat, “How Health Disinformation Hijacks Health Narratives to Make Profit, Erode Trust, and Score Political Points, and What to Do About It”), climate change (Gori, “Climate Change Disinformation”), and elections (Ramón Salaverría, Jordi Rodríguez-Virgili and Aurken Sierra, “Disinformation and Elections”). While these have characteristics which are very specific and vertical, other elements are quite common to disinformation more broadly (for example, monetisation). In addition, it is not rare that “sector-specific” disinformation trends are linked. As a matter of example, climate change and health are closely linked both on the problem side and on the solution side. Another clear example is the connection between climate change and migration disinformation. Elections-related disinformation touches horizontally on many themes.

The chapter by Santos Rasmussen focuses on the Russo-Ukrainian Information War and the attempts to shape Ukrainian and global perceptions on the Russian invasion (“The Russo-Ukrainian Information War”). The chapter by Bângăoanu and

Vladu keeps the focus on Ukraine and introduces a case study on the weaponisation of the issue of Ukrainian war refugees for political and geopolitical gain in Romania (“Weaponizing the Issue of Ukrainian War Refugees for Political and Geopolitical Gain: The Romanian Case”), as an evident example of the twists related to disinformation. Moving to Africa, the chapter by Gichuhi focuses on the 2022 Kenyan elections, reminding us that not only do elections have to be conducted fairly, but they also need to be perceived as such (“Case Study on Social Media Analysis of Elections in Kenya”).

The editors are well aware that this book barely scratches the surface of understanding the disinformation phenomenon in all its varieties and regional specificities and at times raises more questions than answers. At the same time, it nonetheless aims to serve as a starting point to unpack such complexity and hopefully also inform future policy considerations. Structural limits to fully understand the disinformation phenomenon, especially in its online manifestations, remain. One of the most urgent and glaring gaps in developing such an understanding continues to be the extremely limited access to online platform data for research purposes. While the EU slowly moves in the direction of regulating data access for research purposes under the DSA, it remains to be seen whether these systems will be sufficient to allow meaningful insight to researchers, whether they will be opened up to researchers beyond to academia, whether they will also shed light also into questions of algorithmic design, content moderation and their impact on human rights and most importantly whether the tools being built will also expand to include researchers and data from social media users outside Europe.

## **A Complex Phenomenon Requires a Multifaceted Response with a Coordinated Common Aim**

While understanding the complexity of the information ecosystem cannot help us find one common solution to the disinformation problem, it is essential that such complexity continues to inform different types of responses to the problem and different policy discussions and solutions across the world. The results of research on disinformation are an essential asset for evidence-based policy responses. Support and investment in independent research and in relevant technology and equipment, facilitation of such research with data access and instrumental use of research outcomes for evidence-informed and evidence-based policy responses play a pivotal role in this multifaceted approach. As much as the processes towards understanding the phenomenon need to be multifaceted, the same goes for solutions. Indeed, as it is often repeated, there is no one silver bullet to address disinformation. Part III of the book aims to investigate a number of approaches which have characterised responses to disinformation over the last years, with an attempt to showcase both their strengths and weaknesses.

In looking at the main strands of policy responses to disinformation, the editors chose to focus on those areas which have prioritised building societal resilience against disinformation through a multi-stakeholder approach, in line with the position of the EU High Level Experts Group (2018) that government regulation of disinformation can be a blunt and risky instrument, and that legal regulatory interventions should be minimised and always in line with international human rights standards (see Chapter on “International Human Rights Law and the Legal Regulation of Disinformation”). While general laws sanctioning disinformation based on general, vague, or broad definitions of disinformation are problematic from a human rights (and rule of law) perspective, speech should never be penalised solely on the basis that it is false. At the same time, freedom of expression may also acquire different meanings on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Pollicino, “Freedom of Expression and Its Limits: Constitutional Dilemmas and Regulatory Conundrum Related to the Fight Against Disinformation”).

*Ex-ante* initiatives such as media literacy and quality journalism help build societal resilience, improving platform transparency, and the work of fact-checking organisations deserves special attention as examples of what a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-society response may look like in practice. The role of media literacy as a policy response to disinformation is considered in detail by Goodman, while recognising some of the limits in evaluating the effectiveness of such interventions (“Media Literacy as a Policy Response to Disinformation”). And there is no doubt that policy responses cannot be solid if they do not observe and attempt to measure the impact they have on the health of the information environment. The advent and rapid growth of fact-checking as part of the response to disinformation is explained by Zagni and Canetta (Independent Fact-Checking: Ex Post Response to Disinformation) including in relation to some of its main limitations. AI can also be used as a tool to detect and identify disinformation, and a particular example is provided by the vera.ai project (Bontcheva, Papadopoulos, Teyssou, Tsabouraki, Spangenberg, Srba, Aichroth, Cuccovillo and Verdoliva, “Using AI to Tackle Disinformation: Methods and Tools from the vera.ai Project”). Other elements, for which an in-depth analysis is not provided in this book, include: the key role played by Civil Society Organisations as well as Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT); pre-bunking and immunity building; new media literacy tools such as gaming; investments in media pluralism and quality journalism.

Going forward it may be worth asking the question of whether disinformation remains the most appropriate term in a highly politicised international environment, given the conceptual murkiness which remains in the field including in legal regulation and its overlap with many other legal categories of regulation. As evidenced in the chapter by Yadav, Wanless and Lai (“Multilateral Efforts on Information Integrity: Why a Clear Definition Is Needed”) a number of multilateral organisations have already adopted the term *information integrity* to expand beyond the notion of countering disinformation, which some consider to be a “narrow, threat-based focus that has become heavily politicised”. Yet, information integrity too has some way to go before reaching an agreed definition and achieving *conceptual goodness*.

While international organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD have published guidelines on the regulation of online platforms, and the EU has been leading the way with regulating platform transparency on the issue, policy approaches to address disinformation and to ensure information integrity differ from region to region if not from country to country. This is due to many factors, including the history of a given country, its government system, the values on which it is based, the information ecosystem, the level of disinformation, its risks assessments, etc. When looking at policy responses, we included a number of geographic focuses, which cover the different continents, namely: Africa (Shiundu, “Disinformation in Africa: Overview and Responses”), the EU (Cesarini, “The EU Policy Framework to Counter Disinformation: Enabler or Inhibitor of Freedom of Expression?”), the US (Kreiss and Wihbey “Disinformation in the US: Overview and Responses”), Japan (Kuwahara, “Disinformation in Japan: Overview and Response”), Brazil (Siqueira, “Disinformation in Brazil: Overview and Responses”), and Australia (Dwyer and Wilding, “Blurring the Bright Lines: Australia’s Failed Attempt to Regulate Misinformation”). It goes without saying that the approach of one country do not necessarily reflect the approach of the whole geographic area. What emerges from these case studies is that policy efforts aimed at ensuring information integrity differ quite considerably and, as said, most of the differences can be traced back to the very essence of a given country or geographic area and their regulatory principles. The book has attempted to provide a first snapshot, with a limited but important focus also beyond the Global North. Greater attention to different policy and regulatory responses in different regions of the world, their effectiveness, and impact is urgently needed given the threats to information integrity faced worldwide.

This book aimed to keep its scope as wide as possible. As such it already covers a large range of focuses and disciplines. The editors see space for a complementary edition which would have a similar approach and cover other areas of focus such as disinformation and cities, the neurosciences of disinformation, the role of civil society organisations and open-source intelligence, the role of teachers and librarians, the impact of games, inoculation, etc. as well as other geographical regions. In addition, both the policy and research sector are eager to see the first research outcomes, which will stem from online platforms’ data access under article 40 of the DSA. This will hopefully lead to groundbreaking insights about information integrity, which will be worth addressing.

Finally, we would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this book. Such endeavours are a mixture of enthusiasm and challenge. This is more true than ever when it comes to a topic, such as information integrity, which is continuously evolving. In addition, experts in the sector are unfortunately victims of harassment and attacks, especially in some countries. This makes their work even more challenging and difficult and we would like to also thank the authors who initially joined this project and had to give up in due course.

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# **Understanding Disinformation**



# Disinformation and its Sociopolitical Context



Aqsa Farooq and Claes de Vreese

**Abstract** There is worldwide attention to disinformation, including its antecedents, production, distribution, and consequences. The attention spans across academic research, civil society, journalism, politics, and policy circles, and it has become part of public and popular discourse. However, the comprehensive attention also underscores the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon and very important social, cultural, and political context differences. This applies to the *causes* of the phenomenon, to the *actors* involved, the *nature* and *fabrics* of disinformation, the different *dynamics* of spread and the different kinds of *individual and societal* effects.

In this chapter, we provide a brief introduction to the concept of disinformation and a conceptual overview. We discuss how different actors play different roles in the disinformation ecosystem and how individual and contextual factors affect the dynamics and effects of disinformation.

## 1 Origins and Definitions of Disinformation

While disinformation as a research topic has seen a recent upsurge, concerns about false or misleading information are nothing new—in fact, one can go as far back as ancient Greece to find discussions about lying and misleading politicians. Back in 1907, one can find evidence of “fake news” accusations towards the media coming from then presidential hopeful, William Jennings Bryan (Bryan, 1908; LaFrance, 2017). Over a century later, this sentiment would be echoed, and the term “fake news” would be once again coined by another presidential candidate. Former US President Donald Trump was notorious for insinuating that the mainstream media were guilty of misrepresenting him and his 2016 election campaign, yet an analysis of Trump’s social media posts during that period revealed that his frequent use of

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terms such as “fake news” were strategic attempts to position himself as a spokesperson for the truth, while undermining mainstream media (Ross & Rivers, 2018).

Against this backdrop, much of the early research studying “fake news” operationalised the term to cover various concepts, ranging from news satire to propaganda (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). This generous application of the term “fake news” eventually drew concerns about its misuse, as it conflated multifaceted phenomena, and became weaponised by political actors as a means to discredit any criticism or coverage they deemed unfavourable (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Wendling, 2018). Stemming from these concerns, Wardle (2018) developed a shared lexicon that disambiguated the known forms of deceptive and harmful information (see Table 1). The High Level Expert Group (HLEG) set up to advise the European Commission on online fake news and disinformation also, in its 2018 report, was critical of the use of “fake news,” instead opting for “disinformation,” defined as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (HLEG, 2018).

What distinguishes disinformation from other forms of misleading or inaccurate information is the *intention to harm* (Fetzer, 2004). This renders, for instance, misleading information such as satire and humour inadequate as examples of disinformation due to their relatively harmless consequences (Fallis, 2014) and rules out “misinformation” due to the lack of harmful intent associated with sharing false information unknowingly (HLEG, 2018). However, intentionality can be complex to decipher in cases where there is an unknown motive, leading many scholars to use “misinformation” as an umbrella term encompassing deliberate, accidental, and unknown intentionality—though, the proliferation of COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation prompted urgent calls for the need to differentiate between the two types of false information (Baines & Elliott, 2020).

**Table 1** Table from Wardle’s (2018) Information Disorder: The Essential Glossary

Disinformation	False information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations.
Malinformation	Genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation.
Misinformation	Information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who don’t know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.
Propaganda	True or false information spread to persuade an audience, but often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments. It is worth noting that the lines between advertising, publicity, and propaganda are often unclear.
Satire	Writing that uses literary devices such as ridicule and irony to criticize elements of society. Satire can become misinformation if audiences misinterpret it as fact.

This differentiation, and the need for it, is further reinforced by the difference in citizens' perceptions of misinformation and disinformation levels as a result of country-specific factors (Hameleers et al., 2022). For instance, citizens of Western and Northern European countries were more concerned about their national news media spreading inaccuracies via unreliable reporting (misinformation) rather than making deliberate fabrications (disinformation), whereas countries highest on press freedom indices were least concerned about both, in comparison to countries lower on press freedom indices. In order to delineate disinformation from other forms of false information, and create an integrated framework of the types of disinformation defined by researchers, Kapantai and colleagues conducted a systematic literature review which mapped out the dimensions on which disinformation can vary, distinguishing between the known forms of disinformation (Kapantai et al., 2021) (see Table 2).

Disinformation is not just problematic for its ability to mislead; other casualties of disinformation include erosion of trust, sowing of division and polarisation, and disengagement with democratic processes (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Hunter, 2023; McKay & Tenove, 2021). These consequences tend to travel further due to the popularity of social media platforms, which can act as vehicles for the dissemination of disinformation (Allcott et al., 2019; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Broniatowski et al., 2018; Farooq, 2017; Guess et al., 2018). Amidst this proliferation, it is crucial to acknowledge the diverse modalities through which disinformation is encountered by citizens, ranging from textual to visual and even auditory forms (Dan et al., 2021; Fallis, 2014; Hameleers et al., 2020). Multimodal forms of disinformation have, in recent years, become increasingly advanced in their ability to deceive citizens due to technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and the ease with which AI can be leveraged for the synthesis of disinformation (Davis, 2025; Farooq & de Vreese, 2025). The threat of AI-powered forms of disinformation has been salient in the political landscape, primarily due to the abundance of politically motivated use of these technologies and their influence on political attitudes (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Dobber et al., 2021; Pawelec, 2022; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

This surge of disinformation across a range of modalities, further galvanised by the latest sophisticated technologies, is perhaps emblematic of the increasingly polarised political landscape of Western democracies in which disinformation thrives (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Reiljan, 2020). Therefore, it is unsurprising that reviews of the disinformation literature highlight a predominant focus on research conducted by scholars in the fields of political science and democracy (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Pérez Escobar et al., 2023). In order to dissect disinformation against this unprecedented backdrop of widespread political turbulence, it is important to establish the primary *actors* responsible for the dissemination of disinformation. This chapter centres on an examination of specific actors involved in disseminating disinformation, notably politicians and political elites, traditional and social media platforms, and citizens.

**Table 2** From Kapatnai et al. (2021)

Dimensions/ measurement	Motive		Ideological	Psychological	Unclear	Facticity			Verifiability	
	Profit					Mostly true	Mostly false	False	Yes	Not
Clickbait	✓			✓		✓			✓	
Conspiracy theories		✓		✓			✓			✓
Fabrication					✓			✓		✓
Misleading connection				✓		✓				✓
Hoax				✓				✓		✓
Biased or one-sided		✓					✓		✓	
Imposter				✓			✓		✓	
Pseudoscience	✓			✓		✓				✓
Rumors					✓		✓			✓
Fake reviews	✓							✓		✓
Trolling				✓			✓			✓

## 2 The Key Actors in the Spread of Disinformation

### 2.1 *Politicians and Political Elites: “Disinformation Often Comes from the Top”*

Information management and control play vital roles in political conflicts and are part and parcel of exerting political power. By shaping or shifting public preferences, the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation from politicians can be used to fuel political conflict and justify the escalation of outgroup violence (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). Political worldviews entrenched in partisan ideology appear to be stubbornly resistant to corrections of misinformed beliefs, as evidenced by research in the USA following the Iraq War of 2003, where Republicans continued to believe in the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq—despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Jacobson, 2010; Shapiro & Bloch-Elkon, 2008). More recent research suggests that when misinformed partisan beliefs have been successfully overturned with correcting evidence, voting preferences for the political candidates responsible for their misperceptions do not change (Swire et al., 2017; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020). As such, those in the position to dictate political narratives have received extensive scrutiny from scholars with regards to their contribution to the spread of disinformation for political gain.

Though not always from positions of power, populist politicians have been increasingly implicated for their role in the spread of disinformation. The correlation between populism and disinformation has been attributed to a mutually characteristic undermining of the “corrupt” legacy media, and the centring of experience-based truths anchored in social interests, unmoved by expert-driven evidence (Waisbord, 2018). Populist leaders in the USA, Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Australia have most demonstrably used such rhetoric in their attempt to appeal to voters and convey their anti-establishment worldview, dismissing inconvenient truths that deviate from their ideological realities (Farhall et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2022). Where such instances may lead to the conflation of populism with a shift away from liberal democratic values, populism may also be regarded as a much-needed representation of the viewpoints and voices of those outside of the mainstream—a key component of healthy democracies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Thus, scholars stress the need for contextualisation and comparative analysis in this debate. From a communication-centred perspective, where populism is treated as a communication strategy with defining features rather than as an ideology, populist communication manifests itself through three types of key actors: political actors, the media, and citizens (de Vreese et al., 2018). Defining elements of populist communication, including references to the people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of certain out-groups, can be found directly or indirectly within the communication that comes *from* political actors, through social media or via political discourse channels, targeted towards citizens who may engage with these messages and voice their own support for populist sentiments. Here, the media may act as both the source (upholding and advocating for populist

attitudes on behalf of citizens, in parallel to the political actors) and the platform through which populist rhetoric from political actors can be amplified (Esser et al., 2016b). The successfulness with which populist messages are adopted can be contingent upon many factors that vary at the level of the politician, the media, and the citizen at the end of the message. Certain affordances of social media, for instance, have been regarded as being particularly conducive to populist communication in European countries (Ernst et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Waisbord, 2018). Though, the need for further research highlighting the interactions between these three actors, explored cross-nationally, is necessitated in order to further understand the phenomenon of populist communication, and how it may contribute to the prevalence of politically driven disinformation (de Vreese et al., 2018).

One thing *is* becoming clearer: the advent of social media as an accessible platform for politicians to communicate with both the media and citizens led to increasing cases of misinformation and disinformation coming—to quote Rasmus Kleis Nielsen—“from the top” (Nielsen, 2024). False claims from political actors may not be the most common form of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms, but it is certainly the most influential. An analysis of a sample of fact-checked false claims about COVID-19 revealed that only 20% of the sample originated from political actors, yet these top-down claims resulted in 69% of engagement on social media (Brennen et al., 2020). A separate investigation showed that the users following the social media accounts of US political actors responsible for sharing false content were also more likely to share news from outlets independently rated as low-quality (Mosleh & Rand, 2022), possibly suggesting a relationship between citizens’ political influences and their exposure to misinformation and disinformation. The latter possibility is further reinforced by investigations highlighting the untrustworthy sources US political elites shared with their online audiences (Lasser et al., 2022).

In their role as representatives of institutions designed to govern and provide accountability, politicians’ culpability in the spread of disinformation is concerning. As those elected to lead, they shoulder the responsibility of providing information that is perceived as holding a level of credibility and relevance unmatched by few within the information ecosystem (Deluggi & Ashraf, 2023; Watson, 2021). The spread of top-down disinformation from politicians has therefore not just been influential to citizens’ online behaviours and information consumption, it has also led to harmful offline consequences. Unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud from political elites rallied a group of rioters to storm the US Capitol, and subsequently reduced confidence in electoral integrity (Berlinski et al., 2023). The dissemination of disinformation on social media by political actors in Spain has been implicated for its role in creating polarisation and intra-group conflict amongst the Spanish public (Said-Hung et al., 2023). Disinformation from politicians in Austria attacking scientists and journalists led to citizens with similar anti-elitist attitudes believing less in scientific information (Egelhofer, 2023). Brazil’s high rates of cases and deaths from COVID-19 were partially attributed to disinformation about COVID-19 and its cures coming from politicians, including president Bolsonaro, via social

media (Recuero et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2021). With top-down disinformation on the rise, media—both mainstream and social media—play a crucial role within the information ecosystem, particularly as the channel between politicians and citizens.

## 2.2 *Traditional Media: A Circle of Distrust?*

Traditional news outlets find themselves caught in a paradox: tasked with upholding journalistic principles such as balance and accuracy, they also strive to report on stories involving falsehoods, potentially contributing to the propagation of disinformation (Tsati et al., 2020). In the USA and UK, there has been a sharp rise in mainstream coverage of stories involving misinformation or disinformation from 2010 onwards (Al-Rawi, 2019). This phenomenon has been well-documented in US-based election research, demonstrating that consumers of mainstream media paid closer attention to and consequently remembered the ‘fake news’ stories more than real news stories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The alternative media sources from which disinformation stories originate and enter the information ecosystem are often short-lived and have limited reach, with research into European news sites disseminating false stories revealing that such sites were being visited significantly less frequently than traditional news outlets (Fletcher et al., 2018). Mainstream media may not be directing citizens to alternative, untrustworthy sites from which the disinformation emerges, yet the attention they bring to stories involving disinformation can still amplify false narratives—even when trying to correct them (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). In the infamous case of Brazil at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, coverage of disinformation by mainstream media outlets led to headlines migrating to social media, where they were used to bolster discourse supporting the disinformation (Soares & Recuero, 2021). According to one perspective, the role of mainstream media in the amplification of disinformation can be attributed to modern day newsroom practices, where the pressure to consistently produce new, relevant and attention-capturing content can lead to the omission of conventional processes that maintain the integrity of the news (Himma-Kadakas, 2017). In contrast, journalists argue that reporting has never been more transparent, it is the accountability that is missing—and with the influx of options available for citizens to get their news from, citizens will choose the stories and the outlets that appeal to their political leanings (Glasser, 2016). During times of political conflict or turmoil, however, independent journalism can become compromised, with traditional media serving as a source of state-sponsored disinformation instead—see, for example, the rise of investigative journalism in the Arab region in opposition to disinformation from traditional media outlets (Bebawi, 2022).

With terms like “fake news media” being brandished by politicians to describe traditional news outlets, citizens worldwide have gravitated towards alternative media sources to receive political news, mobilised by a depletion of trust in traditional media (Newman et al., 2021). On the one hand, we know this movement pattern is salient for individuals holding strong populist attitudes and preferring

right-wing political candidates, as demonstrated by research with German Internet users (Müller & Schulz, 2021). On the other hand, self-report data from citizens across ten European countries showed that increased perceptions of disinformation being prevalent on mainstream news media was correlated with this pattern (Hameleers et al., 2022). With journalists and media organisations being the pioneers of fact-checking, resulting in fact-checks becoming a staple during electoral campaigns (Adair, 2012; Fridkin et al., 2015), this crisis of distrust in mainstream media is alarming. In line with the reflections of Glasser (2016) in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election, citizens are inundated with options, but it is their partisan inclinations that guide their choices—the same can be said about citizens' fact-checking selections, too: when a sample of US citizens were free to select fact-checkers, for certain issues it was the citizens' prior attitudes that guided their selections (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020). Promisingly, research conducted with Dutch participants revealed that sandwiching fact-checked claims around a false claim resulted in more positive perceptions of the journalists' intentions, suggesting different strategies can be employed to combat depleting trust (Tulin et al., 2024)—however, these findings may be specific to the Dutch context, where trust in the media is already high (Hameleers et al., 2022).

As of yet, there is still a lack of systematic, cross-national research that can inform us about the extent to which traditional news media consumers are being exposed to disinformation. Without this, it is difficult to paint a full picture of the role of mainstream media in an information ecosystem that has become favourable to the spread of disinformation. Outside of European and Western democracies, the picture is a lot bleaker. In the case of the Philippines, independent news organisations with the mission to hold politicians accountable have been the target of government attacks, triggering a decrease in trust amongst the public in traditional media, most of whom trust social media for their news more (Rappler, 2023; Tapsell, 2021). Where mainstream media may try to offset the influence of disinformation content spreading from alternative media sites or from political elites, social media engagement facilitates the dissemination and amplification of disinformation, potentially undermining efforts by traditional media to mitigate its influence further (Fletcher et al., 2018). In this sense, social media's rise has been paradigm-shifting in mainstream media's battle against disinformation. Fortunately, the role of social media in the perpetuation of disinformation is one that has received an influx of scholarly attention, making it a focal point for ongoing investigation and analysis in academic circles.



### 2.3 *Social Media: A Fertile Breeding Ground for Disinformation*

Across the emerging literature investigating misinformation and disinformation, research involving data from social media is by far the most commonly analysed media source (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Large-scale, EU-focused disinformation research using social media as its data source has ranged from monitoring activity related to specific events or topics such as elections or health, to mapping disinformation diffusion patterns, to improving disinformation detectors (Bak et al., 2022). This broad range of investigations is perhaps a testament to what social media offers to disinformation researchers.

The amplification of disinformation on social media can be driven by platforms' digital infrastructures and business models, which use personal data and predictive analytics to prioritise controversial and emotional content. This can result in the proliferation of click-bait and polarising misinformation, as advertisers profit from and incentivise the creation of sensationalist content designed to provoke engagement (Benkler et al., 2018; Diaz Ruiz, 2023; Zuboff, 2019). The personalised nature of social media contributes to the formation of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, where users are exposed predominantly to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and preferences. Where epistemic bubbles may *accidentally* exclude other voices, echo chambers result in the undermining and *deliberate* exclusion of other voices (Nguyen, 2020). Those caught in echo chambers can often find themselves migrating to a more extreme position, a direct result of the homogeneity of the group and the perspectives within it (Cinelli et al., 2021). In such conditions, referred to by Cass Sunstein as a "breeding ground for false information" (Sunstein, 2018), it is not difficult to see why this environment tends to facilitate disinformation actors.

The malicious actors able to exploit features of social media to propagate disinformation campaigns can be difficult to trace, veiled by the anonymity that social media offers. However, one of the most infamous cases of disinformation campaigns meddling in an election cycle was found to be operating from the unlikely small town of Veles, in central Macedonia. During the 2016 US elections, a group of teenagers from Veles gained international attention for their role in disseminating disinformation through social media (Kirby, 2016). Exploiting the monetization opportunities provided by platforms like Facebook, these individuals created numerous websites and social media accounts that spread sensationalist and false news stories, primarily targeting American audiences. Their content, often politically charged and misleading, was crafted to generate high engagement and, consequently, substantial ad revenue. They learned that certain content went more viral than others (ads against Clinton generated more revenue than ads against Trump) and used free title generators to synthesise attention grabbing headlines to lure clicks (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021). For those Macedonians, this was a case of creating a lucrative business out of the polarised climate on social media during the elections. For Americans, this was a lesson that their democracy could be

significantly impacted by foreign actors exploiting digital platforms to spread disinformation and potentially manipulate public opinion.

Disinformation actors may be tempted by financial gains, but in some cases, it is the motivating desire to sow discord between groups or within online communities. “Trolls” can come in different forms: *independent trolls* may plant false stories to elicit outrage, mislead citizens, and even deceive mainstream media as a way of undermining their institutions (Phillips, 2015). On the other hand, hired trolls may be commissioned by politicians, companies, and even governments to take to online forums and social media platforms and write fake comments, posts, and opinions from fake profiles (Mihaylov et al., 2015). Reports suggest that the Russian government’s efforts to sway public opinion in its favour has been bolstered by “troll farms,” an assembly line of employees paid to enter conversations with both domestic and international audiences on online platforms (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016).

In some cases, the individual—be it the Macedonian teenager, or the hired troll—is not even necessary to spread propaganda and disinformation on social media. *Bots* too can create content on social media—despite being pieces of software. Whether the goal is to boost a politicians’ number of followers or likes (Woolley & Howard, 2017) or generate numerous social media to denigrate a political candidate, as seen in France (Ferrara, 2017), bots can be deployed to discreetly fulfil a political goal or prop up an agenda. During the UK’s 2016 Brexit referendum, where there were no political candidates per se, bots played a significant role with their contribution of myriad pro-Brexit hashtags on social media (Bruno et al., 2022; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). Advancements in machine learning have resulted in AI-powered, automated social bots, creating new challenges at an unprecedented scale (Arsenault, 2020; Hajli et al., 2022). With an infrastructure and business model so easily exploited by disinformation actors, what was once seen as a revolutionary means through which individuals could connect, social media platforms have now become the main backdrop for disinformation.

## 2.4 Citizens: Part of the Problem and the Solution?

In a digital age where political elites are spreading disinformation, trust in mainstream media is declining, and social media is providing the optimum conditions for disinformation to thrive, citizens find themselves in an unprecedented situation: one where they are at high risk of becoming *misinformed* citizens. As both consumers and contributors of disinformation, citizens have an important part to play in the information ecosystem.

Disinformation can affect citizens in several ways. As outlined throughout this chapter, political disinformation can influence citizens’ electoral behaviour, scientific and health disinformation can influence citizens’ decisions about preventive behaviours, and disinformation targeting mainstream media and journalists can influence citizens’ trust in traditional and legacy media outlets. Disinformation can target some of the most integral institutions in society. It is therefore no surprise that

many scholars have attempted to discern the factors that make citizens vulnerable to disinformation, both as those who may believe the false claims, and as those who may regurgitate them.

One of the factors most commonly attributed to citizens' susceptibility to disinformation narratives is their identity-driven political motivations. Aligned with the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), it is argued that citizens' motivation to protect their partisan identity impairs their ability to objectively evaluate content, making them more likely to accept and uncritically engage with information that aligns with their political beliefs, leading to the phenomenon of a "partisan brain" where loyalty to political groups overrides truth-seeking, and voters' candidate choices are influenced by their partisan identity rather than the truthfulness of statements (Kahan, 2013; Nyhan et al., 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Swire et al., 2017; Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). Given the fundamental importance of valuing and seeking out objective truths and facts to dispel disinformation narratives, such identity-driven knowledge resistance can have dire consequences for both the individual and democracy (Strömbäck et al., 2022). This literature suggests why disinformation actors disseminating political content find the most success (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2021).

However, it is not just political content that disinformation actors may spread on social media in order to provoke citizen interactions—racial presentation can also be used to farm engagement. A computational analysis of the activities of Russian government-funded troll farms revealed that citizens were most likely to engage with disinformation that was coming from troll accounts that presented as being run by Black activists (Freelon et al., 2022). The success of such tactics suggest that citizens may be vulnerable to disinformation beyond the kind of content that appeals to their political ideologies. Along these lines, there is reason to believe that disinformation spread and belief can be facilitated by content that appeals to certain beliefs and attitudes, such as anti-immigrant views, as found across Europe (Hameleers et al., 2023; Morosoli et al., 2022). Research with UK-based citizens showed that even when they acknowledged disinformation to be a problem, they did not feel that deliberately spreading disinformation consistent with their beliefs about COVID-19 was wrong or harmful (Joyner et al., 2023). Such insights are as concerning as they are enlightening—for disinformation actors, citizens' preference for belief-consistent content over factuality can be exploited in tandem with the infrastructure of social media platforms, making it increasingly easier to disseminate false narratives. For political elites who are motivated by maintaining or claiming political power, citizens who prioritise existing beliefs over evidence can also be manipulated for votes or support. Where citizens' susceptibility to participate in the sharing and believing of disinformation is concerned, there seems to be a value-level conflict between objective truth-seeking and ideological or attitudinal consistency, and the conditions on social media platforms seem to only facilitate the latter.

While the spread of misinformation through citizens' inadvertent sharing of false information has been well documented (Chen et al., 2023), it is of course important to note that not everyone shares the disinformation they come across. For some people, sharing false information has too many reputational costs (Altay et al.,

2022), suggesting that self-presentation online is still valued and worth preserving. However, the anonymity offered by social media platforms may act as a shield against offline repercussions. Amongst those emboldened by such affordances on online platforms are the citizens who unleash their societal frustrations on online platforms—one way of doing so is by knowingly circulating false information, and by definition, sharing disinformation. Surveys conducted with individuals in Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA revealed that some individuals who perceive themselves to be disenfranchised members of society cope with such feelings by inciting chaos online (Arceneaux et al., 2021). For some of these individuals, they report a desire to rebuild the society that has led to the inequalities that they believe to be disadvantaged from, whereas others simply derive joy from the destruction of society. These individuals, who the authors describe as having a high “need for chaos,” are also more likely to contribute to the spread of disinformation online (Petersen et al., 2023). Given that these traits were predictive of sharing disinformation regardless of political affiliations, it is possible to infer that for some citizens, feeling ostracised by society and a political order that supposedly only favours a privileged group at the top can lead to chaotic motivations, and a pathway to sharing disinformation. Beyond the financial, political, and ideological motivations discussed in this chapter, it is imperative to note that disinformation spread can also be due to perceptions of who holds power in society.

For disinformation interventions focused on citizens, there seems to be a lack of synergy with the psychological, individual-level underpinnings and motivations such as those mentioned in this section (Ziemer & Rothmund, 2024) as well as a focus on the societal conditions that may drive individuals to engage in the participation of spreading disinformation (Petersen et al., 2023). With the rise of top-down and financially motivated disinformation able to flourish on social media platforms, solutions to address disinformation may benefit from acknowledging that citizens and mainstream media must be empowered within their roles in the information ecosystem, but that the factors that make citizens susceptible to disinformation must be given closer attention.

### 3 Context-Dependent Factors

The scholarship on the topic of disinformation benefits greatly from research that delves beyond Western and Northern European borders, allowing us to build a global and more nuanced perspective on this phenomenon—while also emphasising the need for additional investigations outside the popularly studied regions. In the wake of populist politicians and parties coming into power at a rapid pace around the globe (Kumral, 2023), fuelling further polarisation and intergroup tension, there has been a growing number of calls for a more comprehensive, cross-national examination that acknowledges national contexts, media systems, and key actors (Reinemann et al., 2019).

The extant cross-national literature reveals how disinformation dynamics can be particularly revealing of the specific national contexts in which they are studied. For instance, national information environments account for differences in disinformation narratives, such as the targets of the narratives. In German-speaking countries, narratives were found to be more likely to revolve around immigrants, whereas partisan disinformation targeting political actors led the way in English-speaking countries (Humprecht, 2018). Cross-national investigations have also provided us with a broader understanding of the dynamics of false information that circulate on social media based on the social, cultural, and political context in which they spread. During the coronavirus pandemic, where there was a global influx of health-related and scientific disinformation on social media platforms, political actors and politically relevant content were found to be the source of COVID-19 misinformation in the USA, Iran, and China (Madraki et al., 2021). However, in line with a society in which the government has a tight control of the content that circulates on social media, only in China was misinformation about the origins of COVID-19 coming from hackers or fraudsters with harmful intentions entirely non-existent. Though strict government rule may have protected citizens from viral disinformation from criminal actors, it did not save them from misinformation that comes from other actors, such as celebrities and public figures.

Cross-national research also furthers our understanding of how certain countries may be better suited to build resilience against disinformation than others. An 18-country analysis accounting for predictors of resilience against disinformation, such as populism and polarisation (as negative predictors) and media trust index and shared media (as positive predictors) revealed that Finland, Denmark, and the Netherlands had environments highly suited to resilience against disinformation, whereas Italy, Greece, and the USA had environments more favourable to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). A closer examination showed that countries with similar resilience levels could be clustered together by their media systems. Countries in Western Europe and Canada were characterised as having media-supportive systems, making them most resistant to disinformation—though the authors noted that countries like the UK were on the precipice of becoming more polarised. Countries in Southern Europe were more vulnerable to disinformation, having polarised–pluralist media systems symptomatic of the strong ideological divides that shape their societies. These differences across European countries can also be traced to journalistic practices, and the politically shaped environments in which they fulfil their obligations (Esser et al., 2016a) as well as differences in how and from where citizens acquire their political information (Castro et al., 2022). Finally, the USA comprised its own category, being the country most susceptible to disinformation as a result of its low-trust, politically charged, and highly polarised media environment, featuring growing levels of populist communication (Humprecht et al., 2020; Nechushtai, 2018). With an overwhelming majority of US-based data receiving scholarly attention from disinformation researchers (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024), the unique context of the USA is perhaps even more alarming due to its relative incomparability to other national contexts.

## 4 Conclusion

The disinformation phenomenon is genuinely receiving a lot of attention both in research, politics, and policy circles. With this opening chapter, we have attempted to provide an introduction to the state-of-the-art in terms of our knowledge, when it comes to the *causes* of the phenomenon, to the *actors* involved, the *nature and fabrics* of disinformation, the different *dynamics* of spread, and the different kinds of *individual and societal effects*. All of this is even more nuanced when considering contextual differences as discussed above. However, with this as a backdrop, the groundwork is laid for the next chapter investigating philosophical approaches to the disinformation problem.

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