Perceived mis- and disinformation in a post-factual information setting

a conceptualisation and evidence from ten European countries

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PERCEIVED MIS- AND DISINFORMATION IN A POST-FACTUAL INFORMATION SETTING

A conceptualisation and evidence from ten European countries

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Today's digital communication environments are increasingly seen as hosting phenomena that are problematic for deliberative democracy (e.g. Van Aelst et al., 2017). One of the most pressing issues in that regard is the alleged spread of false information – which refers to information that is either inaccurate without the intention to mislead (misinformation) or manipulated or fabricated to achieve a political goal (disinformation) (e.g. Hameleers et al., 2020; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017). Although scholars have started to map the dimensions of communicative untruthfulness and its political consequences (e.g. Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017), we know little about how mis- and disinformation are actually perceived by citizens. Do the widespread concerns about communicative untruthfulness resonate with citizens' interpretations of their information environment, and do they actually perceive their information setting as (deliberately) misleading and dishonest? In this chapter, we aim to give an overview of mis- and disinformation through the eyes of news consumers, offering evidence of how salient these media evaluations are among European news consumers.

In a communication era that has been described as post-truth or post-factual (e.g. Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017) – the factual status of reality and the honesty of the news media's worldviews are no longer taken at face value but rather are seen as relative or subject to distortion. This means that citizens may become more cynical and distrusting towards information presented to them as truthful. In line with this, they may use their ideological identities or prior attitudes to separate facts from fiction – rather than basing their judgment on the veracity of information (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2019). In this setting, it is crucial to look not only at the actual facticity, neutrality, and honesty of information, but also at the perceptions of unintended misinformation and intentional disinformation. Hence, as multiple accounts of the same external reality may reach citizens in (online) news environments, it is crucial to explore the extent to which news consumers actually trust the media – or whether they perceive a crisis of accuracy and honesty in the news they are exposed to. Mis- and disinformation may thus correspond to societal developments beyond the lack of facticity and

honesty of information and can spill over into demand-side evaluations of the media's accuracy and honesty.

Relying on existing supply-side conceptualisations that regard mis- and disinformation as different phenomena (e.g. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017), we discern two main dimensions by which news consumers perceptions of mis- and disinformation are structured: (1) misinformation perceptions pertaining to inaccurate news reporting that deviates from reality and (2) disinformation perceptions that tap the perceived dishonesty of the news environment, which corresponds to perceived intentional misleading, deception, and dishonesty of the media (see Hameleers et al., 2020).

Perceptions of disinformation in particular correspond to an overall populist worldview. Hence, it has been argued that populist voters increasingly regard the media and mainstream sources of knowledge as biased, corrupt, and deceptive (e.g. Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Krämer, 2018; Tambini, 2017). More specifically, right-wing populist actors are said to rely on a discourse in which not only the political elites, but also the mainstream media are targeted as enemies of the people (Tambini, 2017). Hence, when people perceive that the media betray the people and deliberately manipulate reality to serve their own interests, an inherently populist worldview is expressed (Fawzi, 2018). Specifically, disinformation perceptions juxtapose the honest ordinary people with corrupt elites in the media. In tandem with the increasing concern about the pervasiveness of populist sentiments throughout Europe, we thus also need to comprehend how such perceptions are expressed towards the media as a likely salient scapegoat for the people's problems.

In the next sections, this chapter will give an overview of how mis- and disinformation can be conceptualised as perceptions of the news media's accuracy and honesty. We will present evidence of the extent to which people in different European countries actually hold these perceptions when evaluating the media's performance, also offering insights into the role of national-level opportunity structures that may give rise to lower or higher levels of these perceptions. As mis- and disinformation perceptions may have different democratic implications, it is important to assess the extent to which news consumers in different countries evaluate the media according to these dimensions, and whether they can distinguish unintentional falsehoods (misinformation) from deliberative deception (disinformation).

Beyond distrust and hostility: perceived mis- and disinformation

In conceptualising mis- and disinformation, we follow extant literature that has distinguished different forms of mis- and disinformation (e.g. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017). Although conceptual consensus on the scope of mis- and disinformation has not yet been reached (see, for example, Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019), many scholars have argued that fake news as a concept is too vague to fully express the nature of untruthful communication (e.g. Freelon & Wells, 2020; Wardle, 2017). Most conceptualisations have in common that different forms of mis- or disinformation are distinguished based on facticity and intent (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). Based on this core distinction, two main types of communicative untruthfulness can be distinguished: misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation can simply be defined as communication that is inaccurate or untrue but without the intention of misleading receivers (e.g. Wardle, 2017). Misinformation thus scores 'low' on the facticity dimension (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018) and refers to statements that are untrue when scrutinised by empirical evidence and/or expert opinion (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Misinformation can be disseminated by many different actors, such as politicians, advertisers, and journalists, but also ordinary citizens who communicate their positions via social media. The

level or severity of untruthfulness may vary, depending on the deviation from the external, objective reality. More specifically, misinformation can be 'completely false' or 'mostly true' and everything in between these extremes. Such degrees of untruthfulness are also captured by fact-checking platforms such as Snopes or PolitiFact.

Different from misinformation, disinformation refers to the intentional or goal-directed manipulation or fabrication of information (e.g. Jackson, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017). The goals of disinformation may vary, but cultivating distrust; increasing support for, for example, radical left- or right-wing issue positions; and strengthening polarisation may be some of the political goals targeted by agents of disinformation (Jackson, 2017; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Disinformation is often partisan in nature: it is tailored to specific issue publics or ideological groups in society that should be most likely to accept the dishonest claims (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The partisan or ideological underpinnings make disinformation potentially harmful in today's media settings: when citizens are exposed to disinformation that reassures their partisan identities or issue positions, they are less likely to cast doubts on its veracity. As disinformation is intended to make an impact and as it can be distributed in a systematic, goal-directed way to bring about societal change or disruption, it may be problematic for deliberative democracy.

Although the distinction between mis- and disinformation has been made in conceptual literature, we know very little about the actual occurrence of these types of communicative untruthfulness in the digital media landscape. Hence, in light of digital developments fostering fragmentation, personalisation, and micro-targeting, researchers face an enormous challenge in mapping the scope of mis- and disinformation on the supply side. In addition, mis- or disinformation cannot simply be equated with any type of communication that lacks objective, factual coverage and/or expert knowledge, which makes it difficult to identify the scope of mis- and disinformation. What we can actually map empirically is how news consumers themselves perceive mis- and disinformation (see Hameleers et al., 2020), which may have crucial ramifications for the effects of false information on society and the selection decisions of citizens in fragmented media environments. More specifically, the more people perceive the traditional information environment as characterised by mis- and disinformation, the less they trust the news media and the more likely they are to resort to alternative sources and platforms. Based on the premises of motivated reasoning resulting in confirmation biases and defensive motivations (e.g. Hart et al., 2009), information that resonates with people's ideologies and prior attitudes is least likely to be subject to doubt and scepticism, which also implies that the perception of mis- and disinformation may mostly be assigned to information that challenges the existing beliefs of citizens. In that sense, these perceptions can have far-reaching democratic implications: if citizens dismiss incongruent realities as untrue or misleading, they can avoid cognitive dissonance and stick to congruent accounts of reality, irrespective of the actual veracity of information. If the same mechanism operates at opposite fringes of the political spectrum, mis- and disinformation perceptions may augment polarisation and partisan or ideological divides in society. In that sense, mis- and disinformation may not only relate to people's actual beliefs in the accuracy and honesty of information, but also serve as cues to defend attitudinal positions and identities in a high-choice media environment in which congruent truths are widely available.

Shifting our focus to the demand side of mis- and disinformation, mis- and disinformation can be perceived as individual-level attitudes corresponding to news consumers' perceptions of inaccurate, untruthful, and/or dishonest communication in their media environments (Hameleers et al., 2020). As distrust and hostility towards information and the press has become more politicised and, arguably, subject to populist framing (Fawzi, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2020), traditional measures of media trust and hostile media perceptions fall short of accurately capturing

citizens' media evaluations. Hence, some citizens not only hold negative evaluations of the media's performance or biases but may also regard the media as part of the established order that deliberately misleads the people. Citizens with less-pronounced populist worldviews may believe that the media at times fail to report on the facts as they happened, without assigning this failure to goal-directed manipulation and deception.

In terms of consequences for deliberative democracy, distinguishing between these different dimensions of the media's evaluation may also separate healthy sceptics from cynical and distrusting citizens: People with misinformation attitudes may still trust the institution and democratic function of the news media to inform citizens, although they feel that information is not always accurate. Disinformation attitudes, in contrast, correspond to institutional distrust and cynicism: people who perceive that the media are lying to the people have no faith in the functioning and neutrality of the institutions that govern the supply of information in society. Together, in an information ecology characterised by increasing relativism towards the objective status of facts, news consumers' perceptions of media honesty, trustworthiness, and accuracy should be measured using a multidimensional measure of mis- and disinformation and not simply by established measures of media trust and/or hostile media perceptions (see Hameleers et al., 2020).

The populist nature of perceived mis- and disinformation

More than conventional media trust measures, mis- and disinformation perceptions aim to map the people's opposition to mainstream media in times of a so-called populist zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004). Hence, it has been argued that populist ideas – which concern the expression of an antagonistic worldview or ideology in which the ordinary people are framed in opposition to the 'corrupt' elites (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2017; Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004) – increasingly manifests itself outside the realm of populist politicians. For example, populist ideas have been found to manifest as frames or organising ideas in news coverage (e.g. Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020) and as individual-level attitudes corresponding to the perceived divide between the ordinary people's in-group and the evil and corrupt elites (e.g. Schulz et al., 2017).

Perceptions of mis- and disinformation resonate with populist sentiments. The element of anti-elitism central to populism pertains not only to the people's opposition towards political elites but also to media elites (e.g. Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Krämer, 2018; Tambini, 2017). Hence, voicing critique of the functioning and honesty of the established press has become a key element of populist communication tactics, which increasingly revolve around an epistemic crisis that separates the people's truth from the lies and deception of the media. On the demand side of voters, empirical research has, indeed, established an affinity between citizens' populist attitudes and anti-media sentiments (e.g. Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2017). This means that the more salient people's populist attitudes, the more likely they are to perceive the media as an enemy of the people. Populist worldviews thus not only refer to an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite but can also emphasise that the news media are to blame for distorting reality and for depriving the ordinary citizens of the truth.

The affinity between populist perceptions and anti-media attitudes (Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2017) is captured in perceptions of mis- and disinformation. Although extant conceptualisations of populist attitudes measure the ordinary people's opposition to the elites (e.g. Schulz et al., 2017), populist attitudes do not specify the elite actors they refer to beyond the political realm. As populist ideas juxtapose the people not only to established politicians but also to media elites and institutions, we need to understand populist perceptions of the media as an integral part of populist worldviews. As populist movements on the left and right that accuse

the media of spreading fake news are gaining electoral terrain (e.g. Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), it is important to assess how these delegitimising perceptions of the media spill over into the electorate.

Hence, moving beyond distrust towards the media and populist perceptions as distinct constructs, it can be argued that the perceived divide between the ordinary people and the dishonest or corrupt elite may also be conceived on the level of media elites and institutions of the mainstream press. We therefore incorporate populist anti-media sentiments in our measure of perceived disinformation – such as the people's perception that the news media are an enemy of the ordinary people, that they only serve their own self-interest, and that the news media are deliberately lying to the people. By integrating the anti-media component of populist ideology into our conceptualisation of perceived disinformation, we empirically approach the affinity between anti-media sentiments and populist media critique that has been developed recently (e.g. Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2017).

Illustrating perceptions of mis- and disinformation

We report on the findings of a large-scale comparative survey in ten European countries in the period of the 2019 European parliamentary elections (see Hameleers et al., 2020, for documentation and background information). The ten included countries, which represent different regions in Europe, are the Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Spain, France Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. We selected these European countries to achieve a maximum variety in contextual-level factors and regional differences that may resonate with perceptions of mis- and disinformation on the individual level.[1]

Measures for misinformation perceptions tapped the perceived veracity, accuracy, and truthfulness of traditional news reporting. These perceptions were measured with the following items (all measured on seven-point disagree-agree scales): (1) The news media do not report accurately on facts that happened; (2) To understand real-life events, you cannot rely on the news media; (3) The news media are an unreliable source of factual information; and (4) The news media insufficiently rely on expert sources. Disinformation perceptions were measured with the following items: (1) The news media are an enemy of the ordinary people; (2) The news media are deliberately lying to the people; and (3) The news media only serve their own interests. The items used for perceived misinformation and disinformation were theoretically informed by conceptualisations of fake news (e.g. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017), as a well as populist attitudes (for the disinformation dimension only) (e.g. Schulz et al., 2017).

Do citizens systematically distinguish between deliberately misleading and inaccurate reporting, and in what countries are the differences between mis- and disinformation strongest? Our findings indicate that citizens in most countries distinguish between mis- and disinformation perceptions, with the exception of Greece and Spain (see Figure 34.1). Hence, in these countries, average levels of misinformation perceptions are equally as high as disinformation perceptions.

In all other countries, misinformation perceptions are significantly lower than disinformation perceptions. Citizens are thus mostly capable of distinguishing their critical perspective on the news media's performance from cynical and populist interpretations of the media's dishonesty. Spain and Greece, two Southern European countries with high overall levels of media distrust and corruption, may provide a contextual backdrop in which citizens hold negative and cynical attitudes towards the press. Distrust in the media may be so severe that citizens do not distinguish between 'honest' mistakes and 'lying' and corrupt media elites. When news consumers have at least a basic level of trust in the institutions governing the media, as in most

countries, a fine-grained distinction between critical media perceptions and cynical or populist media attitudes can be maintained.

Looking at the differences between the countries in more detail, it can be observed that the average levels of mis- and disinformation perceptions vary strongly across national settings (see Figure 34.1). Regarding the average level of misinformation, France (M = 4.91, SD = 1.19) and The Netherlands (M = 3.75, SD = 1.12) differ most strongly. Differences of one full scale point can also be observed for Southern and Eastern European countries versus Northern and Western European countries. Interestingly, many of these differences mirror contextual factors that differ across the ten European countries. In countries where media trust levels and press freedom indicators are low and corruption is high, misinformation perceptions are most salient.

Differences in disinformation perceptions are even stronger than national differences in perceived misinformation. Specifically, disinformation perceptions are strongest in Greece (M = 4.91, SD = 1.19) and lowest in Sweden (M = 3.20, SD = 1.54). Similar substantial between-country differences can be observed between Southern European countries (e.g. Greece) and other Western and Northern European countries (e.g. The Netherlands).

Differences in levels of disinformation perceptions can be connected to contextual-level factors. Specifically, in countries with less press freedom and stronger indicators of corruption, news consumers are more likely to distrust the honesty of the press and perceive the news media as the people's enemy (e.g. in Greece and Poland). Contrary to what may be expected, the presence of successful right-wing populist parties is not associated with stronger disinformation perceptions. Hence, although right-wing populist parties are successful in many Western European countries (e.g. The Netherlands, Sweden), disinformation perceptions are generally lowest in Western Europe.
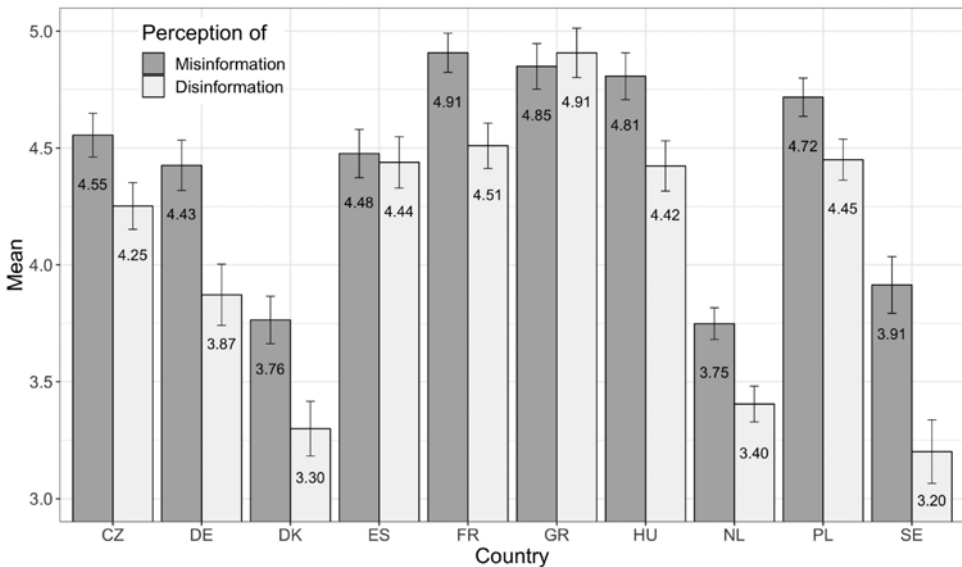

Figure 34.1   A depiction of the mean scores of mis- and disinformation perceptions in the ten countries under study

(See also Hameleers et al., 2020)

Discussion

In response to growing societal concerns about the honesty and accuracy of information in digital information settings, many scholars have attempted to conceptualise mis- or disinformation as a sender-side phenomenon (e.g. Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Wardle, 2017; Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). Hence, (radical right-wing) politicians, ordinary citizens, journalists, and alternative media outlets are accused of spreading falsehoods, which are assumed to make an impact on public opinion and electoral outcomes (e.g. Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In an era where trust in mass media institutions is declining and citizens increasingly turn to non-journalistic alternative media outlets, we need to move beyond the dominant understanding of mis- and disinformation as supply-side phenomena that only have an effect by misleading and deceiving citizens. In a post-truth information era, facticity and expert knowledge are increasingly scrutinised or even counter-argued when they do not fit the perceptual screens of news consumers (Van Aelst et al., 2017). This debate on (un)truthfulness on its own may have far-reaching effects, as it can result in declining levels of trust in mainstream knowledge and the approach of alternative sources of information that are more prone to false information. For this reason, it is crucial to understand how news consumers themselves perceive mis- and disinformation. Do they distinguish healthy criticism of the veracity of information from cynical attitudes towards the deceptive intentions of the press?

Based on empirical data collected in ten diverse European nations, we can confirm that most citizens actually do distinguish between intentional disinformation and unintentional misinformation. Overall, perceptions of misinformation are significantly more salient than those of perceived disinformation. However, we observe strong between-country variation on the salience of mis- and disinformation perceptions. News consumers in Western and Northern European countries with higher levels of media trust and press freedom and lower levels of corruption are more likely to trust the accuracy of journalistic reporting and are less likely to doubt the honesty of the media elites. However, in national settings where press freedom is lower and corruption and distrust in media institutions is highest (Eastern and Southern European countries and France), citizens are more likely to have strong perceptions of mis- and disinformation. France may be regarded as a rather unique case. Even though it is a Western European country, disinformation perceptions are higher there than in all other countries. This can be explained by the political developments taking place at the time of data collection: the yellow vest movement gained visibility and managed to put distrust in the institutions of the press high on the political agenda. This means that real-life developments and contextual variations can have an impact on how the media are evaluated in terms of mis- and disinformation perceptions. Beyond more fixed contextual-level opportunity structures, mis- and disinformation perceptions may resonate with specific developments and crises that negatively impact the evaluation of the media's honesty and veracity.

Mis- and disinformation perceptions have important implications for the information ecology allegedly characterised by post-truth or post-factual relativism (e.g. Van Aelst et al., 2017). On a positive note, citizens in most countries have moderate levels of 'healthy scepticism', indicating that the media are seen as not being able to report on facts accurately. This may be an indicator of media literacy and more desirable levels of scepticism: in times of information overload and high choice, citizens should be able to critically navigate their information environment and should not uncritically accept all incoming political information. Citizens need to act as independent fact-checkers themselves as they cannot rely on their information environment to check the veracity of each and every claim they are exposed to. Importantly, these perceptions can be distinguished from disinformation perceptions. Disinformation perceptions

align with populist worldviews in which the media are severely distrusted and seen as the people's enemy. In most countries, disinformation perceptions are lower than misinformation perceptions, indicating that scepticism in the accuracy of news reporting is more prominent that distrust in the honesty of the press. But how worrisome are such perceptions?

On average, disinformation perceptions are higher than the midpoint of the scale in most countries. This means that holding the media accountable for the supply of dishonest and misleading political information is a relatively salient attitude. In line with extant literature that has pointed to an affinity between anti-media perceptions and populist attitudes on the demand side of the electorate (e.g. Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018), we found that many citizens regard traditional media as an elitist outsider that deprives the ordinary people of an honest worldview. The most important democratic implication is that although citizens with higher misinformation perceptions may still rely on the news media to be informed about the world around them, citizens with higher levels of disinformation may show a strong tendency to avoid traditional news media altogether. Hence, they do not simply distrust the content of information itself but cast severe doubts on the intentions underlying the production of news content: news producers are regarded as part of a corrupt established order that misleads news consumers as part of a scheme to hide the power discrepancy between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites.

As it reaches beyond the scope of this chapter to provide insights into the consequences of mis- and disinformation perceptions for media choices and political attitudes or behaviours, we recommend that future empirical endeavors further explore the extent to which mis- and disinformation perceptions correspond to specific (alternative and anti-establishment) media diets. Is it, indeed, the case that citizens with stronger disinformation perceptions avoid established media whilst approaching alternative outlets that mirror their populist, cynical, and anti-elitist worldviews? And if this the case, what are the consequences of exposure to these alternative media platforms? As increasing levels of disinformation perceptions may trigger selective exposure to anti-elitist content, which, in turn, intensifies negative perceptions and avoidance of the established political and media order, a vicious circle of distrust may become activated. To end on a more positive note, this chapter shows that perceived communicative untruthfulness is not a unidimensional construct – meaning that critical skills and distrust in the media's institutions are distinct perceptions used to interpret information from the media. As long as disinformation perceptions are less prevalent than perceived misinformation, the crisis of distrust and post-truth relativism may be less severe than is oftentimes assumed. An important task for journalists and established media platforms is to acknowledge the mis- and disinformation perceptions of society and respond with formats and reporting styles that restore trust in the fourth-estate function of the mainstream media.

Note

1 The levels of press freedom differ strongly in our sample – ranging from 8.3 in Sweden to 30.4 in Hungary on a 100-point scale (higher scores indicate less press freedom) (Reporters sans Frontières, 2019). Similarly, national levels of media trust differ across the sampled countries: only 24 percent of citizens in France trust the media, whereas these levels are much higher in Western and Northern European countries such as The Netherlands (53 percent) and Denmark (57 percent). Finally, our selected countries differ in terms of the electoral success of (radical) right-wing populist parties. Within the selected countries, data was collected by an external research agency (Kantar). To achieve a sample composition that approached national representativeness, light quotas were used for age, gender, education, and region. We achieved the following number of completes in the different countries: N_{CZ}=733, N_{DE}=518, N_{DK}=563, N_{ES}=557, N_{FR}=776, N_{GR}=494, N_{HU}= 588, N_{NL}=1067, N_{PL}=857, N_{SE}=497.

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