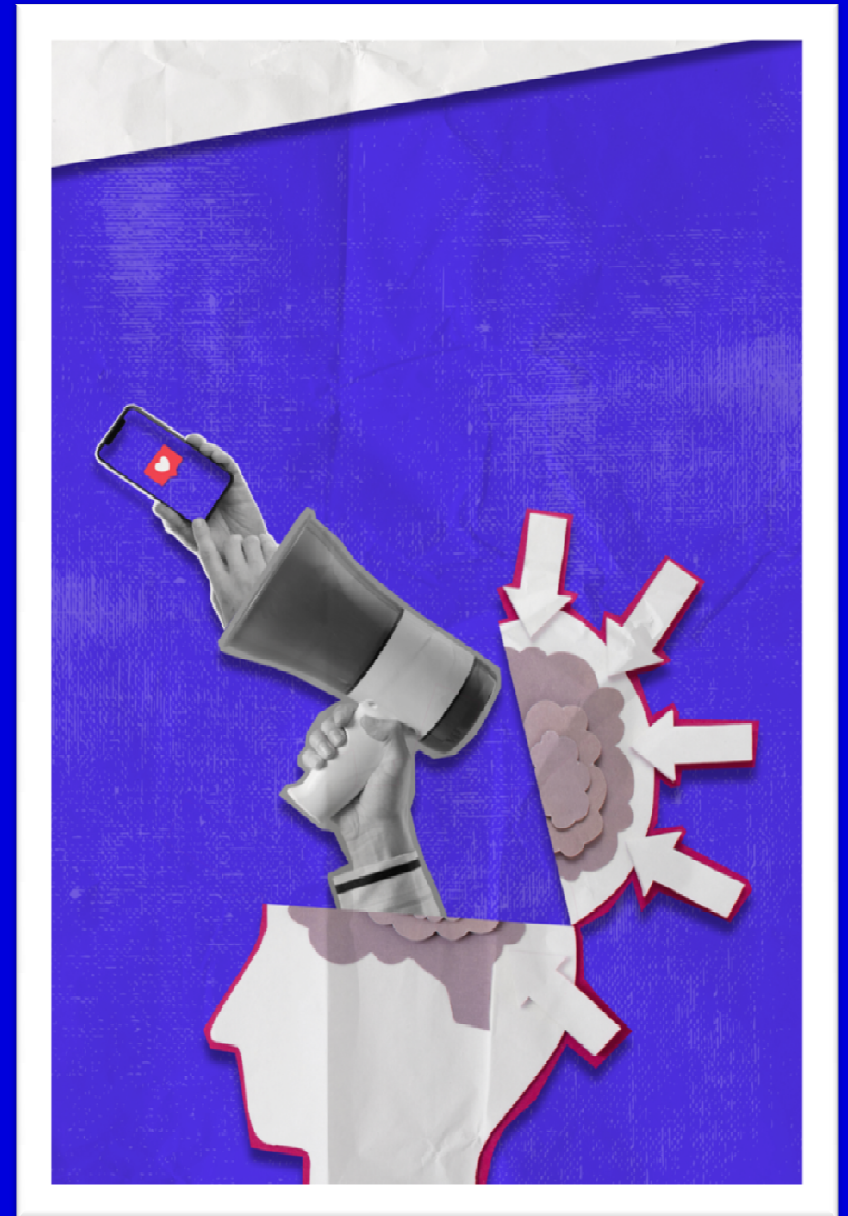# MUNI

Disinformation & conspiracy beliefs

Pmcb1013: Citizens, media and public opinion

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25.11.2024

Today's agenda

– Definitions and reasons

– Looking at the supply side

– Looking at the audience

– What can be done?

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Definitions

– Often terms disinformation, misinformation, fake news and other used interchangably

– Why should we care?
  o Clear concepts allow better research
  o Misuse of the terms by political actors in their favour, results in delegitimization of legacy media
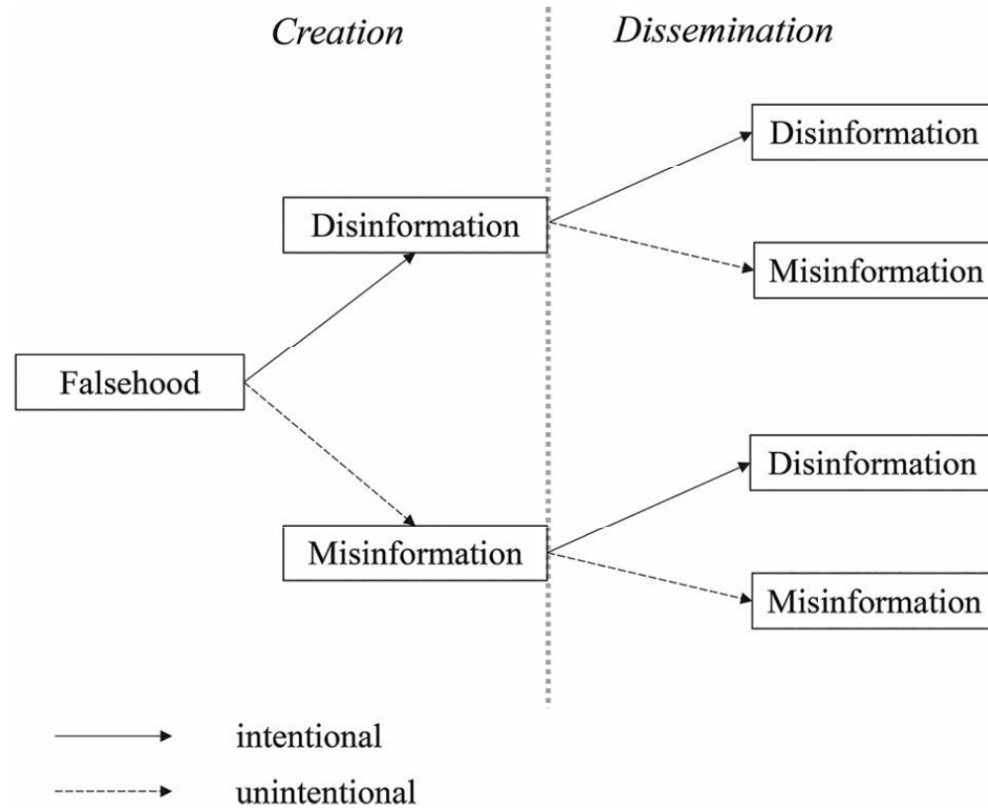
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Definitions

Misinformation

– Incorrect or misleading information

– Created and disseminated unintentionally
  o Misunderstanding the information
  o Sloppy journalism

Disinformation

– Incorrect or misleading information

– Created and/or disseminated deliberatively

4

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Figure 4.2 The Supply Chain of Falsehoods.

Definitions

Fake news

- Difficult to conceptualize
- Consists of similar structural components as "real news"
- Mimics the result of journalistic research that follows certain professional standards

- ALSO used as label to discredit and delegitimize journalism and news media
- Often used by populist actors – anti-elithist rhetoric

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Definitions

Conspiracies and conspiracy theories

– "Conspiracy" = secret plot by two or more powerful actors
– typically attempt to usurp political or economic power, violate rights, infringe uponestablished agreements, withhold vital secrets, or alter bedrock institutions

– "Conspiracy theories" = attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors
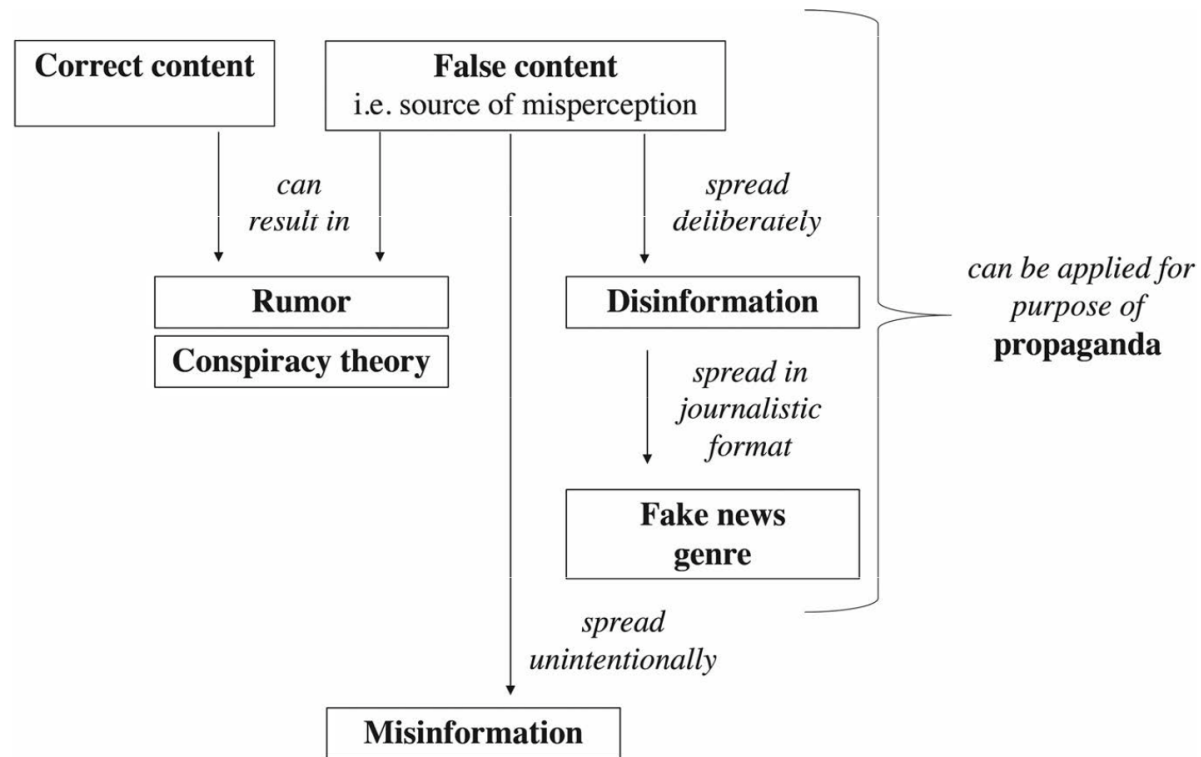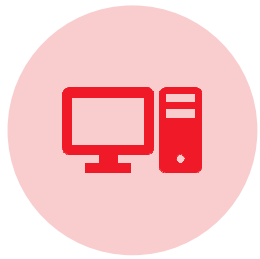– Typically address governments but can accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent

7

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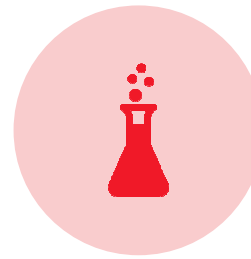
Figure 4.1 Relevant Concepts of Falsehood.

Note. This overview was originally published in Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019).
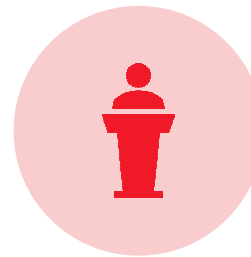
How did we get here?

Current information environment

Breakdown of institutional trust

Politicians becoming more disruptive to the system

Polarization

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How did we get here?

Current information environment

– People consume more information from variety of sources
– The information supply chain is more prone to mis/disinformation (Benner & Livingston, 2020)
– Important role of social media – creation and dissemination
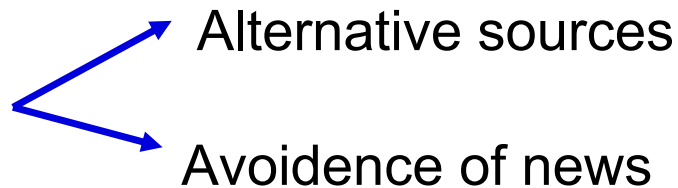
 Further:
– New technologies allowing more trustworthy fake content (e.g. deepfakes)

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How did we get here?

Role of trust

– Growing distrust in mainstream media, which can lead to

Alternative sources

Avoidence of news

– Alternative sources often build of the distrust and further fuel anti-establishment narratives
– Creating "the spiral of distrust"

11

How did we get here?

Role of trust

– Distrust towards mainstream media can be also connected with distrust towards government and political actors (one elite)
– This distrust if often embedded in not being heard by the political elite and the perception of us vs. them

– Populist communication than can be used by both political actors and alternative sources, providing solutions
– This further fuels the distrust spiral

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How did we get here?

Role of trust

Distrust towards
media

Alternative sources/
Disinformation

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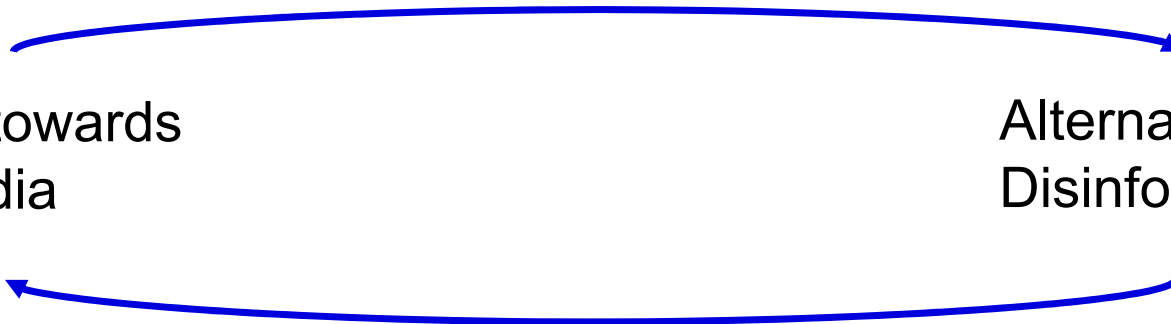
How did we get here?

Role of political interest

– Connected to growing avoidence of news
– The abundance of information available and inability to tell what is right can lead to overal disintirest

– On the other hand people who seek out alternative sources have higher levels of political interest (specifically conspiracy theorists)
– They are willing to look through variety of sources

14

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How did we get here?

Role polarized topics

– Disinformation and conspiracy theories
thrive in topics that are already polarized
(Van Aelst et al., 2017), e.g.:

- Climate change
- Immigration
- Vaccination
- Rights of marginalized communities

– Accented also by populist communication

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Looking at the supply side

What is the motivation?

Political

- Disruption of election campaigns (e.g. favouring one candidate)
- Disruption of foreign relations
- Party politics
- Destabilization of specific region
- Targeting press freedom or freedom of speech

Financial

- Connected to digital advertising (more clicks = more revenue)
- "clickbait" articles relying on sensational and emotional headlines

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Supply side – Political actors (domestic)

– Used to gain political points
– Used as a communication tactic

– Can be intentional or unintenional (e.g. when taking false information from media)

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Supply side – Politicical actors (foreign)

– Foreign state actors and intelligence servises
  o create and spread disinformation without taking credit for doing so
– Example: Russian (state) actors, e.g. Internet Research Agency
  o operated Twitter and Facebook accounts for foreign interference in the 2016 US presidential elections (Bastos & Farkas, 2019; Guess & Lyons, 2020)

– BUT the are aided by citizen efforts, in the sense that citizens often participate in the sharing of false information on social media (Golovchenko et al., 2018)

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Supply side – Media actors

- Misinformation may be created and disseminated also by legacy media and honest journalism (personal misperception, lack of time, limited verification skills (Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016))
- Audience mostly consume mis/disinformation from mainstream news media not social or partisan media (Tsfati et al., 2020)
- Journalistic standards vs. Newsworthiness

- Question of fact-checking, where false information is spread further

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Supply side – Media actors

– BUT some journalists deliberately distort facts and may have a personal or organizational intention to deceive

– Hyper-partisan media may cover fake news content when it fits their agendas (Vargo et al., 2018)

– Creation and dissemination can be motivated equally by political and financial motivation (clickbait)

21

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Supply side – Media actors

– Social media often further
  disseminate false information

– Algorithms prefer false or
  intolerant, which makes I
 more visible to users (e.g.
  comment section)

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Supply side – Citizens

- Citizens are now not only audience but also active producers of information
- Online environment (social media) is a place where opinion leaders/influencers can become a credible source of information for some users

- They can work in line with the mainstream media and act as a support (citizen journalist) or share narratives that different or actively countering them

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Supply side – Citizens

– Primarily role is in dissemination of false information either by purpose or accidentally

– Only minimal percentage of social media users creates content

– But activities such as sharing, commenting or reacting can increase its reach

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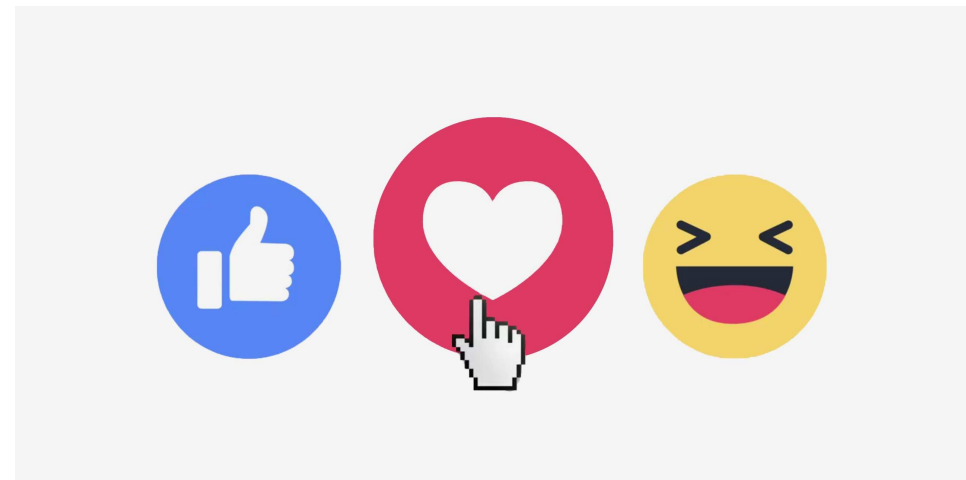
Table 4.1 Motives of Actors in the Supply Chain of Falsehoods

	Creators		Disseminators	
	Disinformation (intentional)	*Misinformation (unintentional)*	*Disinformation (intentional)*	*Misinformation (unintentional)*
Political	Political	Believe true	Political	Believe true
Media	Political Financial	Believe true	Political Financial	Believe true To correct
Private	Political Financial	Believe true	Political	Believe true To correct

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Looking at the audience

Audience
Why people believe in disinformation?

– Confirmation bias = *"individuals tend to seek out reasons to dismiss or avoid engagement with information that is disconfirming of prior beliefs, while seeking out emotionally soothing truths that confirm convictions"*

→ Consuming only sources that confirm our beliefs

– Frustration with the information environment (e.g. abundance of information) --> hard to navigate what is correct/false

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Audience
Why people believe in conspiracies?

– Can be embedded in distrust towards political actors and mainstream media = elite
– Citizens are seeking answers to the question, why are their needs not fulfilled

– Sensationalism and appel on emotions (feeling of fear, insecurity) e.g. your grandparents are worried about you

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Audience
Why people believe in conspiracies?

– People who already believe in particular conspiracy theories are likely to believe in others
– They can be often interconnected without an obvious path, e.g. How essential oils lead to pastel Qanon?

– Forming conspiracy thinking = any information is consumed through conspiracy lense
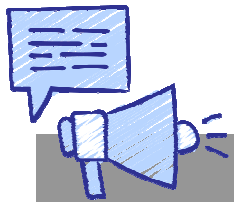
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Road to participation
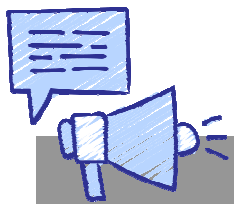
Independent media

→

Informed citizen

→

Political participation

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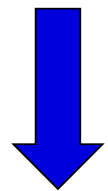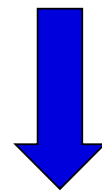
Who is motivated to participate?

– Motivation for participation is highly connected to political interest

Political interest   =   Motivation for participation

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Who is motivated to participate?

- Distrustful people often rely only on the most traditional forms of participation = voting
  - motivated by their percieved duty as a citizen

- Other forms of participation can be seen as useless, producing no results
  - In Czechia this is a typical perception of demonstration

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Who is motivated to participate?

– People consuming alternative sources often have high levels of political interest

– This can lead to high motivation to participate, specifically anti systematic forms of participation (demonstrations, petitions etc.)

– Connected to emotionality of disinformation

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Available solutions

Is there a way out?
Media literacy

= ability to use, understand, and create media content in a variety of contexts

– Considered an umbrella term for other literacies e.g.: news literacy and health media literacy
– Often targeted towards youth and adolescent (as part of school curriculum) or seniors

– Dependent on understanding the fastpace technology change

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Is there a way out?

Pre-bunking

- Using different tool to notify audience that information may be false --> getting ahead of the false information
- Useful for audiences without set opinions on sources and news find me strategy

- BUT people who tend to believe disinformation more are immune to the alerts (further proving their view)

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Is there a way out?
De-bunking

- Fact-checking as an option to correct false information after it has been consumed
- Important role of trust in the debunking sources
- Can have different effectivnes based on the disinformation being debunked as well as the communication style

- Generally considered the las resort and more focus on the other two solutions

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