Being misinformed—False information as a threat to democracy in today's digital world?

Executive Summary

The prevalence of false information is often viewed as a significant danger to democratic societies. When individuals base their beliefs, opinions, and actions on inaccurate political information, they are unable to engage adequately in the political process. THREATPIE has thoroughly examined the issues of misinformation and disinformation, exploring both its potential impacts and possible solutions.

Key findings:

- The prevalence of false information varied among countries, with social media platforms, especially Facebook, identified as primary sources.
- The reasons for encountering false information included intentional spreading for personal and political gains, sponsored content, and geopolitical influences. Citizens regarded false information mostly as disinformation—that is, intentionally spread falsehoods.
- Citizens perceived false information as a significant threat to democracy.
- Fact–checking and news media literacy interventions emerged as impactful solutions.

Being misinformed—the problem of false information

One of the major changes in citizens' political information environments is the increase in available information—both accurate and false information. Concerns about the latter have been particularly voiced during recent political and societal events, such as the US election in 2016, the Brexit referendum, or the COVID–19 pandemic. Here, misinformation—false information that was unintentionally spread—and disinformation—false information that was intentionally spread—coexisted with accurate information.

Independent of whether the misleading information was created or spread by intention, citizens who form their opinions and attitudes on such "alternative facts" and "post–truths" might ultimately become misinformed.

In that sense, being misinformed is different from being uninformed defined as citizens lacking knowledge and selectively informed referring to citizens being informed only about

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Background: Threats to democracy in today's digital world

A healthy, functioning society requires citizens to be well–informed about current societal and political events. Recent changes in the "political information environment" (PIE) jeopardize this prerequisite. With the proliferation of media channels and platforms, citizens can now not only choose from an abundance of news and information; it has also become more likely to encounter false or misleading information. Three potential threats to democracy arise from this development:

- Citizens might be *selectively informed* when they only choose news in line with their political views.
- Citizens might be *uninformed* about what is happening in the societal and political world when they decide to avoid news completely.
- Citizens might be *misinformed* when they build their beliefs about the societal and political world on false information.

The consequences of these developments can be significant: citizens who are selectively informed, uninformed, and/or misinformed tend to be less trusting in the news media and political institutions; they also tend to be less civilly engaged. Moreover, social cohesion tends to decrease while polarization between different groups in society increases. THREATPIE investigated the causes, consequences, and remedies to these threats.

events and issues that reflect their predispositions.

The consequences of believing in incorrect information can be manifold. For example, it has been observed during the COVID–19 pandemic that misinformed citizens were less inclined to follow health recommendations. Misinformed individuals may contribute to the spread of false information to others and are more willing to accept incorrect information in other topic domains. In the political realm, misinformation and disinformation have the power to undermine trust in the news media, as well as governmental institutions.

To get a better understanding of false information, THREATPIE studies addressed the following main questions: 1) How often do citizens come across suspected false information? 2) How good are citizens at detecting it? 3) What are the reasons for encountering false information and to what extent is it considered a threat to democracy? and 4) How effective are remedies against false information?

RESULTS

How often do people encounter false information?

Based on a large–scale survey conducted in 18 countries, THREATPIE focused as the first step on the question of how commonly citizens came across political news and information they suspected to be false. In Germany, Austria, and Belgium, citizens reported the lowest frequency of encountering false political information. Conversely, the three countries with the highest mean values were the US, Spain, and Denmark (Figure 1).

Comparing various social media platforms, messenger services, and traditional media, citizens

Figure 1: Frequency of false information
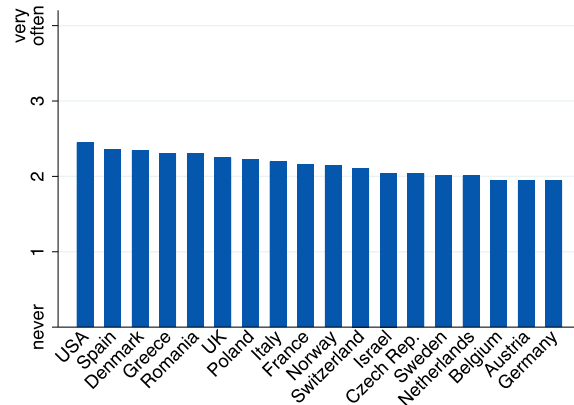
Note: "How often do you come across political news or information that you suspect is false?" (0 "never" to 4 "very often").

reported encountering most often suspected false political information on Facebook, followed by X (formerly known as Twitter). The lowest values were found for the messenger services WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, followed by traditional newspapers (print and online).

THREATPIE also zoomed into the prevalence of false information in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russian sources, such as the government and traditional Russian media outlets, were perceived as providing false information more often than Ukrainian or Western sources. Similarly, Russian social media accounts were alleged as a source of mostly disinformation while Ukrainian social media accounts were described as mostly neutral. Comparing various European countries revealed differences in these perceptions: Citizens in more polarized countries with lower levels of press freedom (i.e., Serbia, Hungary, Poland, or Greece) reported higher levels of perceived misinformation and disinformation than citizens in democracies with higher levels of press freedom and lower levels of polarization and insti-

tutional distrust (i.e., Sweden, Denmark, or Germany).

What are the reasons for encountering false information?

Conducting interviews and focus groups with citizens, journalists, politicians, and teachers, THREATPIE researchers could identify several reasons for encountering false or misleading information. The explanations put forward by citizens involved, for example, the intentional spread of false information for personal gain and political motives or sponsored content. The geopolitical dimension was also noted, with external sources, actors, and countries contributing to the spread of false information. Journalists interviewed for THREATPIE studies emphasized that disinformation was created by politicians to discredit opponents; they mentioned profit–related motives of, for example, non–journalistic content producers. At last, journalists were also self–critical. They saw roots for the rise of misleading information in

> " I work in a profession that is constantly changing. It is scary. We don't have much time for verification. [1] "

their profession: time pressures on media outlets to publish quickly would hinder fact–checking and verification processes.

Overall, the findings indicate that individuals perceived false information mostly as disinformation, that is, intentionally spread misleading information, and not as unintentionally spread misinformation.

THREATPIE was also interested in citizens' self–evaluation of their skills to detect disinforma-

tion, as well as in their assessment of how they perceive others to be able to do so: Citizens tended to view others as less capable than themselves to detect misleading information in the media.

At the same time, they often believed they were better equipped to identify misleading information. Notably, this trend was consistent across all 18 countries analyzed (see Figure 2). Yet, citizens who were more knowledgeable about politics and debated current issues, such as climate change or COVID–19, perceived a wider gap between their ability and others' ability to discern misleading information.

What are the consequences of false information?

The participants of the THREATPIE interview studies discussed several negative consequences of exposure to false information. These consequences permeated both individual and societal levels, with implications for, among others, personal well–being, democratic processes, and social cohesion. At the individual level, false information was suspected to lead to anxiety, alienation, or a decline in self–confidence—notably for those less interested in politics. Others drew connections between the exposure to misleading information and radicalization, as well as engagement in wrong or dangerous actions: Particularly during the COVID–19 pandemic, the individual harm was amplified, as false remedies and vaccine hesitancy were propagated by false information.

At the societal level, the spread of disinformation was identified as a catalyst for supporting radical or extreme political actors. This support, in turn, could undermine the democratic quality of societies. Additionally, the spread of disinformation was perceived as a direct contributor to

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1) Journalist from Poland
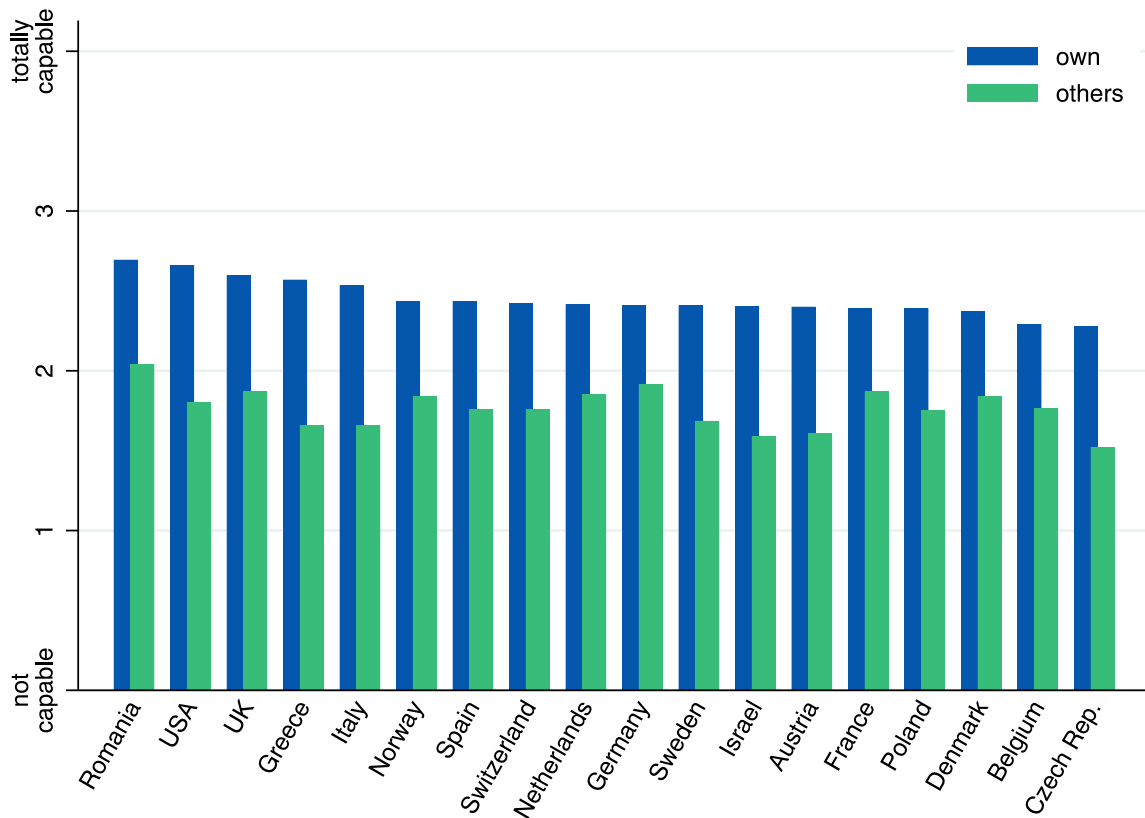
Note: "To what extent do you think you are personally/other people capable to distinguish between what is true and what is false?" (0 "not capable" to 4 "totally capable").

the erosion of journalists' credibility and media trust.

Other participants underscored the peril of disinformation in electoral processes, where the victory or loss of politicians depended heavily on the strategic use of (dis)information. Politicians interviewed in THREATPIE studies were alarmed about an increasing distrust in public authorities, political actors, or other members of society. This heightened level of distrust, so the expressed concerns, may pose a significant threat, potentially leading to societal fragmentation and disintegration.

Again, THREATPIE focused on the consequences of disinformation in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The study revealed that receiving news via YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok was associated with greater belief in false narratives Russia used to justify the invasion.

However, citizens' media diet was overall a weaker predictor of beliefs in these narratives compared to other individual characteristics. Across all studied countries, those with a conspiratorial mindset in the first place were more prone to embracing disinformation related to the war.

Given these potential consequences of misleading information, it comes as no surprise that the participants in the THREATPIE survey perceived

> " It is difficult to distinguish truth from fake news. (…) I have seen the statistics about disinformation during the COVID–19 pandemic, and I was terrified by the number of messages that turned out to be false. [2] "

misinformation and disinformation as significant threats to democracy. This finding held across countries and age groups. Indeed, in comparison to citizens being uninformed and being selectively informed—the two other threats THREATPIE studies addressed—being disinformed was perceived as the biggest current threat to democracy.

How effective are remedies against false information?

Acknowledging the potential threat of false information to democracy, THREATPIE studies also focused on potential remedies. Some participants, for example, advocated for individual responsibility, emphasizing the need to raise awareness about the problem and to question one's own news and information consumption. Correcting false statements within personal circles was also suggested. Journalists echoed these ideas and emphasized the role of responsible news consumption by citizens. At the same time, journalists acknowledged the importance of media organizations and journalism in countering false information, for example, by checking sources or educating their audiences about the problem.

Moreover, regulations and legal actions were identified as a potential remedy. However, concerns about the potential interference with freedom of expression were raised by participants in some countries. Fact–checking was another avenue, such as systematic checks and warnings by platforms, fact–checking experts, or government agencies. Finally, education emerged as a critical pillar in the fight against false information, for example, in the form of inclusion of media and digital literacy content in school curricula.

THREATPIE studied two potential remedies against false information in more detail—fact–checking and news literacy interventions. In the context of fact–checking, citizens yet stated to come across fact–checks only occasionally. Even if the use of fact–checking websites was rather low in the analyzed countries, citizens overall perceived them to be an effective way of fighting false information. The large–scale THREATPIE experiment in 16 European countries allowed for assessing if fact–checking could debunk misleading and false claims. The findings showed that fact–checks were effective in reducing the probability of believing in false claims—even when such claims came from political actors the participants supported.

However, it was not only the fact–check that mattered; also, the source of the fact–check was important. If the source was well–trusted, the fact–check reduced the probability of believing in misleading claims even more. These results replicated across all of the included countries.

News literacy interventions are recommendations to the news user that entail tips about how to identify false information. A THREATPIE experiment found that citizens, when exposed to a news media literacy message, were significantly better at identifying a false article as less accurate.

More so, this experiment showed that this is, at least in part, due to the fact that citizens also applied the recommendations they were given. After being exposed to a news literacy message citizens were, for instance, more likely to check whether reliable sources were used.

The experiment also demonstrated that particularly news literacy messages that highlighted how to recognize both false and accurate articles were effective, as they also improved citizens' ability to identify accurate articles.

What can be done about false information?

The THREATPIE studies underline the importance of combating false information. Several ideas can be put forward to address this threat to the ideal of a well–informed citizenry:

Encouraging responsible news consumption:

Individuals play a crucial role in mitigating the spread and impact of false information. Citizens should be, for example, urged to be more critical of the information they encounter, fact-check before sharing information, or correct false statements within their personal circles.

Enhancing media and news literacy:

Given the significant impact of false information on individuals and societies, there is a need to incorporate media literacy education into school curricula. This education should empower (young) citizens with the skills to critically evaluate information sources, discern accurate information from falsehoods, and navigate the complexities of the current information environment.

Strengthening fact–checking initiatives:

Fact–checking has been found to effectively debunk false information and reduce the probability of believing in misleading information. As such, there should be an emphasis on strengthening and promoting fact–checking initiatives.

Given that fact–checking is more effective when it comes from trusted sources, well–known media organizations, online platforms, and government agencies should collaborate to ensure the availability and knowledge of fact–checks.

Selected references

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For other references, further details on data sources, and other output from the project, please visit the project's website www.threatpie.eu.

THERATPIE stands for "The Threats and Potentials of a Changing Political Information Environment". The project studied how current changes in political information environments influenced the conditions required for healthy democracies. Over 30 researchers addressed this question through a mix of innovatively designed studies. This included in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with citizens, educators, journalists, and politicians, web–tracking of online news use, panel surveys, as well as experiments.