The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism

Howard Tumber, Silvio Waisbord

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Publication details
Johanna Dunaway
Published online on: 24 Mar 2021

How to cite: Johanna Dunaway. 24 Mar 2021, Polarisation and misinformation from: The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism Routledge
Accessed on: 12 Jul 2023

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POLARISATION AND MISINFORMATION

Johanna Dunaway

Introduction

Media choice, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and other characteristics of the communication environment are often blamed for political polarisation and a post-truth era (Sunstein 2017; Weeks 2018). It is reasonable; expanding media choice and rising polarisation incentivise media selectivity and fact avoidance while increasing vulnerability to misinformation. The potential consequences are troubling amidst rising populism, in which elites utilise mass media to employ polarising communication strategies divorced from fact (Waisbord 2018). Yet existing evidence emphasises the centrality of predispositions in motivating information seeking and processing, cognitive biases, and the relative unimportance of facts in belief formation (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013; Swire et al. 2017a). These perspectives suggest political misperceptions are a product of cognitive and affective processes that operate independently from or in tandem with exposure to misinformation (Thorson et al. 2018).

A review of the literature suggests that rather than remaining fixated on how the information environment facilitates misinformation’s dissemination and exposure, we should more carefully consider whether and how cognitive biases, motivated reasoning, and affective polarisation foster permissiveness towards misinformation, as well as its processing, acceptance, and endorsement. The central argument in this chapter is that despite the media ecology’s potential for heightening misinformation exposure (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), cognitive biases, affective polarisation, and sorting are as much to blame for susceptibility to misinformation and the development of misperceptions as structural changes to the media.

Literature review

There is ample evidence for enduring, widely held misperceptions in the US (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Lazer et al. 2018; Jerit and Zhao 2020). Misperceptions persist across several domains, including policy (Jerit and Barabas 2012), the evaluation of politicians (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Miller et al. 2016), and even parties and partisans (Ahler and Sood 2018). Misperceptions plague citizens of both parties when supporting of their political predispositions (Jerit and Barabas 2012). Because misperceptions are often characterised as being on the rise and correlated with changes to media and rising polarisation (Sunstein 2017; Weeks 2018), both are blamed for the
spread and effects of misinformation. Recent Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and rising populism exacerbate these concerns, making it easy to understand references to an ‘epidemic of misinformation’ and a surge in related research.

Yet neither political misinformation nor misperceptions are new (Waisbord 2018). Misinformation has been around as long as politics, and researchers have been explaining why Americans cannot articulate coherent policy preferences since the 1950s (Converse 1964; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Deli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Nevertheless, both are often characterised as on the rise, enabled by digital media, and capable of affecting citizen beliefs and judgments (Weeks 2018).

**Media-structural explanations**

Most explanations for misinformation spread and misperceptions are based on changing media structures or cognitive and affective processes. Media explanations focus on two structural aspects of the digital media environment: those allowing for ideological segregation through media selectivity and algorithmic filtering and those facilitating massive and rapid exposure to misinformation.

**High choice, selectivity, and filtering**

Media-based accounts depict exposure to misinformation as both a cause and a consequence of polarisation, where polarisation facilitates selective exposure in a high-choice context, and the misinformation is persuasive because it comes from like-minded sources. Assuming that much misinformation comes from biased sources of partisan information, high choice encourages exposure by allowing for partisan media selectivity and through algorithmic filtering and homogeneous social networks (Sunstein 2017). Under this view, echo chambers and filter bubbles are harmful contexts for misinformation because attitude-consistent information is viewed as credible and is more likely to be accepted and shared, especially within networks (Bakshy et al. 2015).

But evidence for ideological segregation is mixed (e.g. Weeks et al. 2017), as is evidence about its effects (Flaxman et al. 2016; Peterson et al. 2018). Some studies link digital media to ideological segregation (Sunstein 2017); others find that high choice and networks facilitate exposure diversity (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2017). Cross-ideology exposure is frequent (Bakshy et al. 2015), attributable to the ‘social’ nature of cross-ideology network ties and endorsements (Messing and Westwood 2014). Additionally, media audiences are highly concentrated on neutral mainstream sites (Hindman 2018; Flaxman et al. 2016). When echo chambers are found, there is little evidence of attitudinal or behavioural effects (Peterson et al. 2018). Despite evidence of echo chambers, they are not impenetrable; their potential to intensify exposure to misinformation and misperceptions may be overstated, especially amidst polarisation.

**Rapid information sharing and network structures**

A defining feature of the digital media environment is its ability to concentrate attention even while fragmented (Hindman 2018). Thus, some concerns about misinformation are related to digital media’s vast and instantaneous reach. Low reproduction costs, network structures, and peer-to-peer sharing capabilities facilitate rapid information dissemination and information cascades, allowing the opportunity for intense exposure to misinformation (Vosoughi et al. 2018). The digital media environment lacks the gatekeeping infrastructure of traditional media,
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making it amenable to misinformation spread (Rojecki and Meraz 2016). Elites have an advantage for spreading rumours online and spurring informational cascades (Bakshy et al. 2011) and are known to enlist digital media to spread persuasive and divisive misinformation to encourage polarisation and mistrust (Engesser et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018).

Yet concerns about the persuasive power of mass misinformation exposure are reflective of now-debunked theories of massive media impact from the earliest phases of media effects research, which was motivated by fears about elites’ use of mass media to disseminate powerful and persuasive propaganda (Iyengar 2017). Given what we have since learned about active and selective audiences (Prior 2007; Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Arceneaux and Johnson 2013), the power of predispositions (Kunda 1990; Zaller 1992), and competing demands on the attention of modern audiences (Hindman 2018), we should not necessarily expect persuasion from misinformation except under narrow conditions. Though polarised audiences may be exposed to more misinformation through media choice and personalisation, its potential to significantly change attitudes and behavior is unknown.

However, digital and social media may compound the effects of misinformation in ways other than through persuasion. One is by increasing familiarity. Repeated information exposure increases perceived accuracy even when false (Swire et al. 2017b; Pennycook et al. 2018). When misinformation is disseminated widely and continually circulates within networks, it increases familiarity (Weaver et al. 2007), cognitive accessibility (e.g. DiFonzo et al. 2016), ease of processing (e.g. Schwarz et al. 2016), and perceptions of consensus (e.g. Leviston et al. 2013), all of which influence judgments about accuracy. Thus, even allowing for the limited circumstances under which misinformation should persuade (Zaller 1992; Bennett and Iyengar 2008), the information environment’s amenability to disseminating and recirculating misinformation prompts concerns that repeated exposure will increase its perceived accuracy.

The effects of even highly intense doses of misinformation should, however, be dependent on the message, political context, and individual-level characteristics like political awareness and predispositions (Zaller 1992; Bennett and Iyengar 2008). These factors and high polarisation may help explain why, despite the proliferation of misinformation on social media, there is little direct evidence that it promotes misperceptions (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Garrett 2019).

Cognitive and affective processes

Cognitive and affective explanations portray media environment as more handmaiden than driver of misperceptions; instead, they point to the importance of polarisation in terms of how it affects misinformation processing upon exposure (Flynn et al. 2017; Weeks and Garrett 2014). Some downplay the role of misinformation entirely, highlighting processes that operate independently of exposure (e.g. Thorson et al. 2018; Reedy et al. 2014). Similarly, evidence from research on affective polarisation and partisan sorting (e.g. Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015, 2016) and expressive responding (e.g. Bullock et al. 2013; Schaf- fner and Luks 2018) questions a causal role for the media environment.

Motivated reasoning

Motivated reasoning depicts information seeking and processing as goal directed. Accuracy goals produce information seeking and processing aimed at coming to an informed decision. Directional goals are concerned with finding and processing information to support an attitude-consistent conclusion. With political information, directional goals are presumed to be heavily
Guided by partisanship (Druckman et al. 2013; Lodge and Taber 2013). This reasoning is particularly important for understanding misinformation in the high-choice media environment (Jerit and Zhao 2020).

Because directional motives are presumed common with respect to political information, motivated reasoning is considered a primary cause of misperceptions (Jerit and Zhao 2020) under the logic that misinformation – like information – is processed to yield attitude-consistent conclusions. There is evidence to this effect. Americans interpret economic information in ways that defend their partisan identities, regardless of accuracy (Schaffner and Roche 2016). Predispositions also predict which conspiracies partisans endorse (Miller et al. 2016). Similarly, when misinformation is corrected or retracted, partisans are reluctant to dismiss it when it reinforces their pre-existing attitudes.

However, it is important to recall that under motivated reasoning, exposure to counter-attitudinal misinformation is unlikely to alter preferences and predispositions because it is consistent with out-group arguments. Rather than persuading, exposure to counter-attitudinal information increases the salience of one’s in-group identity, prompting counter-arguments as part of a defensive strategy (Kunda 1990). Directional motivated reasoning goals should dictate the extent to which congenial misinformation is accepted and disagreeable misinformation is resisted. In short, attitudes and identities determine partisans’ willingness to accept misinformation as fact more than exposure to misinformation shapes their attitudes (Thorson 2016; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). This is especially important in contexts with rising affective polarisation and sorting.

**Affective polarisation and sorting**

Affective polarisation is sharply rising in America (Iyengar et al. 2012; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018), and political identities are becoming more coherent through a process called partisan-ideological sorting, in which party becomes more entwined with worldview and social and cultural identity, strengthening partisan identities (Mason 2015, 2016). Sorted partisans have stronger emotional reactions to political information than weaker partisans (Huddy et al. 2015; Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018), and as partisan affect intensifies, it increasingly reflects in-group favouritism and out-group dislike (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018; Mason and Wronski 2018).

These changes should only exacerbate the influence of cognitive and affective biases upon exposure to misinformation. More sorted and affect-driven partisans seek out and process information as highly motivated reasoners, and counter-attitudinal misinformation will be ignored or processed in ways that reinforce beliefs; the same will be true for attitude-consistent misinformation (Lewandowsky et al. 2005; Gaines et al. 2007; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Leisenton et al. 2013).

Research on misperceptions confirms the importance of political identity. When misinformation is worldview consistent, it is more likely to be accepted as fact (Flynn et al. 2017; Weeks and Garrett 2014; Marsh and Yang 2018). Misinformation is used to support existing positions (Reedy et al. 2014), and those with strong political identities accept political misinformation to support in-party evaluations (e.g. Garrett et al. 2016) and embrace misperceptions (e.g. Gaines et al. 2007; Schaffner and Roche 2016), questioning whether misperceptions reflect beliefs about facts or fact bending.

Research on expressive responding questions whether political misperceptions reflect beliefs at all and posits that they instead reflect partisan cheerleading, expression (Bullock et al. 2013; Khanna and Sood 2018; Schaffner and Luks 2018), or the effort to bait researchers (e.g. Lopez...
Evidence for expressive responding is mixed, however (Berinsky 2018; Jerit and Zhao 2020). Related work questions misperceptions on measurement (Cor and Sood 2016; Jerit and Zhao 2020), asserting that survey responses reflect guesses or top-of-the-head responses instead of misperceptions, consistent with early work on survey response instability (Zaller and Feldman 1992).

Assessing the state of knowledge

Researchers are keenly interested in how polarisation and misinformation contribute to misperceptions (e.g. DiFonzo et al. 2016; Flynn et al. 2017; Leviston et al. 2013; Pennycook et al. 2018; Thorson et al. 2018). The fact that the digital media environment is thought to facilitate both polarisation and misinformation exposure makes it a natural place to look for causal explanations. Evidence suggests there is more to the story. Cognitive accounts suggest misinformation effects should be highly conditional on predispositions, motivations, and context. Causal effects from affective polarization are just as much about how misinformation is processed as they are about dictating exposure to misinformation.

While the digital media environment provides ample opportunity for misinformation exposure, beliefs drive information consumption and processing more than they are shaped by them. And as demonstrated by the US – a context of growing affective and elite polarisation – motivated reasoning is only likely to increase the influence of existing beliefs. If partisan identity is so rigidly in place as to drive even the evaluation of information upon exposure, the likelihood that misinformation about politics and issues has much potential for persuasive effects among out-partisans should be minimal in polarised contexts.

Yet whether there are important behavioral effects from exposure remains an open question. We know that exposure to misinformation can make people more likely to endorse or embrace attitude-correct misinformation, even when aware of inaccuracies (Gaines et al. 2007; Garrett et al. 2016; Schaffner and Luks 2018; Schaffner and Roche 2016). Even though evidence suggests direct persuasive effects of factual misinformation should be minimal – or, at the very least, conditional – despite high rates of mass exposure, this conclusion depends on several unanswered questions.

First, what effects are of most concern? Misinformation studies focus largely on direct persuasive effects, but what about indirect effects? Given the role strong partisans play as opinion leaders (Holbert et al. 2010), their vulnerability to attitude-consistent misinformation may have harmful indirect effects as they feel emboldened to endorse and/or share misinformation (Garrett et al. 2016; Messing and Westwood 2014). If there is a two-step flow in the digital media environment, and at least some evidence suggests there is (e.g. Feezell 2018), there may be cause for concern, especially considering that facts do not matter for what gets shared online (Weng et al. 2012; Vosoughi et al. 2018; Van Duyn and Collier 2019). If misperceptions are more about expressive responding or strategic endorsement than belief, should we be any less concerned? Or are the downstream effects just as troubling?

It could be that there are effects from the media environment, but the mechanisms through which they operate might be different than commonly articulated. Misinformation promotes the expression or endorsement of political misperceptions but not through persuasion with incorrect facts. Instead, misperceptions are embraced as partisans feel emboldened to endorse inaccurate but attitude-consistent beliefs (e.g. Garrett et al. 2016). In-network cheerleading and repetition might persuade those without strong political predispositions by enhancing familiarity, accessibility, and perceptions of accuracy (Weaver et al. 2007; DiFonzo et al. 2016; Schwarz et al. 2016; Leviston et al. 2013), but among partisans, it just reinforces willingness to accept
false information and embrace misperceptions in service to identity (e.g. Garrett et al. 2016). In the context of trying to understand how digital media stoke populism, this kind of indirect process seems just as troublesome. Still, it is important that we do not mischaracterise the causal relationships.

Second, what kinds of attitudinal changes and behavioural outcomes should we be most concerned about? Currently, misinformation studies are primarily interested in persuasive effects producing attitude change or misperceptions, primarily regarding voting behavior. This is ironic given the difficult time researchers had demonstrating persuasive media effects (Iyengar 2017), and the bar is much higher to change minds and sides than to undermine and discourage.

Evidence from recent elections underscores the point, showing the intent behind recent misinformation tactics – including recent Russian disinformation campaigns – was to use falsehoods to demobilise and discourage/ rather than persuade (Lewandowsky et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2018). The facts are not relevant, and neither is attitude change. Rather, the relevant outcomes reflect disengagement with politics, such as declining participation among targeted groups, or related precursors, like apathy, efficacy, and cynicism (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Few studies of misinformation focus on these outcomes; the literature provides few answers about behavioural effects (Lazer et al. 2018).

However, what we do know supports insights from cognitive explanations. Misperceptions are irrelevant for vote choice, more evidence downplaying the importance of facts (Swire et al. 2017a). Yet when the aim is to mobilise or demobilise, emotional appeals and divisive issues are often successful (Krupnikov 2011). Research on recent Facebook misinformation tactics reflects this, revealing effective strategies aimed at casting doubt and causing confusion (Kim et al. 2018). If the point is more to discourage and dissuade than to change hearts and minds, we should look at participatory outcomes or their precursors as opposed to vote choice or factual political questions. While the conditions for persuasive misinformation effects might be narrow, the potential for mobilisation and demobilisation seems profound (Lewandowsky et al. 2017).

Relatedly, what kinds of misinformation are most important? There is conceptual opacity across the literature on misinformation and misperceptions (Flynn et al. 2017; Jerit and Zhao 2020). Kuklinski and colleagues define political misinformation as when someone ‘holds the wrong information’ (2000, 792). Allcott and Gentzkow define fake news as ‘news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers’ (2017, 213). Lazer and colleagues define it as ‘fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent’ (2018, 1094). Slippage aside, these are all reasonable conceptualisations. Political misinformation exists in many forms and overlaps heavily with a range of variants from unintentionally erroneous information to purposefully misleading information to all-out fabrication. All of these are found in news, elite rhetoric, and other political communication. Yet recent evidence (e.g. Kim et al. 2018) suggests that these definitions miss the mark, either because they fail to capture outcomes intended by actors spreading misinformation or because they do not capture the tactics being employed with respect to message or source. If the aim is to divide, distract, or discourage, indicators based on facts tell only part of the story. Similarly, isolating studies to fake news might miss important paid media strategies like those used by stealth groups on Facebook (Kim et al. 2018). And limiting research to those messages that are demonstrably false rather than purposefully but only slightly misleading (Rojecki and Meraz 2016) may do the same.

Another underexplored question asks which targets of misinformation are most important to consider. Electoral misinformation tactics are targeted on the basis of class and race and use wedge issues to divide (Kim et al. 2018). This strategy is troubling because it appeals to populist sentiments and may be effective, further exacerbating racial, ethnic, and socio-economic
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Partisanship provides one route for motivated reasoning; targeting other-group divides may be equally effective. According to the literature on media effects (e.g. Zaller 1992), if paid media allow for strategies based on intense, micro-targeted messaging, we should be most concerned about misinformation targeting citizens of low political interest and knowledge (Miller et al. 2016), with affective appeals meant to distract, obscure, and demobilise.

Conclusion

An underlying theme in this chapter is that misinformation is information – albeit an especially problematic type – which means we already know a lot about its effects. Some research characterises misinformation as a new problem, implying the potential for more powerful effects on attitudes and behaviour, which, according to literature on media effects, is unlikely. We need to reconcile what we know about media effects – they are real but indirect and limited at best, and possibly minimal (e.g. Bennett and Iyengar 2008) – with alarm over misinformation. Misinformation might be rampant and exposure widespread (but see Guess et al. 2019), but the persuasive effects of that information should be limited to particular individuals in particular informational and political conditions (Zaller 1992). That said, we know so little about misinformation effects across varying political, institutional, and cultural contexts, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the severity of the problem absent more cross-national comparative research, especially with respect to the roles misinformation and polarisation play in rising populism around the globe.

Nevertheless, we should not mischaracterise the nature of the causal relationships between polarisation, the media environment, exposure to misinformation, and misperceptions. Some accounts suggest the process is that people will be more exposed to misinformation or develop misperceptions because of decisions they make about what kinds of information to attend – especially popular accounts. Other accounts seem preoccupied with exposure because of digital media potential for mass exposure – and network and filtering effects that allow for echo chambers – based on the expectation that such mass exposure will further partisan extremity and polarisation. But an argument more consistent with psychological models is that polarisation – especially the affective form – makes people more susceptible to misinformation once exposed, such that causal influence from polarisation is less about how it dictates selections and exposure and more about how it affects processing upon exposure.

Building on literatures from information processing, motivated reasoning, and media effects, misinformation research should be more focused on the conditions under which three distinct types of exposure to misinformation occurs – motivated, incidental, and targeted – and whether and how that misinformation is processed upon exposure and with what effects. It could be that the current information environment allows for very high rates of motivated exposure to misinformation, which result in processing and acceptance, but little attitudinal or behavioural change due to ceiling effects, though motivated information seekers may publicly endorse misinformation with indirect downstream effects. Similarly, rates of incidental exposure may be high, especially on some platforms, but not sufficiently high to prompt message acceptance or behavioural change among low-interest citizens. If misinformation strategists target groups with high-message intensity and identity-base appeals (e.g. Kim et al. 2018), these messages may permeate enough to induce processing, acceptance, and even attitude change even among those with low political interest. We do not know. It may be more important to consider what cultural, political, and institutional processes have produced the strengthening of political identities and increased affective polarisation in the first place. Doing this properly will require more cross-national comparative research.
It is also worth considering whether studies of misinformation need better partitions between politics and health, science, and public safety, despite the fact that these can never be fully separated from politics. This review questions the relevance of facts to political misperceptions. But this is not to say that facts are unimportant — their importance in health, science, and safety has never been clearer than now amidst the COVID-19 crisis. But, however unfortunate, the relevance of facts is domain specific, and politics is different. If we want to understand the conditions under which elites — populist or otherwise — effectively use misinformation tactics to mobilise support, our research questions and designs should reflect the fact that political battles are not fought or won on the basis of facts. At least under conditions of low media and government trust, elite polarisation, and mass social polarisation, facts do not win hearts and minds; political support is affective (Iyengar et al. 2012). The digital media ecology is an effective handmaiden to misinformation tactics, but it will only be effective in the context of existing structural and political trends that foster post-truth culture (Waisbord 2018) characterised by permissiveness towards misinformation and a disregard for facts.

Note


References


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