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MEDIA, DISINFORMATION, AND POPULISM

Problems and responses

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Current research and debates in media, disinformation, and populism are issues central to contemporary societies and polities as well as to multidisciplinary research agendas. Media, disinformation, and populism have attracted a great deal of attention in past years. The reasons are self-evident. The digital revolution has upended old media orders, technologies, industries, access, distribution, and uses. New and sophisticated forms of disinformation flooded the global public sphere with falsehood at the same time that populist politics gained citizens’ support worldwide. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has only added to the plethora of misinformation and disinformation bombarding the public with conspiracy theories, falsehoods, and rumours propagating by the day.

As these distortions of public communication are central issues in contemporary societies, they are approached from multiple disciplinary and theoretical positions. We are interested in the way these concepts and related themes are approached by scholars who work at the intersection of journalism studies, media studies, information studies, media sociology, and political communication.

Our goal is not only to provide an overview of fundamental concepts, debates, findings, and arguments but also to foster discussions about the relationships among concepts and phenomena. Various literatures provide valuable insights about the core themes of the scope and consequences of media transformations; the scale, strategies, and effects of disinformation and misinformation; and the causes and the characteristics of populism. Despite the growing literature, lines of inquiry generally run in parallel. Few studies explore how and why media, disinformation, and populism are connected. In this chapter we seek out and discuss points of intersection.

Media

In light of the transformations in communication and political processes, it is important to revisit the conceptual scaffolding used to study media, disinformation, and populism. These concepts have long been the subject of semantic disputes. Technological and social innovations, as well as political developments, therefore make it imperative to reassess their validity and to determine whether new concepts are required to comprehend emergent phenomena.
‘Media’ is a notoriously ambiguous, fluid concept. It was and is commonly used to refer to technologies, industries, and institutions that ‘mediate’ social interaction – that ‘assemble’ (Latour 2005) the social through symbolic exchanges. The digital revolution adds layers of conceptual complexity as it profoundly unsettles media technologies, institutions, and industries. Because contemporary life is mediated like never before in human history, ‘the media’ is a more flexible, dynamic notion.

‘The media’ are not limited to the legacy industries and technologies of the golden era of the mass media and mass society in the past century. If ‘the media’ refers to what ‘mediates’ communication and interaction, then it is self-evident that the types of media are substantially broader than in the past. Among other developments, the proliferation of portable technologies and applications, the encroachment of digital media in social life, and the Internet of things reshuffled the meanings of ‘the media’. ‘The media’ are understood as technologies, processes, and institutions that connect individuals, organisations, and groups in multiple ways in the network society. ‘The media’ are not unitary, homogenous, or centralised.

Conceptual pruning and clarification are essential to map the media industries, media systems, and media content, which are constantly proliferating and evolving.

‘Media industries’ is a concept in flux, due in part to the dilution of traditional boundaries between technology and content companies. Contemporary media industries include hundreds of digital companies, together with the foundational technologies of modern society – newspapers/press, radio, film, television. A diversity of internet companies, including hardware and software companies, populate the ever-expanding media universe. Media industries encompass a larger universe than just the familiar UK’s Fleet Street, the US’s Hollywood, and Silicon Valley and other geographical metonyms.

‘Media systems’ are also more diffused and multi-layered than in the past. The geographical-political boundaries of ‘national’ media systems are destabilising due to unprecedented technological and economic globalisation. New and hybrid actors populate ‘media systems’: state, public, commercial, and ‘public/private’ platforms; civil society; radical, alternative, and open/closed media. There is no single ‘media logic’. Consequently, multiple ‘media logics’ may be a better concept to capture the unique aspects of media platforms and institutions. Similarly, the concept of ‘media content’ includes ever-multiplying forms of expression – from memes to movies, from instant messaging to social media postings. Likewise, ‘mediatisation’ is not simply a coherent, one-way process by which unique aspects of media technologies, industries, and institutions encroach upon society.

Contemporary disinformation tactics attest to the shapeshifting nature of media (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O’Loughlin 2018; Gorwa & Guilbeault 2020). In recent years, studies examined automated bots, trolls, troll farms, fake news, deepfakes, news feeds, ‘backstaging’, filter bubbles, echo chambers, synthetic media, algorithms, far/alt-right media, doxing, swatting, and other phenomena. We note here that hardly any new concepts refer to these developments as something to embrace; rather, they present a depressing picture of gloom and doom for society. This demoralising vocabulary is not only revelatory about troubling developments for public life and democracy but is also symptomatic of previous gaps in the analytical toolkit. Media and communication studies lacked the terminology to understand a slew of new media platforms and practices. Given constant media innovations, conceptual updates and repurposing become inevitable.

The lesson of the evolution of ‘media’ as a concept is twofold. Existing concepts should be approached cautiously to determine their semantic validity and analytical usefulness in new scenarios. Secondly an open attitude is essential to generate concepts that capture novel initiatives and developments.
**Dis/misinformation**

Unlike the concept of ‘media’, disinformation and misinformation possess clearer meanings. They refer to different phenomena, even though sometimes, they are carelessly and interchangeably used. Disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of false information for political, economic, and other benefits. Misinformation refers to unintentional dissemination of incorrect information (Wardle & Derakhshan 2018). Whereas disinformation agents know that they disseminate false information in their attempts to deceive others, misinformed citizens are largely unaware that they consume and share false content.

The recent spike in scholarly and popular attention to both concepts reflects empirical developments: namely, the presence of new, insidious forms of disinformation by states and other actors, especially in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election and the 2016 UK Brexit referendum, as well as novel disinformation practices on digital platforms.

Neither dis/misinformation nor the phenomena they refer to are strictly new. Disinformation is conceptually close to propaganda. Both refer to spreading information and ideas linked to the exercise of power. However, there is an important distinction. Whereas disinformation emphasises deliberate deception through fabrications, propaganda may consist of disseminating selective ideas that are not necessarily demonstrably false. Praising the nation, publicising half-truths, leaving out inconvenient facts, inculcating dogmas, and puffery are typical of propaganda by states, corporations, and other powerful actors. They are part of the arsenal used to confuse public opinion, gain political support, and draw economic benefits. But these actions do not exclusively spread outright falsehoods in the same manner of disinformation campaigns. Propaganda blends exaggerations, one-sided arguments, and false/pseudo facts.

Governments are renewing propaganda strategies by taking advantage of digital affordances. Propaganda is no longer centralised, controlled, and activated at the top by state agencies. Instead, it is designed to engage both aware and distracted publics through networked technologies. The ‘rewiring’ of propaganda (Oates 2021) transforms old communication dynamics and muddles the identity of the original perpetrators. Citizens are now both willing and unwilling actors as recipients of dis/misinformation. Digital propaganda resorts to sophisticated techniques of data production and analysis to shape public opinion.

What is new? Despite obvious continuities with pre-digital forms of propaganda, contemporary disinformation makes it possible to target and distribute false information to billions of citizens who, in turn, can easily redistribute and replicate these deceptions. Everyone potentially can be a willing or unwilling participant, as receiver and distributor, in disinformation campaigns.

Novel forms of dis/misinformation spawn and reinvigorate interest in buzzword concepts such as ‘post-truth’. Post-truth refers to the current situation of confusion and pervasive lies. Due to the configurations of the contemporary information (dis)order, it is harder to disentangle truths from lies, to erect a single truth as dominant, and to persuade others about objective truths. Communication and information abundance make it possible to challenge any claims to truth in public.

Attaching ‘post’ implies a new condition supposedly different from a past of ‘truth’. To state the obvious, a congenial state of concord over truth was not exactly common or dominant in pre-digital times. Truths always existed in plural, no matter how much realists and objectivists insisted. Truths are partial, contested, doubted, even when opportunities to challenge truths in public were significantly more limited than today. Of course, political truths clashed with philosophical truths, as Hannan Arendt (2017) memorably argued.
So the question to ask is what, if anything, is different about present conditions and justifies the usage of ‘post-truth’? It is a matter of the structures and the dynamics of truth-telling: the ability of citizens and institutions to dispute any claim to truth and reality through personalised and mass communication. In contemporary media ecologies, anyone’s truth can be publicly challenged through rigorous methods, new facts, simple opinions, falsehoods, and disinformation.

Media abundance is a boon and a bane for disinformation. It opens new possibilities for communication grounded in democratic principles. It acts as a catalyst for citizen empowerment and the affirmation of human rights. However, the lowering of barriers to public communication presents deleterious consequences. It facilitates staggering opportunities for dis/misinformation. Powerful actors, especially governments, intelligence services, and the military, are uniquely positioned to take advantage of networked communication to pump falsehoods into the public sphere.

The severity of disinformation and its consequences are under dispute. Categorical generalisations are elusive because many factors affect the scale of disinformation and its effects on public affairs: namely, psychological processes, political context, affective polarisation, and media systems. Generally, the literature ranges from ‘strong’ to ‘minimal’ effects in ways that, unsurprisingly, echo similar positions in classic debates about media effects. Parsimonious arguments are required about when and why disinformation affects selected publics with negative consequences for democracy. Cross-national, cross-thematic studies may assist us in discerning whether, indeed, disinformation profoundly pollutes public communication on a range of issues such as politics, health, science, and the environment.

**Populism**

Populism is a conceptual chestnut of sociology, political science, and economics. Understandably, it remains a notoriously ambiguous concept (de la Torre 2018). Under the umbrella of ‘populism’, various forms of political traditions, parties, and movements are carelessly bandied about. Renewed global academic and journalistic interest in contemporary populism is not settling semantic debates. Despite the availability of compelling and comprehensive definitions (Cohen 2019; Müller 2017), populism remains analytically porous and open-ended. It is a conceptual Rorschach test of political, economic, and sociological interpretations.

Lately, populism is associated with dozens of contemporary leaders (such as Bolsonaro, Chavez, Correa, Duda, Duterte, Erdogan, Johnson, LePen, Maduro, Modi, Orban, Ortega, Putin, Salvi, Trump, van Grieken) and political parties and movements on the right and the left (Mounk & Kyle 2018). What do they all have in common? Do they share a lingua franca, a political style, and a policy blueprint? If a leader constantly praises the virtue of ‘the common person’ and excoriates ‘the elites’, is it enough to call him (generally, it is ‘him’) and the movement ‘populist’? Is charismatic leadership a necessary condition of populism? Is populism the expression of cultural backlash and/or socio-economic penuries (Norris & Inglehart 2019)? Like ice cream, populists come in different varieties.

From a perspective interested in the media and communication aspects of populism, it is important to emphasise shared characteristics.

Populism refers to a style of discourse that presents a binary view of politics as neatly and essentially divided in two camps – the popular and the elites/anti-popular. Populism draws arbitrary and firm distinctions between these two camps and presents itself as the true representation of ‘the people’. It is ideologically empty, flexible, and omnivorous. It sponges up right-wing and left-wing ideologies plus myriad narratives and policies along the ideological spectrum.
Because populism favours a view of politics as pure and permanent conflict, it has no need for communication values and practices such as dialogue, tolerance, compromise, respect for difference, and listening. It dismisses dissident, critical, and independent voices. Worse, as the fractious history of populism in power shows, it actively seeks to suppress institutions, including the media, that hold it accountable. Its intolerance of criticism and tendency to ignore and disable accountability mechanisms attest to populism’s dangerous and unstable relationship with democracy.

This is a feature of populism. It is grounded in its grandiose, authoritarian claim to represent ‘the people’ as a singular actor and to portray the leader as the true plebeian hero who can do no wrong. Anyone who criticises the leader and the movement is condemned as a member of the elite, not the people – the legitimate political community. Neither criticism nor accountability are priorities for populism.

Therefore, populism eschews the use of the legal edifice of political liberalism, such as equality of rights and a system of checks and balances (Galston 2017). It deems them unnecessary and fundamentally mistaken for it believes that political sovereignty resides in ‘the people’ and ‘the movement’ that it purports to represent. This also explains why populist leaders have a tendency to strengthen executive power, reshape the political order in their image, and demand reverence and submission. Populism’s propensity to go down the authoritarian path is embedded in its political DNA.

Because populism is ideologically empty, it is parasitic on other ideologies. Populists typically rummage through the ideologies of political parties, social movements, and economic proposals. Devoid of distinctive ideological traditions, populism borrows ideas and policies from fellow travellers and tactical allies. The existence of right-wing and left-wing versions shows this unique quality of populism.

Recent cases in Latin America and Southern Europe show how left-wing populism selectively adopted ideas from socialism and communism as well as nationalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist movements. In its attempt to build movements against neoliberalism and construct a self-glorying rhetoric, it tapped into anti-capitalist ideologies and a range of social movements – human rights, environmental, peasants, feminist, unions (Waisbord 2014). This is the kind of radical, populist coalition that Ernesto Laclau (2005) theorised in his defence of populism. Populism is viewed as the catalyst of revolutionary processes that deepen major social and political rifts in late capitalism and lead to the formation of counter-hegemonic alliances and a new order.

Right-wing populism also borrows ideologies and forms strategic alliances with different groups and movements. Contemporary right-wing populism in the Americas, Europe, and Asia finds ideological inspiration and justification in social and political expressions with one element in common: staunch opposition to radicalism, progressivism, and liberalism. These ideologies are represented by a range of rights-based movements: women’s rights, multiculturalism, anti-racist, immigrants’ rights, LGBTI, and others. Tactical allies of right-wing populism include hate groups (racists, Islamophobic, anti-Semites), misogynist movements, anti-science advocates, xenophobic forces, and religious conservatives.

Seemingly divergent populists such as Modi in India and Erdogan in Turkey, potential rivals in a clash of civilisations, are pursuing political projects that are mirror images. ‘Both are champions of a brand of politics that seeks to fuse religion, the nation and the leader. Both lead countries with secular constitutions but want to place religion back at the heart of the nation and state’ (Rachman 2020, 21)

Although right-wing populism presents variations, common elements can be identified. They are reactionary movements that wish to turn back the political clock to a time when a
range of people lacked legal and social equality based on their gender, sexuality, race, religion, or ethnicity. Contemporary right-wing populism is defined by its rabid opposition to progressive parties and human rights movements. However, it has different levels of organisation and mobilisation. Whereas some rely on the backbone of bricks-and-mortar organisations like evangelical churches, others echo fundamentally online phenomena such as the alt-right, xenophobic groups, and the manosphere.

Finally, populism’s binary view of politics potentially leads to polarised politics. If politics is viewed essentially as a constant conflict between two enemies, then polarisation is not only inevitable but also necessary for populism to succeed. Populism thrives on affective polarisation, plebiscitary politics, and elections as referenda on leaders (Schulze, Mauk, & Linde 2020).

**Intersections**

What are the connective threads then among media, disinformation, and populism? We break down these relationships into two separate questions.

**Media and populism**

Populism always sees the media as essential political instruments to drum up support and reaffirm boundaries between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. Contemporary populist parties and leaders maintain close relations with public and private media and regularly clash with and threaten critical media organisations. For populism, ensuring regular and unopposed media access is required for spreading messages and narratives adjusted to the views of leaders and supporters. In turn, media organisations tend to support populism based on ideological communion, economic benefits, and/or political calculations.

Does populism have an affinity with certain media? Do specific media cultivate populist politics given their target audiences, style, and formats? Do citizens who support populism have a distinctive media diet? What is the role of mainstream media in the rise and the consolidation of populism?

Despite scores of valuable national and comparative studies, there are no clear answers to these questions. There is no straightforward relation between populism and the media because there is neither a single form of populism nor a single media order. Real populisms have different relations with the media. Massive, unprecedented changes affect the relationship between populism and the media. ‘The media’ is not a seamless whole anywhere but, rather, a multi-layered, crowded, and chaotic environment. Populist style, discourse, communication strategies, and policies map differently across the vast constellation of media organisations and digital spaces.

On these issues, the literature features various lines of research.

One set of studies pays attention to populism’s relationship with like-minded media organisations on the right and the left. Partisan news media offer receptive, supportive coverage which fits populism’s triumphant narratives and tirades against opponents. They also contribute to populism’s ideological content and legitimacy. Finally, these media generously provide leaders with constant acclaim and comfort. Such connections are visible in the relation between right-wing tabloids (e.g. the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* in the UK) and populism in Europe and the ties between Fox News and Donald Trump in the United States. Recent studies also show the conservative media’s role in sowing confusion about the effects of the coronavirus: [T]hey paint a picture of a
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Media ecosystem that amplifies misinformation, entertains conspiracy theories and discourages audiences from taking concrete steps to protect themselves and others.

(Ingraham 2020)

Such alliances also matter because, arguably, populism thrives in endogamic media and communicative spaces where like-minded citizens find others who reaffirm their views (Gerbaudo 2018). Populism is antithetical to anything resembling communication in difference — exposure to ideas that differ and contradict official discourses. Instead, it exhibits an affinity for communication homophily. The importance of these spaces does not mean that citizens with populist preferences are sequestered in ideologically homogeneous bubbles.

Populism’s chain of supportive media goes beyond legacy news organisations, including newspapers, radio, and television stations. It includes state-owned media that populism in power tightly controls as propaganda machines, as shown in the cases of Duda in Poland, Orban in Hungary, Duterte in the Philippines, Maduro in Venezuela, and Ortega in Nicaragua. Propaganda networks also includes partisan and alternative platforms. These media platforms may not be as visible to the public eye as prominent legacy media, yet they are part of populism’s communication texture and resources. In the case of right-wing populism, this includes a string of far-right, white supremacy, anti-science, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and misogynist online sites (Haller, Holt, & de La Brosse 2019; Heft, Mayerhöffer, Reinhardt, & Knüpfer 2020).

These media provide populism not only with ideological content and legitimacy but also with platforms for reaching sympathetic audiences. They are conduits for populism’s constant attacks on opponents. Unpaid and paid trolls and operatives who harass critics become accesso- ries to the politics of fostering conflicts and intimating adversaries. In some countries, populism bankrolls both media and supportive operatives through networks of patronage and favouritism.

Further attention should also be paid to populism’s relation to social media platforms and corporations. First, the significance of specific platforms whose technological affordances fit populism’s trademark communication style: leader-centred messages, personalistic appeals, the illusion of unobstructed interaction between leaders and citizens, and avoiding the press. Unquestionably, Twitter is a good match, fitting perfectly with populism’s long-standing preferences for top-down, one-way public communication (Waisbord & Amado 2017). Second, social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, are central for right-wing media. Legacy news organisations such as Fox News draw significant audiences from Facebook. Also, YouTube and other platforms serves as channels for far-right and other extreme groups. Twitter makes it possible for right-wing influencers and trolls to reach large audiences and spread their messages.

A further issue to consider is populism’s relation with legacy mainstream media that are not editorially aligned with its politics. This includes public service corporations and private companies that remain bounded by journalistic ideals of fairness and even-handedness. At face value, populism generally has tense and difficult relations with mainstream news organisations. Populism is permanently locked in a state of conflict with ‘the media’. Not uncommonly, populist leaders actively provoke such conflicts when they purport to get negative coverage. They are fond of accusing media critics of being producers of ‘fake news’, acting as ‘enemies of the people’ and as ‘traitors’. Difficult relations with the mainstream media are not unique to populism. Yet populism is a particular case, given its anti-democratic bent.

Underlying the tense relationship is populism’s suspicion of, if not outright contempt for, speech rights and freedom of the press. Populism and democratic communication are at loggerheads. Populism’s position on media, journalism, and public communication is grounded in its distrust of liberal principles. It is predisposed against the right to speech and protections of
public speech from government intervention as well as progressive principles of communication such as dialogue, pluralism, empathy, and tolerance.

Populism tends to be particularly sensitive and impatient with media reports that challenge its self-serving narratives. Leaders legitimise anti-mainstream media sentiments among ideological allies in government, business, media, and universities. Tapping into prejudice, hate, and conspiracies, they dismiss critical news as the deeds of anti-popular, anti-national interests and call on their supporters to punish media companies. In some cases, populist leaders try to weaken critical media by pressuring their owners and editors into compliance with a mix of legal and economic sticks and carrots.

It would be mistaken, however, to see the relations between populism and mainstream media in purely antagonistic terms, as populist leaders often contend. Because populism is a mass phenomenon, it requires coverage by the mainstream media (Boczkowski & Papacharissi 2018). Populism constantly craves media attention to reinforce the dominant public positions of its leaders, amplify messages, and gain visibility. Any media pulpit is critical for populist leaders. Media with large audiences are useful to reach various constituencies, win elections, and cement power.

By providing massive coverage, mainstream media are central to the ascent of populist leaders and movements. With their oversize personas, discursive styles, and colourful histories, typical populist leaders align with media interest in personalities, drama, and entertainment. Populists’ penchant for ceaseless conflict and polarisation is enormously attractive for news organisations focused on controversy, loud voices, and scandal. Populists’ frequent news-making spats with ‘the mainstream press’ might be considered shrewd ruses to reel in media attention. These present opportunities for populist leaders to dominate news cycles but also to show that the ‘elite/establishment media’ are the enemies of the people. They function as performative instances of populism’s narrative about ‘evil media’ and popular leaders committed to scolding ‘the media’ and their allies.

Although some private media adopt critical positions vis-à-vis populism, it is not unreasonable to suggest that commercial media systems possess built-in tendencies that favour certain aspects of populism. Clearly, they do not make populism inevitable. However, some aspects of hyper-commercialised media may lay the ground for populist ideas. Widespread lack of trust in media (Park, Fisher, Flew, & Dulleck 2020) mirrors populism’s frequent tirades against media companies. Certain news biases favour populist messages – distrust of elites and experts; focus on conflict; negative portrayal of governments, politics, and politicians. Even shining examples of investigative journalism, which expose corruption and spawn scandals, may unintentionally foster anti-politics sentiments that dovetail with populism’s cynical view of democracy.

**Populism, media, and disinformation**

What, then, are the connections among populism, media, and disinformation?

Populism is not the only political movement that resorts to disinformation. The history of propaganda shows that governments and the powerful have tried to manipulate consciousness through disinformation. The temporal concurrence of populism and new forms of disinformation should not lead us to simplistic causal explanations.

What is truly novel? Are populism and disinformation interlocked in unique ways? Populism has an affinity with disinformation even though it is not the only political movement that resorts to disinformation.

Populism generally concentrates power in leaders who are deemed infallible. The tendency to build a leadership cult easily devolves into narratives that liberally blend facts, faux facts,
proven lies, and absolute fantasies. Populism utilises disinformation because distinguishing between truth and lies is not exactly a priority. And at the same time, populism’s demagogic leaders are fond of making appeals that validate existing beliefs, identities, and prejudice in order to cement popular support. Since populism believes that enemies constantly plot to bring leaders and movements down, it resorts to disinformation as a legitimate means to fight opponents. Populism tries to remain in power without regard for democratic rules and norms, contesting elections using all means possible. Erasing the distinctions between truth and fabrications and flooding public opinion with disinformation then become essential for political perpetuation. As elections are construed as vital to the future prospects of the leader, the fatherland, and the people, disinformation tactics are justified to secure victories.

In this regard, contemporary populism, especially its right-wing variant, displays a close affinity with communicative spaces and alternative media filled with disinformation and misinformation. These platforms cover and discuss hot-button issues, such as immigration, white supremacy, nativism, and climate change denialism, which are at the heart of populist identities and are closely identified with right-wing and far-right groups. Conspiracy theories, absolute lies, fake news, ‘alternative’ facts, and similar informational aberrations are a common presence on these outlets. Whereas social media regularly circulate away from the attention of legacy media, they gain enormous visibility in specific circumstances, such as when powerful newsmakers spread and legitimise disinformation and hate, when sympathetic influential news organisations offer positive coverage, and when high-profile hate crimes receive broad political and media attention.

In this regard populism possesses an affinity with post-truth (Waisbord 2018). Media abundance offers an endless menu of possible information adjusted to people’s convictions and desires. Mediating institutions, including the press, which, because of their dominance, were the arbiters of ‘Truth’ for the rest of society, do not occupy the same position in today’s chaotic, multi-layered media ecologies.

Truth necessitates social agreements on methods and facts to demonstrate the veracity of claims. It demands trust in the way that facts are produced, examined, and discussed. Populism, however, embraces and legitimises a state of epistemological fracture by pushing a binary view of politics, with truth belonging to its leaders and followers. In a similar vein, truth is fractured by political identities. Populism uncritically accepts the ‘truths’ of allies while it disparages the enemies as liars. ‘Our’ truths are the antipode of ‘their’ lies. Truth encompasses ‘popular’ beliefs, no matter how or whether they are proven. Populism eschews demonstrable facts and scientific rigour to reach truth. Loyalty to the leader and their policies is often sufficient to determine the truthfulness of any claim.

Populism’s claims to owning the truth lead to embracing disinformation and legitimising post-truth. It supports beliefs regardless of whether they are grounded in quality, factual, proven information. It perpetuates communities of belief that feed off and reinforce information dynamics that teem with falsehoods. It weaponises cognitive biases in support of disinformation and hate.

Responses

The preceding discussion illustrates a formidable set of media, information, and political problems. With the tacit complicity of citizens and allies, governments and rogue actors are responsible for large-scale disinformation campaigns in a complex web of domestic politics and geopolitical competition. Misinformed citizens consume and distribute false information and are generally unaware of their ignorance. Populism disfigures democracy. It tends to ignore
speech rights, flout norms of civility and tolerance, and persecute and suppress critics. It represents and legitimises various forms of hate speech. Deep, epistemic fractures make it difficult, if not impossible, for the existence of public agreement over ways to determine veracity and truth. All together, the combination of these problems results in multi-faceted threats to public life and communicative spaces.

One can reasonably argue that these problems are as old as public communication and politics. Yet now they present novel and complex forms in chaotic and dynamic media and information ecologies. They are contrary to optimum communicative conditions in multicultural democracies: namely, facticity, quality information, truth-telling, tolerance, difference, consensus, understanding, empathy, inclusion, and dialogue.

As communication and media scholars, we should not just be concerned with understanding the scope and the causes of the problems. We also need to identify and assess effective actions to respond to the challenges. The complexities of this scenario present important variations of solutions by country and region. Not all societies may be similarly susceptible to dis/misinformation or correspondingly equipped to respond.

The causes of dis/misinformation are located in three levels: individual, group, and systemic/structural, and societies require multipronged actions to combat these threats (Koulolias, Jonathan, Fernandez, & Sotirchos 2018).

One set of responses focuses on equipping individuals and groups with critical media/news literacy skills to assist them in navigating the current information landscape. In this case the focus is on citizens rather than on the sources of disinformation and misinformation. The premise is that citizens should be aware and smart when they consume and share information. Today, more than ever, a citizen requires the skills to constantly hone their communication and informational competencies.

The challenges for implementing successful media literacies are vast. It is difficult to promote and to implement media/news literacy programmes at scale because of the logistical and funding challenges. Media systems heavily tilted in favour of commercial interests are antithetical to actions aimed at cultivating critical learning skills. Systems with strong public service media grounded in truly public ideals are seemingly better equipped to confront the challenges of dis/misinformation.

Changing the way publics interact with information entails addressing significant behavioural and social obstacles, as the mixed record of interventions suggest (Tully, Vraga, & Bode 2020). Well-known cognitive processes, such as motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, and selective exposure/perception, as well as strong, affective identities, present significant demands. ‘Incorrect’ opinions and vulnerability to misinformation are often grounded in partisan and ideological identities. Therefore, offering counter-information may be insufficient to reduce hateful attitudes and behaviours, especially when confronting hard beliefs and strong resistance. Dis/misinformation is not simply a problem of groups who happen to hold incorrect knowledge due to poor media literacy skills, nor is it the failure of news providers to separate the wheat of information from the chaff of disinformation. Toxic identity politics that embrace dogmatic thinking, loyalty to leaders, and hate are significant obstacles.

Another set of responses focuses on systemic issues. Unsurprisingly, here the challenges are significant as well.

One type of intervention spotlights improving information ecologies by adding quality information. Notably, scores of programmes concentrate on producing fact-based information to debunk lies and to counter deception campaigns. Just as rogue actors aim to flood digital media with mis/disinformation to sow confusion, journalism, non-government organisations,
scientific organisations, think tanks, and university centres try to infuse the public sphere with demonstrable, evidence-based facts to achieve the opposite. What brings these initiatives together is the hope that multiplying ‘healthy’ information options may arm societies with more resources and contribute to turning the tide of dis/misinformation.

The challenges are multi-fold, involving taking fact-checking actions to scale, targeting publics who are particularly vulnerable to falsehoods and harder to reach, avoiding boomerang effects, and providing timely corrections to torrents of dis/misinformation. Fact-checking organisations rarely occupy towering positions in disjointed and multi-layered communication infrastructures. Gone are the days of firm pyramidal, hierarchical communication with a limited number of journalistic/media, informational, and scientific institutions atop. Furthermore, uneven and divided public trust in these media institutions across countries affect their position and credibility.

A different set of responses target social media and other digital corporations on the basis that they are major culprits in the current plight. Governments and civic organisations insist that those companies should be held accountable to the public for polluting the public sphere with toxic content. The call to arms comprises demands for transparency, consistent enforcement of their own guidelines, curbs on harmful content in their platforms, and legal action. Amid public pressure and outcry and advocacy campaigns, corporate responses to recurrent public relations crises are ad hoc, halfhearted, scattered, uneven, self-interested, and opaque. For example, Facebook and Twitter, in response to the flood of coronavirus disinformation on their platforms, are constantly updating their policies regarding conspiracy theories and fake news. They do this by flagging up disinformation using labels or warnings to highlight disputed, unverified, or misleading posts and tweets. As Claire Wardle, director of First Draft, quoted on NBC News, commented, ‘They trumpet these transparency initiatives, but they’re marking their own homework’ (Zadrozny 2020).

The decision to prioritise content by ‘trustworthy’ legacy news organisations or to deplatform postings and actors hardly amounts to a coherent set of policies in the public interest. None of these actions are sufficient or convincing.

Certainly, policy and regulatory tools remain important to address the symptoms and the deep-seated causes of dis/misinformation. Options are wide ranging. Eliminating or making access to misinformation difficult may be effective, inadequate, or problematic, depending on the various legal traditions and ethical issues in each country and whether they are public or private spaces. Legislation to regulate and shut down ‘fake news’ raises a host of problems, especially in countries with a strong history and tradition of governments clamping down on dissident speech.

Finally, it is important to develop responses to political and media elites who foster and perpetuate dis/misinformation, hate speech, and other forms of dangerous communication. Priority actions and targets should be mindful of deep power asymmetries in disinformation structures and dynamics. Not all disinformation institutions and agents carry similar responsibility in disseminating dis/misinformation at scale. Political elites and media corporations and funders wield significantly more power than scattered, ordinary citizens who consume and share falsehoods. Unfortunately, media and communication scholarship pays insufficient attention to effective responses to populism. Boycotting media companies that traffic in lies and deception and discouraging the use of digital platforms teeming with mis/disinformation are important steps, but they are hardly sufficient to break vicious cycles of disinformation and populist politics.

The belief there are easy-to-implement, one-shot, off-the-shelves solutions should be avoided. As the problems are complex, there is no single ‘magic bullet’. Some responses to
disinformation show promise. However, none has proved to be stunningly effective to curb misinformation in a whack-a-mole scenario in which lies and deception constantly pop up.

Responses should be part of systematic, evidence-driven, flexible, and localised approaches. Reactive and haphazard interventions are unlikely to tackle fundamental problems or to produce sustainable results. Successful responses at individual, group, and systemic levels may provide valuable insights for future action. Comparative analysis can help work out ways to reach out to and engage with various populations in the battle against disinformation, misinformation, and hate. Just as exposure to dis/misinformation takes place in different circumstances, attitudes and beliefs about politics, health, education, climate, and other issues vary too. Also, responses should take context into consideration, whether it is domestic politics, legal traditions, media systems, social trends, or combinations thereof. What may be viable and effective in certain settings does not necessarily apply elsewhere.

Ultimately, it is necessary to recognise that the challenges are daunting. If we are living in a time of ‘disrupted public spheres’ (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018), then where should societies focus attention and resources? How can societies reconstruct their information ecologies to support democracy and public life? Amid fractured publics and polarisation, how are shared actions feasible? Answers to these questions are necessary to re-imagine common paths to implement successful actions.

References


