While the relevance of incorrect or misleading information that is disseminated unintentionally (i.e. ‘misinformation’), as well as of incorrect or misleading information that is disseminated deliberately (i.e. ‘disinformation’) has been widely discussed (Bennett and Livingston 2018; Waisbord 2018a, 2018b; Lewandowsky et al. 2017), there are only a relatively small number of studies that can help us understand how common the actual consumption of misinformation and disinformation is and what motivates this consumption.

What is more, because public worries and excessive news media coverage about a disinformation crisis have been so significant, there is likely also a certain level of perceived consumption of misinformation and disinformation among citizens (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). This means that citizens are so worried about being manipulated in a polarised political environment that they either believe that a media outlet intentionally disseminates disinformation once the label ‘fake news’ is applied to it (e.g. a populist politician labelling a news organisation), or they generally overestimate the ratio of misinformation and disinformation in their media diet. This perceived consumption might be harmful, in that it may demobilise and raise levels of distrust and cynicism among citizens (e.g. Van Duyn and Collier 2019). But it might also backfire against those who try to cause it. For example, exposure to ‘fake news’ labels against legacy news organisations may actually raise media trust (Tamul et al. 2020).

In this chapter, we summarise the available theoretical and empirical literature on both actual and perceived consumption of misinformation and disinformation.1

**The dual consumption of misinformation and disinformation**

We live in a digital age, when information may be created and spread more cost efficiently and quickly than ever before and in which audiences are now able to participate in news production and dissemination processes (e.g. Lazer et al. 2018; McNair 2017). As a result, classic selection mechanisms, such as trust in the gatekeeping function of professional journalism, are impaired (e.g. Nielsen and Graves 2017; Starr 2012), not only because it is increasingly challenging to differentiate between professional and unprofessional content but also because journalists themselves are now challenged in properly verifying digital information during the news production process (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016). This challenge puts the assessment of information credibility increasingly with an overwhelmed user (Metzger et al. 2003), and even
so-called digital natives struggle with evaluating online information. In addition, digital advertising makes, in particular, disinformation or ‘fake news’ financially attractive as views or ‘clicks’, instead of the accuracy of the content, create business success (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This idea links disinformation to the emergence of clickbait, or the creation of news content solely aimed at generating attention through sensational and emotionally appealing headlines (Bakir and McStay 2018).

These technological developments are met by a number of social and political trends: most scholars connect the emergence of the so-called disinformation crisis to a larger crisis of trust in journalism (e.g. Lazer et al. 2018; McNair 2017; Nielsen and Graves 2017). While most prominently discussed in the US, where media trust has dropped to ‘a new low’ (Swift 2016), increasing mistrust towards news media is also a problem (in varying degrees) in other countries (Newman et al. 2017). Importantly, media trust is not decreasing for all citizens and rather has to be seen in the context of increasing political polarisation. In the US, media perceptions are divided by partisanship, with Democrats having more positive attitudes towards the media than Republicans (e.g. Gottfried et al. 2018; Guess et al. 2017). In (Western) Europe, citizens holding populist views are more likely to have negative opinions of news media than those holding non-populist views (Mitchell et al. 2018). However, for some, decreasing trust in traditional journalism might lead to a higher acceptance of other information sources, including disinformation. Furthermore, increasing opinion polarisation leads to homogeneous networks, where opposing views are rare, and the willingness to accept ideology-confirming news – true or false – is high (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Lazer et al. 2018; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017).

When considering all this, we can pinpoint two pathways to the consumption of misinformation and disinformation. First, there is, of course, the actual consumption of factually incorrect information, be it online or through other channels. Then there is a second pathway of perceived consumption, in which citizens overestimate the occurrence of false information in their media diets, ascribing the label ‘fake news’ to everything they do not believe in or that may even just feature opinions different from their own.

**Actual consumption of misinformation and disinformation**

The literature on the consumption of mis- and disinformation is a moving target, with new studies emerging at a fast pace (Ha et al. 2019). In the most general sense, citizens can be exposed to mis- and disinformation directly or indirectly. That means they may see or read it on a website or on other channels it originates from. What is also possible, however, is that they consume it indirectly: that is, they learn about it through other platforms or channels that have adapted and disseminated this information.

A direct form of consumption often discussed in the literature are websites dedicated to disseminating disinformation (e.g. Vargo et al. 2018). Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) refer to these websites as the true form of ‘fake news’ because they are not only low in facticity but are also created with the intention to deceive using pseudojournalistic cues. For example, fake news websites often have names that imitate those of established news outlets (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) (e.g. the Political Insider or the Denver Guardian). They are, however, also short lived as ‘they do not attempt to build a long-term reputation for quality, but rather maximize the short-run profits from attracting clicks in an initial period’ (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 218–219). This makes accumulating data on actual consumption rather tricky. The available research does, however, show that traffic to these websites is rather limited compared to the general media diet of an average citizen (Fletcher et al. 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018).
Consumption of mis/disinformation

A second way in which misinformation and disinformation may be directly consumed is through social media communication (Tucker et al. 2018). Initially, research suggested that Facebook plays a particularly important role when estimating the role of disinformation consumption in people’s daily lives (e.g. Guess et al. 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018). Research focusing on the 2016 US presidential election suggests that there were posts containing disinformation that received more shares and likes during the election campaign than many mainstream news stories (Silverman 2016). However, recent research shows that disinformation spreads across platforms (Wilson and Starbird 2020) and is driven by the affordances of different platforms, such as hashtags (Weber et al. 2020), algorithmic targeting (e.g. Hussain et al. 2018), and visual communication tools (Diakopoulos and Johnson 2020). Another aspect of social media communication that has received particular attention in research is bots – which are often discussed for their ability to ‘amplify marginal voices and ideas by inflating the number of likes, shares and retweets they receive, creating an artificial sense of popularity, momentum or relevance’ (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, 11). However, comparisons show that humans are the main drivers of falsity online (Vosoughi et al. 2018, 1146) and that ‘effective disinformation campaigns involve diverse participants; they might even include a majority of “unwitting agents” who are unaware of their role, but who amplify and embellish messages that polarize communities and sow doubt about science, mainstream journalism and Western governments’ (Starbird 2019). Given all this, it is still difficult to generalise on how far reaching consumption of misinformation and disinformation on social media really is. While a growing number of studies detect cases of disinformation campaigns during, for instance, election campaigns (e.g. Bossetta 2018), there is only limited contrasting knowledge on the role these disinformation campaigns play in daily media consumption patterns of citizens. For example, Grinberg et al. (2019, 374) argue that ‘engagement with fake news sources was extremely concentrated [during the 2016 elections]. Only 1% of individuals accounted for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared’. The direct consumption of misinformation and disinformation also warrants a look at the relationship between social media communication and alternative and partisan media websites (Faris et al. 2017; Tucker et al. 2018). While this is a bit of an empirical grey area, raising questions about the relationship between false information and biased presentation of information, research suggests that consumption is tied to alternative news websites; new digital forms of populist party communication, such as YouTube channels; and new forms of party magazines (Bennett and Livingston 2018, 128).

‘Indirect forms of consumption of disinformation and misinformation’ most often describes the experience of information through legacy news media. News media play an important role in the disinformation crisis because they may spread misinformation either by mistake through lack of proper verification (Van Leuven et al. 2018) or even intentionally. Importantly, however, intentionality here is hard to measure and has so far not been covered empirically (Egelhofer and Lecheler 2019). Yet indirect consumption through news media is likely one of the most important aspects of the study of disinformation because even in a digital age, news journalists fulfil a disseminator function for many citizens, and misperceptions formed on the basis of false news are difficult to correct (Flynn et al. 2017; Tsfati et al. 2020). Bennett and Livingston (2018, 123) argue this importance of indirect consumption through news media:

While the origins of much, and perhaps most, disinformation are obscure, it often passes through the gates of the legacy media, resulting in an ‘amplifier effect’ for stories that would be dismissed as absurd in earlier eras of more effective press gatekeeping.
Be it direct or indirect, the motivations for consumption are equally relevant, yet equally hard to pinpoint. First, many scholars assume that citizens consume false content simply because they lack the digital literacy to distinguish it from factually correct information (Vraga and Tully 2019). Here, heavy news users may be better in recognising and rejecting ‘fake news’, depending on what kind of news media they regularly use (Lewandowsky et al. 2017). Another proxy for digital literacy is age, and in the context of the 2016 US election, Grinberg et al. (2019, 374) showed that registered voters on Twitter were most likely to engage with fake news when they were ‘conservative leaning, older, and highly engaged with political news’. Also, there is research showing that consumption of false information is related to media trust (Zimmermann and Kohring 2020).

Another important variable is political ideology. While some research shows that conservatives are more likely to consume disinformation (Guess et al. 2019), other studies do not find this connection. For example, Bossetta (2018) shows that one in five Twitter users are susceptible to spear phishing attacks, independent of their political ideology. Humprecht et al. (2020, 7) argue that consumption of disinformation is tied to populist communication because ‘populism and partisan disinformation share a binary Manichaean worldview, anti-elitism, mistrust of expert knowledge, and conspiracy theories’. This relates consumption of disinformation to the confirmation bias and motivated reasoning literature, which shows that congruent information is more likely to be accepted than incongruent information (see Hameleers 2020).

Perceived consumption of misinformation and disinformation

In a growing literature across scientific fields, the impact misinformation and disinformation have on society is perceived to be extremely large (Manor 2019). This huge saliency of the role misinformation and disinformation should play in our lives has led to growing public anxieties about the prevalence of false information in our daily lives. For example, in a multi-country survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, more than half the participants across 38 countries were gravely concerned about the amount of false information on the internet (Newman 2018, 2019). Also, a 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center showed that US citizens ranked fake news as a bigger threat to their country than climate change, racism, or terrorism (Mitchell et al. 2019). All this is hard to marry with empirical evidence carefully suggesting that the actual percentage of mis- and disinformation the ‘average’ citizen is exposed to may be relatively limited, particularly when these citizens also use legacy news sources (Fletcher et al. 2018; Nelson and Taneja 2018; see also Grinberg et al. 2019). Instead, large-scale public anxieties about disinformation may cause some sort of placebo effect.

Specifically, the salience of the threat of being exposed to misinformation and disinformation can lead to perceived consumption: that is, citizens’ own estimation of how much misinformation and disinformation they themselves and others are exposed to. This estimation is likely only weakly related to actual consumption of inaccurate information. While we know that individuals generally have a hard time properly estimating their media consumption (Prior 2009), perceived consumption of misinformation and disinformation may be a political variable in its own right, connected to populist politics and rising media criticism in many Western democracies.

More precisely, attributions of inaccurate information are increasingly used as a strategy to discredit opposed information sources (Hameleers 2020). Most prominently, US president Donald Trump successfully generated a public debate about disinformation by labelling legacy outlets as ‘fake news’. A growing number of studies suggest that mostly populist politicians around the world are involved in accusations of intentional falsehood (e.g. Hameleers 2020). This can be linked to the binary worldview of populism, distinguishing between ‘the people’.
and ‘the elite’. In that view, both groups ‘hold their own version of truth’, or, put more bluntly, ‘the people’ know and speak the truth while ‘the elite institutions’, such as journalism and science, are lying (Waisbord 2018a, 25). This is, for example, reflected in surveys that find that citizens holding populist attitudes are generally more distrustful towards news media (e.g. Fawzi 2019; Mitchell et al. 2018; Schulz et al. 2020).

This also suggests a polarisation of what is understood as ‘true’ and ‘false’, as well as a close connection of truth and facts with political ideology (Waisbord 2018a). As mentioned earlier, this is linked to confirmation bias, which explains how predispositions influence the processing of information (e.g. Casad 2007). For example, information that aligns with one’s political attitudes is likely processed in an uncritical way while information that contradicts one’s ideology is rejected. In the same vein, attributions of misinformation and disinformation (or ‘fake news’) to information sources are dependent on pre-existing attitudes (Hameleers 2020). For example, US president Trump frequently accuses liberal news outlets such as the New York Times and CNN of spreading fake news while he shares and supports the coverage of conservative outlets such as Fox News (Meeks 2020). Also, Australian politicians have been shown to use ‘fake news’ labels to discredit critical news media and political opponents (Farhall et al. 2019). Importantly for this chapter, this polarisation of perceptions of what constitutes disinformation is also mirrored in the public. For example, Van der Linden and colleagues (2020) asked US citizens to indicate which sources they associated with the term ‘fake news’. While conservatives mainly identified CNN as fake news, liberals associate the term more often with Fox News. Similarly, research shows that citizens use the term in social media communication to discredit information provided by opposing political parties (Brummette et al. 2018).

In sum, the ‘disinformation crisis’ is one of the most salient topics in current political discourses, and citizens are increasingly worried about its consequences. While the proportion of actual consumption of false information is increasingly often studied, there is likely also a high level of perceived consumption in polarised democracies. Because of the increasing political divide in many Western democracies and the close current link between ‘truth’ and partisan ideology, we propose that any study on the consumption of misinformation and disinformation must focus on a dual model of consumption as described earlier.

### Conclusion

Citizens consume misinformation and disinformation – be it online, where social media affordances such as bots, hashtags, and visuals distract them, or through traditional news media channels. This consumption is increasingly linked with research on polarisation and populist views: for example, because there is evidence that citizens consume alternative media with biased and one-sided content. Importantly, however, actual consumption goes hand in hand with the perceived consumption of disinformation and misinformation. This is the belief that a piece of news or information is ‘fake’, independent of its actual facticity or journalistic quality cues. Perceived consumption matters to us as scholars because media perceptions shape citizens’ use of and trust in news media and how they are affected by such media. In addition, it helps explain a rising relativism of facts among citizens when mediated communication is concerned. Both the ‘real’ as well as the ‘placebo’ pill of misinformation and disinformation may thus have equally powerful effects.

### Note

1 Parts of this chapter are based on Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) and Egelhofer et al. (2020).
References


Consumption of mis/disinformation


Consumption of mis/disinformation
