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Hameleers, M.; van der Meer, T.

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# The Implications of Epistemic Polarization and Factual Relativism for Misinformation Research and Democracy

Michael Hameleers and Toni van der Meer

Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

In contemporary digital societies, the status of epistemic authorities and democratic institutions is under severe strain by misinformation as well as delegitimizing accusations targeting legacy media, science, and legal institutions. Truth claims are increasingly subjected to ideological and partisan biases, which may result in the reinforcement of oppositions between camps that see the world from diametrically opposed factual beliefs. As a longer-term consequence, delegitimizing communication and attacks on epistemic and democratic institutions can even be associated with democratic backsliding. This wider context of an epistemic crisis has crucial implications for misinformation research and policy, emphasizing the need to view epistemic disorders from a more holistic and context-bound perspective.

## KEYWORDS

Fake news; misinformation; democratic backsliding; disinformation; polarization; trust; truth

Despite widespread societal concern about the effects of mis- and disinformation in the age of fast-paced technological developments such as AI, large social media platforms and political elites increasingly withdraw from their responsibilities to signal, monitor, and avoid the spread of misinformation. Alongside the erosion of content moderation, accusations of “fake news” and other delegitimizing discourses are no longer the domain of fringe groups and populist challengers, as they are increasingly normalized in mainstream political discourse. These contemporary shifts in the status of authoritative facts in the global political and information landscape may for an important part be regarded as an entry point for a crisis of trust and truth (e.g., Rekker & Harteveld, 2022), eventually leading the way to democratic backsliding.

As part of this crisis, influential (big tech) corporations gain unchecked authority over online epistemologies, allowing them to shape contemporary environments to their own blurred financial and political aims. To offer a few examples, in the slipstream of Trump’s reelection as U.S. President in 2024, X-platform owner Elon Musk has taken on an active role in the politicized attack on established truths and the mainstreaming of alternative facts on his very own social media platform. Trump, at the same time, often lashes out at scientists, judges, and mainstream media and blames them for lying to the ordinary people. Mis- and disinformation can also be found in less extreme cases. As indicated by a content analysis of politicians’ social media communication by Buttgereit et al. (2024), even mainstream political actors may delegitimize the press or accuse knowledge disseminators of spreading falsehoods.

Beyond these examples, content moderation is facing a downward trend. As case in point, after years of active support for the fact-checking community, Meta opted out of fact-checking early 2025, further cementing the relative status of facts and empirical knowledge, and cultivating an ideal discursive opportunity structure for the dissemination of misinformation and partisan attacks on established expert-driven knowledge.

We argue that the aforementioned events are indicative of a more encompassing and mainstreamed epistemic threat in which factual claims are surrounded by delegitimizing discourses and polarization, whereas democratic institutions and epistemic authorities are increasingly distrusted, avoided, or labeled as “fake news.” Together, these epistemic shifts raise the question how we should deal with misinformation in the current age of heightened polarization along epistemic lines. This forum article engages with this question by highlighting the main concerns that come with the turn toward epistemic polarization and the erosion of boundaries between truth and politics, and how we should study and respond to misinformation in this context.

### **Concern 1: Factual Relativism Erodes Epistemic Common Ground**

Although facts have always been subjected to interpretation and contextualization, digital information environments and the aforementioned political shifts may exacerbate deep disagreements on what objectively observable facts entail, and how the correspondence between empirical observations and their descriptions may be obtained. This disagreement is, arguably, increasingly more informed by ideological cleavages and strategic delegitimizing discourses: Opposed political camps legitimize in-group congruent claims on truthfulness, whereas they delegitimize opposed perspectives on truth (Van Aelst et al., 2017). This contributes to factual relativism, which can be understood as the increasingly more subjective, politicized and debated status of facts, which are increasingly dismissed as opinions or alternative interpretations when they do not align with communicators’ perspectives (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

The contemporary shift toward factual relativism is at odds with the ground principles of truth and objectivity. Heidegger (1943, p. 1) has referred to truth as “correspondence, grounded in correctness, between proposition and thing.” Hence, although this conceptualization of truth implies that there are alternative descriptions of reality that compete for legitimacy, it assumes that this competition between alternative claims is motivated by accuracy.

Factual relativism undermines this foundation of truth, as it is not correctness, but ideological congruence and political gains that determine which description of empirical observation wins the battle for legitimacy. Ultimately, given that opposed ideological camps are guided by different worldviews and different frames of references, they may use different principles to determine which competing account of truth is most legitimate, and which version should be discounted or attacked.

Against this background, although polarization has traditionally been referred to as the increasing ideological or affective divide between opposed partisans (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019), it has obtained a central epistemic dimension recently. Here, we can define epistemic polarization as the process by which opposed political camps or people with clashing political views come to perceive the world from opposite or conflicting sets of factual beliefs. So, beyond increasing affective polarization, indicating that opposed camps

increasingly dislike each other (Iyengar et al., 2019), society may be divided by the epistemic beliefs that people hold, legitimize, or delegitimize. This process may be fueled by the mainstreaming of “fake news” and other delegitimizing labels (Buttgereit et al., 2024) that contribute to the erosion of the authoritative status of facts.

## **Concern 2: The Digital Revolution of Hybrid Warfare**

Although hybrid warfare and propaganda are of all times, the current opinion climate of factual relativism may create an even stronger opportunity structure for delegitimizing narratives that justify violence and retaliation toward the targeted out-group, whereas affordances in digital media and AI allow for increasingly more realistic modes of deception and visual decontextualization (e.g., Hameleers, 2024). As such, traditional concepts of hybrid warfare and propaganda have taken on a new shape in the context of epistemic polarization and factual relativism. In contemporary digital societies, disinformation does not only spread via state actors or alternative channels that offer a partisan view on reality but often gets legitimized and platformed by mainstream outlets, social media influencers, and political communication on an international scale.

As part of hybrid warfare in times of factual relativism, the truth claims of opposed camps can be denied plausibly, and connected to widely shared delegitimizing discourses and fake news accusations (Buttgereit et al., 2024). Crucially, in a context where international leaders actively attack established media, such as in the US, combined with a lack of online content moderation and eroding boundaries between (social) media and politics, the delegitimization of epistemic authorities (i.e., the press, science, judges) has become legitimized and mainstreamed across the globe. Meta’s decision to end their collaboration with independent fact-checking marks the increasingly more opaque political opinion climate in which disinformation actors can deny responsibility for spreading falsehoods amidst hybrid warfare. When large social media platforms, big tech corporations, and political actors are able to successfully delegitimize institutions of factual knowledge and empirical evidence, such as journalism and independent fact-checking, the checks and balances that may safeguard democracy from malicious (foreign) information campaigns can be broken down.

## **Concern 3: The Conceptual Impasse in Misinformation Literature**

The rich body of literature on misinformation seems to have reached a conceptual impasse regarding how to understand the phenomenon and its harms. In the prestigious journal *Nature*, within the same issue, two diametrically opposed perspectives concerning how the societal role of misinformation should be understood were published in 2024. On the one hand, Ecker et al. (2024) argue that the threat posed by misinformation is significant and should not be dismissed as a mere “moral panic” (Ecker et al., 2024). On the other hand, Budak et al. (2024) contend that there are pervasive misconceptions about misinformation research, which call into question the extent to which misinformation poses a substantial threat to society, especially regarding the depth of its spread amongst diverse groups and its potential to induce behavioral changes.

The observed discrepancy in how to understand misinformation’s harm seems to reflect how research fields, or even paradigms, evolve over time. Years of research that responded to the rise of so-called “fake news” has formed a widely accepted “thesis” that

misinformation is harmful and prevalent. With time, a more critical perspective regarding the methodological approach and attention for potential undesired negative spillover effect of fighting misinformation (Hoes et al., 2024; Van der Meer et al., 2023) has brought into existence an “anti-thesis” that questions the established thesis of the omnipresence of misinformation and its disruptive consequences. In order for the field to move forward, and to deal with the contemporary crisis of truth and trust, there is a need to incorporate elements of the thesis and antithesis and align them in a “synthesis.”

To do so, there is a critical need to revisit the definition of misinformation and ensure a shared and precise definition to advance the field and enhance societal understanding of its true impact. A narrow definition that restricts misinformation strictly to conspiracy theories and intentionally disseminated false information may suggest that exposure to such content is less pervasive and perhaps only reaches and affects like-minded audiences. Conversely, adopting a broader definition – encompassing honest mistakes or (political) biases in communication – may indicate that misinformation is a more widespread phenomenon and affects a broader part of society. Especially recent audience-centric empirical works shows that citizens also struggle with the definition of misinformation, where they seem to hold a broader definition of misinformation that also includes, for example, biased and sensational news items (Kyriakidou et al., 2023), which are more widespread and part of the traditional media environment than politically motivated disinformation.

We advocate for a clear distinction between mis- and disinformation and biased information, as well as more attention for the epistemic disorder that serves as a context for different phenomena that erode truth and trust, and herewith offer an opportunity structure for misinformation (also see Labarre, 2025). Indeed, beyond disinformation, the delegitimization of truth amidst growing distrust on the demand-side of citizens, and the experienced challenges of citizens to navigate the information landscape (Newman et al., 2024) create epistemic vulnerabilities in contemporary societies (Labarre, 2025). Thus, in order to comprehensively understand epistemic disorders, we need to look beyond exposure to disinformation narratives alone. Indeed, discussions about the harms of disinformation, delegitimizing disinformation accusations, and concerns about the prevalence of disinformation may all be part of the wider epistemic crisis facing societies.

By differentiating between these phenomena whilst being sensitive to vulnerable epistemic contexts, researchers, policymakers, and media professionals can craft more effective and tailored strategies to address the unique challenges posed by different epistemic disorders, fostering both a clearer academic discourse and a more informed public understanding of these critical issues and the wider epistemic contexts in which they occur.

#### **Concern 4: Legitimate Knowledge Disseminators on Non-Democratic Platforms: A Deliberative Dilemma**

Should legacy media and other established epistemic authorities keep relying on the services of social-media platforms that fail to adhere to democratic standards or collectively disengage in order to preserve the integrity of deliberative conversations? While social media platforms often serve as critical information gateways for millions of citizens, they also present significant ethical issues. The intertwining of credible information with less credible, or outright misinformation, content creates a spillover effect, blurring the lines

between reliable journalism and unsubstantiated narratives or politically driven attempts of deception.

One of the primary reasons for legacy media's continued presence on such platforms is their wide reach. For many people, social media platforms are the primary gateways through which news is consumed. Across different countries, 66% of people access short news videos weekly via social media, 71% among those under 35 (Newman et al., 2024). Accordingly, even established news organizations depend heavily on these platforms to drive traffic to their news content. This raises the question of whether this dependency erodes the neutrality and independence that credible news sources aim to uphold. From one perspective, engaging with these platforms ensures that high-quality, factual information remains accessible to a broader audience. In information environments challenged by misinformation, the presence of credible voices can serve as a counterweight, providing users with a reliable reference point amid a flood of dubious claims. However, this approach carries significant risks. By participating, legacy media and official sources might become entangled in the platforms' ecosystem, where their credibility could be diluted by association with less reputable content.

### **Conclusions: Where Does the Epistemic Crisis Leave the Study of Misinformation?**

The aforementioned concerns are highly problematic for the study of misinformation. On a pessimistic note, we could argue that misinformation is no longer a meaningful concept to focus on. In a context of mounting distrust in established institutions ought to govern the factual foundations of democracy alongside the weaponization of "fake news" and mis- and disinformation, the endeavor of fact-checking falsehoods and identifying misinformation may not be acknowledged as legitimate. Marking distinctions between true and false information, as often attempted by fact-checkers, may not find support in the political arena or public opinion. Pointing out which information is untrue according to experts and empirical observations can easily be discounted as alternative "facts," and contrasted to the legitimization of an opposed account of reality driven by "common sense." But what approaches may still be conducive to truth seeking?

Optimistically, people may not entirely shut themselves off in echo chambers that resonate with their ideological beliefs. Various studies have indicated that people come across information from different sources, which means that they can be reached with facts that do not support their existing worldviews (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2019). In addition, although media users across the globe have grown to be distrustful toward established media and journalism, they do not systematically oppose the intentions of these institutions. Thus, given that we cannot trust on established institutions to govern a rational exchange of arguments in a deliberative democracy, we may need to find alternative pathways to instill resilience to misinformation, and eventually, divert from the pathway to democratic backsliding.

Here, we specifically summarize three main suggestions that can be resilient to the contemporary threats of factual relativism. First, a re-emphasis on honest and truthful information instead of warning for deception may be worthwhile. Media educators, journalists and fact-checkers may instill resilience to misinformation and undermining delegitimizing discourses by increasing access to and comprehensibility of trustworthy

information. Instead of offering tips on how to recognize misinformation, literacy interventions may need to relativize the threats of misinformation and offer concrete suggestions on where and how to find trustworthy information (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2023). Second, stakeholders and epistemic authorities need to enhance transparency when it comes to their procedures of truth-telling. To avoid being labeled as “fake news” or disinformation outlets, more transparency on the honesty and legitimacy of factual claims is needed, alongside the declaration of any potential biases or influences that shape news reporting. Third, educators and developers of information literacy need to take a more holistic perspective on how news users should navigate the complex information ecology. Hence, beyond warning people about deceptive content and pointing them toward trustworthy information, interventions need to teach people critical navigation skills, for example, related to the influence of algorithms on the curation of personalized newsfeeds, the (in)authenticity of social media accounts, and the ways in which legitimate information may be misused and misinterpreted on alternative platforms to gain legitimacy.

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