Unravelling Misinformation in Politics: Introduction to the Special Issue

Misinformation is discussed as one of the most pressing challenges of the digital age, potentially shaping public opinion and influencing political behaviour across the globe. In this introduction to a special issue, we report on the analysis of Scopus search results documenting increasing attention to misinformation (and related topics) over the past twenty-five years and a focus on the US context. The contributions to this special issue consider the US context (Gomez & Jenkins 2025; Littrell et al. 2025), but also consider Brazil (Bastos et al. 2025), Germany (Unger et al. 2025), and several cross-national studies that include other countries in Europe, the US, and Canada (Holt & Bechmann 2025; Hoffmann & Boulianne 2025; Morosoli & Humprecht 2025). The contributions offer overlapping insights on the themes of misinformation as a socially constructed phenomenon; misinformation exposure and engagement; and the power and limitations of misinformation. We connect these new findings with recently published meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews on misinformation. We conclude with suggestions for future research that addresses contextual and cultural specificity; examines the motivations for engagement; explores new angles for the study of polarisation and partisanship; and new methodologies.

Keywords: misinformation; disinformation; cross-national; conspiracy; politics; news

From allegations of voter fraud in high-profile elections to coordinated campaigns targeting climate change debates, misinformation is discussed as one of the most pressing challenges of the digital age, potentially shaping public opinion and influencing political behaviour across the globe. For example, the World Economic Forum (2024) rated mis- and disinformation as the most prominent immediate global risk. This estimation is based on the perceived pervasiveness of misinformation and risks associated with misinformation mitigation measures. On the one hand, false or misleading information is believed to be pervasive and threatens democratic processes and societal trust. On the other hand, measures against misinformation could endanger

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civil liberties - especially in light of several open questions around the sources, reach, and effects of mis- and disinformation (Jungherr 2024). This raises several critical questions about the power and influence of misinformation - especially in the critical realm of politics, where the borders between intentional disinformation and unintentional misinformation can be blurred.

Vraga and Bode (2020) argued that it is often easier to define "misinformation" in the context of health or science, where deviations from expert consensus or the best available evidence is clearer compared to politics. However, it is not always clear who is the expert; the best available evidence is subjective; and expert consensus is not always available (Vraga & Bode 2020). While we generally understand misinformation as deviations from the best available evidence for the purpose of this special issue, we also acknowledge that the perception of a political claim, its (perceived) factuality, and the maliciousness of its sources is often shaped by the perceivers' political identities, preferences, and contexts. The contributions to this issue offer their own perspective about misinformation and the related concepts of conspiracy, disinformation, and propaganda (see especially Unger et al. 2025).

Misinformation has received much attention in the past 25 years within the social sciences. Figure 1 displays the search results from Scopus (February 19, 2025) based on the following keywords in the article abstract, title, or keywords: misinformation OR disinformation OR "false information" OR conspir* OR "fake news" OR hoax OR "information disorder" OR malinformation. The keywords are adapted from Bak et al.'s (2023) systematic review. While there is typically a general surge in scholarly work across several areas, Figure 1 shows sharp increases in interest after political world events such as the general US election in 2016, around the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019/2020 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

[insert Figure 1 here]

This special issue focuses on misinformation in politics. While misinformation exists in other domains, such as health and wars/conflict (see especially Holt & Bechmann 2025), misinformation in politics is the most concerning to citizens, according to the *Digital News Report 2024* (Newman et al. 2024). Misinformation in politics can refer to different aspects of the communication process: Political actors spreading misinformation to their voters, other parties or countries, misleading political content spread by distinct more-or-less institutionalised actors, as well as political attitudes shaping the perception of and response to misinformation on the side of the recipients.

Regarding the latter, systematic reviews paint a somewhat mixed picture. On the one hand, a systematic review of 31 US experiments suggests that political identity is a key predictor of the ability to distinguish between true and false news headlines (Sultan et al. 2024). The authors suggest that people may label headlines as true or false depending on their agreement with the information rather than on the truthfulness of the information. In short, ideology and/or partisanship shape susceptibility to online misinformation in the US. However, the systematic review only included US-based experiments with raw data available online or received from authors upon request, which limits the sample size for this summary of results. A more global meta-analysis of 67 experiments suggests that political leanings do not affect the ability to discern true and false news (Pfänder & Altay 2025). Furthermore, this meta-analysis indicates that people are better able to identify true versus false news and tend to err on the side of skepticism (Pfänder & Altay 2025). Political misperceptions are likely complex and shaped by the characteristics of the sender (e.g., the credibility of a political candidate), the content (e.g., the plausibility and world-view centrality of a lie), the context (e.g.

digital platforms or national environments) and further susceptibility factors on the side of the recipient.

The articles in this special issue highlight false information (especially Gomez & Jenkins 2025) and conspiracy beliefs related to the US elections (especially Littrell et al. 2025), demonstrating the political dimensions of misinformation. Furthermore, the articles in this issue offer new perspectives about the overlap in exposure to political content and concerns about misinformation (Hoffmann & Boulianne 2025). In addition, the articles in this volume reveal cross-national variations in experiences of misinformation (Holt & Bechmann 2025; Hoffmann & Boulianne 2025; Morosoli & Humprecht 2025) while also offering deep insights into political misinformation in Brazil (Bastos et al. 2025), Germany (Unger et al. 2025), and the US (Gomez & Jenkins 2025; Littrell et al. 2025).

While recent scholarship has predominantly examined health-related misinformation (Bak et al. 2023), this issue emphasizes political contexts, including elections (Bastos et al. 2025; Gomez & Jenkins 2025; Littrell et al. 2025) and salient issues like climate change, migration, and COVID-19 (Morosoli & Humprecht 2025). By exploring misinformation's modalities, its variable effects, and the demographic groups most susceptible to its influence, this issue advances an interdisciplinary and comparative understanding of misinformation's role in contemporary politics.

Furthermore, we encouraged contributing authors to reflect on whether misinformation is as powerful as expected (Altay et al. 2023; Benton 2023). Specifically, scholars were encouraged to be mindful of effect sizes, the limitations of their sampling frames, and the possibility of null effects (e.g., Boulianne & Humprecht 2023). In launching this special issue, we were acutely aware of the publication biases within this field of research. The publication bias applies to all scholarship, resulting in

papers reporting null effects being less likely to be published and ending up in a "file drawer" (Franco et al. 2014). The implications of this bias may be an overestimation of the effects of misinformation on attitudes and behaviours, as null effects are systematically excluded as outputs. Our call for papers was open to null effects. As such, it is not surprising that our special issue includes papers reporting null effects.

Contributing scholars were asked to reflect upon which subgroups may be most vulnerable to the influences of misinformation, such as those who hold conspiracy beliefs (De Coninck et al. 2021; Frischlich 2022; Frischlich et al. 2021; Uscinski et al. 2022). Additionally, we encouraged scholars to reflect on how their observed effects can be translated to other countries or political contexts. Systematic reviews of misinformation point out the focus on the US context (Broda & Strömbäck 2024, also see Table 1) with Western European countries becoming more popular focal points (Bak et al. 2022; Broda & Strömbäck 2024). However, misinformation extends far beyond Western democracies (Table 1). This special issue builds upon comparative work in this field (Boulianne et al. 2022; Boulianne & Hoffmann 2024; Boulianne & Lee 2022; Humprecht et al. 2020, 2023). This comparative approach is important as meta-analysis studies show that the effectiveness of interventions against misinformation depends on the cultural context. For example, Huang et al. (2024) found 49 experimental studies about the effects of media literacy interventions for mitigating misinformation; they found that these interventions were more effective in countries with high levels of uncertainty avoidance, such as South Korea and Japan, compared to countries with low levels of uncertainty avoidance, such as the US.

[insert Table 1 here]

Our special issue is distinctive in several respects. First, we include scholarship from diverse disciplines such as political science, communication, sociology, and

psychology, whereas computer sciences and information studies dominate this field (Bak et al. 2022). This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of misinformation's complexities in elections and political issues. Second, this special issue takes a global approach. Contributing scholars are from North America, South America, and Europe, providing insights from different political, social, and cultural contexts. This diversity of perspectives adds richness and depth to our understanding of misinformation and its impacts on public opinion and political behaviour. Third, our special issue presents a wide variety of evidence on misinformation, including experiments, cross-national surveys, computational methods, and interviews, offering a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon. This diverse array of evidence contributes to a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of misinformation in the political realm.

Thematic analysis of contributions

The articles in this special issue overlap on three themes.

Misinformation as a Socially Constructed Phenomenon

Using qualitative interviews, Unger et al. (2025) examine how different sectors (media, politics, government, and business) understand disinformation dissemination. Bastos et al. (2025) examine the iterative process through which misinformation is co-constructed by grassroots activists and political elites during the 2022 Brazilian general election. Their study emphasizes the participatory nature of misinformation production and the bidirectional influences between elites and the public.

Exposure and Engagement

Holt and Bechmann (2025) analyze Facebook data from 27 EU member states and the UK, revealing demographic and regional variations in misinformation exposure and user engagement. Their findings challenge assumptions about who is most vulnerable, showing that women aged 35 to 44 were most exposed during key events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. Morosoli and Humprecht (2025) also demonstrate different patterns of engagement with misinformation but also reveal that a significant majority ignore such posts based on samples from Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Their finding challenges narratives emphasising widespread susceptibility in the broader population and highlight the need for nuanced perspectives on misinformation's reach and influence. While Hoffmann and Boulianne (2025) set out to understand concerns about misinformation, they document that perceived exposure to misinformation on social media is high. Furthermore, perceived exposure strongly correlates with concerns about misinformation on Instagram across the US, Canada, the UK, France, and Germany.

The Power and Limitations of Misinformation

Gomez and Jenkins (2025) exposed respondents to a one-sided mock news story about voter fraud. They did not find a significant effect of the story on perceptions of voter fraud. While the main effects were not significant, they show that news consumption and political homophily were important predictors of views about voter fraud.

Likewise, Littrell et al. (2025) exposed US respondents to a short text stating that many Americans believe that the Trump campaign coordinated with Russia during the 2016 election. Like Gomez and Jenkins (2025), they do not find a significant main effect of their experiment on beliefs about Russian interference. Instead, participants'

beliefs were primarily associated with following politics, partisanship, and pre-existing beliefs, such as conspiracy thinking, ideology, and job approval ratings for Trump.

Future research

The articles in this special issue collectively advance the study of misinformation while highlighting areas for future exploration. Bastos et al. (2025) emphasize the need to study misinformation within broader cultural narratives and social rituals rather than as isolated falsehoods. Morosoli and Humprecht (2025) advocate examining engagement motivations beyond agreement or disagreement, suggesting behavioural tracking over self-reports. Similarly, Hoffmann and Boulianne (2025) call for web tracking data to provide more objective insights into misinformation exposure and sharing behaviours. Gomez and Jenkins (2025) highlight the importance of disentangling the effects of message content, personal predispositions, and media consumption, encouraging research in less polarized contexts. Finally, Holt and Bechmann (2025) stress the value of comparative, longitudinal studies to track evolving exposure patterns across different media environments.

Beyond the future research recommendations from these studies, we echo some of the calls for future research generated from systematic reviews. In particular, Bak et al. (2022) call for more research on misinformation across different platforms, comparative election studies, and longitudinal research on who spreads misinformation. Broda and Strömbäck (2024) completed a systematic literature review of more than 1,200 studies on misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. They also call for more research that compares platforms, studies beyond Western democracies, and more attention to culture and system-level factors influencing the spread and vulnerability to misinformation.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue demonstrate that misinformation's impacts are neither universal nor monolithic. They underscore the importance of examining misinformation's effects through contextual, demographic, and methodological lenses, aligning with the special issue's focus on nuanced, interdisciplinary, and comparative approaches. The insights advance our understanding of how misinformation functions across different media systems, demographic groups, and political contexts, providing a richer foundation for mitigating potentially noxious societal impacts.

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Table 1. Scopus search (February 19, 2025).

Figure 1. Number of Scopus documents related to misinformation from 2000 to 2024.

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	Number of documents
misinformation OR disinformation OR "false information" OR conspir* OR "fake news" OR hoax OR "information disorder" OR malinformation in Article Abstract, title, and keywords	**52,384**
Within "social sciences"	**19,379**
Top 12 countries (Scopus Classification) "within social sciences"	
United States	6,205
United Kingdom	2,147
Spain	1,116
United Kingdom	2,147
Germany	874
Australia	855
Canada	787
Italy	590
India	542
China	536
Netherlands	499
Brazil	496

Note: Search terms are adapted from Bak et al. (2023)

Figure 1. Number of Scopus documents related to misinformation from 2000 to 2024