

# **MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION CONTENT SORTED BY NEWS MEDIA CONSUMERS**

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## Introduction

In the last decade we have witnessed an increase in misleading and manipulative information in the public space, which, although labelled differently, has similar social impacts. They undermine the stability or value cohesion of developed late modern societies, where they appeal particularly to socio-economically, educationally and cognitively disadvantaged media consumers. Not only in the Czech society, which is under pressure from a serious socio-economic and security crisis, this phenomenon plays a significant role.

The presented pilot study presents how different groups of ordinary media consumers reflect on the issue of misleading news content, i.e. news content that is not based on empirical evidence or that intentionally or unintentionally distorts such evidence.

The analysis focuses specifically on the reception strategies and tactics used by consumers of news content in decoding it, placing the 'reading practice' in the broader context of reflecting on respondents' more general views on the harmfulness, identifiability and need for monitoring misleading news content. And importantly, it brings respondents' views of limiting the right to misinformation into focus.

We open the study by defining the terminological categories that connote the universal label of misleading news content. This is followed by a theoretical exposition and conceptualization, from which an analysis of the four discussion groups and a concluding comparison of their reception strategies and tactics are drawn.

The analysis is based on the premise that misleading news information can be resisted to some extent if its consumers are capable of critical reception, which includes both knowledge and communication competencies and the skills necessary to verify news media content. Several studies have shown that strengthening so-called news literacy helps to reduce the formation and spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (e.g. Craft et al., 2017; Vraga et al., 2020), although it is clear that expanding reception skills and knowledge of ordinary media consumers has its limits (e.g., Jones-Jang et al., 2019). In this sense, our approach also reflects the non-negligible weight of the individual cognitive limits of ordinary media consumers.

The analysis is based on data collected through group interviews conducted among residents of four numerically and regionally diverse cities in the Czech Republic

## Analysis assignment

- A. using qualitative methodology to analytically describe respondents' views on the non/credibility of domestic news media in the context of their disinformation potential,
- B. analytically describe what respondents perceive as misinformation content,
- C. analytically describe how respondents perceive the need for monitoring disinformation content,
- D. analytically describe how respondents go about consuming misleading news content.

## **Technical requirements of the contracting authority for the data collection method and respondent structure**

- A. Data collection will be carried out using the method of moderated focus groups,
- B. Four group interviews consisting of a minimum of 32 respondents (4x8) will be conducted,
- C. Discussions will be held in four types of locations,
- D. Each discussion group will have a different composition in terms of the type of media consumed (see Annex 1 recruitment questionnaire),
- E. Each of the 4 groups will respect as a whole the distribution of basic socio-demographic characteristics of the 18+ population (gender, education, age:18-39, 40-59,60+).

## The main objectives of the study

The presented pilot study presents how different groups of ordinary media consumers reflect on the issue of misleading news content, i.e. news content that is not based on empirical evidence or that intentionally or unintentionally distorts such evidence.

The analysis focuses specifically on the reception strategies and tactics used by consumers of news content in decoding it, placing the 'reading practice' in the broader context of reflecting on respondents' more general views on the harmfulness, identifiability and need for monitoring misleading news content. And last but not least, it brings in respondents' views on limiting the right to false information. The final comparison seeks to answer, at the level of the four discussion groups analyzed, composed of respondents with different news preferences, the question: whether, and if so, how, the views and reception strategies/tactics of regular consumers of misinformation media differ from those who prefer mainstream media.

The aim of the study was to deepen understanding of the mechanisms used by media consumers in decoding misleading news content. Although this is only a pilot probe and the results cannot be generalized, some of its findings are not only surprising but, above all, somewhat depressing.

Given the exploratory and exploratory nature of the study in question, which is intended to set the stage for broader quantitative, representative research on the domestic majority population in the area, we used analytical techniques whose findings can be interpreted using the assumptions of grounded theory. The analysis design used group moderated interviews as the data collection method. For the analysis of the respondents' actual statements and conversations, a procedure was used that is based on the methodological assumptions of reception analysis.

## Partial results of the research

The study suggests the validity of the assumption that regular consumers of disinformation media use partially different reception strategies and tactics than mainstream media consumers when consuming misleading news content. This difference is primarily related to the fact that they do not identify with the existing socio-economic and political order. As the present study shows, their perspective is anti-systemic. In other words, the initial comparison allows us to separate the Prague group of regular consumers of disinformation media from the other three discussion groups, which were composed of consumers of mainstream news.

The following passage outlines the main differences and similarities between the reception practices of these two types of respondents, particularly in the lens of the following two questions: (a) How did respondents reflect not only on the amplification of mis/disinformation content, but also on the need to monitor and sanction it? (b) What reception strategies and tactics did respondents use in decoding the selected news materials?

The reception of news content and the assessment of its truthfulness is fundamentally influenced by the extent to which it coincides or disagrees with the views of the recipients. The analysis suggests that this reception determinant played the strongest role among regular consumers of disinformation media. Their perception of disinformation content was crucially determined by an anti-system, anti-regime sentiment that was strongly critical, with hints of social paranoia and conspiratorial assumption .

Some of the respondents from this group sought answers to their own, or social problems by idealizing the pre-republican, monarchist order of society. In this sense, they proposed to abolish the Constitution, and especially the Senate. However, there were also proposals for the abolition of political parties and elections. The highly critical perception of the current regime indicated above was also reflected in the negative reception of the

credibility of the domestic media. Respondents had difficulty identifying any domestic mainstream media as credible.

In other words, almost the entire group declared dissatisfaction with life in the country. The group discussion with these respondents indicated that they particularly accept information that is consistent with their views and reject information that contradicts them. Especially the second, rejecting, reception -selective variant was stronger in this group than in the discussions of regular consumers of mainstream media. This finding is consistent with previous research in the field (e.g., Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018).

For consumers of disinformation media, value congruence with the received news was crucial. Their mode of reception of media content was independent of the empirical verifiability and truthfulness of the received news information, and thus open to misinformation. A crucial role was played by the saturation of the need for cognitive consistency, which was fulfilled by these respondents by taking the opinion congruence with the news information as an indicator of its validity.

Closely related to value orientation is the lived experience of social actors. It plays an important role in assessing the correspondence of news content with reality. Individual processing of news information tends to be subject to, or adapt to, previously captured experience (interpretation), especially when it comes to, for example, encounters with news distortion, which functions de facto as a metacognitive indicator of non/truthfulness. As has been repeatedly found empirically, individuals tend to find repeated messages more accurate (Reber and Unkelbach, 2010).

This second receptive determinant is also related to respondents' content and topic selectivity. The analysis shows that particularly regular consumers of disinformation media and its content tend to form a "closed communication circuit" in which the disinformation agenda is selectively reinforced. This mechanism was particularly evident in the analyzed reception of an article that negatively thematized the regulatory role of the EU. Respondents here were based on negative preconceptions or repeated criticism of the EU. While this was present in all groups, it was most radical among regular consumers of disinformation media, who strongly articulated the importance of "national interests" in the context, often using various forms of so-called banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). Thus, the decoding of the tested articles took place on the basis of petrified negative expectations and stereotypes related to the EU. We see here the application of the much research - validated finding that prior or repeated exposure of the recipient to one interpretation, irrespective of whether it is true or false, increases the likelihood of its acceptance (e.g. Lewandowsky et al, 2012; Schwarz et al., 2007; Pennycook et al. 2018; Unkelbach et al. 2019; Schwarz and Jalbert, 2020).

The chosen reception tactics were also used by respondents towards Ukrainian refugees. In doing so, they relied particularly on anti-Ukrainian preconceptions to rationalize their cultural stereotypes or negative framing of Ukrainians as those who are favoured over Czechs. In this sense, the approach of respondents from the Prague group and the combined Tábor group, which was closest in their views to the group of regular consumers of disinformation media, was similar. In both cases, the respondents' adaptive defense mechanism played a key role in the acceptance of disinformation anti-Ukrainian messages - there is something to it. The informational cocooning of both groups was also indicated by their agreement in questioning or relativizing the massacre in Buca, Ukraine. It is likely that both the Prague respondents and some of the Camp respondents consume the same or related news sources.



Among respondents who isolated themselves in a closed disinformation perimeter, there was a significantly lower ability to accurately distinguish between real and merely seen/heard messages, and

as they primarily relied on news material that reproduced opinions they already knew. This finding is consistent with the assumption of cognitive theories that confidence in fake news is rooted in underlying cognitive processes, not primarily in motivated reasoning. The described mechanism is also relevant for the identification of misleading (fake) news in social media settings, where the conversational echo chamber effect increases the likelihood of repeated exposure to identical or similar misleading information (Schwarz & Jalbert, 2020; Törnberg, 2018).

Although a qualitative study does not allow for an exact measurement of respondents' cognitive abilities, the analysis tracked their ability to analytically test or verify the veracity of news content as well as their willingness to engage in such activity.

According to this research perspective, which explains trust in fake news by respondents' underdeveloped cognitive, i.e., analytical and knowledge-based, abilities, individuals with higher cognitive scores are more accurate in distinguishing between true and fake news (Pennycook & Rand, 2019), regardless of the political orientation of the news, or its congruence with consumers' views.

In addition to basic cognitive dispositions, a number of studies suggest that the ability of ordinary media consumers to critically reflect on potential news communication distortions and ideological spin plays a key role (Craft et al., 2017; Jones-Jang et al., 2019).

Respondents' analytical ability to distinguish between true and false news was not high, but with few exceptions they had no difficulty understanding the news content tested, or the meaning and objectives of the published material. In contrast to the other reception dimensions, this group of regular consumers of disinformation media did not show different cognitive and educational competencies. In other words, their media or news literacy was

neither lower nor higher than that of the other groups, which showed very limited ability to verify the tested materials, or more precisely, limited awareness of how and where they could be verified.

The second area in which the cognitive and knowledge limits of the respondents were manifested was the reflection on the phenomenon of disinformation content, which the respondents not only found very difficult to define, but most of them could not give even one example of a disinformation message. Respondents also had difficulty explaining the reasons and motivations why a particular disinformation message was published.

With the exception of the respondents from the Prague group, who had a negative view of the monitoring of disinformation messages, the others were divided on the need for it. Some perceived it as useful, others as an attack on freedom of speech, or censorship of a kind. Doubts were particularly raised about the possible misuse of such monitoring by the government for state propaganda. In all groups, this manifested the respondents' distrust towards state institutions, and also towards NGOs, if they are the ones carrying out the monitoring of disinformation.

At the same time, some respondents relativized the possibility of distinguishing accurate information from disinformation. This cognitive skepticism was the reason for almost all respondents' resistance to sanctioning ordinary social actors for disseminating opinions in the public space, even if they were false. There was exceptional agreement across all groups on this issue.

## Conclusion

To summarise these findings, any effort by the authorities to combat disinformation appears to be highly problematic and, above all, ineffective. How can we convince the public of the harmfulness of disinformation content when the most at-risk segments of the public cannot even imagine what lies behind such labels?

The final comparative dimension involves comparing the ways in which respondents decoded the selected model news stories. The analysis looked at two types of consumption mechanisms: reception strategy and reception tactics.

In the first case, the more general and persistent tendency of respondents to accept/reject the power interests suspected (often mistakenly) behind given news content. The analysis of the second mechanism, reception tactics, looked at the extent to which respondents worked subversively with the news materials tested. More specifically, whether and, if so, how they carried out their recoding. Whether they were merely amplifying their original encoding, which is typical of conspiratorial threat reexposure, for example, or whether they were rewriting them against the meaning of their original encoding, which de facto coincides with Hall's oppositional decoding (1973).

The last answer to the research question (#4) also shows the distinctiveness of the Prague group, in which a resistant reception strategy prevailed, based on a counter-systemic perception of mainstream media content. Its members approached the tested news materials, which, with one exception, came from the disinformation media spectrum or its grey zone, as opinion congruent. Thus, they often chose reception tactics that reinforced the original meaning of the message. And so even in 'alternative', apolitical reportage on 'chemtrails', some Prague respondents saw the influence of power manipulation and the workings of forces behind the scenes. This conspiratorial optic occasionally flashed in other groups, but with much less intensity.

Mostly, the articulation of a vague paranoid-conspiratorial sense of threat, with which respondents also associated the mainstream media, was prevalent.

Respondents in the Prague and partly also in the Tábor group were based on a general anti-Ukrainian reception strategy, on which they grafted individual reception tactics, which they linked to various non-war topics - the economic situation, but also to personal experience, including the recurrent criticism of too much support for Ukraine. In this sense, we the prevailing reception strategy, which was resistant to the dominant pro-Ukrainian spin of the mainstream media.

The implied anti-systemic sociopolitical preunderstanding and nationalist optics of not only the Prague but also the Tabor group were complemented by the conspiratorial attitudes or unifying conspiratorial outlook of their members, who felt comfortable with the self - legitimizing myths of "Czechs who are at home here" and "Czechs who are being hurt here," especially by supporting refugees. In this context, we could talk about the use of an imminent conspiracy narrative that is part of a historically constituted reservoir of conspiracy theories that are the product of the collective imagination and reach the population at a deeply unconscious level. The persuasive effectiveness of such narratives is due to their historical flexibility, an openness of their kind that provides a large projective space, especially for insecure or anxious social actors, such as those found in the realized discussion groups. Linking their lived anxieties with the conspiratorial setting of the immanent narrative, creates a hermetically closed and in this sense totalizing view of the world as a conspiracy, a view that resists rational argumentation.

The users of this conspiratorial reception strategy were dominated by the rather 'passive recipients' of disinformation and conspiracy narratives, who felt comfortable in the role of group contemporaries for whom disinformation and conspiracy narratives only provide guidance on how to respond to the threats exposed. The second type, who actively disseminate disinformation and conspiracy narratives in order to fulfill their messianic goals of protecting society from a collective threat, did not appear in pure form in either group. More precisely, none of the respondents manifestly articulated such aspirations.

- *“This report is part of an international project funded by the European Union (action no. 2020-EU-IA-0267). Views and opinions are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them”.*