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WHAT IS DISINFORMATION?

Introduction

This is the first in a series of reading lists that are intended to provide an overview of disinformation research for those of you who either work in policy areas impacted by ongoing disinformation campaigns, or who are being exposed to disinformation in the information and communication media, and that aim to help build resilience by extending your knowledge of the topic.

When researching disinformation, it is likely that a considerable amount of time will be spent disentangling one's findings from their intrinsic ambiguity, the confusion surrounding the concept of disinformation in the media and in informal speech, and the misuse of the term even among specialists. More recently, popular terms such as 'fake news' have contributed to the confusion amid accusations of political bias, journalistic partisanship and modern political propaganda.

This reading list will serve as an introduction to the complicated concept of disinformation. As a point of departure, in carrying out research for this reading list we have looked at disinformation as both an activity itself and as the product of that activity. This list includes an overview of discussions on key concepts such as master narratives, misinformation and Russian active measures, so as to help clarify what disinformation is and how to distinguish it successfully from its false friends.

Resources selected by the Council Libraries

Please note:

This bibliography is not exhaustive; it provides a selection of resources made by the Council Library. Most of the titles are hyperlinked to Eureka, the resource discovery service of the Council Library, where you can find additional materials on the subject. Access to some resources might be limited to registered Council Library users or to users in subscribing institutions.

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Additional resources may be added to this list by request - please contact the Council Library to suggest a title: library@consilium.europa.eu

Contents

Confronting disinformation

Elizabeth Schmermund,
New York: Cavendish Square, 2018
Request via Eureka

"Online and in the news, the word "disinformation" appears often, but what does it mean, and how can it be combated? This book explores the most common usage of the term disinformation, the intentional spread of false information for political means, and provides guidance for how to spot it online, with special attention paid to its propagation through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter."

Disinformation and propaganda: impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States

Judit Bayer … [et al.]
Brussels: European Parliament, 2019
Access via Eureka

"This study, commissioned by the European Parliament, assesses the impact of disinformation and strategic political propaganda disseminated through online social media sites. It begins with a summary of the challenges relating to the definitions of fake news, misinformation and propaganda. The authors state that "there is an emerging consensus among public policy actors against using the term 'fake news' and in favour of using the term 'disinformation' to describe what is generally understood as false or misleading information produced and disseminated to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.". The study examines the effects of disinformation on the functioning of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights in the EU and its Member States. It formulates recommendations on how to tackle this threat to human rights, democracy and the rule of law."

Disinformation's spread: bots, trolls and all of us

Kate Starbird
England: Nature Publishing Group
Nature, 2019-07, Vol.571 (7766), p.449
Access via Eureka

"Disinformation is not as cut-and-dried as most people assume: those behind disinformation campaigns purposely entangle orchestrated action with organic activity. Audiences become willing but unwitting collaborators, helping to achieve campaigners' goals. This complicates efforts to defend online spaces."

Policy-making and truthiness: Can existing policy models cope with politicized evidence and willful ignorance in a "post-fact" world?

Anthony Perl, Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh,
New York: Springer
Policy Sciences 51, no. 4 (2018). p. 581-600
Access via Eureka

"From "alternative facts" to "fake news," in recent years the influence of misinformation on political life has become amplified in unprecedented ways through electronic communications and social media. While misinformation and spin are age-old tactics in policy making, and poor information and poorly informed opinion a constant challenge for policy analysts, both the volume of erroneous evidence and the difficulties encountered in differentiating subjectively constructed opinion from objectively verified policy inputs have increased significantly. The resulting amalgamation of unsubstantiated and verifiable data and well and poorly informed opinion raises many questions for a policy science which emerged in an earlier, less problematic era. This article examines these developments and their provenance and asks whether, and how, existing policy making models and practices developed and advocated during an earlier era of a sharper duality between fact and fiction have grappled with the new world of "truthiness," and whether these models require serious revision in light of the impact of social media and other forces affecting contemporary policy discourses and processes."

Digital disinformation : a primer

Tim Hwang ; Atlantic Council ; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. 2017
Access via Eureka

"Revelations around Russian efforts to shape the 2016 US presidential election through the use of disinformation, bots, and hacking have thrust the problems of "fake news" and social media manipulation into the public spotlight. The aim of the piece is to provide a concise handbook of key terms, major actors, and policy recommendations to address current and emerging threats, including trolling campaigns, cyber-attacks, and artificial intelligence (AI)."

Identifying disinformation : an ABC

Ben Nimmo ; Vrije Universiteit Brussel - Institute for European Studies. 2016
Access via Eureka

"One of the key challenges in countering information warfare is identifying when it is taking place. The concept of disinformation is widely understood and has been exhaustively defined; however, the currently available definitions do not allow for the operational identification of disinformation in a sufficiently rapid manner to allow for effective countermeasures. This paper

argues that the essence of disinformation is the intent to deceive. While such an intent is difficult to prove, it can be inferred by reference to three key criteria, termed the "ABC approach"."

What is disinformation?
Don Fallis
Library Trends, v. 63, n. 3, Winter 2015
Access Online

"Prototypical instances of disinformation include deceptive advertising (in business and in politics), government propaganda, doctored photographs, forged documents, fake maps, internet frauds, fake websites, and manipulated Wikipedia entries. Disinformation can cause significant harm if people are misled by it. In order to address this critical threat to information quality, we first need to understand exactly what disinformation is. This paper surveys the various analyses of this concept that have been proposed by information scientists and philosophers (most notably, Luciano Floridi). It argues that these analyses are either too broad (that is, that they include things that are not disinformation), or too narrow (they exclude things that are disinformation), or both. Indeed, several of these analyses exclude important forms of disinformation, such as true disinformation, visual disinformation, side-effect disinformation, and adaptive disinformation. After considering the shortcomings of these analyses, the paper argues that disinformation is misleading information that has the function of misleading. Finally, in addition to responding to Floridi's claim that such a precise analysis of disinformation is not necessary, it briefly discusses how this analysis can help us develop techniques for detecting disinformation and policies for deterring its spread."

The psychology of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and implications for public diplomacy
Erik C. Nisbet and Olga Kamenchuk,
The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 14, no. 1-2 (2019). 65-82.
Access via Eureka

"Policy discourse about disinformation focuses heavily on the technological dimensions of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Unfortunately, this myopic focus on technology has led to insufficient attention being paid to the underlying human factors driving the success of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. Academic research on disinformation strongly suggests that belief in false or misleading information is driven more by individual emotional and cognitive responses — amplified by macro social, political and cultural trends — than specific information technologies. Thus, attention given to countering the distribution and promulgation of disinformation through specific technological platforms, at the expense of

understanding the human factors at play, hampers the ability of public diplomacy efforts countering it. This article addresses this lacuna by reviewing the underlying psychology of three common types of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and identifying lessons for designing effective public diplomacy counter-strategies in the future."

Surveying fake news: assessing university faculty's fragmented definition of fake news and its impact on teaching critical thinking
Andrew P Weiss, Ahmed Alwan, Eric P. Garcia, Julieta Garcia,
Heidelberg: Springer Nature B.V
International Journal for Educational Integrity 16, no. 1 (2020). 1-30.
Access via Eureka

"This paper reports on the results of a survey of faculty members at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in Los Angeles, California regarding their understanding of and familiarity with the concept of fake news. With very few studies published on the attitudes of teaching faculty at universities, this study is a unique approach to the issues facing educators, knowledge creators, and information specialists. The paper examines the origins of the term "fake news", the factors contributing to its current prevalence, and proposes a new definition. It also reports upon the attitudes that teaching faculty hold, and how they define fake news within their specific disciplines. Though nearly all surveyed faculty felt fake news was an important topic that impacted them professionally, the researchers also find that faculty across all disciplines and ranks, ages, and gender, hold widely differing conceptions of fake news. This lack of consensus may have future implications for students in particular and higher education in general and are worth exploring further."

Understanding citizens' vulnerabilities (II): from disinformation to hostile narratives : case studies: Italy, France, Spain
Massimo Flore
Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2020.
Access via Eureka

"This report analyses how disinformation campaigns have evolved into more complex hostile narratives, taking Italy, France, and Spain as case studies to prove what has been observed and determined from analytical and numerical research. During the last years, malicious actors have been able to rely on much more sophisticated and organized disinformation campaigns in an attempt to manipulate citizens' perceptions (...) This report will highlight in chapter 2 how hostile narratives target citizens' vulnerabilities exploiting fear mongering using algorithmic content curation. In Chapter 3, the case studies will describe how different disinformation campaigns have been used in Italy, France and Spain, while chapter 4 will provide examples

on how hostile disinformation narratives were employed in France and Italy."

Disinformation – Дезинформация (Dezinformatsiya)
Aristedes Mahairas and Mikhail Dvilyanski;
The Cyber Defense Review 3, no. 3, 2018: 21–28.
Access Online

"With the creation of a special disinformation office in the 1920s, Russia embraced disinformation as the means to deceive public opinion. Disinformation was considered as a strategic weapon in Russia's overall Active Measures strategy (a Soviet term that refers to intelligence operations with the purpose of influencing world events to achieve geopolitical goals). Episodes such as the Operation Neptune in the 1960s or the attempts to derail the Camp David peace process in the 1970s illustrate a trajectory that would find its apogee in recent events such as the 2016 Lisa Case, where the leveraging of technology and the use of both overt and covert methods can have an even greater impact to a wider audience in a rather short period of time."

Master narratives of disinformation campaigns
Matthew Levinger;
Journal of International Affairs 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 125–34,
Access Online

"This essay explores how political disinformation campaigns can gain credibility and force by embedding themselves within 'master narratives' of national decline and rebirth. As a case study, it examines the Russian sponsored propaganda that seeks to discredit the humanitarian work of the White Helmets, a volunteer rescue group in Syria. The paper concludes with reflections on the importance of fighting disinformation campaigns on their own turf, not only by refuting falsehoods with facts, but also by opposing the propagandists' master narratives with coherent and compelling counternarratives that can motivate constructive collective action."

The disinformation order: disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions
W Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston
European Journal of Communication 33, no. 2 (2018). 122-139.
Access Online

"Many democratic nations are experiencing increased levels of false information circulating through social media and political websites that mimic journalism formats. In many cases, this disinformation is associated with the efforts of movements and parties on the radical right to mobilize supporters against centre parties and the mainstream press that carries their

messages. The spread of disinformation can be traced to growing legitimacy problems in many democracies. Declining citizen confidence in institutions undermines the credibility of official information in the news and opens publics to alternative information sources. Those sources are often associated with both nationalist (primarily radical right) and foreign (commonly Russian) strategies to undermine institutional legitimacy and destabilize centre parties, governments and elections. The Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States are among the most prominent examples of disinformation campaigns intended to disrupt normal democratic order, but many other nations display signs of disinformation and democratic disruption. The origins of these problems and their implications for political communication research are explored."

Misinformation, disinformation, and violent conflict: from Iraq and the "war on terror" to future threats to peace

Stephan Lewandowsky, Werner G. K. Stritzke, Alexandra M. Freund, Klaus Oberauer, and Joachim I. Krueger;
American Psychologist 68, no. 7 (2013). 487–501.
Access Online

"The dissemination and control of information are indispensable ingredients of violent conflict, with all parties involved in a conflict or at war seeking to frame the discussion on their own terms. Those attempts at information control often involve the dissemination of misinformation or disinformation (i.e., information that is incorrect by accident or intent, respectively). We review the way in which misinformation can facilitate violent conflicts and, conversely, how the successful refutation of misinformation can contribute to peace. We illustrate the relevant cognitive principles by examining two case studies. The first, a retrospective case, involves the Iraq War of 2003 and the 'War on Terror.' The second, a prospective case, points to likely future sources of conflict arising from climate change and its likely consequences."

A conceptual analysis of disinformation

Don Fallis;
Tucson: University of Arizona, 2009
Available Online

"In this paper, the serious problem of disinformation is discussed. It is argued that, in order to deal with this problem, we first need to understand exactly what disinformation is. The philosophical method of conceptual analysis is described, and a conceptual analysis of disinformation is offered. Finally, how this analysis can help us to deal with the problem of disinformation is briefly discussed."