



Editorial: Political Misinformation in the Digital Age During a Pandemic: Partisanship, Propaganda, and Democratic Decision-Making

Andrea De Angelis^{1*}, Christina E. Farhart², Eric Merkley³ and Dominik A. Stecula⁴

¹ University of Lucerne, Lucerne, Switzerland, ² Carleton College, Department of Political Science, Northfield, MN, United States, ³ Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada, ⁴ Department of Political Science, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, United States

Keywords: political misinformation, COVID-19, conspiracy theories, infodemic, public opinion, digital technologies (DTs)

Editorial on the Research Topic

Political Misinformation in the Digital Age During a Pandemic: Partisanship, Propaganda, and Democratic Decision-Making

OPEN ACCESS

Edited and reviewed by:

Sander van der Linden,
University of Cambridge,
United Kingdom

*Correspondence:

Andrea De Angelis
andrea.deangelis@unilu.ch

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Political Participation,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Political Science

Received: 15 March 2022

Accepted: 06 May 2022

Published: 01 June 2022

Citation:

De Angelis A, Farhart CE, Merkley E
and Stecula DA (2022) Editorial:
Political Misinformation in the Digital
Age During a Pandemic: Partisanship,
Propaganda, and Democratic
Decision-Making.
Front. Polit. Sci. 4:897095.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2022.897095

INTRODUCTION

With the world rushing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, an infodemic (van der Linden, 2022) of misinformation and conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19 has rapidly spread, exacerbating political conflicts (Osmundsen et al., 2021) with dire public health consequences (Swire-Thompson and Lazer, 2020). An alarming disconnect between public perceptions and the facts has affected debates surrounding the origins, prevention, and treatment of the disease, and inflamed issues such as mask wearing, social distancing, and perceptions of vaccine safety (Allcott et al., 2020).

Misinformation and conspiracy theories have thus continued to bedevil and politicize public health discussions and policy decisions globally. Contemporaneously, the growing prominence of social and digital media, and a high choice news media environment, make it increasingly difficult for citizens to judge the quality of the information they encounter in their daily lives (Choi et al., 2020). Understanding the mechanics of political misinformation and its connections with public opinion formation is therefore a vital challenge for democracy as high quality information is critical for its functioning.

In this Research Topic, we provide a forum for new perspectives to shed light on two critical challenges for the study of political misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, on the demand-side, questions remain around who is vulnerable to misinformation and how best to correct mistaken beliefs in the digital age. The articles in this Research Topic tackle the issue with a focus on vaccine-related misinformation, support for conspiracy theories, and the psychological profile of misinformation consumers. Second, on the supply-side, we lack an understanding of the mechanisms that generate and propagate political misinformation in traditional and digital media. This Research Topic brings together a group of accomplished social scientists who have begun to tackle these challenges in their research.

VULNERABILITY TO VACCINE-RELATED MISINFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19

Vaccines are critical to curbing the spread of pandemics like COVID-19, so vaccine hesitancy, or underlying skepticism and refusal to receive vaccines, presents a grave public health threat (Solís Arce et al., 2021). Palm et al. test whether vaccine communication strategies can combat vaccine hesitancy using a survey experiment conducted on a sample of US citizens. They compare the effects of multiple messages on vaccine hesitancy, finding that when communication focuses on vaccine safety and efficacy, self-reported vaccination intention increases. However, messages voicing reservations and vaccine skepticism, or discussing political influences on vaccine development, reduce self-reported vaccine intention.

Motta et al. complement this by conducting a survey experiment using a large representative sample of Americans to test whether public health messages related to the personal and collective health costs of the pandemic, or the economic consequences of failing to vaccinate, reduce vaccine hesitancy. They find that messages related to health costs had small positive effects on vaccine intention that surprisingly did not vary by the partisanship of the respondent or by the source of the message. Economic frames, however, appeared not to lift vaccine intention at all. These two works show us that some communication strategies hold promise to encourage vaccine uptake, but there is no game-changing silver bullet for combatting vaccine hesitancy.

CONSPIRACY THEORY BELIEFS AND COVID-19

Hartman et al. also examine the correlates of COVID-19 conspiracy endorsement. Using a representative sample from the UK, they find that underlying predispositions, including right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO), and general conspiracy ideation, are associated with belief in conspiracy theories related to the virus. The authors find that the specific content or target of COVID-19 conspiracy theories determines which individuals are most likely to endorse them and engage in behaviors with potentially negative public health consequences.

Relatedly, Farhart and Chen evaluate how COVID-19 conspiracy theory beliefs, racial resentment, and white identity are associated with taking protective health behaviors like mask wearing, social distancing, and vaccination. They combine observational and experimental approaches to assess how aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and related conspiracies have been racialized, and find that higher levels of conspiracy theory belief decrease compliance with recommended protective health behaviors. In addition, these findings support the view that framing the virus in racialized language alters the endorsement of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, contingent upon racial resentment and white identity levels.

Vitriol and Marsh likewise find in their survey data that COVID-19 conspiracy endorsement is associated with less belief in COVID-19 consensus information, while the latter is highly

correlated with taking protective health behaviors. They conduct an experiment—an Illusion of Explanatory Depth paradigm—to observe whether asking respondents to elaborate on the logic of COVID-19 conspiracies undermines these beliefs by exposing them to the limits of their understanding. In fact, this exercise reinforced conspiracy endorsement for a sizable set of respondents, showing how such efforts may backfire in practice.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE INFODEMIC

Gramacho et al. focus on Brazil, one of the country's most heavily exposed to both the pandemic and the infodemic, as a case to explore the influence of political identity on COVID-19 misinformation. The authors find that supporters of the populist Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, are both less knowledgeable about COVID-19 and more likely to believe in COVID-related conspiracies, showcasing the detrimental effects of the politicization of the pandemic in Brazil.

Stecula and Pickup build on previous findings linking news consumption on social media platforms to higher levels of misinformation and conspiracy theory endorsement. Their work examines the moderating role of cognitive reflection, finding heterogeneous associations between social media and conspiracy endorsement. The authors find that getting news from Facebook does increase conspiracy endorsement among respondents, but only among those that are low in cognitive reflection.

Cognitive and social psychology have long established that facts are subject to interpretation. Brotherton and Son rely on this notion to explore the cognitive processes leading to categorize various claims as fact- or opinion-based statements. The identification of these individual forms of metacognition extends the application of motivated acceptance/rejection theories: by assessing the epistemic foundations in the interpretation of claims, the authors unveil a correlation between the subjective agreement with a claim and its interpretation as a fact-based rather than an opinion-based statement.

De Coninck et al. extends the exploration of the psychological correlates of beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19. Using a large representative sample from eight countries and administrative regions (Belgium, Canada, England, Philippines, Hong Kong, New Zealand, United States, Switzerland) the authors focus on three alleged predictors of the credibility to COVID-19 misinformation: anxiety, depression, and trust/exposure to traditional and digital media. The study reveals intriguing correlations as well as relevant cross-national differences.

PRODUCTION AND PROPAGATION OF COVID-RELATED POLITICAL MISINFORMATION

A fuller understanding of the COVID-19 infodemic cannot overlook the specific mechanisms of generation and propagation of political misinformation in the digital age.

Hiaeshutter-Rice et al. investigate cross-platform differences in the emotional appeal of COVID-19 related content. The authors collect data from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and use computational methods to examine “alternative influencers” who spread misinformation on different social media platforms. The result is a rich, descriptive picture of the emotional and topical prevalence of content shared by these influencers.

Bridgman et al. scrutinize the cross-national propagation of misinformation, focusing on the infodemic pathways connecting the U.S. and Canada. By relying both on representative survey data of Canadian citizens and a large dataset covering Canadian Twitter users between January and July 2020, the authors reveal that most COVID-19 misinformation-related stories retweeted by Canadian Twitter users originated from U.S. accounts. In addition, the authors find that exposure to U.S. information is associated with more engagement with misinformation on social media and higher levels of misinformation endorsement. They also identify an important conditional relationship: the oft-found association between social media usage and misinformation endorsement was strongest among those with a preference for U.S. news.

Disentangling the role of dispositional and contextual factors in the prevalence and acceptability of political misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic is a critical research challenge of our times. Our Research Topic moves one

step forward toward the goal of understanding online and offline political misinformation diffusion, by bringing together diverse approaches and perspectives across the fields of public opinion, political psychology, social psychology, communication, media and social network studies. While the world can expect the COVID-19 virus and pandemic to decline and eventually become endemic (Telenti et al., 2021), we must continue to examine the ways in which social and digital media amplify and accelerate the diffusion of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the information environment so that they subside and do not become endemic as well.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AD: conceptualization, writing the original draft, funding acquisition, and writing—review and editing. CF, EM, and DS: writing—review and editing. All authors approved the submitted version.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We express our sincere gratitude to all the authors who proposed their work, all the researchers who took care to provide their most constructive comments and suggestions, and to the Frontiers team for their invaluable support.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, H., Boxell, L., Conway, J., Gentzkow, M., Thaler, M., and Yang, D. (2020). Polarization and public health: Partisan differences in social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic. *J. Public Econ.* 191,104254. doi: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104254
- Choi, D., Chun, S., Oh, H., Han, J., and Kwon, T. (2020). “Taekyoung” rumor propagation is amplified by echo chambers in social media. *Nat. Sci. Rep.* 10,310. doi: 10.1038/s41598-019-57272-3
- Osmundsen, M., Bor, A., Vahlstrup, P. B., Bechmann, A., and Petersen, M. B. (2021). Partisan polarization is the primary psychological motivation behind political fake news sharing on twitter. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 115, 999–1015. doi: 10.1017/S0003055421000290
- Solis Arce, J. S., Warren, S. S., Meriggi, N. F., Scacco, A., McMurry, N., Voors, M., et al. (2021). COVID-19 vaccine acceptance and hesitancy in low- and middle-income countries. *Nat. Med.* 27, 1385–1394. doi: 10.1038/s41591-021-01454-y
- Swire-Thompson, B., and Lazer, D. (2020). Public health and online misinformation: challenges and recommendations. *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 41, 433–451. doi: 10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040119-094127
- Telenti, A., Arvin, A., Corey, L., Corti, D., Diamond, M. S., Garcia-Sastre, A., et al. (2021). After the pandemic: perspectives on the future trajectory of COVID-19. *Nature* 596, 495–504. doi: 10.1038/s41586-021-03792-w

van der Linden, S. (2022). Misinformation: susceptibility, spread, and interventions to immunize the public. *Nat. Med.* 28, 460–467. doi: 10.1038/s41591-022-01713-6

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 De Angelis, Farhart, Merkley and Stecula. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.