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FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

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Disinformation on messenger services

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Executive Summary

In Germany disinformation, or fake news has often been perceived and discussed as a threat to election campaigns – be it the 2017 federal election or the 2019 European elections. It has frequently been portrayed as an external problem, with little attention paid to disinformation stemming from within Germany. Social media companies including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were called upon to combat the spread of disinformation.

The novel coronavirus, which has ravaged the world since early 2020, revealed that disinformation exists outside of politics to an alarming degree and is increasingly spread via messenger services such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Two voice messages that spread disinformation about COVID-19 went viral in Germany and were shared so often that the German government eventually had to take action.

These problems are not limited to Germany: the World Health Organization now speaks of an infodemic surrounding COVID-19 and social media platforms have started taking aggressive measures to combat the rise of mis- and disinformation, removing false or misleading information on a scale not seen hitherto.

This paper was written at the start of the pandemic and will thus not take the latest events and findings into account. It will attempt to outline current findings regarding the spread of disinformation using messenger services in Germany, as well as India and Brazil – two countries that have had to deal extensively with the issue.

In order to assess the scope of the problem, it is vital that we use accurate terminology. The term ‚fake news‘ is not suited to this discussion due to its ambiguity. This paper is concerned with information that is either inaccurate (‚fake‘) or disinformation. Inaccurate information is often a result of poor research or a misunderstanding and does not necessarily imply malicious intent. Disinformation on the other hand is intentional, often designed to defame public figures or polarise and destabilise societies. Using the term ‚fake news‘ to both discredit assertions by political opponents, and for a ‚state’s information ‚campaign‘ in a foreign country isn’t just damaging to democratic discourse, it also prevents us from understanding the insidious influence of strategic disinformation campaigns. It is not enough to distinguish between mis- and disinformation; the current state of ‚information disorder‘ demands that we consider the various facets of information, as well as the mechanisms by which it’s spread.

Both in India and Brazil, disinformation shared via messenger services – especially WhatsApp – has

caused significant disorder. In India, the messenger service plays a key role in the spread of messages that have resulted in mob violence and lynchings. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro and his allies use WhatsApp to circulate disinformation, discredit political opponents and silence critics. Facebook, which owns WhatsApp, has made technical changes to the service designed to stop the spread of disinformation, with limited success.

Recognising that solutions which focus exclusively on technological aspects do not look promising, is critical. Several studies analysed in this paper show that messenger services facilitate and exacerbate the spread of disinformation. Any solution must make allowances for the complexity with which information spreads. The case studies show that a lack of trust in government is a key factor in the proliferation of disinformation, as is an increase in nationalism and its epiphenomena, including racism, sexism and anti-semitism. Additionally, a general loss of trust in journalism poses a problem.

The infodemic surrounding the novel coronavirus highlights the urgency of the topic. A nuanced and comprehensive discourse on disinformation is crucial, and it is no longer adequate to discuss disinformation as a problem predominantly concerning social media platforms and politics. Addressing the issue can only be achieved by a society as a whole: we need broad social discourse and cannot outsource the solution to social media companies alone.

This paper includes six recommendations designed to provide guidelines for political decisions and as a basis for further discourse:

1. Clear and accurate terminology is a requirement for any solution to the issue. ‚Fake news‘ – though enjoying widespread use – is not clearly defined and therefore not suited to this discussion. Differentiating various forms of mis- and disinformation, the intent of individual actors, as well as the dissemination of information has been neglected thus far and needs to be addressed.
2. Foreign policy should actively address disinformation campaigns. When governments promote or tolerate disinformation campaigns that leads to disorder, it needs to be condemned on the international stage. When developing global internet governance, combatting disinformation has to be considered, meaning that social media platforms have to be held to greater account by politicians. For both official regulation and self-regulation, human rights must be adhered to.

3. Disinformation By Design: messenger services need to review the extent to which they can contain the spread of disinformation and provide greater transparency and accountability. Restrictions on mass-forwarding of messages and prominently displaying information from credible sources – which has been implemented by some platforms – is a good place to start.

4. Misinformation and disinformation are often not punishable by law. As such, regulation has to target other areas. The discussion should focus on what good regulation looks like, rather than how much regulation is necessary, which requires better research. Enforcement of privacy laws, as well as reforming and enforcing anti-trust legislation, could be useful tools during this process.

5. Trust in the media is declining worldwide; an increasingly digital economy and decreasing press freedoms are challenges the media industry currently faces. Financial models that promote local journalism must be established and encouraged. An approach to discussing disinformation without inadvertently spreading needs to be developed.

6. Disinformation is an issue that affects the whole of society. A federal agency responsible for digital education could provide information to schools and higher education programmes. Combating disinformation requires an informed public, aware of the channels of distribution and the intent and consequences of disinformation campaigns. People are susceptible to disinformation regardless of their educational level; nonetheless, further education is essential.

Introduction

Disinformation is not a phenomenon of the digital age. It has long been used to damage political opponents, destabilise societies and legitimise regimes. However, digital technologies facilitate the rapid spread of disinformation, since anyone can easily distribute disinformation – even without intending to. Declining trust in the media and governments contribute to these developments. Disinformation and the threat it poses are fast becoming part of the political agenda; heated debates around the consequences of disinformation on societies, as well as the dangers of ‘information warfare’ are commonplace. The use of messenger services to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation has not been in the public eye in Germany so far. The recent discovery of far-right extremists on these platforms, as well as the pandemic, have shed some light on these practices.

The many facets of disinformation have to be examined in greater detail. The issue is of enormous importance for domestic security, as well as for social cohesion and cooperation. The impact of disinformation outside of

politics is often side-lined, despite the tremendous risks: huge amounts of disinformation concerning the coronavirus has been circulating worldwide since early 2020, including false studies, alleged self-testing and ineffective preventative measures. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes it as an infodemic, which carries a significant health risk¹.

By 2022 three billion people are expected to use messenger services worldwide², with many lacking the media literacy necessary for the digital age. Not only is the way in which we communicate changing rapidly, but also how we consume media and news. Reading newspapers, watching the news together or talking on the phone is shifting to closed-off forms of communication and news consumption. Our societies will need to adapt: what shared experiences and knowledge concerning the spread of disinformation exist on a global level? Has the complexity of the issue been adequately discussed in public to date? What approaches might contribute to an enlightened and resilient society?

Awareness and Complexity – definition of terms

When discussing disinformation, the term ‘fake news’ is frequently invoked. It is inadequate to describe the

breadth of information sharing practices that result in inaccurate or manipulative information. ‘Fake news’ is

¹ Cf. Richtel 2020.

² Cf. Statista 2019b.

frequently used by politicians around the world to discredit unfavourable reporting, thus becoming a tool for circumventing and undermining a free press. As such, it should be avoided in discussions of disinformation.

Understanding and discussing the effects of disinformation requires a definition of the types, phases and elements of information that comprise the current information disorder³. The following framework references the extensive work of Dr Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakshan⁴.

The Three Types of Information Disorder

The term ‚fake news‘ is often used to lump together three types of information disorder which we will distinguish as follows:

- ‚Misinformation‘: information that is inaccurate but was not created with malicious intent. This can also include satire if it is not recognised as such by the interpreter and is shared in the belief that it contains true facts.
- ‚Disinformation‘: information that is false and was created to harm a person, group, organisation or state. This includes decontextualising true information to intentionally cause harm.
- ‚Mal-information‘: information that is correct but is used to cause harm. For example, publishing private chats or data, so called ‚doxing‘.

The Three Elements of Information Disorder

- The agent: who produced and/or distributed the information, and what was their motive? An agent

can refer to the mastermind of a disinformation campaign or a supporter of the campaign that spreads it. Sometimes they are one and the same. People who unwittingly spread disinformation because they believe it to be true are also considered agents. The role of an agent can be split amongst several people.

- The content: what format is used? What are its characteristics?
- The interpreter: how is the content interpreted by the person that received it? Did they react, and if so, how?

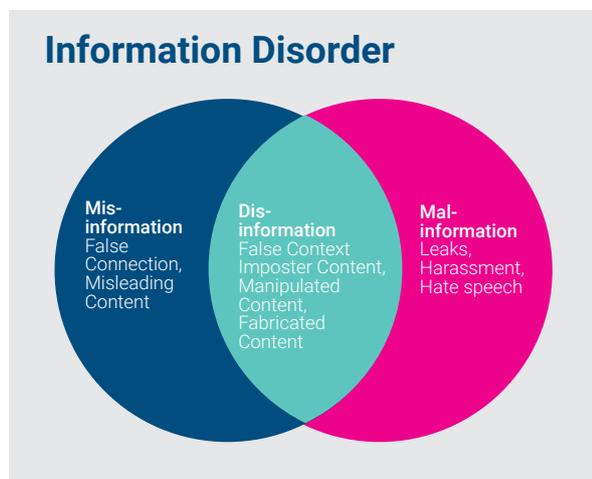
The Three Phases of Information Disorder

- Creation: the information is created.
- Production: the information is turned into news.
- Distribution: the information is released, published or spread.

Wardle and Derakshan state that it is important to bear in mind that the agent responsible for creating information is often different from the agent distributing it. As such, the motivations of a mastermind behind a state-funded disinformation campaign are often different from those of a troll spreading disinformation. Once created, information can be altered and recreated in a different format, sometimes leading to a change of distribution channels. The interpretation by the agent and the recipient can change as a consequence. The creation, production and distribution of disinformation is a complex process that should not be viewed as clearly delineated; it can evolve over time, meaning that roles and functions can be ambiguous. Because it includes anyone who unintentionally shares disinformation, which includes debunking and ridicule or satire, the process is further obscured. Wardle and Derakshan illustrate this with the alleged support of Donald Trump by Pope Francis in 2016.

To understand and develop solutions for the phenomenon of disinformation it is crucial to keep this complexity in mind. Someone may share mis- or disinformation because they find it funny. However, the recipient may take it at face value and indignantly spread it. Some agents may not have malicious intentions and be unaware they are spreading disinformation, assuming the information to be true. In this case, the intent to manipulate is the creator's.

To understand the (unwitting) motives for spreading disinformation, media consumption and the psychological effects of sharing information must be considered.

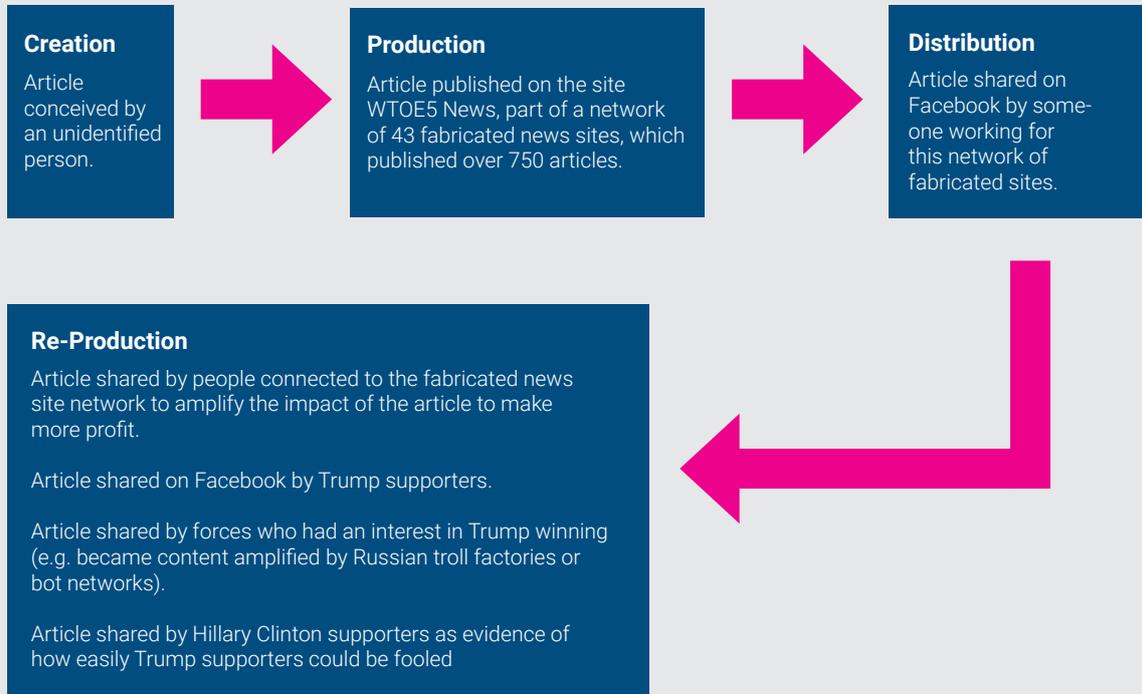


Source: "Information Disorder", Wardle and Derakshan

³ Cf. Wardle 2019.

⁴ Cf. Wardle and Derakshan 2017.

Example of the alleged support of Donald Trump by Pope Francis in the presidential election campaign 2016



Source: "Information Disorder", Wardle and Derakhshan

Media Consumption and Psychological Effects

Compared to today, consuming news and media used to be a social event – news would be watched together on TV, possibly discussed, and a shared reality existed. Newspapers and radio may have different perspectives on events but could not – and still cannot – be contained in a filter bubble. The content of a newspaper or radio show stays the same, independent of who consumes it. In today's media landscape, information can be targeted to specific groups on social networks. Paid advertising can be used to decide what content users see – and which they don't. Target groups can be set according to their gender, age, political views and where they live. Facebook now allows users to see which advertisements an operator has paid for. However, this requires the user to be aware that targeting exists and to visit the page transparency section. The sheer volume of information, its rapid spread and targeting damages a sense of shared reality.

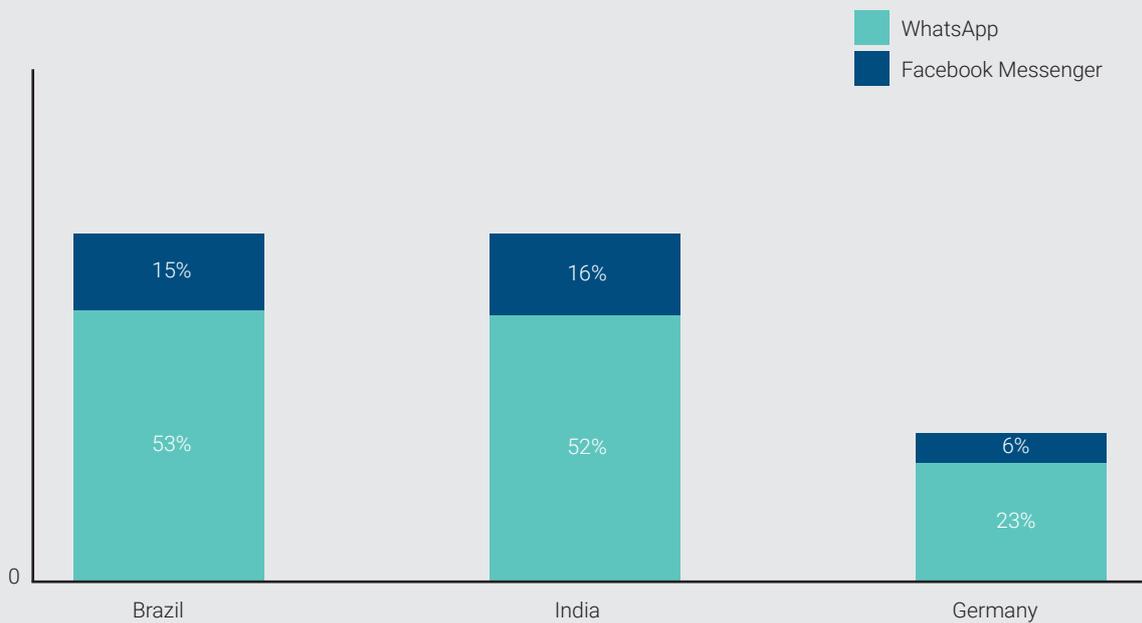
Additionally, news consumption via messenger services is increasing, signalling a shift towards one-on-one discussions or closed groups. In Brazil, 53 percent of the population get their news through WhatsApp and 15 percent through Facebook Messenger. Facebook, with 54 percent is narrowly hanging onto its lead⁵. In India, 52 percent of people get their news through WhatsApp – meaning the messenger service is on par with its parent company Facebook, while 16 percent use Facebook Messenger to get their news⁶. Compare this to Germany, where 23 percent of people get their news through WhatsApp, 31 percent through Facebook and 16 percent from Facebook Messenger⁷. However, it must be noted that people do not tend to consume news from a single source, getting their information from a variety of channels.

⁵ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

⁶ Cf. Aneez et al. 2019.

⁷ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

News consumption via messenger services



Multiple answers were possible

Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2019

The psychology of communication is just as important as media consumption habits. Because communication is more than a simple exchange of information, the researcher James Carey believes a closer look at the ritual meaning of communication is necessary. Communication plays a fundamental role in creating shared ideas⁸: a person's perception of themselves and the social groups they identify with significantly influence the interpretation of different types of information. We signal which social groups we identify with by sharing, liking and commenting – a mechanism strengthened by social media platforms.

The sociologist Michel Maffesoli stated in his 1996 book, 'The Time of the Tribes' that in order to understand a person's behaviour, we must take into account the various groups that a person may temporarily identify with throughout the course of their day. Wardle and Derakshan argue that this describes and explains the online behaviour of users today, including why and how information is posted and shared. This tribal mentality explains why so many people share misinformation and disinformation online – despite having doubts about its accuracy; the predominant motivation being to signal which groups they belong to.

To make matters worse, misinformation and disinformation often elicit feelings of superiority, anger or fear,

increasing the likelihood of being shared. A shared emotional response increases the cohesion of a group, which explains why emotionally charged content is more likely to be shared, liked and commented on across all social media platforms. Disinformation often intends to widen societal divides, using an us vs. them narrative, be it between political opponents, or ethnic, religious or economic groups and ideas.

The rapid spread of disinformation is a problem that fact-checking alone cannot counter. It takes a lot longer to debunk than to create false information. People who share mis- and disinformation may not see a correction in a timely manner, or at all. It is also doubtful whether an attitude based on an emotional response can be changed by confrontation with the facts. Wardle and Derakshan therefore proceed on the assumption that facts alone cannot be the solution. While facts address reasoning, disinformation triggers emotions – which are processed differently by the brain. We may be able to use social psychology as a tool, by developing mechanisms through which sharing mis- and disinformation becomes embarrassing in a social group.

According to Alexander Ritzmann we're more likely to believe our own group and tribal thinking or the identification with a group – which can be as diverse as religion, political party or football club – largely determines what

⁸ Cf. Carey, J. (1989), *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, London: Routledge. p.16 based on Wardle and Derakshan 2017.

we believe to be true. Disinformation often speaks to values that cannot be changed by facts⁹. Someone who believes some nations to be better than others, that

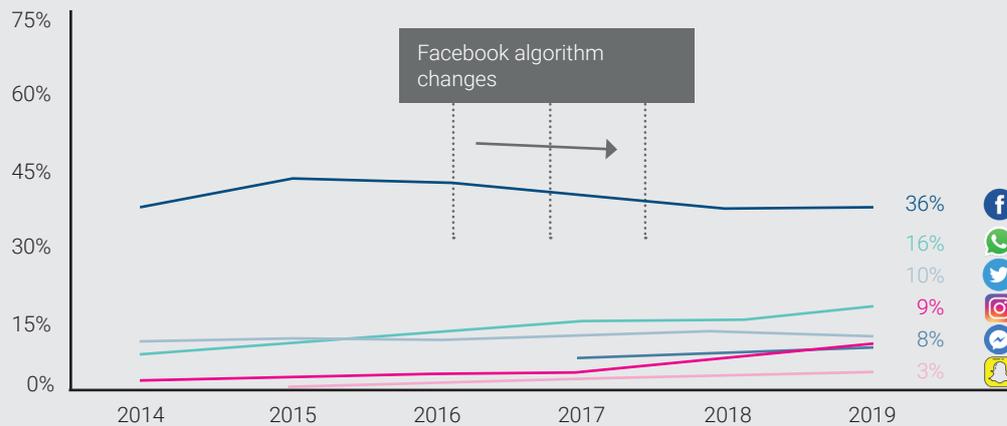
men are superior to women or that abortions should be banned is unlikely to be convinced by facts. Changing someone's values is a lengthy and complex process.

Social Media and messaging

Weekly use for any purpose



Weekly use for news



People were interviewed in Australia (from 2015) Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland (from 2015), Italy, Japan, Spain and USA.

Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2019

Images as a way of spreading disinformation memorably

The format of disinformation is rarely talked about in this context. However, discussion of the format is crucial for assessing how quickly and sustainably disinformation influences people, as well as for effective me-

thods of combatting it – including the use of automated systems. Currently, the discourse often assumes that disinformation is primarily textual in the form of fabricated news. Recent studies depict a different image:

⁹ Cf. Ritzmann 2018.

The Brazilian Comprova project – a coalition of newsrooms and journalists – studied the proliferation of information via messenger services prior to the last presidential election. Comprova debunked mis- and disinformation, fact-checked and verified information and analysed message formats. They found a majority of messages included pictures aligned to a political position. Just as popular were official documents taken out of context and screenshots of digital conversations both real and fake. While the data contained few memes, Comprova assumes memes weren't taken seriously and thus not submitted for review¹⁰, despite the fact that memes especially distribute propaganda through humour¹¹. Propaganda is (unwittingly) proliferated through memes by ridiculing an opponent, often presenting racist, sexist, anti-Semitic or other stereotypes as funny. Another method misquotes people depicted in memes. Videos were the second most common format, with voice messages making up the smallest percentage¹².

Text recognition software can be used to highlight or even delete inaccurate information in articles or texts. Links to websites allow the recipient to review the website¹³, and potentially recognise disinformation for what it is. When presented with images, videos or voice messages, this process becomes difficult – if not impossible. Manipulated audio or video recordings, so-called deep fakes, obscure the truth of a message further.

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, photography and TV programmes were used to show that human perception of text and images is fundamentally different. The brain can process images significantly faster than text. Our ability to critically review content is significantly lower for moving and still images. For instance, memes are generally received as humorous, rather than manipulative or politically motivated. Memes played a significant role in the 2016 US presidential election. Anti-Clinton memes were often tested on websites like 4Chan. Those that garnered the best response would be published on Reddit in the pro-Trump forum 'The Donald'. Some were picked up by the Trump campaign and shared via better-known and widely used social media networks¹⁴. Because Facebook's newsfeed algorithm favours images and videos over links, memes and other images or videos have significantly greater reach through Facebook. Memes, pictures and video can be shared from the newsfeed via Facebook Messenger and as a link or screenshot via other messenger services like WhatsApp.

The non-governmental organisation First Draft supported projects that debunked disinformation during the 2017 French and UK elections. They found that still and moving images, including infographics and memes, accounted for the largest percentage of shared disinformation and were the hardest to disprove. However, as opposed to the 2016 US election, no websites posing as news organisations with purely fictitious 'news' were found¹⁵.

Messenger services – an overview

Over the past decade, messenger services have rapidly grown in popularity and user base. When comparing social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Messenger, WhatsApp is the world's third-largest platform and the most widely used messenger service after Facebook and YouTube. It is closely followed by Facebook Messenger and WeChat, which is predominantly used in China but is growing in popularity elsewhere. Private messages can be sent on many other social networks like Instagram. Facebook, which owns WhatsApp and Instagram, encourages the push toward private communication on all its platforms. In doing so the company is following calls for more privacy – an issue it has frequently been criticised for – but is committing a grave error by confusing private with privacy. Perhaps more nefariously, the move to private communication allows Facebook to absolve itself of responsibility for disinformation and hate

speech on its platform due to encryption of private messages. Encrypted messages cannot be viewed by Facebook, meaning it can claim to be powerless to take action.

According to the latest figures published in 2018, the messenger service Telegram has 200 million users worldwide¹⁶. The Swiss messenger service Threema has five million as of 2018¹⁷. Discord, which is a messenger service popular amongst gamers, has 250 million user accounts worldwide¹⁸. Messages sent via WhatsApp, Threema, Signal and Wire are end-to-end encrypted by default. Telegram and Facebook Messenger offer encryption which has to be enabled by enabling a 'secret chat' function. Discord, WeChat and the direct message feature of Instagram do not have end-to-end encryption, meaning content can easily be viewed by the platforms and third parties.

¹⁰ Wardle et al. 2019.

¹¹ Cf. Ascott 2020.

¹² Cf. Wardle et al. 2019.

¹³ For example, whether there is a legal notice, a mentioned author and by analysing other articles or information present on the site.

¹⁴ More on this subject, among others, from Moore 2018.

¹⁵ Cf. Wardle and Derakhshan 2017.

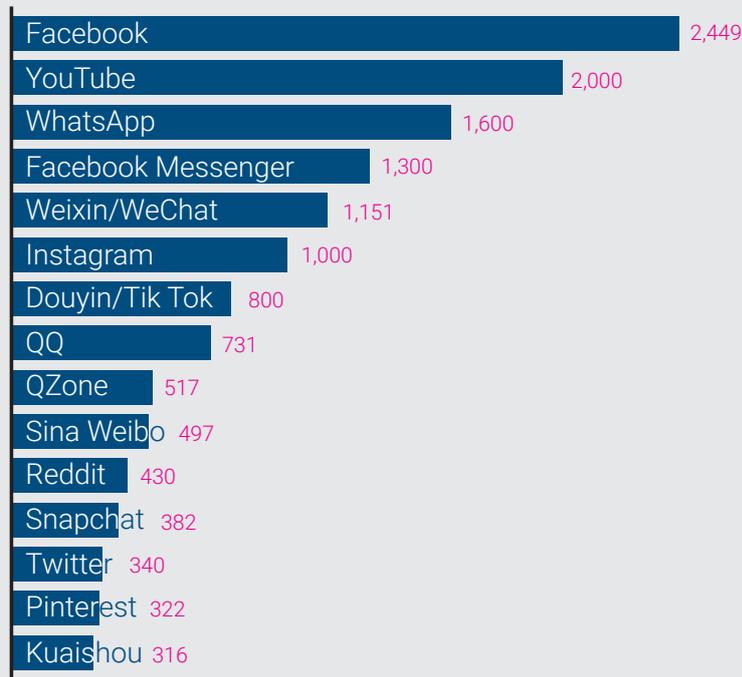
¹⁶ Cf. Statista 2018.

¹⁷ Cf. Statista 2020.

¹⁸ Cf. Black 2019.

The largest social networks and messengers (in January 2020)

Monthly active users in millions



Source: statista

Disinformation on messenger services worldwide. A study of Germany, India and Brazil

German case study

Infrastructure

To understand and compare both the effects and the spread of disinformation through messenger services worldwide, it is necessary to consider the broadband and mobile coverage of individual countries, as well as economic factors such as the cost of internet. Germany's mobile coverage and 4G expansion is mediocre, especially in rural areas¹⁹, and the mobile data prices are amongst the highest in Europe²⁰. However, when the average net income is taken into account the costs are low, especially by international standards. Almost 50 percent of Germans pay less than 30 EUR and 23.08 percent pay less than 20 EUR a month for mobile contracts²¹. With an average net household income of 3,661 EUR²², 20 EUR is equivalent to about 0.5 percent of net household income.

Smartphone market saturation in Germany is only at around 79 percent²³.

News consumption

Germans primarily get their news from television. At 72 percent, TV is ahead of online sources – including social media – which makes up 68 percent. Over six years, the consumption of news in print media has almost halved, from 63 percent in 2013 to 34 percent in 2019. Social media as a first choice for news increased from 18 to 34 percent over the same period. The use of smartphones as the primary device for accessing news is steadily increasing but at 55 percent is still behind the computer, which sits at 56 percent. By international standards, trust in the media is in the top third of countries. However, the Relotius case²⁴ reduced trust by three percent on the previous year, according to the Reuters Digital News Report 2019.

¹⁹ Cf. Balsler 2019.

²⁰ Cf. Verivox 2018.

²¹ Cf. Statista 2018a.

²² Cf. Statistisches Bundesamt 2020.

²³ Cf. Initiative D21 2020.

²⁴ Cf. Yuhás 2018.

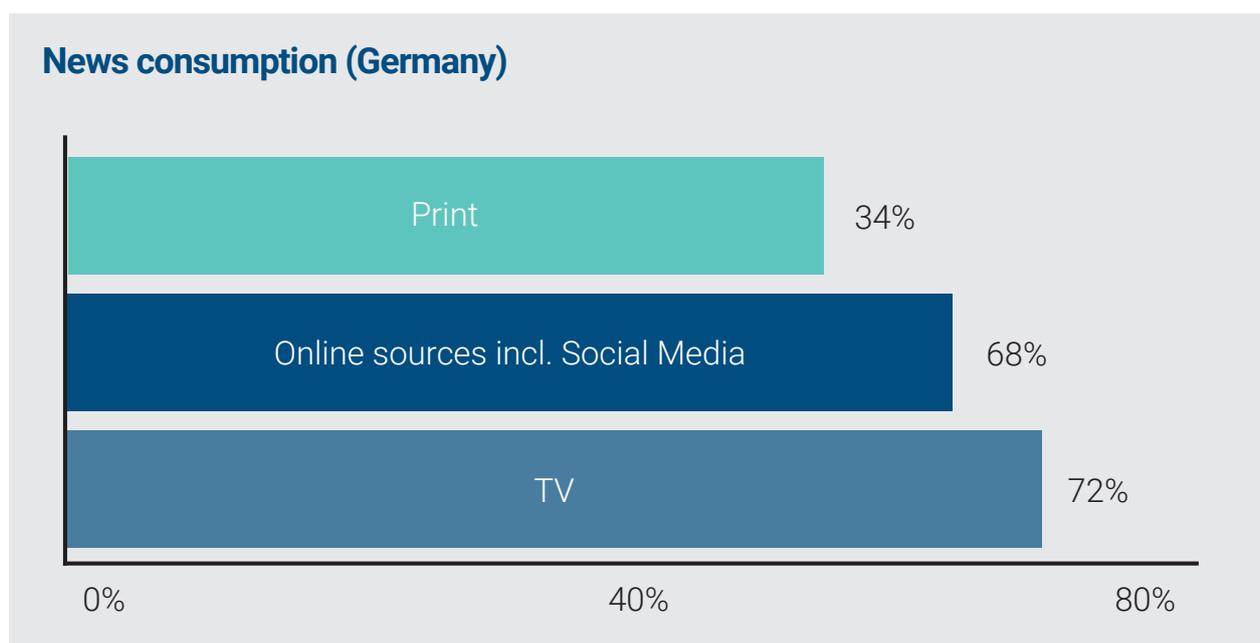
Mr Relotius was a reporter for the magazine ‚Der Spiegel‘ who fabricated articles. The highest trust levels are awarded to public broadcasters such as ARD, whose ‚Tagesschau‘ ranks higher than the comparative ‚ZDF heute‘ programme. Regional and local news follow just behind and then national newspapers like Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, or weekly magazines like Focus and Der Spiegel. By contrast, at only 16 percent, trust in news from social media in Germany is low. The picture is different for search engines, which 27 percent of Germans trust to provide their news. When we compare social media platforms through which news is consumed, Facebook has the largest share, with 22 percent. YouTube added four percent on the previous year and is in second place at 19 percent, with WhatsApp increasing by two percent to 16 percent. At four percent Facebook Messenger is almost irrelevant when it comes to news consumption in Germany. According to Reuters Report, 22 percent of Germans share news via social media platforms and just 14 percent comment on news²⁵.

Disinformation in German elections

Considering the breadth of disinformation created by domestic and foreign actors during the 2016 US presidential election, there was worry in Germany about disinformation in the run-up to the 2017 federal election. Part of the German Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG), which came into effect in October 2018, was initially intended to target fake news, as described in the introduction of the draft bill²⁶. However, this term was soon removed when it became apparent that false news and disinformation are not usually illegal, rend-

ering any possible intervention by law enforcement a moot point. A suspicion that automated accounts may be used to interfere in the election led to hearings on social bots in the German parliament. The Office of Technology Assessment for the German parliament reached the conclusion that social bots were not a threat²⁷.

Alexander Sangerlaub, Miriam Meier and Wolf-Dieter Ruhl looked at whether and how disinformation may have been spread in the run-up to the 2017 federal election²⁸. In a comprehensive study, they were able to show how misinformation and disinformation was spread via social media networks in Germany. Most were cases of mis- and disinformation where true statements were taken out of context, or statements not published in their entirety. The study showed that established media companies were also involved in the spread of mis- and disinformation. In one case, misinformation that spread rapidly originated from the German Press Agency (dpa). The dpa incorrectly used information from a police press release regarding a number of incidents at Schorndorf Volksfest festival. Based on a police report stating that 1,000 young people of mostly immigrant background had gathered in the Schlosspark, the dpa reported the following: „According to the police, up to 1,000 people gathered and rioted in the town’s Schlosspark on Saturday night. A large number of them came from immigrant backgrounds.“²⁹. The report was circulated through the online news channels of Stuttgarter Nachrichten, Welt and SWR, without the editors double-checking its veracity. The right-wing party AfD (Alternative fur Deutschland) used the report for political purposes.



²⁵ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

²⁶ Cf. Bundesministerium der Justiz und fur Verbraucherschutz 2017.

²⁷ Cf. Kind et al. 2017.

²⁸ Cf. Sangerlaub, Meier, and Ruhl 2018.

²⁹ quoted in *ibid*.

Wann es Zeit ist, AfD zu wählen?

Wenn selbst aus dem Dorffest eine islamische Grapschparty wird!

Jetzt diskutieren und teilen!

TRAU DICH DEUTSCHLAND!

Alternative für Deutschland

Facebook posting of the AfD from 07/16/2017

+++AfD unterstützen: Beitrag teilen!+++
Wenn nun, wie in Schorndorf geschehen, selbst kleine Volksteste zu großen islamischen Grapschpartys derer werden, die noch nicht so lange hier leben, dann muss die etablierte Politik endlich den Rückwärtsgang einlegen! Die Politik von CDU, SPD, Grünen, Linken und der sich beispielsweise in Rheinland-Pfalz der rot-grünen Landesregierung anbietenden FDP ist ... See More

and 5,018 others like this.

3,732 Shares 402 Comments

View previous comments

Gegen 6 Personen wird ermittelt, davon 2 mit Migrationshintergrund! Informieren hilft, auch bei politischen Irrwegen...
July 21, 2017 at 7:38am

Marc Magg
Timo Lala... See More
July 21, 2017 at 3:08pm

Deutsche Politiker unter dem Dach der offenen Türpolitik oder Ausnutzung von Großzügigkeit, Naivität und herzlicher deutscher Bevölkerung, um Flüchtlinge, Immigranten, Asylsuchende zu importieren, die den Schein der Drittländern sind, um die deutsche Z... See More
July 23, 2017 at 8:45am

Und sowas darf Politik machen? Sindma im Kasperltheater oder was?
August 30, 2017 at 1:44pm

The study concluded there was no major presence of disinformation during the campaign and no pre-election disinformation campaigns. The spread of the case studies reviewed was manageable, provided that established media outlets were not involved in dissemination. The authors concluded that most mis- and disinformation centred around the topics of refugees and immigrants and was mostly picked up by the AfD. Because their voters lack trust in established media outlets, their primary source of news are social media platforms and right-wing populist media outlets such as the Epoch Times. A survey was also able to show that voters believe in mis- and disinformation when it confirms their world-view.

Through extensive research, journalist Karsten Schmehl showed that manipulative campaigns on Twitter were not carried out by social bots but through coordinated action by people; so-called trolls³⁰. During a TV election debate, several hundred people who belong to the right end of the political spectrum tweeted under the hashtags #Kanzlerduell and #Verräterduell (#ElectionDebate and #TraitorDebate respectively). This group had previously developed a number of memes on 4Chan forums with the intent of influencing the federal election. The campaign was organised and coordinated via the messenger service Discord, which included links to tweets from individual trolls on their numerous Twitter accounts. The plan was for others to like and retweet them in order to expand their reach and get the hashtag #Verräterduell to

trend in Germany. When they failed to achieve their goal, a decision was made to refocus their efforts on YouTube.

Messenger services in political communication

The 'messengerisation' of communication, a term coined by political advisor Martin Fuchs, is currently a marginal phenomenon in German political communication. While WhatsApp and others were used by parties in the 2017 federal election, the focus was on traditional platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) both ran dedicated channels on messenger services, which were primarily used to provide party members with the latest information. On election day, parties used WhatsApp to encourage people to vote – sometimes with pre-made messages³¹. There is no information that supports the notion that large-scale mis- or disinformation was shared through messenger services during the election. To date, there hasn't been a thorough review of how Germans use groups on messenger services. For instance, in the chapter on groups in the 2019 Reuters Digital News Report, Germany isn't discussed in relation to news consumption through messenger services. Neither does the country report on Germany mention groups, so we can assume that (large) groups, especially those that include people outside one's social circle have so far not had a measurable impact on political communication and news consumption in Germany.

³⁰ Cf. Schmehl 2017.

³¹ Cf. Voigt and Seidenglanz 2017.

The increasing importance of groups on messenger services can be analysed by studying their use by right-wing radicals. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation has studied the phenomenon in detail³². Right-wing networks on messenger services, sometimes referred to as dark social, received more press attention following the right-wing terrorist attacks in Halle and Hanau.

One of the largest and well-known German-speaking right-wing groups was created by the Identitarian movement figurehead Martin Sellner. After being blocked on Facebook and Instagram, the group moved to the messenger service Telegram – in part due to calls from the American Neo-Nazi website ‚Daily Stormer‘. While WhatsApp groups are limited to 256 subscribers, Telegram groups can include up to 200,000. Telegram channels can be subscribed to by an unlimited number of people. Telegram, which relocated its headquarters from Russia to Dubai, has said it will disclose IP addresses and phone numbers on court orders. Nonetheless, the messenger service currently seems the preferred option for sharing radical right-wing content – and similarly radical Islamist content – possibly because it expands the reach to people not on boards like 4Chan. Sharing radical right-wing

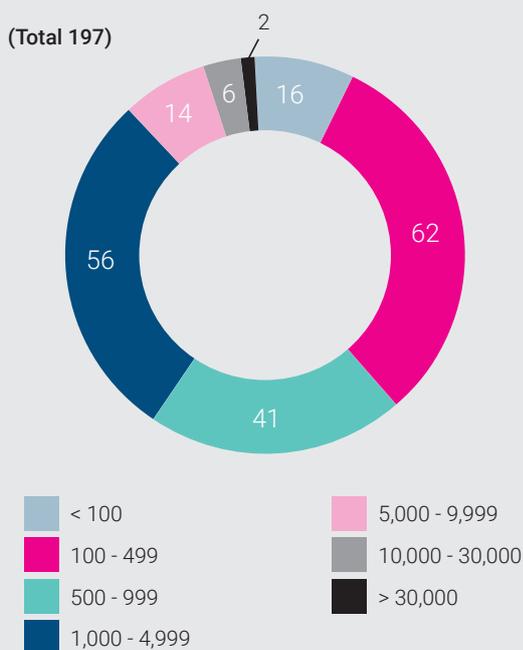
content can thus become normalised and a part of everyday communication.

According to the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, Martin Sellner’s Telegram channel had 39,000 subscribers in September 2019. He largely uses the channel to share links to his YouTube videos, memes or third-party videos and encourages people to establish local groups for networking. Unlike WhatsApp which requires a user’s phone number, Telegram includes a feature to show other users in the area and add them to groups. According to the study, radical right-wing groups, in particular, make use of this feature.

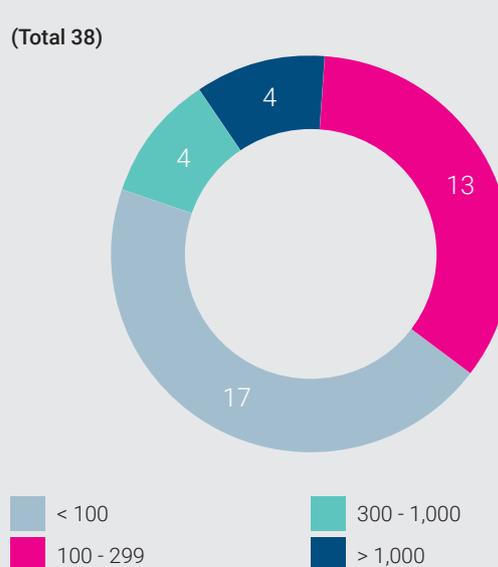
The Amadeu Antonio Foundation analysed 197 Telegram channels and 38 radical right-wing groups. Analysis of the content showed that the channels are primarily used as news aggregators, but also as a space for the community of YouTubers. The biggest motivation for using these channels is to network with other radical right-wingers, presumably because it creates a safe space for them to exchange ideas. The radical right-wing prepper networks’ Nord-/Ost-/Süd-/Westkreuz and ‚Revolution Chemnitz‘ planned and coordinated attacks using the channels.

Investigated Telegram channels/groups of right-wing radicals in Germany

Size distribution of the evaluated telegram channels



Size distribution of the evaluated telegram groups



Source: https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Monitoring_2020_web.pdf (Page 17)

³² Cf. Dittrich et al. 2020.

Indian case study

Infrastructure

To understand the online spread of mis- and disinformation and its implications for society in India, we first need to look at why and how the use of WhatsApp became so widespread in India. India is a country with a relatively low literacy rate (66 percent for women, 82 percent for men as of 2018³³). Sending voice messages and images via messenger services such as WhatsApp thus enables new forms of communication for many people. Decreasing mobile data prices have contributed to the use of these formats.

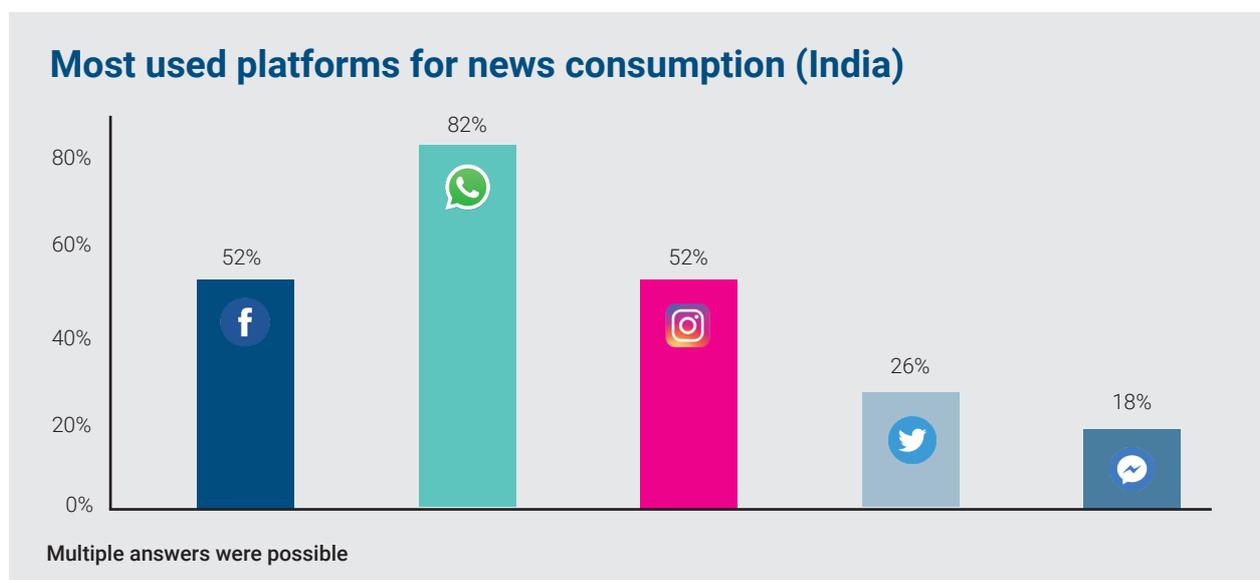
Mobile phone use has been on the increase in India since 2003, and particularly the use of smartphones has risen sharply since 2013. The high tariffs of mobile internet were due to the structure of the telecommunications market and the high costs of 3G and 4G licenses. Network expansion largely focussed on urban areas. Even today, rural areas often only have 2G coverage, which is adequate for text messaging. The provider Jio, which is owned by India's largest private company, Reliance Industries, entered the market in 2016. The prevalence of Jio phones in India is in part due to the company's skirting of antitrust regulations, which was benevolently ignored by the government. For instance, towards the end of 2016, Jio was allowed to offer free phone calls and unlimited data for almost a year. This led to a restructuring of the telecommunications market and lower mobile data prices. Consequently, the telecommunications market in India is effectively an oligopoly, since other providers did not have the financial resources to burden the losses that Jio's offer created. In addition to significantly cheaper data, the cost of smartphones has also dropped by 16 percent over the last ten years³⁴.

News consumption

India is a mobile-first market – even for news, where the primary device is a smartphone and not a laptop or desktop computer, as is the case in many Western countries. According to a Reuters study of the Indian market, 68 percent³⁵ of English-speaking Indians primarily use their smartphone to access news online. The figures are significantly higher than in other comparable markets such as Turkey or Brazil. Of the 75 percent of English-speaking Indians who use Facebook, 52 percent get their news from it. 82 percent of English-speaking Indians use WhatsApp and of that 52 percent use the messenger for news. By contrast, news consumption through Instagram (26 percent), Twitter (18 percent) and Facebook Messenger (16 percent) is relatively low.

50 percent of those surveyed by Reuters share and/or comment on news – largely on Facebook or through WhatsApp. Almost as many (49 percent) were concerned that expressing their views publicly would change their friends' and families' opinion of them. 50 percent had the same concerns about the opinions of their colleagues and acquaintances. 55 percent are afraid that sharing their opinion may get them in trouble with authorities.

Trust in news is low – according to Reuters just 36 percent of English-speaking Indians consider news generally trustworthy. At 39 percent, this figure doesn't improve much for first-hand news. Interestingly, 45 percent trust news from a search engine and 34 percent trust news from social media. Political affiliation doesn't change how much trust is afforded to news, and is even lower for people who feel they don't belong to a party and don't place themselves on the political spectrum. 57 percent of those surveyed question whether the news they receive has been manipulated.

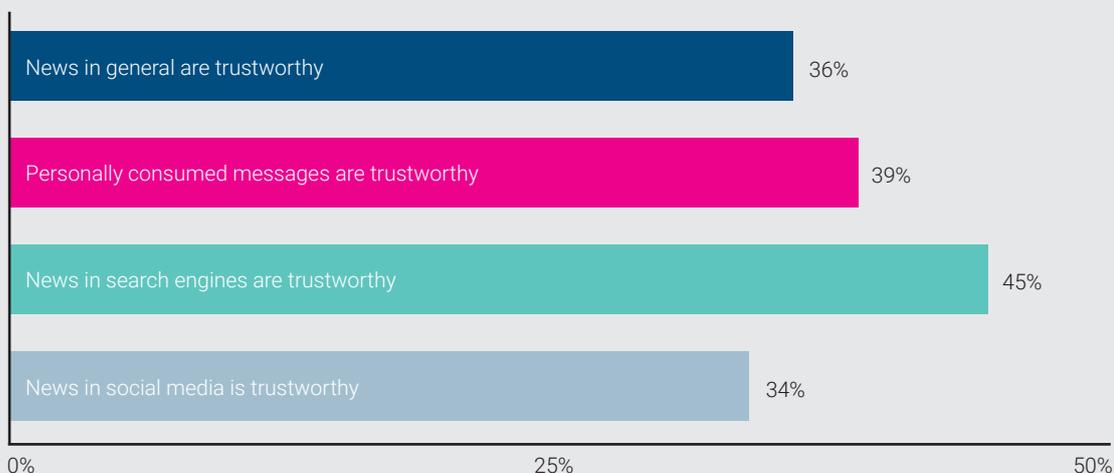


³³ Cf. Statista 2019a.

³⁴ Cf. Banaji and Bhat 2019.

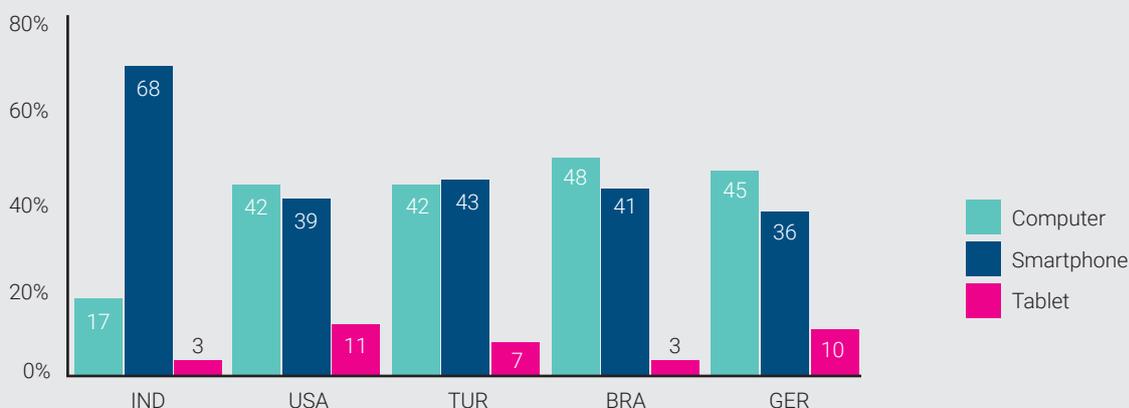
³⁵ Cf. Aneez et al. 2019.

Trust in news



Multiple answers were possible

Most-used terminals for news consumption



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2019

Dr Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat surveyed the non-English speaking population and analysed the spread of mis- and disinformation in India³⁶, where it has been responsible for physical assaults, rapes and lynchings. The two researchers and their team focussed on the sociological and political aspects of the spread of mis- and disinformation. They found that gender has a significant impact on the use of WhatsApp, as well as how content is shared via WhatsApp. There is a substantial difference between the genders in terms of access to smartphones,

private smartphone use, media literacy and the use of resources – from electricity to data. Women in India are disproportionately under threat of physical and virtual violence – increasingly so if they belong to a minority group including Muslim, Christian, Dalit or Adivasi.

The research team found the most likely culprits for spreading misinformation, disinformation and hate news to be young or middle-aged male, tech-savvy Hindus of the upper or middle castes. They are also

³⁶ Cf. Banaji and Bhat 2019.

the most likely to create and manage groups on WhatsApp where mis- and disinformation is spread. If someone is part of a low caste, Dalit, Muslim, a woman, lives in rural areas and less tech-savvy, they're significantly less likely to create or manage such groups.

Internet shutdowns by the Indian government, ostensibly to combat the spread of mis- and disinformation instead have the opposite effect. Limited access to news facilitates the spread of mis- and disinformation because it removes simple safeguards such as fact-checking information using a search engine. In 2019, the Indian internet was shut down 121 times. Venezuela, which takes second place for most internet shutdowns, managed just 12 shutdowns in the same period³⁷. Amongst the Indian internet shutdowns of 2019 is the longest ever recorded worldwide: 213 days.

Misinformation and disinformation in India

In India spreading mis- and disinformation is used to discredit certain groups, particularly affecting marginalised groups fighting for justice, equality and democratic processes. Mis- and disinformation is also employed to normalise and legitimise discrimination and to cement the positions of socially dominant groups. A connection between the emergence of mob violence and WhatsApp use is evident.

Mob attacks have predominantly occurred in states where the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power and 86 percent of the victims



Image disseminated on WhatsApp, which shows Nationalism and sexual violence combined. After the Suicide bombing in Pulawa, Kashmir, at the beginning of the year 2019, this picture was widely spread. The text on the picture can be translated roughly as "With an oath on your mother, direct the Keep-going-Victory for Hindustan!"

of mob violence are men. In Hinduism, cows are considered sacred and cannot be killed. Most attacks happen because of this edict. Another common reason is the spread of rumours concerning strangers kidnapping children and/or trafficking organs. There is a clear correlation between the caste and religion of both victims and attackers.

Messaging services have played at least one of three roles in acts of mob violence: 1. The spread of information about victims prior to the attacks. 2. The quick mobilisation of a lynch mob. 3. The spread of images and videos by the attackers or onlookers after the attacks.

The spread of imagery documenting the attacks often leads to further violence, fear and tension.

Banaji and Bhat identified five different categories for classifying the spread of mis- and disinformation in India: shocking content such as accidents, corpses, natural disasters and violence; nationalism and ethno-religious bigotry; religion; gender; and miscellaneous content – which includes content that did not incite violence but was shared by people whose content did at some point result in violence. The importance of the last category should not be underestimated. It creates a noise floor: everyday content such as animal videos, recipes or videos of children singing, which can trigger positive emotions in the members of a group and creates a sense of belonging.

The breadth of the effects of mis- and disinformation emerged from numerous interviews conducted as part of the study, including a decline in trust of traditional media. Interviewees believe that traditional media outlets deprive them of 'real news' with WhatsApp and other social networks seen as the only source for 'real news'. As a result of disinformation, militant nationalism is bolstered and indirect threats against challenging the hegemony of the ruling class are issued.

Using disinformation, a (Hindu) victim narrative was constructed, primarily based on conspiracy theories that vilify Muslims. An us vs. them narrative strengthens a sense of belonging for religious groups. Strongly gendered, pornographic, violent and voyeuristic content, is used to ridicule and discredit women and elicit general anxiety, fear of technology and self-censorship alongside causing depression, which can lead to suicide.

Banaji and Bhat explicitly state that WhatsApp and other social media platforms are not the cause of mob violence triggered by mis- and disinformation. Nevertheless, social media networks and especially

³⁷ Cf. Mohan 2020.

WhatsApp play a crucial role, enabling the rapid dissemination of content that incites mob violence. According to the authors, deep-rooted issues of inequality, prejudices of religion, caste and origin, as well as racism, misogyny and all forms of propaganda lie at the root of the problem and need to be eliminated. Regulating technology alone is not a solution; the previously mentioned internet shutdowns only exacerbate the problem.

Motivations for sharing mis- and disinformation

People often unwittingly share mis- and disinformation. As in other places, visual content is often viewed and shared uncritically in India. According to Banaji and Bhat, older people in particular are likely to believe and share information they receive from people in their community seen as trustworthy. It appears they see it as their duty to look after the community and alert others to threats, which may explain their behaviour. The social status of the initial person who sends a message plays an important role: the better their reputation, the more likely it is that untrustworthy information is taken seriously and spread.

People are keen to earn a reputation as respectable and trustworthy by being the first to acquire and share information about local events. They position themselves as amateur reporters who provide 'news' via WhatsApp. As a consequence of the race to be first, people often use existing imagery suggestive of depicting an incident when it, in fact, does not. A commonly expressed belief in the interviews held that television would not report on local incidents in order to cover them up. According to the authors, this reveals a need for more local journalism. Local journalists who know and understand the community would reduce the need for amateur reporters, who try to fulfil a need for local news but rarely work according to journalistic standards³⁸.

Brazilian case study

Infrastructure

Broadband is still very expensive in Brazil, accounting for up to 15 percent of a household's income. Flat rates, especially for mobile data, are virtually non-existent. The wide use of WhatsApp is made possible through 'zero ratings': providers offer their customers free data for certain services, in particular Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. The small data allowances result in limited access to websites where disinformation might be refuted, including news websites and news apps, provided the provider hasn't struck a zero rating deal with the news provider³⁹. Despite the comparatively high cost of internet access, 22 percent of Brazilians pay for online news

services. In comparison, just 8 percent of Germans pay for online news⁴⁰.

News consumption

76 percent of Brazilians use Facebook and of those, 54 percent use it to get their news. An impressive 84 percent are on WhatsApp, 53 percent of which use the messenger for news. 54 percent use Instagram, and 26 percent of those use it to get their news. 44 percent of Brazilians use Facebook Messenger, but only 15 percent of those use it for news. In Brazil the smartphone has also replaced the computer as the principal device for reading news online. 77 percent primarily use a smartphone, 55 percent use a computer and 11 percent use tablets. Online news services are very popular: 87 percent use online sources, including social media, while 73 percent get their news from TV. Print media's share dropped from 50 percent in 2013 to 27 percent in 2019. 64 percent of Brazilians get their news exclusively from social media and 58 percent share news stories via social media, messenger services or email. 36 percent comment on news online, either on social media or on news provider's websites. According to the Reuters study, out of the countries included in the study, Brazilians have the biggest concerns about mis- and disinformation⁴¹.

2018 presidential election

WhatsApp played a key role in the campaign of President Jair Bolsonaro. In addition to social media networks, the then-presidential candidate primarily used the messenger service for spreading propaganda. Even though his campaign broadcast only eight second of election advertising on TV per day, it was able to leverage messenger services to boost his campaign.

According to the 2019 Reuters Digital News Report, from 2018 to 2019, Brazilians trust in news decreased by 11 percent, down to 48 percent. The presidential election is linked to the decline because it strengthened polarisation of the left-wing and right-wing media and their respective candidates. In addition to WhatsApp, Bolsonaro relied heavily on Twitter and made several live appearances on Facebook. Journalists had to adapt their reporting as a consequence: to keep up to date they had to check whether Bolsonaro and his allies had made any social media appearances or announcements. Illustrating the point is the 'Bolsonaro's appointment of 14 of his 22 ministers through Twitter.

WhatsApp groups were heavily used by Bolsonaro's followers to spread propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. Brazil is the leading country when it comes to the use of groups on WhatsApp – both

³⁸ Cf. Banaji and Bhat 2019.

³⁹ Cf. Belli 2018.

⁴⁰ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

⁴¹ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

with people in one's social circle and strangers. 22 percent of Brazilians use groups on WhatsApp to get their news and to exchange political views, while 18 percent use Facebook's newsfeed. Only Turkey has a higher usage percentage of groups for political exchanges and news consumption. 58 percent of Brazilians who use groups debate news and politics with strangers, meaning they have no idea who they're talking to and whether the information they receive is reliable⁴².

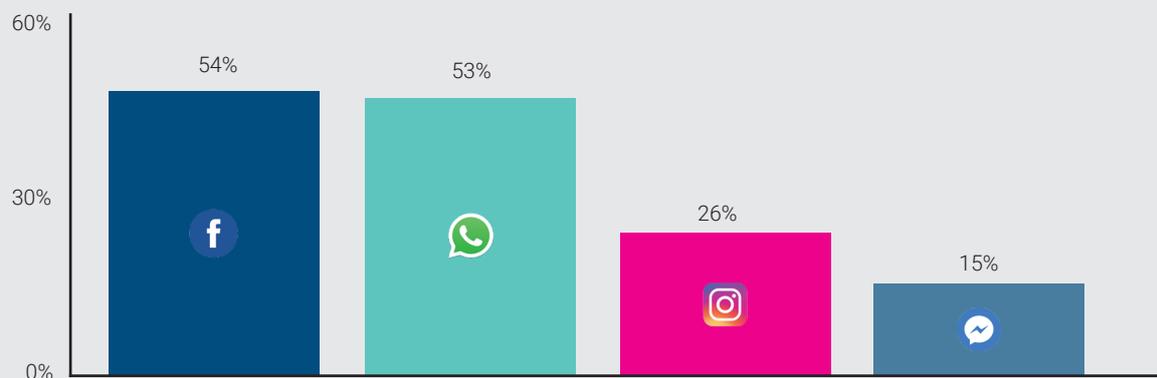
Participants in these groups can be organised into three categories: 'ordinary Brazilians', 'Bolsominions' and 'influencers'⁴³. The majority is made up of 'ordinary Brazilians', which includes people of all social classes and genders who are inclined to vote for Bolsonaro based on their life experiences and right-leaning or radical right-wing political affiliations. This group, in particular, distrusts traditional media outlets. WhatsApp groups are used by 'ordinary Brazilians' to get 'real' information that traditional media outlets supposedly want to keep quiet. The groups

reinforce the views of 'ordinary Brazilians' and provide information and memes designed to promote Bolsonaro or to help legitimise and spread their opinions to other social settings.

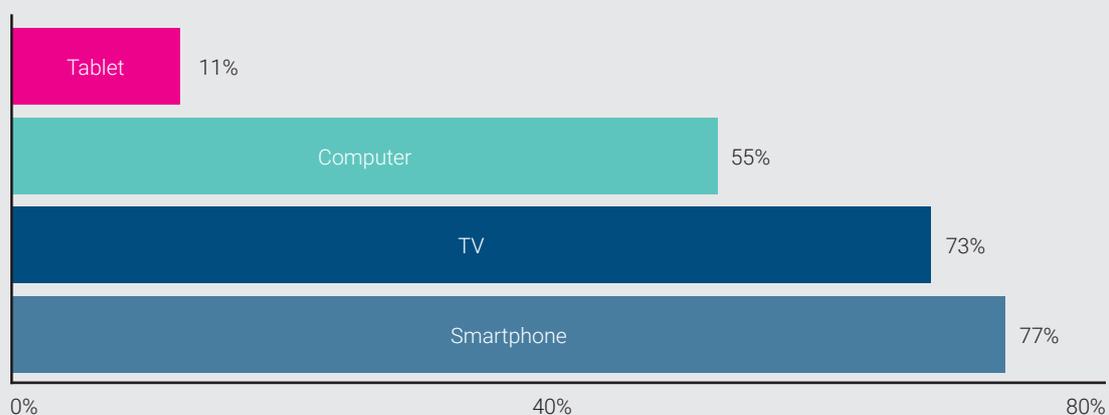
'Bolsominions' are Bolsonaro's loyal 'volunteer army'. They set up and manage the groups, banning critics and contrarian members. Questions about Bolsonaro failing to take part in television debates are said to have resulted in people being excluded from WhatsApp groups. Questions from ordinary members of a group led to a bombardment of arguments by Bolsominions based on false news.

'Influencers' make up around 5 percent of WhatsApp group members. They don't often participate, instead designing and producing content – primarily images and video – to be shared and distributed across groups and beyond. They are good at predicting which content will go viral and react to current events quickly – sometimes considerably faster than traditional media, which won't report on

Most used platforms for news (Brazil)



Most-used terminals for news consumption (Brazil)



Multiple answers were possible

Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2019

⁴² Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

⁴³ Cf. Nemer 2018.

news considered irrelevant. When Marine LePen, the head of the French radical right-wing party National Rally (formerly known as National Front) criticised Bolsonaro, she was called a communist and memes about the event quickly spread. In the first round of the election, videos purporting to show that election computers had been tampered with, and thus that the entire election was a fraud, were spread on social media channels. Links to Facebook posts and YouTube videos critical of Bolsonaro were shared through WhatsApp groups, resulting in a bombardment of negative comments and/or dislikes. Group and mass activism such as this is a global phenomenon – be it the supporters of the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte⁴⁴, the Russian Internet Research Agency (a ‘troll army’)⁴⁵, or the events surrounding the German TV election debate in 2018⁴⁶.

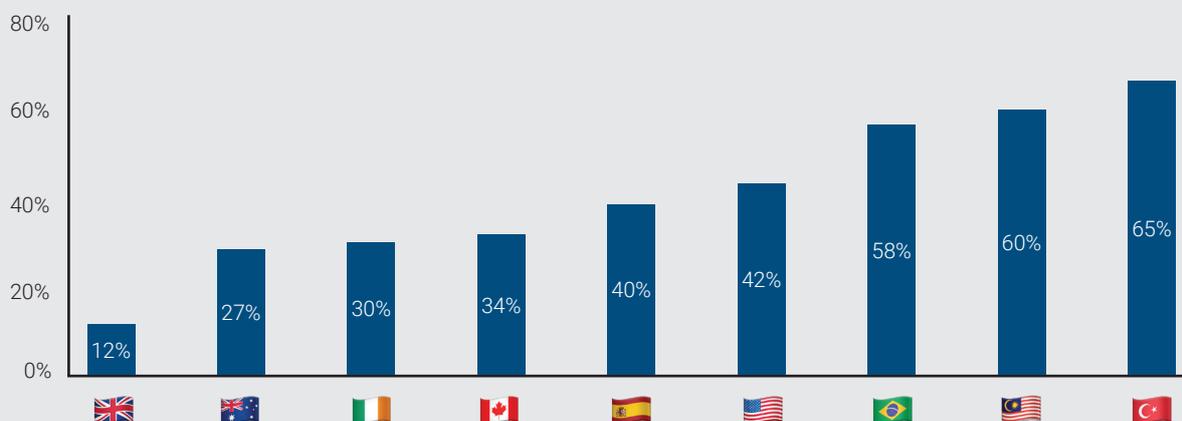
Spreading mis- and disinformation is not a uniquely right-wing phenomenon: Bolsonaro’s opponent, Fernando Haddad, and his supporters spread inaccurate or false information in WhatsApp groups and via other channels. After Bolsonaro was attacked with a knife at an event in September 2018 and subsequently hospitalised, his opponents spread images that showed him unharmed in hospital, implying the event was staged. The pictures were real and taken before the attack and as such had nothing to do with the attack⁴⁷.

There is, however, a quantitative difference between right-wing and left-wing mis- and disinformation. The analysis of several Brazilian political WhatsApp groups showed that the right-leaning part of the political spectrum shared significantly more multimedia content (46.5 percent) than its left-leaning counterpart (30 percent)⁴⁸.

Facebook/WhatsApp groups as message source

Country	Facebook Groups for news / politics	WhatsApp Groups for news / politics
 Turkey	29%	21%
 Brazil	22%	18%
 Malaysia	17%	15%
 USA	14%	10%
 Spain	13%	8%
 United Kingdom	8%	2%
 Ireland	7%	4%
 Canada	7%	8%
 Australia	7%	6%

Whatsapp users who are in groups whose members they do not know



Source: Reuters Digital News Report 2019

⁴⁴ Cf. Palatino 2017.

⁴⁵ Cf. Chen 2015.

⁴⁶ Cf. Schmehl 2017.

⁴⁷ Cf. Tardáguila, Benevenuto, and Ortellado 2018.

⁴⁸ Cf. Morris 2019.

The comparison of the three countries show that so far only Brazil and India have had – and still have – considerable problems with disinformation on messenger services. Timely, preventative measures can only be implemented in Germany if the issue is taken more seriously. It is reasonable to assume that in future, disinformation via messenger services will spread faster and with greater breadth, due in part to the growing proliferation of smartphones. Smartphones or the internet are not the root cause of disinformation campaigns, but changing behaviours regarding news and information consumption have to be addressed.

A problem in all three countries is the – sometimes sharp – decline of trust in the media. Solutions that restore this trust must be developed. This includes financial models for journalism in the digital age. News and information cannot be allowed to become a luxury item, available only to the few. The feeling that local events aren't being repor-

ted, or indeed a general suspicion of cover-ups, must be addressed, alongside a decline of trust in governments.

The current political and social climate is a breeding ground for the spread of disinformation – most clearly seen in India and Brazil. Both the current Indian and Brazilian governments are fuelling nationalism, racism, hatred of (religious) minorities and sexism through political action and inflammatory statements. Disinformation regarding these topics spreads especially quickly. Fighting disinformation requires a far more comprehensive and extensive approach than has so far been the case. Combatting disinformation is made much more difficult if a country's government benefits from the social disorder caused by disinformation – at best it will tolerate it; at worst it will actively promote it. This is certainly not the case in Germany. However, the German government does need to develop better solutions to the economic, social, and societal problems that provide the grounds on which disinformation thrives.

Policy recommendations

1. Properly identify problems

→ Recognise the complexity of issues

A holistic approach is required to combat mis- and disinformation. Regulating platforms is insufficient. It is crucial to use appropriate terminology concerning the complexity of the issue; to solve a problem, we must first correctly define it. In politics and the media, the blanket term 'fake news' – which can refer to both mis- and disinformation – is too frequently used. Making matters worse, 'fake news' is also used to discredit inconvenient statements by political opponents.

Correct terminology of problems and phenomena includes a critical analysis of various aspects of mis- and disinformation. For instance, the way information spreads needs closer scrutiny, as does content and content formats. All too often, a textual format is implicitly assumed; it is essential to name and emphasise the format of mis- and disinformation. Images and videos are orders of magnitude more memorable and widespread, with voice messages growing in popularity.

We need to foster an awareness in politics, journalism and society at large that while mis- and disinformation are not new phenomena, social media networks and messaging services increase the spread of information exponentially. Changes in media consumption contribute to the problem, as do a loss of trust in the state and media outlets, global information wars, reckless use of digital media and peoples' susceptibility to conspiracy

theories. The complexity of the issue demands an approach that goes beyond solely regulating digital platforms.

2. Political and diplomatic responsibility

→ A diplomatic and foreign policy focus on the human rights aspects of disinformation

The case studies of India and Brazil show that disinformation spreads so rapidly, and is so effective in part because government officials tacitly approve or welcome it. Disinformation is used to legitimise political harassment of specific groups, which can be tied by caste, religion, gender or sexuality. Diplomacy and foreign policy must make explicit the abuses that lead to riots and violations of human rights. The extensive internet shutdowns in India are part of the problem, which need to be countered by political condemnation.

→ Make global platform operators more accountable, protect the human right to private communication

Developing a solution that doesn't curtail freedom of speech and holds global corporations and platform operators to account requires a global discussion. Regarding messenger services, this applies to Facebook as the owner of WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram, as well as Telegram and Discord. Any solution must protect the human right to private – encrypted – communication.

3. Responsibility of platforms and technology design

→ The design of messenger services must take disinformation into account

Social media platforms have a major responsibility to combat disinformation. Technology design offers broad possibilities for curbing the rapid spread of information. In response to the Brazilian election, WhatsApp introduced a feature marking forwarded messages as such, clarifying that information did not originate with the person that sent it. While circumventable by saving an image, it does create a little more transparency. WhatsApp currently allows forwarding of five chats at a time, a feature implemented in response to events in India and Brazil. However, groups can be included, meaning that if a group contains the maximum of 256 members, almost 1,300 people can be reached in just a few steps⁴⁹. Further transparency and traceability might be improved with a feature WhatsApp is currently testing – a disclaimer on how often content has been forwarded⁵⁰. All of this is to say that transparency and traceability can be improved significantly by restricting forwarding options.

→ Due to encryption, self-regulation and deleting content are less relevant tools for most messenger services.

Nonetheless, Telegram and others must take more effective action in open groups and channels to prevent the spread of disinformation, possibly through the use of ‚fingerprints‘. Labelling mis- and disinformation through the use of fact-checks can have an unintended side-effect: if only content that’s been checked can be trusted, everything else becomes untrustworthy⁵¹, potentially reducing trust in the media. Messenger services and their parent companies must work closely with governments to combat illegal content. They have a responsibility to educate their users and offer simple options for reporting illegal content.

→ Displaying information on disinformation within messenger services

Messenger services are an ideal platform to educate and caution against mis- and disinformation, including cyber-bullying and hate speech. Apart from asking how NGOs and governments can reach and educate people, we need to discuss what responsibilities messenger services have and how they can help. Telegram, for instance, already informs users about updates and new features through its own channel. Educational campaigns could also be run through such channels. To its credit, WhatsApp has started a campaign – implemented outside of the messenger – in India to combat mis- and disinformation, as well as hate speech that leads to lynchings and mob violence⁵².

4. Regulation

→ ‚Know Thy Foe‘ – promote and support research into disinformation and its spread

Mis- and disinformation is rarely illegal – especially in liberal democracies. As a consequence, we need to ask what good regulation looks like, rather than whether

it’s required. This includes debate over whether shared information can be regulated directly or whether less intrusive measures may be more effective. Generally speaking, disinformation – regardless of the spread of disinformation on messenger services – is currently under-researched⁵³. This is in part due to the fact that social media platforms do not make their data available to independent research institutions. Laws that stipulate that anonymised data be made available for research could be a solution. In addition, ethical standards need to be developed – or existing ones adapted – that enable research to be carried out on closed groups within messenger services. Carlotta Dotto has submitted a proposal for just this to First Draft⁵⁴. Her paper provides journalists with guidelines on researching dark social and raises awareness of the ethical question that needs to be considered.

5. Journalism

→ Promote local journalism to restore trust in the media

Studies have highlighted the erosion of trust in news and the media alongside a decrease in news consumption due to a perceived negative slant of coverage⁵⁵. Journalism and society at large needs to ask how to build trust and improve the negative image of the media. The Danish journalist Ulrik Haagerup in collaboration with others, is attempting to produce more constructive news via the ‚Constructive Institute‘⁵⁶ approach, which puts negative news in the right context. For instance, if several burglaries are reported in area, it makes sense to note that burglaries in general are on the decline. The effect of mis- and disinformation that holds politicians responsible for a perceived deterioration in the area can be somewhat negated. The predominant focus should be the promotion of local journalism and media, which raises the question of sustainable business models.

→ Careful selection of talking points to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation

Editors and journalists must consider what they report – and what they don’t⁵⁷. Reporting mis- and disinformation often increases its reach – regardless of the channel. Therefore a wider discussion between journalists and editors is needed to debate which journalistic standards need adaptation for the 21st century. After all, the assumption that disinformation will be covered by traditional media is often part of the dissemination strategy and can sow doubt – even when reported on in the right context⁵⁸. Journalists also need social media training in order to recognise and classify the effects of information spread via social media platforms.

6. Resilient societies

→ A federal agency for all-ages digital media education

The proliferation of social media and the internet mean the question of how to act online is now a facet

⁴⁹ Cf. Kastrenakes 2019.

⁵⁰ Cf. Sagar 2019.

⁵¹ Cf. Pennycook, Bear, and Collins 2019.

⁵² Cf. Banaji and Bhat 2019.

⁵³ Cf. Jaurisch 2019.

⁵⁴ Cf. Dotto, Smith, and Wardle 2019.

⁵⁵ Cf. Newman et al. 2019.

⁵⁶ Cf. Haagerup 2019.

⁵⁷ Cf. Phillips 2018.

⁵⁸ Cf. Illing 2020.

of everyday life for almost everyone. Misinformation and disinformation are often unwittingly spread by the masses, especially when it validates or confirms someone's values. Questioning all information is thankless and almost impossible task. Nevertheless, education can and must be one of the tools to counter the spread of mis- and disinformation. Studies have shown that people over 65 are the primary spreaders of mis- and disinformation, spreading it seven times more than people under the age of 29⁵⁹. Further education for all ages, which deals with the rapid changes of the digital age and counters disinformation is needed. A federal agency for digital education, similar to the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany could be an opportunity to provide life-long education to everyone⁶⁰. For years, Finland has had a lifelong training programme on disinformation – in part due to its close proximity to Russia – and has not only provided a model for how this could work but also shown the impact such a programme has⁶¹.

We need greater awareness and education on forwarding illegal content – which is punishable and by no means harmless or humorous. The discussion must include society as a whole and cannot be confined to schools.

It has become evident that strategies focussed solely on technological approaches are not promising. While studies show that messenger services enable and increase the spread of disinformation, they also show that a lack of trust in both the state and the media is an important factor in the dissemination of disinformation. Increases in nationalism and its epiphenomena such as racism, sexism and anti-Semitism also play a significant role.

It's not sufficient to view disinformation as an external, political problem, restricted to campaigns. Neither can we only hold social media platforms to account and outsource the solutions to their parent companies. A broad discourse is required to combat disinformation, in which everyone must be included.

Help stop the spread of rumours and fake news on WhatsApp.

1. SPOT NEWS THAT MIGHT BE FAKE

Check for signs that help you decide if the information is fake.

For example, forwarded messages with no source, no evidence, or messages that make you angry are signs that a story might not be true. Photos, videos and even voice recordings can be edited to mislead you.



2. VERIFY WITH OTHER SOURCES

Search online for facts and check trusted news sites to see where the story came from.

If you still have doubts, ask fact-checkers, people you trust, and community leaders for more information.



3. HELP STOP THE SPREAD

If you see something that's fake, tell people and ask them to verify information before they share it. Don't share a message, just because someone tells you to. Even if they're your friends.



Share joy, not rumours.

WhatsApp campaign to curb spread of misinformation

Source: "WhatsApp Vigilantes: An exploration of citizen reception and circulation of WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India"

⁵⁹ Cf. Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019.

⁶⁰ Cf. Riedel 2019.

⁶¹ Cf. Mackintosh 2019.

Glossary

Adivasi

Adivasi is Sanskrit for first settlers or original inhabitant. It is the self-designation of indigenous populations and tribal communities in both India and beyond it. The central Indian government does not recognise the term Adivasi, since it would imply that these tribal communities have lived on Indian ground longer than the Hindu caste. Alongside the untouchables – the Dalits – the Adivasis are some of the poorest people in India, especially in urban areas. Although they have certain minority rights, they are commonly discriminated against as outcasts.

Dalit

The Dalits are the untouchables of the Indian caste system because they are outside of it and as such, casteless. Muslims, Buddhists and Christians are counted among the untouchables which when taken count 240 million people – almost a fifth of the Indian population. Dalits are at the bottom level of the caste system and are considered impure and untouchable, which can go as far as people of higher castes avoiding coming into contact with their shadows. They are often the victims of discrimination, violence and land-grabbing, particularly in rural areas.

Debunking

Debunking is a tool used to combat the spread of false or misleading information and refers to the process of disproving mis- and disinformation. When information has been debunked it is published and shared by fact-checking organisations, journalists or institutions.

Deep Fakes

Deep fakes is a combination of the terms deep learning and fake, and refers to video or audio recording that use machine learning to manipulate and alter recordings. Digitally created faces, facial expression and voice recordings can be superimposed on existing recordings and present information in a very different light. They are extremely realistic and not easily spotted.

Doxing

Doxing refers to the process of gathering and publishing personal data such as addresses, certificates,

email and letters online with the intent of causing harm. Often, the subjects of a doxing campaign are subjected to further threats or violence – including phone harassment or physical attacks in their homes.

Fabricated news

Fabricated news are news items that are completely fictitious

Fact-checking

Fact-checking is journalistic method for checking statement using verifiable facts. Social media platforms work with fact-checking organisations worldwide to ensure content is accurate. Fact-checking was used during the TV debates of the 2016 US presidential election. German fact-checking organisations include, correctiv, mimikama and Faktenfinder.

Fingerprints

Fingerprints refers to an online method for identifying videos, either to prevent their upload or to block them once online. In contrast to watermarks, the fingerprint process identifies components of a video and uses them to create a unique fingerprint. If a video is edited, the fingerprint changes as a result. Platforms exchange fingerprints via a shared database for the quick identification of illegal content.

Hate speech

Hate speech is a term not defined by German law that is primarily used in connection with derogatory online comments, including insults, threats or sedition. In Germany the controversial Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) was signed into law in 2017 with the aim of combatting illegal content, which can include hate speech.

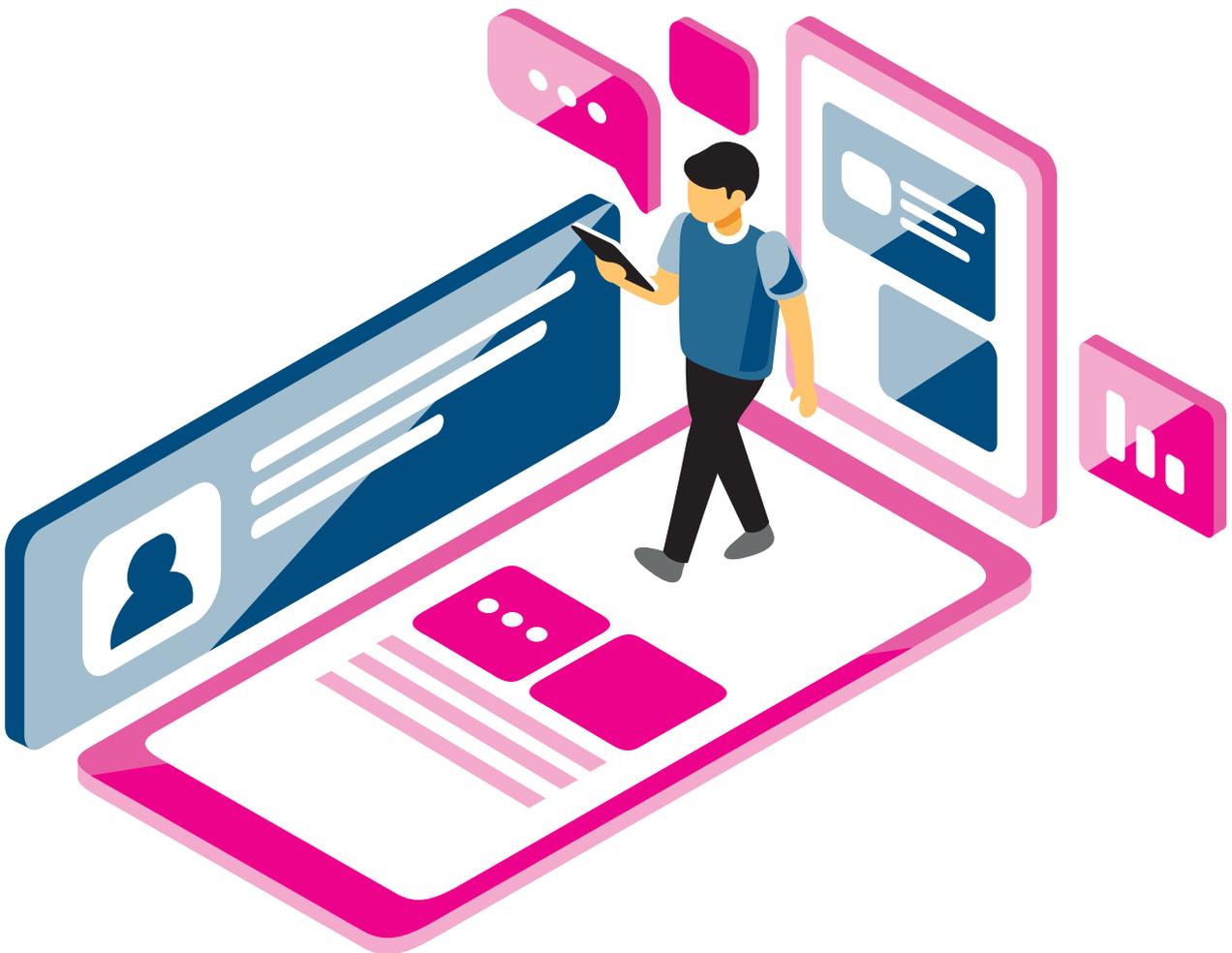
Memes

The term meme was coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to describe the spread of ideas and behaviours via imitation. These days it usually refers to small images or videos with humorous, uplifting or satirical content. Memes are

often sent via social media networks, including messenger services. While, they often use photographs, film clips, animations or drawings taken out of context, memes can also be created using original content. There are numerous dark memes – often considered funny by both sender and recipient – with content that’s clearly racist, sexist or anti-Semitic. Memes are part of ‘network culture’.

Troll

Trolls are internet users who deliberately try to derail discussions and elicit strong emotional responses from their victims. A person can troll on their own, but trolling is often a coordinated effort organised through, amongst others, messenger services. Trolling campaigns have been orchestrated by states, with the individuals sometimes being paid for their actions.



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„We so often disregard facts that run counter to our intuitions and preferences that a reasonable person might conclude it to be an inevitable part of human nature... to be at war with the truth.”

Hannah Arendt – Wahrheit und Politik (1967)

