

**(Why) Is misinformation a problem?**

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### **Abstract**

In the last decade there has been a proliferation of research on misinformation. One important aspect that receives less attention is why exactly misinformation is a problem. To adequately address this question, we must first look to its speculated cause(s) and effect(s). We examine different disciplines (computer science, economics, history, information science, journalism, law, media, politics, philosophy, psychology, sociology) that investigate misinformation. The consensus view points to advancements in information technology (e.g., internet, social media) as a main cause of the proliferation and increasing impact of misinformation, with a variety of illustrations of the effects. We critically analyse both issues. As to the effects, misbehaviors are not yet reliably demonstrated empirically to be the outcome of misinformation, where correlation as causation may have a hand. As to the cause, advancements in information technologies enable, as well as reveal, multitudes of interactions that implies significant deviations from ground truths through people's new way of knowing (intersubjectivity). This, we argue, is illusionary when understood in light of historical epistemology. Both doubts we raise are used to consider the cost to established norms of liberal democracy that come from efforts to target the problem of misinformation.

*Keywords:* Misinformation and disinformation, intersubjectivity, correlation vs. causation, free speech

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Our Aims

The aim of this review is to answer the question: *(Why) Is misinformation a problem?* We begin the main review with definitions of misinformation because this, in part, motivated our pursuit to answer this question. By incorporating evidence from many disciplines, our comprehensive approach helps us to examine the speculated effect(s) and cause(s) of misinformation, which give some indications of why it might be a problem. Answers in the literature reveal that advancements in information technology are the commonly suspected primary cause of misinformation. As to the effects, the reviewed literature shows considerable divergence regarding the assumed outcomes of misinformation, though this may not be surprising given the breadth of disciplines that observe effects from their own lens. The fact that so many effects of misinformation are reported isn't a concern, so long as the direct causal link between misinformation and the aberrant behaviors it generates is evidenced. We emphasize that the evidence provided by studies investigating this relationship is weak. This exposes two issues: one that is empirical, as to the effects of misinformation, and one that is conceptual, as to the cause of the problem of misinformation, the latter of which we argue has been oversimplified. Uniting the two issues, the alarm regarding the speculated relationship between misinformation and aberrant societal behaviors appears to be rooted in the increased opportunities, through advancements in information technology, for people to go at it alone in establishing their own ways of knowing that increases deviations from ground truths.

We therefore propose our own conceptual lens from which to understand the cause of concern misinformation poses. It acknowledges, but goes beyond modern, information technology (e.g. internet, social media), to understand the roots of knowledge through historical epistemology – the study of (primarily scientific) knowledge, specifically concepts (e.g., objectivity, belief), objects (e.g., statistics, DNA) and the development of science (Feest &

Sturm, 2011). The current situation is triggering alarm because it appears that the process of knowing is undergoing a transition whereby objectivity is second to intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity, as we define it, is a coordination effort by two or more people to interpret entities in the world through social interaction. Owing to progress in information technologies, intersubjectivity is seen in opposition to how ground truths are being established by traditional institutions. However, the two processes aren't necessarily at odds, since, for instance, the scientific endeavor is not itself devoid of intersubjective mechanisms. Secondly, there is no clear evidence that intersubjectivity as a means for establishing truth is on the rise outside of the fact that the internet facilitates and exposes more clearly the interactions people are having. Critically, the causal connection between beliefs established in an intersubjective manner and aberrant behavior is also not evidenced. In our concluding section, we discuss whether the efforts to reduce misinformation are proportionate to the actual or rather the perceived scale of the problem of misinformation. We also propose possible methodological avenues for future exploration that might help to better expose causal relations between misinformation and behavior.

## **1.2 Defining Misinformation and Other Associated Terms**

What is misinformation? Several definitions of misinformation refer to it as 'false', 'inaccurate' or 'incorrect' information (e.g., Qazvinian et al., 2011; Tan et al., 2015; Van der Meer & Jin, 2019), and the antonym to information, while disinformation is 'false' but is additionally referred to as being intentionally shared (e.g., Levi, 2018). Additionally, information shared for maliciously ends to cause harm to an individual, organization, or country (Wardle, 2020) is malinformation, and can be true (e.g. private information publically such as doxing) or false. A close cousin of the term disinformation is 'fake news' (Anderau, 2021), a term made popular by the former US President Donald Trump, for which there are a variety of examples that fall under this catchall term (Tandoc Jr., Lim, & Ling, 2018). Echoing

a similar sentiment as disinformation, fake news is defined as information presented as news that is intentional and verifiably false (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Anderau, 2021), which is different from satire, parody, and propaganda. However, rumor, often discussed alongside hearsay, gossip or word of mouth, is perhaps the eldest relative in the misinformation family with research dating back decades; as discussed by Allport and Postman's (1947) *The Psychology of Rumor*. A companion of humankind for millennia, a rumor is commonly defined as 'unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation' (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, p.31).

Yet, these terms are used differently (e.g., Habgood-Coote, 2019; Karlova & Lee, 2011; Scheufele & Krause., 2019). For example, Wu et al. (2019) refer to misinformation as an umbrella term to include all false or inaccurate information (unintentionally-spread misinformation, intentionally spread misinformation, fake news, urban legends, rumor). This is arguably why Krause et al. (2022) conclude that misinformation has become a catch-all term with little meaning. It is perhaps not surprising that these definitions are also contentious and debates continue among scholars. For example, a point of discussion is the demarcation between information and misinformation, with some scholars arguing that this is a false dichotomy (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2020; Haiden & Althuis, 2018; Marwick, 2018; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018). The problem in drawing a line between the two is that it ignores what it means to ascertain the truth. Krause et al. (2020) illustrate this in their real-world example of COVID-19 where the efficacy of measures, such as masks, was initially unknown. Osman et al. (2022) also make the same point with reference to the origins of the COVID-19 virus and the problems in prematurely labelling what is conspiracy and what is a viable scientific hypothesis. A continuum approach (e.g., Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Hameleers et al., 2021; Vraga & Bode, 2020) is an alternative to reductionist classifications into true/false information, but the problem of how exactly truth is or ought to be established remains.

Some define truth by what it is not, rather than what it is. Paskin (2018) argues that fake news has no factual basis, which implies that truth is regarded as equating to facts. Other scholars make reference to terms such as accuracy and objectivity (Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018) as well as evidence and expert opinion (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Regarding falsity, key to disinformation is intentional sharing of it (e.g., Fallis, 2015; Hernon 1995; Shin et al., 2018; S  e, 2017), but another problem is how to determine intent (e.g., Karlova & Lee, 2011; Shu et al., 2017). Given how fundamental the conceptual problems are, some have proposed that it is too early to investigate misinformation (Avital et al., 2020; Habgood-Coote, 2015).

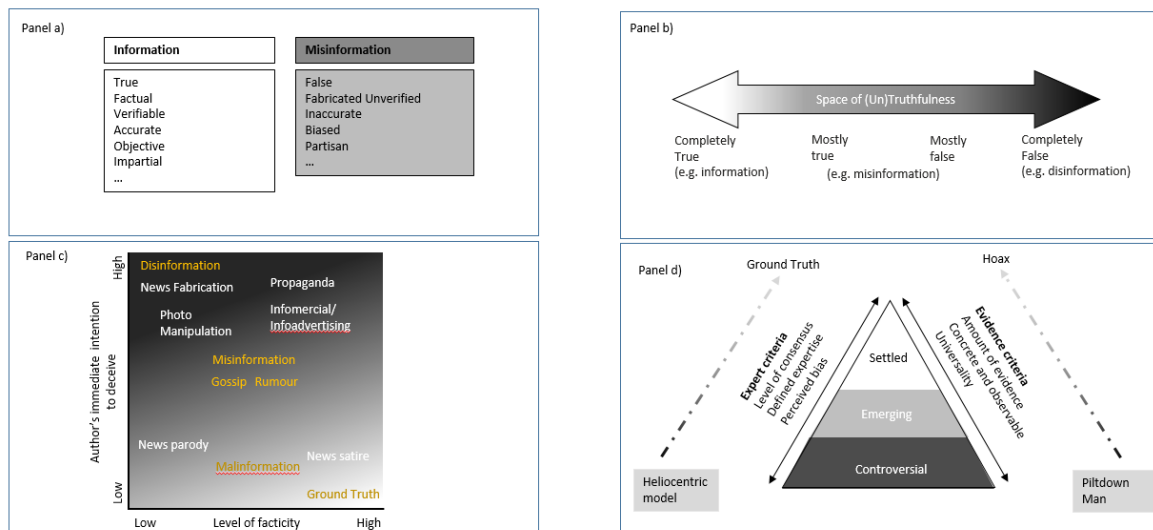


Fig. 1. Different ways of conceptualizing and contextualizing information and misinformation. Panel a) Dichotomous distinctions between information and misinformation based on commonly discussed criteria from the literature (e.g., Qazvinian et al., 2011; Levi, 2018; Tan et al., 2015; Van der Meer & Jin, 2019). Panel b) Hamelner, Van der Meer, & Vliegenhart, (2021)'s Continuum "space of (un)truthfulness" that characterizes (mis,dis)information by degrees of truth and falsehood. Panel c) Tandoc Jr., Lim and Ling's (2018) Two-dimensional space used to map what the authors refer to as examples of fake news, and additional examples of terms (in yellow) that we have added by attempting to map them on to the described dimensions. Panel d) Vraga and Bode's (2020) Expertise and Evidence as criteria for contextualizing (mis)information, two examples to illustrate claims that were controversial that over time became settled (either because they were verifiably true, or verifiably false) are: Galileo's 1632 challenge of the geocentric astronomical model in favour of the heliocentric model (the Church did not officially pardon him for heresy until 1992), Charles Dawson (1912) discovery of the 'missing link' from jaw and tooth remains in Piltdown (England) that were shown by Weiner, Oakley and Clark (1953) to be fabricated to simulate a fossilized skull, and deemed a hoax by the scientific community.

For the purposes of this review a commonly agreed-upon definition is not necessary, or likely possible. Instead what we have done here is graphically represent various conceptions of information, misinformation, and other related phenomena (Figure 1) with reference to some examples. We also distill what we view as a shared essential property of most of the definitions we have discussed here: *information that departs from established ground truths*. Three things of note. First, we make no assertion about whether the information is unintentionally or deliberately designed to depart from ground truth, only that it does. Second, criteria for

determining ground truth are evidentially problematic given the conceptual obstacles already mentioned, and so we do not attempt this, instead we return to discussing the issues around this later in the review. Third, in our view the essential property described is dynamical, what we refer to as *dynamic lensing of information*; this is necessary to reflect that, just as lensing is an optical property that can distort and magnify light, the status of information through various means (lenses) is liable to shifts that over time diverges from or converges to ground truth (for example see Figure 1, Panel d).

## 2. The ‘Problem’ of Misinformation

A review of the kind presented here has not yet been conducted, and so we present this as a starting point for future interdisciplinary reviews and meta-analyses of the causes and effects of misinformation that could extend or challenge the claims we are making here. To address the title question, we concentrated on theoretical and empirical papers that explicitly reference the effects of misinformation. While not exhaustive, we have tried to be comprehensive by drawing on, and synthesizing research across a wide range of disciplines (computer science, economics, history, information science, journalism, law, media, politics, philosophy, psychology, sociology). Our strategy involved searching for articles on Google Scholar containing the terms ‘misinformation’ and ‘fake news’. However, many of these papers contained related terms such as ‘disinformation’, ‘rumor’, ‘post-truth’, ‘hoax’, ‘satire’, and ‘parody’. As the effects of misinformation, and related terms, were rarely referred to as a ‘problem’ explicitly, at first, we did not add ‘problem’ or synonyms to our search terms, and instead selected the most cited articles. To capture any specific references to the problem of misinformation, however, the second step involved examining both ‘misinformation’ (and related terms) and ‘problem’ (and related terms, such as ‘crisis’, ‘trouble’, ‘obstacle’, ‘dilemma’, ‘challenge’).

The time frame chosen depended on the term. Interest in ‘fake news’ boomed after 2016. Though arbitrary, articles with more than 50 citations served as a starting point for our search between 2016 and 2022 (from a total of 25,300 search results), and some exceptions, such as the highly cited Conroy et al. (2015) article on automatic detection of fake news. Research on the term ‘misinformation’ traditionally focused on memory (e.g., Ayers & Reder 1998; Frost, 2000) with applications to legal settings, specifically eyewitness studies (Wright et al., 2000). There are instances of misinformation in the more general sense, as applied to the news and the internet as early as Hernon’s (1995) exploratory study. To make things manageable we limited our search by examining the most cited papers between 2000 and 2022 (from a total of 116,000 search results). Most studies make reference to the effects of misinformation or fake news in the introduction to motivate their research, or in the conclusion to explain why their work has important implications. For others, the aim of the research is to precisely examine the effects of misinformation. In total, we carefully inspected 149 papers, either because they made references to causes, or else referenced the effects of misinformation.

We observed that scholars characterize the effects of misinformation in broadly two ways: societal level effects, which we group into four domains (media, politics, science, economics), and individual effects that are psychologically informed (cognitive, behavioral). We reserve critical appraisals for the literature on the psychological effects of misinformation because they are fundamental to, and have direct implications for societal level effects.

## **2.1 Societal Level Effects of Misinformation**

We will begin with those articles where the effects of misinformation can be classified as general topical areas that impact society: media, politics, science, and economics.

### **2.1.1 Media**

Determining the impact of misinformation for media, particularly news media, depends on whether readers can reliably distinguish between true and false news, and what is biased left



versus right leaning content from objective content. While some empirical studies show readers can distinguish between true and false news (Barthel et al., 2016; Burkhardt, 2017; De Beer & Matthee, 2020; Posetti & Matthews, 2018; Shu et al., 2018; Waldman, 2018), Bryanov and Vziatysheva (2021)'s review indicates that overall the evidence is mixed. There is also work showing that attention towards news classified as misinformation can increase based on the number of social media likes a post receives (Luo et al., 2020). This does not in turn imply that the false content is judged as credible, in fact there is a tendency to disbelieve both fake and true messages (Luo et al., 2020). Possible spillover effects such this have been used to explain disengagement with news media in general, and distrust in traditional news institutions (Altay et al., 2020; Axt et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2021; Greifeneder et al., 2021; Habgoode-Coote, 2019; Levi, 2018; Lewis, 2019; Robertson & Mourao, 2020; Steensen, 2019; Shao et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2021; Tornberg, 2018; Van Heekeren, 2019; Waldman, 2018; Wasserman, 2020). For example, Axios, an American news website, reported that between 2021 and 2022 there was a 50% drop in social media interactions with news articles, a 18% drop in unique visits to the 5 top news sites, and a 19% drop in cable news prime time viewing (Rothschild & Fischer, 2022). Survey work, such as the Edelman Trust Barometer (2019) and Gallup's Confidence in Institutions survey (2018), show declining trust in news media and journalists. Consistent with this, Wagner and Boczkowski (2019)'s in-depth interviews indicate negative perceptions of the quality of current news, and distrust of news circulated on social media. Duffy et al. (2019) suggest a positive outcome may be that mistrusting news on social media will drive the public back to traditional news sources. Along similar lines, Wasserman (2020) claims that misinformation provides traditional news institutions with an opportunity to rebuild their position as an authority by emphasizing verification of claims communicated to the public.

In short, declining trust in media, source credibility, and the blurring of the dichotomy between false and true news are suspected effects of misinformation which worry some (Kaul, 2012; Posetti & Matthews, 2018; Steensen, 2019). A remedy to these effects is a more nuanced appreciation of truth, and how claims are communicated in ways that allow for healthy skepticism (Godler, 2020).

### **2.1.2 Politics**

The overarching negative effect of misinformation comes from the argument that without an accurately informed public, democracy cannot function (Kuklinski et al. 2000); though there is some discussion about whether this falls squarely back on the shoulders of news media<sup>1</sup>. Much of the evidence base is designed to show how beliefs in misinformed claims impact the evaluation of and support for particular policies (e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018; Flynn et al., 2020; Fowler & Margolis, 2013; Garrett et al., 2013; Greifeneder et al., 2019; Levi, 2018; Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2019; Marwick et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2021; Monti et al., 2019; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2021; Shao et al., 2018; Waldman, 2018). However, there is yet no consensus on how to precisely measure misinformation to determine its direct effects on democratic processes (e.g., election voting, public discourse on policies; Watts et al., 2021).

One of the strongest claimed effects of misinformation is that it leads voters towards advocating policies that are counter to their own interests, for example, the 2016 US election and Brexit vote in the UK (Bastos & Mercea, 2017; Cooke, 2017; Humprecht et al., 2020; Levi, 2018; Monti et al., 2019; Oyserman & Dawson, 2021; Ross & Rivers, 2018; Shu et al., 2018;

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Gallup's (2016) findings, Axt et al. (2020) claim that democratic damage stems from media distrust, which suggests that political consequences are perceived as secondary. The logic of the argument here is that misinformation leads to distrust in news media, and that in turn leads to disengagement in democratic and political processes. In fact, even the terms 'misinformation' and 'fake news' are claimed to promote anti-democratic ideology (e.g., Habgoode-Coote, 2019; Levi, 2018) because introducing the idea that false claims are circulated in traditional news media is sufficient cause for generating mistrust and potential disengagement in democratic processes.

Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019; Weidner et al., 2020). Silverman's (2016) found that the 20 top fake election news stories generated more engagement on Facebook than the 20 top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined. Participants in Wagner and Boczkowski's (2019) study indicated how the reporting of the 2016 US election reduced their trust in media based on false news stories associated with both political parties. Effects of this kind are also explained with reference to political polarization because false stories further divisions between parties as well as reinforce support for one's own party (e.g., Axt et al., 2020; European Commission, 2018; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2017; Vargo et al., 2017; Waldman, 2018). However, evidence showing a direct causal relationship between viewing fake news and switching positions, and in turn the outcome of elections and referendums is lacking, and as such, these claims have also been questioned (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019). For the same reasons, drawing connections between misinformation and political polarization has been difficult, and similarly for a variety of other alternative explanations that have been proposed (Canen, Kendall, & Trebbi, 2021; Hebenstreit, 2022).

While there currently is a strong interest in the effects of misinformation on political issues, debates surrounding the effects of misinformation are certainly not new. There are documented examples as far back as Ancient Rome of how misinformation as rumor can impact the reputations of political figures. As a result, misinformation has been used as a form of social control to produce political outcomes, albeit with varying success (e.g., Chirovici, 2014; Guastella, 2017). For example, during Nicolae Ceausescu's leadership of Romania in the 1960s and 1970s, positive rumors helped establish support, but later switched; for example, that Ceausescu had periodic blood transfusions from children. Attempts by mass media to censor such rumors failed, and, as dissidence intensified, so did revolts such as a rumored genocide of 60,000 terrified civilians in Timisoara. Ceausescu and his wife's execution in 1989 was based on charges of genocide, among other things (Chirovici, 2014). As well as rumor, there are

several examples of state propaganda (e.g., Pomerantsev, 2015; Snyder, 2021), alternatively referred to as disinformation campaigns which are also designed as a form of social control. This runs counter to the “Millian” market of ideas, based on Mill’s (1859) work proposing that only in a free market of ideas are we able to arrive at the truth (Cohen-Almagor, 1997). In fact, these examples suggest that deliberate as well as inadvertent processes disrupt the possibility of the best ideas surfacing to the point of consensus (Cantril, 1938). State propaganda and rumors attempt to suppress public discourse, which have been shown to negatively impact the populous, particularly in drawing connections to the instigation of violence, and influence voting behavior (e.g., Posetti & Matthews, 2018).

Thus far, it isn’t clear what the remedies are for addressing the effects of misinformation in the domain of politics. What is clear is that there are strong claims regarding the effects (e.g., polarization, disengagement with democratic processes, hostility to political figures and violence) that underscore why misinformation is perceived as a threat to democracy.

### ***2.1.3 Science***

Misinformation in science communication (Kahan, 2017) and around science policymaking (Farrell et al., 2019) is purported to have an effect on public understanding of science (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Two topics that recur with frequent reference to the negative effects of misinformation are health and anthropogenic climate change.

COVID-19 has been at the epicenter of many misinformation studies examining how it has impacted attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behavior (Ecker et al., 2022; Kouzy et al., 2020; Pennycook et al. 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2020; Vraga et al., 2020). For instance, Tasnim et al. (2020) refer to reported chloroquine (a pharmacological treatment for Malaria) overdoses in Nigeria following claims on the news that it effectively treats the virus. Misinformation was also claimed to have resulted in hoarding and panic buying (Chua et al., 2021) as well as

avoiding non-pharmacological measures (e.g., hand washing, social distancing; Shiina et al., 2020).

Research has also considered the effect of misinformation on the Zika (Ghenai & Mejova 2017; Valecha et al., 2020) and Ebola viruses (Jin et al., 2014). Negative health behaviors include vaccine hesitancy, which has been most notably related to associations between the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism (Dixon et al., 2015; Flynn et al., 2020; Kahan, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Pluviano et al., 2022). The actual effects that are measured vary from self-reported behaviors in response to inaccurate health claims, to views on trust in the news media, politics, and general damage to democracy. Studies examining whether changes are possible suggest that belief updating can be achieved when contrary information is presented in textual form (Desai & Reimers, 2018) or through an interactive game (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019).

The effects of misinformation also extend to the topic of anthropogenic climate change. It has been proposed that misinformation results in divisions in opinion regarding the urgency to respond to the issue (Bolsen & Shapiro 2016; Cook 2019; Farrell 2019; McCright & Dunlap 2011). Misinformation is also used to explain stalling of political action. This is either because of a lack of public consensus on the issue which are claimed to be informed by misinformation, or resistance to addressing it, again because of apparent false claims (Benegal & Scruggs 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Conway & Oreskes, 2012; Flynn et al., 2020; Maertens et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; van der Linden et al., 2017; Zhou & Shen, 2021). Moreover, the effects of misinformation do not have an equal impact on recipients, because anthropogenic climate change has been perceived to be connected with particular ideological and political positions (Cook et al., 2018; Elasser & Dunlap, 2012; Farrell et al. 2019; Kormann, 2018; McCright & Dunlap, 2016).

If misinformation is indeed the sole contributor to these effects, rather than one of several factors, then fears around the impact of misinformation on generating false beliefs and motivating aberrant behaviors are justified given the potential impact on human wellbeing. Some of the empirical findings presented here have also included interventions designed to address the effects of misinformation, primarily centered on refocusing the way people encounter false claims, and improving their ability to scrutinize claims to determine their truth status.

#### ***2.1.4 Economics***

For some researchers, the economic cost of misinformation is considered significant enough to warrant analysis (e.g., Howell et al., 2013). Financial implications are also considered, such as, for example, how misinformation can disrupt the stability of markets (Kogan et al., 2021; Levi, 2018; Petratos, 2021), as well as the cost of attempting to debunk misinformation (Southwell & Thorson, 2015), and the policing of misinformation online in order to develop measures to limit public exposure (Gradón, 2020). For example, Canada has spent \$7 million to increase public awareness of misinformation (Funke, 2021) in an attempt, amongst other issues, to stem economic impact. Burkhardt (2017) focuses on consumer behavior and how brands inadvertently propagate misinformation, and how that can present opportunities to increase profits. As a main goal to get consumers' attention, Burkhardt proposes that adverts appearing alongside a piece of information that is true or false can impact purchasing behavior. Given the appeal of gossip and scandal, as illustrated by media outlets such as the National Enquirer or Access Hollywood on TV, advertisers can thus profit off sensationalized and potentially misinformed claims (e.g. Han et al., 2022). Another fundamental concern is that adverts themselves contain misinformation (Baker, 2018; Braun & Loftus, 1998; Glaeser & Ujhelyi, 2010; Rao, 2022; Zeng et al., 2020, 2021).

There are also real-world examples of the economic effects of misinformation, such as how brands fall victim to unsubstantiated claims. Berthon et al. (2018) discuss how Pepsi's stock fell by c.4% because a story went viral about their CEO, Indra Nooyi, allegedly telling Trump supporters to "take their business elsewhere". This story has been cited by other marketing researchers to emphasize the adverse effects of misinformation (e.g., Talwar et al., 2019) in reputation management – an economy estimated to be worth \$9.5 billion alone (Cavazos, 2019) which excludes indirect costs for increasing trust and transparency. Another popular example, which aligns with Levi's (2018) observation on market stability, is a tweet broadcast by the Associated Press in 2013. It claimed Obama had been injured in an explosion, which reportedly caused the Dow Jones stock market index to drop 140 points in 6 minutes (e.g., Liu & Wu, 2020; Zhou & Zarafani, 2021). Further examples can be found in Cavazos' (2019) report for software company Cheq, which concludes that misinformation is a \$78 billion problem.

In combination, these examples often tie in with effects reported elsewhere, for instance, increased reputation management is a response to the fragility of trust that we noted in relation to the media. Thus, the effects of misinformation have been claimed to impact market behavior, consumer behavior, and brand reputation, which in turn has economic and financial effects on business. Where advertising sits alongside misinformation in news stories, or embedded in advertisements, both are claimed to facilitate profits, or else limit them because of reputational damage to businesses.

## **2.2 Individual Level Effects of Misinformation**

Establishing the fundamental effects of the way misinformation is processed psychologically and its influences on behavior have core implications for research proposing how the general effects are expressed in society (e.g., engagement with scientific concepts, democratic processes, trust in news media, and economic factors). Therefore, we critically

consider the evidential support for the effects of misinformation on cognition and behavior. We review these effects separately also because we think that a tacit inference underlying much of the current debate seems to go like this: 1) Experimental evidence shows that misinformation affects beliefs in various ways. 2) While there are few experimental studies examining the direct behavioral consequences of beliefs influenced by misinformation, we generally “know” that beliefs affect behavior. Hence, we can conclude that misinformation is a cause of aberrant behavior. We are of the opinion that this line of reasoning is an oversimplification and doesn’t do justice to the complexity of the problem, and its serious implications for policy making. The presumed causal chain is also at odds with research on the more complicated relations between beliefs and behavior, and different cognitive factors (e.g., Ajzen, 1991), which we discuss below in more detail.

### ***2.2.1 Cognitive Effects of Misinformation***

A large proportion of research on misinformation has been dedicated to examining the effects on cognition. One example is the difficulty in revising beliefs based on retracting false claims (debunking or continued influence effect) (Chan et al., 2017; Desai et al., 2020; Desai & Reimers, 2018; Ecker et al., 2011; Garrett et al., 2013; Lewandowsky et al., 2012; Newport, 2015; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Southwell & Thorson, 2015; Walter & Murphy, 2018). Findings show that presenting counter examples (e.g., via causal explanations) corrects false beliefs (e.g., Desai & Reimers, 2018; Guess & Coppock, 2018; Wood & Porter, 2019), irrespective of group differences (e.g., age, gender, education level, political affiliation; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). Another option is to ‘inoculate’ people from misinformation (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019). This involves warning people in advance that they might be exposed to misinformation, and giving them a ‘weak dose’, allowing people to produce their own cognitive ‘antibodies’. However, for this, and debunking efforts, following the interventions, there is also evidence of backfiring (increased skepticism



to all claims that are presented or increased acceptance and sharing of misinformation, as well as reduced scrutiny and correction) (e.g., Courchesne et al., 2021; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). In short, intervention attempts to reduce belief in misinformed claims, as defined by the researchers, can have unintended perverse effects that spill over in all manner of directions. This likely indicates problems to do with the interventions themselves as well as the nature of the claims that are the subject of interventions.

Misinformation is claimed to have a competitive advantage over accurate information in the attention economy because it is not constrained by truth (Acerbi, 2019; Hills, 2019) so it framed in sensationalist ways to maximally capture attention (Acerbi, 2019). Hills (2019) highlights that the unprecedented quantities of information available today require increased amounts of cognitive selection, which in turn can lead to adverse outcomes. As people's information acquisition is constrained by their selection processes, they tend to seek out information that is consistent with existing beliefs, negative, social, and predictive. Selecting and sharing information in such manner in turn can lead to adverse effects, for instance a preferentially seeking out and **of** sharing negative information can lead to the social amplification of risks, and belief-consistent selection of information can lead to polarization. These processes in turn shape the information ecosystem, leading, for instance, to a proliferation of misinformation.

In addition, frequent exposure to misinformation is claimed to hinder people's general ability to distinguish between true and false information (Barthel et al., 2016; Burkhardt, 2019; Grant, 2005; Newman et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018) However, methodological concerns have been raised because of overinterpretation of questionnaire responses as indicators of stable beliefs informed by misinformation, as well as the likelihood of pseudo opinions (Bishop et al., 1980), especially since responses can reflect bad guesses by participants in response to unfamiliar content (e.g., Pasek et al. 2015).

### ***2.2.2 Truth, Lies, and Objectivity***

Studies of deception and lie detection provide important insights into the relationship between truth and misinformation, as well as our ability to detect the difference. Meta-analyses show that people's accuracy in lie detection is barely above chance level (Bond & Depaulo, 2006; Hartwig & Bond, 2011, 2014). Even if people can use the appropriate behavioral markers to make judgements about what is true, objective relations between deception and behavior tend to be weak. In other words, catching liars is hard because the validity of behavioral cues to lying is so low.

Not only are we bad at telling the difference between truth and lies in others, we also have a distorted sense of our own immunity to bias and falsehoods, referred to as the objectivity illusion (Robinson et al., 1995; Ross, 2018). Essentially the illusion is expressed in such a way that, if "I" take a particular stance on a topic (including beliefs, preferences, choices), I will view this position as one that is objective. This is because I am objective, and thus can appeal to objectivity as a persuasive mechanism to convince others of my position, along with supporting evidence that is supposedly unbiased. If disagreement with me ensues, and my proposed position is rejected, the rationalisation is that the other side is both unreasonable and irrational. This is a powerful expression of a bias that is centred on justifying a position with reference to objectivity without accepting that it may also be liable to bias, which Pronin et al. (2001) coin as a "biased blind spot". Regardless of political affiliation (e.g., Schwalbe, Cohen, & Ross, 2020), and even profession (e.g., scientists expert in reasoning from evidence; Ceci & Williams, 2018), no one is immune from the objectivity illusion.

Laying the effects of misinformation on distorting cognitions comes with a problem. The fundamental issue is how we establish a normative rule to define criteria that distinguish reliably between truth and falsehood. We need this to be able to say whether or not people can adequately distinguish between the two. But, in a world in which no obvious diagnostic truth

criteria exist, the clichés of how truth and deception or objectivity and bias can be discriminated, are by magnitudes stronger than any normative rule.

### ***2.2.3 Behavioral Effects of Misinformation***

The most commonly referenced behavioral effects pertain to health behaviors in response to false claims (e.g., anti-vaccine movements, speculated vaccine-Autism link, genetically modified mosquitos-Zika, COVID-19) (Bronstein et al., 2021; Galanis et al., 2021; Gangarosa et al., 1998; Greene & Murphy, 2021; Joslyn et al., 2021; Kadenko et al., 2021; Loomba et al., 2021; Muğaloğlu et al., 2022; Van Prooijen et al., 2021; van der Linden et al., 2020; Xiao & Wong, 2020). The same association has also been made between misinformation associated with anthropogenic climate change and resistance to adopting pro-environmental behaviors (Gimpel et al., 2020; Soutter et al., 2020). The effects of misinformation on behavior extend to the rise in far-right platforms (Chen et al., 2021), religious extremism impacting voting behavior (Das & Schroeder, 2021), disengagement in political voting (Drucker & Barreras, 2005; Finetti et al., 2020; Galeotti, 2020), intended voting behavior (Pantazi et al., 2021), and advertising aligned with fake news reports leading to increased consumer spending (Di Domenico & Visentin, 2020; Di Domenico et al., 2021). A further study examined the unconscious influences of misinformation (specifically fake news) in a priming study, demonstrating the direct effects on speed of tapping responses (Bastick, 2021).

Another behavioral effect of misinformation is more interpersonal, and centers on information sharing. First, there are those studies which examine the extent of sharing behavior. Some researchers propose that this is highly prevalent, such as Chadwick et al. (2018) who found that 67.7% of respondents admitted sharing problematic news on social media during the UK general election campaign in June 2017. However, others argue against claims that sharing is a cause for concern (Altay et al., 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Grinberg et al. (2019) found that just 0.1% of Twitter users shared

80% of misinformation during the 2016 US election, while Allen et al. (2020) estimate that misinformation comprises only 0.15% of American's daily media diet. While such estimates should be taken with a grain of salt – because of the problematic basis on which these estimates are made, nevertheless, they do imply that for many citizens the signal-to-noise ratio is fairly high.

But, why would people *not* share misinformation? Altay et al. (2020) show that people do not share misinformation as it hurts their reputation, and would only do so if they were paid. This aligns with Duffy et al. (2019) who found that respondents expressed regret when they shared news that later turned out to be misinformation. In explaining sharing behavior, studies suggest there are message-based characteristics such as its ability to spark discussion (Chen et al., 2015), emotional appeal (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2017), and thematic relevance to the recipient (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Researchers have also argued for social reasons to share misinformation, that is, to entertain or please others (Chadwick et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2019; Pennycook et al., 2021c), express oneself (Chen et al., 2015), inform or help others (Duffy et al., 2019; Herrero-Diz et al., 2020), signal group membership (Osmundsen et al., 2021), social validation (Waruwu et al., 2020), and a fear of missing out (Talwar et al., 2019). Studies show that these motivations can lead people to pay less attention to the accuracy of information because other factors play more of a salient role in the sharing process beyond the content itself (Pennycook et al., 2021c). This reaffirms the fundamental misinformation/disinformation distinction in that sharing misinformation involves unintentional deception driven by interactional motivations, while disinformation stems from intentional deception – with research indicating that there are several motivations for sharing misinformation beyond the goal of deliberately spreading false information to influence others.

Lastly, there are individual differences which increase the likelihood of sharing behavior, and therefore lead to adverse effects of misinformation. For instance, those who believe that knowledge is stable and easy to acquire (epistemologically naïve) are more likely to share online health rumors than those who believe knowledge is fluid and hard to acquire (epistemologically robust) (Chua et al., 2017). Another factor that impacts one's likelihood of sharing misinformation is the need to instill chaos, which arises from social marginalization and an antisocial disposition (Arcenaux et al., 2021). From an ideological and age perspective, conservatives are more likely to share misinformation than liberals, and older generations are more likely to share misinformation than younger age groups (Guess et al., 2019; Grinberg et al., 2019).

#### ***2.2.4 Beliefs, Attitudes, Intentions, and Behavior***

The logic behind studies drawing a causal connection between misinformation and behavior is that misinformation is pivotal to motivating negative behaviors. In other words, if claims that were factually inaccurate had not been encountered, then the harmful behaviors would not have occurred. There are two ways in which this presumed causal relationship between misinformation and behavior can be theorized. Either misinformation introduces new false beliefs and attitudes, and these in turn motivate a particular aberrant behavior, or misinformation reinforces pre-existing false beliefs and attitudes, and strengthens them enough to motivate a particular aberrant behavior (Imhoff et al., 2022; Pennycook & Rand, 2021b; Van Bavel et al., 2021).

Both of these hypotheses rest on there being a reliable relationship between beliefs/attitudes and behavior. Since Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) seminal work, psychologists have been interested in belief and attitude formation, and showing how it is associated with intention and behavior. According to Ajzen's Theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2012, 2020), the principle of compatibility (Ajzen, 1988) requires an explicit definition of the

behavior, the target, the context in which the behavior appears, and the time frame. From this, it is then possible to apply an analysis which determines how each factor (behavior, target, context, time frame) contributes to the target of interest. If applied to the problem of misinformation, we can examine its influence on a behavior of interest. We could formulate the issue such that after encountering some misinformation on social media regarding climate change, when it comes to food consumption (behavior), we could predict that more meat is eaten (target), in a lunchtime canteen (context), and observed within a few days of encountering the misinformation (time frame). The determinants of the intention to act in accordance with the consumptive behavior involve beliefs and attitudes, which in this case are negatively valenced. One can then derive a belief index through the application of an expectancy-value model to calculate the strength of the belief (e.g., climate change denial) multiplied by the subjective evaluation (e.g., negative attitudes to eating sustainably) and the outcome (e.g., not eating sustainably in a lunchtime canteen setting). Critically here, there is a requirement to show how misinformation is instrumental in generating the beliefs and attitudes that can then lead to misbehaviors.

With the exception of the unconscious priming study (Bastick, 2021) none of the cited work examining the association between misinformation (and fake news) and behavior shows a causal link between the two<sup>2</sup>. None of the evidence as yet is able to reveal the kind of relationships needed to reliably establish the cause of behavior via changes in belief along the lines that would be needed according to theoretical accounts such as the ones described here. Why are we making this strong critique? Much of the empirical work relies on self-reports of intentions, judged willingness or judged resistance to behave in particular ways, or else demonstrates correlations between the circulation of misinformation and aberrant behaviors.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth highlighting that through the priming paradigm that Bastick (2021) used, any potential association between misinformation, in their case fake news, and behavior, was finger tapping behaviors. So, it would be hard to infer from this what the effect of fake news is on aberrant behaviors, given that the behavioral measure here was simply finger tapping which in and of itself is not aberrant.

In other words, they are subjective judgments about behavior, not actual direct indicators of behavior. There are some recent meta-analyses that have examined the impact of misinformation on sharing intentions (Pennycok & Rand, 2021b), peoples' beliefs (Walter & Murphy, 2018), and world views (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020), as well as the impact of fact checking on political beliefs (Walter et al., 2020), and people's misunderstanding and behavioral intentions regarding health misinformation (Walter et al., 2021). Again, as yet, none of this work has been able to draw a direct connection between misinformation and specific measurable behavioral effects, aside from intentions to and judgements about willingness to behave in a particular way.

More generally, several meta-analytic studies examine the relationship between different types of beliefs, attitudes, and intentions on behavior (e.g., Glasman, & Albarracín, 2006; Kim & Hunter, 1993; Kraus, 1995; Sheeran et al., 2016; Webb & Sheeran, 2006; Zebregs et al., 2015). On the whole, the reported effects of belief on behavior suggest that there is a relationship, but many authors note that their analyses are limited by the fact that they measure behavioral intentions, not behavior itself (Gimpel et al., 2020; Kim & Hunter, 1993; Xiao & Wong, 2020). In addition, there are weak relationships between beliefs and intentions (Zebregs et al., 2015), and where intentions and behaviors are examined, the effects can also be weak, with many other moderating intervening factors (e.g., personality, incentives, goals, persuasiveness of communication) explaining this weakness (Soutter et al., 2020; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). The observed weak relations are consistent with research on more applied issues. For instance, in health and risk communication it is widely accepted that the mere provision of accurate information is typically not sufficient to induce behavioral change – raising the question of why perceiving false information should be sufficient to induce aberrant behavior.

We return to the issue regarding evidence for the association between misinformation and aberrant behaviors in the concluding section, and how combinations of experimental methods could be used to better locate potential directional relationships between misinformation and behavior.

### **3. Causes of the Problem of Misinformation**

The digital age seems rife with misinformation, which in turn is claimed to lead to several profound societal and individual problems. A comprehensive approach to understanding the causes of these reported effects is therefore required. In essence, this is what we seek to address in this section by answering: why exactly is misinformation a problem given all these apparent effects?

One of the most common candidates to explain the causes of misinformation in its various forms are advances in technologies that produce and distribute information. The information ecosystem (i.e., the technological infrastructure that enables the flow of information across individuals and groups) is the main culprit assumed to drive the problem of misinformation, because it is the critical means by which we now all source information, and has itself been contaminated by misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021b; Shin et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2016). Frequently references are made to affordances of the digital landscape for quick and wide dissemination of misinformation (Celliers & Hattingh, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Moravec et al., 2018; Tambiusco et al., 2020), and claimed to have transformed consumers into producers of information (Ciampaglia et al., 2015; Greifender et al., 2020; Kaul, 2012; Marwick, 2018), and misinformation (Bufacci, 2020; Levi, 2018). Others emphasize that the sheer volume of information now available encourages sharing behavior through online networks (Bessi, 2015) and leads to biased information selection processes with potentially adverse consequences (Hills, 2019).



Technological tools are also seen as facilitating the proliferation of misinformation, such as recommender systems (Fernandez & Bellogín, 2020, 2021), web platforms (e.g., Han et al., 2022) and social media (Allcott et al., 2019; Chowdhury et al., 2021; Durodolu, & Ibenne, 2020; Pennycook & Rand, 2021a, 2021b; Valenzuela et al., 2019b). Also, social media environments allow swarms of bots to disseminate or obscure information (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Moreover, these can also be used to generate Sybil attacks (Asadian & Javadi, 2018), which is where a single entity emulates the behaviors of multiple users, and attempts to create problems both for other users and the network itself. In some cases, sybils are used to make individuals appear affluent to give the impression that their opinions are highly endorsed by other social media users, when in fact this is artificially generated (Ferrara et al., 2016). Thus, not only is the content artificially generated, but features used to judge its reliability, popularity, and interest from others, are also artificially manipulated.

The digitization of media also enables producers of (mis)information to access sophisticated and extremely convincing tools of digital forgery, such as Deepfakes, the digital alteration of an image or video that convincingly replaces the voice, the face and or body of an individual for another (Levi, 2018; Steensen, 2019; Whyte, 2020). Even accurate news of actual events can be distorted as successive users are adding their own contexts and interpretations (Peck, 2020). Opaque algorithmic curation that takes humans out of the loop aims to maximize consumption and interactions, possibly causing virality to take precedence over truthfulness (Rader & Gray, 2015). However, technology also offers ways in tackling misinformation. Bode and Vraga (2018) show how comments on social media are as effective as algorithms in correcting misperceptions, as well as contributing to the development of tools to track misinformation (Shao et al., 2016).

The media landscape has certainly been fundamentally changed by the internet and social media, but historians have also argued that while gossip is a permanent and widespread

feature of social exchanges online, its transmission and diffusion still retains the same core characteristics as pre-internet, pre-telecommunications, pre-writing press (Darnton, 2009; Guastella, 2017; Shibutani, 1966). For instance, Guastella (2017) argues that information has always diffused through an open-ended, chain-like transmission. This hinders the ability to verify any single item of information, because locating the source responsible is by its very nature obscured. In other words, whether it's a rumor in antiquity or present day, communication is frequently disorderly and untraceable. Cultural historian Darnton (2009) offers a different perspective but similar conclusions regarding the role of technology in misinformation. He claims that we are not witnessing a change in the information landscape, but a continuation of the long-standing instability of texts. Information is not more unreliable today because news sources have never corresponded with actual events.

According to these views, while new channels for misinformation have emerged, the conditions in which it is created, and spread have not changed as much as we might think. In fact, viewing misinformation through a historical, as well as philosophical lens, not only sheds light on shifts regarding the medium of information transmission, but also informs how we might view the problem of misinformation in the main. We now turn our attention to this research which explores why misinformation may not be cause for alarm, and the scholars from different disciplines who share this perspective.

### **3.1 Misinformation: Unsounding the Alarm?**

Misinformation is not a new phenomenon (Alcott & Gentzkow, 2017; De Beer & Matthee, 2020; Kopp et al., 2018; Scheufele & Krause, 2019; Waldman, 2017). For instance, fake news was recorded and disseminated through early forms of writing on clay, stone and papyrus so that leaders could maintain power and control (Burkhardt, 2017).

Altay et al. (2021) deconstruct several alarmist misconceptions about the problem of misinformation. One is that misinformation engulfs the internet, specifically social media, and

as a result, falsehoods spread faster than the truth. For example, according to a BuzzFeed report (2016), the top 20 fake news stories on Facebook resulted in nine million instances of engagement (likes, comments, shares) between August and November 2016. However, if all 1.5 billion internet users engaged with one piece of content a week, these nine million instances would only represent 0.042% of all engagements (Watts & Rothschild, 2017). Also, fact-checking and science-based evidence were found to be retweeted more than false information during the pandemic (Pulido et al., 2020). If, as some have claimed, misinformation has always existed as an inherent feature of human society (Acerbi, 2019; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nyhan, 2020; Pettegree, 2014), then the current focus on its presence online may reflect methodological convenience as to where it can be measured more easily (Tufekci, 2014), overlooking misinformation on television, newspapers, and the radio.

Another misconception is conflating the volume of content engagement with content belief. Reasons for engaging with misinformation are numerous, from expressing sarcasm (Metzger et al., 2021) to informing others (Duffy et al., 2019), and, thus, inferring acceptance from consumption can exaggerate the negative effects of misinformation (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Consumption of information is informed by prior beliefs (Guess et al., 2019, 2021), which suggests that it isn't strictly instrumental in the generation of new false beliefs. People aren't necessarily misinformed but may simply be uninformed, which is also where pseudo-opinions can emerge (Bishop et al., 1980), and so this is an important distinction that needs to be made (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Luskin et al. (2011) observed that 90% of surveys lack a 'don't know' response which increased the likelihood of an incorrect answer by 9%.

These misperceptions suggest that concerns around misinformation exceed what can be inferred from the available evidence, as well as the causal link between misinformation and behaviors (Scheufele et al., 2021). This is also why, as Krause et al. (2022) argue, we aren't in

an ‘infodemic’ – a term that was frequently used during the COVID-19 pandemic, which refers to the alleged surplus of false information (WHO, 2022). Our complex information ecology presents a challenge for disentangling the relationship between misinformation and behavior, and science itself grapples with the volatility of the evidence base as it develops (Osman et al., 2022); determining what constitutes misinformation is therefore frequently akin to shifting sand.

From a more historical perspective, Scheufele et al. (2021) show that the worry regarding the current circulation of misinformation neglects examples predating the advent of digitization of information. The emergence of communication studies in the United States in the 1920’s is perceived to be the result of concerns over the aberrant influence of the media (Wilson, 2015). Concern about new media technologies were seen as responsible for the growing disconnect between what people believed and the real world in the 1920’s (Lippman, 1922). Panics also arose in reaction to the arrival of telegraphy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Van Heekeren, 2019)<sup>3</sup>. Before that, after the invention of the printing press in 1440 granted open access to knowledge, concerns from the Catholic Church resulted in the 1560 publication of the Index of Forbidden Books. In all such attempts to sound the alarm, and then address the alarm around technologies offering greater access of information to the populous, failure ensued – because ideas continue to circulate even once speech is restricted (Berkowitz, 2021). Only when we consider misinformation through a historical lens can we learn that the current situation is arguably preferable, but admittedly still problematic, compared to previous information eras (Van Heekeren, 2019). This is because, as touched on earlier, traditional media can learn from the past and focus on verification and fact-checking as a way to reassert

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<sup>3</sup> The arrival of a global telegraph network using cables, wires and relay stations connected people from around the world. However, in 1858, three days after the first successful test of the cable that linked North America and Europe, an article was published in *The New York Times*: “So far as the influence of the newspaper upon the mind and morals of the people is concerned, there can be no rational doubt that the telegraph has caused vast injury.” In 1961, an article in the *Times* argued that people “mourn the good old times when mails came by steamer twice a month.” (LaFrance, 2014).

their authority. Furthermore, digital media has devised means of increasing the likelihood of self-correction due to the number of debunking and fact-checking websites.

The discussion in this section presents obstacles for the argument that technological advances lead to misinformation which, in turn, has a range of negative ramifications. Nonetheless, if this position is pursued, one might ask: *How, then can we make sense of why misinformation is perceived to be a problem?* We address this question with reference to historical epistemology, which is concerned with the process of knowing. We argue that knowledge is currently guided by the concept of objectivity – and its associated objects such as statistics and DNA – but this is a recent development because knowledge has previously been guided by other concepts, such as subjectivity via objects like rhetoric. Thus, how we arrive at ground truth is not as stable as we may assume. As a result, this suggests that the worries around misinformation are rooted in a perceived shifting away from norms of objectivity and empirical facts.

It is helpful to begin with the emergence of *rhetorike* – the art of public speaking (Sloane, 2001). As Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* dictates, rhetoric was believed to communicate, rather than discover, truth through ethos (trustworthiness), logos (logic) and pathos (emotion). Thus, the primary vehicle for both ancient philosophy and rhetoric was orality which, according to Guastella, (2017), meant that information was engulfed by the disorderly and unstable flow of time. Chirovici's (2014) work on rumor throughout the ages also reveals our tendency to relegate the veracity of a story in favor of stirring the listener's imagination. This is exemplified in Grant's (1995) research, which shows how historical writing in antiquity contained numerous instances of misinformation. For example, Roman historian Titus Livy was known for embellishing his accounts such that scholars debated whether he should be regarded as a novelist rather than a historian. According to Grant, Titus Livy was motivated to build his

depictions of events on blatantly fictitious legends. The upshot of the oral tradition was a series of historical accounts that were incomplete, untrustworthy, or entirely false.

During the Middle Ages, the process of establishing knowledge transformed with the emergence of the modern fact (e.g., Shapiro, 2000; Poovey, 1998; Wootton, 2015). Before the 13<sup>th</sup> century, written records regarding one's financial affairs were kept secret, stored away in locked chests with other important documents such as heirlooms, prayers and IOUs (Poovey, 1998). However, Poovey (1998) observes that double-entry bookkeeping by merchants was a catalyst for the development of a new 'epistemological unit' otherwise known as the modern fact. This had two repercussions: (1) private information became a vehicle for public knowledge; (2) the status of numbers was elevated such that they were now positively associated with accuracy and precision, rather than negatively associated with supernaturalism and symbolism. Wootton (2015) also refers to the critical role of double-entry bookkeeping in the mathematization of the world. The value of numerical descriptions produced new standards of evidence that focused on accurately measuring natural phenomena, and precisely characterizing objects for practical use (Winchester, 2018).

The arrival of the printing press solidified a shift in the meaning of knowing (Wootton, 2015). In doing so, facts occupied the new cornerstone of knowledge and became synonymous with truth. The assumption that facts have always been integral to knowledge is evidenced by their use as a reference point for ground truth among those attempting to manage and detect misinformation (e.g., Hui et al., 2018; Rashkin et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2016; Tambuscio et al., 2015). Once facts became embedded in public discourse, the role of rhetoric faded. This is best reflected in the Royal Society's new motto in 1663 'nullius in verba' meaning 'take nobody's word for it.' (Wootton, 2015). As Bender and Wellbery (1990, p. 15) succinctly observe: 'Rhetoric drowned in a sea of ink'. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, knowledge stemmed from an objective

relationship between an individual and the natural world in the form of measurements and facts. Crucially, knowledge could now be widely communicated to a growing literate public.

This historical and philosophical research on misinformation, as well as studies by researchers from other disciplines (e.g., Altay et al., 2021; Berkowitz, 2021; Krause et al., 2022; Van Heekeren, 2019) are distinct from the work earlier reviewed. This alternative position regards misinformation as neither new or especially concerning, and is treated as part and parcel of a variety of linguistic and communication styles that impact every aspect of the way in which we encounter information. So, if we take the position that the problem is not novel, and the way we use information to establish ground truth is never entirely stable, then what else could be causing the current concern over misinformation? The work of those reviewed in this section, (particularly - Altay et al., 2021; Krause et al., 2022), set out the foundations for us to propose our position on why misinformation is perceived to be a problem.

## **3.2 Intersubjectivity**

### ***3.2.1 The Heart of Our Argument***

If we condense the critical issues of misinformation into the following, then academic literature, traditional news media (e.g., BBC, Reuters, CNN) and public policy (e.g., European Commission, WHO, World Economic Forum) are sounding the alarm because the digital information ecosystem allows everyone to generate and distribute misinformation. Technological advances have not only increased access to better quality information, but at the same time resulted in a corrupt ecosystem that enables a greater supply of poor information – which in turn has even greater potential for negative impacts on behavior offline.

We pose the following argument: information technological advances over the past few decades increased the transparency of interactions between people. Simply observing people interact with each other online is not an issue in and of itself. However, by exposing these interactions, current information systems pave the way for a simple and erroneous inference.

The vast volume of interactions must also mean there are more opportunities for people to deviate from objectivity, because they can more easily coordinate beliefs about the world between each other (intersubjectively). In other words, there is a perception that intersubjectivity is emerging as a new way of knowing, and this threatens established (though historically fairly young) norms of objectivity. This leads to a tension between ground truths that are established through traditional institutions and agents that are typically considered authorities presiding over ground truths, and the processes (e.g., via social media) used to establish knowledge outside of these institutions. The problem of misinformation as conceptualized by those sounding the alarm is therefore the perceived misalignment between lay people's coordination efforts for interpreting entities, and mechanisms for objectively establishing these entities.

We argue that the currently available evidence does not support a clear link between beliefs generated or reinforced through misinformation and aberrant behavior. The dynamics of belief formation are far more complicated. In addition, even if intersubjectivity does replace objectivity as the primary way of knowing, research demonstrates that our relationship with epistemic concepts (e.g., objectivity, belief, probability) and objects (e.g., metrology, statistics, rhetoric) has been dynamic throughout history. In that way, desiring a pre-internet era suggests recovery from such current shifts in knowing to some point in time where misinformation was less of a problem, but when was that? Lastly, some coordination between the scientific community is required to determine what evidence meets the criteria of objectivity, because it doesn't happen on its own outside of group consensus. In the next section we expand on what we mean by intersubjectivity and how it can be a useful conceptual device for understanding why there is such alarm associated with misinformation.

### ***3.2.2. Tensions Between Intersubjectivity and Objectivity***



We define intersubjectivity as a coordination effort between two or more people to interpret entities in the world (ideas, events, people, observations) through social interaction. Our definition of intersubjectivity is informed by prior definitions proposed in philosophy (Schuetz, 1942), economics (Kaufmann, 1934), psychology (William James, 1908), psychoanalysis (Bernfeld, 1941), psycholinguistics (Rommetveit, 1976) and rhetoric (Brummett, 1976). The core idea of intersubjectivity, according to Brummett (1976), is that meaning arises from our interactions. Specifically, he argues there is no objective reality in that sensations, perceptions, beliefs, experiences are meaningless. Rather, it is our experiences with other people that imbues these sensations, perceptions, beliefs and other constructs of knowing with meaning, namely emotional valence, and moral judgements.

How does this contrast with objectivity? According to Reiss and Sprenger (2020), observations are objective if they are: (1) based on publicly observable phenomena; (2) free from bias; and (3) accurate representations of the world. There is not only consensus on how these observations should be made and interpreted, but this information and the ways by which it is obtained are made visible for scrutiny (e.g., in the form of academic publications.) This signals that the information has met the necessary standards whilst simultaneously reinforcing them. Crucially, if these observations do meet the criteria, they are regarded as contributing to knowledge. Objectivity converts observations into ‘facts’ which have become synonymous with ground truth, and this functions to reduce uncertainty about the world. Indeed, the fact-as-truth sense developed from the fact-as-occurrence sense (Poovey, 1998).

### ***3.2.3 Intersubjectivity as a Candidate for Why Misinformation is a Big Problem?***

So, why is intersubjectivity supposedly replacing objectivity, and why is this a cause for concern with respect to misinformation? In terms of the first question, given social media is inherently about connecting people, the number of visible interactions is potentially vast. Regarding the second question, the concern is that intersubjectivity is free from the formal rules

of generating objective truths. In short, it looks like more people are going at it alone in establishing knowledge, and this has now been better exposed through advanced information technologies. Anyone can now participate because the affordances encourage intersubjective knowledge production and sharing. Intersubjectivity hampers the influence of facts to accurately understand the world leading to an uncontrollable breeding ground for misinformation, which then produces more aberrant behaviors.

In addition, intersubjectivity can appear like a good candidate for generating misinformation and there is research suggesting that social relationships and interactions, rather than objective methods, are at the foreground of knowledge. Kahan (2017) draws on Sherman and Cohen's (2002) identity protective cognition, which argues that culture is both cognitively and normatively prior to fact. He uses this theory to explain his findings that people are more likely to hold misconceptions if they are consistent with their values. Similarly, Oyserman and Dawson (2020) argue that during the UK referendum in 2016, people used simple identity-based rather than complex information-based reasoning to inform their voting decision. According to Margolin's (2021) theory of informative fictions, there are two types of information in any exchange: property information (object-focused) and character information (agent-focused). Misinformation therefore occurs when people prioritize character information despite the negative impact on property information. These ideas are also reflected in Pennycook et al.'s (2021c) study which found that while people care about the accuracy of the information that they share with others, signaling political affiliation is more important due to the social media context.

#### ***3.2.4. Perceived Intersubjectivity as a Candidate for Why Misinformation is a Big problem***

We each have a vast network of social ties, each with its own strengths (strong/weak) and valences (positive/negative), which complicates the likelihood of what claims are believed and for how long for two reasons. First, our relationships to others are not static but are susceptible

to transformation during an interaction. Second, if a claim is circulating widely, whether it's in a community or on a news website, then it becomes available for negotiation across a multitude of interactions with individuals. There are two consequences: (1) an individual's likelihood of believing a claim is an aggregate of their interactions; (2) the interpretation of an entity (e.g., observation of the world) is constantly in flux. These consequences make intersubjectivity a candidate for explaining why there is so much alarm about the proliferation and consequences of misinformation. But, on the other hand, intersubjectivity also helps to expose why this perception is potentially illusory.

Knowledge can emerge from an interaction, but an interaction or sharing of false information does not equate to evidence that knowledge has been fundamentally negatively impacted. Conflating the diffusion of information with its adoption is problematic because engagement, through likes or shares, does not automatically mean belief (Altay et al., 2021). The billions of interactions we see online (Boyd & Crawford, 2012), whether they contain misinformation or not, may seem concerning but do not necessarily reflect all agents' inner state of mind (Bryanov & Vziatysheva, 2021; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019).

Intersubjectivity does not subscribe to the transparency of objectivity. While scientific methods are explicitly designed to distinguish between competing hypotheses and, ideally, truth and falsehood, intersubjectivity lacks this normative appeal. However, this does not mean that social-negotiation processes of generation and transmission can't have their own corrective mechanisms, and draws attention to consequential, and potentially false, claims that require scrutiny. An example of this is the Reddit thread [ChangeMyView](#), where individuals post their argument about a claim, and asks users to change their mind (e.g., "Influencers are not only pointless, but causing active harm to society.", "Statistics is much more valuable than trigonometry and should be the focus in schools."). On occasions, this is seemingly successful

as indicated by the individual's response to the proposed counterarguments, and research has been conducted into the language of persuasion in this thread (e.g., Musi, 2018; Priniski & Horne, 2018; Wei et al., 2016).

Intersubjectivity in public debate, especially in the absence of simple ground truths, can resemble features of scientific discourse (Brummett, 1976; Trafimow & Osman, 2022). Statistics, which are widely regarded today as a window to ground truth, were initially doubted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, precisely because they were treated as another tool of rhetoric masquerading as irrefutable, legitimate evidence (Coleman, 2018). Thus, the emergence and eventual domination of statistics incorporated an element of coordination and negotiation among scientists to establish it as a valid representation of and inference mechanism for observations of the world.

While one might be tempted to consider objectivity and intersubjectivity as mutually exclusive, they both feature in the scientific selection of ideas (Heylighen, 1997). A recent example was when various hypotheses regarding the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic were ruled out because they were initially regarded by many in the scientific community as conspiratorial, but later ruled back in as valid hypotheses (Osman et al., 2022). This demonstrates how knowledge and claims can be in flux as they are interpreted by different agents. It also highlights the difficulties of being objective on a topic where the evidence is accumulating in real time and for which political factors try to steer what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate investigation. Moreover, there is a historical precedent for censorship where authorities of experts (scholars, journalist, politicians) assert themselves in order to address the destabilization of epistemological foundations, especially when it presents an existential as well as political threat (Berkowitz, 2020). Such strategies therefore serve to maintain not just power but perceived order in the world. Intersubjectivity and objectivity, while different, can

and have coexisted in the past, which offers reassurance to those who are concerned that intersubjectivity is causing chaos in the form of misinformation (Krause et al., 2022).

Lastly, there needs to be a consistent way in which deviations from ground truth are managed. If researchers see the present situation as more problematic than ever before, it indicates that pre-internet society was preferable and had recovered from past shifts in the value of epistemic concepts. In other words, if the present is contrasted with the past to highlight the current problem of misinformation, then there needs to be an acknowledgment that the past shifts, which caused great concern to those at the time, were not as problematic as now. Just because past shifts have not been problematic, this does not mean that future shifts will also be non-problematic. It is just that there is a lack of evidence that objectivity has been displaced by intersubjectivity to the extent it is the current default mode of knowing, and that misinformation arising from this way of knowing impacts behavior. While we do not deny the possibility that misinformation may be a serious problem at some point, it seems premature to reach this diagnosis at the moment.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In reviewing the perceived problem of misinformation, we found that many disciplines agree that the issue is not novel, but that modern technology generates unprecedented quantities of misinformation which exacerbate its potential to cause harm both on the individual and societal level. The hyperconnectivity of today's information and (social) media landscape is seen as facilitating the generation and distribution of misinformation. In turn, this leads to a perceived increase in establishing world views intersubjectively, which deviates from the epistemic objectivity heralded by traditional institutions and gatekeepers of knowledge and truth. We have proposed our own analysis on the fundamentals of the problem of misinformation, and through the lens of intersubjectivity provided a conceptual framework to argue two essential points.

First, today's informational ecosystem is the mechanism by which we can observe transparently the multitude of interactions that it hosts. Seeing the volume of daily interactions in, for instance, social media networks, leads to the inference that more people are deviating from truth, because they can better coordinate their own subjective knowledge of the world outside of established facts – i.e., intersubjectively. We argue that simply because technology is increasing the number of visible interactions this does not necessarily entail anything profoundly new about the status of epistemic objects. The interactions people have when sharing what they think and feel is not equivalent to evidence that epistemic objects in and of themselves have changed. This is what we propose explains why misinformation is viewed as an existential threat. Along with this, in our view, the current evidence is also not sufficient to justify this conclusion because correlation is often viewed as causation.

Second, historical epistemology exposes what is often ignored: the generation of knowledge is a process of establishing conventions for what is the best way to arrive at ground truths. We make this point from a realist, not relativist, perspective. There are objective facts. Nonetheless, as historical epistemology shows, while there is an absence of stable diagnostic criteria for ground truth, the mechanism by which objective facts are acquired, characterized, and communicated, has changed over the course of human history. This is what we propose explains why misinformation cannot be examined without recognizing that distortion forms any act of communicating truth.

#### **4.1 What Does Future Work on Misinformation Need to Consider?**

Future work needs to address three key issues. First, it must show that misinformation in a particular context of interest has the widespread potential to establish or significantly strengthen related beliefs in a considerable manner. This is important because the internet and social media may seem rife with misinformation, but reliable estimates on its prevalence and impact on recipients are hard to come by (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Altay et al., 2021). Thus,

precisely mapping the (social) media landscape to gauge the extent of the problem is an important first step in understanding its potential impact on individuals' beliefs and public discourse. Of course, even if the sheer amount of misinformation is small compared to legitimate information, it might still have severe impact on people's beliefs and attitudes, as well as their evaluation of evidence. Again, however, it can be debated to what extent misinformation influences the public's beliefs on a large scale (e.g. British Royal Society, 2022). Thus, the jury is still out regarding the severity of the problem.

A second key issue concerns the role of misinformation in societally harmful behaviors and whether misinformation constitutes a major factor in individuals' actions. The assumption is that there is a direct causal link between the prevalence and consumption of misinformation, and subsequent harmful behaviors. To date, however, this link has not been sufficiently demonstrated and further research is required into this issue (see below).

Third, when evidence for misinformation leading to harmful behavior at the individual and societal level can be reliably shown, a critical question is what tools and strategies are best suited to address the problem. This issue resonates with broader discussions surrounding behavior change techniques in general (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017; Osman et al., 2020), as well as in digital environments (Kozyreva et al., 2020; British Royal Society, 2022), and their limited efficacy in generating reliable behavioral change (e.g., Osman et al., 2020; Trafimow & Osman, 2022). As well as this, regulatory mechanisms that organizations can resort to serve as more substantial approaches to addressing misinformation, which we discuss in more detail later in this section.

#### **4.2 Approaches to Investigating Causal Links Between Misinformation and Behavior**

A key question for science, policy making, and public debate is the nature and strength of the relation between misinformation and behavior. Sometimes a simple causal chain of the form misinformation → beliefs → aberrant behavior is presumed. This is despite the following:

(a) a weak empirical basis; (b) deep conceptual problems arising from neglecting the dynamics of belief generation, as well as the changing status of what is deemed, by consensus of various authorities, as illegitimate and legitimate claims (e.g. Osman et al., 2022); (c) complex relations between beliefs and behavior. Another line of argument to support the presumed causal relation between misinformation and aberrant behavior is to refer to major events, (e.g. the speculated role of mis- and disinformation spread before the Jan 6<sup>th</sup> 2021 riots in the US capitol). We emphasize the importance of documenting and carefully analyzing such cases, as well as their relevance to academic, political, and public debate. At the same time, we think that such events do not constitute, on their own, a sufficiently robust evidence base for guiding policy making. Just as cases of adverse side-effects after a vaccination require further examination and call for large-scale studies to assess the magnitude of the problem, we call for more systematic research on the relations between the consumption of misinformation and resulting behaviors. This is also of importance to gauge the severity of the problem, identify key mechanisms and vulnerable areas, and take appropriate means to limit its consequences.

If for misinformation to be the cause of aberrant behavior, it needs to either reinforce or introduce false beliefs, future investigations could draw from established methods examining belief conviction (especially of false beliefs) and choice-blindness (Hall et al., 2013). In the clinical domain, work shows how individual differences account for the strength in maintaining false and delusional beliefs in light of contrary evidence (e.g., Combs et al., 2006). This is informed by deconstructing measures of beliefs to examine the association between the belief and conviction in it. As their starting point, beliefs are treated as multifactorial, along with how they are used, which in combination help to develop measurement tools of belief conviction (Abelson, 1988). Items examine strength in, length of time, frequency of thoughts about, personal importance of, personal concern in, and willingness to commit personal time in pursuit of beliefs (e.g. Conviction in delusional beliefs scale



(CBDS), Combs et al., 2006; Brown Assessment of beliefs Scale, Eisen et al., 1988). Work shows that combining these into metrics of conviction can be useful predictors of individual differences in the durability of attitudes and beliefs over time, whether they are false or true beliefs (Lecci, 2000). Why is this important? Using measurement tools that expand the way beliefs are characterized is one important way to gauge the extent to which encountering misinformation should be a cause for worry. Given that, even if, by association people hold false beliefs, they may have next to no conviction in them. But where they do have conviction, this is a predictive factor as to whether they will later act on the false beliefs they hold.

By extension, the choice-blindness paradigm is another way of examining conviction, and has often been used to examine strength in policies that persuade people to affiliate with, and vote for particular political parties (e.g., Hall et al., 2013; Strandberg et al., 2019). The paradigm presents people with various political issues (e.g., gun control, abortion, immigration, tax reform), and asks them to indicate where on a scale they align (e.g., strongly for tax increases on gas to strongly against tax increases on gas). Then through sleight of hand, some responses on the scale are changed to the opposite of the participant's original position. Participants are then asked who they would vote for, while also reviewing their (doctored) positions on political issues. The paradigm reveals that people often don't correct the change, but where they do this is predicted by the original extremity of their initial position. This paradigm offers a way to show where some beliefs that appear to be significant are in fact fragile and can be easily flipped in a simple manipulation, but where others are in fact stable particularly when they are extreme. The extent to which people are discerning about their own beliefs and the conviction in them, then the choice blindness paradigm is another way to detect this. If taken together with work from studies on belief conviction in the clinical domain, then this suggests efforts to examine the link between misinformation and behavior should concentrate on specific groups that already hold extreme beliefs because they are already likely

to be stable over time (e.g., Stile et al., 2017). They are likely to be held with conviction – that is they are already liable to be acted upon. As a strong test of the causal link between misinformation and behavior, the starting point is to expose the extent to which new misinformation, that elaborates on or reinforces extreme false beliefs, then generates aberrant behaviors. From this it would be possible to determine whether a new unit of misinformation is the tipping point to instigating aberrant actions, independent of the propensity to act on already held beliefs with conviction, that by necessity need to be held stably over time to motivate behavior.

Social level approaches to investigating the problem of misinformation focus on large scale units of behavior (e.g., markets, distrust in traditional news media, polarization, voting behavior) to show how misinformation has aggregate effects. It is even harder then, to avoid overly interpreting correlation as causation at such a broad level. One approach to address this would be multidisciplinary, building on historical, sociological, linguistic, and philosophical disciplines to consider how the accumulation of particular claims shape the collective narratives of the populous, some of which could be misinformed. Correspondingly, methodological and theoretical approaches in cultural evolution, which investigate the mechanism of cultural transmission (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981), could simulate the evolution of beliefs across populations over time (Efferson et al., 2020; McKay & Dennett, 2009; Norenzayan & Atran, 2003). Adopting such approaches would help to offer a first pass at investigating mechanisms, at group level, that shape and change how some beliefs (false or otherwise) are preserved and strengthen over time and why others fail to survive. An agreed set of behaviors would need to be mapped onto this to determine the relationship between the transmission of beliefs (false or otherwise) across populations and corresponding changes in behavior over the same period, isolated from other potential contributing factors (e.g. economic, geopolitical). While again, we would need to acknowledge that this wouldn't

determine how any one misinformation claim can directly cause a change in behavior, it would help to show how on aggregate, claims of a particular kind become popular, and how, on aggregate, they contribute to the formation of narratives that people in their day to day lives use to frame their beliefs about the world. The analysis of the formation of narratives could compare those formed in news media or on social media platforms with those formed in day-to-day face-to-face interactions in social gatherings. It is likely that political, economic and social narratives will over time depart from each other or converge in new media, social media and social interactions offline.

### **4.3 Regulatory Responses to Misinformation**

Possible tools to address misinformation include restricting freedom of speech through governmental or private institutions (e.g., removing content or banning people and institutions from social media platforms), fact checking tools and related means to debunk misinformation, as well as strategies to ‘inoculate’ people against the influence of misinformation. Nonetheless, many of these tactics, such as content moderator jobs, require interpretation and agreement as to what distinguishes legitimate information from misinformation (Heldt, 2019). Moreover, to what extent are such methods justifiable? That measures are adequate and effective is of particular relevance because the foundation of an open and free society is diversity in thought, world views, and values. Naturally, this implies mutual respect for opinions and actions even if in the face of disagreement and even if they conflict with scientific consensus – if someone holds the belief that the earth is flat or avoids walking under a leaning ladder to prevent bad luck, they have the right to do so. In which case, what are the criteria for holding illegitimate beliefs, without, for instance, reference to criminal acts?

Freedom of speech and expression is a universal human right in many countries, but it rarely, if ever, is absolute. Society operates within common limitations of free speech and expression that include defamation, threat, incitement, libel and matters of public order or

national security. Typically, justifications of these limitations refer to the *harm principle* (Mill, 1859): the premise that freedom of expression and actions of an individual can only be rightfully restricted to prevent harm to others. Tacitly, the harm principle also underscores much of the current debate on misinformation: the assumption that the surge of misinformation is, at least probabilistically, a cause of actions that are harmful to others and society. Thus, a critical question is: To what extent does the generation and distribution of misinformation, when linked to societally harmful actions, justify regulatory measures and legislative actions that limit freedom of speech on top of the current restrictions that exist?

When it comes to dealing with scientific misinformation (as opposed to strictly illegal content, such as child pornography or violent extremist propaganda) there is both doubt about the effectiveness of such measures and worries that they could backfire, for instance by further increasing distrust towards governmental regulations or scientific institutions (British Royal Society, 2022). Indeed, prohibiting the expression of an idea does not eliminate its darker influence on knowledge, and shows how some authorities think they are worthier of expressing themselves than others (Berkowitz, 2020). Controlling the flow of information assumes that traditional institutions are generally immune from making errors, and this in turn can have backfiring effects on the level of trust that citizens have in them.

Outside of our own analysis of the problem of misinformation, even if we subscribe to the view that it is an existential threat, then what regulatory action is taken to address the problem still needs to be informed by robust evidence. For this reason, we considered what the issues are that research needs to address, and what methodological approaches could offer new insights into the problem of misinformation. Our position is that candidate interventions that regulation adopts should aim at empowering people and helping them to navigate both traditional and online information landscapes without posing the risk of eroding the foundations of an open and democratic society.

Finally, an issue not addressed in this review is the moral imperative that underpins much of the concern around misinformation. The logic goes something like this: there is truth, however defined, and deviating from truth is morally reprehensible, given the potential it has for creating aberrant behaviors. A deeper analysis is required about the new moral landscape we face that encourages simple assignments as to who is virtuous for believing a particular view, and who is bad for believing otherwise. More to the point, if the moral imperative is used to justify punitive actions, then are the grounds for this based on having a false belief, or acting in an immoral way? While it might be the case that aberrant behaviors are informed by false beliefs amongst many other factors, as we have tried to argue, false beliefs are not often stable, and even if they are, they do not inevitably lead to aberrant behavior.

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