



Universität  
Zürich<sup>UZH</sup>

Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ)

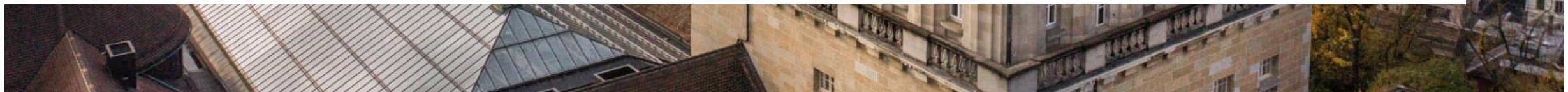
Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society (fög)



# **Beyond Misinformation: Perception, Reality, AI, and the Challenge of News Deprivation**

March 13, 2026 | Aarau Democracy Days

Prof. Dr. Mark Eisenegger



# Misinformation – Dominant Framing

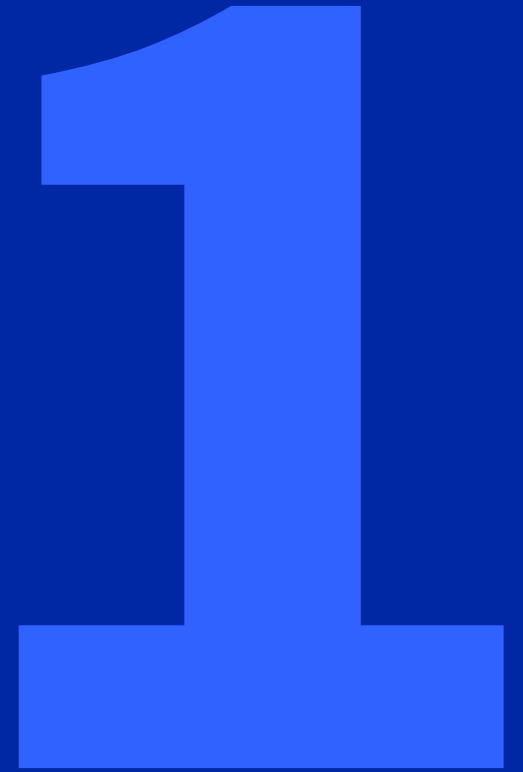
- Misinformation is widely framed as a major threat to democratic systems
- Strong presence in political, media, and policy debates (for example: WEF, EU)
- Growing public concern across many Western democracies
- Question: Does empirical evidence support this sometimes «alarmist» narrative?

# Research Questions

- How extensive is the actual exposure to misinformation?
- How does perceived threat compare to measured «reality»?
- Are we focusing on the most consequential societal information problem?

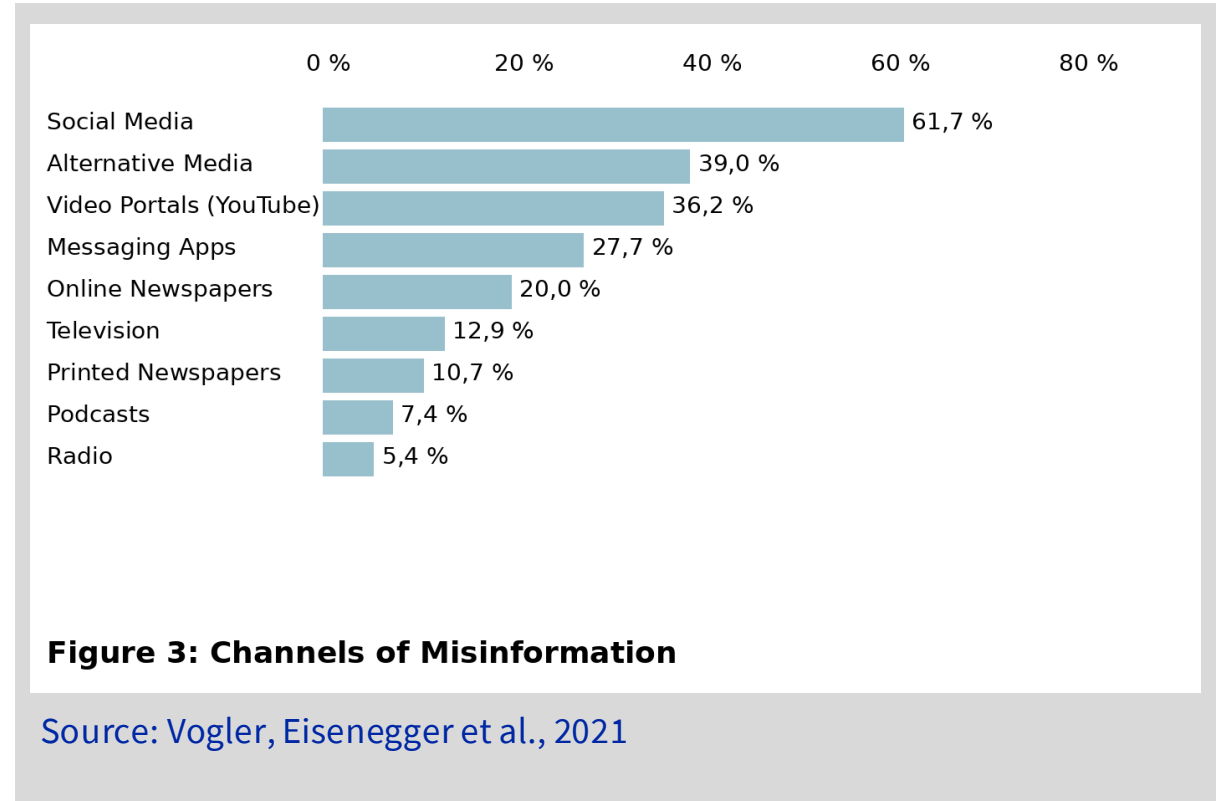


# Perception versus Actual Exposure



# Perception Studies: High Levels of Concern

- Survey research shows widespread perception of a major misinformation problem (Vogler et al., 2021; Van der Meer & Hameleers, 2024)
- Social media are identified as the primary source (Vogler et al., 2021)
- Misinformation is widely perceived as having serious consequences, for example for trust in democratic institutions (McKay & Tenove, 2021; Hameleers et al., 2020)



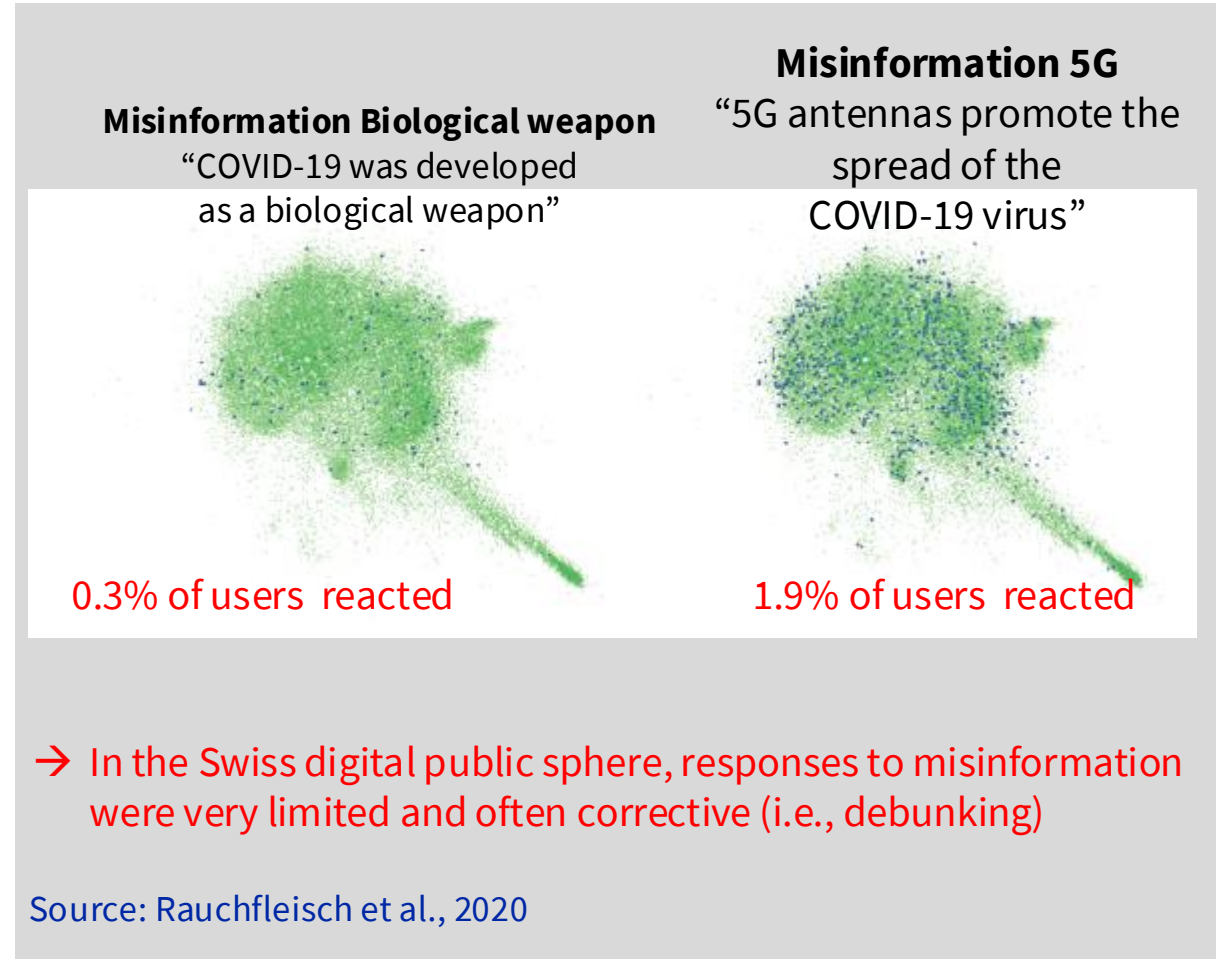
# Tracking Studies – Show a More Differentiated Picture

- Tracking studies estimate misinformation exposure by tracking users' online behavior and measuring exposure to misinformation sources
- Empirical tracking data indicates relatively low exposure to misinformation
- Discrepancy between perceived prevalence and measurable exposure to misinformation

<b>USA</b>	<b>1% to 6%</b> of users' online <b>news exposure</b> comes from misinformation ( <a href="#">Amier et al., 2025</a> ; <a href="#">Acerbi et. al, 2022</a> ; <a href="#">Grinberg et al., 2019</a> ; <a href="#">Guess et al., 2020</a> ; <a href="#">Osmundsen et al., 2021</a> )
<b>USA</b>	<b>0.2%</b> of users' online <b>overall media exposure</b> comes from misinformation ( <a href="#">Allen et al., 2020</a> )
<b>USA</b>	<b>6%</b> of users' <b>news exposure on Facebook</b> comes from misinformation sources; ( <a href="#">Amier et al., 2025</a> )
<b>France</b>	<b>5%</b> of users' online <b>news exposure</b> comes from misinformation ( <a href="#">Acerbi et al., 2022</a> )
<b>Germany</b>	<b>1%</b> of users' online <b>news exposure</b> comes from misinformation ( <a href="#">Acerbi et al., 2022</a> )

# Concentration of Exposure

- Exposure to misinformation is highly uneven: a small minority of users accounts for most exposure (Budak et al., 2024; Christner et al., 2025; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2020)
- A minority accounts for a disproportionate share of interaction with misinformation (Christner et al., 2025; Guess et al., 2020)



# Exposure Does Not Equal Persuasion

- Encountering misinformation does not automatically imply belief or persuasion ([Guess et al., 2020](#))
- Ignorance, scepticism or debunking are common responses to misinformation ([Rauchfleisch et al., 2020](#))
- Effects are conditional on existing attitudes and motivations ([Osmundsen et al., 2021](#); [Petersen et al., 2018](#))
- Caution against premature causal interpretations: Alarmism can have downstream effects, for example can decrease dissatisfaction with democracy ([Jungherr & Rauchfleisch, 2024](#))

# Vulnerability Factors



# Individual-Level Vulnerabilities

... to believe and disseminate misinformation




- Motivated reasoning and confirmation bias ([Zeng & Brennen, 2023](#); [Schmitt, 2024](#))
- Political dissatisfaction and institutional distrust ([Osmundsen et al., 2021](#); [Zeng & Brennen, 2023](#))
- Ideological extremism and populist attitudes ([Dahlke & Hancock, 2025](#); [Guess et al., 2020](#); [Osmundsen et al., 2021](#); [Törnberg et al., 2025](#))
- Harming perceived «enemies», opponents ([Petersen et al., 2018](#))

# Societal-Level Vulnerabilities

... e.g., how much misinformation is circulating

- Degree of societal polarization (Humprecht et al., 2020; Osmundsen et al. 2021)
- Media system quality and public trust in journalism (Humprecht et al., 2020; Frischlich & Humprecht, 2021)
- Societal crises and heightened uncertainty (Adam et al., 2025; Loomba et al., 2021)
- Influence of political elites and high-reach media in the amplification and diffusion of misinformation (Budak et al., 2024)

## Cross-country differences in societal resilience to misinformation

Resilience Factors			
Polarization	High	Low	High
Media trust	Low	High	Low
Reach Public Service Media	Average	High	Low
Reach Social Media in Relation to News	Average	Low	High
Populism	High	Average	High

(Humprecht et al., 2020)

# Artificial Intelligence and Misinformation



# Risks of AI

- AI lowers barriers to the creation of deepfakes; increasing difficulty in recognizing them ([Karaboga et al., 2024](#))
- AI enables large-scale, automated, and adaptive dissemination via coordinated agents (“AI swarms”) ([Schroeder et al., 2025](#))
- AI can increase the persuasive potential of misinformation and propaganda ([Goldstein et al., 2024](#); [Hackenberg & Margetts, 2024](#))

# Potential of AI

- AI can support fact-checking and verification ([Si et al., 2024](#))
- AI can assist with debunking and corrections in “conversational” settings with chatbots ([Lee & Fussell, 2025](#))

# Reframing the Core Problem

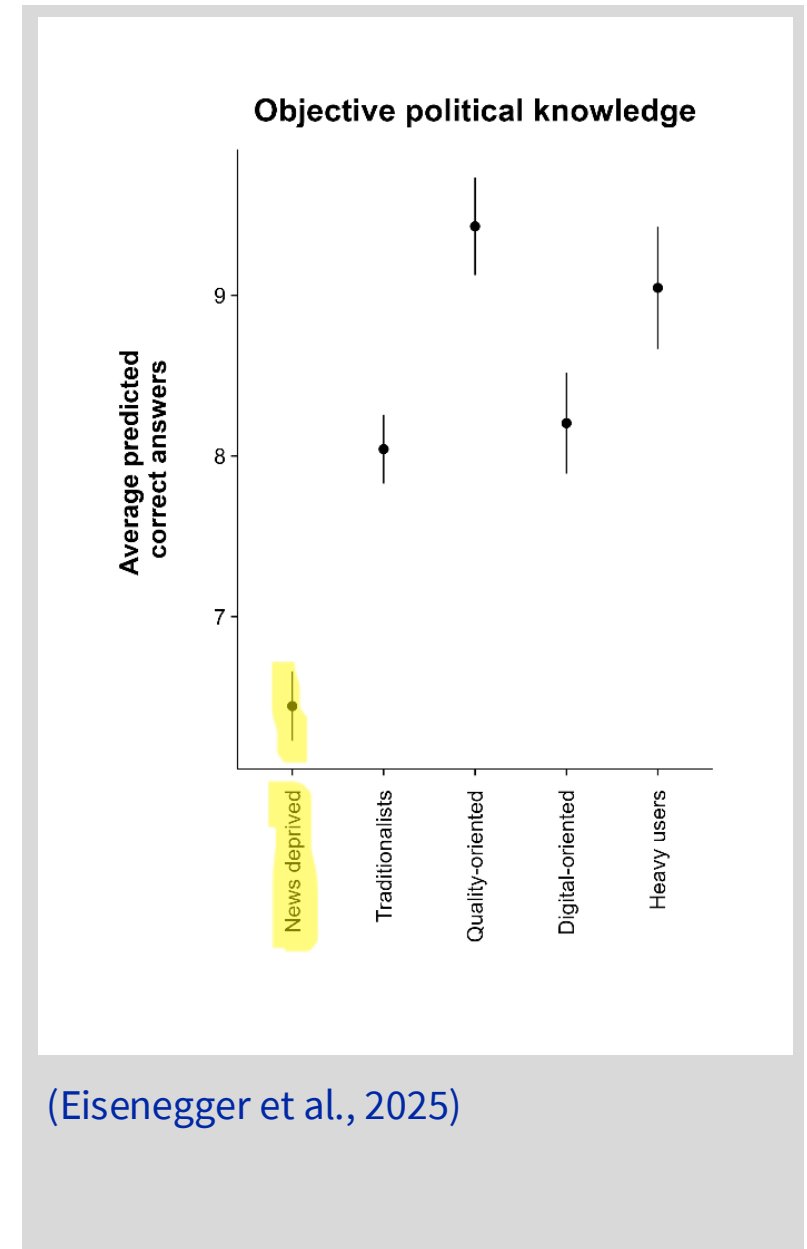
# 4

# Beyond Misinformation: The Concept of News Deprivation

- Difficulty in distinguishing between the “misinformed” and the “uninformed” – both reflect a lack of knowledge ([Scheufele & Krause, 2019](#))
- Increasing levels of news deprivation, i.e., little or no news consumption ([Eisenegger et al., 2026](#))
- In many Western countries exposure to professional news journalism is declining ([Skovsgaard & Andersen, 2020](#); [Toff et al., 2023](#))

# Democratic Implications of News Deprivation in Switzerland

- Lower political knowledge
  - Reduced democratic participation
  - Lower trust in politics and established news media
  - Lower democratic sense of community (Eisenegger et al., 2025)
- Lack of exposure to reliable news, may be more harmful to the information environment than exposure to misinformation (Acerbi et al., 2022)



**Conclusion**

5

# Key Takeaways

- Misinformation is a relevant but sometimes overstated phenomenon
- A gap exists between perceived threat and the empirically measured exposure
- AI may amplify the scale and sophistication of misinformation, potentially increasing future risks
- News deprivation represents an additional and significant risk to the information environment
- Increasing exposure to reliable information (i.e. journalistic quality news) may improve the information environment more than anti-misinformation interventions alone ([Acerbi et al., 2022](#))

# Thank you for your attention!

Prof. Dr. Mark Eisenegger  
Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society (fög), University of Zurich  
Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ), University of Zurich  
Andreasstr. 15  
CH-8050 Zurich, Switzerland

[m.eisenegger@ikmz.uzh.ch](mailto:m.eisenegger@ikmz.uzh.ch)

[www.foeg.uzh.ch](http://www.foeg.uzh.ch)

# Literature

- Acerbi, A., Altay, S., & Mercier, H. (2022) 'Research note: Fighting misinformation or fighting for information?', Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review, 3 (1), pp. 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-87>
- Allen, J., Howland, B., Mobius, M., Rothschild, D., & Watts, D. J. (2020). Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. Science advances, 6(14), eaay3539
- Budak, C., Nyhan, B., Rothschild, D. M., Thorson, E., & Watts, D. J. (2024). Misunderstanding the harms of online misinformation. Nature, 630(8015), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w>
- Christner, C., Makhortykh, M., & Gil-Lopez, T. (2025). Populist radical-right attitudes, media trust, and social media reliance: Combining survey and tracking data to investigate predictors of online exposure to disinformation. Telematics and Informatics, 98, 102250. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2025.102250>
- Dahlke, R., & Hancock, J. (2025). Untrustworthy Website Exposure and Election Beliefs: Selective Exposure and Ideological Asymmetry. Journal of Online Trust and Safety, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v3i1.250>
- Eisenegger, M., Vogler, D., Ryffel, Q., Udriș, L., Rieser, R., & Schneider, J. (2025). II. Wissen ohne Nachrichten? Wie News-Deprivation mit Wissen, demokratie-relevanten Einstellungen und dem Informationsverhalten zusammenhängt. Schwabe Verlag, 29. [https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:6fd74360-2b91-4e74-b0ef-fc39294510af/IB\\_2025\\_Studie\\_II\\_Newsdeprivation&Wissen\\_final.pdf](https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:6fd74360-2b91-4e74-b0ef-fc39294510af/IB_2025_Studie_II_Newsdeprivation&Wissen_final.pdf)
- Frischlich, L., and E. Humprecht. 2021. Trust, Democratic Resilience, and the Infodemic (Issue February). Tel Aviv: Israel Public Policy Institute. <https://www.zora.uzh.ch/server/api/core/bitstreams/ba46ae42-2212-4148-8987-47709971be4d/content>
- Goldstein, J. A., Chao, J., Grossman, S., Stamos, A., & Tomz, M. (2024). How persuasive is AI-generated propaganda? PNAS Nexus, 3(2), pgae034. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae034>
- Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Science, 363(6425), 374–378. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706>
- Guess, A. M., Lockett, D., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020). “Fake news” may have limited effects on political participation beyond increasing beliefs in false claims. Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-004>

# Literature (2)

- Hackenburg, K., & Margetts, H. (2024). Evaluating the persuasive influence of political microtargeting with large language models. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(24), e2403116121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2403116121>
- Hameleers, M., T. G. L. A. van der Meer, and A. Brosius. 2020. “Feeling “Disinformed” Lowers Compliance with COVID-19 Guidelines: Evidence from the US, UK, Netherlands and Germany.” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*
- Humprecht, E., Esser, F., & van Aelst, P. (2020). Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1, 194016121990012. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219900126>
- Jungherr, A., Rauchfleisch, A. Negative Downstream Effects of Alarmist Disinformation Discourse: Evidence from the United States. *Polit Behav* 46, 2123–2143 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09911-3>
- Karaboga, M., Frei, N., Puppis, M., Vogler, D., Raemy, P., Ebbers, F., ... & Rovelli, S. (2024). Deepfakes und manipulierte Realitäten. *Technologiefolgenabschätzung und Handlungsempfehlungen für die Schweiz. TA-SWISS Publikationsreihe (Hrsg.): TA*, 81, 2024.
- Lee, T.-H., & Fussell, S. R. (2025). Countering Misinformation in Private Messaging Groups: Insights From a Fact-checking Chatbot. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 9(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3701189>
- Loomba, S., A. de Figueiredo, S. J. Piatek, K. de Graaf, and H. J. Larson. 2021. “Measuring the Impact of COVID-19 Vaccine Misinformation on Vaccination Intent in the UK and USA.” *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (3): 337–348.
- McKay, S., & Tenove, C. (2021). Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy. *Political Research Quarterly*, 74(3), 703–717. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>
- Osmundsen, M., Bor, A., Vahlstrup, P. B., Bechmann, A., & Petersen, M. B. (2021). Partisan polarization is the primary psychological motivation behind political fake news sharing on Twitter. *American political science review*, 115(3), 999-1015. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000290>
- Schroeder, D. T., Cha, M., Baronchelli, A., Bostrom, N., Christakis, N. A., Garcia, D., ... & Kunst, J. R. (2026). How malicious AI swarms can threaten democracy. *Science*, 391(6783), 354-357. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adz1697>

# Literature (3)

- Skovsgaard, M., & Andersen, K. (2020). Conceptualizing News Avoidance: Towards a Shared Understanding of Different Causes and Potential Solutions. *Journalism Studies*, 21(4), 459–476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1686410>
- Petersen, M. B., M. Osmundsen, and K. Arceneaux. 2018. “A “Need for Chaos” and the Sharing of Hostile Political Rumors in Advanced Democracies.” 114th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August, 1–42.
- Rauchfleisch, A., Vogler, D., & Eisenegger, M. (2020). Wie das Coronavirus die Schweizer Twitter-Communitys infizierte. *fög* (Ed.), *Qualität der Medien: Jahrbuch*, 61-75.
- Toff, B., Palmer, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Avoiding the news: Reluctant audiences for journalism*. Columbia University Press.
- Törnberg, P., & Chueri, J. (2025). When Do Parties Lie? Misinformation and Radical-Right Populism Across 26 Countries. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Article 19401612241311886. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612241311886>
- Van der Meer, T. G. L. A., & Hameleers, M. (2025). Perceptions of misinformation salience: a cross-country comparison of estimations of misinformation prevalence and third-person perceptions. *Information, Communication & Society*, 28(4), 575–596. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2024.2375256>
- Vargiu, C., & Nai, A. (2025). AI chatbots can persuade voters to change their minds. *Nature*, 648(8093), 287–288. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-025-03733-x>
- Vogler, D., Schwaiger, L., Rauchfleisch, A., Marschlich, S., Siegen, D., Udris, L., Eisenegger, M., & Schneider, J. (2021). Wahrnehmung von Desinformation in der Schweiz. <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-210613>
- Vogler, D., Rauchfleisch, A., & Schwaiger, L. (2024). The System Is Corrupted, and the Mainstream Media Is Lying to us! Exploring the Relation Between Affinity Toward Conspiracy Myths and Alternative News Media Usage. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 36(1), Article edad044. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edad044>