

My Reality Is More Truthful Than Yours: Radical Right-Wing Politicians' and Citizens' Construction of "Fake" and "Truthfulness" on Social Media—Evidence From the United States and The Netherlands

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Although a growing body of literature has provided important insight into the conceptualization and consequences of mis- and disinformation, we know little about the construction of communicative (un)truthfulness online. Because (partisan) attributions of dishonesty and inaccuracy may influence citizens' political opinions, and because accusations of fake news can be used to delegitimize political opponents and the media, it is important to understand how politicians and citizens construct different versions of (un)truthfulness. We specifically look at how (radical) right-wing populist politicians and citizens attribute antimedia and anti-elite sentiments in digital media settings. Against this backdrop, this article relies on two qualitative content analyses in the United States and The Netherlands to understand how discourses around (1) the epistemic status of facts and (2) inaccurate and (3) dishonest information are constructed by (radical) right-wing populists and citizens participating in Facebook discussions. The results provide important insights into the resonance of the expression of (un)truthfulness with perceptual screens and hostile media perceptions.

Keywords: disinformation, hostile media perceptions, misinformation, motivated reasoning, partisanship, right-wing populism

In recent years, debates on the veracity and honesty of information in the digital communication environment have intensified. Some even describe today's society as "postfactual" or "posttruth" to emphasize that factual knowledge is increasingly debated by various actors, such as (radical right-wing) politicians and citizens (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012; van Aelst et al., 2017). In this setting, the construction of reality and accusations of dishonest or inaccurate information are crucial to consider. Hence, mis- and disinformation not only refer to untrue or dishonest content, but also relate to the process by which different actors can delegitimize the media or attack political opponents. In this article, we understand constructions and perceptions of mis- and disinformation as the ways in which politicians and citizens accuse or label sources and information as inaccurate or deliberately dishonest (also see Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

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Delegitimizing the media and accusing the establishment of deliberately misleading the people align with populist communication tactics (e.g., Krämer, 2018; Tambini, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Populist ideology emphasizes a Manichean worldview in which the corrupt elites are juxtaposed with the ordinary people (Mudde, 2004). Populist discourse focuses on conflict and dramatization, and it circumvents expert knowledge. These features of populism are in conflict with principles of quality journalism, which strives toward verification, balance, and truth-seeking (Waisbord, 2018). Because accusations of inaccurate and dishonest media reporting align with populism's antagonistic and anti-elitist worldviews, populist politicians may be more likely than their mainstream competitors to criticize the media and the political establishment for spreading lies and inaccurate information. Although this does not imply that media criticism and accusations of mis- and disinformation are restricted to the communication of right-wing populist actors, we focus on the specific ways in which these actors attribute mis- and disinformation. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on mis- and disinformation, or Fake News, as a label to delegitimize political opponents or the media, and it inductively analyzes in what ways constructions of truth and references to untruthfulness are used by right-wing populist politicians and citizens to convey different versions of reality.

As a starting point in understanding how mis- and disinformation are constructed by different actors, this article investigates how (right-wing) populist politicians and citizens communicate competing partisan discourses of truth and fake news. More specifically, in today's communication era of postfactual relativism, different interpretations or versions of reality may coexist and be communicated as truthful or false depending on the ideological perceptions of politicians and citizens. To provide in-depth insights into the construction of reality and accusations of mis- and disinformation, this article relies on two comparative qualitative content analyses. The first study investigates the nature of direct communication of (un)truthfulness communicated by two polarizing, right-wing populist politicians: Donald Trump in the United States and Geert Wilders in The Netherlands. The second study focuses on the demand side of postfactual relativism: How do citizens themselves construct reality, and how do they communicate their perceptions of reality and dishonesty online?

In the next sections, theoretical insights on mis- and disinformation will be extrapolated to the construction of mis- and disinformation by politicians and citizens. Next, empirical insights detailing how right-wing politicians (Study 1) and citizens (Study 2) in The Netherlands and the United States attribute mis- and disinformation via social media will be presented. Overall, this article aims to provide insights into how different actors use mis- and disinformation as a delegitimizing label to construct a partisan version of reality whilst discrediting opposed truths.

Revisiting Fake News: Toward a Distinction Between Mis- and Disinformation

Although the term *Fake News* has received ample attention in recent years, it may be an inaccurate and misleading description of communicative untruthfulness. To arrive at a more precise conceptualization of communicative untruthfulness, we need to distinguish between mis- and disinformation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017). *Misinformation* can be defined as inaccurate information that is spread without the intention to mislead receivers (Hameleers & Van der Meer, 2019; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Misinformation is thus simply false information, which can refer to any information that is incorrect or deviates from facticity.

Disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of fabricated, decontextualized, or manipulated information to achieve a certain (political) goal (Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle, 2017). Agents of disinformation may, for example, spread inaccurate information on the causal responsibility of the government in order to augment political distrust among citizens. Different actors may be involved in the dissemination of disinformation. Ordinary citizens or “troll armies” may be involved in the spread of intentional falsehoods to push a certain political agenda (Johnson, 2018). Politicians may spread disinformation to attack their political opponents, and they may deceive the electorate to augment support for their own party and issue positions. Finally, journalists and media producers themselves can spread falsehoods to maximize attention or to promote the ideological or issue positions of their own (anti-elitist) outlet.

Accusations of mis- and disinformation can also be used to strategically delegitimize opposed politicians and (established) media sources. When information is labeled as untrue or inaccurate, voters’ distrust and cynicism may be fostered. Accusations of disinformation further include an attribution of manipulative intent and emphasize that the actor spreading falsehoods is doing so to mislead citizens. Although both attributions of mis- and disinformation may thus be used to strategically attack opposed sources, the type of accusation differs. Therefore, to comprehend the scope of attributions of inaccuracy and dishonesty, we need to distinguish between accusations of mis- and disinformation.

Together, we do not look at mis- and disinformation as the actual facticity or honesty of (political) communication, but rather as a rhetorical device or label to delegitimize (opposed) sources of information or statements (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Here, it should be emphasized that although we cannot directly reveal the strategies underlying politicians’ media criticism, accusations of mis- and disinformation more likely mirror a (political) strategy than an actual perception. Hence, accusing the established press and political order for being dishonest can be seen as a strategy to shift blame and delegitimize attacks.

Attributions of Mis- and Disinformation by Right-Wing Populists and Citizens

Theoretically, we expect that accusations of fake news align most with the communication tactics of (right-wing) populist actors (Krämer, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tambini, 2017). Populism has a specific discursive relationship to (un)truthfulness. In populist rhetoric, the ordinary people are seen as truthful and honest, whereas the elites are referred to as the lying other, or dishonest enemies of the people (Waisbord, 2018). By communicating this antagonistic worldview, the establishment, including mainstream media, is blamed for deliberately hiding reality from the people. For this reason, it is relevant to consider whether (right-wing) populist actors in particular communicate accusations of mis- and disinformation and, if so, how. More specifically, in line with (mostly theoretical) literature that has claimed that attacking the media and elitist constructions of reality aligns with the discourse of (right-wing) populist politicians and citizens with more pronounced populist worldviews, we aim to provide inductive insights into the specific construction of mis- and disinformation by these actors.

We specifically focus on social network sites (SNSs) as a platform from which mis- and disinformation can be expressed by politicians and citizens. The affordances of SNSs allow (populist) politicians (Engesser et al., 2017) and citizens (Hameleers, 2019) to communicate discourses of (un)truthfulness, and accusations of mis- and disinformation more specifically. SNSs allow politicians and

citizens to circumvent the elite media they claim to distrust while establishing a relationship to the “honest” ordinary people without the interference of elitist media channels. We specifically look at Twitter for the communication of populist politicians because this channel has been regarded as the most popular media for (Western) populists to get their message across (Jacobs & Spierings, 2019), and we look at Facebook for the communication of citizens because this platform allows the nonelitist many-to-many communication of citizens who participate in online discussions on societal issues. Here, it should be noted that these platforms are influential in the countries under study: The Netherlands and the United States. For other regions and populist actors (e.g., in India or China), other platforms may be more relevant to consider.

Because attributions of mis- and disinformation may be used strategically to promote partisan versions of the truth by delegitimizing opposed interpretations and political actors, it is important to consider the extent to which attributions of mis- and disinformation resonate with the political agendas and ideological lenses of politicians and citizens.

Perceptual Screens in a Postfactual Media Environment

Partisan ideologies and issue attitudes may play an important role in how reality is contrasted to mis- or disinformation. If we regard attributions of mis- and disinformation as (political) strategies used to delegitimize incongruent realities, confirmation biases play a central role. Confirmation biases imply that congruent information is approached and likely to be accepted uncritically, whereas incongruent information is more likely to be avoided or discredited (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020). Preexisting identities, ideological perceptions, or issue attitudes may thus act as a filter: Mis- or disinformation is more likely to be attributed to sources and statements that do not fit people’s perceptual screens. In this article, we understand perceptual screens as filters by which certain information or sources are seen as trustworthy or regarded as mis- or disinformation based on the predispositions or ideological identity of politicians or citizens.

Here, it is important to distinguish perceptions from expressions. Although perceptual screens may guide perceptions of reality and (un)truthfulness, this article more specifically looks at how mis- and disinformation are expressed as accusations voiced by (political) actors. In this setting, we consider whether and how constructions of mis- and disinformation are targeted at opposed partisans and politicians or citizens with conflicting ideological perceptions. Hence, if we regard accusations of mis- and disinformation as a strategy to discredit and delegitimize opposed (political) actors, it is important to consider how they connect to different ideological identifications.

In the United States, studies on motivated reasoning and misinformation have mainly defined perceptual screens as partisanship or ideological identifications (e.g., Stroud, 2008; Thorson, 2016). Hence, Democrats and Republicans may find information supporting their party as more credible than information from the opposed party, even if such information is devoid of expert knowledge or empirical evidence. This may correspond to how mis- and disinformation are attributed: Opposed partisans are more likely to be blamed for spreading dishonest or inaccurate information than fellow partisans. Politicians’ and citizens’ perceptual screens may thus play an important role in how they express themselves online: Favored parties and statements are credited, and opposed perceptions and actors are blamed.

Partisan and ideologically informed attributions of mis- and disinformation are likely to be different for a multiparty compared with a bipartisan political setting. In the multiparty system of The Netherlands, for example, perceptual screens may differ across issues. Hence, the Dutch government consists of parties with different ideological leanings (it is not just a right-wing or left-wing government)—which also means that they represent citizens with different perceptual screens. In this setting, confirmation biases may be contingent on issue positions (i.e., being in favor of immigration) rather than a more clear ideological perceptual screen (i.e., being a liberal). Yet, it remains an open question whether different compositions of perceptual screens have an impact on how politicians and citizens construct discourses of reality and mis- and disinformation. Against this backdrop, we can formulate the first research question on the interconnectedness of perceptual screens and perceptions of dis- and misinformation:

RQ1: How are mis- and disinformation constructed and attributed in relation to perceptual screens of politicians and citizens in the United States and The Netherlands?

Biased Media Perceptions and Attributions of Mis- and Disinformation

Although different versions of reality may be expressed to confirm preexisting attitudinal screens, another important factor to consider is hostile media perceptions (e.g., Choi, Yang, & Chang, 2009; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Hostile media perceptions can be defined as partisans' perception that the media demonstrate a bias against their views and thus that the media and the information presented to partisans disproportionately take the side of opposed partisans (e.g., Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001).

Such hostile media perceptions can be connected to constructions of mis- and disinformation. The hostile media phenomenon (HMP) posits that partisans classify information as misleading and/or dishonest—because it is disproportionately supporting the opposed camp. The HMP brings together partisan media interpretations and attributions of mis- and disinformation. Hence, mis- and disinformation constructions typically go beyond general media critique or attributions of deliberate misleading: Sources and (political) information are seen as inaccurate (misinformation) or deliberately misleading (disinformation) because they are biased in voicing disproportionate support for the opposed political camp. Accusations of mis- and disinformation thus resonate with hostile media perceptions because media practitioners are blamed for distorting or decontextualizing reality by favoring one perspective (i.e., the perspective of the opposed party) over the other perspective salient in society—even though the actual content may be neutral in tone. Against this backdrop, we can formulate the second research question of this study:

RQ2: How are constructions of mis- and disinformation by citizens and politicians in the United States and The Netherlands informed by biased and hostile perceptions of the media?

Method

To answer the research questions of this article, existing data sets of politicians' Twitter communication and citizens' Facebook communication were used (Hameleers, 2018). First, the Twitter communication of two (radical) right-wing (populist) politicians was studied inductively: Donald Trump in

the United States, and Geert Wilders in The Netherlands (Study 1). Because they are assumed to both frequently communicate their antimedia sentiments to a large audience of international followers (i.e., Trump has 55+ million followers on Twitter, and Wilders' tweets reach beyond national borders), it can be argued that the discourse of fake and truth communicated by these politicians has important political consequences. Second, because social media afford direct, ungated access to channels of many-to many communication of nonprofessional communicators, this article studies the discourse around mis- and disinformation by citizens expressed on Facebook (Study 2).

Data Collection and Sample

Politicians' antimedia discourse may become more prominent around election periods because they may strategically discredit challenging sources of information to raise cynicism among the electorate. Right after the elections, however, the media can also be blamed for having affected the electoral outcome by negatively steering public opinion. For this reason, the sample frame includes both an election and routine period of social media coverage in the United States and The Netherlands. In The Netherlands, Wilders' Twitter activity was sampled in a period beginning two months before the election and ending two months after (ranging from January 17, 2017, to May 17, 2017), and a four-month routine period (September 1, 2018 to December 1, 2018). The same sampling strategy was applied in the United States, yielding a sample frame between September 8, 2016, and January 8, 2017, for the election period. To minimize the biasing influence of real-life developments affecting public opinion, the same routine periods were used in the United States and The Netherlands.

Different social media platforms are relevant to consider. Community formation on Twitter may be based on weak ties, whereas Facebook members are more likely to communicate through strong ties (Valenzuela, Correa, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018). This provides an important distinction between discursive opportunity structures for politicians vis-à-vis citizens. More specifically, Twitter may provide a platform for the spread and reception of novel information through individuals who do not necessarily know each other (Valenzuela et al., 2018). Twitter is thus more likely to be used for politicians' one-sided communication to their followers (also see Jacobs & Spierings, 2019, for an application to populist communication). Facebook, on the other hand, may reinforce linkages between people who already know each other in real life, thus connecting people based on strong ties. For this reason, this article analyzes Twitter posts to understand the direct communication of politicians, and Facebook posts to analyze citizens' discourse.

The inclusion criteria were informed by the sensitizing concepts of this study—references to the truth, inaccuracy, dishonesty, or manipulation of the information environment—and the intentions of such perceived dishonesty guided the qualitative analysis. Two dimensions were thus central: references to *facticity* and references to perceived *manipulative intent*. Statements did not have to explicitly refer to the term *Fake News*, and mis- and disinformation were seen not only as a discourse targeted at the media, but also as a label to delegitimize politicians and experts (they can also refer to signaling that political communication by opposed partisans is dishonest or deliberately false). The inclusion criteria aimed for maximum variety on statements on facticity and intentional dishonesty, which means that we aimed to sample as many alternative ways of referring to mis- and disinformation as possible from different sources. We did not limit the sample frame to certain topics, events, or actors.

The final sample size was determined by a cyclic-iterative process of data collection and analyses, which corresponds to the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This means that the collection of new data stopped when theoretical saturation was achieved, which was judged by comparing novel data with developed themes. New data were also collected outside the specified election and routine sample frames and were used to explore whether alternative periods would result in different dimensions. This was not the case. In both countries, the core elements of postfactual discourse were similar in different periods.

When new Facebook or Twitter posts did not reveal new dimensions in the data or variation on the main themes, no additional data were collected. The sample frame was not specified by certain topics, issues, or debates. For Study 1 (Twitter data), 1,462 posts sent via Trump's official Twitter account were included in the final analyses. In total, 1,374 posts from Wilders' Twitter account disseminated in the same period were included. These tweets were selectively coded on references to truth and fake news, and the subsample of relevant tweets was coded line by line (247 in the United States and 185 in The Netherlands).

Analyses

The process of data reduction was structured by steps from the grounded theory approach (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During the first step, open coding was used to label the rich data with more or less unique themes. The sensitizing concepts related to the foregrounded conceptualization of mis- and disinformation and perceptual screens were used during this coding step. These concepts are reality, truth, dishonest, misleading, bias, Fake News, (in)accurate, deception, lying, liar, enemy, truthful, untrue, and false. After labeling all text with open codes, these codes were merged, abstracted to a higher level, and grouped during the second step of focused coding. Here, we aimed to capture all variety in the data related to the research questions, while reducing repetition and overlap in the codes. Finally, axial coding was used to connect themes using theoretically meaningful linkages. To provide an example, accusations of disinformation were connected to different levels of distrust in media elites and perceived media bias. The coding process revealed a hierarchical structure of themes and indicators. To offer some context on the dominance of the different themes, the salience of the main themes on the highest level of abstraction is reported as a proportion of the communicated posts.

Data Quality Checks

The rich, interpretative nature of qualitative data does not suit traditional tests of intercoder reliability typically used in quantitative content analyses. However, it is important to assess the credibility and transferability of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013). First, 10% of all data were independently coded by a second researcher unfamiliar with the data structure and theoretical premises. The core themes were compared with the themes established by the primary researcher. Although there were differences in classification and labeling, both coders reached agreement on the main dimensions and the ways of constructing mis- and disinformation. As a second data check, established themes and interpretations were validated by members of the studied population—in this case, people who were part of similar Facebook groups sampled in this study. These member checks revealed that people perceived the same core themes in the discourses around truth and postfactual relativism as established in this research.

Results Study 1

Based on the findings of the qualitative content analysis in the United States and The Netherlands, we can identify four main themes of constructing discourses of truth and fake news in Wilders' and Trump's discourse: (1) cultivating the epistemic divide between the hard truth and ignoring the facts (11.6%); (2) prioritizing the people's will and experiences over elitist interpretations of reality (6.3%); (3) attributing blame to the media for being inaccurate, biased, and dishonest (21.7%); and (4) accusations of disinformation: revealing the hidden agenda of dishonest political opponents (18.6%). Although a detailed quantification of the themes moves beyond the scope of the qualitative analysis, the proportions indicate two main trends: References to (un)truthfulness are very common in the direct communication of (radical) right-wing politicians (58.2% of their direct communication contains at least one reference to one theme), and accusations of untruthfulness are frequently targeted at the news media and political opponents. The results indicate that accusations of mis- and disinformation are equally salient, and there are no substantial country differences in the dominance of the delegitimization strategies of both political leaders. The four inductively identified main themes are not mutually exclusive, which means that one single post may contain different references to (un)truthfulness based on the core themes.

Cultivating the Epistemic Divide Between "Our" Hard Truth and Those Ignoring the Facts

First, both Trump and Wilders clearly expressed a sense of distrust in allegedly "factual" information. Trump, for example, referred to unfavorable poll outcomes as "Fake News" or blamed actors for spreading "made up facts." In The Netherlands, Wilders frequently emphasized how political leaders are ignoring reality by denying factual information: "More Islam means more terror. I say it for more than 10 years. Ignoring the truth is lethal. Defend our freedom. De-Islamize the West" (Wilders, 2017). Wilders frequently accuses the political elites of being blind to the real problems facing the Dutch people: "Dutch political leaders are weak and blind and weak leaders in EU-countries are political responsible for terror attacks because they ignore Islam as the cause and import more and more" (Wilders, 2017). According to Wilders, the blindness of the elites and the failure to disseminate the "real" truth to the people have severe political consequences: "The truth about the Islam has to be told. Otherwise, we will all die" (Wilders, 2018).

An important difference between discourses of untruthfulness in the United States and The Netherlands is that in the United States, the denial of the hard facts and the failure to disseminate the truth are not assigned to the political establishment, but to the media elites—in Trump's discourse,

While the disgusting Fake News is doing everything within their power not to report it that way, at least three major players are intimating that the Angry Mueller Gang of Dems is viciously telling witnesses to lie about facts & they will get relief. (Trump, 2017)

Overall, compared with Wilders, Trump referred less explicitly to the epistemic status of the truth and (political) actors looking away from the hard facts. Different from Wilders, Trump attributed the divide between lies and the untold hard truth to the media: "Stories that should be good, are bad. Stories that should be bad, are horrible. Many stories, like with the REAL story on Russia, Clinton & the DNC, seldom get reported. Too bad!" (Trump, 2017).

Answering RQ1, both Trump and Wilders discredited alleged factual information that did not support their perceptual screens, while they emphasized that the hard, factual reality was ignored by the elites—in Trump’s case, the media elite, and in Wilders’ case, the political elite. This ignored, untold version of reality supported the issue positions of both political leaders, who claimed that looking away from reality harmed the interests of the ordinary people. Politicians thus discredited information that did not support their views, and they delegitimized actors who spread information that contradicted their issue positions. For these politicians, reality and truthfulness were selectively assessed based on the fit with political ideologies and profiles.

Prioritizing the People’s Will and Experiences Over Elitist Interpretations of Reality

Both Wilders and Trump claimed to represent the voice and will of the ordinary people. Wilders, for example, emphasized that the voters are in charge of the country and that they should not trust the prime minister: “The voters are in charge of this country, Mark [prime minister], absolutely no one can trust you these days” (Wilders, 2017). Moreover, Wilders claims that his Freedom Party is the only party that represents the true will of the ordinary citizens, indicating that the other parties do not speak on behalf of the people and ignore their lifeworld.

In the United States, Trump emphasized that the lies sold by the media and, in the period preceding the election, Clinton are “poisoning” the minds of American voters: “100% fabricated and made-up charges, pushed strongly by the media and the Clinton Campaign, may poison the minds of the American Voter. FIX!” Moreover, Trump frequently referred to results of public opinion polls to emphasize that the people’s experiences reflect the hard truth. However, only those statistics and polling outcomes that supported the perceptual screen of Trump and his supporters were shared. The same selective truths were expressed by Wilders, who selectively shared outcomes that supported his anti-elite and anti-Europe sentiments: “BOMBSHELL NEXIT POLL: More than half of Dutch voters now want to LEAVE the European Union.”

Both Trump and Wilders expressed their closeness to the “real” people, indicating that their leadership and policies would represent their will and would therefore also restore honesty and accountability. As Trump emphasized, “My contract with the American voter will restore honesty, accountability & CHANGE to Washington!” In The Netherlands, Wilders frequently cultivated a populist divide between the ordinary people and the failing, corrupt elites. In doing so, he also stressed that the current government is completely ignoring the ordinary people and the “real” experiences of this in-group: “Why is there no attention for the ordinary men and women? It is so unfair. All billions go to Africa, but not to the true people. It is disgusting.”

When referring to the status of factual information, both Trump and Wilders referred to common sense, thereby communicating that some things are true simply because they are “plain and simple.” As Trump says, “Plain & Simple: We should only admit into this country those who share our VALUES and RESPECT our people” (Trump, 2016). Although Wilders referred to common sense less explicitly, the overall reliance on fact-free discourse without using empirical evidence or expert opinion underlines the epistemic construction of reality by Wilders: The reality is out there to be seen directly, and we do not need (biased) experts to verify this.

In light of RQ1 and RQ2, the results indicate that both Trump and Wilders selectively shared those “truths” related to the common sense of the people—as long as these realities confirmed the positions of the political leaders. Media and politicians who did not share the hard facts related to the people’s experiences were seen as biased, and blamed for ignoring the people’s will and opinions. The tweets communicated by Trump and Wilders thus provide insights into the HMP in a postfactual era: Political actors and media elites are accused of being biased against the views and experiences of the ordinary people.

Attributing Blame to the Media for Being Inaccurate, Biased, and Dishonest

Beyond accusations of misinformation, both Wilders and Trump frequently emphasized that the media are dishonest, deliberately distorting reality to sell their own untrue storylines. Hence, the political actors predominantly referred to disinformation or intentional deception when attacking the elites. More so than Wilders, Trump blamed the media explicitly for being dishonest: “Very little pick-up by the dishonest media of incredible information provided by WikiLeaks. So dishonest! Rigged system!” Trump emphasized that the media cannot be trusted because they deliberately distort reality: “Never in the history of our Country has the ‘press’ been more dishonest than it is today.”

Wilders regards the media as part of the corrupt establishment that is alienated from reality: “Dear elites of the media and mainstream politics. These days, no one is trusting you anymore” (Wilders, 2018). Wilders also compares the broadsheet newspapers *NRC* and *Volkscrant* to the North Korean media: “The difference in censorship between *NRC* and *Volkscrant* and North-Korea is, in style and content, minimal. Losers” (Wilders, 2018). Wilders even regards some of the media as betrayers of the Dutch culture: “For the culture betrayers of the NOS [Dutch broadcaster]: this is what Black Pete looks like!” (Wilders, Twitter, 2018).

In both Wilders’ and Trump’s references to the inaccurate, biased, and dishonest media, a strong perception of hostile media perceptions and confirmation biases (RQ1, RQ2) can be revealed: Media channels with different ideological or partisan leanings (i.e., *The New York Times* for Trump, left-wing newspapers for Wilders) are regarded as biased and dishonest, whereas attitudinal congruent outlets are uncritically quoted when they publish information that confirms the partisan leanings of the political leaders (i.e., *Fox News* for Trump and *de Telegraaf* [the largest Dutch tabloid newspaper] for Wilders). Trump even explicitly refers to the “Fake News Universe” to discredit a cluster of media outlets that are not supporting his views: “CNN & others within the Fake News Universe were going wild about my signing MAGA hats for our military in Iraq and Germany” (Trump, 2016).

Although Wilders attacks the media in both the preelection and postelection period in similar ways, an interesting shift in antimedia discourse can be analyzed in Trump’s Twitter activity. More specifically, in the preelection period, the media and political opponents were blamed for promoting a hidden political agenda (i.e., getting a Democrat candidate elected): “@CNN got caught fixing their ‘focus group’ in order to make Crooked Hillary look better. Really pathetic and totally dishonest!” In the postelection period, Trump adapted his blame-shifting strategy to the new situation. In this period, the Fake News media were blamed for posing a threat to the dissemination of honest information in general: “The dishonest media does not report that any money spent on building the Great Wall (for sake of speed), will be paid back by Mexico later!” Even more so,

Trump expressed that the media only report dishonestly on him, whereas they would take the same information by any other actor at face value:

If anybody but your favorite President, Donald J. Trump, announced that, after decimating ISIS in Syria, we were going to bring our troops back home (happy & healthy), that person would be the most popular hero in America. With me, hit hard instead by the Fake News Media. Crazy! (Trump, 2018)

Accusations of Disinformation: The Hidden Agenda of Dishonest Political Opponents

Next to the media elites, political opponents or the establishment were frequently framed as scapegoats who lied to the people to promote their own political agendas. This is especially salient in the preelection phase in the United States, where Trump shifted blame to “Crooked” Clinton on a daily basis. Trump frequently emphasized that Hillary Clinton was unfit for presidency because she was dishonest: “History lesson: There’s a big difference between Hillary Clinton and Abraham Lincoln. For one, his nickname is Honest Abe.” Trump explicitly blamed his political rival for lying to the American people: “Hillary said she was under sniper fire (while surrounded by USSS.) Turned out to be a total lie. She is not fit to lead our country” (Trump, 2016). The cultivation of the lying political elites resonated with an alleged conspiracy of the political elites and the media to get “their” candidate elected: “This election is being rigged by the media pushing false and unsubstantiated charges, and outright lies, in order to elect Crooked Hillary!” Trump even envisioned a coordinated action by the media and the Democrats to make him lose the elections: “Election is being rigged by the media, in a coordinated effort with the Clinton campaign, by putting stories that never happened into news!” (Trump, 2016).

Although Wilders cultivated such conspiracies between the government and the media less explicitly, he did shift blame to the political establishment for deliberately spreading lies to silence his party: “The lying Dutchman Rutte [prime minister] has promised us all sorts of things. This smells. They do whatever they can to silence the leader of the opposition party” (Wilders, 2017). Moreover, in both preelection and postelection periods, Wilders accused the prime minister and the government of betraying the people by spreading lies to promote the establishment’s political agenda: “Indeed, do not buy the fake reality they are promoting. Our vision is crystal clear: become the boss in our own country, decide on our own budgets and borders!” (Wilders, 2017).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the media were not the only scapegoat connected to accusations of dishonesty; political opponents were also accused of distorting reality to promote their own political goals. In the United States, the Democrat party was scapegoated by Trump in the preelection period, whereas the Fake News Media became his greatest enemy in the postelection period. Interestingly, in the preelection period, Trump pointed to a navigated scheme of the media and the Democrats to prevent him from winning the elections—which points to very strong hostile media perceptions. In The Netherlands, in both election and routine periods, Wilders blamed both the media and political elites in his populist discourse—emphasizing the societal divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites.

Study 2: The Public's Perceptions of Truth and Fake News

In digital media ecologies, accusations of mis- and disinformation can also be communicated by citizens (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Through social network sites, they not only share (accusations of) mis- and disinformation communicated by the political actors they follow (i.e., Trump or Wilders), but also can construct their own biased version of reality, or discredit media and political actors who do not support their perceptual lenses. Against this backdrop, it is important to understand how citizens use social network sites to communicate their versions of truth, opposed to the information they distrust and perceive as deliberately biased.

Method Study 2

The data collection and analysis steps were structured by the same procedures as those outlined in the description of Study 1. In this case, however, the sample frame has two different levels: Facebook groups and messages sent in these publicly accessible groups. To select communities, we looked for Facebook groups that resonated with the discourse of Trump and Wilders and therefore connected to an antimedia discourse in public opinion. These communities were identified by a keyword search using the core themes of Study 1 (i.e., dishonest media, media as enemy of the people). Moreover, Facebook's interface and algorithms suggested group pages that were related to Trump's and Wilders' official accounts. For Facebook, a two-stage sampling procedure was followed. First, four publicly accessible Facebook groups were selected in both countries. In each country, two groups that aligned with right-wing (or conservative) issue positions and two groups that reflected left-wing (or liberal) issue positions were sampled. Within every group, an initial sample of 100 posts was analyzed. After this initial sample was analyzed, 50 additional posts were collected to compare the emerging themes with the new data. These posts did not yield novel insights into the themes related to the perception of disinformation and its resonance with perceptual screen and hostile media perceptions.

Results Study 2

Although many of the themes identified in Study 1 also apply to citizens' construction of the divide between truth and fake news, two salient differences can be identified. Normatively, a more negative theme salient in citizens' discourse is the cultivation of a societal divide between citizens who ignore the real facts, and "honest" citizens who acknowledge the truth (this category was identified in 25.6% of all materials). This epistemic divide was frequently hostile in tone; the "honest" in-group excluded the "ignorant" out-group and constructed other citizens as inferior, evil, and deliberately misinformed because they wanted to believe in a "fake reality." On a more positive note, citizens acted as online fact-checkers, signaling instances of weak argumentation by pointing out the lack of empirical evidence and expert opinion of many political claims. Yet, this more critical theme was only identified in 7.5% of the posts.

Shifting Blame to Lying and Hostile Elites in Media and Politics

Similar to the direct communication of Trump and Wilders, citizens in the United States shifted blame to the dishonest media elites for distorting reality. This theme was most dominant (33.5%). In the United States, the media and the Democrat party were both seen as belonging to the lying elites: "Have had it with the government they can't do anything right I blame the Dems and the media it's time to take

them to the wood shed." In the United States, blame attributions to the dishonest media and political elites strongly resonated with hostile media perceptions: "What we find out is those that are white getting in trouble for hate (racist) crimes and yet the far left communist Democrat controlled media never seem to report these hate crimes against WHITES" (U.S. Facebook user, 2017).

In The Netherlands, people mainly blamed the media for looking away from, or for not reporting on, the facts that really concern the people: "You do not get to see this on TV. But the police also wants to join us." Moreover, the media were accused of presenting issues in binary black-and-white frames: "The media are constantly focusing on these divides: Islam versus non-Islam, left versus right, black versus right." As a result of the media's dishonesty, Dutch Facebook users emphasized that the media and other sources of expert knowledge should not be trusted: "They are all screaming the same story. Good luck, no one is trusting media or students and other so-called experts" (Dutch Facebook user, 2017).

A salient difference between the communication of Facebook users in the United States and those in The Netherlands is the clearer distinction between political elites and media elites expressed by Dutch Facebook users, and the more general reference to an opinion climate of lies and dishonesty in users in the United States. In the United States, perceptions of communicative untruthfulness were not always clearly attributed: "The thing that enhances global warming is all the hot air that comes out of there big huge mouths. I'd rather live in the cold than listen to fake news." In The Netherlands, dishonesty was mostly attributed to the prime minister: "Lying and pretending like nothing ever happened. Little criminal!"

Emphasizing a Societal Divide Between Ignorant and Accurate People

More than in the direct communication of Trump and Wilders, Facebook users in both countries expressed a central divide between their honest in-group and ignorant, lying societal out-groups (25.6%). These groups were constructed differently in both countries. In the United States, the separation mainly reflected partisan identities: "That's the truth. People with jobs don't vote Democrat unless they just don't understand what goes on in this world." Sometimes, however, the divide of truth and fake news was also based on left-wing versus right-wing orientations: "The left hates it when you disagree with them and they can get very nasty. God Bless President Trump and he will build that wall." On a positive note, some Facebook users emphasized that the partisan divides in society are inflated by the media: "There are millions of good Americans all throughout this nation, and we are not as divided as the media depicts us."

In The Netherlands, the clash between the truthful us and the dishonest them was mostly marked by referring to the divide between left and right: "Like our page to punish these left-wing idiots who reported our previous page. They do not want to see what is really going wrong here. Are you also tired from these lying idiots?" In addition, Dutch Facebook users frequently referred to the dishonesty of their fellow citizens, referring to them as hypocrites who try to push their incorrect will on the majority: "Disgusting people who confirm to these things. Again a club of self-confirmed 'correct' do-gooders who forces their will to all of us. Disgusting!" (Dutch Facebook user, 2017). In The Netherlands, people with differing viewpoints (mostly left-wing supporters) were seen as "pushers" of a fake reality, promoting an elitist worldview far removed from the people's concerns.

Answering RQ1 and RQ2, perceptions of truth and fake news were attributed in line with people's social identity. The in-group of Republicans, or the right wing of the ideological spectrum, was constructed in opposition to the dishonest, incorrect, and lying others. Hence, more than politicians (Study 1), Facebook users constructed hostile cleavages between different groups in society. Not only were the media and opposed politicians regarded as dishonest and biased against the people's views, but ordinary people with different viewpoints were also regarded as biased and incorrect.

Citizens as Fact-Checkers of Online Mis- and Disinformation

Facebook users in the United States also signaled misinformation directly, not only by labeling information as "fake news," but also by referring to the lack of evidence for the claims made: "Such misinformation trash. This has been going on long enough, many of these things are so ridiculous they seem to be fiction. These people need to be replaced by credible people if any still exist" (U.S. Facebook user, 2017). The identification of disinformation came from both partisan camps: "Fake news from Republican fake news site. Site just trying to rile deplorable retarded Republicans." The identification of communicative untruthfulness, and the labeling of sources as dishonest, was even more specific in The Netherlands: "I suspect that this is untrue. Even if you only consider that taxes are not calculated as a percentage, but as a fixed rate for every 100 liters" (Dutch Facebook user, 2017). Dutch citizens also signaled disinformation, referring to the deliberative spread of inaccurate information to achieve a certain goal: "This is ridiculous. Share this message to show that participants of Facebook communities are not checking the facts, it is important to show that they are acting to share hate across society by spreading inaccurate information." To provide another example: "There is no link or any kind of evidence that she has actually said this. This is propaganda for the Freedom Party" (Dutch Facebook user, 2018).

Together, although the results indicate that Facebook users mainly classify information as fake when it is not in line with their opinion, community pages at times do offer a platform for user-initiated fact-checking originating from different ideological and partisan leanings. On a positive note, Facebook users who typically express themselves in partisan or ideological echo chambers are exposed to cross-cutting views that check the political claims they are exposed to.

Discussion

This article relied on two comparative qualitative content analyses in the United States and The Netherlands to provide an in-depth understanding of the discursive construction of reality and mis- and disinformation by leading right-wing (populist) politicians on Twitter and citizens participating in online discussions on Facebook. The results reveal that both Trump in the United States and Wilders in The Netherlands discredit information when it does not support their attitudinal lenses. At the same time, they use information, statistics, and media sources strategically when these confirm their issue positions. These findings indicate that accusations of inaccurate or dishonest reporting align with the partisan political agenda of right-wing (populist) political leaders. In that sense, although we cannot empirically assess politicians' intentions, accusations of mis- and disinformation can be regarded as a strategy to delegitimize incongruent truths and promote alternative realities that confirm partisan perceptual screens. This connects to literature that has regarded disinformation as partisan in tone (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), and it supports the

analysis of scholars who indicate that disinformation can be used as a label to delegitimize the arguments and issue positions of opposed political camps (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

Accusations of disinformation reflect an overall populist antiestablishment style (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Hameleers, 2018). More specifically, the media were regarded as part of the corrupt elites who betray and lie to the ordinary people. The construction of true knowledge also connected to a populist communication style. More specifically, information was seen as factual and true when it originated from the “ordinary” people and their experiences, whereas it was deemed untrustworthy and inaccurate when it originated from the dishonest (media) elites. Although mis- and disinformation involve different types of accusations, they can both be used to demobilize support for political actors by delegitimizing the reality they convey to the electorate. These accusations can be connected to the HMP (Choi et al., 2009). Specifically, accusations of mis- and disinformation mostly contain an ideological perspective in which political information is framed as biased against the views of the people and copartisans, whereas it is said to favor the opposition.

Two important differences between politicians’ direct communication and citizens’ constructions of reality and dishonesty can be identified. First, citizens in the United States and Netherlands shaped a divide between their in-group of honest ordinary people, and other ignorant, incorrect, and morally inferior people who do not perceive the “correct” reality. In The Netherlands, the in-group consisted mostly of people who voted for the populist right-wing Freedom Party, whereas this in-group was less explicitly defined in the United States, although it clearly excluded the Democrats. The other salient difference between politicians’ and citizens’ construction of truth and fake news is that citizens, and not politicians, take the initiative in checking facts, which was most explicit in The Netherlands. Facebook users warned fellow users that information was incorrect, while also pointing to the lack of empirical evidence and expert knowledge—connecting to the format of fact-checkers in political communication (e.g., Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Citizens’ fact-checking rebutted political news with different ideological underpinnings, potentially stimulating cross-cutting exploration among Facebook users.

This study has some important implications. First, we can extend conceptualizations of mis- and disinformation typically applied to the sender of communicative untruthfulness to perceptions and accusations of communicative untruthfulness on social media. In line with conceptualizations that distinguish between mis- and disinformation (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Wardle, 2017), politicians and citizens differentiate between attributions of incorrect information and accusations of deliberately misleading content. Moreover, this research indicates that accusations of disinformation and hostile media perceptions resonate with an overall right-wing populist worldview (also see Fawzi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2018). The societal challenge of communicative untruthfulness is thus two-pronged: Politicians can adopt disinformation as a strategy to discredit opponents, and they are involved in the actual strategic spread of disinformation themselves as well—which may further contribute to the persistence of falsehoods in online settings.

Another implication is that citizens’ trust in the media and their evaluations of the veracity of information may be affected by accusations of mis- and disinformation expressed by politicians and fellow citizens. By delegitimizing established knowledge and attitude-incongruent information via SNSs, politicians may affect their followers’ perceptions of reality. These accusations may fuel polarized divides in society:

The other camp may be seen not only as ideologically different, but also as a disseminator of lies and inaccurate information that reflects a different "fake" reality.

This article is not without its limitations. First, we restricted our empirical endeavor to the communication tactics of right-wing populist actors and citizens who are active on certain Facebook platforms. Right-wing populists do not have issue ownership over media critique, and it may be the case that other politicians (left-wing populist, parties in opposition) blame the media for being inaccurate and dishonest. Future research may explore whether other politicians and audience segments hold the media accountable for misleading or lying to the people, and if so, how. Second, we only focused on two polarizing politicians in Western countries. Future research should extend our country and case selection to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings. In this qualitative article, we are only able to provide a detailed account of right-wing populist actors in the United States and The Netherlands, and it remains to be seen how these findings generalize to right- and left-wing populists in other parts of the world. When increasing the scope of the empirical endeavor, future research may also explore the relative salience of mis- and disinformation accusations by relying on quantitative content analyses.

Despite these limitations, this study aims to offer new insights into how mis- and disinformation are used and constructed by citizens and politicians to attack opposed accounts of reality and to promote issue-consistent versions of the truth.

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