

Post-Truth Infodemic vs. Human Cognition

Stephan Lewandowsky



- 1 “post-truth”: authentic liars
- 2 “infodemic”: the hardened few
- 3 misinformation: stickiness
- 4 solutions: prebunking and more

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The “Post-Truth” World

The Washington Post

Fact Checker  • Analysis

In four years, President Trump made
30,573 false or misleading claims

The Fact Checker's database of the false or misleading claims made by President Trump while in office.

Updated Jan. 20, 2021

President Donald Trump's Job Approval Ratings, Full Trend

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Donald Trump is handling his job as president?

— % Approve



Repeated polling showed
 $\frac{3}{4}$ of Republicans
considered Trump to be
honest

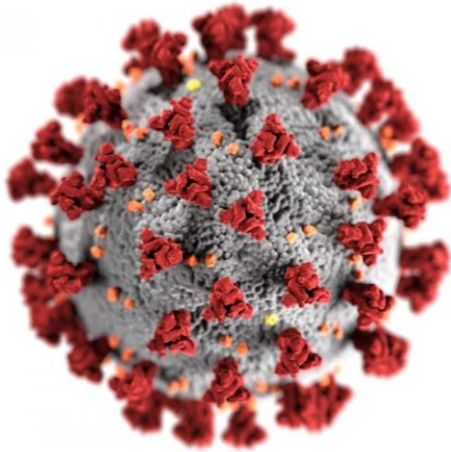
Authenticity of the Lying Demagogue (Hahl et al., 2018)

- Trump states falsehoods about events that can be easily disproven
 - thereby flagrantly flouting norms of truth telling
 - signaling contempt of “establishment”
 - signaling being an authentic champion of the “real people”
- Populism’s understanding of truth involves authenticity and veracity

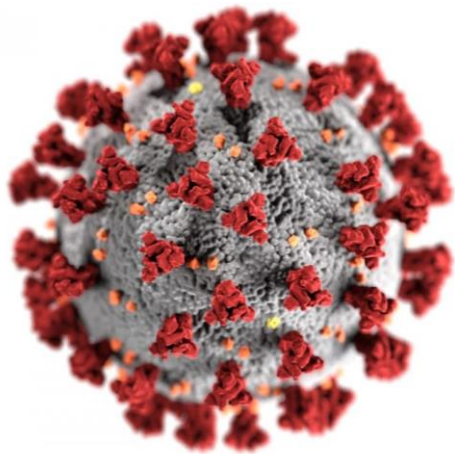
Lying is a feature not a bug
(for populist politicians)

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The COVID-19 “Infodemic”



“Infodemic”



“Infodemic”



Greater trust
in scientists

Soaring Trust in Scientists (Germany, 2017-2021)

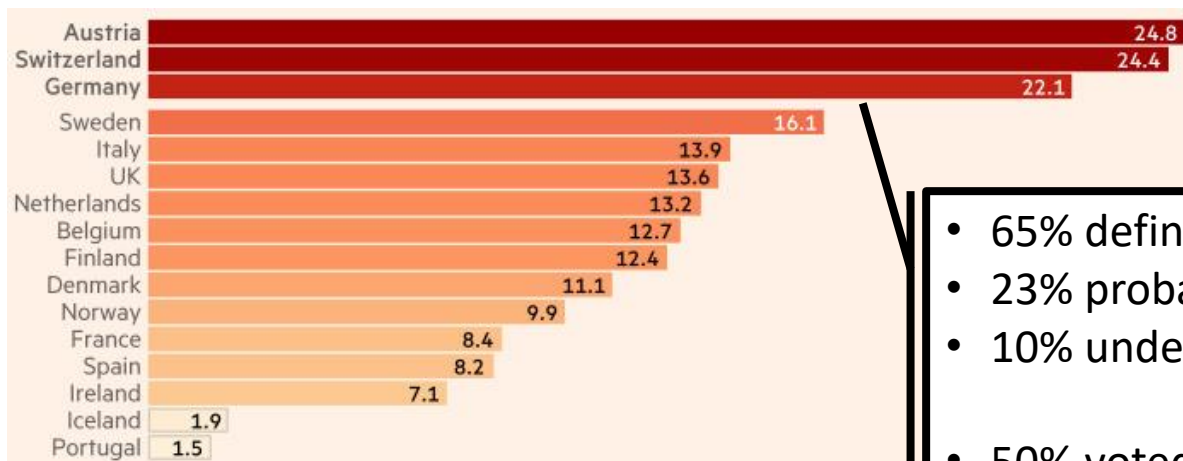


Very similar patterns
observed elsewhere (e.g., UK)

But Residual Vaccine Hesitancy is Hardening

- As of June 2022, actual uptake (first doses) mirrors survey data

Share of unvaccinated people (October 2021)



Source: FT analysis of figures from national sources and Our World in Data. Rates shown are as of November 2021.
© FT

- 65% definitely no
- 23% probably no
- 10% undecided or possibly yes
- 50% voted for extreme right
- 15% voted for other “anti-establishment” parties

Quantifying the “Infodemic”

- Untrustworthy news outlets constitute **14.0%** of Facebook engagement
- **2.3%** of web overall (Altay et al., 2022)

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Misinformation Matters

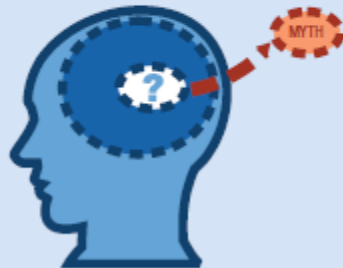
- Misinformation affects people's behaviour
- Exposure to misinformation, as opposed to factual information, reduces intent to get vaccinated by more than 6% (Loomba et al., 2021)

Misinformation Sticks

- “Pope endorses Donald Trump” (Fake news site, 2016)
- No he did not (Snopes, 2016)

Continued Influence Effect

Despite a retraction, people continue to rely on misinformation



- People may *say* that a corrected myth is false ..
- .. but they *act* as if they still rely on it.

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Misinformation Toolbox

- No silver bullet
- Numerous tools for debunking

sks.to/db2020



The Debunking Handbook 2020 ...

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Prebunking or Inoculation is Promising (Cook, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017)

- Inoculation has two elements:
 - an explicit warning of an impending threat
 - a refutation of an anticipated argument that exposes the imminent fallacy
- Requires advance knowledge of *how* people might be misinformed ...
- ... but not *what* they will see or hear

Inoculation: Current State (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021)

- There have been various types of inoculation against:
 - against potential threats
 - against emotional manipulation
 - against common misconceptions
 - against common stereotypes
 - and various other techniques



Conclusions

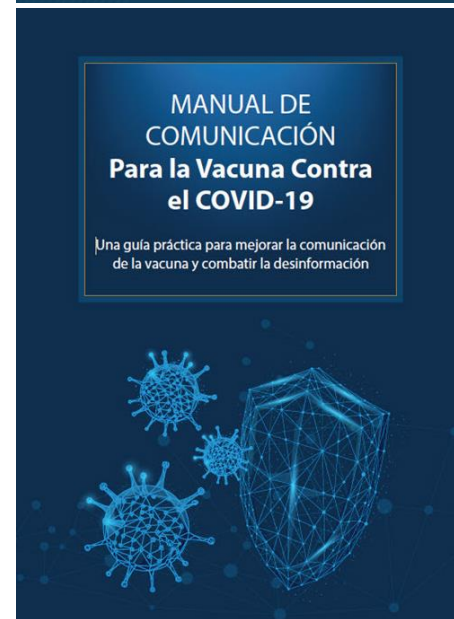
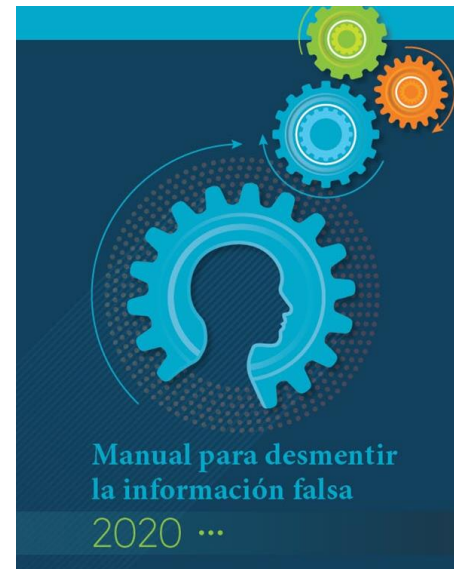
Threats

- “Post-truth” world and populism are challenges
- Misinformation can adversely affect people’s (health) behavior
- Misinformation often “sticks” despite being corrected

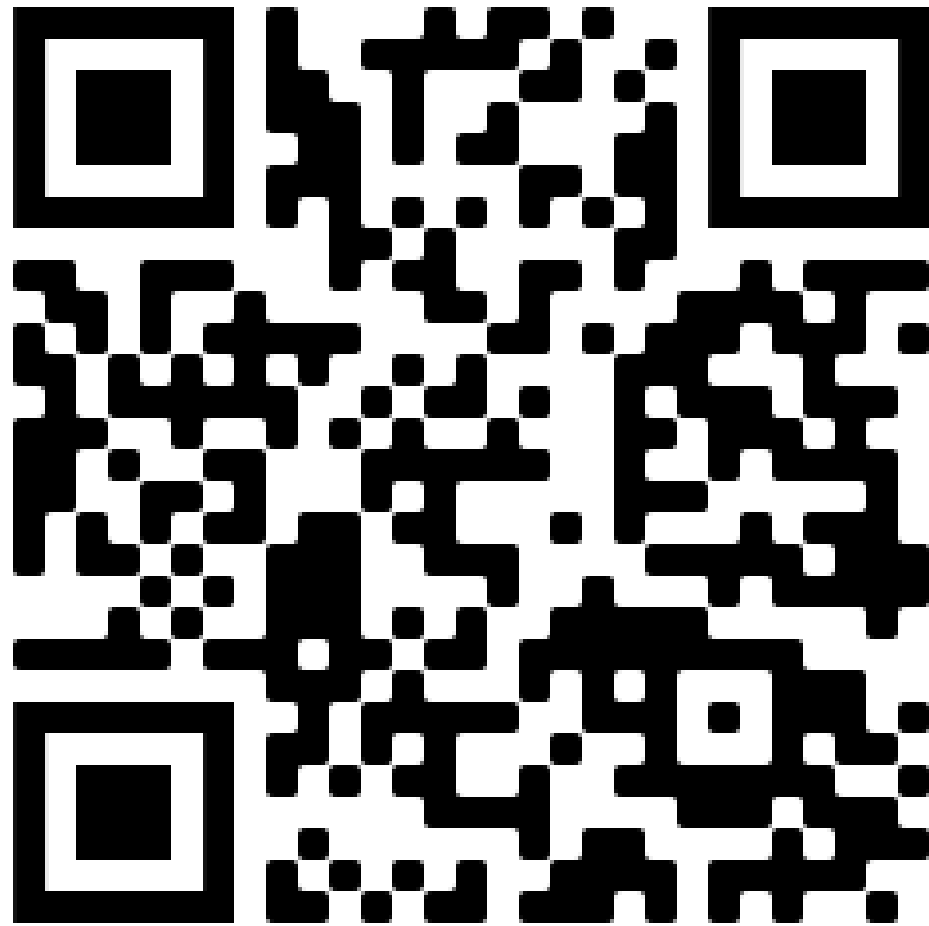
Opportunities

- Most people trust scientists and public-health measures (vaccinations)
- People can be protected against misinformation through inoculation
- Many debunking tools exist

Resources



Resources



Guía Para las Teorías de la Conspiración

Stephen Lawandowsky
John Cook

Handbuch zum Klimakonsens

Warum der wissenschaftliche Konsens zum Klimawandel wichtig ist

- John Cook
- Sander van der Linden
- Edward Maibach
- Stephen Lawandowsky

Christopher Schrader

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Herausgegeben von klimaf