



Belgium-Luxembourg
Digital Media and
Disinformation Observatory

Folk theories of info-democratic disorders: an in-depth qualitative audience study in Belgium and Luxembourg

Executive summary of deliverable 3.2.4.

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EDMO BELUX is the Belgian and Luxembourgish hub for research on digital media and disinformation (EDMO BELUX). It brings together an experienced and extensive network of fact-checkers, media, disinformation analysts, media literacy organisations and academics to detect, analyse and expose emerging harmful disinformation campaigns. Through rapid alerts in the network, fact checks and investigative reporting will reach first responders to disinformation (media, civil society, government) in order to minimize the impact of disinformation campaigns. In addition, through media literacy campaigns, EDMO BELUX will raise awareness and build resilience among citizens and media to combat disinformation. Finally, the hub will embed its disinformation monitoring, analysis, and awareness into a multidisciplinary research framework on the impact of disinformation and platform responses on democratic processes.

Within EDMO BELUX, the research pillar of the hub aims at assessing the impact of disinformation and disinformation responses.

Introduction

This executive summary outlines the key aspects of the EDMO BELUX research report D3.2.4, which is a continuation of D3.2.2 (Wiard *et al.*, 2022¹) and presents the final results of the qualitative audience study on folk-theories of info-democratic disorders in Belgium and Luxembourg. **The study delves into the important issue of the reception of dis-/misinformation in democratic societies**, particularly in the context of major crises like the Russo-Ukrainian war and the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike previous research that focused on the production and spread of "fake news," this study shifts attention to its reception, exploring **how audiences in Belgium and Luxembourg make sense of the relationship between dis-/misinformation and democratic troubles, an issue we term "info-democratic disorders."** The study employs the concept of "**folk theory**" to understand public understandings of dis-/misinformation. It builds on a qualitative analysis of **28 semi-directive interviews** with social media users, identifying **nine folk theories (and over 20 branches)** related to this phenomenon. The findings contribute to academic discussions on dis-/misinformation, media literacy, journalism, and fact-checking, as well as to ongoing reflections among practitioners about how to effectively mitigate dis-/misinformation.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This study delves into the understandings of dis-/misinformation from the audience's perspective, **employing the concepts of "folk theories" and "info-democratic disorders."** It builds on the premise that dis-/misinformation, while not new, has gained impact and complexity due to the rise of social media and algorithmic influences, as well as identity politics and polarisation. **The concept of "folk theories" is central to this study. It refers to lay people's beliefs, assumptions, and generalisations about a particular phenomenon.** In the context of media and communication, folk theories influence how individuals understand and interact with/through media. Folk theories are based on personal experiences, media narratives, and social discussions. This study particularly focuses on how folk theories shape audiences' understandings of the relationship between information disorders and democratic disorders.

Methodologically, **the study is based on 28 semi-directive interviews with active social media users in Belgium and Luxembourg, conducted over 18 months in 2022 and 2023.** The interviewees were chosen through a snowball sampling method using social media to target individuals more likely to encounter dis-/misinformation. Thanks to this strategy, we were able to meet a diversity of informants who can be **categorised into five profiles based on their media consumption patterns: "loyal consumers," "loyal debunkers," "news shoppers," "rebel debunkers," and "rebels."** Overall, our sample is made of 10 French-speaking Belgian informants, 9 Flemish Belgian informants, and 9 Luxembourgish informants. The **analytical**

¹ See Wiard, Victor; Patriarche, Geoffroy; Dufrasne, Marie; Rasquinet, Olivier. *Folk theories of info-democratic disorders: preliminary results from an ongoing qualitative audience study in Belgium and Luxembourg*. (2022) 57 + v pages. <http://hdl.handle.net/2078.3/266130>

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strategy was primarily inductive, involving a thematic coding of the interviews, informant-by-informant analyses, and a transversal analysis to differentiate and identify various folk theories. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of how different types of media users conceptualise the interplay between information disorders and democratic processes. The study emphasises that folk theories, while lacking scientific validation, are significant in shaping how people understand and interact with media and democratic institutions.

Key Findings

In our study, we have identified **nine folk theories and more than 20 folk-theoretical branches related to info-democratic disorders**. Table 1 below provides a summarised view of the findings.

Table 1. Overview of the folk theories of info-democratic disorders found in the study.

(FT1) Legacy media do the job
(FT1.1) Legacy media do minor human errors
(FT1.2.) Political orientation is not a big problem
(FT1.3) One must be careful with non-filtered social media
(FT2) Democracy deserves better than poor journalism
(FT2.1) Partisanship in news is a big problem
(FT2.2) News is driven by economic interests
(FT2.2.1) Fast journalism
(FT2.2.2) Buzz journalism
(FT2.2.3) Amateur journalism
(FT2.2.4) Journalism is (first and foremost) business
(FT2.3) There is a lack of contradiction
(FT2.4) Journalism perpetuates social prejudices
(FT2.5.) Atomised journalism
(FT3) Politics and citizens are disconnected
(FT3.1) Journalists should make political news sexier
(FT3.2) Politicians should engage better with audiences
(FT4) The public debate is disturbed
(FT5) Legacy media are part/victim of a conspiracy lead by financial (and political) elites
(FT5.1) Financial and political elites purposely manipulate media
(FT5.1.1) Follow the money
(FT5.1.2) Political censorship and control
(FT5.2) Media purposely manipulate audiences
(FT5.3) We are self-made hypercritical journalists
(FT6) Defining the truth is political
(FT6.1) What's true or not is only a matter of one's viewpoint
(FT6.2) Truth plays no role in people's persuasion
(FT6.3) Disagreement and disinformation should not be conflated
(FT7) Disinformation is a specific technique of (transnational) political campaigning
(FT8) We have bigger issues than fake news
(FT8.1) "fake news" has always existed
(FT8.2) Only conspiracy theories are disinformation
(FT8.3) The rhetorical invocation of "fake news"
(FT9) Info-democratic disorders are an audience problem
(FT9.1) Most people are vulnerable due to universal socio-psychological factors
(FT9.2) Some people are more vulnerable than others
(FT9.3) Luxembourg's unique informational culture
(FT9.4) Third person effect: it is always the other person that is vulnerable

FT1. Legacy media do the job

The "Legacy media do the job" folk theory emerges strongly, particularly among "loyal consumers" and "loyal debunkers." Participants express trust in legacy media, attributing the spread of dis-/misinformation primarily to social media and "alternative" media sources. They acknowledge that not all legacy media outputs are equal in quality but generally regard them as reliable sources of information. This belief is rooted in the perception that legacy media professionals are guided by ethical standards, placing public service media in higher esteem compared to private media. The idea that journalists are driven by a passion for their profession rather than financial gains is also prevalent. Nevertheless, proponents of the "Legacy media do the job" folk theory do recognize that **journalists sometimes make "human errors"** (FT1.1), thereby suggesting that mistakes in journalism are inevitable but are usually minor and do not significantly impact democracy. These errors are viewed as opportunities for "conspiracy theorists" to discredit the media, but the informants believe in legacy media's capacity to self-correct and uphold professionalism. The study reveals that some informants who endorse the "Legacy media do the job" folk theory **do not perceive the political orientation of legacy media as a major democratic concern** (FT1.2). While recognizing that media are not entirely neutral, the informants see this bias as a normal aspect of a functioning democracy. They advocate for diversifying news sources to understand different viewpoints, a practice deemed essential in constructing informed opinions. The participants who hold this folk theory **express scepticism towards social media, pointing to a lack of filtering and verification mechanisms** (FT1.3). While not completely rejecting social media, they emphasise the need for discernment in choosing reliable sources rather than doing one's own verifications.

FT2. Democracy deserves better than poor journalism

This folk theory counters the positive perception of legacy media. Overall, it argues that the current state of journalism, especially in low-brow legacy media, is inadequate for the needs of a democratic society. This perspective is driven by the belief that journalism should be responsible, accurate, and uphold higher standards to support democracy effectively. This folk theory articulates multiple branches. **First**, some individuals state that **partisanship in news is a big problem** (FT2.1). This line of thought highlights concerns about the overt political biases in news media organisations. Here, informants feel that this bias leads to a blend of information and opinion, deviating from the ideal of "objective" journalism. **Second**, the **"News is driven by economic interests"** (FT2.2) branch argues that the poor state that journalism is in nowadays is due to the prominence of competing economic interests, and encompasses several reasonings, including the fast pace of journalism, the search for sensationalism (buzz journalism), the amateurism of journalistic work, and the perception of journalism as a business prioritising profit over quality. Each reasoning problematizes a different aspect of how economic pressures influence journalistic content and quality. The **third** branch that is prevalent in this folk theory, especially among the "rebels" and "rebel

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debunkers", is the perceived **lack of contradiction** (FT2.3) in legacy media coverage. This folk-theoretical branch asserts that mainstream media fail to present a diversity of perspectives, resulting in a uniformity of viewpoints. This is contrasted with "Partisanship in news is a big problem", where each media outlet is seen to have its specific political stance. The "lack of contradiction" branch raises concerns about journalists not fulfilling their watchdog role, leading to a homogeneity in news coverage that is often perceived as conforming to political correctness or moral conformism. A **fourth** significant concern is the role of journalism in **perpetuating social prejudices** (FT2.4). Informants from various user types point out that journalistic practices may unintentionally contribute to social inequalities and injustices. This is particularly evident in the coverage of sensitive topics like racial or religious minorities, migrants, women's rights, and incest-related issues. The **final** branch of the "poor journalism" folk theory (FT2.5) posits that economic pressures lead journalists to produce fragmented news, resulting in an inability to comprehend complex issues fully, *i.e.* a sort of **atomized journalism**. The lack of historical memory among newer journalists is seen as a contributing factor to this issue, as they often fail to provide the necessary context to fully understand current events.

FT3. Politics and citizens are disconnected

This folk theory, mainly articulated by "loyal consumers" and "loyal debunkers", highlights the communication gap between the government and the governed. It sometimes suggests that this disconnect is due to journalists failing to make political news engaging and accessible, and sometimes blames politicians for not effectively engaging with audiences, especially on social media platforms.

FT4. The public debate is disturbed on social media

The informants who articulate this folk theory value online debates as crucial for democracy but express concerns about the negative impact of social media platforms on deliberative processes. The folk theory points to the adverse effects of trolls and malicious actors using fake profiles, which hinder constructive debate. These actors, often hiding behind anonymity, disrupt genuine discussions and polarise debates. The folk theory also criticises the inadequate content moderation on social media, contributing to misrepresentations and the reinforcement of social biases and discriminations.

FT5. Legacy media are part/victim of a conspiracy lead by financial (and political) elites

A significant number of informants, primarily "rebel debunkers," view legacy media as part or victims of a conspiracy led by financial and political elites. This folk theory asserts that legacy media merely echo the narratives intentionally spread by powerful elites, manipulating public

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opinion. It emphasises the importance of hypercritical journalism in uncovering hidden truths and countering the so-called “official discourse”. The informants express a need for media that challenges the status quo and presents alternative viewpoints, often turning to non-traditional media sources for information that contradicts mainstream narratives. A **first** branch of this folk theory (F5.1) argues that **financial and political elites intentionally manipulate media to serve their interests**. This branch divides into two main reasonings, one suggesting that “higher economic interests” drive world events and media narratives (“follow the money”), and the other asserting that politicians exert control and censorship over the media. A **second** branch (FT5.2) posits that **media manipulate audiences**, either willingly or as “parrots” being manipulated by elites. This manipulation is seen as serving the hidden agenda of the elite through various mechanisms like information filtering, generating fear, and exacerbating social divisions. The result is a populace that is kept in ignorance or distracted from real issues, leading to a weakened democratic process. **Finally**, some individuals sharing this folk theory argue that **it is up to the citizens to do the work of journalists** (FT5.3), since the latter do not do the kind of “research” or “investigations” that they are supposed to do. From this perspective, it is the “conspiracy theorists” who actually play a watchdog role.

FT6. Defining the truth is political

In this folk theory, the informants challenge the notion of an objective truth in the public debate, suggesting that what is considered true or false is largely determined by political persuasion rather than factual correctness. In a **first** branch, embraced mainly by “rebel debunkers” and “rebels” (FT6.1), **truth is seen as relative and dependent on individual perspectives**. Adherents of this view often prioritise “alternative media” as equally valid to mainstream sources, promoting a narrative that both sides of any argument have their own inherent truths. A **second** branch (FT6.2) focuses on the political nature of truth. It argues that even if some facts might be more accurate than others, **public perception is ultimately shaped more by political narratives than by factual accuracy**. This leads to a scepticism towards attempts at establishing a universal truth, with a preference for a more content-focused debate over factual correctness. Finally, a **third** branch of this folk theory (FT6.3) emphasises the legitimacy of multiple perspectives in public debates, warning against the conflation of legitimate disagreement and “fake news”. Adherents of this branch argue that **political disagreements are often mislabelled as “fake news”, undermining healthy democratic discourse**. They recognize the existence of factual truth but express concern over the politicisation of fact-checking, where opinions are sometimes judged as facts, leading to an oversimplified and polarising understanding of complex issues.

FT7. Disinformation is a specific technique of (transnational) political campaigning

This folk theory views disinformation as a strategic tool in political campaigning, used both nationally and internationally. At the national level, it is seen as a tactic primarily used by political extremes, especially the far right. Internationally, disinformation is portrayed as a

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widespread technique employed by states (like Russia, China) for political destabilisation or image improvement. This perspective also identifies disinformation as a globalised business, serving various political actors and ideologies.

FT8. We have bigger issues than “fake news”

This folk theory downplays the significance of dis-/misinformation, considering it either a **timeless issue** (FT8.1), an overemphasised phenomenon that **only concern “conspiracy theorists”** (FT8.2), or a term misused or **overused rhetorically** (FT8.3).

FT9. Info-democratic disorders are an audience problem

Finally, this folk theory places the responsibility for dis-/misinformation on the audience rather than the media or digital platforms. It encompasses several branches. **First**, some informants highlight the supposed **universal socio-psychological factors** (FT9.1), suggesting that everyone is vulnerable to dis-/misinformation due to universal human traits like confirmation biases or lack of media literacy. **Second**, other informants focus on the more sociological factors of dis-/misinformation, stating that **specific groups** (like the elderly or politically extremes) are more vulnerable than others (FT9.2). **Third**, a few of our Luxembourgish informants elaborate on the **unique informational culture of their country** and its influence on their susceptibility to dis-/misinformation, either positively or negatively (FT9.3). **Finally**, several informants articulate a **“third person effect”** folk theory (FT9.4) by which they see others as more vulnerable to dis-/misinformation than themselves, thus indicating a perception that dis-/misinformation is a problem for “others”.

Conclusion

Grounded in the concept of “folk theories”, this study provides an expanded and in-depth exploration of how audiences in Belgium and Luxembourg diversely conceptualise the phenomenon of dis-/misinformation and its relation to politics and democracy. By engaging with a diverse range of perspectives and understandings that people hold about information and democratic disorders, the study moves beyond existing typologies of audiences’ folk theories, thereby contributing to furthering the study of dis-/misinformation at the crossroads of journalism studies and audiences studies. This research provides new insights that help reflecting on the prevalent strategies employed to mitigate dis-/misinformation, such as fact-checking and media literacy initiatives.

First, this study highlights the complexity of public understandings of dis-/misinformation. The diversity of folk theories uncovered in this study underscores **the need for interventions against dis-/misinformation to be flexible and responsive to the range of perspectives prevalent among their target audiences**. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective given the varied and sometimes contradictory nature of these folk theories. This insight is

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crucial for practitioners in journalism, fact-checking, and media literacy, as it calls for a more nuanced and tailored approach to addressing misinformation and disinformation.

Second, the study reveals **a significant gap in the public's knowledge of the interplay between media organisations, political institutions, and economic actors**. This gap indicates a potential area for media literacy initiatives to expand their focus, providing audiences with a more comprehensive understanding of the media ecosystem.

Third, the study highlights the challenge of **fostering a critical approach to media and news without inadvertently fuelling distrust in professional news media**, which are vital for a healthy democracy. This would imply, among other things, to explicitly address complex epistemological notions and questions such as “knowledge”, “objectivity”, “impartiality”, “neutrality”, “opinion”, “research”, etc. Our analysis suggests that approaches to dis-/misinformation that are framed too narrowly in terms of checking and correcting “facts” are likely to be perceived as simplistic or even manipulative.

Finally, the study’s findings suggest that dis-/misinformation should be viewed as symptoms of broader societal issues, particularly the prevailing economic logics and the current state of democracy. Most criticisms across the folk theories call for more democratic engagement, accountability, and transparency, **indicating a widespread desire for a more participatory and inclusive democratic process** that should be better addressed in the initiatives that aim at mitigating dis-/misinformation.

In conclusion, this study not only enriches our understanding of how audiences conceptualise and engage with the notions of misinformation and disinformation but also provides valuable insights for future research and practice. The nuanced approach of the study, focusing on the diversity of folk theories, presents a compelling case for more tailored and responsive strategies in mitigating dis-/misinformation.